All This Sh*t is Twice as Weird

by LadyNorbert

Summary

It's been ten years since the Heroes of Ferelden worked together to vanquish the Archdemon Urthemiel. Lady Victoria Trevelyan and Mahanon Lavellan are both selected to attend the Divine's Conclave to see how the Mage-Templar War would be resolved. After boarding the same ship and being introduced by a chance encounter, they develop a mutual respect which evolves into a strong platonic affection. This sustains them when they emerge as the only survivors of the Conclave, each with a strange mark on their hands. Known as the Lord and Lady Herald, the Left and Right Hands of Andraste, and eventually the Lord and Lady Inquisitor, they must work together to save Thedas from the machinations of an ancient being known as the Elder One.

A Christmas gift for my best friend.
This is a Christmas gift for my best friend and self-appointed bodyguard, Andrea. (No, I don't know why I need a bodyguard, but she says I do.) She requested a story in which her Inquisitor and mine were both canon, and that's what she got. For bonus fun, I decided to make it so that both of our Wardens are also canon; she likes playing male rogue elves and I like playing female warrior humans, so that's why they are what they are. However, we both play Hawke as a female rogue who romances Fenris, so this AU has only one Hawke. This was originally written only for her eyes, but she wanted it shared with the world for some reason, so here it is.

This fic will not focus a lot on the main plot of the game, since I expect the readers will already be familiar with all of that. Instead, the main focus will be the growing relationships between the various characters, and what I imagine might have been happening in the background or in places where the main plot was not taking place. This first volume will cover only the main game; there will be a sequel which covers all of the DLC. Also, if you're familiar with my other DA fic, "Shadow and Rose," you may recognize some of the background details here. A lot of things in the prologue were going to be used in the planned sequel to that story, which I ended up not writing due to time constraints; this project allowed me to make use of a bunch of stray headcanons.

Special thanks to my two beta readers, Tyler (who helped to make sure nothing I wrote was especially lore-shattering) and Rachel (who knew nothing about Dragon Age going in but still managed to squee in all the right places).
Prologue: From the Wellspring of Creation

Chapter Summary

Varric sets up the story for us.

Being the approximately true adventures of the Second Inquisition of Thedas,

beginning in the year 9:41 Dragon

Adapted from the historical records by Lady Norbert, Chantry scholar

Edited for fun and profit by Varric Tethras, Viscount of Kirkwall in the Free Marches

Dedicated to our most devoted reader

Relevant note for the sake of legal necessity:

Everything in this story is a work of fiction. The characters, settings, and events are the lawful property of BioWare, and are being borrowed just for fun. This is strictly a labor of love and no copyright infringement is intended. All rights are reserved.

The titles of each chapter are verses taken from the Chant of Light, the teachings of Our Lady, as this was deemed fitting for the recorded history of the Left and Right Hands of Andraste.

Varric is a mostly innocent bystander. Or so he claims.

Prologue: From the Wellspring of Creation

In 9:30 Dragon, there were few who believed that the darkspawn skirmishes in the southern wilds of Ferelden were anything more than the restless stirrings of mindless, murderous outliers. But for Duncan, the grizzled Commander of Ferelden’s Grey Wardens, the signs were all too clear – the Fifth Blight was brewing. The endless tunneling of the darkspawn had uncovered yet another of the sleeping Tevinter gods; Urthemiel, the ancient dragon of beauty, had awakened, and their foul Taint had rendered it as corrupt and as bloodthirsty as themselves. Now they were massing, preparing for another all-out assault on the surface world, with the Archdemon guiding their plans.

Though the Grey Wardens across Thedas numbered in the thousands, Ferelden’s share of the fabled warriors was barely enough to fill a Chantry prayer meeting. Exiled from the country by the treacherous King Arland during the Storm Age, the order had finally been granted permission to return by Maric, the late father of King Cailan, and thirty years hadn’t been nearly enough time to properly rebuild the ranks. Duncan kept trying to persuade Cailan to allow him to send to Orlais for additional Wardens to face the coming threat, and help to stem the tide of destruction. But Cailan,
young and golden-haired and filled with reckless optimism, was unwilling to share the glories of victory with anyone; and his father-in-law, the world-weary Teyrn Loghain mac Tir, was too embittered against Orlais to willingly stand on the same side of a battlefield with anyone, even Grey Wardens, who claimed that nation as their home.

Duncan was therefore forced to look elsewhere for aid, and to try to bolster his numbers from within Ferelden itself. Cailan’s forces were gathering alongside the Grey Wardens at Ostagar, the Tevinter ruins which form a crumbling unofficial border between the settled lands and the Korcari wilderness. Leaving his men there, the troubled Commander made his way northwest to Redcliffe, paying a visit to Cailan’s maternal uncle. Arl Eamon Guerrin was one of the most respected of Ferelden’s nobility, and Duncan sought his counsel as to where he might search for Warden recruits. Eamon advised him to journey to the northern shores of the realm and visit Highhever, home of Teyrn Bryce Cousland, whom many courtiers had wanted to name king after Maric’s death. Widely admired for his valor in battle, his liberality to the poor, and his unerring kindness to all of high or low estate, Teyrn Cousland was sure to know of at least a few likely prospects.

From Redcliffe, Duncan joined a caravan to Denerim, where he intervened in the hanging of a thief called Daveth; invoking the Right of Conscription, he rescued the young cutpurse from his fate. Together they made their way to Highhever, where a great tournament in the outer regions brought a knight named Jory to Duncan’s notice. Jory was perhaps a little too eager to accept the prospect of glories as a Grey Warden, but Duncan was hardly in a position to deny anyone willing to enter the ranks, and he sent the pair back to Ostagar ahead of himself. Alone, he paid his visit to the Teyrn, where he was welcomed with every courtesy. He hadn’t been within the walls of Castle Cousland for very long before he determined that there were some warriors present of considerable mettle, but none more than the Lady Elissa, the younger of the Teyrn’s two children. Her reputation preceded her, being the only daughter of a noble house who excelled in the arts of war, and she was highly regarded by her own people as having much of her father’s wisdom and judicious kindness. His elder child, the heir apparent Fergus, left the castle at the head of his father’s forces, marching to Ostagar to join the king; the Teyrn himself was waiting only for the arrival of forces mustered by his closest friend, Arl Rendon Howe, before he too would make his way there.

But deep in the night, the alarm bells rang. Arl Howe revealed his true colors by having his men invade the castle. They slaughtered everyone they encountered, and the corridors ran red with the blood of innocents; the Teyrn’s own daughter-in-law and young grandson were among the first victims. Duncan managed to rescue the Teyrn from the handful of soldiers who nearly killed him, but his wounds were too severe to promise much hope. Lady Elissa and her faithful mabari warhound, Toby, protected the Teyrna and joined Duncan and the Teyrn in the castle kitchen, where the family’s secret escape route offered safe passage from the siege. The dying Teyrn gave his blessing for his daughter to become a Grey Warden in exchange for Duncan taking her away from the scene of his death, and the Teyrna – unwilling to abandon her husband – insisted on staying behind to buy them time to escape. Heartbroken, Elissa obeyed their final command to flee, with Toby as the only other survivor of the terrible night.

To throw off any of Howe’s men who might have observed their escape, Duncan took Elissa to Denerim, where they could reasonably expect to be concealed among the crowds. As it happened, there was tremendous upheaval in the Alienage of that city, for Bann Vaughan – son of the Arl of Denerim – and some of his friends had interrupted elven wedding preparations, and kidnapped the bridal party. One of the intended grooms, Darrian of the Tabris clan, cut a swath of bloody vengeance through the Arl’s home and rescued the women, and Bann Vaughan was among those he killed. The blood he spilled was all in the name of exacting justice for his wronged people; but humans of the city, failing to grasp the situation as it truly was, were calling for his blood to be spilled in turn. Once again, Duncan invoked the Right of Conscription to rescue a Denerim convict from his fate.
With his two recruits (and the dog) in tow, Duncan returned to Ostagar and was warmly received by his men. His most recent finds were objects of some interest; Elissa was the first female candidate since the Grey Wardens returned to Ferelden, and Darrian the first elf. Together with the most junior Warden, Alistair, the four recruits made their way into the Korcari Wilds on a mission to retrieve some lost Grey Warden treaties. Once they returned to Ostagar, the secret ritual called the Joining was conducted. Sadly, neither Daveth nor Jory survived the mysterious ceremony, though this is not uncommon; Darrian and Elissa, however, emerged as full-fledged Grey Wardens.

The two new Wardens and Alistair were tasked with a special assignment on the morning of the battle – to light the signal fire in the Tower of Ishal, which would alert Teyrn Loghain that he was to bring his personal forces into the fray. History will recall that, though the three young Wardens did their duty, Loghain turned away from his. He abandoned the king to his fate; Duncan and all the other Grey Wardens also perished in the field, along with hundreds of soldiers. Only the intervention of Flemeth, the legendary Witch of the Wilds, saved the three newest Wardens from sharing their comrades’ grisly demise. With the very survival of Ferelden and all the world in their inexperienced hands, they set out to complete a seemingly impossible task – to unite the Dalish elves, the dwarves of Orzammar, and the people of Ferelden into an army that could turn back the Archdemon and its darkspawn minions.

Over the course of a year, the Wardens gathered their forces. Aided by Flemeth’s daughter Morrigan and a small host of other loyal companions, they delivered their treaties and urged their ancient allies to uphold the promises of aid they had once made. It was no easy task. Arl Eamon had been poisoned by order of Loghain, who had seized control of the throne in the name of his daughter, the widowed Queen Anora. Undead monsters stalked the people of Redcliff, the dwarves of Orzammar were fragmented following the death of their king, and the Dalish were plagued by a werewolf curse. All these things and more had to be set right before any help against the darkspawn could be properly rallied. But the Grey Wardens have never shied away from any task which would lead them to victory over the darkspawn.

Darrian and Elissa worked in tandem, alternating her leadership skills with his raw courage, and together they inspired the multitudes. Among their own companions, they were deeply respected and valued – by some more than others. Working together, spending so much time in close company, it was only natural that strong feelings could be nurtured. No one seemed to find it terribly surprising that Alistair and Elissa were drawn to one another, but that Morrigan should ensnare (or be ensnared by) Darrian was a different story. As for Darrian and Elissa themselves, despite their very different backgrounds and abilities, they forged a deep friendship which continues to this day.

A Landsmeet was convened in Denerim to settle the question of succession, and it was revealed that Alistair, the Grey Warden, was in fact the illegitimate son of Maric and half-brother of Cailan, and thus the rightful heir to the throne. He defeated Loghain in single combat, ending their months of enmity in the midst of the Denerim palace throne room. With the matter settled by Loghain’s death, the nobles of Ferelden pledged their support for Alistair as their new king, as well as for his immediate betrothal to Elissa. Together, the unified army of humans, elves, and dwarves marched into battle, led by the Wardens and their compatriots.

The battle raged through the streets of Denerim, all the way to the top of the highest tower of Fort Drakon. It was there that Elissa, wielding the mighty longsword Starfang, landed the killing blow on the Archdemon – and lived. To this day, no one is certain how, for no other Grey Warden in history has ever struck down an Archdemon and survived to tell the tale. She and Alistair were married in due course, and crowned King and Queen of Ferelden. Ten years later, the Dog-Lords continue to rebuild their ravaged country, though some outside the realm express their doubts as to whether the Fifth Blight ever even really happened.
Queen-Dowager Anora, who had been held as a prisoner for the duration of the battle, was freed from the tower and permitted to inherit her father’s teyrnir in Gwaren, where she reveres his memory to this day; she is one of very few who remember him, rightly or wrongly, as anything other than a traitor. After several years of widowhood, she eventually consented to be wooed by a cousin of the new Queen, whom she married. Their son is, of course, named Loghain. As for Elissa’s brother Fergus, he was discovered to have survived the slaughter of Ostagar, and restored to Highever as its new Teyrn. There was much work to be done to erase the foul stench of Howe’s machinations from the castle and surrounding lands - but much like the Grey Wardens, the Couslands have never shied away from duty.

Alongside her new responsibilities as Queen, Elissa took up Duncan’s post as Warden-Commander; she spent several months in the Arling of Amaranthine, dealing with lingering troubles and adding new members to the old order. Darrian, for his part, left his dear friends to go in search of Morrigan, who had disappeared following the fall of the Archdemon. It’s said that the lovers eventually reunited, at least for a time, though a woman matching her description eventually joined the court of the Empress of Orlais.

In the meantime, a Fereldan refugee by the name of Marianne Hawke rose to prominence. The Hawke family lived in the village of Lothering, in Ferelden; Malcolm Hawke had died a few years before the Blight, leaving his eldest daughter to look after her mother and younger twin siblings. She and her brother Carver left to serve with the King’s army at Ostagar, but they managed to escape the carnage there and return home in time to alert their neighbors to the approach of the darkspawn horde. The Hawke family fled together, meeting and joining forces with a Templar named Wesley Vallen and his wife Aveline. Tragically, both Carver and Wesley were killed by darkspawn, leaving the four women to make their way to Kirkwall in the Free Marches in hopes of finding a fresh start.

Over the next year, Marianne Hawke made something of a name for herself as a defender of the poor and downtrodden. Commonly known as Hawke, she had two primary goals – to protect her apostate sister Bethany from the notice of the Templars, and to earn enough coin to buy back the ancestral Amell mansion which had been the childhood home of their mother Leandra, now in the hands of slavers from Tevinter. It was while she searched for the means to achieve these goals that she made the acquaintance of Varric Tethras, an impossibly handsome and roguish surface dwarf from the Merchants’ Guild. Varric, along with his brother Bartrand, was planning an expedition into the Deep Roads in search of valuable treasure, and he invited Hawke to invest in the scheme with what little money she had managed to save. To persuade Bartrand to agree to the partnership, however, Varric knew they would need a little something extra. He also knew where such a thing could be found.

Varric was aware of a Grey Warden living in Kirkwall, an apostate mage by the name of Anders. After the end of the Fifth Blight, Anders – who at the time was wanted by the Chantry for having repeatedly escaped from the Ferelden Circle of Magi – was recruited to the Wardens by Queen Elissa. He was deeply fond of the Queen, but when she returned to her husband’s court and left high-ranking Orlesian Wardens to look after Amaranthine in her absence, Anders chafed under this new leadership. Compared to her firm but gentle guidance, he found the Orlesian Wardens intolerable, especially when they forced him to give up his beloved cat; Ser Pounce-a-Lot had been a gift from the Queen herself. He entrusted Pounce to his friend and fellow Warden Nathaniel, to be returned to the Queen, but hidden inside the cat’s collar was a letter of farewell. By the time Pounce made his appearance at court, Anders had left Amaranthine and, using Warden maps, traveled to the Free Marches through the Deep Roads. In the seedy underbelly of Kirkwall known as Darktown, he established a free clinic to provide healing magic to the impoverished refugees, and it was there that Varric and Hawke asked for the use of his maps for their expedition.
There are those of their acquaintance who have long suspected that, from the hour of their first
meeting, Anders was secretly in love with Marianne Hawke. This can never be proven one way or
the other; but, if true, it makes everything which followed all the more tragic.

In exchange for his maps, Anders requested a favor of Hawke. The details of the favor have been
obscured by time, and those who do recall would just as soon forget. But he thereafter became one
of her circle of companions, a group as diverse and unusual as those who had accompanied the
Wardens a few years earlier. The expedition to the Deep Roads was a success by general
reckoning, although it had its far-reaching consequences. Most notably, Hawke and Varric
discovered an ancient relic, an idol carved from a strange form of lyrium – it was red, rather than
the usual blue. Bartrand, covetous of this treasure, attempted to seal his brother and friends in the
vault where it was discovered. They escaped, but the day would come when Bartrand’s treachery
would lead to disaster.

The Amell family manor was reclaimed and Hawke became a wealthy woman; unfortunately, her
money and prestige didn’t come soon enough to keep Bethany from being sent into the fortress
known as the Gallows, where Kirkwall’s mages were housed under the close eye of the Templars.
She was well respected there, however, with even Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard, the
leader of the Templars, conceding that Bethany was an exemplary mage. She was able to maintain
close ties with her sister and their friends, as well as with her mother... at least, until Leandra was
brutally murdered by an insane apostate.

Following the deaths of Kirkwall’s Viscount and his son, Hawke was declared Champion of
Kirkwall in recognition of her victory over the Arishok, the Qunari war leader responsible for the
Viscount’s murder. As the Viscount left no other heir to take up his throne, it remained empty after
his death, and Knight-Commander Meredith tightened her hold on the city. She grew increasingly
agitated about its mage population, and her altercations with First Enchanter Orsino became more
frequent and more disturbing. Only the soothing presence of Grand Cleric Elthina was able to bring
any ease to the tensions between the mages and Templars. But even while she became more and
more restrictive of the mages, Meredith had to acknowledge Hawke’s popularity with the people,
and allow her access to her sister in the Gallows rather than risk public disapproval.

The year after Leandra’s death, her daughters ventured off on a strange mission to a Grey Warden
stronghold in the Vimmark Mountains. Accompanied by Varric and Fenris, an elf who had escaped
slavery in Tevinter and eventually became Hawke’s lover, they encountered and defeated a
darkspawn called Corypheus. He claimed to be one of the ancient magisters who long ago stormed
the Golden City of the Maker and, in the words of the Chant, brought doom upon all the world.
Despite their victory, however, Hawke sensed that things in Kirkwall were reaching a crisis point.
She began to prepare for the worst.

Hawke’s dwarven manservant, Bodahn, had accepted a position within the Imperial Court of
Orlais. To ensure their safety, Hawke arranged ship’s passage for him and his adopted son Sandal.
She also made arrangements for Gamlen, her mother’s younger brother, and his daughter Charade
to leave together. Among Hawke’s collection of friends was Sebastian, the last surviving member
of Starkhaven’s royal family; with his help, she sent her relations to the safety of that city-state, and
thence to Tantervale, along with her own young elven maidservant Orana. With money enough to
start a new life, they fled Kirkwall ahead of the coming catastrophe. Having seen her family and
household thus tended, Hawke waited, unsure of exactly what was approaching, but knowing that
she would rather die than leave Kirkwall to its own devices.

In the end, the danger lay closer than she could have imagined. It was Anders, who was the mortal
host of a Fade spirit called Justice; they had become twisted up together in their wrath over the
treatment of mages, and the once-gentle Justice had transformed into the merciless Vengeance.
Having duped Hawke into helping him locate some necessary components, Anders enacted his final bid for mage freedom. He triggered an explosion in Kirkwall’s Chantry, killing everyone inside it and the nearby buildings.

Feeling that he had triumphed, Anders surrendered his own life as forfeit, asking only that Hawke herself be the one to deliver his death. Despite her doing so, however, the Knight-Commander demanded the Rite of Annulment against every mage in the Gallows. Hawke and her friends rallied to defend the innocent mages, and though they won the day, peace was lost. First Enchanter Orsino, driven to madness and despair, revealed himself as a blood mage and took the form of a terrifying Harvester, forcing Hawke and her friends to kill him. Still reeling from the shock, they then took up arms against the Knight-Commander herself. It shortly became clear that she had gone even more mad than Orsino, for embedded in her sword was a piece of the red lyrium idol which Bartrand had brought back from the Deep Roads. It had gradually overtaken her mind, and even her own Templars saw the need to help Hawke bring her tyranny to an end at last.

Though mages and Templars had been briefly allied in that fight, the destruction of the Kirkwall Chantry could not go unreported, nor could the other Circles of Magi in Thedas fail to follow the Gallows in declaring independence from the Chantry. The Mage-Templar War had begun, and Hawke – wrongly interpreted by common report to be the cause of it all – was forced to leave Kirkwall. For their mutual safety, most of her friends scattered themselves to various points across the Free Marches; only Hawke’s oldest friend Aveline, the captain of Kirkwall’s city guard, remained at her post and largely above suspicion. Hawke’s own current whereabouts are unknown to all except her beloved Fenris and Rikki, her faithful mabari, both of whom went with her into exile.

Several years after the Battle of Denerim, not even two years after the Kirkwall uprising, Queen Elissa received an urgent message from her old friend Darrian. His letter’s contents were revealed to no one except her husband, but she too left Ferelden, just as Darrian had done so long ago. Though King Alistair continues to govern his people, and is dearly loved by them, it’s widely recognized that his heart is heavy with longing for his wife. Like Hawke, the present whereabouts of both Queen Elissa and Darrian are unknown, although it’s understood that a handful of the Queen’s most trusted Grey Warden recruits from her Amaranthine days are accompanying her.

Despite the notable absence of such important persons, the Mage-Templar War has continued, with both sides having declared their independence from Chantry control. The fighting at last has been suspended, however briefly; Divine Justinia, in a final attempt to bring peace to fragmented Thedas, has ordered the convening of a conclave. Representatives of both sides will meet under a cease of hostilities at the Temple of the Sacred Ashes, in the Frostback Mountains. It is Her Perfection’s hope that this summit will finally put an end to the division between the two factions; the history books will ultimately reveal whether she was right.

~ A summation of significant events in the years 9:30-9:41 Dragon, penned by Varric Tethras while en route to the Divine’s Conclave
The author and editor at work, by Ada Sulewska
Great Heroes Beyond Counting Raised

Chapter Summary

The future Heralds of Andraste meet in an unlikely manner.

Chapter Notes

Victoria's name is purely an accident; it has nothing to do with the Divine elected at the end of the game. When I played Inquisition for the first time, I named my character Victoria because I've always loved the name, and you can imagine how confused I was by the announcement of "Divine Victoria." I actually thought, at first, that the game was configured to have the Divine call herself after the Inquisitor no matter what their name was! But no, it was just a really funny coincidence.

Chapter One: Great Heroes Beyond Counting Raised

It was the talk of the townsfolk for a few days. Lady Victoria, Bann Trevelyan’s ugly duckling, was actually going to the Divine’s Conclave!

The Trevelyan family had lived in the city of Ostwick, in the Free Marches, for several generations. A pious and generally respectable noble house, they certainly had reason enough to be interested in the proceedings of the Conclave; younger sons and daughters, if not married advantageously into other noble houses, were generally given to the Chantry for one purpose or another. There were many Trevelyans among the lay priests and Templars alike, and even some third cousin of the Bann’s father who was serving as Chancellor of someplace or other.

“But still,” murmured the gossips, “to send Lady Victoria? Why?”

Victoria was the youngest of Bann Trevelyan’s four children. His son Aloysius would inherit his title; his two elder daughters, Brielle and Alisse, were well married. They had the good fortune to resemble the Bann’s wife, while Victoria – considerably younger than her siblings – was burdened with features and coloring like that of her father. On a man such things were less obtrusive, but while there were those who charitably described his daughter’s expressive eyebrows and wide, slightly downturned mouth as “having character,” there were enough unkind tongues wagging about her plainness that even she had undoubtedly overheard the commentary.

It was generally guessed that this was the reason for her dedication to her studies, and her swordplay. Certainly her brother no longer called her ugly, not since the fourth time she had disarmed him in the practice yard, and in fact he spoke to her as little as he could possibly contrive. Her prowess was impressive, to be sure, and most of Ostwick assumed she was destined for the Templars. But as her handmaid discovered, she had something else planned.
“The people talk,” she told her mistress in the evening. “It’s said that you go to the Conclave with your cousins.”

“It’s perfectly true,” Victoria told her placidly. “You know how many of my relatives are involved somewhere in the Chantry. Father naturally wants to know what’s happening.”

“Aren’t you yourself –”

“Expected to enter a life of service? Of course. That’s no secret, I would think. They’ve been talking about having me sent to the Templars since I was fourteen, but Mother insisted I stay home until I was twenty. I suppose she was hoping for a miracle that might get her a few additional grandchildren.”

“Considering the recent schism, she was probably right to keep you home. I’m sure they’re relieved that you haven’t been involved in any of that.”

“That’s putting it mildly. Templars breaking away from Chantry control? It’s almost unthinkable. I’m glad I missed out on that.”

“Surely they don’t expect you to join the Templars now?”

“No. But I had a different idea anyway,” Victoria explained. “The Seekers of Truth – the faction that was supposed to oversee the Templars – are still with the Chantry, at least nominally. One of their members is Cassandra Pentaghast.”

“The Right Hand of the Divine?”

“That’s her. She’ll be at the Conclave, of course. Father agreed that if I can get an audience with her, I can talk to her about what I would have to do to join the Seekers instead. Mother wasn’t too happy at first, but Lady Cassandra is a distant cousin to the King of Nevarra. If being a Seeker is good enough for her family, it can hardly be a stain on my lineage.”

Victoria had been almost happy to confide the truth to her maid. She was looking forward to the trip, eager to get away from Ostwick and its too-familiar sights, and it was with an almost giddy sensation that she boarded the ship for Ferelden a few days later.

“The Conclave,” said her elderly cousin Maeve, “is being held in the Temple of the Sacred Ashes. You know, of course, that the Hero of Ferelden and her entourage visited the place and retrieved some of the ashes of Our Lady to heal a poisoned nobleman, during their quest to stop the Fifth Blight.”

“There were two Heroes of Ferelden, weren’t there?”

Maeve made a noise of irritation. “The Queen of Ferelden, then, if you must be so picky. She was the one who slew the Archdemon; she’s the one that matters most. The elf was practically a footnote by comparison.”

“I doubt she’d see it that way,” Victoria countered. “Brother Genitivi’s account of the whole thing indicates that they were, or are, very close friends.”

“Which goes to show that the Dog-Lords are every bit as odd as their reputation would suggest, dear. Giving the throne to the king’s bastard and all that.”

“King Alistair was a Grey Warden too. He’s a hero to his people, almost as much as the Queen is.”
“You’re very contrary today, child.” Maeve made a dismissive little gesture, looking peevish. “Do go take a walk on the deck or something, we have a long voyage across the Waking Sea.”

Satisfied that she had both made her point and rather thoroughly annoyed her kinswoman, Victoria decided to take the offered suggestion and explore the deck of the vessel. The Queen Madrigal was a fine ship, not overly fancy but certainly very spacious and comfortable. Large canvas sails billowed in a steady wind, and the cry of gulls echoed across the water. The spray of salt water rose up on all sides as the ship cleaved through the Waking Sea as cleanly as a blade. Behind her, the sky over the Free Marches hung low with thick, steel-colored clouds; ahead of her, where Victoria imagined the shores of Ferelden’s Bannorn lay, the gleaming cerulean firmament beckoned – almost as though promising peace and the Maker’s blessing on the Conclave.

[Editor’s note: Forgive an old dwarf his creative liberties. I’ll try to keep them to a minimum.]

As Victoria started down the stairs some while later, intending to return to her stateroom, her attention was caught by a sort of scuffling noise. Doubling back, she saw a pair of sailors and an elf whom they had cornered. Frowning, she moved closer in order to hear.

“Stowaways get dropped overboard, knife-ear,” snarled one of the crewmen. “Don’t know how you managed to get on the ship, but it’s the last trick you’ll ever pull.”

The elf, though his expression was defiant, nevertheless held his tongue; Victoria, on the other hand, did not. “Let him go at once!” she said, adopting the authoritative tone her mother reserved for errant servants and dogs.

The crew members, startled, turned and gave her an unimpressed once-over. “Keep your noble nose out, Ladyship,” said the second sailor. Glancing at his fellow, he added, “Trevelyan. Breed like rashvine, they do; they’re all over the Free Marches.”

“That gentleman you’re menacing is no stowaway,” she said coldly. Bluffing was not Victoria’s strong suit – she was too honest for that – but she plunged ahead anyway. “He’s part of my retinue. I’ll thank you to cease your incivilities at once and leave us both alone, unless you’d like me to speak with the captain about it.”

Grumbling, the sailors backed away just enough to let the elf slip past them, and she gestured for him to follow her. Mercifully, they reached her rooms to find that cousin Maeve was out taking the air, and Victoria muttered a small prayer of gratitude to Andraste as she closed and locked the door. “Sorry about them,” she said, turning to face her guest. “Are you all right?”

For the first time, she was able to really take a good look at her new acquaintance. A son of the forests, he possessed high wide cheekbones and thick black hair half tied back. His tattooed expression was proud, but not haughty, and there was something mirthful in his eyes which in no way detracted from his noble mien. If looks alone may recommend a person, regardless of their race, Victoria found that she was well disposed in the elf’s favor.

“I’m fine,” he said, speaking for the first time. He had a deep, rich sort of voice, serious but with a friendly lilt to its words. “Thank you for your help; I’m not sure what would have become of me if you hadn’t happened along.”

“Are you really a stowaway?”

“If I say yes, are you going to have me tossed off the boat?”

“No, of course not.” Too late did she realize that he was joking; startled, she laughed. “I just
wondered, that’s all.”

“Technically, yes. I tried to book passage properly, but they wouldn’t even let me ask the question before I was hustled away. You’d think I carried the Taint.”

“Some of my countrymen can be very prickly about elves, Dalish or not.”

“I note that you can tell the difference.”

“Of course. You have vallaslin.” She gestured to the tattoos on his face. “That means you’re one of the Dalish – a hunter, if I had to guess.”

“Oh, you’re smarter than the average shemlen, then. Mahanon of Clan Lavellan, at your service.” He gave a slightly mocking half-bow.

“Victoria Trevelyan, daughter of Bann Trevelyan of Ostwick, at yours.” She returned the gesture, her lips curling in a sweetly mischievous smile. “But what would induce a Dalish hunter to leave his woods and sneak onto a ship bound for Ferelden?”

“Probably the same thing that brought you out of your father’s training grounds,” he replied. She wordlessly invited him to sit on a chair, and seated herself opposite as he continued, “Keeper Deshanna asked me to investigate this Conclave that your Divine has arranged. The war between mages and Templars has caused no end of trouble for my people as well as yours; the outcome of the Conclave will affect us all. She wanted a pair of eyes and ears on site for whatever’s going to happen.”

“So you’re a spy!” Victoria chuckled. “That’s exciting.”

“I guess you could call me that. Why are you attending? You don’t look like a Templar, nor a Chantry person – at least, not like any I’ve ever seen.”

“No, I’m neither. Mostly I’m representing my family’s interests, although I also want to meet with one of the Divine’s closest supporters. I’m hoping Cassandra Pentaghast can help me enter the Seekers of Truth, so my parents won’t force me to become a lay sister in the Chantry or something equally dull.” She made a face. “Family tradition. I’d much rather hunt demons than recite verses.”

“I can’t say I blame you. So…” Mahanon spread his hands a bit, and tilted his head. “What happens now?”

“Well, I’m going to have to kick you out of here before my cousin returns, I’m afraid. She knows perfectly well that there’s no elves traveling with us. But I’ll try to find someplace safe for you to hide on the ship.”

He studied her thoughtfully. “I have an idea, but I’d need your help.”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

“I don’t actually know how I’m going to slip into the Conclave,” he admitted. “I hadn’t really thought that far ahead; I was mostly concerning myself with just getting there. How would you like to have an elven manservant for a few days?”

“I am intrigued by your premise and wish to subscribe to your periodical. So… you’re proposing to pretend to be my servant, and use that as your excuse to get into the Conclave? Not to mention it would help you avoid scrutiny while we’re on the ship. It makes sense to me.”
“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. If anything, I’m flattered that you trust me. I doubt you’d make this offer to most humans.”

“No, I wouldn’t. But most humans wouldn’t have saved me from having to swim back to the Free Marches after being thrown into the Waking Sea,” he pointed out. “My dry smallclothes and I are slightly in your debt.”

Cousin Maeve was, rather predictably, less than enthused to be informed that Victoria had managed to acquire for herself an elven manservant. “Do I even want to know where you found this… person?”

“On the upper deck, when you suggested I go for a walk,” Victoria replied brightly. “Some of the sailors were trying to insist that he had no right to be on the ship – can you imagine such an indignity?” She kept her expression wide-eyed as if with bewilderment, trying to sell the story. It was, at least, close enough to the truth that it didn’t really feel like lying. “So he and I talked about it, and he’s agreed to work for me during the voyage in exchange for my vouching for him to the crew. It’s a very friendly arrangement.”

“Well, he’s easy enough on the eyes, I suppose. For an elf.” Maeve shook her graying head. “You’re past twenty. It’s not my place to try to dictate how you should behave, much as I might feel you still need instruction. But I caution you against any behavior, any… entanglements which could reflect badly on your father. The Trevelyan name is a proud one, Victoria. Bear that in mind when you make your decisions.”

“I always do.”

If Mahanon had formed any expectations of what would happen when he made his way to Ferelden, he couldn’t have said precisely what they were. He did find, however, that whatever those expectations had been bore absolutely no resemblance to what actually came to pass.

As Victoria had correctly surmised, he was a hunter for Clan Lavellan, charged with the care and protection of his kin. Until the day Keeper Deshanna had sent for him to talk about the Conclave, he had neither known nor sought to know anything else. He was at home in the forest, most content when his blades were in his hands, and his only real worries tended in the direction of whether the shemlen warring among themselves posed a greater threat to his clan than the coming winter might.

All that changed with Keeper Deshanna’s decision to send him to the Conclave.

“I can’t foresee what the end result of all this will be,” she told him in the privacy of her aravel. “But for years, our clans have been largely free of intrusion by the quickling nobles. As long as we keep clear of their cities, they’ve been content to leave us be. You know too well how much has changed since the mages fled their prisons.”

“We can hardly hunt anymore without stumbling over either a camp of mages on the run or a troop of Chantry soldiers chasing after them,” he grumbled. “Honestly, I don’t know which is worse. The Templars don’t seem able to tell the difference between a mage’s staff and a Dalish longbow, and the mages throw ice spikes first and ask questions later.”

“Exactly. This Conclave their Divine is calling may well be our last hope for the whole mess to
end quietly,” she replied. “I have been in contact with other clans here in the Free Marches, and we are agreed. Someone must attend this gathering on our behalf, so that we learn as soon as possible what the results are.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’ve already chosen that someone?”

“You are our best hunter, our best tracker.” She said it so gently, it was almost as though she were apologizing for the praise. “Out of everyone in our clan, you have the best chance of getting into these proceedings without attracting attention, as though you were following a stag through the underbrush without being heard. And our clan is closest to the shore just now – even if one of the other clans sent someone, they probably wouldn’t arrive until after everything had already gotten underway.”

“I see your point, I guess.”

“There is a shemlen vessel leaving the nearest harbor in three days’ time, which is to carry a handful of their nobles and scholars to Ferelden. I would like you to be aboard it, if you’re willing.”

Mahanon was rarely serious, except when duty called for him to be. For the good of the People, therefore, he found himself on the Queen Madrigal and sailing off to parts unknown. It wasn’t what he wanted, but he trusted the gods to guide his path. However, they had guided that path to where it would intersect with one belonging to an Andrastian human noble, which made him think that the gods just might have slightly twisted senses of humor.

He trusted Victoria, though, which was more than he would ever have expected himself to do. They’d barely known each other an entire day before he came to the conclusion that, against all odds, he liked this woman who had, without provocation, leaped to defend a complete stranger – and an elf at that. Toria, as she’d invited him to call her, was perhaps half a head shorter than himself, with sharp gray eyes and thick auburn hair braided up the back of her head. He wouldn’t call her pretty by Dalish standards, and to judge by something she’d said, she wasn’t considered so by human standards either. But there was warmth and sense in her features, and though she tended to be a little more serious than he normally was, she knew how to laugh.

The journey across the Waking Sea was not a difficult one, or at least the sailors didn’t seem to find it so. They ignored him, now that they thought him a servant, and he could listen in on their conversations without them paying him much mind. They praised the fine weather and the calm waters, groused about the demanding occupants of the more elegant staterooms, and snapped their jaws shut the instant anyone above their station drew within earshot. He and Victoria quickly made a game of it, trying to see how long she could linger nearby before they noticed her and stopped their chatter.

“It’s that noble nose of yours,” he teased her after a few days of playing, referring to the sailor’s remarks on their first meeting. “If you looked more like furniture the way I do, you could blend right in and hear all the details about how Lady Perenelle’s white lace petticoats have to be scrubbed in just the right way with the Orlesian soaps and hung to dry.”

“Why on earth would sailors be discussing such a thing?!?”

“From what I heard before they caught sight of you, one of the sailors is sweet on the lady’s maid, and she was grumbling to him about Her Ladyship’s demands. Then he turns around and tells his mates about his sweetheart’s troubles, and they all laugh.”

“I want to say they’re being ridiculous,” she said after a moment’s pause, “but judging by some of
the things I’ve overheard my family’s servants mutter, Lady Perenelle is probably getting off fairly light here. Besides, they need something to pass the time while we’re at sea.”

“You’ve listened to your servants’ gossip? For shame, my lady,” he teased.

“When you’re the youngest and the least interesting of the Bann’s children, you can get away with all sorts of things,” she teased back. “This is possibly the first time in my life that I haven’t resembled the furniture, to use your choice of words. To be honest, I can’t decide if I’m enjoying it or not.”

Victoria was rarely out of Mahanon’s sight, by mutual agreement. Ostensibly, he was serving as her protector – really, the reverse would have been more accurate, considering the deception. It wasn’t as though either of them particularly needed any sort of physical protection, in any case, and they had a deep conversation one afternoon about their weapons proficiency.

“I prefer the two-handed method of swordsmanship,” she explained. “It just feels like I’m putting more power into every swing, even if it means I don’t get to make quite as many.”

“I sort of understand. I would rather use both of my hands in battle as well.” He took one of the twin daggers from his belt and let her admire their design. “Dalish crafting is second to none, or at least, so we tell ourselves.”

“It’s a work of art.” She held it in one hand, hefting it to get a feel for the weight. The handle was a buttery yellow wood, carved in the shape of one of Ghilan’nain’s halla, with intricate twining antlers. “You dual wield, then?”

“It’s the quickest and most humane way to bring down whatever I’m hunting, in my experience. I did train a little with the longbow when I was younger, but I found using these to be more suited to my skills.”

“I sort of envy you, living in the woods. I mean, I know the Dalish don’t have an easy life, but…”

“But what?”

“But you’re out in the wilds where everything is so beautiful, even if it’s dangerous. And more than that – you seem to understand exactly who you are and where you belong. I mean, you yourself, Mahanon, not the Dalish in general,” she added hastily. “I don’t want to speak for people I’ve never met.”

“I guess I do; I’ve always thought I did. It’s not hard for a Dalish elf to grow up understanding who you are and what your purpose is. Since I came of age, I’ve been at least partly responsible for keeping my clan fed – and you’re right, it’s good to have a purpose.” She handed back his dagger, and he studied it thoughtfully. “Others in the clan have different tasks. Keeping our history, recording our songs. Looking after the halla who pull the aravels. Healing, of course. Preparing the food, making clothes and weapons, weaving baskets. Everyone has a job, and we all share the work.” His mind drifted to the Lavellan camp, and he briefly wondered if they would have relocated by the time he returned from the Conclave.

“See, that’s what I mean. I’ve never had that, not really. I always knew I’d probably grow up to be a church soldier of some kind, if I weren’t married off.” Victoria’s features arranged themselves in an expression of distaste. “But it’s not a life I’d choose for myself.”

“What would you want to do, then?”
“I’m not completely sure. It’s hard to know the answer when you’ve never been led to think you have options,” she admitted. “But I like to read and study. Maybe if joining the Seekers doesn’t work out, I could become a scholar like Brother Genitivi. He’s written a lot of books about the history of Thedas… I wish someone knew what had happened to him. I have a lot of questions about his book *Walking the Earth*. But he disappeared several years ago.”

“So you’d give up your sword and spend your days in a library?” Mahanon looked at her in genuine surprise.

“Well… I don’t know if I could give it up *entirely,*” she said with a laugh. “Just maybe set it down every so often.”

They were interrupted by a sudden cry from overhead. “Land ho!”

“He had grown accustomed to the fragrance of the brine, to the creak and sway of the vessel on the waves, much more swiftly than he had expected, and as they gazed across the harbor waters at Ferelden’s shores he half wondered if he would miss the experience.

Of one thing he was now certain, in any case. His first view of Ferelden confirmed it. Being here was going to make him even more homesick for the gleaming emerald forests of the Marches than he already was. “Well,” he remarked after a few moments, “I can honestly say that I’ve never seen so many shades of brown in the same place at once.”
Mighty of Arm and Warmest of Heart

Chapter Summary

Victoria gets to meet her idol, Cassandra Pentaghast, but it doesn’t go quite the way she expected...

Chapter Notes

Most of the quests from the game won't be covered as thoroughly as this one. However, since this sets up the plot, it seemed kind of necessary.

Chapter Two: Mighty of Arm and Warmest of Heart

So many eyes, so many legs –

The chittering was enough to drive a person mad –

Mahanon behind her, urging her forward –

A woman crowned with a tall miter, gleaming white in the oddly-colored darkness, stretching out a hand to guide her –

A tear in the fabric of reality –

Pushed, flailing, falling – then nothing.

When Victoria regained her senses properly, she was at first aware of only two things. One was that she was on her knees in some damp cellar, her wrists constricted by rusty manacles. The other, which managed to be infinitely more worrisome, was that her left hand bore a strange mark, almost like a shimmering green crack in her flesh. Occasionally this mark surged with light and power, rendering her almost mindless from the pain.

After such a surge, she heard a groan answering her own, and she managed to raise her head enough to discern the figure of Mahanon. He too knelt in restraints on the mildewed, hay-strewn floor, and he looked very ill. Even more alarming, his right hand bore a mark which corresponded to the one on her left.

“Non!” she hissed. He barely moved. Dimly she recollected that he’d been behind her, trying to put himself between her and the many-legged nightmares which had pursued them. Had he been struck, bitten, wounded? “Mahanon? Mahanon Lavellan, answer me!”
The response was an unintelligible grunt. But the disheveled head shook, pointed ears twitching slightly, and with obvious effort he lifted his eyes to meet hers. “Tor… where are we?”

“No idea. We’ve been taken prisoner, and our hands…” She gestured vaguely with her green-cracked limb, the restrictive bindings allowing for nothing else.

Before Mahanon could properly respond, and try to hazard a guess about just what had befallen them, their privacy was broken by the arrival of a tall, slender woman in armor. It was only upon this woman’s entrance that Victoria realized they were surrounded – a cluster of armored guards had been positioned around the two of them with swords drawn, and they only withdrew when the woman, evidently their superior, came into view.

Who this new arrival was, Victoria wasn’t sure, but she carried herself with the elegance of ancient nobility, mingled with the discipline of a seasoned warrior. A scar traced along one side of her stern jaw, the remnant of some battle long past. She had hair the color of night which might rival Victoria’s for length, tightly plaited and encircling her head like a crown, and her dark eyes flashed dangerously as she alternated between menacing one prisoner and the other. Her age was difficult to pinpoint, though that was as much due to the poor lighting in the dungeon as anything else.

As the black-haired woman moved around to study them, a second woman followed her into the chamber. This one walked with a different sort of refinement, her steps light despite the heavy boots on her small feet; her every movement suggested a dance. Her lean, languid figure was draped in a battledress of polished mail, and a purple hood all but obscured a short crop of deep red hair. She studied the pair of prisoners thoughtfully; her expression radiated chiefly sorrow, where her companion’s was filled with anger.

“Tell me,” said the first woman, her steely voice tinged with a heavy Nevarran accent, “why we shouldn’t kill you both now. The Conclave is destroyed, and everyone who attended is dead – except for you.”

“And you think we’re responsible?” Victoria blurted. Her mind was whirling. Everyone at the Conclave dead? Her kinsmen and women, the Chantry officials… even the Divine Justinia? How could it be?

The black-haired woman was closer to Mahanon, and she reached down to seize the wrist of his crackling right hand, lifting it for a moment. “Explain this!”

“I can’t,” he said simply.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I don’t know what that is or how it got there! And neither does she!”

“You’re lying!” She grabbed his shirt collar and shook him roughly, but the woman in the purple hood intervened, physically separating her companion from the elf, pushing her almost up against a wall.

“We need them, Cassandra,” she said, speaking for the first time. Her voice was musical, with a Val Royeaux lilt. Orlesian, then.

“I can’t believe it,” said Victoria softly, and the two women turned to look at her. “All those people…” She felt tears come into her eyes, suddenly regretting the way she had sassed cousin Maeve so many times on their journey across the sea.

“Do you remember what happened? How this began?” asked the Orlesian.
“I remember running,” she said, unable to raise her voice much. “Things were chasing me, chasing us – Mahanon tried to protect me from them. And then a woman…”

“A woman?”

“She reached out to me. I… no, it’s all a blur after that.” She shook her head.

The black-haired woman turned to her companion. “Go to the forward camp, Leliana,” she said. “I will take them to the rift.” As the Orlesian woman walked away, the one she had called Cassandra moved to undo the shackles binding their wrists. Victoria blinked, the name suddenly registering in her mind.

“You’re Cassandra Pentaghast? The Right Hand of the Divine?”

This was met with an immediately suspicious glare. “You know me?”

“You’re the reason I’m here. I mean – you’re the reason I came to the Conclave. I wanted to meet you,” she explained. “I want to join the Seekers.”

The Seeker paused, and appeared to soften just the smallest bit as she pulled the younger noblewoman to her feet. “I’m afraid,” she said, “that whatever aspirations you may have had before this are no longer an option. Not now.”

“What did happen?” Mahanon demanded, pushing himself to his feet as well. Freed of her restraints, Victoria immediately moved to his side; but their hands remained bound by ropes rather than the shackles, and the best they could do to offer each other any sort of comfort was to clutch awkwardly at one another’s fingers. They exchanged a glance, then both turned their eyes to their captor.

“It will be easier to show you,” Cassandra replied. “Come with me, both of you.”

There was no sunlight when they stumbled out of the dark prison. Instead, the world was a pale, sickly green color, and only a vague distant brightness in what Victoria assumed was the western sky seemed to indicate the presence of daylight. Far overhead, the clouds churned in a slow pirouette around a gaping, menacing break in the very fabric of reality. She and Mahanon stared at it, each trying to make sense of what they were seeing, each failing.

“We call it the Breach,” said Cassandra, waiting patiently as they absorbed the scene. “It’s a massive rift into the world of demons, which grows larger with each passing hour. It’s not the only such rift – just the largest. All were caused by the explosion at the Conclave.”

“An explosion can do that?” Mahanon asked, baffled.

“This one did.” The Seeker’s expression was grim. “Unless we act, it may grow until it swallows the world.”

The Breach suddenly gave a crack of what could best be compared to an emerald thunderclap, and Victoria screamed involuntarily as the mark on her hand surged in response. She dropped to her knees in the snow, Mahanon following; he was trying to help her, she knew, but the look on his face showed all too clearly that his pain was as great as her own.

Cassandra knelt beside them. “Each time the Breach expands, your marks spread,” she explained, and for the first time there was sympathy in both her eyes and her voice. “And they are killing you. They may be the key to stopping this, but there isn’t much time.”
“The key to what?” asked Mahanon.

“Closing the Breach. Whether that’s possible is something we shall discover shortly; it is our only chance, however. And yours.”

“You still think we did this,” Victoria managed, choking down a sob of anguish and agony. Mahanon staggered to his feet, attempting to pull her up beside him; with their hands bound, the attempt was clumsy at best. “You think we did this to ourselves?”

“Not intentionally. Something clearly went wrong,” said Cassandra, rising as well. “Perhaps you are not responsible; but someone is, and you are the only suspects. If you wish to prove your innocence, this is the only way.”

Victoria turned to look at Mahanon, their eyes meeting. He nodded at her, and she returned the gesture. They had no choice; that much was clear. Turning back to Cassandra, she gave her a nod as well. “We’ll do whatever we can to help. Whatever it takes.”

“Your cooperation is appreciated.” She shepherded them farther along the path, lined on either side with various individuals who were eyeing them with mingled distrust and resentment. Victoria, stumbling and striving to keep her hold on Mahanon’s hand, felt herself shrink under the scrutiny.

“They have decided your guilt,” Cassandra explained. “They need it. The people of Haven mourn our Most Holy, Divine Justinia, head of the Chantry. The Conclave was hers.” Briefly Victoria wondered why the explanation was needed – of course she knew who Divine Justinia was – but after a moment she decided it must be for the benefit of her Dalish friend. “It was a chance for peace between mages and Templars! She brought their leaders together… and now they are dead.”

They came to a large, ornate bridge spanning the valley; the Penitent’s Crossing, according to an inscription above the gatehouse door. Armored soldiers like those who had guarded them in the dungeon were scattered all over, moving crates of supplies or talking to one another in hushed voices. Cassandra gestured for them to halt, then drew a sharp knife from her belt. Before Victoria could protest or question the action, however, the Seeker had sliced through the ropes around their wrists.

“There will be a trial,” she said. “I can promise no more. Come; it is not far.”

“Where are you taking us?” Victoria managed.

“Your marks must be tested on something smaller than the Breach,” Cassandra explained. They began to cross the bridge, and the guards paid them less attention than the others had done; perhaps they were simply too busy. “Open the gate,” she called to one of them as the trio reached the far end. “We are heading into the valley.”

“The valley?”

“The Valley of the Sacred Ashes. One of the smaller rifts I mentioned is found there; we will see if your marks can dispel it.”

The path was winding, and largely uphill. Barricades were staggered along the way, protecting those back beyond the bridge from – well, from what? Some of these were on fire, and Victoria wondered at that only until she saw a green projectile launched from the distant Breach; it slammed down into the snowy ground not far away, igniting anything flammable nearby. “Maker’s breath!”

“By the Creators,” she heard Mahanon grumble, “it’s the end of the world.”
“Not if we can help it,” said Cassandra, firmly.

With another screech of pain, Victoria was sent to her knees by a sudden flare in the mark. Mahanon too cried out, but managed to keep upright. Much to Victoria’s surprise, Cassandra came and – with unexpected gentleness – helped her to stand again. “The pulses are coming faster now,” she said, and her tone was kind beneath its stern edge. There was something about this Nevarran woman that the Free Marcher decidedly liked.

“The larger the Breach grows, the more rifts appear, and the more demons we face,” Cassandra continued. They were able to walk a little faster now.

“How did we survive the blast?” Mahanon asked.

“They say… that you stepped out of a rift, and then fell unconscious. They say a woman was in the rift, behind you, but no one knows who she was.”

“I remember her – a little,” Victoria admitted. “But I don’t know who she was either. She reached out a hand to me… that’s all I can recall.”

They reached a second bridge, and another projectile from the Breach came racing down to shatter the roof of the gatehouse at one end. Mahanon threw up his arms, trying to shield both women from the blast, but it was in vain. The bricks beneath their feet gave way from the explosion, and all three tumbled down to the frozen river below.
“Toria,” Mahanon groaned as he staggered to his feet. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll live,” she mumbled. They had fallen close together; Cassandra was a few feet away, picking herself up. Another bright green bolt of magic tore down from the sky, and on the spot where it struck the icy surface of the river, a demon erupted into being, laughing. Now Mahanon could see what Cassandra had meant.

“Stay behind me!” the Seeker ordered. She was already wielding her longsword, and raised a strangely designed shield adorned with a giant eye; weapons at the ready, she rushed forward to attack the demon. But as the two friends watched, the surface of the water began to smoke and shiver with green and black magic. It was all too clear that more demons were preparing to manifest. Mahanon looked about wildly for some means to defend them both.

His gaze fell upon a few crates of supplies, which had fallen with them when the bridge collapsed. He could see a few daggers, and at some distance away were what looked to be one or two swords. “Toria!”

“I see it!” His red-haired companion dove into a barrel roll, spinning her body across the sheet of ice until she reached the swords. He, meanwhile, dashed to collect two of the daggers; they were hardly comparable to his halla-hilted knives, which he could only assume had been lost somewhere in the Fade, but they would have to do. With Victoria returning to his side, he hurled into the fray, helping Cassandra to dispatch the demons.

When they were all defeated, however, the Seeker turned on them, menacing them with her sword. “Drop your weapons! Now!”

Briefly, Mahanon considered pointing out the fact that he and Victoria outnumbered their captor, but it didn’t seem like the best idea. Besides, the noblewoman voiced her reaction first. “All right. We’re disarming.” She gave Mahanon a sort of pleading look as she started to lower the sword she had collected.

“Yes.” Cassandra sheathed her blade. “I cannot protect you… and I cannot expect you to be defenseless.” She studied them thoughtfully with her dark eyes. “I should remember that you agreed to come willingly. You could have tried to run while I fought the demons, and instead you stayed to help me.”

Still looking contemplative, she moved to where the broken crates were scattered, and rummaged through what had survived of their contents. “Take these potions. Maker knows what we’ll face.”
Having apparently worked their way into the Seeker’s good graces (at least somewhat), they continued their trek along the path leading to the rift. The sky had never looked so dangerous, nor so terrifying. “Where are all your soldiers?” Mahanon inquired of Cassandra.

“Either at the forward camp, or else fighting. For the moment, we are on our own.”

That, however, was about to change. They raced along the frozen river, battling demons spawning all along the way, occasionally stumbling across the remains of soldiers and others who hadn’t survived; reluctantly, they supplemented their own supplies from those of the fallen, cramming ill-fitting helmets onto their heads and taking unused healing potions for future use. Climbing to the summit of one of the few buildings which remained intact, they started to hear something like a roar.

“We’re getting close to the rift!” Cassandra called as they started to run. “You can hear the fighting!”

“Who’s fighting?” Mahanon shouted back.

“You’ll see soon enough. We have to help them!”

The rift looked like a jagged, irregular green jewel suspended in midair, and its many facets seemed to continually shift and branch outward. Beneath it, armored soldiers were doing battle with assorted demons, and the three new arrivals hurried to their aid. Blasts of icy magic were whipping through the air; a smooth-headed mage was among those fighting, as was a dwarf wielding what looked to be a thoroughly unusual crossbow.

With the last demon defeated, the mage returned his staff to his back, then hurried to grab Victoria’s hand. “Quickly,” he said, “before more come through!” For the first time, Mahanon realized the mage was an elf.

The stranger thrust Victoria’s green-tinged hand in the direction of the rift, and a bolt of brilliant green power blazed from her palm into the heart of the anomaly. It swelled and whirled and finally burst into nothingness. They all stared as a small lingering shower of sparks shimmered to the ground.

“What did you do?” Victoria managed to ask.

“I did nothing,” the mage replied. He had a deep, mellow voice that soothed Mahanon somehow; he bore no vallaslin on his face, but his bearing and manners seemed more Dalish than city elf. “The credit is yours. Whatever magic opened the Breach in the sky also placed those marks upon your hands. I theorized that the marks might be able to close the rifts that have opened in the Breach’s wake – and it seems I was correct. I wasn’t certain if closing the rifts would require both of your marks working together or if one of you alone would be sufficient, but it appears that you will be able to labor singly to close at least the smaller rifts.”

“Meaning they could also seal the Breach,” said Cassandra.

“So we can help,” said Victoria, throwing Mahanon a smile.

“Indeed. To seal the Breach, or larger rifts, I expect it will necessitate the two of you working in tandem,” the mage noted. “It seems you two hold the keys to our salvation.”

“Good to know!” said the dwarf, joining the conversation. “Here I thought we’d be ass-deep in

“Varric – the Varric Tethras?” Mahanon glanced at Victoria, whose smile was more than a little awed. “The author?”

“Guilty as charged, my lady.”

“I’ve read all your books! Well, most of them, at least.”

“Fantastic! We’ll have to get better acquainted later.” Cassandra made a disgusted noise, which Varric ignored. “Technically, I’m a prisoner just like the two of you, so I’m sure we’ll have time to chat.”

“I brought you here to tell your story to the Divine,” said Cassandra irritably. “Clearly that is no longer necessary.”

“And yet here I am. Lucky for you, considering current events.”

“That’s a nice crossbow you have there,” Mahanon commented.

“Ah, isn’t she a beauty? Bianca and I have been through a lot together.”

“You named your crossbow Bianca?”

“Of course. And she’ll be great company in the valley.”

“Absolutely not,” Cassandra interjected. “Your help is appreciated, Varric, but…”

“Have you been in the valley lately, Seeker?” Varric countered. “Your soldiers aren’t in control anymore. You need me.”

She made the disgusted noise again and stalked away. The mage cleared his throat. “My name is Solas, if there are introductions to be made.”

“Mahanon, of Clan Lavellan in the Free Marches,” he replied. “My fair friend here with the sword is Lady Victoria, of the Trevelyan family in Ostwick.”

“Just Victoria will do. The rest is a mouthful.”

“I’m pleased to see that you both still live,” Solas said amiably.

“He means, ‘I kept those marks from killing you while you slept’, ” Varric translated.

“You have our thanks, Solas,” said Victoria, gratefully.

“You seem to know a great deal about it all,” Mahanon added. Solas seemed almost more pleased by the observation than the gratitude.

“Solas is an apostate, well versed in such matters,” said Cassandra, rejoining them.

“Technically,” Solas pointed out with a small smile, “all mages are apostates now, Cassandra.” To Mahanon, he continued, “My travels have allowed me to learn much of the Fade, far beyond the experience of any Circle mage. I came to offer whatever help I can give with the Breach; if it is not closed, we are all doomed, regardless of origin.”
“That’s a commendable attitude.” Mahanon liked this fellow elf, he decided.

“Merely a sensible one – though sense appears to be in short supply just now.” Solas turned to the Seeker. “Cassandra, you should know that the magic involved here is unlike any I have seen. Your prisoners are no mages; indeed, I find it difficult to imagine *any* mages having such power.”

“Understood.” Cassandra nodded, her expression benign – almost relieved, Mahanon thought. *She didn’t want to believe we were guilty after all, he realized. Her grief clouded her judgment at first, but after she started to know us, she started to trust us.*

Leliana was waiting when the five managed to fight their way to the forward camp. A small, mean-looking Chantry cleric was arguing with her, but broke off when he saw the approaching group. “You made it,” she said with relief. “Chancellor Roderick, this is –”

“I know who they are,” he snapped. “As Grand Chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you to take these criminals to Val Royeaux to face execution!”

Mahanon glanced down to where Victoria had instinctively grabbed his hand. He squeezed her fingers reassuringly; they’d have to kill him first. Besides, Cassandra clearly wasn’t having it.

“Order me?” she spat. “You are a glorified clerk – a bureaucrat!”

“And you are a thug,” he replied, “but a thug who supposedly serves the Chantry!”

“We serve the Most Holy, Chancellor,” said Leliana, now angry too, “as you well know!”

“Justinia is dead! We must elect a replacement, and obey her orders on the matter!”

As they continued to quarrel, Victoria edged closer to Mahanon. “I’m afraid we’re not giving you a very good impression of our Chantry,” she murmured with forced humor.

“It’s all right. Any minute now, one of us will wake up,” he replied quietly, “and you and I will find ourselves back on the *Queen Madrigal* and none of this will have ever happened.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“…no.”

“Too bad. It sounded good.”

Chancellor Roderick was urging Cassandra to call a retreat, insisting that their position in the valley was hopeless. Cassandra was equally insistent that they reach the Temple of Sacred Ashes, but she and Leliana couldn’t agree on which route to take. A patrol, they were told, went missing in the mountains. The argument was interrupted only by a surge from the Breach, and a corresponding yelp of pain from Victoria. She released Mahanon, seizing her left wrist in her right hand; he raised his own right hand and stared at it, gritting his teeth.

Cassandra moved to look at them both closely. “What do you think we should do?”

“You’re asking us?” Victoria managed. The surging subsided, letting her breathe.

“You have the marks,” Solas pointed out. He and Varric had been silent until this moment.

“And you are the ones we must keep alive,” Cassandra added. “Since we cannot agree on our own…”
They exchanged glances. “I think we should go into the mountains,” Victoria said. “Maybe we can find that patrol and save them.”

“I’ll agree with that,” Mahanon replied.


“On your head be the consequences, Seeker,” he snarled.

They could not rescue the entire lost patrol. The surviving members were full of praise and thanks for their arrival, but several had already been slaughtered by demons. Mahanon had a feeling that this was going to weigh on Victoria’s mind, and she was already still reeling from all the deaths at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. He pitied her; he hadn’t known, nor particularly cared about, a single person at the Conclave except her. He was sorry for the many casualties in an abstract sort of way, as one feels regret for the victims of a distant natural disaster. For Victoria, there were personal losses at the Temple; many members of her sprawling family had been killed, and he thought it must be strange for her to be the only Trevelyan to survive the devastation.

In any case, however, they were at long last beholding what was left of the Temple. He did feel some sorrow when he saw it; it had been a truly beautiful building, and the people he’d chanced to encounter during his few days there had all, as best he could recall, been pleasant – a little puzzled that Lady Trevelyan had an elven bodyguard, but not in the least objectionable. He glanced at Victoria, who was staring around in undisguised horror. Was she trying to guess which of the scorched corpses were members of her clan? Impulsively he put a hand on her shoulder, which seemed to bring her back to herself.

“There.” Cassandra pointed. “That is where you two walked out of the Fade, and our soldiers found you. They say a woman was behind you in the Fade; no one knows who she was.”

“Including us,” Victoria said absently.

They made their way carefully into the Temple. Everything was on fire; Mahanon half wondered if his clothing would melt off of his body. Stepping gingerly among the bodies, he dropped down to a lower level, turning back to lift Victoria down. “It’ll be okay,” he told her quietly. “Somehow.”

At the heart of the Temple was another rift, larger and more terrifying than any of the ones they had encountered while rescuing the patrol from the mountain pass. “I don’t think one of us can close that by ourselves,” Victoria remarked, staring at it. “We’ll have to work together.”

“For the larger rifts, like this one, that is probable,” Solas concurred. “It’s fortunate that the two of you are already in possession of a strong compatibility.”

“The Breach is a long way up,” Varric commented, staring up. A green whirlwind seemed to extend from the rift all the way to the Breach, which was directly overhead.

“You’re here – thank the Maker,” said Leliana. She hastened to join them, with a company of soldiers following; a longbow and arrows were strapped to her back as well. At Cassandra’s orders, they dispersed to position themselves around the Temple.

“This is your chance to end this,” Cassandra said, facing the two of them. “Are you ready?”

“How are we going to get up there?” Victoria asked.
“This rift was the first,” Solas explained. “It is the key. Seal it, and perhaps we seal the Breach.”

They made their way slowly, carefully, to the ground. The closer they got to the rift, the more they heard voices, which seemed to echo from within the green depths. “Now is the hour of our victory,” intoned a strange bass. “Bring forth the sacrifice.” No one seemed to know who the speaker was, though Solas guessed it the voice likely belonged to the one responsible for creating the Breach.

Varric, Mahanon noticed, was growing increasingly agitated. There were strange glowing red rocks growing out of the walls as they approached the rift – or so he thought. The dwarf soon corrected him on that score. “You know this stuff is red lyrium, Seeker?”

“I see it, Varric.”

“I thought lyrium was blue,” said Victoria.

“Usually. This is the red version… and it’s not good news,” Varric replied. “But what’s it doing here?”

“Magic could have drawn on lyrium beneath the Temple, corrupting it,” Solas suggested.

“Hm. Well, it’s evil. Whatever you do, don’t touch it.”

The voice was still going on about a sacrifice as they continued their descent. It was soon followed by a different voice, female, pleading for help. Cassandra sucked in a gasp. “Most Holy!”

As they approached the anomaly, another surge sparked in Mahanon’s hand. He’d started to develop a tolerance for the pain, however, and he suspected Victoria had done so as well. Closing the small rifts seemed to help; maybe closing this bigger one would help even more.

“What’s going on here?” asked yet another voice from within the rift. It was Victoria’s turn to gasp; the voice was her own, and the one Cassandra identified as belonging to the Divine urged her to get help.

“That was your voice,” said Cassandra. “Most Holy cried out to you. But…”

Suddenly the image of Divine Justinia appeared before them, suspended in midair. They heard Victoria again asking what was happening, and the Divine begged her to run, to warn someone. “We have intruders,” said the unfamiliar bass. “Kill them.”

“Them,” Cassandra repeated. “So you were both there! Who attacked? Is this vision true?”

“I don’t remember anything,” Victoria said. She sounded scared, and sad. Mahanon shook his head; he had no memory of it either.

The rift flared with a blinding light, and the hallucination, or whatever it was, vanished. “Echoes of what happened here,” said Solas. “The Fade bleeds into this place. This rift is not sealed, but it is closed, albeit temporarily. I believe that with your marks, the rift can be opened, and then sealed properly and safely. However,” he added, “opening the rift will attract attention from the other side.”

“That means demons,” Cassandra called out to the soldiers. “Stand ready!”

With eerie green light swirling throughout the place, and glaring horribly against the violent red of the corrupted lyrium, the soldiers drew their weapons and prepared to attack. Mahanon positioned
himself on Victoria’s right side, and wrapped his larger hand around hers. He glanced at Solas and Cassandra, who nodded, and together they raised their marked hands – her left, his right – and aimed for the closed rift.

As the rift burst open, a massive pride demon exploded into being, and let out a savage roar of frustration which changed into sickening, terrifying laughter. Mahanon tightened his grip on Victoria’s fingers. They would have to let the others deal with the demon; their focus needed to be on closing the rift. Together.
Chapter Summary

Our heroes are suddenly, well, heroes. They're mostly confused. Also, Victoria turns interesting colors when they meet the council.

Chapter Notes

Beta reader Rachel (Aurora Borealia) keeps saying that Mahanon and Victoria are her "BrOTP for life!" Since Mahanon is my best friend's character and Victoria is mine, this amuses me in many ways.

Chapter Four: Hymns of Praise Unending

Mahanon woke first, which he hadn’t expected to do.

Of course, to be fair, he hadn’t realized he was unconscious. The last thing he remembered was working with Victoria to seal the rift directly below the Breach. The rift had closed, stemming the tide of demons pouring from it; then, as if angered by the situation, the Breach had surged, and waves of pain had rocked from his hand through his entire body. After that, he knew no more.

The room in which he awoke was entirely unfamiliar. It seemed to be someone’s house, two sturdy and well-built rooms; a wooden partition divided the room in which his bed was kept, and after a moment’s quiet contemplation, he guessed that Victoria’s bed was on the other side. If the pain in his arm had rendered him senseless for however long, it must have done at least as much damage to her – possibly more, for she was smaller and slighter.

He pushed himself off the bed and peered around the edge of the wooden divider. Sure enough, there she lay; he could see the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, reassuring him that she had survived the ordeal, but she was otherwise motionless. Her hair had been undone from its braided style, and for the first time he realized that she – and he – wore no armor. Someone had changed their clothes while they slept, outfitting them in similar costumes of comfortable fabric; his new garments were a deep forest green, which pleased him, while hers were a soft gray that he thought would likely match her eyes, once she opened them.

She did exactly that a short time later, as though she could feel him watching her and it startled her out of her sleep. “Non?”

“Toria…” He sat down on the edge of her bed. “How do you feel?”

“Mm… more confused than anything.” She sat up slowly. “Where are we?”
“Someplace much nicer than the last time one of us asked that question. Beyond that, I have no idea.”

As she gazed blearily around the room, a young elf girl entered, carrying a crate of something or other. She started violently at the sight of them. “Oh! I – I didn’t know you were awake, I swear!”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Mahanon, “we just –” He broke off as the girl dropped her crate and fell to her knees, prostrating herself.

“I beg your forgiveness and your blessing. I am but a humble servant.”

“Um… what?” asked Victoria.

“You are back in Haven, my lord and lady,” the girl explained. “They say you saved us. The Breach stopped growing, just like the marks on your hands.”

It was true, Mahanon realized, looking at his hand. The mark was no longer spreading, and no longer hurting. He took Victoria’s hand and examined it briefly; it seemed the same.

“It’s all anyone has talked about for the last three days,” added the girl.

“Three days?” Victoria repeated. “We’ve been unconscious for three days?!”

“Yes, my lady!”

“Then the danger is over,” said Mahanon.

The girl nodded, still on her knees. “The Breach is still in the sky, but that’s what they say.” She finally got to her feet. “I’m certain Lady Cassandra will want to know you’ve wakened. She said, ‘At once.’”

“Where is she?”

“In the Chantry, with the Lord Chancellor. ‘At once,’ she said!” With that, the girl ran out of the little house.

They looked at each other, and Mahanon pulled Victoria to her feet. “Well… good morning, I suppose,” he said.

“No chance of one of us waking up back on the Queen Madrigal, huh?”

“I’m not holding out much hope, no.”

Mahanon found their armor, which someone had carefully tended during their strange sleep, and Victoria put her hair up again. Several minutes later they emerged, blinking in the sunlight; at least that much had improved since they were last outdoors. The Breach still lingered ominously over the Frostback Mountains, and was still ringed round by thick clouds, but the rest of the sky allowed the sun to show. “Brace yourself,” Victoria muttered, seeing people milling about the area.

But it was different this time. When they’d marched from the prison to the bridge that would lead them to the Temple of the Sacred Ashes, people had sneered and glared and turned their backs. Now they saluted, or bowed, or even knelt. “That’s them,” Mahanon heard someone say. “They’re the Heralds of Andraste!”

“We’re who?” he mumbled. Victoria shrugged.
“Blessings upon you, Heralds of Andraste!”

“That’s them – they stopped the Breach from getting any bigger!”

“Why did Lady Cassandra have them in chains? I thought Seekers knew everything!”

“This just keeps getting weirder and weirder,” Victoria said quietly, taking his arm. “I guess we’d better find the Chantry and see what Cassandra can tell us.”

Haven had very few paths, so getting lost was not really an option, and it wasn’t hard to imagine that the most imposing building of the bunch must be the Chantry. They made their way slowly up the dirt road, feeling the sunshine and fresh air bring strength back into their bodies; Mahanon supposed that a hot meal or two would make him feel a lot better. As they approached the Chantry, they could see a number of individuals garbed in red and white. Unlike those who had gawked at them when they first emerged, these did not genuflect or call out to them. They almost seemed to be guarding the building, in their own way; however, they made no attempt to stop the Heralds, as the others had called them, from entering.

