Summary

Nearly twenty-five years after the events of Trespasser and following the Heritage Wars, the Inquisition, once reduced, has lost all public faith and has disbanded. Publicly, at least.

Here we follow three stories: the events of the Inquisition, what happened after the Exalted Council, and the current world through the eyes of the assumed never-born daughter of the Inquisitor. Happenstance brings her to Val Royeaux to learn about the world she was never a part of, just as the world loses a little more control. The only consistency between the three - a man trying to learn to live with a little bit of humanity in his heart.

The world's trust in its leaders is at an all-time low in an age of discovery and devastation, and with that stirs an uprising that will shake the known world to its core.

*Notice* Flashbacks/memories are not necessarily in chronological order, think "This is Us" type of mayhem. Stay woke
Life is not meant to end where one begins; it is intrinsically interconnected with passion, adventure, and the love of intertwining souls. For this is the natural state of existence.

Think of it this way: brambles come from the same roots as thorns. Thorns come from the same breathe of life as flowers and fruits. The source of all is benevolent – the simple need to exist. And existence is reliant on differences that attribute in form to the greater scheme of being. Life, in total, is the bramble, the vine, the petals, and the roots. All are involved in one another to achieve a greater means of being. Every man and woman, every Elf and Human, every Qunari and every Dwarf. From the dragons that claim the heavens to the nugs that hide in the thickets of the earth, all is interconnected.

This greater being, to be explored later, is a state of love.

But life began here where another ended. A lover, a saint, a savior, was exchanged for an infant. Tears of joy were replaced by cries of indifferent confusion. A fire burned down all and any remains of what once was and all the things that could have been. Much like how a storm scars the sky or a wave may destroy a shoreline, what was and what was not would, in due time, fade away; the only element to know was that instant, for all else ceases to exist.

All of Thedas believed an accident took their beloved Inquisitor from them. It was an accident. It was a mistake.

All, that is, but one.

A secret was born and exposed in the instance of exchange. This instant in time, this thunderstorm that bellows, this crashing and screaming sea, was unknown by definition but known by indescribable remorse. All knew it happened, but no one knew how.

All, that is, but one.
The trees here stand firm and tall, indifferent to the state of the natural world. The intricate weave of bark that details the long lives lived tell silent stories of ages long past. If you look close enough with a knowing eye, you can see a trail between the fragments – in all likelihood, a small, pointless, slimy creature was here. Notches at the entryway of a hollowed section can determine the type of bird that once nested there. In the exposed roots, you can see where a creature once dug at the life-source.

Aupia had always loved the trees here, and the day she leaves, she knew that was what she would miss the most.

If she ever left, that is. Sometimes she is consumed by dreams of exploring the world – to see everything beyond their corner of Fereldin, to meet new people and hear their many stories. Other times she is eaten alive by the guilty longing of potentially leaving her family. More recently the conflict has escalated in its meticulous way, and more questions are left unanswered as Aupia’s mind wanders.

Father always said asking questions is the purpose of life, and the goal is to find the right people to answer those questions for you. Mother says to stop asking questions and to accept what you are given with gratitude and love… but she usually says this at the super table, so who knows what she actually believes.

An elbow nudges the girl. She’s lost, her fingers tracing the wood of the ancient tree as her eyes ascend the many branches above. So many leaves to fall still.

“How old do you think this tree is?” she whispers, unflinched by the second jab immediately at her side. A sharp whisper hisses back. “Maker’s breathe, Aupia shut the hell up.” Her eyes flicker over her companion before turning foreright. He was right of course – Vallen was always right. Not that you could ever tell him that. Do, and you’ll never hear the end of it. The human boy watches the bushes to their right, a soft rustling captivating his keen senses. It’s hard to know what he sees out in the thickets of this forest, but it’s foolish to deny his senses. Challenge him all you want, but Vallen’s the only one in the area that can describe the subtle differences between what is and isn’t real, what is and isn’t present, and what is and isn’t a nug or some other unholy scampering shit.

Aupia draws an arrow and quietly readies her bow. She laces her fingers with magic energy to steady and quite herself, a reassuring vibrancy that slows her body and straightens her back. Magic came naturally to her sure, but who doesn’t want to look like a badass with a proper quiver on their back? Plus, you can’t hold magic, only feel it, and there’s no use in that – you know, feelings - when you want to live free of those damned Circles. She steadies her weapon at eye-level, watching the nearly motionless forest as it holds its breath.

No, maybe Aupia is the one holding their breath. The shock-still forest flutters slightly, a ready orchestra for the concerto of the wind. It feels natural to have the string drawn to its threshold, to have the wood strain against her hand. Vallen reaches out and grabs the arrow gently, turning it a little to face the left-most side of the bramble; he then tosses whatever is in his hand to the right, and the bush reveals it’s secret.

Aupia releases before she realizes what she’s aiming at. You don’t need to know what you’re eating in order to survive: just eat it. Not that she’s eating this, but same thing.

But whatever it is, it is magnificent. At nearly 30 feet away, the arrow hisses as it tears through the air around them, a breath released from both the bow and its girl. The glorious white coat turns scarlet as its body is ricocheted backwards by the force of the arrow. The neck is the first to hit the ground – most likely because that’s where the arrow got lodged – and the beast fights to break away from its doom.
Now it screams.

“Ah, tits,” Aupia curses, charging forward with Vallen as she furiously reaches back for a second arrow. He grunts in acknowledgement as they run towards the deer; the plan was to keep the meat but sell the pelt. Looks like it might be a little difficult now.

Then again, it’s a pretty startling creature. It’s some sort of dear with long, delicate legs and a dainty tail. The antlers are intertwined with each other, almost like vines ascending a garden chalice. Its coat is almost pure white – disregarding the blood, at least – but it is a little grey, as if covered in ash. An assumed imperfection in the creature.

It runs hap-hazardly, a frantic weave between the trees and bushes. The hunters take chase, Aupia only slowing down to align herself with the creature. Vallen notes her absence at his side but continues to run, a little more to the right then he probably needs to.

Aupia holds her breath, steadies her shake, and narrows her eyes. The elk fades further and further from view, white body bobbing as it grows smaller and smaller.

*Release*

The arrow breaths out as it is impaled in the creature’s right hindleg.

They watch their catch struggle as it bleats, an awful, gaging noise, and it falls for good. The hunters easily approach the creature where it lies on the forest floor, legs sprawled out as it fights to get up but knowingly dying. Vallen throws his body over the backside of the deer, father’s knife in hand as he wins the battle of keeping it down. Out of breath, Aupia crouches near the magnificent head, laying gentle fingers firmly on its cheek. For a moment, the only noise in the forest is the dying dear.

“Don’t miss.”

“I *don’t* miss.”

“You did last time.”

Aupia pulls her knife out of its holster and watches the keen, desperate eyes. They are blue like her’s, but brighter. Like they reflect the mountain sky. Pure and that shit.

The girl lines her knife up with the throat, praying to Andraste that the creature can’t see with those big blue, pure eyes what she’s going to do. “You’re going to miss it.”

“Shut the fuck up.” She hisses, trying to steady the head as it rears up to cry one last time at the trees. But he’s right of course. What’s the vein called? Juggles? Jublar? Something like that. She lowers her knife an inch and pierces the innocent flesh.

It’s warm. Why is life so warm, when it spills across your fingers? The blood gushes and at first terror strikes her heart: *shit, did I really miss? Again?* But its head lolls and drops, body heaving as death subdues it. Vallen and Aupia stand in silence as life leaves the creature, the body eerily warm as the last spark of existence leaves it.

Those pure eyes see everything.

“What do you think you’ll get for this?” Aupia asks without looking at her companion. Vallen finally slumps down beside her, a hand sliding over the creature to smooth its fur. “Not too sure,” he muses, dark eyes dancing. “I’ve never seen anything like this.” She watches him observe the
fine details: the muscles, the bones, the tendons. They are all the same to her, but Aupia can practically see her friend defining what invisible structures sit under his hands. He then grips the arrow embedded in the soft tissue and gives it a hard yank. “I wonder how many people have.”

They always share a silent moment after taking down a creature, to which they respectfully do now. Vallen was the first to suggest it a few years ago, a sentimental moment before moving forward. Vallen’s dream, like Aupia’s, is to someday leave Ingersoll. Unlike Aupia, however, he has a genuine means to do so: his mother, the region’s best blacksmith, had four mouths to feed and a lot of virtue to instate in her family. There was always a great respect for the Sacha family, and when Vallen’s infantile interest in anatomy couldn’t be contained, the family started investing in tomes from Redcliff, the closest and greatest city they could reach. Vallen had always wanted to make her proud, and now that his older brother Noa was married and contributing to the household on a regular basis, he could do just that— he wants to become the first Sacha to enter the University of Orlais, and by Andraste he would achieve it.

In the meantime, however, that meant not only trying to make enough money to get there, but lots of tearing bodies apart. It’s a gross gig to get your kicks and giggles out of, but when you only have three books as your foundation for education, you make do with what you can get your hands on.

“How much do you think it weighs?” Aupia asks after a solitary minute, cleaning the head of her arrow. Vallen stands up and sheaths his knife, eyes wandering the forest for a log. “Less than the deer we got last month, but not by much.” He nods to the left and starts walking away. “You know, I still feel—”

“If you’re going to say bad,” Aupia interrupts, walking to the right to find some twine, “I’m going to actually lose my shit.” The space between the friends grows.

“But nothing. So we’re double-knotting it?”

Vallen doesn’t respond, so Aupia uproots twice as much elfroot as she probably needs to. They return to the catch with their respective supplies, Vallen dropping his log with an irritated th-unk. He’s referring to the fact that Aupia refuses to take the prize— he’s referring to the fact that, despite her being the one doing all the arrows and knives and the killing, he is the one to take it all home. He glares at her, their over-analyzed conversation unspoken. Aupia sighs and rolls her eyes, dropping back down to start tying the forelegs. “I don’t need it and I don’t want it, Vallen. There’s no need for my family to have some of this.”

“You mom would appreciate something new to cook with.”

“My mom will have your head if you suggested that to her.” Aupia rolls her head around in the most exaggerated way she can. “Live in your fantasy that I don’t know what I’m talking about - you do that. But you know my mother and you know what I’m saying is true. It’s not me being unreasonable here.” She tosses some elfroot to Vallen. “Now alleviate your guilt or whatever and help me tie her up.”

He grumbles in defeat and gets to work with the hindlegs, but this leads to the hard part.

With the albanisk deer tied boar-style hooves crossed over the log, the two hoist it up over their shoulders. It helps that they’ve been hunting together in pursuit of Vallen’s hobbies for a few years now, but Aupia is without question slightly taller, leaving Vallen to bear the brunt of the weight as they trek through the forest. They are much more careless now as they cut through bushes and
creeks, stirring much more noise than they likely need to. However, in the absence of conversation, it’s a welcomed sound. The underfoot crunch is familiar and homely.

“What’s that vein called again?”

“Huh?”

“That vein, the big one. In the neck.”

“The one you almost missed?” Aupia can almost feel the wry smile creep across her friend’s face as it bores into her back. He sounds slightly breathless, the walk taking a toll on him.

“Do you want me to drop her?” The threat hangs in the air like a noose around a corpse.

“It’s the jugular.” Aupia can feel the log shift a little against her shoulder as Vallen moves it on his.

“There’s two in the neck.”

“Jugular,” Aupia muses quietly, more to herself than her companion. Her head turns, hoping to catch a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye. “Who named it that?”

“You know I don’t know that.”

“But I mean, why do you think it’s called that? And not something… I don’t know, something that someone could actually remember?”

“What, like ‘Aupia’?”

“My name’s memorable. Suck it.”

“Your name is weird.”

“That makes it memorable, you charred piece of toast.”

“Wow, rude. Bringing in looks. What if I called you knife-ear?”

“Oh come on. You like it when I call you burnt toast.”

“Hold on, I need a break.” Aupia stops walking and they set their catch down carefully to the right. Now that she can actually look at him, he looks a little cross. Only mildly so, like when he’s babysitting his younger siblings. “But honestly. Who in their right mind would want to be called cooked wheat?”

“You’re right. I should just call you yeast instead. Toast is a little too specific.” She plants her hands on her hips as Vallen sets his on his legs, trying to stay upright as he breathes heavily. “Charred yeast.”

“This is why you have no friends,” Vallen accuses, rolling his head back to look at his best friend. Aupia shrugs. “I’m pretty sure it’s because I hang out with your weird ass.” He considers it thoughtfully and shrugs aimlessly. They are too out of breathe to laugh outwardly, but they both smile childishy.

This is the simple life. The life lived between kindred spirits, going day to day as they meander into their places in this world.

This is the simple life.
And this precious simplicity ends at the agonizing bleat that echoes through the trees.

Aupia’s bow is in hand within a heartbeat, Vallen’s grip on his knife tightens as he slowly rises. The two exchange glances, a silent, mutual where did that come from? before they hear it again.

It is not a sound to fear – no, not necessarily. The moment etches itself in Aupia’s mind, the cry vaguely identifiable. Where has she heard this before? Her eyes dance as her heart drums away, fighting to stay calm enough to think but drowning in the thought. She turns once more to Vallen, a shared panic in his expression.

Where did it come from?

But no, now she sees it: it is when she turns to Vallen that Aupia’s eyes lock on a frantic shadow over his shoulder. Something ambling in their direction, something crying out as it picks up speed.

Aupia brings her bow up to eye level, Vallen’s momentary confusion exploding into temporary panic as he looks nose-to-nose with her arrow - he drops to the earth and spins around to catch a glimpse of her attention, but instead has a solid head ram itself into his backside.

“Oh, tits,” Aupia whispers, dropping her bow.

After a thorough and wildly unfiltered conversation ripe with unsolicited cursing, the two returned to their journey home: first to Vallen’s, then onward to Aupia’s.

“Do you know what you’re doing with that thing?”

“No.”

“I’ll be by tomorrow, probably with Gracia and Maes. We’ll think of something.”

“Sure. Whatever. Why not.” Aupia growls in reflection as she nears her family’s fields. Small, wet lips gnaw aimlessly at her fingers, wild blue eyes gazing incoherently at the world around it.

The fawn couldn’t have been much older than a few weeks old. Unlike its mother, it was nearly pitch black with an inversed, white-speckled coat. It must have tracked them down in some unholy fashion, sending the two young adults into a frenzy of guilt, pity, and anger.
Of course. Just their luck.

And with Vallen and his high and mighty sense of duty, he found a way in the mess to pin Aupia with the wellbeing of the fawn.

At least for now. Besides, since it actually located its deceased mother, there was no way in Andraste’s good world that it would leave them; the only reason why it left the Sacha house at all was because it was nursing the life out of Aupia’s top.

It talked a lot, kind of like a baby once it was old enough to figure out how to make noises other than crying. Awkward googling, guffawing, and moaning falls from its small lips every few seconds, eyes meandering stupidly at the forest around it. The weight of the situation drew a permanent crease in Aupia’s forehead as they carried the dead mother for another hour, the baby’s short steps and constant crying plaguing their evening with wracking guilt.

When it first saw the druffalo it skid around, dainty legs taking an absurd amount of extra steps as it placed its new guardian between itself and the intimidating beasts. Aupia wasn’t expecting the exhibition and turns, accidentally swinging an end of her bow into the head of the deer.

“Andraste’s tits! I’m sorry little thing.” She reaches down to stroke the fawn, something she had done absentmindedly over the half hour, but it skids aside, avoiding her fingertips with a low gurgling cry and a flick of its tail. In the guilt and exhaustion, Aupia unexpectedly finds herself smiley weakly at the dumb beast as she plants her hands on her hips. She focuses her attention on the druffalo and all their terror – some of the cows come forward, calves attached to them at the hip.

One cow and calf come close – Aupia named her Fancy when she was in her youth, and this bovine was the maternal leader of the Kessler family herd. The calf, no older than few weeks itself, probably outweighed the deer by forty pounds already, but the deer had a couple inches on it. Curious ears swing forward as delicate noses huff at the newcomer. The doe steps delicately in place, unsure of itself and the world it was suddenly a part of. Aupia laughs at the exchange as she reaches out to pet the calf and mother. “This is your family… at least for now, you little shit.” She starts walking towards the pasture overhang, deer crying in confusion and skipping to her side as the druffalo follow her slowly.

It keeps dancing and crying low under its breath, wide eyes brazenly unsure of itself. The calf pushes closer, inadvertently forcing the doe to swing wide and take off, long legs frantically working without reason to put as much space between it and its trespasser.

But the druffalo calf trots after it, huffing and snorting as it kicks playfully with its stout hind legs; if you didn’t know how to read animals, it almost looked like the two were playing. Fancy’s calf definitely thought that was what was going on. Ask the doe though and you’ll get a different answer. Apparently leaving of its own accord was acceptable, but with Aupia walking further and further away, the baby shouts out in agony once more. It spins on its heel and comes barreling back, nearly colliding with the druffalo calf the same way it did into Vallen’s backside.

Aupia finds her stool and bucket and sits down beside Fancy, the two babies circling her once more in a series of gurgles, clucks, and moans. The aged druffalo watches the two with indifferent eyes, giant head unmoving as it observes the chaos. Aupia takes her bucket back to the overhang to hunt out one last tool as the remaining five druffalo calves finally come forward. As she rummages through the family tools, the doe thrusts its head into her space, takes a whiff of the various man-made instruments, and takes off once more, a more jovial bounce in its movements as it tears around, stubby and shabby druffalos hot in mild pursuit.
Aupia returns to find her father watching with his arms folded carelessly over the pasture fence. His weathered face watches the ashen doe, an indescribable curiosity lighting up his eyes.

“Aupia.” She cringes as the sound of her name, her shoulders shooting up to her pointed ears in an anxious reflex.

“Yes Father.” She responds with a statement, not a question.

“I may be wrong, but I'm pretty sure that isn’t a druffalo.”

“That is… correct.”

“Why did you come home with a Halla?”

“A what?” Aupia nearly drops the bucket of milk as she fumbles with the top of the nursing instrument. She finally meets her father’s eyes. He’s still watching the pasture mayhem.

“A halla. The deer.”

“We, uh…” Aupia scratches the back of her head as she sets down the modified baby bottle. There’s no use hiding it. But why is this so nerve-wracking?

“Well, Vallen and I took down a deer.”

“A halla.”

“Yeah, I guess… yeah, a, a halla. And…” She double checks the top and whistles – the infantile beasts all stop, the doe’s elegant ears swinging aggressively in her direction. It takes off, long legs bating at the sky as it throws itself in her direction, abandoning the play.

“And?”

“And it was its mother.”

“Huh.”

A silence hangs between them as the baby eyeballs Aupia, small nose flaring up as it considers the bottle. Its small ribcage expands against the innocent dark hair, body still heaving after the vigorous play. Aupia has nursed several dozen druffalo at this point as well as Vallen’s youngest siblings, so she wasn’t unfamiliar with the process – the doe seemed to be, or it responded with a great deal of shock as Aupia quickly and forcefully exchanged the fingers she offered to the doe’s mouth with the soft lip of the bottle.

The wild blue eyes shot back as the critter tried to recoil from Aupia’s trained grasp, but the momentary fear delves into a knowing need. In time, the ears sway in curiosity, not anxiety, head bobbing forward and back as it consumes Fancy’s milk. The awkward silence between Aupia and her father suddenly seems bigger, a bubble tying all life in the area together in a familiar comfort. Aupia’s head cocks a little as she rests a hand on the baby halla. Its coat flinches at the touch, but its dainty tail swings once in acceptance.

“Do you plan to raise it?”

“I'm not sure.”

“It’s illegal to own one of those. You’ll need a permit.”
“That’s crazy.”

“What it is undomesticated, kiddo.” Mercer Kessler rubs his brow before settling back against the fence. “Anyone that isn’t Dalish needs to have a permit under the law of property.”

“I could be Dalish though,” Aupia replies, eyes never leaving her four-legged burden. It’s not an accusation, just a statement. Her father ducks between the railing and walks to her side. “Yeah, but I'm not too sure if you want to pick that bone with the tax collectors next month.” He moves slowly, scarred and stiff knuckles rolling over the flank of the deer; it twitched underhand, but accepts his touch. His expertise is boundless… perhaps the creature knows this.

“So, do I have to ask again?” Aupia looks up at the man who raised her: his flat ears, his slightly shorter stature, his peppered black hair. He is worth more than the sum of their differences.

“Ask what, Dad?”

“What is your plan? Do you plan to raise her to be wild? Or are you going to wait for her to be big enough to get a few silvers in the market?” The quiet space between them festers, the bottle slowly getting lighter and lighter in the girl’s hands. His hands run over the creature’s small body, checking for abrasions or imperfections.

“Honestly?”

“Nothing but.”

Aupia shifts her weight from leg to leg. “I haven’t thought too much on it yet,” she admits, pulling the bottle away before the fawn gnaws its toothless gums through the false teat. Her father massages the doe, aged fingers finding invisible spaces to soothe the poor thing. Low groans and moans escape the infantile lips in protest as Aupia begins to walk away, but its swaying ears indicate its… relative indifference to the situation, thanks to Mercer’s divine intervention. When the overhang shed is locked up, Aupia returns to her dad’s side and strokes the baby. There are no words, for there are none that need to be said.

“How’re the Sachas?”

“They’re well. Vallen’s getting cramped rooming with Gracia and Maes.” Her dad chuckles low and warm. The fawn eyeballs him cautiously before turning its needy lips on his knuckles. “I don’t blame him, that family is just going to keep getting bigger. Come on,” He adds, turning to walk away. “It’s nearly supper, we don’t want to keep your mother waiting.” He looks at Aupia’s messy hair, considering what to say as she falls into step beside him. The doe ushers a new barrage of throaty gurgles at them, long legs picking up excessively to keep up. “It’ll be easiest on her if you don’t turn around.”

When Aupia and Mercer emerge the other side of the fence, the fawn bellows and rests its chin on the wood beam separating them – it’s a precious endeavor, since its small black frame is just shy of being able to comfortably look up at them, the beam’s height making her strain. Fancy’s calf ambles over to look longingly at Aupia as well. Their eyes are full of anxiety and wonder, curiosity and anticipation. Aupia smiles, strokes its broad head once more, and follows her father up the gentle slope to their cottage.

The cottage is the definition of cozy: small and secure, but just large enough for all three bodies to get through the day without bumping into one another, if such a thing ever happened in a family. It was built brick by brick generations ago but families had long pried down the spaces of each room to renovate it in some way or another, leaving walls of visibly different structure leaning against
each other in a mosaic of history. Tapestry, furs, and paintings dot the walls leaving very minimal space bare. Plants sit in ceramic pots in every corner, all well-groomed and maintained down to the budding flowerheads. Jasette Kessler was hard at work getting supper together. She looks up as they enter then returns her attention to the pot over the hearth.

“By the looks of your trousers, you had a successful evening,” Jasette muses, wiping her hands on her apron. Aupia looks guiltily down as she sets her bow and quiver. “Would you believe me if I said I didn’t notice?”

“Yes. Between both of your absentmindedness, I'm surprised either of you have survived this long.” Aupia’s head shakes a little as she considers the weight behind her mother’s words. She can see Mercer smile as he organizes the kitchen countertops. She baits Jasette on. “I get the feeling you’re not talking about Vallen, Mom.”

“Of course not. That boy is the best thing to happen to you. Other than me, of course,” she lashes back, testing the broth’s temperature with a spoon. Both Aupia and her father laugh. “He argued that you could use something new—“

“To cook with?” She frowns as she snaps at Mercer, who stands up obediently. “It’s good, get it out of that fire. And that old routine? Did you tell him I’d have his head?”

“Yup.”

“Good girl. Now set the table.” Aupia waits to hug her mother before doing as commanded. They embrace carefully to not pass their respective evening’s hard work off on each other.

“Your daughter has neglected to tell you what she did bring home today,” her father threatens from behind somewhere.

“Oh? Do tell.” Aupia bits her lower lip – well, the only answer is the truth, right? You are more than welcome to try and wiggle your way out of Jasette’s wrath, but few live to tell the tale.

“We took down a halla. Its fawn found us.” Jasette’s hold on her daughter lingers a heartbeat longer than it probably should before she pulls Aupia back, pinning her in place by her shoulders. Aupia smiles weakly. “I’m sorry Mom, we couldn’t just leave it. Not while we were carrying her dead mum hog-style.”

Jasette’s hazel eyes narrow slightly. “That… must have been an awkward walk back.”

“Maker, right?” Aupia darts free to collect the dining utensils. “It felt like it took forever.” She looks back over her shoulder at her mother, unanswered question still foremost in her mind. “I can keep her, right?”

Everyone freezes; both women look at Mercer, who shrugs from where he stands, eyes still on the chopped vegetables.

“Now now, this isn’t my responsibility, and I’m not the head of the household. Don’t involve me.”

“Maker, Mercer I thought you’d at least see reason here.”

“I don’t see the harm,” he admits, dumping the last of the carrots into the pot and wiping his hands clean with a towel. Jasette purses her lips, hands on her hips. “Isn’t it illegal to own one of those?”

Aupia butts in, fully aware that she shouldn’t. “Not if you’re Dalish.” Jasette waves the thought away. “Oh please. We have no means to confirm that with you. And what are you going to do with
a halla? Ride it?"

She chooses to ignore the later question: that answer will come later. “The tax collectors wouldn’t
know the difference.”

Her mother sighs, tough demeanor cracking. Both husband and daughter watch her tentatively as
their boss drags her hands down her face.

A smile breaks Aupia’s face the instant Jasette’s hands drop to her side. She knows – oh, she
knows – and darts towards her mom for another embrace.

“You’ll like her, she’s the cutest little black thing you’ve seen.”

“Black? Maker above, I thought you said it was a halla!”

“It is…?” Aupia pulls back to stare accusingly at her father as he sets their bowls on the table.
“Fawns start out black, she’ll grey out later on.” He looks up at his wife as they all sit down. “Do
you remember when they were snowy?” Jasette curls her hair away from her face as she analyzes
their masterpiece. “How could I forget? They were stark and stood out so well when demolishing
our garden. Now sit, I'm not waiting for you.”

The family takes to their meal after a quick blessing to Andraste, Aupia scooting into her seat at the
last possible moment. When they finish, she lets her curiosity get the better of her. She stirs the
soup idly, varying pieces of chicken and vegetables spinning underhand. “What do you mean
white?”

“The halla in these parts changed in the last few years. They used to… almost glow under a full
moon,” Mercer notes, pausing to collect his thoughts. “Folks around here think they grey ones are
the ones that survived the Black Forest incident.” He looks up, brown eyes focusing on nothing in
particular, yet everything at once.

“Seriously?”

“Nothing but, Maker’s honest truth.” Aupia’s mother responds to her daughter’s accusation without
hesitation. “They’re beast like any other, but they were quite the lookers.” She turns to her
husband. “Is that why the Dalish like them?”

He shrugs. As knowing and global as her father is, Mercer lacks the full truth. A quiet man by all
accounts, he lives like the wheat growing behind their cottage: simply. To rise one day and die
another, but content to do so – he has lived quite a filling life, one with little regret. But as a human,
he lacks the intricate – or, as the last few years has dubbed it, misled, pointless, or sad –
understanding of the Heritage Wars. The Qunari. The Dwarves. The mages or templars or agents
lost to the trees. The children burned at the stake. The Elves.

The Dalish, that is. No one wants to know about the Harels, most don’t consider them people
nowadays. The city Elves seem pleasant enough, but even then the disdain held towards the greater
population these days is parallel to that of a dog just before it is put to the death.

Which isn’t a problem, not in this household. The family here walks on a strong foundation: that
love is love, and life is to be lived to its fullest. The path one walks is to be respected and intuition
must be earned in earnest. Compassion must be held of the utmost regard, and no one, absolutely
no one, is to question Jasette and all of her riotous fury.

Beyond that, the forest is beautiful. The farm is bountiful, the neighbors are quite. And life was
simple.
Preface chapter; don't worry, I promise the farm life doesn't last long.
I didn’t realize it was an unusual concept that white critters are generally born black - at least they are with horses. And technically all those white horses you see on tv are grey, but that’s just me being a picky prick.
As spring rolls into summer, the people of Ingersoll continued their indifferent lives. A few neighbors would arch a brow or ask a question regarding the Kesslers’ newest addition, but little else happened in the span of eight months.

Perhaps it is the location. Perhaps the blame for the quite living is to be put on the physical map: Ingersoll was between the Bannorn and the Hinderlands, after all. Their biggest and greatest city was across the lake, and Redcliff did not amount to much as a ‘biggest’ nor ‘greatest’ on any front.

Or, perhaps it was precisely the location that attracted the settlers there. Snuggly between mountains and rivers, the intermediate valley of Ingersoll was a perfect place to be overlooked for all things of value (all things but tax collection of course).

Maybe it was this nothingness that attracts the families seeking quiet that results in the forest, with its tall, unbending trees and winding rivers. Or maybe it was the Still Forest and all of its glory just out of reach of the Black Forest. Perhaps it was spared the flames for a reason - this is what children are told, at least. That the Still Forest and its people were saved.

But no matter the reason, the simplicity here knew no bounds. As such, it is only proper for an entire people to be aware of all of the minuet changes to occur within every household: Noa Sacha getting married, for example, or the Alekon family’s electric lightbulb. Or, as this year would produce, the Kessler – more specifically the elven Kessler – halla.

And true to their word, the creature grew into its legs and color. It was still too short and too young and too frail to consider riding, but the black coat gave way to a marbled grey before beginning to bleed white. The blue eyes remain unchanged, however, in their pursuit of knowing everything.

Everything to be known by a deer, that is. Bright eyes pick out Vallen from the corner of the family farm, and she sings in anticipation, tail high like her budding antlers. As Vallen approaches the fence she runs alongside the pasture, excited feet picking up to new heights as she bolts back and forth.

He stops to stroke her head of course, fishing his fingers around the base of her skull and scratching in those hard-to-reach spots. The halla’s attention sidetracts as her caretaker emerges, warm air escaping her excited bleat in the morning chill. Aupia hushes her, jogging down the cottage path, eyebrows knitted together in frustration.

Vallen pulls at his pack string and smiles at Aupia. “It’s love, Aupia. Don’t hush it.”

“I will hush my damned pet all I want, thank you very much,” she curses, swatting the doe’s lips away from her fingertips. “It’s like she gets louder and louder every morning.”

“Your dad doesn’t mind?”

“My dad doesn’t mind anything – it’s my mom that has an eye out to gut Quagga.”

Quagga. An odd name for an odd find. It was Maes and Gracia who named her, the excited pair spending hours that second day imitating the various noises the elk gurgled as Vallen helped out around the family’s druffalo farm. At first it was a call to hush the excited beast, but the name stuck. Quagga Kessler.

“Are we bringing her with us?”
“Unless you want to carry that eaglevulture the whole way.” Aupia fishes out the doe’s makeshift halter and saddle pack, gearing up the doe for the day. Vallen keeps his attention on the halla, who watches her elf in earnest.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“Yeah. It’ll be a good desensitizing chance for her.” Quagga stands quietly as the two work their way around her, adjusting various straps and adding weight to her back; as undomesticated as she is, few things are allowed to slip out of control in the Kessler household, and manners is definitely not one of them. Where Aupia failed to train the deer, her father took over. Vallen’s mother is convinced Mercer could have trained Quagga to do backflips.

Within an hour the team sets out for their adventure to the city, and they arrive in time for the midday festivities. As the sun peaks around the hazy mountains and the fog rolls away, the trees slip away, bright morning light filtering through the new day. From across the water, Redcliff and its tracks seem out of place compared to the quiet lull of Ingersoll and the neighboring residencies; however, for the generation that eagerly awaits its own adventures, Redcliff looks more like a dragon daring a fight than a… well, a halla in a herd of druffalo, for a lack of better terms. Quagga emits a namesake sound, a low gurgling that starts deep in her throat before blowing out through her nose alerting the other citizens of their presence; some of them are neighbors, and the children come eagerly to stroke the doe’s familiar coat. The others do their best to ignore the newcomers, instead focusing their attention on passing their goods on the community boat. She eyes the wooden device hesitantly, but when Aupia drops the lead rope and boards it, the deer is quick to follow, settling down to lie at the girl’s feet as they push off. Two women take to the oars, Aupia slowly stroking Quagga’s head resting in her lap, Vallen watching Ingersoll grow smaller and smaller. Vallen nudges Aupia, a wordless warning. She wasn’t paying attention – in truth, she never is – and is grateful once she realizes what her friend is referring to.

You can never be too careful in this ever-changing world. Aupia unties her careless bun, dark locks cascading down to her shoulders and runs a hand through it, ushering her hair around her ears. While her neighbors have come to terms with her, the festival in Redcliff is predicted to be host to a large array of people from far and wide; her figure is likely to give it away if the beast at her heel’s doesn’t, but humans tend to envy the thin frame of elven people, and Quagga is a looker in her own right - her ears, however, are a sharp reminder of the all-too recent war. Children meander to their end of the boat to cuddle with Quagga, who sighs and keeps her head in her elf’s lap; but her ears give away her split attention, swaying around to the conversation around her.

In more recent years, Redcliff has grown exponentially. New settlements spring up between the jagged rocks, prompting more commerce to set up booths and exchange points. The day’s festivities mark the anniversary of some event or another in more recent history. In all likelihood, it is a celebration marking the end of the Heritage Wars: Vallen and Aupia didn’t actually know, and nor did they particularly care. It is a somewhat odd concept, celebrating war.. Vallen keeps a protective hand on Quagga’s back as if to reassure himself of their last three weeks’ prizes material presence. The plan is simple – sell as much as possible, and see if there are any new books.

Strings of lights bead the trees as instruments light up the morning atmosphere, and as the boat creeps closer and closer, the fine details of the Inquisitor’s statue emerges. Diligent details were carved into the stone as if recreating the Maker’s image himself; from her braids down to her boots, the artist likely spent years etching away at the marble for this one. She stands with her mage’s staff planted firmly in front of her, a fierce look knotted against her brow, but infamous generosity evident in the slight smile on her lips. The statue probably commemorates her leading the mages, if not that, then the pilgrimage to Skyhold.
Like every father to their daughter, Mercer would tell Aupia as many stories as he could about the Inquisitor and all of her accomplishments. It’s easy to get lost in the details, to forget one’s own limitations when they listen to all of the feats this mere woman achieved, but isn’t that the point? A woman unknown was given a burden and walked away with her head high, only to turn back around to stare down the danger and save the world. A woman, a woman! Not just that, but a mage! A mage? A mage! And better yet? Aupia curls a hand around her ear, covered protectively by her long hair.

Yes, it is easy to get lost when the stories illuminate the near impossible.

The train on the far side of the cliffs cries out upon approach. Quagga’s head shoots up from under Aupia’s fingertips, bright eyes full of mischief as she returns the call, body quaking from her place on the boat’s gently swaying floor. The children laugh, the adults smile. Aupia and Vallen laugh too.

The boat rocks as it docks, and Aupia has a difficult time keeping her girl down on the floor while the families get to their feet and pass their possessions around. Quagga jolts up abruptly once it is their turn to depart, delicate feet dancing as she leaps from boat to dock into Vallen’s quick reach. She spins around him, blue eyes large as she takes in deep breathes and emits low gurgles, Vallen trying in vain to coo her into calming down.

“You ready for this?”

As Aupia reaches up and out of the boat to Vallen’s side, she nods to him.

“Let’s make a one-way trip to the stables. We’ll sell what we can then carry everything back with us for a second try.” Vallen smiles, grateful as ever for her company: again, his people skills are lacking considerably. At least with Aupia he carries a moderate look of knowing what he’s doing… despite the obvious setbacks of walking around with an elf.

They don’t make it too far before they’re stopped and checked. The families meander ahead of them as they make their ways up the dockside slope to the center marketplace. Guards stand at either side of the entrance, expressions masked by their helms, hands gripping lazily around the shaft of their flagged lances.

Aupia and Vallen stop knowingly just as one guard raises a hand at them. Quagga takes a curious step forward before she realizes the sway of the flags; she snorts at the officer and stomps impatiently, tail swishing.

“Sorry about that sir,” Aupia hands Quagga’s lead rope to Vallen as she fishes in her jacket for her paperwork. Vallen offers a satirical smile at the faceless man. “Her curiosity gets the better of her most of the time.”

“Do you have a registration for this creature?” Aupia’s eyes shift up to look at the man, her subtle anger flickering to his face before looking back in her pockets. He shouldn’t have to say that, with her obviously digging around as she is. As difficult as it is to admit, it’s actually almost a nice change from previous stops; every time she enters the city district she is checked. Some will ask her what her business is. Some will ask her to remove all of her heavy layers. Some will simply refuse her the right to pass through without some sort of voucher from a nearby human.

When she was younger, her parents were quick to hush protests from Aupia. They’re just being careful Jasette would say, they’re just trying to keep everyone safe Mercer would say.

Which, if you are on the receiving end of this “protection,” you know it is outrageous bullshit. Her
parents knew it as well, and it’s not like they quietly accepted the treatment every time. But being tolerant of ignorance is a key to living peacefully, and the need to object slowly subdued.

So now that the attention was pinned on her clearly out-of-place goat, it was almost nice.

But it was also hell – *ain’t no one got the right to question my Quagga*.

“Here, sir,” she adds politely, handing over the paperwork. “It’s printed and everything.” The officer removes his helm and holds it under his arm as he takes the folded papers tentatively, eyebrows arched in question as he leafs through the pages. The man flicks his attention between papers and his current hostage, little more than hasty judgement occupying his square human expression. The uncomfortable atmosphere blisters on Aupia’s skin as she keeps her head down to avoid eye contact, Vallen keeping his eyes even with the soldier.

Another officer shuffles over to their presumed superior, a woman under the clade armor. “Sir?”

“I can’t tell if these are real.” Aupia muffles the urge to scream with a sigh. “It doesn’t look printed.”

“Oh for-“

Vallen kicks her and raises an arm to wave at someone. “Hey, Grant!”

“Vallen? Vallen Sacha!” The guards turn around, gifting Aupia the opportunity to look up - she’s met with a smile. “And Aupia. And the Kessler addition! How are you guys? It’s good to see you!”

Grant hustles down the slope, soldier’s armor glistening under the now-overhead sun. The easiest way to describe this individual is obliviously earnest – he doesn’t always acknowledge hostility in the environment, which makes him a powerful neutral force as a city guard in Redcliff. He pulls his helmet off revealing a full smile as he extends an arm to shake hands with Vallen. Vallen grips it feverously with both hands; not something he usually does, but given the quick save from his old neighbor he is grateful. “We’re good, we’re good. Thanks for asking. How’s the post treating you?”

“Not all that bad,” he admits, nodding his chin at his fellow officer. The man holding Quagga’s papers doesn’t look the least bit amused as Grant advances to hug Aupia. She grips him warmly, keeping her face up and smile on. “Is this the new one?”

“Yup. Her name is Quagga.” Grant extends a slow hand towards Quagga’s upright, tense head. She turns to the side to eyeball him more fully. “I didn’t think female deer ever grew antlers.” He murmurs, watching her keenly.

Grant turns a little to look at Aupia. “Is it alright if I-?”

“Of course. She likes scratches behind her ears.”

“My dads told me about her. I thought they said she was a black fawn.”

“She used to be. She can’t seem to make up her mind nowadays as to what she’ll look like.” That gets a laugh out of Grant, deep and warm reflecting the young man’s personality.

Without turning his attention from Quagga, Grant shifts gears. “Loomis, what seems to be the issue here?”

Ser Loomis shifts his weight from side to side as his grip tightens around Aupia’s paperwork. “I’m
validating the state of this animal, Denmark. These papers look forged.”

Grand laughs again, this time a little forcefully. “Of course they aren’t.”

“And how would you presume to know that, Denmark?”

“Because I’m the one who witnessed and delivered the pages to her from the mayor, Loomis.”

Grant responds, as if asked what color the sky is. He settles with a final pat on the doe’s head and turns on his heel to stare evenly at his fellow officer. Loomis huffs disapprovingly and hands Aupia the pages back, to which she keeps in hand. He dismisses her with a flick of his hand and sets his helm back on, Grant standing where he once was.

“My apologies… Today is a big day, there’s no limit to how careful you can be.”

“Thank you.” Aupia avoids saying no problem as often as she can here – at least with Grant he will respect her reasons why. He plants his hands on his hips, one resting calmly on the hilt of his sword as he nods towards their catches. “Looking to sell today?”

“That’s the plan.” Vallen starts walking up the path, Aupia, Grant, and Quagga following suit. “Your dads wanted a new bearskin, right?”

“Andraste give them strength, they doesn’t need another bearskin.” Grant shakes his head. “What he does need to know, however, is when that new niece or nephew of yours is going to be here.”

“Maker’s breathe, hopefully not any time soon.”

Grant laughs at that. “Well, they also want to know when your wedding will be, but I doubt-“ Both Aupia and Vallen throw their heads back in exaggerated exhaust.

“Funny,” Aupia chides with an elbow in Grant’s side. Vallen rolls his eyes and runs a hand down his face. “So funny. Why don’t they just play matchmakers with some other poor suckers.”

“Why do you think they’re coming by later today?” Grant stops at the mouth to the market, the noise of idle conversations rising around them like a gentle tide. He strokes Quagga once more. “I’ll try to get stationed in the stalls later on, hopefully I can keep an eye on her. Have fun with the market you two, it was nice to catch up.”

“We should try to come to Redcliff more often,” Aupia tries, playing with her hair as she takes Quagga’s lead rope from Vallen. “We almost miss you back at home.”

“Funny, Kessler. You’re a funny one.” He waves them off, knowing full well she doesn’t mean it. No one does. Not in a region as small as Ingersoll.

As the two descend into the noise and chaos, Aupia can’t help but purse her lips. “Did you see how he took the papers?” she growls, tucking them feverously in her inner breast pocket. Vallen glares ahead but shrugs, his minuet effort to pass of the situation as if it didn’t bother him as well. His eyes settle on a hunter’s stall.

“It was as if you were giving him the head of his firstborn.” Aupia laughs in relief. She responds with a “you’re freaking awful,” between chuckles. Vallen shrugs again, but smiles as he looks at his friend – her mask is off. She means this smile.

Quagga butts her head between them as she lunges forward – the Qunari walking in front of them had a sweet apple, a forbidden treat in the Kessler household.
"Oh quit it."

For the first three hours, the team barters and banter with traders of all kinds. Some families passing through Redcliff for the day seemed interested enough in the smaller purchases like squirrels, fennexes, and quails – those were gone with relative ease, thanks to Aupia’s quick tongue. The bigger catches were a little harder to bargain for a proper price, but by the time the sun started to curl around for its descent, most of their goods were gone. There were a lot of laughs to be had, a lot of games to test out, and a lot of people to reunite with.

It was a slow crawl through the village with frequent stops, either from people or booths yelling for trade or for passersby eager to meet the foreign deer. There’s no chance a halla would be sighted from Redcliff itself, but a lot of these families came from the western and southern slopes, so even if they had seen some in the distance they were never likely to be close enough to pet one. The children giggle as their parents marvel at how well-behaved Quagga, or there illusion of how well behaved she was. Quagga’s ears never rested during their slow meander: there are far too many sights and smells to be consumed. She was surprisingly quiet however – probably due to the moderate stress of her newfound environment – but when gentle fingers would run over her long hair she would bow her head lower for a nice scratch, wide eyes settling back into her skull as she emitted a low rumble. Quagga was very good at getting things her way around people.

Nearly half way through their parade through town, Quagga froze, legs stiff in bitter refusal to move forward. She threw her head up and snorted, blue eyes bugging at the threat on her life in front of her.

Vallen and Aupia didn’t notice until it was too late that their pack halla stopped – Vallen nearly toppled over himself at the strain put on the lead rope. He curses incoherently and gives a few tugs only to reside in defeat.

"Aupia."

She ignores him, instead opting to finish a trade with a walker for a wolfpelt. Vallen waits as patiently as can be until Quagga’s face ripples as she cries out, lips trembling as she releases a namesake wail into the crowd. Several heads turn in haste towards the boy.

"Addy!"

"Alright alright! What is it?” She bows to the dwarf walking away before spinning on her heel to size up whatever is in front of them. She rolls her eyes, head following in a greatly exaggerated swing around to glare at Vallen.

"Vallen. It’s just a band. Just give her a tug."

"Give me some credit! Don’t you think I’ve tried that?” Quagga lets out another wail and tries to back up into the ever-moving crowd.

"Quagga boo, hush!” Aupia drifts over and takes the rope, stroking the doe’s neck. Vallen’s growing unease is reassured by the crowd watching them in repugnance. “Aupia, we should probably get her under control and walk on.”

She doesn’t turn away. “We’re in the middle of Redcliff, what’s the worst that can happen?” Aupia eyes settle on the band in front of them, one of those ‘hip’ new groups with their new instruments.
And Aupia recognizes instantly what the problem is.

The band has paused for a breather, the lull of the crowd filling in the vacancy of noise; neither of them realized the band wasn’t even playing - not until now, that is. But sure enough they start up again, and Aupia tightens her grip on the doe’s rope.

… it’s nice though. The music that is. Her parents disagree as many of their generation does, but the instruments swing as the band kicks into gear. It’s a new style of music and a new form of dance, bright instruments in hand glistening under the orange-tinted light. They have funny names like ‘the clarinet’. The trumpet. The saxophone. They are big and glistening, brightly colored creations of the new silverite alloy. They swing with the noise, an electric beat that quickly takes over the crowd. Individual conversations are subdued, then their attention sways from one another.

Aupia’s mother once called music a form of magic; Jasette blames music for introducing her to Mercer. She blames the music, of all things. Music, perhaps not unlike the Chant, is a form of communication as well as a means of connection.

(For a deeper understanding, refer to Orlaisian tongue-kissing)

But the times are changing, the people here idle, and no one seems willing to dance.

That is, no one except for the elven girl the world didn’t know was born in the middle of a forest.

Aupia loops Quagga’s lead rope around her neck before tying it off in a knot. It doesn’t take Vallen long to realize what she’s doing, and at first he denies her extended hand, her open invitation.

“No.”

“Your dancing is shit, ‘doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it.”

“Aupia, mind your tongue.” He flicks a hand at the children walking by. “We’re in a family environment.”

“A family environment with music and no dancing. Emphasis on the lacking dancing.” Vallen crosses his arms over his chest.

“What do you possibly have to gain from this?”

“She’s afraid of the instruments, not the noise, not the people.” Aupia beckons to Quagga’s gently quaking body. “Based on how she’s responding, she needs to get through this problem, not go around it.”

“So your answer to the problem is dancing?”

“Nothing says ‘don’t fear it’ like a bunch of people indifferent to it – cause a commotion, create a crowd, and she’ll see its nothing something to fear. See? Getting through the problem, not around it.”

“OR we could just, I don’t know, literally walk around it.” The light in Aupia’s face fades briefly as Quagga stands stupidly next to her.

“Have a little faith. Besides, it not like we have anything to hurry back to… or any egos to bruise. There’s nothing to lose.” She spins around and makes her way closer to the band with a disregarding flick of her wrist. Vallen doesn’t follow, instead opting to recross his arms over his chest.
Fine. Be that way.

And she starts to dance. Not that she’s all that good – most of her dancing comes from sessions with Maes and Gracia in the privacy of the Sacha family room. But she dances carelessly, and in some ways more than others, that in itself is beautiful. Messy and without refrain, aaaaand pretty stupid once you take a step back, but there is a smile. And the band picks up the beat, swinging even more to match their one-man audience.

Some children run past Vallen’s knees to join her, disgruntled parents quick to snap before snapping their jaws shut. Slowly, an elderly couple joins in. Then a younger couple.

Then a group of friends.

And a herd of children – seriously, a heard of them. Probably six or seven.

Then Quagga has had enough; the halla bleats as she watches the chaos, head swinging wide to catch glimpses of her girl somewhere in the mess. Her shoulders tremble, but she slowly walks forward, head low and nostrils flared. Her grey flank quivers as she nears the madness. Aupia emerges, Quagga screams, and in her own way starts to dance, picking up her feet in her characteristically unnecessarily-high lengths as she circles her girl. Aupia is breathless with laughter as she beckons Vallen into the chaos, to which he rolls his eyes and slowly trudges forward.

What’s the worst thing that can happen?

It’s the little moments like these.

These are the gems that make life worth living, makes adventures worth taking, makes pain worth enduring. It highlights the simple livelihood of the people out here with the one thing that matters the most – joy. The friends almost forgot how little they meant to the universe in that moment, the only thing worth wrapping your mind around being the present.

The team runs out of the storm, breathless smiles plastered across their faces. They let their carelessness get the upper hand and were in the middle of the mess for a few songs, Quagga circling them frantically as they flail in the crowd. Once they leave for the stables a round of applause begins, and Aupia spins around in an exaggerated bow, welcoming the attention; even the band set their instruments aside to clap briefly for the girl.

When her face comes back up to meet the crowd, her eyes catch the attention of an eloquent woman. She could have been a hundred feet away, yet their eyes lock, commanding shades of brown pinning the girl down. It lasted no more than an instant, the moment catching her breath. But she releases it a heartbeat later, trailing off after Vallen, Quagga glued to her hip. The woman
was nothing more than a bystander – someone who stood out in the Redcliff atmosphere yes, but someone… someone worth regarding. She was beautiful. All things considered, she didn’t belong in Redcliff.

“Aupia?” Vallen leans into her field of vision; she recoils at his movement. “Sorry what?”

“I asked if you really think Quagga will be alright in here.” The thought of the woman still fresh in her mind traps her thinking; Aupia shakes off the feeling of intrigue and confusion by running a hand through her air. “Yeah, she’s been doing well when I take her on deliveries. This is just another step for her.” Aupia pushes her way into a vacant stall, Quagga obediently at her side. “It should give her a break from the marketplace – since it’s a sensory overload for me, I can hardly imagine what’s going through that little pea-brain of hers.” She unlatches the halter and steps out as Vallen emerges with a bucket of water to pour in the trough. Quagga hums approvingly as she drops her head, Aupia taking the bucket from Vallen as he closes the door behind them, Quagga’s saddlepack and gear tucked into the fore corner of the stall out of sight.

The music still sails through the atmosphere, beckoning her attention back out where they entered. The stone-made stables seems to quiet down the noise considerably, lowering the level to that of the horses quietly munching around her. The warmth of the stables, the stillness, was a refreshing change from the hum of the marketplace. Peace is nearly tangible – it is tangible enough to distract her from the people who emerge from the other end of the hallway.

“Hey.”

Already it’s a trap. There are four of them – three males, one female - Both Aupia and Vallen can feel the next question bubbling before it ever leaves the tallest brute’s lips. He’s big, not unlike Grant, but distinctly ungroomed. Aupia drops her head obediently; the hair on Vallen’s neck rises in disgust as they wait for the inevitable.

“Are you one of them?”

It’s hard, to know how to respond when any feasible answer is likely to lead down a slippery slope: say yes, and they’ll have all means of justification to beat you bloody. Say no and you’re lying, giving them an even better reason to leave you on the cement. So Aupia does the only thing she can do – she tries to walk away.

But its humiliating, to be called out for a war that wasn’t your doing. To be associated with the people responsible for death of not only their enemies and their families, but of their own neighbors and kin. The Heritage Wars was easily the most bloody time in the Dragon Age, no questions asked. The budding new age of weaponry did not contribute in well to the efforts for peace.

And those damned Harels.

Now, notice the tried to walk away. The human puts an arm out, a simple barricade separating Aupia from the rest of the world. Quagga paws from her place in the stall, Aupia raises her head to look forward, but doesn’t look at them. She drops the bucket, a sign of pacifism if there ever is one.

“Aww come on knifey, there’s nothing to fear but a little truth. And hey, maybe, I don’t know-“ his
hand grabs her shoulder. He takes a step closer to her, his body now against hers.

“...maybe we can... destress a little. Unwind, get familiar between our people. Help each other out, ya’ know? Get to know one another in all the nicest ways we can.”

She doesn’t know what she was expecting: maybe she was still processing his words through the steam coming out of her ears, her eyes slowly growing wider as she weighed his syllables against her heart. Maybe someone shouted – that’s likely, given the shape of this crowd.

But I can tell you in certainty, she was not expecting Vallen’s fist in the face of that boy.

And apparently he wasn’t expecting it either, since Vallen met no resistance when he advanced on the leader of the little gang.

Well, now the staying silent option was no longer there, you may as well run with the nugs when the time comes. Aupia ducks and headbutts the same guy, still staggering about after Vallen’s knuckles crossed his cheeks. Vallen then turns on the closest thing he can – the dwarf, so it would seem – and tries to replicate his last string of luck; this young man knew what was coming however and wasn’t taking any chances. The dwarvan tackles Vallen, arms swung wide around the boy’s waist. Aupia yells something - it is difficult to know exactly what in the heat of the moment – before she is also taken down, this time by the girl that was behind her. Whatever hit her in the back of the head was enough to send her face-first into the pavement, bare palms scraping flesh away. It would have been nice to keep her hair back and out of her face as it now spills over her eyes, but the mask doesn’t stop the fire burning inside. Aupia stands, squares up the other girl, and somehow ends up pinning her against another stall in a deadlock. She slams the girl’s chest into the wall, the horses crying out around her in the commotion.

That is, of course, until the initial asshole grabs her by the hair, dragging her back with a punch to her back. He spits wild curses as he drags her across the cold ground, calling her everything from an abomination to a lowly being - nothing worth repeating, nothing worth acknowledging.

But it hurts. As her nails dig into his wrists as she’s hoisted up to her feet, it hurts.

Aupia finds her footing and kicks the guy in the shin, earning a solid yank on her scalp. Vallen yells something unseemingly unforgiving, which earns Aupia another throw-around as she yelps in pain. Quagga dances around, spinning in her stall, lungs shaking as she bleats. Helpless.

But she tries. Aupia continues to struggle against his hold until something forces the boy to dislodge his fingers from her hair. As Aupia collapses, she finally has the strength to recognize the words around her, someone hollering orders to freeze, another calling out Vallen’s name.

The boy that first touched Aupia spits as he yells, “Oh shit!” His head spins, arms out in a wild flail as he tries to reach out and grab his goons. He takes off running down the pavement before his feet know what he’s attempting to do, Armed forces in hot pursuit of the goons straggling to keep up. Echos of “Gogo go!” ring out from the stones as Aupia finds herself on her palms again. She looks up to see Grant standing protectively behind her.

“Ah, tits,” Grant groans after a few deep breaths, slumping down the nearest stall wall, feet sliding out from underneath him. Aupia crawls to his side as Vallen flanks over to them both, a slight hobble in his gait. Despite the blood running from his nose and a cut above his eyebrow, Vallen looks as cross as his mother. Grant offers a weak smile at his old neighbors before his head slumps to the side, good hand resting protectively on his opposing shoulder. “I was supposed to catch the bastards.”
Quagga cries out as she paces her stall, snorting and huffing in agitation. “You did more than you were supposed to, soldier,” Aupia murmurs, fingers flickering over his cheeks before settling one on his back to rub in comforting circles. “You didn’t need to step in.”

“Now that is a ripe pile of steaming shit.” He says, eyes fluttering open with a wicked smile.

Vallen is not amused. His hands dance over Grant’s arm, eyes tracing invisible faults in the skin underhand. His hands shake a little, mimicking his shaky breaths. “Shut up, both of you. I’m trying to work here.”

“Val—“

“Vallen, I'm fine.”

“Andraste’s ass you are,” Vallen growls. Aupia purses her lips at his reaction; at this point, he’s likely to have a permanent crease in his brow from this evening, but she can’t let him walk away with how he acted. She avoid eye contact with him for as long as she can. Grant, oblivious as he is, pays no mind. “Val, I don’t think it’s broken, I'm fine.”

“It’s out of place is what it is. I’m going to pop it back in, but this might hurt.” He looks up at Aupia who stares hastily back. “This is going to hurt,” he warns, a repetition that weighs down the atmosphere. She breaths through her nose and nods knowingly.

“Alright, gimme a sec.” He shifts his weight against the stall and takes a deep breath. “Kay, ready when you are.”

Vallen still stares at Aupia, her hand rubbing reassuringly over Grant’s back. “On the count of three.”

“One, two, –“

Muffled magic runs from Aupia’s palm through Grant; in terms of the extent of her magical knowledge, this is Aupia’s limit. It stings her like a thousand bees, but his sensations momentarily drowning in muddy nerves. He feels a dull ache as his humerus snaps back roughly into place, pain evident in his wince, but it was quick and clean.

“You’re going to want to keep that across your chest.” Vallen checks his handiwork by pulsating his fingers around Grant’s shoulder, Aupia drawing in a shaky breath, a familiar fuzziness settling in her bones. “Try not to use that arm for a few days, not that you’d listen to me.”

“I’m willing to consider it.” He smiles again as he rises to his feet, good arm hanging on to Aupia. “Thank you, really.”

“No,” Aupia wrings her hands once his footing is stable, refusing to look up. Her cheeks burn as she weighs her words reluctantly. The stinging starts to settle in her ears, making it hard to make out words. “Thank you. You didn’t need to step in.”

Grant bows a little to catch her field of vision. Benevolent, oblivious Grant. “It’s my civic duty, Aupia. I’m not much of a city guard if I can’t protect two people. Let alone my friends.” Friends? Friends as in they knew each other their entire lives – that’s the glory of growing up in a small area. You have to get along with everything, one cannot physically afford to do otherwise.

But Aupia smiles up at him, guilty pride returning her eyes to the floor. Quagga murmurs from the stall, still on a high from the blood spilt in front of her. Steps from behind them suggests the other officers have returned, but when Grant straightens his shoulders and clicks his heels to attention,
Aupia turns in confusion to the silhouette illuminating the exit.

It’s the woman from before, and by all means is she the definition of beauty. Her legs fall apart in a powerful stance, silky drapery swaying from her step. Something dances in her eyes as she dissects every inch of Aupia. The girl feels like an insect under a wrathful eye of the Maker, the woman’s lips tightly sealed in an indifferent expression. Her hands are clasped behind her back, stark cheekbones raised as she physically elevates herself to look down on them. But she squares herself up, similar to how Grant did, but for another reason entirely.

*She’s a figure of respect. A visitor. Probably full of her own opinions.*

Aupia raises her eyes to the woman and settles her hands at her sides. Grant readies himself before her like she’s some sort of person of value: Aupia stares back in blatant defiance. She can feel Vallen brush against her side and can only imagine the expression on his face - that boy is like an open book.

She becomes vaguely aware that Grant is addressing her and the situation, his hands waiving over his old neighbors as he says something or another. But the woman doesn’t seem to acknowledge him – instead, she spins on her heel and marches away without so much as a word of warning.

Vallen releases a long, shaky breath before Aupia realizes she was holding one herself, her eyes still transfixed on the point where their guest disappeared.

Vallen turns a little to do a once-over on Aupia. “Are you alright?”

Now her blood boils. She forgets herself, she forgets the day they’ve had – the dancing, the fight, the uninvited judgement – and spits at the ground by his boot. Vallen doesn’t flinch. “Alright? Alright? Val, you just picked a fight with some fucking assholes over nothing!” She shoves against him and advances, taking a step as he’s forced one back. The buzzing in her ears almost makes her trip over herself. “Dammit! Who are you to fight my battles? You know my policy, you’ve known it for years! What the fuck were you thinking?”

His cross expression turns sour as she shoves against him again, but he doesn’t stumble this time. Instead he takes a micro step closer to her, eyes lit in the dark atmosphere.

“I didn’t fight for your Maker’s-damned pride, Aupia. That’s a lost cause.” He spits. “I don’t give two shits about your heritage, I never have and I never will. I told you that before, didn’t I?”

“Then what in the Maker’s name-“

“He was talking about rape, Aupia.” The aggression in his voice drops, but his face is still feverously unforgiving. “Am I not allowed to draw a line there?” Then, hands curling, “What if he was talking about Gracia? To Gracia?”

The silence hangs, a dead man’s noose.

“Uh, guys?”

The friends turn wickedly on Grant – it isn’t the first time they’ve forgotten his presence. They challenge him in unison. “What?”

The oaf of a soldier suddenly seems smaller as he cups his bad shoulder; his companions are with him again, as well as some other figure they haven’t seen before. They all stare at them in varying levels of shock.
But the new face walks towards them. She’s dressed as a private envoy, hood up and knives hanging at her waistline. The young woman must be just a few years older than Aupia, but at the same height, she doesn’t amount to much as yet another outsider.

The woman speaks with an Orlaisian accent. “Grand Enchantress Vivienne would like to see you in her company.”

The two freeze, unsure of how to respond. That was the Grant Enchantress?

Several seconds pass in silence. Vallen chokes up the courage first, still trying to sound angry. “Who does she want to see exactly?” The agent nods to Aupia as she quietly flexes her fingers, her body still humming. The magic, she saw the magic.

I’m doomed.

“I go where she goes,” Vallen immediately insists, crossing his arms over his chest as if a means to make himself look more intimidating.

He expected resistance – he wasn’t met with any.

The agent nods and starts to walk away. “Come with me please.” The two look back at Grant; when he realizes they are looking for reassurance, he does what he always had – he shrugs, which earns him a wince.

But he smiles in comfort and waves his hand, beckoning them to follow the woman. Apparently he’s feeling confident.

But Grant is oblivious, he does not know the weight of the world around him. Perhaps he thought she would reason through the tussle with them, maybe offer them an award for their bravery. Quagga pokes her head out from the stall guard, confusion bright in her big blue eyes.

Vallen thought they were going to get hung.

Aupia thought she was about to be leashed to the inside of a spire.

But neither of them could predict what happened next.

Now, sometimes when working with a creature frozen with fear, I’ve learned you sometimes have to go THROUGH the problem as opposed to around or over it. Kids are like this, at least my students sometimes are.

Not that dancing will help a horse overcome a fear of bikes, but whatever it’s all the same.
Quae Perierat

Chapter Summary

"what was lost"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They trudge through the marketplace like stray dogs leashed and bound to an invisible choker. The liveliness of Redcliff hadn’t diminished in the least since the tussle in the stables – if anything, it seems more alive now; the strings of lights tying the booths and trees together light up under the sunset sky. The band continues to play, the crowd continues to dance.

Vallen bumps into Aupia frequently; there’s a break in his step, so between that and the dense crowd, it would be nearly impossible for the two to not rub shoulders every now and then. What would have once been acceptable, however, was not. Not currently. Thanks their argument and the weight of the situation, Vallen can practically feel thorns growing out of Aupia’s side. When he finally looks at her, what he sees is anything but: her eyes are wide and unblinking, her sight vacant. What he wants to do is stroke the blood off her face before it dries there, or to tie her hair out of her face to help her think.

But all he can do is stare, and the hardness in his heart sinks before turning brittle.

No, Vallen has no plans of losing her today. He will not accept this.

He hooks his fingers between hers and grips them, pinky and forefinger lost to the crowd. Aupia jolts and looks up at the touch only to find him staring indifferently ahead.

Aupia bits her lower lip and tightens her grip on him. When her attention returns to the feet of their guide, she walks a little more comfortably in her skin. They march quietly through the spirited crowd, their hold on each other the only thing anchoring them to their senses.

Aupia looks back at Vallen, acutely mindful that she hasn’t asked about him about their skirmish. “How’s your head?”

“It’s been better,” he huffs, eyes narrowing. He arches an eyebrow and looks at her without turning his head. “Yours?” Aupia winces in return, confirming his suspicions; Vallen felt like his head was splitting open like a nut. Aupia felt like hers had just been run through a meat grinder, the fog of using her untrained magic messing with her sense of balance. Aupia starts scanning the booths around them. “I could go for an orange right about now.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She smiles despite knowing he isn’t paying attention. Her heart falls as she recognizes the hum of the day; a family scurries past, each child toting a sweet treat while the parents drown in their new goods. She walks a little slower, her head a little lower.

“This wasn’t how today was supposed to go,” she whispers. Vallen tightens his grip on her fingers once more as the crowd filters out from around them. Their guide stops at the entrance of a highly-decorated tent, silk parted down the middle with an eloquent golden weave. The tent must be the
size of the Kessler living room, if the entrance can do it any justice. The guards stationed on either side of the entrance seems oblivious to them as they wait for their envoy’s next directions, who offers them nothing but an upward-facing palm in the darkness between the folds.

The two wait a moment longer. They could run, or they could at least try. But with the persona of this implied person, they would not likely get very far.

That was an easy choice earlier, but now Aupia squares her shoulders. She walks boldly forward as if in complete control. Each step leaves behind her anxiety, or at least putting up a valiant effort of trying to. Vallen hobbles to follow her, their fingers no longer woven together. There is no need for that now.

Inside of the tent is a whole new world; truly, if such a thing could exist. Paintings hang from the crimson fabric as if physical strength was of no regard. Various tapestry overlaps across the floor, vivid patterns of vast imaginations spanning the walkway of the guests. The designs are unfamiliar to the two of them, but captivating nonetheless. To the right, a table with great paperwork, piled higher than anything Aupia has seen before. A velveteen cushion is perched on each seat in the small space as if to host a dozen figures, the ivory legs of the chairs carved with great detail.

Ivory? In Redcliff? And such a bright red! They almost matched the stones poking out of the cliffside beyond them. Aupia and Vallen exchange quick looks of intrigue, Aupia silently asking a pleading what have we gotten ourselves into? Vallen shakes his head and turns his attention to the Chantplayer behind Aupia.

“Have you heard one before?”

The voice emerges from the opposing end of the tent; a window has been netted into the fabric, allowing their patron a view of the sea that separated the youths from their home. It is a voice of tell-tale value – it almost sounds like she manicures how every syllable rolls from her lips. The friends fail to answer, captivated, in truth, partly by their fear of this unknown figure. So she tries again, infamous patients wearing thin.

“The Chantplayer. Have you heard one before?”

Vallen swallows, his voice oddly dry. “We’ve never seen one before, ma’am.”

The woman chuckles from her seat in the natural light. She waves a hand to illuminate a lightbulb (light bulbs? In a tent?) and reaches for a glass. “You poor commonfolk, such depravities never cease to amuse me. Now,” she sets her glass back down and stands, her back to her guests. “You are a mage.”

It’s not a question, but rather a simple assumption, not too unlike what Aupia’s father will do when reflecting on the day. Aupia’s heart begins to pound against her ribs, her throat suddenly very, very tight; the young woman suddenly misses her home.

The silence lingers a little longer than it should, a confirmation of the words unspoken.

Vallen speaks after skipping a heartbeat, a sense of urgency in his voice Aupia hasn’t heard before. “I am the mage, ma’am.”

“Oh my dear boy that is enough of that.” The woman flicks her fingers, palm up in a sense of careless disregard. Her volume almost seems to elicit a great disdain for him. “Are you two not familiar with who I am?”

Vallen takes a bold step closer to her before Aupia sets a hand on his arm: if she truly knows, then
there’s no point in making things worse. The silence continues before the woman sighs. “Have you any proper training, as a mage?”

Aupia responds without hesitation because the truth is simple and easy to tell. Her voice doesn’t shake – not as much as she thought it would – as she says, “No ma’am. I never sought to… pursue it.” Vallen stares long and hard at the woman before them, oblivious to the conversation. *If eyes could be daggers…*

“No? Why not?”

“Respectfully ma’am, I have… other ambitions.” This earns a smile from the woman in the light, something dimly visible but undeniable. “Oh? Such as training unconditional beasts? Or is it dancing? I am sure those colleagues of yours in that hole for a stable would agree you have some moves to learn yet.” she teases without filter. The only response she gets is Vallen’s hard glare, to which she turns away from.

“Leave us. I will speak with the girl.”

“N-“

“Val.” He turns to her, his unsettling anger ever so present. Her voice is soft like the features of her face; if he didn’t know any better, he would not have guessed she was anxious. Perhaps her fear had been subdued into a state of sad acceptance. “It’s okay, I promise.”

“That’s shit,” he murmurs back, leaning in slightly to keep uninvited ears out. Aupia shakes her head and runs a hand through her hair as if to make herself presentable. “Go, Vallen. I’m not going anywhere.”

He is reluctant, to say the very least. But he slowly walks away, each step bringing him dangerously closer to cursing out their host. But he leaves without a word, and Aupia releases the breath she didn’t know she was holding.

“What is your name, my child?”

“Aupia. Aupia Kessler.”

Aupia still stares at the tent’s entrance when the woman speaks up again. “What is it your parents do, my dear? You do have parents.” Again, a statement seeking confirmation and explanation, not a question. Aupia thought that much was clear, but she answers obediently. “Yes ma’am. They - we - have a druffalo farm. We sell milk and hides.”

The woman sighs a thoughtful *hmmm*, finger tracing the rim of her glass. As the quiet accumulates, Aupia can’t help but feel like this intervention was less intervention-y than the stories her parents alluded to. “Are you the only elven family in the region?”

“My parents aren’t elven, ma’am. I do not know about our region, but I am the only one in Ingersoll.” The woman stands now, her attention still intently focused on the world outside. One day she must have been exquisite. She still is of course, but age has definitely caught up to her; lines race around her eyes telling stories of great laughter and joy, great scrutiny and social status. Similar lines begin to crease under her eyes, a reluctant admittance to the stress of years past. No matter of time and attention can erase the deepest pains.

But she speaks, this enchantress. “She looked like that, the first time I met her.” Aupia shifts her weight nervously as she toys with her hands behind her back. “Excuse me?”
The Grand Enchantress almost hesitates to continue; Aupia can see it in the momentary tremor in her hand as she sets down her glass, long fingers sliding over the silver.

“Your mother.” There is another pause, but for whose sake is unknown. The enchanter turns her head to the side, the profile of her finer features casting shadows in the artificial light. There’s a fondness in her eyes, a hint of nostalgia in the truth suddenly unveiled. “She was a minnow in a pond of sharks, the poor girl. An insolent man approached her with-”

“I, I am so sorry to interrupt… ma’am.” Vivienne turns foreright and sets a hand on her hip, shock flickering over her well-regulated composure. She stares at the girl before her; her age is known and no ‘girl’ is she, but here she stands, figure so small as she tries to chase the world spinning around her. Vivienne cannot see read her expression, nor does she want to. Aupia shifts her weight for the hundredth time, but she was right in the parallel; there was a fire in her belly, a fight in her heart so few ever witness, and the same storm brewed within the girl. Still, there were things to be explained, her upbringing, the… lack of magic present in her, and her general existence. Vivienne regains herself and folds her arm over her chest to prop an elbow, gentle, powerful fingers rubbing the underside of her chin in consideration. A time will come for those to be explored fully, but for now, one thing at a time.

“Well? Do not keep me waiting.”

“I just-“ The girl hesitates, the words on her tongue topping without thought. But this is a delicate manner, the Grand Enchantress is well aware of what is present, what is at stake: she waits patiently as the girl stares dumbly at the carpets.

“I don’t understand what makes you think you know my mother.”

“Knew your mother, dear.” Her brows pinch together for an instant as sadness washes over her features. But she schools herself with “She was very important to me, as she was to a great many people.”

“Ma’am I mean no disrespect,” Aupia shakes her head and brings her hands around to clasp in front of her. “But whoever you think I am-“

“What I think? My child, what I know is what I hold. You are an elven mage approximating nineteen years old. You are no longer a child, look me in the eye when I speak to you.” The bite in her command keeps Aupia hesitant, but she lifts her chin to face the woman.

“My apologies. I thought this was an environment where I was not… an equal.”

Vivienne rolls her eyes, not ignorant of the subtle cynical bite the young woman had for her. “Not an equal? Why? Because you are a young apostate that has been failed by our system or because you are an Elf?” She takes another sip from her wine glass, eyes drifting to a time far away. It’s hard to look at the young woman, her features are far too akin to that of her parents’.

Aupia’s heart drums against her ribs in a threat of breaking right through them. Her _mother_? Her _birth_ mother? Sure she had always been curious, but she never dreamed of learning the truth. It is simply easiest to assume her first parents didn’t want her. The easiest route is sometimes all you can afford to walk when the small life is all you have.

Besides, as far as she was concerned, she had parents. Real parents, _loving_ parents. This… this wasn’t what she was expecting to hear today. “Ma’am, how do you know how old I am?”

“The same way I knew your mother. The same way I know you are a mage. The same way I
concluded you were adopted, but for you to have lived…” Her careful voice trails off. Vivienne sighs and finally walks over to the girl, bold heart finally measuring her finer features. The curve of her ears, her cheekbones, the fine point of her chin, her wide-set eyes. She clears her throat once she is within arm’s reach; only now does she see the deep color of her eyes. The girl watches her tentatively, unsure of how much fear she should hold close to her heart.

But to know the answers to the questions she never, ever considered could… be answered?

And for her mother to have known the Grand Enchantress?

They stand in silence, eyes transfixed on each other and their histories. There are so many questions to ask for both parties, but they both lacked the strength to start.

Aupia breaks the silence, drawing some hair out of her face with all of the strength she could muster. “She’s dead? I wasn’t just… given up?”

“No.” The response is immediate. “No, she longed for you to be here, more than you may ever know. Your life gave her great strength.”

“What was her name?”

Vivienne eye’s trail off to something just beyond Aupia; they dance like dragonflies, darting as they drift down and away. They return to the girl at the last possible instant.

“Ellana. Ellana Lavellan.”

"Vivienne?"

“Yes, dear?”

Val Royeaux’s summer heat was intolerable. Humidity clung to everyone that season, an unforgiving clench of sweat beaded across their brows. Many masks were exchanged throughout the day to provide relief, a hint of possible relief from the heat as the nobles fought valiantly to continue their facades of control. Vivienne leaned against the balcony railing, absorbing the momentary peace of the world at hand, her own mask on the banister beside her.

Birds sang lazily. It almost reminded the woman of her days in the spire – it was not so foreign
here for her, as opposed to her company. Sera and all of her inept glory was there for a brief stay before returning to the hole that served as her headquarters, and even the Qunari had returned once the private scout had made contact with him. As the weather continued to get warmer and warmer, the mercenary captain bitterly opposed leaving, despite the obvious friction at his presence: not so much his sharp tongue nor his harrowed, conniving expression, but his horns.

The blossoms and roses were in full bloom. People walked idly beneath her, a familiar comfort in the lack of emanate disaster; with the front lines out of view, the people could settle back into their routines of ignorance. And while there was much to do to reinstate order amidst the chaos, the lull of the evening was soothing. The Grand Enchantress donned an evening ball gown, delicate silk offering alleviation as the sun curved around its highest point, its greatest state of removal from Thedas. Her dress reflected the golden rays of the sky, long linens faded blue as it tickled her bare feet.

And yet, the Inquisitor stood in full gear. Her Keeper’s robes were exchanged for the lose layers of an enchanter’s mail, a valiant effort to hide her greatest secret. She joined Vivienne on the balcony that day, her waddle carefully masked in a slow, meticulous walk slightly offset by her missing hand. She had abandoned her intricate wave of braids, instead asking the handmaidens to tie her hair back in a careful bun. Vivienne disapproved of the notion greatly but took it with a full heart, offering well-orchestrated reasons to curious onlookers during the passing days.

“I am going to leave. For the birth.” Vivienne slowly turned in shock, disapproval marrying her face. Well, perhaps not shock: to say she was surprised would be a lie, but she blatantly disapproved.

The Inquisitor spoke before she could respond, eyes tracing the ever-dim but ever-present scars in the sky. “If I stay here, everyone will know. There will be a vulnerability in our forces, and I can’t afford to put that in Victoria’s side, not now.” Her eyes were always bright, that Inquisitor. And while her pregnancy gave them a new sparkle, they now appeared desperate and tired, a reflection of the Inner Circle’s last few weeks.

“We are so close to ending this forsaken war. We can’t afford to appear weak.”

“It is not a weakness,” Vivienne tried, acknowledging her all-to-vain effort at comforting the woman. Ellana turned a little to her friend, weathered expression daring. “Really? I never thought I’d hear that from you.”

Vivienne reached for the glass near her – in recent years, there never seemed to be enough of the good wine within arm’s reach. “Life is a gift, that is not a weakness. Your irrational affliction for the man is going to be the death of us all, but that was not what I was referring to.”

“Ah.” The Inquisitor smiled kindly. She always appreciated honesty, even when it unfavorable. And it wasn’t her first time hearing that. Definitely not the first time from Vivienne either. She reached out and gripped the railing tightly, leaning forward as if to release some of the strain on her back. Vivienne watched, but failed to comment. Perhaps she should have.

Ellana did not object to the accusation.

“I just… I wanted to tell you. Before you heard it from someone else.” The birds sang, the world sat idle.

“I suppose I cannot convince you this is ridiculous.” Ellana laughed then, a sing-song, gentle sound. Vivienne never told her, but the woman’s laughter reminded her of the bells she heard in her youth. Questioning her was a bold attempt, but if there was anything to know about the Inquisitor
that was never stapled onto her statues dotting the landscape, it was that she was unforgivably set in her ways. Sure she was reluctant to be the final say in the lives of many, but her stalwart personality was a beast of its own. The enchantress knew this as well as any.

“You leave in the morning?”

“At first light. We’re departing under a banner of peace talks.”

“We?” Vivienne turned around to rest her back against the rail, eloquent composure present as ever, but her focus on her friend. Her leader. Her comrade, her dearest, most sincere companion. They may not have seen eye to eye on everything that came to part, but that never seemed to get in the way; they were both figures of great authority, both women of astounding power.

And they both found time to enjoy the little things, as often as they could afford to - usually in each other’s company. It was the tie that bound them together, if their mutual work for the betterment of the world was to be disregarded.

“Just Leliana. Some of her agents have set up a camp for us.”

“And where will you be going? Not some miserable inn, I pray.”

She chuckled and took a deep breathe in, a slight breeze washing over them both. “Worse. A forest.” Vivienne huffed in disgust with a disapproving shake of her head. She crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her head back a little. “You Dalish and your inklings towards dirt. Of all things, this I shall never understand.”

“It is obscure and unsettled land, far from the front lines,” the woman reasoned as she tipped her chin down, brows up in a challenge towards her fellow enchanter. “Unless you can think otherwise, it seems the safest means.”

“You say that now, but you will be abandoning everything righteous and advantageous of a proper society. You would have doctors here for goodness sake.”

“Oh please. I’m not trusting Leliana with the delivery, I’m no barbarian.”

Vivienne sighed, but accepted the situation without question. She found her glass again and took a sip, body rolling against the railing to once again admire the sunset.

Her free hand squeezed her friend’s; Ellana’s thumb curled around and over her friend’s affectionate squeeze in grateful response.

“Will I see you in the morning?”

“No my dear, this is not goodbye. I expect you back within two months.” She saw the Inquisitor’s cheeks peek up in a smile out of the corner of her eye once more. It was unknown territory, and Vivienne loathed nothing more than she did the unknown. But she was confident – if not for her own sake, then for her friends.

They spent an hour on that balcony, watching the sun slip away.

And she never saw her again.
The child sits before her, eyes glazed over in a swirl of confusion and intrigue, defiant objectification at the outlandish claim but a longing to know more. More than anything else, however, fear curled around her body like a spirit, hunching her over. She plays with her hands in her degrading position. The enchantress beside her sits with her back as straight as a board, throat slowly loosening as she came to terms with the undeniable truth spilled out in front of them.

“That’s not possible.”

“Not only is it entirely possible, but it is the truth.” A few moments tick past of silence before Aupia tries again, a little more fever in her voice; she’s trying to stop the shaking in her lungs, the weight in her feet, the sinking in her heart. “And what do you have to back this up? This claim of yours.”

“Dear child, you are her walking image, carved by the Maker Himself. Only the blind would suggest otherwise.”

“And my father?” Bile rises in Vivienne’s heart as she battles her natural disgust as the mention of the man; she fights to keep her expression unchanged as the girl’s attention locks on her face.

“I did not know him well. It is assumed he is dead as well.” The answer, while not untrue, seems to suffice for the time being. Aupia pulls the details apart, to absorb as much as she can before the evening ends; at the same time, however, she would like little more than for all of this to be a dream. The shake in her hands that she thought she had control over seems to come back with a vengeance. Her body trembles, she has never felt so weak, so vulnerable in her own skin before.

“What do I do with this?” The woman looks down at her. The girl’s hair was different than her mother’s, a feature likely reflecting her father as it obscured her distress. Vivienne sighs and stands, smoothing her robes. “You have options. Either walk away and pretend none of this happened—“ the girl’s head shoots up “or come with me to Val Royeaux.”

A pause, then “Val Royeaux?”

“Yes. To the Inquisition.” She mouths the words, a silent validation of the situation. Her eyebrows peak as she thinks through the inclinations. “I thought the Inquisition was gone.”

“In the face of the public, yes. We are all but skeletons to the papers and their masses. But I assure you, our job is not yet done.” Vivienne clears her throat once more and tucks her free hand behind her back. “My company will depart for the capitol on the first train. You are welcome to accompany me as my personal guest.”

“I can’t just accept that! Ma’am,” she tags on hastily, now on her feet. “I… how did I end up in Ingersoll? What happened to my mother? There aren’t any stories of her… of her having a partner, a lover. Who was she?”

“I cannot answer all of your questions, not tonight. I have business to attend to yet.” The Grand Enchantress walks over to her desk and pulls apart the pile of paperwork. Without looking, her voice fills the tent with her characteristically unwavering confidence. “But I assure you that everything will be answered in due time. I will leave you to process what you can, and perhaps I will see you in the morning.”

A minute rolls past without words; for a splintering second, she thought the girl slipped back out
and into the world. When Vivienne turns around to see Aupia still standing there frozen, a new intensity creased across her temple. She’s fighting for her words, the enchantress can see it in her tense but taller stature.

“My friend.” Vivienne raises her brow, inviting the young woman to continue. “Vallen. He wants to be a surgeon. I—”

“Does he seek a sponsorship?” Aupia’s hands uncurl in confusion – in truth, she had no idea what was just proposed. Vivienne returns her attention back to her desk, Aupia’s eyes returning to her back. “The boy is commendable, and if what I saw in that skirmish mistaken for a fight was an accurate representation of his abilities, I will sponsor him as a student in Val Royeaux. He may first seek some proper experience however,” Vivienne looks up, lazy gaze deep in thought. “I may get him working experience with the Inquisition’s surgeon, given she is still in the capitol.” She turns back around, fully ready for a whimsical reaction. “Does that fit his criteria? *Your* criteria? I presume you would like to bring your beast with you as well. The stables of Orlais will be made accommodable for the thing, should you also demand that.” The girl’s eyes reaffirm a sense of strength, something Vivienne can vividly recall in the face of her mother when in moments of darkness. It is a claim to comfort, a settling of strength. At last, Aupia seems ready. She nods vigorously and takes a shakey bow, lingering in her bent position as if she had more to say.

And, without a word, leaves.

When the flaps of the tent entrance return to their resting position, Vivienne nearly collapses where she stands. She brings a hand up to her forehead, the other bracing her weight against the desk.

*After all this time…*

“Etoile.” Her personal attendant enters, heels snapping accordingly to attention behind her.

“Send word to the Inner Circle.” She stands upright again, a relentless and joyful smile on her lips. “Tell them I found our lost halla. It is a doe.”

“To all of them, ma’am?”

“Yes.” Vivienne turns around, tugging at the corners of her robes. “Without haste.” Agent Etoile bows and retreats out the tent, leaving her mistress to her peace.

Oh, how the world has changed in a moment.

~

Vallen sits outside of the tent, close enough to run in if needed, but far enough away to bestow angry glares at the guards stationed at the entrance. He doesn’t stand up with Aupia comes to him, his hands rolling relentlessly around an orange.

Aupia sits beside him, eyes still lost in the mess in front of her, hands rubbing up and down her breeches. Vallen doesn’t speak, nor does she.

Well, not at first.
“I got you a sponsorship.”

“Thanks, I got you an or- wait.” First he freezes, locking his joints. Then he nearly drops his prize. “What?”

“A sponsorship. She’s leaving in the morning, she’ll sponsor you in Val Royeaux.”

That was not an expected outcome of the day, that’s for sure.

Vallen shifts to close the gap between them, brown eyes staring intently at her blues. One may think they would be laughing or dancing at this news, but he’s too shell-shocked, too confused by the lack of information also simultaneously overwhelming. As is she.

“Why?” Aupia keeps rubbing her legs – when she stops, she looks at him. There is a fear, a wonder in her eyes.

“Because I’m the Inquisitor’s daughter.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve learned there’s little worse in this world than never getting to say goodbye. It floods your system with regret, but I imagine Vivienne would compose herself better than I would over time.

Anywho, this is more of the format we’ll be seeing from here on out.
Chapter Summary

"what was found"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Have you ever experienced shock? A pure, raw, slap to the face?

Imagine this: Tranquility is a means of castration, a method of depravity to be used against people of magical inclinations. It was known – it was known – that this was the only means of protection for mages. Protection against the mages. It was the barrier that divided the dangerous from the innocent, and generations of people submitted to the process when otherwise offered death.

Misery. Absolute misery. Devastation and depravity, a separation of self from the body. When the body lays curled around oneself on cold, colorless stones in a cold, screaming spire, Death snares hope.

Tranquility offers life. Tranquility is the raft a desperate people will board in order to abandon all that they know, to escape an existence of desolation.

This was known, in some sense. When printed papers were mainstreamed by Thedas livelihood, it did not take long for the truth to be unveiled in all of its naked vulgarity. Especially when Tranquils were helping write the articles.

So the methods were questioned, and raged festered.

And when the truth that Tranquility could be undone – when it was revealed that a Tranquil could be sown back together – and that this means was known for generations upon generations, shock rippled across the world. The strength the Chantry held in reserve over its people, the political chin carried high over the population, nearly flooded out from between their fingertips as Divine Victoria was identified as the sole figure retaining this information.

In the known history of Thedas, it was known that humans rose after elves. This was known. This was accepted. This was truth. But what made the Heritage Wars erupt on the doorsteps of every family was when the truth involved them and their families; the case of Tranquility being one of the many to knock on family values. Elvenos, the state of the Elves, being another.

This is shock, raw and un-embraceable. It takes stalwart strength and gives it a good long shake, corrupting the heart and breaking will. Shock negates any known history and questions any possibility.

And while the comparison may not translate directly, Aupia and Vallen walked in shock. Everything they thought they knew seemed to be in question as they left Redcliff behind, the hum of the festival slowly fading away.

Not much was said between them. Quagga was more than willing to get on the community boat since she was familiar with the promise of returning to her home, but her people failed to praise her
good behavior.

She knew it, too. Quagga tucked her broad head under Aupia’s hands and murmured, tail swishing as the boat rocked across the water. Aupia smiles faintly and strokes the doe’s long ear, Vallen reaching down to itch her hindquarters. Gratefully they sit in their absent state, the other family present willing enough to row. Aupia turns around when they near the bank to catch a last long glimpse of the bright beaded lights; they reflect like stars over the seatop, illuminating the city in a bubble of light. Stretches of green light dance overhead, a fatal reminder of the cost of freedom. Of the truth Aupia now carried, masked as the world’s greatest burden.

Their walk back was long and quiet except for the familiar crunch underfoot. Aupia unties Quagga’s halter to let the girl stretch out her legs one last time for the day before returning to the family pasture; the doe takes off in a full sprint at first release, joy bringing her knees up to new levels. Her greying flank caught under the fading day, a faint spark in a forest of rising darkness.

But she returns with a bleat-like announcement, skidding to a halt in front of Vallen to nudge his pockets for treats. Her body heaves in both juvenile excitement and breathlessness.

Vallen obediently fishes out some berries. “What do we do now?”

“We? Vallen, you got what you wanted. You go to the capitol.” The halla nudges him again - he huffs as he pushes Quagga’s begging nose away. His response, however, is simple and quiet, an uncertainty on his breath. “I don’t know.”

Aupia laughs, a forced, mechanical response. “Excuse me? It’s everything you’ve ever asked for. What is there to know.”

“It’s not like I would just skip off in the hands of a stranger. Not without a pretty damn good reason to.”

“A reason? Vallen-“ Aupia grabs his arm, stopping them both. “Come on. You can’t pass this up.”

“I can and I will.” He starts walking again just to avoid eye contact. Aupia glares at his back, jogging a little to return to his side. He walks quickly despite the bruise on his shin. “Why?”

“Why? Why?” he pauses, long stride briefly stopped. “Because it turns out my closest friend is the freaking Inquisitor’s daughter, that’s why.” His voice hangs in defiant uncertainty. Aupia’s taken back at first before rolling ahead, accusing voice raising in the quiet forest. “Maker’s mercy, what does that have to do with anything?”

Seconds tick by in silence. Twigs snap underfoot, Quagga snorts ahead.

“That’s a dumbassed question, Aupia. What doesn’t have to do with that now?” He pauses, then, “Are you going to go? To Val Royeaux,” He hesitates. “To the Inquisition?”

Aupia wants to storm off with a why should I? – it would be the easiest response, it sung so clearly in her bleeding ears. But she catches herself at the last second; there’s no need for them to fight, not now.

“I don’t… I don’t know.” They match each other stride for stride. Perhaps a minute passed, perhaps a lifetime. But Aupia tries again. “What would you do? In my shoes, I mean.”

Vallen heaves his shoulders, eyes still ahead. “That’s a lot to chew. You’d be walking into… well, who knows what. Politics, at the least. I don’t know if I could stomach that.” Aupia winces at the thought and grumbles something inaudible. As the silence lingers, Vallen speaks again, voicing
both of their concerns. “What would they ask you to do? Are you signing up to, I don’t know, be
the poster child for whatever war comes next? What are their expectations of you? I mean don’t
get me wrong I’m glad she didn’t chain you up then and there, but still. What if it’s all just a rues?”
Aupia dismisses the thought with a shake of her head. “No, she was pretty direct with me. I get the
feeling that if I was anyone else she would have tied me up, but she didn’t. That has to mean
something. There’s a reason she offered me this.” Vallen accepts the answer with a nod before his
expression turns probing.

“Is that reason because you’d be walking into hell?” His face scrunches up. “And while we’re at
this, who is this ‘them’? Who is running the Inquisition?”

Aupia drops her chin and plays with her hands: man, things were a lot simpler a day ago.

“I don’t know.”

Vallen inhales, a faint cloud in the building cold around them. He scratches the back of his head as
Quagga returns to them again, Aupia running her fingers over the halla’s coat.

“Do you want to go?”

Aupia bits her lower lip. The question left her defenseless. “I… I think so? I mean, I never really
thought about tomorrow I guess. I could’ov sworn I was going to take over the druffalo someday.”

“Then maybe this is the opposite of a problem.” Vallen stops again and leans against a tree, arms
crossed over his chest. Aupia massages Quagga relentlessly as a means of distraction while she
waits for more. Vallen watches her while she watches her deer. “I mean the farm is great and all,
but you could maybe do anything with this. You could take it and run, cause some changes, rattle a
few cages. Or you could return in a week and pretend nothing happened... in theory.”

She refuses to look at him; he has a point of course. Vallen always has a point, not that you ever
need to tell him that yourself. She keeps her attention on her circling fingers. Quagga huffs and
puffs underhand, her ears swing around, big eyes bugging out of her head in a content mess.

The team lingers in the Still Forest, heads trapped in the possibilities.

“I don’t want to walk into it unless I have a chance to walk out.”

“Then we’ll find a way. I’m not going unless you are.” Aupia finally turns to him and regards her
friend curiously before her eyebrows fall back down in disgust. “Vallen, this is your freaking
dream-come-true. You can’t hang it on me.”

“I’m not. I could settle for being a medic here in the area,” he waves his hand around the empty
forest and the scattered families. “I could settle for that no problem. Heck, I could work in Redcliff.
But being in Val Royeaux would only be enjoyable if I could watch you screw yourself royally
from afar.”

She sneers at him. “Charming. What makes you think I’ll fail whatever I’m signing up for?”

“Because you’re as indecisive as shit, you don’t know how to talk to people, you are a general
asshole, you can’t learn shit, your shot is crap-“ Aupia starts laughing despite herself. She pushes
against him as he counts off his reasons, Vallen’s attention on the stars as he’s forced from his
position against the tree. Aupia keeps shoving him in the direction of their homes as Vallen’s list
grows longer and longer. Quagga bows her head a little as she watches them and their unusual
behavior. ”and speaking of which, I don’t think you’re allowed to shoot an arrow in Val Royeaux,
so you’d essentially amount to literally nothing. You could buy one of those handhelds, but I doubt
you have the aim for one of those. Plus your ears are pretty much a no-go, probably. I can’t imagine the capitol being much different than how it is here. And your hair is a mess, you might be mistaken for a beast. You’re already from the boonies so there’s no reason for anyone to even really look at you. And you’ll have a Ferelden accent in their neighboring countries capitol, which is going to pin a target on your back.” He grins over his shoulder at the girl pushing him forward, heels digging resiliently in the soil. “Need I continue?”

Aupia gives him a final push and walks around him with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. “You make it sound like you’re any better than me.”

“You know I am.”

“I know you’re shit is what you are! You know what? I bet you’re scared of the big city, you’d be lost without me.” Vallen’s silence is all the answer she needs. She gives him another push.

“Knife-ear.”

“Burnt yeast.”

Their walk continues in silence until the Kessler cottage comes into view. Aupia ties her hair back up. Her gait seems little lighter. “You know, maybe the unknown isn’t too bad. Tomorrow, I mean. And whatever comes tomorrow.” Quagga screams at the druffalo and bounds ahead.

“It’s only bad if you make it bad or if you refuse to acknowledge it. Like a wound.” At that she spins, almost hitting him with her raised elbow. “Shit! I forgot about your nose. How is it feeling?”

“My nose?” Vallen turns. “What’s wrong with my nose?”

“Do you seriously not feel the blood on your lip.” He reaches tentatively and sighs when her truth is confirmed. Quagga paces back and forth along the fenceline touching noses to the herd.

“My mom is going to kill me.”

“You got that right.” They stop at the path leading up to her house. Aupia sets her hands on her hips as she stares squarely at her friend.

“Am I seeing you at sunrise?” Vallen pinches his nose and regards her with a humbly curious expression. Instead of answering – there is little reason for him to answer to that – he baits her with something else. “What are you going to tell your parents?”

“Everything, hopefully.” Aupia’s heart sinks as she considers a weight she has failed to question. Vallen arches a brow for an explanation but she returns to the present with a smile. “You?”

“About the same. I'm not too sure how the fam’s going to handle it.”

“That’s a given. Hopefully they take it well.”

“Give your folks my love.”

“Will do. Pack lightly.”

“Hah! You’re one to talk.”

Aupia turns around and starts working on Quagga’s tack, heart still heavy with a question budding at her lips. Vallen watches her quietly before taking a few steps closer. “Hey.” She turns around and stares blankly at him, modified saddle slipping of the impatient beast.
What more is there to say?

“Thank you.”

Aupia smiles.

“See you in the morning.”

When Aupia retreated into the warmth of the Kessler cottage, she almost didn’t make it through the front door. She hesitated, hand resting on the wood so familiar to her. There were days in her youth when all she ever dreamed of was walking away and never returning. There were evenings where the yelling got loud and the tears streamed relentlessly, and the desire to slam that door behind her burned her flesh like a fire.

And, of course, there were nights spent in the living room, long nights full of laughter and stories. Mornings spent waking up to delicious breakfast, or days in the quiet comfort of family. The flicker of the hearth within invites her, but her feet refuse to move. This home is her foundation, her everything. It always has been and it always will be. And it isn’t until this moment where the weight of this truth roots in her heels.

Now that the chance to run has come, she doesn’t know what to do. It is not that she doesn’t love her parents, nor does she regret her upbringing; but Aupia now questions everything, from her mother’s lessons with a bow in hand to her father’s roping lessons on the druffalo.

Her fingers curl over the hardwood as Aupia slowly rests her forehead against it. Who stood here nearly twenty years ago, dropping off a babe at the steps? Who in their right mind would have chosen a household like this? And why did her parents even agree to take her in?

Aupia takes a shaky breath, teases her bangs back behind her ear, and enters.

Mercer and Jasette were sitting in the lounge chairs in front of the fire, the dim lighting just enough for them to read the week-old newspapers dropped of hours earlier. Mercer turns around when she enters, quiet eyes watching her inquisitively. “Hey kiddo, welcome home.” He sets his papers down when he stands up, simultaneously peeling his glasses off the wide bridge of his nose. “How was the festival?”

Aupia walks over silently and stands in front of the fire, turning slowly as if to savor what time she can to reason out her words. Her mother frowns from her seat and sets down her book, disapproval marrying her weathered features. She starts to say something – in all likelihood, something along the lines of “don’t ignore your father, dear” – but Mercer waves a hand by her face, his eyes tracing Aupia’s lost gaze. He looks down at his wife as Aupia finally looks up at him, unsteady breathing
exchanged for hard fists.

Mercer’s arm drops to his side. “Aupia.”

She looks at him squarely, deep blue eyes meeting brown. “Dad.” Then she looks down at her mother, sullied expression turning concerned. “Mom.”

“Dear? What happened? What happened to your face?” Jasette asks, a slight tremble on her lips. She stands up and runs a hand over her daughter’s cheek as she tries to rub away dried blood; her motherly instincts take over, her gaze rotting hard. “Who did this to you? Where is Vallen?”

“Vallen’s going home, Mom. I’m fine, he’s fine.”

“Then-“

“Mom, Dad.” She takes one of their hands in each of hers as she squares up to her parents. Her slightly shorter mother, her slightly taller father. Jasette’s face melts in anxiety, her eyes darting around her daughter for more signs of abrasion. Mercer keeps his eyes on his daughter, waiting for her evident unease to unfold. “I…I found out who my birth mom is today.”

Jasette retracts her hand and puts both over her mouth to hide a gasp. Mercer’s expression doesn’t change. He waits for more. “And? Is she alive?”

“No, she’s dead. She died a long time ago. You… served the Inquisition, right Dad?” The many lines of Mercer’s face start intersecting as realization drops the corners of his lips.

“It’s her, isn’t it?”

Aupia’s ears start burning red.

“Mercer? Aupia? What are you suggesting?”

“You knew,” she whispers, pulling her hand back from her father’s. From the man that raised her as his own. Fed her, clothed her, trained her. Taught her to walk, to run, to love. “You knew, and you kept it from me.” Aupia’s blood boils, her voice weakens. Mercer fails to answer.

It’s Jasette who responds, gaze trailing off to the fire behind Aupia. Somehow, she has caught up. “We didn’t actually know. There’s no way to truly know.”

“But you knew,” Aupia growls through clenched teeth, her jaw tight. Accusation lights up her eyes. “You knew.”

“Yes.”

“No!” Jasette spins on her husband. Mercer keeps his attention locked on his daughter before he slowly turns to her. “Yes, we did. But your mother is right,” He affirms, arm slowly coming up to embrace his wife. “We had no way to validate where you came from, but we knew.”

“How.”

“You look just like her. Not her eyes or her hair, which doused curious neighbors, but everything else.”

Aupia sits down on the bricks of the hearth, flames snapping behind her. She clenches both hands in a single fist.
“Tell me again. Tell me how I was brought to you.” She looks up, and for the first time in years, her parents find tears in her eyes. “And tell me about the Inquisitor. Please.”

“Of course.”

And he does. Mercer served after Corepheus was defeated; he was on his way to Skyhold with a few men from Ingersoll when he saw their battle ascend Thedas. They protected a trading caravan until they reached the gates, then signed up under Commander Cullen that first dawn. For the first few weeks, he worked in reconstruction.

He sent a letter home to explain that he was planning to stay despite the defeat of their immediate enemy – there were still breaches tearing through forests everywhere, and reports were still flooding in of rogue Templars destroying innocent livelihoods. The Inquisition had yet to yield its power, there was hope to spread still.

So Jasette came out with a few neighbors and aid in the relief efforts. Three months into this new world, the two were assigned to follow the Commander and the Inquisitor herself to a foreign stretch of land. They built houses and supplied meals, Jasette hunting down rams with the men and Mercer distributing blankets in the late evenings.

“We were there for weeks on end, such a dreadful place.” Aupia eyes her mother warily, arms hugging her knees tightly to her chest as she watched the fire dance. Her parents returned to their seats, their eyes also intently focused on the fire. “Children were dying of disease, something somehow spread by lyrium of all things. Demons patrolled the city limits at night.” Aupia almost looks away when Jasette shutsters physically – almost. Her eyes are locked on her mom as she struggles to understand the weight of her words. “I can still remember their eyes glowing in the dark.”

Her father hasn’t fared much better in the retelling. His expression remains largely unchanged: he knew what was to come in the morning. But for now he focuses on his daughter.

“But the Inquisitor,” He begins as the silence hangs between them, Aupia turning to better see his face. “She dealt with it so well. Her work never stopped, she would stoop so low to lift up the most broken souls. Then she would march out into the night with but three companions. I thought it was impossible for that young woman to fear anything.” Aupia’s eyes dart back away from Mercer’s as they meet briefly.

When their time there concluded, the Inquisition forces marched back to Skyhold. Mercer then served on the frontlines in the Exhalted Plains while Jasette helped in the kitchens, pilgrims from far and wide seeking refuge in the ever-spinning world. Her parents went half a year without seeing each other.

They both served once more in Redcliff when the Hinderlands were under fire from a mass of Venatori; they spent several seasons protecting and rebuilding the farmlands alongside the Inquisition’s now-famous faces. A man with horns, a Tevinter mage. A Dwarf with an armada of tales, an Elf with a sharp tongue and arrows to match. These figures came too and from, dropping by only when the friction under Thedas could afford them to. Slowly they disappeared altogether, life pulling the Inquisition apart at the seams.

They were there the day the Inquisitor returned from the Deep Roads; their camp was the closest and largest so she rode to them before spending a day in her tent recuperating - only to emerge the next morning with the foot soldiers to feed the homeless.

“She was covered from head to toe.” Jasette shakes her head at the memory. “It was hard to see the
And yet she kept working.” Mercer’s low voice rings out as Jasette nods. She turns to her husband, fingers intertwining with his. “And yet she kept working,” her repetition confirms, sadness stretched across her cheeks. “She was so lovely, such a good heart.”

“The Inquisition was reduced when they met with the Exalted Council,” concludes Mercer, flickering flames lighting up his solemn reaction. “We settled here after what we experienced in Redcliff, we were tired of what we saw in Orlais.” For a few minutes, the only thing audible was the fire.

“But she ended up out here, or at least I did.” Both of her parents return to the present; they can’t see Aupia’s face too well as it is turned towards the flames.

Mercer nods and clears his throat. “Yes. You were brought to us after the Black Forest burned.”

Wait, that’s not right. Aupia releases her grip on her legs and they spill out around her. “That same week?”

“The next day.”

The Black Forest. It was an ominous area that burned to a crisp some… well, apparently nineteen years ago. Once it was plush and full of life, the Kesslers would tell her that all the time. All sorts of animals were found there, plus some special type of tree. Now it stands as a barren wasteland, the soil hidden under layer upon layer of ash.

So the Heritage Wars were well underway by the time she was born. That means the Inquisitor was pregnant in the middle of all of her peace walks, talks, and formulation.

Damn.

There really isn’t much to say; the family sits together but avoids each other, the only physical connection between them all being Jasette’s grip on her husband.

“And my father?” Aupia tries again, resolve finding itself in the question. She almost seems more collected now, despite having heard the story many times before. It confirmed nothing new, just validated the situation. But her choice of word seems to spite all of them. “Did the Inquisitor…. well, did she have a lover?” Aupia rotates her body to her parents. “I’ve never heard anything about her… personal life.”

Mercer shakes his head and lets Jasette answer. “We never saw her with anyone. Some of us while stationed at Skyhold tried to start a dinner between her and the Commander, but that never happened. Not through our intentions, at least.” Jasette’s eyes drift to the brickwork. “She put on such a brave face every day, but it really wasn’t too difficult to see through it. She was never alone, but she seemed so lonely sometimes.”

So it was a one-night stand. Or worse, rape. Aupia’s body sags as she puts together the facts.

*That means I was a mis-

“...There was never any public announcement of her being pregnant, Thedas didn’t know. If you really are her daughter, they hid it well.” Mercer interjects, keen gaze interpreting Aupia’s expression. His eyes narrow as he presses on. “No matter what happened, she and the Inquisition protected you. Do not mistake what might have happened as an accident or mistake. They had every means and every feasible reason to not keep you.”
“And you are no mistake in this household.” Jasette interrupts, voice full of vice. “You are our daughter when we couldn’t have our own. You are never allowed to forget that. Do you understand me?”

Aupia doesn’t respond: she knew her parents struggled to have their own kids. When she was little she would ask about having siblings after spending the day at the Sacha cottage. Every time she was met with a furious no. Looking at it in hindsight, maybe it was more of a sadness than anger.

But-

“Aupia, you will answer me!”

Aupia’s hands tremble as she smiles weakly. No matter what, her mom is right. She was a Kessler before she was anything else. Her mother would hang her by her toenails if she ever suggested anything else.

“Ok, Ma.”

That’s when Jasette starts to cry. Mercer holds her as she leans into him, but he keeps his attention on their daughter, trying to imprint her every detail in his heart.

“How did you hear this? Who told you?”

“The Grand Enchantress was at the festival. She wants me to go with her to Voy Royeaux. Tomorrow.”

Jasette sobs into Mercer’s shoulder. She had never let herself loose like this before, not in front of Aupia. The girl watches her mother quietly, her own tears slipping out.

But Mercer doesn’t cry. He knew this was going to happen someday. Fathers know these kinds of things.

Aupia stands up and bolts for the door before they can see her tears flow freely. The door she couldn’t open slams behind her, the heads of their herd rising anxiously in the growing darkness, moonlight reflecting. She scales the vines on the wall of their home and ascends, sobs and numb fingers making her slip numerous times more than she ever had before. Her careless fingers grip blindly, toes digging dumbly into notches and divots that may or may not be there.

When she finally settles on the roof, she cries.

She cries for all the things she is, which in her book amounts to nothing. She cries for the Inquisitor and for the expectations she probably had on her shoulders. This figure now seems so much more palpable than before, which leads Aupia into a spiral as to how she may have contributed to the demise of Thedas’s hero.

Aupia cries for reasons she will never understand. It isn’t like she was told she was going to die, there’s no cancer in her bones. It isn’t like she was just told she is going to be sold into slavery, chained to the wall of a spire. She didn’t lose everything; in fact, one could argue she just gained just about everything.
Which, in the long run, is quite the burden to take on.

She squeezes her legs, nails digging deep into the weave of her breaches. Her choking sobs muddle her senses to the point that she can’t hear or see very well, water glazing over her eyes in such disdain that her rage turns inward.

*What a stupid girl. I’m crying like the world is ending.*

Her father announces himself with a cough, his head peeking over the roof as he slowly ascends. Aupia glares at him through her tears, to which he dismisses with an internal sigh and arched brow.

“This was my roof before it was yours, kiddo. I’m allowed up here too.”