Inside, they followed the carpeting to the door at the far end, and even before they reached it, they could hear Chancellor Roderick and Cassandra arguing in the room beyond it. Mahanon growled low in his throat, and pushed the door open. Chancellor Roderick looked up, and motioned to the nearby guards. “Chain them,” he said. “I want them prepared to travel to the capital for trial.”

Cassandra was bent over a table, looking at a book. Straightening, she waved a dismissive hand. “Disregard that, and leave us.”

The soldiers saluted and closed the door behind them. Mahanon was duly impressed; Cassandra outranked even this so-called Grand Chancellor, it seemed. He wondered if there was anyone here who wouldn’t defer to her, since he’d seen even Leliana do as much. The Left and Right Hands of the Divine, Victoria had called them; Leliana was the Left, Cassandra the Right.

“You walk a dangerous line, Seeker,” the Chancellor told her.

“The Breach is stable, but it is still a threat,” she countered. “I will not ignore it.”

“We did everything we could to close the Breach,” Victoria interjected. “And it almost killed us.”

“Yet you live,” sneered the Chancellor. “A convenient result, insofar as you’re concerned.”

“Have a care, Chancellor,” said Cassandra in a warning tone. “The Breach is not the only threat we face.”

“Someone was behind the explosion at the Conclave.” Leliana moved to join the argument. “Someone whom Most Holy did not expect. Perhaps they died with the others… or have allies who yet live.”

Chancellor Roderick clearly did not miss her suggestion. “I am a suspect?”

“You – and many others,” she clarified.

“But not the prisoners!”

“I heard the voices in the Temple myself,” said Cassandra. “The Divine called to them, or at least to her, for help.”
“So their survival – those things on their hands – all a coincidence?”

“So their survival – those things on their hands – all a coincidence?”

“Providence,” the Seeker corrected. “The Maker sent us these two in our darkest hour.”

Mahanon forced himself not to say anything that might offend; however, he’d never believed in the Maker a day in his life, and he wasn’t sure he appreciated Cassandra’s assertion. He did, however, appreciate that she’d turned completely around in her own opinions, and had become his and Victoria’s most fervent champion. For the first time, he was able to really take a good look at her, and despite the battle scars which adorned her face and the fact that she was a shemlen woman, he had to admit that she was – in her own way – strikingly beautiful.

“You believe we’re innocent,” said Victoria.

“We are all subject to the will of the Maker, whether we wish it or not,” Cassandra replied. “No matter what anyone believes, you are exactly what we needed when we needed it.”

“The Breach remains,” added Leliana, “and the marks on your hands are still our only hope of closing it.”

“This is not for you to decide,” fumed the Chancellor.

Abruptly, Cassandra slammed a very large, thick book down on the table; Mahanon and Victoria both jumped involuntarily at the sound. The book had a locking clasp, and was adorned with a sunburst emblem. “You know what this is, Chancellor,” she said, jabbing the cover with her finger. “A writ from the Divine, granting us the authority to act. As of this moment, I declare the Inquisition reborn.” She moved around the table and walked toward Chancellor Roderick, who backed up reluctantly. “We will close the Breach, we will find those responsible, and we will restore order – with or without your approval.”

He stared at her for a few seconds, defiant; then, apparently unable to articulate his thoughts, he stalked out of the room. Cassandra rubbed the bridge of her nose. “This is the Divine’s directive,” Leliana explained, seeing the bewilderment in Mahanon and Victoria’s faces. “Rebuild the Inquisition of old, and find those who would stand against the chaos.” She sighed. “We aren’t ready. We have no leader, no numbers, and now no Chantry support.”

“But we have no choice,” said Cassandra. “We must act now, with the two of you at our side.” Her expression wasn’t exactly pleading, Mahanon thought, but it was close.

“What is the Inquisition?” he wanted to know.

“It preceded the Chantry,” Leliana explained. “A group of people who banded together to restore order in a world gone mad.”

“Afterward,” Cassandra added, “they laid down their banner and formed the Templar order. But the Templars have lost their way. We need those who can do what must be done united under a single banner once more.”

“The Chantry will take time to find a new Divine, and wait for her order,” said Leliana.

“But we cannot wait. So many Grand Clerics died at the Conclave… no, we are alone. Perhaps forever,” Cassandra concluded. She and Leliana looked at each other with mingled distress and determination.

“Well. That’s cheerful,” said Mahanon.
“The marks are upon your hands,” said Cassandra, turning to them. “You are involved, whether you wish it or not. We need your help.”

Mahanon glanced at Victoria. She was a devout Andrastian, he knew, and while he also knew that she respected the Dalish beliefs, she was probably as convinced as Cassandra that this was all the work of the Maker. He cared for his friend a great deal; he already respected Leliana; and he had to admit he was somehow a bit drawn to the fiery Seeker. “If you’re truly trying to restore order,” he began slowly.

“That is the plan,” said Leliana. Something like hope was in her eyes.

“Help us fix this before it’s too late.” Cassandra extended a gloved hand to him. To them. Victoria looked up at Mahanon, and nodded her assent. He turned and, with the very hand which had been afflicted with the strange mark, grasped Cassandra’s hand and shook it.

For the first time since they’d met her, the Seeker actually smiled.

At Leliana’s insistence, the two Heralds ventured down to a small tavern which had been established in the Haven compound, where a friendly, flirtly young woman named Flissa brought them bowls of stew. “They want us to come back after we eat,” Victoria remarked. “Cassandra said they have some kind of established council which is going to function as the Inquisition’s leadership until it gets more organized.”

“Why doesn’t Cassandra lead it herself?”

“Good question. I really don’t know,” she admitted, poking at a lump of potato with her spoon. “Maybe she just doesn’t want the responsibility. Or maybe it’s something to do with her being the Right Hand of the Divine.”

“What does that mean, anyway? You told me about that, but I don’t get it.”

“Leliana is – was – the Left Hand of the Divine. She was in charge of more secret, personal missives for Divine Justinia. Cassandra, as the Right Hand, operated out in the open and – I guess you could say she helped to maintain order, which fell in line with her being a Seeker. Beyond that, I don’t know if I can properly explain it.”

“Your Chantry is confusing.”

“I know. I was raised as a believer and I still don’t quite understand all of it.” She chuckled. “I can only imagine how confusing it might be to you.”

“The Creators are a lot more understandable, in my opinion. I’m… not sure I’m completely comfortable being called a Herald of your faith,” he admitted. “But I guess I’ll get used to it.”

They finished eating and returned to the room where Cassandra had declared the birth of the new Inquisition. She, Leliana, and two unfamiliar figures were bent over her giant book. One was a lady, raven-haired and elegantly dressed, with an aristocratic nose; she carried a scribe’s writing platform and occasionally punctuated the air with a plumed quill. The other was a gentleman of soldier’s bearing, whose heavy armor was adorned with a warm collar rather like a lion’s mane. The light of the lamps glinted in thick yellow curls. [Editor’s note: He had the look of a Templar who had seen the worst of humanity, yet still had time to style his hair.] As the two Heralds entered the room, all four raised their heads to survey them. Beside him, he heard Victoria’s breath catch.

“You are here. Good,” said Cassandra. “Allow me to introduce the Inquisition’s council. This is
Commander Cullen, leader of the Inquisition forces; and Lady Josephine Montilyet, of Antiva, our
ambassador and diplomat. You know Sister Leliana already.”

“My role involves a degree of –”

“She is our spymaster.”

“…yes. Thank you, Cassandra. Tactfully put.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” said Mahanon. Victoria only nodded; he’d never seen her so
unable to speak before, and wondered if she was ill. Maybe the stew disagreed with her.

With the Chantry so opposed to the Inquisition, it seemed that there were two main courses of
action to be taken. Solas, as Cassandra explained, believed that a second attempt to seal the Breach
might succeed, but only if the Heralds’ marks had the same amount of power that was used to open
it in the first place. They might appeal to the mages, or to the Templars, to lend their support. Since
both factions were broken from the Chantry, either one had potential.

Victoria, at some point, found her voice. “Why not both?”

“We may pursue that line of thinking,” said Cullen, “but as they are so opposed to one another, it
might be difficult to persuade them to work together. However, for the greater good, they could
possibly be brought to see reason. In the short term, our request is that you Heralds journey to
Redcliffe, in the Hinterlands. There is a Chantry cleric there, Mother Giselle, who has been aiding
the disenfranchised citizens; the fighting between the mages and Templars is at its worst there, and
many people who are neither have been affected. You might also seek out Master Dennet, the arl’s
retired master of horse, and try to persuade him to provide the Inquisition with Fereldan horses.”

They discussed the plans for a while longer, but as the council members had much to do with their
respective tasks, it was decided to reconvene later when there was some intelligence to be shared.
Victoria gave her permission for Josephine to write to her parents, to ask them for financial support.
“They’re very devout,” she said. “Once you explain the situation, they’ll do anything they can. I’ll
write a letter of my own to send along with yours; they’ve probably been very worried.”

The two Heralds followed Cassandra out of the council room. She pointed at a door to the
immediate left and said, “Leliana, Josephine, and I share quarters here, should you need to find us.
I trust that the two of you don’t mind continuing to share accommodations? It has made things
easier on our healer.”

“No, it’s fine.” Victoria leaned against a wall, one hand over her eyes.

“Are you all right?” The Seeker raised an eyebrow.

“Maker, Cassandra, why didn’t you warn me?”

“About what?”

Victoria glanced around, apparently wary of being overheard, and Mahanon did a double take at
the unusual color in her normally pale face. His concern for her health vanished an instant later as
she muttered, “Cullen.”

It was all he could do not to laugh. He understood her perfectly now, but Cassandra continued to
look puzzled. “Cullen? What about him?”

“That is,” said Victoria in a flat, almost annoyed tone, “the single most beautiful man I have ever
Mahanon stifled a snicker – barely – as his counterpart stalked out of the Chantry and into the sunshine. Cassandra watched her go with a bemused expression, then turned to him. “It honestly never occurred to me to mention to either of you that anyone on the council was particularly attractive.”

“Don’t worry, she won’t hate you forever,” he said, releasing a chuckle at last. “She likes you too much.”

That seemed to surprise her even farther, but she shrugged it off and continued trying to explain herself. “What I mean is, it’s generally supposed that the two of you are...”

“Oh.” He paused. “Oh! Really? I hadn’t realized people thought that.”

“Then you aren’t...?”

“No, not at all. Don’t misunderstand me, I think the world of Lady Trevelyan,” he added. “We became close friends in a very short amount of time, even before all this happened. But that’s all it is – friendship, nothing more.” With a faint smirk, he added, “Besides, I prefer brunettes.”

Cassandra made a noise that didn’t sound *entirely* disgusted.
To Valiant Hearts Sing of Victory Waiting

Chapter Summary

It's a dangerous thing to let Varric get bored.

Chapter Notes

I don't know why Varric would want to play matchmaker. But for some reason, he did. Victoria's personality was deliberately modeled on Bethany's when I created the character, so it seemed to me that Varric would be fond of her for the resemblance. (I ship that hardcore. But if you've ever read my other stuff, you probably already knew that.)

Chapter Five: To Valiant Hearts Sing of Victory Waiting

Varric was, more than anything, homesick in the extreme.

He’d pretty much lost count of the days since he’d been forced to leave his beloved Kirkwall. It would be difficult to find anyone who loved that disaster area more than the charismatic surface dwarf. Arguably, there were only three things he loved more – Bianca, and the Hawke sisters.

He certainly hadn’t come to Ferelden by his own choice, and he longed for the news that he could go home (not that he was eager to get back on a boat), but he had to admit that it wasn’t as terrible as he’d expected. True, it would have been improved by having fewer hills, and more civilized taverns, and a lot fewer mages and Templars and demons. Fewer demons would definitely be good.

Still, it wasn’t all bad. These new companions were no substitute for the old Kirkwall crew, although it was sort of a comfort to have Cullen and Cassandra on hand. They were familiar faces in a strange new nightmare, and he distracted himself from the fear by devising nicknames for them and the others. With regard to the Heralds, however, he almost hesitated to give them any sort of moniker – out of some kind of sense of awe, or maybe it was a fear of being struck down by the Maker for daring an affront to His chosen ones. But on the other hand, he could see that they were just plain uncomfortable in their roles. They needed a bit of levity to ease their minds.

The elf could often be found talking to Solas. He was a hunter for his clan, so Hunter seemed like the most rational choice of nickname, if not the least imaginative. As for the human, her face was so expressive that he found himself calling her Eyebrows before he’d really given the matter any thought.

Haven was nice enough, in its own backwater kind of way. He didn’t hate it, which was more than he’d anticipated. It was sort of a quaint collection of unusually well-made hovels; it reminded him of the Kirkwall Alienage, but bigger and cleaner and more uphill. He knew enough of its history to
respect the place, anyway – it had been home to a murderous tribe of cultists who’d been found and defeated by the wandering Heroes of Ferelden during their epic quest, and those who had survived the encounter had cleared out when they realized the real Chantry was coming for them. Then Divine Justinia, for whatever reason, had sheltered in the ruined Temple of Sacred Ashes at some point and fell in love with the place, and restoring the entire settlement to its primitive glory had thereafter become one of her pet projects.

He was sorry he’d never gotten to see the Temple. The stuff of legends, or so Genitivi claimed, and the man insisted he’d been there himself so Varric reasoned that he would know. Sure, some people figured the old cleric for a liar, but the story was just too good; it was so outlandish that it had to be true. The fact that Genitivi himself had disappeared only made it more interesting. Besides, he’d been able to tell other people where to find it, and that had to count for something.

Varric usually loitered near a fire pit not far from the tavern, fairly close to the building in which he was lodged. If he wasn’t there, he was wandering around Haven, poking his nose in where, as Cassandra liked to say, it didn’t belong. He watched the people, and listened to the stories that were slowly piling up in his mind, and his fingers itched for quill and parchment.

He half thought Victoria was reading his mind when she approached him, at his fireside post, with a scroll in her hands. “Need something?” he inquired pleasantly. “Or are you just here to admire the dwarf?”

“I’m always ready to admire the dwarf,” she replied with her quick smile.

“Oh, come now, you must want something else.” Varric had developed the (admittedly silly) tendency to judge young human women based on how much they did or didn’t remind him of Hawke, and in truth, Eyebrows wasn’t a whole lot like her. Hawke was more irreverent, less bookish, and highly pragmatic. However, the studious, soft-hearted Lady Herald did remind him of Bethany in many ways, and for reasons he preferred not to contemplate too closely, he missed his Sunshine even more than he missed her sister. The resemblance warmed him considerably to Victoria. [Editor's note: Let's rein it in there, Scholar.]

“Well, yes. You see…” Victoria acquired an unused crate and parked it by the fire for a seat. “Josephine is sending a letter to my parents to ask their support for the Inquisition, and I said I’d send my own letter with hers. I need to get it done pretty quickly, since you know tomorrow we make for the Hinterlands, but it’s just not coming out right. I was hoping you could help me.”

“Eyebrows, I’m a writer, not an editor.” He chuckled. “Besides, how would I be able to resist adding lengthy passages in which you extravagantly admire my crossbow and luxuriant chest hair?”

“Oh, I was planning to leave that for my second letter. Right now, I’m more concerned with letting them know I’m not dead.”

“That’s pretty important,” Varric agreed. “All right, let’s see what you’ve got here.” He took the letter she offered and skimmed her writing. “Kind of formal, don’t you think?”

“That’s just… how my family is, I guess.”

“Trevelyan, right? And even if Hunter hadn’t mentioned your homeland during our first meeting, your accent is obviously Ostwick.”

“Good ear.” She nodded.
“So – you’re the bann’s daughter?”

“To use your words, guilty as charged. I’m his youngest.”

“Interesting. How did a noblewoman and a Dalish elf end up wandering the Conclave together?” He had been meaning to ask about that. “Sounds to me like there’s a story there.”

“Well… if you really want to know…”

“Yeah, I could never put that in one of my books,” Varric concluded a while later. “Nobody would believe it. Especially the part where you don’t remember what happened after lunch.”

“I swear that’s true.” Victoria shook her head. “Mahanon and I ate with the cousins whom I accompanied to the Conclave, and then we left the room where they were feeding us. That’s literally the last thing I can remember before waking up in the Haven prison, apart from a few vague impressions in the Fade.”

“See, that’s exactly why they thought you were lying. Forgetting is too convenient,” he said. “You want people to buy what you’re telling them, you have to spin a good story.”

“Not my strong suit, I’m afraid. It’s funny – I read plenty of books, but I could never really tell a story on my own. I never picked up the knack, I suppose.” She looked down at the letter in her hands. “I guess I’ll just stick with straightforward facts for my parents, at least for now.”

“Come on, let’s walk a little,” Varric proposed. “Wander down and inspect the troops. It’s where the Seeker’s usually found anyway, and I haven’t filled my daily quota of irritating her yet.”

“The troops?” Victoria turned an interesting color. “Oh, I – I wouldn’t want to bother anyone…”

“Eyebrows, I don’t think you could bother anybody if you tried. Nobody here in Haven, at any rate,” he assured her. “What’s the worst that could happen? Everybody stops practice fighting and stares at the Lady Herald? Cassandra challenges you to a duel? Cullen asks you to demonstrate the proper way to hold a sword pointy-end-up?”

The mention of Curly’s name seemed to increase the color in her face, which pretty much told Varric everything he needed to know. He wasn’t sure if he approved of the idea or not. Stories like these were really not good for heroes; they had a distressing tendency to either die young or live long enough to see the world turn against them. He’d witnessed enough of that for one lifetime. On the other hand, Eyebrows and Curly had both been through an awful lot already, in different ways. Maybe they could find something in each other that would do them both some good, at least for a little while. Of course, knowing Cullen, he was spending so much time engrossed in his work that he hadn’t even registered the Lady Herald’s name.

Victoria’s complexion regained most of its usual pallor as they walked, so Varric felt like he could give her a nudge without throwing her too far off balance. “Tell me something,” he said. “Just so that I know where all the pieces stand on this particular chessboard – you and Hunter are obviously our king and queen, but…”

She laughed, only a little nervously. “Mahanon? And me? No.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure Curly will be glad to hear that.”

“…who?”
“Cullen. You might have noticed that I don’t call people by their real names very often, except for Hawke. And Aveline, back in Kirkwall. I call him Curly because of that hair of his.”

“Oh. Wait, why would he…”

“Cassandra, of course, is the Seeker. And I’ve taken to calling Solas ‘Chuckles’ since he’s such a happy camper. I think Nightingale is a terror in her own right, but at least she’s on our side, and Ruffles could give any member of the Merchants’ Guild a run for their money in the diplomacy department.”

“Ruffles I get, but why Nightingale?” He could see she was still thinking about what he’d said, and trying very hard to act like she wasn’t thinking about it at all. [Editor's note: Oh, Eyebrows.]

“I met her once in Kirkwall,” he explained. “She arranged a clandestine meeting with Hawke and a few of the rest of us, and identified herself as Sister Nightingale. It sort of stuck in my mind. Plus, from what I’m given to understand, she used to sing in the Imperial Court of Orlais.”

“Everyone here is so interesting,” Victoria remarked, a little wistfully.

They opened the doors leading out to the yard and stood on the threshold of Haven for a few minutes, surveying the scene. Dozens of soldiers were going at one another with swords and shields, under Cullen’s watchful eye; off to one side, Cassandra was dealing death blows to the world’s most unfortunate training dummy. They approached her slowly; she let out one of her disgusted noises and spared them a nod before resuming her practice. After a moment, Victoria ventured a comment. “You’re kind of a force of nature, aren’t you?”

“When I need to be.”

“It’s impressive.”

“You’re flattering me.” Cassandra looked nothing short of suspicious.

“I’m trying.” Victoria seemed inclined to backpedal, however. She glanced across the field at Cullen, who was issuing orders to some of his men. Varric coughed.

“Why don’t we walk around a little. I don’t have as good a view from down here,” he said. Cassandra rolled her eyes but, to his surprise, didn’t make a sound. He practically pushed Victoria over toward Cullen, who was advising one of his lieutenants not to go easy on the trainees.

“We’ve received a number of recruits,” he told them by way of greeting as they approached. “Some locals from Haven and a few pilgrims. None made quite the entrance you did,” he added with a glance for Victoria.

“At least we got everyone’s attention,” she said dryly.

“That you did.” He started to walk between the tents, and she fell in step beside him; Varric trailed behind, watching their backs with an undisguised amusement they couldn’t even see. Curly was explaining to Victoria about how he’d been in Kirkwall for the start of the mage uprising, and had been recruited to the Inquisition from there by Cassandra herself. He was working himself into a slightly fevered pitch, the words tumbling out of his mouth as he soliloquized about how the Inquisition could act where the Chantry could not, and how the incoming followers would be part of the movement.

Abruptly, Cullen stopped himself and shook his head. “Forgive me,” he said. “I doubt you came here for a lecture.”
“No,” Victoria replied, “but if you’ve got one prepared, I’d love to hear it.”

Cullen chuckled. “Another time, perhaps.”

To Varric’s great surprise, and peculiar delight, Victoria tilted her head and smiled at the commander. The quirk of her lips was coy, even coquettish, and the sunlight on her normally plain features gave her a sudden unexpected sort of beauty that the dwarf was going to need the rest of the afternoon to adequately describe. Curly stammered a little, and coughed.

“There’s still a lot of work ahead of us,” he managed, even as one of his men approached.

“Commander,” said the runner, “Ser Rylen has a report about our supply lines.”

“As I was saying.” And as he walked away, it was Cullen’s turn for a tilt of the head and an almost impish smile. Victoria stared after him, lost in thought.

Varric chuckled to himself. This was going to be very interesting.

[Editor's note: And it was. But I get ahead of myself.]
Chapter Six: Few Against the Wind

Dearest Mother and Father,

I am well and safe. I pray that the Maker ensures you are likewise. In truth, I hardly know what to say. My heart is grieved for those who lost their lives at the Divine’s Conclave, most especially our relations and the Most Holy.

I can offer no explanation for how I survived. I’m not sure how much you’ve heard in the Free Marches, but a young Dalish man, Mahanon, and I are said to have been rescued from the Fade by Andraste Herself. They call us her Heralds, now, and we each bear a strange magic mark on one of our hands. Mine is on my left and his is on his right, so some people also call us the Left and Right Hands of Andraste, respectively. He is a good man, and has become my very dear friend; this would all be so much more difficult and bewildering if I were facing it alone, so I’m grateful that I was able to meet him before everything happened.

The situation is dire, though not all bad. I’ve been thrust into keeping company with some very unlikely people. The Left and Right Hands of the Divine are guiding this new Inquisition until a formal leader can be chosen, and they are both rather impressive, awe-inspiring women. Lady Montilyet, whose letter will accompany mine, is extremely elegant and well educated. Then there’s Cullen, formerly a Knight-Captain of the Templars in Kirkwall, who commands the military arm of the Inquisition; I’ve not yet gotten to know him well, but he is very skilled at what he does. I’ve even had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of one of my favorite authors, Varric Tethras, who has been particularly kind.

I will write again and tell you more about the rest of my new friends, but I must close here so that Josephine – Lady Montilyet – can send both of our letters as soon as possible. I hope you will give her request your greatest consideration. Your support will be invaluable.

I will continue to remember you all in my prayers daily. Please do the same for this Inquisition, for
it is truly the only hope Thedas has now.

Your loving and dutiful daughter,

Victoria

Hello, Sunshine!

Don’t know what you’ve heard about this Conclave business, but your favorite dwarf wasn’t there when the whole thing went to pieces. They’ve got me helping with the cleanup, though, and I feel like I’m going to be scrubbing demon guts off of Bianca for years to come.

You probably know about the two survivors of the whole thing, or at least you’ll have heard some of their story. We call them the Heralds of Andraste, but that’s just so formal and official-sounding that I think it makes them uncomfortable. Lady Victoria is a genteel, sword-swinging bookworm with an affinity for ex-Templars. You two would probably get on like a house on fire; hopefully I’ll get to introduce you sometime. Mahanon, the elf, has a great sense of humor, which is a relief because Cassandra still hasn’t grown one and Maker knows I need someone who appreciates my jokes. There’s another elf here too, a mage called Solas, who could easily give your brother-in-law a run for his money in the stoic department. (How is the broody one, anyway? Have you heard from him lately?) And I’m sure you remember Cullen – he was the Templar who came and escorted you the day you went to the Gallows. He’s running the army for us here. I hope you don’t hold a grudge; he’s turned out to be a pretty decent guy after all.

I hear from Aveline that your big sister had her take you out of Kirkwall. Unless my information is very off the mark, and if this letter has reached you then it isn’t, you’re sheltering under the protection of a certain choirboy prince while lending your aid to mage refugees in Starkhaven. I could wish you were helping the refugees here in Ferelden, but I’m not quite that selfish. It’s enough for me to know that you’re safe. Just don’t go accepting any royal marriage proposals until I’ve had the chance to properly threaten his life, there’s a good girl. And whatever it is you’re doing, be careful; those Fade rifts are said to be all over the place. I’m sure that as soon as we can arrange it, the Heralds will be more than happy to come and close any that are lingering in the Free Marches, but steer clear of the demons until they do.

I’d better end this here. Tomorrow we venture down into the Hinterlands in search of a Chantry priestess and some horses. If things ever get to be too sad or difficult for you, you can cheer yourself up by picturing me hiking, climbing, and sleeping on rocks. That should amuse you.

Love always,

Varric

To the Chantry Council of Heralds,

This letter is sent in formal protest of the formation of the Second Inquisition, as forged by the Left and Right Hands of the late exalted Divine Justinia V. I remain in Haven to provide spiritual advisement to the faithful here, as I see no reason to turn away those pilgrims who come to grieve at the site of our tremendous loss, and thus I am able to witness firsthand the extreme heresy and possible apostasy taking place.

My objections to this Inquisition are manifold, but I will try to outline them as briefly as I can. In the first instance, I fail to understand why Our Lady would select an elf as one of her Heralds. The
young noblewoman from the Free Marches is, at least, a devout Andrastian who regularly attends worship services in the Chantry here. The elf, however, shows no intention of renouncing his heathen beliefs in the Dalish pantheon and accepting the truth of the Maker. Surely that alone is proof that they cannot be what is being claimed of them, for how could the Maker permit such a thing?

Not content with corrupting merely the ages of tradition within the Chantry, these alleged Heralds have turned their attention to the Grey Wardens. Though most Wardens are curiously absent – perhaps wishing to remove the mages of their ranks from where they could be influenced by the war between mages and Templars – there has been one lone Warden working in Ferelden. The alleged Heralds located this individual, known as the respected Warden-Constable Blackwall, and brought him into their growing fold.

This growing fold is another point of contention. The alleged Heralds surround themselves not only with a continuously expanding roster of soldiers, but also with a smaller inner circle of closer companions who are more intimately privy to the truth of whatever they have planned. The Grey Warden is only the most recent individual so collected; Madame Vivienne de Fer, court enchanter to the Empress of Orlais, arrived here just last week to be part of the machinations. Her reputation precedes her, and I do not believe she can be trusted.

This is but a sampling of what I have witnessed and experienced since the forming of this Inquisition. I stand ready to serve as a witness when these alleged Heralds are finally brought to trial for the murder of thousands, and fervently hope that progress is being made in the search for a new Divine who will bring them to justice.

In service to the Maker and His Bride,

Grand Chancellor Roderick Asignon

Leliana, my treasured friend,

Words fail me. I can’t express how relieved and grateful I was to receive word that you weren’t present for the explosion at the Conclave. I’ve been heartsick since I heard of the catastrophe, but knowing that we didn’t lose you along with the Most Holy gives me some peace.

I’m so sorry for the loss of Divine Justinia. I know how personally dear she was to you. If I could be there in person to comfort you, I would be.

Word spreads across Thedas about this new Inquisition you and Lady Pentaghast are forming. I’m sorry that I’m not available to assist you with it; it sounds like a marvelous undertaking and I have the fullest faith that you’ll find a way to close the hole in the sky.

As ever, I can send no intelligence of my whereabouts, not least because we are moving quickly. Darrian and I have had only a few leads in our search, but while some have led nowhere, others have opened up new possibilities. Please continue to pray for our success; though I still cannot tell you the exact nature of our mission, believe me when I say that the lives of our brother and sister Wardens depend on it.

I don’t know what news you may have of our old friends, but Oghren sends his regards, as of course does Darrian. My “hand-selected elite,” as Alistair called them before we left, are all well. I’m sure you would like them; I hope that when our quest ends, you’ll get the chance to see that for yourself.
Nathaniel reminds me to conclude, as we need to break camp. I will have this delivered to the usual waypost where you’ve taught your runners to check for missives, and I’ll send word again when I can. My prayers are with you and your Inquisition.

I’m sure that if you send word to Alistair and ask him for support, he’ll do anything he can to help. Should you happen to speak to my King, assure him that he will hear from me soon, and that I love him still.

Ever your devoted friend,

Elissa Cousland Theirin

Queen and Warden-Commander of Ferelden
Came a Storm of Arrows

Chapter Summary

Enter the Chargers!

Chapter Notes

Krem is vastly underrated. It was a lot of fun to write from his point of view.

Chapter Seven: Came a Storm of Arrows

When Krem first arrived at Haven, he wasn’t entirely sure he stood any kind of chance of finding either of the people whom he’d been sent to seek. He didn’t know what he’d expected to see when he got there – a lot of Chantry folk, a couple pilgrims, some disenfranchised Templars maybe. The little village (well, what else could he call it?) that met his eyes was much bigger and busier than he would have guessed.

He began making inquiries to try to find his quarry, and it quickly turned into a game of Pass the Charger. A passing Chantry sister, whom he suspected misunderstood the question entirely, directed him to the forge. The blacksmith, who was almost too busy to even hear the question, suggested he speak with the weapons merchant. The weapons merchant advised him in a surly tone to visit the tavern. The pretty tavern mistress could only say for sure that the Heralds were gone to Val Royeaux, but she didn’t know why or when they might be back, so she recommended that he return to the outer practice area and speak with Commander Cullen.

The blond man appeared a little puzzled by Krem’s introduction, but his tone wasn’t unfriendly in the least. “I can’t really comment on the current activities of the Heralds,” he replied pleasantly, “but we’re certainly not in the business of turning away anyone interested in supporting our cause. Suppose you go into the Chantry and speak with our ambassador, Lady Montilyet? She can give you a better idea of when they might return.” He turned and pointed. “It’s the large building at the top of the hill. You’ll most likely find her inside the last room on the left.”

Lady Montilyet, to his relief, was exactly the person Krem needed. “I’ve heard of the Bull’s Chargers, of course,” she said in a tone of utmost politeness. “The Lord and Lady Herald have sent word from Val Royeaux that their return has been unavoidably delayed. A merchant arrived this morning to offer her services, with their blessing, and she brought a letter saying that they have a few loose ends to tie up, but we can expect them by the end of the week. If your leader can spare you so long…”

“Oh, no problem there. My orders are not to return until I’ve spoken with at least one of the Heralds personally.”
“Of course. Well, you are certainly welcome to await their arrival. I am uncertain where we might house you; it seems like the one thing we never have enough of is space for people to sleep. Perhaps Commander Cullen can fit you into one of the tents out in the barracks.”

“With all due respect, Your Ladyship, I’m perfectly used to sleeping outside. The Chargers aren’t any too fancy,” he replied. “I spotted a sort of courtyard off to one side of this building, where there’s some elfroot growing; with your permission, I’ll just camp out there until the Heralds come back, so I won’t be in anyone’s way.” Permission being granted, Krem set himself up comfortably on an abandoned pile of old straw. It was viciously cold in the Frostbacks – the mountains were well named – and it would be a challenge to keep his head out of the snow while he slept. But he’d manage.

It had taken him a little while to convince the Chief that signing on with this new Inquisition would be a good idea. “Demon assholes everywhere, Krem?” the big lump had muttered. “You want us to give up private contracting for nobles and fall in with this operation?”

“You can impale them on your horns,” Krem had responded.

“Probably not the cutting edge of Orlesian fashion, but it has a certain appeal.”

Krem thought it was the smartest thing they could do, really, and not just because closing the crazy hole in the sky was the best thing for everybody in Thedas. Hitching their wagon to the Inquisition would mean a steady supply of work for the Chargers. It was good public relations to have it be known that they’d had something to do with closing said crazy hole in the sky. It also afforded some good opportunities for the band; Stitches could pick up some new techniques from the Inquisition’s healer, they’d all have access to the services of a blacksmith at no cost, and fresh training was always good for mercenaries no matter how skilled. Plus, now that he had confirmed the fact that Haven possessed its own tavern, he could assure the others that there would be no shortage of off-duty entertainment.

The fact that the Iron Bull had conceded to the plan, however, almost certainly meant that he’d gotten permission from his higher-ups in the Qun. Krem didn’t care much about the Qun one way or the other, so long as nobody tried forcing it on him, but he understood that to them, the Bull was still “Hissrad” and he still had to send in reports. No doubt they wanted an inside perspective on the Inquisition; how useful the information would be to them, he couldn’t begin to know.

The day after Krem took up his post in Haven, he began to keep watch for the return of the Heralds. Their arrival was preceded by that of a young elf, with short-cropped yellow hair and a mildly crazed grin, who presented herself to the Inquisition council members. “I’m Sera. Met your glowy people in Val Royeaux and signed up.”

“Glowy people?” repeated Lady Montilyet.

“You know. The Herald thingies. Andraste’s hands.”

“Ah, yes. Quite. Well, welcome to Haven.”

“They should be here soon. Seemed to be heading this way when I left ‘em.”

“May I ask why you didn’t accompany them?”

“Had a few friends to see on the way. Plus, no more room on their horses.”

Krem was relieved. Sera’s arrival, and subsequent tenancy in the tavern, seemed to indicate that he
wouldn’t need to wait much longer for the Heralds themselves to put in an appearance. He poked around Haven, unobtrusively, trying to gain information about the assorted residents. Harritt the blacksmith was a taciturn man of few words, who by all appearances worked from sunup to sundown and expected the same commitment from his apprentices. Blackwall, the Grey Warden, seemed to be of similar disposition, which might account for why he tended to position himself near the smithy most of the day. The elven mage Solas was quartered near the healer’s hut, probably because he and the grumpy alchemist had worked together to save the Heralds’ lives after the Conclave explosion; Solas seemed to have more actual healing knowledge than the alchemist Adan, though Adan was clearly well educated in the various applications of herbs. Krem made a note to have Stitches consult with both men as much as possible.

On the second morning after Sera reached Haven, there was a sort of minor uproar announcing the return of Andraste’s Left and Right Hands. People were running to open the gates for their horses, barking at confused newcomers to get out of the way. Krem watched the proceedings from a distance, knowing that the Chief would want details of his first impressions.

The Lord Herald entered first, astride a massive red hart. It shook its huge antlers and let out an ungodly noise as it halted; those who had the misfortune to be too close covered their ears. A tall armored woman – Lady Pentaghast, if the Chief’s intelligence had been correct – sat behind him in the saddle, and made some token resistance before allowing him to help her dismount. Behind them came the Lady Herald, pulling off her helmet as she rode. Krem was temporarily blinded by the blaze of sunlight reflecting off of the armor of her magnificent barded charger, and for a moment he completely failed to notice the stocky beardless dwarf who shared the saddle with her. Both Heralds handed the reins of their mounts to nearby pages, who led them back to the stable while their riders turned to walk alongside Cullen and hear his report.

“The watchtowers are completed,” he was saying as they neared the Chantry, “so once you’ve dispatched the wolves per Master Dennet’s request, he should be willing to provide the horses as promised. If you can, try to persuade him to come to Haven himself – we could use an experienced hand to look after the mounts, especially that red hart of yours. There have been offers of other mounts as well, and not all of them are horses, but Dennet’s reputation indicates that he would be up to the task.”

“Will we have space for many more animals?” the Lady Herald wondered.

“We’ll have to make space. Those horses – and whatever else – are going to become increasingly necessary. We’ll work out something, don’t worry.”

“Very good. Thank you, Cullen.”

“I think you’d better ask the other advisors to join us in the war room,” said the Lord Herald. “We’ve brought back some strange tidings from Val Royeaux. Speaking of which, have our new friends arrived?”

“Madam Vivienne reached us a very short time after you attended her salon, from what she told us,” Cullen replied. “The merchant, Belle, got here a few days ago, and the young elf girl arrived the day after. Were there others?”

“Not as yet. Ah, I see Chancellor Roderick is still here.” The Lord Herald jutted his chin in the direction of the Chantry door, where a clergyman was ranting.

Cullen sighed. “Excuse me, please,” he said, and went to deal with the situation.

This was probably, Krem thought, his best chance to address the Heralds. “Excuse me,” he said,
making his way toward them. He was faintly amused; they weren’t related in the slightest, weren’t even the same race, but somehow the curious looks they wore when they turned toward him were nearly identical. “I’ve got a message for the Inquisition, but I’m having a hard time getting anyone to talk to me.”

Of course, that wasn’t true. But the Iron Bull had been very specific – deliver the message to the Heralds personally. Both if possible, but one at least. The Bull’s Chargers weren’t an ordinary mercenary band, and if they were welcomed, the Chief wanted to be reporting directly to the two people who were at the center of the whole thing. It was a small fabrication.

“When might you be, soldier?” asked the Lord Herald. His tone was friendly enough, Krem thought.

“Cremisius Aclassi, with the Bull’s Chargers mercenary company. We mostly work out of Orlais and Nevarra,” he explained. Both Heralds were from the Free Marches, so he thought the name might be unfamiliar to them; to judge by the Lady Herald’s expression, he was at least half right. “We got word of some Tevinter mercenaries gathering out on the Storm Coast. My company commander, Iron Bull, offers the information free of charge. If you’d like to see what the Bull’s Chargers can do for the Inquisition, meet us there and watch us work.”

“What can your Bull’s Chargers offer the Inquisition?” It was the Lady Herald’s turn to speak.

“We’re loyal, we’re tough, and we don’t break contracts. You’re welcome to ask around Val Royeaux; we’ve got references.”

“What should we know about your commander?”

“Iron Bull? He’s one of those Qunari. The big guys with the horns?” Krem smiled faintly. “He leads from the front, he pays well, and he’s a lot smarter than the last bastard I worked for. Best of all, he’s professional. We accept contracts with whoever makes the first real offer. You’re the first time he’s gone out of his way to pick a side.”

“Interesting,” said the Lord Herald. “So why did he send us this information?”

“Iron Bull wants to work for the Inquisition.” It was mostly true. “He thinks you’re doing good work. We’re the best you’ll find; come to the Storm Coast and you can see us in action.”

“It’s a generous offer,” mused the Lady Herald. “What do you think, Non?”

“We need all the help we can get. Creators know we’ve got enough work to do,” said the elf. “The Storm Coast – kind of a soggy place, isn’t it?”

Krem laughed at that. “Constantly raining, or so it seems. We’ve had some skirmishes there in the past; I honestly couldn’t tell you if it really is raining or if the spray of the sea just goes that far. But soggy is a good word for it.”

“T’ll tell you what,” said the Lord Herald, and he was speaking to them both. “We’ve only just returned, as you see, and we’ve got to rest our mounts and make some reports. But tell your commander that I’ll travel to the Storm Coast with a few of our friends in a day or two. As for you, my dear Lady Herald, you and a few of the others should go back to Redcliffe and deal with Dennet’s wolves.”

“Are you sure? You’re the hunter,” she said in what seemed like a joking tone.

“Yes, but you managed to catch something I didn’t.” He smirked. “You’ve got a cold. The Hinterlands are a lot warmer than the Frostbacks, and a lot drier than the Storm Coast. It’ll be
better for you to go there.”

As if by way of a response, the Lady Herald sneezed. “All right, point taken. Thank you, Ser Cremisius. I look forward to meeting your commander on another occasion.”

“Half’s better than none,” said the Iron Bull with a chuckle, once Krem finished delivering the intel. “Nice work, Krem. Sounds like we might have picked the right team.”

“And you doubted me when I first suggested it.”

“Maybe I just wanted you to think I doubted you.”

“Sure, Chief. Whatever lets you sleep at night.”
Heart That Is Broken Beats Still Unceasing

Chapter Summary

The Heralds each have some time with the Inquisition leaders who have caught their attention.

Chapter Notes

For those who don't have the DLC, the "Flames of the Inquisition" charger is a horse presented to the Inquisition by a group of armorers in Orlais. I decided to give a slightly altered explanation for why Toria rides it.

Chapter Eight: Heart That Is Broken Beats Still Unceasing

Victoria took a great deal of comfort from her acquaintance with Leliana.

It seemed like they weren’t often in Haven – there was still much to be done in the Hinterlands, and the scouts were beginning to bring back intelligence of disturbances in other parts of the continent as well. But whenever they were, Victoria made a point of stopping by the Orlesian woman’s tent at least once a day. She liked to hear about Leliana’s friendships with the Divine and the Queen of Ferelden, and accepted every time the spymaster invited her to join her in prayer.

“With everything that’s happened,” she confided on one such occasion, “I feel like my faith is possibly the only thing that hasn’t changed.”

“Oh, but you’re wrong,” came the warm reply. “Becoming the Left Hand of Andraste has changed your faith. It’s grown deeper; I have seen it.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

The conversation tended to linger in her mind at odd moments, a small bright spot on the days when her moods ran gray. It was, perhaps, at the back of her thoughts when she entered Leliana’s tent and found her angrily conversing with one of her agents.

“There were so many questions surrounding Farrier’s death,” she muttered. “Did he think we wouldn’t notice? He’s killed Farrier – one of my best agents – and knows where the others are.” She shook her head. “You know what must be done. Make it clean. Painless, if you can. We were friends once.”

“Wait!” Victoria blurted, and Leliana turned on her with a sharp expression. In spite of herself, she took half a step backward. “What are you doing?”

“He betrayed us! He murdered my agent!”
Exactly who ‘he’ was, Victoria had no way of knowing but she pressed anyway. “And you’d kill him? Just like that?”

“You find fault with my decision?” Leliana’s voice was cold.

“I’m sure most of your decisions are fine. But that one? A little extreme.”

“Extreme?! Butler’s betrayal put our agents in danger! I condemn one man to save dozens! I may not like what I do, but it must be done. I can’t afford the luxury of ideals at a time like this.”

It was Victoria’s turn to shake her head. “Now,” she insisted, “is precisely the time for ideals. And from what you’ve told me of her, I think you have another friend who would say the same thing.”

Leliana scowled, turning to look at her papers. “You feel very strongly about this,” she muttered, and sighed. “Very well. I will think of another way to deal with this man.” Turning back to her scout, she said, “Apprehend Butler, but see that he lives.”

The agent made a little bow and left the tent, and Leliana looked to Victoria again. “Now, if you’re happy, I have more work to do.”

Sensing that her welcome was thoroughly worn out for a little while, the Lady Herald only nodded, and made her way into the Chantry. She supposed she should be pleased by the small victory; she’d saved a man’s life. But he hardly seemed like he deserved it, if Leliana’s intelligence was accurate – which it usually was. Meanwhile, she’d been unable to save any of the worthy people who’d found death at the Conclave, and she couldn’t even remember why. Sure, the Haven residents had long since stopped blaming her and Mahanon for the tragedy, but the same couldn’t be said for everyone beyond the community’s borders. What if they were right? What if she was somehow at fault? Stopping the death of one traitor was hardly enough to atone for the murder of thousands.

The Haven Chantry wasn’t laid out quite like the familiar building where she’d worshiped in Ostwick. There were no windows, and no pews where the faithful could hear a cleric preach; Chancellor Roderick and a few other officials often conducted such services outside instead, where the light was better. Within the building, shadowed alcoves along the sides of the main chamber featured altars where one could light a candle or two and commune in silence. Madam Vivienne had actually taken up residence in one of these, insisting that it was the closest she could get in such a primitive place to any sort of true comfort. Victoria had adopted another as her personal favorite, and she sought its privacy now.

She always lit three candles. One was for penitence of any wrongdoing; one was for grief; and one was for appeal, pleading with Andraste and the Maker for some kind of guidance. With the three flames dancing before her, she knelt, and bowed her head.

How long she was at prayer, she wasn’t sure. But she extinguished her candles and exited the alcove just in time to run into Cullen, who was on his way back out of the building. “I saw you were in there and I didn’t want to disturb you,” he said, “but I did want to let you and the Lord Herald know that Master Harritt has finished with the repairs to your armor. Both sets have been delivered to your quarters.”

“Oh – thank you. Forgive my surprise, but it’s not the sort of news I would have expected you to deliver yourself.”

“I was going to send a messenger,” he admitted. “But I only received word of it myself as I was on
my way here to meet with Josephine.”

She nodded, not having much of anything to say to that, and fully expected him to leave her once they exited the building. To her surprise, however, as she started down the hill to the stable, he seemed inclined to follow. “If you don’t mind my prying,” he said, “are you… all right? Usually you look very calm after you’ve been at the altar, but today you’re a bit distressed.”

“I – well – you’re kind to inquire. To be honest,” she said after a flustered moment, “I keep thinking about the Conclave. The explosion. Mine is a very large family, and several members are part of the Chantry. I lost a lot of cousins that day, and even if I’m not to blame, it still weighs on my mind.”

“I quite understand.” He nodded. “I used to be a Templar, you know. Several of my former comrades died in the explosion too. And I had already seen too many of them die on previous occasions. It’s painful, I know. It gets easier with time – I used to think that people lied when they said that, but it really is true. But it’s also true that the pain never really goes away.”

She returned the nod. “You were in Kirkwall, weren’t you?”

“I was. I knew the Champion, and I was there the day the Chantry was demolished. It was… nightmarish.”

Victoria’s barded charger was enjoying the sunlight, being admired by a few of the residents, and he nickered and trotted over to her when she came into view. She patted the long nose and fed him a bit of stray elfroot from her belt pouch. “We’ll be off adventuring again soon, I promise,” she said.

“He’s a handsome beast,” Cullen allowed. “Have you named him?”

“Falon.” She smiled. “I couldn’t think of anything suitable in the common tongue, but Mahanon’s been teaching me a little bit of Dalish – I’m not sure Solas approves, but I consider it a compliment. Anyway, he suggested Falon. It’s their word for friend; you might have heard the name Falon’Din, their god of the dead. His name basically means ‘friend of the dead.’ This fellow is my friend.”

“That’s a fine name. You know, I still don’t know how we managed to attract the attention of those armorers so fast, that they would send this gift.”

“Oh, I did get an answer to that, actually.” She smiled. “One of my many other cousins was behind it, according to the letter I received from my father. Flavio is one of the few in my family who isn’t in service to the Chantry in some way; his mother married an Orlesian noble. Trevelyan women do one of three things, usually,” she explained. “Either we marry well, or we become Chantry sisters, or we become Templars.”

“But you didn’t?”

“I almost became a Templar, but I was honestly hoping to join the Seekers of Truth instead. Just as well, I suppose, all things considered.” She leaned against the rail. “I’d like to know a little more about you. I mean, about Templars.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have much time to discuss it at present, but I’d be happy to answer your questions a bit later,” he offered. They left Falon to his equine activities and began making their way around the paddock to the smithy, pausing to exchange pleasantries with the Iron Bull, who had stationed his Chargers nearby.
“Afternoon, Lady Boss. Commander.”

“How are you settling in, Bull? Do your men need anything?”

“So far, so good,” the Qunari replied amiably. “Stitches is off with that Adan fellow of yours, discussing tourniquets or something like that. Most of the rest of the boys are down there practicing with your regular troops; I think Krem’s going to herd them back for lunch soon. It’s a nice place, Haven – I didn’t expect it to be so welcoming.”

“Speaking of the troops, I should return to my duties,” said Cullen. “I’ll see you both at the evening meal, I imagine.” He nodded to each of them in turn, and Victoria was left admiring the length of his stride as he followed the path down the hill.

The Iron Bull chuckled after a moment. “I prefer redheads, myself,” he remarked, “but the lady has taste.”

She felt herself turn scarlet again. “Is it that obvious?” she managed, finally.

“In bits. Ben-Hassrath, don’t forget.” He’d been very forthcoming with both Heralds about his double duty providing information for his superiors in Par Vollen. “I’m good at reading people, whether they want to be read or not.” He stretched, rolling the muscles under his broad shoulders. “Besides, the Boss mentioned it when he first brought us back here from the Storm Coast. I guess that was his way of warning me off.” He chuckled. “Came right after I mentioned my partiality for redheads… mm, redheads.”

Startled out of her embarrassment, Victoria laughed too.

Mahanon, for his part, was talking with Cassandra as Cullen returned to the field. He attempted to wave to the commander, but as the blond man was almost immediately accosted by one of the Inquisition’s numerous runners, he doubted that he’d even been seen. “They certainly do keep him busy,” he commented.

“Cullen buries himself in his work,” Cassandra observed. “There is a great deal of pain in his past; he tries to dull it with duty.”

“You’ve discussed this with him, I take it.”

“Just enough for us to understand one another, and call each other friend.”

“A former Templar and a Seeker of Truth. That’s a formidable alliance.”

She smiled faintly. “No more so than that of the Left and Right Hands of Andraste, I should think.”

“You have a point there.”

They were quiet for a minute or two, watching the clash of weaponry around them. “It occurs to me,” said Cassandra at length, “that I don’t actually know that much about you. Either of you,” she amended, including the absent Victoria.

“I’ll let our friend speak for herself another time. But what would you like to know about me?”

“I know you are from the Free Marches, and of course you are a Dalish elf. You hunt for your clan, I am told?”
“Yes. I belong to Clan Lavellan. My clan’s Keeper – our leader – asked me to attend your Conclave and report back on the decisions made there. Obviously, things didn’t quite go according to plan.”

“You have the Dalish tattoos on your face,” she remarked, “but I admit I don’t know what they mean.”

“This? The tree emblem represents Mythal,” he explained. “She is the bride of Elgar’nan, the mother of most of the other Creators. She is our goddess of motherhood, and of justice. She lends her protection to my people in times of need.”

“And the...” She gestured.

“We call it vallaslin – blood writing. When a Dalish elf comes of age, he or she selects the Creator to be honored in this way. They spend time in meditation and purification, and then the Keeper of the clan applies the vallaslin in a sacred ritual.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes, but we have to hold our tongues – crying out in pain is considered a sign that one is not ready for the trials of adulthood.” Mahanon chuckled ruefully. “Of course, the design chosen also determines how painful it is; some are more complex than others. It’s a very important step for us; we are eligible for marriage, a voice in the clan. Most of us are already learning a craft or skill by then, but a hunter – like me – is expected to make his or her first real kill around the same time as the vallaslin ritual. It’s all part of the rite of passage.”

“I admit, my understanding of your culture is minimal,” Cassandra conceded. “I should, perhaps, remedy that.”

“On matters of faith, you’ll find you have a lot more in common with Lady Victoria,” he said. “But if you want to learn more about the Dalish, I’ll be happy to answer any questions you might have. In return, though, I want to know more about you.”

She fixed him with a sharp gaze. “And what do you want to know?”

“The basics, at least. Whatever you’re comfortable sharing.”

“I was born in Nevarra.” Cassandra seemed to find it easier to speak while walking, not looking him in the eye, and he cooperatively strode beside her. They paced a lazy circle around the training field, ultimately making their way out to the frozen lake and gazing at the halted waterfall on its far side.

The Seeker was more forthcoming than Mahanon had expected. She spoke of her background as a member of Nevarra’s sprawling royal family, the execution of her parents following a failed rebellion, and her upbringing by her uncle. (A Mortalitasi, she called him. Someone whose work involved preparing the dead for what follows.) She was like a flask of water which had suddenly come uncorked; the words flowed from her lips, and he wondered how long she’d been quietly wishing for someone to listen. As they walked along the shoreline, frozen weeds crunching beneath their boots, she gave him a brief accounting of how she became the Right Hand of the Divine; he sensed she didn’t much like discussing the events. But the only time her voice betrayed any real emotion was when she spoke of Anthony, her brother, who was dead. She would, she said, rather talk about him another time.

“You loved him a great deal,” he observed.

“He was kind, and had a good heart,” she replied, a touch stiffly. “Yes, I loved him. He taught me
to fight in secret, and promised that he would take me to see the world, that we would fight dragons together.”

“I envy you a little. I never had siblings,” he clarified. “Growing up in a Dalish clan means that you have many brothers and sisters of a sort, but there were none with whom I shared parents, and none to whom I was as close as you were to your brother.” He paused thoughtfully. “I hadn’t thought about it, but I suppose… out of everyone I’ve ever known, Victoria comes closest to being that for me.”

“She’s the youngest of four children, with several cousins.” He nodded.

“I wonder what they would say to her having an elf for a brother.”

Mahanon did a double take. Cassandra, he realized, was eyeing him sidelong, with the smallest lift at the corners of her mouth. “Did you just make a joke?” he asked incredulously. “Seeker, I am impressed! I didn’t know you had it in you!”

Her laugh was throaty and rich, and fell on his ears like a warm spring rain.
Chapter Summary

You know what this story lacks? Dorian. Let's fix that.

Chapter Notes

I adore this character; I just hope I do him justice. Also, the concept of Genitivi's rescue taking place on Lake Calenhad was something I originally fleshed out in my first DA fic, "Shadow and Rose," and I liked the idea so much that I recycled it here. I hope no one minds.

Chapter Nine: By Blood and Lyrium

Dorian was not at all impressed with the Gull and Lantern.

That Fereldan hospitality was less than effervescent came as no real surprise, of course. Even if he hadn’t already been painfully aware of the lack of refinement to be expected from the southern half of the continent, all of the ongoing conflicts between mages and Templars had the people very much on edge, and even more unwilling than usual to be terribly welcoming to foreigners appearing in their midst. Naturally, the recent trauma of the Conclave’s destruction – happening as it did in the country’s own mountain range – would easily answer for any additional crudeness or hostility. He understood, and was prepared to make generous allowances for the situation at hand. The Altus was considerate that way.

No, it was this singular establishment which he found mildly intolerable. That the surly innkeeper was reluctant to accept a Vint’s custom, he had anticipated and bore without particular resentment. Natural enough, in its way. He also recognized, just as his host was forced to do, that the current political climate did not make it an auspicious time for traveling, and Redcliffe was hardly the most fashionable of destinations besides. The innkeeper was in no position to turn away a guest who could pay good coin for his lodgings and meals, however unwelcome said guest’s cultural heritage might be. Thus, Dorian had been escorted to what the innkeeper’s wife insisted was their finest suite of rooms.

He quickly discerned that she was telling the truth, and that was the part which didn’t impress him. He supposed it was acceptable. The bed was clean, the curtains were new, and there were even a few decent books on the shelf (mostly Genitivi, but everyone read Genitivi). He didn’t really expect Rivaini silks or Antivan brandy to be in steady supply, but he would have thought that a decent wine wasn’t too much to ask. But no, what Ferelden had in spades was beer. Beer as brown as the dirt that seemed to make up much of the country’s landscape, and tasting rather like that was the primary ingredient.
And what was worse, he was starting to like it.

Dorian had come to Ferelden in search of one Magister Gereon Alexius, his former mentor. Felix, the man’s son, had alerted Dorian as soon as he decently could that things were quickly going south, both literally and physically. His father had allied himself to some mysterious figure called the Elder One, and this Elder One had need of a large supply of magical power. King Alistair, the soft-hearted ruler of Ferelden, had recently offered asylum in his country to the disenfranchised mages who had voted for their independence from the Circle but were not actively fighting the Templars, and it seemed that Alexius was pursuing them thither. Exactly what this Elder One was plotting, even Felix didn’t know, but he knew it wasn’t good and he knew that Dorian stood perhaps a better chance of stopping it than anyone else. As Alexius’s former pupil, he was aware of the time-manipulating magic the magister possessed; he had helped to develop it. What he hadn’t realized was that Alexius had made it more than theoretical. Joining that kind of magic to the large source of ability provided by the mages… the Elder One clearly wanted to change something in history. The question was, what?

He began to piece things together, slowly gathering bits of information. Overheard gossip near the inn’s hearth by evening, scrabbles and shreds of news circulating the village by day. (Felix brought him what intelligence he could, though escaping Alexius’s notice grew more difficult by the day; poor boy was looking dreadful. Damn the darkspawn.) More and more details emerged. Wolves had ceased to attack the outlying farms; watchtowers were being erected at strategic points. Errant mages and violent Templars were being brought to heel all across the Hinterlands, while refugees were being shown common decency and kindness, with food and healing.

Alone in his room, Dorian sifted carefully through all of the information, separating the wheat from the chaff. One word, he soon discovered, seemed to be on everyone’s lips; even the small briefings which Felix managed to smuggle to him often centered around the same thing. The Inquisition had reformed, and was at the heart of all the heroics – as well as the focus of the Elder One’s ire.

Which meant, Dorian reasoned, that it was exactly where he needed to be too.

He began to make discreet inquiries, but they availed him little. No one was willing to educate the Vint about their precious Heralds of Andraste; Maker only knew what sort of nefarious plot he might have in store for them. Felix, at least, was able to bring him better tidings on that score. “She’s a human noble from Ostwick; he’s a Dalish elf from the Free Marches forests. They fight crime.” He still had his sense of humor, bless the boy.

During his days in Redcliffe, Dorian grew fond of taking a daily constitutional – weather permitting, of course – along the shores of Lake Calenhad. In part, it was because he enjoyed watching the swarthy young fishermen bring in their catches and hoist the trawls from the water. He always did like eating the eye candy, so to speak. But it was also a matter of historical interest. Even in Tevinter, they had heard the story of how the Hero of Ferelden (not the Queen, the other one) and some of his companions had rescued Brother Genitivi from the clutches of a bloodthirsty cult, and had rowed him to the safety of old Redcliffe Castle. This was before the structure had been half demolished, of course, and he had studied the ruins for some time to see just where the lowest levels had opened directly onto the lake to allow boats to sail into the private harbor. The cult had been housed in the mountain village of Haven, where the Inquisition was now headquartered, and the Warden and his friends had managed to traverse nearly the full length of Lake Calenhad in a single night. It amused him to imagine their frenzied rowing, and how the sight of the sun rising over the castle ramparts must have given them hope.
It was while taking one of these walks that Dorian realized the mage population of the village had increased exponentially, and in a very short period of time. However oblivious an ordinary person might choose to be to the presence of a mage, they could always identify one another, and it did not long escape his notice that there were a lot more robed individuals wandering around with large magical staves on their backs. Whatever Alexius and the Elder One were planning, it was moving closer to achieving fruition, which meant that he didn’t have much time to lose.

“Dorian!”

“Felix, what in Andraste’s name is going on around here? Suddenly I’m tripping over a mage every time I turn around. Is this your father’s doing?”

“I’m afraid so.” His countryman grimaced. “I can’t be completely sure, but I think he’s used the time travel magic, Dorian. The Grand Enchanter – Fiona – met with the Heralds when they were in Val Royeaux, and he went back in time to prevent it.”

“He did what? Maker’s breath, you mean it works?”

“In a limited fashion, yes.” Felix’s breathing was a bit labored. “This Elder One wants to use it to stop the Heralds from doing… something. Becoming the Heralds, I suppose. Or maybe from being born at all.”

“Monstrous. It was never meant to be put to such a use. Why is your father going along with this?”

“From what I’ve overheard… it’s something to do with me.” He looked heartsick. “This Elder One has Father convinced that if he does what he wants, he’ll cure me.”

“Oh, Felix…”

“Never mind that. Father’s squatting in Redcliffe Castle with the mages; he’s more or less subjugated them, somehow, and thrown out the arl. I can’t be gone long, you know how he is. But I wanted to warn you – he’s asked the Heralds to meet him at the inn where you’re staying. You’ll want to keep out of sight, of course, but this can’t be good.”

“Why does he want to meet with them?”

“Well, he knows that they need mages, and he’s pretending to offer the services of Fiona and her followers. What he’ll really do… I almost don’t want to imagine.” Felix sighed. “I just want to go home.”

“All right,” said Dorian after a moment, “we’ll need to find a way to get their attention. The Heralds, I mean. They’re going to need my help, and they’ve got to be made aware of the danger.”

Felix was Magister Alexius’s only child, and the heir to everything he was and owned. A grievous misfortune had befallen the Alexius family, however; Felix and his mother had been traveling by carriage when their party was beset by darkspawn. The end of the Fifth Blight had driven many of the monstrosities back underground, but not all, and reports of roving bands were not unheard of even in Tevinter. Felix’s mother was killed in the skirmish, and Felix himself had contracted the relentless sickness of the darkspawn. With every passing day, he was turning more and more into a ghoul. Magic and healing potions helped to slow the process, but his death was imminent, and Dorian could only imagine how much it was destroying the father to watch his son slowly succumb. Yes, his desperation made him the perfect target for this Elder One.

Knowing that the arrival of the Heralds was approaching, Dorian quietly concluded his tenancy at
the Gull and Lantern, so as to avoid his old mentor’s detection. He relocated to the Redcliffe Chantry, and Felix would find a way to pass on the message to the Heralds that they should join him there. He could explain everything then.

Of course, he hadn’t expected to find a Fade rift inside the Chantry, although it certainly explained why the townspeople were avoiding it. That the rift was affected by Alexius’s time destabilization was clear enough; what was less clear was how long he could expect to hold off a demon invasion on his own. He was moderately stupendous, but even he had his limits. Fortunately, the Heralds didn’t make him wait too long.

They had questions; once the rift was dispelled and the demons banished, he had answers, though he wasn’t without questions of his own. “Fascinating,” he said thoughtfully, when the rift was sealed. “How does that work, exactly?” Glancing at their hands, he chuckled, not waiting for an answer. “You don’t even know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers, and boom! Rift closes.” To be fair, of course, neither of them was a mage – just a pair of what he imagined must be very confused non-magical people.

Introductions were made. Lord Herald Mahanon was handsome and well-built, quick with his knives and a sharp wit to match. Victoria, the Lady Herald, was softer and sweeter, less sure of herself alone but stronger with the elf standing close. There was a sort of tandem to their movements, Dorian thought, a sameness despite their differences, which could perhaps be attributed to the shared magic on their hands.

Refreshingly, they didn’t seem to consider his Tevinter background to be a reason not to trust him, although he wasn’t sure he could say the same of their companions. There was a thick-bearded Grey Warden with a taciturn expression; a slender, suspicious-eyed woman of noble bearing; a crossbow-wielding dwarf with an impressive display of chest hair; and a battle-scarred Qunari with an eyepatch and more muscles than any sane man would know how to use. From what little Dorian had managed to learn about the Inquisition, this didn’t even comprise the entire ‘inner circle,’ as the Heralds’ closest companions were described.

He sketched out the situation for them as best he could, explaining that it was magic which had allowed Alexius to circumvent their efforts to recruit the mages. They caught on quickly, he noted approvingly; they’d probably had to accept a lot of seemingly impossible things in a very short period of time. “You’re asking us to take a lot on faith,” commented Mahanon.

“I know what I’m talking about. I helped develop this magic,” he said, somewhat ruefully. “It’s wildly unstable, and it’s unraveling the world. When I was still his apprentice, it was pure theory – Alexius could never get it to work. But what I don’t understand is why he’s doing it. Ripping time to shreds just to gain a few hundred lackeys?” Of course, there was the Felix factor, but he was hesitant to mention that.

“He didn’t do it for them,” said a new voice, and Felix joined the group, nodding at the Heralds. “Took you long enough. Is he getting suspicious?”

“No, but I shouldn’t have played the illness card. I thought he’d be fussing over me all day.” Felix sighed. “My father’s joined a cult – Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves ‘Venatori.’ And I can tell you one thing,” he added. “Whatever he’s done for them, he’s done it to get to the two of you.”

“Flattering,” Mahanon deadpanned.

“Alexius is your father,” Victoria interjected. “Why are you working against him?”
“For the same reason Dorian works against him. I love my father, and I love my country,” said Felix. “But this? Cults? Time magic? What he’s doing now is madness. For his own sake, you have to stop him.”

“It would also be nice if he didn’t rip a hole in time,” Dorian added dryly. “There’s already a hole in the sky.”

“So why does he want us?” asked Mahanon. “Why would he rearrange time and indenture the mage rebellion just to get to us?”

“They’re obsessed with you, but I don’t know why,” Felix admitted. “Perhaps because you survived the Temple of Sacred Ashes?”

“The two of you can close the rifts,” Dorian mused. “Maybe there’s a connection. Or maybe they see you as a threat.”

“If the Venatori are behind those rifts, or the hole in the sky, then they’re even worse than I thought.” Felix shook his head.

Victoria pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“You know you’re his target,” Dorian pointed out. “Expecting the trap is the first step toward turning it to your advantage. I can’t stay in Redcliffe – Alexius doesn’t know I’m here, and I want to keep it that way for now.” He sighed. “Whenever you’re ready to confront him, I want to be there. I’ll be in touch. And Felix? Try not to get yourself killed.”

He headed to the back of the Chantry, to the storeroom, where a rear exit was much less visible to anyone who might be watching. It would take him a little time to get out of the village, and find a way to Haven, but perhaps he could take his cues from the stories of the Hero of Ferelden. He just needed a boat, and a compass.
Neither Man Nor Maker Shall Forget Your Bravery

Chapter Summary

"In Hushed Whispers" and "Champions of the Just," because why choose when you can have both?

Chapter Notes

And the last companion joins the crew. I fully expected to dislike Cole when I played the game; I ended up really loving him.

Chapter Ten: Neither Man Nor Maker Shall Forget Your Bravery

If he were completely honest with himself, Cullen would have to admit to being somewhat biased on the subject of mages versus Templars.

It was true that he’d witnessed firsthand the worst of what both groups could be or become. He’d seen the corruption of mages in Kinloch Hold, back in Ferelden; then, in Kirkwall, he’d experienced the steady increase of Knight-Commander Meredith’s madness and paranoia. There were innocents on both sides, and guilty on both sides as well, and he was more than willing to acknowledge that. Nevertheless, it should be confessed that, given the choice, he would rather seek out the aid of the Templars in closing the Breach rather than that of the mages.

It had been the Lady Herald, when she spoke in his presence for the first time, who had initially proposed the idea of consulting with both sides. Perhaps, he thought, she took the idea from the way the Heroes of Ferelden had tackled certain parts of their quest to halt the Fifth Blight; according to the formal account, they had divided up their company on a few occasions in order to save time. The future Queen had led half the entourage into the Brecilian Forest, to deliver the Grey Warden treaty to the Dalish clans; her elven counterpart had led the other half to Haven, where the Inquisition now resided, to rescue Brother Genitivi from the dragon-worshiping cult which had kidnapped him. If this was indeed Victoria’s line of thinking, Cullen couldn’t really fault her for looking to that historical record for her inspiration. After all, history did seem to be repeating itself, pairing a human noblewoman with an elven man for a higher purpose. The Maker, it was sometimes alleged, had a sense of humor.

He, Cullen, wasn’t entirely in favor of the plan. ‘Divide and conquer’ might seem like a good idea in theory, but the practice could sometimes be another matter altogether. Separating the Heralds didn’t strike him as being the best way to go about things; they were individually able to control minor rifts, and each was a capable fighter in their own right, but no one – least of all the Heralds themselves – was inclined to deny that they were at their most effective when they stood together. Apart from anything else, they appeared to draw a distinct comfort from one another’s proximity, and while they were developing separate friendships with the assorted members of the so-called ‘inner circle,’ there was a bond between the Heralds that seemed to defy description.
What actually forced the matter was simply this: the enemy was attempting to divide and conquer, and it seemed advisable to beat this Elder One to the punch.

A message arrived from Magister Alexius, inviting Lady Trevelyan – and only Lady Trevelyan – to rendezvous with him at Redcliffe Castle and discuss his offer to allow the Inquisition to ‘borrow’ the mages. The Lord Herald was omitted entirely from the handsomely inscribed parchment, as though he didn’t exist at all. “It’s a trap, of course, like Dorian said,” Victoria remarked mildly after reading the missive. “Perhaps the best response is to spring the trap… with live bait.”

“We don’t have the manpower to take the castle!” Cullen protested. “Either we find another way in, or give up this nonsense and go get the Templars!”

“Redcliffe is in the hands of a magister,” Cassandra countered. “This cannot be allowed to stand.”

“A Tevinter magister controls Redcliffe, invites us to the castle to talk, and some of us want to do nothing.” Leliana shook her head.

Josephine sighed. “Not this again.”

“We have to come to an agreement,” said Mahanon. “We’ll never get anywhere if we keep arguing among ourselves.”

“Redcliffe Castle,” Cullen persisted, “is one of the most defensible fortresses in Ferelden. It has repelled thousands of assaults.” He gazed around the room at them, confused as to why they couldn’t understand. Recruiting the Templars made so much more sense to him in every respect; perhaps it was a case of ‘better the devil you know,’ but he just felt it was the wiser option.

Besides, throwing the Lady Herald into an obvious trap didn’t sit well with him at all. He looked at her intently. “If you go in there, you’ll die,” he said, “and we’ll lose our only hope of closing the Breach. I won’t allow it.” Why that made her turn pink, he wouldn’t allow himself to ponder.

“And if we don’t even try to meet Alexius,” Leliana objected, “we lose the mages and leave a hostile foreign power on our doorstep!”

“Even if we could assault the keep, it would be for naught.” Josephine punctuated the air with her quill as she spoke. “An ‘Orlesian’ Inquisition’s army marching into Ferelden would provoke a war. Our hands are tied.”

“The Templars must help us close the Breach,” Cullen said firmly. “The order was founded to fight magic!”

“We would first have to convince the Lord Seeker to bring the Templars out of exile,” Leliana reminded him. “That might not be any easier than breaching the defenses at Redcliffe.”

“There has to be a way.” Victoria was rubbing the spot between her eyes.

“There is,” said Mahanon, and they all looked at him. “You suggested it yourself, back when we first convened in this room. We appeal to the mages and the Templars.”

“And how do we possibly do that?” Cassandra didn’t appear as frustrated as Cullen felt, but her expression was clearly perplexed.