He sits down beside her, one leg lolled out, the other bent with his forearm resting against it. They sit in relative silence for a few minutes as Aupia tries to control her breathing.

“I’m betting Vallen had some things to say to her.” Aupia’s body seems to relax as the thought, something Mercer was not entirely ready for.

“I… actually convinced her to get him into the University.”

Mercer glances at her in a mildly mystified way before turning back away. He was fully aware she didn’t need the pressure of his undivided attention at the moment, despite his longing to do nothing but.

It is tough being a father. You must pick your battles.

“I’m sure he’s ecstatic about that. He’ll do well there.”

They sit in silence for a few minutes, nothing but the chill of the wind and the peaking stars above to distract them from the anxiety, the fear, the uncertainty. Aupia tries to muffle her tears in front of her father, but her shuddering body can only minimize itself so well. Mercer pretends he doesn’t notice.

“You said you wanted to hear it again, how you were brought to us.” Aupia stiffens beside her father, head bowed between her knees as she tried to mask her pain. Mercer leans back on his hands, palms pressed into the tile as if he was rooted there. He looks up to trace familiar stars, brown eyes small under the weight of his eyelids.

“He was tall,” Mercer starts absentmindedly. “The man that brought you to us. Elven too. He was tall and he was quiet, but what I remember the most was his face.”

Aupia doesn’t speak – she doesn’t know if she could, not right now. Mercer lets the pause settle before finding his words once more. “He was devastated, plain and simple. Your mother and I figured he was as much a victim of the Heritage Wars as you were. Didn’t have much to say. Didn’t stay long either.” Mercer’s long fingers fish around his back to reveal what he carried up with him, a mass of fur Aupia had never seen before. He lays it out between their legs, cracked hands resting on the dark color. Aupia’s fingers reach slowly for the soft cloth; a need to feel the fur between her fingers leads her hand, but her intolerant pain makes her shake ever so slightly. The fur was soft to the touch but old: it must have been cared for once – Aupia can still feel the conditioner in the skin. But it was old, fur flaking off at a soft tug under the blanket of dust. It must have seen better days. “He brought you in this. Not too sure what it was before it carried you, but this is the only thing he left with us. That and your name.”

Perspective is a weird gift; the fur lopes around, looking like it was inverted so the warmth would
be better retained. It may have been some sort of sleeve once, but a weird one if it was a shirt sleeve. The cavity inside was pretty small, all things considered – as long as it was with knots tied towards the ends, it was barely wider than the spread of her hand. *I used to fit in that?* It is torn along a center divide as if to offer a window into its vacant cocoon.

“We didn’t know you were her daughter. But when you came in to your magic, it was like a slap to the face.” A faded memory entwines with Mercer’s words as he clears his throat again. “I am not sorry we didn’t tell you. Your mother isn’t either, no matter what she says.”

Aupia can’t feel her throat, so she nods. Unfortunately, it makes sense: you don’t burden someone with unnecessary information, not with information like this. Knowing would have changed nothing except elevate her own expectations. Aupia hooks her fingers in the fabric and brings it up to her face, inhaling softly as if scent could reveal something she had yet to learn about herself.

She buries her face in it, the warmth, the softness. There was no declaration of war in Ingersoll, so maybe it was a border skirmish of some sort. The Inquisitor was there, the man must have been a member of her forces, either that or a bystander. In the later years of the Heritage Wars it was primarily wrapped around Elven pride, so that made sense that he was an Elf too. And whatever happened lead to the Still Forest being split in two and renamed. Maybe the Inquisitor herself was in the Black Forest when it burned.

Aupia finds her voice, eyes still nettled in the wolf’s pelt. “Did you mean what you said? About me not being a mistake?” She turns to him, his attention still on the stars. “Or was that you just being a dad?”

“Hey, what do I say about honesty?”

“Nothing but’.”

“Exactly.” He throws an arm around Aupia and brings their shoulders together, chin still pointed upwards. “You have a lot of exploring to do, both of the world and yourself. Just don’t get lost in the mess and forget who you are, okay?” Aupia rubs her remaining tears away and rests her head on her father’s shoulder. She sighs as she admires the fur, fingers still grazing over the warmth, the mystery. “But what does being the Inquisitor’s daughter make me?” She could feel her chin begin to quiver all over again. “What am I going to do?”

“I have no idea.” Mercer breathes out, finally turning and resting his head on Aupia’s. “Whatever awaits you in Val Royeaux will probably lead you to other places. Skyhold, Haven, Tevinter. But if the Grand Enchantress has something for you in the city, it probably applies to the Inquisition itself.”

“She said it was still standing, the Inquisition.” The two draw their heads back to look at each other. Mercer regards her words with a great curiosity but stays silent. “She wants me to be a part of it, I think. If not that then show me off.” She settles back on the nook of his shoulder. Mercer buries his nose in her hair and inhales slowly, trying to savor what he can. He had been denying himself a few basic facts over the last few years; while he was grateful she grew up healthy and well, the fact that she grew up at all was a simple truth he had been denying. It was about time for her to go out into the world.

“Doubtful. If she wanted to parade you around she would have taken you away from us in Redcliff. Either that or those journalists would be on our doorstep now. Whatever happens, you will make the most of it. I know that and nothing else.” He rubs her back lovingly and pulls back once more, slowly rising to his feet. “If you’re leaving in the morning, it may be best for you to try and get some sleep.”
“Yeah, okay.”

He lingers on the roof, staring at his daughter as she tips her chin up, eyes tightly shut and chin quivering ever so slightly. When he descends, he doesn’t look back. When he enters the familiar warmth of their cottage, he doesn’t turn around.

Chapter End Notes

I was writing out the intro while listening to a lecture on immigration. Did you know people are dying, trying to escape the devastation of the Middle East, but they’re drowning in the Mediterranean since they aren’t allowed to get on land? When someone crosses boarders illegally, it is their last resort in order to avoid death and misery and pain in their home. Like, it happened last week. So hey that’s not acceptable, not in the 21st century.

And I plan to introduce a little more of a distrust between the people and the instated power. Current US politics seems to be inspirational, at least in some way shape or form. You’ll be seeing that in Val Royeaux.

Sorry I know this is a potentially boring one, but it didn’t really fit the last update and it definitely doesn’t fit the next one.

Updates are gonna be a little slower now too: I’m going to lose my computer for a few days for some work on it, plus the new semester’s starting back up. But hey, I hope this started picking a few more brains! Lots of implications, this is gonna be fun.

Translation -> Elvenos (elven + suffix) is a term I’m going to be coining suggesting an “Elven state of being.” This term will refer to both the current global state of Elven people as well as the collective history, the state to which they have been treated throughout Thedas’s known history.

I HOPE YOU LIKE IT >:3
The night was restless, the waking morning no better. Aupia tossed and turned while the stars spun above her, the possibilities nearly as endless as the questions curling her fingers into the fabrics of her bed. But her unsettled eventually heart relaxed against her ribs, and while she didn’t get a lot of sleep, she was more than ready when the stars faded away in the coming morning.

It is remarkably difficult to pack for what could be the rest of your life. She didn’t have much to begin with – there was never a real need for so many things, not when you live in a region like Ingersoll – but she hesitated at every tactile object she found. What is Val Royeaux even like? Do the people really wear gold-plated masks just for the heck of it? Her normal clothes wouldn’t fit their standards, that was for sure.

She came to that conclusion after she leafed through every article of clothing she had; it was long-coming, but she ended up packing minimally nonetheless. There was no need to impress the masses right off the train… right? One dress – her mother’s – and her regular evening clothes. A second pair of shoes, but she’ll wear her boots on the train. A second scarf, her favorite wound around her neck. A second set of breeches, some sorts, and socks. A set of knives, some basic hygiene necessities, and her trusted sketchbook. As she makes room for her quiver, she pauses, fingers draped out across the hardwood she knew so well.

It’s not the end. She isn’t going to die. It’s an adventure, something unlike anything anyone can help her with. It’s a journey to discover and to learn, both of everything and of herself.

She abandons the wood, resting it at the foot of her bed, and instead retrieves the wolf’s fur left strewn out across her dresser. She inverts it to what is its presumed state, then with a quick needle and thread restrings the edges of the pelt.

When her work is satisfactory, she tests it out with a few arrows. It was unlikely she would be stringing up hawks in Val Royeaux, but there’s no harm in being prepared. But her assumption was correct: it was the perfect size, and the surprising quality of the pelt kept the arrows from snagging on the inside. Easier to pack, too. So she stores her arrows in it, reasserting the internal base by removing the bone bottom of her original quiver, and ties off her drawstring shoulderbag.

She paused when the candles flickered to life in the living room, stilling her breathe to listen to the footfall just outside of her room. A fond smile fell on her lips as she tidied her room – of course. She should have known her parents would be up at this ungodly hour to see her off. It wasn’t blatantly unusual for them to do something like this, they did raise her after all. Ultimately, it wasn’t surprise that brought joy to her face; it was the unmistakable love that her parents had for her. She would miss it.

They weren’t going to stop her, they had no need to. Maybe some inclinations, but no need. That’s pretty novel when you think about it.

Aupia finished tidying up her room, laying out the pillows as her mother liked it, making the bed as her father always preferred, and closes the door behind her. she tip-toes through the kitchen and out the door with an apple in hand when she’s convinced her parents have returned to their bedroom. With her bow strung across her back, she leaves her house for what feels like the last time.
Quagga rumbles at Aupia as the girl brushed her hand over the doe’s neck lovingly, calming her morning cries and anxious steps. Val Royeaux is probably the last place anyone would take a halla, but in terms of this being the craziest element of the plan to move, it definitely wasn’t the cherry on top. She did feel bad though – what was she going to do with Quagga there? Was the doe going to be stuck in a stall all day? What kind of feed would she get, or attention?

“We’re gonna go change the world, girl,” Aupia whispers, hand tucked behind Quagga’s budding antlers. The doe leans in at the touch, inviting her fingers. “Or, at least the world we know.” People were undoubtedly going to judge the animal’s presence, but for some odd reason it seemed… well, right to take her along.

Or maybe wrong to leave her behind.

She was quick to tack up; makeshift packsaddle strapped securely in place, Aupia thumbs over the weave of the halter in deep thought. Ultimately, she tucks it into the left-side pocket of the saddle. The halter was more for other people to feel comfortable around her than an actual need on her handler’s part; at this point, it is unlikely Quagga would just up and leave her person inappropriately; she had a great sense for recall too. She didn’t know anything but Aupia and what Aupia introduced to her, all it took was a whistle and she’ll be back at her side.

Long ears swayed and a bleat shook her lungs in greeting as Vallen emerged from just beyond the druffalo pasture. He waves and Aupia returns the gesture only to realize he was waiving at her parents standing in the doorway.

Aupia leads Quagga out and leaves her to her own devices - promptly, the halla charges at Vallen - as she walks back over to her parents.

She stands on the last porch step, shoulderpack shifting one last time against her back. She smiles at her parents and rolls her shoulders one last time. Her mother looks… mildly furious, if such a thing exists, while her father smiles back.

“Looks like we’re off then.”

“Don’t talk to strangers. And only eat cooked meat.”

“Yes Mother.” She leans in for a hug, gripping fiercely around her mother. “Anything else to keep in mind?”

“Don’t forget to wash your socks. And if any of those sellers offer you something they say is a great deal, don’t buy it. It’s probably crap.” Aupia laughs and buries her nose in her mother’s sweater: Jasette doesn’t curse lightly. It must be a serious matter. “Of course,” Aupia promises as her mother pulls her back to arm’s length. The small wrinkles on the corners of her eyes crease as she frowns. “And don’t have unsafe sex.”

Aupia shuffles to her father quickly and leans in for another embrace with a roll of her eyes. “Alright Mom.”

“No, no sex at all. Do you hear that Vallen?” Her father shouts over her shoulder, his long, worn fingers pressing firmly into her back. Aupia quakes with gentle laughter as Vallen responds in kind. She couldn’t quite hear him as her head pressed into Mercer, but it earned a slight chuckle from her father. He lets her go, but his eyes don’t leave her. “Take care of each other, okay? Val Royeaux’s a big place, lots of room for mistakes.”

“Hey, that’ll make this memorable.”
“You’ll write? And take this with you, eat on the way.” She hands off a bag that was just inside on
the banister, which Aupia promptly tucks away into her bag. She then turns back to her mother,
Jasette’s arms folded tightly across her chest; Aupia couldn’t tell if it was an order or a question.

“Of course. As often as possible. I’ll write you something the minute we get in.” Quagga’s need
for attention reappears with a nuzzle in the girl’s back, and she smiles one last time at her parents.
“Well then, we’re off.”

They don’t respond. Sometimes, you can’t respond, not to something like this. Not lightly. So
when Aupia finds herself two steps away from them, she turns around and hugs them at the same
time.

Her parents offer her one last kiss each.

Mercer rubs her arm as they break apart. “Be good, okay?”

Jasette laughs as she pulls at her daughter’s hair. “Oh please. Give them hell honey.”

“Nothing but.” she affirms, confidence elevating her chin as fire light up her eyes.

Aupia then descends the steps to Vallen’s side. He looks tired - in all likelihood, there were many
more tears in his goodbyes – but ready nonetheless. He smiles at her, wry lips curled and brown
eyes bright. “You ready for this?” He asks, nodding in the direction of the boats. Quagga thrusts
her head under Aupia’s hand lolled at her side for more scratches. “Always.”

When they walk, Aupia doesn't turn around. Quagga runs in leaps and bounds, excited as ever to be
free of the pasture; but when they lost in the trees, the halla offers one last cry out to the druffalo.

A call returns in kind.

It was hard to not turn around.

Of the four community boats on their side of the shore, the team picks the smallest one they could
get Quagga in. The sun peeks from behind the forest as they row towards Redcliff, the sky
illuminated in vivid shades of indigo and orange, clouds swollen with life texturizing the heavens.
The quiet lapping of the water stirs Aupia’s trail of thought, and while she doesn't stop rowing, she
turns around to look at everything they’re leaving behind.

Other than a handful of one-time events, she had never left this forest. She never thought the day
would come where something called to her from beyond the trees she knew so well. As foreboding
as it seemed, it awoke something childish deep within her bones.

Maybe she was meant to be an adventurer. Her mother was the Inquisitor, after all.
“Are you worried?” She asks, turning to Vallen, making the boat sway. Quagga moves to rest her head on the benchspace between them while Vallen offers her a wordless eyebrow raise.

“Its-”

“Val Royeaux, I know. And if we’re being serious right now, that’s about all we know about what we’re getting into.” He keeps his eyes locked firmly on the docs ahead of them. “So yeah, I’m worried. But what’s the worst that could happen?”

It was mean to be ubiquitous, but Aupia can’t help but mull over the question. He always as a point. “The University could be full of shit.”

Vallen laughs as he leans back in his seat, arms curled briefly at his side. “If, by some blessing at the Maker’s hand the University isn’t, the people will be. I don’t think they find a lot of boonies like us - well, me - walking in the same hallway.”

True. “The Inquisitor could be less than ideal,” Aupia grumbles, eyes narrowed as she weighs the possibility. In all truth, she was just a person: no matter what she did and didn’t do, she did die at the end of the day. Vallen doesn’t deny it - he accepts her worry with a considerate shrug mid-stroke. “What will you do if that happens?”

Aupia hesitates. Quagga turns her head to better look at her girl.

“I’ll burn down the Inquisition.”

“Tits you’re stupid.”

They both suppress their laughter. It’s getting harder to focus on rowing.

“Would you join me?”

“In criminal arson? In the city of the Divine? Like hell I’d do that.”

“What if her house IS the Inquisition?”

“Shit.” Vallen stops as he looks at her. “You’re gonna have to meet the Divine.” He shakes his head to disregard the thought and returns to the water. “I heard she’s batshit crazy.”

Aupia snorts. “Where’d you hear that? Nothing credible I’m assuming.”

“I think it was your dad.” He smiles wryly. “Man, she’s gonna hate you.”

“Oh please.” the boat slides easily into the doc. Aupia lays a warning hand on Quagga to keep her down, Vallen tying the boat in. As he heaves himself onto land, Aupia’s lip purse in thought. “If I have to meet the Divine, so do you.”

“Yeah right.” He offers her a hand, which she accepts. Before both of her feet are on the platform Quagga springs to life and thrusts herself onto land forcing the small boat backwards forcing Aupia to dismount quickly before falling backwards. Her body shakes as she bellows, cool air leaving her mouth and nose. Aupia promptly smacks her, and Vallen chuckles. The doe doesn’t take a notice. “That would have been a great start to this trip. Way to go, you damned goat.”

“Oh shut up.”

“Hey,” He readjusts his shoulderbag. “We can officially only go up from here.” Its Aupia’s turn to shrug back in silence. They ascend the pier, Quagga walking obediently at Aupia’s hip as they
approach the train.

The Interthedas train was incredible in its own right. Thanks to escaping Qunari and mages desperate for paying jobs, the railroad was said to be built straight through Ferelden and Orlais in a matter of months. The connection facilitated all kinds of growth and development. From exchanging working theories of the world to building modern marvels, Orlais and Ferelden seemed to finally reach a true peace after the Heritage Wars; this is not disregarding their individual bids to stand as Thedas’s one true superpower nation, but peace is only ever temporary.

Aupia had only ridden the train once before on a journey to meet her grandparents in Orlais. Vallen once rode it just for the experience - the steam blowing in the morning air, the hustle and bustle of bodies hurrying around, and their present lack of experience does nothing to settle their nerves. They stand in quiet contemplation as some agents approach them from behind.

One of them eyes Quagga questionably. The other doesn’t seem to notice the bulging eyes or antlers in his face.

“I will be taking your mount to the animal trolley, Miss.”

Aupia offers the man a smile as she respectfully keeps her head down. “That’s okay, I can do it.”

He shifts his weight a little. “I have explicit orders, Miss.”

“You also don’t have a halter,” Vallen tries, snarky personally finally showing through. “All due respect, you may want to let her have this one. But you’re welcome to try.”

Something flickers over the agent’s eyes, but they never leave Aupia. “Then I will accompany you, Miss.”

“Fair enough. Val,” the girl waves a warning finger in her friend’s face, “play nice.”

“Never.” He assures. Vallen turns around in a slow spin, taking in Redcliff for what may be one last time. Aupia sighs and smiles at the officer again; it’s nice to be able to look people in the eye for once. “I’ll follow you.” He nods.

Vallen stays, trying to memorize as much as he can. Claiming he was going to go to a university was always fun, but it was never something to seriously consider. Not when your foundation is three books and several hundred sliced up animals. The mere fact that this happened – and, irrationally so, overnight – was inconceivable.

The hardest thing for him to leave behind was his family, that was indisputable; that being said, he was going to miss the hellhole that was his home. And as much fun as it was to pick fights with people, Redcliff was a part of that home.

His hand comes up to the newest indent in his forehead as Aupia returns, her shoulder bag and bow abandoned with her halla. She nods in the direction of one of the carts near the front of the train but watches him curiously. Vallen frowns as civilians mil around them.

“What?”

She pauses, then “Nothing. Come on, we should get going. Apparently we’ve kept her waiting long enough.” Vallen falls into step beside her, still caught off-guard by the look she gave him, but she looks ahead indifferently.

“We’ve kept her waiting? We came with the sunrise.”
“The agent recommended that we... well, I, I guess from here on out, always be early. She considers on time to be a day late.”

“Tits.”

“I know.” They step into a trolley with agents on either side of the entrance; when one of them recognizes them, they follow the young adults into the train before leading the way.

They find their way to her private cart, one draped in finery for the train’s upper class guests. Aupia pauses at the door – her last hesitation for a few days to come – and strolls in with the biggest fake aurora of confidence she can muster.

Vivienne only glances at them out the corner of her eye as they two enter. She waves a manicured hand to the seats across from her, her attention largely focused on some paperwork in hand. Another considerable pile of papers sits on the tablespace between them. “I suspect you have questions.” She doesn't look up as she speaks. Aupia is reminded of the tenacity in the woman’s voice: she practically brims with self-confidence. It’s hard to believe she’s ever been challenged, like, at all - like life itself would reshape around her words, reality would bend at her knee; she glows like nothing is relevant except for herself.

She continues before Aupia can unleash on her. “Unfortunately my dear, now is not the time.” Now she looks up, but it’s partly to readjust the glasses on the bridge of her flawless nose. “What we do need to discuss is your behavior, however. Val Royeaux is the capitol in more ways than you may care to be aware of. There are rules.”

Her attention returned to her paperwork. Vallen offers his friend a wide-eyed and confused shrug when she glances at him. Aupia swallows the lump in her throat and tries to respond. “Uhm, okay.”

“To begin, you will not tell anyone the reason of your presence. Not unless you have given explicit permission to do so by me. Am I understood, dear?”

Why does she call me dear? She speaks like she's talking to a gnat!

“Yes Ma’am.”

“No, I need more than that.” The Grand Enchantress lets her papers down on her lap and leans forward, forearms resting easily on her legs as she wove her eloquent fingers together. Her voice is direct, shameless. Commanding. Not unlike her sharp eyes. “I need a solemn promise. We cannot afford to have information spreading in ways we do not have control over.”

“Who is this ‘we,’ Madam?” Vallen interjects, leaning forward everso slightly as if his presence had been forgotten in the small space. Vivienne eyes him warily as he presses on. “All due respect, she’s being kept in the dark. It may serve you both best if she knew a little more about what was going on.”

Oh, he is conniving. The woman’s silence was easily enough to start goosebumps rising all over Aupia. She could probably slice someone with those eyes alone. Realistically, all it would probably take her to deal with Vallen would be a snap of her fingers - he could be on the roof, or worse, thrown out the window.

Just with a snap.
But her expression levels and she sits back up, her gaze still on him. Aupia tries to distill the atmosphere, jumping slightly in her seat as her eyes flicker between the warring parties. “He, uh, means us. Us have - sorry, we have been kept in the dark.” the goosebumps begin to settle as she remembers to take a breath. “He goes where I go.”

There is a slight break in the conversation. Trees flash past the window. “What is it you want to study, dear boy?” Vivienne ignores the girl, but Vallen doesn’t flinch. “Anatomy. I’m going to be a surgeon.”

Her arms fold as a leg crosses her lap. She drums a long forefinger on her forearm, a brow raised in careful consideration. “Well, aren’t you obstinate. You would do well pursuing other subject matters with this tenacity of yours, but very well. It is nice to meet you, young master Sacha.” She settles her back against the velveteen cushions of their private car, attention returning to the question at hand.

“Val Royeaux is the capital of Orlais. It would serve to fact that the Inquisition still stands here as the left hand of Divine Victoria. It is also the hive to which most of this Enlightenment Era has sprouted from.” she lectures, picking her words carefully yet easily, as if drawing from a thorny rosebush without a care in the world. Her tone dips at reference to the sub-period of the Dragon Age. “A great deal of reporters amble around uselessly, but they are persistent. Anything told to the presses can be easily used against you.”

“And since she doesn't technically exist, we wouldn't want that on your hands.” Vivienne almost looks shocked at Vallen’s interruption, but she settles for simply glaring at him. “Yes. It was practical to keep Inquisitor Ellana’s pregnancy secret. We were still in the midst of war, something you may never fully grasp, dear boy. Pray you never do.” Aupia glances out the corner of her eye at Vallen. He remains unchanged, but his left eye twitches as he thinks quickly through her word choice.

Oh, it’s a subtle threat alright.

Vivienne continues, her eyes returning to Aupia; the young woman nearly jumps out of her skin at the sharp focus now pinning her down.

*I feel like a cornered nug.*

“Any number of ill-mannered things may come from this becoming public if not well taken care of. So for the time being, you will be my apprentice. Say nothing but that, if asked. You may refer to your home region, but avoid all specifics.” Aupia nods, Viv continues. “You will only walk Val Royeaux when given explicit permission to do so, and you will be accompanied at all times.”

“By you, Ma’am?”

“Mercy no, I haven’t the time for that. It will likely be agents with you or other private personnel. They will be serving the Inquisition, so they will have explicit instructions to protect you. This means you are not in charge of them, and you will not be distributing orders to them. You will also restrict yourself from telling them the truth in the same manner as you would a stranger. Am I understood?”

“Yes Ma’am.”
"No," the enchanter reaffirms, eyes narrowing slightly to stare down Aupia again. "I need you to state your promise to me."

Aupia hesitates. She can feel Vallen’s judgement boring into her, but ultimately she does as she is told.

"Yes Ma’am, I promise."

The woman settles for a nod before returning to her paperwork. But there is still much to know about what was transpiring around them.

"Will you actually be teaching me?" At the woman’s glance, Aupia shifts her weight. "Magic, I mean."

"Yes. “ The response is simple, as if discussing what silverware was preferred at Moonlight dinner parties. Aupia bits her lower lip.

Perhaps Vivienne didn't notice; she took the girl’s quiet response as if it settled the matter. Or perhaps she did notice the flicker of concern that crossed the girl.

“And, can I ask about the Inquisitor?"

“While everything will be answered in due time, there are individuals that would like to meet and converse with you on that very matter. I will have us wait until we are in better company for that.”

“What about the Inquisition itself? Why it broke apart I mean. Or my fa-“

“The Inquisition disbanded publicly because the people lost faith in the eye shrouded in flame, dear girl. Surely you know that.”
“Don’t quite understand the… whys, Ma’am.”

“Or why the Inquisition still functions behind the scenes.” Vallen tries again, a cross expression settling on his face once more. Vivienne’s chest heaves as she exhales. “Where there is a need, the Inquisition will be there to protect the people, regardless of whether or not it receives the gratitude it so rightfully deserves.”
“Why keep it a secret?”

“The Inquisition was reduced once, functioning at its optimal best with about one tenth of the initial body. The people needed it, regardless of whether or not the clowns in charge were aware. The same thought applies here, children – the population may not know what it needs right now, but we do, and we do what is needed.”

Vallen doesn’t skips a beat with a humorless chuckle. “Is that not the talk of someone who-“

“Measure you next words very carefully, master Sacha.”

“And how do you know my name exactly?”

“Vallen.”

Its Aupia who puts her foot down with him, halla-in-the-campfire wide-eyed gaze suddenly harrowed. The smirk riddled across her friend’s face slowly folds away, but the threat in his eyes remains.

Madame de Fer seems nothing more than amused. “This will serve as an enlightening moment for
both of you then. What you are entering is the center of the Great Game, the modern world’s eye of the storm, if you will. You may believe your mind has some amount of fickle value, but that grants you no merit to speak what you think. Anything and everything you utter – every longing look, every lingering gaze, every slight inclination to a particular party – may very well define you for the rest of your life. It is highly recommended that you keep that in mind.”

The tension thickens, cold and heavy like snow.

Then Aupia tries again, Vallen opting to lean back into his seat, arms folded across his chest.

“How is it that you know his last name, Ma’am?”

“The same way I know exactly what you did last night my dear. You may live under the pretense that you are more than accommodated to living in this world, but if you first fail to notice the bodies standing in your shadows, you will get nowhere.”

Vallen’s nose points out the window. Neither of them respond.

Of course they didn’t notice. No one in their right mind would think to look for someone following them, would they?

“I have a question for you. From one mage to another.”

Aupia winces slightly at the suggestion, the temporary silence suddenly whisked out from underneath her. Her eyelids flickering momentarily before taking a deep, silent sigh. “Yes, Ma’am?”

“For a lack of better words, how is it you are doing what you are doing?”

Time ticks by in profound confusion. Aupia’s heart laps into a brisk apprehension.

“Wait, what? I’m not doing anything.”

Vivienne’s expression shifts from one unreadable emotion to another; she does, however, settle for the response and turns her attention back to her inkwell pen abandoned in front of her. She replies with as much palpable scrutiny in her voice a moral could ever muster. “If that is true, then we have quite a bit of work ahead of us, my dear.”

Maybe this isn’t for the best.

Chapter End Notes

*NOTICE: I am NOT suggesting everyone hit their pets

But when you are an animal person, you learn the extent of your critters’ limits.
Hitting a horse hardly fazes them. Most importantly, it is used as a means of communication. Same thing applies here. I’m a zoology student and I have worked in animal behavior, either through being staff at a vet hospital or my local SPCA. If you would like to discuss it with me in length then I am more than happy to do so through Tumblr.
The best way to summarize his association with her was academic: straightforward, for a purpose. He was using her as a means, and she had no need to know precisely that. The whole ‘using her’ part. The care he poured into her while she laid unconscious was affliction-less and tenacious. The diligence he put into teaching her a more proper means of magic was obligatory and rudimentary, when she came around to asking for it. When sweat curled the hairs around her face, he didn’t pay any mind.

Days slowly wove into weeks. At first she was weak and inept, such a slow walker and such a klutz with her staff. Solas attempted to hide his intolerance for incompetence by distracting himself with the others in their company, but that was a feat of its own: the Seeker was too set in her ways, the Child of the Stone too lighthearted to have every made it this successful, this far into his life. And the Dalish - have mercy – it always returned to her. Her ineptitude was painful to bear. Yet he tried to mask his disdain with pleasantry, for there was no present reason for him to leave this festering program to its own. Her vallaslin a physical manifestation of her ignorance of the waking world.

But pleasantry were always short-lived – or the relative fuses were too short – and sharp comments were barked back and forth, snide comments murmured too often under breath. And while the others were quick to chirp back at him like the ducklings they were, she embraced his harsh criticisms. “Then teach me,” she would insist, fingers tracing a weave of Fade energy curled around her fingers. “Then teach me,” she would murmur as she lied in her blood, leg split in two by an arrow. “Then teach me,” she would dare as he looked down the long bridge of his nose at her over their campfires.

It took her some time – and in some ways, no time at all - but in due weeks the party was able to walk at a faster pace.

Wisdom disagreed with his initial choice of interactions. For a spirit, it was benevolently wry in its humor, giving it an almost life-like set of characteristics. But its soft scorn and gentle banter always returned to its initial nature, a kind demeanor and knowing fondness for all of life’s creations.

“You are being short,” it once insisted.

“I am not.”

But he was. Solas was being short.

“What have you contributed on your journey thus far?” If Solas could have rolled his eyes in that moment, he would have. Instead, bristling thoughts pricked his senses.

“I am the only person present capable of magic in any respectable manner. I have saved all of their lives countless times, and it has only been one month.” His hands went up to cover his face, long fingers dragged down over his features. “One month.”

“Are you?”

He turned to it – at present, it was best described he was lying in a meadow, the spirit curled under a spiraling oak at his side. The physical manifestation of the Fade was inconsistent at best, at worst
an accumulation of sensations. His ‘body’ was in rough manifestation, features tumbling aimlessly in a vague collection. When in the meadow his familiar spirit of wisdom claimed for itself, there was rarely a need to embellish one’s experience with trivial things such as legs or arms. Where toes may once have curled in the memories of grass, whispers lingered. Sweet things of taste grazed absent fingers, and what could be ears instead basked in swirling embellishments of color.

The tree was the only thing of truth, every feature concrete in its mass, an accumulation of thoughts and promises.

This was Wisdom’s tree, a white bark with red leaves and ever-growing branches stretching beyond. Vines crawled up it like a heavenly challis. It swayed with life like a breathing body, and it was perfect.

“Am I what?”

“The only mage.” The dissonance in Solas’s heart grew as he put sound behind his sorrow.

“It feels as such in this world.”

Wisdom offered him a great deal of comfort in those first few weeks, but ultimately, it was right in one crucial way: as natural as his temper was, it was unnecessary. Solas’s depleted energy could be best spent in other fashions. Look at what is around you in kindness, it insisted. Forests grow best in good light.

So when Ellana challenged Templars and demons and bandits and the otherwise scum of Thedas, Solas’s stance behind her was compulsory and altruistic: from where he stood, she was exerting some form of whimsical confidence over the people as a means to protect them. Just behind her, just to the left usually. He could see her play with her hands behind her back and her fingers would weave unnecessarily into the intricate folds of her braids, but she spoke in earnest and with great conviction. Her efforts were valiant. This was sincere and moral, in Solas’s eyes.

But when she asked him and Cassandra to accompany her to Redcliff, he nearly denied her invitation; while her intentions were true, she planned something irrationally bold. Solas half had the mind to scold her for her oh-so-da’len-like thoughts – instead, he bit his lip and fell into place behind her. Not too far behind, however: her death would not be tolerated.

“You have something on your mind, Apostate?”

Internally, Solas glowered at the term. Externally, one of his eyes twitched. The team of three hiked to Redcliff, certain to make themselves visible and separate from the otherwise creeping Inquisition forces.

“No Seeker, nothing at all.”

“Please don’t lie,” came the Herald, the refined profile of her elven ears turned just slightly as she looked down their winding path. Solas’s indomitable gait hitched, staff and feet rooted momentarily in the earth. What could she possibly know about deception, other than living a lie herself? She turned slightly to look at him, the curl of her vallaslin looking down at him in the mocking way it did. But her voice was as it always ways: honest, endearing. “If you have something to contribute, I would welcome the input.”

His response was immediate and far more sharp than he initially intended. He was speaking to the husk of his people after all, a blundering child in an age of quick-to-draw barbarians, and his malediction was evident in the snide malice on his tongue. “Would you now? You would consider the thoughts of others? What a pleasant surprise.” Then, before she could respond or he could
actually look at her face, “Ah, no. I forgot that you do not represent your clansmen. Instead you walk about the representor of a faith you lay claim to but know little of, at the head of an armed force you know nothing of.” He spat. “Forgive me, I forgot who I was speaking to, Herald.”

Ah. Again, he fell back on the one story he told so often late at night: that the Dalish were hard set in their ways and unwilling to listen to him. That their cause was, as a collective, nothing more than a contemporary muse. That the calling they sent out on raven’s wings was as promising as it was pathetic. Usually, the woman sat in silence at the suggestion - he wasn’t wrong. It was a newborn initiative, that much was true. And her pride left her biting her lower lip in frustration, but she took his words without so much as a sneeze. Pride puts up barriers for all kinds of people.

But this time he included what he usually kept to himself – an outright disdain for the Chantry and this idle faith. There were no real reasons for the bitterness on his tongue; nothing beyond the fact that it, like the corrupt truth the Dalish hailed as a faith of their own, was pointless.

And this time he failed to exclude his questions of her authority – her the child, her the being in a role much larger than herself. A role that did not need to exist in a very world that did not need to exist. A role granted by a mark on her hand, a mark that should have been his by every extent of right.

“What did you forget?” Solas halted at the words, easily the sharpest she had yet to offer him; he was not expecting any sort of rebuttal. Most probably would have chosen to not answer – it was not a topic of discussion, there was nothing to debate. His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked up at her. From where she stood on the stone slightly above him, the light was intolerable. Her eyes met his, not a whisper of hesitation in her heart. “I know I am Dalish. I know I do not fit your standards. And I believe everyone can clearly identify your disdain for the Chantry or the cause of this collective. If you disagree with the decision made, I’m willing to listen to your perspective.” As she spoke, her hands didn’t form fist, her eyes didn’t narrow down at him. Perhaps they should have. Perhaps there should have been more tenacity in her voice: but alas, it was as patient and endearing as ever. “But I did not ask for this. I didn’t sign up for this crisis. I don’t know why I am the only person to survive the Conclave, and I sure as all Will did not ask to sign my life away for people that will never respect me.” Lavellan’s lips pursed briefly. “You see me in the same light as every other shem and every other stranger, fine. But I am not here to please, I am here to save lives.” Her neck went erect as her chin elevated, Solas standing in a silence riddled with astonishment as he allowed himself that much. His expression tightened as he bit back the only natural retort he had: who are you trying to convince, da’len? But he couldn’t, not as she continued. “If you truly are here for the same, then please continue with us. Otherwise, your company is not required.”

The silence between them was stiffened by the song of birds fluttering by. Cassandra regarded the two still entities curiously but continued their walk, now leading the way up to the gates of Redcliff. Some within the Inner Circle believe she saw the transition first – the change from an academic relationship to otherwise. She will lay claim to this for years. She was present when the Inquisitor vanished before them at the hand of a desperate mage, only she can lay claim to describing the expression that married the apostate’s face.

And that of when the Inquisitor re-appeared moments later. The deceit was objectified, the day victorious with minimal blood spilled out across the tiles. The young Dalish woman seemed shaken but otherwise did not waiver as she spoke down to the man kneeled before her; she reasoned with powerful application as she struck an accord with the rebel Warden mage. In truth, she was good at that. Exceptionally so.

However, there were fists balled tightly at her side.
The return to Haven was merry, as they now walked in the company of the Commander’s forces. There was laughter and a great deal of banter, none of which either elf seemed to partake in. The Herald’s then-new companion seemed excruciatingly unaware of the world around him: hands flying, lips curling, every indication of a glutton that couldn’t read a proper request to shut up if it was imprinted on his own forehead. Ellana tried to acknowledge him with soft smiles and gentle nods, but the two of them together was so agonizing to bear witness to that Solas marched, his disdain festering like a slow burn. But she was silent when the Tevinter sprang to another helpless soul’s side, and one glance by Solas confirmed her silence; she looked lost, a child ambling forward in a slight daze at the back of the armada. He turned away quickly, for a glance was all he ever needed to spare for her.

They returned to Haven in due time, the Commander, newcomer, and elf whisked away into the war room for a debriefing of the new situation at hand. Within those first two hours, three fights broke out between the mages and the Templars. The newly-named Herald walked out to see that once, and with whatever else was weighing her heart down, seeing this unfold broke a new level of grief to her lagging steps. The Commander handled the situation appropriately, but she walked away with her head low, right hand massaging her left.

It was between errands that Solas spotted her, curled body slouched over the stone banister near his Haven settlement. And for reasons he would never be able to name nor admit to, Solas found himself entranced by her. He watched her silent vigil from a safe distance away, his own curiosity nagging him in newfound conviction.

Varric waltzed to Solas’s side, his own attention set squarely on the woman slumped over the stone’s edge. Solas almost didn’t notice him except for the scuff of the man’s boots… an intolerable noise, once out in the woods for weeks on end. But his attention didn’t break from the woman as he would have any other day to cast a sideways glance at his new company. The brisk wind licked his cheeks, but to that he also paid no mind.

No. On this day, a pressure was building over the ice keeping his intentions and personal afflictions at bay. For Solas the man was not without his own subjective longings: despite what he may insist, he had no intention to stand idly by while people suffered. The more he considered her silence, the more the pressure built. The pressure in this stillness, ultimately, was enough for the ice to shift underfoot. A crack was beginning to form in his unbreakable surface.

On one side: his objective nature, his stalwart intention to see his mission through. On the other: his need to help others.

And no matter who you ask or what word labels it, that part of him is undeniable.

Varric nudged him, eyebrow arched in contemplation. “You know, a heap like that could probably use someone to lean on right about now.”

Solas bit the inside of his cheek as he returned the inquisitive expression to his companion. He made note to ignore the derogatory conclusion the Dwarf made about her posture. “And under what pretense should that person be I?”

Varric rolled his eyes and waved his hand, exasperation in his breath as he scuffled away. “You know, for a guy who lives his life in the woods chasing dreams, I figured you would know the difference between being alone and being lonely. But hey, whatever.” Solas chose not to bite back at the insult: there was no need to further that conversation.

In the silence, he had ample to consider. At first, he kept true to his intentions and considered his words in nothing more than an academic means: she was of little (if any) use if she sank in
depression, after all. This was not something easily tolerable, not with the Breach looming overhead. Not with his own agenda to attend to. As he sighed and walked over to her, he thought he could do justice to this thought.

She flinched as he appeared, something he… actually had never regarded her doing before. Not to him, let alone in response to any individual keen to gut her. Her eyes settled back down as she returned her chin to her forearms folded across her knees.

“I… sorry, Solas. I didn’t hear you coming.” Solas initially had no inclination to sit beside her. For what reason did she have to apologize for that? Yet he found himself there, seated on the cold stone, legs folded beneath him.

Neither of them spoke for a long minute. The wind carried between them seemed to still. Perhaps she didn’t need to discuss what happened the day before – it was blatantly clear she didn’t want to speak about it. Solas leaned forward a little, his upright, direct posture and demeanor slouching forward slightly as he clasped his hands together and rested them on his thighs. He didn’t want to look at her. He didn’t need to.

She was a means to his end. A foolish, childlike means. A Dalish. A disgrace.

And yet.

“I apologize for what I said earlier. On the trail,” he clarified, as if they had spoken again since then. They had not. Her body didn’t respond to him, but her gaze did weaken slightly as she watched the sun. So Solas continued, his static, unchanging voice the only life between them. “I meant no dis-“

“Please don’t lie to me,” she whispered, eyes still locked ahead, lips now between the folds of her arms. Solas’s heart harrowed as he again bit the inside of his cheek, the grip of his hands tightening ever so slightly.

What could he say? Upfront and outright as he was, could he tell her the truth? That her very nature disappointed him? That the way she carried herself across the landscape frustrated him to no end? Whatever she had to say meant nothing to him: it could never mean anything to him.

“I can’t stand when people lie to me, Solas. Especially people I respect.”

The thought was so absurd that Solas actually chuckled at that. He hadn’t actually laughed in so long, the vibrations in his throat almost felt alien. The moment definitely did. And he couldn’t help with his inquisitive nature: he just had to know.

“Respect? Me? After how I speak to you?”

“E sathan, hahren. You always have a point. A valid point, at that.” Her fingers arched, her grip curling. “Besides, what you have said to me is no worse than what I already hear.”

Instead of objecting to her unnamed past, Solas’s attention turned to the syllables strung together so naturally. His heart stilled, reflecting the wind of the region. “I was not aware you knew Elven.” She sighed, an audible release of some pent up irritation. “I may not know everything, but I try Solas. Give me some credit.”

The hahren turned his head to her; it was the first time he regarded her in full value. There were many things he could say, but only one seemed to fit his wry lips honestly. “You ask me to give you credit when you fail to give yourself any.” He teased the space with a considerate hmmm, drumming his forefinger against his knuckles. “What a peculiar request.”
At first she stiffened. Her refined ears changed shades of pink.

Then she laughed. And of all the things he should not have done, he smiled.

She would never tell him what she foresaw in the future; in the months to come, there was no need to. In that moment, the elapsed fear seemed to dissipate under the mirth of the safe space he crafted for her. There was no room for fear.

“You’re right. Creators! You’re always right.” Lavellan rolled back on her seat, hands dragging down her face. Muffled laughter rocked through her body. “Thank you, I needed that.”

The weight of the world returned to his shoulders as she said that. His brow furrowed slightly as he heaved a sightless sigh. “Sathem, da’len,” he offered. He bowed his head, fixated on the thoughts lost to him. Lavellan leaned forward again, an imitation of his own posture. She rubbed her anchored hand in the space between her thumb and forefinger.

“I failed. What we saw was the act of me failing.” Her chin elevated as she focused her attention on another element in the heavens above; when Solas returned his gaze to her, the Breach reflected in her eyes. “But there is so much room for me to fail still. One crisis averted, and ten new ones pop up. Bringing the mages here is already leading to conflict. Internal conflict, fighting I literally stirred myself. Is this going to be what ends the Inquisition? It’s still so young, yet I’m shaking its foundation. I know I have to keep looking forward, but that’s a pretty… terrifying thought. Every potential seems just as mortifying as the last.”

After a pause, Solas spoke in earnest. “I cannot tell you what will happen or how to lead this collective. I’m sorry,” she turned to him, forcing his eyes to flicker away, “I truly am. But at present, you are not alone in your endeavors. You will only fail if you permit it.” Solas chided at the end, his voice ringing in his ever-familiar patronizing tone. Ellana chose to ignore him, attention fixing on something else beyond the green hues of the sky. The silence lingered until a strand of hair was pulled out from the wind. It danced before his eyes. “Is it weird for you? When you walk the Fade. To see what once was but in some ways will never be? Could be? Could never have been, yet… is as true as what’s here, right now?”

Solas cleared his throat. He was intent to focus on his syllables, intent to put the reality behind him, but undeniably tying the two sides against the ice together in one fatal stroke. “You have no mind for what was lost.”

Her response was immediate.

“Then teach me.”

This was his first mistake.
The train screeches as it nears the city limits. Vallen stands up and pokes his head out the window, hands resting firmly on the windowpane.

“Maker’s breathe.” He waves Aupia to join him. The enchantress starts to collect her paperwork together but spares herself a glance up at the youths. The city pokes out beyond their heads, the absence of trees giving rise to spires and construction.

It’s beautiful. The city. Val Royeaux, originally a man-made island, is the capitol of Orlais; it is often regarded as its own living entity, perhaps due fact that it was, indeed, created by the hands of man. However, the means of living here is unique in its own right, the people connected by sheer abundance. This abundance is that of physical goods indeed, but one cannot measure Val Royeaux without weighing the city’s words of philosophy and debate: to what purpose do the stars serve? In what way is this better than that in a drink? What is responsible for the re-emergence of the dragons? And how could the Duchess of Dunsmuir wear such a thing? The questions asked and the opportunity that flood the waterways is what marks Val Royeaux’s place in Thedasian history; it would be no surprise if the city was the only thing standing when time stands still and life ceases. So it should be no surprise the Val Royeaux piloted the Enlightenment period that emerged in the Dragon Age. More questions being asked lead to more inventions being made; new alloys were formed, new shapes were introduced in designs, and more curious hearts stirred new means of ease for lives everywhere. The Interthedas train stemmed from the Val Royeaux ports, partly to settle the world’s thirst for the city, but also for Royans to settle their thirst for more. With international travel, new goods emerged. New conversations were being held. Ancient histories were uncovered and better preserved. New parties were being hosted, new entertainment was being crafted. More reasons to celebrate, more art to be made.

Apartment complexes, stacked living residences for the eager, dot the landscape of the outer city limits. Metal beams and rods climb the heavens to accommodate for the ever-increasing need for space to live and opportunity to grow. Steal factories, oil and steam and industrial plants alike for manufactured goods billow exhaust into the heavens, tickling what was with what can be.

Val Royeaux is breathing in, chest heaving to her greatest tidal capacity to make room for all of the people settling here. While the core of the area retains its traditional Orlaisian architect and accents, the world outside seems more like an uncomfortable step-sibling than an addition to an ever-developing world; at least, that is how the upper class members of society view it. The architecture is the same throughout, but the standards of living vary drastically. They will not deny the benefits they have promptly accumulated since the era began, but the age-old families seem the most resistant to the shift. From this a slight friction has emerged, but it is nothing more than words of spite.

And to the young adults that have only known the forest, the display of life was both formidable and heart-tingling.

This.

This is what generations of people have lead to – opportunity. growth. expansion.
This is what heroes have fought for, the Inquisitor included.

Aupia smiles.

Because now she gets to be a part of that.

Chapter End Notes

This was a shit chapter I promise it gets better.
Translations:
E sathan -> Oh please
Satham -> you’re welcome
Sael -> first
The only physical barrier between Central Val Royeaux and its nearly-established Outskirts is the exhaust that plagues the air of the Outskirts; as the train rolls through, Vallen was quick to force the stiff window up.

Its thick as can be and immeasurably difficult to see through, a density unlike anything airborne Aupia has ever seen before. As one may imagine, on one hand she is curious and engaged in the matter: on the other, she’s sick to her stomach as the smog rolls through their cabin.

“Is it usually like this?”

“Oh yes. Revolting, really. I don’t know how anyone could send their time in this, let alone accept this as a standard for living conditions.”

Aupia doesn’t respond. Vallen still sits in bitter silence, but between the two of them, seemingly obvious questions budded in the back of their heads: then why haven’t you done something about it?

“When we approach, do not speak to anyone. Not a reporter, not a bystander, not an agent. You will accompany me to the Grand Cathedral. Am I understood?”

Aupia digests the command and drums her fingers across the table top between them. “Can I take Quagga to the stables first? I don’t think she’s going to listen very easily with any staff.”

“Maker child, I thought you trained the beast.”

Beast? Aupia bits her lower lip. “The train ride was long and new for her. She’s going to be on edge in a new setting with new people. I want to make sure she’s taken care of, and I think that will be best if the care comes from me.”

Madame de Fer nearly glares at her, but her silence was enough of an answer as the train staggered to a slower pace. The whistle begins bellowing in the smog, a dragon in the thicket of the unknown.

Aupia turned to Vallen. “Want to come with me?”

“Not really.”

Wow, someone’s not bitter.

“Then Master Sacha will accompany me to the Inquisition’s old surgeon’s place of residence at the University.” Both perk up at the prospect – for something that never seemed feasible, it suddenly seemed too real. “I have already made an appeal to her for you to be her assistant, she requests a trial of some sort to assess you. We will see when she is soonest available.”

Thoughts start brewing at the suggestion: as much as Aupia loves and feels the need to be there for Quagga, this is essentially a dream-breathed-true for Vallen. She’d be a fool of a friend if she wasn’t there for him during this. And what happens if he fails her assessment? What happens then?
Instead, she resolves to simply smile at him; Vallen shuffles against his seat in the corner, agitation settling in his bones at the prospect of what is to come. “Want me to come with you?” she asks.

“No.” Then, hastily, “no thank you.”

Well. He’s nervous enough to have manners - that’s concerning.

Instead Aupia returns her attention to Vivienne. The train sputters slower and slower, the smog fades away like a sea settling back down after a storm. In its place is greenery, carefully manicured in their judiciously-located places to give off the illusion of spacious peace.

“Where are the stables?”

“When the you get to the animal platform, it is a straight walk from the side door to the East. The walk is short.” Her eyes harrowed again; it almost seems like a narrow, judging squint is her natural expression. “Do not speak to anyone. Am I understood?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Very good.” The Grant Enchantress waves her hand. “You may go now. If you leave the train immediately, you will be able to miss the busiest part of the crowd.”

“Yes ma’am.” Aupia stands on unsteady feet as the train continues to roll forward; she lingers at the door, eyes stuck on her friend, shoulderbag slung across her back with a tight grip.

“Good luck, Val.”

Reluctantly, he turned to her. He blinks.

“You too Addy.”

When she’s halfway out the cart Vivienne calls her back once more. “I am sure you are aware my dear, but your heritage may be frowned upon here.” Her warning was subtly layered in practical concern, if Aupia may be so bold to think as much. Her fingers linger on the cusp of the sliding door as she waits for the affirmation of society’s imperfections. “The Game here has changed since the war, and some people may not be so kind to you. Do not allow these small-minded people to get in the way. Do you understand me?”

Aupia allows herself to smile as the train reaches a halt. “Of course, ma’am.”

“Now go. We will meet you outside of the university when you are done.”

“Yes ma’am.”

With the animal trolley towards the back of the train, Aupia first had to worm her way through luggage and families eager to set foot on solid land once more. Babies cry and children scream, parents fighting to keep their calm amidst the hellstorm that was their own and the outside world. No one spares the time to snap at Aupia any more than they would any other stranger; the girl slips through without so much as a couple “sorries” and quick glances.

When she reaches Quagga, her pet doesn’t fare much better. She screams when her bulging blue eyes settle on her girl, a solid kick of her hind legs to the back of the stall.

“Quagga hush!” Aupia commands, snapping the animal to attention. With a quick, sweeping
motion the girl halts the halla up, saddlepacks and shoulderbag at the ready for a quick departure. The sidecar doors swing open ushering a buzz of light, and out they step before the other stablehands or creatures can react.

People are everywhere. Eloquently dressed individuals saunter too and fro, hems of dresses and dress skirts and fancy breeches and slacks all somehow impeccably free of dirt. Others scurry about in what appears to be worker’s clothes, faded layers, suspenders, and shoes worn through to the sole, blackened soot running all the way up their forearms. By some miracle, the people here never brush and bump into those that are clearly dressed differently than themselves; the blue collared individuals inevitably brush shoulders and the masked figures pass light fingertips over each other in gentle warning, but no one touches the other as the other is inexplicably of a different social status. Between them lie a few scampering groups of outsiders, people dressed from the cultures the Interthedas train has touched.

The hum of conversation hangs in the air not unlike the smog just beyond reach does, scurrying feet confirming new shifts and desperate working conditions. The masks carry muffled conversations regarding everything under the moon and stars, from political dances to technological advances. The new lyrium alloy used in steelwork. The changes in atmospheric pressure. Where the last dragon was sighted. Several unknown languages ring in Aupia’s ears, and she can do nothing but bear utter fascination for what was transpiring around her.

Quagga, on the other hand, was not as pleased. She snorts and stomps, head tossed high in refusal of her surroundings. Her eyes bulge, small pupils dilating under the stress of this new unknown. Her lips flutter as she omits a low hum of uncertainty.

Aupia hushes her with a gentle coo and soft hands, now concerned in her own right.

This is going to be more trouble than its worth.

But as she keeps her eyes on Quagga’s head, Aupia can’t help but notice a woman barreling in her direction. Barreling, as in tossing people aside. Barreling, as in no regard for the noble she just knocked to the ground.

And as she gets closer, dreaded realization droops over Aupia’s face.

She’s looking right at me.

“Come on Quagga,” Aupia pleads with a tug on the doe’s leadrope. But the halla’s legs are erect under her, terror petrifying her into a shell-shocked state.

“Hey! You!”

Shit.

This can only lead to trouble.

“Quagga, now,” she commands, her hands tugging stronger on her doe. Quagga takes a reluctant step forward then three backwards.

“Tits,” Aupia’s head spins as she looks desperately for a stable hand, an agent, someone, anyone, to help her get out of this mess. But for all of the people in Orlais, only one seemed aware that she was even present.

And this one emerges between the sea of faces in Aupia’s own.
She grins ear-to-ear, short blonde hair somehow composed of uneven angles in a fashion that seemed impossible to pull off. She’s dressed like one of the performers that would stop in Redcliff every now and then; bright, mismatched shirt sleeves, yellow breeches, and soleless flats. The only source of familiarity on the woman is the bow strung across her back, but with the current state of the world, it seemed dangerous to carry that around so freely in Val Royeaux.

But what catches Aupia’s breath is the woman’s ears.

No Elf had ever spoken to her before. Not of their own volition. So what would this woman want?

The woman freezes, stiffing up just like Quagga, but her shoulders are up and her arms outstretched in a foreboding hug. Her eyes are wide and bright as they dance between Aupia’s as the poor girl slowly leans backwards on her feet. The woman swoops in for a devouring hug after a painfully long period of silence; Aupia couldn’t respond – she didn’t know how.

A few quiet heartbeats drum past before the woman seems to realize something. Her nose crinkles as her smile droops into a frown, pulling away to search the girl’s face. “Oi, do you not know who I am?”

“Ex-excuse me?” Aupia asks, voice squeaking.

“Do.ya.know.who.I.am.” she speaks slowly as if to enunciate better, but her syllables slur together.

“N-n-n-no ma’am.”

“Ma’m?” The stranger recoils as if slapped across the face. Her nose crinkles in disgust. Then she tosses her head to the side as if to focus on something on the ground. “The li’l shit!”

_Oh Maker._

The woman seems to catch the fear stricken across Aupia, to which she rolls her eyes and offers the girl a reassuring pat on her arm. It did absolutely nothing to alleviate the stress riddled in the girl’s bones, who stiffens at each touch. The newcomer heaves a sigh. “It’s not your fault. Where’s Vivvy?”

Then, before she can respond, the Elf stretches up on her tiptoes to look above Aupia and into the sea of motion. She balances on the girl with her palms in her shoulders. “Eh no, I got it. You get your goat out of here. Wait, is that one a halla?”

Again, Aupia scarcely breathes. Her voice remains a crisp squeak. “Excuse me?”

What is she, a servant to the Grand Enchantress? There’s no way in the Maker’s will that she’d be a friend of the enchantress.

“Well?”

Aupia’s head rattles as she refocuses on the elf. “Sorry?”

“I said ya look like her, but I don’t like your hair.”

_Oh fuck._

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Aupia insists sharper than she intended, grip tightening around Quagga’s leadrope once more. “And I need to go.”

The elf rolls her eyes with an exaggerated toss of her head; she reaches to pat Aupia again, but the girl scoots out of the woman’s fingertips. She allows her hair to drape in front of her eyes, a
makeshift shield against the woman. Quagga was quick to follow Aupia this time – probably due to the insistence of whatever horse was eagerly waiting behind her in the trolley – and the two scampered off into the storm of the crowd. Aupia’s eyes cast a final fleeting look over her shoulder as they hurried away, and her heart settled slightly at the sight.

The woman remained on the trolley platform, hands set firmly on her hips, blatant frown watching Aupia scurry away. The crowd thickens then dissipates and Quagga skips underhand, pastures and stable just within sight.

Calling this place “the stables” seems to be an understatement, or in some way an insult. In no place in Orlais will mounts be treated and housed in such a lavish manner: it almost seems counterintuitive to offer such exquisite finery for creatures that will never grasp an understanding of what is around them.

But it is beautiful. The ceiling rises as if to house a second story, a pentagonal shape to the roof with low-hanging electric lights at every stall. Each stall wall rises several feet higher than what arguably is necessary, yet nothing reaches the ceiling, giving a complementary division yet connectivity between each set of perked ears. The stall guard droops in a gentle slope, offering curious heads a window into their outside world.

The stones underfoot spiral in such an intricate arrangement it almost seems insulting to allow dirt or feces to ever rest on its fine surface; something practically unavoidable where livestock is kept, but fascinating nonetheless. Quagga’s hooves dance over the stones, a quick and chipper beat to match her swaying head. Several long faces turn to greet their newest neighbor in a spectrum of color Aupia could only ever dream of on horses, and each stall has its own mini pasture attached, giving each long face both sun and rain whenever they chose so.

And most importantly a pristine and empty stall just inside the entrance already glistens with a new nameplate: Aupia Kessler.

Quite the welcome to an outsider. It’s hard for her to piece together the societal state of things here—the atmosphere almost tastes like its own hostility, a different shape to the game afoot. Like sister languages sharing similar roots but translating on different tongues. Yet there is respect, something seemingly inherit that was not found in the bustle of Redcliff. Its origin was unknown, but it was respect nonetheless.

She settles Quagga into the stall, the doe all too eager to dance in her new spacious room; it is quite the step up from the train ride, but nowhere near in comparison to the size available to the halla in the druffalo pasture back at home.

But it is well spacious enough. Quagga takes to sniffing every corner and checking out the space outside, frolicking too and fro as she touches noses to her new neighbors as Aupia tucks her saddlepack into the chest in front of the stall’s entrance. An abandoned stall not far away, filled with stored bedding and feed, flakes of hay and alfalfa waiting for the evening distribution. At the toss of a leaf, Quagga comes back loud and happy, neighbors abandoned entirely.

When she settles back down, Aupia brushes her. The doe’s gray flank rises and falls as she conforms to her new environment, eyes and ears swinging around to take in as much as she can without dislodging her owner’s fingers from her shoulder. The relative silence eases into their bones, a quiet calm as if to reassure that everything, no matter how chaotic on the surface it may
be, is not intolerable. Quagga’s chin rolls as she chews away.

But the silence serves as a double-edged sword: who was that woman? How did she know the Grand Enchantress? How did she know me? The peace lets Aupia page through her unorganized thoughts for the first time in what felt like weeks. As the world settles around her, Aupia finally skins into her own skin.

Chapter End Notes

I sliced this in half since the length was bothering me. The second half will be up pretty quickly *thumbs up*
Quagga talks to herself in low tones in what Aupia considered a response to the currying; it wasn’t until the doe takes a half-step forward to poke her head over the stall guard that she is aware of the eyes watching them both.

“Oh,” it was almost a whisper, something easily missed without elven ears. Aupia turns to find a human girl watching with wide, considerate eyes. She is average by all means – not particularly tall nor short for a human, with blonde-ish hair and green-ish, wide-set eyes, and pale lips in a faint ‘o’ with the corners curled up in a ghost’s smile. It’s the tabby cat in her arms watching Aupia, tail flickering back and forth as its attention dances between the halla and her girl. The bystander’s eyes mimic the cat as she considers Aupia.

She seems dressed in a peculiar fashion as well; her breeches are held up by suspenders, something she has never before seen on a woman. Perhaps the differences between Val Royeaux and a waterside village extends beyond the manners of the people – who knew acceptable fashion would vary so widely as well. Perhaps it is attributed to the people of the Outskirts.

But she doesn’t look like she’s from the Outskirts, she is far too clean for that. Her tucked-in dress shirt seems far too liberal to be something from an assembly line. Her hair too well-kept in its high ponytail.

Aupia stares at the newcomer’s boots openly, ever-avoidant of eye contact as it seems most suited to this… confusing individual, egging the girl to explain herself. She smiled slightly at Aupia, smart enough to know the value of distance between herself and an unknown animal but unaffected by Aupia’s lack of eye contact. She seems lost as she confirms Quagga’s presence.

“They lied.”

“Excuse me?”

The girl then takes a half step closer, the tabby flattening its ears at Quagga’s reaching nose. Both animals’ tails flick.

“They lied. They said the new boarder would be a Hart. But this is way cooler.” Then before Aupia can piece a response, “Have you ridden him yet?”

“No. she’s too young.” Never mind Aupia has only ridden a horse twice – why does everyone think she rides Quagga?

“She? Sorry, my bad. Can I check her teeth?” Aupia’s hand drops to her side as she finally looks at the girl evenly. “Wait, what?”

“Her face is similar to a Harts, right? I want to see how a bridle would fit her.”

“Why?” The girl steps back and waves down the barn isle before returning her hand to absent-mindedly stroking the cat. “I own the bay at the end of the hall. I love him and all, but as much fun as horses are, I haven’t ridden a hart in years. My uncle is going to give me one for my birthday and I was hoping to check if my spare bridle would fit it.”
As odd as it sounds, she seems harmless enough. Still, Aupia frowns. Getting a new mount just for a birthday? “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Oh Maker, I’m so sorry. I promise I’m not usually this rude.” She curtsies despite her breeches, hands gripping imaginary skirts as she drops the tabby to the floor. The execution was flawless. “I am Corinne de Caballet, second daughter of William de Caballet, who is the respected head of the de Caballet household.” She says, eyes deep in unspoken thought. She seems to roll through her speech like she has a thousand times before with the same curtsy every time. “Avid equestrian, all things considered. And you?”

It’s hard to summarize a life of secrecy to a stranger – what should she say? She bites her lip as she hesitates a moment too long. Corinne catches on, her expression starts to melt into bold curiosity.

“Aupia.” She falls back on the simplest of truths and a low, respectful bow. Probably an incorrect gesture given the possibilities, but she figured the attempt alone was enough to convey what was needed. “Aupia Kessler. A student, of a sorts.”

Corrine’s expression betrays her kindness; her lip curls in a humorous smile at the gesture but doesn’t comment. “Student? At the university? What subject?”

“Um,” she rises and distracts herself with quick circles in Quagga’s coat thinking over whatever her relationship with the Iron Woman is. The doe seems fascinated in the new girl’s fingers, her delicate nose outstretched as she begs for her attention. “Not really signed up for the University. A private tutorship of a sorts, but my friend is going to be there. He’s actually there now,” Aupia looks down the barn isle as if to see Vallen standing there. “Any chance you could point me in his direction?”

“Of course! I’ll walk you over.”

“You don’t-“

“I’m a student there, so I’ll know it better than any other bloke you’ll find out on the street, and I’m headed that way anyway. Everyone this side of the fence that’s our age will probably be at the University.” She bends over to pick up the cat again and backs into the center of the hallway as Aupia pushes out of the stall, Quagga’s quick feet right behind her. “Although, not everyone is there of their own doing, but that’s a topic for another day.”

She ushers the door closed before her halla finds its way out; Quagga retaliates by forcing her head out the stall guard as Aupia thinks through the girl’s answer. “Well, thank you. You don’t have to.”

“Hey no worries. I was headed that way anyway.” Aupia rubs Quagga one last time before refocusing on the girl behind her. “This… this side of the fence? Is the Outskirts actually fenced off from Central?”

“Not actually no, but if they put up a fence overnight I wouldn’t be surprised. There may as well be one. Is she on regular feed?”

“Whatever we fed the druffalo. Mixed alfalfa for the most part. I don’t think she’s a picky eater.” Corinne laughs at that as the two walk away. “Oh Maker! Druffalo? That’s hilarious! Hey Rue, did’ja hear that?”

Aupia freezes as quiet shuffling rumbles across the stones. Corinne walks on without Aupia, the cat in her arms poking back around the girl’s arm to stare her down as she walks on. “Rue?”

“Yes, miss?” the voice was soft, almost unmistakable as sound reverberated gently against the stone.
“Rue its just us. I have a name. and our new boarder here kept her halla with druffalo!” She laughs again – it isn’t necessarily an insulting laugh, not by any means. But it’s definitely unfiltered, that’s for sure.

“A halla?” A grey head pokes out tentatively, slow fingers curling around the wall keeping the voice from view. Aupia takes the last few steps forward to Corinne’s side to face whatever came her way, a face to pin to the unknown, a crooked nose or broken expression.

Instead she finds wide, gold eyes, not unlike the cat in arms with its flicking tail. A grey head with corkscrew horns and pointed ears not completely unlike her own.

A Qunari? For some reason he looks like a puppy kicked one too many times, like he has yet to grow into his bones yet beaten for his mere complexion. Not that Qunari are necessarily unheard of – there were plenty in Redcliff after working the railroad – but in Val Royeaux? He emerges from behind the storage stall wall, boots covered in muck and suspenders ragtagged with one strap almost completely torn off at the shoulder. It looks sown together one too many times, finally hanging on by a thread for what remainder of its existence it had. His factory shirt – its quality is so particular, so… standard, it couldn’t be considered anything else – was torn at the collar and has sweat stains distorting the color. The curled hand returns to the broomstick at his side as he emerges under Corinne’s gesturing chin, a motion of come on out here, but the beckoning does nothing for his courage. The grip on his broom looks a little tighter than it needs to be.

Corinne looks awful proud of herself for dragging this ‘Rue’ out of hiding. She smiles between them both – again, she appears to have no mal-intent, but oblivious to the sinking pressure at present. “Rue this is the new boarder. New Boarder, Rue’s the only stablehand around here I trust. Rue, you’ll probably be in charge of her mount.”

Aupia offers the young man a smile, which does nothing but force him to avoid her eye contact at all cost. What an odd thing, to be on the receiving end of evasive eyes. “Hi Rue. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Aupia.”

“Hello.” Despite being closer to him in the waking world, he sounded just as soft as before. Aupia almost had to lean closer to hear him.

“Sorry?”

“I said hello.” His eyes dart, dragonflies over the open shorebank. They flicker over the bow on Aupia’s back before dancing back away. Aupia exchanges brief glances with Corinne before dipping her head in a slight bow to the stablehand.

“Well, Rue, it was nice meeting you.” She pauses, then. “You don’t have to worry about feeding her tonight, I’ll be back to do that myself. I’ll probably be feeding her in the morning as well, but hopefully she doesn’t give you any trouble in the meantime. She’s a bit of a talker.”

“No miss. No trouble.” He shifts his weight back and forth, and for an instant, Aupia considers asking him how big he is: he almost doesn’t seem aware that he’s probably twice her weight, or the fact that he’s a solid head taller than her.

But given his nature, it doesn’t seem wise. That would also be wildly inappropriate of her, both of her own unlabeled social standing as well as this girl present. There’s some sort of social awkwardness to him – whether it’s from a class system imposed by the area or something else, he has a barrier up for a reason.

It’s probably safest to not bother him about it.

Corinne spins to regard her one last time Aupia and starts walking out the barn. “Well, we should
probably be on our way. Unless you’ll let me try my bridle on her now.”

“Oh Maker I forgot about that.” Aupia admits sheepishly, readjusting her shoulderbag uselessly. “Sorry, maybe some other time.”

“No worries.” She waves the thought away and walks without look back. “Rumad, please make sure Curlew gets his aloe tonight.” She waves absentmindedly to the stall at the edge of the barn right inside of their exit.

Rumad? She peeks into the stall between bars, finding a large brown horse rump blocking the stall’s exit to its mini pasture. “This is your horse?”

“Yes! Gorgeous, isn’t he?”

It's hard to tell since she could only see its hindquarters, but she wasn’t about to say that to this second-born daughter of whichever noble.

“Oh yes. I love the color.”

The cat wrestles out of Corinne’s grip and races back into the comfort of the stables as the girls continue away. Another last look over her shoulder, and Aupia catches a glimpse of the cat running straight between Rumad’s legs.

Corinne seems content with idle chat - most of her fascination comes from Aupia’s bow, which is apparently a rarity in Central Val Royeaux these days. That and her halla of course, but for every comment she makes about Quagga there are two to match of her own mount. As the stable disappears from view and the intricate buildings of Val Royeaux’s contemporary architecture becomes plainly visible, Aupia can’t help but glance around to check for the presence of the smog of the Outskirts. It seems ever-present, a constant reminder of what was just beyond the fancilies of Orlais’s centralized capitol.

It’s as they cross through the summer bizarre that Corinne leaves Aupia to her devices.

“Head straight. When you get to a red building, take a right around it. After that it’s a straight shot to the University.”

“Thank you Corinne, this means a lot to me.”

“Hey, you’re only new once.” She offers with a wink and a departing sweep of her imaginary skirts. Her curtsy seems more like a mockery this time, but to who Aupia cannot tell. “Make the most of it while you can. I’ll be seeing you around the stables. Maybe someday we can go for a ride together.”

Aupia smiles as she speaks in earnest, returning the girl’s sweeping motion. “Yeah, I’d appreciate that.” Then, with a dawning fear, her eyes widen under the veil of her hair as her guide walks away.

I was looking at her eyes.

Her head snaps up in panic, but Corinne was long-gone by the time any words came to mind.

She stands there for a long few minutes, trying to recollect her thoughts while simultaneously growing more anxious in her foreign environment. How had she slipped into that so readily? So soon after meeting her? Noble - she is a noble’s daughter. Her blood floods her pointed ears as she bits her lower lip, shame and impeding fear putting her head on a swivel.

But the nobles and serving men and tourists pay her no mind.
So she leaves, a vigorous speed in her step as she grips her shoulderbag in a fight for some sort of strength. Painfully aware of the color rising to her cheeks, Aupia tousles her hair to beckon it more into her face. As the sun curls around the horizon, Aupia comes to the bitter conclusion that, somehow, it has truly only been one day since this adventure of hers began. The Summer Bizarre falls behind her as the sound of water lapping intricate stonework fills her senses; its only when she realizes its water making so much noise and not the gossip of nobles that she slows down.

*How dreadful.*

Her palms press into the cool marble of the bridge. What an awful environment. What an odd people.

This place is exhausting. Do people really choose to live here? Then, when the anxiety washes over, her ears color in shame. There are those that don’t have a choice, that much was plain. The Outskirts were likely the only option for some.

The thought twists her heart as the girl hugs herself.

Because as amazing as the center of the world is, home is always, always missed.

The university was exactly where Corinne said it would be; once Aupia rounded the redbrick, upper class apartments marking the corner of a private neighborhood, the university stood right before her, height drawn to its fullest glory. People mill around, all walking in what appears to be speeds beyond normal; their eyes are drawn back and their lips are pursed, likely due to the stress of the working environment.

And there’s Vallen, walking briskly from one too-tall archway to another; his gait is still off from the disagreement the day before, but its him nonetheless, and relief floods her system.

Never before had she been so immeasurably grateful just to see her asshole of a friend.

Aupia starts to jog before she realizes why he’s moving so quickly. Vallen’s head is cocked slightly, admiring the woman next to him and keeping Aupia too far out of his peripheral. She’s speaking, based on the speed of her mouth moving, but to what Aupia cannot tell.

She’s too far away from his world to know.

Vallen hurries away as her brisk speed comes to a halt, anxiety biting at her lower lip.

The whole world is at her fingertips, and yet she can’t find the strength to reach out to it. Val Royeaux, the land of dreams and ambitions and revolution and perfection, is just too much for a single heart to bear.

Her grip tightens on the base of her bow, a new flood of emotions suddenly washing away at her resolve. But she walks anyway, eyes focused on her toes as he boots scuff the never-ending mason work ahead of her.

She almost doesn’t notice the small cloud of people gathering to her right or the break in the crowd’s relative speed. As she looks up, it’s to see familiar and unidentifiable faces alike.

She catches the Iron Lady in the small collective, beautiful robes and heels distinguishable like a snapdragon in a field of wheat. And beside her?
It’s the elf from earlier, cropped hair recognizable from a mile away.

And – wait, is she with the Divine? She stands next to white and red robes, a woman in gold, a dwarf in a red hood, and a man in armor. Each person seems remarkably more out-of-context than the previous.

They all stare in different states of expectation – the noisy elf looks proud of herself as if she was the one responsible for bringing Aupia here, Vivienne looks bemused, the woman in gold somewhat ecstatic, and what appears to be the Divine looks ready to cry. The man’s raw shock seems to have slapped itself across his face because he immediately turns away, forcing a blush across Aupia’s cheeks. Only the dwarvian woman’s smile seems somewhat normal.

_Oh Maker. What have I walked into? Be casual, be cool, be-

“Uh, what?”

_Shit. Failed step one._

The assumed-Divine smiles somewhat blithely, her hands clamped together behind long, silken robes.

“Welcome, Aupia. We have heard a great deal about you.”

Aupia arches a daring brow at Vivienne: what did she tell them, about the stuff she failed to ask on the train or what her spies reported to her? No one seems to notice.

Instead, the Divine steps closer, varying shades of brown and hazel easily visible in the dance of her eyes. The scrutinizing stare – now joined in by others leaning in – forces, yet again, a bright blush to rise to Aupia’s face. The Divine smiles and sweeps an arm in a beckoning motion.

“Come. Let’s go inside, we have much to discuss.” The man leads the group in another direction, something making him eager to leave.

And given the atmosphere of apprehension, Aupia couldn’t agree more.

Chapter End Notes

_Sorry, its boring but relevant._
_Get ready for an awkward evening._
_Questions, comments, complaints and concerns appreciated!_
It’s one thing to keep a sense of cool when you’re a minority in a world ready to slam your face against a stall.

But as Aupia trailed behind the company she was set to spend her time with, a nauseating apprehension started to drag her feet. Arguably, a great deal of that came directly from the size of the hat the woman in front of her wore.

_Tits._

_That’s the Divine._

She knew it was wrong, seeing the people watch them from afar; the fact that the people disapproved of the Most Holy wasn’t news to her. But it definitely was no reassurance when groups of moderately dressed individuals would steer clear of them. And it didn’t help that the street performer from before was absolutely at ease beside the Divine. What is she, some sort of personal jester? How did she know who Aupia was? Vivienne, as prime and proper as she was, did not seem particularly impressed by this character at hand, but she did nothing to swat the pest away as the girl would have thought. They chat about the weather in Redcliffe, as if it held some sort of importance. Like talking about the state of a pond in a world on fire.

The man wasn’t much younger nor older than Aupia’s father, but the way he fought himself to avoid her eye contact put blisters on her hands as she wrings away. Every now and then she catches him jerking his head hastily, as if he allowed himself to look at her before receiving some sort of slap to the face. Like he’s terrified that she’s going to breathe in the same air.

The dwarf is friendly. She tries to talk about everything but what was going on around them, how was the train and have you eaten and when was the last time you found a latrine.

_Literally. Everything but._

Only the woman in gold seems to pick up on Aupia’s aura of distress. She rests a manicured hand on the girl’s arm, startling her into a momentary stumble.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers, eyes soft around the edges as she keeps her attention ahead of them. She leans in a little but retracts her gentle touch. “I know this must be overwhelming for you.” “Overwhelming?” Aupia’s voice cracks. The Divine waves to some onlookers murmuring unrecognizable praise. They look homeless. “That’s… one way to put it.”

“When we get inside, would you like anything?”

“The head cook here is brilliant,” the dwarf insists, a playful curl settling on the edge of her lip. She doesn’t seem like a particularly serious person. “If there’s anything under the Maker’s sun that you want, she can whip it up.”

Aupia almost vocalized her opinion. It would have been something along the lines of _I want my mom_, but no sound found her throat. She coughed instead.

The two women exchange brief glances across Aupia, who pays them no mind.
They cross a pavilion with an incredibly decorative garden, something starkly out of place compared to the stonework that was the hollowed-out cathedral. If Aupia wasn’t already aware that this was the place of residency for the Divine, she likely would have considered it an abandoned fortress. You know, one of the nice ones full of tortured souls and screams in the night.

And like everything else in the last ten minutes in her life – the longest ten minutes of her life – the unadorned place of worship made absolutely no sense.

Correction: it may have made some sense in a regular fashion, but with Aupia’s present company, it was hard to tell if anything would be ‘regular’ here.

Servants walk along the far walls as if trying their darndest to stay out of the Divine’s way as they carry on their duties. The inside was radiant and well-adorned with embellishments from ages past and generations lost. But it remained a representation of Val Royeaux in the little things, like the strings connection the hallway lights. What made Aupia cringe at the weight of her newfound world was the crystal chandelier just over the main hallway, a piece of magnificence adorned with hundreds of light bulbs.

Oh boy.

“Do you like it?”

The girl didn’t realize she was staring in such a dumbfound manner at the chandelier, not until the Divine’s eager face dotted her peripheral vision. Can a woman twice her age be eager? Does that even make sense? Dark eyes are shadowed by her hat; it must be hard to keep that thing upright.

Of her response, Cassandra only caught the world “impressive,” which brought a smile to her face. Her own eyes went up to admire the chandelier as if for the very first time. “Your mother said something similar when she saw the first version. I still do not know what to think about it.”

Her accent rings unfamiliarly in Aupia’s ears, but she isn’t given much berth to think it through.

“Hey speaking of it, you said you’d get me one.”

The Divine’s face flattens in exhaustion as she turns away and continues their walk. The elf bounces behind her, trotting up to her side. “Oi! You can’t ignore me.”

“I’m not ignoring you, Sera. It would be impossible to ignore you.”

“Then you’re avoiding the question as much as your Divine arse can handle.”

Aupia is suddenly acutely aware of the sweat beading on her neck. Her pulse quickens.

“Indeed I am.”

Wait, what.

What kind of a response is that?

“Your Holiness,” the man butts in as if someone forgot he was there. In truth, everyone seemed to be avoiding him and his agitation. His hand gripped the handle of his sword aggressively. “There are other matters that require my attention. I would like to take my leave.”

“Are you sure?” the woman in gold steps closer to him, to which he balks at her advance.
“Yes.”

The man was absolute in his stance: he wanted nothing to do with the girl.

So be it. The Divine nods to him and he dips into a sweeping bow before darting into a long hallway. He’s gone in the blink of an eye like one of the servants.

What an odd man.

The Divine sighs as they enter a waiting room, one adorned with plush seats and a roaring fireplace. “Well, that was Commander Cullen. He is a busy man, I am sure he will make time to get to know you better very soon.”

It seemed smart to not contradict the Divine: as off as this woman may be, as improperly informal, as oddly tolerant as she was, she is the leader of the church. A mighty power church as well, one with its own mighty powerful militia.

So Aupia settles for offering her a fleeting smile before dropped her gaze back down to her boots. When in a situation you don’t know, there’s nothing wrong with falling back on what you do know, right? I feel like Dad would say that right about now.

“I’m Josephine Valjean.” The woman in gold again reaches for Aupia’s arm, bringing her attention back up to eye level. “We all were close friends of your mother. Ellana and I worked on… formalistic matters.” Her kind eyes betray her courage; some sort of sadness is deeply rooted in her expression. But there is a softness to her, a seemingly motherly nature. The weave of her hair is beautiful like her eyes, like the ring on her finger. “You already know Vivienne. She traveled with the Inquisitor across Thedas.” The elf in flats catapults herself onto a loveseat nearby.

Aupia catches her breath. “Wait, really?”

Vivienne half-stares, half-smiles at Aupia as she settles on the largest seat in the room. She eases her skirts out and around her like it was second nature. “What surprises you about this, darling?”

“You never said that you traveled with her. Were you on the front lines?” There’s a surprise.

“Yes. Far more often than I should have been.”

“Which wasn’t very often,” murmurs the dwarf lightheartedly, winking at Aupia. Since she has the girl’s attention, she presses on. “I’m Harding. Your mom knew me as a scout. Nowadays I’m called the Canary. Chantry Canary, more or less.”

Aupia considers her words and blinks. “That’s not a very traditional nickname.”

“Well, I’m not in a very traditional position.”

“And you know me!” The elf leans forward on an armrest, body rolled forward on the palms of her hands. Aupia smiles shyly at the woman. “We met, but you didn’t tell me your name.”

The Grand Enchantress huffs. “Of course she didn’t.”

Her nose crinkles. “Oi, watch it. We met that counts.” She is remarkably at ease here, bow dangling off a foot bent at eye-level as she lounges about. “But I’m Sera. They all have their fancy titles now we’re old, but I’m in with friends. You know, cool friends. The Friends of Red Jenny.”

Red Jenny. Isn’t that-
Forget being rude or not: Aupia just has to ask. “Are you a vigilante?”

“A wha?”

“A rebel body in a lost cause.” Schools Vivienne with a roll of her eyes. “Yes dear, she’s a lost one.”

“Am not!” Sera growls.

Interesting. “How do you know the Divine? If I’m allowed to ask.”

“Your mother my dear. We all worked with her.” The Divine just smiles. She looks like she’s trying to absorb the girl with her eyes.

What a gaggle of people, a very odd little circle of companions. There were stories – there are always stories – about the Inquisitor and exactly who she was. Most of the elders in Redcliff would tell tall tales; how she traveled through time, how she stopped a false god, how she turned the tides of the Heritage Wars without lifting a finger. All great stories but none particularly believable. They were reserved for the little kids running around at the foot of her statue.

Aupia leans back in consideration, unaware of the brewing silence. Maybe this crowd isn’t so far-fetched after all. Maybe those stories had some truth.

Or maybe, just maybe, all of this is some sort of fractured telling of the same story. Something’s missing.

“Aupia.” It’s the Canary who leans forward in her seat. “We’d really like to get to know you.”

Aupia cocks her head hesitantly as she weighs her options. “Why?” She tags a hasty “ma’am” on the end with a low breath. But the dwarf smiles simply again, as if the question almost wasn’t worth asking. “Why not? You’re here aren’t you?”

Aupia weighs her options and shifts to sit on her hands. “There isn’t a whole lot to say.” The room’s silence thickens like ice in a blizzard.

“What are… you have a family, yes?” Divine Victoria leans forward. For a heartbeat, stories of the Divine strolling Thedas with a sword and a shield comes to mind - the girl's mind flickers over the possibilities as she pieces together her response. She blinks rapidly as she tries to school her thoughts. “My parents run a druffalo farm.”

“In Redcliffe.” The Divine tries to clarify.

“Just beyond, north-east-ish across the water. Ingersoll. A basic trade community.”

“Do you like it there? Are… are they good to you?” The question dies off, a low plea of a sort. It came from Lady Valjean. Aupia just nods slightly back at her, testing a weak smile. “Yeah. They’re really good to me. I love them. A lot.”

“I’d imagine you’re good with that bow then.” The Canary nods to the string at her side. “Not a lot to do on a farm most days.”

Aupia shrugs as she reverently tries to avoid eye contact. “I’m alright.”

The quiet rises again. Aupia shifts her hands out from underneath her and holds them on her lap. Madame de Fur clears her throat as her fingers drum across her armrests. “Not to be too direct my
dear, but how did you come into the possession of these people?”

She couldn’t help but purse her lips at the enchantress’s avoidance of calling her family her parents. “They said a man brought me to them. He didn’t stick around. They assumed he was an Inquisition agent.”

The women in the room exchange glances but nothing is said.

“We… would like to know more about you, Aupia,” voices Madam Valjéan, smiling everstill. Aupia almost finds it in herself to smile back. Instead her mouth forms a small line as her eyes dip away. “I… like I said, there really isn’t much. I work on the farm, help with the deliveries… I used to go fishing with my dad, uh-” Her mind wanders to her father. Why did she just tell them that? She hadn’t been fishing in years. “For the most part, I just help my friend. Vallen, he came with me.” Her eyes dart to Vivienne as if for confirmation but she gives no indication of even hearing her. So she defaults to what she knows: the truth and fidgeting hands. “There really isn’t a whole lot to say. It’s a pretty simple place.”

“But what about you. What do you like, where would you-“

“These aren’t yes or no questions, Your Holiness,” warns the enchantress. “Perhaps we should give more time for those answers to come to light.”

The Divine sighs through her nose and folds her hands into her long sleeves. Josephine’s smile is gone, but her eyes remain bright. “Is there anything you would like to ask us?”

Aupia pauses to count her breath. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

Her hesitation all but evaporates. “I want to know what she was like. Not what she did, how she did it.” At their expecting silence, Aupia’s mouth runs. “And I want to know why she did what she did. And how her magic worked. What the Anchor was like. And where she came from. Why did she leave her clan? And she went through the Fade, right? How did she do that? She was from a clan, right? For some reason people tell different stories about that. And what did she like to eat? An-“

“Elfroot,” interjects the Chantry’s Canary. “She loved elfroot.”

The response caught the girl off-guard. “Wait, really?”

“Oh yes. She put it in everything. Pies, teas, cakes. She even cooked it into bread.” Aupia frowns. “Huh.” Well, that’s something odd. “Why did she like elfroot?”

“I don’t… I don’t think any of us ever actually asked her that.”

“She talked. A lot.” Sera rolls emphasis on her last two words with a toss of her eyes. “She’d talk days and circles around stuff. Little stuff even! She used to be quiet. Then she got curious. Then she just got noisy. Like what cup to use and what fork was it and yadda yadda yadda.”

“Not little things, Sera.” Josephine’s voice is shy of its general kindness. “Each decision made was attributed to peace. Using a cup from one designer and not another would swing favor in the direction of different families. Knowing proper dinner etiquette was crucial for nights in the Winter Palace.” She turned to Aupia. “Those were some of the matters that I worked on with your mother. She never complained, but she despised it. Oh, she despised it. All of it, really.” A fond smile finds itself stretched across her cheeks. “She would much rather climb the chalices than waste her time away with all those nobles, but she did. She was so intuitive. She made the most of it.” For some reason, every time she opens her mouth, her voice seems to trail off at the end, like her thoughts
have been soaked in nostalgia.

Sera huffs disapprovingly, her legs swinging over the edge of the seat. Aupia turns to her. “You said she was quiet… and curious?”

“The Inquizzibum didn’t talk a whole lot at first, until you pushed her buttons just right.” Laughter rolls from her chest and off her tongue, something sweet, something salty. Her body stops trembling with the laugh soon enough however. Aupia almost likes this woman. “Then she got all question-y, which was just annoying. All kinds of ‘whazthat’ and ‘hows’ and ‘howsnots’.”

The young woman is not too sure how to proceed with this. “As in…?”

Sera scratches her head. Her nose crinkles up again. She almost wears a wrinkle on the nose of her bridge like the nobles of Orlais wear their masks. “Eh, ‘what horse’ an’ ‘what noble’ and ‘what baddie’ and yadda yadda. Lots of questions, got boring in the camps.”

Aupia tries to digest the suggestion. None of the other woman seem troubled by this woman’s diction – they’re too weathered to it to bear any difficulties translating the Red Jenny’s misshapen thoughts. “She was… boring in camps?”

“Yeah. Wasn’t too big on the pranks at first.” Sera tosses a smile over her shoulder at Aupia. It is wide and unfiltered like the rest of her. “But she got good later.”

Vivienne audibly sighs from across the seating room as she re-crosses her legs. “What else would you like to know, darling?”

Aupia blinks once. She’s always wondered about the logistics behind the Inquisitor, but not many people are probably presented a chance like this. “Why did she stop fighting?”

“She never stopped fighting, dear. She fought until her last day.” Aupia’s brow furrows at Vivienne’s response. “No, she vowed peace. She said she would never take up arms again.” She knew her next words before they fell from her lips and she was well aware of how abrasive the suggestion would sound. But some questions just need to be answered. “She got passive and that lead to the Heritage Wars, didn’t it?” her anger wasn’t justified and she knew that; being angry in the presence of the Divine was probably a sin in its own.

They looked shocked at the outburst, but it was Lady Valjean who answered nonetheless. “Your mother decided she wanted to achieve peace through different means. She was tired of walking over bodies on the frontlines. The Heritage Wars didn’t begin because she set aside her staff. The Heritage Wars both began and ended because she was able to discern the real enemy of the Tevina-Qunari War.”

Aupia’s brows pinch together in disapproval. “I don’t understand.”

“And I expect you may never will.” Vivienne’s voice rings full of passive aggression. “But the entirety of a war cannot be explained to you in one evening.”

She seethes, but settles for playing with her hair. Sera and the Canary watch her fingers intently as the Divine tries again. “Ellana led the Inquisition through a time where war was our only option. War, or death.” She draws breath. “When confronted with the war of Tevinter and the Qunari, she saw it as a different situation entirely. It was a war of pride and prejudice.”

“And what was that difference, exactly? People died in both situations.”

The Divine sifts in her seat. She brushes back stray, short black hair into the folds of her hat. “You
cannot reason with a madman, Aupia. Your mother chose to defeat Corypheus rather than let him have his way. There was no talking our way out of the Breach. That potential was here.”

“Really? there was reasoning with the Magisters? The Qunari? Fen’Harel?” She wasn’t mad, she didn’t want to sound mad. But them defending her when things don’t make sense wasn’t helping the situation. “I mean, the war was essentially theirs. His, really, at the end of the day.”

“The Heritage Wars was not a one-front war, Aupia. It wasn’t that simple.”

“How not? Look, I know she was a hero. I know that. But I don’t understand why she wasn’t a hero in the war.”

The Canary was the one to break the silence this time. “Have you seen the scribes’ accounts of her speeches?”

Aupia blinks. _That’s on odd question._ She shakes her head. “No, big stuff like that never makes it out to Ingersoll.”

“I’ll find those for you,” the dwarf affirms as if there are no other options at present. As if it was the only thing of relevance. “You’ll see exactly what she was doing. You know, she did participate in the war. Before it became the Heritage Wars really, but she was out there. And during of course – she just participated in a new way.”

“Wait, really?” Aupia leans against her seat a little, finding a slight ease in the woman’s demeanor. “The Redcliffe festivals always had people telling her story. I’ve seen one of the street performances. They never mention her raising her staff after the Exalted Council.”

“She did, once.” The Canary’s eyes fall on a clock in the corner of the room. “It’s starting to get late though, maybe I can tell you tomorrow. It’s quite the story.”

Aupia doesn’t feel that impressed by the prospect. “Really?”

Vivienne turned her attention to Sera. “Where _is_ Qat, my dear? Where is your beloved wife? Up to some chaos again?”

It seems out of the blue, but Sera waves it away but beams in a consuming smile. “Out and about. Red Jennies never stick around long, yeah?”

“And yet you are here.”

The snark in the enchantress’s tone was undeniable, but of all the unholy responses the woman could have offered, the Red Jenny stuck out her tongue.

Sera rolls over to glare at Aupia; after a heartbeat the girl bits her lip and returns the look. “But what’s she don to you?” Sera accused, sitting a little more upright. “You didn’t know her. She didn’t-“

“Nothing.” The girl bits back, finally putting words to her thoughts. She pauses to find herself before presses forward. “She’s done absolutely nothing to me.” She turns to address the other women in the room – for some reason, its wildly hard for her to keep her eyes from shaking. Its painfully difficult to keep her voice from shaking. Her anger was suddenly beneath her, a fire in her seat and in the tightness of her hands. _Why am I so angry? This is the hero of Thedas – not even, its her ghost!_

Rage is a funny thing: it is often one in the same as devastation, as confusion, as sadness. And
unfortunately, it doesn’t require a face to pin a mask to. Rage doesn’t require a clean label to exist in a burning heart. It simple exists, somewhere in the storm of the heart. When she speaks next, Aupia’s voice drives louder. “That’s why I have to know – if she was in the middle of a war as you say, then why the hell did she have me?”

The snap is broken by a serving woman dropping a log in the back of the room. Everyone jumps – including the woman – and she apologizes profusely, bent over in a heap as she collects the firewood.

But she is a shade of red Aupia has never seen before hidden behind the drapes of her hair. In time, the Canary sighs and stands up with a shake of her head. She escorts the woman out with a kind hand.

As the silence blisters, Aupia wipes her cheek aggressively. Somehow, they got wet. She murmured, unsure if her small audience had a care to hear her speak any more; nonetheless, she found herself with something to say. “It would almost feel better if she was actually fighting someone. But all it sounds like is she wasn’t even trying, someone the world hails as its hero, and in the middle of all that she made a mistake. In the middle of all of that, she-“

“We do not pretend to understand what Ellana was thinking.” This time it’s Josephine Valjean; her own eyes look softer now, potentially watered-over. “We could only support her.”

“Bu-“

“Ya know she was an elf, right?” Sera won’t look at Aupia. She’s focused on her flats. “Like, one of the Dalish. A real elf.” Her voice drops to a growl. “Well, as real as it could get at the time. There’s no such thing as real.” With that she swings her legs forward and off the seat. No one seems intent on cutting her trail of thought off. “We’re old now, it’s different. But she was one of the real ones.”

When Aupia opened her mouth, Sera shushed her with a pointed finger. “She didn’t have no one. No one but us. All the elfy ones were… taken away. And fighting makes you feel alone, yeah? Makes you feel like less of a person, more of a, oh, I don’t know-“ She scratches the back of her head violently. The young woman could hear the elf’s course nails digging into her skin. “-a shoe? Something useless.”

Aupia was familiar with the first part of her claim: it was common fact that the Inquisitor’s clan was all but eradicated. But that doesn’t resolve the issue at hand. “So what, I was some… amenity? Something to keep her mind off killing people?”

Divine Victoria slams her hand down and tosses her face to the side, eyes winched shut. “You were everything she could have ever hoped for!”

The break from her collected demeanor forces Aupia to drop her head again, as if being scolded by a stranger in Redcliff for the way she looked at his booth. Heat rushes to her ears. When she glances up, she sees Victoria’s head in her hands.

“I apologize. That was… ill-considered of me. But her pregnancy put a new life in Ellana. She was so eager for you to join her in this world.” The Divine takes a deep breath with eyes closed. “It is… difficult to put into words exactly what you meant to her. When we thought we lost you both, we were devastated.”
It was true enough: The Divine spoke from the heart when she said that. But there was yet to be proof to justify this for Aupia. The girl resists the urge to fold her arms across her chest, instead settling to play with her hand. “And you didn’t know I exist? You didn’t look for a stray baby dropped on someone’s doorstep?”

It is the dwarf who speaks next as she returns to her seat. Unbeknownst to Aupia, her response was more directed at the Inquisition’s Inner Circle than it was to the girl. “The last letter the Inquisition received suggested that your mother was well and close to your delivery, but the events of the fire that took her life was never clear. We- I mean, the Inquisition couldn’t… check the remains thoroughly enough without bringing someone outside of her immediate circle in to examine her body.” She sits, her eyes on the Divine who avoided her feverously. “It was thought-“

“You thought it was better to keep a secret from the world then finding out if I was breathing. Alright, fine.”

The jab earns her a scolding glare from Sera. The continued silence breaks with Josephine’s quiet question. “How do you feel, being her daughter?”

Aupia bits her lip. A glance at the speaker reassures her fear – they want the honest truth. Josephine offers her the sweetest, most enduring smile she can. “I don’t know. Sick to my stomach maybe?” She turns between the gathered faces. “Did I kill her?”

The Divine was quick to respond. “We do not know how she passed. All that we know was that she was victim to a wildfire, trapped as she was somehow.” Something else darkens her expression. “No one survived that day.”

Sera snorts. “But if you want the honest truth, she was happy being fat.”

“It’s called being with child, my dear. She wasn’t fat.”

“She felt like she was fat. Try this – she didn’t like actually being fat, but she liked you.” At the last second, the rogue turns away. “A lot.”

Most of the people present look her in the eye: it makes her skin crawl, like Aupia is being judged for a crime.

But not Sera. Sera looks at her hair.

The realization clicks in the girl’s mind. “And my father?” She takes a deep, calming breath and refolds her hands. “Who was he? I’ve never heard about the Inquisitor having a personal life.” “Oh she didn’t,” Sera nearly growls, flicking at something under her nail. “She wouldn’t bang a wall if given the chance.”

“Sera.”

“It’s true.” She asserts with arms folded across her chest.

“It’s vulgar.” Vivienne chides her again. “It’s fact. And which,” Sera waves a warning finger at Aupia, who, respectfully, is trying her utmost hardest to not blush at the conversation (this is pretty wild. Is the Divine really just sitting there?) “If you’re like her, you’re boring.”

At the pause that followed, Aupia chocked out her response. “Excuse me?”

“Bang everyone. Bang everything. Oh!” She’s interrupted by the other women present, but their
disdain has no impact. She continues without filter. “You’re going to LOVE Bull!”

“I almost would rather continue this.” Its Vivienne who’s low sigh breaks the silence. The Divine murmurs something in agreement. She seems to consider something before speaking up once more. “Your father… went missing, right around the time you were born.” There’s a reluctance in the Divine’s tone; it’s hard to distinguish whether she’s upset about this fact or that she’s addressing the fact.

She stops as if that’s answer enough – Aupia nearly barks her next question. The atmosphere in the room is far to testing than it probably should be. “Well? What did he do? How did they meet? What did he look like? He was some noble or something? How did you know him? What was he like?”

They all exchange glances. The Divine coughs, leaning forward ever so slightly. “He.. was a mage. A healing mage.” At that her eyes flicker over the others, but for some odd reason, none of them can look at each other. “He traveled a lot and… and joined the Inquisition as he was…. Well, not needed, but he played a crucial role. No noble, but… well-spoken.”

Sera coughs. “Arse.”

Vivienne shushes the elf.

“Was he human?”

“No. He was an elf.”

“Dalish?”

“No, but he wasn’t from a city either.” Every question is met with the simplest of answers. It became apparent to Aupia that the Divine truly was trying to answer her questions truthfully, but it escaped her notice how careful the answers were. She continues blindly. “And all of Clan Lavellan is gone,” she confirms tentatively.

Divine Victoria nods solemnly. “As far as we know.”

“And his name?” Aupia’s hands word nervously. The prospect of this, a whole new side to her life that could be explored and tested and, hell, maybe, just maybe, he's alive somewhere, and-

Josephine coughs as the Divine clarifies. “I'm sorry?”

“His name. you haven’t told me his name.”

The Divine settles her shoulderblades against the back of her chair as she refolds her hands. “It is our understanding that he had many names throughout his life. During the war, we called him Onis.”

Aupia struggles to wrap her tongue around the syllables. It’s fascinating, such a faceless person, someone so critical to her life, had such a simple name. It almost didn't seem possible. “Onis?”

Sera snorts. “He was elfy. Too elfy.”

Vivienne nods. “Yes. Quite so.”

Only Madam Valjean remains silent.

“What were they like?”
“I’m sorry?”

“Like, their personalities. Both of them, my parents. Together.”

“That may be best answered in due time my dear.” Vivienne keeps her eyes on the fireplace. “The hour is getting late.”

The Divine checks the grandfather clock in the corner. Like everything else in this day, it was only intricate upon closer inspection; from this far away, Aupia could only see minimalist face value. “Very true. It is nearly supper.” When she stands, everyone mimics her (but Sera): Aupia jumps up to attention as the Divine meets her eyes. “What would you care for, for supper?”

Aupia glances away. This is all too much.

So she, again, falls back on what she knows, “I… respectfully ma’am, I’m not all that hungry.”

The Divine didn’t even pause to draw breath. “Of course. You have had a long day. Perhaps it is time to retire early for the night.” She extends a sweeping, robed arm beckoning to the agent standing guard at the door.

“We’re glad you’re here, Aupia.” The girl’s face colors when she sees the pure sincerity in Josephine’s expression.

The Canary walks up to her, her naturally kind face dipped a little in gentle sympathy. "There is a lot we didn't get to, but it was pretty rude to your mom's memory if we dumped everything on you tonight. I'd be surprised if any of this makes sense, but I promise we'll piece things together for you in the next few days."

Aupia isn't convinced. She meets the dwarf's eyes with jaded regard. "You promise?"

Lace Harding smiles in full. "I promise."

“Yeah, I… thanks. Thank you.” A maid comes up to stand behind her, her quite presence enough to stir new awkwardness into the atmosphere. She pauses with a heavy heart, something keeping her from leaving. There is something to be said here, something symbolic or respectful or admirable. Something the scribes would account for in years to come if this day is ever told to another. Aupia muses silently with her fingers running across her knuckles.

But Aupia doesn’t know what those words are. So she picks up her bow, bows, and leaves.

When the doors closed, Lace Harding was the first to drop her head to her hand. Sera stood up and paced. Josephine kept intent on her hands – it’s hard for her to handle the world from a position where she cannot work. To simply sit and tell just seems… idle. Irritating. Cassandra dropped her head back against the seat, her eyes focused on the ceiling.

But it was Vivienne who took command of the room. She cleared her throat, and indication if any that she was tired of their game.

Cassandra rolls the necessary words off her tongue, but her gaze never leaves the ceiling. There is a small crack up there, just to the right. “Thank you for bringing her here. I know it was not your first choice.”

“IT is in her best interest. It has nothing to do with you.” The elegant woman unfolds her legs and stands. “And on that topic, it will be known that she is my apprentice. She will be in my attention before any of yours.”
“Grand Enc-“

“No, let me finish.” The commanding tone in her voice takes over the room. “The Inquisition suffered a defeat unlike any before it and anything that will come after it. The Chantry has suffered just as profoundly, a demise also by your hand.” Vivienne strides over to the fireplace. “I will not have her living in the shadow of your shambles.”

Sera snorts. “*Her* shit? You have your own, you prissy priss.”

The enchantress drums her fingers across her arm. “Thank you for stating the obvious my dear, but my attention is better put elsewhere. At least I can redeem myself.” She turns with a flourish of her robe skirts. “Let me reiterate. She is not here for your sake, it is for her own. There is no safer place for her than here, but if that were not the case-” Her lips purse briefly as Sera turns away. Divine Victoria’s eyelids flutter. “She is my student before anything else. I will not allow her to be weakened by your failed attempts at keeping the people.”

The Chantry’s Most Holy doesn’t spare herself to even react: it was a fair truth if she had ever heard one.

Sera, on the other hand, had a much shorter fuse these days. “Says the woman with the name that doesn’t belong to anything no more.”

Vivienne spins on the elf, who stands erect at the challenge.

She shouldn’t have spoken. Really, she shouldn’t have. But “should” and “should not” has never been a particularly powerful force to keep Sera at bay.

She sneers, fully aware that she hit a tender spot. “Oh come now, Grand Enchantress!” she slurs the title with a smirk and a snarl. “Remind me again what makes you so grand. Was it the Circles? The ones that are crumbly shits now?” The woman recoils as if startled by a thought, breaking eye contact with the steaming enchanter. In truth, it was a mockery, a play of Sera’s ever-evident disdain for the witch. “Oh are they even that now? I’ve heard they’ve got quite the pickings these days. Those broken bits of places and people. Pity that parade of yours, this tangle bit you’re all trapped up in.” Sera’s knuckles stretch for the knife behind her back as she smiles. Vivienne’s fingers twitch, icy magic starting to coat over ever so slightly.

Vivienne advances; her heels tap against the cool floor like stones echoing the advancement of a snake; in truth, it was a warning, not unlike a rattle.

But before the hailstorm could be unleashed, the Divine stands between them. Josephine pretends she can’t see it; while her hands aggressively grip her armrests, her face dips in sorrow.

The members of the Inquisition rarely get together – if anything, they’ve been largely avoidant of one another in the last few years.

Yet she began to bore of this game they play.

“That is enough.” Victoria puts a hand on both women, her expression finally cross. “We have work to do, all of us. There is a child that needs us now, and in her mother’s memory we should-“


But it takes more than that to get the enchantress on edge. “We have a moral obligation to help her. To be for her what she never had.”
“Maybe you weren’t listening, you proper folk.” Sera spits at Vivienne’s boot. The woman’s expression tightens. “I told you before and I’m sayin’ it again. The kid wasn’t hurt growing up. She’s fine. She don’t need us.”

“She needs to know what she has inherited.”

“Then take her out in the woods!” Sera’s arms fly up. The Divine closes her eyes. “Oh, wait, I forgot. That’s what we took her from.”

Vivienne straightens, patients wearing thin. “The Inquisitor was a person of the people, the greater people. We neglect her daughter if we keep her from that.”

Sera’s arms slap down as she jitters around, eyes rolling. “Oh I see. It’s not about her actual blood and shit. It’s about what you all made Ellana become. You know she hated what she became, right?” With her head turned, she glares at the enchantress out of the corner of her eye. “You even sounded like him for a moment there, you great big t-“


“And on that topic, you haven’t the least bit of concern for the beast that may be within her?”

Josephine spins, her head suddenly as heavy as her heart. She finally relents, giving in to the circular bickering. “She is nothing like Solas!”

“We don’t know that, not yet. In due time she may present something the likes of us have never seen before.” Vivienne concludes with an point of her chin.

“And what does that mean?” Victoria’s weariness falls through her words; she tries so hard to keep her presentation perfect, truly, she does. But holding her sword was always so much easier than dealing with the Game.

“Are none of you concerned about the magic in that girl’s veins?” Vivienne dismisses herself by storming to the doors beyond them. “We cannot trust her to magic. She will remain here as long as I see it fit.”

And as if that was the end of the conversation, Vivienne leaves. The fire snaps in the empty space between them all.

“She’s going to hate us.”

Divine Victoria didn’t say it – she also didn’t look up to see who said it.

But she couldn’t have agreed more.
The agent led her without so much as a slight apology when she didn’t hold the door open just long enough.

Not that Aupia was bothered by the silence; the evening had too much conversation for her taste. It left too much rattling around in her head. She thumbs the bare surface of her bow absentmindedly. She wasn’t tired necessarily, not physically at least.

But the promise of a bed seemed taunting.

Arguably, she should have been paying attention to where she was; it wasn’t until the serving maiden stopped at a door with a dipped head that Aupia realized how utterly lost she was. She was in the center of Orlais without a clue for directionality. She pokes her head into the room as the handmaiden flips a switch.

“-Miss?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Would you like a bath drawn?”

Do these people bathe just to bathe? “No thank you, I'm fine.”

She didn’t linger long before giving the woman a simple ‘thanks for your time’ and walking in – it doesn’t matter that much. She tossed her bag to the floor and shut the door. Being lost is all so relative, especially today.

The room is plenty large, considerably bigger than any given room in her family’s cottage. It is adorned with red and gold embellishments, a quiet fireplace, loveseat, an antique vanity, and nightstands on either side of the Royalist bed. The rug underfoot looked like it took years in the making, much like everything else in the immediate vicinity.

She sets her bow against the bedstand and falls backwards, hands up to her face as she tries to focus. But it proves to be difficult to focus when the bed is so damned plush. She lied there for what felt like ages as she mused over the evening’s discussion. Awkward discussion. Was that even a discussion?

Okay, so.

…

The Divine. Holy shit. Holy shit!