“I do know a thing or two about bringing down prey,” said the Dalish hunter. “First things first –
other than the main gate, there’s got to be another way into the castle. Maybe a sewer, or a water
supply?"

“There’s nothing I know of that would work,” Cullen replied.

“Wait.” Leliana lifted her head. “There is a secret passage into the castle, an escape route for the
family. It’s too narrow for our troops, but we could send agents through.”

“How do you know about this?”

“Don’t forget where I was during the Blight – and with whom,” she said with an arch little smile.
“The Heroes of Ferelden and those of us who accompanied them used the passage, with Arl
Teagan’s help, in order to get inside the castle. The windmill at one end has been badly damaged,
but the passage itself remains intact.”

“But the castle isn’t the same as it was back then, is it?” asked Victoria.

“No – but I have it on good authority that the tunnel was accordingly rerouted to allow access to
the new residence.”

Cullen almost inquired what authority she meant, and then he remembered. Of course, the Queen
of Ferelden would have been advised of such a thing; King Alistair considered Arl Teagan to be his
honorary uncle, and the royal couple had probably visited Redcliffe Castle. Still… He shook his
head. “It’s too risky. Those agents will be detected long before they reach Alexius.”

“That’s why we need a distraction… perhaps the envoy Alexius wants so badly?”

“And meanwhile,” said Mahanon, “we divide and conquer.”

“We’ve received word from a knight recruit that the Templars have massed at the old fortress of
Therinfal Redoubt,” Cullen told him.

“It has been vacant for decades,” said Cassandra, still puzzled. “Why go there?”

“We must approach the Lord Seeker if we are to get anywhere,” said Josephine, shrugging. “We
can ask him then.”

Mahanon bent over the war table, studying the map. “If we present a plan to seal the Breach, the
Templars may ally with us.”

Josephine was starting to smile. “If it’s status the Lord Seeker seeks, the Inquisition will approach
him after allying with the noblest houses in Orlais.”

“We send the Lord Herald to Therinfal Redoubt,” said Leliana, nodding, “accompanied by some of
those Orlesian nobles. They’ll demand that the Templars help us close the Breach.”

“Even the Lord Seeker would find it difficult to ignore so many nobles on his doorstep,” said
Cassandra, now smiling too.

“And the Lady Herald, meanwhile, journeys to Redcliffe Castle and gives the impression of
negotiating with Alexius,” Cullen mused. “It’s a gamble, but it might work.”

Before anyone could say anything else, the chamber door swung open, and an unfamiliar mage
with an extravagant mustache swaggered into the room. “Fortunately,” he said, “you’ll have help.”
He was trailed by one of Cullen’s men, whose expression was apologetic even as he explained that
the mage claimed to have useful information.

“Your spies,” said the newcomer, “will never get past Alexius’s magic without my help. So if you’re going after him, I’m coming along.”

Victoria surprised them all by laughing, and waving away the baffled soldier. “This is Dorian Pavus of Minrathous,” she said, “the gentleman we described meeting in the Redcliffe Chantry. It’s all right, he’s on our side.”

Cullen wondered how she could be so sure of that. He studied her for a moment, letting his eyes wander over the curves of her expressive face. “The plan puts you in the most danger,” he told her. “We can’t in good conscience order you to do this – we can still go after just the Templars, if you’d rather not play the bait. It’s up to you.” He was a little surprised at just how much he wanted her to be safe.

She held his gaze, her cheeks still pink, and shook her head. “Mahanon’s right. This is the best course of action,” she said. “You have two Heralds. That’s got to be for a reason, doesn’t it?”

The companions of the ‘inner circle’ were called upon to help decide who would form which party. Not entirely unlike Dorian, whose motives were apparently driven by his previous association with Alexius, Cassandra thought it incumbent upon her to accompany Mahanon to Therinfal Redoubt, and perhaps persuade the Lord Seeker to see some kind of reason.

“We don’t want to antagonize either Magister Alexius or the Lord Seeker by bringing a large force,” Cullen told them, as they stood in a wide circle around the war room. “Cassandra is going with the Lord Herald, and the Lady Herald will have Dorian in the shadows until there’s no choice but to reveal his presence. I think if two of you volunteer to go to Redcliffe and two more to go to Therinfal, that will be a sufficient presence; Leliana’s agents and my soldiers will provide any additional support. The rest of you can stay here and continue to help us defend Haven.”

“I’ll go with Eyebrows,” said Varric, almost immediately. Cullen had observed that the dwarf was, in his own way, rather fond of the young woman, and the way she smiled down at him when he spoke indicated that it was mutual. “This story’s no good for heroes, I keep telling you, but I still want to see how it ends.”

“I think I’ll come too,” said Blackwall, breaking his usual silence. “An extra sword arm never goes amiss, and if I can help to protect the Lady Herald, I will.”

“I appreciate it, Blackwall,” she said in her gentle way. Cullen, privately, did too.

It was decided that Solas and Sera would accompany Mahanon and Cassandra. Madam de Fer and the Bull’s Chargers would remain on hand in Haven, though they could be sent to join either party if some emergency arose. All that they awaited was the arrival of confirmation from the Orlesian nobles that they would be assisting in the matter as planned, and both groups would depart for their respective destinations. “It should be a fairly quick matter; our runners are the best in Thedas, or so Leliana likes to remind me. Until then,” Cullen advised, “I’d recommend getting some rest and making sure your equipment is in optimal condition.”

They splintered off after the meeting, trickling out into the settlement in one direction or another. The Heralds lingered behind briefly, and Cullen watched from a distance as Victoria introduced Dorian to Varric. “There’s still a few vacant places to sleep around here,” he heard her say. “Varric, do you think you can find him a spot? Adan might have some room.”
“I’ll take care of it, Eyebrows, don’t worry. C’mon, Sparkler. Kirkwall this isn’t, but it could be worse.”

“You’ll forgive me if I entertain a few doubts on that score,” Dorian retorted, following him down the hill. “And – Sparkler? Seriously?”

Victoria chuckled, then sighed. She leaned against a wall, folding her arms and looking up at Mahanon. “This feels strange,” she admitted. “This is going to be the first time since we met that we’ll really be separated. We’ve been together for weeks and now…” She gestured aimlessly.

“I’ve grown accustomed to your face,” Mahanon teased her. More seriously, he added, “Just… be careful. If even half of what we’ve heard about Alexius and these Venatori is true, you could be in terrible danger.”

“Nonny, it might have escaped your notice,” she said wryly, “but we’ve both been in constant danger almost since we got off the ship. I’m kind of used to it at this point.”

Cullen suddenly realized he was spying on them – but they were so close to the entrance that he couldn’t figure out how to get past them without looking like he’d been doing exactly that. He was watching, and doing his level best to act like he wasn’t, as they spoke quietly to one another; the pitch of their voices had dropped to such that he could no longer hear the words. The green light crackled across their palms, giving a sickly illumination to their unusual intimacy.

They were the Heralds of Andraste. No one else would ever be to them what they were to each other.

“Good news,” said Josephine, four days later. “Several noble Orlesian houses will petition the Templars to help us stop the Breach. Lord Abernache and several others will meet the Lord Herald and his party at Therinfal Redoubt.”

“This is it, then,” Cullen replied. “Heralds, are you ready?”

“As ready as we can be, I suppose,” Victoria replied. “Let’s call for the others.”

Outside the Chantry, Master Dennet was preparing the mounts while the companions bade farewell to one another. “What would the Inquisition do without our stabilizing influence, Master Tethras?” Solas asked, settling himself on the back of one of the harts.

“I assume they’d just start burning things,” Varric replied.

“That does sound like most humans I know.”

“If you gentlemen are quite finished?” Cassandra scowled at them.

“Now, now, don’t get touchy. We’re just here to lend you simple humans our help.”

“Before you cause everything to explode,” Solas added.

“Again.”

Mahanon’s parting gesture of affection to his counterpart was to assist her into Falon’s saddle. The charger was pawing at the ground, anxious to be gone. Dorian had already left to make his own way to Redcliffe; with a final goodbye to those who would remain, the two groups made their way together down the path leading into the Hinterlands. At the foot of the Frostbacks, Victoria’s party
would head in one direction, Mahanon’s in another. Leliana herself was accompanying the Lady Herald to Redcliffe Village, there to personally lead her agents through the mysterious tunnel.

Cullen stood with Josephine at the gates of Haven, watching the train of riders until they were out of sight. Blackwall, who was the last in line, turned in the saddle to raise one hand in a goodbye salute.

Josephine waved back, and sighed. “Cullen, they… will come back, won’t they?” she ventured.

“If they don’t, we’re all doomed,” he replied grimly.

It was a long week.

There was work enough to occupy Cullen, of course. Strangely, it didn’t seem to help the time pass as well as he’d hoped. He oversaw training exercises, performed his daily devotionals, ignored the urge to take lyrium, and devised at least five different plans for assaulting Redcliffe Castle at the first hint of trouble. He spent more than a reasonable amount of time wondering what the Lord and Lady Herald were doing. Were they succeeding? Were they safe?

I really should have spent more time talking to them, he thought, watching his troops almost without seeing them. He felt as though he barely knew the Heralds – as if he’d treated them like icons. Things to be venerated, rather than people to be understood. He’d had a few conversations with Victoria, fewer with Mahanon, not enough to really get to know either one. When they come back...

He never managed to finish the thought. He wanted to believe they would return, but something held him back from fully investing himself in the idea. Even in this world gone mad, with its gaping hole in the sky, it almost seemed too unbelievable.

“Cullen.”

He looked up, startled to find himself in the speaker’s large shadow. “Ah – Bull. Did you need something? My apologies; my mind was wandering.”

“Yeah, I can tell. C’mon, walk with me.”

“Oh, thank you, but I -”

“Need a break. You’re worried, and I don’t blame you. Come and have a drink with the Chargers and me.”

The Iron Bull was clearly not taking no for an answer, and Cullen truthfully wasn’t sure how to refuse someone who was twice his own size. He allowed himself, hesitantly, to be steered across the compound to the tavern. “Krem! Get the commander a chair!”

“Right, Chief!”

“Dalish, fetch us a new round.” The blonde elf woman nodded and made her way to the counter to speak with Flissa. “Now,” said Bull, seating himself opposite Cullen, “the Heralds… they’re tough. Been getting to know them, and Mahanon’s a smart guy. Knows what he’s doing. And he’s got Cass and Solas backing him up; the Lord Seeker doesn’t have much chance of standing up to all of them and the Orlesian nobles too.”

“I know. It’s…”
“It’s not them that’s got you worried. I get it, I do.” Bull made a face. “Magic. No telling what’s going on inside Redcliffe Castle right now. Toria’s no mage, but she’s studied plenty and she’s quick on her feet. That Dorian knows how to swing a staff. And Leliana’s people are damn good at what they do.”

“I know,” he said again.

“But you can’t help worrying anyway. Just like you worry about your other men when they go into conflict.” Bull’s lone eye seemed to pierce him, even as Dalish returned with frothy mugs for everyone. “Because you care. And there’s nothing wrong with that. A military leader should care about the people serving under him.”

“But it’s difficult not to be concerned in a situation like this,” Cullen pointed out. “I have no eyes on the scene. They could be needing us to come to their assistance and we have no way of learning it.”

“Suppose I’d sent the Chargers along with Lady Herald,” the Iron Bull suggested, “and now I was worrying about what was going on. What would you tell me?”

Cullen hesitated. Slowly, he smiled. “To trust your men.”

“There you go. See? You knew the answer all along.” Bull chuckled and raised his drink. “To great warriors – and the mother hens who lead them!”

The glasses were almost empty when there was a commotion outside. “Riders coming!” someone was shouting. “It’s the Lord Herald! Open the gates!”

By the time Cullen joined the crowd which had formed, Mahanon had dismounted and handed the reins of his red hart to one of Master Dennet’s assistants. The commander observed the group, walking alongside them as they trooped into the council room; they were tired, certainly, and Cassandra looked to be sporting a new wound on one arm, though nothing the Seeker would likely find worth her concern. The signs of battle were very evident on all of them, Solas perhaps the least discomfited. “What happened?”

“We did not anticipate a skirmish with the Templars,” said Josephine, anxiously, as she joined them. “Things did not go according to plan?”

“Knight-Captain Denam,” said Cassandra, in the weary tone of someone who would require a few years to sleep off everything she had endured, “has been working for the Elder One. The same Elder One that we were told Alexius serves. He sought to corrupt the Templars – and succeeded, I am afraid. It was a lengthy battle and we lost several good soldiers.”

“We almost lost the Lord Herald,” added Solas. “What we thought was the Lord Seeker in Val Royeaux was actually a demon in disguise. The demon sought to replace Mahanon, as it replaced Lord Lucius, and lead the Inquisition into its demise.”

“Maker’s breath,” Josephine managed. “Surely not all the Templars are lost?”

Mahanon, who had faced and ultimately defeated the demon in single combat, gave only a brief report. He looked drained, pale underneath his Dalish tattoos, and his eyes appeared creased from the efforts. What mattered most, he stressed, was that they had more or less succeeded in their goal. Those Templars who remained uncorrupted, and could be persuaded to switch their allegiance to the Inquisition, had done so. “They’re on their way here now, under the leadership of Ser Delrin Barris. He’s only got a handful of loyal veterans with him, but he said he could send
“I know the man,” said Cullen, pleased. “Very devout, and a good swordsman. He’ll be an advantage to us.”

“What of the Orlesian nobles?” Josephine wanted to know.

“Lord Abernache has taken charge of the Knight-Captain,” Mahanon continued, “and will hold him for us until such time as we’re able to convene a proper trial. He felt that the Breach needed to be our first concern.” Just delivering all of this information seemed to tax him more than he was ready to handle, but the effect of his speech was marred somewhat by the unexpected arrival of a newcomer. A scrawny young man, with straw-colored hair beneath an improbably large hat, materialized very suddenly in the room. “Cole,” said Mahanon, addressing this person, “you don’t belong on the war table.”

“You’re right,” the apparition agreed, his broad lips pulled slightly downward in a continuous expression of sorrow. “I’m not a war.” And he obligingly removed himself from the tabletop.

“Cole is… well, I’m not exactly sure what he is,” the Lord Herald explained. “But back at Therinfal, he helped me to understand what the demon was, and how to defeat it. I’d be dead without his help. Solas says he’s a spirit, most likely.”

“A guess,” Solas demurred. He shook his head, his smooth scalp gleaming faintly in the candlelight. “I haven’t yet had much chance to examine him. But based on the Lord Herald’s description, that is what I’ve surmised thus far.”

“I want to help,” Cole said simply.

Before anyone could really respond to all of this, the heavy doors swung open, and everyone turned to see Leliana. She nodded to them all as she stepped aside, revealing the fatigued figure of the Lady Herald. Victoria was only partially walking under her own power; Dorian’s strength was making up for her own, supporting her gently on one side, with Varric and Blackwall following closely. They trudged into the room and stopped, and she looked around with a distressed, slightly disbelieving expression. Her gaze fell at last upon her elven counterpart, and something like relief sagged in her features. “Non,” she managed, releasing Dorian and stumbling forward.

“Toria?”

He crossed the room in three long strides, more or less catching her in an embrace as her legs all but gave out from under her. Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, and she buried her face in his shoulder, trembling violently. No one spoke for several seconds; no one knew what to say.

“Maker’s breath, Non,” she said finally, lessening her stranglehold and drawing back to look at him. “I half thought I’d never see you again.”

“And that would have been terrible, hey?” he teased. Frowning, he continued, “By the Creators, Tor, what’s happened? You look like you wrestled with the Dread Wolf and lived to tell the tale.”

“Hardly that,” Solas remarked quietly – so quietly that Cullen wasn’t sure anyone else had even heard him. “But yes, you’ve clearly been through something extraordinary.”

“It was awful,” she admitted. “Alexius cast a spell which flung Dorian and myself forward in time a year. You - well, most of you - were dead. Only Blackwall and Varric and Leliana were still alive, and they were dying, slowly turning into red lyrium ghouls.” She shuddered at the memory, and Cullen found himself wanting to reach out and grip her shoulder or squeeze her hand.
“Sparkler and Eyebrows found a way to get back to the here and now,” said Varric helpfully, since Victoria seemed unable to articulate anything further. “Even more important, they brought back the knowledge of what this Elder One has planned for the immediate future.”

“And we brought a passel of mages with us,” added Dorian. “Madam Fiona is helping her followers to get settled, I believe. King Alistair was rather vociferous that they leave Ferelden, so the dear Lady Herald graciously invited them to serve as allies of your Inquisition, for good or ill.”

“Allies!?” Cullen blurted.

“Let’s discuss the results later,” Josephine proposed quickly. “Both of our objectives were successful, which is good to know; we can quarrel about the details after the Heralds have rested. They both seem to have paid a price for their victories.”

“I agree,” said Leliana. “Let’s reconvene in two hours’ time. We need to know more about the future you saw, and about the demon who replaced the Lord Seeker. But you should all eat something and get a little rest, perhaps have the healer take a look at you, before we do anything else.”

They murmured a collective assent and filed out of the room, Victoria still leaning on Mahanon to an extent. Cullen watched their retreat thoughtfully.

“A brother but not a brother,” murmured a voice near his ear. “Loyal, laughing, lessening the pain. The familiar and the forgotten, the fear and the friendship. I don’t have to walk this path alone because he walks it beside me.” There was a pause. “She likes the sunlight in your hair.”

“Did you say something, Leliana?” Cullen asked.

“Me? No, why?”

“I thought I heard - wait, where did he go?”

“Who?”

“The young man, he was... never mind.”
Poison That Weakens and Does Not Kill

Chapter Summary

The results of the last chapter are discussed. The Inquisitors make their way to the Fallow Mire to rescue kidnapped soldiers. And Leliana has a little fun at Cullen's expense.

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna beat Rachel to the punch and say "BrOTP for liiiiiiiiife!" ;)

Chapter Eleven: Poison That Weakens and Does Not Kill

Time here in Haven passes strangely. Some days are jumbled together, and difficult to tell one from another. Other days stretch endlessly; I'm quite certain that yesterday, a full week passed between sunrise and sunset. But we are doing the best we can, and our efforts are beginning to show results.

Josephine’s letter to her parents was exaggerating, of course, but not by much.

The week-long day in question was the day on which the Heralds gave their formal reports to the council. They had expected to reconvene two hours after Lady Trevelyan’s return from Redcliffe, but Adan had put his foot down. “I may not be a proper healer as the Inquisition deserves,” he told Cullen, “but I’m pulling rank all the same. These two need rest. The Lord Herald has some lacerations and a dislocated shoulder, and the Lady Herald… I don’t even know what to tell you. She traveled through time itself. That’s completely beyond my skill, but she definitely needs more than a twenty-minute nap to recover. You can have them back in a few days.”

Fortunately, the presence of the mages meant that the recovery period would be shorter than Adan had predicted. Fiona had directed her followers with the most skill at healing spells to assist the alchemist, and soon not only the Heralds themselves but all those who had accompanied them were back to their usual selves. Josephine felt rather guilty that the first thing with which the Heralds had to contend, once they were no longer bleeding and broken and exhausted, was an argument.

The Templars had not been disbanded, but invited to rebuild their ranks under the guidance of the Inquisition. The mages had not been taken prisoner, but offered an olive branch of alliance. Cassandra felt the former had been treated too gently; Cullen felt the same of the latter. Leliana was inclined to believe that the Heralds had acted appropriately but also that they should have waited until they could consult with the council members before making such determinations.

Victoria, always the more serious of the two, was taking their reactions perhaps a bit too
personally. “We did the best we could,” she said finally, raising her voice a little. “You weren’t there. Consulting you was not an option.”

“And I’d like to remind you all,” said Mahanon, less jovially than usual, “that we nearly died. Again!”

Cassandra looked at the pair in surprise. “It… does sound like we’re blaming you, doesn’t it?”

“Just a little.”

“Let’s take a step back,” Josephine proposed. “We should hear the details of what you both experienced before we make any comments.” She went to the door and asked a few pages to bring in chairs; after a moment’s thought, she sent another page to fetch a pitcher of water and some glasses.

Mahanon told his story first. The demon which had replaced the Lord Seeker was an Envy demon, jealous of mortal status and adulation. “The plan was to kill me,” he said in a world-weary tone, “and disguise itself in my form, then lead the Inquisition into a terrible future. Anyone who opposed us, however minutely, was the enemy. I was effectively wading through a nightmare world to try to find a way back to consciousness, and all the while I could see imaginings of how it would go.” He shook his head. “Half our circle of supporters were dead. You were dead, Toria – from what I could gather, you were the first to stand up to the fake me. Cullen and Josephine were imprisoned and scheduled to be tortured; Cullen, you were ranting about how you blamed yourself for ever allowing ‘me’ to become this monster. I don’t even know what it did to my clan. And all the while the demon was berating me for trying to shut it out, preventing it from learning even more about me. I wouldn’t have made it if not for Cole.”

“We still need to talk about that,” said Cullen. “I don’t know what Cole is, but he’s certainly not human. I’m not sure having him here is a good idea.”

“Would you rather he go out in the world where we’ll never find him?” Leliana pointed out. “Perhaps it’s best we allow him to stay, so we can keep an eye on him.”

“He saved Mahanon. I think that’s reason enough to keep him,” said Victoria. “As far as my vote counts, I would like him to stay. Besides, he’s kind of cute in his own strange little way.”

Cullen favored her with an incredulous smile. “I can’t even remember what he looks like. But I know Solas is also in favor of Cole remaining; I suppose it’s allowable, at least for the time being. If he does anything to endanger anyone, however, he’ll need to be handled.”

“Thank you,” said a voice, and Cole appeared briefly behind Josephine. She squeaked, turning in her chair.

“Cole, no more surprise appearances,” said Mahanon.

“If I hurt someone, I want you to kill me,” the sort-of-boy insisted. “But I want to help, if I can. I would like to stay.” So saying, he disappeared again.

Mahanon concluded his report, and Victoria took her turn, explaining what she saw in the future. “The Elder One had Empress Celene murdered, to throw Orlais into chaos. And he had a demon army, but I didn’t hear as much about that.”

“Orlais is already in chaos,” Josephine reported. “The civil war between the Empress and her cousin Grand Duke Gaspard is ravaging the countryside.”
“That corroborates what I saw in my nightmare,” Mahanon noted. “There was a note pinned to a statue of the Empress, and Cole remarked to me that the Elder One hates her for some reason, that he wants her dead.”

“We had to kill Alexius, in the bad future. He lives in the present day,” Victoria continued. “King Alistair is making arrangements to keep him locked up until after the Breach is sealed; then he’ll turn him over to us. The King seems like he’s normally a nice man, but he was so frustrated when we got back. I guess I can’t blame him though.”

“He is a good man. I’ve known him for many years,” said Leliana. “He’s a little awkward, but very sweet and devoted to his people. And his Queen.”

“And you… Leliana, you and Varric and Blackwall – you all died to give Dorian and me time to escape.” There were tears in the Lady Herald’s eyes.

“Of course I did. I would do it again, without question.” Leliana’s voice was gentler than Josephine could remember it being in quite some time.

“So then we came back, Alexius surrendered, and the mages agreed to ally themselves with the Inquisition,” Victoria finished.

“As to that – what were you thinking, turning mages loose with no oversight?” Cullen asked. Victoria visibly flinched at the something like anger in his voice. “The Veil is torn open! There will be abominations among the mages, we have to prepare for them!”

“We can’t rescind an offer of alliance,” Josephine protested. “It makes the Inquisition appear incompetent at best, tyrannical at worst.”

“We need them to close the Breach,” said Victoria. “It’s not going to work if we make enemies of them.”

“We have the Templars –”

“Which I had no way of knowing at the time.”

“And we don’t exactly have an army of Templars,” added Mahanon. Josephine quietly admired the way the Heralds consistently defended each other. “Less than two dozen veterans. Ser Barris promised to send word to other Templar strongholds to inform them of the alliance, but we can’t reasonably expect them to reach us in numbers any time soon. Closing the Breach will be much easier with the addition of the mages.”

Cassandra, who had been silent up to this point, now nodded. “While I may not completely agree with the decision… I support it,” she said. “The sole point of the Lady Herald’s mission was to gain the mages’ aid, and that has been accomplished.” Mahanon gave her an approving smile, Victoria a grateful one.

“The voice of pragmatism speaks! And here I was just starting to enjoy the circular arguments,” said a new voice, and they all looked up. Belatedly Josephine realized that they hadn’t closed the door; how long Dorian had been standing there listening, she wasn’t certain. He leaned against the doorframe, smiling roguishly.

“Closing the Breach is all that matters,” said Cassandra firmly.

“And the longer the Breach is open, the more damage it does,” said Mahanon. “We should head there as soon as possible.”
“Agreed,” said Josephine.

“We’ll need lyrium, for the mages and the Templars both,” said Cullen, apparently resigning himself. “I’ll ask Varric to reach out to his contacts in the Merchants’ Guild; he’s got access to what is probably the best network to get us what we need in a short time. As soon as we have sufficient supplies, we can end this.”

“We should also look into the things Victoria saw in the dark future,” said Leliana. “The assassination of Empress Celene – a demon army –”

“Sounds like something a Tevinter cult might do,” Dorian interjected. “Orlais falls, the Imperium rises, chaos for everyone!”

“One battle at a time,” said Cullen. “We’ll need time to organize our troops, the mages, and the Templars. Let’s get things on paper.” He glanced at the Heralds, and smiled faintly; perhaps, Josephine thought, he wanted to reassure them that he wasn’t really angry. “None of this means anything without your marks, after all. Stay and help us, if you’ve a mind.”

“Thank you.” Victoria’s complexion changed color only slightly. “We’d be honored to help with the plan.”

“I’ll skip the war council,” said Dorian, “but I would like to see this Breach up close, if you don’t mind.”

“Then – you’re staying?”

“Oh, didn’t I mention? The south is so rustic and charming; I adore it to little pieces.” He smirked. Despite the situation, Victoria managed to look purely delighted by this news. “There’s no one I’d rather be stranded in time with – present or future,” she said. “Well, except you, Non.”

“Flatterer.” Mahanon laughed. Josephine glanced at the others; Leliana only shook her head and smiled, while Cullen’s eyebrows knit themselves together in a slight frown.

“Excellent choice,” said Dorian, turning to go. “But let’s not get ‘stranded’ again anytime soon, yes?”

Varric assured Cullen that he would be able to obtain the lyrium needed, but that it would take a few days; Haven was fairly close to the gates of Orzammar, though, so it could be worse. With the prospect of taking a breather of sorts, Josephine sat down to draft an overdue letter home. She got as far as her commentary about the passage of time when a runner interrupted.

“Lady Montilyet – I bring word from the Fallow Mire,” he said, breathless. “A group of Inquisition soldiers has been taken captive by the native Avvar. Their leader says that he demands the Heralds of Andraste come personally to rescue them.”

“What?” Josephine stood and took the message scroll, studying the familiar handwriting of Lead Scout Harding. “I see… Harding isn’t one to exaggerate,” she murmured. The perky dwarf was extremely reliable. “Please have someone fetch the Heralds at once.”

Several minutes later, they stood before her, being briefed on the situation. “Harding says he calls himself the Hand of Korth. He’s taken several of our people hostage; they’re probably alive, but it’s hard to say in what condition you’ll find them. He’s insisting that you come personally to the Fallow Mire – he intends to challenge you.” Josephine couldn’t keep the frustration from her voice.
Victoria read the scroll, then handed it to Mahanon. “How long do we have until Varric’s suppliers send the lyrium?”

“Days, at most. The Fallow Mire is south of here, on the border of the Korcari Wilds. You can’t do this, not now – if either of you should be killed, we’ll never be able to close the Breach.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to make sure we’re not killed,” said Mahanon, rolling up the scroll and handing it back. “Those are our people – they’re counting on us.”

“I agree,” said Victoria. “If we hurry, we should be able to return fairly soon. I think we should ask the Iron Bull to come along, and at least one of the mages.”

“Solas would gladly go. He knows a bit about Avvar culture – probably not as much as you do, with your studies, but enough to be of use.”

“Are you mad?” Josephine interrupted them.

“Of course not. But we’ve been invited by name,” said Victoria with a small smile. “It seems rude to ignore such a personal summons.”

“If it makes you feel better,” Mahanon offered, “we could bring Cassandra with us as well. She’ll make sure we get back here as soon as possible to deal with the Breach.”

“I suppose I can’t stop you,” she said, defeated.

“Not really, no.”

“Then yes, please ask Lady Cassandra to go too. Make haste… and be careful.”

The rescue party was gone within the hour, and Josephine managed not to let either Cullen or Leliana know what they were doing until after they had departed. “This is madness,” the commander blurted when she broke the news. “They could be killed, and then what will we do? We can’t seal the Breach without them!”

“They know that. We have to trust them,” said Leliana.

“It’s not _them_ I don’t trust!”

“Cassandra will make sure they return.”

“Or die herself in the attempt. We could lose all of them.”

“If the Heralds could handle being thrown forward in time and tormented by an Envy demon,” said Josephine, patiently, “I don’t think the Avvar will present too much of an obstacle. Most of their people are friendly, or at least not hostile. All our friends will really need to do is to neutralize this Hand of Korth.”

“One man against two Heralds of Andraste, a Pentaghast, an elven mage, and a Qunari.” Cullen pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“Don’t worry, Cullen, she’ll be fine,” Leliana added mildly.

“I’m sure she – _they_ will.” Flustered, he rubbed the back of his neck. “All right. I’d better get back to the training grounds. Let me know if you hear anything.”
Once he walked away, Josephine glanced at her friend and tried not to laugh. “A direct hit on the commander. You’re terrible, Leliana.”

“It reminds me of my days with the Wardens,” the spymaster noted fondly. “King Alistair was far less subtle than Cullen; I think he was more aware of his own attraction. But to be fair, I was Queen Elissa’s confidant. I knew how she felt, so I could amuse myself with the fact that he was somehow oblivious. Cullen and Victoria are a bit mutually oblivious, which is amusing its own way.”

“And what of the other two?”

“You mean Mahanon and Cassandra?”

“Naturally.”

“That’s a completely different situation. Mahanon isn’t subtle at all – Cassandra can’t be oblivious even if she wants to be.” Leliana chuckled. “And she likes it far more than she’s willing to admit.”

“Every time they go into the Hinterlands, he comes back with embrium flowers,” Josephine said conspiratorially. “Of course, he gives the bulk of them to Adan for potions, but he always reserves one to leave on her bed.”

“Ah, so that’s the reason our room smells differently these days. I’m surprised the blossoms are surviving the cold here.”

“She hangs them up to dry in her wardrobe. I think she’s trying to hide them – in a way, it’s almost like she’s trying to hide them from herself.”

“I think I know why that might be, or at least part of the reason. No matter; she’ll find her way. He’ll help her.”

Four days later, Josephine finally finished the letter to her parents and dispatched it. She needed to stretch her legs; she needed fresh air; she went to take a walk around Haven. The air was crisp and cold, like the first bite of water on the skin when stepping into a stream, and she squinted up at the partially cloudy sky. None of Leliana’s messenger birds were in evidence.

Varric was standing in his usual place, beside a fire near Seggrit’s stall, and he hailed her as she approached. “I hope our ‘glowy people,’ as Sera calls them, come back soon,” he said. “I expect the lyrium shipment in the next few days.”

“Excellent. The Templar veterans have arrived; Cullen says he’s quartered them with the regular troops, which they don’t seem to like very much – but there’s simply no place else to put them.” She sighed. “Perhaps after the Breach is sealed, we can look into expanding our settlement.”

“With all the volunteers you’ve got coming, that’s probably a good idea. We have any carpenters roaming around the village?”

“Not to my knowledge, but I’m sure we can find plenty of people who could do the work. Finding the money to pay them is the harder part.” She smiled wryly. “We’ve had some generous donations from the various noble houses who have allied with us, including the Lady Herald’s parents, but our expenses are very little within the sum.”

“Any word from the Fallow Mire?”
“None, I’m afraid. I had hoped there would be a message from Scout Harding, at least letting us know that the Heralds’ party arrived safely, but there’s been nothing.”

“Probably just too caught up in the action, that’s all.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I’m a storyteller, Ruffles. Getting caught up in the action is usually how these kinds of stories go, at least some of the time.” He tossed a stick onto the fire.

Josephine looked at him curiously. “And what sort of ending would you write for the Inquisition’s story?”

“To tell you the truth, I never write my stories with a concrete ending in mind,” he replied. “I just sort of let the characters tell me what’s going on. Ideally, the story ends with the hole the sky closing, the Elder One shriveling up like a prune, and everybody getting to go home.”

“That sounds good. Anticlimactic, perhaps, but good.”

“Oh, well, I’d also throw in a few flourishes – dashing heroics, thrilling romance, all that good stuff. Something to leave the readers wanting more. That’s the secret, you know. Don’t give them everything they want… then they buy your next book in hopes of getting it.” He chuckled. “Though in this particular case, you’ll forgive me if I’m not really eager to do a sequel. One hole in the sky is more than enough.”
Chapter Summary

Despite how cheerful everyone is at the start, happiness can't stave off the inevitable. The sacking of Haven is at hand.

Chapter Notes

I always wondered how Master Dennet manages to get all the horses out of Haven. It's never shown.

Chapter Twelve: On Wings of Death and Suffering

Thundering hooves echoed up the mountain trail as the five riders galloped toward the gates of Haven. There was an unusual gaiety in the air about them, and as the gates were opened and they spilled into the settlement, even their mounts appeared to be in high spirits.

“Nice work down there, Boss and Lady Boss,” said Iron Bull, dismounting from the giant battle nug. Strapped to his back was a powerful maul, the “Gift of the Mountain Father,” which had been claimed as spoils of victory.

“You too, Bull. All of you, well done,” Mahanon said, Victoria nodding her agreement. “It feels good to have completed this mission, doesn’t it?”

“It was so... straightforward,” said Victoria with a chuckle. “No crazy trips through time, no demons masquerading as faction leaders, not even anything weird connected with the marks on our hands. Just a fairly simple rescue operation.”

Assorted personnel came to collect the mounts and welcome the returning party. They all parted ways except for the Heralds, who needed to make their formal report to the council. The Hand of Korth had been defeated, the kidnapped soldiers had been located, and Harding promised to oversee their return to Haven. It would be slow; some of them were injured, though none severely. Mahanon started up the path to the Chantry, and gave Victoria an amused smile as she took his arm.

“You’re in a good mood,” he remarked.

“Like you said, it feels good to have completed the mission,” she explained. “We won the battle, we saved the troops, and we even got that Sky Watcher fellow to agree to join us. The council can’t possibly have any objections this time.”

“You know, you’re right,” he said. “I think the only way this day could feel better would be if I got a message from my clan. Josephine sent a runner to find them, to deliver my letter, but so far there’s been no reply. They’re probably on the move.”
“We’ll soon be closing the Breach, and then maybe we can put all this behind us,” she said. “We’ve more or less proven our innocence, the world is on the verge of being saved, and everything just feels better right now.”

“Savor that,” said a new voice, and Victoria turned to smile a welcome at Dorian as he joined them. “I don’t imagine you’ve had that feeling often,” he continued, letting her take his arm with her free one, “so enjoy it while it lasts. Everything went well in the Fallow Mire, then?”

“Oh yes. It’s a real vacation spot, that place,” said Mahanon dryly. “Constantly raining, swamplands all around, the remains of a settlement that died out from a plague... absolutely enchanting. You should visit sometime.”

“Sounds breathtaking. But the soldiers are safe?”

“Yes, they’re making their way back here. We hurried because of the Breach; they’re taking a more leisurely route,” Victoria explained. “It was productive in other ways, too. Solas showed us how veilfire works to reveal hidden runes, and we were able to make some new allies among the Avvar.”

“Splendid! We should celebrate with drinks later,” said the Tevinter.

They continued to regale him with their exploits as they marched up the path, arms still linked, chuckling and chattering like long-lost friends. The council members, having apparently been notified of their return, were awaiting them at the door to the Chantry, and Mahanon waved when they came into view. “We bring back good news,” he called as they drew near. “No casualties – well, none on our side – and a complete success.”

“Congratulations!” Josephine exclaimed.

“Welcome back,” said Cullen. Mahanon stifled the urge to snicker; the commander’s expression wasn’t entirely happy, and he had a few theories as to why that might be. “We have some good news for you in return. The lyrium supplies from Varric’s contacts reached Haven only a few hours before you did.”

“I’m sure you’ll want to rest a bit first,” added Leliana, “but we’re ready to seal the Breach whenever you are. The sooner the better, as you can imagine.”

“I guess we’ll have to have those drinks another time,” Victoria told Dorian apologetically.

“I’m at your disposal, my dear Lady Herald,” he assured her, unwinding her arm from his and, playfully, kissing her hand before releasing it. “In the meantime, I’ll carry the news to Madam Fiona that you’ve returned and tell her she should advise her people to get ready for what comes next.” He offered a nod to the company and headed in the direction of the mage quarters.

Much of the rest of the afternoon was something of a blur to Mahanon. After a rest period, in which he and Victoria exulted to the council about their success in the Mire (and possibly overdramatized it, just slightly, because they could), they rallied the forces and made their way to where the Breach awaited sealing. Solas shouted directions to the mages and Templars, telling them to “focus past the Heralds – let their will draw from you!” He would later remember the difficulty he had standing at Victoria’s side, just as they had done when they sealed their first major Fade rift; their non-marked hands joined, their marked hands raised, trying not to get lost in the rush of intense power that swirled around them from the Breach, and then from the combined efforts of their allies. Almost without warning there was an explosion, wave upon wave of energy radiating from
the Breach, knocking them both to the ground.

He remembered Cassandra picking her way to them, pulling Victoria to her feet, looking at them both keenly to assure herself that they weren’t harmed by the experience. He remembered locking eyes with her for a moment, feeling a surge of emotion and an urge to kiss her on which there was no time to act. “You did it,” she said, breaking the eye contact, and a cacophony of cheering burst from the onlookers. Victoria looked more dazed than triumphant, and she clung to his arm as they staggered away from the scene.

He really had no idea how they got back to Haven, where Adan all but forced a healing potion down each of their throats “just in case,” and the celebration was in full swing before Mahanon even realized there was one. Some of the residents had rustled up pipes and harps and drums, and were playing while others danced together around a bonfire. Still others sat or stood in clusters, talking and laughing. Flissa weaved in and out of the different crowds, ferrying trays laden with mugs filled almost to overflowing. Everyone was in high spirits, as he and Victoria had been earlier. In the distance, clouds still circled around the spot which had once been the Breach, but it no longer crackled with green light and strange power; it looked odd, but harmless.

They stood apart, gazing down on the festivities rather than actively participating. It felt strange; with their first major challenge overcome, they ought to have been more cheerful, he supposed. But he knew that he was satisfied more than he actually felt it, and he was pretty sure Victoria was the same; it would come in time, but it was too new and unfamiliar a feeling for them both. Neither one spoke. They didn’t need words.

After a time, Cassandra ventured to join them; everyone else had given them plenty of space. “Solas confirms that the heavens are scarred, but calm,” she said by way of greeting. “The Breach is sealed. We have reports of lingering rifts, and many questions remain, but this was a victory.” She smiled faintly. “Word of your heroism has spread.”

“You know how many were involved,” Mahanon demurred. “Luck put us at the center, that’s all.”

“We still don’t know what caused this,” added Victoria, speaking for the first time in what might have been hours. “We can’t rest easy.”

“I agree,” Cassandra replied. “One success does not guarantee peace. The immediate danger is gone; to some, so is the necessity of this alliance. We must be wary.” She gazed out at the celebrants. “The Inquisition will need new focus.”

Be careful what you wish for. Mahanon barely had time to register the thought, but later he would recall it with a pang. As blurred as the afternoon was in his mind, he was fairly certain he would remember the evening, the night, and all that followed with perfect crystal clarity for the remainder of his life.

The party was broken up moments later by the frantic clanging of an alarm bell. “Forces approaching! To arms!” shouted Cullen, chasing several of his soldiers across the field. Victoria, startled out of her reverie, grabbed her helmet.

“We must get to the gates,” Cassandra cried, drawing her sword. Mahanon exchanged the briefest glances with his counterpart before following. They rushed through the crowds of frightened civilians, who were being urged to seek shelter in the Chantry, and found the council members assembled. “Cullen?”

“One watchguard reporting,” he said. “It’s a massive force, the bulk over the mountain.” He
pointed at the more distant Frostbacks.


“None!”

“None?”

Mahanon glanced at the gate, and then did a double take as a puddle of unfamiliar light seeped underneath the wooden barricade. There was a terrific crash outside, and then a strange pleading. “I can’t come in if you don’t open!”

“That – that’s Cole’s voice,” he said. Victoria, perplexed, opened the gate to reveal a soldier, clad in heavy mail, advancing toward her. Suddenly, he was impaled from behind by a long blade, and as he collapsed, there stood Cole. Other bodies lay scattered around him; he had single-handedly killed the first wave of invaders.

“I came to warn you. To help,” he said imploringly. “People are coming to hurt you.” He paused, then added, “You probably already know.”

“What’s going on, Cole?” Victoria asked.

“The Templars come to kill you. Both of you, if they can.”

“The Templars?” Cullen repeated. “But they’re here!”

“No. Not your Templars.” He stressed the word. “His Templars. The red ones. They went to the Elder One. You know him? He knows you. You took his mages. There.” He pointed across the mountainside to one of the nearer peaks, where for the first time the Elder One could be seen. “He’s very angry that you took his mages.”

Even at such a distance, Mahanon could tell that he had never even dreamed of anything so grotesque, so twisted, so nightmarish. The Elder One seemed to pulse with red light, like Red Templars, and appeared to hover slightly above the ground. He was flanked by two figures – a man in a massive suit of red armor, and a petite woman who carried a sword that had to be as long as she was tall. They both gazed up at the abomination with reverence.

“I know that man,” said Cullen in a tone of horror, “but this Elder One...”

“The woman,” said Dorian, who had joined them, “is most likely Calpernia – she commands the Venatori. At least, that’s my guess based on what information Felix was able to send me.” As they all stared, scores of soldiers began to march across the mountains, torchlight glinting on their armor.

“Cullen – give us a plan,” said Mahanon. “Anything!”

“Haven is no fortress,” he said; he sounded almost heartsick. “If we are to withstand this monster, we must control the battle. Get out there and hit that force. Use everything you can!”

The commander drew his sword, backing away slightly from the Heralds as he did. “Mages! You - you have sanction to engage them! That is Samson, he will not make it easy! Soldiers, gather the villagers! Fortify, and watch for advance forces! Inquisition, with the Heralds! For your lives! For all of us!”

Trebuchets were being wheeled into place and armed as quickly as the soldiers could manage it.
They barely had seconds to move before the first wave of Venatori zealots, accompanied by a few Red Templars, approached the outer fortifications. It was like no battle Mahanon had ever fought or even seen, and there was a curious detachment in his mind. He almost believed that he really was still back on the ship with Victoria, and would shortly be waking. Nothing felt real – not the battle cries of friend and foe, not the bursts of flame from mages’ errant fireballs, not even the cold night air stinging his face as he ran.

“Keep them clear of the trebuchet!” he heard someone shout. It might have been Cassandra; he honestly wasn’t sure. “Buy our soldiers time to recalibrate!”

Mahanon rolled forward, his blades leaping into his hands and slashing down through a Venatori’s flesh in one fluid movement. Victoria threw herself at the trebuchet, lending her strength to the one trying to turn the controls. “Stand clear,” she called over her shoulder. As he watched, dazed, the trebuchet’s arm flung a massive flaming boulder into the sky. It dashed against the peak of the highest summit of the Frostbacks, and with a mighty burst of smoke and cinder, it sent a deadly downpour of snow and ice cascading over the helpless army marching below.

Torches throughout the valley were suddenly extinguished, and the victory cry rose around him.

“Everyone get to the gate!” Mahanon bellowed. They raced along the pathways, trying to avoid the notice of the monster swooping through the sky over Haven, trying even harder not to take notice themselves of the dead Inquisition soldiers they passed. Cullen was at the gate, urging everyone to hurry, and slammed it shut just after the last member of the group scuttled into Haven.

“We need everyone back to the Chantry!” he shouted. “It’s the only building that might hold against that – that beast.” He glanced regretfully at the Heralds. “At this point... just make them work for it.”

What followed was a mass confusion of running, tripping over bodies both alive and dead, and a frantic effort to rescue civilians trapped among the disaster. The members of the ‘inner circle’ fanned out to save everyone they could find; Flissa was pulled from the burning wreckage of the tavern, while Seggrit, the arms merchant, had to be dragged out of his little house in shock. They barely managed to retrieve both Adan the alchemist and Minaeve the researcher from a wagon which had them trapped, and Sera took a nasty scorch mark to one arm when something on the wagon burst into flame. As they crested the hill to approach the Chantry, the quartermaster Threnn was fighting three Red Templars at once.

Chancellor Roderick was leaning against the doorway, clutching his wounds. “Move... keep going,” he called in a guttural voice. “The Chantry is... your shelter.” He groaned and stumbled; Cole, who had materialized behind him, caught him as he nearly collapsed, and Victoria doubled back to help. Roderick, according to the spirit-boy, tried to stop a Red Templar from entering the building, and was well paid for his bravery.

“Heralds.” Cullen ran to meet them. “Our position is... not good. That dragon stole back any time you might have earned us.”

“I’ve seen an Archdemon.” Cole’s voice was impossibly soft. “It was in the Fade, but it looked like that.”
“I don’t care what it looked like - it’s cut a path for that army. They’ll kill everyone in Haven!” Mahanon had never seen Cullen so angry, nor so frightened.

“The Elder One doesn’t care about the village,” Cole informed him. “He only wants the Heralds.”

“If it’ll save these people...” Victoria hesitated.

“It won’t.” Cole shook his head. “He wants to kill you. No one else matters. But he’ll kill them anyway. I don’t like him,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

“You don’t like...” Cullen shook his head and turned back to Mahanon and Victoria. “Heralds, there are no tactics to make this survivable. The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche - we could turn the remaining trebuchets, cause one last slide.”

“To hit the enemy, we’d bury Haven!” Mahanon exclaimed.

“We’re dying, but at least we can decide how,” said the commander grimly. “Many don’t get that choice.”

There was a pause. “Yes, that,” said Cole suddenly, as though someone had asked a question. “Chancellor Roderick can help. He wants to say it before he dies.”

Slowly, haltingly, the Chancellor began to clarify. He alone still lived of all those who had made the summer pilgrimage to Haven, and he alone knew of a secret path - one that would allow the people of Haven to escape. “She must have shown me... Andraste must have shown me... so that I could show you.”

“What about it, Cullen? Will it work?” asked Victoria.

“Possibly – if he shows us the path.” Hope was kindling in his face for the first time. “But what of your escape?”

Mahanon turned to face Victoria, who seemed to be forming a resolution. “Mahanon,” she said, “go with the others. Get them out. I’ll stay here and man the trebuchet.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Non, listen to me.” Her young face was pale and calm, like one of the statues of Andraste they’d seen in Val Royeaux. “We sealed the Breach; the Inquisition can manage with just one Herald, as long as the other stays to distract this Elder One. So it’s either you or me, and I’m voting for me. You get the others to safety.”

“I can’t leave you here...”

“You must.” Her gray eyes were glinting with determination. “Your clan needs you to live, but one less Trevelyan in the world is no cause for concern. Breed like rashvine, we do,” she added with a slight smile, bringing back the memory of their first meeting.

“Perhaps you will surprise it... find a way,” Cullen ventured. His tone was hesitant, and beneath the uncertainty there was a surprised sort of pain.

She nodded, then flung herself on Mahanon, giving him the fiercest hug their armor would permit. “Look after Falon for me. He won’t understand.”

“I don’t understand!”
“We’ll come and cover you while you ready the trebuchet,” said Dorian, emerging from a brief conference with Varric and the Iron Bull. “Try to buy you some time.”

“I’ve sent men to load it for you; you’ll just need to calibrate it,” Cullen added. “Keep the Elder One focused on you until we’re above the tree line. If we are to have a chance – if you are to have a chance... let that thing hear you.”

“Thank you.” Victoria put a hand to Mahanon’s face, briefly. “You’ll be fine,” she said softly. Then, with a last, desperate, longing look at Cullen, she was gone. The door shut heavily behind her.

For a few seconds, Mahanon could do nothing but stare at the empty space where she had said, or rather not said, goodbye. “Well,” he said finally, “you heard the woman. Let’s move.”

Cole supported Chancellor Roderick as they headed to the back of the Chantry. “Herald,” said the dying man weakly, “to be the only one left alive who remembers... it could be more than mere coincidence. You could be more.”

“Don’t worry about that right now, Roderick. Save your strength.”

Josephine was in her office, trying to rescue as many of her books as she could. Mahanon and Cullen each relieved her of a considerable pile. “You’ve got to content yourself with these, Josephine,” Cullen told her. “We’ll replace the others when we can. Grab your cloak – it’s freezing.”

The hidden path out of Haven took them down through the prison cells beneath the Chantry building. Civilians and soldiers alike tromped their way to the exit, and Chancellor Roderick wheezed directions at Cullen to find the start of the overgrown path. Master Dennet, trying his best to save the mounts, had herded them all around to the back of the building. “This path’s not wide enough for the animals to go more than one at a time,” he reported, “but we’ll manage.”

“Mahanon,” called a voice, and Cassandra came into view; she had been trying to tend Sera’s burn, but left her to the care of Mother Giselle and hurried over to join them. “What – where is the Lady Herald?”

“Covering our escape,” Mahanon replied grimly. Cassandra seemed to correctly interpret his expression, to judge by her gasp of alarm. “Let’s make sure she’s not doing it in vain. Leave a visible marker beside the start of the path,” he said loudly.

“Do you really think she’ll survive this?” Cullen asked him.

“I think if nothing else, she’ll make sure that our friends who are with her do,” he replied firmly. “So we’ve got to make it possible for them to follow us.” He helped Josephine onto one of the Fereldan horses, loading books into her saddlebags. “Cole, get the Chancellor onto a horse – he can’t walk much more. Cass, you take my red hart... I’ll ride Falon.”

“Herald.” It was Solas; he seemed almost angry. “What is she thinking, doing this?”

“Knowing her? She’s thinking that this is the best chance we have of getting the villagers out of here in one piece. Mount up, please, and say a prayer to the Creators for her if you don’t mind.” Mahanon was in no mood to deal with dissension.

There were, of course, far more people than horses, and they tried to save most of the rides for those who were injured during the battle. Those who could walk were urged to do so, at least as far
as the first encampment. “Once we’re all clear of Haven, I’ll have a mage send up a signal to let Victoria know we’re far enough away that the avalanche is no longer a danger,” Cullen said.

“I just hope it works. We don’t really have any way of knowing how many people survived – we can’t do a head count to make sure everyone got away,” Mahanon replied. “Leave a mount behind at the start of the path, for Dorian and Varric; Iron Bull will prefer to walk anyway. Let’s move.”

It felt like an hour had passed when they came to a halt, though Mahanon knew it couldn’t have been nearly that long. Everything was moving so slowly. At Cullen’s directive, Vivienne fired the signal high into the sky that would advise the Lady Herald of their successful escape. Moments later, they heard the thunderous roar of what seemed like half the mountain falling down onto Haven. The little settlement which had become home to them all was gone – and so, perhaps, was the woman who had risked everything to make it happen.

They huddled around small fires, sharing what few rations could be brought with them on such short notice. “Don’t bury the embers,” Mahanon directed. “We need to leave some kind of trail.”

They broke their camp, such as it was, and pressed on through the swirling wind and snow. Just after they stopped for a second time, the last horse of the Inquisition’s herd joined them, Varric clinging to Dorian’s belt and the Iron Bull leading it by the reins. Everyone watched their approach, uncertain of how much hope to maintain; Bull hoisted Varric out of the saddle and set him gently on the ground. “Watch the crossbow, Tiny,” the dwarf snarked.

“Lady Herald sent us running almost as soon as the trebuchet was in position,” Dorian reported, dismounting. “We were on the path when we heard the landslide begin... Maker knows where she is now, Andraste preserve her.”

“We travel slowly,” Mahanon said. “Give her a chance to catch up.”

“Your optimism is charming, darling,” said Vivienne. “But it must be tempered with reality. Most of these people didn’t have a chance to grab any personal belongings; they’re running around in the snow without cloaks or blankets or anything to protect themselves. We’re going to have an epidemic of frostbite or worse if we don’t get them someplace relatively warm, and soon.”

“What would you suggest, Madam de Fer?”

“We’re in a valley, my dear. There aren’t too many ways out,” she said. “Our best bet is to find a spot that’s reasonably well protected from the wind, and set up camp there.”

“My scouts have mapped out a few such locations during their explorations of the area,” Leliana reported. “There’s one not too far from here, as far as I can tell. It’s probably the safest option right now.”

“And what do we do once we get there?” Cassandra wanted to know. “How long should we wait?”

“Until help arrives,” Leliana replied. “While the rest of you were preparing to evacuate Haven, I released all of my messenger birds. I was able to send two of them to deliver news of our plight to King Alistair and King Bhelen, as they are our nearest confirmed allies. Short notes, of course, written in haste, but they’ll convey the meaning well enough. I expect at least one of the kings to send aid.”

“Bhelen will probably answer quicker, just because he’s closer,” Varric said thoughtfully. “What kind of assistance he’ll provide, I don’t claim to know. But he’ll do something, I’m sure.”
“And it gives us a reason to wait, and watch,” Mahanon reasoned. “Okay.”
The Sun Rose on the Army of the Faithful

Chapter Summary

Now they wait. And wonder. And mourn.

Chapter Notes

My heart ached for Mahanon while writing this chapter. Also, it always bothered me that in the scene of the exodus to Skyhold, it clearly shows that the Inquisition has a few brontos carrying things for them - but they're never seen before or since, so in this chapter I attempt a plausible explanation for how they were acquired.

Chapter Thirteen: The Sun Rose on the Army of the Faithful

Cassandra was, to some extent, becoming accustomed to her entire world turning upside down in the space between one heartbeat and the next.

Her brother being cut down in front of her was still perhaps the worst example, if only because she witnessed it firsthand and it haunted her dreams occasionally even now. The Conclave explosion, however, was an exceedingly close second. How could the Maker, the being she served so devotedly that it felt as natural as breathing, be that cruel? It had shaken her faith to its very core. The weeks since the incident had been a struggle as she fought not only to retain her beliefs but also to trust the very people she had initially believed responsible.

She didn’t believe it any longer, of course. Whatever Mahanon and Victoria really were, however they were involved in the explosion, it was no act of malice on their part. She was too persuaded of their heroism to even entertain the idea.

Now Haven, the settlement she had cautiously begun to consider her home, was being torn from their grasp. She had run its paths with the Heralds, trying to rescue the villagers trapped by the work of the invading forces, but finally rushed into the Chantry along with everyone else to seek shelter from the dragon. (She felt almost ashamed – she, Right Hand of the Divine, a descendant of dragon slayers, running from a dragon now?)

She wanted to listen as Cullen and the Heralds discussed the plan to evacuate, but Sera was badly burned. Cassandra pulled her into the room where she, Josephine, and Leliana slept. “Not that I’m not interested,” Sera retorted, “but now doesn’t seem like the best time to get into bed.”

“Stop that,” she snapped. “We’re getting out of here; once we’re clear, I’ll be better able to look at your injury. Or someone else will. Drink this in the meantime.” She pushed a bottle of healing potion into the elf’s hand. There were some clean linens; she seized one to shred into bandages, and after a pause, grabbed the entire pile.
She was luckier than most, Cassandra realized; she had the chance to grab personal effects before they fled. There wasn’t much she really *needed* to take, beyond the weapon and shield already strapped to her back, but she yanked open a drawer to retrieve her most precious possession. Once the locket containing Anthony’s portrait was stowed in a belt pouch for safekeeping, she caught up a thick blanket and draped it around Sera’s shoulders. “It will have to do for the time being. Go – I hear Cullen shouting. Follow him, I’ll be right behind you.”

She lingered only long enough to get a few things more. The writ ordering the Inquisition absolutely had to be salvaged; apart from anything else, it was Justinia’s personal work, and its pages of her handwriting were rendered priceless by her loss. Josephine and Leliana would have no time to come and collect anything of theirs, but she could bring them something. Josephine had a sheaf of pictures of her family, sketched and sent to her by her sister Yvette; Leliana had a silver symbol of Andraste which had long ago been a gift from the Queen of Ferelden. It was all there was time to save. She jammed the linens into a cloth bag, pulled on the heaviest coat she could find, and rushed down into the Chantry’s underbelly to join the escape.

Cassandra stared at Mahanon when he greeted her with the news about Victoria. Something in his eyes was... *angry* was the wrong word, but she couldn’t quite identify the right one. There wasn’t much time to contemplate it in any case; there was too much to do. Somewhere in the middle of the flurry of activity, she acceded to his request that she mount the red hart and guide it along the overgrown, frost-crusted path which only Chancellor Roderick had understood how to find. The glorified clerk, as she’d once called him, led them all away from what could have been their mass grave and into the comparative safety of the snow-filled valley.

Roderick was dying, a fact she didn’t fully have the chance to appreciate until they’d made their first pause to rest the mounts. Mother Giselle’s people and the mages were doing their best by everyone, but the Chancellor’s wound was deep and severe; the blade of a Red Templar had skewered him beyond hope of repair. All that could be done was to be as generous as the limited supplies would permit with the elfroot, to try to ease his suffering in his final hours. In her heart, Cassandra forgave him for all his previous obstruction in compassion for his pain, and gratitude for his courage. He wasn’t letting go of life just yet, however. “The Maker... is not quite... ready... for me,” he wheezed. “Not yet... not until we... know.”

“The blood that still flows is shallow, shadowed,” said Cole in his oddly metered way of speaking. “The sun has not yet gone down, though the sky begins to fill with stars. He wants to say he’s sorry... he wants to see her face.”

“Victoria,” Mahanon translated, his mouth a grim line. “It’s taken *this* to make him believe that maybe we were innocent all along. He already apologized to me.” His words were quiet, only for Cassandra’s ears.

Roderick, perhaps defiant to the end, continued to live. Cassandra wouldn’t have thought he had it in him, but he was even more stubborn than she had given him credit for being. “He clings to life like a mabari clings to a soup bone,” she remarked to herself, as the red hart stepped delicately over fallen branches.

“Up ahead,” she heard Leliana call. “We can make a proper camp there, near where the valley opens up.”

They sheltered in a large space, a sort of break in the mountains not far from a cliff; when the sun rose, they found they could look out over Lake Calenhad far below. “We’ll remain here at least until we hear from someone,” Cullen told the refugees. “Leliana sent word to King Alistair in
Ferelden and King Bhelen in Orzammar. We can expect help to arrive within a day or two; our supplies have to last until then.”

He began giving directions to erect makeshift shelters for the injured, and to compile and take stock of what supplies anyone had been able to carry away from Haven in all the confusion. Harritt, the blacksmith, had managed to rescue his most essential tools, and once some felled trees had been located, he and a few of the other men were able to start cutting wood to create a makeshift paddock for the mounts. Dorian took charge of the mages, assisting Fiona in instructing them to help where they could, while Ser Barris similarly organized the Templars. Iron Bull put his Chargers to work, sending their healer to aid Mother Giselle in tending the wounded. Varric helped Josephine catalogue her books, while Leliana drafted longer messages to more distant allies and to Scout Harding, alerting her to the situation and advising her to halt the progress of the soldiers returning from the Fallow Mire until further notice. There was a lot of work to be done... but through it all, Cassandra could see, the eyes of many kept turning toward the narrow passage which connected their camp to the rest of the valley.

Mahanon sat a little apart, alternating his concentration between watching the swirling snow blast through the valley and sharpening every sword and dagger anyone would bring him. He could not, of course, do both at the same time. The whetstone in his fingers trembled as it skated over the blades. “If you sharpen that one much more,” Cassandra said, stepping to his side, “there won’t be anything left.”

“I have to do something,” he muttered. His green eyes flicked to the valley once again. A few feet away, Cullen was bent over the map of Thedas which had once covered the war table, but he too kept lifting his head and glancing keenly in the same direction. “If I don’t do, I think.”

“And what is it that you think?” She kept her voice gentle as she sat down.

“That I left my closest friend behind to die while I ran for my life.” The words were bitter on his tongue, and he scowled at the weapon in his hand. “That even if she somehow survived pulling a mountain down onto her own head, she froze to death trying to get out from under it.”

“You think it should have been you?”

“I think I’ll spend the rest of my life wishing it had been.”

They were quiet for a few minutes. “Do you remember when I told you about Anthony?” Cassandra said. She opened the pouch on her belt and drew out the locket, opening the tiny latch and revealing his portrait. “We were children when our parents were executed, spared for our innocence, and my uncle Vestalus had little time for children. We relied on each other for friendship and support; we had no one else. He was everything I loved and everything I wanted to be. And when I was twelve, he was taken from me.”

“You said he was killed...”

“Right in front of me. A group of blood mages had heard of his prowess as a dragon hunter, and they wanted him to bring them some dragon’s blood for a ritual. He refused. They beheaded him without a second thought.” She closed her eyes for a moment, trying not to relive the terror and pain which had haunted her for so many years.

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and opened her eyes again, tucking the locket away once more. “At the Conclave, it was much the same. I lost the Divine, and many other friends and associates, and also
my... Regalyan. He was a mage, and my first love.”

“Oh.” Surprise drove the self-loathing from Mahanon’s tone. “Well. No wonder you were so angry when we first met.”

Cassandra gave a wry chuckle. “I tell you this not to make it about me. Only to say that... I understand your feelings. People are taken from us, sometimes through their own actions or even their own courage, and the Maker – or as you would say, the Creators – might not always let us know why. But we have to keep living... because it’s what they would have wanted us to do.” She put a hand on his arm, a little surprised at herself for doing so. “I do not know how long we must wait, and wonder, before we learn of Victoria’s fate. I only know that she would not want you to spend your life blaming yourself for the choice that she made.”

He didn’t say anything, but after a brief hesitation, he lifted his right hand, the one that bore the mark, and covered her fingers with his own. She did not pull away.

As the afternoon stretched on, there was a commotion in the valley. No one knew what to make of it – it was too much noise to be one lost Lady Herald. A frightened buzzing filled the air. “Could it be the Elder One’s forces?” Cullen wondered, drawing his sword and facing the entrance. “Get the civilians to the rear of the camp!”

“No!” exclaimed Leliana, peering into the seemingly endless storm. “Look!”

The blaze of the torches extended just slightly beyond the borders of the camp, and into the puddles of light trampled a bronto – one of the sturdy pack animals used in Orzammar. A second followed, and a third, and a small company of dwarves driving them. “Hail, Inquisition!” one of these shouted. “We bring tidings from His Majesty, Bhelen, King of Orzammar! He has received your message and sends us with his compliments!”

The sounds of fear changed to cries of joy and gratitude. King Bhelen had sent what he could spare on such short notice – food and blankets, mostly – but it was a welcome boon. A few of the villagers set to work preparing meals, and a long while later, Josephine approached Cassandra and Mahanon with bowls of some kind of stew. “You must eat, Lord Herald,” she insisted. “You as well, Cassandra. Neither of you has touched anything in hours.”

He shook his head. “I’m not really hungry. Thanks, Josephine, all the same.”

“You can’t go on like this,” Cassandra urged him. “You haven’t eaten since before you sealed the Breach, and that was yesterday.”

He looked up at the sky, where the scar was only partially visible from their vantage point. “It’s getting dark again,” he said quietly, and she understood.

“I know. But-”

He waved her off, suddenly. “Shh. Do you hear that?”

“I don’t hear –”

“Shh!”

At first, all she could hear was the howl of the wind through the valley. But as Cassandra listened, she detected a second, quieter noise. It was slow, irregular, the sound of snow being crushed under staggering armored boots. Cullen, she saw, had heard it too, and he snatched up a torch to peer into
the growing darkness. As she watched, his eyes grew wide almost in disbelief, and he pushed the torch into someone else’s hands before taking off at a run. “There she is!”

There was a heavy noise, the clank of falling metal and a sigh of pain and fatigue. With a last desperate surge of effort, the figure of the Lady Herald collapsed into a snowbank just outside the encampment. “Thank the Maker!” Cassandra cried, as she and Mahanon rushed to follow Cullen. The commander outran them, however, and as he ran she saw him yanking off his thick crimson surcoat. He knelt in the snow beside Victoria, bundling her into the garment before gathering her half-frozen body into his arms.

“Call for the blacksmith,” he said, staggering to his feet and clutching her to his chest. “We’ve got to get her armor off – it’s half destroyed anyway. She needs a healer, and a fire. Alert Mother Giselle!”

People were pressing around, gasping and pointing and trying to get a good look at their prodigal defender who had somehow found her way back to them. The legends of the day would almost certainly come to paint her as being larger than life, towering and immortal, the unvanquished. [Editor's note: I'll see to it personally.] Yet she seemed remarkably tiny in that moment, almost drowning amid the fluffy collar which normally adorned Cullen’s shoulders. Her eyes cracked open, and she peered up at the man carrying her in apparent disbelief before losing consciousness again.

The commander arranged Victoria carefully on a pallet in the recovery area, and Harritt freed her from the prison of her badly damaged armor so a healer could attend to her injuries. Mahanon seated himself at her bedside, waiting for her to wake. Cullen excused himself; Cassandra suspected he wanted to stay, but didn’t feel right doing so.

“The Lady Herald,” said a quiet, halting voice, and Cassandra turned to see Roderick, staring intently. “Is she...”

“She lives,” she told him. “She should recover.”

“When she wakes,” he said softly, “tell her... tell her... I was wrong.”

Victoria did wake, though only for a short time. “You must rest,” Mother Giselle told her. “Your friends are with you, and we have healed the worst of your wounds, but you were very badly injured. Andraste Herself must have walked beside you to bring you so far in such a state.”

“Non...”

“I’m here, Toria.” He fixed her with what might be described as a glare, if a glare could carry that much relief or affection. “Hey. Don’t you ever do that to me again, okay? Whether we live or we die, we do it together.”

Her smile was faint. “All right.”

Cassandra summoned the council members, and Victoria haltingly spoke of all which had occurred. The trebuchet plan had gone off without a hitch, but the Elder One – Corypheus, he had named himself – had probably survived with the help of his dragon. The avalanche had broken through the ground itself somehow; her understanding of the matter was fuzzy at best, but she had fallen deep into an underground series of tunnels which had led her out into the valley once she regained consciousness.

“Probably an escape method built by those who founded Haven,” Cullen remarked. Victoria,
clutching Mahanon’s hand in her own, gazed up at the commander as though digesting his words. He held her gaze, his smile faint and a little embarrassed. “The surviving cultists who weren’t killed when the Grey Wardens found the village may have used it to leave before the Chantry arrived.”

“This Corypheus... he called us a mistake.” She gestured to Mahanon and herself. “We interrupted a ritual of some kind... something he said he had planned for years. It must... it must have been what we heard at the first rift... the Divine... all the things we can’t remember.” She shook her head briefly, but stopped, as it clearly caused her pain.

“Depends on your point of view,” Mahanon replied. Cassandra was slightly amused at his demeanor; the restoration of Victoria to the Inquisition had brought him back to his usual self so quickly that it could almost cause whiplash. “Anything that this monster sees as a mistake has to be a good thing.”

“I agree,” said Leliana with a small laugh. “And there’s a bright spot. Corypheus may not realize you’ve both survived – he might not even think either one of you has – so we can lie low for a spell. Buy ourselves a chance to breathe and recover, no?”

Cassandra and the council members left Victoria to the care of Mother Giselle and the watchfulness of Mahanon, with other companions drifting in and out of the recovery area at intervals to see her with their own eyes. But with their biggest concern now in the past, they were at liberty to try to plan... and to squabble, and to blame. They were on perhaps their fifth shouting match – she had truthfully lost count – when they were suddenly confronted by a very much awake Lady Herald. She was leaning heavily on her counterpart for support, Cullen’s surcoat still draped around her shoulders; her unbraided hair was bedraggled and her face bore a nasty bruise from her fall, but her gray eyes could still pierce them.

“How,” she asked in a forcibly patient tone, “is a body supposed to get any rest around here?”

No one could answer her. Cullen turned away, rubbing the back of his neck; Leliana sat and pulled her knees to her chest in a little nightingale-ball. Cassandra sighed and leaned over the map again. She only looked up when Mother Giselle began to sing – an old hymn, one of the first she herself could ever remember learning. One by one, the former residents of Haven came to gather around the Heralds, joining in and lifting their voices to the sky. Some stood, some bowed or even knelt before the duo, who looked nonplussed by the accolade. Only Solas remained apart, watching from a distance, his expression curious; dimly it occurred to Cassandra that of course he wouldn’t know the song.

When it ended, he came and touched Mahanon’s arm, and the two Heralds walked away with him to the cliff’s edge, talking seriously. Cassandra almost wanted to follow, her curiosity nearly getting the better of her, but she held herself back. Cole wouldn’t have allowed her to intrude anyway; he came to her at that moment with the news of Chancellor Roderick’s death. “He believed before he died,” the spirit-boy reported, blinking at her through the fringe of his pale hair. “He heard the song, and he was sorry for doubting, and he was sad that he didn’t get to say so. An old song, heavy in his heart, but lightening the burden of his body as he was carried away from it.”

It was only later, after days of traveling north and traversing the snowy hillsides, that Cassandra discovered just what had been the matter of such importance for Solas. Rising in the distance, silhouetted against the clear winter sky, was a fortress of such magnitude and ancient construction that she was sure she could search the whole of Thedas and never find its equal.

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“Skyhold,” Solas explained when everyone paused to admire it. “It has had many names through
the ages, but its original name in Elvhen translates to ‘the place where the sky is held.’ Ergo, Skyhold. I have visited it many times during my explorations of the Fade, and have long wanted to see it in person.”

“One problem,” said Mahanon. He was still supporting Victoria whenever she wasn’t on horseback; her injuries were healing well, but slowly. “There’s a gatehouse, but there’s no road leading to it – I don’t think the horses can manage it.”

“An age or two back, there was a major collapse,” Solas said, pointing with his staff at where the road had once been. “I think we have sufficient mage power among us to restore it to what it needs to be. Once we are inside, however, turning the Inquisition into what it needs to be... well, that will be up to all of you.”
Wintry Halls of Strong Mountain-Kings

Chapter Summary

Varric summons Hawke to Skyhold and endures Cassandra's wrath.

Chapter Notes

I always thought it was a little odd that the keep clearly is not entered until the Inquisitor enters it for the first time, and yet it's equally clear that some time passes between the arrival at Skyhold and that scene. So I attempted to provide a reason for that here.

Chapter Fourteen: Wintry Halls of Strong Mountain-Kings

Varric didn’t like what he was going to have to do. He’d been trying to avoid it for as long as he’d been mixed up in this whole business. But having heard Victoria’s account of what happened after he’d been ordered away from her side back in Haven, and knowing just what they were facing, he’d come to the very disappointing conclusion that he really didn’t have a choice.

They were still new to Skyhold, still learning their way around the place, still carving out little pockets of it for themselves. Tents were erected in one area for the wounded, while masons assessed the damage to various walls and tried to work out how many bricks and stones it would take to fix it all. Meanwhile, word had gotten out of the Inquisition’s narrow escape and arrival at the castle, and a faint but steady trickle of new volunteers was finding its way to them.

The Lady Herald, for her part, was still recuperating from the fall that had somehow managed not to kill her, and the Lord Herald (quietly backed by Cullen) was refusing to let her lift a finger until the healers had cleared her for it. Until she could see it with her own eyes, no one was being allowed into the castle’s main keep; Varric thought this was a strange sort of consideration, but humans always did things in strange ways. As for him, he had a promise to break. He made his way to the top floor of the tavern, which was being renamed The Heralds’ Rest in honor of Mahanon and Victoria, and settled himself in one corner with a lamp, a quill, a pot of ink, and all the spare parchment he could find.

Dear Hawke, he wrote.

First, I thought you ought to know I’m alive. That came way too close to not being the case in recent days, but I survived the sacking of Haven and am now writing to you from a dilapidated ruin that wants to be a castle when it grows up. Its name is apparently Skyhold, and you’ll find it about a hundred miles from anywhere civilized.
I’m happy to report that both the Lord and Lady Herald also survived the mess. Mahanon was one of those in charge of the evacuation. Daisy would probably love the stuffing out of him; he’s Dalish, good looking, clever, and rather witty. He reminds me of me, except for the Dalish part. He’s also really good under pressure and a strong leader. People followed him out of Haven without so much as a backward glance, even though they had to leave almost everything behind, because they believed in him. If I ever started another romance serial (which I wouldn’t), he’d make a perfect hero.

I recently found out that he’s older than I thought he was. I thought that he and Victoria were around the same age; I guess in my head I’d started thinking of them as twins or something because of how they are with each other. She’s twenty-one, but he’s actually in his early thirties. At least, he thinks he is; the Dalish don’t mark ages the same way we do, plus they live longer, and birthdays really aren’t important to them either so he doesn’t pay a whole lot of attention to his age. But he says it’s been at least fifteen winters since he was given his facial tattoos, and that doesn’t happen until they’re young adults, so I’m doing the fuzzy math as best I can. Anyway, it makes it more understandable to my mind why he’d be into Cassandra, who is only a little younger than me – and believe me, he is into Cassandra. Sure, she’s pretty in her own way, I guess, but she’s... Cassandra. Oh well. To each his own.

Lady Herald stayed behind to distract the enemy while the rest of us got away. This girl needs more hugs. She’s almost desperate to do the right thing at all times. It almost killed her, but she made it and she found us and they tell me she’s going to be all right soon. Good thing too, because I think Curly – you remember Cullen, of course? He’s Curly now – is starting to realize that he’s falling for her. She’s had a terrible crush on him pretty much since day one, and he finally managed to stop working long enough to notice her. Sure, it only took her pulling a mountain down onto her head; but the way he overworks himself, I wouldn’t have laid money that even that would have gotten his attention. She’s not allowed to move very much, so if we want to see her we have to go to where they’ve got her propped up, and I’ve noticed he makes a point of stopping by at least twice a day. Don’t ask why I notice these things. I don’t have anything better to do.

Everybody else in our little troop is pretty decent. Some of them could smile more, but it’s not like we have a lot to smile about sometimes. We’ve lost entirely too many good people – at the Conclave, in the various battles, and now in the destruction of Haven. We’re just lucky we found this place. And you know, it’s weird – this fortress is in the Frostbacks, and surrounded by snow, and you’d think we would all freeze to death. But within the curtain wall, it seems to be permanently autumn in here. The trees have colored leaves on them, and the grass is green, and it never seems to rain. Solas, who helped us find the place, says that it’s incredibly old and that magic has seeped into the stones. Actually, what he told me is that “Skyhold is happy with its new master and mistress,” which I guess means the Heralds. Never heard of a building being happy before, but Cole agrees with him. (Don’t ask about Cole. I don’t begin to know how to explain him to you.) So apparently, this permanent autumn is a reflection of the fact that Skyhold likes the Heralds. Fair enough, I guess; we all like them too.

Varric set down his quill and massaged the palm of his right hand with the thumb of his left. Sometimes the writing left him feeling cramped.
There are days when I think that if I don’t see Kirkwall again soon, I might go crackers. But until I do, I guess I can get used to living in a castle, even if it’s half fallen down. Things could definitely be worse, and at least the hole in the sky is sewn up.

Well, this has all been very pleasant, but it’s been leading up to me asking you to do the one thing I swore I would never ask you to do. I need you to come to Skyhold. I’m sorry, Hawke. I’ve kept you out of this disaster as long as I can, but there’s no getting around it now, and here’s why. When Victoria caught up to us and was more or less healthy enough to talk, she filled us in on her confrontation with this Elder One who’s behind the whole mess. Does the name Corypheus ring a bell? Yeah, I thought it might. I don’t know how he did it, but the bastard managed to survive. You killed him, I saw you kill him, he was dead as dead can be - and yet somehow, he’s still walking around and he tried to kill my Herald buddies. You’re the only person I know who’s had any sort of dealings with him, so I need your help. They need your help. They put the sky back together, but that just seems to have opened up a whole new host of problems.

I’ve enclosed a rough sketch that should help you find the place without too much trouble. I swiped Curly’s map and made as good a copy as I could. If you can’t figure it out, just ask around; we’ve got new people showing up here all the time, refugees and soldiers and stray Templars and the like.

I’m really, really sorry to ask this of you, but all the same, I can’t wait to see you.

Varric

He hated to do it. He was the only person who knew where Hawke and Fenris were hiding, trying to keep out of sight of the Chantry. They never stayed in one place for too terribly long, always moving on after a few months – but they always made sure he knew how to find them. It felt like a betrayal of her trust, asking this. But he had no choice.

Varric expected that within a few weeks, he’d have a return letter telling him she was on her way. Or maybe he’d have one telling him to drop dead; he considered himself responsible for so much of what had befallen Hawke, it didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility. To his surprise, however, he got neither. Instead, about a week and a half after he sent the message, another caravan pulled into the castle, and Leliana’s devoted Charter came to tell him that one of the refugees had asked for him by name.

He made his way down to the gatehouse, where the small wagon was being stripped of its contents and passengers. A hooded figure stood off to one side, back to the wall, arms folded and one knee bent to rest the sole of a boot against the stones. The character’s bearing was too noble to be a refugee, and at the same time too humble to be proud. He could think of only one person who fit that description, and it was a challenge not to let a wide grin sneak onto his face.

Wordlessly he led her up to the battlements, to a spot where they could converse without being seen, and she finally lowered her hood. Marianne Hawke had grown more careworn since he’d seen her last; her skin was like oiled leather from so much time in the sun, and the corners of her mouth were fixed in a permanent small downturn. But there was real joy in her eyes at the sight of him, and though neither of them was normally prone to physical gestures of affection, a lengthy hug was absolutely necessary before any conversation could take place. "You've been skipping meals," he
“I didn’t bring Fenris,” she said. “He won’t like it, but you know how he is. What’s going on is dangerous, and I’d rather he not get himself killed protecting me.”

“Ah, Elf. Still the same.”

“Something’s wrong with the Wardens, Varric.” Hawke was deadly serious. “I don’t know exactly what it is. Do you remember Stroud? We met him briefly during the Qunari uprising, he was acquainted with Anders.”

He flinched. “Please don’t mention Blondie.”

“Sorry. Anyway, he’s on the run from the order – they think he’s betrayed them somehow. I’ve been in touch with him and we know something’s going on that isn’t good, so I was actually preparing to contact you when your letter came. I think the Inquisition needs to look into this, especially given what you and I know about Corypheus having been a Grey Warden prisoner for so long. The two things have to be related.”

“Oh, great. Because we don’t have enough to worry about.” Varric sighed, and looked down at the outer bailey, where the entire population of Skyhold seemed to be massing. “Okay, something’s going on down there – I’d better go find out what before they wonder where I am. I’ll bring the Heralds up to meet you as soon as I can.”

“Is the Lady Herald recovered?”

“I have my doubts, but she insists she’s fine.”

Victoria wasn’t just fine, she was flummoxed. By the time Varric got down to the bailey, Curly and Ruffles were informing the crowd that the Inquisition finally had its true leader, its formally designated Inquisitor – or rather, Inquisitors. He squinted up at the staircase, where she and Mahanon stood with Cassandra and Leliana. A giant sword with a dragon curled around the hilt was in Victoria’s hands. “Have our people been told?” Cassandra called.

“They have! And soon, the world!” Josephine called back.

“Commander, will they follow?”

“Inquisition, will you follow?” Cullen shouted. There was a cry of approval. “Will you fight?” Another cry. “Will we triumph?” A third cry, louder than ever. He drew his sword, turning dramatically to point upwards. “Your leaders – your Heralds – your Inquisitors!”

Mahanon put his hand over Victoria’s, and together, they lifted the sword to the sky. The cheering was deafening. Cullen and Josephine made their way up the stairs to join the others, and as the crowd slowly dispersed, Varric watched as they opened the doors to the primary keep for the first time.

He trudged up the stairs after them, pausing on the threshold to take in the main hall’s dilapidated state. Candelabrum were overturned, smashed furniture littered the filthy carpet, and part of the ceiling hung loose and threatening. The Inquisitors and the three council members were talking; where Cassandra had gone, he didn’t know and didn’t really want to know. “I’d feel better,” Leliana said, “if we knew more about what we were dealing with.”

“I know someone who can help with that,” he said, alerting them to his presence. They all turned to
stare at him in surprise, and he shrugged nonchalantly. “Everyone acting all inspirational jogged my memory, so I sent a message to an old friend.”

Josephine looked puzzled; Leliana raised an eyebrow. “Go on,” said Victoria.

“She’s crossed paths with Corypheus before,” he explained, “and may know more about what he’s doing. She can help.”

“Well, we’re always looking for new allies,” said Mahanon. “Introduce us.”

Varric looked around, genuinely worried that Cassandra was within earshot. She wasn’t going to let him live once she knew. “Parading around might cause a fuss,” he said. “It’s better for you to meet privately, on the battlements.” He saw Leliana exchange a glance with Josephine, and he was pretty sure Nightingale already knew the score. “Trust me… it’s complicated.” So saying, he got out of there before either Inquisitor could ask him any more questions.

Varric returned to the ramparts, where Hawke was patiently waiting, and loitered in the doorway for a few minutes in order to really study his friend. Months on the run had not been especially kind to the Champion of Kirkwall. Her physique had always been lean and muscled, like a languid jungle cat ready to pounce on its next meal; now, though, she had grown thinner, her cheekbones sharp and her soft mouth creased with agitation and more than one sleepless night. There were even, he realized with a jolt in his midsection, traces of snowy white in the black satin hair which crowned her weary head. She was too young for all that life had hurled into her path, he thought; then, belatedly, he remembered that even his immortal Hawke was growing older. Of course, he himself was past forty already, and he objectively knew that she was only five years younger than he was; but it made sense that he would age. He somehow never thought she would.

“The Heralds have been promoted,” he informed her, stepping out into the light. “They’re the Inquisitors now.”

“So I heard,” Hawke replied with a small smile. “Cullen and Cassandra’s voices carry a long way. At least, I’m guessing that’s Cassandra based on your description.”

“That’s her. I’m probably a dead man when she finds out you’re here,” he admitted. “Just remember, the Merchants’ Guild has a copy of my will. I’m leaving everything to you and Sunshine.”

“I doubt the Inquisitors would let her kill you.”

“Let her, no. Arrive too late to stop her, maybe.”

“Anything special I should know about the two of them?”

“Hunter’s like you in a lot of ways.” Funny that he hadn’t noticed the resemblance sooner. “Snarky, funny, great with his knives – you can compare blades. Eyebrows is a lady, but I mean it as a compliment. Almost ridiculously polite. He’d probably cut anyone who looked at her wrong… well, it goes both ways there.”

“They sound a lot like the Heroes of Ferelden,” Hawke remarked.

“Yeah, that’s what everyone says, including Nightingale. And she was part of the Wardens’ retinue during the Blight, so I guess she’d know.” He turned, hearing a noise, and saw the Inquisitors – clad in the informal costumes which he secretly called their pajamas – approaching at a distance. “Ah. Here we go. I’ll go meet them on that battlement there, and you follow in a minute.”
“Why?”

“Dramatic entrance, of course. I’m introducing one legend to another two; we have to make it memorable for the book later.”

“Oh, Varric.”

Of course, there was also a fourth legend walking around the Skyhold compound, and it wasn’t long before he was on the receiving end of Cassandra’s wrath. After making the formal introductions, he decided to let Hawke and the Inquisitors speak privately, so he’d wandered away on a leisurely stroll along the battlements. From there he had gone back to his little corner of the upper tavern, where he liked to hide and write, and that was where she confronted him.

The Seeker was terrifying when she was angry, in a way that made rift demons look like fennec foxes. He made a mental note to uncover just who it was that had ratted him out, and come up with a creative way to make their life extremely difficult – at least, if he survived that long.

“You lied to me! You knew where Hawke was all along!”

Part of Varric wanted to apologize – the rest, not so much. “You’re damned right I did!” he snapped.

“You conniving little shit!” She hauled off and took a swing, which he only just barely managed to duck. They chased each other around the small room, Varric trying to keep out of reach; he was convinced that Cassandra really was trying to kill him.

“You kidnapped me! You interrogated me! What did you expect?”

He dodged around the table, half afraid she was going to pick it up and hit him with it. “I lied to protect her, all right? I didn’t know what you wanted with her!”

“But once you knew what was happening, you should have told me the truth! You know what was at stake!”

“And then what? You’d have dragged her into this mess just like everyone else!”

“We could have brought her to the Conclave! She could have saved it!”

“Enough!” cried a new voice. The Inquisitors had concluded their meeting with Hawke, and for whatever reason, Victoria had come in search of them. Or maybe she’d just been close enough to the tavern to follow the sounds of bellowing. She winced slightly as she finished climbing the stairs, and Varric felt a stab of guilt as he remembered she was still recovering. Once in the room properly, she moved to stand between them, glaring from one to the other.

“You’re taking his side?” Cassandra demanded.

“I said, enough!” The Lady Inquisitor’s arms were spread. “You are two of the best friends I have ever had, but so help me I will knock you both into next sevenday if that’s what it takes to restore order here!” Varric had never heard her speak in such a way, such a tone; if things hadn’t been so serious, he might have laughed. As it was, he hoped he could remember the line to steal later.

With some visible effort, Cassandra managed to adopt a relatively civil demeanor. “We needed someone to lead this Inquisition,” she said. “First, Leliana and I searched for the Heroes of Ferelden, but they had vanished. Then we looked for Hawke, but she was gone too. We thought it
all connected, but no.” She turned on Varric again. “It was just you. You kept her from us.”

“The Inquisition has a leader!” he protested, gesturing at Victoria. “Two of them, in fact! Damn good ones, too!”

“Hawke would have been at the Conclave! If anyone could have saved Most Holy…”

“Varric isn’t to blame for what happened at the Conclave,” Victoria pointed out.

“I was protecting my friend!”

“Varric is a liar, Inquisitor. A snake.” Cassandra scowled. “Even after the Conclave, when we needed Hawke most, Varric kept her secret from us.”

“She’s with us now,” he growled. “We’re on the same side.”

“We all know whose side you are on, Varric, and it will never be the Inquisition’s!”

“Attacking him now won’t help us, Cassandra,” said Victoria shortly.

“Exactly!” Varric’s triumph was short-lived, however. The Lady Inquisitor spun on him, and he shrank back a little.

“And you had better not be keeping anything else from us,” she said.

“I understand.” He sighed, and hung around a little longer to watch Cassandra mope about not dwelling on what might have been. As he turned to go, he glanced back. “You know what I think? I think that if Hawke had been at the temple, she’d be dead too. You people have done enough to her.”

He left the two women then. Eyebrows could handle Cassandra, could probably get her into a reasonably congenial mood. He’d apologize later – not to the Seeker, but to Victoria, who hadn’t deserved to be stuck in the middle of all that. For now, he wanted to spend a few more minutes with Hawke before she struck out for Crestwood.
The Lord and Lady Inquisitor, by MerrilyDoodles
Be a Light for Your People

Chapter Summary

The Inquirors have fun with judging people, and Dorian has even more fun with distressing Cullen.

Chapter Fifteen: Be a Light for Your People

Dorian wandered around Skyhold, admiring the bastion of warmth it provided against the bitter cold of the Frostbacks. It was neither in Ferelden nor Orlais, exactly, and yet both countries maintained at least a minimal claim to it.

His favorite haunt was the library, on the second floor of the keep’s rotunda. It didn’t have nearly enough books; Josephine was doing her best to remedy that, sending messengers to distant courts to request copies of this treatise or that historical record. Victoria, whose bookworm tendencies rivaled his own, also returned frequently from forays into the Hinterlands or Val Royeaux with an armful of volumes to add to the shelves. The Iron Bull’s merry band of brigands had been sent to the ruins of Haven, to retrieve whatever might have survived of the devastated settlement, and among the salvage were a few books, including one of Varric’s.

“If I ever get to go back to Kirkwall,” Varric commented, throwing a glance at Cassandra which she pointedly ignored, “I’ll make sure the Inquisition gets a full set of everything I’ve ever written. And anything else my publisher’s willing to send.”

The Inquirors, as they were now known, kept themselves busier than ever. Not only were they helping the advisors draft plans for infiltrating a ball in Halamshiral Palace, and making preparations to join the Champion of Kirkwall in a secret meeting with a Grey Warden associate, but they spent what seemed like an inordinate amount of time attending to the needs of the ‘inner circle’ members.

There was the matter of Solas, who had taken up residence on the first floor of the rotunda. From Dorian’s preferred chair, he had a clear view of the elf’s activities; in what might be called his leisure hours, Solas was daubing the walls of his chamber with a series of pictures. As near as he could tell, they were representations of the Inquisition’s history, done in a similar style to ancient elven paintings still visible on rock formations throughout Orlais. He had also been appealing to the Inquiros regarding some ancient elven technology, which Dorian would have thought was a contradiction in terms; scattered across the continent were strange devices which, Solas said, could strengthen the Veil and prevent further rifts from opening, and he taught them how to activate the devices whenever they stumbled across them. Interesting to be sure, and probably useful, but still rather odd. However, he himself was an enthusiast about ancient magical workings, and it was pleasant to find common ground with his brother mage.

There was the matter of Cole, who wasn’t quite human, and arranging for him to be allowed to stay; Victoria was rather insistent on the point, for some reason. He occasionally followed her around like a lost puppy, which seemed to amuse her, and Dorian overheard her questioning Cole
about odd things he had done, like throwing turnips into a fire. The Altus knew he shouldn’t eavesdrop, but his curiosity got the better of him; Cole was a curiosity, after all. It seemed he had done many peculiar things, like luring spiders and drugging cats, all in slightly convoluted efforts to bring smiles to the faces of people throughout Skyhold.

“So many voices hurting, needs no one meets,” he explained, “chances to make things better. But you kept me out of kindness. You understand.”

“Yes, I do.” And she patted his cheek and told him to keep up the good work, and Cole looked happy before he vanished.

Then there was Dorian’s own personal matter, involving his father. Mother Giselle urged Victoria to convince Dorian to undertake the meeting with his family’s messenger, but he only agreed when she said she would go with him. It was… difficult, and made even more difficult when the so-called messenger turned out to be no less a person than his father himself. Halward Pavus seemed genuinely contrite, but Dorian was still shaken by the memory of how blood magic was going to be used to make him something he wasn’t. He would need to drink a lot later. But he had a father again, and his father had a son again, and it was largely her doing.

They returned to Skyhold in time to greet the returning party of Mahanon, the Iron Bull, and Bull’s Chargers. The Chargers only took the time to salute the Lady Inquisitor before trooping into the Heralds’ Rest to recover from their wounds. Victoria peered intently at her counterpart’s weary expression. “What happened?”

“It was worse than we expected,” he said. His hand went to her shoulder almost automatically, as though siphoning some of her aura for comfort. “The Venatori were… much stronger than we thought.”

“Don’t worry about it, Boss,” the Bull rumbled. “I’m going to go see to my men. I’ll discuss it with you two later, if you don’t mind.” He nodded at them all and ambled away.

The Inquisitors began to walk across the compound, and Dorian fell in step beside them. Mahanon dropped his hand, allowing Victoria to take his arm instead. “Bull’s superiors offered to make a real alliance with the Inquisition,” Mahanon explained for Dorian’s benefit. “I went with him and his men to meet one of their dreadnoughts – their battleships – and help them bring down some Venatori. But it was more dangerous than we knew; maybe the Venatori found out we were coming somehow. Long story short, it came down to Bull having to choose between the dreadnought and the Chargers.” Victoria gasped, and he nodded. “I told him to recall his men, and he did. His contact in the Qun, that Gaat fellow… well, he didn’t like it much.”

“He did the right thing,” she said gently.

“I couldn’t let him give them up. I know we needed that alliance, but…”

“We didn’t need it at a cost like that. The Chargers are part of the Inquisition. And they’re Bull’s family.”

His expression cleared, relieved. “Exactly.”

Josephine met them at the door of the main hall. “I’m so pleased you’ve both returned,” she said. “When you’re feeling up to it, we will need you to pass judgment on some prisoners.”

“Prisoners?”

“King Alistair received Leliana’s message about relocating to Skyhold. He sends his apologies for
not being able to assist us in the exodus from Haven, and a generous gift of supplies, and Magister Alexius – with a request for you to determine his fate.”

“I forgot about that,” Victoria admitted.

“Lord Abernache is expected to arrive tomorrow morning with Knight-Captain Denam, and there is a third person we apprehended in your absence. If you like, we can wait for His Lordship’s arrival and you can conduct all three judgments at once.”

“I think that’s best,” said Mahanon. “Creators know I need to rest a bit before I do anything else.”

“You go do that, Non,” Victoria suggested. “Dorian and I still need to talk about something. I’ll meet you in our quarters later.”

They broke off, and Victoria made her way back to the library with Dorian. “How do you like sharing that gorgeous room with your brother-in-arms?” he inquired.

“Frankly, I’ve gotten so used to sharing quarters with him that the idea of having that tower all to myself was a little unsettling,” she said with a laugh. “The masons had no objection to setting up a divider like we had in our hut back in Haven, and I think I sleep better knowing he’s on the other side. Meanwhile… how are you feeling, now that you’ve talked to your father?”

“I’m still in shock, I think. But it was good to finally lay the matter to rest.”

“So you’ve… never been with a woman? Or wanted to?”

“Allow me to say: women are fine creatures. You, for instance, are amazing above all others. They’re just not for me.”

“I’m not judging, I promise.”

He shook his head. “Thank you for bringing me out there. It wasn’t what I expected… but it’s something. Maker knows what you must think of me now, after that whole display.”

“I think you’re very brave.”

“Brave?!”

“It’s not easy to abandon tradition and walk your own path.”

Dorian was still mulling over her words, and the great surge of affection they’d caused in him, when he went out into the gardens later. The courtyard of Skyhold, like most parts of the fortress, was in dire need of upkeep. Still, there was a functioning well, and some planters for growing medicinal herbs, and a charming little gazebo with a table and chairs. Someone had placed a chess set on the table; he wondered if it had been Solas, who seemed to enjoy playing the game inside his head, or if Skyhold itself was just continuing to be considerate much like it was with the climate. In any case, what he needed was an antagonist.

If Skyhold was determined to accommodate the needs of its residents, it was doing a charming job, he thought. He’d scarcely formed the idea when a door opened, and Cullen walked out into the courtyard. As Dorian watched, the commander approached Mother Giselle and the new herbalist in turn, apparently with instructions or information from the council or perhaps the Inquisitors themselves.
“I say, Commander! If you’ve a moment?” he called. “You’re exactly what I need.”

“I beg your pardon?” Cullen was doing his level best not to look suspicious as he turned to meet Dorian’s eyes. The Altus chuckled to himself.

“If there’s one thing I’ve not been able to find, it’s a decent opponent for chess. And the garden has a board all set up and everything. Could I distract you for an hour or so?”

Cullen hesitated. “I really should attend to my duties.”

“As you do every other hour of the day. No matter.” He suddenly had an idea and decided to try it. “Perhaps the Lady Inquisitor is free.”

“...I suppose I could spare a little time.”

“Splendid.”

They faced each other across the table. Dorian wasn’t above cheating, in one way or another, but he wondered how long it would take the other man to notice that he was doing it. “This castle really is quite extraordinary. Remarkable how Solas knew to find it.”

“My understanding is that it has some elven origins, and he relied on one of their ancient legends to help him target the location.” Cullen shifted a pawn. “Skyhold is apparently so old that no one remembers who originally built it - it’s been torn down and rebuilt many times.”

“Yes, and there’s magic clearly at work here. Any mage could sense it; Madam Vivienne agrees with me on the point.” Dorian studied the board. “Likely there’s a lyrium vein or something similar in the ground.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me. I just hope we’re able to complete the repairs to the defensive structures before they’re needed.”

“Well, on the bright side, Corypheus probably thinks that at least one of the Inquisitors is dead. For a while, hopefully, we can keep it quiet that they both survived - let him develop a sense of false confidence.”

Cullen looked up, a little surprised. “One of them almost did die,” he pointed out quietly. His words weren’t angry, exactly, but tense.

“I know. I try not to think about it very much.”

“As do I.”

He nodded at that, twirling one of his tower pieces between his fingers. “The loss would have been... incalculable. I don’t mean to suggest that her life is worth more than the others we lost on that terrible day, or any day for that matter, only that...”

“Only that she means something different to the rest of us than they do.”

“That’s a diplomatic way to phrase it. You’ve clearly learned a few things from Josephine.”

Cullen picked up one of his pieces, paused, and set it down again. They played in silence for a few moments, and Dorian surreptitiously watched the commander. A faint flush had spread across his ruggedly unshaven skin; his steely gaze was focused on the board in a way that indicated he was thinking intently, but not about the game. Abruptly, he asked, “What does she mean to you?”
“What’s that?”

“Vi- the Lady Inquisitor. What exactly are your... intentions?”

Dorian threw back his flawlessly groomed head and laughed heartily. “And he finally asks the question that’s been gnawing at his mind! I wondered what it would take.” He glanced across the board, saw Cullen looking unamused, and laughed again. “Would it make you feel better if I said my intentions are strictly honorable?”

“Somewhat, I suppose.”

“Very well, I’ll be more explicit. I adore the Lady Inquisitor; she is probably my favorite person in the world.” Dorian felt his own expression soften. “She’s proven herself to be a true friend and I cannot speak too highly of her.” He looked down at the arrangement of chessmen, and with a dramatic flourish, he positioned one of his men to deliver a devastating checkmate before concluding, “But if we’re speaking of affairs of the heart, or the loins, allow me to assure you that you are much more to my tastes than she ever could be.”

He raised his head, and had the immense satisfaction of watching Cullen’s eyebrows draw together in an adorably bewildered expression, not unlike that of a confused curly-haired lapdog. Then, to his surprise, the commander smirked. “Fine, you’ve won this one. Meet me here this time tomorrow; I want a rematch.”

“I shall look forward to it!”

Lord Abernache arrived to find the Inquisitors very ready to judge all three prisoners. There was only one Inquisitorial throne; Josephine was lavish with her apologies, insisting that in time they’d arrange for a second one. Mahanon didn’t seem to mind it, though. He stood to the left of the ornate chair, preferring to let Victoria occupy it, and Dorian rather thought that she might want to work on her queenly bearing. She looked a little more like a young woman pretending to be a ruler than the real thing.

They were grave and thoughtful when Alexius was brought before them. Dorian was almost afraid to watch; he wasn’t sure he could handle it if they sentenced him to death, even if Alexius himself didn’t care much either way. “I couldn’t save my son,” he said. “Do you think my fate matters to me? You’ve won nothing. The people you saved, the acclaim you’ve gathered – you’ll lose it all in the storm to come. Render your judgment, Inquisitors.”

Victoria turned her head, and Mahanon bent so that they could speak quietly to one another without being heard by anyone else. They had to present the image of being in perfect agreement, he knew, but whether they actually were or not would forever be unknown. To Dorian’s great relief, Victoria’s expression was filled with compassion as she surveyed the fallen magister.

“Your magic was theoretically impossible, Alexius,” she said. “Yet I myself experienced the truth of it. We can use people like you. Your sentence is to serve, under guard, as a researcher on all things magical for the Inquisition.”

“No execution?” He sighed. “Very well.”

He was led away, still bound, and the next prisoner was brought forth. “Knight-Captain Denam, Inquisitors, awaits judgment for serving the Lord Seeker at Therinfal Redoubt,” said Cullen, as Josephine excused herself. “I knew some of the knights who died there; I asked to oversee his sentencing.”
Dorian was interested in this one, as he’d had no dealings with the Templar situation but had heard all the sordid details afterward. It was this man who had aided a demon masquerading as the Lord Seeker – a demon who had hoped to kill Mahanon and masquerade as him. Denam was of average height, with broad shoulders and a scarred, grim face beneath a mop of dark hair. His appearance was by no means as arresting as one might find Cullen or even Mahanon, but it had a certain something; Dorian couldn’t really say what.

“I only did as I was told!” he protested in response to the formal charges.

“We found everything!” Cullen replied. “The corpse of the Knight-Vigilant, even papers proving you knew red lyrium was poison!”

Denam scowled. “There is a greater power walking this world,” he said. “I wasn’t fool enough to deny it. None of you would have. I demand justice!”

“And you shall have it,” said Mahanon, coldly. He bent again to confer with Victoria, who seemed to be saying something rather urgent. He listened, then spoke quietly, and she nodded. Straightening, he looked at Denam. “Historically,” he said, “the Seekers of Therinfal Redoubt had a specific punishment for officers who failed their charges. For betraying the knights under your command, you are hereby barred from any city outside the Sea of Ash.”

The banished man looked panicked. “Lost in that wasteland! No! The other officers were to blame!” He was still wailing as Inquisition soldiers dragged him away.

Cullen looked satisfied. “Thank you, Inquisitors. Josephine has one more prisoner for you to judge.”

Dorian couldn’t really blame the Inquisitors for their confused looks when an Avvar chieftain was brought into the room in chains, and Josephine apologized for the irregularity. “We found this man attacking. The building. With a… goat.”

“A goat?!” asked Mahanon in a baffled tone.

“Chief Movran the Under feels slighted by the killing of his Avvar tribesmen… who repeatedly attacked you first.”

“I don’t understand,” said Victoria. “You answered the deaths of your clan members with a goat?”

“A courtroom?” countered the man. “Unnecessary. You killed my idiot son, and I answered, as is my custom, by smacking your holdings with goat’s blood.”

Both Inquisitors’ heads swiveled silently in Josephine’s direction. “Don’t look at me,” she muttered.

“No foul,” continued the Avvar. “He meant to murder Tevinters, but got feisty with your Inquisition. A redheaded mother guarantees a brat!” He shook his head. “Do as you’ve earned, Inquisitors, my clan yields. My remaining boys have brains still in their heads!” He chuckled.

Victoria put her chin on her hand, elbow propped on one arm of the throne, and tilted her head back slightly to look at Mahanon. He seemed to be struggling not to laugh. Her lips twitched, and Dorian thought he saw her say the words, “Allow me.”

Looking back at the Avvar, she said, “It seems our conflict was accidental, Chief Movran, but it can’t be repeated. We banish you and your clan – with all the weapons you can carry – to Tevinter.”
Everyone in the main hall started to laugh; even Josephine had a hard time concealing a giggle. Movran laughed louder than anyone. “My idiot boy got us something after all!” he exclaimed, as his chains were removed.

“We’ll ask our good friend Lord Abernache to accompany you on your journey,” Victoria added, “and to report back to us about your progress. Safe travels, messere; I believe our court is adjourned.”

Dorian met Cullen for chess immediately after the judgments, and both men were in considerably high spirits after the spectacle. Cullen still hadn’t worked out just how Dorian was engineering his victories, so they planned on a third game, and it quickly became a routine for them. They both needed it.

It was during the sixth or seventh game that Victoria found them. She came into the courtyard with Mahanon and Cassandra, but was clearly doing her best to leave those lovebirds alone, so she wandered into the gazebo and observed the game. “Are you two playing nice?”

“I’m always nice,” Dorian told her with his most winning smile. The smile disappeared a few minutes later when Cullen, unexpectedly, won the game. “Don’t get smug. There’ll be no living with you,” he told the smirking commander. Rising, he gave Victoria’s fingers a surreptitious affectionate squeeze as he passed her.

“I should get back to my duties as well,” he heard Cullen say. “Unless… you would care for a game?”

“Prepare the board, Commander,” she replied. This was too good to miss. Dorian sauntered lazily around the edge of the courtyard before taking up position behind a low wall. He was out of Cullen’s line of sight, and Victoria wasn’t likely to be looking at anything but Cullen (or, occasionally, the board), and he could hear them fairly well. At least, he could hear them until someone else started talking.

“Sparkler, what in Andraste’s name are you doing?” Varric was standing a few feet away, wearing a sardonic look.

“Keep it down, Varric. I want to see this!”

“See what?” Varric glanced into the courtyard and did a double take. “Wait a minute, is Curly actually relaxing? And with Eyebrows, no less? Move over, I want to watch too. I’ve been trying to push them together for weeks.”

“Is that so? We need to compare notes. Meet me in the library when this is over.”
Chapter Summary

Scout Harding reports intermittently about the three keeps being captured.

Chapter Sixteen: The Light From Countless Fires

Official report to the Nightingale from Lead Scout Lace Harding, re: Crestwood

Per their previous discussions, the Lord and Lady Inquisitor reached Crestwood six days ago, and immediately set to work attempting to restore order to the settlement, which has suffered tremendous losses. The original town of Crestwood was flooded ten years ago, but their more recent tragedies have been the result of a large Fade rift underneath the lake, which has caused undead to rise in a manner similar to what the village of Redcliffe experienced during the Fifth Blight.

The first undertaking was to secure the fortress of Caer Bronach, a military outpost which had been beset by a ruthless party of bandits. These thugs were preying on the traumatized population and preventing any sort of aid from reaching them. As you are aware, the Inquisition colors now adorn the keep’s flagpole, and the residents of Crestwood have kindly agreed to our use of the facility as a stopgap and resting place for Inquisition messengers and others. Agent Charter arrived yesterday to relieve me of the duty of overseeing the place. One of the local merchants accepted our invitation to set up her tent in the courtyard, to facilitate the restoration of trade to the community.

Mayor Gregory Dedrick told the Inquisitors that the only way to reach the area beneath the lake would require them to drain it, which necessitated a visit to the Rusted Horn tavern just beyond Caer Bronach. According to the mayor, the dam’s controls were destroyed by darkspawn during the Blight, resulting in the flooding of Old Crestwood, However, the Inquisitors discovered that the controls were perfectly intact, and they were able to drain the lake without difficulty. The discrepancy was clarified upon their return to New Crestwood; the mayor had fled and left a letter of confession, which I enclose for your examination at the Inquisitors’ joint request. It seems that he, not the darkspawn, was responsible for the flooding and the resultant deaths. The Inquisitors leave it to the council to determine whether or not to pursue him.

I come now to the first part of my report which may stretch your credulity. While exploring the ruins of Old Crestwood, the Inquisitors graciously recovered several bodies of villagers who drowned during the Blight, so that the village’s Chantry priestess may perform last rites. While completing this task, the party encountered a benign Fade spirit. The Lady Inquisitor tells me that it was a spirit of Command, and that this spirit identified Cole as “Compassion.” I’m not sure who Cole is, but she said you would understand. In any event, Command requested, or rather – well, commanded the party to kill a demon in the nearby cave system, which was exactly where they needed to go to dispel the rift anyway so this was easily done in the process.

The second extraordinary thing I must report is that under the lake, the Inquisitors and their friends found a mostly intact dwarven waypost which was apparently abandoned many years ago, when its connection to the Deep Roads was demolished. The Inquisitors feel that King Bhelen of Orzammar
will want to know about this, and perhaps send his own party to explore the ruins and collect any remaining valuables. They ask me to assure you, so that you in turn can assure him, that they left everything exactly as they found it, apart from some stonework which was unavoidably damaged during their battle to close the rift and kill the demons it spawned.

With the rift closed, the rain which had been continuously falling on Crestwood for the last few weeks has stopped. The Inquisitors completed their planned rendezvous with the Champion of Kirkwall and her Grey Warden ally, Ser Jean-Marc Stroud; they have made plans to meet again in the Western Approach, where they hope to stop a Grey Warden ritual from being performed. The details of the ritual are yet unknown. They will head for the Approach once they finish dealing with a few wyverns and lingering bandit groups which are currently menacing the locals. I will be leaving in the morning to travel there ahead of the Inquisitors’ party and establish a camp for them.

Official report to the Nightingale from Lead Scout Lace Harding, re: Griffon Wing Keep

Word will no doubt have reached you by this time that the Inquisitors have successfully taken control of the old Grey Warden stronghold at Griffon Wing Keep, here in the Western Approach. They regret to encroach upon the sovereignty of the ancient and respected order, but it was unavoidable owing to the circumstances.

Upon arriving here in the Approach, the Inquisitors and their friends made contact with the Champion of Kirkwall and Ser Stroud of the Wardens. At an ancient Tevinter ritual tower, they confronted Clarel, the Warden-Commander of Orlais, who was working with an unfamiliar mage. It seems that the Wardens are the ones who will be supplying the Elder One with the demon army that the Lady Inquisitor saw in the bad future, but the Inquisitors are at a loss to understand why they would do such a thing. Given the duplicity already seen in their encounters with both Magister Alexius and the Envy demon, I can only hope that the Grey Wardens aren’t truly responsible for their own actions. The Inquisitors and friends were able to disrupt the ritual being conducted at the tower; however, both Clarel and her unknown associate fled the scene.

Since they had traveled such a long way, the Inquisitors decided to do some reconnaissance here in the Approach, and in the process encountered a group of researchers slaughtered by local bandits. The researchers were in the employ of Frederic of Serault, the somewhat eccentric Professor of Draconology at the University of Orlais, and the Inquisitors befriended the gentleman and assisted him in completing his studies of the Abyssal High Dragon, whom they had to exterminate in the process. I am told that the Professor has accepted our illustrious leaders’ invitation to join the Inquisition, and will be making his way to Skyhold very soon. The Lord Inquisitor asks that if at all possible, he be given quarters near the library; the good Professor expects to be able to make several useful additions to its holdings.

The Lord and Lady Inquisitor made a number of other interesting discoveries during their time here, among them a derelict Tevinter ruin containing several frozen demons and an abandoned Tevinter prison named Coracavus, but the primary purpose of this report is to cover the assault on Griffon Wing Keep. As you probably know, the keep was built on the edge of the Abyssal Rift, site of the Second Blight. Thanks to information received from Professor Frederic, the Inquisitors discovered that the Grey Wardens have abandoned the keep, and that it was subsequently occupied by Venatori. Under the circumstances, they felt it was very necessary to clear the keep and remove the Venatori presence from the region.

The party elected to use a dual assault method. The Lord Inquisitor, accompanied by Messere Solas, Lady Cassandra, and the Iron Bull, broke down the front gate and led a direct attack. Meanwhile, the Lady Inquisitor, along with Master Tethras, Lord Dorian, and Cole (really, who is
this Cole person?) engineered a sneak attack, using a hidden cavern on the very edge of the rift to enter the cistern and infiltrate the keep via the water supply. The plan was most effective, and Commander Cullen’s right-hand man, Knight-Captain Rylen, is overseeing operations. The intention, as I understand it, is to chiefly use the keep for a training grounds.

As part of their investigations here, the Inquisitors also apprehended one Crassius Servis, a Tevinter mage who was working for the Venatori. He is being sent to Skyhold under armed guard, though I have to admit he’s been the least troublesome prisoner I’ve ever seen. He claims he has plenty to offer in exchange for his life; the Inquisitors ask that he be held until their arrival for judgment.

The Inquisitors intended to report directly back to Skyhold upon completion of their tasks here. However, word has come from some of our forward scouts in the Emprise du Lion – I’m sure that I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know – about strange activities in that region. Between the unexpectedly brutal winter and the frozen river preventing the arrival of outside supplies, the residents are freezing to death; but beyond that, many of them seem to be disappearing.

I’m not saying it’s the Venatori, but it’s probably the Venatori.

In any event, as soon as I send this report I’m off to the Emprise to set up camp for the Inquisitors, who anticipate joining me there within a few days. If you have the chance, please tell Dagna that the Inquisitors are very pleased with the runes she’s been providing, especially the dragonslaying ones.

Official report to the Nightingale from Lead Scout Lace Harding, re: Suledin Keep

Okay, so it was the Red Templars rather than the Venatori. But at this point, it’s all pretty much the same.

It took the Inquisitors some time to uncover everything that was happening here in the Emprise, not least because the weather has been so inhospitable. Essentially, there was a woman, Mistress Poulin, who owned a local quarry. When the Templars made her a generous offer for the property, she accepted in order to use the money to feed the struggling population. It wasn’t until afterward that she learned they were Red Templars, not the regular ones; by that point they were asking her to give them townspeople to be turned into red lyrium ghouls. The Inquisitors and their friends have shut down the operation pretty handily, for the most part, and they freed several carts of captured citizens. Most have returned to their homes, but some have offered to return the favor by volunteering with the Inquisition and will be making their way to Skyhold for assignment. Mistress Poulin confessed to everything and surrendered to our custody; she’ll be brought to Skyhold under a light guard, but all things considered, I think the Inquisitors are inclined to be gentle with her. She was really in a bad place.

In the midst of all this, the Inquisitors encountered Ser Michel de Chevin, formerly the Champion of the Empress of Orlais. He pleaded with them to defeat Imshael, an entity who had taken control of Suledin Keep in the northern part of the Emprise. I call it an entity because while it behaved a lot like a demon, it kept insisting that it was a “choice spirit.” It offered to make the Inquisitors some incredible deal in exchange for its freedom, which of course they refused, so they had to kill him. The Lord Inquisitor described it as the most difficult battle he’s seen so far – that must be saying something.

Judging by what they encountered on their way through the keep, this Imshael allied itself with the Red Templars in some way. They had even captured some giants and were infecting them with the
red lyrium, but they were having little success. With Imshael’s defeat, the keep has been claimed for the Inquisition, and the Red Templar presence has been removed from most of the Emprise. The Inquisitors are taking care of a few other things while they’re here; the Lady Inquisitor asked me to send information to the council regarding a bridge that desperately needs repair. Its current condition is preventing them from getting to the far side of the river, where we’re hoping to reclaim some watchtowers from the remaining Red Templars. She seemed to think that Commander Cullen would take an interest in the matter.

Also, Michel de Chevin has pledged himself to the Inquisition. I’ll be sending this message with one of your birds, along with the request from the Lady Inquisitor, and then make my way back to Skyhold in his company. I wouldn’t want him to have trouble finding the place. He’s very pretty. The Inquisitors will follow in a day or so, to discuss details with the council about the planned siege at Adamant and the upcoming ball at Halamshiral Palace.
Whatsoever Passes Through the Fire

Chapter Summary

The gang prepares to infiltrate Halamshiral.

Chapter Notes

I never did quite figure out how the Inquisition managed to get all their weapons and stuff into the palace without causing problems. I'm sort of oddly proud of myself for coming up with this answer. And yes, count me among those who wishes her Lady Inquisitor could wear a dress. Also, Mahanon's nickname for Victoria will be explained in a later chapter.

Chapter Seventeen: Whatsoever Passes Through the Fire

Since the transition to Skyhold, and the restoration of his adored counterpart to full health, Mahanon had felt himself free to increase his efforts to win over the Seeker.

That he had been drawn to her for some time was, he suspected, obvious to everyone. That she was not entirely immune to his charms was something he’d started to realize even while they were still in Haven. But the fact that she had been the one person to console him throughout Victoria’s absence had truly endeared her to him. She had become, he realized with a jolt, the one woman who suited him entirely – her passion, her dedication, her kindness, and her prowess in battle all merely enhanced his attraction to her person. His clan probably wouldn’t approve, he had to admit; on the other hand, he wouldn’t be going back to his clan anytime soon. Perhaps never, in truth.

His pursuit had not gone unnoticed, as Varric made clear one afternoon during their trip back from the Western Approach. Just before they had left Skyhold, Varric had been visited by Bianca – not the crossbow, but the real Bianca, the woman who invented the weapon. Victoria had been privileged to meet her, though it hadn’t gone especially well; she still hadn’t filled Mahanon in on all the details. In any event, Cassandra – who was still very angry at Varric for hiding the truth about Hawke – made a derisive comment about the crossbow.

“You brought up Bianca, Seeker. Does that mean I can ask about your conquests?”

“I would rather you didn’t.”

“No tantalizing secrets to divulge?”

“None.”

“So no one within, say, a five-foot radius has caught your eye?” She didn’t deign to reply. “Nothing? You do know he’s standing right there.”
She still said nothing. But Mahanon wasn’t prone to despair.

He found himself, when they stopped to make camp, talking to Blackwall; the two men didn’t normally have a lot in common, but Mahanon had a lot of respect for the quiet, noble Warden. Blackwall had heard Varric’s commentary and addressed himself to the Lord Inquisitor respectfully.

“You're eyeing the Lady Seeker, aren't you? I can see why. She's definitely striking. A little stern, though.” He chuckled.

“You're experienced, I assume. Got any tips?”

“If I say the wrong thing, she'll probably have my head.” Blackwall looked at him seriously. “Cassandra is a warrior. That's all she's ever known, but that's not all there is to life. Show her that.”

It was later, back at Skyhold, after they’d had their meeting with the council, that Victoria approached him with a funny look on her face. “Well, da’vhenan,” he greeted her, “you look like the cat who ate the canary, to coin the shemlen phrase. What’s this about?”

“I just had the most remarkable conversation with Cassandra,” she replied, smiling gleefully. “She’s over near the practice yard, reading Varric’s romance serial. Gushing over it, actually. Now, I’m not supposed to say a word to Varric, she made me promise… but she never said I couldn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what, exactly? That she’s reading a romance novel?”

“No, no. See, she’s got the whole series up to the most recent volume, but it ends on a cliffhanger. She’s dying to know how the story wraps up, and she really wants Varric to finish the series so she can find out. This is perfect for both of you.”

“I’m listening.”

“You get Varric to write the book. He gets back into her good graces, at least somewhat, and you make her happy. Plus, I get to know that I helped, which is a nice little bonus for me.” She grinned again.

“And how will I ever repay such a generous gift?” he teased. “Should I have a chat with a certain commander about treating my Lady Inquisitor properly during courtship?”

“Ah – no, thank you all the same. Things are progressing very slowly in that corner,” Victoria admitted. “But they are progressing.”

“Are you certain about that? I think the man could set a new standard for being blind to such matters,” Mahanon retorted, not unkindly. “In the future, people will ask themselves, ‘On a scale of one to Cullen Rutherford, how oblivious to love is this person?’”

“Very funny, Nonny. I don’t know if you could call it courtship exactly, but there’s something there. We talk more… and we admitted we’d like to spend more time together.” She smiled. “You just worry about Cassandra, dear, and I’ll see to my own affairs.”

[Editor’s note: No comment. About any of it. Yes, it was necessary for me to say that. Sparkler would understand why, even if you don’t, Scholar.]
“Let me get this straight,” said Varric, once Mahanon relayed the matter. “You want me to finish my worst book series… for Cassandra.” He started to chuckle. “That’s such a terrible idea. I have to do it.”

“Fantastic. I can’t wait.”

“One condition, though,” Varric added. “I have to be there when you give it to her.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

“I’ll get started, then. You know, the fact that the book is terrible just makes it all worthwhile, somehow.”

As the dwarf headed off in search of writing implements, Mahanon shook his head and thought perhaps he should distract Cassandra for a time. However, his plans were waylaid by an Inquisition scout bearing a message. “From the Iron Bull, my lord.”

That was odd. “Thank you.” He cracked the seal and unrolled the brief missive, then frowned at the contents. “The Lady Inquisitor – have you seen her?”

“I believe she’s in the bath house at present, my lord. Shall I have someone fetch her for you?”

“No, it’s not urgent, thank you.”

He set off again in search of Cassandra. “Sorry to bother you,” he said, finding her once again menacing a training dummy.

“You are no bother to me, Inquisitor.”

“Good, I’d be very unhappy if you found me so.” He smiled. “I was wondering if you might do me a favor.”

“I might.” She eyed him sidelong, though he was fairly sure her eyes had a twinkle in them. “What is it?”

“My fellow ‘glowy person,’ as Sera calls us, is in the bath house, and I don’t want to cause a scene by walking in there,” he explained, “but I need to get a message to her. Could you just poke your head in and ask her to meet me at 1500 on the battlements outside Cullen’s office?” With a grin, he added, “I’m reasonably sure she knows where that is.”

At that, Cassandra chuckled. “Yes, I have a feeling she’s learned the fastest routes from anywhere in the castle to that particular location. Certainly, I’ll deliver the message. Is anything wrong?”

“I don’t think so – Iron Bull asked us to meet him there to talk about something. He didn’t say what.”

While in Skyhold, both Inquisitors had adopted the habit of wearing their more comfortable leisure garments rather than their armor. Solas had promised them that Skyhold would ensure that nothing could happen to them so long as they were within the fortress walls – a fact which had inadvertently been proven one morning when Victoria, running down a flight of exterior stairs a bit too fast, had lost her balance. Under normal circumstances, she should have been sent tumbling straight into a head injury, but instead she’d slipped over the stone railing and went hurtling down to the inner bailey; halfway down, her fall had slowed, and she landed on her feet without incident. It was extraordinary, though Solas simply reminded them that ‘Skyhold is pleased with her new
master and mistress’ and would allow no harm to come to them.

From that point onward, they walked through their new home unarmed and unarmored; Victoria even frequently left her hair hanging down, either completely unbound or in a single long plait, instead of being up all the time. Mahanon occasionally tugged on it, teasingly, but he admired the softening effect the loose hair had on her other features. He was pretty sure he wasn’t the only one, either.

Just before the appointed hour, Mahanon made his way to Cullen’s office, where – to his complete lack of surprise – he found Victoria deep in conversation with the commander. Granted, the subject matter wasn’t the most riveting, in his opinion at least; mostly they seemed to be comparing swordsmanship techniques from the Free Marches versus those of Ferelden, since Cullen had experience with both. But they were clearly enjoying the discussion, to judge by the way she played with the end of her braid and he leaned on his desk in an almost relaxed posture.

“Sorry to interrupt, Commander, da’vhenan,” he said, trying not to smirk and probably failing. “I hate to disturb you, but the Iron Bull is waiting to speak with us outside.”

“Of course. We’ll continue this later,” Cullen offered.

Victoria nodded and followed Mahanon out onto the southern battlement, where they could see that Bull was already waiting. “You wanted to see us?” Mahanon asked. Behind Bull, he saw a pair of Inquisition soldiers approaching… or at least, they were dressed like Inquisition soldiers…

It quickly became apparent that they weren’t. As they reached Bull, both individuals sank into attack positions. He spun around and punched one of them clean in the face; the man responded by throwing a vial of some liquid at Bull’s face. Mahanon shoved Victoria behind himself, realizing that they weren’t going to be much help and that maybe they should wear their armor around the castle at least sometimes, but Bull had the matter well in hand. He flung a small axe at the second attacker, cutting him down cleanly; the one he had punched staggered to his feet.

“Ebost issala, Tal-Vashoth!” he shouted in Qunlat. Mahanon understood the second half of the sentence, but not the first; Tal-Vashoth were outliers, those who had turned their backs on the Qun. Bull had spent a large part of his career hunting down Tal-Vashoth on his superiors’ orders, before giving it up and becoming a spy for them instead.

Bull very calmly grabbed the speaker and hurled him over the wall to the mountain outside of Skyhold. “Yeah, yeah, my soul’s dust,” he said, almost conversationally, most likely translating the remark for the Inquisitors’ benefit. “Yours is scattered all over the ground, though, so…” He grunted, stretching a little. “Sorry, Boss – Lady Boss – I thought I might need backup. Guess I’m not even worth sending professionals for.” He gave them an apologetic look.

Victoria, finally stepping out of Mahanon’s shadow once the threat had passed, peered anxiously at Bull’s battered face. “You knew the assassins were coming?”

“Little change in the guard rotation tipped me off.”

“Why didn’t you tell us ahead of time?” Mahanon asked. Privately he was thinking that he would have left Victoria with Cullen if he’d known. Neither of them had been hurt, of course, but she really hadn’t needed to witness this.

“You go through years of Ben-Hassrath training to hide facial expressions when I wasn’t looking?” He chuckled. “You’re too easy to read – especially you, Lady Boss. See? Like that.” He gestured at her troubled face. “If I’d warned you, or the guards, the assassins would’ve been tipped off.”
“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Oh, fine. Hurt myself worse than this fooling around in bed.” He chuckled again at the color which jumped into her cheeks at the comment.

“They could have used poison,” Mahanon pointed out.

"Oh, they definitely used poison," Bull assured him. "Saar-qamek. Liquid form. If I hadn't been dosing myself with the antidote, I'd be going crazy and puking my guts up right now. As it is, it stings like shit, but that's about it." He shrugged.

“So what now? Do we need to be worried about further attacks?”

“Nah. Sending two guys like that against me? That’s not a hit, that’s a formality. They’re just making it clear that I’m Tal-Vashoth.” Bull scowled. “Tal-Va-fucking-shoth.”

Mahanon glanced at Victoria; this sort of thing was more her area of expertise. She was the diplomat. She gave him a nod, then looked at Bull.

“You are not Tal-Vashoth,” she said, a bit severely. “That’s a Qunari word, and you don’t follow the Qun any longer. You’re Iron Bull. Mercenary captain for the Inquisition.” Mahanon nodded to show his agreement.

Bull softened. “I can live with that,” he said. “I’ll get this cleaned up and let Red know what happened. C’mere, both of you.” Before either Inquisitor could react, he had a burly arm around each of their shoulders. “I just want you two to know,” he continued, “that whatever I miss – whatever I regret – this is where I want to be. Whenever you need an ass kicked, the Iron Bull is with the both of you.”

“We’ve never doubted that for an instant, Bull.”

Vivienne, to Mahanon’s profound amusement, was in a bit of a lather about the upcoming ball at Halamshiral. She insisted on meeting with the Inquisitors and the council while they planned the details for the event. “I don’t think you appreciate the significance of the situation, my dears,” she said.

“We’re trying to prevent the assassination of Empress Celene,” said Cullen. “I can assure you, we all take that very seriously.”

“Why, of course you do, darling!” Vivienne looked a bit surprised. “I don’t mean the plot against Celene. I’m talking about what the Inquisition will be wearing!”

The commander looked just a touch bewildered, and shook his head. “Maker’s breath…”

Josephine stifled a chuckle. “We have tailors getting everyone’s measurements,” she assured Vivienne. “The Inquisition members will be attired in a uniform of scarlet and gold, with blue accents.”

“I’d like to see the design.” Josephine nodded and extracted a sketch from the sheaf of papers for Vivienne’s inspection. “Hmm… utilitarian, but stylish. Bold too. Yes, I think this will do. But you’re still overlooking one important detail.” She peered over the top of the paper and clarified. “Weapons.”

“Weapons?” Victoria repeated.
“Ballrooms – especially Orlesian ballrooms – are battlegrounds in their own right,” the enchanter explained patiently. “And with an assassination plot in the works, this particular ballroom could well be a literal battleground. The Inquisition will need to be ready for that, but we also cannot be obviously armed at a peace summit.”

“We had been talking about that,” Mahanon agreed. “We definitely want to be prepared to deal with a threat, but we don’t want to look like one ourselves. What would you suggest?”

“Well, you may recall that, as First Enchanter to the Imperial Court, I have my own lodgings at Halamshiral,” said Vivienne. “I can easily travel there a day or two ahead of the rest of you without raising particular suspicion, and bring whatever will be needed among my own belongings. Break the companions into two groups, as you did in Haven. Keep our sweet Lady Trevelyan in plain view at all times to charm the court – you can do that, can’t you, darling?”

“I can try,” Victoria shrugged and smiled.

“While you do, the dear Lord Inquisitor and his team can retrieve their weapons from my rooms and search the palace for the assassin. As long as there’s one Inquisitor at the ball, the absence of the other will be less glaring.”

“It’s a workable plan,” said Cullen thoughtfully. “As the Lord Inquisitor said, smuggling in the weapons was the major issue we were struggling to combat – this gives us a very easy workaround. Thank you, Madam de Fer.”

“What do you think, Victoria?” asked Leliana.

“I think I can do it. If people ask me where Mahanon is, I can come up with any number of excuses – he’s refreshing his drink, he’s getting some air, so forth and so on.”

“Are you comfortable being the center of attention?” The spymaster smiled.

“Not really,” the Lady Inquisitor admitted with a laugh. “But I survived my debutante ball at sixteen – this can’t possibly be worse.”

“That being the case,” Vivienne continued, “the Lady Inquisitor needs to be dressed differently from the rest of us. She needs to stand out, draw the eye – not blend in with the Inquisition. I’ve taken the liberty of sending for my personal dressmaker from Val Royeaux. He can adapt this design into a matching ballgown. And we must do something with your hair, my dear.”

“Maybe I spoke too soon,” Victoria deadpanned.

The dressmaker arrived two days later, and Victoria had the extremely comical experience of helping to plan the assault on Adamant Fortress while standing on a stool and having lengths of fabric pinned around her person. At least, Mahanon found it very comical; she seemed to take it in stride.

“My father is the Bann of Ostwick,” she reminded him. “I’ve spent more hours of my life on a dressmaker’s stool than I care to remember. Cullen, what were you saying about – Cullen?”

“Hm?” The commander gave himself a little shake. “Ah. Yes. Adamant is very old, and was built to repel and withstand darkspawn attacks, but I’ve been going over the records. There haven’t been any significant improvements to the structure in the last few ages. Modern siege equipment should be able to penetrate its outer walls without much difficulty. Getting inside will not be the problem; the problem is what we’ll find once we breach the defenses.”
“We’re just waiting on the word from our forward scouts that the Wardens are massing for their ritual,” said Leliana. “It remains to be seen which we’ll be doing first, the ball or the assault.”

“Turn, please,” the dressmaker interrupted.

“What?” Victoria looked down at the kneeling man, who made a little twirling gesture with his fingers. “Oh.” She obligingly – and cautiously – revolved on the stool a few times, causing the skirt fabric to flare slightly. “You know, I haven’t had occasion to wear a dress since before I left the Free Marches. I’d almost forgotten what it feels like.” She laughed.

Mahanon glanced at Cullen, who had a somewhat dopey half-smile on his face, and chuckled. Before he could say anything, however, he heard Varric calling for him.

“Hunter! You here?”

He moved to the edge of Vivienne’s balcony, where they were conducting the fitting-meeting, and peered over the railing. “Up here, Varric!”


“Oh, I wanted to see this!” Victoria pouted.

“You want me to wait?”

“No, go on. This might take a while.” She made a little shooing motion. “But I want the details tonight as my bedtime story.”

“I promise.”

Cassandra was, for once, not actively training when Mahanon and Varric approached her usual corner of the inner bailey. She was sitting on a bench, looking pensive, though she rose at their approach. The smile with which she welcomed Mahanon dissolved into a sardonic glare when she took notice of the dwarf. “What have you done now?” she asked suspiciously.

“I get it, Seeker,” Varric said pleasantly. “You’re still sore after our little spat.”

“I am not a child, Varric! Do not suggest I am without reason!”

He shook his head. “A peace offering,” he said. “The next chapter of Swords and Shields... I hear you’re a fan.” He wiggled the book in his hand tantalizingly.

“How did...” She trailed off, looking at Mahanon and quickly putting the pieces together. “Victoria. Of course. This is your doing.”

“Oh, yes. Did you really think I’d miss this?” He grinned at her. “But I was hoping you would be happy about it.”

Varric shrugged. “Well, if you’re not interested, you’re not interested,” he said, turning to head back into the main hall. “Still needs editing anyway.”

“Wait!” she blurted. Cassandra’s expression had suddenly come alive with distress and eagerness. The author smirked, turning around again. “You’re probably wondering what happens to the
knight-captain after the last chapter,” he teased.

She gasped, and Mahanon stifled a chuckle. Cassandra’s eyes were wide and sparkling with anticipation, and her cheeks had become flushed. It was downright adorable. “Nothing should happen to her! She was falsely accused!”

“Well, it turns out that the guardsman…”

“Don’t tell me!” she cried, snatching the book from his hand.

Varric cleared his throat. “This is the part where you thank the Inquisitor. I don’t normally give sneak peeks, after all.” He folded his arms and turned slightly away.

Still pink, Cassandra turned to Mahanon, and a smile curved across her face. “I… thank you.”

Mahanon thought he could probably survive for a few days just on the way she looked at him in that moment. He only barely registered Varric’s words, though he agreed with them: “Completely worth it.”
Chapter Eighteen: A Song in the Stillness

Dear Mia,

Yes, this letter is long overdue. For that, I’m sorry. I was not in a good place after everything that happened in Haven, and it felt wrong to burden you with that. But I’m improving since joining the Inquisition.

How much you may have heard about the people I’m privileged to work alongside, I’m not certain. Nor do I think I can do them all justice in one letter, even if I were not confined for time – which I always am. I cannot praise my soldiers too highly; they are devoted to the cause. The more central members of the Inquisition are, generally speaking, a passionate and dedicated group. Our ambassador and spymaster are women I respect greatly.

No doubt you know at least a little about the Inquisitors themselves by reputation. Exactly what you’ve heard I wouldn’t know, but I can almost certainly guarantee that it’s either an exaggeration or an understatement. The Lord Inquisitor, Mahanon, is an extremely noble individual, though his sense of humor is a little irreverent. It makes an interesting counterpoint to the Lady Inquisitor, Victoria, who is of a more serious disposition; she’s very gentle and compassionate, he’s lively and clever. They balance each other well and are the closest of friends.

I will write more when there is time… though when that’s likely to be, I don’t begin to know. Give my love to Branson and Rosalie.

Love,

Cullen
Mahanon, *da’len,*

We were grateful to receive your message, and to know that you escaped. Even here in the forests of the Marches, there is a lot of news passed between the clans about the Inquisition. That you are alive brings us joy; that you, along with the young woman you credit as your friend, are leading this crusade brings us great pride. You have always been a credit to your clan, but in this work you now do with all the races of Thedas, you have become a shining beacon of hope for the People.

I am told by the bearer of your letter that the Inquisition does much to help all those who are affected by war and famine in Ferelden and Orlais. Your hunting skills have no doubt been put to good use. We will continue to ask the Creators for their blessing on you and your Inquisition; rest assured that those who approach the clans garbed in your army’s colors will be welcomed so long as they come in peace.

Clan Lavellan has taken up residence in a valley near the city of Wycome. I have begun to hear strange things about the city; I do not claim to make sense of it just yet. However, I will keep you informed if anything changes or is made clear.

I enclose a token of ironbark for you, as a reminder of the clan who will always call you their own. Though you are far from us, you are in our thoughts and your absence is felt, I assure you.

*Daret h shiral, lethallin.* May you be blessed with the wisdom of Dirthamen and the strength of Elgar’nan.

Keeper Deshanna Istimaethoriel Lavellan

Bastien, my darling,

I hear from your dear son Laurent that you will be unable to join the Council of Heralds for the peace talks at Halamshiral. I had hoped that you might be well enough, but of course you must rest. Laurent and I are in agreement about this; we desire only the best for you, my love.

The Inquisition has been invited to attend the talks, as you are no doubt aware. It pains me that I have yet to have the pleasure of introducing you to the Inquisitors themselves. Leliana you have met; Lady Montilyet and Commander Cullen you know at least by reputation; but the Inquisitors must truly be encountered to appreciate. They will, as I expect you’ve been informed, be attending the ball as personal guests of your son-in-law Gaspard. I do hope he can keep his saber rattling to a minimum at least until the peace talks are over.

I am particularly eager to see the Lady Inquisitor presented at court. She is a sweet creature; lacking in guile, perhaps, but that is likely to be expected. Politics in the Free Marches are, of course, nothing like the Grand Game. But her manners in general are pleasing and proper, and I have done my best to coach her on important names to know and who particularly may be able to assist us in the future. I trust she will do justice to all of my hard work.

The Lord Inquisitor, by comparison, really has a mind that would lend itself to the Game. I hesitate to insist that he play – his being Dalish troubles *me* very little, but I can imagine it may cause some ruffled feathers. Still, he has more of a natural talent for it than I would have expected, and there is something roguishly charming in his disposition which I suspect may draw the interest of a few of the more cosmopolitan courtiers. He is, in his own way, rather delightful. I somehow imagine he’s
going to surprise us at the ball.

I regret that my work with the Inquisition keeps me from tending to you personally, darling, but rest assured that you are never far from my thoughts. I continue my researches and have lighted upon some promising leads. I will not stop until I have what we need.

Yours always,

Vivienne

To Master Varric Tethras, regarding the purchase of eight tons of lyrium from Orzammar

[Editor’s note: Scholar, I don’t read my mail from the Merchants’ Guild – why should anyone else have to look at it?]

To His Majesty, Alistair, King of Ferelden,

Allow me to formally thank you for your recent gift of supplies to the Inquisition. Your generosity is deeply appreciated by all who live here at Skyhold.

Allow me to informally acknowledge our continued friendship. How recently you have heard from your beloved Queen, I do not know; but my most recent missive asks me to send you a reminder that you are still to eat your meals regularly and take care of yourself. Even as far away as she must be at this time, you are never far from her thoughts, and she worries for you. I wish there was a way I could respond to her occasional letters, and tell her that you are well; but I’m sure I don’t need to describe that feeling to you.

Leading the Inquisition is, in many ways, a reminder of old times. There are days when I miss our year of adventure. As dangerous and as deadly as it often was, and as uncertain as we were of victory, it was a good year. I would give much to sit around the old fire once again, and play the harp for all of you. I suppose none of us are who we were then, but at least we have the memories.

Please do take care of yourself, my old and dear friend – for Elissa’s sake and for Ferelden’s. And for your own too.

With love,

The Nightingale
Chapter Nineteen: Secrets Beyond Measure

[Editor’s note: This chapter was not part of the official Chantry record. I got it firsthand from one of the scouts who was there, and frankly, it’s too good not to include. Like I said earlier, forgive an old dwarf his creative liberties.]

A handful of Inquisition scouts, off duty, were ensconced in an upper area of the Heralds’ Rest tavern. “I’ve got the cards,” said Ayden. “Where’s Jim?”

“He should be here,” said Neria. “Unless he’s getting chewed out by Sister Leliana for something, anyway.”

“Maybe he forgot,” said Theron.

“He’d better – oh, here he comes.”

The missing scout in question stumbled over to their table with the look of a fennec fox which had just managed to escape from a great bear, and was still trying to figure out how. “I’m not playing,” he said, his face white and his voice filled with something like horror. “This has been the worst day of my life. I’d probably lose my pants if I played.”

“You know we’re not allowed to bet clothing ever since the Parker incident,” Neria protested mildly. “Seriously, though, what happened?”

“I don’t think you’d believe me if I told you.”

The other three looked at each other in surprise. “Theron,” said Ayden, “run down to the bar and get Jim a mug. He needs some proper Fereldan beer in him before he talks.”

This was speedily accomplished, and despite Jim’s protests, he soon had a belly full of Dorian
Pavus’s guilty pleasure. “Okay,” he said, his hand still shaking slightly as he wiped foam from his upper lip, “I’ll tell you, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Is this one of those stories that starts with ‘No shit, there I was’?” asked Theron.

“More like ‘Oh shit, was I there?’ to be honest,” Jim replied.

“This is either going to be horrible or amazing. I’m dying to know which,” said Neria. “Come on, tell us.”

“It all started normally enough,” Jim began. “Sister Leliana had written up a report on the results of the completed excavation of Coracavus, out in the Western Approach, and she said Commander Cullen wanted it right away. Something about allocation of troop resources. So I went to his office, but he wasn’t there.”

“That is unusual,” Ayden acknowledged.

“It is, but that wasn’t even the weirdest part. He wasn’t there, but the Lord Inquisitor was – and so was that balmy elf, what’s her name. The one that drives Lady Montilyet crazy because she keeps eating all the jam. They looked like I’d caught them in the middle of something, but it didn’t really look like they were doing anything. Anyway, the Lord Inquisitor told me that the commander had stepped out for some air, and the elf girl – Sera, that’s her name – started laughing and said ‘Is that what you call it?’ I didn’t know what that meant, but I figured I’d better go find the commander since Sister Leliana was so insistent that he wanted the report right away.”