…

And the Inquisitor lied to the public, at least once. Everyone said she never picked up her staff again – NEVER – following the Exalted Council. Unless people were just romanticizing her memory and pretending it didn’t happen.

The idea was almost reassuring, given how utterly Orlesian it sounded. Passing it off just to embellish her story. Oh so perfect, the lady Inquisitor.

And her father.

Aupia drops one hand to her chest and extends the other one to the ceiling. She studies her fingers.
Vallen always mocked her fingers, saying they were too long to be useful for anything. The comment never bothered her, but still.

Was this her mothers blood? Her fathers? She finds herself mouthing the name again and again.

Onis.

What an odd name for a man. No less odd than Ellana or Aupia necessarily, but *still*.

And he was dead too, or at least that’s what they were alluding to. They didn’t seem nearly as bothered by that fact as they were by… the Inquisitor’s passing.

It’s odd, referring to a hero of the world by their first name. Ellana. It feels unnatural on her lips. Like-

A thud from across the wall startles the girl. She retracts her hand into her chest as if caught red-handed in some unseeing act and startles into an upright position. When the sound repeats, she stands up and reaches for her bow.

But when a familiar curse rattles through the wall, Aupia smiles and darts for her balcony. She is greeted with a gush of cool night air, hot from the concrete and alloy and the many bodies of the city, but a relief from the stuffy nature of her room. Sure enough the space between the two balconies was small— an extended stride was all she needed to cross the intricately woven marble. She hurdles, stands, straightens, double-checks to make sure no one below saw her, and opens the bedroom door, startling Vallen out of a similar position of contemplation on his bed.

When he sees her, his expression falls in brief relief before turning over in disgust. He groans and flips over, face-first into the plush quilts.

It was charmingly Vallen-esk to do that. Aupia smiles to herself and closes the balcony doors.

“Your room is nice,” Aupia observes, walking in slowly as she tries to memorize what she can. “Yours is probably bigger.”

Aupia winces. “Not by much.”

Indeed, they were both grateful to be next to each other here; it was a thought neither of them really put genuine *thought* into. But Aupia wasn’t about to tell him the most startling differences: it looked like he was in servant’s quarters, joined at the hip to the master of the bedroom next door. At least the colors were the same. The bed looked about the same size too.

“I have a fireplace,” Aupia admits.

Vallen groans. “I bet you do.”

Vallen brings his face up to look at his palms. Aupia sits on the opposite side of the bed. She watches his quietly from over her shoulder. She lets him muse before asking in a quiet whisper.

“How was your day?”

“She thinks I’m a waste of time.” Aupia turns around with a frown. “There’s no way she said that.”

“She didn’t have to.” His brows furrow against the blankets, his agony muffling his syllables against the bed. “I thought I was ready for this.”
Aupia settles herself against the bed, head proper up on raised hands. “Same.”

Vallen rolls over with an exaggerated sigh, his back now against the bed. He sticks his hands in the air the same way Aupia did not long ago. “How is the Divine? As much a lost cause as the papers say?”

“I can't tell. She seems… I don’t know. Normal? Kinda desperate. Eager to please. Makes me think of a dog. I’m not sure what for though.”

“Huh, who would’ov thought. Learn anything?” He turns to her, dropping his hands. Aupia turns away and kneads her hands into her thighs.

“A little. My dad. His name was Onis.”

“Odontis?”

“Odontis? No, Onis. He… he was just a guy. Literally.”

“Oh. Damn.”

“Yeah.” Aupia grimaces. “And the Inquisitor put elfroot in everything.”

“Wait. You’re kidding me.”

“No. Like, bread even.”

“Tits. You serious?”

Aupia lies down and cures up against herself. “Yeah. Weird, huh?”

“Yeah.”

When neither of them speaks next, it’s the first time that day the silence feels comforting. But something gnaws at Aupia’s heart. She wants to relieve the building pressure.

Vallen apparently is feeling somewhat similar. “Tell me about it?”

“Mmm. Let’s talk about your day.”

“No thanks.”

“What?” She tries to tease, but there is a strain to her sarcasm. “The University isn’t all its been chalked up to be?”

“No, it’s more. I'm way out of my league here.”

“What are you even doing? What’s a sponsorship look like?”

Vallen raises his hands again. Aupia rolls over to watch. They seem a little trembly.

“She’s only a professor on the side, the Inquisition’s surgeon. Claire from Del Forest.”

“Del Forest?”

“It’s southwest of home. Far west. But since she’s only a professor on the side, she still does a
bunch of research. She isn’t an ass or anything so that helps, but I’m now her personal assistant.”

At the title, his voice rings with scorn. “I get to fetch things and carry stinking bodies and take her papers and scribe her lectures and- well, I’m to be her damned dog.”

Aupia hesitates: it’s hard to be reassuring for him, given how cynical her friend is. On a good day he’ll just spit at you – on days like these however, “I mean, you’ve got your foot in the door now, right? It’ll definitely be hard work but it sounds like it could be worthwhile.”

Vallen groans.

Sometimes no response is just as bad as the worst response. Then again, Vallen isn’t one for being quiet in any regard.

“Do you understand how much literature is involved in this? How much science is involved?” His hands drop angrily as his eyes narrow. Vallen stares at the ceiling as if to incur his wrath on something, anything. “She said she ‘has an appreciation’ for what I know already. ‘Some of my students couldn’t tell me what you just told me’ she claims.” His voice rises in mockery of her assumed tone. “But when I didn’t know the names? The people that named them? You should have seen her face when I couldn’t answer what makes up bones!”

Aupia stills before looking at her friend in full. “What makes up bones?”

“The righteous hell if I know!”

They sit in comfortable silence before Aupia relents: there’s no use in saying what he wants to hear – Vallen sees through that all too easily.

“So are you complaining about this opportunity or complaining about how… I don’t know, unprepared you are for this?”

“Am I not allowed to complain about both?”

“No. pick one. Getting your breeches in a knot over both won’t do you any good. It’s a waste of energy.”

“Leave.”

“No.”

“Leave, you shit.”

“Oh so I’m a shit? You know what, fine.” She stands, ignoring Vallen’s cringe at her tone. He rolls over as if to speak to her plainly, but by the time he understands what’s going on, Aupia is already making for the door. “You’re here because you have something you can feasibly succeed with. it may be a long shot but we always knew that was your best-case scenario. I’m here just to remind a bunch of people of some dead… cow!” Her long fingers tighten around the door handle. She doesn’t turn around – she’d rather not have to face her fears any more than she already has this day. “Because unlike you, I was invited here out of pity and shame. I’m in the center of the world to remind some old hags about what they let die. Hell, I might have been what killed her.” Aupia’s face twists in agony as she fixates on the handle. “So hey, whatever happens happens, but don’t be a shit the whole time, alright? Because I’m tired and I can't keep this up with you anymore. Because I can already tell this is going to be hell.”

Chapter End Notes
This one's pretty boring in my opinion. And pretty content-heavy. My bad. But shit what was I just saying about it being long?
Notice how well-said the Inner Circle is regarding Solas. So well-articulated. I love that they won't lie to Aupia, but Maker knows they aren't about to tell her who he is :3
As always, comments are loved!
“This is boring.”

“This is discovery. Just wait, you’ll see.”

“I’ve already waited! Skulls don’t say ‘here’s a good thing,’ this is a bore.” Sera whined, stooping over to pick up a small stone she had been kicking around. She turned it over and over again in her palm, tires of the activity, and hucked it as far off the cliffside as possible.

It was Cassandra who rolled an exhausted sign of disgust. She brushed her brow and stomped at the elf. “Sera!”

“What?”

The Seeker frowned in full at the woman and gestured angrily over the cliff. Her arm swung erratically. “You could have hit someone!” Sera leaned a little over the ledge and squinted at the lights in the distance. “You’re full of it. There’s no way that got that far.”

“What about scouts? Patrols?” Solas’s hands stopped working over the surface of the Ocularum as he bit the inside of his cheek ever so slightly. Ellana smiled from beside him and kept working on the spinning dials. The surface was slick but the creator was dedicated to their craft, devising intricate layers and surfaces to the Ocularum that spin and switched as the lightest of touches. The two mages worked on deciphering the code at hand, matching smoothed-over bumps and indentations to match up with other spinning sections.

But it was getting harder and harder to concentrate with the archer’s endless banter ringing in all their ears. *A leisure excursion* the Herald called it after finishing their evening stew. *I want to see what’s glowing up on that hill.* Scout Harding and her agents opted to stay at the camp and start the first night’s watch. The rest thought better than to let the wanderer to her own devises.

But it was getting ridiculous.

“You can always head back and see if Vivienne has arrived, Sera.” The Herald looked up with a crafty glint and a slight smile. “I’m sure she would appreciate your company.” The Red Jenny huffed in response, settling to sit on the ledge and swing her legs.

Its then that the Ocularum clicks, pieces finally settled against themselves. Ellana beams at Solas in pride as the contraption spun on its axis and lit up. “That didn’t take nearly as long this time. I think we’re starting to get the hang of these.”

Solas only nodded slightly. “Indeed. And it has only taken us three months.”

They were back in the Hinterlands briefly to converse once more with the horsemaster. In the meantime, the Herald and her party grew in name and members: a Qunari now waited for them back at Haven, as did Master Tethras who opted out of returning to the mountainside (“too steep” he argued with a dismissive wave at the invitation). The First Enchantress was to join the party and help the Herald with some finer details regarding potion ingredient and specifications.

Solas stepped back so Ellana could peek into the contraption. Sera nearly pushed her over to see
through the scope. “My turn!”

“Alright alright just… this is really unique.” Ellana stepped away before leaning back in, brows knotted together as she peered at their work. Cassandra joined her.

Sera batted at the women. “Oi, what’s it supposed to be?”

Ellana stumbled over the foreign syllables, trying to tie it into Common. “Dra-dragonisk? Dracolisk?”

“Onis. Draconis.” Corrected the Seeker, finger tracing Tevinter words. Solas leaned down over them both to muse over the unfamiliar language. “A dragon somehow involved in… oh, was it the Archdemons?” Sera wiggled against the eyepiece. “It’s big and fancy. Like a dancer.”

Ellana cocked her head a little as Cassandra stepped into Sera’s place. “What kinds of dancers do you watch?”

“All kinds of the good ones.” She wiggled against the Herald with a devious grin. “I could show you some if you like.”

Ellana, as altruistic as she was, just smiled. “I’d be honored to test a few, but maybe another night. We have an early start tomorrow. How good are you on a horse?”

Sera spat in repulsion as Cassandra walked away with yet another sigh falling from her lips, allowing Solas glimpse at the stars. It was quite the sight to behold, some form of practical magic tying them together. Such a simple marvel for such a simple world.

The conversation rolled from horses back to the stars, from the Hinterlands to the Storm Coast. Ellana lit their path with a faded glow of her staff; Solas mimicked her from the back of the party. The spacious peace of the darkness was alluring, sparked with the soft chirps and rustles of gentle nightlife. The stars overhead seemed to blanket them, a coat of blue and purple darkness offering not darkness and despair, but comfort and ease. It was a relatively peaceful end to a long day.

Cassandra turned to the woman beside her. “I did not know you were familiar with the Tevinter language.”

“Tevene? Dorian’s trying to teach me. I was kinda close.”

“Very close.”

“Did you grow up learning many languages?”

“A few more than most. Seeker Calhoon, a tutor of mine, was from the Imperium. She thought it was critical to know the language of such a critical people. But as a Pentagast it is expected of me to be well educated in the matters of the world. It helps to be able to speak the tongue.”

“Ah.” Their conversation drifts to the Pentagast’s training over the years – her tutors, her topics, the maps she memorized. The two women opened up to each other more readily in the most recent weeks, the tense line of Ellana’s shoulder gradually becoming more and more relaxed in her former captor’s presence. It was a welcomed change to the party’s usual silent evenings; it even stirred enough conversation for others to join in, and while the members of their small band came and went, there was more and more to reconnect with one another over as relationships were forged.

Sera fell into step beside Solas. Since the space between them settled, Solas renewed himself and thought to test his most recent budding theory.
“Ar dirthan’as ir elgara, ma’sula e’var vhenan.”

“Pffftt.” Solas’s head rolled back in a physical recoil as Sera stuck out her tongue. “Excuse me?”

“Excuse yourself. Whatever you said and what I did, same difference to me.”

Ellana turned to regard them out of the corner of her eye, her brows arched. Solas bit the inside of his cheek as he tried to stay level with the street rat. “Well, I’d hoped… some of our people have a natural affinity for the language. Some can sometimes feel the rhythm of the language despite lacking the vocabulary. I thought—”

“You know what makes sense? Words. Like these. Words.”

Solas’s brow tightened as he hissed at her. “Fenedhis lasa!”

Sera rolled a raspberry off her lips. The Herald cast the woman a warning look before meeting his eyes for a fleeting instant and fluttering away. “Language is a skill Sera,” she chided. “We could work on honing that with you.”

“Ug! Now you’re sounding like him! Just less elfy. No, I lied. You’re just as elfy.”

Both Solas and Ellana had a hard time looking past the insult.

“She has a point,” Cassandra tried in vain. “Mastery of other languages could prove critical to your… initiative.”

“Oh eek. Like you give a care. Stop bothering me ‘round it.”

The Herald chided her with a tisk and a shake of her head. “What good are we for the people if we don’t care, Sera? You protect the little guy. It’s not an insult unless you make it one. Ea atisha.”

Solas very nearly smiled.

But Sera was, as she always will be, stubborn. “I.don.care. keep your fingers to yourself.”

The camp was quite with the exception of a few scouts speaking amongst themselves across the fire. Scout Harding and the Circle enchantress lean over a tabletop, deep in conversation. As they approach the mage abruptly stops paying attention to the scout; Vivienne straightened to attention and delicately folded her arms across her chest. Her fingers move slowly as if to emphasize her control.

Solas immediately veered to the stream marking the edge of their camp – he had yet to find a reason to accept that woman with an extended arm in kindness. But as he knelt at the waterside, thumb and magic working over the latest bloodstain in his coat (one of which elluded him in his endeavor earlier), he couldn’t help but catch some of the women’s conversation.

“-Draconis.”

“Oh?”

“A fragment from Imperium lore.”

“Vivienne, what do you know about it?”

“It’s far outdated my dear, do not let it concern your little mind.”
Solas snapped his coat a little more forcefully than he likely needed to: he didn’t appreciate the tone on the enchantress’s tongue. Ellana paid it no mind. “I’m just curious. We found an Ocularum dedicated to it.”

“Just because there is a Ocularum dedicated to it does not imply some inherit value.”

“Just because it’s not my culture doesn’t mean it isn’t relevant.”

“The Tevinter Imperium is not relevant, lady Herald.” The enchantress’s tone signified the end of the conversation. “It is Tevinter. There is no sense to make of it.”

“The archdemons were right enough,” the Herald argued, palms up in open consideration. “No one’s completely right or wrong. There has to be something worth learning from here.”

He could hear the enchantress’s polished laughter at the elf’s response. “And what makes you say that?”

“Everything must come from something. Someone. Somewhere. I don’t know. In fear of sounding a little too Dalish, my father often said that every rabbit trail leads somewhere.”

Sera snickered, plain and full, but it was Cassandra who spoke next. “You speak of a people with slavery still in play. I am surprised you would give them any consideration.” She said, her perplexion evident in her tone.

There is a thoughtful pause in their conversation. He could imagine the Herald tapping her chin in consideration. “I’m not suggesting they’re a superb race, and I’m probably the last person to support slavery. I’ll take my disdain for disrespect to my grave. But they’re human. They’re prone to… imperfections.”

“Oi, now you sound like him.”

Solas was suddenly acutely aware of eyes on his back. He turned his attention to wrapping up his staff for the night. His fingers slowed as the Herald spoke next.

“Thanks, Sera.”

“It isn’t a compliment.”

“Doesn’t have to be.” There was a shuffling of papers. Against his bulwark neutrality, relief rolled down Solas’s spine. He breathed long and slow through his nose. “Nonetheless, we still don’t know what the Ocularums are designed for. We know where they came from but not where they lead. Scout Harding, can we send some personnel back there in the morning? It seemed to direct energy in one direction. I would like to know where that leads.”

“Of course, Lady Herald. First thing after breakfast.”

“Thank you. Is there anything else that needs to be settled for the night?”

“None, night shifts have already been established. You’re home free.”

Sera, bored already by the conversation, stormed off as Ellana thanked Scout Harding. Lavellen turned to the enchantress. “Vivienne, I'm glad you could come and join us. So quickly too, I appreciate it.”

“Of course, darling. Anything I can do to help.”
To Solas, she sounded like a snake. Sera thought the same thing. Cassandra had yet to be impressed by the woman – she respected her and her success in her demanding role, but she had yet to find a reason to trust the woman (however, this was not necessarily uncommon: lady Pentagast was not quick to trust anyone).

“I come with a message as well. Do you recall the investigation Sister Nightingale set out on? Word went back to Haven for confirmation first, but the spymaster believes she has located a potential Grey Warden in a time of lost Wardens. Scout Harding located a woodsman in the area—”

“Not far from here,” Interrupted Scout Harding, stretched across the charted map of the Hinterlands. It appeared that this was what the women were discussing when the party returned to camp. “You know that camp we established near the Upper Lake? He was apparently sighted around there.”

Ellana sighed as she rested her staff against the table they stood around. “And why don’t we know about this?”

The Seeker was quick to answer. “Leliana works with many whispers, Lavellen. She likely does not want to waste the time of others on misleading rumors.”

The Herald sighed through her nose and scratched her brow. “Alright. How about after we finalize the details with the horsemaster, Scout Harding, take your best agents to accompany him and his steeds to Haven. I’ll take a few people to find this man.”

Lace nodded. “How many agents should I take?”

“As many as the horsemaster asks for that we can reasonably supply, but I don’t want to leave anyone vulnerable in camp.”

Solas turned around to face the women to see Ellana gripped the back of her neck in sheepish shame before disappearing into his tent to retrieve his washcloth. “I’m sorry, that’s probably not the answer you were looking for, is it?”

At this point in the Inquisition, the scout had a thorough respect for the woman: no one wanted to be in her position - no one within reason at least. And coming from a background where such decisions and interactions were never options, the scout appreciated her more. In the days to come, when the evening sun slipped into the mountains or when the dawn broke the grey dusk, the two would find connections in their pasts over mugs of slowly chilling tea. They could find similarities and likenesses in so many elements of their upbringings despite coming from such acutely different backgrounds. It brought comfort to them both as well as an ease to the vigor of their schedules.

At this time, however, her answer was truly enough. “No, that makes sense. As long as you, Seeker, think it’s appropriate.”

Cassandra took a second, her chin cupped in her hand. “This works well enough. I will have you return a letter explaining the situation to Sister Leliana, if you would be so kind. I will add it to the report recording our finalization with Master Dennet. I shall write it in the morning before we break camp.”

“Of course.” The scout started rolling up their table top map for the night as Cassandra turned to the women beside her. “Then I take my leave. Good night, Lavellen.”

Vivienne and Scout Harding where quick to follow in the night’s well wishes, eager to start the following morning off well and quick. As the others left her company, Solas crossed paths with
her, slowing to a stop at her shoulder to peak at what was left behind on the tabletop. Ellana spun to face him with a tired smile. She looks at the washcloth slung over his shoulder, a question on her lips.

He met her gaze before returning his attention to the table. Troup movements in the South were being laid out. “I am going to the river. I won't be long.”

Ellana’s upper body rotated around to the scouts crouched by the fireplace. “Do you want company? I’m sure-“

Solas cut her off with his uncannily calm demeanor. As unnecessary as her consideration seemed, it was appreciated. “I am fine, da’len. I don’t think we need fear bears anymore.” He tried a gentle smile which she returned in kind, a reference to their last evening’s run in with the… locals.

“Yeah but- no, alright. Just, yell if you need anything.”

Solas almost found it in himself to smile again. For some reason, more and more recently the inclination found itself renewed in him; not that he objected of course, he wasn’t a man without pleasantries. But it was nice to be unburdened enough every now and then to enjoy the company he found himself in.

Once he was on his way, the Herald took to her nightly routine of stretching and tending to her staff before laying out on the grass one last time for the day; the arch of her back and the elongation of her arms always seemed to bring an audience. The people were slowly but surely growing more accustomed to mages free to do as they found necessary - some would even ask her about it, and in due time, some will join her, mage or otherwise. Tonight as the fire died behind her however, Ellana settled down to rest against the grass, fingers curled into the earth beneath her. Tt was cool to the touch, a calming blanket to soothe worked muscles. As conversation died away and the night life stirred around them, the stars overhead took full grasp of the night sky. She chewed slowly and carefully on something between her teeth, only pausing when she recognized the soleless flats that approached her head.

The voice, its face still out of view, slurred slightly. “How elfy are you exactly?”

Ellana smiled, rolling whatever was between her teeth to her cheek. Sera evidently already had a quick drink with the scouts; it was in her routine just as much as Lavellen’s stretches and poses were in hers. “Not sure. I haven’t seen the scale for ‘elfy-ness’.”

Sera kicked at an overgrowth.

“You’re on it.”

“Yeah well, I figured as much.” Sera’s face loomed into view as she watched the Herald’s working lips.

“What do you got there?”

“Sap. Want some? There’s probably more on the tree right over there.”

“Eww no! Are you serious?”

“It’s really not bad. Once you get it started its pretty sweet, like those candies in Josephine’s office.”

“Eh, if it comes from the dirt then I don’t know if I trust that.”
“It’s not… never mind.”

Ellana watched Sera’s toes curl in her flats. “Why are you on the ground? Isn’t the lady Herald supposed to sit on silk?”

“Trying to relax. And think. Not a very good combination. Care to join me?”

“Nah.” Sera plopped down next to her nonetheless. Ellana smiled again but kept her attention on the stars. She was so quick to smile in those early years, so easy to read in her unfiltered expression. No one really noticed this a trait until it was all but gone from her palette.

She liked Sera – she didn’t understand Sera at the time, but she found her intriguing nonetheless. For the time being however, the elves sat in comfortable silence while Sera re-organized her quiver, the Herald quietly working away at her sweetling. However, the silence never lasted long around Ellana: it started with a purse of her lips and a question.

“Sera.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever seen a dragon?”

“Nah.” It took a minute before the archer turned to her. “Why do you care?”

“I think they’re terrifyingly fascinating.”

“They shit fire, there’s nothing fun about it.”

“I disagree. The fact that something can do that is amazing.”

“You’re a mage!”

Lavellan sputtered at the suggestion, nearly spitting out her chew. She recollected herself with a short laugh. “Pfft. What I do doesn’t count!”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re dragons!” she folded her arms behind her head and turned to regard her companion a little better. “What? Not a fan?”

“Magic is just shit waiting to make things more shitty. And I know a shite when I see one.” Sera’s face crinkled up on itself as she rewrapped and arrowhead.

When steady stillness fell between them again, it was Sera who dropped her arrow to look at the stars. She held it slack between her forefinger and thumb, rolling it idly as she squinte at the sky.

“Home for you. Wherever in the woods that is. You watch the stars, yeah?”

“Yup.” Ellana chewed thoughtfully as she observed the heavens. ”There are stories here and there. It was my job at home to know the stories, be able to retell them to the kids. Not everyone takes kindly to the idea, but I enjoyed it plenty.” She points up, using rubbed fingers to spark weak lightening that danced just outside of reach. Indigo ignites a path between several stars, temporary but lively in a fleeting serenade. In due time, that will be one of her defining traits as a mage – Ellana had incredible dexterity for this modern world. “But those stars there? Part of the ones in the Draconis constellation? That’s a part of Fen’Harel.”

“Eww, stop.”
“You asked!”

“Yeah well I take it back! itsfuckshit to it all, you really are spending too much time with him!”

Sera’s comment didn’t register well with her, but Ellana passed it off with a sigh: she was too used to working with… characters. Sera was no different than one of the children of Clan Lavellan, not that she would ever dare say that to the woman. Not any day soon, at least. Everyone has their breaking point. “I- alright fine. No more talking about elf-stuff.” She rolled on her side, head propped up on her hand. “You ready to get the horses tomorrow?”

Sera held an arrow up to her eye, checking the directionality of her whittling. The arrow was dented and crooked. “I’m ready to race you again. Ready to win.” Ellana huffed slight laughter, but it sounded a little strained. “Oh I doubt that.”

“Come off it.”

“I beat you a month ago, I can beat you again. Do you even like animals?”

Sera’s laughter fell apart as it wove across the camp. “I like what horses make, but the smell!”

“That wasn’t what I asked you, city girl.”

Sera threw something at her as she objects. Ellana didn’t care to notice. “What? You like the smell?”

“Of course I do.” Ellana spoke passively as if discussing the weather.

“Oh you’re full of it.”

“What? Mad that you can’t fill my bedroll with their poop anymore?” Sera’s wicked laugh bounced around. How she achieved such a feat will allude everyone for years, but Sera once successfully was able to line and fill the future-Inquisitor’s tent with horse manure, curtesy of Master Dennet’s benevolent daughter. This was the first day in three that the Herald didn’t still carry around the smell. Solas worked in earnest to scrub the smell away immediately – admittedly, there may have been some magic involved in getting the stench out of his coat. “Oh but that was good.”

“But do you even like animals?”

Sera hummed in thought before pulling out another arrow. “Cats are cool.”

Ellana stifled a groan. “Cats?” She turned over to look back at the stars. A cloud was rolling over the them as she mimicked Sera’s crinkled nose.

“Yes cats! What? You don’t like them?”

“I don’t dislike them. Why do you like cats?”

“They’re easy.”

“Alright.”

“And they feel nice. You know. With fingers.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And they’re… you know.” She elbowed the woman at her side for her undivided attention,
leaning in with a fatalistic grin. “…pusses.”

“Yes yes, I figured as much.” Sera’s laughter rocked her backwards with a snort. Ellana smiled – it wasn’t an entirely unpredictable comment for her companion to make, let’s be honest – but it wasn’t ill-received either.

Their conversation got her thinking again though. When she opened her mouth, Sera ticked her disapprovingly.

“Don’t you start.”

“I was just going to ask if you’ve ever pet a halla.”

“Nope! I’m done! Night-night!”

Lavellan laughed. “Good night Sera.”

Again by herself, the Herald found her momentary peace. It was almost ritualistic in the way that she would make time every day to sit in nature’s silent embrace. The future Inquisitor lived in her fame like a bee in the eye of a hurricane – these quiet moments were few and far in between if they weren’t sought out.

But time was not something to be spent frivolously. Ellana stood, stretched, washed her mouth out, bid her goodnights to the scouts, and left for the sanctuary of her tent.

In terms of their sleeping arrangements, their routines made sense in the early weeks of the Inquisition: the Herald was, as kind and curious as she was, remarkably uncomfortable to sleep around. She slept like a storm, never settled and never calm in her skin.

On one hand, it seemed to be her natural state. She admitted to being difficult in the arravals where her clan would sleep together: like rabbits in a den she said once with a nostalgic half-smile, eyes lidded slightly in fond memory. Varric was quick to comment.

“I’m sure they appreciate you breaking into dance in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

On another, the mark on her hand seemed to stir her relentlessly. When asked, she would only hint at slight aches and restless nights. Solas knew better of course. He found her serval times in the Fade, the mark as luminescent in the warped space as a light in absolute darkness. He’d watch as she battled demons, fears, and anxieties, only to be swept back into the waking world with a jolt and a startled yelp.

At first she would cycle through these interactions, never a change on the wheel of possibilities. Solas quickly grew tired of watching the nightmares play out, and while he itched to help her, having someone else keep your demons at bay is never a productive means of living. So Solas would find his peace elsewhere.

So on the night he stumbled into her in the Fade again, he was pleasantly surprised to see her reprimanding the spirits at hand.

But it didn’t take long for the companions to learn how to make the most of the situation: Solas, rightfully so, could sleep though nearly anything.

But this left the Seeker to the same tent as the merchant prince, which, as one may imagine, was a
difficult accommodation to grow accustomed to. There was a great deal of elevated scolding and mockery in the late nights. Then it left the Cassandra with the mysterious elf from the city, which presented its own challenges. Despite this, it was assumed the best situation: even if that came at the cost of threats of snakes in boots in the morning. Few could get through the night with Ellana’s restlessness.

In regards to how their tent was managed, it was done with the utmost of proper respect. They had their routines and their privacy. While she stated repeatedly she had no apprehensions about nudity, Solas always found a way to give her the space to change and settle in before getting into his bedroll. He waited outside of their tent, head cocked up to admire the night sky one last time, before the rustling in the tent settled down.

“I’m coming in.”

“Alright.”

He entered and set his staff besides hers at the entrance. Solas pulled off his tunic as her back is turned to him per their respectful routine, and he spared himself a glance to see her hair spilled against her pillow in a river of color. He could see her under shirt crinkled up, sleeveless fabric bunched near a scar on her shoulder. She flexed her hand in the corner of the tent before turning her cheek slightly towards him in question; Solas turned away as if to not be caught staring at her back, the sharp angle of his cheek greeting her curiosity.

“When do you leave?”

It is a very matter-of-fact tone he responded with, bland as ever in those early weeks. Solas put his pendant back on over his exposed undershirt. He gave one last tug at the hem of his sleeves. “In the morning.”

“Ah.”

“Scout Harding has some agents escorting a caravan back to Haven. I have been asked to accompany them.”

With the turn of his head, he saw her fingers drumming her hip as she thought through his answer. “You were asked? Or were you…. asked?” she asked at length.

Ah.

Solas turned in tease, eye narrowed in deliberation as he catches her in his peripheral. “You were earnest when you said you’d keep me safe from these shemlens.” He reflected in slight tease, referring to their conversation weeks earlier in Haven. Her brow tensed up a little at the suggestion. “I like to stay true to what I say, Solas. If they’re giving you any trouble, I would like to put an end to it.”

Solas turned his back to her as he organized his personal belongings. He responded in kind once he was under the blanket of his bedroll, arm stretched out and fingers rolling briefly to end the spell illuminating his staff. “Thank you, but it appears unnecessary. There are greater concerns at present for those watching over us. It seems more a clever device to keep me from straying into trouble than to keep me under their eye.” Darkness flickered over them both. “Now with mages free to run about frantically, it seems these people cannot be too careful.”

There was a lull in their conversation before Solas was oddly aware of incredible rustling. He cringed ever so slightly, curling his blanket up to his nose when he became intimately aware of her
eyes boring into his back. “That was rude.”

“Is it an unfitting analogy?” he bit back.

“Doesn’t matter if its unfitting. Its rude.”

Solas sighed and gave up with a toss of his shoulders so he stared evenly back at her. She didn’t flinch at the change – she almost seemed to welcome it with that daring glint in her eye. Yet they remained soft in the lackluster light. “What should I have said instead?”

The light betrayed her steadfast position; he could see her lip curl as she pressed it in thought. Then, “Loose, like children.”

All he could do to keep from laughing was arch a brow at her.

“Kids get lost easily! Dirty easy. In trouble easily. But mostly lost without any guidance. They’re like children. They just have a lot to learn.”

“Some of them are undoubtedly well older than you.”

“And those individuals have likely never… oh I don’t know, spent a night sleeping in a tree.”

Well, that was a confusing sentiment to staple into the conversation. “You’ve slept in a tree?”

“Not the point. My point is you can’t compare the life of one against another based on age. You’d be better off looking at their experiences. And I thought you supported giving freedom to the mages,” she weighed with a frown.

His answer can easily to him – more and more often, he found himself having to navigate his truth around her less. “I do not disapprove of giving them their natural right to freedom. I oppose the situation they were in to begin with.” He shuffled under his blanket to cross his arms in a kinder position for his tired shoulders. “And what experiences have you to make you so wise? To give you this insight?”

“I don’t make that claim.”

“I think you just did.”

“Fair enough.” Ellana unfolds an arm to rest her head on her hand. Shades of green dance under her bedroll as her left hand hid just out of sight. She sighed as she tapped her chin, thinking her words through thoroughly. “Now, I’m not all-knowing. If I was I think we’d be done with this Inquisition already, the Breach would just be a memory. So I’m aware that my opinion isn’t going to be the cleanest or the most accurate, but I think I have it within my rights to claim I’m… I don’t know…”

It took her a moment to collect her thoughts as she discovered a new light in the man; where she thought he was regarding her words, it seemed he was more regarding her. Considering her. Weighing her words against some unseen tide. He watched her with this dangerous eyes of his, eyes that made Ellana reconsider herself. It was getting harder and harder for her to tell just how impassive this man was. The more she got to know him, the less she realized she knew about him.

She blinked rapidly, hoping the darkness would hide the faint heat rising to her ears before pulling her hair out of her eyes. “Well, I think I have it within my right to say I’m a good person. If not that, then a genuine one. I have met a lot of people and will meet many more. I’d hate to think that’s all for naught.”

Solas hummed thoughtfully. “And now you have even more doors open to you.”
“Maybe more doors than anyone else my position has ever had.”

“Being good seems correspondent to the… weight of your position.” Solas’s long fingers drummed his hip as he considered his phrasing. “You don’t sound that concerned.”

Her chin elevated slightly to look down at him. “You’re not the only one who can hide how they’re really feeling.”

“I do not hide what I’m feeling.” Oh, that was a bold claim. Lavellen gave out a twisted snort of humor, low and soft to match her heart.

She despised her laugh, but the Inner Circle came to take it in full. There were many light-hearted mockeries over Wicked Hearts games. Solas was one of the first to really find light in it, however. It – and her typical I hate my laugh response which was always quick to follow – was very charming.

“Oh yes you do. And speaking of,” she waved her hand in front of her face, veins illuminated in the darkness by the powers of Fen’Harel. The green sparked over her flesh like a summer storm. “How do you do that?” Solas kept his eyes on hers. She kept her eyes on his and that soft spark he often betrayed expressing to the world, that faint light of genuine serenity. In gentle mockery he mimicked her, bringing his head up to rest in his palm and waving his free hand around.

“What is this?”

“What you do with your face. where you look like you want to scold Sera but laugh at the same time. You’re doing it right now.”

“I do no such thing.”

Ellana rolled her eyes. “Oh yes you do!”

“Show me,” he said with a nod of his chin, egging her on, his lips teasing a smile. He enjoyed this, her trying to see through what cracks lied in his foundation; she would never see through he told himself again and again on these late nights. She will never see the man behind this mask.

But as she tries to mimic his scrutinizing eyes and lifeless lips, she broke out in chopped laughter. She clamped down over her mouth to muffle the noise and tired again with incredible failure.

Solas actually smiled at that. Full and wide, one of those smiles where the sides of your eyes wrinkle up. Then he laughed at her stillness, her shock and her embarrassment. It was a low chuckle, something easily permisable as an insult, but it was laughter nonetheless.

Sure it wasn’t loud, but to his ears, it was a shot ringing in an eternal darkness.

And her laugh, her muffled giggle behind her hand. It sounded ageless. “Oh you know what I’m trying to say!” She fought with a wave of her hand.

Solas advanced with a snide grin. “I assure you, I haven’t the slightest clue.”

They stay like that, chuckling softly in the darkness, the only light in their tent coming from her hand and what reflected off their tired eyes. When the humor died off, they found comfort in each other’s exhaustion, settling for the stillness between them. That is, of course, until Ellana found something new to ask Solas. “Have you heard of Draconis or any Elvhen equivalent in your journeys in the Fade? Like, these stories of the stars.”
Solas weighed his options as he allowed his eyes to flicker to the ceiling of their tent before finding her again. He sighed as he drummed his fingers. “Stories like that are carried on many lips, and many variations come to light. Visually, it may be like different birds taking flight. Sometimes divergent tales take color, and in one place, the same story can light up like a hundred rainbows, reflecting its variations everywhere.” Solas revealed a hand and fluttered his fingers: his staff lit up obediently, a cascade of hues taking comfort in the fabric of their tent. Ellana’s expression lit up under the new colors, her eyes first tight under the newfound light before opening wide in childlike delight. The pure glee in her expression didn’t last long before she schools herself, her fascination undeniable but her maturity reestablished (perhaps this was not the first time she had seen such a thing, but for the people outside in their camp, it was positively a surprise). The snide of her smile only appears, however, when her eyes return to him. She remained quiet, basking in the blues and greens, reds and indigos of Solas’s creation like she was born to it. The color rolled over her naturally, a pure river sliding over her skin. Something burned inside Solas as her eyes found his once more and he turned away, instead focused on his staff as the colors fade back to shadows. “Sometimes one story may hold so true for countless generations, and the memory appears more like a burning sun, a story so true it bled only one color.”

She looked entranced, and if nothing else, Solas admired that dearly about her. She nodded. “It’s like the difference in telling Cassandra and Sera about a halla. They would have their own perceptions.”

It was a biting reminder, but her example served its purpose nonetheless. Solas nodded. “That is correct.”

“But in the Fade, everything becomes real, right? These colors would be real there. The story or my halla could take physical form. It’s not just spirits that are… I don’t know. Spirit-y.”

Solas eased a gentle smile; it was natural enough. There was no reason for him to mask it.

“In a way. They are more likely to be expressed in color or a breeze than they are to take a physical form.” The man gazed her with a compassionate consideration and an arch of his brow. “You have mediated many unusual conversations this evening.”

She shrugged. “I’m a curious person. A day is wasted if you don’t learn.”

“Well da’len, I hope that curiosity does not become your undoing.” He meant it in jest; he enjoyed the games they played, he would give himself that luxury. But at the suggestion the focus left her eyes and she averted his gaze, expression falling soft as her eyes turned to the color rolling over her hand. “Yeah, well. We’ll see.”

She rolled over, leaving Solas to his questions at her sudden change in demeanor.

“Sleep well, hahren.” He could see her working her left hand in her right, the glow of his forbidden power working against her mortal body.

His attention shifted without thought to the back of her head. Oh, what he would consider giving to know what she meant behind her words.

But Solas settled for looking at the texture of her hair. Even in the darkness it seemed exceptionally soft, waves of color cascading across her pillow.

“On nydha.”

*Lethallan.*
Did you honestly think I just pulled that out of thin air.

It’s been suggested by the creative team of Bioware that the archdeamons are more likely to be the Forgotten Ones than the Elven gods; personally either route makes sense to me, but hey. There’s that. Check out the codex if you’re confused.

I wanted to put all the characters from the last update together with Ellana. Things have changed and the dynamic has adapted, but there are some key traits that I think would remain the same despite the flow of time.

The using-sap-as-a-substitute-for-gum thing is a Native American thing, if anyone’s curious.

Translations, thanks to the glorious fenxshiral:
On nydha -> Good night
Ea atisha -> Calm down
The other bit is direct game banter.
Agents were stationed outside of her room; not that Aupia necessarily needed to know that, but there they were. The chantry’s Canary nearly went down the wrong hallway if it wasn’t for the personnel hanging around the corner to remind her.

Lace Harding pauses at the door, waves the agents away, rolls her shoulders, and raps her knuckles against the door; the woody rattle of the knocking is met with a grumble that sounds akin to an acknowledgement, so she opens the door slightly.

She finds the girl face down in her bed, the balcony doors flung wide open. The room’s curtains dance from the far side of the room, a gust of wind. The fire was left unattended, the heat and kindling dying as the day seemed to fall apart for them all.

“You didn’t return. You missed the meal.” When the dwarf was met with silence, she brings a hand up to her brow to massage away the headache.

“Well, if you want to eat, you’ll have to go and find the kitchens yourself.”

Aupia perked up at that, turning over in the bed to frown openly at the woman, mouth curled low in disapproval. “You can’t just tell me?”

“Nope. You missed supper, that’s on you. The world isn’t just handed over on a silver platter kid. You’ll have to find it yourself.”

*Kid*. The young woman’s frown hardened around her lips before she sighed and sat upright.

But she was raised better than that. She kept her head down out of resentment, but her mouth moved in genuine appreciation.

“Thank you.”

Harding’s heart lifted at that; already, their little enigma was showing signs of being like her mother. “Grand Enchantress Vivienne wanted you to know that you will be beginning your training tomorrow morning,” The Canary warns. “I would advise you be ready by sunrise.”

“Thank you.”

Harding smiles as she closes the door behind her. “Good night, Kessler. Sleep well.”

It felt odd, looking at Lavellan’s face but not being able to call her by name. the entire evening conversation had been difficult enough for all parties, but the fact that she now knew the girl resented Lavellen was just… well, sad.

Lavellen would never have wanted this.

Lace Harding closes the door behind her and walks off with a newfound determination for her agents. She hadn’t been present when the Inquisitor died, she was one of the public: in this respect, she didn’t know Ellana was pregnant. In fact, she didn’t know until just the day prior when they received the code from Vivienne. Her reasons for being away were her own, just as Ellana’s were,
respectfully, hers. When she was asked to the Divine’s side following the late Sister Nightingale’s death and the change of position for Charter, she objected, but understood: in times darkened by radical racial fear, it made sense to have someone else step into play. Lace Harding never even got to say goodbye to Charter, for the woman was sent away almost within hours of Leliana’s death, which served no comfort as the Canary stepped into the vacancy waiting for her. She wasn’t insulted necessarily that the Divine had kept this news of Ellana from her – how do you even approach the topic of Ellana and Solas, only the Maker knows – but she wasn’t particularly pleased by the entire situation.

No, that’s an understatement. Lace Harding was a little pissed. But nineteen years was more than enough time for her to set her personal afflictions aside for her duty.

And Maker knew the girl’s conception was founded off secrets and deception. So despite being the spymaster of the Chantry, Lace Harding wanted nothing to do with these lies when around Ellana’s daughter.

Onis? Who even came up with that? A shiver runs down her spine.

Such an odd thought, Lavellen being a mom.

Back in the bedroom, the girl was in a hurry to put her boots back on; if getting food means having to wander the fortress that the damned Divine lived in, she’ll have to be quick about it. Where are kitchens usually in a place this big? Does it even have a kitchen? Aupia pauses, leaned over with her fingers in her laces.

No, that’s a dumb thought. Her fingers work quickly again. The food has to come from somewhere before she draws out a lace to slowly, forcing her to start tying all over again.

Right? She works quicker this time, eager to leave the spacious vacancy of her room.

Well. You can’t learn to swim if you don’t test the waters. She swings her door silently behind her and knocks on the one right next to her. The hallway is almost eerily quiet except for her quickened heart.

“Val.” She’s met with a thud, footsteps, and a creaky wood. Vallen eyes her wearily. “What?”

“I’m going to the kitchen. Do you want t-“

“No.” He moved to shut the door before pausing with the about an inch of space between them. He thinks through himself. Aupia waits tentatively with a half-hearted squint. Her friend scratches his head as he speaks. “I was being a piece, I’ll admit. But-“

“That’s the nearest you’ve ever been to giving me an apology.”

Vallen scowls at her smile. “-I was going to say but you were also. And I have no appetite.”

“We haven’t-“
“I ate what your mom packed on the train, remember? Besides, I spent the first part of my day in a cold space literally filled with bodies. I'm not hungry.”

Aupia bites her lower lip and sighs through her nose. This guy can be exhausting sometimes, but it seemed justified. “Fine.”

Vallen closes the door with one last sideways glance. “Just don’t get in trouble.”

She tip-toes throughout Grand Cathedral, long halls giving way to more long, aimless halls. The foreboding masonwork outside didn’t seem to find its way into the architecture inside of the castle. Instead there are carpets and rugs and embroidery everywhere, a mosaic of Thedas’s cultures and people. Brightly illuminated light bulbs tinker at her from the walls like stars in the night sky, portraits and memorabilia and books and chants on podiums and pedestals and frames of woven gold; respectfully, the décor is overwhelming, but it is definitely appreciated. Aupia takes her time, walking slowly as she digests everything on display. There are several staircases presumably dedicated to the servers of the mansion - they dot dead ends and house scurrying feet in rapid motion. At first Aupia froze, thinking they would react to seeing a strange elf creeping around in assumedly off-limits areas as she meandered from decoration to decoration. Instead they brush past her, indifferent to her presence as they would be to a gnat. They side step around her without a second thought.

Oddly enough, most of the serving people are Qunari. The second most common population seems elven, then human with a few scattered dwarves. Which begs the question: other than Sera, a blatant outlier in every assumed scenario, what is the state of elves in the nation’s capital? It seemed the same as in Ingersoll – a difference marked by hasty glares and upturned chins.

Aupia skips down the stairs two steps at a time.

No, it’s not that there is no tension here. It’s all masked as ranking tension. Societal. Based on the class system dividing the wealthy and the poor, the dirty and the masked. The desperate and the sheltered.

How sad.

But as long as the servants don’t mind, Aupia slows down to absorb more of the world around her. One hallway is framed with varying documents signed by kings and queens and regents and all sorts of other big, imposing names. Another one has rows upon rows of armor with their matching swords, axes, and shields. Aupia can very nearly see her face in the armor, worn down by ages and wars but polished violently against nature. Some plates are golden, some have pink, and oddly enough, one is made of ropes.

She strolls a few more hallways, leafing through books of antient texts and works of worship. When she turns the page of one book in particular, Aupia feels keenly aware of whispering in the corner of her head.

She looks up for a culprit to find herself alone, but the whispers remain. Her heart races in the absence of company, at the foreboding promise of something unknown.

In most situations, a wiser person would likely avoid said peculiarities. But in both her blood and
how she was raised, Aupia Kessler is not someone keen on sitting out curiosities. She closes the
book carefully and navigates a few more hallways, becoming more and more dimly aware of the
soft lighting from both candles and lightbulbs alike. The whispers never grow necessarily, but the
sound starts to find itself in more than just her head. Her palms begin to itch. The air grows both
damp and cold, settling a new weight in her lungs, and the whispers begin to buzz in her ears.
Aupia doesn’t know what she’s looking for – voices in your head are never necessarily a promising
discovery – but for some reason, the itch, the pulsation in her heart, the quickening of her pace – it
all feels… so natural. So natural yet so unexplained. The sounds without words seem to command
thought, evoking emotion and memory all the same.

And she finds it. She peers into a broad hallway, an open space well-lit despite the darkening hour
outside. There is but one lightbulb in the middle of the space, yet the tile underfoot heating her feet
through her boots.

It’s a hallway decked with staffs propped upright on either side. The two staffs closest to her light
up at her presence, one sparking blue and one a bubbling green, energy popping and snapping as it
awakens in the darkness. Most are wrapped up along the shaft in tightly-woven cottons and silks
while others stand blank and bare to the naked eye. Aupia leans in to the first one; it is pitch-black
under the poor lighting. There are engravings up and down the broadside, just big enough to fit her
palm.

And there’s a plaque, something just to the right of the stand. A name and date lights up as the
staff wields itself, a name and age long past. It longs for her touch, a gravitation towards the
unknown drawing her fingers across the surface. She hesitated – truly, she did – but no amount of
proper upbringing can keep curiosity caged. Almost instantaneously magic sparks at her fingertips,
energy like that of a thousand waves crashing against her skin.

But her fingers trace the embellishments, a calming lull sweeping her breath away like the tide of a
far-away shore. The push and pull of energy wraps around her body, making her toes curl in
exasperation and her pupils dilate against the light.

She pulls back, suddenly aware of the songs lighting up the hallway; the other staffs light up as she
holds her hand gently against her chest, rods of black, red, silver, and brown illuminated by
varying shades of green, blue, red, yellow, and indigo. What once was unknown suddenly sings, a
call out in the night like a chorus of wolves baying at the moon. Yet it was gentle, like a swaying
forest in the morning glow.

She strolls the hallway, light tips brushing against staffs of all lengths and sizes. Some have long
and narrow ends like an Antivan sword; others have heads not unlike blunted maces. Then there
are the nice ones with heads shaped like the sun and some like the waning moon. One has a
woman, arms outstretched, and another has a skull. There are some that twist upon themselves in
agonv and others with the heads of dragons woven into each other.

But it’s the two propped against the farthest wall that sing the loudest, a song unlike anything
Jasette would ever dream of stringing together to soothe her crying infant; and yet, it almost sounds
like her. One glistens under the light of its companions, a sleek metallic head broadside facing the
girl. The sound emitted from it sounds more like a hissing, a violence, a rage as much as it is a
desperation. the second one is soft, a gentle rainfall over an open, thirsty plain. It is much thinner in
comparison and irregular, a long shaft and head made of crooked wood with small stone creatures
tide to the top.

Energy snaps between them both, crackling like thunder as color pops over them both. For some
reason, the sound catches her breath. It feels like she’s siting down, watching a captivating dance.
Like she couldn’t pull her eyes away even if she wanted to. She can feel the trees of her home underhand, the bark that rests in her palm like it was foretold in an age-old story. She can see the trees swaying, the leaves as they ascend the furthest of branches. She can feel the earth beneath her toes, smell the moist soil in the wind.

*This is… home.*

Aupia’s hand reaches for the small stone figures.

“Don’t you DARE touch that!” Aupia’s hand jerks back. The storm of clanking of armor lights up the hallway, forcing her to tear her eyes away. She nearly jumped out of her skin, startled back into the present like a cold hand to her spine.

It’s the commander. He storms past the staffs on either side of him, indisputable rage lights up on his face in red and indigo. Cullen balks at the light, the greens and blues flickering out of life around him. “Don’t you know lyrium when you see it?” He barks, eyes locked on hers, his face tightening up in anger. The lines of his body arch together in alarm as he marches for her, fists swinging tightly at his side.

When he’s as close as he dares to get, Cullen grabs her forcefully by the wrist, his concern coming out in a snap. “Did you touch it? Well did you?”

“Nosem.” Aupia’s heart races, pounding in her ears.

“Speak up girl! Did you touch it?”

Regret floods her body, a pounding against her ribs as the staffs now behind her long for her touch. “No, Ser.” She tries to breathe out, eyes fixated on the floor.

His boots are startlingly well-polished.

Cullen sighs as she waits expectantly for his order or punishment. Her head hangs low like one of the servants of the chantry, and *that* is what keeps the tension in his brow. His hand still on her, he drags her out of the hall. Aupia trips more than once over herself, but she keeps her head down.

That. That is what breaks him a little inside.

But the Commander has never been keen on revealing himself to others; instead he sighs and runs a hand over his face, occupying himself with the doors of the hall of staffs.

“What are you *doing* down here? It’s far too late to be wandering the Cathedral.”

“-kitchens.”

“Speak *up.*”

“I was looking for the kitchens, Ser.”

He colors *violently*, heat rising to his cheeks as he turned away from her. The open doors of the hallway are slammed forcefully closed behind them.

“That way.” When she doesn’t respond – how can you, with something so vague as that – he glares
At first she just bounced on her feet, hesitation flickering plainly across her features. Then her head shot up to look at him and before it dropped again, all in rapid motion. She seems to consider more than what he lets on, but ultimately, she dips a little lower with a bend of her back and walks away.

Her feet move quickly. Cullen almost wished they’d move faster, just so he could unburden himself from the pain that suddenly rooted itself in his own feet.

She is a child yet. Twenty years is not nearly enough time for someone to be mature or respectable. Ellana knew that – it’s because she knew that she kept agents signed up under twenty at Skyhold for community rebuilding; she meant it as a means of protecting those that were young and eager from the battlefield waiting for them.

But the shame keeps the color in his cheeks as his words turn over again and again in his mind. He can do nothing – well, nothing he would like to do, or say. Because he doesn’t know what he wants to do or say. A few things rest just inside the curl of his lip, thoughts flickering across the grip on his arms as his hands clamp down.

He does nothing, however. He cannot resolve himself to do something, not in this moment. He watches her turn down the blunt end of the hallway and he takes his leave.

He won’t cover his mouth in shame. He won’t shed a tear. He won’t shake his fists at the heavens, not anymore. It’s taken him twenty years of getting up in the mornings to continue the fight she left behind, twenty years to finally find himself outside of the criteria of war. Two days is not nearly enough time for the undeniable dream of his to be real.

Hope, when you have held on to it for so long, is hard to wean out of one’s reach: however, it is the logical thing to do.

So imagine how the heart feels when that hope finally breathes truth, after desperately coaxing the heart to let it go.

Logic, emotion, and the fine line that divides the two, is hard to understand when such a truth is uncovered.

Aupia was no foreigner to racism. She knew when someone hated her for the shape of her body or for the blood in her veins.

But for some reason, Aupia almost – almost – pities the man. She can't put a name to his reaction other than blind anger; an anger, however, that was not necessarily meant for her. Usually there’s more spit in their speech when humans got mad at her for simple things. There was no indication in the vigor of his step or in the wrath of his tongue to suggest he thought she was a Harel, which is always a promising sign.

She walks away as quickly as her feet will carry her, and she hates it nonetheless. Soon enough she was well on her away to all kinds of self-loathing, now topped off with a dull ache of incompetence. Aupia stride falters as she falls back on how he stared at her when she first arrived;
she battles herself as she tried to turn from the run-in with him, instead opting to think back on the staffs. But soon enough, the tension twisting in her fists leaves her. The whispers behind her stop beating against her ears.

That hallway was something else entirely.

At least he didn’t lie: the hallway he pointed her down was now lined with worn-down carpets imperfectly lining the center of the hallway, leading her to double doors hinged to swing in either direction. She pauses only momentarily, breathing in, just to breathe out again.

Well, she thinks, pushing against the door, that was awkward at best.

The lighting was, arguably, poor at best. But given what was behind her Aupia couldn’t care less. Assorted pots and pans hang form the ceilings, and knives line her view just to the right just before the countertops filled with meat and produce, all lined up in an orderly fashion, either in exhaustion from the day behind them or begrudgingly ready for the morning to come. There are two giant brick ovens, both offering the only light source in the room, lighting up the low ceiling with a warm red glow. The kitchen is big and open, a canvas waiting for a storm of smells and sensations. Given the hour, Aupia isn’t surprised by the lack of activity in here. But something warms her heart as the smell of sweet bread tickles her nose. She opens the door just wide enough to squeeze through.

As the door creaks closed a growl greets her, startling Aupia into slamming the door with her back to the sound. She squeals and jumps, spinning on her here to face her assailant as barks ring her ears. Of course, just her luck – a mabari. Who closes the door behind them as a reflex like that?

Aupia’s line of sight darts to the knives as a voice takes command on the tension. “Gannon hush! Who’s there?”

The dog doesn’t stop growling, and Aupia’s arms reach out for tables on either side of her. She’s too far away to reach the knives, but what if-

“Gannon enough! Sit!” By some miracle, the dog huffs disapprovingly and slowly collects itself in a sit. Aupia finally breathes, unaware that she was holding her breath, as she looks up and around the room for the person behind the voice. “Whoever’s there, you better identify yourself.”

Aupia peaks around, refusing to take a step closer to the subdued dog as she looks around the vegetables on the center island of the kitchen. A woman sits on a barstool in the opposite corner, close to one of the stone-brick ovens. Weak light licks her, casting warm hues across her skin. Thick, curly black hair rests in a careless bun against the crook of her neck, escaped strands tumbling out to both frame and veil her face. Aupia squints to try and see better, still refusing to step closer as the dog sits between them; oddly enough, the woman doesn’t turn at all. She faces a wall, hands working some diligent claim to her art, but she is otherwise motionless. But her face turns slightly towards Aupia and the door, the smooth curve of her cheek catching the firelight.

“Well?”

Aupia stutters “I’m… I'm sorry ma’am. I didn’t mean to intrude. I was just-“

She stops when she recognizes laughter coming from the woman.

“You must be new here if you think you need to apologize to me.” Aupia drops her chin as she apologizes softly once more out of habit. “Sorry ma’am.”

“Please, none of that is needed here. Come closer so I can hear you better.”
Aupia scrutinizes the dog and the trail of saliva strung from its jowls. She frowns openly. “Will the dog-?”

“He won’t give you any trouble. Just don’t touch his face, he was in the waste bin a little while ago. He still smells like fish.”

True to her word, the mabari just watches her walk past him before following her back to the side of its master. Aupia stands beside the woman and dips forward slightly to see her face better. Her eyes bleed a brilliant shade of blue, something easily beautiful even in the warm red hues of the room; the colors glow like diamonds tossed across the surface of a lake. Sweat seems to be curling some of her hair in tighter ringlets, but it’s her hands that catches Aupia’s attention. While the woman works without her eyes, her hands dance in long, fluid movements. Flour powders her fingers as she kneads the bread again and again, palms pressing and releasing as she flexes the dough. Her dark hair might have tightened up on itself due to the subtle intensity of her fingers, faint freckles dot her like sugar, a subtly matching her flawless complexion and hidden partially in the cool colors of her skin. She blinks, but otherwise doesn’t outwardly respond to her intruder. “Now, how can I help you?”

Aupia stutters as the dog runs up against her exposed palm. Aupia recoils and steps away from the creature, stepping into the smoothed edge of the countertop the woman works on. “I don’t mean to intrude ma’am, I just-“

“Here’s an idea.” She interrupts, kindness cascading from her tone. “If you promise to never call me ma’am again, I’ll find what you came down here for.”

“O-okay.”

“What do you want honey?”

_Honey._ Aupia bows her head, confused about how to ask. “I… I don’t know. I missed dinner.”

Oddly enough, the woman doesn’t seem to care about the condition that brought the elf to her kitchen. “Are you sick? Or from anywhere special? I can’t whip up just any old anything at this hour, but I can help with most cravings.”

Aupia’s gentle heart gets the best of her – she plays with her hands, chin still dropped as she thinks through herself. It was pretty childish of her to think she could just waltz in here and pick up a bowl of her mom’s soup.

The thought of her mom makes her hands stop. She chuckles quietly to herself. “I’m… a little homesick, if that counts for anything.” The woman’s hands pull swiftly away from her work as she bats them off on her apron. The plaidwork is worn-down, long loved and faded from many obvious years of hard work. “Oh, I know exactly what you need. The second cupboard on the opposite side of the room. Below the counter, not above. In the left in there. It’s tucked behind a big bag.”

Aupia obediently backs away and starts fishing around. “What am I looking for, exactly?”

“A bag about the size of your torso, I think. You don’t have to pull it out or anything, just stick your hand in there. There are big, solid, irregularly-shaped chunks.” Aupia opens the cupboard and sticks her hand into the darkness; behind her, the woman turns slightly on her barstool as if to look at Aupia out of the corner of her eye. “How old are you?”

Aupia has to think for a second – the question wasn’t necessarily provoked. “Nineteen. Ish.”

“You’re tall for a nineteen-year-old.”
“I’m an elf,” the girl reasons, wincing as she stretches to find the open lips of a bag. The woman nodded to herself from across the room. Her mabari watches its guest intently from its owner’s side, sitting politely with its feet tucked together. “That makes sense. Are you new to the city?”

Aupia pauses with a frown, her fingers grazing smooth surfaces. The bag’s contents made odd clunking sounds as she shifts through the inside. “Yes. How does that make sense?” Her hand curls around something and she fishes out a lump about the size of her fist. She sniffs the dark figure before realization makes her head shoot upright. “Cocoa?” she spins around. “Is this cocoa?”

“You walk quietly. I almost didn’t hear you enter. But you walk differently from the other elves around here, hence you really are new to the Cathedral. And yes. Bring me some too, while you’re at it, please.” She instructs, smiling. She sticks an arm out absently, curling her fingers into her palm as an indication to Aupia of the woman’s expectation. Aupia obediently digs around for another piece, settles on one equal in size, and closes the cupboard up behind her, intent to leave it as she found it. She returns to the woman’s side and gently places the chocolate on the upfacing, waiting palm. “Thank you,” the woman says, turning her head almost absent-mindedly towards Aupia as she rests her free hand over her pan and the chocolate. For a moment she teases it between her palms before breaking it perfectly in fourths – she promptly pops one piece in her mouth, the others in the middle of her waiting stretches of dough.

Aupia hesitantly licks the block before testing it herself, grating the solid against her teeth to test the smallest bite possible. She finds it raw and gratifying, melting easily on her tongue as sugar granules roll through her mouth. She chews quickly and merrily, all but forgetting any reason to savor the sweetness. The baker turns her head slightly as a satisfactory crunch sounds off from her mouth. “Do you like it?”

Aupia nods vigorously before clearing her throat to respond vocally. “Yes, it’s amazing! Thank you! I’ve never had it like this before. It’s much sweeter than what we get at home.”

“I know right? It’s still pretty fresh and made locally. I’m sure its packaged in something to help it keep for the train ride before it makes it to your family, but it’s not uncommon for products to lose flavor through shipping.” Her hands keep working, now threading the dough into a triangular shape, layering it over and over again. “Cocoa makes anyone think of home – well, it’s more that it makes people think of family. Where is home for you?”

Aupia sits down on one of the bar stools lining the center island as she quietly contemplates the cocoa. She bits down, breaking it in half to crunch soundly. “Ingersoll. Near-“

“Redcliffe, right?”

“Yeah,” Aupia leans against the island behind her, interest tilting her head without thought. “How did you know that?”

“I’m from Ferelden as well. West of Lake Calenhad, a little place called Scottswood.”

The prospect of someone knowing her home lifts the girl’s heart. “Oh I know it! There’s a family in Redcliffe that’s from Scottswood. Sophia, Hue, Agatha? You don’t know them by chance do you?” The woman laughs. It’s the sweetest thing Aupia has ever heard. “I was there when Sophia and Hue bumped into each other the first time. Have you heard the story?”

Aupia rolls her eye, cocoa bar hanging out the side of her mouth. “Of them first meeting? Everyone has.” Emmalyn laughs again. “It’s cute, but it’s not that exciting of a story.”

“No, I guess not. But it definitely was exciting at the time. You know how small villages go.”
Aupia purses her lips, suddenly glad the woman can't see her disrespectful response. "Scottswood isn’t that small though." The elf mumbles, more in defiance than to pursue the conversation. "It’s probably twice the size of Ingersoll."

"Well, between you and me, Ingersoll really is just a blip isn't it?"

Now it’s Aupia’s turn to laugh – she sputtered with a single chuckle, curling slightly over her barstool. It’s the first time she’s thought of home out of pure fondness since arriving in the capital. "Yeah. It doesn’t count for much, but the people aren’t half bad."

"Well, I guess that’s all you need, isn't it?"

Aupia holds her breathe. Was the woman asking her to leave the kitchens? “Sorry?”

"Growing up. All you really need is good people to grow up around. Everything else can come and go." Aupia runs her thumb over the chocolate as she looks up at the ceiling. She was right. Of course she was right.

"What is your name?" The woman’s bright blue eyes keep ahead of her, hands still working.

"Aupia. Aupia Kessler."

"Well Aupia, have you had a croissant before?"

"I’m sorry?"

"A croissant. Have you tried one before?" Aupia shakes her head before remembering to vocalize herself. "No, Miss-"

"Emmalyn."

Aupia smiles to herself. Of course this lady has the nicest name on the planet. "No, Miss Emmalyn," she repeats in full.

"Well, would you like to try one?"

"Yes please. What is it, exactly?" she’s cut off partly by a bell-like ding just to Emmalyn’s right hand side. Aupia cranes around to find the source of the noise, subconsciously glad it wasn’t just her hearing things again. Emmalyn stops the ringing by hitting something small at the top of a small contraption. As the bell settles, Emmalyn pulls out a handle from the oven, apron wrapped carelessly around her hand as she shuffles out a flat surface covered in what appears to be sweet rolls. "You can think of them as dessert rolls, but they’re usually eaten for breakfast. The Divine likes having one before bed." She fishes a plate out from under her table, hands working in deft sweeps as if she knows exactly where everything is around her. She presses gentle fingers into the bread to test its warmth before shuffling one onto the plate. "Here. They have a little bit of chocolate in them. Tell me what you think, I'm trying something new."

The dog gets up to sit beside Aupia, ears perked as it watches her sweet roll intently. Aupia folds her arms across her chest as if to hide it, tucking the plate under her arm. "May I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"How did you end up working in the Grand Cathedral? Scottswood is a little different form the Grand Cathedral."
“My husband works here. I was given a working offer by the Divine when we were married. If you haven’t met him yet, I’m sure you will soon. Are you staying in the Cathedral long?” Aupia settles against the bar stool, feet tucked onto the pedestal as she brings the bread and plate up to her face. “I guess so. I’m supposed to start, uh, studying magic pretty soon, and I’ve been invited to stay here.” Eager to change the conversation, Aupia pushes ahead. “Do you like it here?”

“In Val Royeaux, or in the Grand Cathedral?” she starts setting new molds onto the oven’s tray, the uncooked bread vaguely reminiscent of the rolls that just came out.

“Both, really.” Aupia takes a bite, the bread flakes away at the touch. It’s pretty buttery too, making it almost melt on her tongue. She watches the woman space the dough apart, carefully moving her hand as a base measurement, dropping rolls as they touch her pinky until she reaches the edge of the tray. She doesn’t respond immediately, likely due to the concentration she needs to work.

“It isn’t bad,” she finally responds at length, shifting on her seat with her apron wrapped around her hand again. She slides the tray into the oven. “The people are nice, and its clean here at the Cathedral. The people work hard so the atmosphere can be pretty testy, but everyone works with their hearts in mind.”

Aupia takes a bigger bite into the roll; the faintly-charred chocolate burns her tongue, but its oh so good. She nibbles at the roll as she eyeballs the mabari’s elongating saliva. “I don’t understand what that means,” she confesses, reaching out to stroke the dog. He raises his head to meet her hand, short fur in her palm. His eyes never leave her food.

“The people who live here are the people dedicated to helping Thedas.” Emmalyn teases the contraption beside the oven, setting it up again. “The people who serve them, thus, are helping protect all things good and defeat all things bad. For the most part, the people are working in positions where they are happy.”

Aupia thinks back on the servants in the hallways and the woman who, earlier, tended to the fire. She thinks about how they avert her eyes and how they do nothing but comply.

Are people truly happy like this? She has never seen slavery before, but it almost seems the same; a life is exchanged in order to provide for others. The only difference here is they are providing for their family.

Aupia turns the roll over again and again in her hand. Family is without question a defining difference between slavery and indentured servitude, but still. It doesn’t seem like a way to live. The elves here seem to fit the criteria of being enslaved, at least to some marginal degree. A new wave of gratitude for her upbringing in Ingersoll as opposed to Redcliffe leaves her wondering exactly how different she truly is from the elven people here. She takes a tentative bite of the roll, it flakes apart at the touch.

Maker, that’s good.

Aupia’s attention returns to the dog at her side; when their eyes lock, he licks his dropping lips.

“Question.”

“Yes?” Emmalyn, unbeknownst to Aupia, is loving her change in company. But she knew the question was going to come eventually – just like how water falls from one surface to the next or how the birds must sing in the early morning, there are things that are like laws of nature. “You said I walk differently from the other elves here. How?”
“The elves here are from the slums, but walk all the way over to the Cathedral just to work all hours of the day. They walk quietly, but slap their feet the further into the day we get. But you walk on the outsides of your feet, something more common to those who know how rough a forest can be to walk through.”

“That’s really impressive.”

“Yes. The perk of being blind is I can impress people with my hearing and deductive reasoning.”

The girl chokes a little on her food, fingers scrambling for the surface beside her as if looking for a way to root herself to the world. Bannon scoots closer to her eager for a crumb as if he knew her reaction was coming. “I- I’m sorry. I didn’t mean-“

“Honey, I’m teasing you. Don’t worry about it.” She switches gears swiftly, demonstrating that the question truly didn’t bother her. “Do you like it?”

While the comment was genuine, Aupia was hesitant to respond out of courtesy, still caught up on how guilty she felt. “It’s delicious. What did you say it’s called?”

“A chocolate croissant. There should be some plain rolls behind you if you want to take a small loaf as well. It’s not necessarily the most nutritional dinner, but it should keep you full till the morning.”

Aupia turns around to try and find them; sure enough, they sit just between the uncooked bird and some spices to the right near the room’s entrance. “Thank you. I should probably try to find my way back before I get in trouble,” again.

“Of course. If you’re leaving, please take another croissant up to the Divine for me.”

Aupia’s stomach turns over on itself. She turns around, a beg practically falling from her lips. “Excuse me? Sorry Ma’am, but I’m not-“

“She could use it, it’s been a rough few days for her. And I’m sure she’d appreciate the chance to receive it from you as opposed to Gannon.” Emmalyn smiles, blind eyes bright as she stares ahead. Gannon perks up at the sound of his name, ears popping upright as the stump of his tail wiggles. “Just say it’s from me. There’s nothing to worry about. This is a part of the routine here.”

Aupia shifts her weight and leans against the banister, opting instead to play with Gannon’s ears. “Aupia.”

“Yes?”

“I can’t see what you’re thinking. Think out loud for me.”

It has only been a day – a day! – and Aupia feels like she’s wearing through her bottom lip with all this worried gnawing. Her brow creases. “I don’t think she likes me very much,” she confesses.

“And why do you think that? She must like you enough to let you be staying here.”

Aupia waits before responding, piecing together her thoughts. She nearly answered her, but her chest tightens. “No.” She asserts, standing straight up and pulling her hand back to herself. The dog whimpers softly, more a growl of disapproval than a plea for more attention.

“Au-“
“I’m sorry Ma’am, but it’s really, really not my place to say.”

She can hear Emmalyn’s hands stop, but the woman doesn’t otherwise move. She knows better than to pry at closed doors. “Very well. Maybe someday you will. But for now, please, do me this one favor.”

She was hesitant to comply, but Emmalyn has proven herself to be kind enough. She answers as she makes her leave. “What?”

“Come back and visit me again when you get the chance.” She turns to the girl with a smile and a gentle blink of her eyes. “It’s nice having new company around.”

Gannon watches Aupia intently as she hesitates at the door. The dog stands up to escort her out as the girl pauses once more. She speaks slowly, almost as if trying to believe her words herself. “Yeah, I think I’d like that.” She waves the small loaf in her hand. “Thank you for dinner. And for answering my questions.”

“Of course. Have a nice night.”

“Thank you. You too.”

As she finds her way back, hallway after hallway of crisp overhead lights and weak candle flames, she can’t help but feel somewhat renewed. For every bad interaction she’s bound to run into, there will be ten more good ones to outweigh it. Besides, how bad can it be here? It’s better to not judge than to judge it all at first glance. She takes the stairs two steps at a time, loaf in mouth as she scales the center of the world.

Maybe this place isn’t so bad. There are good people keeping it afloat, and there’s no reason to be caught up in what is and isn’t. It’s the city of opportunity, why not let an opportunity present itself?

Aupia dreamed that night. She was knee-high, a child once more without concern to weigh her feet as she walked. Her hair was shorter then, and she kept having to brush it out of the way to watch her mother work in the kitchen. Aupia’s hands reach just high enough to curl over the countertop, small feet working to stay balanced as she stood on her toes.

Her mother was making bread; she could taste the cinnamon on her lips, the promise of warm food in her growing stomach. She could hear her mother speaking softly, warning curious fingers away from the unfinished meal.

Then her mother was not her mother. Aupia woke with a scream when Jasette’s head morphed into a dragon.

Chapter End Notes

I really want to resolve everything with Cullen like, right NOW, but that would be pretty boring. I promise he’s all happy and well, he’s just awko-taco, you know? Aupia's a bit daft, but I'm sure we'll get to see exactly who Emmalyn is married to in due time (hint hint, he owns a mabari).

Anywho, something new. The next bit is pretty fun
The New World

Chapter Notes

Since this spans the entire length of a day, and its a day for an overwhelmed kid in the big city, its meant to be a bit exhausting of a read. But hey, here's where the fun REALLY begins.
Bear with me, yeah?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aupia woke before the first light – despite the late night, she found it oddly difficult to sleep past the time of her usual morning responsibilities. For an instant her groggy mind focused in on that – the fence that needed a second board, the druffalo that needed milking, and the four deliveries due throughout Ingersoll. She could stop by the Sachas on the way back to see what Vallen was up to.

It wasn’t until she sat upright that she remembered she was as far from home as she had ever been.

With a stiffening moan she stretches in the grey morning and collapses back onto her bed several sizes too big. She curls up against herself as if to hold on to whatever fragments of home she could, knees digging deep into her chest as her fingers take root in her legs. She thinks about what Vallen must be doing – is he sound asleep, was he already at the university, or was he contemplating the same dilemma as her? Because wanting to go forward in an uncharted world is about as daunting as the prospect of doing nothing in the face of all possibilities.

With sickening dread, Aupia realizes she forgot to check in on Quagga the night before. She groans outwardly, tosses her quilted comforter aside, and gears up for the day: boots, breeches, a trusted scarf. She thinks back on what Emmalyn said the night before, how the people here serve with their hearts or something of the like. How they all must seem content with their lives because they’re serving some “greater good,” feasibly farther from reach than any given person may understand; it’s a big concept to wrap one’s mind around at first light. People live in the capitol city for all kinds of reasons; the newspapers were always quick to blame the influx of low-skill citizens in Val Royeaux on the manufacturing industry, since most lack vocational training. So are people here because they’re desperate, or because they want to be? Aupia pauses at the door to regard her bow and arrows a second time. It’s the desperate people that are dangerous, right? Or was it people in general? The people in power, or the people at play?

She opts to leave it behind and puts her trust in strangers.

It seemed Emmalyn truly meant the invitation she gave the elf the night before – there was a tray of food just outside of her door, greeting here with two croissants and an apple red as love itself. The agents milling around in the hallway didn’t seem to notice her, so Aupia swoops down, takes the croissant in hand, and starts off on her day.

She got ten steps before she realized she was being followed by one of the agents.
The man smiled mostly with his eyes, his lips usually set in an indifferent, schooled expression of neutrality. He was undoingly kind and questioned very little which set off his rough background. A Rivain man, he bore few tattoos demonstrating his low status by birth; unlike many in western Thedas, however, it meant little to him, as it means little to his people. He is modest like that, a kind soul that bears no judgement; there are more pressing matters to worry one’s life away. Human by blood but a merchant by trade, Finch left his home in his early years as a stow-away offering support to merchant ships as they crossed oceans and seas alike. He didn’t sign on to work for the Inquisition until the late Sister Nightingale stumbled across him in her time at the previous Divine’s side, and he had been a constant source of support ever since.

With the Canary now at the head of the darker aspects of the Divine’s protection, he served her willingly and happily, partly in due to the family he now had settled in Orlais. Staying here seemed only reasonable, as it offered his family some stability in the ever-changing world.

So he smiled with his eyes, because he always had something to return to at the end of the day. He knew the dangers of the world, but he also knew the good that could come from an able-bodied heart. He carried a handheld on his waste and a knife on his back, braced across his lower back for a quick slash. Like many agents, he was more than proficient at both close-quarters combat as well as ranged offense. His handheld, one of the standards provided to the Inquisition officers, could fire up to four rounds before requiring a change; rounds were not immediate, as the technology is imperfect, but efficiency was not to be question.

“Hello Miss. I have been assigned to your personal guard during your stay here in the capitol.”

Aupia blunders, uncomfortable by the prospect. She scrambles to wipe crumbs and butter from her lips, face coloring almost as bright as the apple core in hand. He speaks with an unnerving accent and a sort of brashness to him, a fearless compliance only comparable to that of the booth-owners of Redcliffe’s festivals. She considers him quietly, eyes slowly rising as she searches him for signs of confirmation. For a human, he was oddly well-built. When she meets his eyes, she can't help but question him. She opens her mouth before drawing it closed one more, afraid to overstep.

How do you treat a guard?

“I’m- no, I'm sorry. My name is Aupia.”

When he doesn’t respond, Aupia tries again.

“My name is-“

“Yes, Miss.” His natural expression does nothing to sooth her nerves; Aupia turns away sharply and starts walking.

Oh Maker, he did hear.

What an imbecile.

He walks without so much as a shuffle. Its maddening, hearing only her own boots scuff slightly against the marbled floors.

They turn several hallways before Aupia pauses, hand to her brow as she weighs her embarrassment.

“Am I allowed to ask you things?” She turns around to meet him squarely. Under his hood, Finch’s eyes dance.
“Yes, Miss. However, I am not at liberty to answer everything you may ask.”

Oh thank the Maker. She disregards the second part entirely, opting instead to focus on her one micro-achievement.

“What is your name?”

“If it pleases you Miss, please call me Finch.”

“Finch.” She tests the word against her lips. “Like the bird?”

“Exactly that, Miss.”

“Why? Or, sorry. Forget that. Se-“ she stumbles over herself as she continues to walk away. This was precisely what Madam Vivienne said would happen on the train when they arrived, and Aupia was in no place to question him. He isn’t a friend, he isn’t a companion. He’s an agent here to keep an eye on her.

What a pain.

She wanted to ask him why he was named after bird despite having the face of a horse. She wanted to ask him how he got to the position he was in today. More importantly, she wanted to know why he was up so early: isn’t this fairly unheard of? There aren’t any farms here, right? The Canary said to be up at sunrise. There’s another hour before the sun even entertains the idea of rising. She wanted to know the life behind her shadow. How long had this stranger been standing here when he probably had his own life to live?

So Aupia walks instead, letting the silence speak for itself. All things considered it was uncomfortable, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as anything else that had transpired in the last day. But he acts like a shadow – always within sight but as silent as a dead night.

Then she remembers why she actually turned around the first time.

“Finch.”

Again, she is met with silence, but she steams ahead, shoulders arched a little in embarrassment.

“Finch, where is the exit to the Grand Cathedral?”

She shouldn’t have been surprised that he didn’t laugh, but it definitely was no reassurance that he was probably rolling with laughter internally. It hurt just as much as hearing it herself.

“Which exit would you like to go through?” his accent is warm and disguises any humor he found in the situation.

“Whichever one is most direct to get to the stables. The barn. Whatever it’s called.”

“Then if it pleases you,” Aupia turns around to see him extending a hand in the direction they just came from. “This way, Miss.”

She follows him as they backtrack, the shadow leading the fool. It was refreshing when they got outside and pleasant when they avoided all possible contact with her late mother’s companions, but it left an untasteful experience in her heart. She walks briskly when she recognizes where she is, eager to restart the day right. Finch matches her stride for stride in silence.

In the morning light, Val Royeaux breathes life into the idea that it is “The City of Hope.”
Ingenuity, curiosity, and discovery all walk hand-in-hand with one another as entities stroll around, papers in hand, contraptions at the hip, tongues dancing as philosophy takes wing. The nobles have yet to stir – either that or they are busying themselves in their cafes and morning leisures – leaving room for the future to burn. As dawn breaks grey to blue across the clouded sky, the future bubbles. Change is in the wind, a maddening state of expansion and questions and riddles and poems. And in all likelihood, that wind may never change, not so long as this city continues to stand.

Aupia and her escort find their way to the stables; a quick enough walk to be sure, but when the conversations fade away the silence breaks the comfort in her stride. She bits her lower lip and curls fists at her side: it’s a new day in a new world. A new city, a new nation, a new possibility. And Aupia plans to start it right. No matter what the situation.

She turns to her escort as they near the entrance – Finch seems unaccustomed to this detour, she can see it in the faint interest playing at his expression. When he sees her observing him he schools himself acutely and turns to her, hands clasped behind his back.

Heat flushes against Aupia’s skin despite the early chill. It’s the first time she’s kept her eyes level with a stranger. “I’m going to turn my… mount out for a little bit, then feed her. We shouldn’t be here long.”

Finch doesn’t speak: it’s not his place to comment, but Aupia doesn’t know that.

So instead he peaks his brows a little, pinching them together slightly with a gentle smile on his lips. It’s a look he often gives his sons when they show him their latest crafts, a warm, considerate look. Not to say his current assignment is a ten-year-old, but still. She didn’t even seem to notice; she’s far too eager to get rid of him already. She knew it wasn’t his fault he was stuck with her, but its awkward, being cast into one of the lowest people of society by birth, only to have someone literally at your beck and call.

Its unnerving, to say the very least.

She shouldn’t have been surprised that the stables weren’t completely empty, but she had completely forgotten about the qunari boy. He was there, swift as a hummingbee as he moved in and out of stalls. With pitchfork in hand, he danced around the horses, the flick of a hand or the press of an elbow swinging mounts around him. It’s a fascinating subtly to watch and is entrancing in some unspeakable way. Maybe because so much can be achieved without lifting a finger or opening a mouth – what subtleties the naked eye would easily disregard as nervous twitches here speaks volumes as means of connection and possibility. A new form of connection was forged here, something novel and remarkable to the girl watching.

Even Quagga seems fascinated: the doe’s head pokes out just as far as she can, large eyes and ears boldly following the qunari boy. Aupia saunters into his view just as quagga takes notice of her girl – promptly, she screams and kicks out, her shrill cry echoing in the stony halls as her small hooves connect with the wall.

Rumad jumps, both at the noise and the sight of his audience. His golden eyes shoot to the floor as he drops his chin to his chest, panic still in his eyes from the spook.

Aupia smiles and leans into the stall wall. The palomino barely acknowledges her, instead opting to eyeball its trusted stablehand. “Sorry,” Aupia tries, arrogant smile still on her lips. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” She nods to the palomino as it nudges the young man, ears swaying between them both. “you definitely have a way with them.”
He keeps his head down and his pitchfork at his side, and it only takes a heartbeat before Aupia realizes how disgusting she feels. She can put a name to it easier than she can name the breed of the horse before her. Rumad stands like a statue, oblivious to the compliment yet profoundly aware of his place in the world. His head stays down, his grip white-knuckled.

So Aupia scratches the back of her head as she avoids his face; they both stand in momentary awkward silence before Aupia finds it in herself to speak again. “Ah, I’m sorry I didn’t come back by last night. Hopefully she wasn’t too much of a nuisance.” When he doesn’t respond, her fleeting glance at him jars his eyes quickly away… again. “Well, can I take Quagga out to one of the pastures? Would that get in the way of your routine?”

“No Miss.”

Miss.

Aupia’s starting to hate the sound of that.

“Alright, thanks,” she feeds the inept response and walks away, eager for her doe’s head in her hands. Quagga was happy enough to oblige, but despite the stall walls between the two young adults, the gaucheness bled through the atmosphere like rot in a corpse.

Then there was Finch, unchanged as ever at the entrance. He contributes to the awkwardness by pretending it wasn’t there, eyes transfixed dismissively ahead of him.

“What am I doing, girl,” Aupia whispers, playing with Quagga’s long ears. Innocent(ish) blue eyes peaking back at her before she dipped her head, forcing her girl’s hand into the catch right behind her budding antlers. She grumbles and mumbles, full of talk from the night. Aupia smiles and indulges her with smart fingers and a caring ear before swinging the stall door open.

“Come on girl. Let’s go stretch out those legs of yours.”

Quagga screams and bolts. The cat from yesterday scurries out of the way at the last possible second, the halla’s small hooves kicking and dancing in a flurry of bucks and jumps. She seems eager to remove all sources of contact from her feet in this frantic expense of energy. Quagga takes off in full stride out of the stable, stirring the calm of the grey morning and long heads. Some horses respond with a kick in kind, solid hooves connecting with the back walls of their stalls. Others just pin their ears and cry out.

Aupia starts to jog after her doe, spinning around to try and meet Rumad’s eyes with a grimace and a wave. “I’m sorry for the nuisance! She’ll get better, I promise!” he doesn’t respond (other than that wide-eyed stare of his), instead leaning a little to the side to look around the elf at the loose hurricane.

Rumad is fascinated, pure and simple. He has never seen a halla before.

Or met such an… unorthodox being before. He knew elves sure enough, but none with such little regard as this one. Was it disrespect in that crooked grin? Or was it blatant ignorance? He couldn’t put his finger on it, but it seemed unlikely. She looked like someone who only smiled because they were obliged to.

Arguably, that could be worse than simply never finding reason to smile.

Rumad’s mind falls away, the familiar silence his once more. The man that followed the elf seems to walk in panic after her, something unspoken making his arms swing in full as he tries to keep up.
It is unusual, to see something so unconventional exist in the same space as himself. He was honored to work for the Chantry’s Inquisition, even as it slipped apart like rain through the world’s fingers. “A lucky catch,” he’d been told time and time again, in regards to his job.

“Not lucky,” someone would spit. “It’s bad pay, and it smells.”

But he likes the horses, and the new deer.

He’s a quiet one, that Rumad from Val Royeaux’s Outskirts.

Aupia, like Quagga, runs in abundance. Their feet move without care as they stretch out in the weak morning light, breath caught in a fog as it escapes their lungs. The atmosphere is crisp but by no means cold for the children of the forest.

Aupia slows to a stop at the furthest pasture, breathless laughter curling her lips as she sets her hands on her hips, chest still heaving as her lungs try to catch up to her. When she whistles, the deer slides to a halt, spines around, and charges back, ears pressed against her white head as her body lowers itself to the earth. Quagga stretches in her gallop, leaving a trail of wisps in the air behind her.

Aupia throws open the gate at the last possible second, only just figuring out how to unclasp the latch on the fine railing in time. Quagga’s head reaches forward, her neck strained to reach as far as she can, body streamlined in order to keep up with the frantic movement of her freed legs. With her ears still flat against her head and that wild look in her uncanny eyes, she looks like a shot fired from a handheld. The pasture, several acres in size, stretches in a lazy curl over the gentle hill. Beyond the white picket fence lies a forest with grasses as green as the leaves overhead, wet with morning dew, a thousand promises reflecting like diamonds.

With her arms against the railing, Aupia leans into her temporary peace of mind. It almost seems like home, for an instant here in the center of the world. It could have been five minutes or it could have been twenty – Aupia didn’t know. But watching Quagga in her freedom served its purpose and the tension in the girl’s shoulders melted away. Without warning, the doe slams to the earth and begins to roll, carefree in her riches. Aupia laughs out loud at her quirky beast. Her laughter dies inevitably as her thoughts trail to Ellana Lavellen.

Did the Inquisitor have any animals? She came from a clan, so she probably had halla of her own. Aupia taps her forearm as she thinks through who she met yesterday may have the answer for that: the Divine seemed responsible enough, but that’s a pretty daunting person to sit down with. That woman in gold, who was she again?

Then again, maybe the Inquisitor didn’t like animals. She killed dragons after all. Not that they’re the same as a nug, but still.

Quagga trots around and up to her girl, nose thrust into her arm with aggressive affection. Aupia happily complies with the quiet command, fingers reaching around with vigorous love.

“I’m sorry girl,” she apologizes, more to herself than to her doe, “but I can't keep you out here for long. I don’t think the stablehand would appreciate you getting in his way.”

Quagga gurgles as her lips snag the cusp of Aupia’s sleeve. The girl finds Quagga’s spot easily, tilting her head in quiet love, smile deepening.

It’s a wonder, how far one can be removed from all they know: but as long as they have someone
to keep home close to their heart, it seems anything may be possible.

Aupia stretches before moving for the gate once more. “Alright girl, you good for now? We’ll do this again later, I promise.” As she unlatches she whistles, a shrill, sharper whistle: the doe’s respective que to be obedient for once. Quagga shakes, morning dew flying off her flank before trotting obediently to her girl’s side. She breathes heavily through her flared nostrils, but she complies with the silent command her girl gives her through a hand on her shoulder; Quagga’s head stays up, but she walks beside her girl the entire length back to her stall knowing all too well what was expected of her now.

When Aupia pauses at the stall door, Quagga walks in with a reluctant groan and a drop of her head. She settles for rolling, legs in the air as she dirties herself in her yet-to-be mucked out stall – all her owner can do is sigh and drag a hand down her face as manure buries itself in her halla’s coat.

Ultimately, there is nothing else for her to do, other than to feed her another flake. Aupia dashes to the storeroom, heaves a subset of hay into Quagga’s stall, and heads down the hallway without a second word. Her guard followed her, and neither of them saw Rumad as they closed the double doors behind them.

They start to walk, Aupia eager to get their next mission over with. Magic. With the Grand Enchantress. The lady called the Iron Woman, who, oddly enough, had no Circles to preside over as the Grand Enchantress.

An oddity, to say the very least.

“Do you know where Grand Enchantress Vivienne is?” she asked, turning between her companion and the rising sun with a squint.

“Yes, Miss.” He takes the lead. The girl follows, her steps full of resentment and awkward passive aggression.

Conflicting, pointless emotions are just that. Pointless. In the way. Obnoxious.

But so, so awkward.

***

It didn’t take them long to cut across Val Royeaux to find the Grand Enchantress’s place of study. On one hand, it was very hard to miss – on the other, it is just as embellished as every other building in this district. They navigate the halls, scouts and agents and mages patrolling the halls in a similar fashion to the flow of motion in the Grand Cathedral. They find her office soon enough, a giant space with the sole balcony and a giant bay window. There is more sunlight in this room at the break of dawn than there may be on the street.

Lady Vivienne sits at the most engraved desk Aupia had ever seen; in truth, it was deemed one of the most decorative piece of furniture in all of the capitol, something whispers around her would claim. And when whispered just loud enough, the woman would ask said whisperers to clean and polish her desk, engraved wyvern’s paws all the way up to the tabletop scaled with a serenade of dragons. Not that she needed them to. But how else can one better appreciate such fine
workmanship if they do not get to know it intimately?

She peers at Aupia and Finch before straightening up, looking at them in full behind her small-rimmed glasses. “I’m glad you came my dear. Based on this hour I was worried you would disobey me entirely.”

Aupia’s heart quickens against her ribs as breathless anxiety rises to her ears. “This hour, ma’am?”

“Why yes, dear. The day is nearly gone already.”

Aupia glances at masterclock to her right. It’s barely seven!

“The morning is the morning, my dear. I hope you will be joining me before the morning is gone from this day forward, but you had a long day yesterday so I appreciate you coming.”

*She appreciates me coming*, Aupia’s mind teases in exaggerated disdain.*Oh please.*

The enchantress waves to the space across from her before taking off her glasses. “Please, have a seat.” Aupia quick obliges, settling herself in the heavy rosewood seat offered to her. It isn’t as adorned as the desk in front of her, but it was plenty extravagant in its own right.

Aupia wiggles on her cushion as Vivienne leans forward, elegant fingers entwined together, elbows raising her hands up to her lowered face. for some reason, Aupia’s heart skips a beat – the circle mage looks vaguely similar to a lioness about to strike. Or at least what Aupia thinks a lion would look like. She glances quickly behind her to see Finch at his post at the entrance to the office, his disciplined eyes focused ahead.

She turns back around to Vivienne’s waiting eyes, her mouth hidden behind her hands. “Now, before we begin, I need to understand what is happening with you. Are you aware that your magic is keenly unusual?”

Aupia’s voice comes out in a squeak. She clears her throat, but the pitch remains the same. “Excuse me?”

“Have you ever worked with another mage before? Spoken to one?”

“Not- not before speaking to you Ma’am, not as far as I know.” Vivienne considers her answer quietly before sighing and pulling over a fresh piece of paper. “All magic,” she says, “is connected. There is a flow across Thedas connecting all energy of the Fade.” Her pen works quickly before she promptly pauses to glance up at the girl again. Aupia’s spine goes erect under her analytical eye. “You *are* aware that magic is associated with the Fade, correct?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Then explain the Fade to me.”

“I…” Aupia’s hand goes for her neck as her eyes reach for a distraction in the room. At the awkward silence, she refolds her hands and dips her head to look at her lap. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I can’t.”

“The Fade is Thedas’s source of magical energy. If everything you see before you is the physical world, you may consider the things you cannot see as the Fade. The Fade’s energy is in nearly everything and in varying degrees of energy. Some will consider it a blanket of energy cast across the world, but the analogy is imperfect.” Vivienne’s head drops back down to her paper as she writes. “It is imperfect in that a blanket cannot occupy internal space. The Fade, however, can.
There is magic within the things around you, from this desk to your seat to the two of us. Look at me when I speak to you.”

The young woman’s head snaps up, despite the fact that Vivienne was, in turn, not look at her. “Yes ma’am.”

“A proper mage practices means of keeping a healthy flow of magic, an exchange of energy with their body and their environment. The flow is naturally-occurring, but there are means of fine-tuning the flow. This includes physical stretches and your dietary habits. Mages often use an instrument to stabilize their flow and cast spells. Traditionally, these are staffs. A properly maintained staff can help a mage amplify and refine their casting. This flow between everything is a crucial aspect of being a mage, and a proper Flow can be used to maximize a mage’s potential. Now,” She reaches around and fishes something out of a drawer, holding it up to eye level. “Do you know what this is?”

It’s a stick no longer than her forearm; thin and nimble, its bare, smooth surface glistens in its dark and polished perfection. A naturalistic piece of wood, all signs of natural life has been eradicated from its surface – Aupia bits her lip. It looks like a castrated branch.

But she knew it well enough. She had never seen one as nice as this of course, but she knew it. “It’s a halfstaff.”

“Very good. What does it do?”

“Its… like a staff. But shorter?”

“Simply put, yes. You are not incorrect.” The enchantress leans back in her seat, arms folded across her chest, halfstaff tapping lightly at her upper arm. She couldn’t tell if her student was mocking her with such a simplistic answer, but it seemed unlikely by the anxiety alight in her posture. “Why do we have these?” she presses after considering Aupia’s words at length.

Aupia’s brow creases as she thinks it through. “They… sorry, I don’t.”

“Then guess. Ignorance is not an option, nor is passiveness.” Aupia’s thoughts linger on the tip of her tongue as she looks at her teacher in a new, slightly angrier light. The nerve of this woman!

It doesn’t take her long to summarize the extent of what she knew, which, shamefully, isn’t much. “They came from the Heritage Wars,” she tests. Vivienne gives her a slight nod. “In a way. They were developed following the invention of handhelds. You are familiar with those.” Her question was assertive, a claim more than a curiosity. In this day and age, however, her assumption was correct. Everyone knew someone with a handheld, just as much as everyone knew someone who died because of one.

Aupia averts her instructor’s gaze, the lines of her shoulders slouching. “Yes.”

Vivienne pauses; naturally, she is intrigued by the girl’s response. Ultimately she sits forward again, dismissing the comment without so much as an arched brow. She continues. “The handheld was created in the Heritage Wars, initially to resolve the conflict. As they failed to stir peace, new measures were needed to combat the firearms. The halfstaff was created as a means of defense for mages in this new era of quick-draw combat. If used properly, they have immeasurable uses.”

Aupia’s attention returns to her instructor with a curious furrow in her brow. “If?”

“Improper use of a halfstaff gets in the way of proper maintenance of a mage’s Flow. If no
corrections are made, a mage can corrupt their connection to the Fade, the Veil, and their magic.”

Well that’s quite disheartening.

As distressing as it sounds, Aupia still finds herself entranced by the polished wood in Vivienne’s hand. “Will I get one?” she asks.

“Perhaps, but not today nor any time soon, my dear.” Vivienne stands up and with a wave of her halfstaff unveils a mat tucked into the corner. A circle is woven across it with scripture enhancing its unknown purpose, a series of markers indicating some sort of intricate power. Aupia stares, entranced as it floats across the room onto the floor beside her seat. “Why do you think I am telling you all of this?” Vivienne asks, absent of all wonder. The question may be redundant, but the purpose is omnipresent.

Aupia stutters. “… because you’re my teacher?”

Vivienne’s head rolls around to glare at the girl as she laughs. “Oh my dear! Think a little deeper than that.” Vivienne turns to walk back towards her student. “No, it is because you have no Flow.”

Aupia shifts uncomfortably in her seat at the unusual accusation. “I’m… sorry?”

The Grand Enchantress, the Enchantress of the Circles that no longer exist, leans backwards against her exquisite desk, her robes brushing against Aupia’s knee. “I say you have no Flow in that this is what makes you a curiosity. A mage can, with practice, sense the Flow of their environment. You omit no Flow, not in the least. Something remarkably uncanny since every object, connected to the Fade or otherwise, can and dose produce Flow.”

Aupia leans slightly to her right as if to put more space between her and Vivienne. “I, well, uh, didn’t know that.”

“You didn’t.” Again, her question sounds more like an assertion. Aupia shakes her head in response. Vivienne frowns and taps against her forearm, looking out the window in thought. “Yet you do have magic.”

“I think so. I can do little things, like with my arrows. Not in a hard wind, but I can keep it going pretty straight. And I know a little bit to help people. Well, I don’t know if it’s helping or not, but I can kind of… dull the senses of people? See when Vallen-”

“I know what you can do. Explain to me how it feels.”

“It kinda hurts.”

“What kind of hurt?” at her silence, the mage tries again. “What does the pain feel like, Aupia?”

The young woman works her lower lip as her eyebrows crease. “It depends on what I’m trying to do. With little things like the arrow, it feels like bees, kind of. A lot of them.” She scratches the back of her neck in shame; it feels like her father is ridiculing her patchwork on the pasture’s broken boards. “With healing people, it’s like someone’s hitting me with rocks. And a hand tightening around my head. And my heart.” She rests a hand on her chest, reflecting on the tightening pain that bit her so feverously; it was odd at first for her to wrap her head around getting hurt from healing people, but if it turns out that this is unusual, then maybe magic isn’t such an impractical tool after all.

She turns upwards to the Iron Woman, face relaxing once more as curiosity took her. “What does that mean? Me having no Flow.”
Vivienne turns away – she despises not knowing, and absolutely hates admitting anything of the like. “I don’t know, since there is no record of this ever occurring before. But you do have magic, and it hurts you when you use it minimally. It doesn’t take a scholar to assume there is a connection between these facts.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Potentially.” She busies herself with her magic, diming the lights and untying the knit keeping her window covers at bay. The room darkens as Vivienne reasons with her student, achieving complete control of her office with little more than a wave of her halfstaff. “What happens when a dam is removed from a lakeside?”

Aupia thinks of a forest being flooded, trees being uprooted as animals are drowned or swept away – she’s assuming her teacher is referring to cities or villages or something considerably more relevant. She refolds her hands. “Uhhh, lots of bad?”

“And you have no control over your magic. What do you think will occur if I open the floodgates for you, right now?”

She again thinks of the forest: this time, of her forest back at home and her likelihood of never getting to see it again. Aupia cringes. “Probably nothing good.”

The Circle mage responds without any hint of kindness in her tone. “You are most probably right. I would much rather not have to deal with a demon on my new rug.” Aupia looks down to admire the carpet at present worth more than her head. “You have yet to prove that you can even engage in your magic. Before you are casting spells, you must demonstrate proper control over yourself.”

“A great deal of magic, since it is metaphysical, can be explained in part through comparisons to the physical world. However, your sense of willpower, control, and focus must be conquered on your own. Those are the few things that are unchanged between the two words – the magical and the physical - and there is no poetry to help you understand it. This can only be conquered through practice.” She gestures to the mat. “Sit. Now fix your posture, like this. No, straighten your back more. Very good, now cross your legs. You are going to remain there until I tell you otherwise. Do not speak, do not shift, do absolutely nothing. Focus on silencing your mind and refining your sense of yourself. Steady your heart - slow it, if you can. Relax and control your breathing. Feel the vibrations of the hairs on your fingertips. Feel your blood as it cycles through your feet.”

It seems easy enough: just focus. The further into her instructions the harder it was for Aupia to follow, as the Grand Enchantress was well aware of exactly what having magic felt like; now more than ever, Aupia hadn’t the slightest of clue. But this seems easy enough she thinks, shifting her tailbone slightly. Stay silent and stay still. Easy peasy.

After about twenty minutes, Madame Vivienne left.

After three hours, Aupia’s tailbone felt bruised, and her irritation kept her shoulders arched. She kept crossing and recrossing her legs as they fell asleep.

Her eyebrow twitches as she settled back into her seat. Again.

This is ridiculous.

She peeks out the corner of her eye for the millionth time at Finch. He stands as shock-still as ever, a statue in a world of status. It doesn’t look like he’s moved even once.

Which is just vexing.
What is the point of all of this? Is the Iron Woman trying to prove something?

Aupia shifts around – again – and sighs as loudly as she can. Finch doesn’t respond.

*Oh, for the love of-

“Finch.”

He waits silently for her command, which doesn’t come. Simply put, Aupia doesn’t know how to issue a command. She doesn’t know that it is implied a servant hears her; confirmation, in realistic settings, is both improper and unnecessary. All she can think is that he fell asleep standing upright somehow.

Aupia has never known a person to do that. One of Grant’s dads liked to tease the town by suggesting his husband could do it, but rumors weigh very little in a small town.

Her mind wanders briefly to the druffalo before her irritation rises again.

“Finch?”

Finch settles for appeasing her lack of knowledge. “Yes, my lady?”

“Where is she?”

His answer came after a pause. “That is not for me to know.”

“How long has she been gone?”

Finch breathes through his nose and checks the window with a lean and a squint. “three, three and a half hours?” He confirms his guess with a glance at his watch. “Three hours, and twenty-one minutes.”

*Maker’s breath.*

“What is the point,” she groans, rolling her neck. Finch mistook her question as one she needed an answer to. He responded as kindly as he could. “It is not my place to question it.”

“I’m not asking you to question it. I’m asking you to explain it.”

“I’m afraid I cannot, Miss.”

“Any ideas? At all?”

“I- no, Miss.”

“Do you have to say ‘Miss’ every time?”

“It is an expectation of me to address you properly, Miss.”

“Who’s expectation? It makes me feel old.”

Finch smiled slightly. Aupia felt like she just won something at a festival, seeing him crack like that.

But that brings her to another question. Aupia turns in full, twisting the trunk of her body around to regard her shadow. “Am I allowed to ask who pays you, Finch? Do you work for Lady Vivienne?”
He doesn’t spare an instant. “I serve the Chantry’s Canary, Miss. Not the Grand Enchantress.”

“So you actually have no idea what she’s doing right now.”

He opens his eyes to look at his assignment.

“None, Miss.”

“Am I allowed to ask you to not call me ‘Miss’?”

“You are, but I am not allowed to do otherwise. I apologize, Ma’am.”

Aupia rolls her eyes and sits forward again. “Alright alright, smart guy. You know that’s worse with the making-me-feel-old thing, right?” As she settles against her tailbone, body slouched forward, she considers something new. “Hey Finch,” she asks. “You have a handheld. Have you ever fought a mage with a halfstaff?”

“I have.” He alleges slowly, shifting his weight between his feet. Aupia rolls her shoulders. “Was it hard?”

“Every fight is hard, Miss.” That comment makes her pause. “Do a lot of mages in the city use halfstaffs?” she asks ignorantly.

He thinks considerably, time weighing against him. “I have seen many, yes. As mages have been free for the last twenty years, most are doing what they see fit to survive.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Finch looks down at her. His accent is soft like his heart, but both have been worn down by this changing world. No more than any other of course, but time changes everyone. “There are some, Miss, in every group. There are some in every group that abuses power, either on those in their command or below them.”

“Oh.” It doesn’t take someone from a centralized city to know that he was referring to both the mages and their abusers. She knew the Circles fell, and them falling led to a new age of mage acceptance - piloted, in part, by the Inquisitor and her beseeching for respect for all. But not everyone agreed with the initiative, not after generations of fear and belittlement of mages across Thedas. Change is best brewed slow, after all: there’s less of a chance for death in the masses. Empires don’t fall in a night, and they surely are not built overnight either.

Still. It is fascinating to see how the current world changes when more truth is brought to light; ever since the truth about the Tranquil was made public, a great deal of fear was replaced with empathy for brothers and sisters lost to mis-handled magic. In the span of only twenty years, the world had completely flipped over itself just to spin on its head and land on its feet, eager to find fault in any other systematic flaw of Thedas. Magic was now almost as accepted as it is acceptable to marry someone of your gender identity – another triumph to be discussed another day.

At present, that means the Harels; that group deserves the discrimination for what it has done to the people over the last few summers, that’s undeniable. In Aupia’s world, they were little more than rumor and paper headlines. Unbeknownst to her, however, Finch has handled them himself several times over.

Aupia continues, finding sanctuary in her answered questions. “Have you seen what happens to a mage if they don’t work on their flow?” She asks, pulling herself back into the present. “Those that use halfstaffs uh, what’s the word… improperly?”
“Yes.”

“What does that look like?” Finch waits at length, trying to simply what words may never do justice to. “Disease, first. It was first considered a new onset of rapid illness when halfstaff usage was still new. Then they are overtaken by demons.”

Aupia humms in acknowledgement, playing with her hands once again. That was something she didn’t feel any reason to see for herself. She forgets herself as her thumb rolls over the back of her knuckles. “Did the Inquisito-“

“What are you doing?”

The hair on the back of Aupia’s neck stands up as her spine snaps straight, a sharp call demanding attention pulling her heart back into its anxious cage. Her head turns slowly before stilling and straightening once more when familiar robes come into view, long, bold strides angrily clicking across the cool tiles. Aupia bows her head slightly as the angry heels stop working, Madame Vivienne now standing in front of her student, hands firmly planted on her hips.

She turns to the scout, who, to no surprise to Aupia, has returned to his statue-esk state. “Leave us,” Finch does without protest and without sparing a glance at his assignment. It isn't her place to be hurt by that, but Aupia hurts at the sight as he walks away. She chews the bottom of her lip as he turns a hallway, closing the doors behind him. When the double doors silently clink into place, Vivienne’s bark rings out, dropping Aupia’s head further in shame. “What were you thinking?”

Aupia’s voice cracks as she tries to defend herself, dropping her gaze as the last possible instant. “You left for three hours. I'm sorry, I know it’s a concentration… Thing. Exercise?”

Vivienne laughs, a shark, sarcastic bark. The sound infuriates her student, but all she can do is gnaw away on her lower lip. “Oh no. we are not discussing that right now. Why where you talking to the agent about your mother?” Aupia runs a hand through her hair, trying to distract herself from the sudden storm brewing in their confined quarters. “It wasn’t… it wasn’t a question about her as my mom, ma’am. It was a question about-”

“No, don’t you dare ma’am me right now. And do not lie to me, Aupia.”

The girl’s head comes up, momentary anger flashing across her features. She’s met with the fury of her teacher, but she doesn’t flinch. “I’m not lying, I was-”

“That is besides the point. What you did was provoke unsolicited and ignorant conversation. Can you not gage the situation you are in at present? Here? In Val Royeaux? The instant this world knows who you are is the instant you are in danger. You cannot trust anyone with the knowledge of your heritage.”

The girl sits stiffly, her heart tightening just like the expression on her face. She is not nearly as composed as her teacher – arguably, no one is as well composed as the Iron Woman. “I mean no offense, Ma’am, but-“

“No buts!”

“You’re not listening to me!” She cries, head wiping up to her teacher. “All I was doing was asking questions! About magic and the people here and what the newspapers don’t right about! I’m stuck not knowing shit unless I ask!”

“If that is how you feel, then you are asking the wrong questions,” Vivienne replied evenly, battling feverously to keep her wrath at bay. Few people dared speak to her in this manner, at least
to her face. “Do not ask about what was, ask about what is. Because the very second you slip up is the instant your life is jeopardized.” She leans down, palpable fury rolling off her like steam.

“Remember this. It is safer to assume everyone is your enemy than it is to trust those around you.” She straightens, gaze returning to the bay windows of her office. She chose this space so she could watch idle lives mill beneath her, as it is in writing as the Maker’s child to be above the weak and weary. “Especially the people here. you cannot trust the non-noble, as they will rob you, nor can you trust the noble, as they will play you like a harp.”