“Wait,” said Theron. “This was on the battlements by his office?”

“Yes…”

“That was you?”

“You heard about that?”

“I heard it from one of the soldiers on patrol that the commander was out there with the Lady Inquisitor, and he was just about to kiss her when one of our scouts interrupted!”

The other two gasped, then burst out laughing. “Jim,” Neria begged in a giggly voice, “Jim, please… tell me you didn’t.”

“I didn’t know!” he protested. “I was reading the report – my eyes were on the report – I had no idea the Lady Inquisitor was even there until Commander Cullen got up in my face, and I swear to the Maker I thought he was going to kill me. I really did. And then I saw her and I saw the look in his eyes and I realized what I’d barged in on and all I could do was back away really slowly and hope he didn’t follow. It was like – like – I don’t even know what it was like. I think my life flashed before my eyes…”

“Did you see the kiss? I have it from Daylen that after the clueless scout in question ran away, the commander suddenly rushed back to the Lady Inquisitor and kissed her so hard she couldn’t see straight.” Neria looked a little giddy at the prospect. “Is it true?”

“I don’t know! I was running for my life!”

It took a few minutes before his listeners calmed down. Theron noticed that their laughing had garnered some attention, and quite a few of the other tavern patrons had started to draw closer in
order to hear Jim’s story. Sutherland, the farmer turned swordsman, and his little company of followers seemed particularly interested. “All right,” he said finally, “so you interrupted the first kiss between Commander Cullen and Lady Trevelyan. Sounds like it didn’t ruin the mood entirely, if Daylen’s report is accurate, but still. What did you do when you fled from the commander’s fury?”

“I went back into his office to leave the report on his desk,” said Jim. He was apparently oblivious to the crowd he was beginning to attract. “The Lord Inquisitor and Sera were gone, but the desk… I don’t know how to describe it. It was just a little… wrong. Sort of wobbly. I set the report on the desk, and it all shifted only the littlest bit. Not sure why. All I know is, it’s going to drive the commander crazy.” He shuddered slightly. “And since he was already angry with me, I wanted to get out of there before he could come back and possibly think I was responsible. I’m not! The Lord Inquisitor – he must have done – I don’t know what, exactly. Something. I think maybe they sawed one of the desk legs a fraction or something to make it off balance. I didn’t stick around to try to figure it out, I ran for it.”

“Where did you go?” Ayden asked.

“To the other side of the castle, on the lower battlements. I thought, well, as long as I stay away from Commander Cullen and the Lady Inquisitor, it’ll be fine.” He stared into his empty glass. “But I guess the whole thing took longer than I thought, because I came across the Lord Inquisitor again.”

“What was he doing this time?”

“He was with Lady Cassandra. Uh…” Jim rubbed the back of his neck. “Wooing her, I guess, is the best way to put it.”

Neria looked giddy again. “Everyone’s been waiting on that almost as long as they’ve been waiting on the other two!”

Jim, Ayden, and Theron all looked at her. “You’re serious?” asked Theron.

“She’s right,” Sutherland piped up. “Half the Inquisition has money on when they make it official. I believe Master Tethras is downstairs collecting his winnings from people about that kiss you interrupted.”

“I guess everybody needs a hobby,” said Ayden with a shrug. “So what happened next?”

“Well, the Lady Seeker had just said something to the Lord Inquisitor and slammed into a room off the battlements. But then she came out again, and her face was… soft.” Jim’s expression turned briefly bewildered. “And she told him that ‘That is what I want,’ although I’m not sure exactly what that is. Something to do with courtship, I guess, because I heard something about candles and books and flowers. Then they spotted me and… well, I ran again. I didn’t want to interrupt another kiss, if that’s what they were about to do!”

Theron, obeying a look from Ayden, went and retrieved a refill for Jim. His hands were still shaking. “I’ve never seen someone so traumatized over something like this,” he remarked, coming back to the table and setting the fresh beer in front of his friend.

“It’s not the things I’ve seen… it’s the fact that I’ve managed to displease so many people who could – who could assign me to the Hissing Wastes or worse,” Jim explained. “My only saving grace is that all the scouts dress the same, so they can’t possibly recognize me from a distance at
“All right, so you ran from the Lord Inquisitor’s potential wrath. Where did you go next?”

“Down to the outer bailey. I thought maybe I could find out if there was a scouting party going out someplace, you know? Join up and get out of Skyhold for a little while.”

“Obviously you didn’t, so what happened?” Theron wanted to know.

“Ser Blackwall. He was standing in the entrance to the stable, you know, where he sleeps?” Jim pushed away the half-empty glass and put his head on the table. “I should have just kept walking…”

“What did the Warden do?”

“He saw me coming and he beckoned to me. Well, he’s a Grey Warden, you don’t exactly say no when a Grey Warden wants your attention, especially here where he’s the only one. So I followed him into the stable and he had this nice little bouquet of flowers all ready. He said, ‘These are for Ambassador Montilyet. I need you to take them to her office when she’s not there, and leave them on her desk. No note, no indication of who sent them. I think she knows, but that’s not the point.’ And he pushed the flowers into my hands and shooed me out of the stable.”

“So that’s who’s been sending her flowers!” Neria squealed. “I wondered! It’s been going on for a while, he sends her flowers and she leaves scented handkerchiefs and things for him to find.”

“Maker’s breath, is everyone’s love life on parade today?” asked Sutherland, amused.

“Seems like it’s on parade every day, to hear Neria talk,” said Ayden dryly. “Go on then, what’d you do, Jim?”

“Well, that sounded… safe, right? So I went up to the ambassador’s office and it all seemed quiet. I eased open the door, nice and steady; I was going to just slip in and leave the flowers and make a break for it.”

“But…?”

“But she was there. Ser Blackwall explicitly said to leave them when she’s not there. So I was going to go away again and try later. But she saw me and stood up, real fast, and…” He looked bewildered again. “I still think I was seeing things, but I could swear that a bunch of dolls fell out of her lap! And we just sort of stared at each other for a few seconds, like we were frozen, and then before she could yell at me I ran for it. That’s when I just gave up and came here.”

Everyone groaned. “You really had us going, Jim,” said Rat, Sutherland’s squire. “The first story we know is true, and we could buy the second, but come on. You expect us to believe that a highborn lady like the ambassador still plays with dolls?!”

“Come off it, Jim,” added Neria. “Your other stories were good, why’d you go and tell us a fib like that?”

“It was funny, I’ll admit,” said Theron.

“But – it really happened!” Jim protested. “True as I’m sitting here!”

“Sure, Jim. Come on,” said Ayden. “Even Master Tethras couldn’t cook up something like that. Good job winding everybody up, though, you’ve had the whole tavern on tenterhooks for half an
hour.” He chuckled and, pocketing the deck of cards, headed downstairs, leaving Jim protesting in his wake.
Valiant of Spirit Blazing Like Star-Shine

Chapter Summary

Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts, part one

Chapter Notes

This is my least favorite quest in the entire game, which may account in part for the way I've chosen to handle it. What is about to commence are two, possibly even three chapters which alternate between the Inquisitors' points of view as they attend to the very different duties they undertake at Empress Celene's ball. I don't like deciding the fate of Orlais, but it must be done, so here we go. At least both of the pairings get some happy scenes in the next couple chapters.

Chapter Twenty: Valiant of Spirit Blazing Like Star-Shine

Mahanon was truthfully convinced that they would be heading to Adamant first, that surely the Wardens wouldn’t delay their big plot long enough for the ball to take place. But to his surprise, a brief update on the situation from the watchful Hawke indicated that there simply weren’t enough Wardens at Adamant Fortress yet for what they were planning, and Orlais being as big as it was, they were awaiting the arrival of others. He still wasn’t completely clear on exactly what was happening; Hawke and Stroud were hoping to figure it out ahead of the Inquisition’s arrival. In any case, they were ready to move at the first signal.

However, first there was the matter of this ball. He wasn’t completely sure about it, if he were honest with himself; the Dalish had celebrations, sure, but a formal ball was a whole different matter. He tugged at the cuffs of his brown dress gloves, surveying himself in the mirror. The Inquisition had been quartered in what seemed to normally be an unused part of the palace grounds, at least for the duration of the festivities. He wasn’t overly comfortable being there; Halamshiral was once the capital city of his people, and the palace which carried its name was the very pinnacle of Orlesian design. On some level, it was almost personally insulting.

“You look very handsome,” Victoria assured him warmly, emerging from her own little dressing area. The top halves of their outfits were identical – deep scarlet jackets adorned with gold braid, with bright blue sashes encircling their waists and crossing their torsos over the left shoulder. The main difference in Victoria’s costume was that instead of coordinating trousers, she had a long scarlet skirt which flared from the waist, split down the front to reveal an underskirt of blue to match the sash. Per Vivienne’s very detailed instructions, her hair was a mass of curls flowing over her shoulders, though some were gathered at the back of her head and secured with a blue ribbon. She looked oddly small without armor.

She crossed to where Mahanon stood and adjusted some of the braid for him. “There. Perfect. We’d better hurry up and go meet with the Grand Duke; I believe the others are already inside the
palace.” She looked up at him, a little anxious. “You remember how to find Vivienne’s rooms? She gave you the key?”

“Yes, and yes. Are you sure you can keep the court from noticing my absence?”

“No,” she admitted. “But I’ll do my best. Cassandra, Bull, and Solas will go with you; with any luck, the rest of us will be interesting enough that it won’t be too obvious that you’ve all disappeared. Maker preserve us, this is sort of terrifying.”

“I’m the one who has to potentially fight an assassin,” he pointed out with a laugh.

“I’m the one who has to talk to Orlesians!”

“…good point.”

Grand Duke Gaspard, cousin of Empress Celene, had extended the invitation to the Inquisition to attend the ball as his guests. A delegation of six Inquisition guards entered the palace grounds ahead of the Inquisitors, marching to stand in formation on either side of the garden path. Victoria briefly tightened her grip on Mahanon’s arm as the Grand Duke, an imposing and rather impressive figure clad in elegant silks and a metallic mask, marched over to greet them. He was the picture of gentility and affability.

“Inquisitor Trevelyan! Inquisitor Lavellan! It is an honor to meet you both at last.” He saluted Mahanon and bent to kiss Victoria’s hand. “The rumors which have reached me of your courage and strength are simply incredible. Imagine what the Inquisition could accomplish with the full support of the rightful Emperor of Orlais!”

Mahanon glanced at Victoria, almost as if to say This is your moment. She rolled her eyes at him girlishly and smiled at the Grand Duke. “That certainly would be something for us to consider, Your Grace.”

“I am not a man who forgets his friends, my lady. You help me… and I’ll help you.”

They followed him toward the entrance gate, glancing around at the assembled partygoers as they walked. The Inquisition members were the only ones not wearing masks, which always made Victoria feel a little out of place in Orlais. “Well, Your Worships,” the Duke continued, “are you prepared to shock the assembly by appearing as the guests of the hateful usurper? They will be telling stories of this into the next Age.”

Victoria offered him her best ‘noblewoman’s chuckle,’ as her mother called it. “I can't imagine that crowd has seen anything better than us in their entire lives,” she replied, sweetly playful.

The Grand Duke seemed somehow pleased by this. “I knew we would get along famously, my Lady Inquisitor,” he said, pausing in his stride. “As my friends, perhaps there is a matter you could undertake this evening. This elven woman, Briala – I suspect that she intends to disrupt the negotiations. My people have found these ‘ambassadors’ all over the fortifications. Sabotage seems the least of their crimes.”

Mahanon spoke, for the first time. “That sounds like something I should look into.”

Gaspard nodded slowly, and sighed. “Be as discreet as possible,” he urged. “I detest the Game… but if we do not play it well, our enemies will make us look like villains.” Straightening, he continued, “We’re keeping the court waiting, Inquisitors. Shall we?”
“By Your Grace’s leave,” Victoria replied. “We are eager to experience the magnificence of Halamshiral for ourselves.”

“Are those the Inquisitors?”

“An elf! And a Marcher! No, there must be some mistake.”

Mahanon tried to keep his scowling to a minimum. A pleasant appearance was a must, and normally, he had no difficulty presenting one. But he didn’t like people staring at him, speaking about him as if he weren’t there. He walked Victoria to the entrance of the palace, and as Grand Duke Gaspard disappeared inside, Josephine met them with some delicate reminders about the Grand Game. He barely paid attention; dancing to the tune the nobles played was Victoria’s challenge, not his own. He was trying to remember the route he had mapped in his mind that would get him to Vivienne’s rooms the fastest.

Victoria squeezed his arm slightly before releasing it. “You’ll need to mingle around here for a little bit,” she advised him quietly. “Let them get a look at you before you disappear. Besides, it’ll make me feel a little better.”

“Reason enough, then. Let’s get a feel for where our people are stationed,” he proposed.

They found Cassandra first, positioned at the top of the vestibule staircase which guided them into the gilded palace. “This ball is a waste of time, like all Orlesian foolishness,” she greeted them. “Let’s find the Venatori collaborator and get out of here.”

“You look very nice, Cassandra,” Victoria said.

“As do you.” The Seeker relented with a small smile for her younger friend. She eyed Mahanon for a moment. “And you. I suppose.”

He smirked, and bowed. More seriously, he asked, “Have you witnessed anything noteworthy?”

“Nothing yet. I will let you know.” Lowering her voice to barely more than a mutter, she continued, “Were it up to me, I would let Celene fall and Gaspard take the throne. He is the leader Orlesia needs in this crisis. He would see the true threat, not spend his time throwing balls and writing letters.”

Victoria looked more than a little horrified, but held her tongue. Mahanon felt a shift of conversation was in order. “I don’t suppose you’d care to dance, Lady Cassandra?”

“Now?” That she was pleased, he was certain, but she wouldn’t admit it. “This is hardly the time. We are here to stop a killer, not… dance.” This last was said a bit wistfully.

“Stay alert,” Victoria murmured. “We don’t know who the enemy is or where they’re hiding.”

With her hand in the crook of Mahanon’s elbow, Victoria steered them around the edges of the vestibule. She was studying the various potential entrances, trying to guess where the assailant might strike and in what manner.

“We have to stay in the vicinity until the Grand Duke is prepared to be announced to the Empress and her court,” she told him. “We’re being introduced as his guests. After the herald finishes presenting us all by our names and titles –“
“By the Creators, titles too? You know I haven’t got any, besides the Inquisitor.”

“Titles too. Orlesians.” She shrugged. “They’ll probably invent some for you.”

People were still eyeing them and whispering as they passed, and she saw his frown. “They’re not the most welcoming society, that’s for sure,” she said. “I belong to the nobility, and they think I’m a joke. We’re a couple of Marchers, my dear Non, and in Orlais, the Marches are viewed as a quaint backwater at best. Our independence puzzles them. But if you listen, you’ll hear them say something along the lines of ‘At least they aren’t from Ferelden.’” She smiled, trying to put him at ease.

After a moment’s consideration, he relaxed some. “I just don’t like it. This place makes me uncomfortable, like there’s an itch under my skin that I can’t seem to scratch.”

“I kind of understand what you mean.”

They met the Grand Duke at the door to the ballroom, and were ushered inside by the bowing pages. On the far side of the dance floor stood the Empress Celene Valmont I, of whose elegance Victoria had heard much. The youngest grandchild of Emperor Judicael I, Celene was in her thirties, and had held the throne of Orlais since she was a teenager. She’d outmaneuvered her cousin Gaspard, who was technically the next in line, to inherit after the death of their uncle, Emperor Florian; it was said that Grand Duchess Calienne, Gaspard’s wife, had retaliated by arranging a hunting accident which killed Celene’s mother. Celene’s father, Prince Reynaud, was believed to have returned the favor and widowed Gaspard. Whether there was truth to any of this, Victoria had no idea, but such was the reputation of the so-called Grand Game in the Free Marches. Not for the first time, she felt incredibly homesick for the simpler politics and easier manners of the court at Ostwick; being the Bann’s youngest child was so much easier than being the Lady Inquisitor.

Seeing their approach, the court herald cleared his throat and began to announce the Inquisition’s party. As each individual was named, he or she bowed low to the Empress, who returned the genuflection with her own delicate courtesy. “Now presenting Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons, and accompanying him... Lady Inquisitor Victoria Hope Trevelyan, daughter of Bann Trevelyan of Ostwick, and Lord Inquisitor Mahanon Lavellan. Shepherds and leashes of the wayward Order of Templars, purgers of the heretics from the ranks of the faithful! Champions of the blessed Andraste Herself!”

“Did you see their faces?” Mahanon heard Cullen murmur, chuckling, as they passed him. “Priceless.”

“Accompanying the Inquisitors...” Rather than have the entire inner circle presented formally, which would have taken up far too much time, they had agreed on simply naming the three council members. “Ser Cullen Stanton Rutherford of Honnleath, commander of the forces of the Inquisition, former Knight-Commander of Kirkwall. Lady Leliana, Nightingale of the Imperial Court, veteran of the Fifth Blight, seneschal of the Inquisition, and Left Hand of the Divine. And Lady Josephine Cherette Montilyet of Antiva City, ambassador of the Inquisition.” With their advisors following, Mahanon escorted Victoria across the ballroom to once again genuflect to the Empress, who was greeting her unenthused cousin. Beside her stood the Grand Duchess Florianne, Gaspard’s younger sister, who greeted the Inquisitors by calling their presence “an unexpected pleasure.” That, Mahanon thought, was a little odd.

“Your arrival at court,” said the Empress, pleasantly, “is like a cool wind on a summer’s day.”
Mahanon was slightly distracted by the strange metal… wings? Sunbeams? He wasn’t sure what she was wearing on her back. “We are… delighted to be here, Your Majesty,” he managed. He gave Victoria a brief glance; she quirked her lips in an approving smile. That hadn’t been terrible, but he’d let her do the talking henceforth, lest he say something about Halamshiral’s origins.

“We have heard much of your exploits, Inquisitors,” Celene continued. “They have made grand tales for long evenings. How do you find Halamshiral?”

“There are no words to suffice,” Victoria said. “Halamshiral has many beauties; we couldn’t possibly do them justice.”

“Your modesty does you credit, and speaks well for the Inquisition.” Mahanon was faintly amused at how easily pleased this woman was. “Feel free to enjoy the pleasures of the ballroom, my lord and lady.”

They genuflected again and, with all the speed Victoria would allow in her skirts, made their way off to the side of the room. “That wasn’t so bad,” she muttered. “Stick around a little longer, though, would you? Let me get my bearings a bit?”

“Only for you. I could do without the rest of this.”

Victoria decided that the most necessary thing for them to do, at first, was to perform a circuit of the ballroom and surrounding area to determine where everyone was. She caught a brief glimpse of Varric before he was herded down a flight of stairs; Vivienne, who was holding court herself near a window, explained that it was a meeting room for the Council of Heralds. “Varric’s books are still considered quite fashionable among the courtiers,” she said. “He’s probably being mobbed for autographs.”

“I feel a bit out of place,” Victoria confided to her. “We’re the only ones in the whole place not wearing masks.”

“Darling, the Inquisition is your mask. Wear it proudly. So far, I’ve heard nothing but approval for the decorum you both demonstrate, but you must be a bit more active with your charm.” She lowered her voice. “Don’t wait too long before starting the search. Celene and Gaspard have withdrawn to begin their talks.”

Dorian was in the courtyard, near the caprice pond; Solas and Bull, who would accompany Mahanon and Cassandra on their expedition, were both stationed not far from there. They doubled back to the vestibule, where Leliana intercepted them. “Good – I was hoping I’d catch you,” she said, gesturing for them to join her in a corner. “What did the Duke say?”

“He points the finger at Ambassador Briala,” Mahanon reported.

“The ambassador is up to something,” Leliana agreed, “but she can’t be our focus. The best place to strike at Celene is from her side.” She began to speak of an apostate mage in the court, a woman she had herself known long ago and didn’t trust. “She’s worth investigating,” she concluded simply. “We can’t be sure of anything here. I’ll coordinate with our spies to see if I can find anything better; I’ll be in the ballroom if you need me.”

“I should get the others and get going,” Mahanon said. He could sense Victoria’s apprehension. “You’ll be fine, really.”

“I know. I just… I wish I could go with you. And… that’s a little distracting.” They were in the
vestibule still, on the far side of the room from where both Leliana and Cullen had stationed themselves, and she nodded at the commander.

Mahanon chuckled. “Cullen himself, or the apparent crowd of admirers he’s acquired?”

“Both.” Her face was red.

“He looks uncomfortable. We should go rescue him,” he proposed. She looked faintly green at the very idea. “Oh, come on. We’re the Inquisitors. It would look very strange if we went the whole evening without speaking to our commander.”

“Well… that’s true.” She took his arm and allowed him to sort of pull her in Cullen’s direction. As they approached, Mahanon could see that he hadn’t exaggerated; he’d known the man for months now, and he’d never seen Cullen look less at ease. A cluster of courtiers were all but surrounding him, asking questions, inviting him to dance. He looked like nothing so much as an animal in a particularly inhumane trap, desperate for a way out. Seeing the approach of the Inquisitors, his face lit up with gratitude and he managed to excuse himself. “Inquisitors, did you need something?”

“You’ve attracted a following,” Mahanon greeted him playfully. “Who are all these people?”

“I don’t know, but they won’t leave me alone!” He looked back at them uneasily.

“I don’t suppose you’ll save a dance for me?” Victoria asked, quietly.

“No, thank you.”

“Oh.” All the excess color quickly drained out of her complexion, and Mahanon bit down a growl. He’d always liked Cullen, but for the first time, he felt an overwhelming urge to punch the man in his stubbled face.

To his credit, Cullen immediately paled as well. “No! I didn’t mean to – Maker’s breath! I’ve answered that question so many times I’m rejecting it automatically. I’m not one for dancing,” he explained. “The Templars never attended balls.”

“Not enjoying the attention, then?” she asked, hesitantly.

“Hardly. Anyway, yours -” He coughed, and lowered his voice meaningfully. “Yours is the only attention worth having.”

Seeing the glow come back into Victoria’s eyes, Mahanon released the fist he hadn’t realized he had made. Belatedly, it occurred to him that it would probably have cost them a lot of court approval if the Lord Inquisitor had broken his own commander’s jaw in the middle of the ball. Fortunately, it was clearly not necessary.
A Night Without Moon or Stars

Chapter Summary

Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts, part two.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not fully canon-compliant, but you know, it was a lot harder than I expected to divide the ball between the Inquisitors. So I tried to give them equal chances to be heroic. Once again, the perspective flips back and forth. We get the explanation for Mahanon's nickname for Victoria, and both of our Inquisitors get to not only defend each other, but also their respective love interests.

Briala's nasty snipe about Victoria is something that she may actually say to a Trevelyan Inquisitor in the game, depending on where she is first encountered. When I first played the quest, I triggered this particular dialogue and I was, for very personal reasons, insanely angry. I have never forgiven her for it, so I threw it in here to show why I don't like her.

(Also, I hate the way Cullen is trapped like a wild animal at the ball.)

Chapter Twenty-One: A Night Without Moon or Stars

“Don’t worry about me,” Victoria told Mahanon. “You had better get the others and make your way to Vivienne’s rooms. We don’t know how much time we have before the assassin makes their move.”

“All right. Try to stay near our friends as much as possible,” he replied. “Stay alert. Stay safe.”

“You too, Nonny.”

He nodded and went to retrieve Cassandra. “Ready to move,” he murmured. “Let’s go get Solas and Bull, and get this done as fast as we can.”

“An excellent suggestion. Lead the way.” As they started moving through the vestibule to the corridor where their companions were stationed, she glanced at the Lady Inquisitor. “Do you think Victoria will be all right?”

“She can hold her own with these fops better than I could,” Mahanon replied. “And I doubt Cullen or Leliana will be far away if she needs help. *Ma da’vhenan* should be fine.”

“I have heard you call her that before. What does it mean?”

*Da’vhenan?* It translates to the common tongue as ‘little heart.’ An endearment,” he clarified. “A
lot of my people’s language has been lost, so there’s no longer an exact translation for ‘little sister’ - *da’vhenan* is the closest I can get. My little heart.”

“How sweet.” There was real warmth in Cassandra’s tone.

“You, on the other hand, are *ma vhenan’ara*. My heart’s desire.” He grinned impudently at her; she rolled her eyes, but said nothing, and he was delighted by the two spots of heat he perceived in her cheeks.

Victoria, left to her own devices, began making rounds in the vestibule and courtyard areas. Vivienne had urged her to be more active in her charming of the nobles, and she was determined to try, but she felt vastly out of place. It was easier to be brave with Mahanon at her side; even just keeping Cullen within sight helped some, but she couldn’t stay in one place all night.

Her first effort seemed largely successful. A gentleman called Duke Cyril, a member of the Council of Heralds and uncle to Grand Duke Gaspard, grumbled to her about the behavior of his manservant and she offered just enough sympathy to win him over. Duke Cyril, in turn, brought her before a woman who was colloquially known as the Dowager, and Victoria was trapped for what felt like approximately four years as the woman talked about the many ways her multiple husbands had met their deaths.

“…but at least he died at Chateau Haine!”

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” said a voice, and Victoria thought that she’d never been so grateful to see Leliana. “Forgive the interruption, but I must speak with the Lady Inquisitor.”

“Of course. It’s been a delight, my dear.”

“Bless you, Leliana,” Victoria murmured as they walked away. “What did you need?”

“Oh, nothing specific. Though I have been making a few observations about the people here at the ball. If you manage to do the same while you’re making your rounds, bring me anything you learn. It’s hard to say what may be useful.” With a chuckle, Leliana added, “However, I can guarantee that nothing the Dowager says will be, so try to steer clear.”

“Have we got everything?” Mahanon asked, watching Bull shoulder his maul.

“Think so, Boss. Wish the boys could be here for this,” Bull noted, a bit wistfully. “She doesn’t look like it, but Dalish is actually a pretty incredible dancer. And you just know Krem would be getting mobbed as much as Cullen if he were standing around the ballroom.”

“Now we have a new problem,” said Cassandra. “Where… exactly… are we headed from here? We can’t go back to the ballroom looking like a small invasion.”

She was right, Mahanon realized, looking around Vivienne’s chambers. This was something for which they had neglected to plan. “Well… let’s just follow the corridor and see where it leads, for now. There’s got to be something around here that will tell us if we’re going the right way.”

He opened the door and peered into the hall. There was no sign of movement, so he gestured for the others to precede him and carefully locked the door behind them all. “Head north,” he suggested. “That leads as near to the ballroom as we can really get just now. Keep an eye out for any of those weird little halla statues Vivienne mentioned – we’ll need them to unlock some of the doors, she said.”
“Swell. We don’t know where we’re going, we don’t know who our target is, and we don’t know what’s behind door number one, two, or three,” Bull said dryly.

“Why would the Empress use halla statues to lock doors?” Solas wondered. “That seems a little strange.”

“I suppose it’s some kind of nod to what Halamshiral really is – or was,” Mahanon said irritably. “From something Vivienne said, the Empress is obsessed with different kinds of arcane magic and mysticism and so forth. The Orlesians have no qualms with taking whatever they want from the elves, so long as they don’t have to actually treat us like people.”

Before anyone could offer any further commentary, however, a new voice interrupted the group’s explorations. “Well, well… what have we here?”

Slowly, the four Inquisition members revolved in place to observe the one who had discovered them. The black-haired woman wore a sumptuous red velvet dress, cinched with what almost looked like a mail corset, and the eyes which studied them were yellow-brown rather like a hawk’s. The slightest smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

Having determined the locations of most of her companions, Victoria suddenly realized that she still hadn’t seen Cole. He was loitering on a balcony overlooking the ballroom, muttering to himself. “The faces talk even when they aren’t moving. Silk on satin on skin, always wanting, chaste but chased. Too many.”

“Are you all right, Cole? You seem distracted – more than usual.” She approached him a little warily, reaching out to touch his shoulder. He seemed to calm a little at that, but his eyes were still large and uneasy as they peered between the pale fringe. He was dressed in the same outfit that the rest of the Inquisition members wore, although Victoria found herself wondering why; if she knew Cole at all, she knew that no one outside of the Inquisition was going to remember him after this evening.

“They have faces inside their faces,” he explained, gesturing at the dancing people below them, “lying with a layer that tells the truth. I don’t know how to help them.”

He seemed almost panicked by his inability to do anything for anyone. Wanting to distract him, she inquired, “Have you seen anything?” Immediately, his expression grew serious.

“Cullen is afraid,” he replied solemnly, and Victoria felt her eyebrows shoot up in alarm. “They’re hunting him, following fear. He shouldn’t be here.”

“Who is – you mean the nobles? The ones who are so interested in him?”

The spirit-boy nodded. “He shines in the dark, too honest. He would tell them the truth if he could. Tell them about you. But he’s afraid. Someone could use him to hurt you, gentle stabblings in your heart until the pain seeps in as the love leaks out. So he hides the hurt and the healing. They must go through him to get to you.”

She couldn’t speak; she had to blink very hard. “I understand,” she said softly. “Stay out of trouble, okay? I’ll check on you later.” With that, she all but fled to the courtyard, grateful for the night air to cool her cheeks and the company of Dorian to soothe her mind.

Her ‘Tevinter brother,’ as he had appointed himself, gave her a smile as she approached. “Did you see what that marquis is wearing?” he murmured impudently. “That suit is a greater crime than anything we’re looking for.”
In spite of her fresh anxiety, Victoria smiled. “I appreciate that you were willing to come here.”

“And expose myself to all this exquisite finery and exotic wines? Such hardship.” His expression was fond, however; he understood her meaning.

“The leader of the new Inquisition,” the woman continued, “fabled herald of the faith. What could bring such an exalted creature here to the Imperial Court, I wonder – and sneaking around in all the parts of the palace where the ball is not?” She put her hands on her hips, looking entirely too satisfied for Mahanon’s liking. “Do even you know?”

“We may never know,” he replied glibly. “Courtly intrigues and all that.”

She smiled. “Such intrigues obscure much – but not all. I am Morrigan; some call me an advisor to Empress Celene on matters of the arcane.”

“So you’re the one the servants mentioned,” said Solas. “They were wondering at your absence, since you are not normally far from the Empress’s side.”

“And with good reason. But I also had a good reason to be delayed,” she replied. “Perhaps you and I hunt the same prey.”

“Do we?” asked Cassandra, her tone dark.

Morrigan chuckled. “Caution is not unwise, here of all places. Allow me to speak first, then. Recently I found, and killed, an unwelcome guest within these very halls – an agent of Tevinter.” She handed Mahanon a key. “This was on his body. Where it leads, I cannot say. Celene is safe enough for the moment, but I must return to her anon; I cannot leave her side long enough to explore myself, but you can.”

Mahanon studied the key, turning it over in his fingers. He only barely noticed while Solas and Cassandra asked further questions of Morrigan; he was rather unconcerned as to why she killed the agent or felt it her place to defend the Empress. “I think I know where this leads,” he said quietly. “We’ll need to slip back down to the vestibule and go into the servants’ quarters.”

“You will attract too much attention in those outfits,” Morrigan said. “I would recommend instead letting yourselves into the library. From there you can access balconies that will enable you to reach the corridor you seek.” Seeing him nod, she turned to go. “Proceed with caution, Inquisitor,” she added. “Enemies abound, and not all of them aligned with Tevinter. What comes next should be most exciting.” She smiled at them over her shoulder before disappearing around a corner.

“Interesting person,” Mahanon muttered to himself.

“Can we trust her?” Cassandra seemed dubious.

“Bull? This is your area of expertise, what’s your read?”

“She’s definitely had some kind of training to hide her emotions,” said Bull thoughtfully. “I can’t read her perfectly. But my instincts tell me she’s not our enemy. Let’s look into this key and see what happens.”

“I don’t have a better plan,” Mahanon agreed. “To the library, then. Let’s move.”

Victoria desperately wished she could go back to her usual position as the ‘last and least
interesting’ of the Bann’s children. It would make fact-finding and gossip-gathering for Leliana so much easier. She usually managed to stand very still for a short time, and listen carefully, but before very long someone would come along who required her best efforts to win support for the Inquisition. *Mahanon, next time, you make small talk with these people and I’ll go exploring.*

“But tell me,” said the noble to whom she found herself forced to speak, “where is the Lord Inquisitor? I’ve not yet had the pleasure of making his acquaintance.

“I believe he’s stepped outside for the moment,” she replied. For all she knew, it was the truth. “He mentioned wanting to see the caprice fountain; neither of us are entirely familiar with the practice.”

“I admit, many of us have questioned the Blessed Andraste’s decision to have an elf as her Right Hand,” he said conspiratorially. “It must be strange for you, sharing your distinction with one of those… savages.”

*Modest in temper, bold in deed.* Victoria’s family motto rang very forcefully through her mind, and she attempted a very strained smile; but she was pretty sure there was plenty of anger in her eyes that she was failing to suppress. “Not at all. The Lord Inquisitor has proven himself a worthwhile champion – not only of our faith, but of people of all faiths. I have no difficulties sharing my distinction, as you put it; I would be a most ill-chosen Herald of Andraste were I to presume to question Our Lady’s wisdom, after all.”

“Of course, Lady Inquisitor. Pardon me – I meant no offense.”

“None taken,” she replied in what she desperately hoped was a sweet tone. “Will you be so good as to excuse me? I should see if I can find the Lord Inquisitor.” He swept her a low bow, and she turned to make her way through the vestibule once again. Her target was Leliana, but her attention was caught by another voice.

“Did you just… grab my bottom?!?”

Cullen’s expression, from where she stood, was blocked by some of his crowding admirers – most, if not all, of whom appeared to be giggling at his reaction. But his tone, while mostly surprised, betrayed the smallest undercurrent of fear – and Victoria was suddenly reminded of what Cole had said. For an instant, she saw red. Almost before she knew it, her fancy heeled boots were carrying her in his direction.

“Commander!”

“Lady Inquisitor? Did you need something?” She could see the unspoken cry for help in his eyes – *please need something.*

Victoria smiled genially at the nobles surrounding him. “Please excuse us for a moment,” she said, “but Lady Montilyet needs to have a word with the commander and myself.” The crowd reluctantly parted, allowing Cullen to escape and follow her away.

“I – what does Josephine want?” he asked, as they slipped past another group of courtiers.

“Probably the same thing we all want – for this to be over,” she replied quietly. “She didn’t send me. I just couldn’t leave you there another moment.”

“Maker’s breath.” He exhaled. *Thank you.*

Victoria held her tongue until they reached the far end of the vestibule, near the palace entrance, where no one was standing. “I can’t fault them for admiring you,” she said in a low voice.
“Andraste knows, I do it enough myself. But they had no right to touch you – are you all right?”

“A little shaken,” Cullen admitted. “It reminded me of – well – a time I don’t care to recall. I’m sure they meant no real harm, but it was jarring. I’ve told them repeatedly that I’m not married, but that I am taken. They refuse to take a hint.”

She smiled at that. “I’ve had to turn down my share of dance offers too,” she said. “I wish we didn’t have to hide – but I can’t bear the thought of someone possibly hurting you to get to me.” Cole’s warning still jangled in her mind like a bell.

“Hurt me? No, they’d have to kill me to get to you,” he said firmly. “Trust me, though… I’d be more disappointed if we had nothing to hide.”

“You should be safe enough for a little while… if need be, slip out to the courtyard and hide behind Dorian.” She chuckled, and briefly put a hand on his arm before turning. “I’d better get back in there.”

“Of course.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I… I haven’t had the chance to say so, but… you look lovely.”

She turned back, and smiled. “Words I have never heard in my life,” she said. “I’m… very happy that you’re the one to say them. Thank you.”

“That was bracing,” Bull muttered as they entered another hallway. They had found themselves in a courtyard moments earlier, where a man dressed in some sort of official regalia lay dead near a fountain. Wedged between his shoulder blades was a dagger bearing the Grand Duke’s family crest. They had scarcely discovered the body when a Harlequin – a curiously attired warrior – had cut down an elven servant before disappearing, leaving the four companions to deal with a cluster of Venatori zealots. It was one of several fights they’d been encountering since entering the servants’ quarters, and it was anybody’s guess how the staff was going to clean up all the blood.

“I don’t think we were... quite prepared for this,” Cassandra muttered. She had taken a nasty gash to her shoulder, and leaned against a sheet-covered piece of furniture while she chugged down a healing potion. “There are more of them than I anticipated, certainly.”

“Cassandra!” Mahanon bellowed, his knives coming into his hands almost unbiden. He hurled one forcefully at her, and as she swept aside to dodge, it embedded itself in the throat of the figure in the shadows behind her. “Venatori!”

“How many of these bastards are there?” Bull roared, swinging his maul in a wide circle. “And how many times do we have to kill them before they take a hint?”

This fight raged on, with reinforcements emerging from adjacent rooms, and Mahanon wasn’t completely convinced they were going to survive it. But the last Venatori fell suddenly, a dagger in his face, and a masked elf with thick reddish hair emerged from the shadows. “Fancy meeting you here,” she said idly. “Shouldn’t you be dancing, Inquisitor? What will the nobility say?”

“No doubt there’s a line of people breathlessly waiting for dances with me,” Mahanon replied. He could practically hear Cassandra rolling her eyes.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there was. You cleaned this place out. It will take a month to get all the Tevinter blood off the marble. I came down to save or avenge my missing people, but you’ve beaten me to it.”
“Your people?” he repeated. “You must be Ambassador Briala, then?”

“Indeed I am. So... the Council of Heralds’ emissary in the courtyard – that’s not your work, is it?”

Mahanon shook his head. “He was dead when I arrived.”

“I expected as much.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “You may have arrived with the Grand Duke, but you don’t seem to be doing his dirty work. I knew he was smuggling in chevaliers, but killing a council emissary? Bringing Tevinter assassins into the palace? Those are desperate acts. Gaspard must be planning to act tonight. I misjudged you, Inquisitor. You might just be an ally worth having. What could you do with an army of elven spies at your disposal? You should think about it.”

“You flatter me,” he retorted, “but don’t forget that I’m only half the equation.”

“Oh, yes. I saw Inquisitor Trevelyan down in the ballroom. I’m surprised they got her sobered up and dressed for this party.”

Mahanon saw the other three immediately turn to look at him with varying shades of alarm and disgust. He didn’t blame them; he was pretty sure that there were very few things Briala could have said that would have made him angrier, and it was with some difficulty that he kept his tone even remotely civil. “Take care, Briala,” he said evenly. “An alliance with you may be worthwhile, but don’t ever make the mistake of insulting the Lady Inquisitor in front of me again. Ma da’vhenan is above reproach.”

Briala seemed to do a bit of a double take at his response. “You surprise me,” she said. “But I’m not one to question alliances. We can help each other, Inquisitor. All three of us are outsiders here, after all. I know which way the wind is blowing; I’d bet coin that you’ll be part of the peace talks before the night is over. And if you happen to lean a little bit our way? It could prove advantageous to us both. Just a thought.” With that, she did an impressive acrobatic flip off of the balcony, disappearing into the night.

There was a very loud silence. “Well,” said Bull after a moment, “that was a thing that happened.”
Mahanon’s whole body ached. The exploration of the palace was nothing short of exhausting, and though they’d exterminated quite a number of Venatori, he wasn’t convinced that they’d found the real culprit.

“I have to get back to the ballroom,” he said wearily to the others. “People will have been looking for me, and I need to at least try to bring Victoria up to speed on what we’ve found so far.”

“Let’s return to the courtyard,” Cassandra proposed. “Some of Brialà’s people have taken up position there and dispensed with the mess left by our fights. The three of us can wait with them while you change and slip back into the festivities.”

She was right. When they reached the fountain where the dead emissary had been discovered, they found that some archers were posted. “If you go through that door there, Lord Inquisitor,” said one, pointing, “you’ll find yourself in the Hall of Heroes. The vestibule is just beyond.”

He gave them a nod and ducked into the tall shrubbery to remove his armor, revealing the formal attire underneath. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said, eyes lingering on Cassandra. She still seemed to be smarting from that blow to the shoulder, not to mention the others she had probably didn’t see.

Inside the Hall of Heroes, he paused. Most of the trophies and plaques and other ostentatious nonsense were, naturally, dedicated to heroes of Orlais. But the figure dominating the scene was a large statue of a pair of warriors which, at first glance, he honestly thought were supposed to be himself and Victoria. On closer inspection, it made more sense; the bronze nameplate fastened to the marble base announced that it was meant to represent the Heroes of Ferelden, in celebration of their triumph over the Fifth Blight. Despite approving the subject matter, he thought, he didn’t particularly care for the statue. Maybe it was just the nature of the stone, but he hated their blank eyes, their vacant expressions. He had to believe the real Wardens themselves were… warmer.

Victoria was lingering just outside the door leading to the vestibule when Mahanon appeared, and to her profound relief, he appeared more or less unharmed. Her eyes raked over him anxiously, scanning for injuries; it amused her to realize that he was giving her a very similar once-over. “Any
luck?” she asked, taking his arm as though nothing unusual had happened.

“It’s… been interesting,” he replied.

“Is everyone all right?”

“In largest part. What about in here?”

“Apart from some very pushy nobles behaving badly toward our commander, it’s been fairly quiet,” she assured him. Cullen’s predicament still bothered her a great deal, though his compliment to herself would probably continue to ring pleasantly in her mind for the next few years. “I had occasion to meet that woman Leliana warned us about, the so-called arcane advisor to the Empress.”

“So did I. She gave me the key that allowed us to access the servants’ quarters, and it’s all been quite the adventure since then. I don’t think she’s our enemy.”

“No, I’m inclined to agree. Not that I doubt the enemy will put on a polite face,” she added, “but… she just didn’t strike me that way.”

They walked together to the ballroom entrance, but once there, Victoria released Mahanon’s arm. “I’ll gather our council and we can discuss things. You take a quick walk around the ballroom so people catch sight of you – I’ve covered your absence as best I could, but I can’t help wondering if anyone got suspicious at some point.”

“Good idea. I’ll catch up with all of you shortly.”

As she started to turn away from him, she felt the weight of his gloved hand upon her shoulder. Whatever he’d been through during the course of the evening was taking a toll on him; that particular gesture always seemed to indicate as much, and she reached up to pat his hand before he pulled it away.

Mahanon had barely left Victoria’s presence when he found himself face to face with the woman who had been on the balcony with the Empress. “Inquisitor Lavellan?” she greeted him in a sweetly accented voice. “We met briefly. I am Grand Duchess Florianne de Chalons. Welcome to my party.” She curtseyed to him, and he returned with a short bow.

“Why,” he asked, “am I not at all surprised that you want to see me now?”

“This is Orlais, Lord Inquisitor,” she replied with a smile. “Nothing happens by accident. I believe tonight you and I are both concerned about the actions of… a certain person.” She started to move toward the stairs. “Come, dance with me. Spies cannot hear us on the dance floor.”

He followed, half wondering why she hadn’t sought out Victoria if she wished to confide in someone about her misgivings. Surely that wouldn’t have looked strange? Now, he was being forced to perform a shemlen pantomime of which he knew virtually nothing. None of Vivienne’s warnings or teachings had prepared him to actually dance where anyone could see him – when he’d pictured himself dancing at all, he had thought he might spirit Cassandra into a curtained recess, or playfully twirl Victoria in the vestibule shadows just to make her laugh. Either of those scenarios pleased him. Not… this.

For the sake of appearances, he forced himself to take up position beside the Grand Duchess, and she gave him her hand. At least he was a quick study; he could more or less mirror her, despite the exhaustion that seemed to be creeping into every muscle of his body. But just to enhance his
annoyance farther, Her Grace seemed determined to make small talk. It was, at least, relevant small
talk, so he reluctantly paid attention and matched her every question with a question of his own.

“My brother and my dear cousin have been at each other’s throats for far too long,” she said. “It
took great effort to arrange tonight’s negotiations. Yet one party would use this occasion for
blackest treason.”

Mahanon twirled her, trying his hardest to mask his rising irritation. He was going to need to sleep
for about a week when they got back to Skyhold. “In times like these,” he said, “it’s hard to tell
friend from foe. Is it not, Your Grace?”

“I know you arrived here as a guest of my brother Gaspard, and have been everywhere in the
palace,” she said. How, he wondered, did she know that? “You - and the Lady Inquisitor too - are a
curiosity to many... and a matter of concern to some.”

“And which are we to you, Your Grace?”

“A little of both, actually,” she admitted.

They continued to jibe back and forth as they spun about the floor. “In the Winter Palace,” she
murmured in his ear, “everyone is alone.”

“I am never alone,” he corrected her. “Not while there are two Inquisitors.”

“You are fortunate in that respect, then.” Mahanon wasn’t sure he liked her tone. “It cannot have
escaped your notice that certain parties are engaged in dangerous machinations tonight.”

As the music swelled to its conclusion, Mahanon realized that the dance floor had cleared, and the
entire court was watching him dance with the Grand Duchess. He planted his foot and, catching her
by the waist, dipped her low on the final note. Her words were barely audible over the applause.
“You have little time,” she urged. “The attack will come soon – you must stop Gaspard before he
strikes.” As he walked her off of the floor, she continued, “In the Royal Wing Garden, you will
find the captain of my brother’s mercenaries. He knows all Gaspard’s secrets. I’m sure you can
persuade him to be forthcoming.”

Victoria, along with the three council members, had watched in frank astonishment as Mahanon
and the Grand Duchess danced. She hadn’t known he could do that, but the look on his face as he
joined them told her plainly that he hadn’t enjoyed it in the slightest. His hand found her shoulder
again.

“You’ll be the talk of the court for months,” Josephine said kindly. “We should take you dancing
more often.”

“Perhaps I should be the one to dance next time,” Victoria interjected, glancing at her counterpart’s
weary face. “Just... not with Corypheus.”

“I promise not to invite him to our next ball,” the ambassador replied.

“What happened in the servants’ quarters?” Cullen interrupted. “I heard there was fighting!”
Mahanon didn’t say anything, but he nodded.

“I hope you have good news,” Josephine said. “It appears the peace talks are crumbling.”

Haltingly, and quietly, Mahanon related a summary of his experiences – how Morrigan had helped
him enter the servants’ quarters, how they had tangled with Venatori, how Gaspard’s dagger was embedded between the shoulder blades of a Council of Heralds emissary, and the substance of his conversation with the Grand Duchess.

“Then… the attack on the Empress will happen tonight,” Cullen said, unfolding his arms and looking perturbed.

“Warning Celene would be pointless,” Josephine observed. “She needs these talks to succeed, and to flee would admit defeat.”

Victoria was frankly horrified – so, she sensed, was Josephine – when Leliana suggested that maybe they should allow Celene to be killed. Her point was valid, to an extent; Corypheus wanted chaos, and the way to prevent that was for someone to emerge victorious from the evening, be it Celene or Gaspard. But to actually allow the Empress to be murdered in cold blood? She shook her head. “We can’t decide this, not yet.”

“You must,” Leliana insisted. “Even inaction is a decision.”

“You could speak to Celene in the ballroom,” Josephine said dubiously, “but without proof she won’t act.”

“If Gaspard is guilty, he’ll admit nothing,” Cullen added. “If he’s innocent, he knows nothing. We need the truth.”

Mahanon sighed. “Florianne said the mercenary captain in the gardens knows the truth, whatever it is.”

“It could be a trap,” Victoria mused, “or it could be a lead. There’s no way to know.”

“Then I guess I’d better go find out, hadn’t I?” His hand on her shoulder tightened briefly before releasing her. “Josephine, get me access to the royal wing. Cullen, get your soldiers into position. And look after ma da’vhenan.”

“At once.” Cullen nodded. “Be careful, Inquisitor.”

Mahanon returned to the courtyard to reclaim his armor and his allies. Cassandra, he was pleased to find, had been tending her injuries in his absence; Stitches had insisted on sending some potions and poultices with the Iron Bull, and she had taken advantage of a few in order to get her shoulder back to rights.

“What now, Boss?” asked Bull, helping him secure the straps of his armor padding over the formal attire.

He related an extremely brief version of what had just happened in the ballroom. “So I’m fairly certain we’re walking into an ambush, or a trap, or possibly just one massive practical joke,” he concluded dryly, “but we have to get into the royal wing and find this mercenary captain in the gardens. He’s possibly the only one who can tell us what’s really going on around here.”

“How is the atmosphere in the ballroom?” Solas inquired.

“Tense, at least among our people. Cullen’s moving soldiers into position as we speak, just in case something happens while we’re gone.” He paused. “Also, I really don’t care much for dancing.”

“No?” Cass raised an eyebrow.
“Not with Grand Duchesses, at least. I don’t like being paraded around the ballroom like some sort of… trophy animal.” He made a face and shook his head. “Henceforth, I am only dancing with partners I actually care about.”

“Well, that’s real sweet,” said Bull, jostling the last of Mahanon’s armor into place. “Meanwhile, how do we get to this royal wing without looking like we’re taking over the palace? That Morrigan isn’t here to give us directions this time.”

Mahanon looked around, and addressed himself to one of Briala’s archers. “What’s the fastest way for us to get into the royal wing?”

“There’s a door just inside the main entrance of the palace,” the other elf replied, pointing. “Climb over that wall there and duck through the main gate, then go up the stairs on the left.”

“And we can just… walk in, looking like this?”

The archer frowned a moment. “By the time you get there, you’ll be able,” he said at length. “I’ll take care of it.” Before they could question him farther, he darted away.

“Well… let’s hope so,” Mahanon said after a pause. “I’ve got no better plans.”

Victoria, in the absence of her counterpart and lacking any better ideas, decided that it would be the best course of action to take up position relatively near the Empress. That way she’d be directly on hand if anything were to happen. Empress Celene had reclaimed her station at the far end of the ballroom, with her three strangely identical ladies-in-waiting forming a sort of loose barrier, and the Lady Inquisitor positioned herself opposite. She focused her attention, or at least tried to give the impression of doing so, on the artwork of the ballroom.

Of course, as she belatedly realized, there was a serious flaw in her plan. She was unarmed, and unarmored, and this didn’t really make her the best candidate for defending anybody if there were to be a need.

She fervently hoped there would not be a need. Maker, or Creators, or whoever will watch over an elf – guide Mahanon to where he needs to be.

By the time they actually reached the Royal Wing Gardens, Mahanon was struggling to decide exactly which part of the evening had been the weirdest. First there had been the Harlequin menacing an elven servant in the Grand Duchess’s room, and he’d had to run in and kick the attacker out of the window. The girl was convinced that Briala had set her up to be murdered. He’d sent her down to the ballroom in search of Cullen and Victoria for protection, but not before she dropped the bombshell that, years earlier, Celene had purged the Halamshiral alienage while also sleeping with Briala. That Celene and Briala had once been lovers, he already knew; Celene’s handmaidens had let that slip. The purge was a different story.

He had barely wrapped his head around that when they entered the Empress’s chambers and found… well, Cassandra was hard-pressed not to giggle, and he supposed he couldn’t blame her. There was a man tied to Celene’s bed, clad in nothing but a helmet. Apparently he, too, had been working for Gaspard in some capacity, but had succumbed to Celene’s seduction technique and found himself in this awkward predicament. “No one say a word,” Mahanon told his friends, once they’d released the humiliated captive.

“Indeed,” Solas replied dryly. The others nodded.
But all this paled in comparison to bursting into the gardens to find a massive *Fade rift*.

The four Inquisition members all but piled into one another as they stared at the scene. Flanking the rift on all sides were a small company of archers, with their arrows pointed at the Lord Inquisitor. As they tried to assess the danger, a voice cried out from the balustrade above them. “Inquisitor, what a pleasure! I wasn’t certain you’d attend.”

Grand Duchess Florianne was pacing. “You’re such a challenge to read,” she commented. “I had no idea if you’d taken my bait. I considered approaching the other one – they do say she’s much more expressive – but she’s been virtually inaccessible all evening. Either she’s being swarmed by nobles or she’s got your commander looking over her shoulder. So it had to be you.”

“I’m a little busy just at the moment, if you were looking for a dance partner,” Mahanon replied.

“Yes, I see that. Such a pity you did not save one final dance for me.” As he studied the rift, she continued, “It was kind of you to walk into my trap so willingly. I was so tired of your meddling. Corypheus insisted that the Empress die tonight, and I would hate to disappoint him.”

“Well,” Bull muttered, “now we know who we’ve been looking for.”

“At this point,” Mahanon retorted, “I would think Corypheus and disappointment would have become old friends.”

“Ah, poor dear.” She smirked. “You can’t begin to imagine what Calpernia and I have in store. Between her Venatori and Samson’s Red Templars, victory is only a matter of time. As for myself… in their darkest dreams, no one imagines I would assassinate Celene myself. All I need to do is keep *you* out of the ballroom long enough to strike.”

“We hardly left the Empress unguarded,” he pointed out.

“Yes, yes, your little compatriot and her big bad bodyguard – not to mention all your other friends. They’ll be watching for an assassin, but how would they ever expect to have to protect my dear cousin from *me*?” She glanced down at the archers. “Kill him. Bring me the marked hand as proof… it will make a fine gift for the Master.”

With that, she sailed away, and the battle began.

Back in the ballroom, the nobles were beginning to gather for the Empress’s speech. As Victoria turned away from examining perhaps her fifth painting (each subject less comprehensible than the last), she observed the Grand Duke and Duchess walking together on the far side of the room. They appeared to be speaking quietly to one another, but Florianne slowed her pace to a halt.

*She’s looking at me… why is she looking at me?* Victoria wondered. *Why is the Grand Duke folding his arms like that? They’re staring. This is strange.*

A flash of scarlet and blue out of the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she turned to the ballroom entrance. Cullen had moved to intercept Mahanon, who seemed breathless and disheveled – he was still in his armor, but nobody was paying attention to it. They were too focused on the court herald, announcing that Her Imperial Majesty was ready to address them. And then Cullen turned, and signaled to some of his soldiers to follow him, and Victoria realized that *something* was about to happen.

“Lords and ladies,” Celene began, “as a nation, we mourn our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and lovers claimed by war.”
“The sky is torn open, our Divine is dead, and many fear the end of all things comes upon us.” The Empress’s tone was impenetrably grave, and all eyes were upon her. “Orlais must stand as a bastion, a bulwark behind which all Thedas may take shelter. So it has stood for a thousand years! So shall it ever stand!”

As the assembled applauded, Victoria swept her gaze around the room. Inquisition soldiers appeared to be scattered throughout, ready for... what, exactly? What was going on? It felt like her heart dropped into her stomach. She couldn’t get across the room fast enough, blast her skirts, but she was trying.

“This would not have been possible without the efforts of many. Dear cousin, please step forward.” Celene was extending a hand to Florianne. Victoria narrowed her eyes. Was she just imagining the glint of light on a knife? No – it was there!

As she broke into a run, Mahanon’s voice suddenly burst from the crowd. “Grand Duchess, stand down!”

The very astonished Empress was brushed aside by one of the Inquisition soldiers, and suddenly, three of them surrounded the Grand Duchess. As the Lady Inquisitor finally reached that end of the ballroom, Florianne quickly flipped her blade around and cut down her captors. “Now!” she cried, pointing out onto the dance floor, where some of the strangely-garbed Harlequin warriors had slipped in amidst the gathered nobility. To Victoria’s horror, the Inquisition soldiers who had so quietly infiltrated the palace were outmatched by these champion assassins.

“For Corypheus – kill them all!” Florianne shouted, slashing her knife across another would-be defender of peace, before turning and racing into the courtyard. Mahanon, followed closely by Cassandra, Solas, and the Iron Bull, rushed to give chase. Victoria backed away from the courtyard doors, trying to stand between the Empress and Florianne’s loyalists.

Above the din of frightened courtiers, she became dimly aware of one thing – one of the Harlequins was advancing on her, and she had no means either to escape or to defend herself. She glanced about wildly, trying to spot anything within reach that could serve as a weapon in such a contingency – but nothing was within reach, and no one could get to her in time. She saw light glaring off of the blade of the dagger destined for her heart. Everything moved so slowly, as if Alexius had once again cast his time magic. She could no longer hear anything except the blood pulsing rapidly in her ears; she raised her arms in a defensive stance, trying to shield face and chest from immediate devastation.

_Blessed are the peacekeepers, she thought desperately, champions of the just._

The strange silence in her ears abruptly came to a crashing halt. The Harlequin froze and then crumpled, clattering to the floor and revealing the scarlet-clad figure behind him. Cullen had, at least from her perspective, materialized from out of nowhere and clubbed her attacker into insensibility with the pommel of a sword.

“Lady Inquisitor! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she managed. “Where did you - how did you -”

“Hopefully the Empress won’t mind too much,” he said, his smile faint. “There were some swords on display on the wall - I took the liberty of borrowing a couple of them.” He lightly tossed the
sword in his left hand, and she caught it reflexively. The world was suddenly moving at its usual speed again.

“Thank you,” she murmured fervently. The remaining Harlequins were fleeing the ballroom in the direction of their mistress, and Mahanon and their fellows came tearing by in hot pursuit.

“Cullen, protect the people!” Mahanon bellowed, just before disappearing into the courtyard with the others.

“Yes, Lord Inquisitor!” Once they were outside, Victoria helped Cullen slam the doors. They stood back to back, swords raised, ready to defend the ballroom should the killers try to return.

Mahanon, with the others close on his heels, skidded to a halt. Florianne had managed to shed her ballgown to reveal a much more utilitarian costume underneath, and now she brandished a longbow and pointed an arrow at Mahanon’s face.

“Beaten at every turn,” she sighed. “You stole the moment of my triumph, and now you’ve chased a defenseless woman into the garden. Are you proud of yourself?”

“You just tried to murder the Empress,” he reminded her. “We both know you’re not defenseless.”

She snorted. “True. You never were one to fall for my helpless-damsel act.” She loosed her arrow, which Mahanon barely dodged, then performed a rather spectacular backwards vault into the fountain some distance away. “The night is still young,” she called. “All I need to recover… is to kill you, Lord Inquisitor. So good of you to attend my soiree.”

Clouds of smoke rose up around the party, and they spun around to find the Harlequins locking the garden gates. There was no returning to the ballroom, not until Florianne was dead, and Mahanon just hoped that Cullen and Victoria would manage to restore order in there in the meantime.

He had thought the fight in the Royal Wing Garden was difficult. Imperial archers plus the demons spawned by a rift had put up one nightmare of a fight. But no, this was much, much worse. Harlequins and Venatori kept diverting the group’s attention from where it truly needed to be, which was on the Grand Duchess herself. “Who would have guessed the Empress’s cousin would be a bard?” he muttered, dousing one of his blades in poison. “Someone remind me to have a word with Leliana when we get back to Skyhold.”

By the time it was over, he half wanted to die himself. As Florianne fell, Mahanon dropped to his own knees, and Bull wandered over to gently pick him up and dust him off. “Come on, Boss. Can’t nap yet,” he said. “Let’s go make sure the rest of the team is in one piece.”

They found the gate key on the body of one of the Harlequins and forced their way back inside. The surviving Inquisition soldiers, under the direction of Josephine, were attending to the bodies of their slain fellows; Victoria, for her part, looked like she might faint if Cullen weren’t right behind her. She dropped her sword – where in the world did she get a sword in this place? – and, with a small cry of relief, darted over to throw her arms around Mahanon, ignoring his armor. He patted her back, chuckling weakly. “It’s all right, Tor. It’s over now.”

Unfortunately, it was not over. Not yet. Victoria let Mahanon lean on her a bit as they followed Celene, Gaspard, and Briala out onto a nearby balcony to discuss how best to resolve everything. Briala’s attitude was snide, and Celene’s posture was more rigid than usual and her masked face was stone cold. Gaspard appeared disgusted, and perhaps disappointed; Victoria assumed he was
also at least somewhat eaten up with grief for the death of his only sibling, whom by all accounts he had truly loved. Briala, however, clearly had no sympathy for his loss. “Your sister attempted regicide in front of the entire court, Gaspard,” she said.

“You’re the spymaster,” he countered. “If anyone knew this atrocity was coming, it was you.”

“Surely you don’t deny your involvement.”

“I do deny it! I knew nothing of Florianne’s plans! But you… you knew it all and did nothing!”

“I don’t know which is better,” said Briala, darkly amused. “That you think I’m all-seeing, or that you’re trying so hard to play innocent and failing.”

Victoria looked up at Mahanon, who seemed like he might be perfectly okay with murdering all three of them just to be done with it. The Empress, however, interrupted. “Enough,” she said. “We will not bicker while Tevinter plots against our nation! For the safety of the empire, I will have answers.” She looked expectantly at the Inquisitors.

Victoria felt again the grip of Mahanon’s hand on her shoulder. He was tired – tired beyond her own ability to describe, to judge by the look on his face – but she had no information to offer, no evidence to present. Much as she wanted to shield him from scrutiny, she had to let him be the one to speak. He did, haltingly. She listened in mute horror and bewilderment as Gaspard’s treachery was slowly revealed, and in perfect confusion as something he said seemed to bring Celene and Briala back together. They had been lovers once? Celene had kept a locket, and its discovery softened Briala? Victoria was so lost.

“In light of the overwhelming evidence, cousin, we have no choice but to declare you an enemy of the empire,” Celene said, in a voice that could freeze the waterfall inside Skyhold. “You are hereby sentenced to death.”

“No!” Victoria blurted. “I mean – please, Your Majesty, has there not been enough blood spilled for one evening? Let him be exiled.”

Celene was silent for a moment before looking again at the Grand Duke. “It seems we both owe our lives to the Inquisitors, Gaspard. You have until sundown tomorrow to be out of Orlais.” She turned to lead the way back inside.

Mahanon gave a soft snort in Victoria’s ear. “He doesn’t deserve your compassion, ma da’vhenan… but I expected nothing less of you.”

They followed Celene and Briala back inside for the conclusion of the Imperial speech. “Thank you for your efforts tonight, my Lord and Lady Inquisitor,” said the Empress. “I owe you my life, and Orlais owes you its future. You have done a service for the empire never to be forgotten, my friends. This peace is your doing – you are truly the instruments of Andraste.”

She took up her post again, with Briala on one side and the Inquisitors on the other, and proclaimed a new era for Orlais. Things would be different for the elves, now; Briala was declared Marquess of the Dales, the first elven noble in the empire, and the cheers which reached Victoria’s ears were both pleased and puzzled. She supposed that was how she felt, too.

Divested of his armor once again, Mahanon forced a little food and wine down his throat in hopes of regaining some energy. The Inquisition’s party would stay the night in the area which had been set aside for them, then depart for Skyhold in the morning, and he really hoped that there wouldn’t be a message waiting for them about Adamant. He needed a break between death traps.
Taking a leisurely, almost stumbling stroll around the vestibule, he spotted Morrigan coming inside from a balcony. Beyond her, he could see Victoria leaning on the railing and staring out at the night; he started to move in that direction, but checked himself as he realized Cullen was doing likewise. He’d leave them alone for the time being. Besides, Cassandra was approaching him, and he had to smile for her.

“What’s the general mood?” he asked.

“A bit confused, but overall, satisfied,” she reported. “Orlais stands with the Inquisition now, which is the most important thing. We have struck a blow against Corypheus. That said, I am perfectly happy to be leaving this… den of iniquity as soon as possible. This has all been a lot of foolishness.”

“Always my ray of sunshine.” He smiled. “Where is everyone?”

“Varric is still holding court in the Council of Heralds’ chamber. I don’t think he left it all night – I don’t think they let him,” she said. “Leliana and Vivienne are renewing old acquaintances, Josephine is still minding her sister, most of the others are eating. Except for Cole – one never knows where to find Cole. And I’m not sure where Cullen is either.”

“That one I can answer.” He nodded in the direction of Victoria’s balcony.

“What? He – oh. Oh, would you look at that.” She actually chuckled, which prompted Mahanon to turn.

“Ah… and here I thought Templars never attended balls,” he said, smirking. The dance step they were attempting was a bit halting, a bit uncertain – but Victoria was clearly happy. “That doesn’t look too difficult… certainly less of a spectacle than what I had to endure earlier.” He looked back at her. “May I have this dance, Lady Cassandra?”

“A dance?” she repeated. “After all we’ve been through tonight? You look ready to drop from exhaustion, but you want to dance?”

“Can you think of a better way to celebrate?”

She hesitated, and then the corners of her mouth lifted faintly. As he pulled her to him, and they started to pivot, her smile became more real. “I suppose this isn’t… terrible.”
Mahanon and Cassandra, and Victoria and Cullen, by Ada Sulewska
Chapter Summary

In which a box gets judged, a bog unicorn gets named, a coin is given, and Cassandra succumbs to her passions. Also, Varric snarks at the author again.

Chapter Notes

I must credit AuroraBorealia for the name of Cullen's horse. It's a long story as to how that came to be, and not really important for our purposes. All you need to know is that she gave me the idea, and I love it.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Blade of the Faith

Cassandra didn’t really attend the Inquisitors’ council meetings anymore. Since the move to Skyhold, and the formal appointment of the Inquisitors to their roles, she hadn’t felt the need. (Solas had puzzled her with his fascination over this fact. He seemed almost incapable of comprehending that she would willingly surrender control of the Inquisition. He didn’t appear to think her foolish for doing so, though, but appeared more impressed than anything. So while she was confused, she was also flattered.)

However, following their return from Halamshiral, and with everyone having finally gotten a chance to rest, she thought she would tag along on a visit to the war room. They had never said she couldn’t, after all; the choice to stop going had been her own. Besides, Mahanon had been monopolizing her attention and she didn’t entirely feel like surrendering his just yet.

Victoria was already there when they arrived, and to Cassandra’s considerable amusement, Mahanon opened the war room door in time for them to hear Cullen, of all people, offer the humorous observation that “If you squint, Lake Calenhad is shaped like a bunny.”

“Oh, I think I see it!” Leliana said. Victoria just laughed.

“Before we get started,” said Josephine, nodding at the new arrivals, “Cullen, there has been a curious development since our trip to Halamshiral.”

Both his smile and Victoria’s instantly vanished. “Dare I ask?” was his wary reply.

“I have requests for information on your lineage from a few… interested parties at the Winter Palace.”

“Andraste preserve me!” he exclaimed. “Feel free to use those requests as kindling!”

“No! I shall take them,” said Leliana, her voice full of glee. “I want to know who pines for our commander. We can use this to our advantage.”
“I am not bait!”

“Hush. Just look pretty.”

Cassandra glanced at Victoria, who stood with her arms folded, and her expression was anything but amused. The light gray eyes had gone steely dark with irritation; her lips twitched, and her brow was heavily creased in a manner that suggested something almost dangerous lurked in her mind. *Well,* the Seeker thought, *Varric doesn’t call her ‘Eyebrows’ for nothing.*

Victoria then exchanged a meaningful glance with Cullen, and for the first time, Cassandra registered something more than mere embarrassment or annoyance in his face; the expression in his brown eyes was one of discomfort, or maybe even fear. Whatever it was, Victoria clearly understood it, and Cassandra suddenly realized that her friend wasn’t jealous at all. She wanted to protect Cullen — although from just what Cullen might need protecting, neither of them seemed inclined to explain. After a few seconds of this silent held gaze, they both relaxed somewhat. “I’d just as soon you burned the information requests, Leliana,” said the Lady Inquisitor, turning back to her. “But I leave it to your best judgment. Promise them nothing, that’s all I ask.”

“Of course, my lady.” The spymaster’s voice was pacifying. Teasing Cullen was one thing; teasing the Left Hand of Andraste was quite another, at least when it came to a subject dear to her heart. Cassandra could understand that.

Clearly hoping to smooth things past the discomfort, Josephine coughed politely. “Meanwhile,” she said, “there are a few things we need to discuss. One is that we will need the Inquisitors to journey into the Emerald Graves of Orlais and meet with a gentleman named Fairbanks. He has taken charge of a growing collective of refugees who were displaced by the recent hostilities. Despite the end of the civil war, they are experiencing difficulties, in part thanks to a large company of Red Templars in the region, as well as a group calling themselves the Freemen of the Dales. Fairbanks has reached out to us for assistance, and in exchange for it he would be willing to join us as a field agent.”

“Is there any word from Hawke about Adamant? That demon army needs to take priority even over the Red Templars,” Mahanon said.

“Very true. Our latest intelligence suggests that the Grey Wardens are indeed on the move.” Leliana sighed. “I wish we could reach the Heroes of Ferelden. I would feel much better about all this if we could have them with us.”

“At least we have Blackwall,” Cullen pointed out. “Whatever’s affecting the Wardens doesn’t seem to be affecting him.”

“There’s that, at least.”

“All right, well – we know it’s coming soon,” said Mahanon, his expression thoughtful. He pointed at the map. “The Emerald Graves are closer to Skyhold than many other parts of Orlais. Why don’t we head there, and Leliana, you can send word when we need to make for the Western Approach? At least we’ll have a head start, and meanwhile, we can perhaps at least begin to assist this Fairbanks gentleman. Get a lay of the land. We can return to the Graves after we’ve dealt with the Wardens.”

“That makes sense to me,” Victoria conceded. “But you still need rest. You’re still recovering from everything that happened at Halamshiral.”

“I agree,” Cassandra put in. “And you’re not the only one recovering — there was a fair bit of
exhaustion and distress for everyone to share.”

“A delay, perhaps?” Josephine offered. “Leave for the Graves in three days’ time. It will give everyone a chance to rest and to tend their injuries, and to make whatever preparations they will yet need to make for Adamant.”

“That seems a reasonable compromise.” Mahanon glanced at Victoria for her corroboration. She nodded, looking relieved.

There was a knock at the door, which made them all jump a bit; they were almost never disturbed in the war room. Curious, Cassandra pulled it open to reveal one of Leliana’s scouts. “Excuse me,” he said in a mildly terrified voice, “I hate to intrude. But – um – Lady Montilyet, we have… a situation.”

“A situation?” she repeated. “I’ll be right back.”