Then, as if her foreboding tone wasn’t enough, she summarized herself, eyes still on the people like ants walking below her window. “Trust no one, as none of them deserve your trust. You will only make things harder for yourself if you get attached.”

“Why do you say that? Because you-“ She drops her head, submissive as a bitch on a leash. Vivienne’s sharp eyes narrow. “Say it.”

“It isn’t my place, ma’am.”

“Say it.”

She hasn’t moved, not for hours. But she begins to tremble, a weak leaf victim to a storm as if driven to some fictional state of exhaustion. She felt like she was shaking violently: perhaps it was just her heart. in truth her body only quivers, fingers lacing and reknotted themselves together.

“Say it,” Vivienne commands again, tone shaped by far too many battles of whit.

“I was… just going to-“

“Out with it. Stuttering is shameful.”

Aupia’s head comes up, and her eyes are hard. “Because you’ve lost the Circles. And the Inquisitor.”

The silence of the office chills the girl’s blood by several degrees, Vivienne’s reserve smoldering any reassurance Aupia craved. But she had something to say yet. The girl keeps her keeper’s eyes, shades of winter colliding with the colors of autumn.

“I’ve seen the papers, Ma’am. I know how the world thinks of you.”

The Iron Woman’s reserve erupts, infamous steadiness boiling over in fury. The lines of her shoulders rise and stiffen like an enraged beast as she fights her intuition to retain control. Her regularly partially-lidded eyes widen at the bold affront, face smoldering under her stony expression. Vivienne distractsd herself with the little things to calm her boiling blood – the faint spray of freckles across the girl’s cheekbones, the sharp angle of her ears poking out from behind her dark auburn locks, the flare of her nostrils as she speaks in defiance. They all remind her, at least to some capacity, of her beloved mother.

But those eyes. And while the texture of her hair was that of Ellana’s, the color served its own reminder of what never was: that, and the truth of what always will be.

Vivienne hated Solas, but not for the clearest of assumptions: it wasn’t because he was an apostate, it wasn’t because of how he scorned her and her world. Vivienne hates him for everything he did to Ellana. And, partially, she hates herself for allowing him to have ever affected her as such. She wished ill of few, but with all her heart, she wishes he were dead.
Grand Enchantress Vivienne doesn’t resolve to turn away, but the color of her student’s eyes bleeds too much reality into the present for the woman. There is nothing more terrifying than the unknown than, perhaps, the known terrors of the past. Those eyes were responsible for so many things, including, in part, the failed reconstruction of Circles Thedas-wide.

The two hold each other, trapped in their own pride. The silence is deafening, only out-drummed by the frantic beat the girl’s racing heart. The silence lasted no longer than a few seconds, but it was a several lifetimes too long for either of them.

Vivienne sighs, releasing the breath she didn’t know she was holding, the tension in her shoulders spiraling out of her body. Aupia turns away at length, biting her tongue as she keeps herself in check. Vivienne resolves to rest against her beautiful desk, fingers curling.

Oh, there are things to be said. She used to laugh off petty nonsense, and given her position she once could have strung Aupia up for a quick beating to set her straight.

But as the flash of her anger faded away, there was nothing to protect her from the pain reawakened in her heart. The child seemed to shrink before her, fire reduced to fleeting embers. What would Ellana-

“Leave.”

Aupia looks back up as Vivienne looks away, her head angled, her gaze falling to the window beside her. “Leave, we are done for today.”

She did. She felt overwhelmed, weakened by a violent onset of both fury and frustration. She stood quietly, body still shaking a thousand times faster than it needed to and a thousand times weaker than it physically was.

She left without a word.

She wanted to slam the doors behind her, but she already felt bad enough.

Finch seemed to reattach himself at her hip, slipping out of nowhere to suddenly appear in her peripheral. Aupia didn’t comment, she was too numb to do as much. She left with her head down and her shadow behind her, Vivienne trapped in the stillness of her office and racing mind.

She did, however, offer herself the sanctuary of slamming her fist against her beautiful table.

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The two didn’t make it far once they were outside before they were stopped. Someone called at her from across the pavilion, chirping doves taking flight to escape the hurricane about to blow in their direction.

Finch affirms himself with a wide-set stance immediately at Aupia’s shoulder, hands clasped behind his back. Aupia’s shoulders sag as realization dawns her features.

_Andraste’s tits, what does a girl have to do for a break around here?_
“Uh, Sera. Hello.”

The elf trots over with a qunari in tow: the sight is most unusual, given literally everything else about the pretenses of this area. The nobles around them pause on their strolls to sneer at the little gathering, to which the newcomers pay no attention. Aupia, on the other hand, has to fight to keep her control, her heart still racing from only minute before. “Little duck! Meet my Kitty!”

*I'm a duck now?* Aupia glances up, squinting in the sun to greet the qunari. “I uh, hello?”

“I am Qat. I have been told about you.” The grey woman before her speaks clearly and plain, forming awkward blocks of syllables with an overworked tongue. Yet the fluidity of her speech almost leaves Aupia taken aback, surprise reading clearly across her face; while she wasn’t necessarily surprised by a qunari speaking Common so well, she was utterly *dumbfounded* by the contradiction between her tongue and Sera’s. Her clothes is a series of ropes, leather and velvet, as well as baggy breeches and knee-high boots, something of the likes Aupia has never seen before, and she can’t help but stare at it all as the woman offered her a hand to shake. The pigments are vibrant, offsetting the pearled color of her skin. Small twine embellishing the robes in silver, the uncanny color of her long, braided hair, a series of weaves enveloping her skull at the base of her horns. The dark undertones of her eyes rock blue like a summer storm over the Stormy Coast, staring down at the elf in neutral dissatisfaction. There are swords on either hip, long and bended as if to appease an unseen wind. Aupia takes the woman’s hand slowly as she tries to school her expression.

Sera seems more than wild enough for the two of them; the elf bounces at her companions side before reaching out for Aupia’s hand with a giggle, breaking the girl’s hold of her wife. “Come’er, we’re gonna go get lunch. You’ll join us, yeah?”

“Uh-“ Aupia looks back at Finch for some sign of understanding as Sera takes hold of her. Her agent simply folds his arms behind his chest and looks ahead unblinkingly.

Maybe no sign of *take off running* is better than a clear sign of *get the fuck out of here.*

Sera tilts, heels snapped together in mock attention as she cranes around Aupia. “Oh, you’re one of Canary’s birdies right? Swallow or something?”

Finch keeps his eyes ahead of him as Sera smiles deviantly. “Finch, ma’am.”

At her failure to crack him, Sera rolls her eyes. Qat offers him the slightest of acknowledging dips of her chin, to which he responds in kind. She blows through her nose before spinning in a circle. “Well Finchy my man, I think we’re good here. I’ll take care of our little one, alright?”

Finch frowns and steps forward at the suggestion, putting himself physically at Aupia’s side. “I’m afraid I cannot do that, ma’am. I’m-“

“Given whatever orders yeah yeah.” Sera runs a hand up and down the bowstring slung across her body. “But if she ain’t safe with me, she ain’t safe with you. Don’t worry nothing, I’ll bring her back to that castle in the clouds in no time.”

Finch takes another step forward – it is significantly smaller, but it was a step nonetheless. His shoulders arch under his scout’s uniform, his body going rigid. “Ma’am, respectfully, that is out of the question.”

“Why? Cause you’ll lose your job?”

“Because I have-“
“Finch.” The qunari speaks up, taking an equally small step forward; her body sways however, suggesting a confidence in the woman the man does not exhibit so keenly. She stands about a head above them all in stature, something no fool could be mad enough to ignore.

That, or the horns. But she speaks slowly, sure to enunciate the meaning behind her words. “There is no need for you to waste your evening here. Your assignment is under our careful protection. You and I have worked together,” she alludes vaguely, eyes staying level. “You know who we are. I sent word to the Canary, but she has yet to respond to me. I am sure she will pass your responsibility on to us for the afternoon.”

Aupia would have been insulted by the degrading label of assignment, but she catches Finch’s fingers curling slowly around the handle of his handheld, so she steps up to him, resting an arm on his shoulder. “Finch, I know I don’t have a right to order you around, but I think Sera might have a point.”

The scout draws out a long and slow blink, looking hard at Aupia. “Miss, I am under explicit orders to-“

Aupia draws her arm back and puts both hands up, palms in open wonder. “It’s like she said, I’ll be safe with the two of them. And I have some catching up to do, something that may be done best in privacy.” “I know it’s your job to protect me and everything, but I’m sure we can relieve you of your duty where it isn't necessary.” He doesn’t even gratify Aupia with the slightest bit of concern for her words. She bits her lower lip as she works another angle against her intuition. “Look. You’re the kind that don’t listen to thought, just orders. Which is good… I think. But I’ll take whatever Harding gives you. I’ll be responsible, I promise.”

Finch almost looked convinced if it wasn’t for that last attempt at appeal. But he sighs and folds his arms against his back, hard eyes meeting the qunari. “Very well. I will return to the Canary now. If she deems this improper, I shall return immediately.”

Sera just nods and spins around on her heel, arm hooked through Aupia’s, effectively startling the girl into step next to her. “Good to know! I’m being sarcastic,” she whispered to Aupia, who looks back at her warily. “I figured as much,” she breathes back. A single, barking laugh erupts from Sera – more from her nose than her mouth – and they are soon on their way, Finch feeling somehow both incapable yet overqualified for his current assignment: it doesn’t matter, or, at least, it won’t once he loses his job.

They clear their way across the street. Sera tries to keep her eyes ahead of her, but she keeps looking back at Aupia – well, not at her, more at her hair. The woman seems like a child in the way she avoids Aupia’s eyes, which adds to the unsettled bounce in Aupia’s feet. Aupia tries to keep her eyes down, but it gets increasingly harder and harder the smaller the street becomes. It feels good to be walking again, but the atmosphere was almost intoxicatingly tight. She felt like she was being stared at like an animal in a cage until Qat murmurs something to Sera. The elven woman hisses back before clearing her throat. “How was Vivvy?”

Aupia’s hands curl into fists before unwinding again, her right hand moving up to cup the back of her neck in anxious denial. “I, uh. Well-“

“She’s a shit that one. But she isn’t half bad when she’s got good in her.”

Aupia struggles to decode Sera’s words, hand dropping back to her side. She knows better than to assume anything here, but the truths laid out before her are confusing, to say the very least. “It
amazes me that you two are friends with each other.”

“Friends? Oh hell. She’s fam.”

Aupia nods, pretending to understand as her fingers flutter in deft movements to tie her hair up. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Where are we going?” Aupia turns around, admiring the many restaurants and cafes. “I thought we were getting lunch.”

“Not here we’re not.” Sera elbows her with a wicked grin. “We’re gonna go get you some real grub.” She proceeds to speak aimlessly, referring to all sorts of adventures and facts and insults about the people around them. Sera is the kind of person to speak without filter and by laughing through her nose, a laughter loud and bold and unfiltered as she summarizes the countless lives around them. Aupia only partially pays attention, politely nodding or commenting when gaps seemed desperate for a comment; the clean porcelain and artisanry slowly fades away, clusters of buildings starting to filter into view, and the girl was fascinated by the designs put into every piece of masonry. The further they walk, the further the people of the upper class seem to fall from their standards; long, draping robes and dresses become more simple by the block. The polish of men’s boots begins to fade less and less exquisite, their own dress shirts beginning to exhibit less and less colors.

Now, if there is a ‘formal’ name to bestow upon such a place as this, it must be an appropriate title that can be recognized from across boarder lines. For places like these live and, moreso, bleed in infamy with their habitants of cheat perfume and blood-dotted cheekbones. The people here skirt across recognized lines drawn in the sand between neighbors and sinners and saints; some are, respectfully, living on a day to day basis and pray nightly for the slightest of chances to continue tomorrow. Others carry themselves with erect chins and hard lines in their shoulders as they walk from one job to the next, hands blackening with every shift they pick up at the assembly line. Some, respectfully, have a little more life in them, and there will always be the bourgeoisie class to patrol and critique and heckle those around them.

For this is No Man’s Land, a stripe of territory not dividing nations at war, but a people at ends. Here, the Outskirts brush against Central Val Royeaux, complete with a chain of incoherent booths and poorly-mannered children with quick fingers and hungry bellies. They’re hard to catch – you’re better off letting them go and trying to carry minimal on-body in this area. And despite the odd hours and endless shifts most inhabitants are stuck abiding by, it is a rare moment when No Man’s Land is quiet or lifeless. If there were ever a waking moment of peace here, no one knows when it is; when the children go to sleep, the bandits come out. The only difference here is they predominately use knives, unless they’re actually reputable in their line of work and have lifted handhelds.

The buildings here stand in brick and steel, the new alloy that allowed for this rapid expansion of society. This alloy, funded initially through research piloted in Kirkwall, apparently is starting to sway under the weight of its eastern habitants: here, however, there seems to be great disregard for whatever may come, as many cannot afford to think of the future to that capacity. Fog and muck once in the distant horizon now billows from crooked rooftops, dirt underfoot starting to slush and collect in the uneven cracks of the pavement. Naturally, the area smells like soot and excrement, to which most residents seem to forget the longer they live among the soot and soil.
The hub of this strip of overworked, over-baked people and brick is the water fountain of the Inquisitor herself – perhaps in irony it is the more extreme characterization of her, scaled over and bearing both wings and horns. The Inquisitor here is a dragon, curled around a mangled darkness of demons and wolves and Venatori alike. The fountain is dry and cracked, waterless for years now, but her form shines flawlessly as claws and wings alike unfurl, shielding onlookers from the darkness. The marble minister surrounding the fountain sits with blisters and cracks, the only thing of perfection remaining is the rough texture of scales betraying the Inquisitor’s renown compassion.

The irony? Calling this place by its formal name, No Man’s Land, alludes to the space between trenches of war: more often than not, that name is difficult to whisper in the ear of a night-walking entertainer, cold in the bleak darkness as they dress for their next customer. No, this place is better known as The Rift. It is both the Inquisitor’s greatest achievement and her greatest failure – while the scars in the sky are nearly healed, the space between the people has never been greater since her passing. A pity, considering how she lived out her last few years fighting to amend that very strife across racial lines.

For in all her glory, she could not protect the people from everything.

Who knows. Perhaps that statue was placed there years before her untimely death as an omen: no being, even if their power rivals that of a dragon, can protect humanity from itself.

The people don’t seem to mind it all that much, all things considered. Faces are tight with worry and need, the need for more money and the worry that there will never be enough.

Sera leans into Aupia’s shoulder once more as they walk past a family, a woman escorting several dirty children. All of their arms are blackened up to their elbows, their shoes worn around the edges. The racial population here seems to be mostly elven and qunari with humans and the occasional dwarf trickled in-between, usually the men and women running the booths dotting the perimeter of the space. Sera is quieter, and Qat walks with less assertion in her shoulders. “This is the Rift. Its only dangerous in the day, so don’t you worry nothing ‘bout it.” The elf assures, releasing her grip on the girl and folding her arms behind her head. She looks like she’s lounging in a meadow instead of walking in the middle of a hurricane of poverty.

Aupia stops walking before stretching her stride to keep up, confusion stretching from the corners of her eyes to her slowed feet. “Is it not… the middle of the day?”

“Both day and night,” Qat corrects, the hard lines of her face tightening as she eyes a man to their right. Sera shrugs. “Yeah, night too I guess.”

“But what does that mean?”

“You’ll find out. Anywho, this is my place.” She leans in towards the girl and points at a crooked building. The window has no pane – in its place is a pokedotted fabric torn haphazardly up the middle. “If you ever need a Jenny’s dance, you just lemme know. Not that we’re usually there.”

“We are never there,” corrects Qat, almost absentmindedly. Neither of them seem particularly bothered by the fact they are never home. Aupia walks slowly as they round the building, venues and chatter and idle prayer starting to fill the gaps of her mind.

The women wait for her, slowing down with a knowing grin on their lips (well, lets be honest: Sera was the one that was giddy. Qat was just happy to see Sera behaving normally again, a nice change concerning her wife’s agitated behavior from the night before). Sera waves the girl closer and leads them all to a booth not far from the fountain where a man wearing superb facial hair smiles at their
approach over the crowd of heads milling between his booth and his neighbors’.

“Sera! If it isn't my favorite hooligan. How are you two doing today?”

“We’re good Danny, we’re good.” She leans against his countertop, stained in blood and gore and Maker knows what else. The booth smells like fresh kill and boiled gravy, like a kettle on fire for too long with the leg of…. Well, something in it, cooking for far longer than it ever should have. Despite the smell there is no obvious kettle, just strings of animals hanging from the ceiling, fried and coated and cooked in all sorts of ways.

Danny’s mustache is supreme, shaped well by nervous fingers throughout the day. His beard reaches all across his face, mapping out the scarred textures of a man’s hard life – despite this, his smile is obvious from across the way, as the curl of his lips shapes the rest of his face and, subsequently, the hair on his face. Somehow, he reminds Aupia of Grant. Maybe it’s in the squint of his eyes under it all: Grant’s face is as smooth as a baby’s bottom. Maybe it’s more simple than that and it’s just the burly shape of his body. Whatever it is, Aupia tries to keep herself respectful by avoiding eye contact.

He leans in with Sera, their faces almost close enough to touch. Qat leans against the pillar with the least animals nailed and roped to the wall. Aupia appropriately hovers awkwardly, trying to find the source of the smell. She looks closely at what appears to be a badger, body pulled of its fur but weak tufts still cling desperately to its flesh. “What can I get for you two today?” Danny asks after some quick banter with Aupia’s escorts.

“I actually have a… ducklin’ here. It’s her first day in the Rift.” Sera jabs her thumb in Aupia’s direction, nearly startling the girl out of her boots. Danny smiles over Sera’s shoulder at her, dipping his head slightly. “Well hello there new duckling! Why is she a duck?” He asks curiously, as if that was the only concerning thing in the rotting hell he lives in.

“Nevermind that. I want to give her the goods, being her first day and all. Do you have anything for us?”

“Do I-? Oh my darling, I always have something for you.” Danny stands upright and fishes around in the unslightly darkness of the inside of his booth. “I have exactly what the girl needs for a good first day. How has this first day been going for you, friend?”

Aupia takes a tentative step closer, weary of the carcasses now closer to her head. “It has been… eventful, thank you for asking.”

Danny reemerges, an entire bird (chicken, maybe?) friend and dripping in some unholy grease. His fingers, darkened by grease and grime, pries the muscles and bones apart, the bird’s body hissing in release. He pries off legs and breasts, fingers reaching deep into the meat before slapping it down onto a wooden surface. He speaks as he works, asking Aupia about where she’s from and why she’s here. She says she’s here to learn. He asks how Aupia and Sera know each other. Sera just calls her a duck again, to which Danny only nods in satisfaction. He glances up between moments, meeting Aupia’s eyes before falling back to his work. It was… unnerving, to be addressed so casually. As if he had no expectations of her, no judgement. He hands them the plate as he throws the bird’s remains back into the abyss of his workspace. “Here you go, fresh from this morning. New recipe too.”

“Is it as good as the other one? You know, the good one.”
“Sera my friend, it is better than the other one.” He says with a wink, wiping his hands on his apron. Qat quietly turns around to pick up the tray, dropping some money in it’s place. “You can give me the wood back tonight. Are we still on for drinks?”

“We’re always on for drinks,” Sera confirms, wicked smile spreading as she takes his hand in a hearty shake. He only winks again in return before nodding once more in Aupia’s direction. “I hope you like it, Aupia from Ferelden. It’s really something else! A Danny original!”

“Alright.”

They sit on the edge of the fountain, surrounded by this never-stopping world. Qat and Sera sit on either side of Aupia and wordlessly drop the plate of food on her lap before fishing around for their favorite bits.

At Aupia’s hesitation, Sera waves her hand over the food. “Come’on, tryyy it.” She cooes between a mouthful of saliva and grease. “It int gonna eat you.”

“I know.”

“Then try it.”

And so she does.

And, surprisingly enough, its fucking delicious.

They tear the meat straight off the bone, eating like rabid dogs in content silence. Aupia only slows for air before something strikes her, slowing her working mouth. She sets her “chicken” (maybe it’s actually duck?) back down on her lap so she can wipe her mouth off on the sleeve of her shirt. “So, you two are married?”

Sera grins from ear to ear while Qat just nods, her quiet contempt only betrayed by curled lips.

“Vivienne mentioned you last night, Qat.” Aupia continues, turning to the qunari. “How do you know Vivienne?”

“I knew the Inquisitor,” she says, looking down with deep, thoughtful, silent eyes. Her eyes flicker between Aupia’s as she speaks next, keeping her course but hesitant nonetheless. Aupia turns back to her food, anxiety making her cross and recross her dangling feet. “That’s cool,” she murmurs before taking a second bite. As she distracts herself with the juice of her food dripping all over her fingers, the two women seem content for once to let silence grow between the all.

“She saved me.”

Aupia straightens up to look at the qunari again. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, speaking around the food in her mouth. “Wait. Really?” Qat meets her again and holds the girl’s attention, the firm lines of her body never breaking. “The mistake that led me to her, she convinced me it was no mistake. She helped me see beyond the Qun. But Sera is who I married,” she supplies, as if the answer resolves some grand illusion. She turns to look fondly past Aupia, her face finally breaking in subtle joy. Sera blows her a kiss, to which the qunari’s smile grows to a legitimate smile.

“They’re pretty cute together. An odd couple, like a flamboyant poppy in a field of daisies. But a cute couple nonetheless. Aupia thinks back on her parents.

“Question.” She pauses, trying to find the words to the complexity of her question. She settles like
a child with the easiest thing that comes to mind, praying that her hidden depth could somehow be excavated from her little words. “Do you think the people are happy here?”

“Happy?” Sera glances up. Her eyes narrow as she settles on someone in the crowd. “Nah. There are too many things going against people to keep ’em happy.” Secretly, Aupia was a little more than upset at the answer, but she took it as she could.

“Why do you ask?” questions Qat, leaning back to prop her body up on an arm. Aupia speaks around her mouthful of grub. “Because Vivienne said the people need stability from the…. I don’t know, ex-Inquisition. And that since they’re getting that stability, the people have… you know, whatever they need. It’s hard to see that if I keep my head up.” Aupia glances around the people, everyone in one hurry or another. “She said that’s why she’s still here. Because the people still need her.”

“Oh, that’s Vivvy for you. She’s just trying to get people to believe in the Maker’s people again is all.”

Aupia turns her food over on her lap. “But the people don’t really like the Chantry anymore. How does she plan to do that?”

Qat shakes her head as she tears a massive bite out of the breast between her hands. “Wrong,” she gurgles, between spit and juices. Sera gave a considerate shrug, eyes fleeting away as if considering Aupia’s words before she came back to, leaning in slightly closer. “The people like the buildings and the Maker’s statues and all that, they just don’t like what the Chantry has done right under their fat noses. They don’t like that the pretty world was forced out in the open and it wasn’t all that pretty. Like one of those fruits, you know?” Aupia offers her a confused look, but nods to go along with it. “And they don’t like Cass, but that’s another thing.”

“A separate thing,” clarifies Qat at Aupia’s blatant increasing bewilderment, “For another day, perhaps.”

Who’s Cass? Is that supposed to be The Divine?

It wasn’t unknown that the Inquisition united the people. Races and cultures may never truly converge, but there was a day where the people could stand side by side. Sure this was due to demons pouring out of the heavens and whatnot, but it was still a calling for everyone to unite with those that were around them.

And it was well broadcasted that the Chantry doesn’t now have the people’s support; for the first time since its founding, the masses of Thedas seemed to cry out a lot in regards to how the Chantry was doing wrong by its divine calling. A conversation for another day Qat called it, as if the past could be held in rein by the future. As if the papers would allow such a conversation to wait a week.

Aupia tries again, setting her meal down once more. “Can I ask you a question?” Sera waves dismissively at Aupia. “Ugh, you’re really one of those people. Just as the question.”

Aupia isn't sure if she should blush or laugh at the call-out, so she tries to stay neutral. “I’m not… supposed to talk about it, you know. Vivienne said so. But I have questions,” she relents.

“Don’t always do what Viv says, duckin.” Sera scolds with a greased finger waving in the girl’s face. “You’re better off learning on your own than having people tell you what to do.”

That… actually made sense. Kind of.
“But you knew her. You worked with her.” Aupia fishes for her words and some conviction. “What was she like?”

“Shit.”

Aupia’s heart stills. Sera continues; she’s looking up at the sky for the scars that were left behind. “But the good kind, you know?”

The girl smiles down at her lap. She should have expected that. But it seemed genuine enough; Sera cares about the girl seated beside her, in her odd way of doing things. A poppy in a field of daises. It’s a nice change from how Vivienne spoke to her that morning. She refocuses, glancing at Sera’s bow. “You’re good with your bow, right? I was wondering if you could maybe try to… I don’t kn-“

“No.” Qat straightens up to glare down at them both. Sera, on the other hand, has a slowly-widening smile creep across her face. “Oh yes.”

“No.” her wife says again, this time much more firmly.

Aupia frowns at the denial as she crosses her arms. “Why not?”

“Because Sera is an awful teacher.”

Oh.

“Am not!”

“Oh yes you are.” Qat response nonchalantly, taking another bite. Sera’s face wrinkles up, her ears dipping slightly at the flexion. “Oh, and you’re so much better?”

“Not with a bow, but with a great many things.”

“Who was it that taught you about peaches?”

“Peaches?” Aupia butts in, the tide of her confusion taking her in full. Her voice nearly cracks as she fights to stay level with herself. “What about peaches?”

“How to pleasure a woman,” Qat supplies, as if asked the what color the sky is. Then, as if clarification was ever required, she turned to the girl. “I was not very good with pleasuring a woman before I came here.”

Aupia chokes on her food, almost grateful for the near-death experience. “Ah, well, yeah. Ok.”

The rest of their time together passes quickly, talking about the people here in this place called the Rift. It’s odd, how lively it seems to be. But there is an undeniable charm to the community – and it’s nice not having to keep your head down. Aupia looks at everything like a child at a festival, trying to absorb as much as possible. They toured the couple’s home, bright and mismatched and messy as it is, before all three of them take turns throwing knives at a haphazardly-placed target, conspicuously placed right next to the entrance of their flat. Qat offers great advice to Aupia, correcting the girl’s posture and realigning her body. Sera repeatedly throws, her only words being “Like this! Like THIS! No! Like this!”

The two offset each other very well – Qat’s patients and calm demeanor balancing against Sera’s impish need to do everything her own way. Aupia watched them banter with each other over the formalities of knives, her knees tucked into her chest as she perches herself on their beaten sofa.
They may exchange heated words, but there is undoubtable love blooming here. Which, to Aupia, seems a perfect addition to the day. She quietly watches them unfold into snark and laughter. And between it all, it was nice having Sera slip subconsciously into meeting the girl’s eyes instead of locking her attention on her hair.

It’s the little things that make the world go round.

By the time they made their way back to the Grand Cathedral, the sun was starting its descent in the horizon. Finch met them, body hard as he speeds in their direction. Sera froze on the spot before slamming the palm of her hand between Aupia’s shoulderblades in hearty farewell.

“Alright duckin. He’s ripe to tear me a new one, so I’m gonna say bye now. Keep your head up, yeah?”

“Yeah, alright. Thank you for lunch. That was-“ Aupia’s eyes bounce between them, at a loss for words. “-fun. A lot of fun actually.”

The couple glances between each other, something unspoken passing between them. Sera’s face swells up a little and she turns one last time, engulfing Aupia in a rabid hug. Her hand massages the back of Aupia’s back as the girl slowly returns the favor. “I’m glad to hear it,” she says softly in the girl’s ear. Her words are slow.

Then, as if it never happened, she withdrawals, holding the girl at arm’s length. She sneers over Aupia’s shoulder at the rapidly-approaching Finch and bolts, running with Qat’s hand in hers. Qat is bemused by the notion, but trots along with her wife nonetheless.

Finch comes up, quiet face tight. Aupia looks at him as if waiting for a scolding of some sort, but she receives none.

“Finch.”

He doesn’t respond – it’s not his job to. Instead he breathes heavily through his nose. They stand shoulder to shoulder as they watch the Red Jennies run away.

“I want to go to the stables again.”

He responds this time for her sake of comfort. “Yes, Miss.”

So they leave, Aupia leading this time. The lights of the Grand Cathedral’s plaza garden flicker on as they walk past. In the distance, fireflies light up in the forest beyond the city’s bounds, lighting up over the waterways. It seems that there are people out in Val Royeaux at any given instant. The nobles trickle too and from, talking as they always seem to. When they arrive at the Royal boarding facilities, Aupia whistles. Quagga screams back, head thrust out her stall guard as she wails. She brushes past her doe looking for the stablehand; Rumad is leading a horse to pasture, a giant black stallion with a head the size of a dwarf. He spies her from across the way, somewhere between one hundred and two hundred feet away from down the pasture line. Aupia waves him down from the entrance of the barn and tries to indicate her meaning to him through a series of pointing and gestures; somehow he makes sense of her flailing hands and he nods, visibly gripping the horse’s leadrope tighter.

Aupia returns to her doe, turning around just in time to see Finch snatch his hand away from her nose in curious greeting. Quagga grumbles, low vibrations from deep within her throat as she paces her stall.

“Alright you little piece, we’ll get you out of there. But you have to behave, unless you want to be
killed by that stallion out there,” Aupia cautions, releasing the stall latch. Quagga bolts before the door has opened far enough for her shoulders, squeezing herself through with a bang that echoes across the stable. Aupia whistles again and her halla turns around to her side, circling her girl as she nudges her hands and pockets in her dance. Once they’re outside she fumbles with the pasture closest to them and ushers her beast in. Quagga gets the idea soon enough, bolting from Aupia’s side once the fence opens before her.

Rumad passes by quietly, stallion in hand huffing and puffing as it takes in the scent of the newcomers. It’s astounding, really, how such a quiet person can control a monster like that. Aupia smiles at him as he passes, offering a quick “thank you,” to which she receives no response.

As Aupia leans over the railing, she becomes acutely aware of the quiet steps just to her right. She brushes some hair behind her ear but keeps her course, crossing her legs as she watches Quagga. “I apologize. I might have-“

“You have absolutely reason to apologize to me, Miss.”

“You might be in trouble because of me,” Aupia bits back, scowling at the ground in front of her. “It’s because I don’t know how this world works. I encouraged doing something… bad, I guess. Or at least not thought through.”

The silence falls upon them again as a breeze cuts across the pastures. The grasses blow in a wave of ethereal peace.

“Finch. Am I allowed to apologize to you?” His nose crinkled up before quickly releasing, his expression schooled once more. “No Miss, as there is no need to apologize.”

She let that be enough. Quagga dashes across the pasture, a fleeting speak returned to her wild state. Aupia turns slightly to watch Finch out of the corner of her eye. “Why do you work for the Canary? For the Chantry?”

The wind pushes against his scout’s hood, gently beckoning his face out of the shadows. “Because hope is hard to see sometimes, Miss. There once was a time here where hope was difficult to avoid. If asked, I may suggest that the Misses got to see quite a lot of Val Royeaux today.” Aupia nods, and Finch continues, both of them keeping their attention on the halla. “I would suggest that there is quite a bit of room for hope to grow here once more. I like what I get to do.”

“And what is that, exactly?” Aupia turns around, resting her cheek on her arm to regard the man. Finch doesn’t look at her, but he very nearly smiled. “I get to protect what matters to the people that matter the most.”

Aupia stares at him long and hard before shifting back forwards. He doesn’t know about who’s blood runs in her veins, but he doesn’t care – he only cares about the fact that the Canary, the Divine, and the Grand Enchantress (and hey, maybe even the Red Jenny) care about her. It’s hard to discern what is worst, but he was ultimately right: at the end of the day, its people who care about her. Shouldn’t that be enough?

But that is a LOT of ‘care’ to live up to, even if she overlooks her heritage. If she even could overlook that.

Did the Inquisitor ever consider this, what her child would have to live up to? Did her father ever ask those questions?
There are so many questions that still need answers Aupia muses as Quagga trots up to her. She’s grateful for the opportunity – at least, she’s smart enough to know she should be grateful. But where is her life going from this day forward?

“Is it time to head back in honey?” she coos, grabbing Quagga’s face in her hands. Quagga gurgles and spits, chest heaving in her exhilaration. Her split lips try to catch the cusp of Aupia’s sleeves, but her girl is far too sharp to know better than to let that happen. “Are you ready to behave? To go back in your box?”

Quagga’s ears dance as she sounds off some untranslatable response.

“Very well. Let’s go.”

She unlatches the gate, leading her small party wordlessly back into the grand stables. Once Quagga settles into her stall, Aupia leaves for a flake of alfalfa just to find Rumad waiting silently with a flake in hand. Aupia blinks rapidly, startled by his proximity and promptness. “Oh, thank you Rue.” A cascade of emotions roll through Rumad’s eyes but he doesn’t speak to it; Aupia takes the flake hesitantly from his waiting grey hands and tosses the mess in. He backs off almost immediately, retreating into the sanctuary of chewing horses and stomping hooves. Aupia lets him go, and she leave just the same.

With Finch at her side, they make their way back to the Grand Cathedral. She pauses outside to absorb the garden in the night life of the city, sparse and far-between couples patrolling the winding pathways. As they linger in the cool evening heat, Aupia catches glimpse of the one true thing in her world.

“Hey, Val.”

“Hi Addy.” He doesn’t stop walking, so Aupia falls into step with her friend, the only natural thing to come into place in the course of their rugged day. The stillness was invigorating, a comfort finally bleeding into each other simply in the presence of what little they knew. Like the silence between jokes after a burst of laughter, breathless peace alights both of their strides with subtle joy. It’s a silence that affirms just how much they appreciate about the other; the quiet place of contented peace. They ascend the grand staircase and meander the hallways, nothing spoken because nothing needed to be spoken.

They turn down the last corridor, their respected rooms in front of them. Aupia breaks the spell of their silence. “Wanna hang out?”

“Yes.”

“My place or yours?”

“Yours. Always.” Aupia almost smiled at that. He always said the same thing back at home, if given the choice. She opens the door and lets Vallen pass into the room in front of her before turning back towards her day’s companion.

“Finch. Would you mind bringing us something for dinner?”

The man blinks. “You are suggesting that you will skip dinner with the Divine again, correct?”

“Yeah. Am I supposed to give her a heads up?” she asks, turning her whole body towards him. His eyes smile a little, but he only looks ahead of them. “I will notify Most Holy that you had a long
day and you are eager to join her for dinner another time. I will send someone to bring you dinner later.” She smiles at him while Vallen’s confusion elevates with an arched brow. “Sure, thank you.”

“Goodnight, Finch. Thank you for everything.”

“Of course, Miss.”

He closes the door behind him. Vallen rotates on his heel to regard Aupia curiously and full of sarcastic spite. “When?”

She rolls her eyes and plops down on her bed, quilts bouncing with her weight. “He has to, it’s his job.”

“So you have a man servant now?” Aupia kicks off her boots, one in his direction. They ignore the electric chandelier overhead, instead readily accepting of the fire already in place. “Sure. If it helps you sleep at night. He’s one of the Canary’s agents, he’s my guard. Bodyguard? Bodyguard, I guess.”

“Uh-huh.” He kicks her boot back at her before pulling off his own. He spreads his chestful of papers out around him on the floor, taking in Aupia’s room as he hunts for a quill and ink. Aupia spread-eagles herself out on the floor beside his nest, face first in the plush carpet. She runs a hand over the intricate weave, thinking back on the mat she sat on earlier in the Grand Enchantress’s office. “I’m so tired,” she laments. Vallen immediately scoffs her. “Did you even do anything today?”

“We walked quite a bit. I got to see a lot of Val Royeaux. Went to No Man’s Land. They don’t call it that though.”

“Really? What do they call it?”

“The Rift.” Vallen hums in acknowledgment, hand cupping his chin and lips. Aupia didn’t feel necessarily inclined to tell him the gritty details of the day, mostly because she didn’t want to relive it herself. She settles for telling him about Rumad, Finch, Qat, and Sera, how each of them seemed respectfully weirder than the last. She tells him about lunch, the clothes the nobles wear, and the street vendors she saw. Aupia puts special detail in describing what the non-nobles look like before fetching her sketchbook to blot out rough shapes with blackened arms and shoeless feet. Vallen clarifies her periodically with polite questions, but the conversation only ever stays superficial and light. But after a solid minute rolled by in silence, pulling at her hair wasn’t going to be enough; she needed to relieve the blisters on her heart. She pulls the wound right open, speaking quietly as she sets her sketchbook aside and avoids his eyes.

“I yelled at her.”

“Sera? Or Qat?”


Vallen stopped working just long enough offer her a recoiled, incredulous look. “You’re fucking with me. You? Yelled at the Grand Enchantress?”

Aupia winces, shuffling her hands behind her head. “In a way. I don’t remember… you know, actually yelling. But I kinda lost my cool.”

Vallen nods and returns to his work. “You have the tendency of doing that, but it usually takes white a beating before you give up like that. You let your emotions get the better of you.”

“Oh, and you don’t?”

“Not in front of people who could blow me up with a flick of their wrist, no, I don’t.”

She exhales. “You’re right. I don’t know what it is, I just-“ she focuses on the fire, on the colors dancing in front of her. “I don’t know. My head turns… cold, anxious, angry. And I don’t usually express it, but she was really being a piece, you know? I struck back, like a cornered rat.”

“You did what was natural, Addy. Not that condoning what you did will overlook anything, but you don’t usually do that unless you’re cornered. Maybe you’re somewhat justified.”

Aupia crinkles her nose; he was right, of course. “But I acted like a child.”

She was met with the sound of aged papers, to which she was content with as an answer. She should have guessed her friend better though, since he speaks plainly again. “Maybe that isn’t such a bad thing, if all they’re seeing is a ghost.” She turns to him curiously. Vallen glances up only to return pen to paper. “It doesn’t make sense for them to invite us – well, you – out here, just to keep you as a pet. Something’s biting at them – regret, anger, a general overwhelming feeling of sadness, whatever. Probably the shock is all. I'm sure they’ll warm up to you eventually.” He glances up at her momentarily. “Bat-shit Vivienne included.”

They let the quiet settle for a little while, thoughts churning while papers flickered from one pile to another. Aupia rolls over, resting her head in her hand. “And how was your day? Hopefully better than mine.”

“I feel lost. And naked.” Vallen’s expression falls from content to tired, his eyes betraying the calm level of his voice. “And maybe a little incapable.”

“Still? It’s only been a day.”

“Yeah, it’s been a great twenty-four hours of feeling ten steps behind literally everyone. Even the undergrads seem more competent then me.”

“More competent, or just more educated? You can’t be unrealistic with yourself.” Aupia pulls a top page out of his pile to glance it over. Truth be told, she didn’t recognize more than half of the words on it. She turns it sideways. “Is this supposed to be a diagram of the leg?”

“An arm, actually.”

“Yeah, shows what I know.” She sets it back down to pick up another. Vallen swats her hand away; at the display of her friend renewed, Aupia smiles. She leaves through the pages. “Did Claire say anything rude to you today?”

“Not in particular. Lots of instructions, but once I brought her lunch, she seemed to warm up a little. Calmed down quite a bit actually. Started telling me stories between errands and lessons and the like. I think that’s the trick, it’s that she doesn’t eat. It’s a pain that I have to work through the morning with a prick, but once I bring her food, she’s almost normal enough.” Aupia giggles a little at the idea – she imagines a demon melting into a nug when offered a sandwich. “Any good ones? Stories, I mean.”
Vallen shakes his head. “Interesting stuff, but not the kind you’d like to hear.”

“Try me.”

“She told me about how she once had to amputate six legs in one day.” Aupia rolls over, facefist into the rug with a muffled groan. “You’re right,” she grumbles, barely audible from between smashed lips. “I’m good without the details.”

“It was cool to hear though.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it was. Creep.”

“She’s trying to find me a work space, since I’ll be going through a whole bunch of stuff. I might be setting up in an actual lab.” He downplays this, his tone casual as he keeps his eyes in front of him. Aupia, however, knows better. She crawls forward on her forearms. “Vallen, that’s great!”

“Yeah. I should be set up somewhere by the end of the week.” She reaches for her friends arm; he stills and finally looks at her. Aupia tries to give her most genuine smile of the day. “I’m really, really freaking happy for you. Once you pay your dues, this might actually be worthwhile, huh?”

A knock at the door pulls their attention away from each other, but they still as no one comes in. Vallen elbows her into an upright position as Aupia squawks.

“Uh, come in?”

A serving man enters, his back against the door as his hands are full. “I have dinner, Miss.”

“Miss,” Vallen teases once more. She bats at him before offering her thanks to the agent. Once given clearance to enter, the man emerges with two more behind him, two trays full of food with orange drinks waiting for them both. Bright and colorful vegetables and fruits outline some cured meat (smoked turkey, they determine), sautéed in some appropriately-considered divine sauce. It is likely very improper to eat on the floor of a bedroom, but the servants don’t speak to it.

Once they leave, the two dig in.

It's knowing that sometimes silence is more comforting than comfortable. Silence gives the space needed to process, to develop and devour. It soothes them both as they reflect on their days, knowing all too well that words aren’t always the solution to their problems. Once they’re nearly done, Vallen speaks again to their new world.

“I thought this opportunity of ours was going to be somewhat awful, based on how yesterday went.”

“Same.”

“But,” Vallen dabs his lips with her napkin before reaching for his glass, “I think we’ll be okay here.”

Aupia raises her glass. “Same,” she repeats.

Vallen gladly meets her with a satisfactory tink.
It wasn’t long after he left that the Canary was knocking at her door. This time, she announces herself as such, and Aupia jumps right at the sound. She worriedly knits her fingers into her nightgown but otherwise tries to keep herself level.

“Yes, please do come in.”

Lace Harding emerges, head moving as she surveys the darkness. “Are you alright if I turn on the light.”

“Sure.”

It flashes on overhead, bright and blinding. The Canary comes beside her, hands comfortably down at her side as she observes the girl. “So, how bad is the big city?”

Aupia bits her lower lip as she releases the apparent death-grip on her nightdress. “It’s-

“Be honest with me.”

“-fine. Really. It is.” Harding doesn’t look convinced, but she lets it go. “Well, I have a little something for you. Not that you need to end the day with a dreary read, but I figured you have some learning to do.” She reaches into her coat pocket, unveiling a thick wad of papers. As she hands it to the girl, Aupia sits back down on the edge of her bed.

The Canary speaks, letting the girl absorb what was in her hands. “I know I promised transcripts from Lavellen’s speeches, but before we get there, I think you need to see what the Inquisition was like right after the Exalted Council. Things don’t just happen around here, there’s reason behind every decision that’s made.”

Aupia’s wide eyes survey the cover page. 9:44 - *The Account of Plague in Atsikeyah.* “And this is what made the Inquisitor stop fighting?”

“In a way. Nothing ever results from one thing, life is a pretty messy business with all kinds of things tangled up. But this,” she pokes the stack of papers, “this gives us a little bit of insight in to how the Tevinter-Qunari war was a breaking point for your mom. Hopefully you’ll learn something new about hear with this.”

Aupia holds the papers on her lap, her words lost to her. She glances up. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

The Canary smiles. “Don’t thank me just yet. It’s not an easy read.”

Aupia’s thoughts linger, her heart rolling several emotions like marbles around the palm of her hand. She winces, her heart on the cusp of blurting outright. In the end, the Canary saw the hesitation in the girl’s restless hands, and she waited until the Cathedral’s guest found it within herself to speak.

“Is Finch in trouble because of me?” she finally asks, weakly.

“Nah, he’s in trouble because of Sera.”

The Canary almost laughs at Aupia’s facial response to that – her head snaps up before dropping in
such shame, it’s almost a pity that she was teasing the girl. “She- we didn’t mean any harm. I just
don’t want to waste his time.” The humor in her evaporates at that, and she looks at the girl in a
new, serious light. Harding regards her wording curiously: its fascinating, truly, how similar she
seems to her late mother. She stares quietly at length before speaking again.

“That’s fair, but I’ve already spoken to Qat about it.” Aupia’s head tilts as she arches a brow at the
dwarf. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah. From here on out, when you’re with Sera, there’s no need for you to have a bodyguard too.
But we aren’t giving you any more liberties than that, okay? You hear me?”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you.” The Canary heads for the door. “Do you want the light on?”

Aupia stands back up but doesn’t look at Harding – her attention is given in full to the papers in
hand. She cuts across the room for the desk. “Yes, please.”

Harding watches her quietly before closing the door behind her. “Of course. Good night, Kessler.”

“Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

This mess is way longer than it needs to be, but there’s so much to be introduced still.
Sorry if its boring. Not planning to run through an entire day again, maybe in the
distant future, but that’s a HEARTY ‘maybe’.
True fact: The first time I was talking to Sera, I had absolutely no freaking clue what
she was trying to say. I couldn’t decode her for the life of me, so I stopped trying.
Actually truth be told I didn’t like her at all my first playthrough because I didn’t
understand her. She reminds me of my east coast cousins.
I also didn’t recruit Vivienne. I didn’t know who she was until I finished the game and
looked up background info. My bad. I definitely prefer having her around.
Questions, comments, complains, and concerns well loved!
The Account of Plague in Atsikeyah

Chapter Notes

Writing this was hard. It’s like filming the last scene of a movie first, so it’s hard for the actors to get the scene to play out right. Long ways down the line I might revise this… hopefully not. Sorry this took so long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Heritage Wars, to some extent, came from the Teviner-Qunari war; one became the other as more people were involved in the injustices plaguing Thedas. Some scholars will argue that, if not for the hostilities of Tevinter and the Qunari, then the Heritage Wars could have been avoided altogether. Death in the masses could have been prevented as humans and elves and dwarves would never have had to face certain devastation. Others, however, will lay claim that this war was inevitable, a buildup of societies collapsing on themselves. No matter the opinion, one thing is agreed on: the peace that came, the economic changes that rose, and the deviation of a world-wide war was embraced. But like any all-consuming, world-wide war, the peace that came after it was well received.

So before there was the present peace, there was a war not unlike one between dragons. It tore havoc across several lands as claws divided families and humanity. Fire burned the living, screams echoing across plains and mountainsides alike while ocean-side storms tore up deserts. The sounds of shots ringing out in the dead of night became just as common as the quakes of the earth underfoot. An entire generation of children were born in hiding, and the youths that will remember this day and age will never have the language skills to truly convey the terror of the waking day; Common, the King’s language, can only do justice to so many emotions. Fear of death is not one of them.

Life imitates art in this fascinating way; when the people wanted war, they received it, and it was a war between two nations of dragons. One can only imagine how those play out.

It was within a week of the Exalted Council that the war was declared. Troup movements began to chart themselves across both the Imperium and the Anderfels, clouds rising from the flurry of footfall and trenches left in their wake. The shift started slowly among the common folk – what foods would be most readily accessible to families was reprioritized for soldiers; then came the draft and the increase in taxes. Some like to suggest that wars do not begin until a tax has been imposed: others say it is when blood is first drawn. However, blood here has been drawn for years in this war; in that respect, some say the war never ‘started’ because it never truly ended. Because nations with excessive pride never truly lay down their arms.

Within a month, fire tore through the heavens. Trenches, then considered a modest means of ‘modern warfare,’ held many staff-wielding men and women that died. Waves of dedicated Qun followers would die in a single assault, thousands in the exchange for hundreds, just to advance territory lines.

Initially, the Inquisitor was at a lost as to how to act. It was nice to hand direct control of the Inquisition to the Divine (nice is an understatement. Some believe that alone was potential to add years of life back to the Inquisitor despite taking some, in turn, from the Divine herself), but having
nothing to do and a world to fight for was difficult to live with. In the end, the Iron Bull had a recommendation for the Inquisition – a Qunari outpost was to be raided, and whispers suggested a new means of war was to be used there as a test.

The Inquisitor didn’t hesitate – she brought the Bull and his words to their wartable with a shaking hand grasped firmly to her temporary crutch. “We should go.”

“We? All due respect Lavellan-“

She glared at her ex-commander and his blatant concern. Of course Cullen would be the one to object. “All due respect Commander, I want to see this for myself.”

And so she did. At an issue decreed by the Most Holy herself, the primary Inquisition forces, now reduced, set out for Atsikeyah. The left within the week for the outpost, a village by a weak river in a barren land. The soil underfoot is dry, resulting in cracks across the earth that can stretch for as far as the eye can see. Plateaus and canyons sit like crowns of thorns across the vacant space, offering scavengers and violent beasts shade they cast across their kingdoms. As they lay of the land is so flat and so barren, the sun almost takes longer than it seems it should to cross the entire spectrum of the sky, making a single day’s march feel more like two days of wear. A terrible place, really. So naturally it is perfect for a breeding outpost fitted with its own farm. “Everything that comes from here goes back to the Qun,” Bull noted on their fifth day out in the middle of, what appeared to be, absolutely nowhere.

Ellana frowned as she neck-reined her mount, bringing it closer to her companion. A storm was brewing in the horizon, thunder clapping in the distance; Nislean’diala, her hart, sidestepped away from the storm with a snort, simultaneously stepping away from Bull and his mount. Ellana’s grip on her reins was too lose, just like her seat and her control over her beast. Wind snapped at her reins, the dry air rippling through their clothes. She carried on the conversation as her hand swung up by her face. “So the people here are getting by minimally,” she concluded.

The merc pretended to not notice her swaying seat or swinging hand. Instead he focused on the storm in the horizon and the darkened clouds at its bay. “Oh yeah totally, but I’m talking about the kids. Once they reach a particular age, they’re all shipped back to Par Vollen for their education.” For some reason, that was especially difficult for Ellana to accept.

They didn’t speak again until Sera approached them that night with a skewered rat the size of a cat. Ellana and Cullen thought the forward troupes would meet them in Uten, the valley to the west of the settlement. They saw the grey and they saw the horns from afar; they knew bodies were coming at them, but across a flat surface, it was a long and anticlimactic approach. Ellana shifted in her saddle, sole hand gripping her reins in a restless knot. She wrung the leather across her thumb as the stump of her arm ached against her heart; it was tied in a sling, the stump resting over her heart, an entanglement of physical and otherwise non-palpable pain. It was in times like these that Ellana found reassurance in the grip of her staff, but now with that tied behind her and her sword belted out of reach, she felt useless. Not that Nislean needed a hand on the rein at all times – he would respond well enough with just a shifted heel in his side – but eyes were on her back. Should she set her control aside for the hilt of her sword, that would mean something to the soldiers marching behind her.

So her inability to act, other than continuing their slow advance forward, did nothing but add to her agitation.

Cullen’s steed came to her shoulder, the stallion dipping its head to avoid the swinging antlers of Ellana’s hart as it regarded its companion, swinging its massive display. “They aren’t that great in
numbers,” Cullen warned, breathe low as if to so the lion of his helm couldn’t hear his words. Ellana frowned. “Thank you Commander I see that.” She turned her chin slightly towards him, considerably unaware of the bit in her tone. “Magic, then?”

Cullen turned to meet her gaze. Given everything in the last few weeks, he wasn’t uncomfortable with the new hostility that burned in her – she lost more than most that day, it was irresponsible of him to even consider her being completely healed from the turmoil so soon. But it set him on edge, seeing and hearing someone so resolved to peace using a sharp tongue so loosely. He couldn’t deny that much. But forever a man of respect, he just shifted his silent gaze forward once more. “Should we have our archers move to the front?”

Ellana shook her head with a low hum of disapproval. “I don’t think they’re in any standard troop formation. There doesn’t seem to be too many of them."

Cullen frowned. “Should we send someone ahead to investigate?”

“No.” Her command was affirmative. “I will not risk people so carelessly. We proceed but with caution."

Cullen dipped his head in compliance and slowed his mount to talk to his first officer. As his steed swung its hindquarters around, another thunderous clap sounded off in the distance. He kept his eyes on his friend as he spoke to his agent.

Something felt off to him, and it wasn’t just her behavior.

Sure enough, the two parties walked under they were mere stretches apart from each other; one, no more than twenty, the other counting in the low hundreds. Of the small group – no, at second glance, they numbered no more than fifteen – many were heavy with child. Dressed in rags, the women seemed lost and irritated by the state they were in. By the tight look of their weary eyes, it didn’t appear that their exasperation came from marching for miles on end while eight or nine months pregnant; it was more an annoyance with the fact that they were outside of what they knew. Some of the women were moderately slimmer, each with a child slung across them in some form or another, swaddled to their backs as their mothers carried food in their arms and bags across their shoulders.

All but one, the woman dressed in priesthood finery at the front of the party. A hand rested on the head of her sword, another sword on her hip. The weave of ropes around her face obscured her yet pronounced what needn’t be said: she was high ranking. She was in charge. Her stiff lips only reaffirmed this truth as she elevated her chin to stare the Inquisitor down.

Ellana dismounted, swinging a little wider than she needed to. Her land was abrupt and painful, one leg almost gave out underneath her. But when she landed she signaled to others to remain as they were, taking a few cautious steps forward.

Ion Bull ignores the order at her hand and comes closer, sliding off his steed with a heavy slam to the earth. He stands at the ready right behind the Inquisitor, hand on his axe and eye harrowed. He spoke just loud enough for their ears. “They’re Tizar’um, mothers in waiting.”

Ellana leaned towards him. “Breeding mothers?”

Bull nodded. “They look pretty confused. Newborns are taken almost immediately after the delivery. The fact that they’ve had to carry them around is probably a foreign concept."

Ellana actually had to pause and think it through. She regarded him with a full turn. “What about
“Breastfeeding? Like, it’s pretty important for- oh never mind.” She turned back to the woman at the front of the small party. Her face was contorted in scrutiny, red and gold paint, the trademark toxin of her people, stretched her cheekbones like the scars across the land. “She’s not one of the nursemothers.”

“No. She looks like a Tamassran.”

“But not necessarily a war leader?” Bull nodded but kept his attention on the Tamassran. “Low-ranking by the looks of it. Maybe new to the job. Young, too.”

Ellana took another step closer, hand back towards Bull, the silent command to remain where he was. “So she should know Common.”

“Enough of it to know a threat when she hears one.”

Ellana brings her hand up in front of her, eyes never leaving the Tamassran. She opted out of speaking under the implication it would suggest herself as a superior; the best means of being neutral is to embody that in every action, and here, that means remaining silent.

The woman’s hand on her sword flexed, then her other went to her other hip. When Ellana was but a few steps away she could hear her commander hissing at her from behind. There was an undeniable desperation in the words too soft to be carried.

But that wasn’t about to make her stop. Instead she steadied herself at an arm’s length away, hand still up.

A fleeting eternity passes between. A breeze fluttered by, heavy with the scent of stormy rain.

Then the woman sighed. She unholstered her swords and tossed them between herself and the Inquisitor. The steel rattled against the brittle earth, solid and cracked in this land without water. Ellana copied her suggestion with a fluid motion, her Antevan sword tossed down on top of the dual wielder’s.

“I am-“

“I know who you is.” Her voice was dry and tired; despite trying to sound assertive, she sounded exhausted. “You is Inquisitor.”

Ellana nodded. “And who are you?”

“I am Tamassran,” then with averted eyes, “dishonored Tamassran.”

Ellana frowned. “Dishonored?”

The woman turned to Iron Bull and speaks directly to him. Elan glanced behind her to see Cullen whispering hasty orders to the agitated troops. She met his eyes briefly before turning back around.

The Iron Bull finished his conversation with her. “The act of leading these women out of the crossfires is an act against the Qun. Don’t look at me like that, you know how hard the Qunari are about our ways.”

Ellana didn’t mask her glare at him: she couldn’t. “But leading people to safety?”
“If you die a Qunari, you die with pride. Avoiding death through cowardice is treason, more or less.”

The Inquisitor knew this, more or less. But knowing a fact and seeing it face-to-face is its own. She picked up her chin as she addresses both of them – it wasn’t loud enough, but perhaps it was truly addressed to everyone present. “Kindness is not a weakness. If we set up camp here, would you and your company join us?” the woman didn’t supply an answer immediately, and Ellana feared the possibilities.

But the woman, pearled skin and uncanny eyes, nodded slowly. She turned to her company and translated to them – whether they were orders or simple instructions, Ellana did not know – and the Inquisitor did the same.

“Cullen.”

“Are you sure?” She turned around to face him completely, the human now on his feet just behind her. Clearly, he disapproved. “We are exposed here, Inquisitor.” He leaned in to her with a raised hand, sweeping the area. “This could very easily be a trap. We have no water, no shade. Our troops could easily reach the city by the next nightfall, or even tonight if we give them our mounts.” He beckoned with a nod of his head in the direction of the quickly fading sun. “Let the scouts look for something better for us, or at least send some to check it out while we backtrack. We have options.”

“Anyone who wants to move against us is also under the same disadvantage,” Ellana dismissed, her eyes hard as she stared him down. “And it’s not a city, it’s a settled outpost. One evidently with focus on being a breeding ground, so there’s little need for them to have an armada lying in wait.” She turned away from him and waved Sera closer; the elf almost ignored her cue, eyes still intently focused on the newcomers. She begrudgingly made her way over as Lavellan continued issuing her orders. “If it is a trap, then we’ll be able to see them for miles. We’re fine as we are, and we have the resources on-hand to last the night. We should start camp soon before the darkness brings the cold.”

Cullen sighed within the sanctuary of his helm and dipped his head. He didn’t like fighting with her, but the situation seemed to ask for it; nevertheless, he complied – she did have a point, after all. “Very well. I’ll start to issue guard rotations. There may be something in the area still. Do I have your permission to flank the encampment?”

“Of course. Report directly to me if anyone finds anything.”

Cullen’s scouts didn’t find anything, but he had them search nonetheless throughout the night. After a week of marching, they were eager to fight. Or do to literally anything other than march.

While agents, soldiers, and scouts established their camp, Ellana and her Inner Circle sat down with the Tamassran. She again tossed her swords aside – this time with a little more anger at her summoning – to which Ellana did the same (with noticeably a little less spite in her toss). Her company followed suit. Once everyone was seated, awkward without weapons on their hips, Ellana leaned forward, forearm rested against her thigh. Her left arm still hung on her chest; as she curled over, pain sparked in her. She bit it back without so much as a slight wince. But she did the only thing she can – she gets down to business. Idle chatter around them rose in a content gale as the sun began its long, tiring descent.
“We caught wind of a potential attack,” she led, the Tamassran meeting her eye. The Tamassran looked around the campfire, settling on each face individually before she spoke next. “Not potential.”

Iron Bull leaned in as she whispered to him. The tightness in his features solidified as his eyes came up to meet Ellana. “Not potential, as in it happened.”

“Already?” Ellana shot a double-take above the woman’s head to look at the city. From where she sat, the walls stood unchanged, the towers without flaw. There was no billowing smoke nor residual downfall of cement or bricks. Remarkably, it seemed unchanged. What was more worrisome was the lack of armed forces nearby – as the land stretched into the horizon, there was no evidence of armed forces having camped around them. The elf leaned forward, forearm resting on a knee. “It doesn’t look assaulted in the least. We were expecting large numbers here.”

The woman shook her head and glanced over her shoulder at the women sitting by the other fire. “Not feet. Not… mages. but magic. Without… magic.”

Ellana sighed and rubbed her hand down her face. The woman whispered with Iron Bull. He nodded politely and occasionally asked her for clarification, to which the woman’s tone became sharp. Their conversation continued, oblivious to their onlookers as tongues turned sharp. At some point their conversation got heated, the woman’s voice rising like a tide at their legs. She barked at Bull and stood up in haste, eyes darting around the circle before retreating to her company.

Ellana could do nothing but arch a brow at him. Bull reached for his abandoned bottle of Abyssal Peach. “Well?”

“She says its cursed magic. Spread like smoke through the people, killing many almost instantly.”

“Why’d she leave?”

“She is… adamant about us not going in there. She’s worried the curse could still carry over to us, the the dishonorment would have seriously amounted to nothing.” He swirled his bottle as if to unveil a hidden truth in the drink. “Used ‘fucked’ a few times if that means anything to you.”

“The Curse. As in, we would be cursed if we enter the city?” pegged Cullen, trying to be as calm as ever. The Iron Bull looked at him, hard. “As in, we all will if we don’t leave the area immediately.”

Ellana leaned back on her hand, tipping her chin up to the heavens. The ache in her left arm throbbed in the heat and she folded it up over her chest as if to alleviate what she could. It was such a simple means, resting what once was over her heart, to such a complicated end. When the pain got bad, she couldn’t help but think back on the man she lost that day.

But the stars look the same as they always had. The firelight masked the full range of the waning night sky, but she knew it was there, the stars and their blanket over the world. It was all the same as it was a week ago. The same it will be in a week’s time. In all likelihood, they were stalwart across the ages; perhaps Solas looked up and saw the same stars when he walked the land long ago as Fen’Harel. Perhaps they will be the same when this silent war is over.

Small things – like this war, like the hurt in her arm, like the ache in her chest - don’t impact the big things: only the ignorant would mask this truth. But that doesn’t mean the little things are any less valuable.

Solas would never accept this, but her love for him did nothing but reaffirm this truth. He was…
stubborn, set in his ways. Ellana, arguably, was even more so.

The Inquisitor stood up on slightly shaking legs, stretched, and followed the woman. Commander Cullen tried to question her, but Lavellan didn’t feel like being questioned. She had grown too tired for that in recent days.

The Tamassran sat with her company, her agitation bouncing her leg. Ellana swooped over to a basket of their troops’ goods and pulled off the first thing she could – the day was growing late, and the cold was sure to get stronger soon.

She went to the woman, velveteen over-robe in hand.

“Here, take it.” The Tamassran only held Ellana’s gaze, her own stubbornness and pride keeping her jaw set. The Inquisitor had to fight to resist the urge to roll her eyes; she settled for blinking instead. “Not that I think you can't handle the cold. But it will make things easier in the night.”

Time passed slowly between them before the woman begrudgingly accepted the offer with a slight nod and an extended hand. “Thank.”

Ellana smiled. “Consider it yours. May I sit with you?” the woman didn’t look at her, fingers knotting deep in the fabric balled in her fist. She only nodded.

Ellana eased herself down, one leg at a time, and was glad when the Tamassran didn’t comment on her stiffness. They sat in silence, the horizon bleeding darker as night spread across the land. The quiet, comfortable hum of camp substituting the usual night life of chirping and ribbits. The scouts and their idle chatter once kept her up at night, but now Lavellan almost couldn’t find peace without it. She thought back on the days of her clan before returning to the present, a gradual fall from sorrow to the business at hand. “How long were you stationed here?” she pressed gently, eyes still ahead of her.

The Tamassran shifted. “One season. A few months.”

“How many people were inside?” The Talvashoth winced as she considered the numbers. She spoke in Qunlat and held up her hands.

Ellana nodded. “Six. Six hundred?”

The Tamassran’s painted lips test the syllables. Her comfort with the common language was minimal at best. “Six hundred.”

The Inquisitor tried to steady her expression. Six hundred dead is a lot, especially when they could have been spared – if only her party had arrived sooner. The ache resided itself deep within her, taking root alongside the other weeds of war. After so many years of being the Inquisitor, she would have thought it would get easier. She breathed deeply to reconnect with her spiritual self, trying to find solace in her momentary quiet. Lavellan kept her eyes on her hand flexing in front of her. “And you all are the only survivors?”

The priestess turned away. Ellana thought their conversation was well over, knowing that those loyal to the Qun do not disclose more than needed. But the Tamassran had other plans. She spoke slowly – not to keep her string of words together, but to keep her voice from showing weakness.

“The Qun is everything. We are nothing unless we give to the Qun. I prevented them from giving everything to the Qun.” She watched the Tizar’um with a discerning squint. Whether or not she was expecting the Inquisitor to respond, Ellana did. Because it was her duty, both by title and nature, to do whatever she could for the people of this world.
“By giving them a promise of life.” She shouldn’t have responded so quickly: there are times where one should respond considerately; if a respectable person were speaking, they would weigh their words before speaking. Ellana, however, was tired of being complacent. She could only speak the words that came to her, and the words that would always come to her came from her heart.

The Tamassran tisked as she shook her head. “Life in an age of war is not life.” Her head came up to meet Ellana’s eyes. “The Inquisitor should know this.”

Ellana paused, answering at length. “War does not last forever.”

“War can take forever away.”

Ellana sighed and sat back on her tailbone, again bringing the bud of her arm up to her chest. It was probably due time for her to change the wrappings around her wound; she was all too familiar with the colors hidden underneath, gleaming in a distasteful muck, puss and pain swelling over the stump in a yellow and green haze. “Gross” is definitely an understatement, just as hard to explain is here. It is vastly difficult to be articulate when your mind is bogged down. “I know I am basra, an outsider. I know I do not understand the Qun as a person of respect should.” At the Qunlat, the women sitting around the fire glanced up at her. The Tamassran’s expression didn’t change, she only blinked. “But where there is life, there is hope. The Inquisition wants this war to end before it takes more people.”

“The Inquisition killed our people,” the Qunari noted, her voice still level. “We tried to stop the war before it began.”

Ellana’s volume dropped as she spoke next. Her lips pursed. Her arm hurt. “The Inquisition was trying to protect the innocent. At the time, those outside of the Qun were innocent. Now people within the Qun are innocent. We want to protect all life.”

“Why?”

“We cannot promise forever. But we can try to promise tomorrow.” Her resolve settled violently in her bones, an answer she didn’t know she was looking for finally unavoidable. She stood and stretched, the cold making her stiff. As her back cracks, she released a breathy sigh; she almost wished she had her walking stick handy.

“I don’t expect you to believe me. This is only day one for you in this world outside of your own. But I promise, once you give it an opportunity to prove itself,” she glanced around the camp, fond memories trickling between the pain as she surveyed her agents. “life, here? in the rest of the world? It can be worth it. You just need the resolve to continue into tomorrow. Besides, death is not the greatest loss Thedas has to offer. The greatest loss is what dies within the heart still beating. You should never surrender to the world around you, follower of the Qun or otherwise.”

The Tamassran overserved her, face never revealing her thoughts. Ellana was used to it, actually – more used to it than she would like to admit. She took a deep breath as she closed her eyes, trying to relax as thoughts as plans ran through her churning mind. “You speak as if you’ve said this to many,” the Qunari noted, heavily yet simply.

Lavellan huffed a stifled snort as it comes ungracefully out her nose. “Not many. Just the one.” She heaved upright, her eyes on the bleak horizon. The Tizar’um watched her rise, a phoenix crawling from her thrown of ash. “And it’s weird to finally hear it out loud.” She paused, unsure of how much she’d be crossing a line if she asked her next question; ultimately she didn’t care enough if she was insulting.
“May I ask you something? You don’t have to answer.” She assumed the silence that followed confirmed consent, so she goes on. “Why did you save these women? For what reason, when you knew it was against your code?” The Tamassran almost balked at the level-headed question; however, she was no coward.

“I wanted… to be a face of the Qun. I want to be a face of the Qun. The people of the Qun are what make the Qun live. I want to protect the ones of the Qun as they will, someday, be the Qun.” The sheer resolve in her voice was unsettling, but Ellana kept her gaze steady as the Tamassran concluded her thoughts. “The unborn have a right to the Qun.”

Ellana rolled her achy shoulder. “Even if letting them have that choice means disobeying exactly what you’re trying to uphold?” The Qunari didn’t hesitate to respond, but she was sure to speak slowly as she came to terms with herself. “The rules… the words of the Qun should be here to protect, to guide and to build. It should not restrict.”

Ellana thought about how contradictory her sentiment seemed, but did not question it. Instead, she wished a silent prayer, that this Tamassran will some day get to meet some of those trying to escape the Qun. Perhaps her faith was not so different from that of those who abandoned it, in this uncanny way.

Everyone just wants something more than what’s in front of them.

She bowed slightly to the Tamassran and the woman seated around the fire, to which all eased a similar dip of their heads in response. She walked away feeling more complacent with the turmoil rooted in her heart while also setting her mind afire; there were things that had to be done. And now, Ellana knew exactly what the world was asking of her.

She found Cullen quickly; he waves his agent away as Lavellan approached, setting himself squarely before her with his arms folded behind his back.

“I’m going to-“
“I’ll join you.” It shouldn’t have been a surprise that he knew what she was going to say. His assertion made her still herself before she could respond, hand on her hip. “Commander-“

“I’m coming with you. The Iron Bull already agreed to come as well. We will take some agents I’ve already debriefed.” Ellana sighed, her shoulders going limp as she gave him a schooling frown. “Cullen, we can't just leave everyone without someone high ranking in charge. They need you to remind them how important this is. Everything we do from today forward-“

“-Has an impact on the years to come I know I know.” Cullen reached up to put a hand on her shoulder; it didn’t last long before he pulled quickly away. “But… you’re valuable too. If you can't still see that-“ He cleared his throat and reached for the back of his head, hand on his hip as he turned around to regard the camp.

Ellana’s heart lifted around him – the Inquisition’s commander did a wonder to make her feel better, and his bashful interactions always made her smile. But that night her smile was sad and slow, as it would be for years to come.

But she appreciated him, and it pained her as the realization dawned on her: she hadn’t been expressing that gratitude.

He was the one to carry her out of those last Eluvians after all.

She watched him discerningly in the rising darkness. “Thank you, Cullen. I appreciate your
concern. But we can't put myself ahead of our men. Besides, if something happens to me, we need someone here to lead the charge. We have to try and be realistic with ourselves. The notion is appreciated, really, but we have obligations for our men we need to uphold.” She rested her hand on his shoulder, tapping against him gently as his attention returned to her. “Thank you, truly. But I need you here.”

Arguably, Cullen was pissed. But her mind was made, and there was no means of going around that. At least Iron Bull was going with her. “Very well,” he conceded, heart and eyes still weary. “But if you do not return by sunrise, I will set out for you myself.” She brushed some dirt off his shoulder with a hum of agreement before walking in the direction of familiar, uncanny laughter.

She found her long-time companion as she always did when the stars came out; when the days were too long and the nights too short, when the only thing that was just right in this world was the time spent between sunset and dusk, Sera would make the most of herself. With a horn in hand and a sneer on her lips, Sera leaned forward in her seat as she looked over the fire before her, wicked eyes gleaming as she and the scouts around her shared story after story. She sat on one of the stumps the troops packed as a chair as if it were a throne; Sera lived and laughed like a jester, but she ruled her life like a righteous queen.

Ellana brushed a few lingering fingers over her friend’s shoulder before walking a quiet distance away, Sera joining her quickly before settling down on the hard earth beneath her. She focused on her horn, swirling it before taking another long swig.

“Sera.” Her blonde hair bobbed as her head turn up, horn of mead at her lips. Lavellan looked over the crowd of her men at the grey horns that peak just within sight. “I'm leaving the care of our guests to you. Make sure everyone treats them properly, or they’ll have to answer to me.”

Sera grumbled something about how Ellana Lavellen was the least intimidating person this side of nowhere, which the Inquisitor promptly ignored. “If they have any needs – more blankets, clothes, food, water – please make sure they get it. If they’re willing, I’d like to coerce them into letting a healer look at them. I’m not too sure when I’ll be getting back, but the sooner someone looks at them, the better.”

Sera spat her drink back into her cup as realization rooted its way in her - some, inevitably, sprayed out in front of her, crap nourishment for the cracked and crumbling earth. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, deep frown settling on her face. “Wait, you're going? After they just told you not to?” She folded her arms across her chest in a pout as she rocked backwards. “You’d think being gimpy would stop you from drinking from these wells of sorrows and goin places full of shit.”

Ellana glared at her frankly before rolling her eyes. “Thanks for the concern Sera. Much appreciated.” She looked down at her, hard. “And I'm not gimpy.”

Sera sat down her horn carefully on the ground beside her. “Gimpy is nice, there’s worse to say and to hear. You’re missing an arm, you daft tit.”

“I’m going to be honest with you, you’re really testing my patients.” “At least I can walk straight!” She snarled, hands firmly tucked under her armpits. “Sorry not sorry. You’re a nut for the truth, aren’t you? Well here it is. Let someone else do this.”

She very nearly cursed her companion out. Instead, she pinched the bridge of her nose, eyes closed. “You don’t get a say in this, Sera. I'm not asking for your permission.”

The silence built between them, a hostility that, in months and years and evenings prior, was
nonexistent. Neither of them spoke for quite some time before Sera stood up once more. She left her horn on the earth. She spoke quieter this time, head cocked a little as she tried to peak under Ellana’s fingers, hunting for her eyes.

“You still look broken, Ears. Quit it before something actually breaks you. Again. For good.”

It took every fiber in her body to not spit a sharp curse at her friend. Instead she waivered her hand dismissably as she stormed away.

“At least I can walk straight,” Ellana mocked with a roll of her eyes. As she focused ahead of her, she left her response unspoken.

*Like hell I need someone to tell me what I can or can't do!*

“Boss?”

It was Bull. It had to be Bull. No one else would even *entertain* the idea of approaching her when she was like this.

“I’m walking,” she growled, stubbornness making her one arm swing excessively. The Iron Bull almost stopped her – then he paused, knowing better, and stopped her anyway. “That’s a two day’s hike, boss. Everyone else is riding. You won’t get there in time.” Ellana stopped, curling and uncurling her fist again and again. She turned back around in the direction of their mounts, passing Bull wordlessly.

The merc crossed his arms with a tilt of his chin. “They’re already being saddled, Lavellan.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” that spite was *incredibly* rare for her. Not so much in the last few weeks, but very uncharacteristic of her nonetheless. Bull frowned: it was also absolutely fucking unnecessary. But he didn’t promote it. “Just making sure.” He tried to hide what he could from her – but sometimes there are things that need to be said. As they depart the sanctuary of their camp for the head of their charge, he tried again. “You’ve got a little stormcloud over your head, Boss.”

“What?” She spun on him, hand now gripping the hilt of her sword aggressively tighter than probably necessary.

“Nothing,” he tried, smiling falling apart as she averted his gaze. “Forget it.”

“No.”

“Boss?”

“Actually, keep it to yourself. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to hear whatever kindness you have to offer.” She stopped her march in the growing darkness, a festering wound of a dying day. Lavellan waved over the stablehand holding both her hart and Bull’s steed.

The scout dipped her head respectfully as it passed the reins off to the mounts’ masters. Ellana began to fumble with the girth, Nislean’diała standing patiently. Bull’s own mount stomped, and the world around them began to mount up.

“Bull.”

He hummed a confirmation in response: subconsciously, he hoped for the best. For the conversation to end.
“Am I weak?”

Her back faced him as she tugged at something on her hart. Iron Bull mounted up, swinging hard into his saddle.

He shifted around, eager to not continue this conversation. “No.”

“Then why is everyone acting like I am all of a sudden.” There was defeat in her voice, volume low as if trying to avoid her words as they leave her mouth. He couldn’t see the crease of her brow, but he knew it was there, inevitably so: she would never admit to it, but Lavellan was a proud one. And this transition of hers was… hard, to say the very least.

“Maybe weak isn't the word for it.” He tested, turning the black creature around to survey they party. “Maybe people just care about you.”

“Care is appreciated, but to undermine me-“ she shook her head, hand flexing in nervous habit. How do you put words to an emotion that consumes you? “I don’t appreciate people stepping on my toes.” She summarized, as if the expression could do justice to the fury within her.

“Well, no one likes watching you trip.” She spun on him. All he could do was shrug. “Just saying.” She tisked before nudging Nislean forward, a firm scowl settling into her kinder features; all her friend could do was follow.

As to this transition of hers. The ferocity of her grip of her staff, the crease of her brow and the gentleness of her heart, now belonged not to her clan, her people nor her charge.

Four years. It took four years for this world to turn a woman against herself, to collapse and reemerge a new person altogether. Her warm heart disintegrated, her gentle touches fell to wringing fists. Her smile twisted from kindness to gasps for air in a drowning world. But it wasn’t always like this; being the Inquisitor did her a great service as she saved the world – she became her truest self, something only revealed by the skin of her teeth as she fought day by day to save this warring world. She was in a position where she could do the most good for those around her, and she took that in full stride. Some theorists, for years to come, will claim that Ellana Lavellan was born for the role she inherited; that the raw probability of her having been the sole survivor of the conclave explosion was no coincidence. That, for all that she was before becoming the Inquisitor, the world was all the more better for her bearing that impossible mantle.

But this change she underwent in the years following the Inquisition took their fair toll on her. For the woman endowed with righteous selflessness was asked to do something she had never done before: instead of fighting for the side of the living, she was asked to lead a war between people. And that, to all and any who may be concerned, is a very, very difficult transition to walk.

They rode their mounts hard into the night, galloping at intervals to push their mounts to their limits. They rode for hours on end, the moon rising high above their heads before curving away in the distance. Without clouds to offer sanctuary of rain, the stars were inconceivably beautiful as they shined in their absolute abundance. They rode well until their bodies ached, but it was all in due perspective; they arrived at the abandoned city-state, fortress walls greeting them in silent command as they towered overhead, tops tickling the heavens, demanding darkness over the stars overhead.

Ellana dismounted, her head on a swivel as if expecting some form of assault. Steam rolling off their mounts rose in the quiet night, the wind all but holding its own breath in the magnitude of Atsikeyah’s watchtowers. The creeping stones trespassed into the sky, towers looming ominously as it held vigil over the secrets within its doors. A scout danced around like a dying fly, collecting
reins as they took the mounts to water; the Inquisitor handed off her hart without a second glance, attention focused on the walls before them.

Lavellan reaches for her sword – at present, the balance of her body (or lack thereof) was practically unusable for magic. The trauma she had been dealt during the Exalted Council, only weeks prior, was still reverberating throughout her body. As it is known, magic involves manipulating the delicate balance of the Fade and its relationship with the mortal body, an equilibrium that takes entire an entire lifetime to establish and understand. Without that balance of her body, there was no practical means of using magic (unless one was desperate, of course. Anything can be achieved when one is desperate). So the Inquisitor reached for her sword, as one might do when reduced to grasping at straws in a world on fire.

“Two at a time, follow standard procedure,” she ordered, the words the only natural thing about her in the instant. It is difficult to reflect on how much Ellana grew into her role unless times like these plainly stamp themselves across the blatant world. Two years ago, she would have never considered these words: here, she knew them and their meaning better than she knew her own heart.

The agents fell into place behind her and the Iron Bull, moving quietly and carefully around the fortress as the descend on the entrance. Beyond the obscured darkness, the fortress was eerie, stale air weighing heavily on each step they took. Ellana flickered a Veilfire stump to life before handing it off to Bull. She eyed her team before proceeding with caution, anxiety starting to rise in her throat like a steady tide.

They didn’t get far.

Ellana stepped forward through a narrow space, Iron Bull forced to follow at her heel. When the light graced the corps beneath her, Ellana’s heart dropped.

No.

She leaned down, hand once on her sword now inches from the corps. Rotten flesh caved away, indenting the skull and face of what was once a man. His jaw laid unhinged, a scream unheard. Bull cursed from somewhere behind her. One of the agents gasped.

Bull came to her side, the Inquisitor’s head just at his knee as he surveyed what remained of the village.

Lavellan pursed her lips as her eyes hunted the body. The stench burned her nose, forcing her to breathe through tight lips. She glanced up to survey the vacant space, houses and cabins and tools all abandoned as bodies draped across the unforgiving earth. Something was… wrong. Clearly. The rate of decay here was exponential, which confirmed the idea of pathological warfare. She had a hunch when the Tamassran laid claim to “magic without magic,” but this, whatever this is-

She wondered where the flies were.

Then it clicked.

Ellana threw a barrier over her company as she brought the back of her hand up to cover her mouth. She stood abruptly, bumping into Iron Bull as she backed away from the howling man. Her barrier sparked in protest and crumbled away almost instantaneously. Lavellan bit down, desperation knotting her brows together as she gave her most affirmative command she could surmise.

“Everyone retreat! Do not touch anything!” she cast a barrier again, grinding her teeth as the backlash of magical output stung her nervous system.
Several voices sound of in alarm, but they retreat slowly and carefully, with every step meticulous. The Iron Bull stayed ridged, shoulders tense; they weren’t just dead bodies lying around, up and abandoned in the middle of their lives. They were the people of his blood, and race aside, they were truly innocent.

If such a thing existed.

They pulled back into the safety of the quiet world, leaving the dead behind in their silent, undug graves. It felt wrong to leave the bodies where they were strewn out, but there was ultimately nothing to be done. Not if Ellana wanted to keep her people safe.

She frowned as her eyes settled on their mounts once more; the scout holding them went erect, heels snapping together in fear that her scowl was directed at him. If her gut feeling was right – as right as a gut feeling can be when twisted over on itself – then their problem was not yet resolved.

She kneeled beside her hart, hand against the cracked land as she steadied herself. She slipped a hand into the cool river water before sinking it into the bucket beside her. Nislean’s lips still dripped with water, his thirst unquenched after the tiring work.

Bull spoke from somewhere behind her. “What is it?”

She pulled her hand out of the bucket, shaking it off in haste. She directed her attention at the scout holding their mounts. “They drank from this,” she concluded, her question coming out softly. She knew the answer before the scout responded – she didn’t hear the response, in all truth. Only the silence that followed.

“I need you to drop the reins, Agent.” She did without question, springing back in full confusion. She nearly bumped into Iron Bull as he stepped closer, his large hands rested gently on her shoulders to still the agent. “Boss, we don’t know that they-”

“I do. It’s in the water. It’s the most effect means of distribution.” Ellana started to untie the lead ropes and halters from the mounts she knew wouldn’t run – they could reuse the leather. She brushed down each horse as she moved between them, playing with their ears, pulling at their forelocks. She made sure to look each of them in the eye as she moved slowly. “They’ve already ingested it. It could be days or weeks before they show the symptoms, but it’s in them.” She reached forward to brush Nislean’diala’s forehead, the hart’s wide eyes watching her trustingly. As her fingers lingered just out of reach, it brought its head into her touch.

“How do you-“

She was trying so hard to be strong. To do what was necessary of her. To not choke on her words. She cleared her throat. “It’s the same thing they did in Wycome, where they massacred the city elves.”

Ah. The connection slowly filtered through Bull's racing mind.

Near where Clan Lavellen died.

Sure it was several months after the Clan was massacred, but the city was where she put her hope in saving her family. When the elves within the city bounds died, she didn’t sleep for a week, yet she didn’t shed a single tear. Dealing with that mess was the first and only time Ellana got to see the site of her lost people. For her, Wycome was personal; the people responsible were apprehended, but there was no punishment fitting for their crimes. Instead, Ellana bore the knowledge that what transpired there could have been avoided. If only we had acted sooner, she
lamented once in confidence with her companions. She attended every funeral – perhaps that was more for her own sake than for the families the world lost.

She will come to blame herself for the events that transpired in Atsikeyah despite not having been there to prevent the incident. Perhaps it was largely due to just that – that she was simply inadequate in terms of protecting them. *Again.* Another people lost, their hope for salvation at bay of time and war.

“And it will affect the animals like it does people?”

“Water is water. We don’t need to know the specifics to know it impacts every living creature. Why don’t you think there were any flies? Maggots?”

“But maybe they could-“

“**Bull.**” She turned to him sharply. “That’s enough. Unless you want to risk bringing this to every man, woman and child out in the rest of the world.” She sighed and brushed a hand over the colt next to her. “We were lucky this was a contained event. If you don’t want to watch, you don’t have to.”

A few anxious individuals shuffled around, fewer ultimately resolving to turn around when Ellana drew her sword. It was a nimble thing, light and nearly useless in the hands of a warrior. But she was no warrior, and she knew how to use this needle to its best capacity. She drew swift movements with her shaking hand as the creatures fell one at a time. Respectfully, some of them came to balk at her advance in their direction, but she calmed them as she could calm a storm, mystic arts connecting her to each creature as they settled down. They cried out as they fell to their knees, sword thrust well up and through their hearts. The noise was agonizing in the bleak darkness, the only sign of life here in the dead corner of the world being that of life taken away.

Ellana Lavellan, Inquisitor and savior of the known world, killed each creature in slow and steady succession. Nislean’diala, unlike the horses, did not flinch as she came to him for the last time. When she lingered an arms length away, pain of duty blackening her heart and lungs, she breathed out to regain her composure.

And Nislean came to her, eager lips finding her palm as he had since he first became her loyal steed.

She brushed the broad space between his eyes one last time, the great beast suddenly fitting in the palm of her hand. She wished she could have kept a hand on him as his legs folded beneath him, but she couldn’t. Ellana Lavellan only had one hand: she had to replace the touch of her fingers with that of steel, and she pierced him without so much as a second thought.

When she finished, she stood up, leaned on her sword as its blooded peak dug into a crack in the earth. The Inquisition force waited in silence. It was deafening, the silence that followed the sound of their mounts’ cries.

“Come,” she ordered dismissively. “We can't stay here.”
They walked back, heads hanging. They walked well into the morning light, as none of them felt tired enough to sleep through the nightmare they had just witnessed; exhausted yes, but there would be only hauntings in their dreams.

It was a silent march across the plain, the only noise coming from the scuffle of weary boots and the wind as it whipped through their clothes. It got cold, too, far colder than anything the Maker should ever consider even remotely appropriate to create in his image. So the weather seared itself into their skin, bruises and cuts and blue lips starting to fester on their mortal bodies like maggots should a corpse. The healing mage in their party wasn’t particularly adept at fire magic, and Ellana was in no state to power warming glyphs on their clothes without running the risk of burning everyone.

So they walked.

And walked.

And walked.

It was admittedly beautiful, watching the sun curl over the horizon. The sky lit up on all kinds of vivid colors – without clouds to dilute the sky, colors cascaded far and wide in vibrant display far and wide in this place where the world is too flat. That was the only element worth noting of their journey back to camp.

Cullen met them some time between dawn and day, he and a band of agents galloping furiously from within the sun.

They slowed only within a few strides of contact, the Commander’s mare tossing her head at the sharp pull on her bit. Lose gravel splayed up at the Inquisitor and her company; respectfully, none of them were fit to care.

Cullen eyed them wearily, counting heads as he circled his mare around. The remaining agents in his company mimicked him, tossing heads and flared nostrils lighting up their world.

Lavellan looked up with a squint, meeting him eye-for-eye as the sun backed him. “How many men do you have?” she asked, voice level and unreflective.

“Twice as many as you.” He scanned her men, unsure of how to proceed with the fact that nothing appeared wrong with them. She held her squint, but her expression had no fire. She was tired of this, this nothing that happened. This everything that happened. “Have everyone mount up with who they can.”

“Yes, Herald.” Cullen didn’t need to repeat the order; his men were already climbing out of their saddles faster than a fire lighted on their asses could provoke.

Bull walked a little closer, hands on his hips. “Your timing is great as ever, Curls. But if we could shuffle some of you little people around-“

“We’ll get you your own horse, Bull.”

“Thanks, I don’t share too well.”

An elf came to the Inquisitor, reins in hand. He swept low in a respectful dip, something somewhere caught between tradition and duty of his role. The Inquisitor barely glanced at him before mounting up. Horses run differently from harts. Already, the saddle fit differently. As of late, she preferred the deeper seat – less likely to fall out, an added security she needed in recent
weeks. She shuffled around before tightening her numb fingers around the reins. The mount moved stiffly, a reluctant step at the shift of her heel.

“Inquisitor Lavellan Ellana, would you prefer another?”

She stilled at the way he addressed her. It shocked her, all things considered. Surprising how THIS was what shocked her over the course of her morning.

She hadn’t been addressed formally in so long.

The horse snorted.

She turned to the agent, welcomed surprise blatant. She tested a forced smile. “No, agent. Thank you. This will do just fine.”

She neck-reined her mount towards her commander, eager to get back to her world falling apart.

He looked at her expectantly, still with no word about the villages situation. Instead, she opted to answer about the mounts.

“They drank the water.”

It was vague, but it served its purpose. “I- I'm sorry.” He regripped his reins nervously, turning to regard her out the corner of his eye. He was cautious, knowing all too well she could snap back into her uncharismatic state. “I know- well, I mean-”

“Thank you, Commander.” Her voice carried far more depth to it than the simple words seemed to convey. She looked ten years older that morning, but she kept her eyes on the horizon.

Then they rode.

As they approached camp, they slowed their horses to a steady trot. Ellana bit her lip as she thought through her words. Cullen and Bull flanked her on either side, watching her chin go erect as she cleared her throat.

“It was a similar agent to what destroyed the people of Wycome.”

“Are you sure?” Cullen’s voice came out soft. Ellana almost laughed. She didn’t know why. “Yes. Please don’t question me about that.”

“It could be completely unrelated. It could be-“

“It’s one hell of a coincidence if this isn't related,” Ellana argued, shutting it down almost immediately.

“So they used Venatori practices.” Bull reasoned. Cullen moaned. “That means either the Venatori have still infiltrated the Magisters-“

“Or the other Magisters lied to Dorian,” Bull supplied, something unreadable tightening his lips.


“We can't eliminate the possibility. He’s in a war, Bull, a war for his people.” She looked back at
him, all of her innate sympathy absent. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t consider doing the same, if
given the choice.”

He returned the anger in kind. “I don’t massacre people! Not like that.” He pointed behind them,
suddenly betraying his collected demeanor. “That, what we saw back there? That’s not an act of
war, Boss. That was a test of godhood. A test.”

Cullen turned to him. “What happens when they use that on something more than a contained
population? If they use it in Par Vollen? Hell, what about Orlais? Ferelden? Just some old river
connecting a few villages?”

It only escalated; Ellana couldn’t keep herself from biting back. “Like I said. It’s all an act of pride.
That’s all this is. We aren’t fighting for any good thing anymore – we’re fighting for pride.”

As they returned around midday, scouts and agents and swords alike eager for words of solution.
Word quietly spread that they were going to leave. Eager hearts turned brittle as hands set out to
pack up the camp.

Watching camps disassemble, tents collapsing, rations being recollected, mounts being packed up
once more, is always a dreary thing to watch. After successful missions it’s a time to reflect on
those that have been lost; on days like the present, however, they served as acute reminders that
marching on end for no avail sucks.

The camp came apart slowly. Ellana, on her feet once more, took to her customary stroll through
their site to watch everything fall apart under her command. Stereotypically, scouts and agents
would stop her to congratulate her and their efforts, either that or they try to catch up with her,
depending on how many missions they had been on together. Idle chatter really, but worthwhile at
the end of the day: everyone works for someone else, but how many truly get to know them? Get
to respect them, to see them for the person they are, not the insignia they wear?

But that even was quiet and awkward, a smog of stillness rolling over everyone. Ellana only
received hasty glances in her direction and the occasional “Ma’am.”

How alienating.

She spotted the elf from earlier, the one that addressed her appropriately, formally, elvhen. He was
leading several others through their rations.

“You.” They all paused; when he realized who spoke, the elf stepped forward, clipboard handed
off to the woman beside him, a curious expression under his hood. “Yes?”

She nodded to their company and tent. “I know this trip cost a bit. What’s the state of what
remains?”

“Viable and usable, my lady.” He dipped low again. “We should have no problem returning our
resources to other forward movements.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.” She flexed her hand. She was oddly suddenly aware of the mess of her
hair. “Thank you, for your mount.”
“Of course, Inquisitor Lavellan. It is an honor.”

She shouldn’t have asked. She wasn’t in the mood to reopen old wounds.

But it was oddly comforting, finding something familiar from a world she thought that abandoned her. So against her intuition, she asked him one last question.

“Are you from a clan?”

He blinked before looking away briefly. “I was not born to one, my lady. My wife was.”

She took a bold step forward, a natural smile finding itself on her lips. She surveyed the contents of the tent. “She’s taught you well.”

He nodded, his attention on her once more. “She taught me what she could.”

Ah.

Well then.

Ellana nodded in acknowledgement of his past tense vernacular and began to walk away. Well, that was a miserable attempt. She bit her lower lip.

I should have just-

“She has a name.” Ellana stopped walking, but didn’t turn around.

Sera was the last person she was in the mood to deal with. Instead she rolled her eyes.

“She has a name, but you never asked.”

The campsite slowed around them, the planet coming to a near-halt. Her agents seemed to circle them unintentionally like vultures around a corpse.

Ellana kept her chin from lowering, but she didn’t turn around. Instead, she chose to focus on the one cloud out in the distant horizon. It was starting to brew into the colors of a storm. “And?”

“It’s Qatifa.” She could hear Sera step closer, closing the space between them. She knew in her heart the cross look on her friends face better than she knew her own; Ellana clenched and unclenched her fist to try and keep her composure. “She’s a person, you know. Like the rest of them. But they’re far from you.”

“Oh?” Ellana spun on her heel to stare down her friend. She marched over slowly and carefully, not a step out of place, not a single movement unnecessary. For a woman without an arm, she was still a bitch with quiet the bite. “Far from me? Explain that bit for me, if you’d be so kind.”

Sera doesn’t even flinch – she’s stared down dragons before. An irrational friend is not nearly as terrifying as fire from the heavens. Even if her friend was the Inquisitor. “They may be a little crooked or a little broken inside, but at least they aren’t the ones pulling themselves apart. ‘Most know better.”

Ellana paused as her eyes flickered over the stillness of the camp. Agents everywhere where stopping in their duties to watch the two of them. She swallowed, returning to the rogue. “I’m going to need you to step off, Sera.”

“Why? You couldn’t get me to do a thing if you wanted. Believe it or not, I’m saying it cause I
care. You’re the only one to blame for this, I’m just telling you the truth that you can’t hear.”

“So I’m deaf now too, is that was you’re saying? Do you want to add that to the list of things you think I can’t do? Because when I’m around you that list only seems to grow. But hey, what if – what if – that list is growing because of you. Am I a better person because of all of this? Am I any less the elfy shat I was months ago?” She took another dangerous step closer. “Go ahead Sera, let it be said. You’ve got something to say, you’ve always got something to say – rarely helpful, but always to be heard. It’s been a long morning and I’m doing what I have to, Sera.” She glowers, head sliding slightly sideways as she looked down at her. She was taunting her the same way they bantered with each other for weeks on end, she spoke with the same snarl she carried over private campfires and long, weary nights. But was the middle of the day, and Ellana wasn’t having it. She was still seeing the bodies they left behind. She was still seeing the red lyirum that plagued the countryside. She was still seeing the delusions of the Eluvians. When she blinked, she could see the howling man she left against the unforgiving earth. What color was his corps in the faded light? Was it grey? Black? White as snow?

She had been pushed too far. Her eyes fall to narrow slits. The dull ache in her arm throbbed away, but she couldn’t feel it. “It’s my damned job to keep putting myself out there, but you’d know that if you’d been paying attention at all these last few years. But I’m itching for a fight, so go ahead, make my day.”

It was too quiet. Either that, or her blood was too loud. Her fingers were still numb and her heart still ached. But her brows creased as she stared her friend down.

So she repeated herself.

Sera spat at her boot.

“Make my day, you-“

Her world already fell apart. How much deeper she could sink, she would soon learn.

She opened her mouth only to be abruptly cut off by the howl of a familiar Qunari.

“Alright alright! All of you, both of you! Back off!”

Ellana spun, a ferocity on her lips. “Like hell I will do what-“

“Inquisitor Lavellan!”

She turned towards the new voice before turning away. Cullen grabbed her arm from somewhere in the abyss. She settled on Sera, who was being towed off, vulgarity and all, by the Iron Bull. Cullen’s fingers dug into her arm gently, teeth against naked flesh.

She pulled from his touch and marched off, the reaction of her militia and men unknown.

She didn’t want to know.

She didn’t want anything to do with this.

They broke for her tent. They walked, awkwardly quiet. “Hey, you’ve still got a few hours before we head out. Take a-“

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she growled, hand on her sword. They got several paces, Ellana musing slowly, stomach and heart still churning. “I’m going to take a nap.”
At this point, he couldn’t hide his sarcasm. “Good idea.” Cullen shrugged as she spun back to him, but her glare held no fire. She left for her tent, leaving Cullen standing in the middle of the mess as the Inquisition came down around them.

She didn’t bother changing into something comfortable. She didn’t think far enough ahead to even unstrap the sword at her side. Instead it lay there, blunt end digging into her side. She laid against her back, the dark earth beneath her somehow sharp despite her velveteen blankets.

She held that idea so close to her heart for years, the idea that where there is life, there is hope. She would repeat that any time they had the option to rescue a lost agent or the chance to save a broken soul. Because what is the value of life when a soul is twisted out of recognizable form? How does one shoulder the weight of the world when they no longer know how to pull their feet from the mud?

But this.

The throbbing in her arm was bleeding severe pain in her upper chest, like something sharp clamping down on her senses. She folded her arm over her heart and brought her hand down to clasp over it.

Her vhenan was planning to take that hope away because life breeds strife. Differences breed difficulty. Fear breeds catastrophe. Catastrophe and fear brings chaos. Solas wanted to use the fear, the catastrophe, the pride of the people of this world against them. What hurt Ellana was these fundamental ingredients were already there: it was just as much in the prejudice of Orlais as it was in the gaping mouth of that howling corps within Atsikeyah. Solas was to turn a war of nations into a war of the world, all by simply stirring the pot.

The Inquisitor rested the back of her hand against her brow as she sighed for the last time that day.

“I’m tired,” she relented to no one in particular.

Her evening was filled with silent tears of frustration.
Related Codex Entry: The Plague of Wycome

Nightingale;

In following up on leads of potential survivors of the Clan Lavellan massacre, Skeets and I have settled ourselves in the Wycome alienage; while we regretfully cannot confirm any leads of Dalish within the city, something else has been brought to our attention.

For reasons unknown, a particular illness is spreading through the city elves. As some human children have also fallen ill, the blame of the sickness has been all but put on the elves. ‘Purposeful harm undo innocent children,’ the Duke’s official report cites. The nobles have rallied behind him to keep the illness at bay. The people turned upon their neighbors within a fortnight.

As such, all elves have been quarantined, alienage or otherwise, and no aid is being provided in fear of the disease spreading to healers. We have been restricted to but one water source, and the store of food is depleting faster by the day. Skeets left my company yesterday to follow a possible lead, as we concluded it seemed centralized. She has yet to return.

Fears aside for her personal safety, something is in the air here. Perhaps literally.

The signs of the illness is starting to get harder and harder to ignore in me. I fear I may not be able to respond for some time, unfortunately, given the circumstances of treatment here. Should this correspondence find you, I would like to kindly note that I did not perform in any disgraceful manner to contract this illness. If Skeets suggests otherwise, do not believe her.

And whoever you send, please send water with them. I am thirsty beyond words.

Jester

Chapter End Notes

I’ve always kinda wondered what happens with the Wycome elves if Clan Lavellan dies before they ever actually enter the city.
We once drove through Utah. There were storms brewing all around us. It was pretty freaky.
Translations ->
Nislean’diala – Blueskin. Shamefully inspired by President George Washington’s war mount. Rest in **cking pieces, Blue.
Tizar’um – [Arabic]. Literally, “waiting mother,” more or less. Butchered a little to try and fit Qunlat a little better.
Basra – rude way of calling non-Qunari people. Ellanas a little down in the dumps, she isn't about to refer to herself as a power figure.
Their routine continued for almost a week with successful peace. Sometimes Aupia would be up early enough to actually visit the kitchen, catching up with Emmalyn before heading back to her room with enough food for both herself and Vallen. Emmalyn was always eager to ask her polite questions, asking about her day before and any upcoming plans. Sometimes, she’d slip Aupia an extra sweet in her morning bundle; usually, however, Gannon would get to it before she could. Aupia had yet to sit down for a meal with the Divine, to which Emmalyn voiced gentle disapproval over the girl’s avoidance (“She’s kind once you get to know her,” she would suggest every morning – Aupia was having none of that. “She’s the Divine, for Maker’s sake). By the time she was back in her hallway Vallen would be hustling out the door, never quite awake early enough to be on time. Finch would be there as well, her quiet sentinel waiting patiently by her bedroom door.

Vallen would stop his hustle, papers tight to his chest and discerning scowl adjusting to the hallway light. He always seemed to start the day off wrong.

Aupia knew better than to be cheery when he was like this, but she did it anyway. ““morning Val.””

He grunts a reply.

He’d shuffle things around just enough to grab whatever he could out of her hand. Vallen Sacha, like the rest of his family, was not a morning person. Today he was expected to assist in the dissection of an infected urinary tract. He has yet to be told if it is that of a human or animal. He hopes for the latter.

Aupia hands off to Finch whatever Vallen wouldn’t take. He takes it without comment, grateful but having already eaten breakfast, it meant little more than a kind gesture to him. This morning, it’s an orange and a slice of sourdough; Vallen took off with the meat and cheese. As her guard takes it, he palms the fruit before handing it back to her. He knew she liked oranges. “You have been requested this evening to join Lady Valjean.”

“Oh? What for?” they walk through servants as they descent the Cathedral. Usually, Aupia takes this chance to grab her arrows and quiver from her bedroom, as well as any other miscellaneous tools or means of distraction, like her sketchbook. She has spent the last few evenings with Sera and Qat either in the woods outside of the Outskirts (a mere thirty-minute walk) or in their cluttered flat, working on archery and knife-related techniques. As with their first evening together, Qat proves most efficient as a teacher: Sera, respectfully, just kinda yells and laughs. Sometimes Aupia gets the chance to sit back and watch them or watch the world outside, not that their flat was any less exciting. And sometimes she’d get to blot out rough figures, or practice detailing the finer patterns of their makeshift living space. Somehow the two of them had a pillow with a total of six different patterns and fabrics on it.

However she spent her time, her bow arm was getting more sore by the day, reaffirming new strength the girl never knew she had. It was an unpredictable end to the day with her new teachers, but a fun one nonetheless. She missed her home and the ache in her heart was undeniable, but there was no time in the day to let it slow her down – and now that she had a rhythm, a routine, she felt established.

So the prospect of skipping on tonight’s lessons was a little upsetting; however, it presented
something new for the girl, and she couldn’t help but feel a little excited by the prospect.

Finch speaks between mouthfuls of bread. “Unspecified. She only made note that it was… ‘girl
time.’”

Oh. Well then. “That’s a little foreboding.”

Finch coughs, chocking on a piece of bread. He clears his throat as Aupia relishes in her small
victory. They arrive at the stable in no time, Quagga sounding off in shrill joy. More recently,
Rumad made sure to be there to watch Aupia turn out her halla; he seemed fascinated by their
dynamic, as any proper equestrian would be. Today, however, he asks a question.

“Would you like me to add her to the mid-day pasture rotations, Miss?”

Aupia smiles at him over her shoulder. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d actually be super grateful.” She
curries Quagga down as her doe’s lips search for alfalfa crumbs in her feed bin; her tail swishes as
she feels girl’s attention leaves her. Aupia drops her arm and regards him in full, making the boy’s
head drop. Again.

She holds herself still though: hopefully, he’ll get the hint and stop behaving so… lowly. Finch is
somewhere outside, Rumad blocking the entrance to the stall. The content sound of munching
horses fills the hallway.

“Are you comfortable with her? You haven’t gotten to work with her much yet, if you want to try
her out you’re more than welcome to whenever you have the time.”

Rumad visibly glances to his side; the barn tabby’s making its way towards him. “Try her out,
Miss?”

“I don’t know. Give her treats. Walk her around. Her halter’s in the tack bin. And don’t be afraid to
give her a good smack if she misbehaves. She knows what I do and don’t tolerate. Common sense
stuff really – biting, for example. Or tossing her head. Just being a piece in general.”

They leave it at that, so Aupia bids her farewell. She glances back over her shoulder to see delicate
lips reaching to a half-curled hand; even if Quagga’s temperamental, which she has the tendency to
be around strangers, he will figure her out.

He’ll probably have her eating out of the palm of his hand within hours, literally.

And as with the mornings that precede this one, Aupia and her escort make their way to her
teacher’s office somewhere across two pavilions and the Summer Bazaar. The girl’s been making
more of an effort to absorb her surroundings, finding something new and intricate and absolutely
Royalistly unnecessary in the marble and paintings and vines of this manicured world. As of late,
she has been recognizing a little bit more of a pattern to the masks the people of Orlais wear. As the
world continues to spin, something new appears nearly every day – in the last few years, a new
trend in fashion has popped up as it always does; elitists and the highest-ranking individuals seem
to done the masks with as many shades as possible, detailing almost real faces onto the porcelain
that betrays the world. The lower, I-want-to-be-in-the-big-leagues citizens of Orlesian society tote
very, very intricate paintings, usually of flowers and vines. Aupia’s favorite thus far was one she
saw yesterday, a woman singing at the bay of a fountain with roses curling up her cheek. The
Inquisitor stood in vigil behind her, head lowered, a marble sword in hand. Apia watched a bird
poop on the statue’s head.

Vivienne seemed to wear hers whenever she leaves her office, a mask critical to her position of
control in the modern world; otherwise it sits perched on a stand on her desk, blues and golds staring Aupia down every day as she continues her studies. Its pretty, but she doesn’t seem the woman to need a mask to look beautiful.

Aupia looks up as Finch reaches out to grab her, stopping her in her absentminded march. A slow parade crosses the pavilion, people in heavy furs and thick boots. There has to be twenty of them in this group but with their layers and unusual height they look more like a pack of thirty on a slow prowl. In the morning hustle of university students and normal citizens these people seem to carry a plague: everyone, masked and otherwise, steers clear of these strangers.

“Finch.” Aupia turns her head slightly towards her guard. “Who are they?”

“Avvar,” He replies quietly, as if worried they would overhear him from across the way. “They are a missionary envoy.”

“An envoy?”

“An exchange of personnel, of a sort. We have emissaries in their hold, and they have people here.” Aupia nods in understanding as she slows her walk to a halt to watch them pass. The neutral colors of their clothes betray any indications of regard for fashion – in fact, they don’t seem to care in the least for what the people of Central Val Royeaux would think of them; of all the sideways glances, none have any inhibition in their walk. Aupia turns around fully to look at her companion, Finch’s hands clasped firmly behind his back in his eternal state of composure. “Why are they here? Exactly, I mean.” she asks, turning back to beckon at the group with her eyes.

“They’re working in an exchange of information. Tonics and resources, as well as capitol. A lot of the Silverite used in the Kirkwall Alloy is from the Frostback Basin where their hold is located.”

“Capitol?”

“Resources of knowledge. Their training and techniques in exchange for our manufacturing.”

Aupia nods as she fishes through her hair. A stray piece of alfalfa escapes its hold at the base of her neck. “Not too sure why they’d come all the way out here then. It sounds like we’re the ones banking on the relationship.” Finch only squints a little from under his scout’s hood, observing the leader of the emissary closely. “They work in close relations with the new Circles and University of Magi. Their basis of magical understanding seems similar to sophisticated Thedesian magic, but they train in a slightly different manner.”

“Oh?” she pulls her hair through the final loop of her band. “Do you know how? Or is this something I should ask Viv next time?”