While she was gone, the remaining members of the group studied the map. “Send Scout Harding ahead of us,” said Victoria, “to establish a forward camp as usual. Meanwhile, send word to Crestwood and Suledin Keep that we probably need additional soldiers reporting for the mission to Adamant. We don’t want to risk our entire force, but if we turn up in numbers that overwhelm the Wardens, we might be able to minimize losses on both sides.”

“Is it only the Orlesian Wardens that are affected, or are they coming from Ferelden too?” Mahanon asked.

“From what I’ve been given to understand, the Wardens in Ferelden are not moving. That’s not to say they aren’t necessarily affected,” Leliana clarified. “I really don’t know if they are or not. But the Queen is still the Warden-Commander, and I have it on good authority that she sent explicit instructions to Amaranthine and Soldier’s Peak that the Fereldan Wardens are to stay in Ferelden.”

She looked distressed; one of Leliana’s deepest personal worries, Cassandra knew, was the fate of her royal friend, and only the fact that the Queen occasionally sent messages provided any sort of relief on that front.

Josephine returned then, with an odd expression on her face. “It seems,” she said, “that we do indeed have a situation which is… demanding the immediate attention of the Inquisitors. If you would be so kind as to convene court, we have a prisoner… of sorts… which must be judged right away.”

The Inquisitors exchanged baffled looks. “A prisoner?” Mahanon repeated.

“Did they send us that Harlequin who tried to kill me?” Victoria guessed. “Because I wouldn’t be the most impartial judge if that’s the case - that face has been haunting my dreams for the past two nights.”

“Not the Harlequin, no.”

Leliana returned to her rookery, but Cassandra and Cullen followed the Inquisitors as Josephine led them to the great hall’s dais. Cassandra found herself immediately covering her nose and mouth with one gloved hand. Positioned on the floor before the throne was a pine box, flanked by a pair of Inquisition soldiers, around which hovered a few flies. An abhorrent odor seemed to emanate from inside, and most of those attending the judging were standing as far from it as they could while still able to hear the proceedings.

“This wasn’t my idea,” Josephine told the Inquisitors apologetically, once they were situated at the
throne. “It is an issue born of titles, and heir apparentcy, and...” She sighed. “Halamshiral is having
difficulty freeing trade routes formerly controlled by Duchess Florianne. Had she been tried, her
assets would be forfeit and considerable bureaucracy avoided... so they ask that we judge her.”

“This is supposed to make sense?” asked Mahanon, baffled. “We’re to judge a box?”

There was silence as everyone stared at the box in question. “That was the time allotted for
rebuttal,” said Josephine. “Her crimes negate any claim to...” She swallowed. “Forgive me, there is
an odor.”

The Inquisitors glanced at one another with almost identical expressions of disbelief and distaste.
Mahanon made a little gesture, which Victoria’s nod suggested she understood, and she steepled
her fingers. “Strangely enough,” she said, “something similar happened to an uncle of Emperor
Leandre the Second. His trade routes were returned to the reigning monarch. Why don’t we just
follow suit?”


“Hold on,” Mahanon said, and Victoria looked up at him. “I want to add something to the Lady
Inquisitor’s pronouncement. I call for rehabilitation! The skull shall do public theater about the
evils of evil. I also judge the box - end table for orphans.”

“That’s quite enough, Lord Inquisitor,” Josephine said dryly, although Cassandra suspected she
was trying not to laugh. Most others in the hall were making no such effort. “Point taken.”

The box was hastily removed from the hall, leading everyone present to sigh with relief. “And
now, Your Worships,” said Josephine, “if you will be so kind as to follow me, there is a second –
though much less urgent – matter requiring your attention.”

“I can hardly wait,” Mahanon muttered. Victoria stood, rolling her shoulders briefly, and they
allowed Josephine to lead them outside.

“I think I’d like to see this,” Cullen remarked to Cassandra. “Let’s tag along.”

“All right.” They joined the Inquisitors (our Inquisitors, she thought, with a strange thrill) and
Josephine in the lower bailey near the stable, just in time to hear Victoria inquire, very slowly,
“What… is… that?”

The *that* in question was a horse… of sorts. A fierce black mount snorted and pawed at the ground,
its wild eyes surveying them curiously. The body was emaciated, the ribs visible through the skin,
and the mane and tail were made up of wine-colored braids. Most improbably, a long sword was
embedded in the creature’s *head*, the blade protruding upward between the eyes.

“According to the message which accompanied it,” said Josephine, “this is called a bog unicorn.
All that is known is that it once belonged to an evil marauder, and some necromancer found its
corpse in a bog and... brought it back. The Marquess of the Dales has sent it as a gift for the Lord
Inquisitor, as thanks for the part you played in giving her that new title. She says it longs to serve,
although I’m not certain I understand what exactly that means.”

Victoria’s eyes were so large, Cassandra half thought they might fall out of her head. “This can be
ridden?” she asked.

Mahanon seemed amused, and he walked over to his gift with an intrigued expression. “Here,* ma
falon,*” he said gently, raising a hand to its peculiarly maimed face. The so-called unicorn gave
another snort, but butted its nose into his palm. It was oddly docile, for something so fearsome. “I
like it!” the elf declared. “Cass, you can have the red hart. I’ll keep this one. *Mythal’enaste*, I name you – Mythal’s favor.”

“It looks like Falon and Ferdinand are getting quite the strange new neighbor in the stable,” Victoria commented, glancing at Cullen. “I’m almost afraid to find out what Master Dennet will have to say about this.”

“Ferdinand?” Cassandra repeated.

“My horse,” Cullen replied. “We’ve acquired so many mounts that I picked one for myself.”

“And… named it Ferdinand?”

“After Genitivi.”

“Oh. Of course.” Chuckling, she made her way cautiously to Mahanon’s side to examine the new arrival.

The Lord Seeker, Cassandra was informed the next morning, was at Caer Oswin in northern Ferelden.

Exactly what he was doing there, she didn’t understand. Caer Oswin was the seat of Bann Loren, a minor noble who had become increasingly reclusive since the deaths of his wife and son ten years earlier. Their story was tied to that of the Queen of Ferelden: they had been visiting Castle Cousland, home of the Teyrn of Highever, and had fallen victim to the slaughter which had all but destroyed the Cousland family and forced the future Queen Elissa to flee in the night with Warden-Commander Duncan. Since that time, Bann Loren had turned inward, refusing most visitors and rarely leaving his lands. But what connection he could possibly have to Lord Lucius and the Seekers, Cassandra was at a loss to fathom.

Nevertheless, all of Leliana’s intelligence indicated that the Seekers were massing there, for some reason, and so that was where she needed to go to confront the Lord Seeker. She wished the information had reached her before the plan was arranged to travel to the Emerald Graves; on balance, however, she had to admit that Caer Oswin was out of the way, where the Emerald Graves were more or less on the way to the Western Approach. Whatever was happening with the Seekers would have to keep until after they had dealt with the Grey Wardens. It was bewildering, in its way. Templars, Seekers, Grey Wardens… was there a faction left in Thedas, beyond (she prayed) the Inquisition itself, which had not yet been touched by madness and malice?

She went in search of the Inquisitors, to ask their assistance in the matter. That they would both want to help, she didn’t doubt. That she couldn’t find either one of them, however, was baffling. They weren’t in their tower; she checked the tavern, the war room, the library, the undercroft. No sign of them. Josephine was in her office, but couldn’t give her any news, and to Cassandra’s surprise, Cullen wasn’t even in his office to be asked. A cursory glance at the stables revealed that both Falon and Mythal’enaste were absent. Feeling somewhat nettled that she hadn’t been included in whatever was happening, she climbed the stairs to the rookery to bother Leliana about the whole thing.

The spymaster was reviewing reports, but glanced up when she heard the sound of Cassandra’s boots. “And the Right Hand pays the Left Hand a visit,” she said pleasantly. “You look troubled.”

“I am not troubled. Not exactly,” she amended. “I am… a little perplexed, that’s all.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain elf’s absence, would it?”
“I – it – I only wondered if you knew.”

“The Lord Inquisitor has gone into Redcliffe Village to retrieve something. He wouldn’t say what,” Leliana added, “so I can offer no more clues than that. But he expects to be back before sundown.”

“I see.” Cassandra hesitated. “I… presume that Victoria has accompanied him, then?”

“Yes and no. To a point, most likely she did, but their paths would have diverged by this time. The Lady Inquisitor has gone to Ferelden, but not to Redcliffe.” There was something in Leliana’s expression that strongly resembled mischief.

“What aren’t you telling me? And while we’re on the subject of missing persons, where is Cullen? He isn’t in his office.”

“Cullen,” Leliana replied, “took the day off.”

“…he did what?”

“In his own words, he had some ‘dealings’ in Ferelden, and left a little while ago. He asked the Lady Inquisitor to go with him.”

“Dealings?” Cassandra repeated. “And they went alone? Is that safe?”

Leliana gave her a look of mingled amusement and exasperation. “I feel quite certain that they’re a sufficient match for any problems they might encounter.”

“Not that I question their mettle, but in such dangerous times as these…”

“Cassandra.” Leliana’s mouth curved upwards. “Think about it for a moment.”

“…oh.” Now that her friend had all but spelled it out for her, Cassandra felt rather foolish for not having immediately understood what Leliana had been trying not to say. “My own thoughts were distracting me, I apologize. I understand now.”

“They should be back later this afternoon. If your matter is urgent, I do have the means to reach them…”

“No, no. It’s nothing that can’t wait until they get back. Really, it will have to wait until after Adamant, but I wanted to talk it over with the Inquisitors first. As I say, it’s not so urgent as that.” She paused, then chuckled faintly. “This is probably the first day off Cullen has taken in years. I won’t be the one to interrupt it.”

Leliana smiled more fully. “I’m sure they’ll appreciate your restraint.”

Cassandra found that she could no longer read in peace in her little section of the inner bailey where she liked to train; Sera was too apt to sit on the roof outside her window, and do distracting things like shouting insults or lobbing olives at anyone passing. She never dared antagonize the Seeker directly, but her antics made it impossible for Cassandra to concentrate. Instead, she found a fairly quiet corner of the ramparts and settled down to enjoy a leisure hour, and another reread of Swords and Shields.

She was engrossed in her book when the cry rose up. “Riders approaching! It’s the Lady Inquisitor and Commander Cullen – open the gate!”

“It’s who?”
“You heard me! Open the gate!”

Chuckling quietly to herself, Cassandra stood and moved to the stone railing to watch as Victoria’s charger and Cullen’s chestnut raced each other across the bridge before slowing to a halt in the outer bailey. Grooms came to take Falon and Ferdinand (trust Cullen to name his horse after his favorite author) back to their stalls in the stable, leaving their riders speaking quietly to one another before moving in different directions.

Victoria disappeared into the tavern, and Cassandra – feeling her curiosity get the better of her – decided to leave her reading spot and make her way down to join her friend. By the time she reached the Heralds’ Rest, Victoria was seated at a long table across from Varric, whose expression was one of smug satisfaction. He prodded at a coin on the table with one finger; seeing Victoria nod, he lifted his glass and clinked it gently against hers.

“Best put that away though,” he was saying as Cassandra approached, “before somebody mistakes it for a tip.”

“I’m thinking maybe I’ll go to the undercroft and ask Harritt to attach a chain or something. So I don’t lose it.” Victoria looked up. “Hello, Cass, won’t you sit with us?”

“Thank you.” Cassandra seated herself, studying Victoria with just a little curiosity. The Lady Inquisitor, despite having left the promised safety of Skyhold’s borders, was neither armed nor wearing armor, but attired in a comfortable-looking hooded riding habit. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was uncharacteristically unbound and more than a little wild – from the ride, probably. “Where in the world have you been?”

“Ferelden. Not too far from Redcliff – a little spot outside the village of Honnleath, on the southern shore of Lake Calenhad.” She looked almost absurdly pleased with herself; Cassandra was hard-pressed not to laugh.

“Interesting. What sort of ‘dealings’ did the commander have at Lake Calenhad, exactly? And what is that?” She nodded at the coin on the table, a smirk playing about her lips.

“It’s…”

“Come now, Seeker, you read the sort of books that include things like this,” Varric interrupted. “Don’t you know a token when you see one?”

“It’s for luck,” Victoria protested, smiling.

“Call it what you want, Eyebrows.” The dwarf chuckled. “You should probably get up to the library soon. You know Sparkler is going to want all the juicy details.”

“There aren’t any juicy details,” she said in a mildly exasperated tone. “Just… details.”

“Speaking of juicy details, where’s your other half? The one that isn’t Curly, I mean.”

“He parted from us to make his way to Redcliffe. I thought he’d be back by now, actually, his errand was fairly simple.” Victoria eyed Cassandra sidelong. “I won’t say anything else about it, though. Don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“Well, now I’m really curious,” said Varric with a grin.

“It’s no concern of yours, Varric! Er – whatever it is,” Cassandra added. She didn’t actually know what Mahanon was doing, after all, and she was secretly dying to find out.
“Lady Cassandra?”

The three looked up to see a Skyhold scout. There was something vaguely familiar about him, Cassandra thought, but they all sort of looked alike so it was difficult to tell one from another in their uniforms. “Yes?”

“I have this for you. From the Lord Inquisitor.” He awkwardly brandished a sealed parchment scroll.

“Oh, he’s back?” Victoria looked pleased.

“Yes, Your Worship. He said if I saw you I should tell you that he – he was successful in what he did today.”

“Very good. Thank you.” She waited until the scout had left them before patting Cassandra’s shoulder. “You should read that, and I guess I should go to the library before Dorian dies of curiosity. Oh, before I go…” Victoria glanced down at the bench, where Cassandra had put her book. “Can I borrow that?”

“You want to read… this?”

“I have to admit I’ve been curious.”

“Suit yourself, I suppose.”

“Thanks.” Victoria put her coin into a pouch on her belt and picked up the well-thumbed copy of *Swords and Shields*. “Come on, Varric, let’s leave her to it.”

With ill-disguised disappointment, Varric grudgingly got up from the table. *Editor’s note: I wasn’t all that interested, or disappointed. As long as the Seeker isn’t stabbing things in my vicinity, far be it from me to ask for details. Quit making me sound like Gossiping Gertie.*] Only when he was out of the tavern did Cassandra feel comfortable breaking the seal on Mahanon’s letter and reading the carefully penned words. She felt herself grow warm, and a thrill of anxiety gave a brilliancy to her eyes. She almost left the letter behind as she scuttled out of the tavern.

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Ma vhenan’ara,

*Forgive my unannounced absence today, but I had one final thing I needed to get before I could complete a certain mission. Now that I’ve returned, I would like to speak to you privately. There is a grove just outside of Skyhold, but near enough to being within its walls that it’s warm enough and the trees are almost green. Exit the fortress by the main gate, then turn left immediately before the bridge and follow the path as it slopes down the hill. I’ll be waiting there at sundown. Trust me.*
The Lights in the Shadow

Chapter Summary

Skyhold celebrates with Mahanon, Victoria makes a joke about her middle name, and Cullen makes a really bad decision.

Chapter Notes

I'm rearranging some of the order of events, as you may have noticed, just because it's where the story (and my editor) wants it to happen. And of course, you'll observe some key differences between the Wicked Grace game here and the one in the actual gameplay... Mahanon's big brother tendencies kick in at such amusing moments.

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Lights in the Shadow

In the early light of the next day, Victoria woke. Slowly, cautiously, she eased herself off of her bed and peered around the divider which separated her sleeping area from that of her beloved counterpart. Seeing his bed still perfectly made, she smirked.

She was dressed and lounging on her bed with Swords and Shields when Mahanon crept in a short time later. The second she caught sight of him, she adopted her best little-sister sing-song voice. “Someone never came to be-ed,” she crowed softly, and the sight of her roguish friend almost jumping out of his skin made her laugh for what felt like forever. “Oh, your face…”

“By the Creators, Tor!” He scowled, briefly, but soon laughed as well. “All right, you caught me. I’m reserving the right to get you back when the time comes.”

“That’s fair, I suppose.”

“Or has it already?”

“Things aren’t quite so forward between Cullen and myself as they clearly are between you and Cassandra, dear.” She grinned and put the book aside. “I trust she enjoyed the surprise?”

“That might be the understatement of the age.” Mahanon smirked. “You don’t… really want to know, do you?”

“Not the specifics, no. If you’re happy and she’s happy, that’s everything I need.”

His smile gentled. “We are. And you?”

“I have no complaints about yesterday.” She crossed to the desk and picked up the coin. “This is… a good luck token that his brother gave him years ago. He asked me to keep it, sort of a talisman against everything that’s to come. And we talked a bit about how we’d reached that point.” She
chuckled, her cheeks pink. “Remember when we first met the council, and I could barely speak? He told me I wasn’t the only one. I’m still in shock.”

He tugged fondly on her braid. “In your own words, if you’re happy and he’s happy, that’s everything I need. Go on, da’vhenan, I need to get a little more sleep.”

“Rest well, Nonny. I shan’t breathe a word of this to anyone… but knowing our friends, they’ll figure it out fast enough.”

They did, of course. As she made her way through the fortress to the little chantry by the courtyard, Victoria could hear the excited murmurings. Dorian was delighted by Mahanon’s new ability to bring a blush to Cassandra’s cheeks; even Vivienne described them as a “fetching couple.” After her devotions, she went to the stable to check on the mounts, and overheard Blackwall congratulating Mahanon on how “adorable” he and Cass were – adding that “I never thought I’d use the words ‘adorable’ and ‘Cassandra’ in the same sentence.”

She went to the undercroft, where Harritt affixed a tiny silver ring to Cullen’s coin so she could wear it on a chain around her neck. While he did that, Victoria listened with fond amusement to Dagna chattering about the recent romantic development. “How did you even hear about it?” she asked, curious.

“The messengers,” Dagna replied cheerfully. Harritt grunted but made no comment. “Unless they’ve got an actual message to deliver to somebody, it’s all they can talk about! Lady Cassandra blushing! The Lord Inquisitor looking at her with those shiny green eyes full of feeling! It’s been building up little by little, but now it’s blown wide open and they don’t have any more reason to hide how they feel!”

Victoria was alternately amused, relieved, and just the smallest bit envious that she had to endure almost no teasing nor observations of the same nature. In fact, the majority of Skyhold’s residents seemed completely unaware of her own situation; if they were otherwise, they were very carefully keeping it to themselves. Dorian and Varric occasionally dropped comments, usually of a strangely self-congratulatory nature, but the only real raillery to which she was subjected came from Mahanon – who was allowed, of course.

Thanking Harritt for the quick work, she made a trip to the kitchen and collected a plate of bread and cheese and apples, then returned to her room. She had some reports to read and letters to write. As she dipped her quill in the ink, she heard a voice.

“Happy thoughts, swirling like colors, a rainbow gone mad. Brighter than the sky, darker than the night, too much joy all at once. She thinks it might consume her.”

Victoria looked up, and smiled at Cole. “Are you talking about Cassandra?”

He perched himself on a chair, watching her thoughtfully. “She’s forgotten how to be this happy. Consumed by duty, daring, devoted to her cause. He had to get past all the barriers she built around her heart to keep it from breaking.”

“But he did.”

“He did! And she’s smiling!”

His happiness for Cass was infectious; if she hadn’t already felt it herself, she would have had no choice but to catch it from him. “And he’s smiling too.”
“The Anchors are too bright,” Cole explained. “Reading you, reading him… I would go blind if I tried too hard. But your hearts are mirrored in the people around you. By looking into them, I can see you both.”

With her paperwork finished, Victoria thought she would take a walk on the battlements to stretch her legs and sort of accidentally-on-purpose wander into Cullen’s office. However, he wasn’t there; instead, she encountered a scout who helpfully advised her that he had gone to speak with Cassandra.

“I suppose even he wants to get in on the teasing a little bit,” she muttered to herself, chuckling. But when she reached the small forge above which Cassandra had established her quarters, she instead found the two of them engaged in a quarrel.

“You asked for my opinion and I’ve given it. Why would you expect it to change?”

“I expect you to keep your word! It’s relentless! I can’t…”

“You give yourself too little credit.”

“If I’m unable to fulfill what vows I’ve kept, then nothing good has come of this! Would you rather save face…” He was half growling, but they both froze as they realized she was on the threshold. Subdued, he turned to walk away, pausing only long enough to murmur, for Victoria’s ears only, “Forgive me.”

“What’s going on?” Victoria asked, staring after him as he stalked away.

“And people say I’m stubborn… this is ridiculous.” Cassandra shook her head. “Cullen’s told you that he’s no longer taking lyrium?”

It had actually slipped her mind, with all the recent excitement. “He mentioned it some time ago,” she recalled. “He told Mahanon and me that we had secured a supply of lyrium for the mages and Templars here, but that he was no longer taking it and that he… he could endure the pain. I respect his decision.”

“As do I, not that he’s willing to listen.” Cassandra sighed. “Cullen has asked me to recommend a replacement for him.”

“What?!”

“I refused,” she added hastily. “It’s not necessary – besides, it would destroy him. He’s come so far…”

“Why didn’t he come to me?” Victoria wondered.

“We had an agreement, long before you joined us,” Cassandra explained. “As a Seeker, I could evaluate the dangers. Besides, he wouldn’t want to risk your disappointment.”

“Can we change his mind?”

“If anyone can, it’s you,” her friend replied gently. “Mages have made their suffering known, but Templars never have. They are bound to the Order, with someone always holding their lyrium leash. Cullen has a chance to break that leash, to prove to himself and to anyone who would follow suit that it’s possible. Talk to him… he can do this.”
It was a struggle for Victoria not to run the length of Skyhold, anxious as she was to find Cullen before anything might happen. However, she was not prepared for a howl of rage, nor to have a box of some sort of tools flung at her head as she entered his office. Cullen was instantly apologetic, horrified at what he’d nearly done. “I didn’t hear you enter!” He stumbled as he started to move around the desk, but held up a hand when she tried to assist him. “I never meant for this to interfere.”

“Are you going to be all right?”

“Yes… I don’t know.” He sighed. “Do you remember asking me about what happened in Ferelden’s Circle of Magi?" Seeing her nod, he began to speak – for perhaps the first time in years, perhaps even the first time ever – about the torture he had experienced at the hands of demons and abominations. The slaughter of his brother and sister Templars, how he was kept alive like some sort of plaything while they tried to burn through his mind... it had been over ten years, but the pain was still fresh on his face. From there he had been sent to Kirkwall, where he’d watched his Knight-Commander slowly succumb to madness and nearly put every mage in the city to the sword; she might have succeeded, had Hawke and her friends not helped Cullen and the other Templars defeat her. “Can’t you see why I want nothing to do with that life?”

“Of course I can, I-”

“Don’t. You should be questioning what I’ve done!”

“This is… this is what you meant at Halamshiral, isn’t it? When you said that the way the courtiers treated you reminded you of a time you didn’t want to recall?” Cole said you were afraid… and no wonder.

“Yes. I thought this would be better – that I would regain some control over my life – but these thoughts won’t leave me!” He was pacing, frantic, a caged lion. “How many lives depend on our success? I will not give less to the Inquisition than I gave to the Chantry! I should be taking it!” He slammed a fist into his bookcase.

“This doesn’t have to be about the Inquisition,” said Victoria. “Is this what you want?”

Cullen paused, and slowly lowered his hand. “…no.” He gave her an almost desperate look. “But these memories have always haunted me, Victoria. If they become worse… if I can’t endure this…”

Gently, she put a hand to his chest. “You can,” she said simply.

He sighed, but his expression cleared. “All right.” Glancing down slightly, he lifted a gloved hand to the coin in the hollow of her throat, and for the first time he smiled. “You give me hope, you know. More than anyone or anything ever has.”

Smirking faintly, she lifted her chin. “You were at the ball,” she reminded him. “You heard the court herald. Hope is my middle name.”

“There you two are!” said Varric, as they entered the main hall a little while later. “Been looking all over for the both of you, we almost had to start without you!”

Victoria glanced at Cullen, but he didn’t seem to have any better idea than she did about what Varric meant. “Well,” she said, “we can’t have that, now, can we?”

Smirking, the dwarf gestured for them to follow him, and together they walked across the
compound to the Heralds’ Rest. The normally bustling establishment had been completely emptied except for one table near the fire, where they found Mahanon, Cassandra, Dorian, the Iron Bull, Josephine, Blackwall, and Cole assembled. Sera, for some reason, was asleep on the floor near Bull’s feet. “I found them, Ruffles! Deal us in!”

“A card game?” Cullen frowned slightly. “I think you have enough people… and I have a thousand things I need to do.”

“Oh, come now, Commander,” said Dorian. “Losing money can be both relaxing and habit-forming. Give it a try.”

“Curly,” said Varric, sitting down, “if any man in history ever needed a hobby, it’s you. Besides, I think someone would rather you stayed.” He winked subtly at Victoria.

“He’s not wrong,” she murmured, taking a seat herself. [Editor’s note: Am I ever?] Cullen shook his head but, indulgently, seated himself opposite her and accepted the cards Josephine slid in his direction.

“I do hope I remember the rules,” laughed the ambassador. “It’s been ages since I played a game of Wicked Grace.”

Mahanon, grinning, left the table and returned with mugs for the new arrivals. “We’ve been looking for you this past hour,” he said quietly to Victoria. “Cass thought you could both use this break.”

“Cass is a smart woman,” she replied, equally quiet.

The conversation devolved from snarking about the size of people’s bets to telling increasingly hilarious and often ribald stories. Victoria concealed a grin behind her hands, elbows propped on the table, as Cullen held the table enraptured with a tale about a Templar recruit who ended up more or less on display in front of a hundred people, only to salute and march out as though in full dress uniform. Cass laughed so hard she seemed like she might fall out of her chair.

“I think it’s our professional storyteller’s turn to tell one,” Mahanon said. “But we need more drinks first!”

“I’ll get them,” said Cullen, rising. “Don’t start without me.” He caught Victoria’s eye and smiled; she was relieved to see him feeling better.

“Well, I can oblige,” Varric said as the drinks were retrieved. “Did I ever tell all of you about the time Hawke and I had to sneak into Chateau Haine? It started – as most capers do – with a trap.”

And so it continued, late into the night, until Bull had dozed off on the table. “And the dealer takes everything! I win again. Shall we have another hand?” Josephine inquired sweetly.

“Deal again,” Cullen challenged her. “I’ve figured out your tells, Lady Ambassador.”

“Commander! Everyone knows a lady has no tells,” she said, feigning innocence.

“Then let’s see if your good fortune lasts one more hand.”

“This I have to see,” Victoria muttered to Mahanon. “I’m out.”

“I’ll gladly take that risk, Commander, but I believe we may have a problem,” Josephine observed. “I cannot help but notice that you actually have no coin left with which to bet.”
Cullen paused, then chuckled and knocked back the rest of his drink. “Fine. I’m feeling confident. I’ll bet my armor against your entire pot.”

Victoria felt her eyes grow wide. She looked at Mahanon, but he was snickering broadly into his mug. “Erm… come again?” she managed.

“Curly, I really wouldn’t if I were you…” Varric began. Dorian shushed him, eyes sparkling maliciously.

“Too late. Challenge accepted.” Josephine dealt the cards – no one was playing but the two of them, though everyone was watching intently. Victoria thought she might actually lose consciousness from how anxious she felt… especially when Josephine laid down the winning hand a few minutes later.

Cullen turned faintly green. “We’re not… we weren’t serious… were we?”

“Oh, heavens, yes.” Dorian was grinning almost maniacally. “You wagered, you lost. Time to pay the piper.”

“It was an expression! I was joking!”

“Never bet against an Antivan, Commander.” Josephine smirked.

“Maker’s breath…” Slowly, hesitantly, Cullen stood up and pulled the surcoat over his head, dropping it in the middle of the table while looking anywhere but at Victoria. She didn’t know where to look either, and was fairly certain her face might literally burst into flame.

“Hold on,” said Mahanon, in a more sober tone than he’d been using in the last few hours. Almost before she knew what was happening, he picked up the surcoat and draped it unceremoniously over Victoria’s head.

“Hey!”

“It’s for your own good, ma da’vhenan!”

“And mine,” she heard Cullen mutter.

“Fine,” she sighed. “Can I at least have my drink?” She held up a hand and waited for her mug to be placed in it, then pulled it carefully under her fabric prison. For the next several minutes, her entire world was nothing but overheard commentary and the rich color of the surcoat. At least it smells nice, she thought.

“Not a word, dwarf.”

“I tried to warn you, Curly!”

“It comes off!” This from Cole. “I didn’t know it came off!”

“Is somebody going to tell me when it’s safe to look?” Victoria grumbled.

“I’m leaving,” she heard Cassandra say. “I don’t want to witness our commander’s ‘walk of shame’ back to the barracks.”

“Well, I do!” Dorian replied brightly.

“My sympathies, Cullen,” said Blackwall. “Reminds me of the one and only time I played
Diamondback with Solas – had to walk all the way back to the stables with a bucket over my privates.”

There was a pause, and the sensation of movement all around her. “All right, he’s gone,” came Varric’s voice. “In fact, just about everyone’s gone. You can come out now.”

Warily, she lifted the surcoat to find that he was telling the truth. Bull was left, still cheering over what she could only imagine was the sight of Cullen’s retreating backside, and Josephine was gleefully gathering up her ill-gotten gains, but everyone else had dispersed except Varric and Mahanon. She joined them by the fire.

“I’m glad you two could both join us tonight,” said Varric. “It’s too easy to mistake you two for the Inquisitors.”

“Are you kidding? I enjoyed this,” said Mahanon.

“Except for the part where I almost suffocated in the defense of my relative innocence, so did I,” Victoria retorted.

“See, that’s what I mean. It’s too easy to forget that you’re not a couple of icons, or symbols – like those statues of Andraste holding bowls of fire. At least, it is for me.”

“Why does she hold bowls of fire, anyway?” Mahanon interrupted. Victoria shrugged.

“My point is,” Varric continued, chuckling, “things are gonna be pretty nasty in the days ahead. It’s probably going to get worse before it gets better. It’s nice to have moments like this to hold in our minds, something to remember when it gets really dark. When this is all over, you up for another game?”

Victoria exchanged glances with her counterpart, and smiled. “Varric, we wouldn’t miss it for the world.”
By Grief Arrow-Studded

Chapter Summary

After a bit of mucking about in the Emerald Graves, it's off to Adamant... and you probably know what happens then.

Chapter Notes

I still have to deal with both Samson and Calpernia. It's on the to-do list for after Adamant.

The messenger bird who appears in this chapter doesn't have a name in the game, but AuroraBorealia suggested it and I thought it was a perfect choice. The bird in question is only mentioned in ambient dialogue between Cullen and one of the Skyhold runners; after he 'borrowed' a bird from Leliana, she apparently gave him one so he would have it whenever he wanted to send a letter.

Victoria had previously wondered if the others don't tease her about Cullen because they just don't know; I think this chapter and the next one more or less prove that they do. The lack of teasing is actually due to the fact that there's virtually none in the game at any point. I think it's because Cullen was a late addition to the love interest lineup, so they didn't have a chance to record banter lines like the ones heard if the Inquisitor romances, for example, Dorian or Cass.

Chapter Twenty-Five: By Grief Arrow-Studded

Mahanon’s ghastly mount paced around the outer bailey while the rest of the companions readied themselves for the ride to the Emerald Graves. Dorian was impressed, both by the necromancy involved in resurrecting the creature and the delightfully morbid name of their destination.

“Until we receive word that it’s time to head for Adamant,” the Lord Inquisitor informed the party, “we will take hold of the Emerald Graves. These Freemen of the Dales are only aiding the Red Templars by making life difficult for the refugees – they must be stopped by any means necessary. Hopefully we can also uncover some of the Red Templars’ ongoing plot, and the Venatori too.”

“I think you’re just eager to test out your new weapons,” his counterpart teased him.

“Maybe a little,” he admitted, smiling. A new pair of daggers was strapped to his back, which he had fashioned for himself the previous day. Handsomely crafted from stormheart metal, one boasted a corrupting rune and the other a cleansing rune, making him a formidable opponent for just about anything that crossed his path.

“What did you name them again?” asked Cassandra.
“Andruil’s Blessing,” he said, gesturing to one, “and Gift of Sylaise. And thank you so much, my lady, for girding them on me this morning.”

“I understand that is… considered proper.” She was pink as she smiled, Dorian noted with a certain amount of unholy glee.

Leliana came out to greet them. “Before you go, Inquisitors,” she said, handing a report to Victoria, “we’ve completed the fact-finding about the Sulevin Blade. After you brought back those notes from the Emprise, I had my agents contact some of our Dalish allies; we’ve determined the location of the Cradle of Sulevin, which is where the blade was believed lost. It may be worth investigating, once we’ve dealt with the Wardens.”

“What does Sulevin mean, Solas?” Victoria inquired.

“Purpose,” he replied. “If you plan on attempting to resurrect the lost weapon, I should very much like to be part of the adventure. The Cradle of Sulevin is believed to be on the edge of the Arbor Wilds, where my people once maintained a great presence. I have seen the sword itself during my journeys in the Fade,” he added. “A two-handed sword, such as you yourself tend to favor. It may serve you well in your battles.”

“We’ll add it to the to-do list,” she replied pleasantly. “Thank you, Leliana. Are we ready, then?”

“As ready as we ever are, I suppose,” said Varric.

“You still hate horseback riding, do you?”

“He hates everything,” Sera interjected. “Don’t get him started.”

“He’s not that bad,” Victoria protested, laughing.

“Yes, he is,” said Cassandra. “He hates the Deep Roads, caves, the outdoors…”

“Also Orlesians, Fereldans, Nevarrans, mages, Templars, the entire Merchants’ Guild, and nugs,” added Vivienne.

Bull nodded. “Uneven ground, the dark, pretty much all kinds of weather…”

“Orlesian cafes, taverns that are too tidy, and slopes of greater than ten degrees,” said Dorian.

“Don’t forget he also hates quiet,” Blackwall offered. “And most kinds of smells, rain – just water in general, really.”

“The smell of the sea,” Cole said thoughtfully. “‘Who made the ground vertical?’ And mountains covered in the dead.”

“In conclusion, he hates pretty much everything that isn't hearing himself talk,” Sera finished.

“Look, I have to complain!” Varric protested. “Otherwise you'll forget I'm here and trip over me! I'm providing a service.” He looked up at Victoria. “To answer your question, yes, I hate horseback riding too. But the only other option is for me to be pitched to our destination on a trebuchet, and I think Curly’s still calibrating them.”

“It does seem to be one of his favorite hobbies,” Dorian commented, watching Bull pick Varric up and settle him on Falon’s back behind Victoria. “One of them.”

“Everybody needs something to do in their leisure hours,” she said airily. He was disappointed that
she ignored the bait, but perhaps he should have expected no less.

“Well, come on, Cole,” he said, reaching down to help the spirit-boy share his own horse. “I can’t wait to see what fascinating observations you make about this new place.”

“Yes, Cole,” said Blackwall, adjusting the harness on his brown hart. “Say something interesting, won’t you?”

“Something interesting.”

“Yes… I deserved that one.”

The Emerald Graves – which, according to Solas, were initially named the Emerald March – turned out to be quite possibly the most beautiful part of Orlais. Certainly it had to be the greenest, and thus very well named. It had once been guarded by an elite cadre of elven warriors known as the Emerald Knights, and it was said that every tree in the Graves was planted in memory of one of them after they fell defending the Dales. There were also a proliferation of wolf statues, though Solas said this had less to do with Fen’Harel and more to do with the fact that Emerald Knights were each given wolf companions.

The Fairbanks fellow they had come to meet, as it turned out, was a stocky, good-looking man with a noble appearance and a quick smile. He was very straightforward in his idea of ‘you help me and I’ll help you,’ but more impressive was the way he had organized the refugees in a cave system where they could be safe. It reminded Dorian a little of Skyhold on a smaller scale, the way he had everyone working together and pooling resources. The caves were home to a rather spectacular set of falls, so they never lacked for water, and whatever food they could gather without attracting the notice of the Freemen was collected and shared according to everyone’s needs. Watchers looked out along the paths leading into and out of the caves, perhaps inspired by the statue of such a watcher who gazed down into their little canyon. No one, according to Fairbanks, remembered anymore just who or what the figure was meant to represent, but its watchfulness somehow made people feel safe rather than scrutinized.

Under their new friend’s directions, the Inquisitors led the campaign against Villa Maurel, a noble household whose true owners had fled to Val Royeaux when the civil war broke out, and Argon Lodge, an old military outpost, both of which had since been taken over by the Freemen. For four days, they labored almost singly at wiping out this presence. In the process, they found documents which confirmed a relationship between the Freemen and the Red Templars.

“Those bloody bastards have their fingers in every pie in Thedas, it seems,” Blackwall grumbled as they sat around the campfire. It was early evening, just approaching sundown, and the party was gathered in Direstone Camp. The ancient elven ruins provided more protection than the usual Inquisition camps did. Some of the Inquisition soldiers had prepared a stew for them, and they alternated between eating this and tending to their equipment.

“Well, when you’re working for a maniac who wants to rule the world,” Dorian replied, almost cheerfully, “it comes with the territory.”

“I like trees,” said Cole, almost absently. “Trees don’t hurt people. If you listen, you can hear them all reaching for the sun.”

Dorian chuckled. “I suppose you can. Tell me, Cole, what do you hear from our friend the Seeker these days?” He grinned at Cassandra, who scowled. “Come now, Cassandra, that’s not the expression you usually wear anymore!”
“Green,” Cole said softly. “Like his eyes, like the trees when the sun shines through them, a shining color like newness of life. The walls are cracking, little by little, letting happiness in once more. I’d forgotten how it feels to be this, to be more.”

Cassandra was trying desperately not to smile, now, and there were two little spots of heated color in her cheeks. Dorian nudged Mahanon, who just smirked. “What about him, then?”

“Too bright.” Cole shook his head. “I can’t see too far in. But I see he’s happy.”

“Well, anybody with eyes can see that,” said Varric, chuckling.

“The weight of all, on both of you.” Cole pointed at both Mahanon and Victoria. “All the hopes you carry, the fears you fight. You are theirs. It must be very hard. I hope I help.”


“My dear Lady Inquisitor,” Vivienne drawled, “do please put your pet demon back on its leash before it starts wandering.”

“She lets her hair down now sometimes,” the spirit-boy added thoughtfully, “soft like summer fading into autumn, leaves on the trees saying farewell with a kiss of color.”

Everyone looked at him. He was gazing into the fire, his dinner untouched as usual. “Eyes, spun silver like spiderwebs in the sunlight, skin pale but turning pink. I can’t stop looking. Why does she turn away like that? It’s because looking at him is like looking at the sun.”

If anyone had any idea who was being referenced, nobody was willing to admit it. Dorian was at a bit of a loss, truthfully. In any event, they were suddenly diverted by a cawing arrival. “Hey, it’s one of Red’s messenger birds,” said Bull, glancing up.

Victoria lowered her spoon and peered at the circling crow. “Brona,” she called, extending an arm, and it flew down and perched on her hand, making its way to her shoulder.

“Brona?” Solas repeated.

“She’s named after Andraste’s mother. See the white feather on her breast?” She gestured with her other hand. “Makes her stand out. What have you got there, hmm?”

Dorian raised one eyebrow and exchanged glances with Varric, then Mahanon. “Seems a bit odd that you would know the name of any of Leliana’s birds.”

“Well, technically,” she said, untying the message from the creature’s leg, “this isn’t one of Leliana’s birds.” Offering no further explanation, she unrolled the parchment and frowned. “It’s time. Everybody get a good night’s sleep… we leave for Adamant at first light. Our people are moving into position as we speak.” She broke off a small portion of bread and crumbled it into little bits, setting them in a pile on the ground and allowing the crow to hop down to eat. “I’m going to try to sleep now, if I can… I already know I’m going to be up ridiculously early. Good night, everyone.”

The carnage at Adamant Fortress was, perhaps, not to be described. Dorian had to hand it to Cullen – he’d been completely accurate in his assessment that a building which had been holding off darkspawn for several ages was not prepared to withstand modern siege equipment, and it wasn’t very long before the Inquisition’s battering ram had smashed a hole in the front door. If one could manage to avoid looking around very much and seeing all the dead and injured bodies, it was really
The Inquisitors stepped through the broken door and surveyed the interior of the fortress with an impassivity that Dorian knew neither of them really felt. The Wardens being what they were to Thedas, no one felt entirely comfortable with this particular siege. But they were all but ensorcelled, the mages enslaved by the whims of Corypheus, and for their own sakes they had to be stopped. He sincerely hoped that Leliana had been correct, and that the warriors among the Wardens might be willing to, if not turn against their commander outright, at least not hinder the Inquisition’s efforts to stop her.

Cullen made his way to join them. “All right, Inquisitors, you have your way in,” he said briskly. “Best make use of it. We’ll keep the main host of demons occupied for as long as we can.”

“We’ll be fine,” Mahanon assured him. “Just keep the men safe.”

“We’ll do what we have to,” the commander replied. “Warden Stroud will guard your back. Hawke is with our soldiers on the battlement – she’s assisting them until you arrive.” He paused, and they all looked up at the sound of a scream; a demon stared back. Cullen shook his head. “There’s too much resistance on the walls. Our men on the ladders can’t get a foothold.”

“Then I guess it’s up to us to clear the battlements for you,” said Victoria.

“If you can do that, we’ll cover your advance.” Cullen nodded, holding her gaze for a moment before turning to go back outside.

“You heard the man – let’s move,” Mahanon barked.

The battle to clear the battlements and reach Warden-Commander Clarel was brutal. Some of the warriors were induced to fall back, to stand aside rather than die for a cause not their own; Blackwall’s name was not unknown to them, and hearing that he supported the Inquisition was enough to sway many of their number.

But Clarel herself, being a mage, would not be deterred. For a moment, it seemed as though she would capitulate, but instead she directed her Venatori associate to go ahead with his ritual – to bring through the exceptionally powerful demon he had apparently earmarked for her. The rift which confronted them was massive, and Ermiond smirked at them from its far side.

“My master thought you might come here, Inquisitors!” he shouted. “He sent me this to welcome you!”

Victoria grew pale at the sound of the screeching; Corypheus’s Archdemon, or dragon, or whatever it was swooped into view, and Dorian could only imagine that she was having flashbacks to her confrontation with him in Haven. It sailed around the sky, spitting bolts of red lightning, before coming to rest on one of Adamant’s towers.

Strangely, it was this which seemed to snap Clarel out of her stupor. She turned on Ermiond, and dimly, Dorian realized that she must have sensed the Taint in the dragon. “Kill them all,” she shouted at the Wardens before running off in pursuit of the escaping magister. But she didn’t mean the Inquisition this time – she meant the demons who still stalked the fortress, and continued to occasionally fall out of the rift. The battle was joined, now, and the two factions were on the same side.

“Clarel is hurting,” Cole pleaded. “We need to help her!”
So the party accompanying the Inquisitors gave chase through the fortress, trying to catch up to the Warden-Commander and lend her their aid. The demons didn’t make it easy, but at last they found the two mages battling on a broken bridge which had once connected two halves of the fortress. “You’ve destroyed the Grey Wardens!” Clarel raged.

Erimond was unimpressed, even as she sent him to the ground. “You did that to yourself, you stupid bitch! All I did was dangle a little power before your eyes, and you couldn’t wait to get your hands bloody!”

“I will never serve the Blight!” she cried. With Clarel on one side of the cowering magister and the Inquisitors’ group on the other, Dorian thought sure it was over... but then in came the dragon, snatching Clarel up in its jaws and shaking her like a stuffed toy in the teeth of a dog. It flew to another battlement and dropped her, then slowly climbed down, snarling and drooling, advancing on the Inquisitors. Victoria was visibly shaking; Mahanon was trying to shield her from the thing. They all backed up slowly.

But Clarel was not dead yet, and she had one last blow to strike against the dragon. She cast purple lightning from her hand, sending the part of the bridge on which it stood crashing to the ground far below. The dragon screamed, trying to get a foothold long enough to take flight. The rest of the bridge began to shake, and to crumble.

“Run!” Victoria screamed.

For a few minutes, there was a heavy, stunned silence overriding all else.

Dorian almost hadn’t made it; if the Iron Bull hadn’t somehow shown up to lend him a hand, he probably would have gone down. He’d need to thank the hulking brute, later. For the moment, he was still trying to process what had happened. They all were.

Most of the Inquisition forces had either not actually been on the bridge in the first place, or had managed to get clear before the bricks disappeared beneath their feet. Varric lay on the ground near Dorian, clutching his crossbow and panting. “Hawke... Hawke, no.” It was the only thing the Tevinter could understand of the dwarf’s grief-maddened mutterings. Hawke was gone, as was her Warden ally Stroud; they were among those at the tail end of the fleeing group.

Solas, too, had fallen. And Cole, Cole who came from the Fade in the first instance, now returned. Cassandra... Maker have mercy on His devoted Seeker, who spent her last moments in Thedas trying to shepherd the rest to safety. Dorian had seen how she all but threw Sera across a gap to more stable ground before losing her own footing.

And the Inquisitors.

All of them went tumbling down, down, toward a flash of green light that he recognized too well. He had seen the Inquisitors close rifts many times; this time, they opened one. He supposed they simply hadn’t known what else to do. Or perhaps it was the Anchor, on one or both of their hands, acting without their directive. Perhaps it didn’t really matter why it happened; the fact was that it did happen, and they were now beyond anyone’s reach – possibly forever.

Those left behind all looked at each other in shock, and sorrow. “They’re gone?” Sera whimpered. “They’re - they’re really gone?”

“I can’t believe it.” Vivienne looked as close to grief as Dorian had ever seen her. “It doesn’t seem possible.”
“They opened a rift,” Dorian said quietly. “That’s really all we know at this point. We’ve got to keep fighting – that rift in the courtyard is still open and our men can’t hold off the demons by themselves forever. We’ve got to get back there.”

“I hate to be the one to bring this up,” said Blackwall, “but someone’s got to ask the really unpleasant questions.”

“Like, what do we do if they don’t come back?” Bull muttered.

“That’s one of them, yes. Here’s another.” The Warden-Constable grimaced. “Who’s going to tell Cullen?”

_Maker’s breath._

“I’ll do it,” said Dorian after a short pause. “The rest of you get down and help fight the demons; I’ll find him.”

“Sparkler, are you sure?” Varric had finally forced himself to stand. “I mean... I could.”

“It’s all right. He’s got to be told.” Dorian sighed. “And I think Toria would want me to do it. I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

Cullen was not far from where they’d left him, directing Inquisition forces against the demons. His sword was clutched in his right hand, and as Dorian approached, he noticed for the first time the striking contrast of bright blue against black leather. There was a length of material wrapped around Cullen’s wrist, fluttering just slightly as he gestured. As he drew close, he realized it was a silk ribbon, and with a sinking heart, Dorian recalled the last time he’d seen it – tied in Victoria’s curls at Halamshiral Palace. _How positively medieval. And adorable._

“Commander!”

“Dorian, what’s going on? We heard a terrible crash, but I haven’t been able to send anyone to investigate!”

Dorian sighed. He wanted to be kind, to break the news gently. He was positive, judging by the way all the color drained out of Cullen’s face, that he failed in both objectives. “No…” The light faded from the commander’s eyes. “They fell?”

“Into a rift of the Inquisitors’ own making. Yes.”

“Andraste preserve us all. Let’s… let’s try not to make this known to the men as yet, if we can help it,” Cullen managed. “It would destroy morale. If they opened a rift to go into the Fade, they… they could conceivably come out again, right?”

“It’s possible. They did it once before, after all.”

“We’ll hold onto that, then. Have this Erimond character bound and readied for transport to Skyhold for judgment, and keep me informed of any new developments.”

“An excellent notion. Neither of them will be best pleased to return and find that we’ve abandoned their cause, I expect.” Dorian shook his head. “Though if they survive, I might just kill them myself for putting us through this.”

Cullen cracked a smile; it was clearly forced, but it was still a smile. “You’ll forgive me if I can’t
allow you to do that.”

“Good man.”
There I Saw the Black City

Chapter Summary

Cole feels everyone's pain and panic as the little group traverses the Fade.

Chapter Notes

Okay, first of all, this chapter took me almost an entire day to write because Cole's point of view is so bloody difficult. Actually, I'll let Varric explain that. Anyway, canon purists may note that I have some aspects of the Fade written in the wrong order, because I wrote them before I watched a playthrough for guidance and I still felt like they made more sense the way I wrote them. Also, no, the advisors and Inquisitors did not have stones in that graveyard of fears, but one of the BioWare writers confirmed Cullen's fear on Twitter so I decided to use it. Of course, Solas doesn't explain the gravestones in the game either (nor does anyone else), but his explanation here makes sense to me.

Chapter Twenty-Six: There I Saw the Black City

[Editor’s note: Scholar and I had a really hard time putting this chapter together. Cole’s point of view isn’t exactly the easiest to understand. But with so little in the official record about the Inquisitors’ time in the Fade, this chapter would have been really short if we’d only gone by that. I managed to get a little out of Cole at the time, and a little out of Eyebrows later, and that’s how you got what’s here. It probably isn’t quite right, but that’s what creative liberties are meant to cover.]

Cole watched as Mahanon fell down, and then up, and then collapsed on what might be called the ceiling – depending on one’s point of view, anyway. Everything was green and eerie, and he looked around for the rest of the party. To his surprise, he didn't have as much trouble as usual discerning what the Inquisitors were thinking and feeling; in the Fade, the Anchors weren't nearly as bright and blinding. I'm all right, I'm alive… I think…

“Where are we?” asked Stroud. Fear bristles in his mind like the hairs of his mustache.

“We were… falling,” said Hawke, slowly. “Is this – are we dead?!” Maker, no, not like this. Let me see the sun again, soft light in white hair, a sardonic smile turns sweet at my approach…

“No,” Solas replied calmly, gazing upwards. “This is the Fade.” Overhead, a copy of the Breach – a rift, in fact – swirled in a lazy circle. “The Inquisitors opened a rift. We came through… and survived.” All will be well. “I never thought I would find myself here physically! Look – the Black City. Almost close enough to touch.”

Mahanon, however, did not share in the calm and curiosity which Solas was radiating; he had other
concerns. “Cassandra!” he shouted. “Victoria! Where are you?”

“Here,” said Cassandra’s weary voice. The two women had landed on the far side of a large rock pile, and picked their way toward the rest of the group. They were clutching each other’s hands as they walked; Victoria looked nigh panicked.

Cole could relate. “I can’t be here!” he told the others. “Not like this – not like me!” He clapped his hands over his ears. “Not here!”

“It’s all right,” Solas assured him. “We’ll make it right.”

Cole shook his head. He doesn’t understand. He’s happy here.

“This isn’t how I remember the Fade either,” said Hawke. Gentle, careful, don’t frighten the boy any farther than he’s already frightened. “Perhaps it’s because we’re here physically, instead of just dreaming.”

“So… we’re definitely not still on the Queen Madrigal dreaming all this, then?” Mahanon asked, looking at Victoria. Make the old joke, bring back a little light – it won’t be so bad if I can just make one of them smile.

“It’s been a while since I thought that,” said his counterpart, her smile faint. “Granted, I’m sure I could dream up something like Cu-” She broke off, drawing breath in a sharp gasp, her pale eyes growing dark with alarm. “Oh, Andraste preserve us…” Her fingers flew to the talisman at her throat, hidden inside her armor. He won’t know what’s happened, he won’t know where I am…

Cole studied her for a moment, following the thread of her pain back to the mortal world. It distracted him from his own fear, reading someone else’s. “Maker, why?” he intoned. “You didn’t bring me this far to let me fall now. Don’t take away the thing I need most.”

“…Cole?”

“It’s just a coin… it can’t possibly help… but I’m glad she has it. Luck, lingering, loitering, let it never leave. Maker, chase the shadows from her path, give her light.”

Victoria gave herself a shake. “Enough, Cole. Thank you.” She looked around at the group. “Is this all of us who fell? Did the others escape?”

“I believe so,” Cassandra replied. This is not what I expected, but at least I’m not alone. He’s beside me; I can face anything if he’s beside me. “I know I saw for certain that at least a few of the others made it to solid ground.”

“Cole?” Solas inquired. “Perhaps you can tell us. Where are the others?”

He thought a little, reaching out across the divide of realities to the rest of the Inquisition. “Fear, cold like ice down the back of my neck, dripping, draining, drawing the blood from my veins. Hawke… where is Hawke? How could Hawke have fallen?”

“That’s Varric,” Hawke said grimly.

“Vishante kaffas, how could this happen? At least they’re together,” Cole continued, switching to another perspective. “Bad enough if we only lost one Inquisitor, but as long as they both fell, neither is left to mourn the other. There would be no comforting a lone Herald.”

“Well, it sounds like the others are all safe enough in the regular world,” Mahanon replied. “It’s a starting place.”

“The stories say you two walked out of the Fade at Haven,” Hawke said, looking at them. “Was it like this?”

They both shook their heads. The lost memories, holes in our thoughts like cracks in our lives, will we ever know? “We still can’t remember what happened the last time we did this,” Victoria said. “We were at the Conclave, and then we were at Haven, and in between there’s just… nothing.”

“Well… whatever happened at Haven, we can’t assume we’re safe now,” said the Champion. “That huge demon was right on the other side of that rift Erimond was using, and there could be others.”

“In our world,” said Stroud, thoughtfully, “the rift the demons came through was nearby – in the main hall. Can we escape the same way?”

Mahanon stared at the rift which so resembled the Breach before it was sealed. I must find a way. I have to get them back. Toria is frightened; I don’t like it when she’s frightened. “It beats waiting around for demons to find us, right? There – let’s go.”

Solas alone seemed perfectly happy to be where he was. Like being home. “It’s not the area I would have chosen, of course,” he said as they walked, “but to physically be in the Fade…” He sighed.

“Concentrate on the task at hand, mage,” Cassandra told him curtly. “There is no place more dangerous than this place.” Andraste, guide me… Maker, help us find a way out. We shouldn’t be here, but at least we’re alive.

“I don’t suppose you have any words of wisdom for this part of the Fade?” Mahanon inquired, politely. Help us if you can. You might be the only one who can.

“Why would I ever have voluntarily come to this part of the Fade? The demon that controls this area is extremely powerful. Some variety of fear, I would guess. I suggest you remain wary of its manipulations and prepare for what is certain to be a fascinating experience.” Why is everyone so afraid? This is marvelous. They don’t understand.

Cole, for his part, certainly did not understand. He was possibly more afraid than anyone, and it upset him. “Wrong, wrong, wrong,” he cried. “Wringing me out. Wrought right and rigid. Can’t relax. Can’t release…”

“It’s all right, Cole.” Victoria was trying to calm him. There is someone here more scared than I am – I have to help him. “We’ll get you out of here soon.”

“Thank you. It should be like home. It’s not. This isn’t me, not this part.”

It was called, simply, the Nightmare.

Cole could feel it. “Once it helped people. It ate their fear so they didn’t have to be so afraid,” he mumbled. “But it got too big. Now it needs fear to eat. So it creates fear and then it feeds… and it feeds…”
When it sent scores of things after them, it wasn’t so bad. The things could be seen, and fought, and beaten. His knives kept him busy, kept him from thinking about what was happening. It was good. Something to do, to distract, to defeat, to die.

“Why are they all spiders?” Victoria asked.

“You see spiders?” Mahanon replied. “I see bears!”

“The Nightmare is shaping them according to our individual fears,” Solas explained.

Then they came upon the gravestones. “Why would there be a cemetery in the Fade?” asked Victoria, studying the odd inscriptions. Sense, sense, can’t something make just a little bit of sense?

“Count them,” Solas replied. “Fourteen in total – you see it, do you not? Two Inquisitors, and three advisors, and the nine friends you like to call your inner circle. These are our deepest fears. I would not venture to say whose is which, but I imagine you can find your own.”

“Why would they be on graves?” Mahanon asked.

“Because we all seek to bury our fear.”

Cole looked at the stones. Irrelevance… that was Vivienne. Himself was Blackwall. Becoming his parents was Varric. “So many fears, hidden deep down, trying not to let them surface,” he murmured.

Mahanon was staring at the one which read Disappointing his loved ones. “Once that only meant the clan, but now it’s so many more people…” Cole continued quietly, falling silent when Mahanon glanced in his direction.

“I don’t see mine,” said Victoria, trying to sound a bit lighthearted. “Oh… no. There it is. Right next to Failure.” The stone of which she spoke read, simply, Unworthiness. She shook her head and turned away, meeting Cole’s eyes as she did.

“You buried your fear beside Cullen’s,” he said. “They are almost the same thing.”

“I suppose they are, in a way.” She smiled faintly.

Cassandra, meanwhile, had a hand on Mahanon’s shoulder. “You could never disappoint the ones who love you,” she told him. “Your clan, your friends… me… we are all proud of you.” Believe in yourself the way I believe in you. The way I am sure the Maker does.

The Nightmare spoke to them.

As they surged forward, battling their way through the Fade, the deep voice echoed in the air around them – addressing them, agitating them, speaking to everything inside them that was raw and real. “Perhaps I should be afraid, facing the most powerful members of the Inquisition.” It chuckled. “Are you afraid, Cole? I can help you forget. Just like you help other people. We’re so very much alike, you and I.”

“No.”

“Don’t listen to it, Cole,” Victoria said in her soft way. “You’re nothing like it.”

“Cassandra… your Inquisitors are frauds, Cassandra. Yet more evidence that there is no Maker,
that all of your ‘faith’ has been for naught.”

“Die in the Void, demon,” she said flatly.

“Dirth ma, harellan. Ma banal ensalin. Mar solas ena mar din.”

“Banal nadas.” Solas used an utterly dismissive tone. *Nothing is certain.*

“Warden Stroud.” Everyone turned to look at the Grey Warden, whose jaw was set like stone. “How must it feel to devote your whole life to the Wardens, only to watch them fall? Or worse, to know that you were responsible for their destruction? When the next Blight comes, will they curse your name?”

He adjusted his shield. “With the Maker’s blessing, we will end this wretched beast.”

There was a bit of a pause, as they climbed over a rocky ridge, and then the Nightmare spoke again. “Did you think you mattered, Hawke? Did you think anything you ever did mattered? You couldn’t even save your city - how could you expect to strike down a god? Fenris is going to die, just like your family and everyone you ever cared about.”

“Well, that’s going to get tiresome quickly,” Hawke replied dryly.

Cole thought, for a moment, that it was done – that it had run out of pains to inflict. But no; he couldn’t usually see past the Anchor into the minds of the Inquisitors, but apparently, the Nightmare could. It waited until they had advanced a bit farther, and then it turned on them too.

“Yet another lost Dalish, searching for a home he can never reclaim. So big and so strong, but weighted down by the veneration of someone else’s faith. You serve false gods, Mahanon, and they made you take on one more besides. You sold out your beliefs for the adulation of the crowd and the love of a woman.”

“Really? Is that the best you can do?” He snorted. “I thought you were good at this.”

“And then we have the little one. Swinging a sword as big as she is, trying to prove that which can’t be proven. Oh, Victoria... always the soft heart hidden behind the armor. You’d forgive anything just for a few scraps of attention and affection, wouldn’t you? Or did you think they really wanted you? Did you think he did?”

She trembled a little – the words struck their mark a bit too well, biting, bleeding, burning – but rolled her shoulders inside her pauldrons and shook her head. “Are you done now?” *It’s a lie it’s all a lie it is it has to be.*

The bright spirit awaited them at the top of a flight of stairs. *Divine Justinia – her but not her – like I am Cole but not Cole – she has been waiting to help us all this time.* Cole paid little attention to the substance of the Inquisitors’ conversation with the Divine, or the not-Divine, or whatever they wished to call her. It was enough for him to know that there was someone else there to help.

It was the part which followed that was the hardest. Mahanon and Victoria were restored to their lost memories, or the memories were restored to them – two parts which had been kept from each other – and as he and the others watched, the Inquisitors relived the missing moments during which the Anchor had been conferred upon each of their hands. The memories took the form of little orbs of light, and the Inquisitors extended their enchanted limbs to reabsorb that which had been stolen. It was like sealing a rift, but backwards, drawing into themselves instead of casting outwardly, unlocking bright cages of mystery to take back that which was rightfully their own.
Aided by Grey Wardens, Corypheus had infiltrated the Conclave and taken Divine Justinia prisoner. “Now is the hour of our victory,” he said. “Bring forth the sacrifice.”

“Someone, help me!” she cried as she was raised into the air.

Meanwhile, Mahanon and Victoria had just finished eating lunch with her relations when they passed the stairwell leading down to the chamber in which Corypheus hid. “Do you hear that?” he asked. They listened, and heard the call for help.

“We’d better get the Templars,” she said. “Or the Knight-Vigilant, or someone.”

“I don’t think there’s time enough for that. We’re armed – let’s hurry.” They ran down the stairs and burst into the room, drinking in the bizarre scene before them.

“What’s going on here?” Victoria demanded.

“Run! Warn them!” cried the Divine.

“We have intruders,” said Corypheus. “Kill them.”

The ancient darkspawn raised his hand, in which he gripped a strange artifact – an orb, black as night but glowing green like the Fade. Mahanon instantly moved to shield Victoria from his gaze, and from the Grey Wardens who turned upon them. But the Divine, taking advantage of the momentary distraction, knocked the orb from Corypheus’s hand. It bounced and rolled across the room and, without thinking, the elf scooped it up in his right hand.

“Non!” Victoria cried, seeing his face contort as if in pain. She tried to take the orb from him, tried to relieve him of the burden, but her own hand instantly seared as well.

Then, suddenly, all was enraged screaming and a shower of ashes, and the three of them – Divine, woman, and elf – were plunged into the Fade. They ran, trying to escape the chittering menaces which assailed them, making their way toward a rip in the air which could bring them back to where they had been.

“The demons!” cried Divine Justinia. She was at the top of a broken bridge, and the other two were trying desperately to climb to where she held out her hands to them. Mahanon was forcing Victoria ahead of himself, making every endeavor to keep shielding her from the monstrosities which followed.

They reached the top at last, but the Divine was screaming. The demons had her. “Go,” she urged, before she was ripped away from them.

Victoria was in tears. Wrong, wrong, it’s all wrong, it’s nothing like they said it was. “It wasn’t Andraste at all,” she wept. “It was you. They thought it was Andraste who sent us from the Fade… but it was you. It was the Divine. And then you… she… died.”

The bright spirit gazed on her sorrowfully. “Yes,” she admitted.

“So this creature is merely a spirit?” asked Stroud.

“I think we all knew that was the case, Warden,” Hawke said pertly.

“I am sorry if I disappoint you,” said the bright one. Hawke’s expression dimmed; she looked
ashed. *Whatever you are, you don’t disappoint us.*

The façade of Justinia melted away from the spirit, then, revealing her true golden form. A spirit of faith, perhaps; Cole wasn’t completely sure, but usually only faith had so much radiance in the Fade. Victoria went to her knees, distraught, and Cassandra wasn’t much better. Mahanon remained calm.

“Whatever you are, you’ve helped us this far. I knew it didn’t make sense that I would be chosen by your god,” he remarked.

“But you… were. Sort of,” Victoria managed. *It was you, it was you who wanted to go down there, it was you who took the orb. Corypheus called us a mistake. I was a mistake, an accident. I should be dead too.*

He pulled her to her feet, even as Stroud and Hawke started to bicker about the responsibility of the Wardens involved. “This can wait until we’re out of danger,” he told them sharply. *Fighting friends should be fighting foes. I can’t win this battle alone, I need you to help me.*

Stroud seemed ready to apologize, but his expression changed. “Lord Inquisitor!”

Mahanon spun around and found a host of *things* approaching them. “The Nightmare has found us,” cried the bright spirit, before vanishing.

“Form up!” said Stroud.

“I’m with you,” Hawke agreed.

Victoria struggled to shape her tears into anger, to fight through her misery. She pulled her sword and, with a battle cry that was more like a screech of pain, hurled herself into the fray. Cole, frightened by her sudden lack of fear, gave chase. *I have to stop her, save her. The sorrow and the sadness will sink her. She has to survive.*

“Do you think you can fight me?” asked the Nightmare, almost conversationally. “I am your every fear come to life! I am the veiled hand of Corypheus himself! The demon army you fear? I command it! They are bound all through me!”

“Ah,” said another voice. The bright spirit, still speaking with Divine Justinia’s musical Orlesian lilt, stood in the near distance. “So, if we banish you, we banish the demons? Thank you, every fear come to life.”

“Oh, I like her,” Mahanon quipped. “She’s a quick thinker.”

They followed her voice, her occasional appearances, through the shifting Fade. *A golden glow, bright strength of an ally, sweet words in a soft voice, a friend beyond friends.* As they held off the *things* which served the Nightmare, the bright spirit worked to dispel the last barrier which stood between them and the way home.

“You must get through the rift, Inquisitors,” she said as they followed her. “Get through, and then slam it closed with all of your strength combined! That will banish the army of demons, and exile this cursed creature to the farthest reaches of the Fade.”

They emerged from something like tunnels into a sort of a clearing, and there…

“Andraste preserve us,” Cassandra cried in horror, gazing up at the Nightmare. *Save us all, please,*
It was Stroud who would stay behind – Stroud who would give his life, his strength, his sanity to buy the others a way home. But it was the bright spirit who gave herself first, who extinguished her golden beauty in the first strike against the Nightmare. “Tell Leliana… I failed you, too.” And then she was gone, snuffed out like a candle flame in the darkness, and the last shimmer of her silhouette stayed in Cole’s mind even as Victoria pushed him through the rift.

The stones beneath him were hard and they hurt.

Around them rose the cries of Inquisition soldiers and scouts, battling fiercely against the remaining demons, staring, shaken, stunned as the lost friends stumbled out of the Fade. Last of all came the Inquisitors, their faces masks of mourning and malice, clenching their Anchored hands in gestures of pain and power. The demons crumbled; the rift sealed; the cheers deafened, the darkness lifted.

Mahanon briefly turned to study Cassandra and make sure she was whole and safe, and Varric came running to take Hawke’s outstretched hands. Cole lifted his eyes to the high ramparts of Adamant Fortress, where something red and yellow and shining rushed into view. Show me, let me see with my own eyes that they’re alive. Is she here, is she hurt… Maker be praised. You brought them back. You gave her back to me.

Victoria followed Cole’s gaze, and saluted briefly with her fist over her heart.

“She was right,” said Hawke. Oh Varric, don’t tell Fenris about this, please. “Without the Nightmare to control them, the mages are free, and Corypheus loses his demon army. Though as far as they’re all concerned, the Inquisitors broke the spell with the blessing of the Maker.” She half-smiled.

“They came out of this alive.” Mahanon chuckled. “As far as I’m concerned, they can tell whatever stories they like.” I don’t understand any of this. Why do I have to keep championing this Maker who didn’t even save me in the Fade? At least Mythal has an excuse for why she ignores us.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Inquisitors!” One of the scouts came rushing to greet them. “The Archdemon flew off as soon as you disappeared. The Venatori magister is unconscious, but alive. Cullen thought you might wish to deal with him yourselves.”

“Cullen knows us well.” Victoria’s smile was a little forced. What will he think, when he knows that I’m not what he thought I was? Will it matter? Will this change him?

“As for the Wardens,” the scout continued, “those who weren’t corrupted helped us fight the demons.” He gestured to one of the winged-helmeted warriors, who stepped forward and saluted.

“We stand ready to help make up for Clarel’s… tragic mistake,” he said. Please, I beg you, don’t hate us for what we could not prevent. “Where is Stroud?”

The Inquisitors exchanged a glance, and Victoria nodded at Mahanon, their signal that he should speak. “Warden Stroud died striking a blow against a servant of the Blight,” he began in a soft, sad voice. “We will honor his sacrifice, and remember how he exemplified the ideals of the Grey Wardens, even as Corypheus and his servants tried to destroy you all from within.”

“Inquisitors…” The Warden gulped. “We have no one left of any significant rank. What do we do now?”
It was Mahanon’s turn to nod at Victoria, who studied the clustering Wardens with sympathy and sorrow. “You stay and do whatever you can to help,” she said in a ringing tone. “Do you believe the Wardens can still help?”

“I do, Your Worship.”

“You’re still vulnerable to Corypheus, and possibly his Venatori,” she added, “but there are plenty of demons that need killing.”

Cole watched her in a kind of horror. What are you doing? They hurt people. They were scared, but they hurt people in their fear. They should be sent away. He glanced at Mahanon; the elf’s jaw was tight, and though he would never dare to contradict her in front of others, Cole knew that he was not pleased.

“Thank you, Your Worship,” came the grateful reply. “We will not fail you.”

“While they do that, I’ll inform the Wardens at Weisshaupt what’s happened. Best they not get caught off guard,” said Hawke. “Good luck, Inquisitors; it’s been an honor. And... take care of Varric for me.”

They both nodded to her. As the Champion went to make her farewells to her friend, Mahanon turned to his counterpart, who seemed to shrink back a little in astonishment at his expression.

“Victoria... we need to talk.”
The Aegis Faltered

Chapter Summary

Neither of the Inquisitors is especially happy about what went down in the Fade or afterward. Mahanon is angry and Victoria suffers a crisis of faith. Unusually, they take it out on the people anyone would least expect them to hurt... each other.

Chapter Notes

I feel like I need to clarify (for some reason) that although these are our Inquisitors and there are certain aspects of our own personalities inherent in them, Tk and I have never had a fight of this magnitude. Or any other magnitude, actually. It's really hard to argue with somebody who laughs at your terrible jokes and insists you play video games and yells at you for lifting things.

Anyway, it'll be a few chapters before these kids get themselves sorted, so get ready to board the feels roller coaster. Don't worry, it'll all work out... I think. Cullen and Cassandra will help. Dorian too. Maybe even Solas.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Aegis Faltered

Victoria’s self-assurance, which was not usually as assured as she wanted people to think, had taken a direct hit in the Fade. She’d hardly been unprepared for the Nightmare to assault her peace of mind, of course; after listening to it hit her companions in their weakest spots, she had more or less assumed her turn was coming. But where they had deflected the blows with sarcasm, with wit, or with sheer force of will, she had felt her knees buckle. The little one – it had nothing to do with her comparative size, even if she was shorter than most of her friends. No, it had to do with her youth. She’d marked only her twenty-second birthday in the days between the Halamshiral adventure and the siege of Adamant. She was far too young to be co-leading an outfit like the Inquisition.