Finch blinks repeatedly, the corner of his mouth creeping up in the slightest of smiles. “If I were asked, I would not recommend bringing the topic up with the Grand Enchantress. She is known for being very disapproving of the new means that is being introduced. She is well-regarded as a traditionalist when it comes to magi training. As for the specifics of Avvar magic,” the agent returns his attention to the young woman at his side, “I cannot say. If the Miss would like the information, I can request it be brought to you.”

“Ah, that’s alright.” Aupia keeps walking. “I’m sure I’ll learn it eventually. Who would’ov thought they were responsible for the Kirkwall Alloy.”

“It’s a new day, Miss. New people are coming together to achieve a great many things.” She only nods; it’s a very simple conclusion to such an emerging dynamic. Despite the benefit they bring,
they still seem lower than the lowest of people. It must be alienating, staying in a place like this for no reason.

And as with the last few mornings, Aupia’s sessions with her teacher was relatively quiet. Vivienne was adamant about having Aupia develop her focus before letting her use magic, but she made sure to keep herself busy in her office as to not repeat the tension of her first day’s test. Sometimes she assigns the girl readings, which proved more difficult than either of them anticipated; the extent of Aupia’s vocabulary is pretty minimal at best, and Vivienne came to learn that she didn’t like describing quantum variables, the content of blood, or the velocity of rushing water. It is all such tedious work.

But they both stick with it, hostilities politely veiled. And question after question, Aupia proves herself to be very similar to her mother. She is a fascinated girl who just can’t seem to get enough information. It almost makes Vivienne smile. She even waves her halfstaff around, polished wood demonstrating spell after spell in a sort of liberty she had never considered before as an educator; surely there is no need to demonstrate the physical product of something, right? But when Aupia sees what she’s working towards, she seems much more engaged in her readings, inspiration residing within her.

Soon enough, Aupia and her master part ways; Vivienne has a luncheon to host, something about some sort of special somebody. Aupia wasn’t really paying attention to that part. She dips her head and trots away with Finch at her heel. Her mind buzzes with new content – the direction of the flow of blood in her veins, the structure of the Veil, what it means when a mage sleeps. Everything new lead to a new barrage of questions, like how Aupia had no recollection of ever dreaming of the Fade or the Veil or spirits or anything magical. Vivienne said that was likely to change once Aupia’s focus improves, which sounded more like a veiled insult than a hope.

She plays with her hands as they weave through the lunch crowd, fancy skirts and dresses creating a maze for the girl and her companion. And why does magic come out of hands and staffs and not feet? Or the head? Nose? What about ears?

She was about to ask Finch about his opinion on the matter when a woman in gold stretches up over the crowd. “Aupia!”

Josephine smiles, reaching for Aupia’s arms as she takes the girl in full. It’s still hard for her to believe Aupia was truly here – any apprehension was promptly dealt with and exchanged for eager joy.
There was so much to do! So much to learn about her!

“Oh, how are you? It’s a beautiful day!” She spins, beautiful teeth flashing. Aupia looks around too; suddenly, she’s overwhelmed by the crowd again. Her eyes land on Finch briefly.

“Yeah.”

Josephine takes Aupia into a hug, which the girl tentatively returns. She draws back, again holding the girl at arm’s length. Josephine quickly turns to Finch, her smile never fading. “Finch. How is the family?”

“Well, thank you for asking. I hope your girls are doing well.” He dips his head respectfully – Aupia balks in Josephine’s gentle grasp, turning in abrupt confusion.

Wait. He’s got a family? And I don’t know that?

He catches her with a wink as Josephine continues. “Finch, I think we will be fine on our own. Unless you would like to give shopping advice.”

“My wife is the expert in that department, my lady. However, I am very good at keeping company and carrying bags.”

“Oh we’re fine Finch, thank you.” For some reason, Finch leaves without question. He has to know her, he might even trust her. Personally, too. But how?

She waves him off and starts pulling Aupia away by the fingertips; it almost feels like she’s back with Sera being pulled around the Outskirts. “Come,” she instructs as only a mother can, “I’d like to take you shopping, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Oh.

Aupia inadvertently laughs. Snorts, really. “I don’t have much of a fashion sense. I’m grateful, really I am! But I don’t think I need to-“

“Aupia, no one needs to do anything here in Central.” She pronounces Aupia’s name a little differently, but its hard to tell exactly how when the girl is so focused on the woman’s perfect teeth and perfect smile. “Shopping is a social event, and I’d like to treat you in a way the others can’t.”

Aupia brushes closer to Josephine’s arm as she dodges a noble. She’s being led to a new area of Central, and the unfamiliarity starts to invoke but apprehension and curiosity in her. “Yeah, I don’t think Sera is going to be doing this with me any time soon.”

“Sera, Vivienne, Rainer, Bull- oh, wait. Dorian probably will take you out once or twice, but-“

“Who?”

“Other friends of your mothers.” She speaks so naturally, as if these foreigners are welcomed family. “They’re all so eager to meet you. But come,” she hoops her arm around Aupia’s. “For now, you are mine.”

Aupia slows slightly, a new nerve working into her walk.

Josephine notices it somehow. She blinks, pulling Aupia closer to her. “It’s not about Ellana, Aupia. It’s about you.” Then, kinder, softer, “they want to know you.”

How she knew what Aupia was thinking, the girl will never know. However, she will come to learn about the Antivian in the same way her mother did – Josephine is a wonder.
Josephine and Ellana were perhaps the closest in the years of the Heritage Wars than any other members of the Inquisition. They were everywhere together, conversing in hushed whispers or preforming to their utmost in the Game.

Maybe not closest then, necessarily; they definitely spent more time together than most would, but it all appeared to be in part due to the changed nature of their world.

But most days began in a simple and quiet manner, Josephine strolling the garden in search of the Inquisitor. Like an elephant in a cage, keeping Lavellan in Val Royaux was as much insult to her success in saving Thedas as it was a crime against her nature. With a few well-placed requests, a plot of land was uprooted and tilled, left bare for the woman to do as she pleased.

She started off with little more than soil and clay. The smell of fresh earth was the most alienating, especially when in the future capital of the industrial revolution that would take root in Thedas. Many high-ranking personnel casted sideways glances for weeks on end when the project began. It was such an odd thing: in one way, the garden was strategically centralized to the royalist region, which was very out of place in the ever-changing world. On another hand, no one but the indentured servants walked with soil on their hands. For a person such as the Inquisitor to insist upon doing all the work herself was… unprecedented. When members of the Inner Circle asked to help her, Ellana politely declined.

So she worked. For weeks on end. At first she tilled the soil with a crutch under her good, solid arm, before she did away with that and ignored her companions’ protests. Her hair was pinned up to perfection in order to lay claim to some sort of control and stability in her life, but none of it mattered. No amount of pins could mask the lack of sleep layering itself under her eyes, for it is difficult to find sleep where you cannot find peace. The crutch was abandoned relatively early in her rehabilitation; the ghastly look in her cheeks remained, however, for quite some time.

But she did it anyway, and in the same leisure haste that occupied her on quiet days in Skyhold. Ellana tilled the soil of this fresh plot of land and Ellana distributed the fertilizer and Ellana collected every seed that would soon sprout. She would walk for hours on end over the same path, too and from the waterside with a pail in hand, weight offset like the grimace that now occupied her once soft features. Word of barricades and trenches of changing boarder lines dotting the evening conversations around her but she worked, deaf to the roaring world around her.

In time, the garden grew. There was sparse a morning when the Inquisitor was not out between the rows of Felandaris and Translucent Asters. But time passed nonetheless, and the Friends of Red Jenny stopped seeing her in the dead of night, knee-deep in manure. And Leliana’s agents stopped reporting her endless trips to the waterside.

Eventually her hard work was expanded, and more walkways were uprooted so more could be planted. It was done wordlessly and without suggestion nearly a year after she first began her work, but Ellana didn’t question it the morning she returned to find more naked earth at her disposal. Instead, she rolled her shoulders, tied off her slacking sleeve, willed a weak psuedohand into place, and got to work.

It was nearly a year after that before benches were installed and winding ceramic walkways were laid down. fragments of colored glass light up the paths, illuminating both truth and potential the further into the garden one strolled. In due time – like most things – the highborn and the wealthy
and the nobles trickled into the garden between meals and parties. In the evenings, Ellana would sit outside with the Divine and Josephine and pens in hand, new orders and issues being addressed as the sun faded away.

In the months of the garden being built, the war between the Tevinter Imperium and the Qunari rooted itself in the hearts of its respective citizens. Trenches were built and crafts were devised in order to deviate opponent’s numbers; it was with the development of modern weaponry that made the war, in the years to come, the deadliest of the known ages. The low-end families of Tevinter began re-writing their standards for day-to-day life—in order to keep up with the decree issued by Divine Victoria, the children of chantry were given schooling Thedas-wide. The Imperium followed suit with emphasis promptly focusing on war tactics and emergency protocols. The desperate signed their lives away to march on the front lines, well before any of the generals would ever step foot forward, simply in order to help their families survive another day as the economy fell. And the Qunari did as they did best: they raged. War was as natural to the people of the Qun as water is to a lily, and they perfected their means beyond any feasible means of measurement. Because, in the later Dragon Age, war was all that people had to hold on to.

It became bloody almost within a fortnight of being declared. Waves of lives were thrown away to cross barriers and glyphs, mounted horns and battleships.

But in Val Royeaux, the people watched from afar. The elitist made sure to take note and a few volunteered in some manner or another, but for the most part the war composed the tea time discussions. Evening strolls once discussing the latest drama production now made note of the latest headcounts. But there was a new Game afoot.

In the quiet of the first year following Solas’s reveal as Fen’Harel, Val Royeaux began to question everything. From what was known to what was once deemed impossible to know, the university started publishing papers related to every which topic the mortal mind could conceive. Some would argue it was a distraction from the war in the neighboring Imperium while others claimed the two events were mutually exclusive. Yet there were some, however, that knew the two events were not so unrelated as they may seem; in Tevinter, everything that was the source of its foundation was being shaken. Slavery. The uprising of humans. The histories uncovered worldwide. The corruption of both the Magisters and the Venatori spilled like ink through the new age’s newspapers.

In this regard, the people of Orlais were content to control the changes in information by unveiling it themselves.

With this in mind, an economic boom took place once Kirkwall’s Alloy was discovered; by all practical means, the Silverite and lyrium alloy was meant to help with infrastructure and housing, keeping the material cheap but the quality high. The Viscount of Kirkwall, the sponsor behind the discovery of the alloy, exploited it appropriately across Thedas – what he did not account for, however, was how it would be used in massive manufacturing changes across the world. The steel once thought just for buildings became the go-to for swords. Then, as the war progressed and the curious minds of the University got their hands on the new material, cannon fodder, handhelds, and more came into form. While many nobles of Val Royeaux were settled in their parlors content to gossip about what was going on outside of their world, manufacturing plants popped up along the city limits as ambitious individuals found honor for their family names once more in the manufacturing industry. Families moved, uprooting their children and husbands and wives to move closer to the plants where there were promises of work and payment. Thus the slums of the Outskirts developed.

For all of the blood that was being spilt and for all of the idle conversations being held, for all of
the lives being thrown away and all the blood that drowned the flowers of the vulnerable world, Ellana would sit in relative peace in her garden, enveloped in idle days as her life wilted away.

And it was there that Josephine found her one evening when their world changed yet again.

“Your Worship?”

The elf sat on her heels, hand resting on her thigh; with closed eyes, she looked like she was in deep meditation. But one of her brows perked up at the question of her name, an acknowledgement of her advisor’s presence. “Yes, Josephine?”

“The Divine requests your immediate attention.”

Ellana opened an eye at that and offered the woman a pondering expression – most days, Divine Victoria was content to discuss the day’s activities over their evening meal. For her to be called upon now and in such a formal manner suggested a great change afoot.

And indeed there was.

The Inquisition, now under the hand of Divine Victoria, served as far as it could reach in military assistance. The Inquisitor, however, failed to accompany the Commander’s forces as they marched across boarders once more – the Divine, Sister Nightingale, and Antivan mistress were more than willing to consider Ellana’s silence regarding the matters at hand as answer in its own: she was tired of war, arguably just as died of death as she was of life. Not only did she want nothing to do with it (not with these petty wars, not with these little things), but she was in no physical state to participate, not as she once was. Not with the darkness under her eyes, not with the gauntness of her cheeks that remained ever still. She sparred now weekly with the Commander, but that was no dissertation to her physical state.

“Lady Herald?”

“Yes yes, I’m coming.” She hoisted herself up on briefly unsteady feet, stretched, and followed Josephine to the new War Table, a room she hadn’t set foot in in several months. Fourteen, to be exact: not since the excursion to Atsikeyah, which was followed by weeks of unnecessary political drawl between Orlais and the Tevinter Imperium. Weeks of meetings and validations and processing and fights. The result? Orlais officially denounced the Imperium’s war tactics; they wrote a lengthy piece of legislation for nations Thedas-wide to agree to never again use these means of mass genocide in ages of war.

Ellana was tired.

The legislation was signed by all but the Imperium and the Qunari. Promptly, it was burned when it was left on the dignitary’s desk. To add to the insult, every other nation that signed it – Nevarra, Antiva, the Anderfels, Rivain, and even the Free Marches – vowed their own tensions against the people of the Imperium as well as the Qunari for forcing weeks of debate on them to no avail, despite seeing and hearing firsthand the foul play both nations were conducting: “they condemn peace and advocate only war” the papers said, back when they were new. Now they illicit more colorful headings.

As a result, the budding racial tensions of the world took a new turn. Ellana kept her eyes ahead of her when the Qunari servants bowed their head at her passing.

She hated little, but she hated seeing that. Qunari - outside of the Qun or otherwise – were distrusted everywhere they went, forcing many to Val Royeaux in the promise of the Inquisitor’s
sanctuary. It did little, however, as the nobles couldn’t have cared less for what a hiding Inquisitor suggested from behind the Divine’s curtains.

Ellana was tired. She was tired of these games and these people. She was tired of hearing bad news after bad news. Another plague drop, another city eradicated. Another forest fire. Another new invention. She stopped paying attention altogether, opting out of hearing about these “bombs” and these “explosives.” These days, she much rather preferred her garden to her companions and the news they brought.

It was either the garden or the grave, yet she wasn’t quite ready for death. But time changes people.

Eighteen months. Nearly two years after she lost her arm and her lover, Ellana was reconsidering that very thought.

That was, of course, until Lady Montilyet approached her with a quill in hand.

Josephine led Lavellan straight to the war room. The other advisors were already present and deep in discussion – they paused as the two entered the room, Ellana offering them little more than an arched brow. She planted her hand on her hip. “Well?”

Divine Victoria got straight to business. “It would do well to have the Inquisitor publicly voice her opinion on the war.”

“I disagree.”

“Well, I don’t.” argued Cullen, folding his arms across his chest. “Explain it to me.”

Ellana chewed her lower lip. Her brows knotted together in disappointment. Did she really have to justify herself still? “Because the title is no longer mine. I only carry it for your paperwork, I’m done putting up a façade for Orlais.” Most Holy tried again, a hand dragged down the length of her face. “You are the Inquisitor, the hero of Thedas, beloved savior of the people, and the protector of life as we know it.”

Lavellan nearly barked at her. “And as we know it-”

“It is imperfect, yes,” interrupted Leliana in haste, “That is why we are asking for your help yet again.” She arched a brow in playful jest, but her eyes told another story all together. “Wouldn’t you agree you have spent far too much time on your own? I see the boredom in your days, my friend. I think it would be wise to have something new to commit yourself to.”

Ellana stood in stubborn stillness, lips pursing together in a weak defiance.

After a long minute, she sighed and leaned her hip on the table. “Alright. What do you want me to do?”

“Speak to the people of Val Royeaux. I will begin by addressing public matter then will address the war. I want to hand it off to you to speak. It will be brief.”

“And you talking about it isn’t enough?”

“It may never be enough, but everything we do that sways public opinion may save lives,” reasoned Leliana. “The people still revere you, Lavellan, and you have not addressed the situation before. Some are suggesting Orlais join the war. If nothing else, they want to rid their countryside of the refugees. The hope is that you can help prevent that.”

Ellana came to the table. She drummed her fingers over the map she once knew so well; even now, finer details spark her memory. “So I’m to serve as a symbol.”
“That is correct. Unless you would like to actually go back out there and fight.” Ellana huffed at the underlying sarcasm. She curled the fingers she still had as her eyes glowered over the troop movements on the map beneath her fist. “And elves? Any changes on that front?”

Everyone exchanged glances. Should they tell her?

“It is as we thought it would be. Reports of elves are coming in, tampering with trench supplies and messages. There is an evident third party at play, despite neither side willingly admitting to it. They believe everything is at fault of their respected enemy. Without question.”

Ellana huffed as if the thought was funny to her. A third party. More like the end of it all.

Her hand curled into a fist. Cassandra cleared her throat. “You may believe your time has come and gone. But know that the people do not see a tarnished light in your wake, Inquisitor.” Ellana blinked, struggling to weigh the words she heard. “You are beloved, now more than ever.”

Lavellan was thinking about the lives lost under her command, both personal and those she never learned. She thought about the civilians she failed to protect, about the children that suffered at the hands of demons simply because she failed to mobilize fast enough to come to their aid.

She thought of the plague in both Wycome and Atsikeyah. She thought of the corpse she stumbled upon, gaping mouth screaming in her dreams.

She was tired of fighting. She was tired of treading water, only to have the heavens rain down on her without relief. And now more than ever, she was tired of being on the wrong side of humanity: as a woman that once fought for the side of the living, she was now trapped in a world gnawing its own leg off due to pride.

But that didn’t mean she was done with it. She groaned and shook her head and cursed her own stubbornness. And she agreed to speak.

Josephine was kind enough to write the Inquisitor’s address, a speech of moderate length and great consideration. As always, they were careful in word choice and diction; the Inquisitor would tell the people that the Chantry would accept refugees of the war and that the people should do the same as it was Andraste’s will. She was going to talk about how well-maintained the people were in this time of crisis in their neighboring nations, and that there was strength in unity under faith.

Ellana read the speech everywhere she went; from small council meetings to her new sparring matches with the Commander. She even read it while seated in her garden in the late afternoons and early mornings. In earnest, she wanted to have it memorized so she could appear as benevolent as possible to the people. Josephine helped her at every step along the way, the two seated in park benches and at long tables and each other’s bedside as they conversed over pronunciation and when to best pause and in what gaps could she breath. She wanted to be convincing so the people could regurgitate her lies to their neighbors, so goodwill would spread. She took her assignment in full and approached the matter with such a sincerity that her friends at her side were almost convinced she was well in heart again.

Somehow, she was so engaged that she stopped refusing meals. It had been so long since any of them had seen the fire in her eyes again.

So when Cassandra spoke from her podium a week later, voice ringing across the many blank faces of the wealthy and the poor of Orlais, Ellana was ready to do her part.

The Divine condemned the war, suggesting that the differences between the Qun and Tevinter
ways was not nearly as vast as their constant friction may suggest. She bellowed how the people were being mistreated everywhere and how that wasn’t acceptable, how subtle difference make a people great, and how their pride was getting in the way of the future’s wellbeing; and when she paused to draw breathe, the people roared in approval. The crowd seemed to grow with each pause, and the world felt as if it were shrinking around her; and Ellana wasn’t even on the stage yet!

She pulled at her dress uniform, eager to get the evening over with.

It was quite a feat to behold. Andraste’s Herald had neglected to attend these events in months prior, and this was the biggest one the people clamored to that season – for as invigorating as the head of church may be, it was the Inquisitor the people were gathered to hear.

Ellana jumped when Divine Victoria offered her a sweeping arm in her direction, beckoning her forward and into the people’s line of sight. Most Holy must have said something because the crowd sounded off, Lavellan’s ears drowning any sense of stability as her heart leapt to her throat. Josephine, loyal as ever and at her side, grabbed her gently by the arm.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” she tried to whisper, kind tone being drowned out by the crowd.

“I’ve always had to do it whether or not I wanted to,” Ellana nearly shouted back just to be heard over the roar in her ears. “I don’t have a choice now, do I?”

When she turned to her companion, Josephine’s soft eyes betrayed her.

And Ellana ascended the stage.

The roar only became more deafening once she stood at the podium. Divine Victoria stood loyally beside her, hands folded into the long sleeves of her elegant robes. Ellana never before felt so incompetent, so alienated in her own skin: having a thousand eyes on you will do that. She was suddenly very, very self-conscious about the dirt under her nails, about the pin that was falling out just behind her ear.

The people didn’t settle down for what felt like an eternity, or at least a half-dozen lifetimes. Once it was quiet, the silence became its own coffin; it strangled her, the sound of her own shaky breathes and her heart threatening the stability of her mortal body.

She gripped the podium, eyes flickering over the seeming-endless sea of strange faces. She had her speech before her, she knew that, she knew that, but as the silence stopped beating against her ears, she took a deep breath. She took a glance down at the papers right under her nose.

And she spoke without a word of regard for her carefully manicured presentation.

“People of Orlais – no, people of Thedas. I thank you for coming today.”

The Divine shifted uncomfortably beside her, just as Josephine brought a hand to her chest. That wasn’t-

“But you are here for your reasons, as am I. we are not the same people – none of us are like our neighbors. In this simple truth, a great difference lies between us all.” She drew a great pause, something at length that almost seemed forgetful: did the Inquisitor know what she was doing? What was the Divine thinking, bringing her out here when she hasn’t been seen to the public in months?
Her face stiffened, something returning to her. Perhaps it was her resolution. Perhaps it was her stout character. Whatever it was, it came back to her after being gone for nearly eighteen months. “Some time ago, word reached the Divine’s Inquisition that a new means of war was going to be introduced. It was said that it would be unleashed upon a small, innocent population. And I saw exactly what this war reduced these people too – carcasses that can’t even be buried out of fear of killing the hands laying them to rest.”

The crowd stills. Curiosity turned away, masking the crowd in a new, silent aura. Ellana cleared her throat – she had nothing to fear of these people or their thoughts. Right?

“And I have to tell you that I can’t stop thinking about this.” She moved away from the podium, a few slow steps towards the crowd. “It has shaken me to my core in a way that I couldn’t have predicted. So while I’d love nothing more than to pretend like this isn’t happening, and to come out here and speak as I would to the masses of the people that I love and the people that, dare I say, may even love me,” as she broke for air, chuckles rose from the crowd. She smiled but pressed forward, her brow coming together. “It would be dishonest and disingenuous of me to just move on to the next thing like this was all just a bad dream.” She shifted, hand outstretched to her side to rest on the podium, no longer desperate for something solid under her fingers. “And to make it worse, after all of the nations of this great world came together to establish a humane means of settling our differences, it now seems very clear that this isn’t an isolated incident. It’s one of countless examples of how a people consumed by want become a people of terror. These are such simple, almost primitive thoughts, are they not? And yet they seem to manipulate people as if pulling them by strings. Sheer want has taken control of people. Thousands of people. And has led to thousands of deaths.”

She shifted gears with a half breath. “An idea. That’s what this war has been reduced to. And an idea is like a person – and a person become even more powerful when it becomes a people. When all members of the community pull together for a united cause, the power of a person becomes unlimited. The change, or transformation, that occurs from the entire community is something greater than just what a small group or an individual can achieve.”

Ellana paused to glance at the Divine. She breathed steadily through her nose, as if to settle a racing heart; in fact, she was as calm as could be. Surprisingly so. But she couldn’t see the face that she turned to; she couldn’t see the disappointment, the support, the fear. Her vision was going blurry. “Communities are diverse. We have people of all ages and backgrounds who are skilled in different areas. Is that not the glory that Val Royeaux can bring together? Is that not the hope that is fostered by great minds, in and out of the Chantry? By working together, having old mentor young, young inspiring old, and strong helping weak, we all give. We all develop. We all grow. Only together, as a community, can we give beyond our individual means.” She surveyed the crowd and took a bold step, stepping closer to the people and the perfume and the pretenses she despised so. “we have before us the same dilemma as those on the front lines between the Imperium and the Qunari – the only difference is we can use it to throw ourselves forward. That being said, participation is essential. We all have something to contribute. One may be a storyteller. Another may be an inventor. Some may be artists, and others mathematicians. What we see in the University of Orlais is students changing the world by sharing causes that matter to them, working together with the community of teachers, city government members and concerned citizens on how to solve them, and then collaborating with mentors to have these become reality. We can't expect fruit to grow if we do not tend to a garden – and right now, we have such an expansive set of able-bodied souls that are here to help us, so surely we can reap something phenomenal, no? This wouldn’t be possible without us all coming together.”

She paused again, this time noting the silence around her. Blank faces rose like a sea of pressure. She tried to breath: slowly, carefully.
Slowly, carefully, she was drowning.

“What I’m trying to say is simple enough – we are witnessing a changing world. Beyond our patios, a war ravages our neighbors. I am not here today to suggest that those strangers are our responsibilities, but of a people so able-bodied, do you all not think we can do something to alleviate them? Who are we as the Maker’s children, as Andraste’s chosen, to stand aside as children beyond our borders die? Who are we as intellectuals or survivors or champions of our own rights to deny rights to privilege for those that live among us? I do not stay in Orlais because there is nothing for me to do here. I am in Val Royeaux because there is still a shit that needs to be accomplished!” she waved her hand over the crowd, her faulted arm coming up as well. She expected someone to react – someone, anyone – in the sea drowning her to balk at her curse. Instead, they all remained stonefaced.

Does that mean they aren’t listening to me? Am I not loud enough? Did they see straight through my lie?

So be it. Ellana straightened her back, body going erect. Her voice grew with every word. Strings of saliva strewed from her lips. The Inquisitor’s notoriously calm face twisted in on itself, something fierce breaking through in its wake. “Humanity, as plain as the word may be, carries great strength behind it. We, here in Orlais, have an opportunity to shape the future coming at us to our whim. So join me, today and tomorrow and for the rest of our days to come.” Her arms came up once more. “I am asking you today, join me in shaping our world for the better. For our children!” she was feebly aware of her voice growing louder. Louder, louder. “For our childrens’ children! For our neighbors and for our names! In the honor of our fathers and our mothers and our ancestors, for all that we love and hold dear and for all our hearts seek to protect, JOIN ME!”

And again, stillness.

Something unmoving like a corpse in a grave.

Something silent like the land that stretches between trenches.

Something dead like the creeping fear that rose within her.

She blinked, her fist still in the air. Her dead arm fell to her side, something making her tremble. Was it the thought of what she once was? Was it the promises she just spewed, words she had never thought of before?

She jumped as a hand brushed her shoulder. Ellana turned to see Cassandra at her side, a gentle sleeve brushed against her Inquisitor’s uniform.

She blinks several times, extended hand slowly coming back down to her side. She breathed heavily, some sort of exhaustion settling in her.

She couldn’t hear.

She couldn’t hear, but Divine Victoria was appealing to her. Lavellan winced, forcing her eyes shut before reopening to focus on her. She shook her head, ringing out whatever was slowing her thoughts.

No.

It wasn’t that she was deaf.

She just couldn’t hear her friend’s words over the bloody roar of the crowd at her feet.
She turned back to the masked and unmasked faces before her. Only now does she hear the cheering, the clapping, the promises being thrown back at her. The damned roar that practically shook the stage beneath her. The ferocity of their cries, the tremble in their own overreaching arms. Only now can she see what was invisible and impossible for her to see before.

Ellana breathed once through her nose as she returned to them with a bow. A humbling notion yes, something symbolizing her role for the people: these people that she despised and their useless ideals, their fancy dresses and homes and drinks. Only a servant bows. That, or a slave.

But she bowed. And they grew louder. She was to serve them as she would serve those around them with her dying breath.

Her ex-advisors circled her as they made their way back to the cathedral; it had taken nearly an additional hour just to get through the storm of people who wanted to speak to her. Eventually the people filtered away; the perk in her step, however, remained. Tension was all but gone, the ache in her body all but healed.

Cullen was first to speak when they were free of the crowd. “That was… phenomenal, Ellana.”

The elf laughed. “My throat hurts so much.”

“We can solve that so, so easily.” Josephine promised, coming up to hook herself into the Inquisitor’s arm. “We shall drink tonight to celebrate what is new in the horizon.”

“About that.” Ellana drew breath, turning towards Cassandra. “What are we going to do?”

Divine Victoria, in turn, shrugged and looked at Leliana. The spymaster was already sending a raven off – her third within the last hour. There was so much to be done that she was having agents bring the birds to her out in the pavilion. “We start by doing more of this. There is already talk on the streets of what to do with the homeless. Some families are offering fundings and tickets for your travels.”

“Travels? Aren’t I good enough if I keep yelling here?”

“Good yes. Good enough, no. the more people we can have you speak to, the better.”

“What about the newspapers?” She groaned inadvertently, rolling her eyes. “Come on, they have to be good for something.”

“Papers are not published daily, and they only ship so far. Only so many families can purchase them regularly. And it will appear much more authentic if they were to hear it from you.”

They continue in silence, something reignited within them all.

“The world needs you yet,” Leliana concluded, eyes ahead of her.

Lavellan turned to her left, breathing deeply through her nose. They were passing her garden. “That’s disappointing.”

“It is.”
Another ten heartbeats roll by; then Ellana asked the question she had been avoiding all week. “Do we have any word of Solas anywhere?”

Ellana stopped walking and stood in silence, awaiting her response. Josephine’s face softened as she griped her board. “I’m afraid not.”

She didn’t respond; she didn’t need to – she knew the answer before the question was asked. she didn’t change, her resolve was too high to do any less.

“Solas is hoping to use this war to manipulate people. We’re going to turn the tide against him.” They all stop in their tracks again as they turned in towards each other. The fire kindling within her kicked Lavellan’s chin up once more. “Let’s remind him exactly what the word humanity means.”

“This was hers? She built this?”

“Oh yes.” Josephine keeps her attention on Aupia, trying to absorb the girl’s response to the garden. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” She waved a hand to one of the posts as they approach before returning her attention hastily to her guest. “Things have undoubtedly changed since she left us, the lights being among them. But she loved each and every detail. She planted every tree, every vine, every flower. This was hers from the ground up.”

Aupia surveys the landscape. Over the course of Josephine’s story, she could rarely look at the woman. The Inquisitor held and grew each and every one of these. From seeds! She leans forward, forgetting the bags beside them and the trials of their shopping excursion; it was a pleasant enough experience, something new that Aupia never would have before considered finding herself in.

However testing the trivial nature of fitting and refitting and refitting again, it wasn’t bad. Josephine is a wonderful person who brings out the joy in everyone around her. And to be brought back to this - “That’s really impressive,” she notes, awe still moving her lips mutely. “Why did she like to garden?”

“There are- were, several reasons. It reminded her of Skyhold and the peaceful days of the Inquisition.”

“That sounds like a contradiction.”

“Yes, it was quite the oxymoron. But it also reminded her of her family. Dalish clans have many traditions that differ from clan to clan, but her arravals were never in one place for long. Growing a garden was one of the things she could rarely do while on the move.”

“I guess that makes sense. Did she mind the nobles using the gardens?”

“The process irritated her – the high families seemed to judge what they could of her. They all seemed to dislike the process of creating the garden, but once it was complete, they took to it like it was meant for them.” Josie’s face curls up. “I don’t think she was fond of that. But like everything she liked seeing others enjoy what she made, so she came to overlook it. Even asked some of the constant visitors what they would like to see added to the garden – she replanted many things after
she began to travel again.

Something begins to chirp, starting up an orchestra of insects all around them. As the daylight fades, Aupia takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. For once its… inspiring. The knot in her gut that she never talked about seemed to loosen before rising once more like a noose.

She’s still one hell of a lot to live up to. She reopens her eyes. People still need her. The Harels are here and elves are hated and Qunari are despised and-

She bites her lip. Maybe, just maybe… what if I wasn’t here, and she still was?

Josephine seems to read her mind. "You know, there is one thing I have told myself day after day since her passing. I don’t think this world was ready just yet to lose her – she was still so full of life, still so young and willful and generous. She had so many incredible things to do still. But I must remind myself that we were fortunate from the beginning with her and her temperance and her kindness. And this world was changed for the better thanks to how she threw herself into everything before her. What I'm trying to say is, rain makes flowers grow. We lost her, but I don’t think we may ever truly lose her mark on this world. People grew in her image. We’ve been learning, and that’s the best thing you can do for people – help them learn. Does this make sense to you?"

“Yes,” Aupia lied. Then she considers a freckle merging between her folded hands. She relents. “Maybe.”

Josephine smiles, pushing up against the park bench. “I am glad to hear it. Truly, I am. But for now, we should be wrapping up the day. Look at us! Gossiping like little old women.” She smiles as she spins on backwards on her heel. “My daughters will be leaving their evening courses soon. Would you like to join my family for dinner?"

Eating a family dinner? Her mind flashes to Vallen but the promise of something familiar and warm is too tempting. He’d understand, wouldn’t he?

Aupia relents. “I would love to, if it’s not asking too much.” Josephine hooks her arm in Aupia’s once more. “Not at all, they would love for you to join us. They know nothing since it’s not my secret to tell. You control your story in our household, understood?"

“Yes,” Aupia lies.

The Valjean residence is right on the waterside of Central Val Royeaux’s Summer Bazaar, across from the water circling the trading pavilion and cafes and between other noble family houses. The moon rises under a veil of weak lamp lights; faint, golden fires sparking to life one by one down streets. The four story building had lights in every window, candles or electric or otherwise, just like every other house on this street. Based on how illuminated in the grey evening the area was, it almost seems to Aupia that this corner of Val Royeaux is single-handedly consuming all of the electricity in the city.

The house itself is brick and alabaster and marble and surly beautiful, something extravagant yet beautiful and graciously flawless. It is plenty big enough for husband, wife, and their daughters with extra space outfitted for the family dogs, cats, and nugs. The serving men and woman to the family live in the west wing, each with their own room unless some ask to share a space in confidence and love. There are not many that serve the family as compared to other long heritages, but Aupia counts at least eight heads greeting them and taking coats and bags as they enter the entry hallway. The decorations are simplified compared to that of the Cathedral’s with a unified theme and color scoop in every illuminated hallway, basic walls outfitted with what one may say is
a perfect placement of décor. Two girls come charging down the stairs, eager arms outstretched for their mother.

There are introduced oldest to youngest with polite curtsies and bright eyes. Eleonora and Noemi Valjean, twelve and seven years old, respectfully ("I'll be eight this year!") Noemi corrected swiftly), with the same genuine smiles as their mother and tasseled thick hair. Like their mother, they are dressed in fineries considered “humble” by their tutors and friends.

“Our standards are low in this house,” Josephine explains to Aupia as they head for the separate dining room. They are flanked by servants led by the girls in their rhinestone encrusted flats.

“I can tell,” Aupia politely lies.

Eleonora is quieter than his sister, wiser in her youth to know when to speak and when not to. She excels in her studies and plans to one day work in an observatory to study stars. She is curious and gentle, soft like a young tree that has yet to learn just how far she will go. That being said, her sharpest feature is without fault her curiosity – she is very, very well read, and will call out just about everyone if their information contradicts her extensive knowledge.

Noemi is loud and unafraid and sincere in her brash fearlessness. She doesn’t care to study like her sister does, but she is committed to her own causes, like building the tallest paper tower she can or seeing just which nug runs the fastest. For her, every experience is one to be shared, and every day a bright one that deserves a smile. She, like her sister and her mother, is also quiet set in her ways.

Alessandro is already seated at the head of the table, evening papers in hand. He is a square fellow with long hair and small eyes, something a step removed from handsome but still attractive nonetheless. He has big hands and a tall stature, standing somewhat like Aupia knows a bear to as he never seems to pull his shoulders back. Alessandro Valjean comes from strong roots himself, stronger yet in their notable love and loyalty to family. He loves his wife without refrain and is proud to be her husband. He loves his daughters like no other, often exploring their studies in the late evenings together or wrestling with the dogs to the girls’ greatest pleasure.

He stands up at the sight of his wife and crosses the space between them quickly to take her in a tight embrace. “My love, I didn’t know you were going to be out for so long today.” He cuts off her apology with a wave and a squeeze, “Oh never mind that, I’m sure you were having a good time. And I take it you are Aupia?” Alessandro releases his hold of his wife to take Aupia into a quick embrace.

Also like a comical bear, Alessandro believes in hugging people as long as no one stops him. The girls giggle as Aupia wiggles in his arms.

As they sit, servants seem to walk through walls, dishes upon dishes being served around her. Then, oddly enough, they sit down at the table too! A moment for grace falls across the table, a respect in everyone holding hands without question or fear, then the dining room rings with voices.

They’re nice, these Valjeans. They talk about flowers and what the girls learned that day. Very rarely does the conversation broach work – when it does, the parents happily wave it away, instead intent on focusing on pleasantries. They prod Aupia with questions about the countryside, about Ferelden and the Black Forest. About Vallen and exactly what he’s here to study. What Aupia’s favorite things about the city are so far and her favorite foods. The people she has met, the magic she has learned. The servants talk amongst themselves and occasionally join in the family’s conversation – between that and polite questions to Aupia and the many passing plates, a bystander
would have sworn everyone was related in some way or another.

It's all so damn comfortable that Aupia forgets her anxiety. She finds herself laughing (of all things!) at the girls’ stories, at how Josephine and Alessandro banter with each other. She can’t help but picture her own parents being like that when they were younger, how they would dance slowly with the music of their generation. As plates are refreshed for clean dishes and desert, Aupia sinks in her seat a little, her body warm.

For once, the nostalgia doesn’t hurt. Not in the least.

Not until she realized how much she missed her mother’s cooking.

The day ended like any other with content silence in Aupia’s bedroom. Vallen would sit beside her, papers fanning out in all directions as he tried to work through what was and was not written in front of him. Aupia would prod him with questions, and he would answer her kindly or not. Sometimes, Aupia would have some of her own readings, to which her friend would help her disentangle. He was understanding enough as to why she wasn’t back for dinner, opting to be short with her and demand that he be invited next time (he promptly retracted the demand when Aupia told him just how many people were there). Tonight, however, she writes a letter home: her first one and arguably one of the hardest things she has put herself through. We’re fine, she writes again and again, only to scribble it out each time and pull out a fresh piece of paper. We’re doing well… Vallen and I are learning quite a lot… the night sky is so much more boring here… you have to come and try the food sometime… I went shopping today, of all things! She is sure to note Emmalyn and details about Finch, who seems the one person she’s spent the most time with. Then again, does she know him at all? She describes the Valjean family, how Quagga is doing, and the wonders of the Cathedral.

She lingers at the last line.

As the fireplace faded to embers glowing in pitiful protest, the stillness of the bedroom would consume them. All Aupia can do is question all she has learned over the course of the day, pulling out a book deep in her knapsack; something with faded pages and unnatural penmanship, black bindings and a silver lock. Magic is the sum of the caster as the sun can only be measured in the light it bequeaths all. Simply, there is no ‘chance’ nor opportunity greater than performing as one should naturally – should magic then, in all its arts, not be reined? There is no in-between nor refuge in failure. There is only what one creates, what one does, and where one goes with what they have; in this regard, there is no ‘try,’ no ‘intention.’ Do or do not.

Yadda yadda magic magic. But there, towards the end – she was tangled in the thought.

There is no try. Do, or do not.

The girl falls onto her back to stare up at the ceiling for the millionth time that week. She spies the flowers out of the corner of her eye, flowers in a forgettable vase just by the entrance to her bedroom.

She rolls over to look at them. Someone changed the flowers for her this week.

Now she wonders where the new ones came from. How long they grew until they were pulled from
the earth. She wonders who put them there and what their unknown face would look like.

Something sharp pangs her. Aupia sighs as she puts a name to the feeling twisting her gut: guilt.

“You good?” she rolls back over to look at Val, catching him staring at her with a discerning frown. She smiles weakly and picks up her pen again.

Ma, Da. I think you’d be proud of me. I miss you so much. Maybe there’s something good for me here. I hope you are doing well.

She stands. “Yeah. I think so. I'll be back.”

Chapter End Notes

Bernie Sanders spoke on my campus when he was in the race for presidency, it was one of the most surreal things to listen to him speak. It was an enlightening experience and the atmosphere was electric. I think Cassandra would pull off the same kind of crazy in the hearts of the people.

And hey, maybe the Inquisitor can learn to do the same

I'm a little butthurt that we don’t have more names for flowers and stuff in dragon age :/. At the zoo I am officially on-record under a “nature name” and almost went with Aster (but leave it to kids to make it “ass turd” within a weekend).
“Seeker Cassandra Pentagast?”
“What?”
“May I ask you something?”

Her hand refused to stop in its course of action, sliding its wet stone over the long surface of her sword. She sighed internally, but exhaled just loud enough to be heard over the crackle of their evening fire. “We will be traveling together for some time, it would be best if we became familiar with one another. Call me Cassandra.”

The asker neglected to turn her eyes away when the Seeker finally looked up at her; Cassandra sat, perched on a large stone, blade facing the fire. She glared down without regard; not angry but neither amused. The newly-named Herald brought herself low and sat on the ground in an untraditional manner, hands on her thighs as she sat on her heels. Her staff rested on the ground, deliberating an arm’s length away. It was a very attentive posture, Cassandra noted: like many things the elf did, it seemed intentional. Unconventional but intentional. It was surprising how often she… well, surprised Cassandra. The woman seemed very well thought-out despite the whirlwind she was now in the middle of. They stared at each other. They were not friends, they were scarcely more than strangers.

Lavellan Ellana, she introduced herself as while chained to Haven’s floors. She spoke it with a blooded lip, gifted to her by a guard only recently relieved of duty protecting said prisoner. She had only a bloodied lip and a cut on her cheek, something disconcerting for Cassandra. How in the Maker’s good will can a woman come through the Fade with nothing to her but the clothes on her back dirtyed? This made for immediate skepticism. The guard decided to deal out his skepticism and rage on her face. The cut, deep as it was, was nearly gone now.

When she didn’t respond the Seeker took it as an indication of apprehension so she tried again, attention returning to the stone in hand, this time trying temperance with her former prisoner. “If my memory serves me, the Dalish prefer to be referred to by their last names. Shall I call you Ellana?”

Of all the things the suggestion should have elicited, Cassandra didn’t except a snort. Cassandra rested her forearm on her knee as she regarded the mage with a scrutinizing stare. The Herald’s eyes widened and she blushed like a youth in a meadow, but she held her gaze before dipping slightly away. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to offend you.”

“You haven’t,” Cassandra started with a slight cock of her head, Nevarran accent ringing in the silence. “But have I offended you?”
“No! No, not at all. It’s just—"

“Is Ellana not your last name? Lavellan Ellana?” Her eyes narrowed, sparks of gold under the fading light. So, the Herald lied. She’s more human than the Seeker gave her credit for. “You said that was your name. Were you—”

“In the clans, we introduce ourselves to those we’re unfamiliar with in an, uh, well—” she cleared her throat, obviously at a loss. “I am Ellana, from clan Lavellan. Clan name comes first. Until you know your company well, of course.”

Their gazes lingered in the silence before Cassandra dropped her attention back to her sword; this time to slide it into its scabbard and set it down at her side. A slight sound of surprise entangled itself in disappointment as she spoke again. “So I have been calling you by your clan name this whole time?”

Ellana nodded vigorously, to which the Seeker rolled her head back to look absentmindedly at the clouds above. In the darkness, they were hard to distinguish from the space beyond them. Her sword beside her, she leaned backwards on the heels of her palms. “Well, I am not much of an interrogator am I?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I thought I was referring to your informal – personal – name from the beginning. It is a means of disrespecting the person you interrogate to put them on the defensive. But here I was doing that wrong.” She leaned forward once more to stroke her forehead before resting her chin in her hand. Lavellan jumped forward. “Oh no! No, rest assured, you are a remarkably intimidating interrogator.” She smiled despite herself; It seemed genuine at least, if not pained as she winced slightly in thought. “And soldier. I’m glad we’re on the same side.”

“I just told you I was trying to disrespect you on a fundamental level.” Cassandra shook her head at the thought, this evening suddenly one to remember. “You are thankful for the woman that tried to get her imprisoned. You have an odd sense of faith in people, Herald of Andraste.”

Their first few weeks of working together were both successful and simple. The two rarely spoke, the Herald largely keeping to herself out of uneasy but contempt respect. She walked with weary eyes and heavy feet, some sort of “mage sickness” dragging itself like claws across her; eventually, she overcame it. It passed over her like the plague then rolled away like the tide without a moment’s comment. Lavellan tried – granted, she always, always tried – but she really tried during that time to distance herself from others. Things were pretty quiet from her end of the travel party during that slow and painful time.

(No true silence existed, however. The merchant prince in their company took away all opportunities of that. He always seemed to have something to say, despite the best wishes of their company. So be it.)

Lavellan shifted her weight but kept her gaze. “Yeah, about that.” Cassandra turned to better regard her company; it will be some time before the men are back with the evening hunt. She may as well focus on the subject at hand. She leaned forward on her knees. “What is it?”

“I… I was wondering if you could – well, hoping really – that you could tell me a little about, uh, Andraste.” She kept her gaze steady, but her presentation of confidence was betrayed by the way she played with her hands in her lap. “You know, since… people call me her Herald and all.”

The thought held the space. Ten seconds passed before either of them knew what to do. “Maker’s
mercy.” Cassandra breathed. “No one thought to tell you? While we were in Haven?”

“It never really came up. I’ve been able to slip through conversations regarding her and her messages to me and all, but I don’t…” Her line of sight wavered as she focused on something just beyond Cassandra before returning to the present with a sheepish, forced grin. “I’m so sorry. I just don’t feel comfortable being an advocate for a religion that I know very little about. Whatever you are willing to tell me about it would be lovely.”

She regarded the answer quietly. “I… suppose I should not be surprised you are not Andrastian.”

“But you’re disappointed.”

The Seeker regarded the suggestion in earnest – it was an abrupt response, which was fairly uncharacteristic of the elf, but not untrue.

Drawing her eyes back momentarily, Cassandra bounced her feet and rubbed her hands together. “Perhaps. I never really considered any alternative. I do not know if it was Andraste that bid you live at the Conclave while everyone else perished, or if it was indeed one of your Elven gods. Perhaps it could have been something else entirely,” she paused as she considered a flicker that crossed the mage’s face, “but you are here nonetheless.” Then, “Is it uncomfortable for you? To hear that title.”

She responded in due time with careful words, slow and careful. Cassandra was beginning to see a pattern. “Not necessarily. It gives me something to work towards, a better understanding of what’s around me. I… I think that’s why I was at the conclave in the first place.”

Ah, yes. sometimes the bare facts slipped her mind. “Have you remembered anything more about why you were there?”

“Nothing more than what I already told you.” Lavellan toyed with her fingers, stroking the flesh between her thumb and forefinger on her left hand. It was no secret between the women that Lavellan’s memory was faulty at best; it seemed her walk through the Fade or her moment at the Maker’s side, however brief it was, left her with more questions than the rest of the waking world. She remembered the people she came from, but the details were kept to herself – what Cassandra needed to know was those last few days before the elf ended up in her chains. Green hues light up Ellana’s hand, a wonder undeniable yet without the faintest of answer like a secret held on a banner for the world to see. “But the circumstances that apply to me and no one else, I can’t – I can’t quite recall.”

The fire flickered as slight silence came between them.

“I have faith that it will come back to you.” Ellana’s eyes rose once more to Cassandra as the woman continued. “You are more than someone simply far from home. Whatever it is that brought you out of the Fade is indefinitely something attributed to who you are – I would suggest that, perhaps, you are unique not in what happened to you, but who you are.”

The elf smiled. “Thank you. That is very kind of you to say.” She played with her hand as she weighed her next words. “How did… how did Andraste rise to the Maker’s side? She is his wife, correct?”

“In a spiritual way. She came from very humble roots, first as a slave in Tevinter before she became a prophet, war leader, and spiritual icon.” The elf nodded as Cassandra continued. “She spread the word of the Maker in a time where worship of the Old Gods was the predominate form of faith.”
“The Old Gods. Tevinter.”

Cassandra nodded. “The Old Gods of Tevinter. Dragons, the beings responsible for the Blight.”

“Ah.” Something unrecognizable flickered across her eyes, but she continued nonetheless. “And as a Seeker, you’re... an enforcer of goodwill. Of Andraste’s goodwill?”

“Well, that’s... an astonishingly accurate summary.” The Nevarran acknowledged it with a roll of her shoulders and a considerate nod. “Yes, as a Seeker I serve to protect the faith and the people it serves. We Seekers of Truth are the swords of Andraste to some - to others, Her shield. We were initiated by the last Inquisitor believe it or not.” Again, Cassandra shuffled in her seat. “It feels like a full circle in some ways.”

“And the Inquisition. It’s a religious front, right? Is our reach only religious?”

Cassandra considered the suggestion thoroughly; as experience as she was, both at the side of the Divine and on the frontlines, she had never had to explain the Inquisition before. “I would claim so. It is in founding religious, but at its core it serves everyone regardless of origin or faith.”

“So we can make it that way.”

“Sorry?”

“We don’t need to make it religious. We don’t need to support of the Chantry.” Cassandra thought to Chancellor Roderick. “Not necessarily, no. However, the support of the Chantry would likely be a very valuable resource.”

“And we could be open to everyone?”

“Of course.” The elf kept her gaze with hard eyes. She played with her hand. “Because above all else, I’d like it to be that.”

Cassandra balked at the suggestion, curiosity creasing her brow in snide question. “You would rather support the minority than have the support of the masses?”

“Would you rather-“ Lavellan bit back, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t say. That was rude of me.”

“No, please.” Cassandra leaned forward, edge in her voice. “Continue.”

“I was,” she plays with her anchored hand again, hues flaring at the touch. “I was going to ask if you’d rather extend our support to everyone regardless of faith than have the support of a faith that doesn’t accept all of its people.”

They were quiet again. It was the first time Cassandra actually heard some sort of opinion from the Herald, other than where to go and when to camp.

“You don’t think the Chantry serves everyone equally?”

“I trust you know your way in the light, Seeker. But I have spent much of my life in another light, and I have seen people offered the backhand of faith one too many times.”

The Seeker’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not speaking of clans, are you?”

“As First of my clan, it is my duty to do what I can to best help my people. I thought,” the elf wrung her hand again. “I thought, for quite a while actually, that this came from learning about
others. You know, traveling about and talking to as many as I can.”

“That is why you were at the Temple of Sacred Ashes.”

“Yes. My Keeper wanted to know what was happening, but I would be lying if I didn’t acknowledge that I was partly there to learn as much as I could about everyone around me.” Her gaze grew distant as she thought back on muddled truths. “I… I think I remember speaking to many people in the days before the explosion.” Her voice rose. “But I can’t remember their faces.”

The Seeker was eager to change the topic. It was evidently clear that this was still a fresh wound for them both. But nonetheless, she respected the woman’s words. “You speak as a Dalish. That is a welcomed change to the rhetoric.”

“I don’t think so, ma’am. I think I just speak as an onlooker.” The woman brought her attention back up to the Seeker. “What happens to mages under Andraste? To people born with slight differences, slight inabilities? Is everyone granted equal rights? Is everyone offered the same protection, the same love, the same freedoms?” Her eyes dropped to her lap once more. “Because as a bystander, it didn’t look like it.”

Cassandra nodded considerably and rose to her feet. The fire was dying.

“I will agree with you in this simple truth – the Chantry is imperfect. But so are people, and the Chantry is run by people.” She tossed another log into the embers. “Divine Justinia did what she could with what she had to help everyone. She genuinely believed that the Maker’s love shouldn’t discriminate between sinners and saints. But alas her time… came to an end.”

“I’m sorry.” Ellana waved a hand, and the fire sparked in newfound height. “I don’t know what took her life, but I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“No, really, I’m sorry.” She rotated around from her position on the ground to stare at Cassandra’s back. The Seeker stood firm, hands on her hips as she watched the fire dance. “She was well-loved. Those that are well-loved deserves their fullest lives.”

Cassandra walked closer, standing by the elf’s side. She appreciated her words, but that didn’t mean she had to speak to it.

A few seconds rolled by, then Ellana tried something new. “Have you learned any more about what caused the explosion?”

“No, not yet.”

Lavellan looked genuinely upset about the answer as she bit her lower lip. Cassandra sat down beside her in the dirt, raised to the sky as her eyebrows peaked in consideration. She didn’t say what she needed to in the moment, likely because she didn’t recognize the fact that she needed to say it.

Years from this day, she will say what lingered on her tongue. She will put voice to her opinion when the masses will lay claim to the same thought. Some time after that, the people will turn on her; Cassandra Allegra Portia Calogera Filomena Pentaghast will be branded one of the known Ages’ worst Divines, and there will be nothing she can do about it.

But for now, she let her silence be enough.

A few minutes rolled by, the tension of truth slowly bleeding away.
Instead of letting the silence grow between them, Cassandra started to recount the telling of Andraste and the foundation of the Chantry. Her audience watched in eager thought, asking polite questions only when a lull broke in her lecture. They only got to the most recent times – how Justinia came to her position and how Cassandra met her – when the men returned. The fire dwindled once more, which earned the women a pained look of discontent from the newly-emerged elf. It was dark and growing colder by the maddening moment, and it didn’t help that they were covered head to toe in what appeared to be dripping, fresh mud. He flicked a hand over the fire, yanking it taller in bitter protest.

Cassandra rolled around and stood, sizing the two men up. “That took you far longer than it should have.” As they came closer to the light, it became evident some sort of muddy bank must have been involved. Ellana laughed at their state, something between a snort and a bark. “Did the hares fight back? Where did all of that mud come from?”

Varric shrugged, a tired but telling smile emerging from behind the mud and grime on his face. He smelled of clay and soot, fresh soil and livestock. But he had a rabbit in either hand. “Hey, we caught them. That’s what counts.”

“I caught them,” clarified Solas walking past, tossing a rabbit to the ground, noticeably larger.

“It’s all the same.” Varric laid the hares at the women’s feet and sat down, head lolled back as he looked up at the stars. “So now you both get to prep them nice and warm, right?”

Ellana heaved herself up and took the hares without question, setting herself straight to work with a knife dug out of Solas’s abandoned pack. The other elf frowned as her liberty with his belongings, but did not speak as he excused himself: Varric did a number on his patients in those early weeks. And their untold excursion through the woods didn’t help his mood.

Varric lied down, hands folded behind his head as he admired the stars. He seemed oblivious to the state of his breeches, hair and face as Cassandra fished for the knife in her boot, eager to help get their meal ready. Ellana was quick to work however, leaving only one rabbit to be flayed within seconds. She was already draining them of blood by the time Cassandra’s knife found catch.

She was great at skinning rabbits, something the people will neglect to include in their worship of her after her death.

Cassandra fumbled slightly, tearing muscle along with fur. She regripped and tried again, yanking the skin back over the creature. Ellana had already moved to rabbit two, a slight puddle of blood glistening under the fire’s new light. “So, what should I call you? The path we are on seems to be a long one.”

Ellana’s hands worked over the rabbits, magic flowing freely from her fingertips. “Whatever you’d like. I’ll respond to anything.”

“What would make you the most comfortable?” Cassandra offered a soft smile, her first to the elf. “I would think you’d have some sort of preference over Herald at least.”

But the Herald seemed indifferent to the woman’s attempt, intent on her work. “No. if that’s what the people want to call me, then so be it. I just need to learn in the meantime. Hopefully I’ll live up to it some day. Maybe once I get what it means, it won’t sting so much to hear.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. What are you most comfortable with?”

“Ellana is fine.” It seemed her heartbeat steadied as her mouth hung slightly open as she considered
her truth. “But… Lavellan, please. At least for now.”

Varric didn’t miss a heartbeat. He jumped in as soon as he understood what was going on without him. “Did I miss some fun lady-time while we were out?”

“Shut up, Dwarf.” Cassandra barked with much less spite than her usual self.

Lavellan was polite. Not dainty, but gentle. Firm yet flexible. Adaptable yet unyielding. In time, she will curse openly when around friends. She will slouch and yawn and burp when the space allowed it.

But in this time – in the budding weeks of the newborn Inquisition - she was little more than a quiet elf with bright eyes and a green hand. She would read poetry despite having no knowledge of the meaning behind the words. She would train with people from Thedas’s farthest reaches just to better understand techniques. She will walk without shoes - much to the disdain of many – yet walk as if each step is a kiss to the earth beneath her. For she always returned to her values.

Varric helped with that transition she would embark on. As did Solas and Cassandra. Somehow, this entourage of misfits would strike a balance with each other and bring out the best in each other.

In time.

“Did you both neglect to collect more firewood while we were away? And set up the tents? You could have made better use of your time then wasting your day away.”

Ellana responded with far more consideration and patients than Cassandra would have attempted. “Life isn't wasted if it's spent learning.”

He hummed something, words too low for anyone to catch. Ellana chose to ignore him, instead revealing some grasses and black seeds from her bag. Varric smiled at her as Cassandra took the opportunity to glare at the apostate. “Weren’t you going to wash?”

He left without another word, something angry and jarring in his stride. Varric pat his thighs and stood up as well as Lavellan draped her herbs across the rabbits. “I might as well go with him. It's hard to enjoy a good meal shit up your nose. Reminds me of a time I'll have to tell you both about.”

Ellana’s “I'm sure it does” is muted by Cassandra’s “Save it for yourself!” Varric left with hands up in defense and a coy smile. Neither of the woman were quite sure of what to think of him just yet; however, his company was surely appreciated more than Solas’s… at least when he wasn’t in the middle of an endless story. The two were left to the quiet and their thoughts once more, their peace disturbed by the inevitable overtone of their party.

Cassandra wrapped her arms around her legs. She looked smaller now, something vulnerable – normal, almost. As if the weight of Thedas was no longer on her shoulders. “You know. You don’t have to let him get away with everything he says.”

“He has a right to his thoughts, I'm not going to step on that.”

“He’s… irksome.”

“For some reason I'm under the impression that isn't the first word that comes to mind for you.”

“I don’t know how you can tolerate him. Already you are giving indications of being Andraste’s Herald.”
“There’s… a steady calmness to him. When he isn’t caught up on something small. I think he’d make good company if he let down his guard a little more.” Cassandra only huffed in acknowledgement. “Well, I will agree with you on one front.” They look at each other. “Irksome is surly not the word I think of.”

Divine Victoria, when not trapped in an office, is often found in one of several rooms throughout the Cathedral. The mansion is outfitted with several stone and brick fireplaces – eight, to be exact – and each was designed and redesigned again and again to be better and bigger and more modern than the last one. Each chandelier that survived the electrical revolution of recent years hangs like crystal vultures, twinkling and sparkling as if they had nothing better to do. The electric chandeliers, on the other hand, only glowed as much as wanted. The adjustment of a switch on the wall controlled them like a hand over a crowd once could.

Which is such an odd concept to wrap ones mind around – one that is not a mage, at least. The ability to control fire and electricity at whim: it may not seem very powerful to flip a switch, but it definitely left Cassandra thinking.

This room she liked so much had one chandelier, an electric one that was always turned down low in the later hours of the day. It spans an impressive nine feet across and cost more gold to install than it costs to pay for labor in the outskirts that probably built it for an entire year. She wasn’t too fond of that fact, and at present, she was trying to wrap her mind around how to feasibly change this. The difference in wealth across the people was slowly building up against itself like a damn at the brink of a waterfall. Before long, something was going to give out. Something always does.

She’d prefer to act on it before someone new clamors to put her head on a stake, that is. How exactly the people fell out of respect for the Chantry was no secret (and, in this telling, it shall not remain a secret for long!), but as justified as it may have been years ago, the respite of the people was getting tedious. Not that she couldn’t handle it, but goodness. Cassandra was starting to think she was getting to old for all of this drama that followed her around. She looks up at the chandelier.

There is nothing but vultures here.

A forgettable knock resides against the double doors closed behind her. Cassandra doesn’t bother moving – if it was important, they’d know to come in.

She does, however, sit a little more upright in her seat, eyes returning to the fire dancing in front of
her. The room was big and there was little to distract in the space, making the noise much quieter than it was meant to be.

Even so,

No one knocks like that. Servers or agents or otherwise.

Cassandra breathes slowly threw her nose as she fingers the knife in her sleeve. Maybe an assassin will try to break in. That would make the evening at least a little more enjoyable than lying around and worrying about politics.

“Come in.”

Gentle feet make their way across the floorboards. Too loud to be an assassin. Victoria breathes out, somewhat disappointed. She turns and catches herself, pulling into a more erect posture in her seat. She smiles naturally enough, something new, a blossom, a flame, growing within her. “Aupia. Hello.”

The girl stands idly by her shoulder. She grabs her arm from behind her back. She seems at a lost – if not lost itself. Her hair is up, something Victoria has not seen, emphasizing her cheekbones and distinguished chin. Her ears and her eyes are bright and sharp. Freckles, too. Despite the poor light, she was a vivid image of her parents.

Aupia responds with averted eyes. “Most Holy.”

The air stretches tight as neither of them speaks. Cassandra leans back in her chair and waves over the one beside her. “Would you like to sit?”

The silence is charged, but the girl sits down. She immediately focuses on the fire as she tries to cool her agitated nerves. The only thing dividing the two of them is the drink on the Divine’s end table.

It comes to Victoria that the girl has something to say – otherwise, she would have continued to avoid her, by all means necessary. So she waits, eager anticipation distilled as best she can.

When Aupia finally speaks, it comes out pained. “May I speak freely?”

“Always,” the Divine promises.

“Then I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.” Victoria turns her head to her, but otherwise doesn’t speak.

Then she does. She was never very patient. In fact, it comes out slight of a laugh. “Aupia, you have nothing to apologize to me for. You have done nothing wrong.”

“Still. I feel bad. I feel really guilty that you’ve offered me all of this and I haven’t been grateful towards you.” She dips her chin to play with her hands, something Cassandra fondly notes seems inherited. “I have been given a great privilege coming here, to be taught and fed and treated so… so nicely. And without question. And not just me, but my friend. My best friend. It means so much to us both that you’re willing to do this for us, especially when you don’t know us. I never would have thought something like this would be possible for us.” She smiles at her hands, the corners of her eyes dipping down. “You know, if someone told me that this was going to happen, like, two years ago, I would have never believed it. I would have never signed up for something like this.”

“Yet here you are,” Victoria supplies gently. Aupia smiles into her lap. “And yet here we are.”
“Well. Then I am sorry you feel the need to apologize, but I am grateful you came to me.” The girl stills, eyes widening as she ponders the aged woman beside her. “May I ask what changed for you?”

“Madame Josephine. She reminded me of something.”

Cassandra doesn’t press what, but a knowing warmth spreads in her.

*Well done, Josie.*

“I don’t want to press what people don’t want to talk about, but the more I can learn about them both, the more grateful I will be. It’s… it’s my heritage to tell, right? My secret. I have options here.”

“That it is.”

“Then I wouldn’t have this opportunity if it wasn’t for your kindness. So I just wanted to say that. To say thank you.”

*Oh, Ellana. How much she reminds me of you.* “Of course. the pleasure is mine.” The child seems to relax in her skin; neither of them noticed she was holding her breath until she let out such a shaky sound.

Some time flexes by in comfort before the Divine speaks again. “What do you think of me?”

“Nothing complicated. I don’t know you yet. I only know what the papers say.”

“Ah.” Victoria shifts in her seat – it’s not the most promising introduction to someone. All that’s written these days is about the faults of the Chantry; no wonder the girl is intimidated by her.

“Aupia. Why do you think you were invited here?”

Something gets to her, but no thoughts rise. Her lips curl. Seconds tick away. “I… I’m not entirely sure.”

Most Holy leans against the armrest so she is as close as she would allow herself to be. “I feel the same. I don’t think I know why you are here, other than sheer want. In that way, I am guilty and selfish. I wanted you here, in part so you could learn about what you can become and who your mother was, but also because I simply wanted to meet you. To get to know you. But I am glad you are here.”

The girl looks struck but otherwise doesn’t respond. Then her eyes fall and drift, something silent never to be spoken.

“Thank you.”

She leaves, as the night is no longer young. They shared a few tales, some long-winded and some simple. It fascinates Victoria that the girl never presses farther than what is given to her; perhaps this is due to the state of the world. Elves must be careful, now more than ever. But she is a soft thing, something eager and youthful, something full of life and promise. Victoria has heard the
reports on her evenings, how she walks with Sera and Qatifa, how she reads with Vivienne, how she studies and studies and studies and tries. How she never pushes and silently takes as much as offered. How she has kindled a relationship with Emmalyn. In this light, Cassandra can only respect and love the girl. Through it all however, a sharp, soft, echoed question always rings through; she watches the fire as the thought consumes her for the hundredth time today.

Cassandra is a selfish person – she could never be as absolute in selflessness as Ellana could, nor does she aspire to. She missed her friend profoundly, more than this child may ever know.

But as sweet as Aupia is, why was the world not wide enough for both her and her mother?

A solid knock against the door, then study feet against the floorboards. Victoria straightens up in her seat. She clears her throat. She tries to sound as resound as possible. “What is it?”

“The Harels have taken action.”

Victoria’s heart sinks. Her hands clench her chair. She stands up and adjusts the hat that weighs so heavily against her head.

“Then let’s get to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok so a part of this comes from my own absent-minded staring at the screen when Andraste was mentioned – I bought DA:I on a whim and didn’t even know there were previous Dragon Age games. Serious whoops. I would pick dialog almost at the flip of a coin since I was terrified to agree to a faith that I knew literally nothing about. I think its safe to assume a Dalish first would not necessarily know everything about the religion at hand either. Right? Maybe?

I love Cas. I love what she stands for and how she executes herself. I love that she’s imperfect and yet she tries, despite not seeing clear-cut answers all the time laid out in front of her. I can respect that. I know this will lead to more questions than answers, but I promise things will be resolved soon.

Next bit may feature everyone’s favorite dread wolf.
There is a simple fascination behind chess; moving pieces convey different powers. Several actions and counteractions will occur all at once yet behind a single move at any given time. That being said, the game is slow for the observer, and perhaps even idle or pointless; for those participating, however, for those who bear the intricacy and intimacy in knowledge, it can become anything but. The board is flat and polished, the pieces are groomed and perfected. The air is still and mind runs laps around its foe. The only physical aspect of chess are the dancing fingers, a slow and meticulous serenade with those across the board: a romance of a sorts between the two parties. Pieces move one at a time, silence following stillness. Silence leading to an outcome. An outcome, something irreversible.

Moving pieces such as a nameless and faceless elf standing in broad darkness. The night is draped like a lover’s coat over the sky, stars calm above. In the city, the lights filter through the stars, preventing all from being seen. This is one of the worst things about the city, this person thinks; the naked eye only see what is allowed. She wears a hood despite the disagreeable temperature of Val Royeaux’s summer nights, plain breeches, and tattered bandages around her arms. They, like the farthest stars, are not seen.

This nameless elf is called Taenia, not that anyone needs to know this. The prostitutes and the bar patrons and the homeless around her do not care, she is as free and sightless among them as a breeze. And as she walks away a building falls in on itself, one of several stories. Like a horse in the desert, the base of the building simply cannot carry itself any longer; it caves in, the creak of walls suddenly giving way to an instantaneous plummet. Screams echo as dust begins to rise, a plum of debris rising in a mushroom behind her. The shouts come soon after, startled calls of confusion and tears and fear and despair. A bell chimes, then a horn. The night lights up as switches are flipped.

Such a quick action, and so many counteractions.

She turns around to admire her work and nods to the man slinking in the nightshadows to her right. At the cue, several bodies move, chess pieces – pawns, really – put a new ploy in motion. She gives her hood a satisfactory tug and walks against the turning tide of frantic faces racing towards the rubble. She’s pushed and shoved, stepped on and shouldered alike. She does nothing.

Bodies fall into place around her. The world turns upside down.

It is time to see what happens next.
In an opposite corner of the world, in a place and time just as easily forgotten as it is dismissive, walks a man of an unforgettable face. He is old and that age is finally starting to catch up to him in this weathering world. He’s looking for something – what exactly he doesn’t know, but he hopes to know it when he sees it.

Hope.

Such a… welcomed, old friend. Something unseen and unheard of for years. He has stopped wasting time on angst. There are too many things to be done.

Chess is played in one of two ways: some focus on the board, the intent and the needs that need to be met. The other only sees the endgame, all moves revolving around ensuring success. To see the forest for the trees, for example, as opposed to burning an entire forest for one.

He bends down and runs his hand along an ivory surface. In one sweeping brush, he uncovers what he knew he was looking for. Now in dread he pushes more debris out of the way, a hand coming up to his mouth. Eyebrows knot together as he puzzles over the truth he now knows.

A breadcrumb, really. This is not what he was looking for. There is much work to be done. An endgame laid in the horizon, an unavoidable truth: what he seeks is the route this world will take before reaching that end. There was no way of knowing this was going to be the fate of this world, but he was all too aware of it. Fatalistically aware, in a way.

Something behind him moves. Solas stands upright in a jerk with a glance over his shoulder, then disappears in a flurry of ice and snow.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this is short. I also don't know why I didn't post this like two weeks ago cause its been sitting done for days now. On another note, the next few bits are gonna be in the present; I'm tired of bouncing around so much. Massive THANK YOU to the comments and kudos! Ya'll literally got me writing for, like, 3 hours on a Sunday morning last week. I love each and every one of you, words cannot convey right now <3. I was hoping that being free of courses this summer would help, but I'm working 45+ hours a week at present, my bad and sorry for the delays.
So it turns out Finch has a family, which all things considered is probably the coolest secret to learn about someone. And what’s cuter is he gets two days off once a week in recognition of the Andrastian week, days set aside for faith; he and Vivienne kept up her routine for the first three weeks of her stay in the capitol, something Josephine insisted “was for her own sake.” Now that they were convinced she was somehow set in a rhythm, they released a little bit of their hold on her. Vivienne, on the other hand, had to revamp her schedule altogether – some sort of accident occurred in one of the manufacturing factories, and she was investigating some sort of hush-hush related matter. There was a lot of whispers about what happened exactly, but reporters have only gotten the basics out of the Chantry this morning: it was some sort of design flaw, a fault in the building’s interior design. It collapsed in on itself naturally - so they claim. Witnesses suggest otherwise. The press was relentless, but since no one could disprove what the Chantry was saying, the story was slowly being accepted by the city. It will take until midday for that dust to settle.

So that means Aupia doesn’t have lessons or obligations to uphold. In fact, it seems no one does – Vallen takes the morning to sleep in, a sweet freedom that almost brought him to tears when he realized it last night: his excuse was some sort of day-long university event for professors only, leaving Vallen to twenty-four hours of himself. He planned to sleep most of it away, and rightfully so.

This left Aupia to do the same, but the hand of a clock can only be moved so far from where it should be. She slept till a reasonable hour then made her way to the kitchens, where she sat in the corner watching the circus take to its morning act. There are nearly twelve occupants in the kitchen at any given time when meals are being served – this accounts for delivery, food prepping, storage, the cooking itself, and the eye of this hurricane; Emmalyn kneaded and breaded and drizzled and flipped so many things, Aupia couldn’t help but imitate Gannon in his head dance of mindless observation. There’s no room to speak either, orders and fires and yelling and the like drowning out all sense of thought.

Then when the morning dance is over, the kitchen slowly filters out, and Aupia helps clean with the fair payment of cocoa and cheese on toasted rolls (a new favorite, Aupia has discovered in this lap of luxury). Vallen stumbles in somewhere between cleaning the oven and prepping the lunch duck.

Gannon stood with a low rumble. Aupia smiles, waving the dog off. “Good morning sleepy-head. How’d you sleep?” Gannon advances on the newcomer, his hands stretched over his head in a yawn. He drags his hands down his face then throws one over the head of the dog in greeting. “Too well. Your mood makes me want to scream.”

Emmalyn laughs, bubbly and warm. She’s chopping vegetables in the corner. “Now that sounds like a true friendship! You’re Mr. Sacha I take it?”

“Mr. Sacha doesn’t exist,” Vallen warns, reaching for a warm loaf of bread as he stands over the oven. “I’m just Vallen.” Aupia swats his hand away. Emmalyn pauses as her palm finds the base of the carrot – she moves on to the next one, waiting just at her elbow. She scoots the leaflets of the veggies off her cutting board with a precise sweep of her knife. “Well Mr. Vallen, if you wouldn’t mind making yourself useful, there’s a food waste bin waiting for this.”
“I didn’t come here to work.”

“You’ll work if you ever expect anything to come of out this place again. This is my kingdom,” she now takes her turn to warn, knife waiving up at the wall. Her blind eyes sparkle in jest. “my kingdom, my rules, my subjects. You all abide by me and my whim.”

The two friends pause. Somehow, her sentiments are true. Then they all laugh.

They spend nearly another hour there, eating and chatting and wasting their morning away. Aupia laughs perhaps her most genuine of laughs during that morning – Vallen finds it in himself to do the same. It was good to hear again.

They left for the stables, arms full of goods and books they retrieved from their rooms. On their way down the stairs they scamper past the Canary and several of her agents. She pauses as she watches them both, something knotting her brows together.

“Hey, both of you.” She waves a folder over them both, something surely secretive and valuable like a lady-in-waiting’s fan. “Stay out of trouble, you here? A day off isn't the same thing as a day at a festival. No going in the Outskirts. And I mean it.”

Aupia takes the stairs two steps at a time. “No prob.”

Vallen bounds after her, nodding respectfully at the Inquisition as he passes before leaning over to Aupia for a whisper. “Definite will-do. Who was she again?”

“Like, the know-it-all of the Inquisition. Dante’s dads. Left Hand of the Divine.”

“Ah. She’s short.”

“You’re racist. And she could have you murdered in your sleep.”

“Umm-hum. Kinky.”

“Maker! Vallen!”

Aupia was eager to leave as quickly as possible, as if to leave the thought behind her. At the stables they handed Rumad possibly the greatest jump scare of his life; they rounded the corner running and very nearly took the poor Qunari boy out. He jumped back, pitchfork raised up over his head just as quickly as the two threw up their bags in front of their faces. Vallen launches an apple into the air in the effort; Aupia’s mind reals, some sort of instinct kicking in as her body moves into a defensive stance without thought.

“Rumad! Wait! Maker its just me!”

The apple falls back down anticlimactically between the three of them. They still, something forcing Aupia to draw a long breath. Rumad’s arms drop. Vallen reveals his face, and the two friends exchange looks.

Aupia looks between both of them. “Boys, both of you. I swear.”

Rumad drops his pitchfork without mercy; it bounces against the stone floor, rattling and forcing horse heads to peak over stall doors at them. Quagga’s head emerges, and she bloody well screams. “I’m-“

“Oh quit it. Rue, its just me. You don’t have to be a certain way just because I'm around.” She
breathes again, blinking. The details fade away. Aupia recollects herself with a slight smile. She fishes around in the nook of her arm. “Sorry, that was on us. We startled you. Have you had lunch yet?”

“Rue? Rumad. The stable hand.” Vallen’s conclusion is unimpressed. He runs a hand through his hair, papers against his chest. “I thought you’d be taller.”

“Val. Be nice.” Then to Rumad. “Don’t take it personally, he’s like this with everyone.” The qunari only drops his head, but Aupia catches herself aware of a crease in his brows – and, maybe it was just her, but she swore she saw his hand clench.

He shuffles his feet, chin still down. Vallen frowns. “It’s just a question.”

“I do not often have lunch, Miss.”

Vallen’s feeling feisty, especially after getting a normal night’s rest. “Really? Tits. How are you so big without eating a lunch?” Aupia elbows Vallen and glares in warning. “I swear, you need to quit. Rumad is more a man than you’ll ever be at this rate.”

“Fuck off.”

“I’ve got some food here, obviously,” she adds lowly, ignoring Vallen altogether. “Would you like anything?”

He bounces in place then allows himself to look up quickly. His eyes fall quickly away again. “Thank you, miss, but I’m-“

This is just frustrating at this point. They’re weeks into this dance, and Aupia doesn’t want to “Alright, I’m going to leave a few things here. I won’t be coming back for them – and neither will he,” she adds, gesturing in a nod at Vallen, “But I don’t find it very acceptable for someone to not have access to food. Especially when they’re in charge of my halla.”

He freezes, glances up again, then turns away. Aupia inhales slowly then drops her entire armload on the tack box next to her. She then hoists up her books again, grabs one orange off the pile, then clears around the qunari for her halla. Quagga is nearly vibrating with excitement, and at the sight of Vallen, lets off the loudest cry she can muster. Rumad is left standing there, and Aupia finds that she doesn’t quite care what he does with the pile – toss it all or eat it, it makes no difference. There’s still has enough for her in Vallen’s arms. Quagga tears out of her stall, bouncing around Vallen as they leave the world behind them.

They clear off for the woods beyond the paddocks, somewhere past the curve of the earth and the white pasture lines. Horses out to pasture turn to them, tails swishing and lips dumb as they stuff their faces with grass. Some even follow the Fereldens as they walk past, heads tossing and feet dancing. Quagga is the only one that seems to notice; the young adults are wrapped up in the prospect just ahead of them. Quagga instead dances alongside her neighbors, speckled back catching the light like the freckled soil across a forest floor. The manicured grasses fall away as trees come into reality, bramble and branches and bark underfoot. and for the first time since leaving their homes in the Still Forest, both of them realize something they had always missed.

“Did you ever notice-“

“That a forest has a smell?” It’s something crisp and refreshing, the taste of oak and moist dirt and a trickling stream on their tongues as they breathe it in. Aupia stretches, reaching up as high as she can, then meandering up to the closest, tallest tree she can find and rests her chin on the bark. As she looks up, the creature seems nearly endless; it ascends like a dream. Light filters across her
face and the mud her feet. the bark grazes her chin, and her throat pokes against the tree as she
breathes in.

She smiles. She rolls her eyes around to catch a glimpse of her best friend; he’s face-first in the
dirt, arms and legs spread. He’s a starfish, somewhere out in space. He is safe and free, everyone
and everything behind him: for the first time in years, there is nothing in front of him either. Its
nice to see him so free.

“Yeah, no. This is great.”

They didn’t speak for the first hour or so, finding peace in their glimpse away from the new normal
they were living. Quagga ran in leaps and bounds, gnawing on mosses and berries and only coming
back when Aupia whistled for her. The meadow claimed Aupia’s weary body as she too found
herself spread out between soil and lush patches of grass. Eventually responsibility claimed them
once more; Vallen settled down, some sort of unnamed fruit in his hand as he reads paper after
paper. Aupia took her usual place beside him, just to his left so as to not interfere with his
handwriting. Today he had theoretical papers – nothing to really mark all over or to return to his
teacher, instead readings on philosophy and nature and other things pertaining to the minds of man.

“The newest researchers seem to think that Thedas is round.” He says somewhere in a time Aupia
cannot place; the day has ambled and meandered, passing quickly and slowly without refrain.
“This guy seems to think its to keep us from seeing too far down the road.”

“Too far down? What, afraid someone’d teeter over the edge of the world?” Vallen leans in closer
to read between the margin lines. “I don’t know. Maybe they’re afraid people would learn
something if they look closely. Like Titans.”

“Or Elven ruins.”

“Something people buried for a purpose way back when. I'm sure they were expecting some loons
like the Harels to emerge in the future some day. Maybe they’re just trying to keep the nuthouses
away.”

“I’d like to find one of those one day,” Aupia muses, rolling over onto her back to watch the trees
once more. “Something about where all this shitshow came from, you know?” she shuffles her
shoulders, a rock lodged somewhere beneath her. “The Inquisitor literally lived and died with that
shit, plus whatever the Imperium’s still trying to keep tucked away. But I kinda wonder what else
could be out there.”

Vallen flips a page. “When the old mapmakers got to the edge of the world, they wrote ‘beyond
here be dragons.’ But now the dragons are here and among us. And the wolves and the spirits. So
where does the edge of the world go on a map now?” Aupia sighs, arms folded over her face. “Did
you come up with that on your own?”

“Would you believe me if I did?”

“Not in the least.”

“Well. We’re in the center of the world, so there’s no reason to worry about it.”

Aupia lets her breathing control her body, allowing her focus and peace to take hold over her
physical self. *But isn't it the center where things are first to collapse?* she worries, inexplicit thoughts peeking through the dark corners of her mind. She muses, somewhat content with the thought that she will never find her answer; then something stretches in the corner of her mind like a muscle that hasn’t been worked in years. She peeks in the direction her mind yearns to find a quickly approaching body.

Quagga sensed them too; she comes quickly, head high as she trots back to her girl.

“Vallen Sacha?” the messenger questions. They aren’t dressed as an Inquisition agent, more like someone from out on the street.

“What?” The boy turns sharply, humorless state returned. The messenger doesn’t seem to notice – he’s already walking back where he came from. Perhaps they know each other.

“You’ve been summoned by the University. Miss Claire has been asking for you for an hour now. Be glad I found you.”

First he was sure to slam his books. Then Vallen shoot upright, followed by a slow and steady fall back down to sit on his heels. Then up again. “Fucking tits. Are you serious?”

“Go,” Aupia reaches for her friends arms in his frozen state. His legs shake once before he turns to her. His mouth forms a ring. “She’s going to kill me,” he whispers. Aupia snorts. “Not if you leave now! Go! How bad can it be? Just go, I'll see you later.”

“Fuck.”

“Go!”

“Fuck! Fuck Fuckity Fuck!” He starts to run after the messenger. Aupia watches him, Quagga’s head craned around Aupia’s back to watch as well. She rests her chin on her girl and sighs outwardly, something long and sad.

“Come on girl,” Aupia grabs one of her halla’s ears. “Looks like its time for us to go as well.”

They two walked as slowly as possible, absorbing what little fragments they could before the trees fell away and the smoke came into view. She tucks Quagga away in her stall, notices triumphantly that the food left behind was gone, and leaves for one of the pavilions she had yet to sit in.

Yet her mind wanders as a child’s might at dusk or before dawn, some time between reason and knowledge. Mystery and opportunity, questions and hopes. There are so many things left to be understood about the world she now walks in; what *is* in the far corners of the world? What is here, what is also *there*?

Elves. The ruins Fen’Harel’s agents would hide out in. Harels, or Thedas’s newest band of renegades and misfits. They’re all one in the same, which she guessed is why the whole near-massacre of the elves took place in this last decade. The clans are almost all but gone. How many are said to still exist? Eight? Nine? Her moth-no, the Inquisitor’s clan being one of them. But that one was long gone. And what about her… father? This man that didn’t seem to exist?

Which of course left her musing in circles. It didn’t help that she found a comfortable pavilion to sit in – one, like what seems to be every other damned social area, was outfitted with the Inquisitor’s image. Which left her asking other questions. The Divine promised to share things with her when the time came, and Aupia wasn’t keen on pushing her hosts on a matter they weren’t inclined to breach. It isn’t her place to push. That being said, not one of them seemed ready nor eager to speak about her father - not one, not on their own terms. There was no record of him as far as the Canary
seemed concerned. No footprints left behind, no whispers still dragging across mountains: he was nothing more than a ghost it seems. Which, like an itch, is agitating.

Onis. Onis. Onis.

Her finger brushes the last line of charcoal on her pad, hand darkening with each stroke and blurring her uncertainty. She had his hair, that much must be true based on Sera’s constant nagging. But his face? His jawline? His shoulders? His eyes? Everything else that didn’t come from the Inquisitor was some sort of mystery.

Aupia looks up and squints. It’s a little odd how many times you can find your own face staring back at you across an oil canvas. The people her worshiped her, like, worshiped worshiped. She wasn’t just a war hero, Aupia always knew that; but the people here seemed affected on a person level by her presence. Too bad they can’t look at an elf sitting on a bench and see the features in the statue right across from h

Aupia studies the cheekbones on the marble work – this one has her walking with a train of children attached at the hand. The Inquisitor is midstride but looking back over her shoulder at the faces bright with admiration. There’s some sort of animal in the crook of her arm; it’s probably supposed to be a halla, but whoever the sculpture is definitely didn’t research halla very thoroughly for this.

Which is just a pity: the figure is about ten feet tall and nearly twenty feet long with the caboose of tiny hands and feet behind her. Each face is chiseled with such fine detail, it seems such a waste that the only true imperfection came from the thing that symbolized the Inquisitor’s heritage. Aupia turns back down to stroke out something rough, a slightly more pointed chin than the Inquisitor’s.

Did he have a kind demeanor? It didn’t seem like it. Was he gentle like the Inquisitor? Maybe he had a quiet, snarky personality like Vallen. Or maybe a blunted, to-the-point one like her mother.

The thought leaves Aupia’s mind trailing back to Ingersoll, to the quiet of the farm and the gentle sway of the treetops. It was unrealistic to expect a response from home in just the few short days since sending her letter, but the longing left her feeling lonelier than she thought was possible.

Aupia frowns to herself and turns back to the statue. Oddly enough, none of the children look to be anything other than a standard human.

The Inquisitor must be rolling in her grave.

Right?

She abandons the effort and lets her mind wander, hands resting on her closed sketchbook. Aupia knows she could ask anything and everything under the sun about both her birth mother and father, but the people here can only tell her so much about them. A healing mage. An agent of the Inquisition. Someone who loved her animals. An agent with a mysterious association and a clear set of secrets; which, all things considered, sounds fair enough. Spys seem to do that. Finch isn’t even a spy yet he’s got his own history, so why wouldn’t the Inquisitor’s lover? It seemed a little too romantic novel-like, but not unreasonable. The Inquisitor was the reigning image of the Chantry, moreso in recent years than the Divine herself – being pregnant and unmarried was shameful in the eyes of the Maker. Every Thedesian girl knows that.

But still. Surely her father could have done something about it. Between the two of them – leading agents of the Inquisition no less – surely something was a possibility? Maybe they had something
planned all along?

Aupia rolls her shoulders and flips to a new page to sketch what she has done a hundred times over, her halla. After a while she shifts gears and tries to outline the people walking in masses around her, idle chat swinging in the gentle summer heat. Dresses and breeches are bright and flavorful in color, everything long and pronounced to give off pointed and rounded edges alike. One man seems particularly keen to show off his shoulders – they jar off his body like blades. And as scandalous as it is to show off ankles, cleavage seems to be all the rage; Empress Celene, from her seat in Orlais’ shaky but strong Constitutional Monarchy, seemed to start that trend some time after she was de-throned. One woman sports a rosary chalice snaking up the side of her face and breasts almost completely exposed to the midday sun; she sat with two other women, one in a dark blue mask with stars, another with a lion curled around her eyes. They sit and fan their enlarged breasts, umbrellas sitting at the heel as they perch themselves at a table complete with a rotisserie covered in frilly cakes. Which, all things considered, is a fascinating thing to try and draw. it holds its own beauty of a sort.

The whole “who’s who?” of Orlais seems remarkably complex. According to Jasette, it became even more entangled when Celene was dethroned. While her nation no longer clamors for her family name on a spike, she still holds power, power granted to her by paperwork signed and cosigned and witnessed again and again regulating what an Empress can and cannot do. Elected bodies now rein over the freedoms of the people (which includes these nipples out in the open Aupia infers, otherwise someone would be out here putting handheld fans over those ladies). Constitutional. Exactly what does it mean?

And the Inquisitor played some role in reshaping Orlais’s political map. Was she responsible for the Empress losing her power, or was she the saving grace that helped Celene keep her head? It’s hard to tell, especially now that Aupia has seen first-hand how the newspapers never seem to tell the same story as the Chantry.

Tits. Maybe Onis had something to do with it all. Everyone’s so tight-lipped about everything.

Creation, especially when something new, always seems to be quite messy. This new national power-play definitely has its pros and cons, fashion perhaps being a con. But beauty comes from the eye of the beholder, or so her mother has always said. Beauty this and beauty that – here, the people seem wrapped up in beauty and perception like a druffalo in mud on a hot summer’s day. Aupia pulls her bag around, fishing for what she needed, the iron-bound journal with its leather backing and yellow pages - the one that smelled like the pages should be brown, not yellow. She leafs through, intent on a specific passage. Where oh where was-

The fluidity of the creation, the action of weaving a spell, is nothing less pulchritudinous than that of creating life itself. In more ways than perception would allow it, such action bears great semblance to palpable conception, and, to also significant semblance, to witness creation endows its own euphoria.

Pal- pulchrit-

“Pulchritid- no. Pulch- pulchritudonous? Pulchritundinous.”

That’s a lot of syllables for such a simple thought. And that’s how magic seems to be – a whole lot of unnecessary truths. She’s still not allowed to cast a damned spell in the enchantress’s office: again, there’s some sort of fear for her life. What a damned shame. It’s about time she got to do something with this new life of hers. Aupia sighs through her nose. She looks back up at the statue and finds herself fixated on the Inquisitor’s chin: its definitely different from her own.
The girl sighs again, this time heavy with frustration. What more do these people ask of her before they start telling her the things the rest of the world doesn’t know?

Something bothers her, a tickling thought resonating somewhere deep within her. Aupia glances up, oddly aware of the pavilion’s silence. The thought is no louder than a whispering wind; as rational as the girl is, she knows it’s coming from somewhere. Someone? There’s something in the pavilion that carries some answer, like an old memory may beckon forward a resolution or answer. She just can’t seem to place where it belongs.

When she turns to the left, she finds what she knew she was looking for.

“Excuse me.”

The man looks up, something innocent on his features. Aupia points to the thing in his hand.

“That’s my book.”

He turns it over with a rotated wrist and points at the cover, mystified by her claim. “Truly? How odd, it looks like one of mine. And here it was, sitting all alone on this bench.” He smiles down at her. Aupia blushes as she looks up against the light. “Nothing this valuable should be left alone like that. Perhaps it needs some company, if not to be returned to where it belongs.”

Now, Aupia has never been a witty child. Her snark only came second-hand from Vallen, and she was never quite as quick as he was when it came to biting back. She also wasn’t very good at sensing sarcasm when it was served to her on a silver platter, thus here she sat riddled by his words. Mind you, few people are stirred like this out of the blue. It’s quite exciting and new to be flirted with so boldly under the broad daylight, and his accent wasn’t doing any favors in helping her see through this with reason. He looks like the written form of the word handsome, and educated and eloquent, something cursive with a confident brushstroke. Smoke still billows from the building that fell the night before; it drapes lazily behind him like a cloak. His breeches look like they’re made of silk.

This man looks down at her with somewhat of a curiosity stretched across his features. He regards her as something regal, something as if it stills his heart. He rests a fluttering hand over his chest. “Heavens me, I’ve encroached. I apologize m’lady, I shouldn’t get in the way of your evening.” Then he lowers himself, his free hand reaching for the bench’s armrest. “Unless, of course, this treasure would grant me the permission to join it?”

Aupia doesn’t know how to respond. Instead she folds her hair behind her ear and pats the seat next to her, closing her sketchbook and shoving her bag to her feet with racing hands. He’s playing her, and she knows it. But my oh my is he good looking. There’s absolutely nothing plain about him – even his chin seemed sculpted somehow.

It’s not saying much coming from her to say she’s, theoretically, attracted to him: Aupia is often enamored by people across all lines, so her standards may be low. His mask is startlingly simple, a light orange draped from cheek to cheek but exposing the top of his nose and the curve of his chin. His neck is well-defined and his forearms carry dancing freckles, and there’s something about that damning smile that means he knows just how attractive he is. His clothes is expensive, his face is handsome, and is words – well, his words were dangerous.

How are people born like this.
Aupia swallows, trying to regulate her breathing. She tries to smile as the young man sits down beside her. His smile widens, swallowing her whole. “This book, you see. It’s something fascinating on its own. One of those classics all the professors want their kids reading each year. Even though each year the material is that much more outdated, but a good read. Maybe we should be listening to our elders, they seem to have something useful to share with us despite croaking all day. You know how it is, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Aupia settles her hands on her lap, folding gentling over her legs. She actually found the book quite a bore, and she has yet to riddle a reason out of it for why she’s been assigned to read it.

The boy rests against the back of the bench, his eyes rarely leaving hers. As if changed, he stretches the book to her. “I’m sorry for taking your book. Honest mistake. Hopefully you’ll forgive me.”

Something rings within her, the first clear thought in what feels like days. “I might find it in my heart to.”

He chuckles – he *chuckles* – then sets the book down between them. “You know, I’ve been seeing you ‘round these parts recently. Are you new?” Aupia nods vigorously, then catches herself, sending more heat to her cheeks to counteract her churning mind. “I’m from Ferelden.”

His chin bobs as he laughs. “Oh mon chou, that much is obvious. Where?”

She opens her mouth, but something starts to bit her. She closes again and looks away, something nagging her like an invisible leech on her leg. But she can't place the thought.

“Near Redcliffe.”

“Redcliff? You’re a king’s girl then.” The boy tosses his arms over the bench, suddenly much more comfortable looking.

“In a way.”

He hums. “What do you think of how we handle things on this side of the mountain?”

“It’s nice,” she admits, taking the chance to look across the pavilion. No one seemed to notice this boy beside her. He also didn’t seem aware that Aupia’s face was on the statue in front of him. A pigeon sits on the Inquisitor’s shoulder. It watches them both intently, blank. It cocks its head to the side to better obverse them. “It’s different from home, but not unpleasant.”

“I would sure hope not. They don’t call Orlais the Center of the World for no reason.” He watches her from behind that simple mask of his, something hidden away yet plain to the naked eye. “Have you seen the city at night from the docks? The water reflects the lights like a thousand suns.”

Aupia instead pictures Lake Calenhad. “I can’t say I have,” she tries to reason. Talking truly about home seems to alleviate her heart, “but I’ve seen something similar.”

“Oh? From Redcliffe?”

“Yes.”

“With family? Friends?”

It seemed odd, but it didn’t bother her. That nagging feeling definitely spiked, but Aupia couldn’t ignore the heat in her face. “Both.”
“Both? Tell me about them.”

Now she pauses. As she chews her lower lip, she watches him, her heart racing for a new reason altogether. It’s like he has a shovel in his hands, and all he has before him is a plot of land to dig.

She’s the soil, to be pushed and plowed. His words are the shovel.

“They’re all back at home,” she tries, playing with her hands, worrying over the knuckle of her thumb. He leans into her vision. “So why are you here, exactly?”

Is this a race thing? He was so much more forthcoming than previous racists, but maybe this was his angle and he’s going to smite her in a heartbeat. Maybe he has friends around the corner. Maybe the instant she bits back with a lie he will know and he will hit her or-

He could have a handheld on his hip and Aupia wouldn’t even know. All she has is her knapsack, somewhere underneath her feet. Her toes dig around for the contact beneath her.

She paused for something between two heartbeats and three lifetimes, but it was long enough for the boy to catch on to her anxiety. She bows her head as he swoops lower, shuffling his body closer by an inch. He now has his arm behind her, a leg folded over his lap, and a head encroaching on her personal space. She couldn’t get away without causing a scene, and who knows what these pompous tit would do if she ruined their fair evening? All he has to do is claim she did something. No one would ever question a wealthy human, not when its his word against hers.

“Mon chou?”

“Sorry?” Her head stays low. She plays with her hair, letting it out. It drapes between the two of them. That…feeling inside of her grows like a hand reaching out from the darkness. It grabs onto her, fingers slowly prying her away.

_Don’t make me fight you, don’t make me fight you, don’t make me fight y-

“Why are you here?”

“I’m guest to Most Holy.” She glances up and away, begging the stars and the Maker (hell, any god right now would do just fine. Even those elven murderers) for a chance to escape. Because being in a minority means that certain rights are taken away from you by birth – she’s just a poor elven girl, a Ferelden. A foreigner in a city full of people ready to discriminate against her.

What was that passage just a chapter ago? _A thing is only the sum of the beholder, the witness, and the Maker. Moments between action and inaction are that of the Maker’s will._

The Maker’s will. How many girls have been vandalized by those words?

The boy doesn’t seem to notice how slowly the world is spinning. Another unexplained sensation rolled over her like a cool wave across the ocean – somehow, somewhere, her brain was forcing her to be aware of his every damning word. “Ah. Guest of the Divine.” His fingers drum behind her, she can feel it in the hairs on her spine. “There’s rumors of you out on the street. Got anything to share?”

_ Stick to the truth. She can’t tell if it’s a little voice in her head or a memory of her mother bleeding through. Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the-

“I’m here to learn. it’s really cool – the Cathedral’s beautiful.”
“That’s not what I meant, mon chou.”

Something nags her mind again, a slight tug against a faded thought. She scratches her head to alleviate her anxiety. Mon chou, mon chou… chou?

Aupia’s mind escapes her. Then her inner Jasette kicks in. “I’m sorry, but I really must be on my way. I’m expected to be-“

He comes a little closer, a world closer. Aupia can see the paint peeling off his mask. “It’s a simple question, mon chou.” He cocks his head and puts a hand on her leg. “Just tell me what the people want to know.”

His hand feels like a brick on her thigh. She’s trying to think. Really, she is. But she couldn’t recall her name in that moment if someone asked her.

The pigeon ruffles its feathers, turning its head again.

“Let me help you out,” he whispers, leaning into her ear. “You’re the new sap on the street, so I’m going to let you in on how this world works. You can walk away problem free, no strings attached. But there are some friends of mine around the corner, and all you gotta do is tell me what I want to know.” He smiles against her lips; Aupia can feel the space between then curl.

Aupia breathes out. Act out, and he can hurt her. Turn the people against her. Anything. She glances around but sees no gang looming in sight. All she can see is the pigeon on her mother’s statue as it flies away.

Aupia caves. She doesn’t know how to do anything else.

“What do you want to know?”

He puts his free hand on her back, rubbing her in circles. Aupia bits her lip, the heat in her ears and cheeks making her blood boil.

“The Divine. She’s got something in the basements. All I want to know is if there’s a-“

“Oh, there you are!”

The white of her world bleeds away; Aupia glances up to see a stranger cutting across to them. He’s waving not at them, but at her. “I’m so sorry! I could’ov sworn we were meeting at the Coquelicot yard. I’m sorry, this is what I get for not listening.”

He smiles, this young man from… well, somewhere. His hair is feathery and very brown and tied back in a very messy knot. His eyes are brown. His teeth aren’t very clean, but he smiles – again, not at them, but at her. He takes a very sheepish pose, on hand on his hip, the other behind his head. “I’m sorry, this is the second time this week, isn’t it? That’s on me.” Either he’s dumb or acutely unaware, as he only now seems to notice the boy eating Aupia’s world. “I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met before. You must be a friend. And you are-?”

“Leaving.” He stands up in a flurry, knocking over the book that started this whole mess. He cats one haunting look over his shoulder at them both but otherwise curses something low and unrecognizable, his cape in a fist as he swishes and stomps away.

The ringing in Aupia’s ears takes too long to go away; the man looks like he was speaking, but Aupia can’t but thought to his words. Instead he waits patiently, several arms lengths away.
Finally she blinks, breathing out. The hand of warning retreats into her ribs.

She looks up and into the sun. She winces and lifts a hand to her eyes then drops her head once more, all too aware of her position.

“I don’t think I know you.”

The man shrugs, something innocent about his shoulders suddenly gone. He’s set square and tall as if born to stand above her. “Ah, I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t sure what else to do, but it didn’t look like he was doing you any favors.”

Oh.

Aupia reaches down for her things, parting her hair out of her eyes. Her voice is weak, only now having returned to her. The man doesn’t seem to notice as he’s watching the boy’s figure disappear. “Thank you ser. Your kindness is greatly appreciated.” He looks at her curiously before coming down on his knees to help her. “Don’t sweat it. If I had a gold for every time I saw someone treating an innocent heart like that, I’d be a king. Or at least an actual lord. It’s the least I could do as a bystander.” He’s careful to never touch her fingers, sure to keep space between himself and her. He thinks he’s funny, and Aupia doesn’t appreciate it. But the rate of her racing heart slowly comes back under her control. He speaks next, somewhere between the silence and Aupia’s absent thoughts. “Would you care for an escort home?”

Aupia glances around, trying not to look at him – maybe if he doesn’t see the panic in her cheeks he’ll leave her alone. “Thank you, but I’m-“

She pauses, hands in fists as she swings her bag over her back. Aupia glances at the statue before frowning outright at it.

Mothers are supposed to protect their daughters, aren’t they?

The man stands up as well, peaking at her as she avoids him. “Did he threaten you?”

She snorts. She shouldn’t - it’s not ladylike - but she snorts. “Hardly.”

This guy doesn’t appear dissuaded. “Something is more than nothing. Please, I'd feel much better walking you home. Which way do you go?”

Aupia’s chin stiffens as she glares at the marble in front of her. Perhaps a year passes before she turns on her heel. She only slows as she speaks. “This way, and I'm fine…” her eyes dart reluctantly to her savior, “but you’re welcome to walk with me.”

They walk, silence ringing louder than any words circling them. Aupia clutches what she can to her chest, eyes unblinking as she tries to steady her shaking fingers.

That was unnecessary.

I over reacted.

I should have seen the signs. I should have walked away the moment he approached.
He could have hurt me. Raped me. Done absolutely anything he pleased. And what of those friends he was promising?

There’s no need for a stranger to be so kind to me.

Her heart stills at that, and she finds herself glancing at her escort. He doesn’t have a mask, so he isn't Orlesian. He doesn’t have very fancy clothes either, but the sword on his hip is nothing to simply overlook. His boots are tall and his breeches are worn and warm in color. He’s messy and there is dirt under his nails, as if he’s some sort of wanna-be knight who moonlights as a graverobber. His hair is nothing but shades of brown, tangled and curly and ungroomed like a street dog. His nose is crooked. Aupia can’t see his eyes.

Their walk was long, so much so that Aupia was convinced she lost a few years of her life in this march of theirs. But the boy seemed content to waste his time with her, and he bore not a worry in the world despite all the looks cast in their direction. She only now realizes he’s speaking to her, but its nothing important. She continues to walk, him more discussing himself than anything else.

Then her mind parts like a river as she registers a question aimed at her, something somewhat unavoidable. “Hot damn. I can't remember the last time I’ve been to the Cathedral. I take it you’re religious?”

The pass the Inquisitor’s garden. “Hardly. Somewhat. I don’t know.”

“That’s fair, at least you’re figuring it out. People here seem to set all kinds of standards. First they’re conservative, then they’re liberal. They’re bending over backwards to sing a chant just to be snide about it when they’re in their friends’ living rooms. Racism and freedoms and privilege and the like.” For the first time, Aupia sees the light in this man’s eyes. “It’s no wonder people are struggling in this city.”

At first she didn’t care to dignify him with a response: then she couldn’t help it. Her voice is oddly low. “I don’t think that these are the people that are suffering.”

He nods as if fully aware of her thought and the bits she failed to speak to. “Ah. I see what you’re saying. But I'll wager you haven’t met a lot of people here yet. Have you, now?”

She stops at the main Cathedral doors, facing the young man with an even expression. “I’m not new to how people live, ser.”

He shrugs as if the matter was simple. “Well, take it or leave it, but I know everyone in this city. At least now I do. And it’s always healthier to live a day in their shoes before judging them.” He tips low to her, a respectful gesture abandoned at the slight of his grin. “Not to assume anything, of course. May we meet again under better circumstances.”

Aupia doesn’t watch him walk away. She doesn’t want to. She may never see that young man again, but right now she couldn’t care less about him. Instead she allows the darkness of the Cathedral to consume her, the quite of the lazy world evaporating in the bustle of preparing the evening meal.

A serving agent stops, a dwarf with gray hair. “Will you be joining Most Holy in her meal tonight?”

She also doesn’t have a care for this-

Then pauses, frustration sagging and sloppy remorse tugging at her heart. “Am I allowed to say no?” She asks, daft and improper.
The agent doesn’t seem to care for the question behind the girl’s words; she walks away immediately, orders on her lips as she commands qunari with plates in-hand. Fine. So be it. Aupia wasn’t hungry anyway.

She retreats to her room, empty faces floating through empty hallways. Its only when the door is behind her that the girl realizes where she is: this isn’t her room. This isn’t home - this may never be her home. Her hands find catch on the wood behind her – something old and exquisite, she’s sure – as she sinks to her heels.

Aupia, believe it or not, is not big on tears. She can count the number of times she has cried on but two hands: the first being shed for the dog her family once had, the last being for the Inquisitor. She had never wasted time on pitying herself: there was no need to cry over what simply is.

So as she sits on the beautiful carpet, woven fabric with speckled gold catching the evening light like a thousand diamonds over the sea, she cries for herself.

She cried into herself in a dumb ball on the bedroom floor; she doesn’t know how long she was there, only that when she pulled herself up and against the bed that a knock came across the door.

“Misses? May I come in?”

Aupia nods, forgetting herself briefly before her croaky voice is released from her broken lungs. She works tight fists against her eyes. “Yes, come in.”

She should know this voice by now. It’s the serving lady with black hair and slightly misaligned pupils. She does this every evening.

The woman slips in, hands folded politely over her. “Would you like a bath drawn tonight, Misses?”

Aupia laughs. “Sure. Why not.” I’m falling apart as-is. Why not bask in this broken world? The woman doesn’t seem to notice the red stains on the girl’s face, but it doesn’t slow her down as she reemerges with a bathrobe and a turning heel. “Then I shall have a bath brought to you, Misses. I will-“

“Wait, I’m sorry. The bath comes to me?” this is just absurd.

“Yes, Misses.”

Maker, these people! “Is there a bathhouse I can go to instead?” She tries, shuffling as quietly as she can. The woman seemed repulsed by the idea but nods nonetheless. “I shall have the bathhouse cleaned and prepped for you, Misses. It is on the first floor in the southwest-most corner.”

Aupia doesn’t get the chance to say thank you; her head feels too dull to even consider poking her head out the room as a last attempt to reach the woman. Instead she focuses on her focus, her will, and her breathing before standing up on crippled legs. She undresses and dons the itchy robe, the silk and fabric alien to her skin. She walks without even considering how improper it must be for her to walk so far from her bedroom in nothing but a robe: well, she does consider it, but not until she is nearly halfway there. She seems to remember in a breeze of a panic that she’s nearly nude in one of the most important buildings in Thedas. All she can resolve to do is walk quicker, head down as her bare feet brush across the tile floors.

And she does find the bathhouse. And she opens the doors to a steaming room, one where the
serving agents all dip out in a hurry as she approaches. Sweat starts to bead across her body, effectively eradicating any reminiscent scent or stain from the forest that morning. She doesn’t realize this. She only watches, blinking as bodies scurry by.

Someone offers her towels, which she takes without word. Someone asks her if she wants a meal to be brought to her. Aupia also doesn’t respond. Soon enough she is left to herself. Her, the adorned walls, the golden chandeliers, and the steaming waters.

Aupia eases out of her robes, dropping the silk to her toes with dreaded acceptance; her fingers dig into her arms, afraid someone in the walls might be watching her. Water drips from somewhere across the fog of the bathhouse, a trickle of some sort of stability in Aupia’s slowly decaying world. Everything seems to slip apart, this broken faucet the center of the girl’s known world.

She sinks into the bath. It’s beautiful and warm, heat rising through her like wind over a field. It burns, it stings. Aupia can barely feel it. She turns around and slowly lowers her forehead to the beautiful stones. The water stops lapping against her skin, rustled by her shallow movements.

She slips into the bath too numb to think about the steam rising in her eyes. The walls glisten, golden and far from reach. This whole world seems to be like that; something amazing yet forever beyond her grasp. Center of the world? More like a hellhole.

Ah, wait. A hellhole for everyone who isn’t a wealthy human. Everyone else is trapped in the slums, only going so far as their work hours and factories and billowing steam will allow them.

Do these people dream of flying away some day?

Probably not. They don’t know any place to fly away to.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, first, sorry. This carries a bit of relevance but I thought it somewhat boring. Also, sorry. This took wayyyyy too long to type out. One a positive note, I wasn’t typing nearly as much cause my job at the zoo was eating up my time - so hey, that’s done!

On a not so positive note, today’s the first day of the semester and this organic chemistry class is gonna eat me alive. Nonetheless I’ll be spending quite a bit of productive time in the library between classes, so things should be a little more frequent from here forward... at least for now, I hope.

All and any comments much appreciated! Your support gives me wings <3
Aupia, like many others her age, is a blank page. She is a face bare of grief and glory and seeks not the future, but the present. She seeks herself in the world and to finally recognize the face in the mirror when she lays her head down at night. Granted, this is much easier said than done: the whole wide world always seems to turn on its own agenda.

Yesterday was a disappointing end to end to a just fine morning, and with reason Aupia was quite deterred. She spent the next morning still feeling soap on her lips and skin, the smell of honey and lavender quietly flooding her senses where the comfort of the woods once lingered. She watches the tapestry above her spin and twirl, mute colors waking up as sunlight filters across her bedsheets. It’s a beautiful piece, the only thing of any equal artwork being what she saw in Vivienne’s tent all those years ago.

Years? Days? Weeks?

Her palmy fingers kneed against each other. How long has it been since her world flipped in on itself? The only way to describe the ache of time is by the nausea in her stomach and the sores on the insides of her cheeks. Maybe this ‘being the Inquisitor’s daughter’ thing isn't all its cut out to be.

No.

She rolls over, slowly bringing her feet to the carpeted floor. It tickles with unnecessary pleasure, something no one could ever had afforded in Ingersoll. She can't scratch away the image of her dead mother watching her yesterday, a personification of her judgement, frozen and overbearing. That boy could have had her removed from the city; well, couldn’t he? Aupia’s a guest of the Divine and the secret Inquisition that still runs in the Chantry shadows. Surely they’d be able to pull some strings for her.

But does Aupia want to be that person who throws around the weight of her name? it would make things easy that’s for sure, but she’d be living in the shadow of a dead woman. A dead man, too. Who the hell is this father of hers – the less people talk about him, the more curious Aupia grows. Would he have protected her yesterday?

She groans, pulling at her hair. She checks the grandmother clock on the vanity to her left, a modesty she has taken full advantage of in recent days. The morning is nearly gone already, and by her estimates Aupia has been lying here for nearly three hours, her mind working against her in a tirade. All this privilege seems to be coming together to amount to... well, just about nothing actually. She feels like she’s trying to catch flies in a jar with nothing but her fingers, like whispers pleading her racing thoughts to settle down.
Its only now that she notices the note jammed under her door; the buzzing of her mind almost stops altogether. Aupia bends over for the bathrobe she abandoned the night before, walking over with arms tucked into irritatingly soft sleeves. Hopefully it wasn’t some dispatch from Vivienne, or else Aupia will be about two hours late to anything the mistress could have had for her (and let it be known: there is nothing worse than the wrath of that woman). No, the parchment wasn’t refined, and once it was in her hand her heart signed in fond relief – it was yellow and hazed, corner ripped off carelessly. She knew this handwriting anywhere, that careless curl of the pen.

*Meet me at the Rosewood Pavilion at noon. There are some people I want you to meet.*

She flips it over, the ink bleeding through and several unfavorable words crossed out. She doesn’t bother dignifying them with a read.

*PS – come with low standards*

Aupia smiles and runs for the oak closet waiting for her: Vallen will cure her of this stump she’s in - he always does. Her pause is only temporary and only as lasting as the purse of her lips; then, she resolves to do something she has never done before. She throws the doors wide and is gone within a half mark of the hour, dressed in the newest casual clothes Josephine had ordered for her – if she’s to meet Vallen’s new labmates, she should do her best to impress, right? Limit the reasons for her to be an outsider? At least her choice of clothes was within reasonable control. And she doesn’t need to remind every bloak on the street that she’s an outsider. She all but forgets the price these layers cost as she bounds into the basement. A serving lady stops her along the way: the Divine will be eating an early meal tonight, she says like servants do with her head down. She asks Aupia if they should set a place for her. Aupia, somewhat reluctantly, agrees to the terms; the girl has to realize she can only say no for so long, and with everything already going on around her, why not spin it a little faster and sign up for an awkward dinner? It couldn’t be any worse than yesterday’s interaction.

When she bounces into the kitchen it’s all but vacant – all except for Gannon, slobbering in the corner on a bone the size of Aupia’s thigh. She swoops and steals what she can, grapes bright orange like tomatoes and something breaded and salted by the over. She’s sure to pat Gannon twice, but even the dog doesn’t seem to care: there’s better things to do then to waste one’s time on something as irrelevant as *pats*.

Gannon follows her out though, dutiful and proud with his jowls draping over his bone. He follows her only as far as one hallway, the one Aupia stumbled across her first night here.

She hasn’t put any thought in that night since; all she needed to know was that the Chantry’s military commander wanted nothing to do with her. That’s totally fine - he won’t be the first and he won’t be the last. And any experience with that overbearing man outweighs any unusual magic. Aupia pauses as Gannon trots back to the kitchen, sparing herself only a moment to reflect on those closed doors. A residual heartbeat echoes somewhere from outside of her body, a tremor, a hum.

*Was this what that man was asking about in the basement yesterday?*

She knew this pavilion better than others as it was the one just in front of the university. Students
mill too and fro like a thousand ladybugs with their nest disturbed at the base of a tree so far reaching the top never seems to be quite within view. Most of them walk without thought as they read and talk, lavish clothes noticeably imperfect with rows of buttons off or a crooked corner on their skirts or shoulders. Pleasantly enough, this generation of researchers doesn’t seem to be as into the flaunting of cleavage and breasts as their parents. Aupia sits at the base of a fountain, perhaps one of her favorites in the city solely for the fact that it was not the same face as every other corner has. This has some man, and Aupia couldn’t care less who he was or what he did. There is a book folded into his chest, a lengthy beard on his face, reading glasses, and an outstretched arm with a dove coming down onto his finger. The fact that he is here is enough for her to enjoy his company. Was he a professor? A founder? Someone who wrote something big and long? She asked Vallen when he came to her, flaying his arms as he passes through a collection of pigeons: he looks vaguely like a god, out of control and serving his maddening subjects.

“He’s the one who created radiowaves. Discovered them? Something like that.”

“Really?” She watches the statue, hoping this new knowledge might shed some light on his figure. Nothing changed. Vallen brushes a feather off his sleeve. “It doesn’t seem all that revolutionary.” She notes, somewhat flat.

“He made communication easy as water is meant to flow around a riverbend. They say he’s the one responsible for the explosive work being done in the University, and Thedas-wide. He’s the father of radios. Half of the world’s inventions wouldn’t be here without him.”

“Hmmm.” Aupia stands up, once-overing her friend; other than the exhaustion that now seems permanent in his expression, he seems to be in one piece. “I didn’t see you yesterday evening. Was Claire mad at you?”

“No, she couldn’t really care less actually. Thank the Maker for that too, if it was anything else I would have been hung by my laces.” He glances around, a squint in his eyes as he tries to adjust to the sun – natural light seems so much more intolerable after spending some time indoors these days. “But I’ve been given what I asked for, and if I’m being frank, I’d like to give this back.”

Aupia didn’t care to tell him about her experience last evening. Instead she rolls her eyes and pulls at something on the bench. “Gifts aren’t meant to be returned, Val.” He shakes his head and begins back on his way. “This isn’t a gift, trust me.”

The girl has never actually entered the university before, as she was caught somewhere between awe and terror at the sheer size of the building: the front doors where about twice as wide as that of the Cathedral, which, if you’ve seen either building, you know that its wildly disproportional to the average being. It is made of pillars of brick and wood, mason stones and vines stretching for miles around. Inside she is greeted by rows upon rows of books, and these are just the hallways – lean into a classroom or observatory, and one’s swept away by the sheer magnitude of open journals and experiments and steam-engine machinery.

“Speaking of ugly things, you look terrible today.”

Vallen walks past all of this as if walking through the woods back at home, navigating walking bodies with the ease of a breeze through a tree. Aupia follows him to her best as she’s nearly swept away by this new world she is in. Based on his comment, he isn’t too impressed by this wing of the university. “What, this old thing? I think I look great thank you for asking.” She brushes off her shoulders and tosses her hair. “Josephine picked it out. I think I like the colors.” Her breeches are tricolored, the first tricolored thing she has ever owned. Vallen just scoffs. “You can dress like them fine, but don’t start acting like them.”
“Them?”

“Royalists.”

“Give me a blue moon and a sky full of stars and I'll turn into one altogether.”

“You're so full of shit. Try to check that at the door where we're going.”

“Why? No shit allowed?”

“No, not at all. This place is full of crap. Don’t add to it. And don’t do the lowly eye-contact thing you do, it will only open a can of worms.” He leads her out some glass-pained doors and into a pavilion within the university, a little square no bigger than the one she was just in. Within here there is a small building: no roof, no coloration, just white walls and a few opaque windows. He unlocks the door with a cryptic key and ushers Aupia in with a gentle hand on her back – his knuckles brush over the tension in her shoulders, residual spite at his last comment. “Don’t come here the way we just did ever again. It’ll be best to avoid questions from people,” he supplies, guessing the question about to fall from his friends lips. Val then straightens up as he closes the door behind him. “Meet the de la Mutivera brothers.”

Aupia turns around, blinded under the bright overhead lights. She is met by two shadows who seemed to have predicted her arrival: they stand shoulder to shoulder, rugged forms unimpressive and careless. A heartbeat passes, then one hundred more.

“Cisco and Monte,” says one.

“Monte and Cisco,” challenges the other.

The two are equal in both stature and expression, their bodies nearly perfect replicas of one another. Their skin pales under the bright lights of their laboratory, dark hair up on edge at almost any given time.

Once one gets to know them, it isn't impossible to notice the subtle differences between the brothers: Monte has the tendency of brushing his hair down in the morning, giving him a somewhat respectable look – that is, however, as long as he has the chance to do so. Most days he looks like there was a mad rush out of their flat in the morning - if they ever returned home the night before, that is. And he must not stress throughout the day, as his nervous tick is to comb through his long, feathery hair. He has idle hands which never still unless his work requires fine dexterity of him.

Cisco slouches a little more than his brother, his figure usually curved if ever upright. He is usually found on the floor, and there are occasional burn marks that will accumulate on his sleeves throughout the course of the day; it’s a good thing they come from a wealthy family, otherwise he would likely have run out of shirts within the first few weeks of arriving at the university. Likewise, Monte is better known for having soil dirty up his sleeves, but they are infamous for exchanging one another’s work in order to best perfect their own. As such, basing them on the contents of their clothes is never a guaranteed answer to solving the riddle of this laboratory. Neither of them bathe frequently enough to fit the standards of modern Orlesians – they bathe when they get the opportunity to return to their flat, which occurs only when they actually find the resolve to leave the laboratory in the weak hours between sleepless nights and lifeless days. Most research scientists do not function as normal beings would – there is wild variability in their routines, if one would ever dare call their day-to-day lives as ‘routine-based.’ In this way, the brothers are no exception to the rest of the academic species of beings.
Now, if they stand next to each other, it is feasible to notice the slight crook of Cisco’s nose, or how Monte’s earlobes are slightly more attached to his head. Monte’s eyes are more green than his brothers, while Cisco’s are more brown. Monte often also has an optic lens in his breast pocket, and his suspenders are usually aligned due to repeatedly adjusting them out of idle irritation throughout the day. Cisco, on the other hand, has a pack of cigarettes on hand and usually has his left suspender hanging lower than his right; he too would correct it if he still could see out of his left eye. Surely it would bother him if he was aware – now it just irritates him if anyone ever makes note of it. Especially if his brother is the one to tell him. In the last twenty-four hours, however, his world has been spun with all sorts of new faces to aggravate him.

“Why are you here?” Cisco demands, Aupia unaware of which is which.

“Because I invited her,” Vallen hisses with a roll of his eyes. He gives an over-emphasized sweeping gesture to introduce her to the brothers. “Aupia Kessler, these are my new lab mates.”

Aupia smiles, trying to ignore the obvious hostilities in the air: it doesn’t take much to get on Vallen’s bad side, but based on his behavior, these two must be some sort of extreme. The two stand next to each other temporarily, surveying Aupia as if under one of this new micro lenses. She walks closer to them, head on a swivel as she admires the lab space, eye level even. The don’t seem particularly comfortable standing still, so Aupia choses to ignore it. “I’ve never been in a laboratory before. This is really something else.”

In regards to the lab itself, it smells a lot like a garden. Or sometimes like the inside of an engine, topped off with slippery and intoxicating oils. Or cigarette smoke. Or like something was burning. Or all of them at once. The space is well large enough to house several researchers or students or professionals; despite this, it is restricted somewhat mysteriously to two half-whited brothers. Table tops and banisters control most of the space and its outfitted with several long overhead fluorescent lights that are far brighter than they need to be. Hidden under the banisters and table tops are secondary shelves outfitted with plants and disassembled engine intestines. Fresh soil is tilled at all times, and coming from a nonexistence source is the constant sound of running water. Everything seems to have a place here, which, within good reason, is why the brothers are weary of guests in their lab: the human element is an unpredictable one at best, and human error is not acceptable. They watch Aupia with such scrutiny it’s almost as if they expect her to thrash about and destroy their hard work like an infant.

Aupia inhales a giant whiff of alcohol. She wheezes, waving her hand over her eyes. She tries to keep her head up as Vallen suggested, but its physically hard here with so many chemicals in the air. “You know, this is somewhat exciting. How many people are allowed in here?”

One of the brothers waves a hand over the door then returns to the floor. Aupia turns around to see several dead bolts locking her in. She blinks, fighting off the need to roll her eyes. “I take it not many.”

“No one, really.”

This day just gets weirder and weirder. Aupia spins, heels together as she regards the tables. “Where do you work?” she asks Vallen, half-expecting him to have his own set up somewhere. Instead he gestures vaguely at a long-winded tabletop some ten feet across, papers thrown out in a mockery of a bird’s nest. The brothers have abandoned their post, instead returning to the abyss of their work.

Aupia leans back against Vallen’s table, hands behind her back and cool metal in her palms. Her friend drags a stool closer to the workbench, screeching and angry as it slides across the floor.
She tries to ignore that as well, seeing that none of them seem aware. “Um, so. What is it you two study, exactly?”

They’re already long gone, noses in paperwork and machinery. “Plants,” says the one with a pen. “Engines,” says the other from somewhere on the floor.

Aupia notices a sprouting Balsam tree in the back corner; at least something was familiar here. “Those seem like broad topics,” she notes casually.

“No offense,” one of them, the one leaning over a plant. He has a little lens in his hand as he observes a leaf; his eye is magnified, something giant and unnatural. “But you don’t strike us as someone highly educated in the matters of botany or motors.”

Aupia stiffens and exchanges glances with Vallen. He’s in a stinky mood which isn’t all that unusual for him, but it was doing her absolutely no favors. He chooses not to notice, instead pulling out a pen of his own. She breathes through her nose and focuses on the resolve she granted herself this morning; then she balls her fingers into fists but walks over to him, dragging a steel stool against the unforgiving and crying floor. She sits down and shuffles into his bench - Aupia can't think of a time where she was ever this loud, ever. But she’s determined to not allow yesterday to happen… at least not for another week.

“Then teach me,” she says.

He looks up almost reluctantly. Aupia can feel Vallen’s eyes boring into her back; he’s protective of her, and while he’s the last person to ever admit to such a thing, its undeniable. While Vallen was eager to show off his new workspace to Aupia - and dare he even suggest proud to show her off to his new roommates – he was now regretting the whole idea. This is a part of his world now, and he’d be damned if he wasn’t proud of how far he’s come. Surely he’d want to make Aupia a part of it as well.

But not at the cost of some buffoon ridiculing her.

Something of a lifetime passes between them before the young man’s expression softens – he pulls a hanky out and begins cleaning his lens. His posture changes as well, something of a dedication to his work now spread out and eased as he leans back, leg folded over. “What would you like to know?” He asks, almost kindly.

It opened doors for her, that’s for sure. Monte spoke of water and how it determines the shape of life, how all civilizations came somehow, somewhere from near water. The same can be said about plants, as this was related to the theory he is in the middle of publishing: something called the “Muddy Bank” theory, to which he promised to describe another day. But that evening he broke down several detailed concepts for Aupia, all slow enough to allow her the girth to ask questions to which he answered as he saw fit. Monte is by no stretch the kindest of educator Aupia has met, nor is he the worst; nonetheless his knowledge seems wide-ranging, and he was willing enough to set some time aside to talk to her. That alone seemed huge in this laboratory. Cisco even allowed himself the space to interject, which might be the most normal thing about these brothers with the two cutting each other off to pull emphasis in one direction or another. There is something inspiring about listening to people explaining what they love, and doing what they love with absolutely no refrain.
“So you do all of this work by yourself?”

“We work together. Until now we have not had another labmate for quite some time.”

“How long?”

Monte scratches his head, leaning back for his brother. “Some… eight? nine years?”

“About,” Cisco confirms, finally standing up as he fishes around for something. Monte glances back at him. “Piper?” He guesses without a complete question; his brother seems to understand it enough and shakes his head, pulling out a hanky of his own to clean his hands. “Socks.”

Aupia minds her posture and sits up straight, unsure about their change in behavior. “Socks? These sound like pet names.”

“Wrenches, actually.” Cisco skims his line of sight all over the work spaces, even granting himself the space to peek at Aupia again. He seems confused as to why she is still here.

Vallen laughs, rude and loud. “You name your wrenches? You two are a joke.”

“I have no justification that you can comprehend,” Monte warns, voice flat. He’s looking around, mimicking his brother. Aupia does the same, trying her best to ignore her friend’s gest.

“Is it red?” She asks after a moment. Yes, they both reply, heads spinning at her words. Aupia points to a potted plant in the corner of the laboratory, somewhere between a giant block of metal and a running engine puffing out silent steam. Most of it is being filtered out of the lab, but some lose billows collect in a cloud in the corner.

Cisco marches over, snatches it up, and continues his work.

Its… a very unusual episode to bear witness to, to say the very least. She returns to Monte with a twist of her torso and fingers drumming over the tabletop. “So you like what you do, but why do you two do all of this? Like, why are you here? At the university? Are you students?”

“We haven’t been students for semesters now,” Cisco warns as if insulted by the pomposity of her claim. She drums her fingers a little louder. “Uh-huh. But why are you still here?”

“The resourcing here at the University is nice. We receive most of our funding from a creation of ours some years ago.”

“Oh? Do you still have it around?”

“No, not in any shareable form.” Monte ruffles his hair and leans back forward. “Plus it’s just something to pay the bills. There’s no need to glorify it. We do what we need to to get our research done.”

Aupia turns around to meet Vallen’s weary eyes and arched brows; it’s always reassuring when people aren’t forthcoming, but he could be very well telling the truth. If it’s a source of income, people here seem willing to do just about anything. And they don’t seem… that likely to be dealing in illegal activities. The conversation could have very well been over, but Monte spoke once more, paused over his paper. “Discovery is not just for the sake of discovery, it’s for humanity’s sake. I for one would like to think that what we do helps people.”

The comment alludes to something greater at play, but even Vallen seems stirred by that. His lips purse as he considers his labmate. “You almost sound wise.”
“Is it so hard to believe we have a good reason for what we do?” comes Cisco’s voice full of spite.

“Noble intentions aren’t so bad,” Aupia says, standing up as if to get herself between her friend and the voice hidden from view. Monte nods, his eyes on Aupia. He noticed the subtly in her movement – neither of them may be good with people, but Monte will be damned before anyone claims he doesn’t know how to read what’s in front of him. “Agreed. We live in an age where intentions define you. Might as well have the right ones.”

She nods, and the hackles on Vallen’s heart goes back down.

This is going to be a longgggg year. Year? Week? Month? Who knows how long this will work out. Aupia turns back to her friend, settling down against his workspace. “You don’t research what they research – I don’t think I’m being that bold when I say you have, well, absolutely nothing to do with what they do. Then why are you here with them?”

Vallen sits down stiffly, eyes still on Cisco hidden around the corner. “It was the cheapest option. Claire will pay for one twelfth of their rent for the lab if I stay here.” Aupia huffs as she leaves through his pages. “One twelfth? Doesn’t sound like much.”

“Every little bit helps,” says Monte, wise and indifferent.

“She was stubborn. We couldn’t get it any higher,” says Cisco, bitter and tight.

The Fereldens exchange glances one last time before Aupia smiles and shrugs. “Well, I’ve been here long enough. I should probably get out of your hair.”

“Agreed.” Vallen stands up hastily, checking the lab clock. “I’ll show you out.”

They pause at the door though, Aupia’s hand on the wall. From here she can see both of the brothers easily. For some reason, their hostilities seem remarkably akin to Vallen’s – if the three of them can work through the kinks, she’s sure she’ll be seeing more of them. Who knows, they could even become friends.

“It was nice meeting both of you,” Aupia chimes, trying to smile in earnest. “Thank you for taking your time out of your morning to talk to me.”

They both pause for a drag far longer than it should have lasted. The brothers exchange glances. “Is it morning already?” asks Cisco, pulling goggles off his brow.

Aupia’s fingers worry against her palm but otherwise she doesn’t speak. They both jump up and make their ways to the back of the laboratory – they huddle around the silent engine billowing into the room, pens and papers being shuffled around. One raises a hand in a dismissive wave, to which Aupia waves back despite knowing all too well neither of them saw it.

“Come on,” says Val, tugging gently at her elbow. The smile stays on her lips, gentle but true.

There’s something to them that seems remarkably familiar.

He weaves her through backways between corridors that just barely touch, somehow ending up back in the pavilion he first retrieved her from. “I think they’re nice,” Aupia finally breathes, trying to keep up. Her friend seems eager to get rid of her.

“I think they’re garbage, but they’ll do for now.”

“I think your problem is you’re too like them.”
“I’m better than them is what this is. And I’ve never been better than anyone before in my life, so that’s saying something.”

She laughs at that and shakes her head. “You know, people aren’t inherently bad. You might want to reconsider your approach on handling your first interactions with people. Treat strangers a little kinder.”

“Do you honestly expect me to waste my time and energy like that.”

He left soon after that, something about a femoral artery dissection in the mark of an hour. There’s several papers he has to finish grading up before he is capable of showing his face to Claire (her students have had to do some sort of analysis on… blood? It’s hard to follow when he’s speaking in such a hurry). So she wishes him good luck, as it’s the best thing she can do to help. Vallen groans, his universal sign of acceptance and love. So Aupia sits, once more on the bench she started her afternoon at. There are less students milling around now, but there are more pigeons and gulls taking command of the area. It’s calm. Soothing. Aupia releases the breath she didn’t know she was holding and leans back – yeah, this looks like a good thing for Val. If they don’t work out in the long run, at least he’ll be working on his management skills.

She couldn’t have been there long before something washes over her like a warm breeze. She wasn’t sure what she was looking for, but she felt more in tune to the agitation registering deep in her gut; it was similar to what came yesterday, although the tightness feels less like an anxiety attack and more like a call to arms. The girl sits upright, unsure and tense. Something, or someone, was here. But who? Where?

Then something of a nagging starts to itch the left side of her head, a prodding that bounces off her. Its more obnoxious and befuddling than anything else – and somewhat vandalizing, as this is something… alien, to say the very least – but not much more than that. Then it comes back, then again. Then again.

What in Andraste’s holy tits-? She looks ahead and somewhere to the left, an inkling of a thought keeping her attention. Her eyes are fixated, but her head cranes back a little for support from behind. “Val? Val? You still here?”

Of course he wasn’t.

Of course he isn’t.

No one’s around except for the ghost rattling around in her head and the tight feeling in her gut. A bird flew by, and she could hear something rustling around in the trees to her right. Was that tight feeling a warning to the… knocking on her skull?

Then she sees it.

It’s almost directly above her.

“Why can’t I speak to you?”

Hol-holy shit! It sounds… normal? Like a person!

The creature – a legged snake? A salamander? Some sort of hairless mammal? - snakes around, feathery head-appendages wiggling in a nonexistent breeze. Small, webbed toes flex and curl as legs alternate between gaping strokes – something the creature would likely do in a lake to swim – and pressing flat against its body, the most stream-liked form it could take on. Its tail flutters in easy back-and-forth strokes, body humming as it rises and falls, curling around Aupia with
inquisitive eyes and a cocked head.

Aupia, on the other hand, is just as mystified as she is concerned. Aupia frowns as she pushes the creature away, a hand not strong enough to bat away its entire body, but enough to press firmly into the creature’s head. She chooses to believe it was her mistake and nothing more – animals don’t speak, no matter how weird a stray pet may be.

But her effort came to no avail; the salamander resisted her touch, instead leaning into her and taking a remarkably insulted look as Aupia leaned away from it. When the girl stands up, the creature came up closer to her face, insulted yet, body bobbing as its tail breezes easy strokes behind it.

This is ridiculous. Yet… charming somehow. Simply put the matter is a mystery to Aupia, but she watches the creature as best she could without freaking out. Is this an amphibian native to Orlais? She hasn’t noticed any in the waters. It looks somewhat comical, perhaps it’s a mage’s pet.

It cocks its head, still looking upset. It spoke again but caught the girl off-guard, so all Aupia could do was stare blankly back. Then it nose-dives for the earth in a puff of ribbon-esk smoke, long appendages of dark space swirling around it until its pink flesh was gone.

And what stood in its place was a girl.

Aupia closes her gaping mouth.

She couldn’t have been older than sixteen with her cheeks glowing in a slightly childish light. Knots of untamed hair falls to her shoulders, her bangs braided back over the top of her head as it trails long enough to rest between her shoulder blades: so, lots of hair. Oddly enough (now that Aupia thinks about it), the salamander had its head… things (external gills?) the same shade of bright red. And it’s something vivid like the color in her eyes, bright lights and unabashed freckles. Such freckles can only compare to stars in an open sky.

The girl straightens up, standing to her full height: which wasn’t much of a height mind you, but with all things considered Aupia wasn’t about to judge her for that. her stance is wide and her hips are set strong, something curved and undoubtedly beautiful under the many layers of furs. She lacks the narrow bones of an elf, but she isn’t built like Vallen. More like Jasette. The head of a staff pokes out from behind her and her thick layers, and Aupia can only think of one thing: Avvar.

Did this girl just-?

The girl cocks her head not unlike the salamander did just moments ago – she purses her lips as the freckles on her nose wrinkle in thought. She asks her question for a third time. “Why can’t I talk to you?”

Aupia is so taken back she doesn’t know how to respond: so, without fail, she embarrasses herself with a squeak. “Excuse me?”

“Why can’t I talk to you?”

“I’m-“ Aupia’s attention darts around, nearly desperate for some sort of answer to her confusion to be lying in the bushes around her. No one seems to have noticed the creature before, nor are they particularly concerned by the Avvar hordsgirl hanging around the elf. Then again, these are university students: they probably wouldn’t have noticed if someone was murdered. “-I’m sorry, what?”

“I can talk to everyone. Why can’t I talk to you?” her voice carries a slightly distinguishable
accent, something Aupia can’t quite put her finger on. But instead of being critical, Aupia settles for trying to be kind. She offers the girl a sympathetic smile. At least she can pretend this all is something normal, right? “Isn’t that what we’re doing right now?”

“No, I can’t reach your mind. Why is that?” Her eyes flicker to her left. Aupia mimics her to glance to her right, half-expecting to see a headless horse or something. It would make sense, given how this day is coming together. Instead the girl snaps in her face bringing Aupia back around with hasty recall. She asks simply, her voice profound. “Are you a mage?”

Aupia bits down. She’s unfamiliar with the stance the Avvar take with their mages, but snapping her hand in front of Aupia’s face can’t be a good sign. Instead she does what she’s noted Sera to do – she twists the conversation. “I’m going to be honest, I don’t know what you want from me.”

The girl is unfazed. “Just to understand.”

“Then use your words.”

“You’re a mage. You have magic. But I can’t sense you. My friend can’t see you, but you’re right in front of me. You’re not a spirit, you’re a person.”

Aupia shifts her weight. How in Thedas- and what is she talking about?

No, wait. She plays it like Vallen. Tries to, at least. “You can’t expect something of me if you can’t explain what’s going on here,” she notes coolly.

“Look, I gotta go.” she leans around Aupia; she seems to expect the answer to appear behind her. “But I want to know what makes you so special. How about we meet up later? I can explain what I can, and you explain what you can.” Since she doesn’t get a response, the girl continues with a cock of her head. “I can even teach you what I did! Since you’re acting like you’ve never seen shapeshifting before. So I’ll show you how to shapeshift, and you’ll show me how to mask myself like that. Easy peasy.”

A trade. Aupia registers that in the fog of her mind. Her heart skips a beat as she thinks of what to say. “Is that all your people have?”

The redhead takes a moment to understand her meaning, but she takes it with a smile. “At the moment, maybe. Maybe not. But that’s all I have.” Again, her eyes dart to the side and she starts to walk away. “Look, I have to go, but I’ll be back here tonight. Sunset. If you’ll tell me how you do what you do, then I’ll tell you what I do. A promise is a promise!”

“Wait!” She’s jogging backwards, hair bouncing ridiculously off her shoulders – even so far away, Aupia could see the smile curling over the girl’s freckles. “Who are you?”

“What?” She doesn’t stop jogging, instead cupping an ear. Aupia speaks up, oblivious to the university heads turning towards her. “Who are you!”

“I’m Farah! Farah Karmdotten! From Blackhawk Hold!” She turns facefront, smiling one last time over her shoulder with a wave. “And it was nice to meet you!” With that she was gone in a puff of ribbons, hands and feet replaced by webbed toes. She darts and wiggles through people before ascending to scale rooftops, some far destination in mind.

How... odd.
That was probably the first interaction Aupia’s had in this city with someone so… profound. So animated. So lively. She seems sweet, unafraid of being kind and naturally so.

No. So wild. So ridiculous. This must have been some sort of test sent by Vivienne.

Either way, she was willing to teach Aupia how to shapeshift – how many opportunities are thrown at your face like that?!

Something inside of her, something strong and resound, seemed to have opinion here. She shouldn’t waste her time with someone so childlike and she shouldn’t be trying to do any sort of trade that girl – hell, that stranger - might offer. Vivienne is her teacher, and as testing as it is, she is an excellent mage: she must know what she’s doing. Doing anything outside of her unspecified lesson plan was plain dumb. It’s dangerous she would scold day after day after day. It’s wrong she would threaten. Don’t waste my time with this she would demand.

Aupia sits down, fingers fishing in the space beside her for the handle of the wooden bench. No one should tell me how to live. Vivienne included… right?

But that’s not what she’s doing a part of her bits back. She’s teaching me. Keeping me safe from the danger lurking inside of me. Magic isn't knowledge – knowledge you can weave into a lifestyle. Like Vallen and Cisco and Monte. The Fade isn't like that, it must be kept at bay and worked around: learn to live with it and one might just live.

She thinks of the papers her parent would talk to her about when she was young and soft and the world was just right. When Aupia first came into her magic, her parents didn’t know what to do; but as no immediate danger manifested before them they settled her down at night with stories in the papers and tales shared on the red rocks across the narrow sea. Her parent would be on either side of her or she would sit on one of their laps, they were so tall back then, so big and so all-knowing. They would show her pictures and read what was published just weeks earlier.

Magic is dangerous they would say, magic can hurt you and those around you.

Even the Druffalo? Aupia would ask.

Yes, they said with a pat on her head or a tug of her pigtail. Even the druffalo.

So, simply put, Aupia didn’t touch the well dwelling deep within her. It was easy enough to avoid it, so she might as well keep herself. She would look at those pictures with such earnest empathy she didn’t know anything else other than the resolve to put as much space between her and her fingertips as possible.

When magic came back to zap her on the few instances she used it on purpose, she would dig up those old papers and just look at those blurry pictures. Usually it was late at night, well after the hour her parents retreated to their room. She was alone to her room and the blank space in her mind.

Magic is dangerous the papers would read. Not these people, not the scars they bear on their backs nor the emblems burning on their brows. It’s the magic within them, and we, as a people, must fight that evil together and keep it in check.

Aupia would stare at those blurry faces with her knees folded up to her nose. She looked at those eyes for what felt like years, the desolate, the defeated. The candlelight would fade and die, and she would promise to never use magic again. Evenings like this happened at least a dozen times, each leaving Aupia with furious, confused tears and dreamless sleep.
Then of course, Vallen would prod her and they used it on a few instances. But never nothing more, and it was always with whatever Aupia was comfortable with, a comfort that began nonexistent slowly budded like a stubborn weed. Magic became a secret part of her life that she would try to avoid if possible, yet she came to never fear it – she hardly acknowledged it for it encompassed so little of her life on the farm. So it was not a serious matter. It was not something to define her.

Now that magic’s in front of her nose like a carrot on a stick, she could only be so curious. She was in the capitol because the Inquisitor’s friends wanted to keep her safe, right? They want her to have a proper education. That, here, includes magic. The Avvar are here because they have some safe means of teaching magic to their children. The university is trying to find a way to understand their methods. The College of Magi is doing the same. Surely that should be some guarantee of the girl.

Aupia couldn’t have sat there for more than an hour or so, weighing the potential against her fears and what she knew.

Ultimately she crossed Val Royeaux for Sera and Qat’s house, settling on the answer she knew all along: the course she was on with the Iron Woman was a privileged one. She was wrong to toss that opportunity aside. Forget the Canary’s warning – Aupia needs a distraction.

Sera and Qat proved to be just that: when Aupia arrived, they immediately began throwing knives around as if it was some childish pent-up need. Five minutes later, Aupia began working with Sera on fighting with knives; ultimately, she left exhausted and bitter. She couldn’t get a single hit in on the street elf. Qat was no softer as a teacher.

The way they flew through topic after topic seemed… not childish, but impulsive. And broken. And anxious. Like there was some hidden agenda at the end of their day that they couldn’t share. They talked about everything from buildings to rocks you find in streams to Harels and cats around the corner. The color of the sky seemed to be some sort of sport between them, to which Aupia’s “I don’t know” somehow settled their marriage-long argument of blue versus grey. Sure it was a stress relief, but Aupia wasn’t in the mood to argue against prying their reasons apart: these two are hard to reason with, now more than ever. Even Qat seemed to have some sort of cloud about her. Nonetheless Aupia was still catching herself stepping over thoughts of that girl with the freckles. In the end, she was grateful for their time with her but left tired and somewhat knotted up.

She returned in time for the Divine’s early dinner, to which she was directed to one of the longest tables she is sure exists in the world. She couldn’t tell what tree it came from – the lighting was too poor. She couldn’t tell who else was in the room for the very same reason; people walking all around, setting two places on opposite ends of this far reaching table and one somewhere in the middle. Surely there is a more productive means of putting a few plates down than constantly walking in a clockwise direction. Spin spin spin they go, rotating around the table in the same damning direction as every other moving body. None of the serving agents speak either, so maybe this is what they want: if everyone goes in the same direction, no one bumps into anyone else. But… this is still enabling an earie silence across the room, where the only sounds are the floorboards echoing each step these servants take.

All it is is awkward. And unnecessary. And weird to watch.

Josephine walks into the room with her head down and nose in some paperwork; she startles at the sight of Aupia, calming herself instantaneously with a joyous smile and dropped hands. “Aupia. I wasn’t sure if you would be joining us.”
The girl shuffles her feet; she’s been standing in the corner of the room for nearly a half-mark now, watching these people like ants working up and down a tree. “I thought it was just the Divine,” she admits quietly, trying to smile back. Having Madame Valjean around will make things all the less stressful, and her inherent kindness is sure to dispel the atmosphere Aupia is breathing in. But now she’s curious; isn’t dinner with Most Holy something of a rarity? She’d always assumed only the desperate and the well-paying were ever given the privilege. Surely this meal would be awkward too… unless Josephine dispels that? Somehow?

Is the Divine even allowed to be informal?

Most Holy came last, three agents flanking her with something of an intensity on all their brows. They speak in hushed whispers on matters Aupia’s curiosity can only catch so much of: something to do with that building that fell. Something to do with where do we put the remaining explosives once they have been examined? And are they safe to dismantle? What place would be safe enough to hold them?

Josephine seems to catch on instantly; she flies across the room, gentle flats fluttering across the floorboards with a hand up and coming to Aupia’s shoulder. “Aupia, tell me about Ingersoll. I’ve never been to that area of Lake Calenhad.”

The girl gives her an upfront look of disapproval before glancing at the Divine once more. She’s not impressed with the effort. “Do you want to just wait outside instead?”

Divine Justinia’s head pops up and out of her hand at that; she says something to her agents and they back out of the great hall like mice. “There’s no need for you to leave,” she insists, drawing back the seat at the head of the table. “I always hope to sit down to a meal without work. It rarely happens, let alone a meal with friends away from work.” She’s smiling as if she isn’t the Divine, which stresses Aupia more than her resting expression probably every could. She sits, the others follow, and soon enough the meals are brought out to them.

They’re both just so eager to please Aupia that they appear blind to absolutely how awkward the entire situation is. Josephine figures it out eventually, ultimately swapping the questions about Aupia and her insecurities to common things going on around the city. Josephine’s eldest daughter, Eleonora, saw a speaker recently at a public event. Now she wants to discuss politics at every family meal.

“And how does Noemi take it?” Divine Justinia asks around mouthfuls of pork. Josephine rolls her eyes. “Well, anything her big sister does, Noemi wants to be a part of it.” She wipes her brow of exhaustion but smiles softly, the way only a mother could. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with these girls.”

Truth be told, Aupia wasn’t quite listening up until now; not being pinned under the Divine’s constant questions about her neighbors and her family and her farm and her bow and her day was a relief. She needed a break.

This day feels like a marathon. She checks the grandfather clock in the corner, dismayed at the fact that, sure enough, it wasn’t even seven o’clock yet.

But hearing that got her thinking again. She stops spinning her fork around, laying it down with careful precision. “Who was the speaker?”

“Someone who claims to be a liberal advocate for the Orlesian democracy. Wants to change a few things still.” Josephine rolls her eyes – it’s probably the least lady-like thing Aupia has yet to see her do. “Of course I will always support her, and I adore her curiosity. But I can only wonder where
he got these ideas. And where do all these supporters come from? The fellow wants to do away with the electoral vote altogether. I mean, voting is still so young here, you think he would let it figure itself out first before complaining about this and that.”

Aupia wipes her chin. “Honestly? I feel like I'm curious about his background too. Whatever makes a person speak publicly like that has to have some sort of educated background, either professional or not. And he’ll have to know the ins and outs of the vote Orlais has, better than others if he’s got folks that will listen. And a lot of incentive.” She forks a bit of pork, turning her utensil in thought. “I always wonder where these thoughts come from.”

The Divine seems intrigued. “You don’t think they come up with it on their own?” she asks. Aupia shakes her head. “My mom would always say that everything good, bad, and ugly stems from somewhere else. That ideas are shared things that only exist because they're shared.” She pauses, thinking back on when her mother first said that. it was probably on one of their early visits to Redcliffe: Jasette was always very vocal in private about how people stared at her daughter.

_They don’t hate you_ she would say, her jaw frighteningly tight. _They’re afraid of you._

But they don’t know me, Aupia remembers saying once. She couldn’t have been much older than seven or eight years old.

_Someone else knows an elf in the other corner of the world. That’s enough reason for them._

Aupia’s jarred back to reality by an unknown source, visibly stirred as she reaches for her glass. “You’re so much like your mother,” the voice say, benevolent.

Aupia snorts, spitting water back into her glass. She thought it was funny – unprovoked, daft even. Comparing her to the Inquisitor was-

“You’ll be a fine politician someday,” predicts – no, promises - the other. “I’m sure she’d be proud of how you’re taking after her. I sure am.”

Oh

No, no. I-

That’s-

_Huh_. Something reignites in Aupia, something from the bathhouse the night before and the bench with that man and the knife somewhere in the wall of Sera’s apartment. It is the fire in her mother as they rowed away from Redcliffe, it is the blank, blurry faces of those newspaper articles she clung to so _desperately_ in those weak hours at home. It is the confusion in Vivienne’s office and the blank terror of wandering Val Royeaux alone. It is the judgement of her ears and the whispers at her turned back. It is the anger in her fists as she clutched that wolf’s pelt on the roof of her home, baying at the moon.

It lasts no longer than a decade, a moment tucked away in a single heartbeat.

Where do you begin with that?

How do you even _acknowledge_ that? And where do you get to-
Aupia breathes; usually, it’s the only thing she can do.

I don’t want to be her.

I can't be her.

I’m not her!

Josephine leans in a little, motherly worry creasing her brows. “Aupia?”

That blank page Aupia has been trying to fill in, that face of hers that she has been trying to discover and identify with - that open, malleable shape of her heart - it now fills with rage. Rage upon who no one can say; perhaps it is one of those thoughts that are faceless and are passed from person to person. But it is rage nonetheless.

“I- I’m sorry,” she smiles, setting down the glass and setting her utensils properly to the side. Her politeness is forced, her hands are shaking. “I just remembered something. I need to go.”

“Where are you-?”

“Thank you, truly.” She bows a little to both women, holding her position feebly. Her heart claws at her chest as it tries to run from the room, but she holds her position appropriately. Then she straightens up and leaves.

First she goes to her room, weaving past agents and maids and servers alike. She take the stairs one at a time and even jogs around a corridor, something in the back of her mind making her feel like a cornered animal.

When she gets to her room all she can think to do is pack everything up; but she doesn’t get too far, as realization catches up with her eventually. Her fingers catch bundles of shirts and breeches and scarves and her one dress. The beautiful closet filled with beautiful clothes is ignored altogether. She pulls the wolfskin out from underneath her bed, pauses, then marches to the balcony to chuck it over the edge.

She very nearly did it too. Really, she got pretty close. But as her arms wound back for the throw she paused, the tension in her shoulders sagging.

A trapped animal indeed.

She sits down, the arrows in the pelt jigglingly as they settle against the marble floor next to her. She breathes, hands on her head. She thinks, fingers digging into her scalp. She looks at the sun, praying that the day be over, that the year would just turn in on itself and time would release her back home.

Visiting Redcliffe was always interesting: anything new is interesting to people who live their day in the same echo of the day before. But living in this? A world where, from all angles, people tell you what to do and what to think and how to feel?

Then she breathes again, wincing as forces her eyes open. She lets go, fingers uncurling slowly. She chose this, she chose this. She chose to be their pawn, to see what the world had to offer her. And Aupia would be damned if she didn’t know all of this was due to her heritage.

But more and more recently, this heritage feels like a curse. Like a weight stopping Aupia from becoming her own. Her eyes swell as she shuts them, only to open with a squint at the fading sun.
She pauses. She remembers.

*Oh, why the hell not.*

The girl has nothing to lose, only something to prove to herself. So she leaves.

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True to her word, the girl was there just as the walkway lights were flickering on. Aupia didn’t know how to proceed; she almost responded, but she wasn’t quiet given the chance – the girl saw her first.

“Hello!” she waves gayishly, curls and braids and face bounding. The nobles between them almost tripped over the helms of their pearled skirts at the site of the two girls. Aupia eyes flickered over their audience as she rushed towards the Avvar, clad in boots and leathers and furs alike. Aupia murmurs a greeting into her scarf, fingers close to her lips as she tries to anchor herself in the familiarity of her favorite clothes. It wasn’t scarf weather, but wearing it was a reassurance.

“Don’t you ever get too hot in all that?” She asks quickly, mouth moving in small figures as she tries to keep her volume low.

The girl cocked her head at the elf. “Why would I? Can't you manage your body temperature? You ARE a mage, right?”

Aupia flusters, hand up to her scarf once more. She tries to busy herself by straightening it out. “Mage in training. I only started with my teacher a few weeks ago, I have a lot to learn.”

The Avvar rolls back on her seat. Her benevolent expression doesn’t diminish. “I haven’t even asked. Is body temperature not something lowlanders get training in?”

Lowlanders? Aupia shrugs as she glances away. “Not sure. Again, I'm still new to this.” She glances over her shoulder, half expecting Finch to be standing there. Perhaps an escort now wouldn’t be so bad. “So. What do you want to do?”

The Avvar shrugs, leaning forward with her hands on the bench space between her legs. She looks like a cat ready to pounce. “I dunno. We should probably find some place to work without these hooligans watching us.”

Aupia tests the waters, offering a gentle, dumb smile as she scratches the back of her head. Heh, hooligans. “Well, I don’t know this area very well yet.”

Farah stands up and stretches, her arms raised high above her. “You probably know better places to work than me. Where do ya wanna go?”

Aupia glances around, absolutely at a lost as to how to proceed. She doesn’t respond before Farah bounces in place. “Well, where HAVE you been?”

She takes her new friend to the stables. She figured they’d have a quiet walk over since every interaction she’s had since arriving in the capitol has been an awkward one, but Farah was quick to
speak to everything. She thought the trees blooming out of season were beautiful and asked if they
were common across the lowlands. No, Aupia responded, she didn’t think so. Then Farah asked
about the people here, what the masks were made of. Aupia didn’t know, but she knew they wore
it in even the most seemingly unnecessary of moments, like in restrooms or when saying good
morning to their lovers and family.

“It seems odd.”

“Oh?” Aupia turns to her companion as they walk down the corridor of the summer plaza to the
stables. “I think it’s just a cultural thing. Doesn’t make sense to me, but I don’t judge it.”

“Oh, I’m not judging,” Farah quickly corrects, her eyes on the water as she hunts for fish or other
signs of life beneath her. “It seems strange to me to wear a mask all the time. What do they have to
hide that makes this a normal thing for them?”

Aupia didn’t know, so she says just that. “I’m not sure actually.”

Farah turns the conversation to the type of fish in the capitol, to which Aupia also has seen no signs
of life from.

They arrived at the stables quickly, arguably the quickest walk there Aupia had yet to experience.
She waved down Rumad when they came through the entrance, Farah’s attention directed to the
low lights hanging across the ceilings as Aupia calls to the stablehand; it had only taken the elf a
bare month to adjust to the surreal extravagance here: she already was overlooking the chandeliers
the same way she’d overlook anything else.

She furrows her brow to keep the thought away as she continues down the aisle. Quagga screams
from her stall, kicking out and gurgling as her girl approaches her quickly. Alfalfa dangles from her
clumsy lips.

“Hush now, there’s no need for that,” she scolds, bringing a hand up to her doe’s face. Farah
bounces over to her, eyes bright in fascination; her expression reminds Aupia of children at
festivals, eyeing candies and factory shirts and goodies alike they could not afford. “She’s
beautiful,” she whispers, hand extended towards Quagga’s quivering muzzle. The halla lips at her
gently through the flakes as Rumad pokes into view; the Qunari never seems to be in one place at
any given time, the way his face always appears but the rest of him doesn’t. Aupia smiles up at
him in greeting. “Hey. I just wanted to let you know I’m here.”

He nods then falls back out of sight. Aupia sighs. “What can she do?” Farah asked, inquisitive as
ever. Aupia could only shrug. “I don’t know, whatever a halla can do I guess.”

“How fast does she run?”

Aupia laughs. “Faster than me, that’s for sure! But I’ve never really thought about it before.”

“Can I race her?”

Aupia is so taken back by the suggestion she nearly misses Quagga’s spinning head. The two
nearly collided, a thoughtless step to the side the only thing preventing the bloody act. “Excuse
me?”

“Can I race her. You know, like running.”

“I-“ Aupia plays with her hair, trying to think it through. Well, this is definitely a first. She busies
herself with opening the stall door. Farah laughs involuntarily and claps her hands together at
Quagga’s bouncing feet, circling her girl with gentle lips pulling at the curve of her tricolored breeches. “I guess so,” she reasons through the quiet commotion. “I’ve never tried to run her on a course or anything. I don’t think she’ll run straight.” Quagga emerges happily and excited, all but abandoning her evening meal. Farah runs both hands along the length of the doe’s body, fingers deep in the short fur. She keeps spinning around to reposition her hands on the halla as Quagga trots down the aisle, the two inadvertently spinning in circles around each other between giggles and gurgles. Farah speaks up, her eyes never leaving Quagga. “I’ve never seen something like her before. Not up close like this, at least. Or feeling this free in this area. She’s comfortable, happy even.” She reaches for Quagga’s long ear as if the matter wasn’t a question. “It’s good to see when you’re in a place like this.”

Pride blushes in Aupia’s cheeks.

“Have you been to many cities? I heard that Avvar travel a lot.” Aupia asks in distraction as they near the closest pasture. Less horses seem to stick their heads out as they walk past: they’re slowly becoming accustomed to their new neighbor. Farah runs her hand over the stall bars, the head of her staff just barely knocking softly into them. “A few holds, but fewer cities. Just the ones we stopped in on our journey here.”

“Where’s home for you?”

“South-east. Beyond the Boarderlands.” The pasture gate swings open. Quagga charges ahead, a bullet shot from a handheld. Aupia nods as if the answer makes sense but she doesn’t know what the Boarderlands are. “And how long are you here?”

“For as long as need be. Maybe a few months, maybe a few years. You?”

“Something the same. Although I’ve only been here for a few weeks now. You’ve probably been here longer already.” Quagga runs right up to them, her smart ears perked in their direction. The halla studies them as she takes a few tentative steps closer.

The Avvar nods and jumps, her legs folding beneath her. She seems to be stretching Aupia realizes. The movement startles Quagga into backing up a few steps. “A week? Maybe two? Doesn’t matter anyway.”

She sits in the long grasses of the pasture, Quagga running in leaps and bounds around them. Farah watches in jubilation, something kindled in her like a warm thought. Her legs are spread slightly as if ready to take off on a moment’s notice. Occasionally she glances to the left for something that isn't there, but those moments are few and far-between. Not unnoticeable, but passably sane.

Aupia watches proudly, the day behind her. Farah finally turns on her heels, bending down over Aupia “So. Are we good to start our race?”

Quagga tosses her head. Aupia says sure. Farah smiles down at her as she stands up. “Can you watch my staff?”

“Can I use it?” Aupia asks, in tease. Farah laughs as she hands it over, her back already to the elf. “Why not? Good luck though.” It feels funny in her hand, like a spice she’s never tasted before or a language she’s never heard. It drums in her palm like a heartbeat that caught a spark of electricity - something agitated, youthful. The energy feels brown and natural, rooted and old. And despite its alien nature it curves in Aupia’s palm as if meant to, energy bleeding between her and it in a means of whispers and shudders. It looks like nothing more than a branch with twine and a stone at the end, the only truly distinguishing feature being the etch of fish and flowers into the stone at the top. She must have sat there for several minutes in silence as it’s an entrancing experience; her eyes
only draw up in time to see the finale of the ‘race,’ Quagga sprinting in leaps and bounds well beyond the girl’s abilities. And somehow, Quagga was running straight! What a fascinating little trick the girl must play to be able to get Quagga to do that.

Aupia perks up, sitting more erect as Farah comes down on her hands and knees, breath short of laughter. Both girl and doe circle back to Aupia. Quagga trots victory circles around them before taking off again. “How’d you make her do that?” she ponders out loud, setting the staff aside. Farah smiles, pulling her hair out of her face. Her words are lagged, her face bright. “I asked her to,” she breathes.

“You… asked?” At least it wasn’t some sort of mind-control.

“Yeah.” She plops down on the grass, chin up as her legs and arms spread out; she almost imitates Vallen in his peace in the woods just the day prior. “Animals don’t necessarily think in thoughts like we do, it’s more of a tangle of concepts. Hunger doesn’t lead to ‘huh, I should go find some berries.’ She speaks deep and gravely as she imitates the fake thoughts, eyes rolling around in her skull for emphasis. “Instead, they know what hunger feels like and they want to avoid it. Or, uh, ‘I wonder what that guy’s doing over there’. Instead they feel curious, and they just… I don’t know. They go.”

Aupia plays with a blade of grass, one long and wispy. “So how do you ask her a question?” Farah turns her head so her full attention is on Aupia. She drops a hand onto her stomach, outlining her belly. “You those gut feelings you get when someone rubs you the wrong way, or when you feel nervous right before doing something really fun?”

“Yes,” Aupia lies. She knew the first sensation all too well. The second one? All she could think about was when she tried to ride Fancy that one time: her father was sure to shut that dream down. It wasn’t even that bad – she only had one leg over the cow’s back.

Ah, well. Maybe she should include the whole ‘running away from the Divine during dinner’ thing.

“Well,” says Farah, “When asking a question, all I’m really doing is introducing a gut feeling for her. An instinct of a sort, but nothing to force her to act. Instead she’s given the chance to respond or walk away. I’d be able to show you if you let me in your head.”

They sit there in the pasture grasses for a few minutes as Farah’s breathing steadies itself. Aupia watches Quagga run around until her halla finally settles down behind her, curling with her belly against Aupia’s back. Her legs tuck around the girl as she tries to curl around with her head on Aupia’s lap, her girls hand brushing lovingly between her eyes. Finally Farah rolls over and props herself up on one hand, watching the interaction quietly. Then she watches Aupia, letting her finally ask the question she’s been holding on to.

“So,” she tries, tentatively. Like tipping her toe into icy water. “Were you trying to get into my head like that? Earlier today?”

“Kinda, just to talk to you.” She assures. “I don’t like reading minds without asking first. Feels gross.” Aupia humms a thought but otherwise doesn’t speak. Farah scoots closer to her. “How’d you know?”

“I could feel like.”

“What did it feel like? Did it hurt? I'm sorry if it hurt.”
“Oh, no. Not like that.” She scratches her head, trying to put words to thought. “It was more like… a soft egg bouncing against my head? Didn’t hurt at all. Just… weird.”

“Oh. Well then.” Farah rolls over so she can watch the clouds. “I’m glad it didn’t hurt you! But can I ask you something now?”

“How is it you can’t get in my head?” Aupia predicts, folding her knees up to her chest. Quagga shuffles around a little so Farah can pet her. A glance at her companion shows she nailed the thought. “Honestly? I don’t know.” Aupia relents. “My teacher doesn’t know. She says I have a lot of unusual properties for a mage.”

She was expecting something more out of the Avvar than a “That’s understandable,” but Aupia took it nonetheless. She speaks through her knees, eyes narrowing as she watches the horizon. “She doesn’t want me to use magic, says I have to be super careful. Honestly though? I’m…” she pauses and plays with her hair a little – why was Aupia confronting her feelings like this to a stranger?

“You’re what?” Farah prompts, a curious crease in her brow. “Tired of being careful?”

Aupia fights for her words. Somehow, it been very difficult for her to articulate this evening. “Tired of being her pet.”

She doesn’t look at Farah simply because she can’t – she doesn’t want to see the girl’s judgement. But Farah scoots even closer, crawling forward on her elbows. “The lowlands has a weird way of teaching people about magic and the Fade, but it’s like the masks. I don’t judge. I’m sorry that it sucks though.”

Aupia can feel her cheeks and ears color a little but otherwise doesn’t respond.

Farah rolls back over with her face to the grass and begins drawing in the blades with small crystals of ice shooting out of her fingertip. Quagga’s head pulls up as she watches in earnest curiosity; Aupia does the same, leaning in as the light fades around them.

“A lot of your body’s energy goes straight towards keeping your body a particular temperature. Something to do with everything else going on in there, you know? The stomach and the brain and the lungs and the like.”

Aupia frowns at her. “Are you going to teach me? Is that what this is?”

“I’ll try to teach you what I can. I promised that much earlier at least.” Farah flashes a smile over her shoulder, curls bouncing. “And I’d hope you’ll tell me whenever you figure out your weird thing with magic!”

Aupia bits her lip and lets go with a nod to Farah’s finger. She’s never seen someone create ice before, and as reluctant as she is, she’s damned curious about how else magic can be taught. “My teacher said the flow of blood – counter… counter-current? – and other things are related to that. How your body takes the food you eat and uses it for energy to fight off illness. It’s all related to your body’s energy which, somehow, is related to your body temperature. It has to be within a certain window.”

Only now does she see the lines coming together in the frost under Farah’s finger; it’s a rough sketch of the human body, imperfect in nearly every way. Her head is cocked in careful thought. “With what we naturally are, non-mages have to spend a lot of energy trying to keep their body at a normal temperature. For mages, we can control where our energy goes. Think of magic as an extension of your arm – you can control it. If we do it right, we can save our energy and use it for...
other things.”

Aupia’s hand clenches and releases. She’s so far from any point of control with magic its almost laughable. “That sounds pretty advanced.”

“It’s one of the first things we’re taught in the Hold. Here, let me show you.” She abandons the drawing and realigns herself in a seated position, legs folded evenly and hands resting on her legs. “You gotta make yourself comfortable first. I’ve always pictured it as taking a river that flows from you and you’ve gotta make a little pool on the side of it – you know, digging a little hole in the side of the stream and creating your own pond. The more energy you store, the more magic you’ve set aside. That gives you more strength to pull from when you need it.”

“How do you… make a lake? Like, where do you store the energy?” Farah rubs her chin, glancing to the left once more. “I think it depends on the person. I like to think of it as somewhere near my belly. A friend of mine thinks of it as somewhere in the head. I guess a big part of it is how you create it, you know?” she waits quietly, bright eyes soft. She seems to expect another question from Aupia, which comes once the girl figures herself out.

This is all kinds of… new.

“But for the, uh, lake itself-“

“You know leeches, right? The Lowlands has to have leeches.” Aupia doesn’t dignify the question with a response, only an arched brow. Farah presses forward. “Ok, so, leeches right? They take the blood out of your body when you seem to notice it the least. They take it away and put it in their own. But you don’t control the leech, and a non-mage can’t control blood. If the lake is a leech, pretend your blood is your magic. You can control blood, alright? Someone said once that it’s not so much about digging the lake as much as it is slowly down the stream.”

Ah, okay. This makes absolutely no sense.

“You’re talking about a LOT of different bodies of water.”

“Yup.”

Farah seems oblivious to Aupia’s dilemma, so she shifts her seat and tries to think. Ok, forget her analogies. how hard could it be? Just try to make your body colder. She sits like she does in meditation in Vivienne’s office.

She glances over one more time. “And you use what you’ve set aside to shapeshift?” she asks, cautiously.

“Yup! Easy peasy! It’s like sipping through a blade of grass. Little sips.”

Sipping? Sipping water through grass? Maker give me strength. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply, and her focus washes over her.

Needless to say, nothing happens. Quagga gave up as well, instead opting to patrol the pasture for the longest grass to uproot. Aupia’s eyebrow begins to twitch. Farah’s making some sort of ice sculpture, so the cold air wasn’t doing Aupia’s bare arms any favors.
Finally she throws her hands and rubs her eyes. “I can't do it!” she barks, palms deep against her the curve of her face. Frustration wields her throat tight. “That is absurd - it’s not going to work!”

“What? No, wait a sec. You can only do magic so wrong.”

Aupia glares at her so much so that Farah ducks away from the fire in the girl’s eyes. Then she recollects herself, glaring back at Aupia evenly and with a tilted smile. “Stand up.”

Aupia holds her glare but stands up after a moment with a roll of her eyes. She cocks her head, arms across her chest. “Alright. Now what?”

Farah smiles. “Get back down.”

Oh for fuck’s sake. Aupia drops down on her butt, rolls over, then spreads out her limbs in the grass. Like Vallen from yesterday she is face-first, and she lets her loudest groan out into the earth.

Farah, for some reason, lies down next to her. She copies Aupia curiously, mimicking her starfished position so that their heads are almost touching. A drape of flames covers Aupia’s forehead as Farah settles down beside her, which sparks her irritation. Aupia sighs and speaks out of the corner of her mouth. Wisps of hair fall between her lips. “Farah, look. I-“

“Now try again.”

Aupia’s mouth closes. Then opens. Then closes again.

Then opens again, her brows creased. “What?”

“Do it like this!” Farah declares happily into the dirt. She squees a little and laughs from her place on the ground before going deadly silent. Aupia glares through the fiery curtain to see her in deep concentration, a gentle smile across her face.

There’s something about this that suggests the world isn't real; that reality was left behind somewhere, that the sense of normal and acceptable was chucked off a balcony somewhere.

Aupia thinks of the wolf’s pelt.

Then she closes her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

The technical term for the blood thing is anti-parallel, like the term applied to describing helical DNA. Your blood runs in veins and arteries in opposite directions but right next to each other – from this, there is slight friction, which helps keep your body temperature regulated and high. That’s why when a leg falls asleep it feels kinda cold. But yeah a regulated ody temperature is super important for homeostasis.

But hey! Here’s a few new companions! The first of many!

All support appreciated!
Vivienne seems one of those people desperate to cling on to the past. Sure she’s got her money backing the wrong horse, and her attempt at maintaining the Circles as they once were is slipping from her grasp (or so the papers claim: no one dared confirm the subject matter with her), but Aupia’s largest, slight spark of irritation with her teacher comes from the fact she still uses a quill to write.

Honestly. Those writing machines seem fascinating, and there’s one sitting idle on her desk to the right, dense mahogany wood big enough to bite off Aupia’s hand at the wrist. The beasty thing is probably worth more than the Kessler family farm, why not use it? It’s, like, an arm’s reach away. If nothing else, the Madame de Fer could use a pen. For Maker’s sake.

Aupia’s eyes dark back down to her book as her teacher catches her staring. Pages shuffle. The quill continues on its tirade.

“What is it?”

“I’m sorry?” Aupia looks up from her scrolls and books and notes: Vivienne doesn’t from her paperwork.

Well, Aupia knows this game well enough – she isn’t about to admit to judging her teacher. She opts to stay silent which prompts Vivienne to speak again. “Something is obviously on your mind. Your training won’t work unless you commit to it.”

A pause drags out before Aupia turns a page, pretending to read. Her vision swirls under the pressure of her master. “I’m committed.”

“Not enough.” Vivienne sets aside her quill and folds her hands under her chin. She seems more irritated than anything else; it’s as if Aupia and her troubles are some great inconvenience for her. Aupia knows better – or, least she tells herself she does – so she only slightly takes it to heart. Their time together has been unconventional, but she truly does respect her teacher. Honestly. But her tone never makes it easy.

Vivienne lets her exhaustion diminish any enthusiasm she may bear. “What is it?”

Aupia shuffles on her seat as they hold each other’s attention. The girl glances away. “Nothing.”

“You are a horrendous liar.”

Aupia squints. “So I’ve been told.”

There was a long pause, both expecting the other to speak. Vivienne breaks the silence with ever-
narrowing eyes. “Well? You’re not focused. Why is that?”

“I am,” Aupia lied. In fact, she was not. Her mind kept dragging like bricks back to her favorite secret: Farah has been teaching her magic for the two weeks. The best part? She wasn’t approaching the matter like a teacher, she was a friend. And shit, Aupia was already feeling it.

That night didn’t make a whole lot of sense, but Aupia’s heart settled against her ribs for the first time in what felt like years. And when she tried to picture that river, she didn’t see a lake or a leech or anything of the like; she envisioned the trickling stream that bends around her home on the other corner of Thedas. It’s no more than a hand-width wide, yet it was where Aupia found herself. The sound, the smell, the calming reassurance of its presence. And, somehow, it worked. Not in a clear-cut sense or anything that’s useful, but a light was pulled from Aupia’s chest, and she could feel. Feel the grass and the hair on her arms and Quagga’s hooves and Farah’s limp fingers. She could feel the wind as it breezed over her back, over Quagga’s, over Farah’s, over the cat in the barn. It was all little more than a lull or that of her ears being stretched beyond their usual abilities, but somehow it worked.

It’s amazing how much a person can learn in a different environment. Especially when face-down in the dirt.

“And you’ve never done that before?”

Aupia remembers sitting upright, curling and uncurling her fingers again and again. It was a… surreal experience, to say the very least. But natural, yes. Like a deep breath of crisp mountain air, one you can see. And somehow it didn’t hurt!

“No. Never before.”

That’s when Farah asked a dangerous question: why not?

She could feel Finch’s energy sway slightly behind her, and she had to fight to keep her own expression neutral as she focused on the enchantress; Aupia is still under the impression that the woman is a lion in human skin, somehow able to sense fear. Maybe she can read minds too.

Finch went along with Aupia’s secret without question. Their third time out, Aupia couldn’t do the same. “Do you tell anyone about these? Ours.” She asked, stopped on a bridge, the sunset against her back. “These little… excursions of mine. Ours.”

He was a few feet behind her, her forever sentinel. “I am required to note everything of relevant value,” he surmised, eyes on her. More recently, he has been granting himself a slightly more informal position with his assignment; it seemed to be paying off as the girl was much more comfortable in this city while in considerate company. The nervous look in her shoulders and eyes reminds him of a pigeon avoiding stepping boots – the analogy was better, in his opinion, than the look of a fish about to be skinned alive.

“And how do you note these … trips exactly?”

“The Miss is spending her time with a friend.”

“Is that it?”

“Why? Are other things occurring? Should I be concerned that you’re being approached by more reporters?” Ah, well, there he went half-teasing-half-warning… again. Sure the interaction gave her quite the startle, but apparently it was something she was supposed to report; Finch only harassed her about it since he was harassed for not being there to stop it. The lightness in his voice
diminishes quickly as he returned to the matter at hand, seriousness returned like a flip of a switch.
“Do you want me to say more?”

Aupia gave him a coy look. “Do I need to say it?” She asks, not soft, not without tease.

Finch shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.” Finch is a smart man – more importantly, he is kind. He would help her keep her secret from the Circle Mage. Time with a new friend he would note if the Canary ever asked.

*Which one?* She would poise. “The Avvar or those lab brothers?”

Immediately after and before her lessons with Vivienne, Aupia would drop by the lab. Sometimes it was just to say hello, sometimes more. On a few occasions there were evenings when she would go back, sure to find all three of them there and with new questions always ready. Finch wasn’t too fond of them, but he knew her respect for Vallen Sacha was unparalleled and Aupia seems like the kind of young woman to make the most of every situation given to her. She was quick to befriend them (as much as those young men could be befriended), and he would listen in earnest curiosity on those nights. In time, he almost resented that his assigned hours at her side ended at seven – unconventional conversations are always interesting to listen to. He’d beckon and corral her into returning to the Cathedral, but he was no fool to assume she actually stayed there after he left. Sure she was spending more dinners with the Divine and the occasional familiar face, but the food was never as appetizing as it seemed it could be; the conversations always turned to something negative or imposing as a comparison between her and the Inquisitor. Simply put, it felt like it was taking years off her life.

So she resolved the bitter end to these sad and slow nights by leaving: more often than not, she spent her later evenings in the woods with the Avvar.

“Magic for a mage is like water for a fish – you need it, you live it and you breathe it. Don’t treat it as a tool or a weapon, treat it like an extension of your arm.”

Aupia rolled her forearm around, curling her fingers. At present she was trying to determine how magic felt within her body; to Finch it seemed to be working, as every now and then her face would light up. It was the middle of the day and a pleasant breeze stirred the stale air. “So its… well hold on. What about mages who do use magic for power? For a tool or weapon?”

“Do you think they started off shooting lightening out of their armpits, or do you think that they first learned how to notice it in them?”

Aupia’s lip curled. “My teacher says the proper way to start using magic is to treat it like a foreign body. You have to dissect it first before you can analyze it.”

Aupia has deduced Avvar are not very good at sitting still; in the moment, the hordsgirl mimics walking along a wire, arms extended on either side of her as her feet cross in front of her. One step after another. One step after another.

Her head was down. She was concentrating on her feet with a curl of her brow. “What does dissect mean?”

“To pull it apart… kinda?” She glanced at Finch for confirmation; unsurprisingly, he gave her none.

“Huh. Well, that’s boring.”

“How is that boring?”
“Maybe boring isn’t the word. Why pull apart what’s put together?” She glanced at Finch again this time; his only response for her was a considerate shrug.

Aupia didn’t have an answer for her that time – she approached Vallen with it when she was next at his lab. He didn’t care enough to have an opinion, instead barking at her over the obnoxious nature of the question. “How old is this girl supposed to be?”

“A little younger than us.”

“And you’re wasting your time with her?” Vallen was beginning to morph into the de la Mutiveras: he was returning to the Cathedral at unholy hours and rarely ate breakfast. Considerably, this was affecting his mood. Finch, Aupia and Vallen would go to his lab in the mornings regularly, and it seemed only then that he was in a descent mood. Otherwise he was being weighed down by his many expectations, and it showed.

“I’m not wasting anything thank you very much! You should come out and meet her some time. You might even get along,” she glances over the labspace – it was silent as a damned graveyard. “At least better than you do here.”

“He’s the problem,” challenged the one Aupia was convinced was Cisco.

“We’re doing just fine here,” asserted the other, possibly Monte.

Cisco came over then to lean against the same banister as Aupia, suspender strap completely off his shoulder as he worked a rag over his hands. He observed Vallen’s paperwork before dropping his gaze over Aupia then back to his hands. He speaks in condescending tones; unlike his brother, Cisco seems to have little patience for common folk. “She’s not thinking deep enough if that’s how she approaches life.”

Aupia leaned back and watched his hands. “Oh? I mean, it was fairly deep for me.”

“If you don’t know what’s going on inside then you don’t know how you can best move forward. How do you improve an engine by just looking at it?”

“I think she’s thinking from a mage’s standpoint.” Aupia reasoned, picking at something under her nail. “She treats magic as if its… an extension of your arm.”

Cisco met her eye and nodded, but he wasn’t convinced. “And how do you best exercise the muscles in your arm if you don’t know what muscles are there?”

Aupia brought his points to Farah the next day as they peeled apart oranges and grapefruits. Quagga tried eating the skins around them. “Can I meet these people?” She asked once Aupia finished. It seemed neither of them had an answer for each other on the original matter, but Aupia nodded nonetheless. Sure, she reasoned. How bad could it be?

“Tomorrow then,” Farah promised with a wave of her hand as the two parted ways.

“Tomorrow,” Aupia vowed, returning to the Cathedral for the night.

It was the next morning now, and Aupia was agitated beyond belief. Time can’t pass fast enough for her lesson with Vivienne to be done, and she only had a small window to pop over to the lab with Farah while Vallen was available. He was dissecting something today, a brain. She didn’t know what animal’s head it was coming from and was quite content to not know.

Vivienne stares at her with enough force to make Aupia’s heart palpitate, but the girl holds herself
together with the sheer hope that Vivienne can’t see the sweat on her temple.

Finally, she asks something very, very simple in a very, very monotone voice. “Do you have pressing matters today?”

“Not pressing, no ma’am.”

“Then why are you so distracted?”

Aupia finds a callus on her palm to worry over; it’s probably from all the bow work she’s been doing with Sera. Right now though the only thing that matters is the fact that it’s on her hand and something to distract her. “What does focus feel like?”

Vivienne, admittedly, was caught well off-guard by this. “Excuse me?”

“Focus. The thing I’m trying to build up. The thing I’ve been trying to build up for weeks now. By reading.” Her intent was to be subtle in her anger, but Aupia found she was in no mood to sugarcoat herself. Not when she’s truly supposed to be herself in this new world.

No one has time for that, not at all waking hours.

Her master was feeling the same tense line in her expectations. “You would know if you did as you were expected.” She speaks through lips that only usher commands, an indication of strained patience. Aupia knows better than to lie or bait this on, but she finally caves. As always, the girl has found solace and peace in avoiding eye contact – it seems that societal norms, as racially charged as they are, shape us. Her eyes fall to the side, something safer than the fire lying in her teacher’s expression.

But something clicks in her. She speaks with a tight jaw. “As I’m expected?” Aupia blurts, brows knotting together. Is she serious right now? Is this for real?

“You aren’t trying hard enough, you aren’t considering your readings. And Maker knows you can’t meditate properly.”

“I am trying. I’m doing everything you tell me and without question!”

“Right now you’re not trying enough. You need to maximize your learning opportunities as they come to you.” Then, of all the things she could have done, Vivienne turns her attention to something under her pinky nail. “Not as many are as privileged as you. don’t forget that.”

“I am trying to maximize what I’m given! You’re not letting me!”

“Excuse me?”

Blood roars in Aupia’s ears – noticeably, she has no sense of control right now. “You’re barely teaching me! You have me reading and meditating, but I haven’t learned shit! I haven’t so much as touched a staff or halfstaff since coming here! How in the hell is that learning?!?”

The enchantress blinks, physically taken back with a momentary recoil of her head. “Would you like to apologize for this tone you’re taking with me?”

Aupia hears Finch leave the room. The door closes snugly behind him.

She should apologize.

I should apologize.
“No.” She swallows, the frustration in her heart still strong. “There’s nothing for me to apologize for. All I’ve done for the last month is all you’ve asked of me, no questions asked! Not ONE! I think I’m ready to move on and actually learn something!”

Vivienne acts as if nothing has changed, as if her student is still just a girl sitting quietly in the chair in front of her. Her accusation comes out without question. “This is why you’re not focused. It is just because you think you’re ready?”

“NO, I'll rephrase that bit. I think I deserve something more.”

“On what front do you deserve anything? Your work ethic? Your dedication as my student?”

“I have done EVERYTHING You’ve asked!”

“Yet I deem you unfit! What of your respect towards me?“ She leans forward slightly, a predator ready to strike. “You are nowhere near ready to bear the responsibilities of a true mage.”

Aupia shouts, leaning forward, hard. “Who are you to decide that for me?!”

It is only now that her heart stills, but in retaliation of the rising pressure in her cheeks, Aupia’s eyes simply narrow. She’s tired of not being allowed: not her race, not her magic, not her damned self. She’s tired of this city telling her what to do, especially when she’s supposed to be in comfort off the streets. She’s tired of trying fighting passively to fit everyone’s expectations when she sees no fruit from her effort. Especially when its someone who is supposed to be helping her! What kind of help is this supposed to be?

Perhaps tired truly isn't the word for it. She should ask someone what this feeling is.

Vivienne’s eyes match her students, they fall to slits under the hostility of her heart. She cares, Maker damned, she cares. So she speaks once more, an olive branch reaching as far as she can.

“Your mother-“

“FUCK my mother! This isn't about her!”

Neither of them are particularly aware of how loud Aupia’s retaliation is. Was it a whisper? Was it a shout? Or was it just echoing against their unspoken thoughts like bones dropping to the floor of a cage?

Whatever it was, it was loud enough.

The girl is standing; as she realizes this, her heart palpitates. She doesn’t know why - no, wait. Yes she does.

“I apologize.” her teeth are tight against each other. Her jaw hurts, yet she speaks delicately. She tries to mean it.

Vivienne’s lips are thin.

“Leave.”

A calm settles somewhere in her bones; Aupia takes a deep breath and straightens so she is standing upright. She thinks of Farah, her gayish curls and her bright smile. She thinks of them in the meadow, the little, non-impactful conversations they have.

Her heart is faint. Blood roars in her ears. She tries to speak evenly. “Please?”
“No. We are done for today.”

“Why not?” the Avvar asked that day, “Why haven’t you done anything like this before?” Aupia tried to respond, my teacher doesn’t want me to use magic. She says-

“Well, what do you want?”

Aupia leaves.

Storming out of the Enchantress’s office in the middle of the day felt just as much like it’s a power move as it is a childish act of rebellion. Aupia will admit to this later on, but right now all she can think about is trying to pacify her screaming ears. Several heads turn to them – she can feel it just as much as she can see it in her peripheral – which does nothing to quell her racing heart. The sun overhead is bright and gentle, a warm heat enveloping them all.

For the girl, it feels more like a scarf wound a little too tightly more than it does a mother’s embrace.

Finch trotted after her without question. Right now it is an infuriating silence, but his presence is always a comfort. Did he hear what they were discussing? Was he waiting for the chance to pounce with a question or two? Did he not care at all? The latter seemed most likely as Aupia stormed through the city – he did nothing but follow quietly, polite hands folded over the small of his back.

This is all kinds of messed up. A month might not sound too long in the big scheme of things, but honestly? To anyone it can feel like an eternity. She’s beelining for the University, for Vallen’s sanctuary. But- well, shit. She’s too early. Aupia stops to spin around, a hand on her hip as she turns to the sun. “Finch. What time is it?” She computes her answer just as he speaks, measuring the sun against the sky. Finch squints at his watch. “It is almost two.” She hums a response as she rubs her eyes with the heel of her hands, something frustrating driving it deeper and deeper into her skull. What she should do is go back in there and beg for the enchantress’s forgiveness: it’s what the normal her would do, the her with her head down and quiet weave through people and always passive voice.

What’s with this agitation riddling her? Aupia glances around with a squint, half-hoping some demon was lurking in a corner somewhere. Is there an… anxiety demon? Where is this coming from?

She’s left with nothing but her own hands, which she can only frown at. This whole situation is nerve-wracking. Its about time someone spoke up for her – and the only person to ever do so will be herself, it turns out – but it’s still nauseating how discrediting these people are! They’re supposed to be supporting her! Or something! Right? Right?

“Finch. Am I crazy?”

“It is not my place to say.”

He’s no help. Her frantic heart continues, words slurring slightly together. “Do I bathe enough to
pass as Orlesian?"

“I do not believe bathing more than once a month is the sole criteria for being native here, Miss.” She hums again, never unsurprised by his response but somewhat irritated she couldn’t get something more out of him. That was probably the most snarky response he’s fed her, but it was still Finch at the end of the day. Finch, as it turns out, is not a friend nor a companion: he is a solemn oak to lean on on a hazy day.

She turns to him and starts off in the other direction. She feels like throwing knives, or maybe impaling some walls with arrows. “Wanna go see Sera and Qat? Let’s go see Sera and Qat.”

All he does is arch a brow, any discerning thoughts politely veiled. “I would… almost question whether that will help the Miss.”

Aupia can’t ball up her fists, not in a public setting without someone raising some alarm. The frustration boils under her skin and makes her question come out in a growl. “How would spending two hours with them not help me?”

He doesn’t respond, not even with a twitch of his face. This does not help sort out the mess inside of her.

Oh, wait. She knows the word for it now. Realization dawns on her as she glares at Finch:

This, this feeling, the one right now. This is regret.

And that makes her all the more frustrated with herself.

She wants to release this on someone, someone who will listen and hold her and get angry with her. How is it a person can live in the center of the world and feel so alone?? The only one to really understand what she’s going through would be Vallen just because he’s been here every step along the way; but he’s busy as all hell, and probably isn’t in the mood to listen. And Aupia doesn’t want to bother him when he is so overwhelmed as is – his schedule is so out of whack that she’s seeing him less and less except for the times when she schedules ahead with him to meet in his lab. Should she write a letter home? She’s spinning now, pacing in tight, irregular circles. It’s now she sees just how many masked faces are turned to her; thanks to Farah she can feel the inklings of whispers like ants on her spine too.

Her body begins to ache, a gentle stiffness filtering through her. She should be feeling proud of herself, not sick.

Oh fuck this.

“I’m tired,” she relents, more forced than anything else. Exhausted is a better word, yet she must filter herself: someone will always have the eyes to judge, and now more than ever it feels like the girl is standing in a pit of vipers. Those eyes on her turn to whispers, hisses. Ants turning to spiders against her spine. “I want to go back to my room,” she cracks, eyes down. Her hands relax at her side before cupping together nervously.

At first he didn’t respond – again, not even the twitch of a muscle. Finch’s mind was working in circles yet he does nothing. Perhaps he will regret that someday. Instead he finds his place beside her, a slight step closer than usual.

“Okay.”
The city is beautiful, its hard to not admit to that. At least the inner city, Old Val Royeaux: the Outskirts are hard to admire for anything other than the sheer magnitude of the apartment complexes and steam factories. They walk across white bricks, under walkways and over bridges, all pristine and without flaw - it’s like this world is fighting to ignore the harsh realities of its people. And there is symbolism here, a reflection between beautiful and broken things; cracks are easiest to see in porcelain and alabaster and marble. Aupia tries to trace them as she walks through the city with her head down. White things, beautiful things, clear things. Those are the easiest to see fault in.

“What would you like to eat?” Aupia blanks and rubs her eyes. Had she been crying? The Cathedral is within view now, the Inquisitor’s garden separating them from the front door. It’s just as foreboding as the first day she arrived. She tries to smile but her lips just won't hold. “Sorry, I'm not hungry.”

“I should get you something.”

“No thanks. I don’t know if I could eat right now.” Nobles and their wide hems and thick dresses pass them shoulder to shoulder, ambling through the garden as if it was put there for them. Aupia cannot stand this as she keeps her head down, beginning the Maker for them to stop looking at her with those eyes.

Vipers, all of them.

Something agitates her in the back of her neck, a recognized hint of a thought like a soft alarm in the back of her head. Like a bell it is clear and undistinguishable, hard to orient and hard to place. Yet it’s here, bringing Aupia’s head up.

Finch seems to be on edge too; his shoulders are knotting up. Does he hear it? Does he hear the Maker yelling in the back of his head as well? Because what else could this be, other than a godly figure toying with her senses?

He brings a hand up to her, protecting her from whatever lies within the Cathedral. Its only as they stop at the front that Aupia understands what that primal warning was: someone’s yelling just on the other side of these beautiful doors.

Finch’s face turns fractious. “Stay here,” he commands, hand still up. His other unholsters his handheld, and Aupia can't help but look at it in his hand. That’s a terrifying strength to put in simple, mortal fingers. Maybe she’s just hopeful, but Aupia doesn’t think it’s going to escalate like that; if the ringing in her neck is any indica-

He goes in, sliding sideways through narrow doors. The ringing in Aupia’s head thunders before dropping off sideways, the noise echoing against her bones as Finch slips out of view. Finch doesn’t spare her an instant to recognize her situation, their surrounds or the echo of don’t go in there bleeding through her body.

Then he’s gone.

The ringing is still there. As is the yelling.

Aupia’s throat stiffens. She should listen and she should always do as she’s told. Think, Aupia think. Do nothing. Do as you were told.

She watches the handle, the last trace of him and his handheld. But he just-

The yelling gets louder. Any notion of thought evaporates, dew in an erupting sun. 
She throws the door open. The world inside is dark, dimly lit as the lights don’t seem to be turned on.

The Canary’s here. As are several other hooded figures. One is on the ground with blood thick and warm streaming from his face, another with a hand on the hunched figure. The world slows but Aupia does not care to register or consider each face – she sees that each are moving in on one, a spiral, a murder of ravens honing in on one body. No, not one but two: two connected by a bag being pulled in two directions.

Aupia blinks and the world resumes its rapid motion. Finch spins around, his weapon holstered and hand up, but his face now on his assignment and wrought with dread. His lips are moving and he’s probably saying something, probably a what are you doing here?! or go back outside! Aupia doesn’t listen; she instead focuses on the friction of voices circling in front of her. She focuses on the bag, on the one figure unhooded and unafraid.

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She’s lithe, something narrow and long with undefined features. She has no jaw and a lot of neck. She’s about two-thirds leg, spindly arms at her side somehow shredded with scars sand muscle. Her hair is thick and long just like the rest of her, a midnight black with the side of her head shaved. She heaves the bag connected to a qunari, dislodging the man. Her teeth are bared.

Her eyes spit fire, there’s no other way to put it. All Aupia can think of is a tiger - that this person looks like a tiger – but she’s never seen one before. She’s elven too: those ears could probably cut someone if the knife between her shoulderblades didn’t first. The woman can’t be much older than Aupia but that look in her eyes makes her seem old enough to talk down just about anyone and get away with it. And given her heritage, that’s a mighty strong nature to be carrying around so openly. Dumbly enough, Aupia can’t help but be inspired by the brashness of her tight features. There’s something to that confidence that, as terrifying as the newcomer is, is really damned remarkable. Inspirational maybe. But the moment of awe is brief at best, as now her angry eyes are on new prey: Aupia.

The chiming in her head quickens in its softened state. Aupia brings a hand up to the back of her neck as if to alleviate herself of the noise. The yelling stops and the newcomer’s face stiffens, her attention on the girl. “You. Are you-“

Finch steps between them, hasty and haunty and he somehow looks bigger than before. Maybe it’s how he’s carrying his shoulders. “You will not speak to her,” he says, clear and strong.

The woman must have made a gesture with her face – a roll of her eyes or something else unflattery – which made Finch’s shoulders rise a little higher.

Tits.

“Yes this is her.” The Canary is loud, speaking as if backed by a mountain instead of a measly six agents. “Now do what you came here to do.”

The woman doesn’t respond to her, each step measured and powerful. It’s like a prowl, but Aupia doesn’t move: is this what prey feels like when the see the head of an arrow? But Finch is here, surely Aupia is-

The Canary signals to Finch something the girl doesn’t recognize, and the tension heaves anew through the man before he steps aside, leaving Aupia vulnerable to onslaught. Her head recoils on her neck a little, fitting more into the grasp of her hand.

Tits. Fuck.
When they’re face to face there is nothing to be said, only a satchel to be handed over with a somewhat aggressive thrust. “This was to be delivered to your hands and your hands only. It has been done.”

Aupia sputters, dumb fingers curling around the bag; there’s something hard within as well as a roll of parchment sticking out. For her? She’s, wait, what? “I’m sorry?”

The woman doesn’t respond; it’s as if the girl’s weak words aren’t worth her time, so she tries again after swallowing the lump in her throat. “Sorry, who sent you?”

“The Viscount of Kirkwall. To your hands and your hands only.”

Varric Tethras. Arguably the most powerful man in the known world. Aupia leans over to glance at the Canary, her wide eyes betraying any feeble attempt at her appearing confident. The Canary just smiles as she walks over, a hand on Finch’s stiff shoulders. Aupia glances at him; he doesn’t trust this young woman, so neither should she. But the Canary is all kinds of comfortable with this now that the transaction is complete, despite the stiffness of her lips. And the woman’s eyes never leave Aupia’s: maybe the expression ‘makes her skin crawl’ doesn’t do justice here – it’s more like setting tarantulas up and down the girl’s spine. Like setting flies on fire in her stomach. She swallows again, trying to ignore the young woman’s unspecified wrath. “I’ll personally notify Master Tethras that you’ve completed your mission, Iso. I hope you will let pass any confusion that transpired today, its only a necessary precaution. All deliveries mus-“

Harding stops midword, watching Iso’s face roll from uncaring to aggressive. The woman doesn’t appear to care for protocol, so Lace readjusts. “I assume you won't be staying the night?”

Iso doesn’t respond. Not to the Canary at least. There are lines on her face, and they dance. Her head snaps back over to Aupia, which makes the girl jump. “Open the bag,” she orders.

“I-what?”

“Open the bag. They wanted to take it from me because they thought it was a trap. Open the bag.”

“Do you-“ Aupia again turns to the Canary, forcing herself to blink. “Do you need this opened?”

“No, not at all.” Someone’s lying, and Aupia’s hoping it’s to diffuse the situation. But now this ‘Iso’ sounds like a tiger. She practically growls her command. “Open it.”

Aupia’s dumb fingers curl a little tighter. She doesn’t quite want to for reasons she cannot put a name to. The Canary rests a hand on hers as Finch peeks in from above. “It’s alright, Iso. Now that we’ve cleared things up and Agent Verbena’s nose is being tended to, we can let it go.”

Verbena must be the one that was on the ground. Aupia can’t find them. The air is too tight to swallow. Its getting hard to focus in here.

“No. Open it to prove that I wasn’t a-“

“Clear.” Finch looks at them each individually, leaning back from where he was looking over Aupia’s shoulder. His expressionless rage rests on Iso. “Clear.”

What is going on here?

The Canary nods to Finch, who takes Aupia away with a hand on her back. Her has tight fingers, they curl slightly as he ushers her away. They go outside, Aupia leashed both willingly and without thought. She doesn’t even try to look back at that woman.
Once the doors are behind them, Finch takes the knapsack away somewhat forcefully. He inspects the content further, rummaging through the bag without looking at her. Aupia’s world is spinning. She feels lightheaded. She tries to focus on the breath she didn’t realize she was holding. “I thought I told you to stay outside,” says Finch, his expression unreadable.

She swallows. That was… a charged experience. “You did. I—”

“You nothing. You were given a command. Know that I will not forget this.”

Like a blow to the gut, his feelings unhinge her. Her stalwart and unchanging, always perfect and never vulnerable Finch suddenly swarms with emotions, a buzzing in her head like a thousand bees churning the moment. It feels like someone has outright punched her, a blow unprecedented, leaving her tight with fear and unexplainable worry. She realizes the weight behind his unspoken words; its, perhaps, the first time she has ever truly felt that weight people seem to imply with each other.

He’s disappointed in her.

And she hates it.

He waits as if expecting a command from her or some sort of initiative. She’s about ready to tear her skin clean off.

“I don’t want to go back in there,” she whispers after a moment. The fist in her stomach loosens slightly as she tries to breathe out, the residual pain of magic started to bleed through her senses. Her head hurts, like a bundle of twigs slowly splitting down the middle. Finch doesn’t spare her any sort of reaction and that only worsens the throbbing. He’s still mad – furiously so – and perhaps there is something mad buried within it, but Aupia does not know how to name that feeling.

Her hands worry together. she tries to stabilize the swinging in her ears by closing her eyes; it grants her temporary refuge from the madness cycling around her. She’d kill for an orange right about now.

“I want to go to the pastures. To the stables.”

Without you.

“Can you go tell Val that I won’t be there today? And Farah?”

It’s the only thing she can think of, but he takes it in earnest.

Something about him switches instantaneously: he’s silent at first, reflecting either internally or externally, but then he reaches for the bag still in Aupia’s white knuckles. “I will return your delivery to your room. So you don’t have to carry it.”

He’s fishing for excuses too, excuses for her. But he second-guesses himself with a modestly arched brow. “Unless you want to open it, of course.”

From the Viscount. For her. Because of her dead mother. All of this anxiety, all of this weight from the day, all because of her dead, rotten corps. She tries to summarize for him but she can’t look at his face. “No. I don’t… I don’t want that.”

Finch nods as Aupia, with still shaking fingers, manages to let go. She starts off on a familiar path, but she feels like a ghost floating several feet above. She breezes past the garden and with tears in
her eyes, shoots a blistering look at the lamppost closest to her.

This is all your fault!

She didn’t quite make it to the stables. Aupia stopped on a smaller garden, one secluded in a nearby neighborhood with an Astrarium in the middle of it. There’s supposed to be something symbolic about this garden – all the flowers here are blue and purple, colors of a romanticized night sky. The magnifier shows the heavens on a clear night but with its placement between these spiraling walkways it’s supposed to signify that Thedas is in the center of the universe. Or at least it’s something along those lines. Aupia didn’t really read the podium at the entrance. She just skimmed it. She was trying to focus on just about everything else around her so she didn’t have to turn her attention internally. Because why should it hurt to say what you feel like you have a right to say? Why should you be guilted for just wanting to help? Sure she wouldn’t have been able to do anything if there was an real danger, but still! Her fingers brush petals but her meandering mind circles the image of Finch disappearing behind those doors. The more she thinks about it, the more she realizes it looked like he was getting eaten by the building; the thought of him walking into danger just to leave her behind? Something she had never considered before today, and something she never wants to see again.

Somehow, it brings her back to the Inquisitor and Onis. They both left her behind. No one living knows how Lavellan died, and just about… no one? no one seems to even care about Onis. Where does that leave her?

Farah came flying over while Aupia was somewhere between the Forget Me Nots and lavender, the Avvar’s small aquatic body wigging too and fro as she cut over rooftop and curious heads. She arrives floating at Aupia’s eyelevel like the day they first met, her little gill-like appendages still swimming about and her little plain head turned to the side.

“I’m glad I found you!” she says, blunt lips forming weird words. It still unnerving to watch her speak in this form. Aupia shrugs and turns back to the flowers; she wasn’t exactly looking for company at the moment, and was unaccustomed to telling someone to shoo. Farah circles her, admires the flowers, then finds a place beside Aupia near her shoulder. “Finch is worried. He didn’t say it, but he meant it. I don’t think he said it to you either,” she says gently.

“It’s in his job description,” Aupia retorts coolly.

“He thought you were gonna get-“

“Can we not? Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude, but-“

“No forget it. Sorry I brought it up. Mind if I land on you?”

“Sure.” Aupia braces for impact; Farah’s animal form still retains her human weight when she isn't focused on it, which is generally when she’s airborne (respectfully, there's a few other things to be focused on than manipulating one’s weight when flying). Once her squishy little toes land on Aupia’s shoulder she pops light as a feather, the weight of a person all but removed. Her bland
little face turns to her friend, a smile on those dumb, blunted lips. “Sorry. I just was so eager to find you I was moving a little fast. Don’t think I can change back for a minute or two.”

“No worries.”

“Were you going to see Quagga?”

“Yeah. But I’m here now.”

“Mmm. I didn’t get to meet your friends today.”

Straight to the point are we? “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry about that, I just- well, I got overwhelmed today,” she reluctantly admits, instantly feeling her ears peak in color as she confronts her feelings. Farah just nods. “Don’t be sorry, we’re all people. Days do that sometimes.”

“Sure. I just haven’t had a day like this before. Its… a lot.”

Farah hums in Aupia’s ear, considering something. No one can see it, but her pupil-less eyes move to the left as if looking at someone. Aupia shuffles her arms, refolding them over her chest.

“Wanna hear what I did today?”

“Sure. Actually please.”

“So you know that I’m in the exchange here, right? Well, the University professors wanted to run a few tests today too. Threw some games into the mix to compare what I know to lowlanders who’ve been getting trained the same amount of time as me.”

Now it’s Aupia’s turn to hum. “Why would they do that?”

“Wanted to see who was a better mage I guess. Either way, I won everything. We won everything,” she corrects with an exaggerated roll of her head (a blue lily’s substitute for an eye roll, apparently), “meaning the hold beat everyone. But I won the most. Yes we,” she grumbles, but Aupia isn’t paying attention. There’s a bee in one of the flowers. She was going to pick that one.

Farah rests against Aupia, little chin tucked into her shoulder. “The best part was seeing all their faces. Like, they knew we were gonna win, right? Cause that’s why I’m here with my hold. Its cause we’re good at what we do. But they were still surprised and it was pretty funny. You should have heard the thoughts they were thinking!”

For reasons unknown the comment rubs Aupia the wrong way. “Do you read everyone’s minds?” she asks.

“Not everyone’s. Its rude to poke around all the time. But sometimes it just happens and I can’t stop it.”

“Uh-huh.”

Farah’s head gills wiggle excessively. “You don’t believe me?”

“It’s hard to believe what I don’t understand.” She tries to turn her neck to look Farah in the face but she can't quite make it. “You make it sound like reading minds is like breathing. I still can’t figure out what’s in my own head, you know? Let alone use magic naturally. So, I don’t know. The idea of reading people’s minds without thought is just… odd.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry, cause I can't do it with you. Besides it comes with time. And
practice."

Aupia snaps back at her, tone unforgiving. “That’s not my point. What I’m saying is its weird that you do that without thinking.” She rubs her hands, trying to take back the emotion she didn’t mean to dump on her friend. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I think you did.” Farah comments gently, shifting her little fingers and toes. Aupia eases down to a bench, a hand on her brow. “Farah, look. I’m sorry. I don’t mean anything personally against you. I just–”

“No its alright, I get it.”

It sounds like she doesn’t. Farah is much more guarded in her emotions, so its hard for Aupia to reach out and feel what the girl is thinking. Its there, somewhere, but buried. Resentfully so. Rightfully so.

They share a moment of silence, the bees fluttering around them. Farah’s tail licks over Aupia’s back in a sweep. “I know its not my place to say it, but if you have anything you want to share – you know, anything that’s making–”

Aupia cuts her off: its hard enough suppressing her truth internally, and she’d rather not have someone she cares about vocalize even an ounce of what was going on. “I don’t know. I think so? But, uh,” she turns her face away as she tries to think, think quickly and truthfully. She’s not supposed to share her heritage with anyone, The Canary, Divine, and even Qat have made that clear. But articulating without lying - now that is hard. Farah waits patiently, tail still grazing over Aupia in wide motions.

She’d rather not lie. Sera told her something once, something about telling as much of the truth as possible. If you minimize the lie its easier to believe. Aupia swallows, hands wringing together in tight knots. “When I’m here, learning and stuff, its not that my teachers are teaching me, you know? They’re teaching- I don’t know, someone else. An idea? I feel like I’m just here to prove a point to them. Or for them to prove a point to everyone else.”

Farah shuffles, rearranging her little form so she can rest her chin on Aupia’s shoulder. For a terrifying moment Aupia can’t tell if she believes her or not.

Then Farah’s tail stops swinging, instead curling just under Aupia’s armpit. “Do you want to go work on magic?”

Aupia slowly breathes out. “Sure.”

Its hard to tell if the girl believes her or not; she’s internalizing something, a conversation or thought. Her little eyes keep darting around, her lips working over and over as she tries not to speak out loud. Its only as the stables lies within sight that Farah starts anew. “You said you know there’s something that stops me from getting in your head. Why don’t you know more about it?”

“Because my teacher doesn’t understand it yet. She doesn’t want me to get hurt.”

Farah brings it up again as Quagga tears from her stall, the beast’s legs reaching and kicking as high and far as can be. Like releasing her from her stall was freeing her from shackles.

“How could you get hurt by magic?” Farah asks again, the thoughts apparently having never left her. She stands on human legs now as they watch Quagga. Aupia heaves a sigh with her response. Quagga runs around them in leaps and bounds, screams and cries. “If I knew that answer I think I
Their attention turns to the trees, colors of leaves and what Quagga likes to eat. Several conversations later they return to it, the silence stirring more words from Aupia’s reluctant heart. Farah draws the sun out of ice and frost while her companion watches in bitter admiration, pulling out fistfuls of grass. Quagga stretches her head around, lips pulling gingerly at her girl’s fingers. “Magic hurts when I use it too much. Or even just a little. She says the best way to figure out what makes me so different is we first have to learn what my problem is, since we can’t trust whatever’s wrong with me.”

Farah sighs, a groan worrying her eyebrows. “I don’t get it. Magic shouldn’t hurt, should it?” Aupia shrugs, frustrated by the heat that rises to her cheeks for the umpteenth time this day. “Your magic is a part of you,” the Avvar argues. “Whatever is there, how can it hurt itself?”

“Again - I think if that if we had the answer to that, I wouldn’t have fought with her today.” At Farah’s knowing look Aupia clarifies with a cleared through. “It was… onesided,” she admits reluctantly. Her head turns to Farah’s staff. “I just want some payoff for the effort I’ve put into being here, you know? I just wanted to… I don’t know.”

“Feel valid?”

Aupia blushes and tries to distract herself with her hair. “Yeah, I guess so,” she says under her breathe. Farah just nods and looks away. “Well, either way. Magic shouldn’t hurt. It’s not natural for it to hurt.”

At Aupia’s puzzled expression, the girl tries again, lips pursed. “Like, okay. Think of a bird. Does flying hurt a bird? Or swimming a fish?” she waves a hand over Quagga. “Does running hurt Quagga?”

Aupia frowns. “When she isn’t careful. She stumbles quite a bit. But I don’t think that’s the same.”

“Okay.” Farah drops her hands to her ankles. “How is it not the same?”

“Well, for one, magic isn’t in all people.”

“Isn’t it?”

Aupia frowns but reasons through with a considerate nod of her head, eyes rolling up as she tries to remember what she can. “The Fade is in all things, magic isn’t.”

“How is that not the same thing?”

“Because magic comes from the Fade.”

Farah bolts back upright. “And magic is energy, right? Well, all energy returns to nature. And the Fade is in nature. See, we think of it this way.” Farah drags a finger through the dirt, a circle now. “Everything is connected. There is the Fade in all things – new leaves and fallen oaks and rushing rivers and lazy clouds. Even goats and pigeons and crabs and blue lilies.”

Aupia thinks about Farah’s animal form. It’s not blue, not in the least. “I still don’t understand why you call it a blue lily.”

“Lilies become Kelpies.”

Since she’s given no context as to what in the holy world that might mean, Aupia just shrugs the
conversation away. Farah misinterprets it as a simple end to the matter. “Well, my point is this.” Her finger traces her artwork, bright eyes watching the earth as it reveals her great secret. “There is energy in the grass. The grass is eaten by a hare, which is eaten by a wolf. The wolf, one day, dies. Its energy goes back into the dirt which helps the soil and the grass grows again. Makes sense, right? Well, the Fade is the same. At least it is for us.” She pauses in consideration, scratching her head. “People have the Fade in them, which carries magic. Thus all people have magic.”

“That’s not the same thing as saying someone’s a mage.”

Farah rubs her eyes in tight circles. “This was so much easier when you explained it to me,” she growls, low and nearly inaudible. Quagga’s tail flicks from behind them both. Aupia turns on her. “What?”

“My friend. My spirit. He explains things so much better than I do. But since I can't reach you, he can't see you. He can't speak to you, and this is all such a pain. If you didn’t have your weird thing you’d—”

She pauses, then tries again, something tightening her expression; it’s as if someone just scolded her. Her voice comes out low like a resistant child. Aupia has to swallow the urge to say something about her wording and is instead taken back by the one-sided conversation she seems to be missing. Or the elephant in the field. She blinks several times, trying to register the obvious truth she’s never considered while Farah continues nonchalantly. “No. The spirit I’m bound to. That’s bound to me, whichever comes first. Depends on who you ask.” She sounds like discussing simple matters. As if any of this is making sense.

Aupia’s heart beats three, four times before she tries again. She knew the answer to her question but couldn’t quite fathom the truth: its like grabbing air, an unpalpable truth. “Let me get this straight. You have a spirit in you somewhere?”

“In a way, he is me. We’re bound is all.”

Aupia stands up and starts walking away. Her footfalls stop and her hands go up to the back of her head – then she marches back over to Farah. The girl doesn’t seem not notice her companion’s confusion. She’s drawing more rays from the sun again, lying belly-down against the pasture meadow. Quagga watches them both, her legs curled beneath her in a trap.

Aupia hovers for no longer than a minute. Then she groans outwardly, a hand on her hip as the other works over her eyes. “You know what? I think I’m done for today.”

“Its weird to you Lowlanders.” Farah comments quickly, hand in her hair as it weaves across the meadow in a copper mess. “It’s because it’s weird for you and you think it’s not natural. It’s not healthy, it’s not safe.”

Aupia loosens and regrips fists at her side. It’s not her place to say, but yeah, it kinda is. You don’t need to spend a month in the city or be born a mage to know what ever child fears. She clears her throat. “Demons are—“

“Not the same as spirits. Yet you see them as one in the same.”

Aupia’s line of sight falls away. She doesn’t want to say it, but in this moment she can't think of much else. “We don’t always get the chance to distinguish between them,” she quotes her teacher softly, “We shouldn’t waste our time with bad potential.”

“Bad potential? What is that?”
“I think you know what it means,” Aupia chided tightly. Both hands are on her hips now as Farah props herself up on her elbows. The freckles of her face bunch up like someone has pinched the night sky. “No, not in this sense I don’t. Am I the bad potential? Or is he?”

Breathe, Aupia, breathe. “I don’t want to fight with you,” she adjourns meekly, her heart tangled in the thoughts of this morning. “Today hasn’t been good. I don’t want to end it saying something I shouldn’t.”

“And I don’t want to fight with you either, but-“

“But?”

“But you’re suggesting I’m doing something wrong. That he’s going to corrupt me. That something you don’t understand is bad for me. How can you say something like that and be okay saying it? And be okay not learning where you’re wrong?”

Aupia’s hands fly up, vulnerable exasperation finally unveiled. “Where I’m wrong? Why is it that I’m always the one in the wrong? Maybe we lowlanders have a point! And who are you to judge me? Maker I’m not judging you it’s just weird!” She barks. “You started this by saying there was something wrong with me! Why do I have to watch my mouth when you don’t? don’t pretend I didn’t hear you say it, cause I did! I hear what everyone says!”

Farah sits upright, her face tight. “Oh please. How could you EVER be in the wrong if you never say what you need to say?! Look, I didn’t question what you told me earlier, I took what you said in faith and believed in you. CLEARLY you can't do the same for yourself, on anything! Gods, this is the first time you’ve said anything to me without trying to write it all down first! Just get over whatever’s holding you back and say it!”

Quagga stands up, balking at the friction building between the two of them. Aupia’s oddly aware of the wind now but it doesn’t seem to matter; nothing does but the strength of her raging heart. “Well?” Farah baits. “You say today was shit because of people but it’s because you never speak your mind. You blame it all on people not listening to you when you never give them the chance to listen!” Her lower lip begins to noticeably tremble, but it’s not in anger or sadness: it’s in pity. “You’re not going to change anything if you don’t get over yourself and whatever’s holding you back!”

She pauses; they’re encroaching on dangerous territory. But.

That’s all this world is. A bunch of contradictions. A bunch of unknowns.

But its not fair! “Nothing is holding me back!” she screams, her vision going soft.

“Say that to the ghosts you’re lugging around! Gods you’re just so unaware! The worlds bad but you’re just making it worst by doing nothing about it!”

Aupia’s head screams; she minimizes the roar by gripping her arm with one hand, crossing an arm over her chest. Quagga walks wearily between them both before trotting for the gate.

That’s just… unfair.

“Have a good evening, Farah,” she mumbles, trying to still her face. Farah’s own softens, her eyes darting between Aupia’s and something to her left. She tries to stand, leaving her staff behind. “Wait, Aupia. Come on-“

“I’m done. I’m done with today and I’m done with this shit. I’m going back to my room. Good
night Farah. Go home.”

She was hoping Farah wouldn’t follow. A part of her was also hoping her friend would betray that hope and follow her. As much as she wanted to be alone, she didn’t want to. Her heart just couldn’t break even, and that only contributed to the day’s chaos. Quagga was beyond agitated too, picking up vibes from her girl. She bolted straight for her stall, low rumbles coming from a hanging head as she paced around.

Aupia followed her in and sank to her heels. She wraps both arms around her chest, rubbing her upper arms and holding herself as tightly as can be. No one followed her. She was finally as alone as she felt.

Then she rolls over onto her side.

And she cries silently into the hay.

Perhaps Rumad is the king of cats. He has those big eyes, those listening ears and the minions to count for a kingdom. Or he’s really a ghost with his body in two places at any given time, his big eyes watching, his body somewhere invisible or left behind. The animals adore him and his silence and Aupia cannot fathom how or why, she only knows that it is.

The king watches her from a distance – magic or not, Aupia can tell by the itch in her neck.