(She had made little mention of the event; everyone had quite enough on their minds. But there had been flowers on her bed all the same, and even now she wasn’t sure whether to thank elf-brother, ambassador, or commander for the gift.)

Did you think they really wanted you? Of course they hadn’t. The memories they recovered only proved that point – she, Victoria, had not been chosen. Not by Andraste, not by the Maker, not by the Inquisition. She had been marked only by circumstance, and by the determination of Mahanon to keep her from harm. She tried to cheer herself with that notion, because in one sense she had been chosen. One person, at least, believed her worth shielding and saving.

Well… he had at the time.
“What were you thinking?”

Mahanon was not in the habit of raising his voice to his counterpart, and she was certainly not used to him doing so. She flinched at his tone. “What did you expect me to do, Non? Was I supposed to have them all executed? After we came to save them if we could?”

“You should have sent them away! Made them all go to the Anderfels and live in that Blight-damned pit of despair where they couldn’t hurt anyone else!” He was scowling, the light of his Anchor reflecting in his equally green eyes and making them look almost Fade-touched.

“Thedas needs the Grey Wardens! What if Corypheus unleashes another Blight? Who’s going to stop the Archdemon – me? You? Everyone knows that only Wardens can kill an Archdemon, even if nobody knows why!”

“You’re too soft, Toria!” She relaxed a fraction at that; at least he was using her nickname again. Her full name on his tongue filled her with nameless dread. “By the Creators, I know you’re not Dalish, but you have to learn to judge like Mythal! Save your mercy for the ones who deserve it!”

“Then maybe I shouldn’t be the one making the judgments!” she snapped. “If I’m too gentle, put someone else on the throne! Take it yourself if you don’t like what I do!”

Mahanon huffed, and glanced around to see if they were being observed. He had waited to vent his agitation until they had left Adamant, and camped for the night. Most of the companions had retired to their tents, to sleep or otherwise unwind. Cassandra alone remained at the fire, probably waiting for him. The bulk of the Inquisition’s forces who had participated in the siege were traveling separately back to Griffon Wing Keep; one small cadre had remained behind at Adamant to help the Grey Wardens transition, and the rest were assisting Cullen in forming a loose perimeter around the camp. Victoria desperately wished her commander would get some sleep himself.

“You really think they’d let me sit on that throne?” he asked in a low voice. “You really think they’d put up with an elf Inquisitor if he didn’t have a shemlen at his side?”

“Of course they would – you have the mark! From what I saw in the Fade, you were meant to have the mark!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

“You think I want this?” he snapped. “You can keep your Maker and your precious Andraste. I don’t know them, I don’t worship them, and I do not want to be their chosen one! You can have it, if it means that much to you!” He turned away from her then, muttering to himself in the Dalish tongue.

“Non, please…” She hated that the pain was so obvious in her voice, and quite likely on her face as well. Varric didn’t call her Eyebrows for nothing, after all. “Please. You want me to say I’m sorry for pardoning the Wardens? I can’t apologize for doing what I thought was right!”

“I don’t want you to say anything! Fenedhis!”

“Don’t swear at me in a language I don’t understand!” I will not cry. I am not going to cry. I’m not. “I wish I could lose those memories again, you know that? You liked me better when we didn’t know what we are!”
“I still don’t know what I am, Victoria!”

“Well, I do.” The words were in her mind so suddenly, so sharply, that they almost knocked the wind out of her. “You’re the reason I’m not dead like everyone else at that Conclave.” She vaguely registered that his expression shifted, but her vision was so blurry with the tears she was refusing to shed that she didn’t know whether it was a good thing or not. “You insisted we go down there. You kept the Elder One’s people from killing me. You grabbed the orb. The Maker and the Prophet I’ve worshiped my whole life couldn’t be bothered with me or with anybody else!”

“And you think I should still go around calling myself their Herald? Listen to yourself,” he said, and there was a note of something like disgust in his voice which twisted in her heart. “Maybe Corypheus was right the whole time… maybe we were a mistake.”

“Non…”

“Forget it. Good night.” He stalked away from her then, back to the camp, throwing himself down onto the ground beside Cassandra.

The rest of the journey to Skyhold was tense, although it seemed that most of the group didn’t entirely know why. Mahanon spoke very little to anyone other than Cassandra, or occasionally Sera; Victoria herself had no heart to speak much at all. Falon’s steps felt plodding, even as he cantered majestically up the long road leading into the outer bailey. She handed off the reins to one of Dennet’s assistants, gave the armored nose an affectionate pat, and went to the tower to shed her armor and sleep.

The following day, she felt it incumbent upon her to check on her companions. In part, she was genuinely concerned about how they were faring after the adventure. But she was also concerned as to what they might think of her now. The majority of them seemed to more or less agree with her decision to bring the Wardens into the Inquisition, or at worst they made no outward contradictions. Solas was angry – very angry, in fact – but as far as she could tell the vitriol was chiefly directed at the Wardens themselves, not at her. She could tell he disapproved of her decision, to judge by the way his eyes narrowed when he surveyed her, but he kept his tone civil.

Cole did not. Of all her friends, Victoria had thought he would be the most understanding of her position, but he was quite of Mahanon’s opinion. “They hurt people! You should have sent them away!”

“I couldn’t do that, Cole.”

He didn’t seem angry, not the way Solas was, but he was clearly upset. “No right answer, no way out, the song is loud in our ears and our minds… they didn’t want to do it but they did. Someone could try to make me do something to hurt people too. You have to kill me if they do! I can’t hurt people!”

He was, frankly, scaring her. “All right,” she managed after a shocked moment. “All right, Cole. If that’s what you want, we’ll make sure you don’t hurt anyone.”

“Thank you.” This calmed him. “I know… I know you are sad. And you don’t want to hurt me. I will… I will try not to be taken like the Grey Warden mages.”

Desperate for some consolation, Victoria fled the tavern and took refuge in Dorian’s library, only to find him throwing books on the floor and complaining about the selection. “I wouldn’t have to critique your library if you could find some rebellious heretic archivist to join the cause,” he
snapped.

“…are rebellious heretic archivists? Besides you, I mean.”

“If Corypheus ever starts burning masterworks of literature, I’m sure a few will pop up.”

He turned away from her, muttering something about Genitivi, and she watched him for a moment.

“If I knew what you were looking for, maybe I could help you,” she ventured.

“You? Ha! Unlikely!”

She took a step backwards at that, half ready to bolt. She couldn’t take much more of this. He must have sensed her unease, because he relented almost immediately. “I heard some of the details about your tumble into the Abyssal Rift,” he said. “You went into the Fade. Physically went in!”

He turned back to her then, and his face contorted into a softer grimace. “Are you… all right?”

“Stroud is gone…”

He shook his head. “That you made it out at all is a miracle. But something in your eyes is telling me you don’t see it that way.”

“It was… horrible. I just wish it hadn’t happened.” Victoria turned her head. “I learned things I wish I still didn’t know. But I do, and now I have to learn to live with the knowledge.”

Dorian regarded her affectionately, and reached for her hand to squeeze gently. “You know,” he said, “I think what you need is to head up to the battlements. Take a stroll. Enjoy some fresh air… and the scenery.”

“Perhaps a little later. I still need to take care of Inquisitor business before I’m allowed to be just Victoria, you know.”

“My dear, I don’t think you can be just anything even if you try.”

After speaking with Varric (briefly, as he needed to write to Fenris and Bethany to let them know where Hawke had gone) and Vivienne (she disapproved of recruiting the Wardens, but only mildly so), Victoria went to see the Iron Bull, who had a rather unique way of dealing with his fear of the demons. Cassandra was occupied, so she headed back toward the main hall – only to find herself face to face with the one Warden whom nobody seemed to mind keeping. Blackwall was descending the stairs, and judging by his purposeful stride, he seemed to be looking for her, even though they had already spoken about the Wardens, and about Clarel in particular. “Your war council is assembled,” he said. “They want to hear the formal report from you and the Lord Inquisitor.”

“Oh.” She and Mahanon had barely spent five minutes in one another’s company since their argument in camp; she was not looking forward to this. “Thank you.”

“I offered to deliver the message,” he continued, “because I wanted the chance to express my gratitude. I neglected to do so earlier.”

“You – what?”

“You could have done something terrible to punish the Wardens for what they did,” he explained. “And a lot of people probably would have. But you didn’t. I don’t know what it is about you that makes you see the best in people and give them a second chance where other people wouldn’t, but
it’s rare. You are rare. I hope you realize how much we appreciate you.”

His words both touched her heart and broke it entirely. “I… needed that, Blackwall. Thank you.”

“Ladyship.” He touched his forelock to her and headed off to the stable.

Slightly encouraged, she headed for the council room. Mahanon was already there, his arms folded, his expression only a little surly. Cassandra had decided to attend the meeting as well, either in support of him or to help them make the report, since she’d witnessed everything which had transpired in the Fade; Victoria supposed it didn’t really matter which.

She allowed herself only a brief glance at Cullen before they called the whole thing formally to order. The blue ribbon she herself had tied around his wrist was still there, half hidden inside his armored cuff. Had he taken it off at all since the day at the lake? His coin for her ribbon; it had felt like a fair trade at the time. Now she wasn’t so sure.

Slowly, in halting and hesitant voices, they took turns informing the council members of the details. How their Anchors had opened the rift without their conscious directive. How the Nightmare had attacked everyone’s peace of mind in turn, how what seemed to be the spirit of Divine Justinia had aided them. Cassandra added a few details here and there when she felt a need, and if the advisors noticed that the Inquisitors weren’t looking at each other while they spoke, they gave no sign. Leliana’s breath kept catching in her throat as she listened to the involvement of the bright spirit; Victoria’s did likewise when they began to reveal their recovered memories.

“So we weren’t saved by Andraste after all,” she said quietly. “It was the Divine who forced us out through the rift, at the cost of her own survival.”

“Your Andraste had nothing to do with it at all,” Mahanon added. He seemed bitter still. “Or if She did, She was being extremely subtle about it, which is practically the same thing as far as I’m concerned.”

“We’ll play the part,” said Victoria abruptly. She glanced at Mahanon. “We sort of have to, I think, at this point. If the people found out that we’re false Heralds… it could destroy the Inquisition from the inside.”

“Heralds or not, you are the Inquisitors,” said Josephine. “And you have the marks on your hands. If you would rather we keep things quiet about what you experienced in the Fade, that’s the way we will spin it. It’s generally understood that the less the Maker does, the more He exists; this will only support that.”

Mahanon huffed and shook his head. “Do whatever you feel is necessary.”

“For now, it seems we have some breathing room,” said Leliana. “With both the demon army and the assassination of the Empress stopped, Corypheus will need time to formulate new plans. I think we need to turn our attention to his generals; we’ve got to take out Samson and Calpernia. Our scouts in the Emerald Graves are assembling some more information on a likely place where Samson may be, and we’re gathering similar intelligence about Calpernia as well.”

“Meanwhile, the captured magister will be here by tomorrow for your judgment,” Cullen added. “I also have a more cheerful issue which needs addressing; in light of his exemplary behavior in a few recent incidents, Knight-Captain Barris has more than earned a promotion. If you’re willing, Inquisitors, I would like to formally recommend him for the post of Knight-Commander of the Templar Order.”
“He’s a good man,” said Mahanon, in something much more like his usual tone. “I think that’s a great idea.”

“I’ll have the Templars gather in the main hall prior to Erimond’s sentencing,” Cullen said. “It might be better to do the promotion first, so that the unpleasantness of that matter doesn’t sour it in any way.”

“Let us know when you’re ready,” Victoria said.

Cullen was on the battlements when she finally had the chance to walk along them near sunset. As she approached, she could see him closing his eyes and enjoying the breeze hitting his face. He turned when he heard her step, and smiled. “I wanted to thank you,” he said. “When you came to see me, before Adamant…”

“Is it always that bad?”

“The pain comes and goes,” he said with a light shrug. “Sometimes I feel as if I’m back there… I should not have pushed myself so far that day.”

“I’m just glad you’re all right.” She felt oddly… timid, even as he gestured for her to join him in looking out over the valley.

“I am. You know, I’d never told anyone what truly happened in Ferelden’s Circle… I was not myself after that,” he mused. “I was angry, and for years, that anger blinded me. I’m not proud of the man that made me. Now I can put some distance between myself and everything that happened… it’s a start.”

Victoria nodded. “Well, for what it’s worth, I like who you are now.”

“Even after all that?”

“Cullen, I care about you – you’ve done nothing to change that.” She sighed, though the way his expression softened was not lost on her. “But I’ve been worried that I have. I mean, I’ve worried about how you see me.”

“What? Why?”

“The report. I’m not what you thought I was – or even what I thought I was – and I didn’t know if that might… change anything.” She grimaced a little. “That… made more sense inside my head.”

He chuckled faintly. “I know that feeling.”

“What the Nightmare said to me…”

“Was a lie.” He gathered her hands in his own. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I suppose, but then again, it feels like a lot of what I know isn’t accurate. All this time I’ve thought that Andraste chose me, that I’ve been doing the Maker’s work… to find out otherwise feels strange, like finding out that I’ve been using someone else’s name.”

“But you still believe Mahanon was chosen?”

“Well, yes. He insisted on going down there – doesn’t that sound like he was obeying the will of the Maker?” She glanced away, down at the road which led to Skyhold's gates.
“But the whole reason he was at the Conclave in the first place was because you saved him from being thrown off the ship, wasn’t it?”

“Yes…” She looked back at him again, not sure where he was going with this.

“Well, then by your own logic,” said Cullen, “you were also obeying the will of the Maker. And you’re just as marked as Mahanon.” He briefly tightened his grip on her left hand.

“He cried out,” she explained. “I thought he was in pain. I wasn’t actually supposed to handle the orb, but I couldn’t let him suffer.”

“And surely the Maker knows that about you.”

“Do you think… I really was chosen?” Victoria wasn’t sure whether she was pleased or concerned by the persistence.

He shook his head. “I think that in the long run, it doesn’t really matter if you were or you weren’t. What matters is what you’ve done with everything that’s happened as a result. Whether you’re the Herald of Andraste or not is somewhat beside the point, because you’re still the Lady Inquisitor.” Resting his forehead against hers, he added, “But most importantly… you’re Victoria Trevelyan. Giver of second chances, and of hope. Just be you, Victoria. That’s all anyone can ask.”
A Lonesome Choir

Chapter Summary

Mahanon's words to Victoria have repercussions he never expected. Also, someone dies! (Nobody we like though.)

Chapter Twenty-Eight: A Lonesome Choir

Mahanon was not going to apologize. On that he stood firm.

He loved Victoria – earnestly, honestly. She stood second only to Cassandra in his affections. And it bothered him, deep down, that she was so hurt by everything that had happened; he didn't like seeing her even slightly upset. But he'd meant what he'd said, because she was too soft. If this was how she had to learn, then so be it. He'd make it up to her later, somehow.

She stood before the mirror, braiding her hair and studying her reflection with a distracted gaze. He was waiting for her to get ready so they could go down and promote Ser Barris, and he watched her thoughtfully. Since they had come to Skyhold, she had started to change; the long braid, instead of the compacted one, had been only the first sign. Today she wore a cream-colored outfit, trimmed in silver, and perhaps that was what made it more evident that her skin looked different. Instead of the pallor she'd sported when they first met, her time in the sun had gradually increased her color, as the fair skin first burned and then faded to a light brown. It made her eyes seem paler than ever by comparison, and the dark auburn hair had glints of copper threaded through it.

She finished the braid and flipped it over her shoulder, then glanced at him. “I'm ready if you are,” she said in a forcibly even tone.

“After you, Lady Inquisitor.”

Victoria once again sat on the throne, with Mahanon at her right hand. They watched patiently as Cullen, followed by Ser Barris and the other Templars, made their way through the great hall. The Templars fanned out in formation behind Ser Barris, who looked a little embarrassed by what was about to happen.

“Ser Delrin Barris,” said Cullen, “we've gathered to review your military service to the Inquisition. You showed exceptional valor defending the people of Val Colene from Venatori, and broke a siege of demons in Ansberg. You stood against an entire town that wanted to kill a mage for imagined demonic possession – without raising a sword.”

Mahanon glanced at Victoria. The man's accomplishments were impressive, and it was reassuring that in this, at least, they were on the same page. There was no question that he had earned the accolade Cullen wished to bestow. She glanced up at him and gave a slight nod; she wanted him to do the talking. Fine.

“In thanks for your service,” he said, loud enough to echo through the hall, “and your help at Therinfal Redoubt, we endorse your promotion to Knight-Commander of the Templar Order.”
“Your Worships.” He went to one knee, not quite looking at them. “I… am not worthy.”

“Of course you are,” said Victoria. “You have shown loyalty, determination, and courage, as all Templars should.”

“I – I will honor your faith in me.” Barris now sounded simply awed.

“Templars,” Mahanon called, “will you take Ser Barris as your Knight-Commander?”

As Barris stood, and turned around, the other Templars gave a “Huh!” of acknowledgement, saluting with fists over their hearts. Cullen nodded, satisfied. “Thank you, Inquisitors.”

With the Templars gone from the hall, Mahanon assumed they would next move on to judging Erimond. However, Josephine joined them with a bit of a surprise. “Another of the lingering pains of Adamant, Your Worships,” she said, somewhat apologetically. She gestured to the scouts who were holding a woman, dressed in Grey Warden armor with her hands bound at the wrists. “Ser Ruth is a senior Warden of the Order. She was one of the many who slit the throat of another to bind a demon. She does not contest this. In fact, she surrendered to us. She requests no mercy. She wants the public justice of the headman’s axe.”

Mahanon studied her. She looked to be about Cassandra’s age, and had the same sort of world-weariness he sometimes saw in his vhenan’ara’s eyes. “You’re very serious about this,” he said. “Is more death the answer?”

“There is no excuse for my actions.” Her voice reminded him of Keeper Deshanna’s, though in a lower register. “I murdered another of the Order. That blood marks me more than the Blight ever could.”

Josephine spoke up. “Excepting their actions while thralls of Corypheus, many treaties allow Wardens any extreme, if it opposes the Blight.”

“I can't do it!” burst out Ser Ruth. “I can't use the greater good to justify my crimes, as if it would create a future I could be a part of! It is wrong that this broke me. I've done worse with full sanction. I can do nothing… except be an example of the cost.” She hung her head in utter defeat.

Mahanon glanced at Victoria, who was looking at him. He was struggling to read the expression in her eyes; he was sure only of her sympathy for the woman. Whatever judgment she wanted to hand down, it was a lenient one. On balance, that wasn’t necessarily the wrong thing to do, he felt. Ser Ruth was certainly no more guilty than any of the other Wardens who had participated in the plan, and arguably less guilty than some. After some consideration, he gave her a short nod – she could proceed with whatever it was she intended.

Turning back to Ser Ruth, Victoria leaned forward a bit in the throne. “The Inquisition stands for faith,” she said. “Our work has greater purpose. Sometimes we need a reminder.” Sitting up almost rigidly straight, with the sunlight through the stained glass windows leaving colored shapes in her hair, she delivered her pronouncement. “Ser Ruth, the Heralds of Andraste forgive you in Her name. Find peace in that.”

Mahanon barely registered the astonished Warden promising to try, and didn’t bother to watch as she was released from her restraints. Victoria had done it again. Not the mercy bit, but the Andraste bit. Why was she so determined to play this part? He leaned down to speak quietly in her ear, with a bit more of an edge to his voice than he’d actually intended. “Could you not have just let her go without all that?” he grumbled. “Was it really necessary to invoke your Prophet?”
She gave him no answer – in fact, he would almost suspect her of not hearing him, except that he watched her jaw tighten. As he straightened, the proud, smug figure of Magister Erimond was being brought before them; the soldiers escorting him gave him no very gentle treatment, and in a way that seemed to please him rather than otherwise.

“Lord Livius Erimond of Vyrantium, Your Worships,” said Josephine, “who remains loyal to Corypheus. We found him alive and offering extreme resistance – likely because the Order would ask for his head,” she added grimly, “in more colorful terms. There is also the matter of what justice you might require for what was suffered in the Fade.”

“Many places suffered because of Adamant,” Mahanon growled, studying the proud and haughty figure who had authored so much pain. “You will answer for a great deal.” Victoria held her tongue, but he more or less felt her nod.

“I recognize none of this proceeding,” said the magister, coolly. “You have no authority to judge me!”

“On the contrary,” Josephine replied, in possibly the harshest voice Mahanon had yet heard her use. “Many officials have communicated that they will defer to the Inquisitors on this matter.”

“Because they fear - not just Corypheus, but Tevinter, the rightful ruler of every piece of ground you trod in your pathetic lives!” Erimond sneered, directing the words at Mahanon and Victoria, but clearly meaning them for everyone within hearing. “I serve a living god. Bring down your blades and free me from the physical. Glory awaits me!”

Victoria gripped the arms of the throne tightly, which Mahanon thought might be an attempt to hide the fact that she was trembling. He knew her too well to be fooled, but to those not standing so immediately close, it was probably convincing. She stared at the upturned face of the unrepentant prisoner. He suspected he knew where her thoughts lay – the Nightmare, the terrors, their inability to save Stroud. Stroud’s fate alone had earned this man death a hundred times over; of that he was certain. She looked up at him, but before he could say anything, he watched something behind her eyes grow hard and cold.

She turned back to the one awaiting his fate. “Lord Erimond,” she said slowly – and her voice was even harsher than Josephine’s had been, almost a hiss, “any protection you thought you had is gone. You… will… die.” She dragged it out, as though she had to force the words out of her own mouth. Then she added, “By my hand.”

Whatever response Erimond offered to this before he was dragged away, Mahanon didn’t know. He was too busy staring at his counterpart in shock and something akin to horror; the gasps of the assembled made it clear he wasn’t the only one alarmed by her words. Cullen, who had remained at attention after the Templar ceremony, was watching her with undisguised concern. Unusually, however, Victoria didn’t seem to even register his presence; instead, she looked up to meet Mahanon’s eyes.

“Was that too soft?” she asked quietly. “Or am I learning to judge like Mythal? You’ll notice I didn’t even mention the Maker and Andraste.”

“He deserves to die, no argument,” he replied, a little dumbstruck by her reasoning. “I was afraid you’d have him imprisoned. But you can’t be the one to do it!”

“Why not?”

He almost said “I forbid it,” but he knew that would only push her farther from him, possibly to a
realm where they’d never recover. “I’ll do it,” he said instead. “I want his blood on my hands, and you’re not taking it from me.”

“Victoria,” said a new voice, and they both turned to see that their commander had approached and heard at least a little of the disagreement. “Please. Let him do it, or let me, but don’t do it yourself.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, and now she sounded angry. “I’m too soft, I judge too gently, but when I lay down the harsh judgment that’s also wrong!”

“Your judgment was fine. But you’ve played the role of judge and jury, now I’ll be the executioner.” Mahanon glanced at Cullen. “Keep her in the castle until this is over, please. Where do I go to finish this?”

“The executioner’s block is on the battlements of the western courtyard,” Cullen reported, “the one that isn’t used much.”

“Thank you.”

Mahanon left Victoria to vent her frustrations on their military leader. She wasn’t happy, he knew, but in the long run this was better for her. They both had killed in battle; he had killed in hunts; but a straightforward execution was new. Maybe he should have allowed Cullen to do it, since as a Templar he’d had to put down possessed mages and therefore had at least a modicum of experience, but it was too late now.

As he stalked through the fortress to the executioner’s block, he was joined by a grim-faced Cassandra. “You are the one who will do it, then?”

“I can’t let her behead a man. I just can’t.”

“I’m glad.”

He glanced at her. “You think I did the right thing, then, telling her no?”

“I don’t doubt that she could do it, if push came to shove,” she replied. “But it would haunt her nightmares for years to come, and she is haunted by enough things, especially in recent days. It will recede from your mind more easily.”

“At least she didn’t do any more trumpeting about Andraste,” he grumbled. “No offense.”

“You understand why she did that, don’t you?” She looked at him in such surprise that he slowed his walk.

“Honestly? No. It’s been made pretty clear to me that whatever we are, Heralds of Andraste we aren’t. But she won’t let it go.”

“Mahanon, invoking Andraste’s name was the only way she could have let Ser Ruth go without complications,” Cass explained. “It wasn’t enough to say ‘We are the Inquisitors and we’re setting you free.’ Ser Ruth wouldn’t have accepted it, nor would those watching have felt it sufficient. But regardless of what we saw in the Fade, it is commonly believed that you are Andraste’s chosen… and if you and Victoria have to use that sometimes in order to mete out justice, I don’t think it’s a bad thing.”

He didn’t say anything, but let that stew in his mind for a while. From a pragmatic point of view, it did make sense. “I suppose,” he said finally, having chewed on his tongue.
“As to why she felt like she should be the one to rid the world of this piece of filth,” she continued, gesturing as they reached the executioner’s platform, “I can offer no insight.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve figured that one out.”

He climbed the steps to where Erimond knelt, his hands bound behind his back. “Lord Livius Erimond,” he said slowly, ignoring the small crowd which had gathered to watch the grisly spectacle, “you have been sentenced to die for your countless crimes against humanity.”

“And I thought the little girl who pretends to be an Inquisitor wanted to be the one to kill me,” the magister sneered. “Too delicate to take my head?”

“I wouldn’t suffer her to be anywhere near you,” Mahanon replied. “Your life is mine to take.” He turned to Cassandra, who extended a sheathed sword to him; the scraping noise was loud and metallic as he drew it from its scabbard.

“I’ve never cut someone’s head off like that,” he said.

The Lord Inquisitor was in a corner of the Heralds’ Rest with Cassandra, not far from Bull and his boys, staring into a glass. Her gloved hand was folded around his, and occasionally she squeezed his fingers as though to remind him she was there.

“Don’t get used to it,” she recommended. “I don’t imagine it’s pleasant.”

“Understatement of the age, ma vhenan’ara.”

“Can I help at all?”

“I’ll be all right. I just – distract me, please.”

“That, I can do,” she replied. “I have a favor to ask, actually.”

“For you? Anything.”

“Shortly before Adamant, I learned that the Seekers have been gathering at Caer Oswin, a noble household in Ferelden,” she explained. “Lord Seeker Lucius will certainly be there as well. I want to confront him about what he’s done, and I don’t want to go alone. I was hoping you and Victoria would accompany me.”

Mahanon hesitated. “Let’s leave her out of it,” he said. “I’m sure she’d want to help you, but…”

“But things are not right between you. They haven’t been since the Fade, I know.”

“She should have exiled the Wardens – I shouldn’t have left the decision in her hands.”

“I too would have exiled them,” Cass replied. “I agree with you. But just because she did something different from what we would have chosen does not mean that her choice was the wrong one. Consider what she saw in the Fade, my love.”

He jerked his head up at that – Cass used endearments so rarely that it always caught him by surprise – but she continued speaking. “It would be as though you learned that the Dalish pantheon you have always revered did not exist, or that they exist but had no interest in you. Victoria is devout in her beliefs, and her family fully expected her to enter Chantry service in some manner when she grew up.”
“She told me about that,” he said, vaguely remembering. Their crossing on the *Queen Madrigal* felt like it had happened a lifetime ago. “She wanted to meet you and maybe become a Seeker, instead of a Templar.”

“Which, in my opinion, all goes to show that the Maker has a truly exquisite sense of humor,” Cass noted wryly. “Instead of either of those things, she became friends with a Seeker and fell in love with an ex-Templar. Very amusing, if you look at it that way.”

Mahanon supposed it was at that. “Well, anyway… I know she believes, just like you believe. And she’s never pressed me to believe in the Maker, I have to do her that justice. But her beliefs take her so far, she’s *too* compassionate. Worse than Cole in some ways.”

“Which brings me to one question,” she replied gently. “What would you rather Victoria be than what she is?”

“I…” He paused, digesting the inquiry. “I’ll… let you know,” he said finally.
Chapter Summary

Cassandra learns what's become of the other Seekers.

Chapter Notes

Party banter in the multiplayer reveals that Cullen smells of elderflower and oakmoss, and research into those particular herbs told me what I've mentioned here. So I figure this is why he smells like that, and I could absolutely see Cass being the one to get him the stuff. They are bros.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Blood, Bone, and Metal

“Elderflower and oakmoss,” said Cassandra, brandishing a jar.

Cullen looked up from his papers with a bemused expression. “I already have a cologne.”

“Your sense of humor is still intact, I see.” She placed the jar on his desk. “It’s an herbal salve. Elderflower helps with pain when applied topically, and oakmoss is a restorative. I thought it might be of use with your withdrawal symptoms – I realize that you are slowly improving, but I also realize that you still have pain.”

He softened a little, taking the gift and examining it with more interest. “Where did you find such a thing?”

“I made a few discreet inquiries of our apothecary. Elan Vem'al may not be the friendliest soul in Skyhold, but she doesn’t ask too many questions either. See if it helps,” she added. “If you need more, let me know.”

“Thank you, Cassandra. I... appreciate this.”

“More than you appreciate my sending the runners to check on you, I imagine.”

He chuckled. “Very much so. You’re ready to leave, then?”

“You’ve heard?” She lifted her eyebrows in surprise.

“Victoria mentioned it.” He brushed his fingertips over the ribbon at his wrist; Cassandra wondered if he was even aware that he made the gesture. “She’s getting ready to visit the Cradle of Sulevin, her party will leave around the same time as yours.”

She nodded. “I thought it might be wise to give the Inquisitors a bit of space.”
“Yes.” He sighed. “They are... tense, since Adamant. Perhaps separate tasks will be what’s best for them for the time being. Sometimes I forget how fundamentally different they really are, they’re normally so tightly knit.”

“And they’re both horridly stubborn, don’t forget that part. I don’t know which one will break down and apologize first,” she admitted.

“I’m not even sure which one should,” Cullen replied. “Personal partiality aside, that is. They both have reasons to feel as they do. Maybe it’s not an apology either one needs to make, but simply an admission of... something. I don’t know how else to put it.”

“Well, we’ll just have to look after them until they sort it for themselves. Will you go with Toria to the Cradle?”

“I wish I could, but you know I’ve got too much to do here. Rylen needs improved supply lines, Suledin Keep is so heavily damaged that we might never get it sufficiently repaired for our needs, and reports keep coming in of Fade rifts which need to be closed. Until the Inquisitors can be everywhere at once, I have to keep dispatching soldiers to monitor the rifts and destroy any demons which appear. Shockingly, it’s sometimes difficult to find volunteers for that particular duty. The Chargers are helpful in that regard, I must say – not only are they fearless themselves about taking on the demons, but they’re very good at encouraging others.”

“Good. And yes, I know all too well that you have so much to be done. Just make sure you get some sleep now and then,” Cassandra admonished him.

With Bull and Sera close at hand, Cassandra and Mahanon made their way into Ferelden and headed northwards to Caer Oswin. It was a fine estate; like most residences belonging to Ferelden nobility, it had a modesty and a simplicity to recommend it even though it was a castle, and the woods which surrounded the structure were beautifully sunlit.

“Caer Oswin,” Cassandra remarked, dismounting the red hart. (He still needed a name, but she had yet to come up with one she liked.) “Odd that the trail should lead us here. Bann Loren is a pious, unassuming man; what has he become involved in?”

“He might simply be a victim as well,” Mahanon observed.

She nodded, afraid to consider the Bann’s fate; there was a strong chance that he was no longer even alive. “Let’s see what lies within.”

To her horror and revulsion, what they found within were foot soldiers. “Promisers. I should have known,” she grumbled, once the first wave of fighting was done. Foot soldiers were barely anything – often less competent than even a raw recruit.

“Prom what?” asked Sera.

“The Order of Fiery Promise is a cult with... strange beliefs about the Seekers,” Cassandra explained. She nudged one of the fallen foot soldiers with the toe of her boot. “They’ve hounded us for centuries.”

“What kind of ‘strange beliefs’?” Mahanon frowned.

She sighed. “They believe they are Seekers - the only rightful ones. They say we robbed their powers long ago, preventing them from ending the world.”
“Ending the world?” he repeated, looking baffled. “Is that a bad thing to prevent?”

“It’s the only way to truly eradicate evil, in their eyes. ‘The world will be reborn a paradise.’ It’s all nonsense.” She shook her head.

“Why haven’t the Seekers dealt with them?” Bull wanted to know.

“We have. Many times. They simply reappear after a time, like weeds. Nobody knows how.” Cassandra gestured helplessly.

“Cultists,” said Mahanon, and it was his turn to shake his head. “Why am I not surprised?”

“This explains why the Seekers might be here, but not the connection to Corypheus.”

“And the lord of this castle?” asked Bull.

“Almost certainly dead. It’s hard to say how, but to some extent it almost doesn’t matter. Bann Loren lost his wife and only child during the Fifth Blight; by all accounts, he has been a broken man ever since.” She looked at them mournfully. “And now his home is in the hands of the Promisers – who seem to be somehow connected to our enemy.”

“Then we find them,” said Mahanon. “And we find out what they’re doing, and why. Maybe it’s not too late.”

They picked their way through empty castle halls before stepping out into a courtyard, where an abandoned blacksmith’s forge stood alongside stables filled with rotting dead gurns. Cassandra barely had time to wonder why in the world before they were set upon by some of the Promiser Knights. These were much harder to kill than the mere foot soldiers had been, and she thanked the Maker that they’d decided to bring the Iron Bull to help dispatch them.

Once the dust had settled, she searched the pouches on their belts, hoping for some sort of clue. Mahanon found a courtyard key on one of the bodies, but she soon had what she was seeking – a letter, which she read aloud to the company.

“’As the Seekers of Truth have proven resistant to the effects of red lyrium, the Elder One has seen fit to place them in your care. Reclaim your destiny, and know that the Elder One expects your devotion as repayment.’ It’s signed by Magister Calpernia, leader of the Venatori.” She crushed the paper in one fist, torn between equal measures of misery and rage. “Does Corypheus not realize that the Promisers want the world to end? What use are they to him?”

“So,” said Bull, “Corypheus sold your fellow Seekers to these cultists?”

“And they leapt at the chance, of course.” She scowled again. “But this doesn't explain how he captured the Seekers in the first place, or what's been done with them. We must keep looking. There has to be an explanation here somewhere.”

“The letter said Seekers were resistant to red lyrium,” said Mahanon. “Is that true?”

“I honestly never thought about it. Our abilities grant us many gifts, but a resistance to red lyrium's corruption? That seems strange.” Cassandra paused, thinking. “Although... it would explain why none have numbered among the Red Templars. If it is true, Seekers would be useless to Corypheus. He would have no leash to hold us.”

“You sound worried.” His tone was gentle, concerned.
“I am. The Seekers are my family.”

“Oi,” Sera protested mildly. “What are we, then, candied yams?”

In spite of herself, Cassandra chuckled.

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It was just as well she got that little laugh when she did, because it would be a long time before she felt like laughing again. They climbed the stairs to the third floor, and in the dim and debris-strewn corridor, they found a lone figure sprawled against broken statuary. He was gasping for breath, his veins discolored and vivid against his sickly pale complexion. He was deathly ill, and very familiar.

Horrified, Cassandra broke away from the group and dashed forward. “Daniel! Daniel, can you hear me?” She dropped to her knees at his side, peering anxiously into gaunt, ghoulish eyes which didn’t seem to perceive much of anything.

After a moment, his head lolled to one side, and he stared at her. “Cassandra? It is you. You’re alive.”

“As are you. I’m so glad I found you.” She was fighting tears.

He tried to shake his head. “No, they... put a demon inside me. It's tearing me up.”

“What?” Mahanon knelt on Daniel’s other side, watching them both intently. She glanced at him, then back at Daniel, disbelieving. “You can’t be possessed – that’s impossible!”

“I’m not possessed,” he corrected her. His voice was growing steadily thicker and more choked. “They... fed me things. I can feel it growing.”

*Red lyrium.* Daniel was not a full-fledged Seeker yet; he had not yet undergone his vigil to receive his abilities. So he was not resistant to the effects of the damnable mineral as the letter claimed full Seekers were. Cassandra bit her tongue to keep from crying out.

“What could they hope to gain from this?” Mahanon asked, sounding baffled.

“Our powers?” she guessed, her tone flat. “Revenge? Who knows?”

Daniel coughed again, a horrid hacking sound. “The Lord Seeker. You have to find him.”

*He must be in grave danger,* Cassandra thought. “Of course we’ll find him,” she said soothingly. “If he lives, we’ll-”

“No.” Daniel interrupted her, trying again to shake his weary head. “Lucius betrayed us, Cassandra. He sent us here, one by one! ‘An important mission,’ he said. Lies. He was here with them all along – he’s still working with them.”

“Are you sure it’s the real Lord Seeker?” Mahanon wondered. “Could it have been the demon from Therinfal?”

“No. The demon came later.”

“But a demon couldn't simply take his place without anyone noticing!” Cassandra protested. Even as she met Daniel’s eyes, and read the truth in them, she could scarcely bring herself to believe it. He gave a single, painful nod.
“The Lord Seeker allowed it. He let the demon take command, while he...”

“...came here,” she finished softly. It was pain beyond pain. The Seekers were no better than the Grey Wardens whom she had condemned for following orders.

“Cassandra...” Mahanon’s voice was gentle again, but she shook her head.

“Now is not the time for sympathy.” She forced herself to her feet. *I will find Lord Lucius... and I will do to him what Cole did to Lord Seeker Lambert.*

“Wait!” Daniel’s choked voice pleaded. “Don’t leave me like this. Please...”

No...

“You should have come with me,” she told him, fondly and sadly. “You didn't believe in the war any more than I did.”

“You know me,” he replied, trying to be a little lighthearted. “I wanted that promotion.” He spewed another sickly cough, and his eyes begged her for release.

Cassandra nodded slowly. “Go to the Maker’s side, Daniel,” she said softly. “You will be welcomed.” She arranged her sorrowing features into a stern, hard expression, forcing herself to draw the blade from its scabbard and put an end to his suffering. Dimly she registered Sera turning her face away from the scene, and Bull putting a hand on the young elf’s shoulder.

Only when her sword was again sheathed did she speak to them. “He was my apprentice,” she explained. “I have never known a finer young man.” She did not weep, not yet. There would be time for that later, when she was done with righteous anger.

“By the Creators,” Mahanon muttered. “If the Conclave had gone differently, that could have been Toria.”

“It could. And it has been many others, I suspect.” She all but glared at them. “Now we find Lord Seeker Lucius.”

He wasn’t hard to find, as far as that went.

Caer Oswin had a beautiful garden on its uppermost level, with a stunning view looking out over the valley for miles and miles. Lord Seeker Lucius stood waiting patiently in the sunshine as the Inquisition members emerged from the castle, flanked by a few more Promiser Knights.


“Cassandra,” he greeted her. His tone was almost fond – indeed, almost fatherly, and normally that would have pleased her. Not now. “And with a man I can only assume is the new Inquisitor.”

Mahanon gave him a mocking bow. “You must be very proud of your handiwork.”

“I presume you know we Seekers of Truth were once the original Inquisition. Oh, yes.” The Lord Seeker smiled blandly; there was something strange about his expression, almost as though he were hypnotized. “We fought to restore order in a time of madness long ago, as you do now.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Sera interrupted. “Aren’t you special. Just another big knob who deserves an arrow in his face.”
Lord Lucius didn’t even spare her a glance. “And we became proud,” he continued. “We sought to remake the world - to make it better. But what did we create? The Chantry. The Circles of Magi. A war that will see no end.”

“How is aiding Corypheus supposed to help with that?” Mahanon demanded.

Lord Lucius shook his head. “Corypheus is but a monster with limited ambition.”

“And your ambition is so much greater?” asked Cassandra. She was very nearly ready to give a signal for Sera to actually put an arrow in the Lord Seeker’s face – but she wanted to hear his explanation first. She wanted to know how he could surrender so many good people to those who wanted nothing but to destroy them.

“We Seekers are abominations, Cassandra.” He spoke somewhat pleadingly. “We created a decaying world, and fought to preserve it even as it crumbled. We had to be stopped. You don’t believe me? See for yourself.” He held up a book, similar to the one penned by Divine Justinia to authorize the Inquisition, but the cover bore the seeing eye symbol of the Seekers superimposed on the flaming sunburst of the Chantry. “The secrets of our Order, passed to me after the former Lord Seeker was slain. The war with the mages had already begun, but it was not too late for me to do the right thing.”

“He's completely mad, isn't he?” Mahanon inquired, almost conversationally.

“Lord Seeker, what you've done...” Cassandra all but growled low in her throat.

“I know.” For an instant, his tone turned regretful. “But what Corypheus did with the Templars does not matter. I have seen the future. I have created a new Order to replace the old. The world will end so we can start anew - a pure beginning.” He extended a hand to her, his eyes blankly searching her face. “Join us, Cassandra. It is the Maker's will.”

You dare invoke the name of our god as you sentence those under you to a painful death?

With another snarl, Cassandra drew her sword.

“He was insane.”

They sat in camp, huddled around a small fire, and Cassandra leaned against Mahanon for strength and support. He had his arm wrapped around her shoulders.

“He had to be,” she insisted. “Perhaps the envy demon's influence? Remove the Lord Seeker so it could take over the Templars?”

“If so, the plan worked perfectly,” Mahanon mused. “Look what happened to them.”

“Still... he could not have destroyed all of us. I won't accept it.”

“You think your people are still out there?” asked Bull, tossing back some of his field rations. “If they are, maybe Red’s people can help you track them down.”

“It’s possible. I will concern myself with it more fully once Corypheus has been defeated – that must remain our focus. I appreciate that you all came to help me with this,” she added, looking at them gratefully.

“Are you all right?” Mahanon asked her.
“I will be in time. Giving Daniel a pyre in the courtyard... it helped. He has gone to the Maker; he is worthy of Andraste’s embrace.”

“We’ll be back at Skyhold tomorrow, yeah? That’ll cheer you up,” Sera offered. “Beating the tar out of your training dummy, glaring at people, all the things you love.”

Cassandra smiled. “I’m curious to see what’s in this ‘book of secrets’... when there is time, I intend to study it thoroughly.” There was a fluttering overhead, and she looked up. “A messenger bird from Skyhold?”

Mahanon looked up too, and squinted. “Isn’t that the one Toria called Brona?”

“Ah, yes, the white feather on the breast. She’s Cullen’s bird.”

“That explains a lot.” He watched the bird glide down and perch herself on Bull’s horns.

“Hey,” the hulking figure protested. Carefully, however, he reached up and detached the message from her leg. “Here, Cass, looks like it’s addressed to you.”

Curious, she accepted the scroll and broke the seal. She scanned the contents quickly and felt her eyes growing wide at Cullen’s agitated handwriting. “We leave at first light – we have to get back to Skyhold,” she said.

“Why? What’s happened?” asked Mahanon.

“There was an accident at the Cradle of Sulevin... Victoria’s been badly injured, and she’s asking for you.”
The Loyal Shield Broken to Pieces

Chapter Summary

We find out just why Cass said what she did at the end of the last chapter.

Chapter Notes

Solas's explanation for what happened at the Cradle of Sulevin is almost entirely headcanon. I read the codex entry for the location and crafted what you get here out of what I learned. I hope it makes sense.

[Editor’s note: Did you like that little wham line? Scholar and I thought we’d show you what led to it, so we’re jumping back in time to Erimond’s trial.]

Dorian, learning belatedly that a judging was in session, came down from the library midway through the sentencing of Lord Erimond. The man’s comments about Tevinter gave him a strong urge to stride over and kick him for his stupidity, but he refrained; like many in the room, he was too taken aback by Victoria’s unexpected declaration.

By the time he managed to work his way through the astonished crowd, Mahanon was storming away from the dais, barely sparing him a nod as he passed. Victoria remained on the throne, somewhat slouched, her expression cloudy; Cullen stood to one side, watching her with thinly veiled distress.

“It’s not a memory we would want you to carry,” Dorian heard him say.

“I have to agree,” he said by way of announcing his presence, and when she looked up he offered her a disarming smile. “Come, what’s all this? Let Mahanon deal with the distasteful business. You can come and watch me beat Cullen at chess, surely that’s a much more attractive sight.”

The smallest smile tried to quirk the corners of her mouth; it didn’t quite make it, but the effort was there and that was important. “I’m not a child, you know. The Nightmare might have thought I am, but I tie my own boots and everything.”

Inwardly, Dorian sighed with relief. If she could make a joke, even a terrible one, then Victoria wasn’t too far gone. She was by no means as insouciant as Mahanon in most instances, but she had a droll little humor of her own and he was glad to see it intact. “That’s the spirit. Come now, both of you, the chessboard awaits.”

Victoria glanced at Cullen, who gave her an encouraging sort of nod, and she got to her feet and allowed Dorian to wrap an arm around her shoulders as they walked. “Now, you mustn’t think any of us believe you’re incapable of such a dreadful thing,” he insisted, guiding her to the door leading out to the main courtyard, with Cullen trailing close behind. “We’re all of the opinion that you can do just about anything. Not only have you survived things that should have killed you, but you even make this dour fellow back here smile sometimes.”
“I’m not that dour,” Cullen objected.

“You’re getting better. I’m giving her most of the credit,” Dorian informed him over his shoulder. “I daresay some of it belongs to me as well, but this is about Toria. Really, my dearest Lady Inquisitor, you are extraordinary and we all know it. Mahanon just can’t bear to have you get your hands dirty this way, and I understand that better than anybody.” With his free hand, he tilted her chin up so she was forced to look at him. “You’re the only sister either one of us has ever had. We simply can’t help wanting to protect you from everything under the sun.”

She seemed to soften at that, the pain in her eyes receding at least a fraction.

They passed a pleasant hour, or maybe it was two, in the courtyard. Victoria took less of an interest in the daily chess battle between Dorian and Cullen than he had anticipated, but she was diverted by new arrivals. Morrigan, formerly the arcane advisor to Empress Celene, had been directed to join the Inquisition at the Empress’s decree, and she had recently arrived. As the ‘lady of the manor,’ so to speak, Victoria naturally felt it incumbent upon her to welcome this newest member of the little army, who was accompanied by a young boy Dorian presumed to be her son – and, if the common report about the Heroes of Ferelden was accurate, that meant that he was also the son of Darrian Tabris. Most interesting.

Cullen, meanwhile, was so diverted by Victoria herself that Dorian almost didn’t need to cheat to win. He did anyway, just for his own amusement, but Cullen didn’t catch him. “You’re starting to make me feel like a voyeur, you know,” he said finally, leaning back in his chair. “Not that I’m complaining, but still.”

“What?” The commander jerked out of a reverie when Dorian spoke.

“You’re not even trying, Commander. I realize your attention is elsewhere, but you’re being a soupçon more blatant about it than usual.”

“It’s not like that,” Cullen protested, and Dorian was amused to see a tinge in his ears. “I’m worried about her.”

“I am too.” Dorian sobered a little. “I don’t even quite know what to say about it.”

“You don’t know the half of it, you didn’t hear the report.” Cullen sighed. “The memories they recovered in the Fade… they didn’t just face off with the Nightmare and a host of demons, they also learned how they ended up the way they are. It’s… it doesn’t seem to have been Andraste at all, at least not obviously. So now Victoria is worried that she wasn’t chosen, and that everything’s a lie, and meanwhile she and Mahanon have had an argument over her pardoning the Wardens and she’s just very… lost, at the moment.”

“She told you all this, did she?”

“We had a long talk yesterday. I’ve done what I can to reassure her, but I suspect this new business with Erimond has opened a few wounds that were barely closed.” Cullen’s hand closed on one of his pieces, but he didn’t move it just yet. He glanced over to where Victoria was apparently concluding her discussion with Morrigan, and straightened as he realized she was coming back to join them in the little gazebo.

“Who’s winning?” she inquired. Her voice was steadier than it had been in the hall.

“I am, naturally,” Dorian replied. “Unless you were referring to the game and not my winning personality and charm, in which case… I still am.” He tossed Cullen a devilish grin. The ex-
Templar rolled his eyes and moved his piece.

A party was setting out the next morning, as they discovered later at dinner. Cassandra was mounting a small expedition to Caer Oswin, in Ferelden, to deal with the situation concerning Lord Seeker Lucius. “We want to keep it small, so as not to give him too much warning of our arrival,” she said. “The Lord Inquisitor, Sera, Bull, and myself should be sufficient for the purposes.”

Victoria toyed with her napkin, not quite looking at either Cassandra or Mahanon. Dorian thought he knew where her thoughts were tending, so he decided to redirect them. “That should work out nicely, don’t you think, Toria? We can take a quick run down to the Arbor Wilds and look at that curious cradle place, get you that shiny ancient sword you want so very much.”

She lifted her eyebrows a bit, but nodded. “That’s not a bad idea. Once we complete these two small tasks, we can work on dealing with all the intelligence we’ve gathered on Samson and Calpernia. You want to go with me, then?”

“I wouldn’t miss it, my dear.”

“Solas, you also wanted to go,” she mused, and the elf nodded. “If we bring Cole or Varric along, that should be plenty. I don’t imagine there’s a whole lot to fight in there.”

“Ah, you can’t be sure of that,” Solas warned her. “The ancient elves would have left wards of some nature. I can’t be sure exactly what we’ll encounter, but I doubt it will be so simple as walking in and reclaiming the sword, regardless of its condition.”

“Wait, what do you need me for?” Varric asked. [Editor’s note: Look, I’d have gone almost anywhere if Eyebrows asked, but ancient ruins? Not my favorite places to vacation.]

“We need one or the other of you in case there’s something locked,” she pointed out. “I can ask Cole if you’d rather stay here.”

“I would recommend Cole remain here,” Solas advised, “until that amulet he requested has been found. Perhaps I’m being overly cautious, but I would feel more at ease if he were at Skyhold than in the Cradle.”

“All right – what do you say, Varric?”

“Well, I guess I’ll need to know what happens so I can put it in the book later.”

They set off the following day, perhaps an hour after Cassandra’s party left for Caer Oswin, traveling due south along the Orlesian base of the Frostback Mountains. The Arbor Wilds were an almost mystical place in southern Orlais, a sort of jungle filled with decaying ruins from the long-gone time of the elves. Solas seemed pleased to have the chance to go there. “The Cradle of Sulevin, from what I have seen in my journeys through the Fade, was once an impressive citadel,” he told the others as they rode.

“Which came first? The cradle or the sword?” Dorian asked.

“The sword. The Cradle of Sulevin was built specifically to house the Sulevin Blade,” Solas explained. “It was said to be the finest weapon in all of Elvhenan, and was wielded in the defense of the People – protecting the innocent from injustice. More than one hand has borne it over time, but always it was returned to its resting place until an hour of tremendous need.”
“So what became of it?” This from Victoria.

“During the Exalted March on the Dales, some of the elves grew incredibly desperate.” The hedge mage’s face grew sour for a moment. “You recall that I said the word Sulevin means ‘purpose.’ The original purpose of the blade was protection, defense. But these elves drew it with the intention of revenging themselves against the Chantry – and the desire for vengeance seeped into the sword, corrupting it and turning it to a new purpose.”

“I used to know a guy like that,” Varric muttered.

“They attempted a blood magic ritual,” Solas continued, “using the sword to shed the blood of many of the same innocents it was meant to defend. Perhaps that is the reason the ritual failed, since it was in defiance of the sword’s genesis. Those who were killed rose up against their murderers, and took vengeance themselves. As for the sword, by all accounts it lies in pieces scattered throughout the fortress.”

“So all we have to do is go in there, scoop up the broken sword pieces, and bring them back to Skyhold to be fixed. Sounds like a delightful adventure,” Dorian said wryly.

“That’s assuming that those undead aren’t still walking around the place,” said Victoria.

“Oh, I’m quite certain they are.” Solas appeared unconcerned. “It should be a fascinating encounter – we can help these spirits finally be laid to rest.”

“Eyebrows… you really need a new sword this badly?”

“It always seems like the smaller parties travel faster than the larger ones, doesn’t it?” Dorian observed, as they pitched their tents just before sundown.

“I read something about that once,” Victoria remarked. “Fewer people can cover more ground because it takes less time for them to set up camp, essentially. We could have brought a company of Inquisition soldiers with us, but that requires taking time to stop, pitch tents, feed horses, prepare rations, and so on. I like it being just this small group – we go, we lay the dead to rest, we get the goods, we go back.”

She sat down by the fire with her rations of bread and dried meat, watching the flames distractedly. Dorian, meanwhile, watched her; he never quite knew where her thoughts were tending these days. She was so down about the mouth ever since her return from the Fade. It bothered him a great deal; Victoria was normally more resilient.

“So,” said Varric, on the other side of the fire, “let’s have a friendly debate.”

“About what?” inquired Solas.

“Who do you think is the toughest – Josephine, Leliana, or Cassandra?”

“I’m too diverted by you using their real names to come up with an answer,” Dorian replied, chuckling.

Solas gave the dwarf a look of amused incredulity. “Cullen’s not up for consideration?”

“Curly? They just keep him around to look pretty.” Varric glanced at Victoria, and put up his hands in a placating gesture. “No offense, Eyebrows.”
She studied him for several seconds, her lips pursed. “Some taken,” she finally admitted.

“Oh, come on.” Varric’s own expression dimmed a little. “You’re not still sore about the way the Orlesians were throwing themselves at him, are you?”

“No, it’s not that. Not exactly. He just… I… it’s hard to explain.”

“Come now, Varric, don’t pester,” Dorian said, trying to smooth away any genuine offense. “Toria, darling, pay him no mind.”

“I’m not – that is – I’m not angry,” she managed after a few seconds of floundering. Then she paused. “I’m… not angry,” she repeated. It was like she was just realizing it for the first time herself.

“The Lady Inquisitor and the Lord Inquisitor have had a few disagreements of late,” said Solas, delicately. “I would venture to say that is what is truly distressing her. Am I correct, or do I overstep myself?”

“No, you’re right. Mahanon and I haven’t been getting along too well since we got back from… from the Fade.”

“Because you kept the Wardens instead of sending them away?”

“That’s what he wanted to do. But I didn’t know that. Keeping them seemed like the right thing to do, so I did. And then it felt like everybody was mad at me for it.”

“For my part,” said Solas, “I was less perturbed by your decision than I was by the Wardens themselves.”

“I think you did the right thing,” Varric said. He still appeared troubled by her taking offense at his quip. “Give them some credit, Chuckles; it's not like you can study the Blight safely. I may not like everything they've done, but without the Wardens, we'd all be blighted by now.”

“They’ve bought us some time, I will grant them that.”

Victoria picked up a twig and hurled it at the base of the flames. “And he keeps getting mad at me. I reference my faith too much for his liking, or something.”

“Consider Mahanon’s position,” Solas offered. “He has been held up for months as one of the fabled Heralds of Andraste, sent by the Maker to save us all. Except he doesn’t believe in the Maker, or Andraste.”

“And now we know we weren’t sent by either.”

“What do you mean, Eyebrows?” Varric eyed her quizzically. “You haven’t exactly told us what you saw on the other side.”

“We got back our memories of when we got these.” She held up her left hand. “When Alexius told me I was a mistake – when Corypheus said it – they weren’t grandstanding. We were. Well, sort of. What happened was more of an accident than anything, unless you believe that accidents are the will of the Maker or something. So it’s been… confusing, for me, and I guess for him it’s been a little liberating.” She glanced at Solas. “You’re right, of course. It was all sorts of weird for him to be the herald of a faith not his own.”

“I doubt he’s been genuinely angry with you,” said Dorian. “Frustrated, perhaps. Unable to put his
thoughts into words. But almost certainly not angry, not really.”

“I guess. I’m sorry, anyway… I’ll try to be less… touchy.” She finished her food and stood, brushing the dirt from the back of her legs. “Good night, boys.”

“Cullen knows the whole story,” Dorian explained in a low voice, once Victoria had retreated to the isolation of her small tent. “She hasn’t even told me everything, but of course they made a full report to the council, and he’s told me some of what he knows. So she’s a little tender on that subject, since…”

“She thought it would change things for them?” Varric guessed. “Not likely.”

“I know that and you know that. But…”

“But our beloved Lady Inquisitor takes a bit more persuading. I get it.”

“Did she really think everyone was angry about her choice?” Solas wondered. “I didn’t approve, certainly, but it wasn’t my decision to make. Mahanon agreed with me, I know, but he’d never contradict her publicly.”

“No, he wouldn’t. And yes, she did.” Dorian ran his fingers over his mustache thoughtfully. “I think she’ll be all right once the two of them get over themselves and patch things up. Whatever they believe for themselves, they are the Heralds of Andraste as far as the rest of the world is concerned. ‘Fake it until you make it,’ and all that.” He sighed. “In the meantime, let her rest; I’ll take first watch, if no one minds.”

The following day found the group setting foot into the massive stone structure which was the Cradle of Sulevin. Victoria gazed around with an air of undisguised wonder. “So… this is where the Sulevin Blade was lost.”

“Good spot for it,” Varric said dryly. “I wouldn’t look here for anything.”

The floor was wildly broken in places, with massive trees having shot up through the stones. Vines clambered up and down the damp walls, enormous fungi sprouted along cracks in the floor, and there were even some exotic and brightly-colored flowers growing on some of the overhangs. A scant few vealfire torches provided the only light beyond what filmy sunshine filtered through the chinks in the ceiling. There were a few treasures scattered throughout, mostly old knives and some faded scribblings which even Solas was hard-pressed to translate. Gingerly, they descended to the darkened lower portions of the Cradle; Dorian’s mind was whirling with the explanation Solas had given for what had happened in this place.

Why are we here again? Maybe Varric was right – does she really need a new sword this badly?

“There’s an altar.” Victoria pointed at a strange statue of a hooded figure holding a golden bowl.

“And everything was perfectly serene until they disturbed the ancient altar,” Dorian deadpanned. “It looks like we’ll need vealfire to activate the altar; are you sure you want to do this?”

“We’ve come this far. It seems a bit strange to leave it. Besides, if we can put these ancient dead to rest…” She shrugged, looking a little sheepish.

Solas made his way carefully back up the stairs to light a vealfire torch, and brought it down to where two empty braziers adorned opposite sides of a stone pillar. After a moment’s contemplation, he touched his torch to them – and instantly, at least half a dozen empty braziers ignited throughout the entire lower chamber.
“Huh. Well, saves the trouble of running around to each one,” Varric mused. He climbed onto a small pile of broken stone pieces which had apparently fallen from the upper level. “Okay, Eyebrows, do your thing.”

The other three approached the altar again, where the veilfire revealed the presence of an object in the golden bowl. Warily, Victoria reached out to grasp it; it looked to be a scroll of some sort. It was barely in her hands when there was an explosive sound, and a large magic sigil surrounded the base of the altar; within seconds, they found themselves accosted by a small handful of undead, led by an elegantly armored revenant; Dorian wondered if the revenant was one of the ancient elves who had caused the destruction of the sword.

He felt justified in the thought once they had defeated the creature, as the revenant’s remains proved that he was carrying a fragment of what was clearly an ancient elvhen blade. “It’s only part of the sword,” Victoria observed, turning it over in her fingers. “The elves broke it, after all. It looks like we’ll have to interact with the other altars in order to gain the other three pieces.”

They made their way to the uppermost level, where the sunlight was brightest. “Memories I viewed in the Fade called this the Starlight Chamber,” Solas observed. “The reason for it is long since lost, however.” The revenant battle here provided the guard of the sword; returning to the lower level, they completed a third fight to acquire the pommel.

It was the final fight which proved the most dangerous. Though all of the enemies were of comparable difficulty, the fourth altar was the one which stood on the shakiest ground. Dorian supposed he shouldn’t have been entirely surprised when more of the floor began to give way under the strain of their battle. “Varric, look out!” he shouted, seeing the stones near the dwarf’s feet begin to shift.

As Varric backed away to a better supported position, Victoria spun to slam her sword into the revenant’s side. Two things happened, then, and neither of them were particularly cheerful. One, the blade of her weapon blunted against the ancient golden armor adorning the undead foe. Two, more alarmingly, the revenant lashed out, and she lost her footing. The entire Cradle of Sulevin seemed to echo with her shriek of alarm, followed by the crash of her landing in the lower level.

“Victoria!”

“Varric! Did you find her?” Solas called, even as he took the sword’s hilt from the defeated guardian.

“I’ve got her – she doesn’t look too good! You’d better get down here because I can’t carry her!”

With some difficulty, the three men got their broken Lady Inquisitor out of the Cradle and onto her horse. “Let the wilds claim this place for good and all,” Varric puffed. “Sparkler, maybe you’d better ride with her and let me take your mount.”

“Do you even know how to ride?” Dorian retorted. He had a point, however, and he carefully pulled himself into Falon’s saddle behind Victoria. Solas assisted Varric into the saddle of the horse Dorian had used for the journey.

“I’ll figure it out. Let’s just go.”
“Sorry, boys,” Victoria mumbled, sprawled on the armored neck of her beloved horse. “Didn’t mean to…”

“Hush, of course you didn’t. But let’s not make a habit of such things, yes? The blacksmith will be fit to be tied when he sees you.” Dorian pulled off her helmet, letting her breathe a bit more easily. “Just what hurts?”

“My leg… and my shoulder… mostly.”

“Ah, my kingdom for Cullen’s messenger bird. We could warn them that you’re coming in this state so we don’t take Skyhold by surprise.” He was impressed with the light, calm tone he was keeping in his voice.

Skyhold, however, was not surprised by their arrival. They pushed the horses, refusing to camp and only stopping for brief intervals to water the mounts. As Falon rushed across the bridge, Dorian could hear the watchman shouting to those who operated the gates. “The Lady Inquisitor!”

Inside the castle grounds, a small party waited to welcome them. Cullen, flanked by three mages and Harritt, had joined the grooms who normally came to tend the exhausted mounts, and even as he slid out of the saddle, Dorian gave him a baffled look. “Dare I ask?”

“Cole,” replied the commander, moving to where Victoria was already extending her arms to him for support. “He came to me yesterday, I can only assume he sensed your distress. ‘She lies broken and bleeding, Maker help her, I cannot help, cannot heal, can only hold her on the horse for home.’ It took me a little while to translate it, but we’ve been waiting for you ever since.” He turned to the mages. “Once Master Harritt gets the armor off, make sure she’s comfortable.”

“Can I please rest in my own bed? Or is that too far to carry me?” Victoria’s lips twitched in a weary smile.

“You let me worry about that,” Cullen told her.

“Cullen. I want to…” She grimaced, and to Dorian’s amusement, looked a little embarrassed. “I want to see Mahanon. As soon as he gets back.”

“I thought as much. Don’t worry – I already sent Brona to tell him to hurry.”
Chapter Summary

Varric observes as the Inquisitors reunite, the council has some fun at Cullen's expense, and Victoria gets her new arms and armor.

Chapter Notes

This chapter might be a little heavy on the Cullen/Victoria, but I promise there will be some upcoming Mahanon/Cassandra to balance it.

Victoria's new armor is based on The Taken Shape, which is found only in the Trespasser DLC. It is the best and most badass armor in the entire franchise to date.

This particular chapter has a song attached to it; "Walk Beside Me," by Celtic Woman, is my song for the reconciliation of the Inquisitors. It works best if you imagine Victoria singing the first verse and refrain, Mahanon singing the second verse and refrain, and them singing the final refrain together.

Chapter Thirty-One: Shield-Brothers and Spear-Sisters Distant

Varric knew better than to think Victoria was really angry at him. It wasn’t her nature. Still, he felt a little guilty over his remarks about her precious commander, especially since she’d gotten hurt so soon afterward, and he thought an apology might ease his conscience. Besides, he had some intelligence to share, courtesy of letters from Hawke and Bethany; that would break the ice nicely.

He’d never actually been in the Inquisitors’ tower, so in addition to every other possible feeling, his curiosity was piqued. A guard was always posted outside the door leading to the tower, bathed in the multicolored light which streamed through the stained glass wall behind the throne, and he addressed himself to this armored figure. “I’d like to visit Her Inquisitorialness, if that’s okay.”

“You are welcome, Messere Tethras,” came the reply. “Commander Cullen is with her at present, but he gave no orders that she should not be otherwise disturbed.”

Varric suspected, as he passed the guard, that he (or she? It was hard to tell in those outfits sometimes, especially with helmets) was hoping the dwarf might interrupt something and maybe provide the barracks with a fresh bit of gossip about their beloved commanding officer and his romance with Lady Boss, as Bull called her. That most of the soldiers and quite a few scouts practically revered Curly as more or less widely understood; that they legitimately did revere the Inquisitors was known fact. But Curly and Eyebrows were very particular about how they behaved toward each other in front of an audience, so with no hardcore facts to share, the residents of Skyhold had to amuse themselves with mere speculation. Varric understood this, and contributed to the speculation as often as circumstances allowed, because he liked to see just how exaggerated the
stories could become when passed from one person to the next.

(The short answer was extremely exaggerated, to the point where he couldn’t even use the stories as book fodder because they were too outlandish.)

As he made his way up to the tower, Varric made two particular observations. One was that, while he knew that the Inquisition had gone to great lengths to make their leaders’ actual bedroom look good, they’d spared no attention to the area which connected said bedroom to the main hall. It was ramshackle and threadbare, its lone adornment an inexplicably placed Templar banner dangling from one wall. The other was that he could distinctly hear Curly’s voice, low-pitched and soothing, echoing through the tower; as he climbed the stairs, Varric realized he could identify the words.

“Traveling through the Emerald Graves in the Dales, one will see dozens of carven stone wolves. The Dalish call these the Knights’ Guardians. In the days of elven Halamshiral, wolf companions walked alongside Emerald Knights, never leaving the side of their chosen knight. Wolf and elf would fight together, eat together, and when the knights slept, wolves would guard them. The statues were erected in memory of their unbreakable bond.” Cullen paused to take a breath as Varric reached the top of the steps, so that seemed like a good time to interrupt.

“The gossipmongers would be tremendously disappointed if they knew what you two get up to behind closed doors,” he greeted them. Eyebrows was on her bed, propped up in a semi-sitting position on the pillows, and Curly sat on a white loveseat a few feet away. He chuckled at Varric’s assertion.

“Probably,” he agreed. “But Genitivi always cheers me up some, and it seems I’m not the only one.” He stretched and put a marker in the book. “I should get back to my duties, though. Cass sent word; they should return by the evening meal.”

“All right. I’ll see you later.”

Varric pretended not to watch as the commander bent over the patient for a moment. In truth, he was a little diverted, since he’d never seen the room. The doors to both balconies were open to allow the cross breezes to cool the space; one faced east, where the sun rose over the mountains, and the other faced north, overlooking the inner bailey. The windows had been a gift from the Marquis of Serault, handsomely crafted in that region’s distinctive glass patterns, with a round window high above the staircase. Bookcases dominated one corner, behind a desk. The Inquisitors each had their own bed, separated by a stone wall, canopied in red velvet in what he recognized as a Free Marches style; an arched doorway beside each bed led to what he imagined were their wardrobes and changing areas.

It also looked as though Solas had been involved in the decorating of the tower, since a painting on the wall high above the beds was similar to those he had done in the rotunda beneath the library. The Inquisition’s flaming eye and sword was superimposed over the mountains, flanked by trees, with a castle inset representing Skyhold itself. By the time Varric had concluded his study of the art, Cullen was on his way downstairs and he had Victoria’s full attention. “You know,” she confided, “I’m in love with the sound of that man’s voice no matter what. But there’s something about the way he reads history.”

“Down, girl.” He laughed. “Although – color me shocked that you would be alone with him in your room without a chaperone, miss proper lady.” He claimed the loveseat Curly had abandoned.

“Who says I haven’t had a chaperone?” she sassed him. “Cole shows up so intermittently and without warning, it’s practically the same thing.”
Varric laughed again. “Okay, that’s a fair point. So, uh... how’re you feeling, kid?”

“Well, I will say that falling through the floor at the Cradle was less devastating than whatever happened to me at Haven,” she said thoughtfully. “I mean, at least I remember falling at the Cradle, so I can’t have hit my head nearly as hard.”

“Three cheers for helmets. The mages did their thing, right?”

“Oh, yes. Really, I’m fine – they just want me resting to be on the safe side, at least until Non gets back.” Victoria looked a little chagrined. “I suppose I’m in for a lecture.”

“Probably. Listen... Eyebrows... about what I said back in camp…”

“About them keeping Cullen around to look pretty?” The gray eyes glinted. “Yeah, I didn’t forget. I know you didn’t mean any harm by it, Varric. I just haven’t been in a good place since...”

“Since you went back into the Fade. Sparkler told me.” He sighed heavily. “You know, we were all so glad to get you all back in one piece, we didn’t think too much about what you went through in order to find your way out. We just wanted everything back to normal. Most of us, anyway. Curly’s been looking after you, huh?”

“Oh, you know...” Her cheeks were a little pink.

“Never mind, I don’t need details.” He laughed. "At least, not right now."

Varric shared the contents of Hawke’s letter. She was perhaps halfway to Weisshaupt when Fenris caught up to her, thanks to the direction he’d taken from Varric’s own letter, so she’d been reunited with both him and her dog. Bethany, meanwhile, was still under Sebastian’s protection, and – at the Prince’s insistence – would remain there at least for the foreseeable future. She had sent him, to his profound amusement (and quiet appreciation), a small portrait of herself.

“So this is the famous Sunshine,” Victoria said, when he showed it to her. "She's very pretty."

[Editor's note: And the sky is blue.]

Victoria invited him to make use of her desk to write letters to both Hawke sisters, although he wasn’t sure a reply to Hawke would actually reach her. Still, it was worth a try, and he set to work while she amused herself with another book. In this quiet way they passed some time; he wasn’t sure how long.