She sits in Quagga’s stall. Time stands still, but it’s not like that mattered. The lights flickered on at one point and the sound of feed was passed around at another, but that was all. Nothing else really happened in that space which allowed the young woman to retreat into a girl again.
In time she noted the cyclic passing of Rumad’s scuffed boots, and she eventually came to peak up from her crumbled position to the gap opening her up to the world, a window from the opened stall door just wide enough for a cat to squeeze through. The black of his boots has faded to brown so much so that only the cracks between the leather offered a glimpse of the original intended color. They sagged around his ankles and bunched up at his toes as if they were a few sizes too big – unusual, considering how large his feet seem to be. And the skin of his boots peeled over the edges around the balls of his feet, the boots compressing lower and lower as he tracked back and forth. It didn’t take her long to realize he was walking so frequently just to steal glances at Aupia, curled up in defeat in the day-old hay.

Quagga tired of his game as well; she kept her head out the stall opening to watch him as much as she could. She eventually snorted at him and retreated to her girl, content to curl up and whisper sweet groans as Aupia played with her ears.

Eventually, Rumad came to a standstill, half within view, half not. Three cat heads poke around as well, one weaving between his legs and into the stall to rub cheeks with Quagga. One stands guard at the opened door, the last in the boy’s arms.

“Hello, Miss Aupia.”

“Hi Rumad.”

“How are you today?”

“Fine, thank you.” Actually she is far from fine. She feels like a fish flopping about on the shorebank, unable to live and breathe and trapped by the world she’s supposed to be blessed to be a part of. She knows she’s supposed to roll a few things off the tongue – *I’m fine no great thank you how are you today and you and you and you and you* – but she cannot bring herself to say it. The words would be wasted. She doesn’t know this, but that much is obvious; a hand goes up to Rumad’s horn, rubbing it over as he thinks over what to do.

She wasn’t much good at lying. But he also wasn’t much good at helping either. He was somewhere between saying something and nothing at all when she spoke next, nearly startling him out of his skin in the process.

“I’ve done everything wrong today,” she chokes, red, wet cheeks puffy and blatant. Her voice is raw, angry. “I speak my mind for the first time since coming here and it all falls apart. Vivienne walks all over me and the one time I call her out I actually say what I’ve wanted to, she kicks me out! Then Finch, my Maker! I just wanted to make sure he was okay! How am I in the wrong? Then there’s Farah and honestly? Maker I just… Maker I knew she was bound to a spirit, that should have been a given to from the start. But how am I not supposed to fear that?”

The king blinks. Aupia’s tirade swells on her lips. Her firsts curl in the hay as Quagga eyeballs them both. “She scared me and it’s not like I wasn’t expecting her to say what she said, you know? But she finally said it and it scared me. And I don’t know if that’s me being scared or the person I’ve been here getting scared. I don’t know if it’s because I judged her or because I was hoping I didn’t? But I still did? Does that make me racist? And she pretended its nothing? Although just about every other person in this world would back me but I feel so freaking fucking rotten inside? Like, guilty? Like I need to go back on my knees and apologize to everyone but I really freaking don’t want to? To her and Finch and Vivienne – Maker, probably that shitty agent too!” Her head whips up, angry, confused, weak eyes shaking as she sought him out in her blurry vision. Rumad, again, was startled something fierce at her sudden movement. Those golden eyes watch her.

I’m no good at helping, he thinks. The cat leaps from his arm and he takes the chance to sit down;
might as well, you know? Aupia doesn’t seem to notice; she noticed his silence and thought it was like Finch’s, obsolete and without care. The girl sits upright, now rubbing her legs, eyes trapped in a crack in the wall. “I wish I was braver. Like heroes. If I said what I was thinking from the start, maybe none of this would have happened. Or if I was brave enough to keep lying, you know? Lying that everything’s okay and nothing bothers me. Maybe things would work out. That way things might go my way once in a while.” She grumbles this more to Quagga than anyone else. The doe simply stares her down, large, blue eyes, drowning Aupia like a bird against the backdrop of a cloudless sky.

Rumad won’t look at her, but for some reason he seems to have something to say. His massive head drops to his open palms. “Heroes aren’t brave,” comes his quiet voice.

Aupia glances at him before turning away, nose back in her arms. So, he does speak she thinks. Her eyes narrow at the thoughts she can’t put words do, but she tries her best - maybe he’ll even listen. “I’ve never met one, but I grew up on the backs of them. You know, all those stories they tell little girls and little boys about the heroes of Ferelden and the Inquisition. That all they are is perfect and flawless and they handle everything in great graces.” She shuffles against the straw, fingers gripping her arms tightly. She can feel skin under her stunted nails. “I don’t know what I was thinking when I came here, but I was hoping something amazing like that would happen. You know, like life would sort itself out. That good things happen to good people. That things would just… work. Like it did for them. That maybe there’s something good for the rest of us, you know? Maybe the trick is you just need to be fearless. But I’m not in a position to be fearless – I have to be what everyone else expects of me. Mean, you can relate, right?” Her tone rolls to something condescending, fingers digging deeper. “A quiet elf. Keep my head bowed. Always respectful and quiet and staying out of trouble. Just getting by day by day without bothering people.” She thinks of the vipers in the pavilion, their wordless, porcelain lips tracing her movements. Those masks haunt her now, and she hates them. There is no other way to put it – she hates them with every ounce of her being. She clears her throat and runs a hand through her hair, the release starting to make her feel shaky. Guilty again. “But being brave? I don’t think that’s something I can do.”

She wasn’t expecting a response, not from Rumad. But not only did he speak a full thought, sentence and conversation, but he did so looking at her. “You heard different stories than me then.”

Aupia’s head slowly comes up to meet his, her hot breath filling her lungs. It’s hard to breathe as he looks at her with those big, golden eyes and speaks. “Heroes are dumb folk, the ones that are stubborn, thick. Full of it. They charge up and forward and on without a thought to themselves. This doesn’t make them brave – nowhere are they without fear or doubt, Miss. They’re heroes because they act in spite of it.”

The warm space lingers between them, soft words and gentle hearts aligning one another. What do these words mean to him? Aupia cannot begin to fathom what he’s leaving unsaid. Instead she drops her head to the stall wall. She won’t comment and she won’t question it – somehow, he might be right. As right as can be, at least: it seems Aupia is more in the wrong than she may have been aware. He’s probably had it worse than her, growing up in the city and all.

“You don’t have to call me Miss. Please, I’m Aupia.”

Rumad’s golden eyes blink. He finally turns away, his cheeks coloring ever so slightly. “I am not supposed to be comfortable with that,” he muses. Aupia’s ears copy his cheeks at the comment. “I hope you will be. Because I’m not comfortable being what everyone sees when the look at me.” She frowns at the ceiling overhead. Maybe that’s it, she thinks. Maybe I just shouldn’t be here. “Can I ask you something?”
Rumad’s head perks up again. One of the cats walk up to Aupia in low, warm purrs. “Yes?”

“Are you from here?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever wanted to leave?” Aupia asks.

“Yes. When I didn’t know any better.” Aupia turns back to him with an arched brow. “And now you do? You know better?” Rumad’s eyes dart about as he considers himself. “I think so. Yes.”

“So you don’t mind living here?”

“I have a reason to be here.”

So no. The lights flicker. Quagga shuffles closer, impatient by the lack of attention she’s getting. She works her lips in gentle circles, low gurgling demanding affection. Rumad comes a little closer to pet Quagga and one of the cats, the last of the three watching them both with a curled tail resting over its paws. “I got in a fight with my teacher today. And my friend, and… someone else who matters to me.” she admits for no particular reason. He stops petting Quagga, resting his hand instead on her freckled coat. “Yes?”

Aupia almost laughs at that - such a weird word to use so freely. She picks at the hay poking into her breeches. “I think something might be wrong with me.”

She keeps pulling at the straw: it appears to have embedded itself in her. “And… I think that- I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t have to say what I said.”

“But you did.”

“Hmm?”

“You needed to say it then. Having something to say shouldn’t hurt outloud.”

“I was being childish.”

“If being a child is part of being you, then that should be okay.”

“You say should be,” Aupia clarifies, putting stress on ‘should’. Rumad’s hands work feverously against themselves. “I’ve already said too much.”

“No, I think you haven’t said enough.” She bits back the urge to sigh, instead glancing over him once more. “But it’s not my place to say.” Then, “Thank you. For listening.”

“Yes.”

“Do this again sometime?”

“Yes.”

Aupia stands up, brushing off her thighs. Relief bleeds through her as the chilling air wafts through the stables. It is somewhat soothing. “Maybe you’ll tell me more about yourself next time.”

“Yes. Maybe,” he corrects, standing as well. Quagga jumps up, unceasing lips gnawing on her girl. She’s as oblivious as ever yet as at peace as if at home. Aupia runs a hand up her halla’s broad face before cupping its ear. She thinks of the letter she left unopened. Of the woman with the dancing
lines and the angry eyes. She thinks of how wrong the day went and how all joy seemed to exist elsewhere.

But then she thinks of this king of cats, of this young man she hardly knows. A ghost, really. Maybe he’s more than that.

He's probably not though.

Chapter End Notes

This was genuinely supposed to be short. And organic chemistry sucks. I cannot put into words how testing this semester has been.
Ochem aside my ecology professor made an interesting point last week: you never know what’s going on in Mother Nature’s head unless you bear witness firsthand. You’ll likely die in that case however, so instead we dissect what we can about this world.
Really sorry though about the wait. My anxiety’s getting pretty bad with this coarseload I was daft enough to keep on. Put myself in the ER too once this semester from the stress *thumbs up* so hopefully this is still ok? Next bits are more fun I promise, we’re, like, THIS close to getting the companions back on the scene
As with every beginning of each week, The Divine ascends a platform, her head bowed and her arms folded in submission. When she was a woman named Cassandra she lead thousands with a shield on her back and a battle cry in her lungs. She sang of days to come, of fights to be fought and of fire that rained down on the millions that lived across Thedas. She has faced darkspawn, venatori, rebels, demons, ravaging qunari, monsters all in the same yet people and hopes beneath it all. Sometimes she still dreams of those days, of misted battlefields with the only thing behind her being the shield on her back; she will look through this mist in her dreams, through the unknown and the faceless. And horrors will appear before her, bodies manifesting just out of reach. She will double check what is behind her in these dreams as there has never been a day in her life where she wasn’t fighting besides others, for others. But in these lucid nightmares she is alone as bodies and screams and terrors descend on her across this bleak grey battlefield. And she will unsheathe her sword. And she will unveil the eye on her back.

Now that she is the shield the people so need, there is no sense of security behind her but the few that catch her as she falls; and here too she stands alone, the only thing protecting her being the podium now under her palms and the microphones in her face. Lights flash before her as they always do, blinding her as they must. *The people need her, the people need the Maker in their hearts.* It’s getting harder and harder to continue believing that.

But she is the shield, and she knows she must do this. Because without the Chantry there is no faith to protect the people.

The lights flash, giant bulbs burning and whizzing as they pop and die. It’s hard to not flinch every time, but Divine Victoria has been getting better at it over the years. She clears her throat, the seven clunky microphones wheezing in protest.

“Let us begin.”

Inside, Aupia stirred back into the cognitive world at the sound of murmuring at her door; it was probably Val and Finch. Either that or Finch and the Canary. Finch and someone but it doesn’t really matter – no one will come inside. And she’s not about to leave, not with Finch on the other
side of that door.

Val will though, mostly because he doesn’t care what Aupia does or doesn’t want: he’s too tuned to what she needs as opposed to just about everything else. And he’s snarky about it – he doesn’t bother to filter himself. Never has and never will. Last night he came into her room with a fistful of papers, sat down, and started working away. There wasn’t a word between them. Aupia thought it was because he had no light in his own room; whatever the cause, the only thing she got out of him was snide curses as he turned page after page. However, his presence did all the speaking it needed to: in this odd way, they strike a balance. Aupia felt a little peace and comfort as she lied face-down on the quilts that are too soft in her bedroom made of gold.

But apparently something has changed - the door’s handle turns slowly. Aupia turns away from them as the bell starts to chime angrily in her neck. A pear strikes her in the back of the head, making her entire body recoil deeper into the comforter.

Vallen.

Some friend!

“Fuck off!”

“No, you fuck off. You’re being full of it.”

Hopefully ignoring him will deter the boy. Obviously, it doesn’t work: the door closes but his body stays, warming up the room like a resentful beacon.

“Go away,” she grumbles, face down.

“Whats-her-face doesn’t have any oranges. At least none to bring up to you. She said she might find one tucked away if you visit her.”

“What the hell do you want?"

He’s silent at first. Aupia can feel his hands release and reclench. The flowers in the vase behind him are rotting away; no one has had the courage or authority to step in and change them. Where petals were once bright red and purple is weathered greys and yellows, shriveled stalks and blackened leaves. She feels like the flowers but she doesn’t care. Vallen doesn’t see the wilted colors because he doesn’t know how to. There’s a pile of clothing in the corner haphazardly thrown about, masking what appears to be a sack of some sort – Vallan can see a strap and a dark hole.

“I don’t have to go in today,” he notes absentmindedly.

“That’s amazing.” She tries to speak as spitefully as possible but her voice holds little fire. She meant it despite not wanting to. Aupia is confused, but like all that came before her she will not ask for help; simply put, its not in her blood.

Vallen walks over and sits down gently using his hands to guide him in his descent. He leans his back against the bedframe, head curling just over the edge of the bed. He’s a spirit full of frustration, and more recently it was brought to light that he’s been negligent of his best friend. Vallen knew she was suffering – cause tits, who wouldn’t – and had thought she was finding her way through this labyrinth. He reflects on the last time she came to the lab, when she came running in with her guard on heel, breathless joy written across her face and free-flowing hair. That’s how a person is supposed to look, he thought to himself, as if she’s finally figured something out. It turned out she just had an answer for one of the twins’ mazes. She wasn’t even close to finding peace out here.
Not that he was either, but still. He’s been force-fed less information in the last month and a half than her. That’s a little different. Vallen watched her with narrowed eyes, waiting knowingly for something more. Inevitably, Aupia spoke again, her voice strained. “I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“You came here to learn, just like I did. Don’t let the little things get in the way of that.”

“Little things? Holy Maker Val! There are no little things! Not here!” Then, as if to drive her point home, she whispers through clenched teeth. “We’re in the home of the Divine! Nothing here is small!”

“Then what’s got your breeches in a knot?” He huffs a laugh at the pomposity of her claim. “I figured that was one of the last things on your mind.”

She plays with her hands as she laments. “I don’t think I fit their expectations.”

Vallen’s only response was crude laughter.

“Look. You’re a farm girl from Ferelden smack-dab in Val Royeaux. You’re going to be the farthest thing from anyone’s expectations here, other than fitting a damned stereotype. Besides, these people don’t know you. They didn’t know you existed a year ago.” A good friend would have given a reassuring pat: Vallen crosses his arms over his chest. “Get over their expectations and move on. Or this stay of ours here is going to go to the dogs.”

She doesn’t respond; Aupia is passive by nature—bickering is not one of her strong suits—so Vallen turns the conversation on its head a little. “Yesterday was rough. Claire’s convinced I’ve got nothing to me, no innate skill. She keeps dropping hints that I should change my area of interest.”

“Wait, really?” This gets her attention; Aupia rolls over, watching the back of his head. Vallen rests his forearms on his knees. “The only reason why this woman wastes her time with me is because someone high and mighty told her to. That’s it. There’s a reason why she never had an apprentice before me. She said that people who can identify bones and muscles are only as useful as people made of bone and muscle. The fact that I don’t know their names or associations is apparently a sin.”

He can hear Aupia shuffle a little behind him. “And what did you say to that?”

Vallen smirks, gaze rising to the ceiling. Aupia knows him well. “I said she’s gonna have to do more than jab at my pride to get me to leave.”
Outside the questions are as bad as they always are: rumors never seem to sink submissively. They always seem to float for people to pick up and toss about. These session began some time ago after the good guys lost, somewhere in the months following the dethroning of the Empress as the new legislative body was put in place in Orlais; the chantry and then-Inquisition were subsequent advocates for protecting the throne in Ferelden – related to matters officials may never find the reason for – and as a result the people pushed for weekly news sessions. It is meant as a means of connection between the people and the church, so there are “no secrets” in order to reestablish trust.

But let’s be honest. Everyone knows when a boat is slowly sinking. The truth is always found, regardless of how direct the Chantry is or is not.

“People are saying the collapse of the shirt factory weeks ago was parallel to the Provo building that fell two nights ago. That they can’t be absolutely unrelated.”

“Like with the Triangle Shirt Factory, the Provo Sewing Building fell due to structural instability. It appears that many factory buildings that were built around the same time may have been structurally unsound, that-“

“So they are related?”

“They could be. The Chantry has people looking into it.”

“The Chantry, or the Inquisition?” the question elicits low chuckles and groans alike which morphs into idle chatter. Divine Victoria drums her finger against the pedestal, turning knowingly to the face in the crowd responsible for the question. “Ser Darvis, surely you tire of asking this every week?”

“Never Most Holy, never.” He flicks a pen in the air, a coy smile on his lips. He has dusty hair which makes him easy to pull out from the crowd. He’s also the worst of them all. “But to the matter at hand, there’s word of dangerous people being at the sites. Pictures going around of faces – sketches, really, but-“

“As with before, we cannot logically pin the responsibility of aged infrastructure on a people, good or bad. It is-“

“So you deny again that Harels are involved?”

Divine Victoria clears her throat. “As I just said. We cannot put responsibility on a-“

“But the Harels. The organized crime rates, inside men have reported that-“

“Again. There is no correlation city officials have been able to find.” She points to another face in the crowd, something blurry and hard to see. Its getting harder to field the same thing over and over again. Its hard to make it not sound like a lie every time.

“Next.”
“Do you miss it? The air,” Vallen clarifies, rubbing his knuckles. His head is still tilted upright, his legs bent. “I think I do.”

She was silent for a moment more before she turns back over to him. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I don’t know. But of all the things I figured I’d miss of Ingersoll, I never thought it would be the damned air.” His eyes catch hers before her eyes dart away. “Yeah, I guess so,” she admits rather reluctantly.

“It just smells funny here.”

“You haven’t even been to the Outskirts.”

“True. I bet it smells like arse there.”

Aupia groans. “Don’t say that.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Mmmm.”

His hands stop. Even in a slump she usually uses words; how far gone is she? He lolls his head further back over the bed to force their eye contact to reunite. “I think I want to get out of here. Just to escape for the day, you know?”

“Mmmm.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Nowhere. I’m fine right here.”

“You haven’t left this bed in days, girl. That can't be healthy.”

“I haven’t stayed here,” she growls into her pillow. Vallen takes a full second before he twists around, his most full look of dishevelment. She just gives him a look in return. “I've gotten out more than once thank you very much.”

“Really? There a boy I should be aware of?”

“A qunari it so happens.” He recoils a little at her response. “That’s tits. There's no way.” Aupia rolls her gaze away. “He’s the stable hand you dummy.”

Vallen takes a moment to digest what she’s saying then gives her a new look altogether. “The one that doesn’t talk?” he asks, puzzled now more than ever.

“Turns out he does. Talk I mean.”

“Huh.” Vallen settles against the bedframe again, confusion still evident in the knot of his eyebrows. “Then why you making everyone believe you’re in here?”

“Because I want to,” says Aupia.
“Its because you don’t want to see Finch,” he resolves softly. Vallen hears her tense up in the blankets but he doesn’t want to see it. He goes back to massaging his hands – all this writing was killing him slowly. His hands are meant for digging into tissue, not theories and hypotheticals. “He’s no fool, Addy. He knows.”

They fall back into resentful silence, Aupia clawing at the fabric around her heart.

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“There’s something in the air about your ward, Most Holy. That the Grand Enchantress has given up on training her or that she’s too dangerous. Surely she shouldn’t be-”

“As with before, I would ask that you leave questions of my ward to yourself. She has enough going on in her life as-is.”

“Did the Grand Enchantress give up on training her, or was there a fight?”

Victoria pauses. She hasn’t heard about anything on Aupia recently; the only thing she knew was the girl didn’t join her for dinner last night. She clears her throat purposely, stealing a glance at Harding. The dwarf misses it, instead scowling at the man in the crowd. Obviously this wasn’t supposed to be made public. She has to fight the need to roll her eyes. This would have been good to know.

“My ward is taking a break,” Most Holy concludes with a smile. “Right now she’s inside taking a day off. That’s what the weekend is for.”

“But it’s been a few days now. Two, to be exact, with this being her third. Is your ward dangerous?”

“Dangerous?” She couldn’t stop her tone from showing through. “Why? Because she sleeps like a bear?”

“Hardly. Because she’s a young adult with magic.”

Victoria fumes: if she was still just Cassandra she’d probably laugh at his face. Then pull out a sword – actually, belay that. She wouldn’t need a weapon. “I cannot tell you how disappointed I am to hear such judgement in today’s day. I thought we overcame our prejudice against mages following the Heritage Wars.”

The reporter is unfazed. “Just curious. People are worried – you know what they say about snakes.”

His comment rustles the crowd up a little bit; the expression hadn’t been used in a few years now and was a prevalent reason why Circles were considered to be so necessary. Young snakes are the most dangerous – they’re the ones that cannot control their venom, or so the people say. He presses
on, his bombardment relentless. “And she isn’t the only one under your care, correct?” They roll from topic to topic in the overwhelming sense that things are done here. “There’s another one, a young man who is studying at the University. It was said the two are in relations with each other. Is he also a mage?”

“They are friends, yes. They came to Val Royeaux knowing each other. I would believe they find comfort in each other’s company. No, he has no connection to the Fade,” as far as I know.

“Then what is the reason for the boy’s stay? Is he any sort of exceptional?”

Her eye now twitches slightly – truth is, she barely knows the boy. From her one interaction with him – an early morning where he was running out the doors no less - she found him fairly boring. “They are-“

“What’s stopping you from creating an influx? From sponsoring students Thedas-wide from entering the University? Surely he’s not the only underprivileged young man out there who’s seeking an opportunity like this. What are his qualifications?”

“As stated before, this program is to offer select students personalized opportunities to better themselves. We are only in the preliminary stages, but there is room for this program to grow.” She spared a sideways glance at Josephine who could only shrug aggressively: they’ve never actually discussed the matter, but the answer seemed good enough for the time being.

Darvis is resistant though. He pipes up once more, cutting off three reporters assertively.

“So, these wards. We’re not allowed to talk about them, but what do we tell the people who have these questions? Are they qualified for this program in their knowledge or in their natures?”

“I don’t quite-“

“He’s asking if they’re here because there is no where else for them to study. If the people are in danger because these two have been brought here.” Comes the woman beside him, her own writing utensil up in the air. The crowd’s murmuring grows. Its extreme, but a reasonable question regardless which just makes this all the more difficult to lie about. Refusing to answer this will only thicken the mud that separates the people’s trust from the chantry.

Most Holy clears her throat for the fourth time this morning.

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“What do you do with him in these little escapes of yours? That qunari.”

“Nothing really. Sometimes I help him with the stable stuff, the bedding and things. Or we just sit there. Sometimes we talk.”

“Anything interesting I should know about him?”
“He’s got a gentle heart.”

“Unlike me,” Vallen Sacha concludes.

“Unlike you,” Aupia Kessler agrees. Vallen is on his feet now and rummaging through Aupia’s wardrobe of fancy clothes; now that Josephine knows her sizes, she keeps sending the girl more and more blouses and breeches, make up and bras. There’s a few more dresses in here too. “Why do they have to make socks so fancy if no one sees them? It’s not even romantic!”

Aupia mumbles into her pillow. Val turns around, a floral dress with cloud-like sleeves puffed up all the way from his shoulders to his chin. The window for cleavage reaches his navel.

“Can I meet him?”

Aupia’s rolled over, watching the whirlwind tear through her clothes. “I sincerely doubt you actually want to meet him,” she says.

“Why? Because I’m self-centered?”

“Because there’s no gain in you meeting him, but yeah we can call you selfish.”

He throws a boot at her; all she does is flinch.

“So is that a yes? You’ll get out of here with me?”

She sits upright slowly, arms dragging. Of course it was a yes, the only question remaining was the hows. “I don’t want to see Finch.”

“Fine. How do you want to do this? Down the balcony or across the roof?”

She takes comfort in how he doesn’t question her motives, only the execution; she rubs her chin in thought. “We’ll get around the back fastest if we take the roof, although you haven’t been up there yet. I’m not sure how well you’ll take to the tiles.”

“Let’s find out.”

Now that the questions have started, there seems to be no turning back. Shout after shout Most Holy fields these questions in her best attempt to make them stop. It appears, however, that is not an option today. She speaks up over the crowd, her voice very nearly a shout now. “Here at the Chantry, we appreciate those of you who have honorably let these two students live their lives in peace. I know that there are natural curiosities, but they truly are—“

“If they’re so normal, then why don’t we know where they’re from? Their pasts?”

“They are mature, young adults. They are what we hope future generations may reflect, and we are
hoping that this opportunity is helping them see the world for the better. That, despite their upbringing or misfortunes, they understand that a city such as this is for every child of Andraste.”

Something starts among the crowd like skeeters across a pond. They point, they whisper, then the cameras turn away from her. It’s a temporary relief almost instantaneously replaced with a crease on her brow: now what could it be?

She turns around to follow the faces and fingers. And there is Aupia and... her friend, running along the rooftop. There’s some fruit in her mouth as she pauses, surveying the Divine’s landscape. Then she catches Victoria’s eye and pauses like a deer in a meadow, the look right before an arrow strikes it between the eyes. The fruit lulls between her lips as she pauses just long enough for a snap of smoke to catch her image. She disappears out of sight, friend in tow.

Maker’s breath.

“She hates us.”

“Maybe. Well, me definitely. You, eh.”

They scale tile and rifts, brick after brick of molded and wind-grinded stone. It’s not like the branches of oaks and pines they’re used to, but it’s something to climb, and they were pretty good on their feet after running through undergrowth as much as they did. Aupia rolls another bit out of her pear. Its sweet but rough under the skin; she isn't a big fan, but it'll do. “She only likes me ‘cause I've got the Inquisitor’s ears.”

“So?”

“So that doesn’t count.”

“Its more than I've got going for me.”

“And less,” Aupia corrects.

“Huh?”

“And less. You’ve got more going for you. And less.” Vallen stops briefly, his fingers latched into the curvature of a tile as he balances on the slanted roof. He squints as the wind picks up around them. “Mmm. Fair. I get it.” He picks out one of the statues of the fallen hero, surrounded by a courtyard of meandering buisnesswives. He catches himself lingering a moment too long however since Aupia begins to scamper away; Vallen watches the statue carefully before chasing her down the slanted surface. Even he grew up admiring that woman without flaws. Certainly Aupia has more than her ears, right?

He thinks on it, but can't think of anything she shares with the statue.
Growing up, Ellana never cared much for her hair. It was too thick and too hard to maintain when there were so many other concerns to abide one’s time to. She was not negligent of course – she would do the traditional weaves and don ceremonial flowers as a First should without question – but it was always low on her list of personal priorities. She just didn’t have the dexterity nor the patients. One of her fondest memories of her grandmother was one with the old soul sitting behind her, her wrinkled, jointed fingers and long, even nails pulling through snarls of hair. She was chuckling, and Ellana loved the sound of her Maela’s chuckle. The morning fire was reduced to nothing but greying coals, and the sun was pulling up against the sails of their aravels. The birds were so lulling to listen to and they mirrored the idle morning conversations of her family, yet nothing compared to her Maela’s soft and fuzzy laughter. Nothing could ever compare to the grace of that sound.

Ellana could smell the mud against her scalp as her gran pulled and pulled. It was a comfort.

“Some things are not meant to be tamed, *ashala*. Perhaps this head of yours is one of them.”

It was a perfect life. she could freeze herself in that memory for an eternity before ever growing tired of it.

But when she began living among the shemlens and the strangers that would one day become family, Ellana did her utmost to do her hair new every morning. Fresh braids and long mornings over a woven bowl of warm water, her short, unflattering nails racking through and through. She knew better than to enable their judgement; rather, she did what she could to control what was still within reach. Not many things of course - not in the days before she was Inquisitor - but she did what she could. No one seemed to notice; at least, no one seemed to notice the effort she put into it. Then there was that *one* morning when she emerged from her lodging oblivious to the mess on her shoulders – the night had been long, far too long. Varric was the first to see her and he erupted.

His laughter did not compare to her Maela’s, and in that moment the sound was little more than a morning mockery. She turned to him, initially oblivious as she rubbed sleep from her eyes.

“Hey, uh, Lavellan? I think you forgot something this morning.”

She froze like a deer in a hunt, shoulders and neck stiff. Her eyes meander down to check she put on breeches (another thing that can, naturally, slip one’s busy mind). “Yeah?”

“Either that or you’ve got some sort of pet you haven’t introduced to me.”

She looks around, reaching into her sixth sense for any sign of life around her. At her bewilderment Varric could only laugh more, coming up to her with his mug offered in apology. “I mean your hair, Taps.”

She reached for her head mindlessly before her expression rotted to bitter dishevelment. She took his coffee without question and kept walking, pretending to ignore the snide laughter now following her. they walk past a bald elf with his nose in a book, one who so kindly spared them a discerning glance before arching his brow in discrediting acceptance. Solas opened his mouth as if to say something but Ellana cut him off with an aggressive snarl. “Don’t you dare!”
He shrugged and walked off. Onlookers did the same, scampering about like hares in a chase.

Varric trotted after her – she was a quick walker, moreso when irritated. She downed half of the wretched beverage in a long, solid gulp before spitting it back out into the cup. She examined the copper more closely now before dropping it back in his hands. “This is an atrocity of a drink.”

“Hey now,” he grabbed her by the elbow, his smile softer, fonder. “Coffee’s an acquired taste!”

“Tea is better.”

“I don’t carry around leaves.”

“You should change that.” she looked at him now and slowed, a hand dragging down the length of her face. “I’m sorry Varric, I don’t mean to-“

“Relax Lavellan. I’m not judging you for anything. Just know that you’re sporting a look I would never be able to pull off,” he chimed, reaching up to brush something off her shoulder. Ellana rolled her eyes and took the drink back. As unwarranted his concern was, she appreciated this about him – he reminded her of family, more than anyone else it would seem, in all the good and not-so-grand ways. Which makes her need the drink: there is undeniable alcohol in it. Hopefully, this will help.

She finished off the drink before handing it back to him, her face curling up in disgust as she swallowed the warmth in full. She coughed as it went down, earning her another smile from her companion. Handing the mug back was more like a shove to the man’s chest as she wiped her mouth. “What did you put in this?”

“A little whiskey,” Varric admitted triumphantly. “A little?” Ellana accused with a roll of her eyes before shutting them tight. Her headache was softening, but the warmth of the beverage drew comfort. “You’re a brave man, Varric Thethras. Disgusting, but brave.”

“Sure. Call it that. What are you off to? Its nearly midday, a little late to start anything new.”

She was nonchalant as she walked away from him. “Hopefully the pub. I slept the first half of the day away, my goal is to drink away the rest.”

It took him a moment to wrap his mind around the proclamation. “Wait, what?” Varric trotted after her as Lavellan weaved around people. Naturally she invited him to join her. “You heard me. Wanna join?”

“I mean always, but should I be concerned?”

“Not at all. This is that self care you were telling me about.”

It was not exactly what he had been hoping for her, Varric will be the first to admit to that. But hopefully it helps. “You running away from anything?”

“Only paperwork.” She said with a toss of her head, hand scratching somewhere deep in the fray. Varric tossed the mug aside and caught up to her, hands shoved deep in his pockets as the mountain wind ushered itself across them.

“Well, in that case count me in!”

In the first few months of the newborn Inquisition, there were a few individuals that stood out head
and shoulders above the rest; usually this was due to strange or distasteful personalities. The people’s Herald seemed desperate to remain unheard and as far from the chantry hall as possible, and the magi she brought into Haven were just as bizarre. Several of these unusual characters rounded up day and night in the pub under song and story, difference in background somehow shared in experience. Why the pub? Mostly because of the drink – alcohol seemed to be a universal medicine. Ellana broke through the double-swinging doors just as the sun was peaking overhead, a confident hand propped up on either side to announce her entrance. Unsurprisingly she was beaten there by two regulars – the qunari mercenary and an elf who’s mouth never seemed to shut.

Immediate company excluded of course.

Bull was the first to notice them; he waved Ellana and Varric over with half a greased horn. “You’re looking a little weary there, Boss. Especially for being here at such a decent hour.”

She sat down aggressively, head hanging in slight defeat. It was nice to not have to prop herself upright all the time – Lady Josephine was adamant about proper representation when among the common folk; good thing most people are sensible enough to not go into a pub this early in the day. Varric pat her back as he scooted in next to her. “Good day to you as well. Are you going to finish that?”

“Its good as gone, let me get you a new one.”

Sera stood up, eager to have Ellana try something new. She traced a few fingers over Lavellan’s head as she passed by. “Don’t you have that nifty scarf you usually wear?”

“Why? Think I’ve got something to hide?”

“Nah, but I took you for one with a high sense of decency.”

“If you think this isn't descent you should see me in the Dance of Vines ceremony.”

“What’s that look like?”

“Naked. There’s no truer decency than that of the Free People.” The Iron Bull laughed at that and offered his horn. Ellana took a hearty swig.

Varric switched seats with Sera once she returned, something snide passing between the women. It sounded like something about Cullen. Varric whispered when he was just close enough to the Iron Bull so not be overheard. “She’s overwhelmed.”

Ellana still heard him, cutting him off with a snort. “That might be an understatement.”

“A friend of mine-“

“Daisy?” Ellana interrupted, five steps ahead. “Yeah, Daisy,” he continued, “she was-“

Sera pulled out a knife to pick at something between her teeth. “He don’t got any other friends. Anyone here could have called it was Daisy-mae.”

“Between them all he’s only got three good tales,” Ellana murmured which elicited a rumble from Bull. Varric glared at each of them individually, making the point to lean in hard across the table as necessary. “As I was saying before I was so kindly interrupted, Daisy was a First too.”

“We know that.”
"Yes but let me get to my point maybe? She said being First prepared her for everything under the sky and everything that wasn’t. Surely you’re at an advantage here over us common folk."

"Yes, sure I should be grateful, I’m leagues above everyone else when it comes to falling out of the sky with a glowing hand and a headache of a world to lead! Mind the racism and judgement and systematic inequality,” Lavellan snapped, cup to her lips once more. Varric threw up his hands in defeat with a desperate look at the Iron Bull; the qunari could only shrug. “Honestly she’s got a point. Not necessarily helping when someone’s suffering.”

“Suffering? You call this suffering? You live in a damned castle on a cloud out here and you think you’ve got it bad?” Sera snapped, pointing a bold finger at Lavellan. Ellana leaned back, palms against the wooden table as if to remove herself spiritually from the physical world. Her forehead met the glass window behind her, her eyes unfocused and unwilling.

“Now Sera, I don’t think that’s what she’s saying,” argued Bull, eye half-lidded as he observed the Herald. Sera spun on him with a hand pointed at the elf beside her. “But she isn’t denying it neither!”

The table was silent for a moment more, the almost-friends each to their own. Ellana’s fingers drummed as the words came to her, her lips moved slowly as she tried to articulate to the best of her ability. “Sera, you once told me that you try to help others. That would lead me to assume that, maybe, there has been a day or moment in your life where you needed help and you didn’t get it.” Sera’s stubborn mouth opened and closed as Ellana continued. “I respect what you’re saying, I really do. But you don’t get to tell me that I’m not having it hard right now.” She rolled her head to the side, face tangled in her messy hair. “I’m not saying I have it worst than them, Sera. I’ve never met those people. But this? The mess we’re in? I’m at the center of it, and I have to weigh the lives of men and women that I’ve never met before. And that’s… well, that’s not natural. Nor is there any training for it. There’s nothing you can do to prepare for a burden like this.” Her eyes closed for a moment as she willed herself to a place of peace; was she thinking of home? Of the act of running away? Maybe one of them should have asked her. No one did.

No one could speak to her claim, so they sat quietly as cheers and songs circle them. It almost felt like a facade compared to the truth just dropped on them.

The Iron Bull was the first to try and speak next, but Ellana beat him to it. Her brow still grazed the glass. “Do you know what happens when you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water?”

Bull and Varric exchanged glances. Sera snorted mockingly as she returned to dragging her knuckles in circles across the table. “No. what happens?”

“The frog jumps out,” said Lavellan, nothing shy of matter of fact. “Now. Do you know what happens when you put a frog in a pot of cool water then slowly bring it to a boil? Do you know what happens then?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell us.” Said Sera.

Lavellan suddenly whipped upright before teetering forward to raise her flagon. “The frog cooks.”
They didn’t quite make it to the stables. Not before they were stopped by a mob quietly enchanted by something that happened without their knowing, a pack of thirty or so nobles swarming like ants about a disturbed nest. Vallen was quick to put a protective hand out over Aupia, slowing her down and nodding to her hair. She dropped her ponytail and pulled up a hood, careful to watch their footing as the people thickened around them. She should have grabbed her quiver. The crowd grows louder, and its only after they agree to take a closer look that they see exactly what transpired; it looks like an attempted robbery, either that or a straight-up murder. Someone on the ground was bleeding and heavily, the stench of the hunt loud on their senses.

Val pushes ahead to the limp form on the ground, his shoulders set as a man does when they need to look bigger. He starts demanding information, his hands moving knowingly over the body beneath him. He paused once however, a breath drawn that no one else could see: this is a lot of blood to plunge hands into. He was slow at first, searching for breaks, searching for a pulse. Think Sacha think! Claire’s gone over this a dozen times already – time is of the essence. His fingers move swiftly now as he tries to breathe through the blood flooding his senses while speaking to the man, coaxing him for signs of life.

Aupia keeps back between the whispers and sideways glances before she spies who can only be the culprit; an elf, a child of all things. She’s on the ground with her limbs splayed and a bloodied nose, three people standing over her with swords. She’s no older than Josephine’s daughters.

She’s trying to smile.

“That’s enough.” Someone storms past, heavy boots clanking as they cross the pavement.

Oh, this is a recognizable demeanor. Vallen’s the only one who doesn’t move, his eyes intent, his energy focused; everyone else moves like a shudder across a body. Vallen recognizes the voice like a dim memory, faded but true like Aupia’s own. Few have ever met the man but everyone who’s in the present knows that tone of voice and that expressionless face. He’s in black and white – traditional Chantry colors and insignias no less – but with accents of red, deep like blood. You can drown in that color, just as you can the gold trimmings of his gauntlets and belt. Aupia steps out of his way as everyone should: you don’t keep yourself between Kodiak and his prey.

People follow him as he carries out his duties Thedas-wide, following in his step like street dogs after a scrap of meat. He’s terrifying to behold which naturally leads to a few distinct rumors; some say he’s torn the head clean off a dragon. Others will say that he laid with the beast first. It’s also said that he singlehandedly resolved two Circle revolts before being sent to the sight of the third – upon arrival, the leader turned herself and her followers in. And ever since? Circles everywhere were reshaped. The Age was almost renamed for this alone.

She watches him closely now, something criticizing in the way she keeps her head down just to pop it up. She wants to know who the Right Hand of the Divine is. What’s his real name again? He’s known best for the name his prisoners cry and for the make of his helm; a bear, roaring with lips a gasp. The Kodiak. One of the last of the original Seekers, following their purge at the hand of the present Divine. Apparently trained the entire next generation of Seekers for what it’s worth. And she’s never actually seen that helmet.

“When did he get back to Orlais?”
“Maxine claimed to see him on the train yesterday. I didn’t believe it of course, but it looks like she was right.”

Someone behind Aupia whispers to a waiting ear. “They say his silence speaks volumes.”

“Shut up!”

“That he can freeze a heart just by looking into your eyes.”

“Good thing he’s here then. He should give that Harel what they came looking for!”

Aupia’s favorite rumor? There was once a time where he was said to be passing through Redcliff. Hundreds gathered just for a glimpse, a young Aupia and Vallen among them. Eager hearts and hungry eyes practically begging for a chance to lay eyes on him, the indominable, the unbreakable. Lake Calahad just froze over, leaving the children to walk for three hours along the cliffs and waterside in the breaking morning light. Grant and his dads joined them, the children running ahead in eager giggles. Before the sun had even risen a festival was practically taking place, the newly-installed city lights flickering on, laughter and chimes of joyful conversations echoing across the pavilion. Aupia and Vallen couldn’t see over the heads of the adults gathered, but they knew something changed when the crowd started to push against them. Then people parted like the sea, waves of silence starting to push back over the thrill of the oblivious. Grant was thrown up on the shoulders of his father. The other two preadolescents exchanged glances.

Aupia distinctly remembers Val turning to her, her hand in his. The city was in shades of grey, but his eyes were bright. Amber against the dying world. “Let’s go.”

They charged through parents and adults and hands knotted together. They pushed against bodies that pushed back, something light in their innocence. Past the last set of torn breeches, then there he was.

He passed by without a word, trailing chains what seemed a mile long to their young hearts. There was fresh ice on the ground as soleless men and women were dragged by. His silent, stoic force seemed to scream with dozens of prisoners bound to him in these screeching, crackling links.

There was a lot of blood on all of them, Kodiak included. The city once clamoring for a glimpse of the man fell quiet, families and rows of onlookers losing the strength to speak as this dismantled parade. Aupia recoils as one of the heads popped up, a man with hands chained to the horned beast in front of him. Stray hair fell, covering most of his face. Dry blood covering everything else. His eyes were green like her mothers, but he had ears like her.

Aupia’s young heart swelled against her ribs. Small fingers tightened into a ball on her shirt. It was said that the Kodiak could not feel pain. It proved then and there to all those that gathered that the rumors were true. He was indominable, the unbreakable. The pride of the people swelled. They boasted about him once he was out of earshot, how he was the pride of Thedas and how he would reinstate true strength in the Chantry.

Aupia started to choke on young sobs.

They were mages.

They were like her.

She’s jolted back to the present as a familiar face breeches her line of vision.

It takes her a moment to realize she should respond; she looks back at Kodiak. He’s putting some bindings on the person in front of him: the fool knows better than to try and run. Some - two, to be exact – have fallen to their knees. They’re singing praise to him. Vallen stands, squaring up to the man as best he can; the person beneath Vallen’s feet doesn’t stir, and the air is warm with blood.

“I-I’m fine,” she responds, turning back to focus on the unfamiliar face. Familiarly unknown. His messy hair seems most recognizable somehow. Wait a second.

“Well, if you’re feeling alright, you should probably dip out.” He concentrates on his sleeves, unrolling what was once up for what looks like a fist fight. His knuckles are bruised and there is a single scratch between his ring finger and pinky. He doesn’t seem to notice or care – he’s too focused on his sleeves. “These folks aren’t going to take too kindly to you just being an onlooker.”

Aupia nods absentmindedly. Kaplan. The guy who helped her before. There were… pigeons that day? Is that what it was? No, it was that reporter. Maybe both? He peeks at her with a smile and raised brows. “Do you want another escort?”

“I think I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah. My friend’s here. he’s helping.” She plays with her bag’s shoulder strap as she points to Vallen, the human – her human – talking to Kodiak. Man, they’ve really come far in the last few weeks! But Vallen feels… different now. That tension in his shoulders won’t leave.

Kaplan doesn’t seem to care much. “Willing as you may be, again, I don’t know how smart that is.” Aupia rolls her eyes at him before sweeping a glance over the gathering crowd; yeah, there were definite eyes watching her. Kodiak. The fallen nobles singing. Vallen. Her.

Makes sense, being an elven onlooker when the only other knife-ear peoples present is being arrested. The girl tenses and tries to take a deep breath.

_But I want to-_!

“Come on. There’s nothing to see here anyway.” She turns to him with open lips, but he is more forceful this time; now that he has her attention, he wants to pull her away. “Like I said - there’s nothing to see here. Do yourself and your friend a favor. Where do you want me to tell him to meet you?”

She regards him more closely now, head level with his for the first time. She notices the blemishes on his cheeks, the tired look in his eyes, the façade he puts up. He wears his own mask just like the rest of the people here. She turns hard, her lips firm. She’s tired of this. Time for change.

Aupia takes a half-step closer, narrowing his field. She wants him to see her, to see her and not her ears. “I’m good thanks,” she growls, pushing past him for Vallen. If the man’s dead, there’s no need for either of them to be there. Dead is dead. Kaplan watches her and throws his hands up in defeat, settling to stand back and watch.

She came up to the Kodiak’s shoulder, keeping eyes with Vallen and cutting him off mid-word as she breaks his line of sight. The Right Hand of the Divine hardly acknowledges her, at most giving up a glance out the corner of his eye as Vallen diverge his attention from him. He continues, something firm in the set of his hands on his hips. She feels like she’s shriveled up about a foot next to him.
Val clears his throat and continues, brows set like his lips. “It’s as I said.”

“But it wasn’t immediate.” His voice is gravely, like he eats rocks for breakfast lunch and dinner.

“Like I said. A few minutes at best. No longer than three.”

How long it took for him to die. How sad. It looks like the child went for the neck. She missed the… jammer? The thing to the side. It’s a little lower on deer, for humans it’s to the side. Pretty far out there. She looks at the mess beneath her. She just went straight for the throat, which is considerably inhumane. Flooded the neck with blood. That would have… hurt, to say the very least.

Kodiak returns to the girl, hoisting her up on her feet by the nap of her neck. “We’re going,” he says, gravely voice deep in her ear. All she does is laugh, but its forced and weak. She sounds like she isn’t completely dedicated to the act she took to. She says something about the Hunt, about Harels and about the glory of the days to come.

“The Hunt will rise,” she says. “Like the tide, the Hunt will come. And it will come for all of you.”

Aupia barely listens. She’s heard the tirade before. Everyone has at least once. She grabs Vallen by the sleeve. “Let’s go,” she says in a whisper. This is a lot in one day. This isn’t what they had planned. He goes willingly, something in his hands; Aupia thinks it’s his pride, that’s what’s got his hands in knots at his side.

“It will swallow you whole,” the girl promises, now behind them. She’s no older than twelve. She’s sweating. No one knows what the Kodiak will do to her. Probably something legal. The people on the ground continue to sing the Chant.

Aupia holds on to his sleeve until he pulls sharply away only after they’re cleared from the mob. A murder in the middle of the morning huh? This’ll go over well. Aupia doesn’t fight it when he’s free from her grasp, instead she glances at him.

“I’m sorry,” she says as softly as she can muster. She sees Kaplan nearby; he waves at them both.

“I couldn’t help him,” Vallen responds, his tone unusually forgiving. Aupia is unsure of how to respond; the man was already dead by the time they got there, yet it hurts him immensely. That much she knew. She brushes her knuckles against his. “I know. Now come on, I think we could both use a break.”

For those of the world that are unfamiliar with the inner workings of an equestrian center, such places of wood and stone and manure are rarely left an unguarded minute. Depending on the number of heads and stalls, most stables take approximately four hours a day to care for about ten mounts: this includes morning feedings, evening feedings, cleaning the stalls, and pasture rotation.
One must also consider the time it takes to clean and prep tack, cleaning the isle way, proper deposition of manure, grooming, arena care, pasture maintenance, farrier visitations, and more. Keep in mind, that is only ten horses.

Another norm to add in this formula is owner visitations. For standard stables, owners come and go throughout the day and may stay for any period of time, which, inevitably, throws a wrench in the system. Pasture rotations go out. Schedules get in the way of every owner.

Whether this is a fact of luck or something to pity, most mounts kept at the Grand Cathedral Stables are not frequented by their owners; instead, they are trophies owned simply to be owned. For better or worse, such a standard does exist in the modern world – there is an inevitable risk to every grand thing’s longevity. Why would you risk running an injury into such a fine, high-bred creature? For the same reason anyone refuses to wear their largest of diamonds and pearls. The mortal world is an unforgiving place.

So with all of this in mind, this stable is relatively quiet place most days of the week. Unfair rates in an unfair environment – plus the smell – drove most attemptee stablehands away in due time, leaving but two to patrol the stable at any given time. There are three owners that make frequent use of their animals – one, a man hell-bent on breaking his own back with his untrained (and frankly untrainable) beast, a university student who loves her horse with all her heart, and a newcomer, one that smells like trees with a deer in tow. At one point she smelled like trees; now she smells like the rest of them, fruity and fancy and hard to breathe in. She would smile the same though in a way that suggested she was kind, but as of late her smile was weak, unspecific, and probably fake.

Today she comes with a boy Rumad has only seen a few times before; a young man with hard set eyes and a jawline only defined by how tight it clenches. He seems snide and sharp and like someone to fear despite being smaller in stature. Like the pony, down in the far end: it bite is something ferocious.

Rumad heard them before he saw them and hid as Quagga begins her uncanny calls for attention. He thought they were going to leave for the farthest pasture as they usually do – or the indoor arena, as Aupia does on some wet days – but they sit down among prancing hooves in the bedding, few words shared between them.

This is unusual, and Rumad doesn’t like it. He tried to ignore them for as long as he could and carried on with his day’s responsibilities, but in due time he ran out of things to occupy himself with; and, like Quagga, he found comfort in the noisy elf. He appreciated that Ms. Aupia didn’t make him speak as many do. He stole glances into the stall with every pass, putting together a photo of the three sitting around each other and a few papers between them. Eventually the quiet chatter died out altogether, a candle in dying hours of the middle of the day. The young man was asleep against Aupia, his face buried in her shoulder; even in a nap he looks stressed and taught. Maybe it’s the blood under his nails and in the cracks of his hands.

After some times more he finally stopped in the doorway. Aupia smiled up at him in that thoughtless way she does. It is unnerving.

“Would you like to join us?”

A small part of him doesn’t, but the rest of him is too curious to do otherwise. Rumad sits down, half of his back against the open hallway behind him. Despite being half on her girl’s lap, Quagga huffs at the absence of Aupia’s eternal attention and thrusts her head into her girl’s hand. Aupia smiles as she returns to the present while Rumad muses over what he just witnessed. “Why does she do that?” he asks quietly after a moment, golden eyes entranced by the creature.
Aupia cocks her head slightly as she strokes Quagga’s long ears. “I’m not too sure. She’s very needy, but I didn’t do a whole lot of discouraging that when I probably should have. Now that I think about it, I definitely let her in my lap when she was little. Never really did anything to stop her once she grew into herself. So I guess this is on me.” Aupia reflects quietly with a smile. Rumad nods seriously, his horns bobbing with the effort. “Is she going to get bigger?” he asks.

“A lot. Halla don’t get all that big,” Aupia notes as if she knows. Her brushing motion pauses as she thinks it through – Quagga’s mother wasn’t that big when they took her down. Probably about the same size as Quagga now. She looks down at the head cradled in her lap, noting fondly how her intensive gaze was half-lidded in comfort. Maybe her mother was young, but there was no way of knowing now.

Vallen stirs beside her, a breathy sigh bringing him out of sleep. She was quiet for a moment longer. “I don’t want to be afraid,” she drops out of the blue. “But I don’t think I can be without fear.”

Rumad tries not to look at her. This is abrupt, but obviously was weighing heavily on her mind. “I think that’s okay.”

“You do?”

He doesn’t know the answers to most things, so instead he asks her a question. “Why shouldn’t it be?”

Aupia couldn’t think of a response. She thinks of how the animals she chased and hunted always looked when she struck them down. “I’m afraid of telling people what I think,” the girl relents. “I’m afraid that they’ll think I’m just being dramatic. Like I’m not grateful for what I do have, which is leagues above hundreds of others.”

Rumad just reaches for Quagga, callused hands and worn knuckles brushing through Quagga’s light coat. He doesn’t know how to make her feel better because he agrees with her sentiments; she is way better off than him in Val Royeaux despite their natural-born circumstances. He envies her, surely. “Do you miss your home?” he asks instead.

She glances up at him. “More than anything. But I don’t want to… you know.”

Rumad didn’t.

“Go back to Ingersoll,” comes Vallen, eyes still closed and arms still folded. He folds his legs and shifts against her shoulder. “You don’t want to go back to being nothing. Or being nowhere.”

Quagga groans from Aupia’s lap, prompting Rumad to scoot a little closer to them all. He sits crosslegged, long back hunched over as he compresses himself against the straw. “New things are nice,” he admits, reaching tentatively for Quagga’s neck this time. The halla’s skin quivers under his touch as grey meets grey.

“It’s hard to be what they want. To just take everything without complaint.”

“Is it your job to just take it all the time though?” Says Vallen, somewhat angry. “Is it your job to be pushed around?” Rumad internally balks at the aggression in his voice; it sounds like they had been chasing this conversation in circles.

“But that’s the problem Val! They aren’t pushing me or anything. They just—” she glances between them both, Vallen opening his eye just enough to catch her meaning. “-don’t see me when they look at me. I’m always something else, someone else.”
They sit quietly for a moment now, Vallen slouched against his friend and Rumad stroking Quagga. Aupia does as she always does – she waits for the answer to materialize in front of her. A minute passes between them, thoughts and words tangled in intangible messes.

Rumad clears his throat. “My horns,” he tries, “Are what people see when they look at me. There are people that I can say things to and there are people that I can’t.” he plays with one of them, stroking it under long fingers and deep calluses. He taps it, rubs it. He has no fingernails, but he scratches against it. “My… family doesn’t see it. They see how I am quiet. They say I am not of the people, but they aren’t either.”

The people. The qunari. “They aren’t?” Aupia asks. Rumad shakes his head gently. “None of us are. We’re from a place called Atsikeyah, although none of us remember it. The true way of the qunari is lost to us. To many of us here.”

“Where is that?” Vallen asks.

“Nowhere anymore. That’s kind of the problem.” His hands drop, mimicking his eyes. “None of us belong to the old way because it’s gone. So, when they say the things they do, I can’t give them space to change me.”

The two friends can't respond; this is a lot to process, and it can't be easy for someone who doesn’t speak much to reveal so much about himself. He glances at them before standing once more with a final pat on Quagga’s flank. “I cannot allow it to change me because their words have no right. And I think I feel the same about having horns. But that’s just me, and I've said too much.”

Vallen opens and closes his mouth, chewing over the need to call the young man out on his claim. Aupia instead takes his words into great consideration. “You paused when you said ’your family’. Any reason why?”

“I am not related to them,” he says as he disappears once more. It explains nothing, but it was apparently all he was willing to give up. Vallen turns his smudged cheek against Aupia’s shoulder to look at her hard. “He’s got a point you know.”

“I know.”

“Say it out loud.” She glares at him, but her look has little strength. He’s always short-tempered with her, but because of this morning he is acting extra bitter. Aupia chooses not to address it. “I know what others think don’t matter. Or, they shouldn’t. but-“

“But?”

“- But I’m in a position where I can be imprisoned for giving someone a bad look! Someone can blame me for their own crimes and no one would second-guess them. I could be approached in the street and no one would bat an eye.”

“Maybe you don’t have enough trust in people.” This time he is matched with fire, so Vallen throws up his hands. “Alright fine, that’s warranted. People suck. But what do you hope to gain if you don’t offer up a little trust first? And how are people gonna learn they’re hurting you this bad if you don’t say anything about it?”

She, again, does not now how to respond, so instead she refocuses the conversation. “Do you know what my biggest problem about all of this is? That its not actually that bad. I mean-“

“Addy. You’re miserable here.”
“No I'm not!”

“No, then you’re depressed with a sprinkle of misery! What else do I have to say to convince you that you need to change something?”

The two stare each other before Aupia caves with slacked shoulders and a turned cheek. “Val. Do you remember the day we met?” she asks.

“Hardly,” he denies. “I only remember important things.”

Aupia ignores him. “Do you remember what you told me?” He looks at her knowingly, his head lolled over. “Something about how being a pussy doesn’t help your cause?”

“Serious question. Do you think it doesn’t help me here?”

Valen’s expression levels out as he slowly sits upright; he thinks it over for a moment, careful with his words. “I read a paper this week, something on why there aren’t bears in deserts of wyverns in cities. Dragons can go anywhere because they’re unstoppable force, but everything else is restricted in where they can live because of natural limits. If we popped a bear in this ‘Ash-ee-kayah’ it would die. Not because it’s weak or anything, but because it can’t naturally do everything,” he reasons. “They call this the theory of ecology, or something like that. The thesis argued that beasts are conquerors because they fight, but they can’t fight everything. Thus there are niches and habitats where any organism can thrive. I think maybe people are like that and we need to pick our battles, that we need to chose what we fight for in order to find places for us. So we can thrive. A place where we aren’t tearing ourselves up over little things. Or if we’re to use that analogy again, like how bears found forests or how fish found rivers.”

Time passes before Aupia tries to reason through his logic. “So what? I should go and throw myself at a tree and see what happens?”

“SO you need to step up your game! These niches don’t just fall out of the sky Addy! You have to go out and find it. Create it if necessary.” His eyes drift to unspeakable thoughts, thoughts of the body this morning. Aupia doesn’t know he speaks for more than just her sake so she asks him one last time. “And you think I should tell the Divine tonight? Vivienne next time she burdens herself to speak to me? The Canary? Josephine?”

“Nah, I think you’ll chicken out at the last second. I think you’d just be digging yourself a grave.”

“So what do I do?”

“Pick your battles, Addy, but personally? I think this is a fight you have to fight. Don’t dig that grave, kill it all in one fell swoop.”

Later that evening and with nothing to do, Valen stumbled his way back to the laboratory to get a head start on something or other. Rumad returned to his ghostly self, and Aupia was left dragging her feet in the direction of the Cathedral. Valen had a point – they both did, really. But one thing
was certain: Aupia is a coward. She’s only ever lived passively. It is truly against her nature to do anything else this late in the game. She thinks of horses, wired to war against the instinctive fear that drives their hooves. She thinks of how they were trained to charge into the fray for mankind’s wars when their ancestors ran away from every matter to approach them, and how, if you give them their freedoms today, they will opt to run and never return.

She kinda wanted to be a horse, and was kicking herself over how unrealistic that was. Horses don’t think NEARLY this hard about anything. They’re dumb.

She winces up at the statue nearest to her, trying to see through the sun at the marble looming over her. Like every other figure in this city, it’s a ghost and it’s a Makerdamned waste of space. She wonders if Onis would have statues if he was public knowledge, what they would symbolize and what they would incorporate. Would there be any of the two of them together? If he was public knowledge, and if she was still alive, who knows? Maybe the would have put the three of them together on a-

Oh that’s an ugly thought. She pauses as pressure mounts on her, eyes from several couples converging on her back. They’re all speaking to something or another; a building that fell or the murder that morning, rumors and spiteful comments and racist inclinations. Aupia glances around as the heat rises in her – she feels like she’s surrounded, a beast with nowhere to hide and nowhere to go: despite having nothing to hide, she knows she must protect herself on these busy, white-paved roads. The force of attention serves as the reminder Aupia may never be able to ignore: in truth, she is a coward. She doesn’t want to rewrite the world, her own or otherwise. She draws up her hood once more and leaves for the Cathedral. The dragon statue’s eyes follow her, as does the mountainous wolf curled around the marble scales. There is a peace in the atrocity of this statue, something calming in the collateral friction.

As ready as she is for change, she will continue to avoid what she can. But maybe – just maybe – she can do this another way.

It’s so much easier being so negative. Honestly. Such taxing effort wasted in letting everything be okay. It makes sense that the people want someone to blame for all their problems; it’s so much easier putting fault on something out of your control. So the worst part about all of this? It’s how the girl understands. She understands why the world is as it is, which makes it that much harder to beat against the tides of the norm. It is… difficult, to say the very least, to oppose the natural order of things. Arguably unnatural.

But change is, fundamentally, a part of nature. She’s seen this in the seasons and the generations of birds and game that surround her home a million miles away. So while she knows she cannot control the outcome or how her caregivers will react, she knows that there is one thing in her control: what she does from here.

Aupia marches up the stairs, clear past several voices calling for her attention. She continues without pause with a hand on the railing before turning sharply to the left for her chambers. Let no one decide for her how she will handle herself.

Finch is there. He watches her approach with each step crossing fire and ice. His eyes are like knives, but Aupia holds his gaze. She feels like she’s staring down a bear, or worse her mother. Yet
she never breaks from her resolve. She sees his weight shift and she feels his conflicting thoughts
on her skin, but nothing changes between them until she’s face-to-face with her sentinel.

“I would like to go in my room now.” She instructs. Something changes on the man’s face, but it’s
hard to tell what. He looks like he considers disclosing his two cents on the last few days, but
ultimately he chews the words away and steps aside.

Aupia was quick to close the door behind her, leaning against the heartwood as the flurry of
meticulous footsteps leave down the hallway. *He’s going to tell the Canary* she realizes with a
release. She refocuses on the flowers to her right; someone put some new ones in. Well, so be it.

Aupia pulls the secretary apart in hunt for pen and paper. She finds her stashes, pulls the chair
underneath her, and starts to write.

She wrote for three hours – no longer, no less – before there was a knock on her door. Something
resound and forceful.

“Come in,” the girl voices, hand still moving furiously. She was nearly done, and she’d be damned
if someone got in the way. In came the Canary – surprise surprise – to whom Aupia promptly
ignores.

The woman stood there with the door behind her for a few moments in silence before clearing her
throat. “Sorry,” Aupia says unapologetically, “this is important to me.”

Lace Harding leans against the wall. This morning started way too early for her, and it had been
going downhill ever since. And not to be too petty, it was thanks to the young woman sitting in
front of her - ignoring her of all things.

“Aupia. Someone wants to meet you tonight, but first we need to talk.”

“Hold on. I’m almost done.”

“With what exactly?”

“My letter to you,” she says, signing off something giant in a scribble. She then folds it up, writes
something on the back, and stands. “And that one’s for the Divine, this one for Josephine… I’ve
even got some for Sera and Qat. Vivienne too but I think she’s the last one to read this shit.”


“Yeah ok. Is Most Holy here somewhere?” Harding folds her arms over her chest. “Aupia please
take a seat. We need to talk about your behavior.” Aupia stands, rubbing her hands. It’s hard
writing with ink, quill or otherwise – she’s left-handed, so it smears like crazy if she isn’t careful.
Cramps throb, offering her a dumb distraction from looking the Canary in the eye. “That’s what
these letters are for. I understand that you have things you need to say to me, really, I do,” she
acknowledges at the Canary’s twist of expression, “But I can't hear that right now. I'm not in a
place where I can listen to your criticism, not after I've been playing puppet for so long.”

The Divine’s left hand sighs and rubs her eyebrows. “Aupia, please listen to me. I understand what
you’re going through. This would be hard for anyone, alright? But you’re forgetting to
acknowledge the innate danger you’re in here. I don’t like scolding people, alright? I get no joy
from this. But you can't just go on pretending you can do whatever you want here. There are rules under this roof, there are expectations. You can't-“

Aupia cuts her off aggressively. “See that’s what’s going on. Because I don’t think you understand anything? And this has been bothering me since the moment I stepped foot off that train – no offense to Sera – but I need to say something and I hope you all will listen? Because I've only got words to me, you know? And hardly that since I need to write it all out.” Harding doesn’t respond, and the conviction burns in Aupia’s cheeks. She breathes out. Then back in. She slowly sits on the floor, ignoring the chair now behind her. “I love you, I think. And I really, really appreciate all that you’ve done for me. You’ve given me a bed and endless food and honestly? That alone is overwhelming sometimes. And I’m learning left and right and I don’t have a fear in the world of not having to deal with money! So I want to make myself clear – thank you. For everything. I really, truly appreciate it all.” She’s careful now to watch the Canary’s expression. “But right now, I don’t feel comfortable enough in my skin to even tell you all these things. So I wrote them out, and I hope you’ll listen.” She retreats into her hands, fishing for the papers for the Canary and extending it in vulnerable fingers. She doesn’t look up, but her burden goes light; Harding took it. She sat down as well.

Aupia clears her throat, finding peace in playing with her hands again; she stops abruptly, closing her eyes as her dancing fingers stop. “I think that, since this world is so much bigger than what I'm used to, its easy to get swept away in it. But I'm tired of living a half-life and- no, its not like that,” she clarifies, seeing the Canary’s change in expression, “I don’t want to tell everyone the truth. I don’t… I don’t know how well people would handle that, you know? Their, like, new-Andraste became a mom in secret. I think they’d lose their minds a little bit. But I'm so tired of you all looking at me and only seeing her. I have to deal with people daily looking at me and seeing a Harel or a street urchin or something unpleasant, and that’s fine. That’s how things are. But in here, I'm her. I'm Lavellan. And I'm not? Not actually?”

Lace Harding’s features run soft, her gentle heart bleeding out for this girl. Aupia is so quiet: it is easy to forget she suffers. It’s no forgiving task to be the one enforcing so many restrictions on such a young and vibrant life – especially when she knew Lavellan would have wanted nothing but freedom of choice and life for her daughter. So she takes the papers gently from Aupia’s outstretched fingers: she knew the young woman had more to say. And Aupia does.

“I’ve wasted a lot of my life looking down, afraid of everything beyond the next step.” She starts again, voice small. “I used to dance in the rain and perch myself on the druffalo and sketch the creek and I was happy. At least I thought I was because I didn’t worry about anything – I had all I could ever hope for, all I could ever need. Hell, I learned to climb trees because I could, I had that freedom. They terrified me but I figured it out. I didn’t know where I came from and that was just fine since I knew I was in a good place. I knew how to behave around outsiders because I was afraid of their judgement. And like I said, that shits totally fine! I can't change the world, I know that.” she spares a fleeting glance up, mindful of her language. The woman only watches her with soft, dark eyes. She seems contemplative, so Aupia pushes on. “But I’ve been reminded recently that I need to look up. And that I shouldn’t need to filter myself when around people who say they care about me. I’m making friends who are helping me learn that about myself. I saw a dead guy this morning, and I'm only realizing now that that’s an important fact? Like, shit. I don’t want to die out on the street like that. Not without living a little bit.” Aupia looks up again, her eyebrows pinched in worry. “Does that make sense?”

They sit quietly in nothing but each other’s company and the thoughts between them. A few moments pass before the Canary folds the papers once more and tucks them on the inside of her coat. “I still need to talk to you about your behavior,” she warns. Aupia scratches the back of her neck, something Lace has notices she does more and more often. “That’s fair.”
“But I think we can save that for another time.” The Canary stands and Aupia follows suit, bewildered ease of joy now crossing her face. “What will you do next?” she asks the girl.

“Pass out the rest of these I guess. Then go down to the kitchens.”

“A meal can be brought up to you.”

“No, I need to go down there. I need to talk to Emmalyn – I can’t quite write her a letter, you know?” she adds sheepishly. The Canary nods acceptingly. “Then we’ll talk tomorrow. Thank you for saying your peace. I’m sorry you feel this way, I really do. But this doesn’t excuse how you’ve been acting.”

“Yeah I figured as much.” She walks with the Canary to the door. “Am I allowed to take these to Sera and Qat?” Harding laughs as she rubs her brows. “Man its good to hear you ask! Are you going to be mad if I say no?”

“No.”

“Then let’s save that for tomorrow, okay?” She stands in the hallway now and rests a hand on Aupia’s shoulder. The girl – Maker curse it, young woman, she’s no child – continues to surprise her. It makes her think of Lavellan.

The Canary opens her mouth to say more before someone shouts her name from behind. She turns half-sunken to the left past Vallen’s room. Its someone from the direction of her study, but who could it be? The voice comes again, resound and loud in a belly-ache of a laugh. “Harding! Cass kicked me out. Where’s my drinking buddy?”

A hand goes up to Aupia’s neck in warning at the call and loud feet, and almost instantaneously she feels the color drain from her cheeks. Harding doesn’t seem to notice; this was the visitor she mentioned earlier.

Around the corner storms a man nearly three times her size. The chime in Aupia’s neck ignites but not in warning – no, in something new, something recognizable, something familiar, something-

Aupia puts name to body, to the bare chest, to the massive affront of form. She knows him from something personal, from something undeniable. It takes her too long and the shock filters through her for a sparse moment longer than a heartbeat; not long enough. Like finding a leak in a boat she knows she’s drowning. The air around her heats up as a flurry of thoughts cast over them all.

The Iron Bull stops in his tracks as his eyes meet hers.

“Oh shit.”

Chapter End Notes

The title for this chapter comes from the Kodaline song of the same title. The science we know today as Ecology didn’t really rise until the 1900’s, which I think we can say this does not mirror this age very well. Nonetheless it follows a few
basic principles: that life has a few themes of survival, and niches arise to limit competition. Aka speciation: they've got it a little backwards since the theory of evolution hasn't come up yet, but that's what Val’s going on about here.

And that big important thing in your neck is called the jugular.

I'm tired of all this mopey stuff. The next few are fun and we finally get some background information holla.

Elven:
Ashala – granddaughter
Maela - grandmother
Aupia began her morning with a spring in her step; like a snake shedding its skin, she felt anew as she tied her boots and picked out her favorite scarf. She started her day with Emmalyn for nearly an hour in the kitchen. At first she served as little more than a nuisance, but now that she’s familiarizing herself with the other cooks and bakers they seem to welcome what little distraction she brings; All except for Ochaco, who does nothing but bite at any newcomer she’s forced to interact with. But even then the old cow is slowly getting used to the elven girl’s presence, who slowly was beginning to win her over by dealing with the more unappealing kitchen tasks. Aupia’s mother taught her well when it came to skinning and flaying it would appear, and she was more than willing to put her shoulder to the test when taking the food scraps up two flights of stairs to the waste site just behind the Cathedral. It was made easy with good company like Gannon to guide her, and the hound was more than willing to comply with his task of escorting as long as he was fed properly at their turn-around. In all, it was nice to be able to contribute somewhere, even if it stirred some mild resistance because there is nothing more validating than helping others.

One of the cooks, a qunari man by the name of Ahanu, was the first to break the ice on Aupia’s presence down there. “I don’t mean to be rude, but what reason does Most Holy’s ward have to be down here?” He asks tentatively, working a rag over his hands. Aupia would only shrug and try to smile. “I like to help, and being in the kitchen reminds me of home. As long as I'm not in anyone’s way-“

“Yes! Begone with you!” Snapped Ochaco. Ahanu drowned her out however, as did the twin dwarfs that man the oven. Emmalyn laughed.

“You’re more than welcome down here Aupia so long as you’re taking care of yourself in the evenings. I expect to hear more about these friends you’re making in due time. And do plan to introduce me to them some time, okay?”

Aupia grunts, which made all the adults chuckle at least a little bit – even old Ochaco seemed slightly humored by the response. She tossed Aupia a grapefruit on her way out.

She peeled her grapefruit as she wandered the Cathedral, weaving past busy feet so naturally now that anything different seems like a foregone memory. She does, however, keep herself on edge; she’s on a mission now while weaving these hallways. She is childish in this way, but she will avoid the Iron Bull with as much effort as it demands.

She does come across the Divine though, taking back passageways to her grand dining hall. With her letter in one hand and an uneaten fruit in the other, her heart felt somewhat queasy; it’s such a first-world problem to be issuing complaints to the Divine, but surly this is something more than that.

*I love you, I really believe that. And whatever words I use will never truly convey how grateful I am for the experience you’re giving me here – I don’t have to worry about money or safety, and that is something very few can say.*

*But I want to be seen not as a ghost, but something new altogether.*

Among other things, Aupia wants this place to be reasonable to her: hopefully Divine Victoria will
feel the emphasis behind Aupia’s words. She found her promptly in the middle of her morning meal and stayed for only a few minutes – but minutes longer than she would have chosen - as Divine Victoria introduced her to someone both prominent and terrifying. Sweat pools at the nape of Aupia’s neck as the man half-regards her for the second time.

“Aupia, this is-“

“We’ve met actually,” said Kodiak, wiping his lips with his napkin and standing up with an outstretched hand. She caught them in the middle of their breakfast. That’s, like, two assaults on the faith through disturbing both the Divine and her Right Hand. If he’s truly like his namesake, don’t bears attack if disturbed during a meal? “Yesterday, around noon if my memory serves me.”

At full height he is a beast of a being; less so than the other stranger wandering the Cathedral hallways in the last day or so, but still a feat to behold. “Yes, Ser Kodiak. It is nice to meet you,” Aupia says, voice level and chin low as she takes his hand. The man didn’t say anything to the girl’s posture, instead resting a hand on his sword once their contact withdraws. “Indeed. I have heard a few things about you, it is a shame we had to meet under such unfortunate circumstances. Your friend is a wonder,” he added, deep voice unchanged, drawing strength away from whatever compliment he may try to say. Kodiak turns to the Divine who watches them in wonder. “Her companion was able to determine the time and nature of death in that slaying yesterday. An accomplished young man.”

“Yes, indeed he is,” says the Divine, proud for reasons Aupia cannot fathom: as far as she knows the two haven’t met. She doesn’t question it; instead, she bounces on her heels and bows to the Divine. “Sorry for interrupting your meal Most Holy, I just wanted to-“

“Give me my letter yes, and I have it now. Thank you, I will read it once I am done here.” She says it in earnest, watching Aupia with what the girl can only surmise is parent-like love. This is new… perhaps the Canary already told her; which is concerning to consider – how quickly do rumors spread here?

The Divine waves a hand over the seat beside her. “Would you like to join us for breakfast? Emmalyn has outdone herself as always, and Ser Kodiak will only be here for a few days before leaving for Tevine. It would be a marvelous opportunity to meet the other Hand of the Divine before he leaves again.”

Aupia wants nothing to do with this man. The little girl nested under her ribs curls, tightening in the thought of spending any more time than absolutely necessary around him. Aupia brings a hand to her chest. “Thank you, but I should be on my way.”

“Perhaps I will see you again at the Chant this weekend,” says Kodiak, dark and ominous as a person could. Aupia winces in thought, thinking of how to evade the prospect; she’s neglected to go to any of the Divine’s chants thus far, mostly because… you know. Not everyone is as Andrastian as their neighbor. She half-hoped Most Holy would speak to her defense here but she does not, leaving Aupia to grasp at straws and weak promises. “Yeah,” she tries, clearing her throat, “I’ll be there.”

She left with another bow, retreating to her room. Tit’s he’s foreboding! How does the Divine deal with that cloud he carries around with him? Its only once the door is snugly behind her that it knocks again, leaving Aupia no time to prepare for what came next. It was the Finch.

He escorts Aupia wordlessly to the Canary’s office, where the two proceed to hatch out a dreadfully long conversation regarding her “recent decision-making abilities” (or lack thereof); it was a dreary way to continue the morning, but they reach a compromise - Aupia would be better at
minding herself and how she interacted on the streets with others in exchange for a little more freedom.

“I want to be free of Finch twice a week.”

“In addition to the weekends? You must be joking.”

“I’m not.”

Canary tisks disapprovingly. “Unacceptable. Finch is here to protect you and I will not waver on this matter. If you want a new companion I can arrange that immediately, but there is no way I’m letting you out on your own during the day.”

“You know most girls my age are married, right? They know how to take care of themselves and, like six kids.”

“You’re not the one I’m worried about, Kessler,” The Canary warns. Aupia rolls her eyes. “So what? If I carry my bow around would that make you sleep a little better at night?”

“I just told you. I’m not wavering on this matter.”

“Neither am I. I don’t need an escort for my every waking moment! No street thug is gonna do that much damage to me. Please,” she ushers, turning front-right to the woman. She takes her guardian’s hands in her own. “Please. Trust me to make my own mistakes, to make my own decisions. Give me the chance to prove to you that I can look out for myself.”

“Why should I?”

“Because if you do, I’ll be extra mindful about what I do.”

Ultimately, the conversation was heated and lasted longer than it needed to, but the Canary (reluctantly) agreed to the terms. For one week, if Aupia was able to stay out of trouble, she would give the girl two days to herself. Of course she was to be followed, but it will take some time before she realizes this; agents of the Inquisition are difficult to shake off after all.

The Canary and Aupia also discussed the matter of mail within the Cathedral that morning; it started off quite pleasantly all things considered. Naturally, however, it ended with bitter, unsaid words.

“And my family?”

“What of them?”

“I sent them a letter some time ago. I figured I’d get a response by now.”

The Canary scratches her head. “We had to pass it through a screening – don’t give me that look, that’s just policy. It wasn’t sent out until a week or two after you handed it over.”

The girl stutters – she doesn’t need any bell or wrecking ball in the back of her neck to know that’s wrong. “You read my letter?”

“Not me personally, no. An agent sworn to confidentiality did however, and-“

“And that! that right there! That’s what I’m talking about with this place!” Aupia stands up abruptly, brows peaking together. “That’s a total breach of trust!” The Canary raises her hands in defense. “Hey now, don’t shoot the messenger. Try to see it from my perspective – if anyone got
their hands on that and learned something about the Cathedral or your time here, don’t you think that would put the Divine at risk?”

Aupia tries to get angry – really, she does – but she’s not very good at this. Her lips move but no words come out. Harding shuffles papers around and continues in Aupia’s silence. “Let me say something plain and clear for you, because I don’t think you quite yet grasp the reality of your situation. Your own heritage aside, you are in the care of the most prominent figure in our time. There is a lot of power in removing her from her seat.”

Aupia snorts. Harding would have compared it to the Inquisitor (my how she hated her laugh!) “So what? Making sure I don’t give anything to the Harels?”

“I’m not talking about some street squirmishes, Kessler. Harels aren’t that much of a concern for us. I’m talking about big game competitors.”

It didn’t feel like a total truth, but regardless it was quite a bold claim. “I don’t even know what that means and I don’t think I want to at this point.” She pauses, then turns on her again. “Does that mean you’re snooping through what my parents write back?”

“No. We just check it for dangerous content.”

“I’m sorry. Like, as if my dainty little human parents are packing explosives?”

“Again, it’s nothing personal.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You know, for someone claiming to be so mature and responsible you sure know how to act like a child.”

Again, her mouth opens and closes wordlessly. The Canary just smiles in triumph. “You’re free to go. And,” she turns around in her chair as Aupia makes for the door, “Do be nice to Bull, okay? He’s a descent guy and a close friend to us all. He came here to meet you.”

Oh, well. That one was easy to disobey.

On one hand, Aupia was becoming more familiar with the stoney Cathedral she now called home; avoiding the Iron Bull at all costs seemed to do the trick in prompting her to learn about new hallways and office spaces. She navigated like a stray bird lost from its flock, yet she always found her way through with minimal contact. On more than one occasion she found herself stumbling through Commander Cullen’s office – the first time, he was at his desk and spooked something physical at Aupia’s manifestation. He barked at her but she couldn’t respond: she was long gone by the time he realized her trespassing and summoned his voice to call her out. He always questions her but she’s too quick to ever respond with anything more than an apology, especially when the Commander is in the business with others in his company. The last three mornings all he does is stare her down, continuing with whatever conversation is already present. He watches her in a way Aupia is not accustomed to so she has yet to question it. This quaint awkwardness was their new normal, and it served its purpose. If Aupia is ever to be honest, she prefers just about any awkward situations over any interaction with that beast of a man, either Kodiak or the Iron Bull. She’s not even sure why, but do you need a reason for everything?

The legends, it appears, do not do justice to the sheer magnitude of the Charger. The Iron Bull was a surely appropriate name for that monstrosity – she’s pretty positive he could eat her if he really aspired to. Vallen agreed when she put words to it once: “qunari have unique teeth,” he noted,
nonchalant and unfazed by his friend’s fears. “They’re specialized for tearing through meat and bone like no other.” This, naturally, then prompted the twins to chime in.

“Never seen one eat a salad before,” said what could possibly be Cisco.

“No need to. No micros in the gut for them,” said what must have been Monte.

“Too much cellulose to digest.”

“Not enough of what they’re born for. Like hounds.”

“Or dragons.”

“What are micros?” Asked Aupia. Monte responded first, a barrage of words related to ‘small organisms living within everyone’s bodies. Cisco concluded for him in easier words: “Essentially, new theory suggests there are little tiny almost-animals living within your body. They help you function in accordance to your species.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“That’s the nature of ways.”

Vallen, as per usual, was eager to disagree with them, bringing the conversation to a close. “Sure. You say that.” He handed Aupia a hide organizer, a bag for papers. “Carry that for me will you?”

They left for Claire’s office, the twins now standing and pacing over the nature of ‘micros’ in the guts of qunari and how they compare to humans. “I don’t understand how you don’t like them,” Aupia denotes somewhat accusingly. Vallen’s face tightens. “I don’t understand how you can. They’re annoying as all hell.”

“They’re interesting.”

“The material is interesting, not them. They’re about as interesting as a pile of steaming shit.”

It took a few hours of aimless wandering through the city streets, faceless heads turned to her everywhere she went. But Aupia knew where to find Farah, and it was only a matter of time now for her to reconcile with the Avvar. She found Farah somewhere between the business district and the University where she knew most Hold-related experiments were held. She practically fell on her knees explaining herself: nothing too truthful of course, but just enough of the truth for Farah to forgive her. “I’d rather not lose my first new friend over something petty like me being an ass,” she admitted reluctantly, side-by-side with the Avvar as they stood atop a bridge. The water underneath rippled as water skeeters hop along its surface in the summer heat. Farah just rolls her eyes and scratched her head. “Yeah, that’d be dumb wouldn’t it? Being rude like that over nothing. I'm sorry too, I know- well, I know now it’s not my place to say those things I said.” Aupia laughs. “Oh please, I needed to hear it. Its just… hard for me, adjusting here. I'm learning and I'm setting boundaries, but that was wrong of me to let it out on you. Especially since you didn’t deserve any of it.”

That was… surprisingly easy.

“You sure?” Aupia smiles. “I think so. Although I'll admit, it’ll take me some time to really settle with the fact that there’s another brain rattling around up in your head.” Farah snorts and throws something out on the water – it sinks into the abyssal darkness, scattering the bugs. “Tell me about
it. But you’ll get used to it, I think.” She starts walking away, Aupia hot on her heels. “Wait, why
do you think that?”

She turned around with a smile. “’cause I eventually did. Now come on, let’s do something fun!”

She got to (finally) meet Val and the twins later that day, the three of them wildly unimpressed by
Aupia’s new companion. Only Monte seemed to really care enough, prompting the conversation of
using Farah in a new experiment of his. Politely, she declined. The conversation then turned to the
wildlife native to Blackhawk Hold and a thesis on why plants are the source for all energy on
Thedas. All five of them ended up sitting down at one table, discussing varying facts and
experiences that contradicted and reinforced several elements. After some time, Vallen insisted
they all were getting in the way of his productivity, ushering the girls out as the twins bickered
over the truest form of energy (something comparing the nature of engines to plants: it was
actually quite fascinating to listen to). The girls left quickly after that in a fit of masked giggles,
their light steps chased by Finch. Farah then took Aupia’s hand in her own and started running.
“Come on,” she ushered, eyes bright, “there’s someone you should meet.”

It’s a breath of fresh air to be back to how things were. Not that this all isn’t awful still, but it’s nice
knowing things will happen in a manner that can be predicted. Farah will be as free as ever. Vallen
will be short as he always is. Finch will be, well, Finch, and the twins… actually Aupia doesn’t
know what the twins are going to do. Not much probably. But that’s their normal, and that’s a
comfort to be living in once more.

She blinks as she returns to the moment and smiles. Farah asks “Ready?” with a cocked head and
gentle, outreached hand. Aupia breathes through her nose and nods, taking her friend’s fingers in
her own. She doesn’t know what will happen next – she has ideas, guesses really, but no infinite
knowledge. But what’s the worst thing that could happen? She will meet Farah’s people. The bell
in the back of her neck chimes reassuringly: its not like the Avvar are going to string her up like a
fox to prop on their tent wall. Surely they aren’t that bizarre.

Farah shares a triumphant grin with Finch as she jumps as she jogs, who just looks blankly ahead. He
is different from before in only how Aupia looks at him – otherwise, he was the exact same,
indifferent shadow attached to her hip.

This is right. This is normal. This is… fine.

They walk walkways Aupia didn’t know existed, winding alleyways and spires of alabaster and
marble, homes white as a cloud and pure as day. The streetlights will turn on soon, lights like stars
connecting buildings as strings connect the stars in their dreams. It reminds Aupia of
constellations, and Farah agrees with the idea. “It makes people feel like gods, being able to
control the world like this,” says Farah almost wistfully. Eventually the houses and office spaces
fae out and the purity fades away; they are in the Outskirts in no time, complete with poor
drainage underfoot and that musky smell the Outskirts naturally seems to carry. Is it the stench of
urine or something else entirely? Aupia doesn’t think so. She asks Farah what she thought.

“I think its rats. Rat pee.”

“Why?”

“Cause it smells like acid piss.”

“I guess that’s fair.” Aupia’s head keeps moving like she’s a lost child. There are less people out
here than gulls on the rooftops; wood boards up windows and there are holes boring into walls
surrounding them, material chipping away like layers of a tree. Granted they are no bigger than the
average fist except for the occasional boaring that digs out space big enough for bodies to be
stored between layers of houses, but it’s not like anyone actively thinks about that kind of stuff.
Right? There is nothing natural about this place – it’s like a decomposing human forest, like what
Aupia imagines the Black Forest looked like before it caught fire overnight. The occasional glance
back at Finch puts Aupia in a fit of giggles; bless that man’s intensity, he tries so hard to pretend he
isn’t appalled by the sight. Farah accidently kicks a can, sending their escort in a flurry of agast emo
tion. Its hilarious.

Aupia clears her throat, trying to muffle her laughter. She can feel Finch tense up behind her.
“Where are we going exactly?” she asks.

Farah ducks under a fallen board and through a rabbit hole in the side of a building. She meanders
expertly around three nails in the top left-hand side. “The business district said they didn’t have
enough housing space to give up an entire building, although that’s the terms the Hold agreed to
before coming here. So the gave Blackhawk Hold a whole building to itself! The only downside
being it wasn’t used for anything.”

The floorboards creak underfoot, cobwebs dancing around them as a faint breeze stirs through the
vacant building. Stairs ascend to nowhere, holes dismantling steps altogether. Unlike modern
buildings it appears to made mostly of wood, a lumbering beast several stories high. She turns
around to Finch for confirmation as the man steps over a hole. “This building came from before the
Industrial Revolution, before Kirkwall introduced its metal alloy. Deconstruction was poorly
funded, so the Outskirts simply formed around them.” He seems to marvel at this small world,
hooded expression masked but evidently bright in thought. As far as he knew, no one was
permitted to live in these buildings – the reason why the public was moved out was because it was
deemed structurally unsound. For the city to put people in here despite public order… does the
Canary know about this?

Aupia stumbles, her boot puncturing a new hole in the molded floorboards. Finch lunges forward
to catch her by the arm and heaves her back upright. Aupia immediately pulls away.

Farah watches them both curiously. “You good?”

Aupia curls some hair behind her ear, desperate for the distraction. She can feel her cheeks
coloring. “Yeah. Let’s keep going.”

It is when they pass into the third haunted apartment building that Finch puts name to the
goosebumps on his arms; he grabs Aupia again, his jaw hardset as he brings them both to a stop.
She tries to yank free, eyes hard on his. But his grip is resound. “What?” she barks, tugging against
his touch. Finch refuses to let her go. “Look up.”
She does as instructed, and her throat runs dry. There are several hundred faces looking down at her, heads turned to them without noses, eyes or mouths. Ghostly ethereal bodies, nothing definitive or concrete, only mists and faint outlines of figures.

“Farah,” She whispers, face running color once more, “what is this?”

“What? Oh, them?” Farah stops and looks up. Her nose wrinkles up and she tosses a hand dismissively; its as if this is… typical. Normal. Actively natural. “Word spreads here like wildfire. They were gossiping about you is all. I guess everyone wanted a peak.”

You’re kidding. Aupia swallows the lump in her throat, attempting horribly to ignore the attention boring into her. “Of me? Why?”

“You’re an oddity,” Farah explains quite simply with a twirl on her heel. “Plus we don’t get a lot of lowlanders in here.”

A wisp materializes besides her, almost-legs matching her stride for stride. It’s almost-head is alit in white flames. The sight is… uncanny. Mystifying. Magnificent. “Can they see me though? Like, physically?” she asks, watching this body as the body watches her.

“Yup. They’re anchored here, so they have as much presence as they want. They come and go as they please, but they can’t actually leave the building.”

“Why not?” Finch asks. Farah chuckles lowly at something, a memory of some sort. “Once when we first got here, they figured they’d do well poking around at night. Ended up giving an entire brothel a serious scare!”

Aupia tries to imagine that, a building full of people – clothed or otherwise – collectively losing their minds at these ghostly figures ambling around on the street at night. It’s a fascinating concept. “I wish I was there,” Aupia notes, coming up to Farah. “That’d be something worth sharing.”

Filtered bodies now appear around them, putting a new charge into the space Aupia walks into. It feels warm like the lakeside after a lightening storm, yet the cool blues and greys do not come to mind; here, for reasons Aupia has yet to understand, this place is saturated in color. Thoughts tangled with sensations, topped off with colors to breach the metaphysical and the physical. Farah leads them to the last hole, one covered by a sheet stirring gently. There is clear life on the other side, hushed conversations and warm bodies. Farah passes through free as a breeze; Aupia, however, lingers at the fabric. It rustles against her forearm, the conversation on the other end growing steadily muted. Aupia casts half a glance over her shoulder at Finch before she catches herself. She curls her hands into fists at her side as she corrects herself, swallowing the lump in her throat.

How bad could it be?

The emerge into Farah’s temporary home, a hollowed-out building with no electrical power yet strings of lights hanging from the ceiling. There are holes in the floorboards and in the walls, punches and mishaps taking out chunks of their to-be sanctuary. Yet none of them seem particularly bothered by this; there are strings of furs, paintings and words written everywhere, an accumulation of culture as the people made do with what they were given. Aupia can only hope that it looks nicer in their actual home – the pelts and animals heads are all local wildlife, squirrels, gulls, crows, pigeons, and the occasional deer from what appears to be a forest expedition. There are rats too, and fish. Lots of fish.

The people are all silent as they stare at both Aupia and Finch; their aggression is distinguished in
their brows, but otherwise they convey little to no emotion. Finch seems unhinged by the conversations around them. He leans a little into Aupia’s shoulder. “They’re saying-“

Aupia snaps at him, diverging her eyes. “I don’t need to know!” He backs off a respectable halfstep and resumes his stoney position at her side. After a moment or two of Aupia awkwardly fishing fingers through snarls in her hair, Farah comes up to her and takes her friend’s hand in her own. She leads Aupia up some broken stairs to a tent the size of her bedroom at the Cathedral, her pull as aggressive as the scowl on her face. Perhaps it truly is better Aupia does not know what they were saying about her – she’s probably heard it all before anyway, although it is somewhat unnerving that a people from outside of Val Royeaux would hasten to judge her so. The two pause just outside the entrance, wisps and humans watching them in tentative scrutiny. Farah clears her throat and strokes her thumb over Aupia’s hand in reassurance; it must be for her own sake. “Now remember, he’s gonna say weird stuff. It’s his job, so take it in pieces.”

Aupia breathes out again and bounces on her heels. “Maker, what am I walking into,” she curses under her breath. Farah swats her cheek gently. “Shh! He can hear you! Just know that, okay? And know that it doesn’t have to make sense. Okay?”

She dips into the space around her through her magic – the only emotions she cares to really tap into are Finch’s and Farah’s, as everyone else is still tight with inexplicable fury. She sighs and drops her hands to her side, squeezing and releasing fists. She tries to smile at her friend. Its forced. Her pulse leaps for the umpteenth time. “I’ll try.”

They take each other by the hand and walk in side by side.

He’s a curled thing, this… Agar? Agar. The man in charge of the Blackhawk Hold representatives here in Val Royeaux. He’s unfathomably ancient – his bones look like they’re made of paper as he hunkers over his cane and staff. He’s dressed in the same heavy furs as Farah but the tent smells like fish, which is remarkably unpleasant with how concentrated the stench is in here. And he scowls, somewhat to the same intensity Vivienne must in her sleep. Aupia will later realize it is for show – yet another mask here in this foreign place.

And while Aupia is entranced by this massive figure in his throne-like seat, he’s completely oblivious to her; his harrowed eyes surrounded by black layers are on Finch. Perhaps the makeup is what makes the tent smell like fish. Its either that or he has some fish bones stored in his beard. The girl stiffens as he looks over her shoulder in disappointment.

Then Finch leaves, and for the first time in the last two days Aupia’s fleeting mind almost asks him to stay.

The Agar shuffles in his seat and refocuses on Aupia. As he is a forthcoming man, he gets straight to business. “We do not loose young magi, not to death or desolation.” He says quite frankly, accent tickling Aupia’s ears. His voice is deep and stoic. “We raise ours with companions that guide them, knowledgeable and ageless as they learn how to control what they can and cannot.”

Aupia turns to Farah, the two beaming; Farah’s always a proud one and enjoys showing off. Aupia’s just impressed by the prospect of what the hell she’ll learn here. “Then where do I sign up?” she asks, turning back to the Avvar. He’s not impressed. His subsequent glance at Farah suggests they were communicating through their minds, as Farah heaves a sigh and leaves the enclosed space. Aupia’s hand grows cold where her friend’s fingers once kept her stable. His own hands flex atop his staff and cane as he once-overs her.

“Now then. What do you fear, Aupia Kessler?”
She pauses; the first thing to come to mind is *that's abrupt*. But the shock wears away leaving the thought of death, but everyone says that. What does she truly fear? The Agar, in her pause, answers for the girl. “You strike me as someone afraid of getting to the heart of your own mind. As a mage, you fear what you know and are controlled by what you do not.”

Aupia blisters at the claim – that’s rude to assume, and dangerously true. She knows better than to object to someone senior, so instead she bites her lip. At her lack of a response he draws the drapes of the tent about, unsurprised and unafraid. This is not unnatural, not among the lowlanders. The Agar finds a wonder in how the people here treat their young and how surely surprised they seem every time a demon finds refuge in these broken hearts.

The only difference here is he cannot see within her – that alone is cause for concern. That and fascination. Of course he would permit Farah to bring this case to him.

So he, promptly, had no idea how accurate his accusation was. Without getting up the Agar draws his staff against the floor of his tent in a barrage of shapes. The marks summon shapes around her and the air grows heavy. “Here’s a thing about demons, Aupia. they do not always fight with fire and they do not always follow the rules of what is expected or understood. And you cannot simply dip your chin and have them ignore you. Demons do not enter you in moments of weakness, child of the trees. They come from the fears within.” With each word the air grows thicker and slicker, warmer like a lover’s touch and colder like a father’s fury.

She spins around as bodies flash around her; colors and spectrums and emotions and dreams and thoughts and hopes and fears and wonders and loves. She spins, absorbed yet naked in this sea of mystic energy. She slows as he stops talking though, words slowly registering in her. “Then how do you fight that? How do you keep them under control?”

The Agar's fingers drum against his hooked staff. “Why must you fight them?”
The reds begin to fade away. Then the yellows and the greens. “I... I'm sorry?”
The blues rise to the ceiling, followed by the pink and purple; with each vanishing color comes a sense of depravity, like walking away from a mother’s embrace or another step out of a frigid sea. She feels exposed, misplaced. “Why must you fight what you do not understand?”

“Because I kinda want to live? Respectfully.”
You do not strike me as the one to deal the first blow, nor one capable of bending rivers to your will. Try again.”

Soon enough, only a few ghostly outlines, pale and void, remain. Aupia walks tentatively up to the last one, one with a young figure and cocked head. Was this a man who dove over for his love? Was this a woman who served her horde? Or was this a child, lost to a simple accident? Her tentative fingers reach for the figure before retracting slowly - it must be rude to reach for one of them. Grey rises like fog and steam, a slow swirl as much as a steady incline as the smell of wildflowers fill the room, the only impressions a mortal can grab on to. It’s like fingers in smoke, but undeniably sweet and it smelled like the wind. Was this a gift or a warning?

"We do not give things freely here, child. You must find these answers you seek." Aupia turns around to the Agar, idle like stone. There is a gentle fondness that ebbs from him like a cloud, but he is stern in this truth. He stands, crooked back shrouded over layer by layer. The spirit is gone by the time Aupia returns to it, everything unanswered left unsaid. So she walks closer to the Agar, eyes transfixed where the last one once stood. Her senses are weakened, the wildflowers gone like a vase rapidly rotting but she isn't surrounded by death. No, not in the least. This place is too lively to be described as that.

“What did that feel like?”
Aupia’s hand lingers where the body once was. The Agar leans, his shoulder propped against his heavy seat. “Aupia Kessler?”

“Who were they?”

His answer is gentle and leads into a repeat of his question. “Spirits of those long lost. What did that feel like to you?”

“Everything,” she surmises, unwittingly afraid the word won't carry enough meaning for her. “It felt like everything.”

“Why do you think that is?” he asks, bringing her to another pause. She chews her lip and turns back to the place where the wildflowers spirit was.

“I don’t know. This isn't really anything I’ve been shown before.”

“Are the only things you know the things that are taught to you?”

The suggestion rubs her the wrong way. “Excuse me?”

“Aupia shuffles around to face him again. “I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking me,” she says.

“You keep telling yourself what you know – that this is different, that your teacher or teachers are right, that your home is far away and that you fear what you cannot control.” Aupia turns from his gaze again, hands fistng at her side. What did Farah tell him? “but what do you feel? What do you believe?”

Her hands relax again. He’s… only trying to help. He’s not like Vivienne with a hidden agenda, and he’s not the Divine nor the Inquisition with their eyes full of ghosts. “What do I believe? I believe in... trying. In hope? In trust… and love.”

“Those are big words. Define them.”

Its embarrassingly simple yet complicated. Aupia glances for her companions who seem to have disappeared; the only comfort she finds is Farah’s words that she rediscovers - it doesn’t have to make sense.

Aupia swallows her embarrassment and clears her throat. "I believe in how my halla looks at me in the morning, and how my friend-"

"Use names," the Agar gently guides. "Use their names, child."

"I believe in how Quagga looks at me when I see her in the morning. I believe in how Vallen says mean things but will imply another. I believe in Grant’s laughter and how fiercely he wants to keep people safe. I believe in Murphy’s fireside chats and Duran’s love of her wife. I believe in the people having power and taking what is theirs, like freedom and joy. I believe in running, you know? And the forest. I believe in the scent of pine needles and I LOVE the wash of a river around my ankles."

"You've mentioned love. What love drives power?"

"My parents. They love me. And without question. And I think… I think that drives the try in people, you know?"
“Do not second-guess,” the Agar scolds. “Have faith in what you say, for your words are yours and yours alone. Do you not trust yourself?”

Aupia can’t look at him, not after he says that. The man leans forward to limit the scope of her avoidance. "You take these things that hold power, child. You take these faces and these names, these smells and these feelings. You take them all and winde them up. Wind them all up, put them between closing palms, and you will have power. Now, where does your power come from?"

Where does magic come from? Aupia glances at her hands – isn’t this what staffs as supposed to help with? "I don’t."

He leans closer and grips her arm. "Where does your power come from?"

Aupia doesn’t know. She knows it’s in her bones and blood and brain and lungs, but where would it all come from?

No, wait. Just wait. He isn’t asking about magic, he's asking about power. That’s different. Kinda. Right?

He’s asking about my connection, she realizes, my connection to myself and others.

Aupia releases a breathy 'ohhh' as it comes to her, which earns her rolling lips suppressing a coy smile. "Where does your power come from?" the Agar asks once more, leaning back.

"My heart."

"And? Can you trust your heart?"

“I think so."

“Then have faith, Aupia Kessler of Ferelden. I cannot teach you more unless you learn to trust what is within you.”

The pause drags as Aupia’s demeanor changes in a flash. “Wait, for real?”

“Why are you in a hurry to press knowledge?"

“Because why should I have to wait?” Aupia bits back. The man arches a brow. “You have lived this long of a life without the vigor you show me now – for if you haven’t, then you would have mastered magic long ago. Why have you changed?”

“I haven’t!”

“You should not lie. It’s not good for you.” He catches her in the middle of I don’t lie! With a firm expression. “Leave for today, do not come back for a week. And trust your heart, Aupia Kessler. You have nothing to lose by trusting yourself.”

He dismissed her thereafter, and Farah hurried Aupia out of the haunted building. But it appeared they had more work to do, as Farah escorts her to a small garden not far from the university. They
talked the entire way about the experience and the Agar’s wisdom. Farah says he’s the oldest of all the Holds, which makes him the wisest. Aupia doesn’t know if she agrees. It is here that Farah unveils a branch waiting for them in the bushes. As Aupia took to her staff, she quickly found herself unable to keep up.

“It’s not a stick,” Farah warned. “Don’t treat it like one.”

Aupia winces as she weighs the branch in her hands. “I might have to disagree with you on that one.” She palms the staff over and over, finally tossing it to an unexpecting Farah. The girl jumps but shoots a seemingly reluctant hand out to catch it. “That is most definitely a stick,” Aupia says as smugly as she can.

Farah tosses it back. “Use your imagination.”

“Why? And don’t tell me because it’s safer this way.”

“Well yeah that. But I’ve also never trained anyone before, so I want to teach you the way I was taught.”

“With- what’s his name again?”

“Sovin. Sovin Flat-ear. Though I call him Fitz.” Aupia tries to mimic her teacher, twirling their respective staffs. Farah spins her staff like its second-nature, her feet stepping one before the other as her staff rolls between her palms.

“Fitz? That’s not even close to Sovin.”

“It just… fits him, you know? Fitz. Just say it. Fitz Flat-ear.”

Aupia giggles till she smacks herself in the side of her head. They pause before she starts smiling again. “Fitz Flat-ear.”

“Fitz Flat-ear.”

“Fitz Flat-ear.”

“Fits Flat-ear. Check your wrist, it’s all in the wrist.”

“Gotcha. Why Flat-ear?”

“His other form is a giant feline. A cat of a sort, or something like a dog. An animal between the two, we call them Simmons.”

“Why a Simmon then?”

“Nah, Simmons. A Simmons, a pack of Simmons, you know. It’s all the same.”

“Ok but why one of them?”

“I dunno. It was in his nature. Like how a Blue Lilly is in mine.”

“Why are they called that?” Farah cocks her head as she skips about, pretending to balance on a beam. One foot before the other, then a delicate repeat as she weaves across the grass. “Why are you called an elf?”

“That’s-” Aupia smacks herself again, noticeably hard this time. “Tits!”
Farah starts laughing in a bubbly, snotty type of way. She catches herself with a hand over her mouth as Aupia flowers at her hard. “You’re an elf cause of tits.”

“I- well.” She shrugs as she rubs her face. “You know, that could actually be valid. I’ve never seen a busty elf before.”

“The Inquisitor was.”

“Yeah.” Aupia looks back at her hands as they dumbly hold the branch. “Yeah, hers maybe. But those are statues, you know? Could be lies. The people here tend to… inflate things. They like unnecessary drama.”

Farah stops spinning her staff; she’s trying as hard as she knows to be patient with her friend, but sometimes curiosity can’t be ignored. “Can I ask you something?”

Aupia’s pulse leaps. “Yes?”

“Is it weird, being like the Inquisitor and being in her place and still being judged?”

“Judged. Like, for being an elf?”

“Yeah.”

Maker, bless it. She thought this was about to get really bad – good thing she’s only asking about racism. “I think it’s a different world than the one she left behind,” Aupia absolves. “There aren’t dragons terrorizing folks, but we also have idiots in the streets forming gangs. Different problem different day, you know?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You know, I don’t think anything you could have said would have prepared me for that.” They’re walking now, spinning and talking all at once – well, trying to. Farah brings the staff behind her back and can even spin it above her head. Aupia feels the feats are a tease, but she marvels at them nonetheless. Finch watches them quietly against a large hedge. He sinks into the shadows, and Aupia wishes she could leave him there.

Farah whirls, a small flame coming out of her staff. “What makes you say that?”

“Because nothing makes sense now, but it… oh I don’t know-“

“Somehow does?” At Aupia’s nod Farah giggles. “Yeah, that’s how it is here.” She pauses to draw a finger to her chin. “I think lowlanders have said this a few times before, that we try to connect magic and the… the nonphysical to the physical. But lowlanders like to use big words and fat concepts. The Hold doesn’t frame things based on big, fat ol’ words. Instead we base it around what we do know. Then we build from there. It’s like a house! Or something,” she shoots a look off to the side. “Fitz said the house bit. He thinks it would help you.”

Aupia stops and massages her wrist. “Well, I think I see. I don’t at all, but I might.”

They met up the next day, Farah tossing her the branch and Aupia catching it midair despite the lack of warning. She was proud of her feat, but Farah hardly seemed to notice.

“No Finch today?”
It was the first day of Aupia’s trial evening: freedom, at long last! Everyone in the Cathedral was quick to leash her, from Ochaco to the Canary: be careful not to have too much fun they all said. Aupia made no promises. She clears her throat. “No Finch, thank the Maker.”

The continued again for an hour or so, talking about differences between the Holds – Blackhawk Hold seems to put emphasis in their mages sharing a few tricks of the trade; for one, their ability to shapeshift, but for the most part they only change form into one or two beasts. The other being the way they communicate through their minds.

“It helps us when we’re diving,” Farah clarifies, floating in and out of Aupia’s twirling motions. She weaves about very acutely in her beast form. “It’s hard to speak underwater, so we all talk through our minds. And when it comes to fights, our mages always give us the upper hand over the other Holds – we can communicate over vast distances, across all of the Hold.”

Aupia nods as she spins the stick; realistically it makes sense. Sounds like the Avar one-upped the world there – they had wires before anyone else could even wrap their minds around it. “And does everyone turn into fish?”

“Does this look like a fish?” Farah laughs, stopping in front of Aupia’s face. The girl just smiles and keeps spinning, making a point to nearly whack her friend. “Sea-things, then?”

“Nah. Blue Lillies live on shores and along rivers, ponds. Simmons are along ocean sides. Most of us take to water things because we’re surrounded by them back at home; we live alongside them all, might as well have them in our natures.”

It is a simple truth. A good day, a simple truth, and some freedom; it’s a beautiful day. They meditate some as the sun reaches its peak in the sky, then try fighting one another with branches. Farah says you want to be resourceful as a mage – you can’t just rely on your magic. Anyone can be called to fight, might as well know how to with what you’ve got. But despite Aupia’s smaller size, Farah quickly out competes her in every way.

“You’ll get it no sweat. You just gotta stick to it.” Farah assures after a while, sitting on the ground with a bee in her hand. Aupia’s flopped down beside her in the grass, heaving. She turns over, looking at her friend through her hair. “Alright, but now I’ve not a new one. How do you determine what’s in your nature?”

“That’s hard. Words don’t usually relay what it means, not fully at least. Maybe one day we can figure out your nature.”

“You mean shapeshifting?” Aupia asks slowly, trying to mask her excitement. “You’re willing to teach me how to shapeshift?”

Farah snorts. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be willing? Only if you want to of course, I know lowlanders can have a thing against this stuff.”
Farah had her keep the branch, convinced Aupia should practice on her own. They parted ways as Farah left for something horde-related behind a puff of smoke and a smooth-sailing body, granting Aupia the berth to walk freely around the city for a little while. No one seemed to call her out for having a tree branch against her back which came as a pleasant surprise. However, her freedom was short-lived, as someone inevitably came to bother her. Better yet, he pulled the staff off her back.

He lifts it over her head in a clean swipe, pulling it off without so much as a shuffle against Aupia’s back. She reaches for it in reflex only to grab it right where his own fingers wrap around the shaft.

And he has the audacity to smile about it.

“Hey Peaches! I like your stick. Beat up any goats with it recently?”

She pauses, one too many unanswered questions drifting around in her mind. What should she address first? “There aren’t any goats in Val Royeaux,” she says cautiously, eyeballing him. He has quite the audacity to come up to someone like this.

“Not that you know of,” clarifies Kaplan, handing her the branch and shoving his hands in his pockets. He glances around the streetway. “The far reaches out the Outskirts has some they bring in to the marketplace. Plus you’ve got the villages right outside the city limit. You haven’t been out that way yet, have you?”

Aupia’s not too sure if she wants to divulge this information to him, so instead she sheaths her stick against her back once more. Vallen’s good at this – avoid the question by asking another. “Why’d you call me Peaches?” She asks, something tightly.

Again he smiles. He looks dangerous as he does this, his hair viciously ungroomed, one hand coming out now to rest on the handle of his sword. “Peaches. You know. What you ate on the roof of the Divine’s little crib the other morning.” He uses several words in a string as if they make sense; individually his words make sense, but together? Aupia just gives him a funny look, which earns her a heartfelt laugh. She transitions to a frown, her mouth opening and closing as she thinks
it through. “It was a pear,” she finally concludes taking swift strides to leave his company. Kaplan reaches for her before pulling back at the last instant, instead opting to just walk beside her.

“Really?”

Aupia rolls her eyes. She doesn’t need to dip her head, not for him. She glances around the area for signs of someone watching their interaction, trying to measure the need of whether or not she needs to pull up her hood. “Peaches are gross. Too fuzzy.”

He laughs again in a low tone before clearing his throat. “Sure, although I love all fruit equally, if you catch my meaning.”

She just frowns again. How is she not surprised by this development? She feels the need to correct herself but bites it back; he doesn’t need to know.

He’s stroking his chin and looking around. “Looks like you’ll be putting a lie into the papers.”

“I’m not the one putting words in their mouths. I didn’t say it was a peach.”

“Yeah well, that’s what fame’ll do to you. Half the facts are gonna be wrong, might as well let them be the facts that don’t matter.” He matches her stride for stride, hands cupped precariously behind his back as he leans forward a little. He is too innocent in demeanor to ever, seemingly, take any matter seriously. Not if he struts about like a child on a playground. “What are you off to today?”

Aupia stops. “Nothing, actually. I was going to read at the university.”

“Read what?”

“Not sure. My… friends have some waiting for me.” Can she call the de la Mutieras friends?

“Well then. If you’re looking for some new sights, mind if I take you to the reaches of the Outskirts?”

Her mind ablunder, Aupia stops walking. “You want to show me some goats?”

He laughs. “It’s nothing formal - the outside perimeter, mostly. Well part of it – you’ve also got the Grits, the Bits, the Swamp… all bit by bit things that most don’t want to see. But the people are nice enough I promise it! The Outskirts forms mostly a circle around Old Val Royeaux, but its way more than that. This city’s the largest in the world because it’s the center of the world. Or, was it the other way ‘round? Bollocks. Well, whichever it is it’s really something else,” he ushers, smiling. “You haven’t seen it yet and you’ve got time today. Why not try something new?”

She doesn’t particularly want to, but she doesn’t find the heart to tell him this. His grin is shiteating and he doesn’t seem particularly trustworthy, but.

But.

But why in Andraste’s holy tits not? He’s proven himself at least twice now to be at least somewhat descent. And Aupia’s got a branch tied to her back – surely she’s resourceful enough to take care of herself.

She shoulders her pride and stands a little straighter: this is want she bargained for when she asked for her freedoms. Might as well pursue it.

“Yeah, alright.”
“How about now?”

“Nothing.”

“Still?” One of the twins bounces upright, fury written across his face; at least, the part of his face you could see. Most of him was covered in soot from his engine backfiring moments ago. There are smudges around his right eye. He looks like a racoon with half a bite taken out of him to Vallen.

He tries to ignore them – really, he does! – but it proves to be much more difficult some days over others. Between the backfires, the explosions, and hissing plants there is rarely a quiet moment in this laboratory. That’s the only measurable reason why Claire got Vallen this work space to read through her student’s reports and his assigned diagrams; that, and they are naturally detestable human beings.

They tamper around some more, bickering with each other like jays on a foggy evening. To think that this is a natural livelihood for certified and published professionals! Some of the brightest of the University! Vallen scratches something out on another sheet – this environment, the smell, the sounds, the nature of it all: surely if he had known this was what he was walking into he would have been smart enough to deny the Enchantress’s offer. It’s a marvel that these bright minds all stoop to such levels. Something takes off this time, launching itself across the room before erupting against the wall to Vallen’s left. All he could do in the moment was duck – that, and regret his every moment in life. Cisco’s little rocket echoes across the laboratory in a shout, blackening the wall in a star-like debris.

They all pause. Vallen lifts his head from his desk to find his fists tore a page clean in half. Good thing it wasn’t a student assignment.

Half of him expected the de la Mutieras to display half an ounce of care for his wellbeing – the rest of him knew better. They resume their bitching.

“The dial was turned too high!”

“Are you kidding me? Your input was too strong! The math supports that steam and coal can’t run the same engine! Be lucky you didn’t take out my Proxima shelf!”

“We jumped from no input to a 100-volt pulse. Something was wrong on your end.”

“Acceptable conclusion. Take over, I’m going to write this down and get back to what I know.”

Now they’re both standing. Vallen covers his ears as the reverberating sounds wrack his mind. “I need you for this! I need another set of hands!” claims who could only be Cisco.
“I much rather prefer the company of plants right now. What does the voltage read now?”

There’s a pause. “162.374.”

“Rounded.”

“Yes.”

Vallen shoves against the table, forcing his stool across the screeching floor. The two turn to him in frank disappointment. Before they can say anything he grabs as many papers as he can and makes for the door. The two watch him without comment as he slams it behind him. Then they look at each other.

“What was the hundredth?”

“Seven. Three-seven-four.”

Outside, the guard at the door jumps at Vallen’s appearance. “Buzz off!” Vallen screeches at the officer, a young woman. She freezes – it is her first week serving the Chantry – so after a moment she does as she’s told. She will be reprimanded for this the moment she crosses into the Cathedral’s threshold.

Vallen storms through the University hallways, unsure where to do but desperate to not turn back. The sheer audacity of those two! Are they so unaware of the world they can’t pay attention to the people – nay, person – breathing the same air as them? Published and respectable, I think not!

Lectures are in session with dozens of bodies seated in the rooms he usually escapes to. They refuse to turn at his passing, blinking eyes and vacant stares transfixed on professors and dissections. Vallen is of such little value to these people it’s almost infuriating; it’s not like they don’t talk about him, he’s heard it all. But they refuse to acknowledge him as a person of any equal, and that is what bleeds his fury. The need to escape the mounting pressure of the university takes charge of him, drowning out the calls that echo across the corridors.

“Val? Hey, Valley!”

Eventually he stops to sum up the voice calling out to him; when he catches eye his frown deepens and he continues his tirade through the halls, step unwavering as he clutches his stack of papers.

“Hey don’t do that! Come here! Have you eaten yet?”

NOW he pauses. And spares himself a second glance. He bits his tongue, twisting it in his mouth. Then he goes to the girls.

Aupia has poor taste in company, and Corinne de Caballet may be the worst of all. She waves at him gayishly and unafraid, textbooks bound to her chest as she hops on her heels. Its only as he is a few feet from her that she stops waving and instead puts a fist on her hip. “You really are a flattering man aren’t you? Avoiding some fetching girls like this. I don’t know who raised you but they could have done better.”

His blood boils, and his mouth opens with a curse ready. “My mother-“

“Is a charming woman I’m sure,” quickly interjects the girl at his side. She nudges her companion. “Honestly Corinne, you should know better than to say something outlandish like that.”
“I’m sorry but I must! We stand among some of the most famous people in our age, professors and students alike yet some of them cannot think for themselves! It’s a wonder they come to University with their trousers on correctly.”

She’s a fool.

The girl beside her clears her throat and shuffles her own books around. “Ignore her, she did well on her last exam, and its gone to her head. It’s a wonder she puts her own trousers on correctly.” She offers him an extended hand cutting off anything Corinne may say. “Marigold Folds, Zoology department. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

They both wear masks – Corrine’s takes on animal-like features, silver colors with upright ears with porcelain bunched up in the center to give her a protruding muzzle. Vallen wonders why anyone would ever wear such an atrocity. This new girl’s face is half-exposed, revealing unworked skin and tinted golden eyes. Her yellow hair drapes over her shoulder like a waterfall behind her, light and color framing her in a halo. Her mask looks like a crescent moon now that he thinks about it.

“We have typing together,” adds Corrine somewhat proudly, overpowering Vallen’s polite reply. “Despite what they may say about her department, she’s a considerably upright human being. Morally, at least. I don’t know about these men you pursue.”

Marigold laughs as hand retracts. “Oh, is that how this is going to go? Come on, we don’t have much time before we need to part ways, and I'm eager to get to know your friend over a meal.” This newcomer smiles at Vallen, her white teeth flashing. Oddly enough that’s… quite a beautiful feature. “She pointed out to me how you were in the papers this morning. That’s quite the honor, making the front cover although I wish it were under better circumstances.”

Vallen’s mouth opens and closes: he shouldn’t be surprised. In fact, he should have seen the papers this morning – it was on his banister and he never once bothered to look at it. Corinne reaches to tug on his sleeve. Vallen pulls back with a slight frown, his conscious mind returning to the present.

“Join us, will you? We were discussing the nature of Ferelden dramas in our previous class. I’d like to hear your thoughts on the matter.”

“I have no thoughts on the matter.”

“You’re Ferelden, you must.”

“Smithy families don’t watch plays with the king, Corinne.” He concludes somewhat forcefully. She heaves, rolling her eyes behind the silvers and blues. “Goodness you’re no fun. Come now, what if I paid for your lunch?”

“I have a budget. I'm not worried about money.”

“A trade, then.” Offers Marigold with a smile. “You let us pester you about your nationality, and we’ll answer your own questions.”

Vallen frowns after a moment. He’s careful now to not frown directly at her. “I have no questions for a horse or a zoologist.”

“I am not a horse! I study-!”

“You look like one in that. Why don’t you wear it when you’re at the stables?”
“Why in Andraste’s holy land would I dirty-“

Marigold touches her friend’s arm. “Come on Corrie, he’s not interested.”

Corinne is pulled away with a word hanging on her lips. Marigold turns around, her moon facing Vallen at the last possible instant. Her hair looks like a crown. “Although, I'm sure if we shuffle our deck a little, you may change your mind.”

They stop walking just a short distance away. Vallen doesn’t move. He also refuses to acknowledge his own curiosity about these girls. Corinne’s whispering, her books still bound tightly to her chest. Vallen can see her mouth working behind the mask. He can see the faces in the classroom. He can feel the soot on his cheek from the laboratory.

Want to know how to best twist Vallen Sacha around your finger? Taunt him with what he doesn’t know.

“What do you have to offer?” he finally asks. Marigold just smiles. “Perks of being a horse and zoologist – we get all the city gossip.”

They get to know each other informally in the University dining hall. Marigold (she prefers Mary) held up her end of the bargain, buying him lunch and talking him through the rumors surrounding three professors within the dining hall alone. Corinne offered rumors about Claire and how she was raised by a collection of wolves and chickens in Del Forest: that’s why she’s so good with bones. She’s been pulling meat off them since she was a pup herself. Vallen’s not amused.

“You don’t have to be Ferelden to know that’s not a possibility.”

“I don’t care if it’s a possibility or not, I find it beautiful.”

“Beautiful? A woman in the woods being raised by wolves?”

Mary forks some lettuce into her mouth. She holds a dainty hand over her lips to mask her chewing. “Corrie has a tendency to lean towards the flare in life’s stories.”

Vallen turns to another page, wiping crumbs off his lip. The sandwiches aren’t as good as they are back at home, but he isn’t caught up on that at the moment. “That’s redundant. Life has enough excitement here.”

Corinne nibbles on a biscuit. “And it doesn’t at home?”

“It’s Ferelden,” Vallen supplies turning to her. “Most of us don’t have last names. There’s no time or place for good times.”

“Clearly. You’ve never even seen of Eyelashes at Dawn. Has your mother at least seen it?”

“My mother hasn’t been to Redcliff in years.”

“That’s a pity. It’s a good play.” Vallen shrugs; Corinne has too many things to say for him to keep up. “Mary, you haven’t told me what it is you study.” She arches a brow at his interest. “Zoology. We’ve already told you that.”

“That’s a big field.”
“And you don’t think one measly girl can study it all? I’m kidding,” she adds, lowly, immediately. “My, your expression shifted. Afraid of saying something wrong to a girl?”

“Afraid of saying anything to anyone,” he admits after a moment. “Not supposed to step on any tails. I could be removed in a heartbeat.”

“Even if you’re under the Enchantress’s eye?” Asks Corinne. Vallen takes a sip from his glass. “Especially when I’m under her eye.”

“What’s she like?” poses Mary, leaning on a hand. “She’s a marvel at a distance, but I don’t think I could ever spend a near her.”

“Same.”

“What?”

“I said same. She’s hard to be around.” The two girls exchange looks. “You know,” bides Mary, “If anyone were to say that, other than you? I’d be confused. Maybe even concerned.” Vallen shifts in his seat and writes someone on the page in the margin – the student is… wrong here. This is unusual. He shuffles pages around for the master copy: why hasn’t he noticed this before?

“Vallen?”

“Mmm. Yeah, I don’t spend time with her. I’ve only actually spoken to her twice.” Corinne folds her hands over her chest. “Sounds shady if you ask me. A woman like that, bringing her you without so much as a notice and without even consulting the advisors. A pity.”

She likes to say that, Vallen notices. “Its only a pity if you make it a pity, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to be here. You still didn’t answer me.” He adds to Mary who only shrugs. She rubs her hands to lose any crumbs. “This and that. Mostly aquatic, although it’s hard to describe exactly what I do. Easiest to show. I also do what I can around the laboratory - recently there’s been more vacancies with other projects so I’m stepping in wherever I can.” Corinne leans forward at that. “Same! At least with Martin, although he’s a flake as-is. You know Martin right? The one with the curls and the green flowers on his mask? He’s-“

“You can’t trust Martin. He’s a Vint.”

“Well I know that, but I never once pegged him for a Harel. Davey yes, but Martin?” She sits back and collects her belongings, charged by the boldness of her claim. “I guess there are things you never really know about people.”

Vallen rolls his eyes and writes something down for Claire. He was right about the correction he found, but now he taps his pen in thought. “Being a bad lab partner makes a Harel?”

“No,” says Corinne lightly, “Being a Harel makes you a Harel.” She shoulders her bag, taking up her plate in one hand and books in the other. “I’m off, it’s been fun. Come by the stable some more will you?”

Mary cuts off any response Vallen might have. His fingers begin to quake. “Bring your paper tomorrow, its due in the morning.”

“The final?”

“The preliminary. Don’t forget it this time, alright?”

“Yeah yeah.” She’s gone and Vallen doesn’t notice. Leaving the two alone, Vallen tidies up his
tablescape and folds his hands. His heart is pounding, and it takes him a moment to realize why.

They’re playing him, and they don’t even know it.

Ten seconds pass. He licks his lips and scratches his head. Finally he packs up his belongings. Marigold doesn’t notice. At the continued silence she looks up at him, the half of her face light and curious. “What?”

He drops his hand. He’s decided. “Why do you speak so freely about Harels?”

She cocks her head. “Is there a reason for us not to?” Vallen thinks on it. “I don’t think I grasp exactly what the people here make of them. They’re a thorn in everyone’s side, that’s what the Divine has issued again and again.”

“And have you never considered that they were more than that? Or perhaps less than that?”

The response leaves him slightly stunned. “What do you mean exactly?” he asks. “They’re everywhere, yet they do nothing. And when they do something there’s an uproar, but nothing’s done to stop them. Remember that story about Claire with the wolves? It’s like us – we’re surrounded by them here, and it’s the city’s greatest secret.” She sighs through slightly parted lips then leans forward on the table. She is dangerously close to Vallen, yet he leans in a little as well. He watches her curiously. “The city’s greatest secret? What does that mean?”

They sit there for a moment with their faces close before Marigold leans back with a shrug. She won’t tell him. Vallen sighs. “What reasons do students have to join the Harels anyways?” he asks accusingly. “They’re street thugs, murderers, thieves.” Mary blinks a few times. “I couldn’t tell you, although I know a great many people here associate themselves with Harels.”

“That can’t be true.”

“Why not? Who doesn’t want to be a part of something bigger than themselves? And it’s not like they’re all so bad. Squeaky wagon wheel gets the grease, right?” She watches him with newfound interest. “It seems someone is curious. Don’t tell me our smithy is looking for trouble.”

Vallen leans back. “Only looking for answers,” he says in resolve, looking away. Corinne said green flowers, right? Martin. Green flowers on his mask, and there are only so many of those in these halls. Curls too. It takes him a moment, no more than two. Then his eyes widen slightly.

Vallen knows exactly who she’s talking about.
Kaplan leads Aupia to a building she’s walked past a dozen times over, offering an extended hand in a dainty manner he could have only picked up from the nobles in the cleaner part of town. He only lets go of her once his hands are on a rusted old stairwell. Aupia’s stomach does a flip.

“I thought we were going to the farthest part of-“

“We still are. We’re just taking a shortcut.”

“Up a building?” She clarifies, now glancing down; they’re at least three stories high now. There is nothing but cold steel preventing her fall, rusted steel at that under her fingers and toes. She looks up to her companion and watches him wearily. “Would you be offended if I clarified something with you?”

Over the course of their walk thus far they have discussed every matter from how quickly mold grows on logs (it depends on the rain) and how long it takes before chicken isn't safe to eat any more (depends on how drunk you are). They even touched base on Kaplan’s sexuality once more, to which Aupia has concluded doesn’t actually exist: he’ll have sex with anything still breathing. He also has the vocabulary of a sailor. “Depends on the something!” he shouts back, somewhat cheerfully returning her to the moment.

She pauses at length, concentrating on the steps she needs to take. “Are you gonna kill me up here?” she finally asks. Kaplan laughs as he throws himself up on the roof and out of sight. A moment later he returns, a hand reaching down for Aupia. He’s smiling. “If I wanted to mug you I would have done it on the street – things get bitchin’ gross if you fall from up here.” then he winks. “Trust me. How hard can that be?”

She pauses before taking his hand in hers. She has come to realize that she hates his crooked smile and his choice of words. He lifts her over the last of the steps and the two look over the edge – they’re now some four, five stories high and on a cement roof to a building she has never seen before.

This is painting a very, very troubling picture for her. But Kaplan remains at ease, walking in casual circles with hands on his hips as he eases his breathing. So Aupia sets her anxiety aside; besides, that little bell in her neck hasn’t come up or anything. Surely she’s doing alright. She runs a hand over it as her mind wanders, the wind blowing hair across her vision of the ground below.

“Don’t people look funny from up here?”

“Sorry?”

“The people. I feel like they look like… I don’t know. Not ants, maybe rats from up here.” Kaplan proceeds to turn up to the sky with a hand over his eyes. “I wonder if that’s how the Maker feels about all of us. Do you think we look like ants to Him?”

Aupia isn't sure how to answer his question, so instead she asks another of her own. “Why did you bring me up here Kaplan?”
“Because we’re taking a fucking shortcut. Don’t you listen?”

She walks across to the other side of the roof, her arms folded over her chest in reassurance. “How is this gonna help us-“ she stops as an engine screams near them. Aupia pauses, thoughts coming together. Kaplan’s sitting with his feet dangling over the rim of the adjacent wall, his palms flat against the roof’s edge. He points. “Cause we’re gonna catch the train Peaches. You ready?”

She proceeds to him wearily: now the bell starts to sound off in her head, but its drowned out by the billowing cry of the train’s engine somewhere below. She peers over the edge to the docking station below. Of course! How had she gotten so twisted up in her location that she didn’t realize where she was? Beneath her emerges the head of the train, a conductor and his companions slowly coming out of the shadows the buildings beside them. She settles for letting go of the breath she didn’t realize she was holding. “I don’t think-“

“This is a short one so we’ve got, like, twenty seconds left.” He says, patting her on the back. “What’cha gotta do is just land square on the pieces beneath us, easy peasy yeah?”

“What? No! Not easy-peasy! You’re asking me to-!“

“Ten seconds left. Would it be easier for you if you hold my hand?”

Aupia’s heart stops. She should have meditated before coming out here – better yet, she shouldn’t have gone on this adventure. She glances around for a reasonable escape, an excuse to carry her away. She can’t find one, and the bell in her neck rocks slowly to the rhythm of the screeching train beneath her feet. The ground – the roof? – begins to tremble a little bit beneath her: either that or Aupia is shaking. It could very easily be both. Her sweeping gaze settles on the boy beside her, that god-awful smile stretched across his face – the bugger’s enjoying himself.

Aupia takes him by the hand.

She’s not about to be outplayed by her fears. She swallows, looking down. Kaplan mimics her, squeezing her hand in measurement. “Jump on my mark. Ready?”

She nods, breathless.

_Tits._

The train thunders beneath them.

“Jump! Now!”
Ellana had a few… unusual quirks. She had blood painted on her cheeks and this uncanny taste for elfroot. She seemed to always have an extra sock on hand (despite never wearing shoes, let alone socks) because she found them “fascinatingly versatile”. She would read romances in languages she barely comprehended and would write coded notes in the form of weak-willed poetry – which, naturally, was absolutely both unnecessary as well as see-through. But she did it despite protests; she might have done it because of the protest, but the world will never know now.

But another defining trait was how much she loved to jump – it wasn’t even climbing, because as great as she was against a cliffside she didn’t like the ache it put in her fingers and toes. But she’d leap as if trying to fly, an escape of a sorts. Either that or she liked now the world anchored her back. She felt tethered when she tested the way of things, and that tether gave her ease of mind; its nice to know something will catch you when you fall.

Naturally, her advisors disagreed.

“Don’t do that. Not where the public can see you.”

“Alright.”

“I'm serious.”

“Alright! I hear you!”

“Do you understand why I insist on… quitting this childish behavior?” raised Cassandra, hand on her hip. Lelianna and Josephine were there too, all of them appealing to Lavellen’s best behavior. Cullen was oddly silent, but that might have been due, in part, to the fact that he witnessed her leap from her bedroom floor to the garden that morning. It was more like a show of cornering a dog than it was a helpful intervention, but Ellana subsided to their requests.

“Fine. I'll do it when people aren’t looking.”

She liked sitting on rooftops, and no one could take that from her. In time, many of her closest allies will join her on those rooftops. Solas especially – they liked watching the stars from atop the cottages and masonwork. Because as they watched the stars, they were looking for something else entirely. 

Something they, in due time, will find in each other.
Aupia believes this is what it feels like to be a bird – either that, or this is what it feels like to die. She can’t feel her stomach and if you were to ask her her name, she wouldn’t have been able to tell you.

Yet she did it, a strange boy’s hand in hers as they dropped.

It was slow yet not slow enough; when her feet hit the tin ceiling of the train her legs crumble. She collapses and curls somewhat instinctively to appeal the motion that still controls her body. Kaplan landed on his feet and lunges for Aupia as she rolls away from him, helping bring her to a standstill almost as quickly as it took for them to land on the train. She glances up to see that smile, and she breathes out.

Kaplan says something then repeats himself, leaning in a little to be heard over the wind. Aupia doesn’t hear him regardless, but she understood his actions well enough – he takes two steps away from her, walking in the direction of the wind. The train whistles and blows as it passes through the city, little people passing them by in a standstill.

He stands, throwing himself forward with a hoot and outstretched arms. He leans slightly forward, body outstretched with the wind rolling through his hair. He tilts his chin back; with his palms upwards, it looks to Aupia like one might pray to the Maker.

Then Kaplan remembers himself and turns back to Aupia, that crooked smile now in tease. He’s distinctly louder this time. “Come on! You’ve made it this far!”

Aupia shakes her head, pulling hair out of her eyes. “I’ll fall over!” she shouts over the wind, fingers anchored violently to the tin roof of the cabin. The wild wizzes around them, home after home, building after building. Billowing smoke passes through them, over and around them in a sooty embrace.

Kaplan laughs once he’s visible again, reemerged after Aupia rubs her eyes; its hard keeping them open with this much wind in the way! She squints up at him, her street urchin now blackened once-over. He’s laughing and its entirely inappropriate. He hoots again, hands now in fists.

And just for a moment Aupia realizes what she could not name about this young man; he looks like he rules the world. He’s unabashedly unafraid, fearless for all the wrong reasons. He doesn’t dress like he as a cent to his name yet here he stands on top of the world. That’s it she realizes with a jolt – he’s free. And she envies him all the more for it.

Aupia tests herself, reaching for the branch still against her back. She’s here to learn. To experience. What was it the Agar said?
Trust yourself, Aupia Kessler. Trust in your heart.

As smokey spires rise and fall around them, Aupia slowly draws her hands from the tin. She turns her feet to better grapple against the wind, her hair violently whipping free from her ribbon.

I'm not gonna die, I'm not gonna die, I'm not gonna-

She lunges for Kaplan once she’s on her feet to use him as a support. He takes her weight readily, that stupid smile of his bright against his blackened face. Once she’s upright Aupia releases her deathgrip on his pant leg, reaching instead to knot his shoulder up in white-knuckled embrace.

Kaplan’s hands shake at his side, outstretched as far as possible. He hoots again, them howls. No one could hear him but himself and Aupia. The girl’s heart thunders against her ribs, the energy palpable as vigor radiates off him.

And Aupia does the same.

Kaplan doesn’t tell her until they jumped safely off that they weren’t even going that fast, which was a irritating truth to be told. “Since we’re within city limits, the trains don’t go any faster than 30 kilos per hour,” he reasons for her, brushing off layers and layers of soot. He tries beating it out of his cape as Aupia pulls hay from her body. “They don’t want to accidently catch anybody on the tracks, so it’s a safety precaution.”

“You say ‘only thirty’ like it’s not that much.”

“Once you’re between cities and out in the middle of nowhere they can go as fast as eighty or ninety kilos an hour. That’s when you gotta be extra careful to not fall.”

Kaplan safely lead Aupia to a leap into a shelving of hay, something that he assures is always there.

“Why?”

“Because hooligans like us are constantly doing dumb shit.”

“Really?”

“No dummy. Its hay they bring in for steam factories. They’re unloading that shit constantly at the docks here. Now come on - less questions, more fun!”

It’s different here, drastically so from Old Val Royeaux yet there are subtle distinctions between the Outskirts Aupia is so familiar with and the far reaches of this city. It feels like she’s living between layers of lives only reachable after traversing different worlds altogether. For one, the slums have dried out as the drainage seems better the further from the city you go; however, the waste has dried in the streets, leaving small pools of excrement every which way she looks. The buildings stand sideways and are a modgepodge of wood, shacks and towers sprinkled about through narrow, winding alleyways. There are not walkways here connecting the different levels as there is only one level: the floor where commerce and trade occurs and the houses just above. Stretches of this area are built upon bridges crossing over what appears to be giant rivers underneath; either that, or the city truly is built upon a lake. It’s hard to tell with so many people
and homes everywhere. The streets are made of cobblestone and mud, uneven and smooth underfoot.

Kaplan speaks without regard for his language or conversation; his tongue rolls out words like ‘soap’, ‘dogs’, ‘hormones’, ‘vigilantes’, and ‘bedfuckers’. He also says fuck a lot, but Aupia has far more on her mind. There are so many things to see here!

There are a few roads, designated and maintained by city officials. This is where caravans and travelers come in to the city; unlike the Rift which divides Central Val Royeaux from the new where most of the crowded streets are paved with mud, there appears to be a true attempt and cleanliness out here. Perhaps the city wants to put up the façade that it cares for all its residents. Yet another mask, really. The streets are also noticeably wider here with walkways flanking the cobblestone paths for horses. There are workers here from the Rift, designated by their kept working shirts and rolled up sleeves; they are installing lamp posts, digging out the earth to plant large steel rods. It’s like a manmade attempt at godhood, like they’re trying to build a forest.

Aupia thinks of home, of the Maker and her time here. She hopes her letters have been read and that the Head Enchantress will find it in her to forgive Aupia’s mistake.

It takes her no longer than three minutes to realize the most concrete difference between this place and every other she’s been in; there are elves here! Ragged and torn, but sharp-eared and sharp eyed regardless. They mill around in families on errands, curls and straight hair and dark and fair skin alike. Some children play in the street as their mothers hang row after row of garment and blankets to dry.

It’s a wonder that the girl has gone this long in her life before being surrounded in such a way. She watches in wordless wonder until a set of eyes land on her; he’s no older than Josephine’s children or that girl who killed the man just days ago, yet he looks older than he probably should. Then there’s a young woman probably Aupia’s age with a belly wide and full, swollen with child. It may be twins for all Aupia knows. And that cripple in the corner, propped up against the wall – he’s missing a leg and leans on a crutch. It’s a wonder he has that in his possession, as it appears he has little else.

There is a way that they look at her but Aupia didn’t know what it was. Never more than a moment, it could never last longer than breath, a week, a year. It was the way dogs look at each other when there is only one piece of meat. It is the way lovers look at each other after a fight. In the end though, it was just that – it was nothing. It was there and then it was gone. The child, the woman, the cripple, they all look away with bowed heads. Aupia did the same as them.

It was terror. It was enslavement. Yet somehow it was raw acceptance, like a dog with a chain that knows no other. It was kindred fear for tomorrow, and it tastes like iron. She tugs on Kaplan’s sleeve who abides by turning his attention to her, mid-word as he continues his one-sided conversation.

“Let’s keep walking.”

He took her to the most pavilion-like area he knew, a busy district with a few street vendors and a dozen children running around in game. It happens to be on one of these bridges, one with houses in the middle and walkways flanked by handrails separating the careless from their plummet below. The water itself looks absolutely disgusting – something green, brown and blue all at once
and it smells like it should be yellow too. But Aupia knows better than to judge. They meander without aim and speak easily to many broad topics. He is from many places all at once he claims, yet his accent is somewhat Vint-ish. He has no family here and is of no faith. That’s all Aupia can pick up in clarity. Its only after Aupia buys them both apples that Kaplan pauses; he tosses his apple up again and again before he asks his tantalizing question.

“What do you know about the Kodiak?” he prods, watching the apple’s descent into his waiting palm. Aupia shakes her head, covering her mouth politely so he can’t see her chewing. “I don’t. I live with the Divine. I’m not his ward.”

“But they’re one in the same aren’t they?”

She manages to swallow her bite. “How so?”

“He’s a Right Hand, and I think there’s a trend tying them together. Poor old Cassandra was one before she started wearing that hat in public. I heard she rode mastiffs and dracolisks into battle.”


“-Victoria I know I know, but she wasn’t always the same person.”

“She’s gotta be the same person. She was chosen to be Divine. Otherwise she wouldn’t be in the seat!”

Kaplan laughs for some reason; his laugh is clean and good, strong like it comes from his belly. “Then pray tell, why do to-be Divines get a new name when they’re inducted if it’s not to be a new person?”

Aupia found that to be a surprisingly descent point. Surely Divines are chosen for the fact that they don’t let the power get to their heads, but… huh. She rolls her eyes and turns away from him so he can't triumph in her agreeing with him; he still claims victory in her silence, however. He lets it go with a nudge at her arm and a vigorous bite. “Don’t worry, no one knows everything. It’s alright to have someone flawless bestow their glory upon you every once in a while.”

“Flawless? Their glory?” It’s like a ridiculous show of plumage. Aupia knows better than to let little things irritate her and to let it be known that she’s bothered by these things, but his call to attention is so outlandish it would be almost wrong to not react in turn.

“Don’t hate.” He says, smile widening. Aupia can only nudge him back before tossing her apple core into the water below. She lets the moment pass in peace as it bobs beneath them. “I saw him once before, as a child though,” Aupia admits after a moment, thinking back and thinking hard. “He was… terrifying.”

Kaplan was unnaturally quiet at first. He stops throwing his apple. “People in power tend to be like that.”

“No, you don’t get it,” she says with a solemn shake of her head. “He was dragging mages around by a chain. That was,” she works one hand over the other, “it just was.” She didn’t mention the elf, and he doesn’t think to ask about it.

“Damn. That’s… a lot. I’m-“

“Don’t say you’re sorry,” she says lowly, half-pleading. “No one wants pity.”

Ten heartbeats pass before Aupia feels his gaze leave her. “Yeah, alright. I don’t pity you. But if you’ll hear me out, I think we’d be much better off without him.”
“Who’s we?”

“This city. The chantry even, probably.” She catches him scratching his head; he seems to be weighing what not to say. He tosses his apple out into the water, twice the distance of Aupia’s. it was only half-eaten.

“There’s rumors about him,” he says cautiously, slowly.

“There’s rumors about everyone.”

Kaplan’s demeanor instantly melts away in a half-laugh. “Yeah, ain’t that the truth Peaches!” he pats his thighs and stands. “Alright, enough of that. We came here to tout around didn’t we?” He offers her a hand with the same brash flair the nobles use. Aupia takes it readily. They walk with her hand on his arm in peace before he tries another deepened question. “How you feeling about that sad case we saw in the streets the other day?” Kaplan asks.

Aupia’s mind drags trying to put name to case – oh, he’s talking about the Harel. “It was weird seeing that. I’ve seen the dead before but with people it’s a little, uh,” she pauses, thinking of the right word. Kaplan tries finishing the thought for her. “Gross?”

“Nauseating.” He nods in agreement. “Death invokes a certain level of fucked up,” he summarizes as if discussing the nature of water. “Water is wet,” is what he could have very easily said. It is somewhat unnerving for the girl to spend so much time around such loose lips, with someone who curses so freely. As the hours pass however, she slowly comes to lose the weight of the vocabulary and each spiteful term slowly losing its sharpness. He’s kind underneath it all – his demeanor is rugged, but he has a heart and actively tries to use it when conversing and making decisions. It would appear that this young man is resound in his ways, a confidence inflated not by wealth but worth. And he takes that sense of worth and puts it forward in interacting with others. He’s kind to the children on the streets, even giving them advice like an older brother might despite no obvious connection as they flank them. He bats at their hats and tugs at their breeches in mockery, which they do in equal jest. One even pulls his cape off, the rag-tag drapery hanging by a thread on one shoulder and tucked into his wasteline. Its bright red, something flashy like the rest of him. It may even be orange, but after all its been through it is a sheer amazement that any color still resides in it.

Once the children release them and Kaplan has secured his cape back in place, he asks her one last thing that surprises the girl. “How much do you know about Harels in this city, Peaches?”

Aupia pauses, mind wandering. That’s an… almost accusing thing to ask. He clarifies himself before she can dignify him with a response. “I don’t mean it as in you are one, just if you know how big it is out here.” she hums on it, pulling at her hair. “Not big at all?” They’re stopped now, face to face as trolleys and weary horses pass them by. “Like, I know they’re Thedas-wide gangs everywhere you look, but I’ve never pictured their presence to be much more than a thorn in the sides of everyone. Biggest thorns being in cities. Am I allowed to ask why?”

He huffs and pats her once on the back. “Then you’ve still got a lot to learn out here,” he insists, tone dropped of all humor. He stills once more, fingers curling gently into Aupia’s back. “Just act surprised when someone asks you questions about them.”

She arches a brow at him. “Are you really sure you need to be preaching to me about that?”

He looks like he’s about to laugh before he catches something above Aupia’s head. Instantly he’s serious – his posture shifts, as does his expression. His fingers return to her back, gently gripping her. “Hold up Peaches. Someone’s coming our way. How many qunari do you know?”
Oh, this can't be good.

Aupia turns in the direction he’s looking to find what change his demeanor so readily. She clears her throat and swats his hand away, taking a gentle step towards her adversary. “Hey Qat! I, uh, didn’t know you come out here.”

It was Qat, approaching her from across the way with a duck slung over her shoulder, a rope in hand tied around its neck. The bird’s eyes are open. She nods at Aupia, failing to even acknowledge Kaplan without so much as a curt look. For all of the magic Aupia has taste-tested in recent weeks, she cannot put a single name to the feeling surrounding her surrogate keeper. The cloud of energy encasing her feels so dry she surely isn't feeling any emotion – right? Or was that just raw… anger? Petty irritation? What is this sensation?

She ignores the girl’s comment, instead issuing one of her own. “Aupia. I had not known you to come out this far.”

Aupia smiles somewhat bashfully. “Yeah, this is my first time. I’m-” she remembers herself, then “Oh! Qat, this is-“

“Kaplan,” Kaplan says, extending a hand. “It’s nice to meet you ma’am.”

Qat remains unchanged. Her eyes are still on Aupia. She doesn’t even look at his hand. “You should not be out here,” she warns, voice low. Aupia begins to speak in settled protest but the qunari takes her by the shoulder. “Come. Sera and I have something for you.”

Her grip is forceful, making Aupia turn in guilty defeat back to her companion. She shrugs. “Oh, well, Sorry Kaplan, I-“

He waves it off. Qat forces them to take another few steps. He’s smiling. “Don’t sweat it Peaches. Catch me next time you’re in this area, okay?”

Aupia smiles. This time she waves as she leaves. “Of course. And thanks for the tour!”

Chapter End Notes

Hell this took forever. Honestly I just want things to happen and we’re like, a few chapters from that? idk.
Meanwhile

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Iron Bull has only once ever reconsidered his name – the suggestion came from Cole (who is a half-person at best back in those days) but most people will object to the ‘The’ in his title. “It’s weird without it,” he once told Krem over a shared drink and a bloodied handkerchief. His eye was just cut something nasty, but otherwise everything seemed to come out just fine: he might even walk away with a new drinking buddy at the end of this. In fact he will – that and an eye patch.

“It makes things hard,” Krem objected, still unsure about their company. All Bull did was laugh at the time in jest. “I like the challenge!”

Which was not – and is not – completely untrue; The Iron Bull likes difficulty because it makes the day interesting. It makes the job memorable and it makes the experience worth having. That’s his general understanding at least, and is partially what encouraged him to stay in the Inquisition despite the numerous calls to leave both from his Chargers and the Ben-Hassrath. But what happened nineteen years ago put his resolve to the test, and ever since the taste of challenge has left his heart feeling softened. Things that once gave his pulse an extra jump now felt excessive, even unnecessary at times.

Don’t get it wrong, he will always love a good fight – nothing will change that. Combat is in his blood. But there’s something about the death of someone, someone who always made a point to fight the good fight: when that death is innocent and unjustified, that does something. Because it means something to die without meaning.

Needless to say he has not spent much time in Orlais since, mostly in honor of Ellana’s own sickness of the nation. She never quite figured out what she liked least about the people here; lying is universal, as is the great game of politics and policy. It might have been the masks. Either that or the wigs. Or the general pomposity? Whatever it was, the two shared frequent drink over the matters in those last few years they had together. It’s weird being back, but even more so being back for a dream born in the form of a ghost. He’s only seen this child twice now, and in both instances she fluttered away like a rabbit in the underbrush. Vivienne’s initial letter wasn’t wrong, neither was Josephine’s that followed - Aupia bears uncanny resemblance to both Ellana and Solas, and it’s a damned pity; he can taste the energy in the air, how the people here judge her as they see her. Yet he can't quite bring himself to do anything but the exact same! Maybe less of judgement, more of hope in the form of tumbling thoughts: Ellana had so many dreams for this child, its only right that someone finally tell her these things! And in his defense, Aupia hasn’t given him a chance to do anything but judge her thus far.

But he will not let it change his mission. He is there on two counts, one being to meet her; The Iron Bull is no amateur and is infamous for his abilities to multitask. So he struts across the Cathedral as benevolent as possible, bouts of humor and fond, idle chatter at every turn. He spent the night drinking with Harding (complete with a sheet of bird-related jokes the Chargers helped him with), his morning shooting with Sera (neither are oh so good at these handhelds, and Qat is sure to say it every chance she gets), and now his evening is to be dedicated to meetings with Cass. A waste of time if he ever knew one, but oh well - it’s been so long. He’s well past due for a rough one. At least Harding and Sera were going to be there. He’s stopped by Cullen on his way in, the curly head caught in somewhat of a mood. The Iron Bull tried to distill the aurora of the man with a hearty thwack on his back, jolting the human. “Curls, it’s good to see you again. How’s the
married life?”

He grunts, rubbing the small of his back. “It’d be easier if there wasn’t so much of a mess for me on the daily. Its more than troop movements or mage management, its politics. I don’t know how she did this all so naturally.” Bull nods, catching his reference. “Yeah, the stuff’s like rat poison. Needed in a city as busy as this.” He then glances around, eyeballing the many moving bodies; it appears to be business as usual here, which means Cullen would have his wife here still. Come to think of it, Bull never met her. “Hopefully that up-and-coming family of yours is keeping you busy. Any little feet yet?”

All he did was huff and flip through his papers in hand. “No, and if they end up like the one waltzing through here now, I’m not sure I want to go down that path.”

Well. That turned oddly serious. “Come now. You don’t mean that,” Bull tried meekly in a weak chuckle. Cullen stiffened then relaxed into his bones, his head dropping slightly. It seemed to The Iron Bull that this was the first time he let himself go like that in months. He massages the nape of his neck as he glances up at the qunari.

“Yeah. You’re right.”

Qat and Sera arrived promptly then (another glorious thing about this wife of hers, she gets Sera on time to shit), cutting off Cullen from further revealing himself.

“Commander,” nods Qat, beckoning him to the side after greeting them both. “I have something for you.”

“Right. Good. Well,” he tries patting Bull on the back as hard as he can – it does little in comparison to Bull’s thump against his own. “It’s good to see you around again Charger. Be sure to stay for a while this time.”

“Sure. Make sure to schedule some chess in with me between the parties and meetings.” He watches them off with a curious expression as Sera comes up to his hip. “What?” She asks, pointed lip curled. “Not sure what they’re talking about?”

“Not a clue. Mind letting me in on the secret?” He looks down at her; he knows the two have no secrets. Surely Sera would—


“To?”

“Here,” she says, putting it simply with a stomp and a wave. “Now come’on. They’re gonna flay us if we don’t get in there.”

He watches them silently, an unlikely alliance if he ever knew one. Must be serious.

Well. That makes it a challenge.

Consider is accepted.
Its nice to be included again after being gone for so long; he’s certain it wasn’t Cassandra’s idea to include him in their briefing, but it’s an appreciated gesture nonetheless. Between the Divine, Josephine, Sera, Harding and himself it was almost like old times. Minus any mages, or Ellana herself. Or any sort of sense of commonality it would appear – to the trained eye, it seems like the gang has fallen out of sorts yet they carry themselves under some veil of facades. But who are they lying to? Is it for the sake of the people, or themselves?

Naturally they cycle back material they have discussed for the last few months: murders, banking statements, international concerns, the like. There is mention of Varric Tethras – he was very apologetic about his agent’s behavior, but glad she returned to him without an extra head in her bag. He asked in his report if Aupia opened her gift. No one thinks she has, so they put off responding to that.

“She said she would attend the next Chant,” The Divine says, leaning back with a look at the Canary as the conversation rolls on. “We will require extra security.”

That’s a surprise to just about everyone. “Of course,” confirms Harding, writing herself a note. Bull leans against the back wall watching all of this unfold. “I didn’t peg El’s kid for being Andrastian.”

“Her relationship with the Maker is her own,” says Cassandra, almost proud in a way. Bull blinks. *Well that answers just about nothing.*

The Iron Bull felt his presence was unnecessary as they rolled through their normal content; he’s not here to enforce anything within the city, he has his own agenda. One with a schedule. “She seems like a bright thing. Kind too, but kinda mousey.” He surmises.

Josephine almost looks apologetic. “She’ll be like that at first. Give her time, she’s coming around.” Bull rolls his head around in exasperation at her. He has never been one for beating around bushes, and he would be lying if he wasn’t hoping she’d immediately take to him. “She’s all tight up like Solas. Just clutzy about it, cares too much and doesn’t have a good poker face. More like Ellana if you-“

“We do not use that name here,” began Josephine, pen scratching her board. It takes The Iron Bull a moment to put tone to meaning “Wait. She doesn’t know who her old man is?”

“He *isn’t* her old man,” responds the Divine.

“But you haven’t told her? For real?”

A few passes are exchanged, but nothing more. Bull pinches the space between his eyes. “You know, of all the things you could do wrong… you chose this to be your break-even? You know El didn’t want her kid in this damned city yet you got her here like a caged bird! Then this?”

Josephine’s exasperation sounds through. "And what would you have us do, Bull? Drop into her breakfast, tell her the man that fathered her was a genocidal maniac?" Bull comes closer, laying a hand down on the table. "Now you know he was more than that. We wouldn't be talkin' about this today if it weren't for--"

“Perhaps if you had been so kind to be here when she first arrived you could have had a say in all this.” It’s Cassandra - Divine Victoria, *whatever* - who interrupts him.

It stings. Its unsettling. The truth hurts, or whatever the hell this is. “Hold on, this is my doing?”

And Harding – Harding, of all people! – *backs her up.* “That’s not what she meant,” she says
coolly, calmly. Bull turns to her now; the hand on the table curls into a fist. “Well that’s what I heard and she hasn’t corrected herself much has she.” He tries to laugh it off as he rubs the back of his head – is angry the word for this? Nah, it can't be. This isn't anger. Its disappointment. He heads for the door. “I can't believe you all would do this to her.”

Divine Victoria looks like he’s accused her of treason. Her tone is low. “Aupia doesn’t know any better. She’s treated well here, she doesn’t need to know things outside of her control, outside of her power. She doesn’t need to be weighed down by anything more than she already is.”

He doesn’t know who said that because he wasn’t quite paying attention. But no, now he remembers what it was Lavellen disliked the most. Its all the white lies that aren’t even of value.

“She’s not the one I'm talking about,” he growls, waving them off. Sera chased after him.

Chapter End Notes

Idk why I haven't posted this. Its been sitting done for days. 
Next (actual chapter) up by the end of the week. Thanks for being patient, and as ALWAYS thank you for the comments and kudos! <3
As implied by the title, this takes place during the previous and upcoming updates.
The walk from the furthest reaches of the Outskirts to the Rift, Sera and Qat’s home and domain, took longer than Aupia would have cared for - no wonder Kaplan stole a ride from the train. It took then nearly an hour of walking through slowly darkening corridors before they reached the Hotel des Abeilles’s purple lights and makeshift walls. Inside there was quite the commotion, and Aupia almost forgot to freak out when she saw the face responsible.

Sera stumbles about, singing something loud and daft with laughter and rounded lips. She’s drunk as a bird with its wings on upside-down. The Iron Bull, on the other hand, looks like he’s ready to just about start a street-wide brawl.

Qat quite calmly opens the door to her flat three floors up; with Aupia tucked behind her, neither Sera nor the Bull sees her at first. Sera squeals at the sight saying something about cats; The Iron Bull bellows, his back to them both. Somehow the cry for “kitties!” seems to register with him. “Qat! Qatifa my velveteen woman! Come’er, it’s time for us to-”

Aupia grumbles lowly. “I'd like to leave.”

“They’re leaving.” Qat responds, unchanged by the sight in her living space. Sera and Bull exchange glances. Sera then thrusts a firm finger into her chest. “I live here!”

“And Aupia does not wish to see this. Leave.”

“I-!”

“It’s not you,” Bull says, a voice much quieter than the girl ever would have pictured he was capable of. He gently extends an arm to Sera, offering the last of his bottle. He’s watching the girl and her cheeks boil under the pressure of his eye. The Iron Bull approaches Qat and Aupia, the cheer once bouncing off the walls stunned into silence. Aupia shuffles her feet, refusing to look up at him as he stops in front of her.

A few moments pass. Then a few lifetimes – It’s hard to tell exactly. Then the pressure of his gaze leaves Aupia. He’s looking at Qat.

“Qatifa.”

“The Iron Bull.” The way she says his name is strained. She puts unnecessary emphasis in The.

He gives a quick tug of his belt. He has no shirt, why doesn’t he have a shirt?!

“I’ll be seeing you tomorrow. I'll be back for that business we were hoping to discuss.”

“Of course. I will see you then.”

There is more silence. Aupia wants nothing to do with it. She battles herself to keep her dancing fingers at bay: there is too much energy in this room, too many colors, too many emotions. Then he speaks to her, again, a voice measured by one too many unspoken thoughts.

“Pardon me, kiddo.”

That’s what her father calls her.

Aupia bits on the insides of her cheeks as she steps to the side, head bowed submissively. She
wants to scream, to run and never come back, but she really has nowhere to go. He walks around her, leaving a trail of silence in his wake. After a moment Aupia’s heart settles and she forces her head up with a smile. “You said you had something you wanted to show me?” she asks.

Qat was being odd – she was always quiet around Aupia, but this energy was charged. The girl could feel hidden intentions like ants on her ankles. Sera looks upset too. Her wife hands her the duck on her shoulder and a folded note without so much as a word on her part and a poorly-hidden grimace. Something’s been chewing her up. Sera opens her mouth to speak again, but Qat spins around and tosses a knife at the girl’s feet.

Aupia watches it curiously, half-expecting it to grow legs and dance. That would be fairly natural given the silent circumstances of the flat. The bell in Aupia’s neck begins to hum, something low and ominous rising like a bubble in her throat. She lifts a hand to her neck, glancing at the qunari in bewilderment. “What is this?”

“Pick it up.”

“Sorry?”

“Fight me.”

“What?”

Qat lunges at her, crossing the room in three clean strides. Aupia’s only reaction is bringing up a single hand to shield her face; it does very little to protect her. Qat smacks her clean across the cheek, throwing the girl to the floor.

Sera says something beyond Aupia’s understanding; her senses are rattled, her palms roughed against the carpeted floor. Qat stands over her now then takes a single step back. She nods to the knife once more.

“Pick it up.”

“What the hell!” Aupia screeches, trying to get on her hands and knees. She worries a hand over the bridge of her nose – was it broken?

“Pick up the knife, girl.”

“What the hell! What are you doing?”

“Qat, come on,” pleads Sera, standing with her arms erect at her side. “This isn’t how we were gonna do it!”

*Do it? Do it?! Do WHAT?*

“What the blazing tits is this?” Aupia cries, now facing them both from the floor. It’s hard to see, so instead she pleads. “I didn’t do anything! I swear!”

“Indeed you have not. Yet you wander the streets with a stranger, going out to areas where no one should.” She comes closer, brushing her wife to the side; Aupia brings up a hand in reflex, her heart pounding against her ribs. Surely one of them’s going to break if Qat keeps this up! “If you will not learn to be afraid, then you will learn to fight.”

“To be afraid? You think I’m not afraid? Clearly you don’t know me!” She shouts, shoving against Qat’s bare chest. The towering woman only takes half a step back, the force behind the girl hardly more than that of a child. Blood roars in Aupia’s ears in unforgiving fury. “You honestly think I'm
not afraid every time I leave that damned castle? That someone on these streets is gonna snap and kill me? That someone’s gonna figure it all out?” She shoves again and again. “These people have no reason to protect me! To support me! To trust me! To let me live!” When her bare hand curls into a fist Qat catches her. Aupia’s head snaps up to hers in shock.

Qat shoves her back; Aupia is lifted off her feet easily, coming back down on her ass against the sofa.

Qat leans down over her. Aupia tries to swipe the woman’s arms away, but her attempts are fruitless. Strong knuckles graze her neck as Qat lifts her to her feet by the girl’s collar. She claws against grey skin, the bell in her neck rising like heat into her head. Something infuriating curls in her toes, a sickening heat like poison she cannot describe. “That is not what you should fear, child,” she growls.

Sera’s pulling at her hair. She’s screaming her wife’s name again and again. “Qat!” The qunari turns, and Aupia punches her in the face as hard as she can. The grip on her loosens and Aupia yanks her by the horn, dislodging the last of Qat’s hold on her and making the woman stumble.

Qat reaches down for her but Aupia scrambles back, bouncing to her feet and reflexively reaching her for her back; she has to turn over her shoulder to confirm what has completely eluded her – of course she doesn’t have a damned bow. She turns frontright only quick enough to see Qat’s fist mere inches from her gut.

Then, by some miracle, her breath leaves her.

And she’s swept back in an involuntary step of her right leg.

Aupia turns in disbelief, watching her foot. That was…. what?

Qat seems curious too; she betrays herself by watching the girl precariously, something unnerving in that squint of hers now. That was an incredibly fast reflex for someone who’s never fought a day in her life. As Aupia turns frontright once again, she flinches under Qat’s gaze and brings her hands up in a ready position. After a moment, Qat does the same.

Then Sera finally steps between them. Bold hands come up to her wife.

“Qat! We are not doing it like this!”

Qat watches Aupia without blinking, which is probably the most frightening thing this woman has done to date. She drops her hands to her sides. “She needs to learn,” she states. Sera’s lip curls. “And we’ll do it right! But this aint right!” As she thinks she’s subdued her wife, Sera slowly turns over her shoulder to Aupia. “You okay?”

She doesn’t respond. Her heart swirls against her chest as the bell both descends and rises.

“Hit me.”

Sera frowns. “What?”

“Hit me again.”

“Wh-“

Qat does as commanded, kind of. She kicks out a leg with just enough reach to get Aupia in the shin. Yet she recoils with lightening-like reflexes, her eye dragging as they move from Sera
downward. The sound of bells drown out any reasoning in the girl’s senses.

Then Qat reaches for her again. Aupia steps to the side. Then Qat strikes again with a fist. Aupia turns her face aside, just enough to miss the roaring knuckles. Qat repeats with the other arm.

It catches Aupia square in the nose.

She gags and stumbles, the bell battling the nausea rising in her lungs. As she steadies her breathing, she glances at the two women now beside her. They all look at each other, trapped in questions. Qat begins to say something, then Sera. Aupia cannot hear them.

“I think I feel a little dizzy,” she says lightly.

Aupia passes out.

The entire geographical footprint of the university is illuminated all night every night. It buzzes and throbs with people coming and going, books and conversations and papers being lost to the wind. No one seems to notice her which comes as a great breath of relief for the young woman. She tries to not run this time, instead walking with such a pace she’s sure someone will call her out for thievery. Yet no one does; here, the lights are on not to judge those around them but to continue on whatever tirade their research demands. Aupia’s heart settles against her ribs as these people ignore her so much so that she can nearly breath through her nose again. Her and her entourage of a drunk hissing elf and a stoic qunari weave and meander with a shared purposeful trot, the fastest pace Aupia can manage without throwing up. Again.

When at last she lays her toes against the entrance to the laboratory she pauses before she knocks, trying to establish her composure. As she knocks, she’s sure she can keep her calm. Vallen yanks the door open after a moment’s lag, his mouth open in curt and surely crude remark; then he squints as the light adjusts for him.

“Addy?”

She quivers – there are no tears of course because she’s at least stronger than that – but her body hurts something violent. Vallen’s arm drops beside her, his face immediately wrought with worry.

“Well? What are you waiting for, an invitation? Come in!”

“She was hit,” says Qat right behind her. Sera says something short. Monte’s blurry body comes into vision for Aupia; she squints, trying to figure out if it’s truly him or Cisco. She tries to ask, but
the ache in her head comes back to her. Sera and Qat start to argue amongst themselves by the door as the figure retreats to the back of the laboratory.

Vallen shoulders her to his work area, propping her up against the cool banister with forceful palms. He sounds angry. “Stand here, and don’t move. Can you stand?”

“Yes,” Aupia says meekly, afraid that the action of nodding might take her out. Vallen starts working over her face, checking for abrasions. He rests one hand on her hip in reassurance and quite possibly to stabilize her; the girl doesn’t know if it’s her world that’s spinning or if it is her body. The bell has yet to leave her, as does the nausea.

“And who hit her?” asks one of the twins. The women fall silent. Vallen’s head whips around. “Well? Who was it?”

“I did.”

“What?” Vallen’s touch leaves Aupia, who very nearly whimpers like a pup at his absence. She tries to rub her head. She needs to act fast before Vallen (or the twins) get the wrong idea in their head. “I asked her to, I thought—”

“You WHAT?” He pulls her hand forcefully away from her head. “Stop that! You’re not helping yourself.”

“But my head hurts,” she whimpers. Vallen snorts. “Yeah, I figured as much. But this is what you get for being a piece.” The de la Mutiera twin reappears with a bucket filled with water. The other one joins him in a conjoined form, a rag in-hand.

“Here.”

“Thanks. Now get those two out of here.”

“Who are they anyway?” asks one of them. Aupia envisions the other shrugging, pulling at a suspender or possibly fixing their optic lens. Vallen runs his fingers up and down the length of Aupia’s nose before placing a wet rag in her hand. Over the noise of Sera and Qat in the back, the Nevarran accent rings in Aupia’s ear. “Does it matter? And Vallen Sacha, who are you to assume we can remove these people?”

“It’s your lab, and you’re not doing anything are you? Make yourself useful! Aupia, use that to—”

“-clean up, I get it. Is there a lot of blood?”

“On your face? Yeah, a lot. But your clothes is clean.”

She exhales. “Good.”

“We’re not going anywhere!” Slurs Sera, coming forward. Aupia winces as Vallen presses down on her face. Oh Maker. Qat comes up to Vallen’s shoulder. “I will retrieve Vivienne. She will know what to do.”

“What would she do that I can’t?” asks Vallen.

“Vivienne who?” Asks one of the twins at the same time. The other one seems up to speed – “The Head Enchantress? Here?”

“PLEASE don’t,” Aupia wails, swatting Vallen’s touch away. He slaps her gently, a force ten
thousand times harder than it needed to be. Aupia moans into the rag as she resteadies herself. “Don’t do that! And stop tilting your head back!”

Aupia ignores him. She opens an eye to Qat. Sera has a fist raised behind her wife; she’s currently threatening to hit the twins. There is… wayyyyy too much going on in here right now. Aupia tries to breathe again as her eye closes. “Please don’t get the Enchantress. Please, I’m begging you.”

“She can help,” Qat insists gently at length. Sera’s voice rises behind her, as does Monte’s. Cisco’s? Aupia doesn’t know; she doesn’t know which way is up right about now, let alone which twin is which. Vallen presses a little too hard against her forehead and he notices it in how Aupia’s closed eyes wince tighter. He curses under his breath and slams a hand down on the tabletop. “Enough!” he shouts. “Can’t you see none of you are helping right now? Cisco, take that outside and leave her out there!” he points wildly between Sera and the twins. “Qat, get her or don’t, I don’t want to hear any of it. Right now what Aupia needs is rest and water.”

Sera pipes up from the back. “Nothing’s broken?”

“No.”

“That’s a shocker.” She grumbles quite audibly.

“I don’t need her,” Aupia whispers tightly, the throbbing in her head sparking resistance in her. Qat comes up to her, so near that Vallen is forced a step back. Her face is hard to read, and the pulsating energy that ebbs and flows from her disorients Aupia. Qat’s nose looks like it has been broken before, and there’s a scar under one of her eyes that Aupia has never noticed before. As her eyes adjust to the light, Aupia can barely head Qat’s words – she’s forced to try and read her lips as the laboratory spins around her. “Swallow your pride, it is not poison.”

Aupia looks away. “I don’t need her,” she growls. Vallen and Qat exchange silent looks before the qunari shrugs. “Sera, we should go.”

Aupia tries her best to smile. She licks her lip – it tastes a little like it’s red. “Sera, we’re all good here. Go home.”

Aupia hears some more grumbling, something along the lines of she hates me, she hates us, what have we done – but the voice eventually leaves. Sera is not particularly good at expressing concern towards others; she settles for chewing her lower lip and pulling at her hair. In a week she will apologize. She will cry a little and hit her. But the message will come across. For now however, Aupia tries to not sway.

Tits.

Her head feels like it’s about to pop. The bell has fallen out of range, but the ache seems to have amplified itself. Perhaps the bell was… trying to muffle the pain? “How’s your head?” Vallen asks gently in her ear. Aupia snorts. “‘Feel like it’s in an oven.”

“An oven?” Asks one of the twins, coming over. He stoops over her, grazed fingers reaching under Aupia’s chin. He looks precariously over her, lensed eye half-lidded in thought. Monte. “This is
unusual,” he surmises, simply and even. Vallen shoves him over with an aggressive shoulder. “No shit you duck. Now move!”

“She shouldn’t be sitting,” Warns another voice from within the lab. Aupia squints, trying to adjust to the fluorescents of the room. “And what should she be doing, oh doctor you are?” Snaps Vallen. Aupia can hear through his aggression though and she smiles despite herself, breathless laughter falling from her lips. Everyone turns to her but as it appears she has nothing to say, the bickering resumes. “Its basic fact. Blood-related trauma can be alleviated quicker if the host is lying down or standing up. In our case, our host is best lying down.”

“Why is she a host? The word is patient you engineer, *patient*. He bits his lip. “Doesn’t matter anyway. Aupia, we gotta get you back to the Cathedral. A warm bath might help.” His hands leave her as he tends to his pile of papers. “Do you think you can walk?”

“Can I have five minutes?”

“Of course. And drink some water.”

“Alright.”

They stayed for almost a half hour, then Cisco helped shoulder her back to their stoney prison. Their journey was a slow and silent one, but by the time they were at the doorstep Aupia could stand on her own once more without feeling the need to vomit. “Thank you Cisco,” she says. “I really appreciate you doing this.”

He grunts, hands in his pockets. He pulls out a box of matches and a cigarette. “Think the two of you can make it up the stairs on your own?”

Vallen nods. “We’ll manage. See you tomorrow.”

Cisco lights his cigarette and tosses the match. It dies like a star. He grunts again and takes a drag. “It’s already tomorrow, we’re well into the new morning. Sleep it off, and stop letting people throw you around,” he says almost angrily at Aupia. Behind those narrowed eyes Aupia can feel his intentions, weak colors but colors nonetheless. She smiles and bows slightly.

They bid their farewells and Vallen leads the way up to their rooms. Its only as the door closes behind them in the master bedroom that Aupia recognizes something on her friend. He takes to the wooden chair by the balcony; his body faces her but his mind is a million miles away.

“We made the papers,” he finally says. The fog of the city light beyond her balcony calls to him. Streetlights and strings of pearled bulbs look like stars in the heavens. “Yeah,” Aupia acknowledges steadily. “I know.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Vallen folds a leg over as Aupia eases down on the bed. “They talked about us. They bumped the newest burning to the next page. We made the cover. Four people died in that building Addy, and they put us on the front. Six pages further and they note the assassination we intercepted.”

She shoulders off her jacket in exasperation. There is a hard line on her face of discontent. “I thought I was coming into this heated. Are you coming into this heated?”

His mouth opens and shuts. “I’m not heated! I’m telling you how it is!”

“And? Your point is?”
He hunches over as Aupia leans back, her head facing up. “I won't tell you again,” Vallen warns, voice stern. “Don’t tilt your head back like that. It might stop the bleeding in your nose but its draining all the blood down into your lungs.”

Aupia stiffens a groan and obediently drops her chin a little. Her brows remain furrowed together, and she starts working knots over her hand. He asks her. “So. Are you going to tell me what happened or are you going to listen to me?”

“I think… I think there’s something wrong with me.”

Vallen was patient; he is always patient with her. He gave her the space to expand on her meaning, and when she fails to he steps up. “Okay. What does that mean? You letting people punch you in the nose for kicks?”

“I think there’s… someone else inside of me. Maybe it’s something else, maybe it’s nothing,” she quickly adds as his expression jerks. “But there was a moment tonight where I wasn’t in control of my body. I, uh, wanted to test it, because — you know — in the moment, it made sense, you know?”

“I haven’t the slightest clue what you’re talking about.” Vallen sits back, an arm resting on the backside of the chair. His hand flexes. “But to the point, you think there’s-?”

“Maybe. Maybe there’s something inside me.”

“And that prospect doesn’t terrify you? Addy please,” he leans forward a little, his face turning hard. “You need help with this. Set your pride aside and talk to the Enchantress. She’ll know what to do!”

“And how do you know that?” Aupia snaps. “Because this isn't natural!” Vallen snaps back. “Because this isn't something a practicing surgeon hears. This is magic, and she’s the world’s leader in—”

“-She is no one’s nothing. She’s a relic.”

“And she’ll wither away and out of sight before you know it, and the resource will be gone by the time you man up and finally consider how to act appropriately here!” Vallen’s head jolts away from her; it’s almost as if he can’t bear to glare at her. Instead he casts his fury out into the naked, dark world. “Honestly. You preach again and again about how you are going to be better than all of them and all of this shit, but honestly?”

“Shut up. I don’t need to hear this.”

“See I think you do!” Vallen stands abruptly, his voice curled like his lower lip. “You come to me with blood all over. You come to me with your problems, and you complain and complain and complain yet you refuse to do anything!”

They sit in silence for a moment. His meaning was clear to her, and Aupia is in no mood to hear it. She tries again, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Alright. So, the papers.”

“I also learned quite a bit about Harels today.”

“Really? Is this related?”

He straightens. “Corinne connected me with someone today who’s a known Harel. I was able to chase him down between courses – see, he’s a student of Claire’s in her fundamentals undergraduate course, and I—”

“Don’t tell me you asked him about his plot to overthrow the government.” He festers; he doesn’t
appreciate AU-pia cutting him off. “No. I talked to him about how to join.”

They stare at each other. A long moment passes.

“Val-“

“We are in a guaranteed safe position to do something about this! We can finally-“

“Guaranteed? Safe? Since WHEN? Val, if nothing else we’re in the opposite position! We’re the Divine’s wards, we can’t go around doing whatever we want!”

“But we won’t be questioned for that very fact!”

AU-pia stands. Then she sits again – her exasperation is clear in her agape mouth and thrown hands. “I cannot believe this right now. I cannot begin to tell you how wrong this is!”

“How? How is it wrong? Addy, the people in charge of this world are lying to everyone else! The Harels are everywhere, they’re responsible for everything! From the burnings to the murders to the mudslides in the countryside. They’re claiming responsibility for every-“

“Mudslides? Out in the countryside? Do you hear what you’re saying? Facts are facts, we can’t just staple unknowns into them and run with it.” She folds her arms over her chest – she thought she was going to come into this space angry and confused, not him. “People like to put name to blame especially when there’s a common enemy. The Canary has told me at least a dozen times now that Harels aren’t involved in anything. They’re a bunch of wannabes. Val, I’m not-“

“The Harels are only ever acknowledged as side conversation, that’s true,” he presses. “But the Inquisition – they do call themselves that still, right? Don’t look at me like that it’s a relevant question.”

“Maker Val! I don’t know! They don’t tell me anything! Look, honestly? I just came back from a brutal beating with Qat and Sera. I really just want to-“

“Ok, then hear me out before you crash, because this has been bothering me all day. I learned today that its not just shadows everywhere, there are whispers in those shadows, there are-“

“Are you reading poetry now?!“

“Just listen! To! Me!” He shouts, standing. The chair is forced back into the corner. “There are no rumors here! There’s facts, facts the Divine and the Inquisition is trying to cover up!”

AU-pia rubs her brow; the headache is starting to come back. “Okay. Let’s say what you’ve heard is true. Why in Thedas should we take it seriously? How do you know it’s not just people who recognize who you are and are feeding you lies?”

His energy burns her like a candle under a fingertip. “Because they’re us AU-pia! They’re us!”

“What?”

“They’re regular! They’re citizens! They’re witnesses! They’re people who have seen the real world and want to change it!”

AU-pia’s arms drop to her size as she comes to the bedside. “Alright. And?” Vallen heaves. He takes the moment to put the chair back where it was before and sits on the corner of her bed. “My point is back at home, we heard all the bad shit that happened because there was no immediate force regulating what was and wasn’t said. We heard what they say here. The Chantry filters what the people are told. Like, religiously. Yet they dump people and money and agents and urgency into every rat tail the Harels leave behind. That’s a LOT of dough that’s being shuffled around in
the dark for a bunch of side chatter.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Have you never stopped to listen to the conversations in these halls?” He questions. Aupia rolls her eyes. “Just get to your point.” She’s tired – truly – but Vallen’s truth dawns on her. Her body goes agape as turns her full body to him, finally recognizing his suspicions.

Vallen leans back against one of the bedposts. Five strides ahead, he smiles. “That means the Harels are bigger than anyone can imagine. That’s proof right there that they’re lying to everyone, that this is all just a scam!” His pointer finger is thrust into the quilt beneath him. “This is my point Addy – they’re lying, and we have access the people don’t have. We can figure out the exact information that they’re withholding, and we can do something about it.”

She glances at him and his smile then leans back, easing down across the bed. “Val, what does this have to do with us?”

“Because there was another killing today, this time in the Outskirts. Guess who isn’t going to acknowledge it tomorrow?” She watches his expression, feeling his energies ebb and sway. Her head hurts, but the clarity bleeds through; something isn’t adding up here. “That’s not all, is it?” she asks.

Vallen shakes his head. “And guess who learned about a rally happening five nights from now?”

The excitement dawdles, dripping away from Aupia as reality bleeds into her. her expression softens then hardens again. "Vallen, what would you say we do with the information?" She pauses, disappointed. "We can’t just show up there and expect to do something about it."

"And why the hell not?"

"Because it’s not our job!"

"Why not?!"

"Because we didn’t come to this city to change the world!" Aupia yells, oblivious to her volume.

"Then why did we come here Addy, huh? To learn?” He comes up to her, finger waving in her face. "Are you really content to settle for that?" Aupia swats his hand away, taking a half step closer to meet his challenge. Her head still feels uneasy and her feet sway beneath her, but she still takes that step. "Yes."

Vallen shakes his head. his eyes rise to the ceiling as he laughs, a chuckle of idle disbelief. His arms flap at his side. "I honestly cannot believe you right now. You’re really something else, you know that right?"

Aupia’s head recoils slightly at the accusation. "What the heck does that mean?"

"You know what? Fine, I’ll walk you through it. Consider this you dumb tit - consider the fact that you pitch fit after fit about people lying to you through their teeth and how you have to lie to all of
them. think about how much of your time and energy you've wasted on all this. Yet you continue to lie yourself?! Yeah, alright. you do that. The hell if I care." His hand comes up to her face again, the curl of his lip accenting the snarl on his heart. "But you better fucking reconsider it the next time you think about lying to me."

They hang like that in this stale space, hardly a breath released between them. Then Aupia screams, arms straight and tight at her sides. "Are you kidding me? Val, we aren't heroes! We aren't them! We're hardly US as it stands!"

"Why the hell do we have to be something special in order to do something right?" Vallen roars. They linger a mere few inches apart from each other, their noses almost touching. They both divert their eyes at the same instant, the heat shared between them both something viable, palpable.
"Fine," he growls, his own hands in tight fists. "Be that way. Be ignorant. Be daft. But I've got things to do." He pauses once with his back to her before he stoops over for his things, his neck erect as he stares at the ceiling. “You know, I'm not sure who you’re trying to disappoint here – you, me, or your folks?"

“My folks are dead,” Aupia whispers, eyes winced shut. “I'm not them. Don’t you dare-“

“I’m not fucking talking about them,” he barks.

Aupia doesn’t stop to help him pick up his things. She doesn’t even consider stopping him on his way out. Vallen opens and slams the door of his own accord, retreating to his own room. Aupia spins around and throws herself at the bed.

She screams into the quilt.

She took a bath the following morning; there is a new ache in her neck which she has concluded comes from sleeping in her clothes and lollled over the bed. She was in no mood last night to care of herself, not after the whirlwind that blew through her life.
Vallen had a point. He always had a point. But to impose that it’s their responsibility to handle it? Come on, they have no freedoms as-is. What does he expect they would be able to accomplish that professionals can’t? If the true threat of the Harels is being hidden from the masses then there is a reason for it, its Aupia’s job to trust that reasoning. Its everyone’s, including Val’s. The golden chambers and dripping water alleviated what it could, but it held no cure. Why can't her thoughts settle? Her mind swayed, returning again and again to the thoughts she failed to articulate.

Why can’t things be simple here?

Not minutes after she returns to her room do several hands wrack against the door. She glances up from her folded position on her bed. “Hello?”

The door unleashes Noemi and Eleonora in leaps and bounds. Josephine hurries behind them and their chatter. “Girls! You can't just-!”

“Aupia! Hiya Aupia!”

“Aupia, it’s been so long!” They nearly knock her over as they run into her arms. It’s a good thing she was already sitting on the bed, but her wrapped towel only does so much to keep her dignity. They giggle in her arms. Aupia squeezes them to her chest – it’s good to be loved!

She laughs as they push off from her. “It’s been like a week and a half. Two you are so emotional.” “Am not!”

“Girls!” The two turn to their mother; the kinship between them all is striking, especially in their smiles. Josephine tries her best to keep her composure, but her brow twitches. She keeps her hand to her face. “First of all, you enter a room when you are given explicit invitation. You know this. And you don’t just tackle someone! That is improper on all accounts!”

Noemi doesn’t seem to care. As Aupia stands she points at her. “What’s wrong with your face?” Josephine physically recoils. “Noemi!”

Elli leans in to Aupia again for closer inspection. “She just said it wrong. Did you get hurt?” Aupia touches her cheek; she forgot about the inevitable bruising that must be there. She cranes her neck so she can look in the vanity mirror. “I, uh, fell yesterday?”

Josephine sighs and rubs her cheek as she retucks her towel around her. “Oh, now what are we going to do with you, Aupia?”

That reminds her. She turns between each of them. “Why are you here?”

The girls giggle. Josephine cocks her head. “Did no one tell you? You’re going to the Chant this morning. We’re here to get you ready. And it’s a good thing too.” Gentle fingers prod Aupia’s check. “It looks like we have our work cut out for us this morning. Go on, sit at the vanity. We brought you something to wear.”

Aupia squeaks. “You did?”
“Yes, but.” She leans in as the girls hurry for their bags at the door. “I read your letter, and I appreciate all that you told me. I promise we’ll take time to talk about it later. For now though,” she backs up as Elli prods her shoulder. “It’s time to start layering up!”

According to Josephine, the Inquisitor liked to suggest this was all ‘armoring up,’ but the girls took it too literally when they were young; Elli apparently stole her mother’s under armor once and wore it to her sister’s baptism. “I thought it was cute, and it made sense!” Josephine’s been mindful of her language ever sense, but is quick to share the story with anyone who will listen. Naomi wanted a shot to do the same but both her mother and father have hidden anything from the Heritage Wars since.

Naomi isn’t as good with the laces of her corset, so Elli redoes them once her sister isn’t looking. As soon as the dress was dropped over her head the team shifts gears to doing her makeup; it brings Aupia no peace that she now wears some twenty pounds of new fabric when she explicitly told Madam Valjean that she wanted no new clothes, but it appears there is a standard when going to the Chant. Hopefully this standard isn’t that you have something new every time you go. They talk about their private tutors, their parents’ work and everyone’s friends with no space for Aupia to interject. On one hand it is pleasant to be swept away in someone else’s world for once; on another, it feels somewhat claustrophobic to be breathing in all this information with little to no context and absolutely no means to remember it all.

Its only now as these hands flutter around her face that Aupia realizes something: looking into the mirror, she notices one of her eyes is slightly larger than the other. It could be from the red swell of her nose, or maybe it’s due to the black and purple ring now there. Her face looks crooked now that she notices this subtly. She gently touches the soft skin under her eye. Josephine pauses long enough to grab Aupia by the wrist. “Don’t do that honey, you’ll smear all our hard work.”

“Right. Sorry.” She couldn’t stop looking at her reflection, oblivious to the changing shades of color in her cheeks, neck, and eyelids. They draw on eyebrows and pluck off stray hairs on her chin and in the space between her eyes. Josephine even puts a paste on Aupia’s armpits to shave those off – as if some young noble steed would be able to see it – and rips the hairs clean off. Beauty is terrifyingly painful, and no one seems to acknowledge this.

As the girls tidy up the mess they’ve left behind, Aupia gently touches Josephine’s elbow. She smiles down at her, that perfect smile with this perfect teeth and perfect eyes. “Yes, honey? What do you need?”

“What color were her eyes?” Aupia asks quietly. Josephine’s face turns rigid then soft all at once. “Purple, once. Then one of them turned green.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Josephine wears the best smile she can fake. “It was after the incident with her arm. Her eyes were like alliums, so bright and full of life.”

Her arm, not her hand. That means she’s referring to when she lost her arm. Fen’Harel Aupia cocks her head. “What are alliums?”

“Flowers, honey. They’re outside in the garden. Haven’t you seen them before?”

“I guess so. Did she like alliums?”
“Yes. They were her favorite.”

“How?”

Josephine stops. The girls come back into Aupia’s temporary bedroom. They’re talking about sapphires. “I don’t actually know the answer to that.”

“You never asked her?”

“No. I guess I never did.”

Oh. She looks at her reflection again. She assumes Onis had a slightly crooked look about him.

Elli clears her throat for their attention. Naomi bounces on her heels beside her sister. Elli asks, “these shoes, right?”

“Yes, perfect. Thank you darling.”

They’re pearled flats like the ones the girls wear. They’re terrible for support, and her feet feel cold. Why can’t she just wear boots? Something with socks? She is given no chance to ask. Almost immediately they are out the door in a fit of giggles and excitement. Aupia’s residual pain from the night before seems to have evaporated away in the bathhouse but the bright gray light of the new day is remarkably unbearable. Despite the sun overhead, it would appear Thedas threatens their time with stormclouds. A quick gust of wind stirs from the North and clouds impede in the distance, a clap and boom warning rain and thunder. The warm summer air stirs like a restless beast dragging the length of its chain to and fro, unsure if it should be pleasant or all-out winter-like. The elf tries to breathe as deeply as she can, a hand to her brow. Naomi tugs on Aupia’s sleeve, big, gentle eyes watching her like a puppy. “Are you sick?” she asks in a quip. Aupia smiles, taking the eight year old’s arm in her own. “No, I’m fine. The fresh air feels good though – I’m just… trying to take it all in is all.”

That makes the girl smile, and my oh my is that a precious face. “Okay!”

The walk arm in arm like that through the garden and into the conjoined building to the Cathedral. Josephine and Eleonora match them with their arms tucked into each other and they all come to meet Ser Valjean and a restless crowd. Alessandro embraces them – Aupia and all – in relentless embrace. “Oh my girls, look how lovely you are this morning!” his laugh echoes like the deafening clap of the clouds behind them; he too seems to have accepted his role in the faith, dressing now in business attire complete with a rose-embroidered undershirt, unforgivingly blue ascot, and boots that reach up to the tail ends of his suit. The sight is ungodly in Aupia’s perspective, but perhaps this is what the Maker demands: it’s not so far off from the extreme measure of her own garments. He makes the point to compliment Aupia’s dress which is maddening. She colors, resentful of the fact her hair is out of reach - it’s in a bun which was likely on purpose. Now there’s nothing for her to fiddle with.

The Chant hall is a long and ugly place. The colors are dull and remarkably lifeless despite the attention and care that goes into the faith – flowers stand guard at the entrance however, bringing promise of good fortune to those to attend to His word and command. The windows stand in varying shades of white, red and pink, shattered glass melted back together depicting varying figures in purity and blood. An odd combination, to say the very least. Josephine’s family takes their place in the first pew to the right, shoulder to shoulder with Aupia on the very end next to Ellie. The rows fill in around them, chatter like crows rising from these peopleless masks.

Aupia squats a little to whisper in Eleonora’s ear. “How long does this take?”
She bats her lashes – Aupia will soon learn that’s how she suppresses her need to roll her eyes. “As long as it needs. A few hours usually. Shouldn’t be longer than two.”

“And we sing the whole time?”

“I'm afraid so. Pretend to sing,” she says, glancing sideways. “They'll notice if you don’t at least pretend.”

Aupia rubs the lobe of her ear. Well, that’s am embarrassment. How did she know Aupia doesn’t know the songs? It’s not like she’s a bad Andrastian. Is it… that frank that she’s not the best either? Ellie watches her, waiting. “How do I-?”

“Just move your lips.” She straightens as does everyone around them, and in comes the Divine and her Right Hand. As Ser Kodiak takes to his pew across the aisle, Most Holy commands the attention of the faithful, beckoning all seated to rise and begins right away.

The flurry of words and hidden innuendoes that come from Divine Victoria were surprisingly easy to catch at first. It was no more than ten minutes into the call to the Maker however that Aupia feels like she’s drowning. No one sits down over the course of the two and a half hours, and Aupia’s ankles begin to stiffen. As does her back. And her neck. The people around her sing with such depth and practice it’s a tad overwhelming to bear witness to it all; that being said, the sounds and sensations were powerful and mystifying. The glamor of these dull stones seem to amplify the song, bleeding life and color into the space. Aupia’s lips move in humble admiration, deft and thoughtless movements as her attention sweeps the world around her.

Aupia’s mind keeps returning to her time with Blackhawk Hold in the Agar’s tent. She periodically dips into her magical senses to gage the hall – it ebbs and flows with emotion, colors she could practically see as the songs shift and sway. If it weren’t for the ache slowly building in her head, neck, back and ankles, she could have enjoyed the experience quiet fully. It doesn’t help that she didn’t know any more than one tenth of the words, but graciously she felt only a few eyes on her at a time. Mostly it was Most Holy herself, looking down on her from her podium with such love in her expression Aupia almost felt like a daughter again.

But like the clouds outside, she knows there’s something darker waiting within her to snare herself in. She thinks of Vallen and the regret of last night.

The Chant continued far longer than it should have, but like all things it came to a close. Families filter out of the double doors and into the gray of the world. It seemed to wait in a sleepy embrace, taking its subjects willingly as they pass from view.

Divine Victoria waits until every last family has left, taking her time to thank those who attended and shake hands with a few respected dignitaries. It isn't until most have left, however, that the truth dawns on Aupia: this was a strikingly small number of people in attendance with all things considered. She hears it in the comments that hang off the walls – that, and a mixture of rumors and complaints about Most Holy. It appears her people do not appreciate her word as much as she would hope they do.

Finally the Right Hand leaves with his associates, as does Josephine. Aupia held back at Madam Valjean’s behest – she insisted the Divine would like to speak with her afterwards – and as the doors close the world shrinks. A moment of awkward silence passes, then Divine Victoria waves a hand over the pew closest to them. “Would you sit with me?”
Aupia nods.

They sit.

The silence continues. Aupia can practically here the sway of the candles around them.

“It brings me such joy to see you here today Aupia.” Her smile is so true and so potent Aupia almost feels guilty for not being of genuine faith. “Hopefully you will take more time while you are here with us to join our community in safeguarding our faith.”

Aupia’s expression breaks away as she plays with her hands – the way her thumb rolls over the space between her opposing pointer finger and thumb strikes Cassandra. It’s exactly what Ellana would do. She looks away, content to not explore those thoughts at this time. “I have no right to ask this of you, but I am… hopeful that you will continue to explore your relationship with the Maker. I know that you face great challenges ahead of you and within you, but the more you let Him into your heart, the more one may learn about themselves.

Aupia turns to her, meeting her gaze in even confusion. “Let Him into my heart? Even if it’s not His? If its damaged?”

“Especially so.”

She didn’t like this. It feels to Aupia like all the Chant is is a serious of riddles, and that irritates her. All Most Holy can do is smile in the hope that the words bring her ward peace. They will in late nights when Aupia sits alone, but for the time being all she can do is wince. Most Holy rises now, Aupia following suit. “I must attend a formal gathering now, I shall see you back at the Cathedral later. For now though, has anyone shown you where Ellana’s resting place is?”

The rain continues to fall, filling the silence of Aupia’s racing mind. Finally, she says “no.”

“Would you like me to?”

No.

“Yes. Please. Thank you.”

And so she does, leading Aupia by a linked arm down a corridor and into a connected room. She smiles and sends her off with a pat on the hand. “Take your time. No one should bother you in here, her spirit must be lonely in this space.”

She enters the furthest chamber and is immediately engulfed in a stale cold; the stones seem to reverberate with dull, aching energy as if the hall itself is full of nothing but tears. The candles do little to illuminate the crypt, and the only window is covered in stained glass with a picture of Andranste looking down. She watches the tomb at her feet. It looks like she gave up half way through mourning and is instead contemplating how to catch bees with her hands. Orlesian artists, Aupia has concluded, don’t know what sorrow truly looks like.
The tomb itself is raised well above the ground, cement and stone separating her from the world. There are two wreaths of laurels and olive branches intertwined and burdened by the darkness; they flank a giant painting of the woman, another of the many dotting this busy city. She looks just to the left and her one remaining hand is resting on her lap, silver-blonde hair short and upright. It is drastically different from Aupa’s own mixture of red and black, Lavellen’s like the summer storm outside with hints of gold. Both her eyes look green here, but Aupia can see where Josephine went wrong – one is clearly still mixed with purple. Her suit is red and crisp, lined with medal after medal of achievements and awards. They look heavy across her chest. The splay of colors cast from Andraste’s shadow to Lavellen’s tomb makes it look like it houses a disfigured rainbow instead of a corps.

The doors close, and the darkness swells around her. There’s a dead woman in that slab of stone, one with hands that took down Corypheus and Fen’Harel, the corrupt Seekers, demons and beasts alike. She probably punched them all. She might have spit on them too or something ridiculous. What would that hair, those eyes look like on a twenty-year corps? Aupia’s cynical nature only carried her thoughts for a few moments of question. Then, inevitably, she fell to sorrow.

That womb also carried Aupia. The world’s most noble herald they called her, dead quite possibly because of the girl sitting now in front of her.

One can only imagine how that weighs the heart down.

The pews around her smell rotten and with all things considered, she should have noticed the person sitting not too far from her; she didn’t mostly due to the throbbing interfering with her magical reach. She jumps as the person speaks, their head bowed and hands folded. “We’re supposed to worship this place, but they made it so very dreary. It’s no wonder few come in here.”

Aupia startles straight out of her skin and into the Fade, standing abruptly. Well, tits. She clears her throat, restless hands smoothing out her dress. Thunder claps outside. She finds grey eyes in the darkness behind her. “Hello, Ser Kodiak.”

“Hello young lady.” He stands and walks up to her, tight hands folded behind his back. He has two swords on his belt and a cape of magnificent flawlessness. This man may be the Chantry’s bear, but he prowls with the confidence of a lion. “Did you enjoy our time together this morning?”

Enjoy it? Sure, you could say that. He speaks again before she can respond, shifting the conversation away and under his fluid control. “It appears there are few places where peace truly exists in this modern world of ours. It is such a shame that it must be in a crypt. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The comment strikes her in a foreboding way. A hand subconsciously comes up to her neck; Aupia can feel the beginning rattles of that bell of hers.

Perhaps a minute passes. It could have been no more than ten seconds. Regardless Aupia doesn’t know. She probably didn’t know her own name in that dead moment; she was caught between a thorn and a rough spot. How do you mourn a life - one you never meant to mourn in the first place - with a manbear sitting behind you in the shadows? Why was he here?

Aupia starts getting frustrated with herself. She bits her lip and turns around to leave just to have Kodiak interrupt her escape. He’s leaning forward on the pew in front of him, folded hands behind his back. “I have the feeling that the world has much to learn of you yet. Anything you feel like sharing?” He speaks with closed eyes; is he giving her a means to leave? A moment to speak her peace? She does entertain the possibility of telling him everything for a hot minute – how bad could that be, honestly – but something leashes her. “Sorry Ser, but I don’t know what you mean.
I'm just a girl from a farm in Ferelden.”

He doesn’t respond, not visually at first. Then Aupia catches the barest flicker of his eyes. “Sure. Perhaps it is… just a feeling.” He looks like he’s about to say something else before the sound of feet outside peaks his attention. Kodiak sighs, rubbing his brow. As he makes for Aupia the girl tries to get out of his way; the haste in his movement implies a beast on the hunt.

“Ah, well, this is my cue.” He takes Aupia’s hand in his own for a vigorous shake; his grip is ferocious and unrelenting. “It was nice seeing you again, Miss Kessler. I hope you find the peace you’re looking for here.” Kodiak releases her and heads for the tomb, climbing the windowsill while careful of the many candles now flickering around his feet. Instead of making way for the door and the call of his inferiors, it appears he plans to-

“What are you doing?”

“Moving the window. Its paneled you see, meaning it can swing out. Ah, like this-“ The glass clicks under his touch, and Andraste’s bussom swings wide. Light ushers in and Kodiak ducks under the colors that chase him. “Stay well, young ward. I shall see you soon.”

Sometimes, doing nothing in your shock is all you will ever be able to do. Within moments the doors fly open behind her, several faces lit up in apparent angst. All she can do is question the absurdity of the interaction. The agents are quick to correct their behavior once they recognize her. “Pardon the interruption. Have you seen Ser Kodiak?” one of them asks.

Aupia spins around. Is she… supposed to lie? Why is the Right Hand of the Divine… running away from his subordinates? Her voice squeaks. “He uh- well, he’s not here now.”

The man blinks. “Where’d he go?”

“He left.” He left? Maker dammit Aupia. You fool. They stare each other down for a few long moments in mutual awkwardness before the lead agents spins on his heel. “Alright men! Move!”

Aupia turns back sheepishly to the tomb in front of her – it appears that there is no such thing as peace in this meek place.

It is still raining by the time the doors are closed behind Aupia. it’s a short journey back to the Cathedral but she doesn’t feel quite like returning to the confides of her room for the evening. Maybe she could go out to Quagga and Rumad in the pastures? Surely the horses could use some extra grooming on a day like this. Her dress sags at her ankles, growing damp and heavy as the light summer drizzle continues on its descent. She takes her dress in fistfuls, grabbing it at the hems. This… probably isn't the most practical way to go about things. She considers changing before a looming shadow takes over her focus.

It’s a shadow with horns.
Not another one. This day has been unpleasant enough! She keeps her chin down, refusing to look up at him. Maybe he’ll take the hint.

The Iron Bull clears his throat. He seems uncomfortable and entirely unsure of where to put his hands. They alternate between pulling at his belt and going behind his head. “I was hoping to catch you at a good time,” he says. “Is... now a good time?”

Aupia hesitates. She finally looks up and when she does he looks away, immediately pulling at his eyepatch.

“I, uh, found a nice pub not too far of a walk from here. Want to go and catch a drink?”

_Oh Maker._

“It’s the middle of the day.”

He laughs as if her reasoning is absurd. “No better time to start if you ask me! Whattda say?”

She understands why he wanted to come here – it’s quiet as the crypt, the only other people present being some patrons in the corner and the barkeep that keeps disappearing around the corner. The lights are dimly set, electric wires snaking up the walls. It appears the keeper didn’t care whether or not his guests saw the wires then decided otherwise; they are stapled and taped in place, metal beams hooking them into corners where they have been painted over in sloppy ruby tones. The entire facility does not appear to be the most spectacular, but it serves as refuge from the rain.

Bull keeps chuckling to himself and explaining something or another – a story here, a story there – and settles into the warm colors of the bar like a painting. The stool squeals under his weight.

“She liked the messy places like this. Everywhere we went we’d always stop in just as much for her sake as mine. I’d be six drinks deep before she even made it to the table – she’d stop and talk with everyone. Folks couldn’t stand that up until the moment they realized exactly who she was. Now that was always fun to watch!”

Aupia hosts herself onto the stool next to him. Slick, sticky wood clings to her dress. Josephine’s going to be furious.

“Fun how?” she asks with a furrowed expression. “I can't imagine many people expecting to be stopped by a Dalish while in the middle of a beer. It sounds like she was asking for trouble” Bull turns hastily back and forth between looking at her and the people in the corner. “No they wouldn’t, but having an entourage like that cult of ours definitely gave her some leverage.”

Bull orders drinks for them both, two life-long favorites of his he claims. He downs his own quiet easily; Aupia’s restless fingers curl around her own, finger tapping in reluctant thought. He starts
off on a tale about a time with the Inquisitor, a mage and a ghost but doesn’t get very far; his volume falls away as he regards her once more.

“What? You don’t like to drink?”

“I don’t think I can get drunk,” she admits blandly. As her words stumble out, Bull spits his drink back into his cup. “What, for real?” He asks, wiping his lips. Aupia can’t look at him. “I’ve drank before with my folks, but never felt drunk from it.

“You’re shitting me.”

“I figured it was an elf thing,” she notes somewhat shamefully. “It was the only thing that made sense.” Bull just taps his glass – now that he thinks about it, he never saw Solas drunk. Not even a little. He never cared to drink with the rest of the Inner Circle but, but.

“Well then,” he says after a long period of silence, lifting his cup to her. “Now’s a good time to change that.”

She doesn’t know who she dislikes more – The Iron Bull, an imposing face from her mother’s past, or Ser Kodiak the modern terror. They both seem to expect something of her, right? Aupia takes this time to chance a glance at Bull; he doesn’t seem to be superimposing. The only thing she thinks he wants is to make her laugh, and this uncertainty is just as foreboding as the fear of expectation. They’re silent for a few moments, Aupia watching her drink while Bull downs his in easy gulps. She almost considered leaving before he tries again after the bar keep slips away again.

She could feel his budding thoughts like needles underfoot. She looks at him. “People would tell me that she was too good for this world.” His smile was faint, an echo. He brings the bottle to his lips. “It took me a few years to realize that was a load of shit.”

Aupia looks down at her hands. Hopefully he won’t say anything else; unfortunately he continues.

“She loved this organization, as absolutely shitty as it was to her. And she loved the people in it tirelessly despite the shit we all gave her daily. She just didn’t love herself much it seemed. Didn’t give her much strength to speak up for herself.”

Aupia just humms, trying to avoid him as much as possible. Its… uncalled for, how much hearing this unnerves her so. Up until now all she’s really heard are glorious tales of war and peace: now? Now, this is what she has been seeking for weeks and with it right in front of her Aupia doesn’t know how to take it.

Bull watches her out of the corner of his eye; he can tell how looking at her directly sets her on edge, and it pains him to recognize this. But he’ll do what he can to be there for her. “What? You’re thinking of something, I can tell. I’m magic that way.”

She almost laughs at that. instead she just smiles faintly, finger tapping the handle of her drink. The Iron Bull downs the last of his horn. “You’re free here, you know that right? Say your peace.”

Chatter behind them swirls. Aupia’s thoughts dwindle. “She didn’t love me enough though,” comes her voice, meek and small. “She didn’t love me enough to stick around.”

Someone laughs behind them. Bull drops a large hand on her head, making the girl flinch. She still can’t look at him and he can’t look at her.

Then he picks up his hand and drips it again. His fingers curl around her senses.
He does this one last time: Aupia doesn’t so much as shudder this time.

The Bull leaves his hand there before dropping it to pat her once on the back. “You’re dumb as shit.”

She actually smiles at that.

Another minute passes between them before Aupia summons the courage to speak. Her fingers drum relentlessly against the countertop as she focuses intently on a stain in the wood. “You were friends, right? What was that like?”

He looks up as if the ceiling holds an answer for him. “She was great to have around. We’d drink just for the hell of a drink and we’d- well, you’ve heard the stories of what we did with dragons, right?” As the Iron Bull reflects he can't help but feel a little lighter – maybe, just maybe all of what they did was with reason. That every interaction was measured for the fact that she knew she was going to leave him early. It’s a lonely thought to ponder, but a reassuring one. Maybe it was meant to be, despite all the fuss about destiny and fate. He tells her about their journeys from the Storm Coast to deserts Aupia has never heard of. Everywhere it was the same – people needed help, and the two of them (with others in tow) did everything they could: they were sure to stop for a few drinks along the way as well.

Aupia can feel his energy ebb and sway around her like a cool tidepool. She glances away hastily when he speaks. “You know she was good, right? Like, religiously so. Didn’t care much for the Maker but you get my meaning. Being good was all she had when the world took everything else from here. Gave us all something to rise to, especially when she treated the rest of us so naturally. It was like we had no other choice than to do our absolute when someone called on us to step up. ‘don’t think anyone’s done that for me before, which was weird. Especially since she wasn’t doing it for me. She didn’t do it for any of us. It was a long time ago though, so you know.” He swirls his drink massive hand cupping his drink like a child holds a pebble.

There was something innocent, perhaps overwhelming about it. Aupia watches his hand absentmindedly as Bull watches his drink, content to not say more. “My dad would say things about that,” says Aupia, her attention still on his hand, “That there’s no such thing as a long time ago. Only the memories that last and the ones that don’t. Like how there’s things that fade away and aren’t that important. But we can't forget the things that really matter.”

Bull chuckles lowly before turning to her. “Words of a half-descent guy. Sounds like you got lucky with your folks.”

“I did. They’re great.”

“I bet its hard being away from them.”

“More than anything.” He hums and takes another drink. Once the burn passes, Bull speaks again. “I don’t know much about your original old man’s past, but I got to meet your ma’s grandmother. She was a fighter, that little old…” his hand curls and uncurls, searching for the words. “Wrinkle.”

Aupia sputters, sharp laughter she didn’t know she was hiding coming out of nowhere. She keeps laughing and she doesn’t know why, maybe it’s the audacity of him calling an elder a wrinkle? But
its so – oh, why bother. Don’t try to reason it. Just embrace it.

Bull watches, the hard lines of his face and body releasing rolls of tension. He tries to hide his chuckles from her but his attempts die in vain.

“That wasn’t even that funny!”

“I- Maker, I’m sorry. I’ve just never heard someone refer to an elder as… a wrinkle!”

“Hey now,” Bull scolds, pointing to his own face. “Don’t lump all us old folks together. Some of us are in our peek now.”

She snorts as she laughs, hard curled over her mouth as if trying to mask her first sense of joy in the last six weeks. Bull bring his head down to a waiting fist and watches her, something light rising in him. Ellana didn’t like her laugh – she hated it, and she didn’t hate many things, but she was sure to reiterate how she felt about it several times in their nights together. her daughter seems to have inherited the same difficulty in laughing normally.

And he loves that about her, this kid he’s never met before.

At this point she isn't much younger than Lavellan when he first met her. How old was she? Thirty? About, she was some thirty-five when she died. They knew each other for a few years there. It’s weird to consider how the ghosts of someone could be up and gone with such ease, just to be mirrored in a life so similar. Hs twenty years really passed since she died? Its then that he reconsiders the ache her absence left behind. Maker, gods, whoever’s out there – this girl was so, so ready to be a mom. It would have meant so much to her, yet the world continued to take and take away. It’s a damn shame it had to take this once last gift away as well.

“Did you ever wonder about where you came from?” Bull asks later. She could only say so much to the question, because no one truly knows how to answer that. it was odd for her growing up; everyone seemed to think she’d be wrapped up in knots over how she didn’t know her birth parents. In truth, she rarely thought about it because when she did find herself caught in that invisible web, it threw her about something fierce. There was something about never knowing that was calm, and there is something about wondering that always makes your heard go wild. Once she spoke to her parents about it – only once – and her parents could only say so much. So that was the end of it.

Vallen and she poked and prodded the thought til it was dead a week old, and after years the thought seemed to stop weighing consequence on her heart. So Aupia found peace in not knowing through painting this lovely picture for herself right before she fell asleep on most nights; the thought of her birth parents loving her beyond reason. She’d live inside it the way a goldfish loves a bowl, as if that was the only world to be known. She told the Iron Bull this in hope that it gave him something – refuge, perhaps, or peace of mind – but it only made his eyes sag a little.

All he said was “oh,” when she finished. But there was nothing more to be said on the topic, so they both let it sink. This gave Aupia the chance to think back on Vallen for the umpteenth time that day. “What would you say,” she asks gently, “if I told you I might have made a mistake?”

“What kind of mistake?”

“One I can't fix.”

“Those don’t exist,” he says with a huff. “Mistakes are things you can fix – maybe given some time, but they’re repairable. They always are.”
“But what if this isn’t?”

“Look. You made the mistake, right? Then you get to control what happens. You can’t make statues out of mud if you don’t get your hands a little dirty first, same thing here.”

Aupia thinks on it for a little while. Then her hand drops from her chin. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s an expression from back home. Point is, YOU made it. You have a say in everything you stick your hands into, be it a person, a place or the damned future. You’ve got innate power kiddo, use it.”

Aupia finishes the rest of her drink oblivious to their conversation. Bull likes to talk and he reminds her of Kaplan; in a way, he also reminds her of Grant’s dads. The way his eyes wrinkle up when he smiles also makes her think of her own father. But mostly she thinks of Vallen, and she knows what must be done.

The rain has stopped by the time they leave. They had spent nearly two hours sitting there as the rain softened outside, their voices growing louder and their thoughts growing braver. Aupia doesn’t think she was drunk per-say, but she started feeling the tingle of bubbles in her throat about twelve horns in. They even upped the alcohol content about half-way through – the burn was violent, but the bartender’s astounded gaze was hilarious. The Iron Bull takes this as a challenge.

“We’re gonna break you in, lemme tell ya!” He had matched her drink for drink, but only has his voice begun slurring recently. Aupia half-wonders if he will make it back to the Cathedral fine on his own. “Don’t be a stranger, alright? Unless you want to, then I guess you get that choice. But you gotta remember I’m not here for long, and I want to take this time to get to know you. The real you, not the you they write to me about.”

“They write about me?”

“On the daily! Don’t look at me like that - not actually, but you get my meaning. They think you’re really something else. There’s a lot of her in you they’re hoping to peal apart.”

“That’s a terrifying analogy.”

“I was thinking of onions.”

“So now I’m an onion?”

“Oh back off!” They’re both laughing, one deep, the other light. “Listen for real when I say this,
alright?” He drops a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t let the world tell you who to be, but also let the world in a little? Give it a little bit of grace, give it all a chance.” His fingers drum against her shoulder but his gaze is avoidant. “They do mean well, Cass and the rest. They just don’t know how to show that yet.”

“And you do? You know how to show it?” Aupia challenges.

“I’d like to think so.” He hoists his belt one last time. “I’m one of a damned kind. I’m also the coolest uncle you’ve got til now, and cool uncles get to do cool shit.” Aupia laughs again and reaches to pull at her ear. She’s blushing and she doesn’t know if it’s the beer or her thoughts. “I, uh, want to thank you. This has been fun, it really has.” The Iron Bull takes her smile with genuine joy. “I’m glad you think so kiddo. Hopefully now you won’t avoid me every chance you get!”

The lab seems to have been built on a slight slope; a mass of rainwater collects at the entrance. She considers walking right through it, but then she would have to stand at the door waiting to be let in. Actually, he probably won’t let her in: Aupia resolves to take those steps and push the door open on her own.

Everyone glances at her, but no one speaks. One of the twins is watering some plants in the corner with a cigarette in his mouth. The other is writing formulas out in a whirlwind of papers strewn across the ground.

Aupia focuses on undoing her bun. “Why are you on the floor?” she finally asks, peaking around to find the missing twin. He’s sprawled out, several disfigured engine parts scattered in a glyph at his feet. Looks like Cisco.

“Because it’s better to work down here,” he reasoned with dry spite. The young man bites back a curse as his fingers take some electricity, hand shaking angrily at his side as if to rid himself of the pain. He jots something down. Monte takes a deep drag from the corner. “The lighting is better,” he asserts after a moment.

“There’s more space,” adds Cisco, now sucking on his finger. He pulls his hand away to shake it out again.

“Someone could easily, oh, I don’t know, step on it all,” says Vallen boldly, his tone brittle as if reiterating a point made previously to no avail.

The brothers promptly wave the concern away, Cisco with his right hand, Monte with his left. Cisco glances up, his hunched figure only partially visible from the cocoon he impersonates around his machine. “Not if someone is careful,” he claims.

“Or if someone is paying attention,” adds his brother, not a breath between each other. Vallen just rolls his eyes before returning to his work. Aupia’s beginning to think they share minds or something, based on how eager they are to speak for each other. But at least a hurdle has been cleared – Vallen has acknowledged her presence now.

“How are things?”

“Fine. How’s the nose?”
“Fine.” She touches her face gently. “The Valjeans treated me to a make-up session this morning. Do I look pretty?” He frowns at her. “You look greasy.”

“Thanks.” Unfazed, Aupia takes this chance to sit down on the stool next to him. “Can I talk to you?”

“Aren’t you now?” Her eyes narrow. Then she leans her cheek on her fist, propped up and forward so she can better see his face. “I guess so. If you’re willing to hear what I have to say here, then-“

“Then say it. You’re wasting time piddling around like this.”

It’s hard being the better person sometimes. Aupia swallows, occupying herself by rolling one of his ink pens around. “I need to apologize.”

“You don’t say.”

“Give me some credit, I’m acknowledging my fault,” she argues, turning around so her back is against the banister. Vallen flips a page. “I’ll give credit where credit is due. Right now it isn’t.”

“Alright then. I apologize, sincerely, for what I said. You were right. About everything.” She scratches the back of her neck. “I’ve been… too wrapped up recently. Not even in myself but in all the things I’m not. It’s no way to live.” Aupia speaks slowly, hoping to pour more meaning into her words. “And you were absolutely right about that thing we talked about last night. It’s not my place to put myself ahead of everyone like that.”

They let the silence settle. The sound of running rainwater trickles down the walls. The reemerged rain overhead almost lightens.

Vallen finally sighs. “Words only mean so much.”

“That’s why I think we should be on for that date a few nights from now,” she insists. “We don’t know what we’re doing til we test the waters ourselves. We have to come to our own conclusions, make our own understandings of all this.”

He doesn’t respond. The twins do by spinning around to watch them. Finally Vallen hunches further over, the feeling of eyes on his back bringing him back to his brittle self. “Fine. We’ll do that. Now,” he adds, masking his desperation with spite, “tell me about the Chant.”

The de la Mutieras stopped going to church years ago because it started at ten in the morning and didn’t end til three in the afternoon, which is enough religion to kill a full grown horse they said.

“Not enough reason to go in the first place,” insists Monte.

“Bland people breathe down your neck,” added Cisco.

“I can’t say I disagree,” Aupia says with a faint smile, wringing out her hair. “It’s a pretty dreary place.” Her expression falls, the lightness starting to fade. “And the Inquisitor’s tomb is in there, it’s a dreadful space.”

Vallen stops writing enough to sit up straight and look at her. “What was that like?” He asks, careful of his words. Aupia kicks her legs. “It was cold and… pretty dead, all things considered.”
Monte runs a hand through his hair. “I'm surprised you needed to say that. It’s a tomb.” Aupia tries to hide her disappointment. “Yeah well, I just know I don’t want to be buried like that. Make sure I end up in a flowerbed somewhere, alright? ‘don’t want some stones trapping me like that.”

Vallen doesn’t let her see it, but his heart turns rigid.

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