The silence was broken, however, by shouts in the bailey below, which wafted through the open balcony doors. “Stay there,” he admonished her, seeing the Lady Inquisitor start to rise. He went out to look down at the commotion. “Ah, our remaining absentees return. Your lecture will be forthcoming, I expect.”

“Oh... well, I’m glad they’re back.”

As Varric watched, Mahanon slid from the saddle of his bizarre horse and handed off the reins to a wary groom. Blackwall approached, and they spoke briefly; presumably, Hero was telling Hunter that Eyebrows was recovering and could be found in their tower. “Here he comes,” he said, watching the elf make his way up the stairs. He wasn’t running, exactly, but he was certainly walking faster than normal. “You want me to give you guys some privacy?”

“Thanks, but I’m sure you want to make notes for your next book,” she teased him. “Just keep
Much to his profound amusement, she turned out to be completely correct in this assessment. When the Lord Inquisitor made his appearance a few minutes later, he didn’t so much as glance in Varric’s direction; his eyes were focused entirely on the figure of his reclining counterpart. “Toria.”

“Hi, Non. Uh. How was Caer Oswin?”

“How was Caer Oswin?” he repeated, baffled. “You fell through a stone floor and could have broken your neck, and all you can say is how was Caer Oswin?” He shook his head, moving to sit at her bedside. “Well, to answer your question, it was depressing. I’ll give you the details later; right now I’m too busy being mad at you.”

“In my defense, the revenant sort of pushed me,” she objected. “I didn’t just slip off a ledge while chasing butterflies or something.”

They studied each other for a tense minute, and then Mahanon chuckled. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine. They have me resting just in case, but my armor took more damage than I did in the end. A spurious rumor brought to my attention claims that Harritt and Dagna are cooking up something special to replace it,” she added. “Some schematic one of the scouts picked up somewhere.”

“A spurious rumor? In Skyhold? I don’t believe that.”

Victoria laughed, quietly, but sobered shortly. “I... look, I know... things have been... tense,” she said; her eyes were somewhat downcast, at least as far as Varric could tell. “I don’t think I’ve been entirely fair to you. Solas... kind of made me see that. I never thought about how hard it must really be on you, getting called the Herald of Andraste when you don’t even believe in the Maker. I mean, I’ve thought about it, but not as seriously as I probably should have. I’m sorry for that.”

“Well, Cass helped me realize something too,” he replied, equally serious – something he rarely was. “I won’t say I’m sorry for disagreeing with you about the Wardens. I’m still not sure it was right, but maybe it wasn’t wrong either. But I will say I’m sorry for not having expected you to do what you did. You are who you are, Toria, and I should have realized it. Cass asked me... what would I have you be other than what you are? And the truth is, I’d have you be exactly what you are. Maybe you are too soft and too forgiving. But maybe those aren’t such bad things to be.”

As Varric watched, quietly delighted, a genuine smile crossed Victoria’s face for maybe the first time in days. “I missed you, Nonny,” she admitted. “I really don’t like being Lady Inquisitor when you’re not with me.”

“Yeah, yeah. What did I say about too soft?” He grinned teasingly, however, shifting from the loveseat to seating himself on the edge of her bed. “Come on, get it out of your system.” He eased her into a more upright sitting position and let her wrap her arms around his neck. “Ar lath, ma da’vhenan. Even when you drive me crazy.”

“Right back at you, Nonny.”

[Editor’s note: It probably seems like they forgave each other too quickly, doesn’t it? And maybe they did. Here’s the thing, though, which made their fight so difficult. Neither of them was really right – and neither of them was really wrong. They recognized that, and they decided to move forward. And as to what Hunter said there in Dalish... well, if you don’t know, you can probably]
Eventually, Mahanon became aware of their audience, although Varric did his best to delay that moment as long as possible. “Oh, good, now I know this will all be presented accurately in the book,” he deadpanned.

“Hunter, you wound me. You think I won’t overdramatize this?” Varric grinned. “The touching reunion between the Inquisitors after days of distress and separation? Shit, I need to add a violin player to the scene in order to really sell the emotion.” [Editor’s note: I would have, too, but Scholar wouldn’t let me.]

“Hold that thought,” said Victoria, amused. “I hear stirrings from below, which probably means we’re about to be invaded in one way or another.”

Sure enough, a moment later the three council members trudged up the stairs to collect in the room. “Welcome back, Mahanon,” said Josephine, pleasantly. “How are you feeling, Victoria?”

“I’ll survive. I’m feeling better now than I have in a while.” She smiled.

“Excellent. Well, we won’t intrude on you long,” said Leliana. “At least, most of us won’t. I can’t speak for some of us.” She gave Cullen a sideways smirk, and he coughed and pretended not to see it.

“What did you need? Should I ask Varric to leave?” Victoria laughed.

“Eyebrows, you gave me away! I could have sat here spying on them and they never would have known!”

“Oh, no, we knew you were here,” Leliana assured him. “Even if Cullen hadn’t been here when you arrived, the guard at the door confirmed that you never left.”

“Ah. Foiled again.”

“And no, there’s no reason for you to go if you don’t wish to leave,” the spymaster continued. “We just need to confer with the Inquisitors on a few points, and it made more sense for us to come up here than for Victoria to go downstairs.”

“I appreciate it, but I do need to start walking around more,” Eyebrows replied, shifting to sit up. “I’m going to go stir-crazy if I don’t. Let me at least circle the room while we talk, and if I get too tired, I’ll get back into bed.”

This seemed to strike everyone (except possibly Mahanon, who eyed her warily) as a reasonable compromise, and she started pacing a wide, slow path around the suite. “The first point of order,” said Josephine, “is a request from Knight-Captain Rylen for a boost to the morale of our soldiers at Griffon Wing Keep. We have each had some thoughts on how to make things more comfortable for them. Cullen wants to send a proper chef to make them real meals, instead of rations; Leliana recommends a cobbler to ease their aching feet; and my suggestion was to establish a library out there for them, so they can enjoy some reading in their spare time.”

“Well. Those are all very good ideas,” said Victoria thoughtfully. Her steps were ginger and careful, but steady; she didn’t seem to be in much pain.

“Here’s my question,” said Mahanon, “since they are all good ideas. Is there any reason we can’t do all three of those things? Our people are giving everything to this cause, including their lives in
more cases than I want to count. They deserve the best we can provide them.”

“I agree,” said his counterpart. “Can it be done?”

Varric could see that the advisors were starting to say no, but that they were also hesitant because... well, why couldn’t they do that much? “If it’s a question of funding, I might be able to kick in a little something to help pay for it,” he offered. “I’ll even throw in a couple copies of *Hard in Hightown* and *The Tale of the Champion*, if that’ll help.”

Ruffles was scribbling on her papers. “It might not be the easiest thing to arrange,” she conceded, “but... it’s not impossible. The cobbler would actually be the most difficult aspect... I think I can call in a favor. Leave it to me, Your Worships.”

“Thank you, Josephine. What else did we need to discuss?”

“I want to send an agent to Serault,” said Leliana. “We’re getting strange reports, and I think we should have some eyes in the region. It was the last stop of Divine Justinia before she attended the Conclave; there could be some significance.”

“Agreed. Anything else?”

“We’ve heard back from Dorian’s friend Maevaris Tilvani,” Cullen reported.

“Mae?” Varric repeated. “I didn’t know you were in contact with Mae.”

"You're acquainted with a Tevinter magister?" Josephine looked baffled. "Is there anyone you don't know?"

"Probably, but I'm working on it."

"How do you know her, Varric?" asked Leliana, curiously.

"She's family, believe it or not. She's my cousin Thorold's widow. How is she?"

“She had to deal with some threats; we were able to dispatch Templars to assist her.” The commander shifted uncomfortably. “In return she sends her thanks, some magical artifacts which may be of use, and... a scented handkerchief.”

Varric stifled a snicker. Victoria, on the other hand, paused mid-stride and glanced at Cullen. “A scented handkerchief?”

“Don’t ask.”

There was a very awkward, somewhat confused pause, which Ruffles evidently felt the need to break with something completely different. “You’ve styled your hair that way for ages now, Leliana. Why don’t we do something new with it?”

“I’m used to the way it is,” Nightingale replied, sounding mildly surprised by the inquiry.

“What about our commander?”

“He does something with his hair already.”

Both women rounded on Curly, smirking. “It does look very nice today,” Josephine observed. Victoria covered her mouth with one hand, trying to suppress a giggle and largely failing.
“I don’t -”

“You mean it just gets that way on its own?” Leliana asked.

“Not... entirely,” he hedged.

All three women started to laugh.

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The following day, as Varric was handing off his letters to one of Nightingale’s runners, he caught sight of both Harritt and Dagna emerging from the undercroft. Harritt had a massive sword in his hands, easily longer than Dagna was tall, while the dwarf carried a bundled something or other made from what looked like white leather. They crossed the main hall and had words with the guard at the Inquisitors’ door, who stepped aside to allow them entry.

There was no way he could deny his curiosity on such a subject, so he made his way to that end of the hall as quickly as possible and climbed the stairs. “Don’t mind the intrusion,” he said by way of a greeting. “I had to come and be nosy.”

“At least you admit it,” said Eyebrows with a laugh. “Look what they’ve done with the Sulevin Blade.” The fragmented sword they had excavated from the ruins had been reforged into something that actually looked like it would do some damage.

“You can’t stitch a sword,” Dagna chirped. “Metal doesn’t heal. What if it did, though? That would be amazing!”

Harritt coughed. “Dagna, the sword.”

“Sorry. The pieces were quality, right? I was able to use them to make a plan for a new sword that’s less broken.”

“She used the sword fragments sort of like a pattern, and sort of like a skeleton,” Harritt translated, presenting the sword to Victoria. She hefted it experimentally, admiring the shine. It had a single-edged blade, which was adorned with what was most likely elven writing; a gleaming rune had been set into the pommel, and the whole weapon had a vaguely purplish-pink coloration which suggested it had been cast with lazurite. It crackled and hummed in the Lady Inquisitor’s hand. “That master lightning rune should give you a boost in battle.”

“This is the most marvelous sword,” Eyebrows said, running her fingers carefully along the blunt side. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s not all we brought! Look at this!” Dagna held up her odd bundle.

“Is this the new armor that we heard you were making her?” Mahanon relieved Victoria of the sword, eyes widening as he found himself staggering under the thing’s weight, and carefully set it on her bed.

“Aye,” Harritt said. “Engineered from a design one of Sister Nightingale’s people brought us. We used the leather and bones from your defeat of the Abyssal High Dragon. This isn’t the whole thing,” he added. “There’s a metal aspect that I’ll help you attach once you try on the base outfit.”

Very curious, Victoria accepted the suit and disappeared into her changing room. “This is so light,” she called. “Are you sure this is armor? I mean – I don’t mean to question the experts – but it’s like nothing I’ve ever worn on the field.”
“Trust us,” said Dagna with a giggle.

The Lady Inquisitor emerged a few minutes later, looking genuinely amazed. The sleeveless leather ensemble had a long capelike aspect at the waist, creating a sort of skirt effect over the trousers tucked into knee-high boots. A many-pocketed belt hugged her hips, and matching fingerless gloves covered each hand. “This is a battledress,” she said in a tone of pure delight, and as if to prove it, she spun around a few times to make the ‘skirt’ flare. The white leather was crisscrossed in a delicate gray pattern.

Hunter laughed. “I had no idea you were such a girly girl,” he teased her.

“You don’t know all my secrets,” she retorted. “Seriously, Harritt, Dagna, thank you. This is so pretty.”

“And that’s dragon skin,” Harritt reminded her. “It may not feel like much protection, but something really has to get a fair few strong hits on you to even begin to cut through the material. By the time they’d make a dent, you’d have long since cut them down.” He came to her side and helped to attach the final part of the armor, a strong pauldron and gauntlet on her left arm. “Silverite. It’ll form a counterbalance to the sword, since your right arm will be providing most of the support for that.”

“It’s so... white. And shiny,” Mahanon observed. “They’re gonna see you coming.”

“That’s all right. Let them know the woman in white is a holy terror.” Victoria laughed. “I almost feel like I need to learn to walk and fight all over again,” she admitted. “But I love it. Thank you so much.”

“Well,” Varric mused slowly, “you could always go down to the practice yard and see what kind of trouble you can find. I’m sure nobody’s going to mind... much.”
Chapter Summary

Cole meets Kieran, and Victoria gets a feel for her new armor. Naturally, an audience is required. Meanwhile, the chain of events leading to the Temple of Dumat is underway...

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to my beta reader AuroraBorealia for her help with this chapter. Not only did she give me the bright idea to make it from Cole's point of view (it was originally Morrigan's, and it was giving me absolute fits because it just wasn't working), but she also helped with a lot of the dialogue.

This chapter features a brief return of that magnificent one-scene wonder, Inquisition Scout Jim. He's the one who's wondering where his friends are and worrying that they'll think he's lying when he tells them about this. Obviously I took a lot of creative liberties with this chapter, as Varric would say.

And if you're wondering, yes, this does lead to a certain desk being used for an alternate purpose.

Chapter Thirty-Two: A Sword to Pierce the Sun

[Editor's note: I was there for most of this, so it was easier to do Cole's point of view this time around. I was going to do my own, but Scholar and I decided this was more fun.]

The boy – Kieran was his name – was a few years younger than the real Cole had been. He lived in the library, or sometimes in the courtyard, and he had come to Skyhold with his mother. Soft and sharp, hard and gentle. A good teacher, a good guide, she never thought she would love him like she does. His mother was a raven sometimes, Kieran said, and she liked to fly around the castle and look at things.

Cole also liked to go around the castle and look at things, so he understood.

What he didn’t understand was why Kieran would not forget him when he asked. The amulet had not yet arrived – Victoria had promised an amulet to bind him, and they had found one, but it was on its way from Rivain and they said the ship which carried it had been delayed by storms. It was nothing the Inquisition could help, so all he could do was wait.

Of the boy’s mother – Morrigan – Cole was not afraid. She comes from damp and darkness, southern peat bogs, a hut where magic lived at every hour of the day, no fear of Templars. Her own mother had no words of kindness, and she ran from the memory. Morrigan’s pain was carefully
hidden, but not where he couldn’t see it, and it was hard for him to be afraid of someone who could feel that much, could hurt that much, could love that much. *Love is a weakness, and yet she had allowed it to consume her. Her son, his father, her one and only friend. For these three alone did she feel it, did she permit it.* She loved no one else; she liked very few.

He watched her with a little curiosity. Leliana, she claimed, she knew of old; in days when Wardens crisscrossed Ferelden to raise an army, one had sung songs while the other had kept to her own fire. They were not fond of one another, but they were fond of the Wardens, and in that alone did they find their common ground. Vivienne was different, and indifferent, or so she would have them think. *The usurper has left the gilded halls of the Winter Palace and come to the dusty stone passages of Skyhold. If she thinks she can take my place to the Inquisitors as she took my place to Celene, she is sorely mistaken.* Cole had to be careful not to let the First Enchanter know that he heard her thoughts.

To all the others in Skyhold, Morrigan was as new as the morning. Some distrusted her, some were curious about her; some admired her skill and others her beauty. But whatever they thought of her, nearly all of them steered clear of her, which seemed to be how she preferred it.

As for Kieran, the majority of the residents paid him little mind. There were few other children in the fortress, though they did exist; one kitchen maid had a small son who was constantly underfoot, and there had been some children among the rebel mages whom Victoria had brought from Redcliffe, mages too young to have completed their Harrowings. Kieran stood out very little from these, except for the double-headed griffon badge he wore proudly on his chest. *My father gave it to me. It keeps him close when he cannot be.* To Cole, however, Kieran was like a magnet, drawing his gaze and his thoughts.

Exactly what Kieran was, he didn’t know. He was not entirely one thing and not entirely another. On the outside, he looked ordinary enough. Inside, there was something Cole could not identify, and it scared him. He met the boy, he liked the boy, but he was afraid of the boy. So he tried to make him forget.

And the boy said no.

“Forget.”

“But I don’t want to forget. Mother says it’s important to remember.”

“Forget.”

Cole had never met someone who could not be induced to forget him. It made Kieran all the more alarming, and in his fear and frustration, he fled.

A different sort of feeling tugged at him. As he had honestly said more than once, he couldn’t often interpret the thoughts or emotions of the Inquisitors – bright, brilliant, blinding, he could not see beyond the simple knowledge of whether they were happy or sad, angry or unwell. Today he could sense a peculiar sort of unease, and he followed it to where they walked across the compound toward the practice yards.

In the section where the archery targets were positioned, Leliana was waiting with a dwarf scout while various Inquisition members arranged themselves. *Josephine likes it when I get out of the tower. She says I do not see the sun enough. She doesn’t understand, my place is in the shadows.* At present, however, she was almost serene as she waited to judge the archery competition which had been organized.
The Inquisitors were making their way to join her. Victoria’s steps were slightly halting; her armor was new, and her skill was old, and they were not getting along as well as she might have hoped. “I keep thinking I have to take firmer steps,” she remarked to her counterpart as they passed Morrigan’s post. “This is so much lighter than any armor I’ve ever worn.”

“And prettier, I’ll wager,” he teased her. “Girly girl.”

“True,” she admitted. “But honestly, wearing it is like learning to walk again. I should probably take Varric’s advice and get in some time in the practice yard so I don’t do something foolish in battle.”

“Like chasing butterflies off a ledge?”

They both laughed at this. Gentle joking, reknitting that which had been sundered. They had suffered much in the days since their visit to the Fade, he knew; the pain was equal in intensity, if not in measure. We never meant to rely on each other so much. This was not supposed to happen. But here we are and it’s too hard to walk alone.

“Inquisitors, I’m glad you could make it,” said Leliana as they approached. “We had a much greater turnout for the archery competition than I anticipated. Some extra eyes will be very helpful with the judging.”

“I saw the notice in the tavern some weeks ago,” said Mahanon. “Did Sera decide to compete, or not? She hadn’t made up her mind last time I asked her about it.”

“I believe she did,” the Nightingale replied, nodding in the direction of the archers. A flash of scarlet and plaidweave had taken up position among the others.

“What about Scout Harding?” asked Victoria.

“I have her on a special mission to Val Royeaux,” Leliana explained. “A merchant called Vicinius is rumored to be connected to Calpernia – I sent her to find out what she can about him. Hopefully she’ll return soon with useful information.”

With the archery competition completed, Victoria headed to the far side of the practice yard, where soldiers clashed with blades and shields. Her steps were still a little ginger, a little halting, and the lightness of her armor changed the way she carried herself. As Cole watched, it swiftly became apparent that Cullen’s attention was diverted. He wasn’t the only one, either; several of the practicing warriors missed swings because their attention was drawn by the Lady Inquisitor.

She was aware of it herself, he could see, and the look in her eyes showed that she didn’t altogether like it. The last and the least, the youngest, the Bann’s ugly duckling. This isn’t right. What are they seeing? Her gaze flicked to Cullen’s face, however, and that seemed to reassure her somehow.

“So is this the new armor?” he inquired pleasantly as she approached. He’d been spending too much time in the sun; his cheeks were pink.

“Yes. It’s... comfortable,” she allowed. “I like it very much. But it’s so much lighter than what I’m used to wearing, I need to adjust before I find myself on the field. I thought I’d take up with one of the dummies.”

“I’m sure we could find you a volunteer if you’d rather spar properly,” he offered. Maker’s breath, I didn’t think it was that warm today.
“Thank you, but I also have to get used to this.” She unsheathed her new sword and allowed him to admire the gleaming blade. “With that lightning rune... I’d be a little worried about hurting someone.”

“Of course, I understand. Well, let me know if you need anything.”

Cole watched her address herself to the dummy farthest from anyone’s observation. The Sulevin Blade blazed in the sun as she began to slowly and methodically attack the straw figure, and he wondered why weapons had names. Did she talk to her sword? Did it answer? His knives never answered him when he tried to talk to them.

That the commander was distracted by her presence was obvious to anyone paying attention, which included both Cole and the Lord Inquisitor. The elf was openly smirking as he flagged down one of the Skyhold runners.

“Please tell Lady Cassandra and Lord Dorian that they really want to see what’s going on down here,” he said. “Mm... better include Master Tethras too. He’ll be grumpy if we leave him out.”

“Yes, Your Worship.” The confused runner made her way back to the castle keep.

Before any of those individuals could join Mahanon, Cullen more or less gave up pretending his gaze wasn’t continually drifting in Victoria’s direction. He made his way slowly across the field and stood observing her technique for several minutes. “Is it giving you much resistance?” he asked after a moment. “The blade, I mean.”

“No, the sword is fine. It had better be, after what I went through to get it,” she added with a slight smile. “But between the weapon and the battledress, it’s a matter of changing how I think about approaching the fight. My arms give the swings the same amount of power with less effort, now, and I keep having to remember not to swing quite so hard. It feels strange, that’s all.”

“I imagine that’s true.”

“I like the increased freedom of movement,” she added, “but it’s all still really new.”

Cullen was oblivious even as Cassandra reached the practice field and made her way to stand with Mahanon. “Once you get used to that increase of movement,” he was saying, “you’ll be able to benefit from a significant increase in stamina. You’ll probably find running is much easier now than it’s ever been. And you can use that to your advantage while still maintaining power in your strikes, but that might be easier done with a partner than a dummy.”

“Think you can find me a volunteer? I can check the supply swords, maybe there’s one with similar weight to this.”

He chuckled. “I doubt anyone would be willing to risk sparring with the Lady Inquisitor.” Harritt deserves some kind of commendation for that armor. I’ve never seen anything like it. “But I could be your volunteer.”

“Well, I don’t mind, if you’re willing,” she said, a little nervously. She glanced at Mahanon and saw that he’d been joined not only by Cassandra, but also Sera, who was evidently bored following the end of the archery contest. “Though I have a feeling it will end up being a bit of a spectacle.”

“Everything we do is a bit of a spectacle nowadays,” he said with a little grin. “But as I believe I already told you... I’d be more disappointed if they had nothing to talk about. Find yourself a sword and we’ll get started.”
“How long do you think it will take for all of your diligent soldiers to stop what they’re doing in order to watch?” she teased him.

“Mm, five minutes tops.”

Laughing at that, she returned to Mahanon’s side, handing him the Sulevin Blade. “Could you hold this for me, please? I don’t want to take a chance on possibly electrocuting our esteemed commander.”

“Well, not literally, anyway,” said the elf with another smirk.

“Quiet, you.” She walked off to find another weapon, and Cole settled on the grass at Mahanon’s feet. They didn’t seem to know he was there.

“So that’s the sword for which she risked her life?” Cassandra studied the blade with some interest. “It does seem to have been almost worth the trouble.”

“Just what’s Her Gracious Ladybits wearing, anyway?” Sera wanted to know.

“Some confection of dragon bones and webbing that Harritt and Dagna dreamed up.” Mahanon shrugged. “She calls it her battledress.”

“Good, right? Bit grippy round the middle, innit?” Sera rolled around on the grass a bit, watching the practice field upside down. “She’s sort of popping out in places.”

“Please don’t ever say that again.” He laughed, but underneath the laugh there was a genuine undercurrent of unease.

“Shit, and here I didn’t bring popcorn,” said a new voice, and they turned to see Varric and Dorian both arriving. “The runner didn’t tell me we were being summoned for a show.”

“Welcome to Skyhold - the place where the news of a sparring couple actually means that both parties are out banging away at each other with swords,” Dorian put in, shaking his head slightly. “Thank you for fetching us to bear witness to this display, I would hate to have missed it.”

As Cole watched, Victoria hefted one sword in her hands, and then another, trying to find one that more or less matched the weight of the weapon she would be carrying in battle. Finally settling on one, she glanced at Mahanon, then did a double take at the gathering crowd. “An audience,” he intoned, and everyone turned to look at him. “I wasn’t prepared for that. I should give them something worth watching, I suppose.”

“Are we making her nervous?” Dorian wondered with a chuckle.

“Yes,” the spirit boy replied with a nod. “But not as much as he is.”

“Quit encouraging him,” Sera grumbled.

Victoria was getting her bearings, thought she was a little distracted by the gradual lessening of noise around her as, slowly, the other soldiers practicing stopped what they were doing in order to observe. A small smirk dawned on her features. She parried a thrust, then stepped back and pivoted on her right heel, causing the “skirt” of her battledress to flare as she spun in a circle to parry him again.

For a moment, their blades were locked against each other as Cullen blinked and he was forced to
spin his weapon slightly to escape. He took a step back, suddenly a bit breathless - and not from the effort of their duel. Again and again, the swords crashed together.

“He said he doesn’t dance,” Cole observed. “But he’s been practicing.”

Cassandra chuckled in spite of herself. “I don’t think this is quite what I’d call dancing. On the other hand, I’m not entirely certain what I would call it. They do circle each other like this is a pantomime of sorts.”

Victoria gave a little hop backward, dodging the reach of Cullen’s blade. The form-fitting nature of the armor on her midsection seemed to make that easier, and she was obviously growing more comfortable with the garment. Dorian turned away only briefly in order to glance at the resident novelist. “Varric, you enjoy making wagers on everything - what are the odds looking like for this little duel?”

The dwarf considered the question. “I guess that depends on what kind of odds we’re talking,” he said after a moment. “If you’re asking who’s going to win, it’s a pretty even match and I’d wager there’s a strong chance of a draw.”

“What other odds are you considering?” asked Cassandra.

“I’d say the odds of Curly needing a cold bath after this are extremely high.”

Dorian nodded as if considering that, watching as Cullen’s eyes seemed to follow the curves of Victoria’s torso. “Mm, yes, my money's on cold bath,” he agreed at last.

“You’re both terrible,” said Cassandra. “But I’m not taking that bet... that’s more like a foregone conclusion.”

“I really don’t want to hear this, y’know,” said Mahanon. He sounded mostly amused.

“Apologies. We’ll try to keep our lasciviousness to a minimum,” Dorian replied, turning back towards the practice yard just in time to see the sparring partners lock blades again - and to see Cullen bite his lip slightly as he did so. “Then again...”

“All right,” said a new voice, as Blackwall joined them, “I’m just going to say exactly what I’m thinking. Intending absolutely no disrespect to either our revered Commander or our beloved Lady Inquisitor... that is the strangest foreplay I’ve ever seen.”

“For once you and I are in agreement.” Dorian shrugged. “It almost feels too intimate - like I shouldn’t be watching it.”

“As if you’re going to stop, though,” Cass remarked.

“Goodness no! It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

“You think she’s doing it on purpose?” Varric wondered. “I’m never quite sure with Eyebrows.”

“Normally, I would say no. But that twirl was very suspect...” mused Dorian, folding his arms and lifting one hand to finger his mustache thoughtfully.

“Twirl?” Blackwall repeated. “What kind of armor is that, anyway?”

“Apparently, the very distracting kind,” the mage replied, as Cullen blocked a blow with his shield perhaps a few seconds more slowly than he might normally have done.
“It’s something Harritt and Dagna invented, based on a design schematic we received,” Mahanon interjected. “Dragon bones and scales with silverite accents.”

“It’s eye catching, I’ll say that.”

“Have to agree,” said Bull as he joined the party. “Heard there was some commotion down here - now I see why. Are they going to be putting all of us in that outfit?”

“Can you imagine if they do?” Dorian replied, somewhere between amused and slightly appalled. “All of us running around in matching outfits…”

“Maker, I hope not,” Cass answered, curling her lip.

“Oh, come on, Seeker,” said Bull playfully. “You’d look at least as good in that as Lady Boss does. Maybe better.”

“Pure flattery,” she replied, rolling her eyes but grinning.

“Is he getting tired, do you think?” Varric wondered. “Never saw Curly droop quite like that – usually, they say, he can go for hours.”

“I don’t think tired is quite the word for it,” Bull deadpanned.

“He has to concentrate,” Cole intoned softly. “She moves differently now, like nothing he’s ever seen on the field. Leather and bone, slender like the blade and almost as bright. The woman in white burns like a beacon. Maker, she’s fluid, like water made woman.”

Victoria whirled away from her opponent as he launched a brief series of overhand strikes, dancing just out of reach, holding her sword above her head. The lightness of her own steps was oddly invigorating; it looked as though he was right, the new armor was a tremendous boost to her stamina levels. “Getting tired, Commander?” they heard her ask.

“Nonsense,” he returned with a smile, giving his head a slight jerk as if trying to make the muscles in his neck relax. “I could do this all day.” He forced his steps to match her own as if to accent his point.

“Duly noted.”

“Okay,” said Blackwall, “now I get what you said about the twirl. Andraste’s ass, maybe they should put more people in that outfit. Might distract the Red Templars.”

“Unfortunately, it also seems to be distracting our people,” Dorian observed.

“You know, if Victoria could hear the way you’re all talking about her she’d think you’d lost your collective minds,” Mahanon commented. He held the Sulevin Blade’s grip in one hand, the tip pointed downward into the ground; it was almost as tall as he was. His free arm was looped lazily around Cassandra’s waist. “I won’t presume to guess what the Commander would say.”

In the duel itself, Victoria had driven Cullen back a few paces. He seemed to be deliberating his next move, and while there was still space enough between them, she suddenly and swiftly tossed her sword up so it spun in the air. She gave another pirouette on the ball of her right foot, then caught the pommel of the sword as it came down again, resting the blade on her shoulder. Her belligerent grin of delighted surprise told them that this trick didn’t often work for her. Cullen, for his part, seemed frozen in shock, and her grin melted into a smirk.
“Had enough, Commander?” they heard her inquire sweetly.

“Had enough?” he repeated. “Never.” And they were back at it.

On the sidelines, it was Dorian who spoke first. “So...” he drawled. “Should I start drawing our Commander that cold bath later or now?”

“I take back my earlier question,” said Varric. “I’m almost positive she’s doing this on purpose. Or at least, she is now; maybe she wasn’t at first.”

“What, trying to get Cully-Wully all hot and bothered?” said Sera, chortling. “Good on her, ‘cause it’s working.”

Mahanon looked faintly uncomfortable. “I doubt she can dance around like that when she’s carrying this thing,” he commented, indicating the weapon. “It’s got to weigh more than you do, Sera.”

“It’s like fighting and yet... not,” said Cole absently. “It’s more like... something else too.” He paused. “See how she moves like that - tempting him, teasing, taunting. Well done, dear, I didn’t think you had it in you. I’ll have to get all the details later. Spare nothing, my dear, spare nothing.”

Cassandra gave a low chuckle, meant only for Mahanon’s ears. “That had to be Dorian.”

The elf relented, smiling slightly. “At least I know he and Varric are purely entertained. If anything, Varric’s probably making notes for a future book.”

“I could never write this, no one would believe it,” Cole added almost absently, mimicking Varric’s voice as he did so. “They circle each other, almost like birds. Lovesick birds. Which bird will break first, I wonder?”

“Not a bad analogy,” Mahanon admitted. “Do I want to know what the soldiers are thinking, Cole?”

Cole looked around slightly, trying to pick out one voice from the crowd. “Where are the others? Where are they? They need to see this! They won’t believe me if I tell them, they’ll think I’m telling tales again. But it’s true! The way Her Worship and the Commander are looking at each other... oh, where did they all go?”

Everyone laughed at that. “You’d have to be blind to miss it,” Blackwall noted.

Bull nodded. “I’ve only got one eye and I can see everything.”

He didn’t want to say more, there was too much and it was difficult to sift through it all. But one thought leaped out at him because of how much pain was enmeshed in it. “Maybe I was blind to only see her now. All this time, just Inquisitor... maybe I should have noticed the Lady more.”

Varric gave him a baffled sideways look. “Who’s that one? I could stand a few more details, kid. That sounds almost good enough to use as-is.”

“Don’t encourage him! Nose out, creepy!” Sera went as though to take a swing at Cole, who immediately hid behind Bull.

“It wasn’t you!” he protested.

“I know that! Doesn’t make it right!” She growled and went back to watching.
“I want to help,” Cole explained, looking at Varric, “but the hurt is knotted with it – too many threads, too much to untangle. I want to help him heal who he is... but how can I do that when even he doesn’t know who he is?”

“Damn. That really would make a good book,” Varric mused. “How does Eyebrows fit into that mess? I could spend a week unraveling that mystery. Anything more you can tell us?”

“Tuesday,” said Cole almost immediately. “A week from Tuesday. Val Royeaux. The little dressmaker’s shop in the Belle Marche. This may be a war, but I certainly don’t intend to live through it wearing rags.”

Everyone looked at him. “That... sounds like Vivienne,” said Cass with a laugh. “She’s not even here.”

“Just as well.” Blackwall looked faintly uncomfortable, even as he resumed watching the sparring. “Andraste’s ass, don’t they ever get tired?”

The spirit boy watched the practice duel in silence for a moment before he spoke again, his voice quiet, almost contemplative. “Watch her sword - straight, silver, shining in the sunlight. Watch the weapon in her hand, not her... but she is like the weapon too - glinting and graceful.” His voice dropped to a deeper pitch, almost breathless. “Andraste preserve me, her eyes are like stars. How can gray be that warm?”

They all looked at him again (except for Sera, who was deliberately ignoring him). “I meant this to be practice, to help her,” he continued, a little more softly. “She doesn’t need my help, but I... Follow her steps, focus, it’s like she’s teaching me to dance again. Focus.”

“Oh...” It was Cassandra’s voice, and her unspoken thought jolted Cole out of his reverie. Should I stop him before he embarrasses Cullen?

He looked at her in surprise. “Doesn’t he want her to know? I want to help.”

At that, Cassandra chuckled again, quietly. “He might want her to know. I don’t think he necessarily wants us to know.”

“But don’t let that stop you,” Dorian added. “Because I for one am very interested.”

Cole looked back out at the practice field once more. The match was remarkably even, for the most part. “He likes the stars,” he said. “He never bothered to fix the hole in his roof because he can see the stars at night... they make him feel free. She does the same thing, with the stars in her eyes – she sets him free, lets him forget. She helps. It’s good.” He looked at Cassandra. “Like he does for you.”

“That’s sweet,” she replied, a bit flushed.

“It’s not sweet, it’s creepy. Stop encouraging him to go into people’s heads,” Sera complained.

“Anything on her end, kid?” Varric asked.

“The Anchor is bright, too bright for me to hear much...” he replied, shaking his head. “Like looking into the sun... the sun, he’s like the sun sometimes. Sometimes it almost hurts to look. But today he’s looking at me like I’m the sun. I think I surprised him. Good.”

“Maker’s breath, they’re ridiculous.” Dorian’s voice held more affection than anything, however.
“One of them really needs to just spit it out,” Bull laughed. “But it’s fun to watch until they do.”

“Maybe if Cullen keeps dragging his feet, I’ll have a go,” Cole added, imitating Bull’s rumble. “Always had a thing for redheads anyway.”

“What?!” Mahanon blurted.

“Uh, kid...” Bull had the good grace to look embarrassed.

“Oh. Sorry,” Cole said to Bull before turning to Mahanon and studying him. “It feels strange to hear these things. She’s not a woman, she’s ma da’vhenan. There shouldn’t be a difference, but there is.”

“Very true. There is,” Mahanon replied, nodding. “This is all extremely weird. You lot want to tease me, that’s one thing. But hearing you say things about her is just... wrong.”

Chastened, Cole turned his head away. “I pulled the threads and made the knot worse. I didn’t mean to make a hurt.”

“You didn’t hurt, Cole. You just... told me things I didn’t expect to hear.”

“No. And they didn’t expect to feel them.”

After what seemed like hours, although it was more like twenty minutes, the swords rang out with one final metallic note as they met in the air above their wielders’ heads. Their eyes and blades both locked for several seconds, and then they spun the weapons free and wordlessly agreed to end the match. Cullen offered his Lady Inquisitor a short bow.

“Well played,” he said. “Your new armor serves you well.”

“Thank you.” She inclined her head to him, and they saluted one another with their swords before turning to walk in opposite directions. He immediately barked orders to the soldiers to return to their own practice, while she went to return her borrowed weapon to the rack. She made her way over to the crowd of her friends, her hands clasped behind her back, her expression faintly smug.

“I trust you all enjoyed that?” she inquired.

“More than you can possibly imagine,” Dorian smirked. “Some of us more than others, some of us less so.”

“I feel like I don’t want to know what you mean.” She turned to reclaim the Sulevin Blade from Mahanon’s care. “I always wanted to enter the Grand Tourney back in the Free Marches, you know. Of course, the Bann’s youngest wasn’t allowed, but that didn’t stop me from wanting. I feel almost like I just did.”

“It was very impressive,” said Cassandra. *Let me steer the conversation, help me make him stop being upset by all of this. I’m not sure if he’s as distressed as he looks, but she shouldn’t be made to feel ashamed for it. A bit more artistic than we’re usually able to do, but very impressive.”*

“Thank you.” Victoria smiled. “It was fun. I haven’t *played* with a weapon in a while, but it was definitely enjoyable. That toss trick was something I learned a long time ago and it doesn’t usually work, but I just thought, why not? Maybe it inspired the men a little.” She hefted the Sulevin Blade briefly before slotting it into the scabbard on her back with a distinct *chink* sound.
“Oh, it inspired them, I’m sure,” said Dorian. “To gossip.” His grin was impudent. Well done, my darling.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Victoria replied dryly. “But to use the words of someone of whom I’m rather fond, I’d be more disappointed if there were nothing for them to talk about.” She smirked. “And now I think I need a drink.”

“Feel like some company? I’ll buy if you’ll give me a play-by-play,” he offered, his eyes glinting.

“Sure. I’ll meet you in the tavern - I need to stop by the Tradesmen’s tent first.”

“All right. But don’t you dare back out.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

By the time Victoria joined Dorian in a relatively quiet corner of the tavern, he had procured two mugs from Cabot and Cole had arranged himself on the crossbeams above their table. He wasn’t eavesdropping exactly; he didn’t need to know the details that Dorian so clearly craved. He just wanted to make sure that what he’d said to the others had helped, and not hurt.

“So what was it you desperately needed from Bonny Sims, hm?” Dorian asked.

“Chocolates, actually,” she replied, sitting down and taking a long drink. “We made a small wager on the outcome of the sparring; Cullen mentioned she had some chocolates he’d like to have. The man has a terrible sweet tooth. It was a draw, but I thought I would be generous anyway. I had them sent up to his office.”

“What were you supposed to get if you won?” he wanted to know.

“I left it up to his imagination – I just requested ‘something shiny.’ But I already have this,” she added, fingering the coin in the hollow of her throat; the new armor forced her to wear it on the outside of her clothes, visible to everyone. “So I’m not complaining. Why were you all there, anyway?”

“We were summoned. Well, Varric and I were summoned,” he amended. “I’m not sure about anyone else. You two were quite the show, I haven’t seen the Inquisition that enraptured since the day you and Mahanon received your formal appointments.”

“It amazes me that it was of so much interest to anyone, but... well, if you all enjoyed it, I guess that’s what counts.”

“Oh, we certainly did – some more than others, as I said. You’ve acquired quite the pool of admirers, my dear.”

She eyed him over her mug. “Do I want to know?”

“Cole was there. He had some... choice tidbits he plucked out of assorted persons’ heads. Nothing too scandalous, mostly just admiration. Your dashing commander had the most to say on the subject, of course.” He chuckled at the bloom in her cheeks. “And your honorary brother – the other one, that is – was rendered quite uncomfortable to think that anyone sees his precious da’vhenan as an object of desire. He’ll get over it, I’m sure.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad,” she said, a little dubiously. “As long as nobody’s pining for me or anything ridiculous like that.”
“I think I can safely say, my dear, that only one man falls under that category.”

“Cole, get off my desk,” said Cullen. “I have men coming in here shortly to receive their new assignments.”

He obliged, but watched the Commander for a moment. Varric said he needed a cold bath. Cold water, hot breaths, the sun is bright, blinding, blurring… “Are you all right, Cullen?”

“What? Yes, I – why do you ask?”

“Flames in her hair, lights in her eyes,” the spirit boy mused, still watching him. “The sun and moon and stars all rolled into one. She would be happy if you said it. Others don’t say what they think about her either, but she doesn’t want to know. Yours is the poetry she wants to read.”

He smiled, perhaps a bit sadly. “I want to, Cole. But sometimes it's not as easy as all that. No matter what else, we are still at war, after all.”

“War,” Cole repeated sadly. “It’s bigger than you, bigger than her. But sometimes small is better. A little happiness becomes a shield when standing in front of the fear and the fright. Like Mahanon and Cassandra have learned to be shields for each other. You shielded her in the Fade when we were lost. She knew you were waiting for her to come home. It was louder than her fear.”

Cullen somehow managed to both stiffen and soften at these words. A dark hour. If she hadn’t returned, I don’t know what would have happened... my faith waned in the shadow of that battle. Andraste gave her back to me, Herald or not. “Thank you for that, Cole,” he said after a moment. “I’m glad I could help, even from so far away.”

Cole nodded. He started to speak, then turned his head. Turning back, he peered up from under the brim of his hat. “She’s coming. Even if she wanted to stay away, she couldn’t. And she doesn’t.”

“What should...?” Cullen looked oddly blank at this news, as though unable to figure out how to respond.

“She put away the armor – soft and supple, but sturdy and strong. She wants to be just Victoria for a little while. You can give that to her. Something shiny. You’ll find the words.”

A small group of soldiers filed into the office, followed by the Lady Inquisitor, and Cole vanished.
Chapter Summary

Blackwall disappears, Harding needs a rescue, Victoria gets frightened, and Varric tells a story.

Chapter Notes

I mixed Blackwall's personal quest with the "Under Her Skin" quest from the Templar playthrough. What gets reported about Mahanon, though, that's all unique to this tale. As for the question Varric doesn't entirely answer near the beginning, I'll bet a couple of you can guess, and you can find the answer in the supplemental story "Across the Waking Sea," found elsewhere in this series. His story at the end is one of my personal headcanons for DAII.

Chapter Thirty-Three: There Is But One Truth

“Are you still mad at me?” Victoria asked Varric, a little anxiously.

“Eyebrows, I was never mad at you.” He shook his head. “Cole could have been a person. I was a little disappointed that he didn’t get that chance. But I know you did what you did because you felt it was best for him, and it was your call to make.”

She gave him a relieved smile, running a brush through Falon’s tail. They had very recently returned from Redcliffe Village, where Cole – now sporting the amulet that would defend him from corruption – had confronted the ex-Templar who had been responsible for the real Cole’s terrible death. The details of that situation would haunt her for a while, but of more immediate concern to her was Varric’s disappointment with her decision. He had wanted Cole to become more human, while Solas had wanted him to fully embrace his origins as a spirit; she had, after troubled deliberation, come down on the elf’s side.

Varric seated himself on a crate and watched her fuss over her horse. “I’m not fond of horseback riding, but this guy’s all right,” he conceded, nodding at the barded charger. “He seems pretty well trained – I don’t feel the rocks quite so much when I’m riding pillion with you.”

“He’s a good boy.” She patted the long nose, and glanced around the stable. “Odd. I wonder where Blackwall’s gotten to – he’s usually here when we get back, if he hasn’t gone with us.”

“Yeah, the scenery is strangely lacking in Grey Wardens just now,” said the dwarf in a puzzled tone. “You think something came up while we were gone?”

“I’m not sure.” She frowned. “Let’s go find out.”

Mahanon met them on the stairs to the main hall. “Glad you’re back, da’vhenan. One of Leliana’s
scouts found this in the stable.” He handed Victoria a sheet of paper, which she read quickly before handing it to Varric. “We’re not sure why Blackwall thought it was important to rush off to Orlais for an execution, but he’s been gone for several hours. There was also this,” he added, handing her a second sheet, “addressed to you and me. It’s been an honor to serve with us and so forth.”

“Hasn’t anyone gone after him?”

He shook his head. “Cass and I were going to go, but we’ve gotten a distress message from the elves at Din’an Hanin, in the Emerald Graves. We thought it was more urgent to prepare to go to their aid, since Blackwall doesn’t seem to be in any particular danger.”

“Hm. Makes sense,” she said. “Let’s convene a quick meeting with the advisors.”

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Two hours later, most of the Inquisition’s inner circle had broken into two parties, and were getting ready to depart. Varric, Dorian, and the Iron Bull were accompanying Victoria into Val Royeaux in search of Blackwall, while Cassandra, Solas, and Cole were setting out for the Emerald Graves with Mahanon. The groups would travel together for a time, then go their separate ways.

“Victoria,” said Leliana, “I’m concerned. I’ve not heard from Scout Harding, and she’s usually terribly reliable. While you’re there, can you see if you can find her?”

“What exactly is she doing?”

“I sent her to Val Royeaux to meet with a merchant who had a connection to Calpernia. But I haven’t gotten any word from her since she wrote to say she reached the city safely. She’s not alone, but all the same…” She shrugged.

“Certainly, we can look into the matter.” Victoria started to say something else, but glanced up to see Cullen leading Ferdinand out of the stable. “And just what are you doing, Commander?”

“I’m coming to Val Royeaux with you,” he replied.

“Because of your immense appreciation for Orlesian culture and manners?”

He chuckled and moved to help Varric into the saddle behind her. “Because of assorted reasons. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Oh, no, now we need an explanation,” said Dorian with mock eagerness. At least, Victoria hoped it was feigned, but she doubted it.

“Very well. We’re not sure why Blackwall’s attending this man’s execution, but it can’t be the most peaceful reason.” Cullen climbed onto his own horse. “I’ll just be more comfortable if I oversee it myself.”

“Whatever suits you, I suppose.” She chuckled. “I’m not going to object, that’s for sure.” She glanced at Dorian, who smirked at her.

As they set out through the gates and down the road into the valley, she steered Falon to walk beside Mythal’enaste. “I’m a little worried about the elves,” she said. “We know Corypheus’s people have been scouting elven ruins – I guess it’s no surprise that they’d find this one too. But what do they want?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. As far as that goes, what does Blackwall want with this condemned fellow?”
“That doesn’t make sense to me at all. But he is a Warden,” she mused. “Maybe he’s gone to invoke the Right of Conscription, get the man for the order. It could be this is someone he knows, or at least knows by reputation, and Blackwall thinks he’d make a good recruit.”

“That makes as much sense as anything. But why leave in secret? Why no explanation?”

“That’s the part I can’t work out.”

Mahanon shook his head and glanced over at her, then did a double take. “Varric, what is that?”

“What’s what?”

“The red thing on your belt. I never saw you wear that before.”

“It’s a scarf, Hunter. Sort of like the one you wear? In case my neck gets cold.”

Mahanon frowned slightly, shifting his gaze to Victoria’s face before looking back at Varric again. “It doesn’t strike me as your style, honestly. Not that I’m criticizing.”

“It was a gift,” the dwarf replied.

[Editor’s note: I wasn’t going there, Scholar.]

It was raining when they reached Val Royeaux, and Victoria picked her way through the gathered crowd before the scaffold. “Cyril Mornay,” said a man in a chevalier’s helm, “for your crimes against the empire of Orlais, for the murders of General Vincent Callier, Lady Lorette Callier, their four children, and their retainers, you are sentenced to be hanged from the neck until dead. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

The condemned was a pale, sickly-looking creature with shorn hair and a crushed expression. He made not a sound. “Very well,” the masked speaker continued. The executioner pulled the prisoner to his feet.

“Well... this is grim,” said Varric, a bit sadly.

“Who is this man to Blackwall?” Dorian wondered. “A brother? A friend?”

Victoria shook her head, staring at the sorrowful prisoner as the rope was looped around his neck. “Proceed,” said the chevalier, and the executioner moved to open the platform beneath the feet of the condemned. The drums of the dead began to beat. Then...

“Stop!”

As they watched, Blackwall mounted the steps leading to the scaffold. “A Grey Warden?” asked the chevalier in some confusion.

“This man is innocent of the crimes laid before him!” Blackwall declared. The crowd was silent, enraptured. “Orders were given, and he followed them like any good soldier. He should not die for that mistake!”

“Then find me the man who gave the order!” said the chevalier.

Blackwall paused, looking out at the crowd... and suddenly, Victoria knew. Beside her, so did Varric. “Oh, shit,” the dwarf muttered.
“Blackwall!” Victoria cried.

He shook his head. “No. I am not Blackwall. I never was Blackwall.” His eyes were trained solely on the Lady Inquisitor, as though he were speaking only to her. “Warden Blackwall is dead, and has been for years. I assumed his name to hide, like a coward, from who I really am.”

The city felt like it was closing in on Victoria. She barely registered the shock of the condemned as he recognized his defender, barely felt Cullen’s hand as it found her shoulder to steady her. She stared at the man she thought she knew, unable to hear anything except his declaration of guilt.

“I gave the order. The crime was mine. I am Thom Rainier.”

“It’s a damned mess,” Cullen said. “Listen – you four go find Scout Harding for Leliana. I’ll go to the jail and see if I can make any sense out of this.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m almost as shocked as you are, Lady Inquisitor. But maybe there’s more to the story that we don’t know. We can hope, at least.” He squeezed her fingers. “Be careful.”

“This Vicinius has a place on the docks. We shouldn’t be long,” Dorian assured them.

Victoria was still somewhat in shock as the three men herded her through the streets of the Belle Marche and into the merchant’s house, but the mess which confronted them snapped her back into the here and now. “What’s happened here?!"

“And where’s the merchant?” Varric wondered. “Oh, this can’t be good.”


They began to search the house, coming across evidence of slaving and, as might be expected, some Venatori. “Harding!” Victoria shouted, slamming the Sulevin Blade into one of their adversaries. “Are you here? Where are you?”

There was no reply, at first, but the body of the merchant was soon discovered sprawled on a rug before a fireplace. “Looks like Calpernia sent the Venatori to deal with him,” Varric mused. “Shit. Where’s Harding?”

“I’m here,” said a somewhat weak voice. They turned, and an overturned cabinet in one corner slowly opened to reveal the exhausted scout. “Been hiding for... to be honest, I have no idea how long. They killed the soldiers who came with me.”

“Thank the Maker you’re all right,” Victoria said, moving to help her. “We’ll get you out of here. Were you able to learn anything before they killed Vicinius?”

“Not much. It seems that Calpernia buys slaves in order to free them – she’s a former slave herself. It’s weird,” Harding admitted, “but I don’t think she’s exactly a bad person. I mean, she’s not a good one, don’t get me wrong, but I think I expected her to be more...” She gestured silently, trying to find the right word.

“More of a ‘mwa-ha-ha’ mustache twirling type?” Varric offered. “You know, those don’t really happen too often. Most bad guys usually see themselves as good guys because they’re fighting for a cause.” [Editor’s note: I’m a bit of an expert on the subject.]
“What’s this?” Bull interrupted. He handed Victoria a piece of a crystal. “Looks like part of something. We should find the other pieces.”

“Here’s one,” said Harding, digging in a pile of discarded papers.

“Think I’ve got the last one,” added Varric, examining one corner of the room. “Here, Eyebrows, put them together and see if they look like anything.”

Victoria gasped as the third chunk of shattered crystal slid into its position. A sort of white smoke began to emanate from the bauble, accompanied by a voice she assumed belonged to the lady mage. They listened, transfixed, as Calpernia raged about the condition of the slaves Vicinius had acquired for her. She had wanted them unharmed, and to judge by her words and her wrath, they had most certainly not been. She then gave the order for the Venatori to kill the merchant, and the little scene ended with Vicinius pleading for his life.

“What was that?”

“I’m not entirely sure. Probably best discussed with Leliana,” Dorian advised. “Perhaps this could be used to help us somehow.”

“Yes, maybe it could. All right, boys, take Scout Harding to our camp outside the city,” she said after a moment. “She needs food and healing and rest. I’ll go and see what Cullen’s discovered with regards to Blackwall... or whatever his name is.”

The bailiff was still at the scaffolding when the group returned to the Belle Marche. While the ‘boys’ shepherded the weary scout down the Avenue of Her Reflective Thought, Victoria exchanged words with him. They weren’t encouraging words. “There are a lot of people who want to see that bastard swing,” he said. “He’s in the jail – that way. If you’ve goodbyes to say, I suggest you say them now.”

It was sort of a perk of being an Inquisitor, she supposed. The guards made absolutely no objection whatsoever to the ‘woman in white’ descending into their dank, depressing prison cells and speaking to the only person behind bars. Blackwall sat with his chin on his chest, as though counting the stones in the floor pattern. He didn’t look at her, but he clearly registered her presence as he began to speak.

“I didn’t take Blackwall’s life,” he said quietly. “I traded his death.”

“That’s something,” she said, her tone equally quiet.

“He wanted me for the Wardens, but there was an ambush. Darkspawn. He was killed. I took his name to stop the world from losing a good man.” Only then did he finally look up at her, his eyes sadder than usual. “You remind me of him, sometimes. There I was, a criminal on the run, but he saw something in me that he considered worth saving. Worth keeping. Like you when you’re on that throne, trying to see the best in everyone you have to judge – even when the others give you grief for it.”

“Was the bailiff telling the truth?” she asked. “Did you really do those things?”

“Yes, I did. It’s all true; it’s time we all took a good look at who I really am.” He spoke haltingly, like he was trying to find the courage required for the words. He had been a captain in the Orlesian army. Yes, they had killed the Calliers. Lord Callier had been one of Empress Celene’s generals. Rainier was hired by Robert Chapuis, one of Grand Duke Gaspard’s supporters, to kill the man; but they’d expected a military party – not the family. Rainier had ordered his men to ambush the
carriages anyway, and lied to them about the reason. When word got out about the atrocity, Gaspard denounced the action, and Rainier’s patron committed suicide. With no proof that he had acted under orders, he had fled, and left his men to take the fall.

Abruptly, he threw himself against the bars of his cell, and Victoria backed up instinctively. “Those men, my men, paid for my treason while I was pretending to be a better man!” He stared at her for a moment before sinking back down. “This is what I am, Ladyship. A murderer, a traitor... a monster.”

She hesitated. “A monster wouldn’t have given himself up,” she said. “Somewhere along the line, you stopped pretending. You became a better man.”

He gave a bark of unamused laughter. “There you go again. Always determined to see what’s good in someone, even when the truth is right in front of you. The Lord Inquisitor would not be handling me so gently, I think.”

“Perhaps not, but he’s not here,” she replied. “The man on the gallows – Mornay – who was he?”

“My second-in-command, and a good man. When I heard about his execution, I resolved to stop it. I couldn’t let another die for my mistakes.”

“See? Not so very monstrous, are you?”

“You’re impossible, Ladyship.” Despite the bitter self-loathing in his voice, however, there was a faint undercurrent of fondness.

When Victoria left the cell block and returned to the exit, she found Cullen waiting for her, and all she wanted was to throw herself into his arms; but they were in public, Inquisitor and Commander, and she reluctantly forbore. Instead, he presented her with the report Leliana had forwarded about Thom Rainier. She glanced at it, mostly registering that it confirmed everything the man himself had already said, and sighed. “Let me guess. Our spymaster had this lying around somewhere.”

“It would have been difficult to connect Blackwall to Rainier,” he pointed out gently, “and Leliana has something of a blind spot when it comes to Grey Wardens.” His shrug was light, tolerant. “She spent a year working alongside the three greatest Wardens of a generation; she tends to believe they’re all like that.”

“I suppose I can’t blame her.”

“What do we do now?” he asked, watching her intently. “Black-er, Rainier has accepted his fate, but that doesn’t mean you must. We do have resources. If he’s released to us, you may pass judgment on him yourself.”

She hesitated. “What would you do?”

Cullen scowled. “What he did to the men under his command was unacceptable. He betrayed their trust, and ours – I despise him for it.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“Well, he still fought as a Warden. He joined the Inquisition, shed his blood for our cause. He has been a friend to many, yourself included. Saving Mornay the way he did took courage, I’ll give him that.” He shook his head. “I can’t tell you what to do. But we can explore our options back at Skyhold. Where are the others?”
"I had them take Harding back to camp; she was injured. They’re waiting for us there."

"Let’s go."

That Victoria intended to have Blackwall (or whomever) released to the Inquisition was never in doubt. She could cash in a favor with the empire; they’d probably be glad to be rid of him. Still, she was relatively quiet on the return trek, and the fact that Leliana was waiting for them on the steps of the keep didn’t seem like an auspicious sign.

"What is it? What’s the matter?"

The spymaster hesitated. "The other party has returned from the Emerald Graves," she said, "and Mahanon is not with them."

"What?"

"I am sorry, my lady. Cassandra says they were ambushed when they left Din’an Hanin – by the time the scene was cleared, the Lord Inquisitor was no longer with them." She shook her head. "They returned here with all haste in the hopes that we would have word of him."

"But you don’t. Of course you don’t." Victoria stumbled a little, and Dorian caught her gently by one arm. "What can you tell us?"

"Your efforts in Val Royeaux bore fruit. Calpernia is a former Tevinter slave, and if Corypheus freed her, it makes it more understandable that she would follow him," Leliana replied. "Harding’s assessment was correct; she has freed every slave she has purchased. Meanwhile, I’ve had Dagna examine the crystal you sent back with the runner."

"You’ll forgive me if I have a little bit of trouble caring at the moment." The Lady Inquisitor’s voice was unexpectedly hard, and she blushed at once, biting her tongue. "My apologies. Of course, this is important."

"It’s all right. What we’ve learned is that the crystal is similar to something the dwarves in the Orzammar Shaperate use. It preserves memories, and this particular one yielded a memory of Corypheus talking to Calpernia. He wants her to prepare to become something called ‘the vessel,’ and to have no fear of possible possession. The alliance seems to be somewhat less than harmonious; it appears as though she doesn’t entirely trust Corypheus."

"So she’s not completely dense," Victoria mused. "What’s this ‘vessel’ business?"

"They spoke of power and demons, but Calpernia is already a magister. Corypheus must have some other plan." Leliana shrugged lightly, and gestured for them to enter the keep, as though belatedly realizing they were still standing on the steps.

While the others retreated to their quarters for a bit of rest, Victoria followed Leliana down into the undercroft, where Dagna was fascinated by the new acquisition. "I’m no Shaper," she said, "but I might be able to get the crystal to accept new memories."

"Really?" Leliana’s eyes lit up. "If we hid it among Calpernia’s belongings, imagine what we could learn!"

"I could split it, and keep half here! We’d be able to hear her speaking right then! I mean, it’s not how they’re supposed to work, and it’ll probably break," Dagna admitted. "Like I said, I’m no Shaper."
“Calpernia’s Venatori have been digging up elven ruins, just as the Red Templars have,” Leliana added. “Tracking them might lead us to her. If this crystal were placed in her lair, I cannot overstate the value of what we might learn.”

Victoria looked from one to the other. “All right, do what needs doing. Keep me informed.”

She couldn’t sleep. Knowing that the bed on the other side of the divider was empty, knowing that its occupant was not within Skyhold... it drove her mad. Victoria pulled on a dressing gown and made her way down the stairs, thinking maybe she’d go to the kitchen for something warm to drink.

The main hall was empty, except for a couple of guards and one author. Varric was sitting at one of the tables nearest the fire, papers and ink and quill before him; he glanced up at her approach. “If you’ve got questions, I’m your dwarf,” he offered.

“No really. Can I sit with you for a bit?”

His expression softened. “Worried about Hunter, huh?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It’d be more of a shock if you weren’t. I know what he means to you.”

She half-smiled. “I guess you do. Am I interrupting the new book?”

“A little, but I don’t mind. I don’t know what possessed me to write this, honestly. It’s probably both the best and worst idea I’ve ever had. The research alone is exhausting, but I can’t very well put the Duchess in anything but the latest fashions – by order of Madame de Fer herself, of course.” He chuckled. “Ah well. It gives me something cheerful to put in my letters.” He nodded at one of the sheets of paper, folded in half. “That was waiting for me when we got back. Bethany writes like clockwork.”

“She’s your most regular correspondent, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. Aveline sends a note every so often, but she’s busy keeping Kirkwall from falling into the sea. Merrill writes about every couple of months – I get the impression she starts a letter, gets distracted, and finds it later.” He shook his head, smiling. “Fenris is with Hawke, Isabela’s at sea, and I ignore any letters I get from Sebastian as a matter of principle. But Sunshine? Every other week.”

“I imagine she misses you terribly,” Victoria remarked.

“Well, that’s mutual. I don’t know what possessed me to write this, honestly. It’s probably both the best and worst idea I’ve ever had. The research alone is exhausting, but I can’t very well put the Duchess in anything but the latest fashions – by order of Madame de Fer herself, of course.” He chuckled. “Ah well. It gives me something cheerful to put in my letters.” He nodded at one of the sheets of paper, folded in half. “That was waiting for me when we got back. Bethany writes like clockwork.”

“I imagine she misses you terribly,” Victoria remarked.

“Well, that’s mutual. But I’d rather let Starkhaven hog all the sunshine than put her in the middle of this mess.” He scribbled the rest of his current paragraph, then set down his quill and stretched. “I ever tell you about Curly helping me visit her in the Gallows?”

“No, never.” She folded her arms on the tabletop. “You only mentioned him a few times in The Tale of the Champion. I got the impression you didn’t know him well.”

“Well, he was far and away my favorite Templar in Kirkwall, but I don’t need to tell you that that isn’t saying much. He got on decently with Hawke, though, so that was in his favor; we helped out with a couple of Templar-related matters and I guess he felt like he owed her. Once Bethany was in the Circle, he sort of kept an eye on her.” Something in Varric’s face went very hard for a moment. “Good thing too, with that Ser Alrik running around in there. The way he wielded the Rite of
Tranquility... I don’t want to think about what might have happened otherwise.” He shook his head, letting his expression relax.

“Yeah, I shuddered over that part of the story, I was sort of hoping you were exaggerating.”

“I wish I had been, Eyebrows, believe me.”

“So what prompted the visit?”

“It was just the one time. You read the book; you remember that the girls’ mother was murdered.” She nodded. “Their uncle Gamlen took care of actually notifying Bethany about it, but Gamlen has all the sensitivity and warmth of your average dracolisk. Fenris went to Hawke, so I went to Cullen to see if I could get in to Bethany. I didn’t know it at the time, but he’d lost his own parents just a couple years before, in the Blight, so he was sympathetic. Anyway, he got me into the Gallows. They had a little courtyard in there, smaller than the one where you have your herbs, and he had me wait there for her. Poor girl should never have been expected to go through that alone.” He sighed, and shook his head again. “He had to stand guard the whole time, but he was decent enough to keep at a distance and not listen. Anyway, that’s your bedtime story for tonight; it seemed like the sort of thing you’d want to know about your commander. I know he made a lot of mistakes in Kirkwall – I know he still blames himself for them too. But he tried, more than most did anyway. Some days he succeeded more than others.”

Victoria smiled. “Thanks, Varric.”

“No problem. Now, you want to read this over for me? I’m not quite sure I’ve worded it just the way I want, and maybe a fresh pair of eyes is what it really needs.”

“A sneak preview of the newest Varric Tethras novel? Who would turn down that?”
The Lady of Sorrow

Chapter Summary

The misadventures at Din'an Hanin are revealed, along with what came afterward.

Chapter Notes

Varric wasn't actually supposed to appear in this chapter, except in his usual notes. He decided otherwise.

Chapter Thirty-Four: The Lady of Sorrow

[Editor’s note: Just like when Eyebrows got hurt, we’re going to do a little skip backwards in time to show you what happened. I had to resort to a little bribery to get the Seeker to help us with this chapter, but I like to think it was worth it.]

Cassandra had to admit, privately, that she was extremely fond of the Emerald Graves. It was arguably the most beautiful place in all of Orlais, or at least the most beautiful region she herself had seen.

She was a little puzzled, however, as to how anyone could actually live there. Fairbanks and his people were one thing, but the scattered manor houses – Villa Maurel, Chateau d'Onterre, and there were probably others too – indicated a completely different lifestyle, one the area hardly seemed equipped to support. How the nobles’ wagons and carriages navigated the woods was anyone’s guess; at one time, she supposed, the Orlesians had laid the stones which formed the roads connecting these ‘civilized’ pockets of the forest with one another and with the country beyond its borders. Now, though, tree roots were reclaiming the land, and wild bears roamed among the ancient ruins without concern. Part of her, the part which she imagined really was the Nevarran princess she reluctantly admitted to being, would have loved to take up residence in the abandoned chateau, since it had been purged of its resident horrors and the bodies of those unlucky souls were put to the torch. The rest of her, however, was largely content with her somewhat nomadic existence. Besides, Mahanon lived at Skyhold, and so long as her heart dwelled within the castle, the rest of her would be there too.

It started to rain as they entered the Emerald Graves, following the southern road. It was light at first, but the farther north they progressed, the heavier it seemed to become. The trees shielded them from the worst of it, for a time, but by the time they reached the Briathos’s Steps region, it was a full downpour and little means of sheltering.

“Let’s make for the camp at Direstone,” Mahanon directed. “Our people are still there; if nothing
else, we can leave the mounts sheltered and cross the river on foot.”

“The hour is late,” said Solas. “I would recommend we remain within the camp overnight; the weather may clear by sunrise. Though your idea to leave the mounts is a sensible one, since we don’t know what to expect when we reach the tomb.”

The soldiers at Direstone welcomed them, and ushered them into tents. It was understood that Mahanon and Cassandra were familiar, so to put as little strain on the setup as possible, they were given one tent to share. The ruins in which the camp was constructed still had a largely intact roof, and so with the aid of campfire and rations, they waited out the stormy night.

Cassandra awoke the next morning and listened intently. Mahanon’s breath cascaded over her ear; her head was pillowed on his chest, rising and falling with him as he inhaled and exhaled. The rain had stopped sometime in the night. The tent was brilliant crimson with morning light, and beyond the flap, birds were singing. In the midst of dreams, he tightened his arms around her; for a few minutes at least, the world was a beautiful place.

As she turned her head, she blinked, catching sight of the pillow she had abandoned. Her locket – the one containing the priceless image of her beloved brother, the one she had refused to risk leaving behind in Haven – was lying there.

Several minutes later she emerged into the morning, and found Cole sitting by the fire. “Cole,” she greeted him, “I found a locket on my pillow...”

“It was Anthony’s,” he said simply.

“It was my grandmother’s, actually, but it has his portrait inside. I thought I had lost it.”

“You did,” the spirit-boy admitted. “I had to fight a rat for it.”

So that was what happened. Genuinely touched, and unable to speak for a moment, she opened a belt pouch and tucked the precious bauble inside. “Thank you.”

“That’s all right. It wasn’t a very big rat.” He gave her a somewhat lopsided, bashful smile.

“My people built a life here,” Solas remarked. “It must have been something to see.”

They stood at the entrance to the ruined building of Din’an Hanin, the burial tomb of the Emerald Knights, and he was doing his best to decipher a partially illegible sign. Mahanon, however, was less concerned with the history and more with the utter silence. “It’s much too quiet,” he said. “Where in the world is Taven’s scouting party?”

“Maker have mercy,” Cassandra said, stunned, as she turned a corner.

“Taven.” Mahanon sounded stricken as he surveyed the bodies. Cole was unusually silent, only dropping to one knee to touch a lifeless pointed ear.

“Most were unarmed,” she heard herself saying. “They didn’t stand a chance.”

“There should be Inquisition soldiers here!” said Mahanon, his grief shifting quickly into anger. “Where are they?”

“I think perhaps the answers we seek are found within.” Solas nodded at the great doors leading into the tomb.
Sure enough, barely ten steps beyond the door, they found the missing soldiers. “These are our men,” said Mahanon, a touch miserably. “I’m grateful Toria’s not here; she gets so upset when our soldiers are killed.”

“Should we make a pyre?” Cassandra offered. “For them and for the elves?”

“Not yet,” Solas cautioned. “First we should deal with whomever – or whatever – is responsible for their deaths. Once the area is clear, we can do right by the dead.”

“Curse the past, the place where lies were born,” Cole intoned. To Cassandra’s surprise, he wasn’t simply spouting philosophy, as he so often did; he was reading the words from a plaque on a broken wall.

Mahanon, less interested in their surroundings than she had supposed he would be, led the charge through the ruins. They had to climb over crumbled walls and rambling vines.

“Keep searching,” a voice shouted. “I want the rest of that seal!”

“Red Templars,” Mahanon growled, unsheathing his blades.

“Fanatics,” said Cassandra, shaking her head. “They know not the truth of what they serve.”

With some difficulty, they clambered down to where the first group of Templars could be found. They were accompanied by a Behemoth, red lyrium jutting from its back, and only when it had fallen did they find the clue they were seeking. Mahanon held up a strange emerald green fragment. “Corypheus’s men had part of a seal,” he said, puzzled. “Do they even know what it opens?”

“Taven’s interest must have been enough to draw their attention,” Solas mused. He led them farther into the tomb, where a magnificent statue remained almost perfectly intact. “The Emerald Knights once patrolled the borders of the Dales, protecting the elven people,” he explained. “The Dalish saw them as romantic heroes; the Chantry called them ruthless butchers. I suspect both sides have some element of the truth.”

He led them through the crumbling ruin, down elaborate half-collapsed staircases and through doorways with high vaulted arches. In what he called the Knights’ Hall, they encountered and eliminated a few more Red Templars. “This must have been a stunningly beautiful building once,” Cassandra commented, gazing overhead at the ceilings.

“It was. I have seen it in my journeys through the Fade,” Solas replied.

“Still, silent, old and old,” said Cole. “We protected until we fell, then our bodies were laid here to be protected by the stone. The sadness curls through the floors like the roots of trees grown wild.”

“You said this was a tomb. But it seems almost more like a cathedral.” Somewhat impulsively, Cassandra picked up an overturned bench which looked like nothing so much as a Chantry pew.

“It’s not an ill-chosen comparison. There is a similar level of reverence here – or at least, there used to be,” said the mage. “When the Dales belonged to the People, Emerald Knights who fell in battle had their names inscribed in the great record books of this place. If it was possible, their bodies were brought and interred here as well, but that wasn’t always practical. By at least having their names here, they were remembered with honor, and it was thought that they might have an easier time finding their way to Falon’Din.”

“So what does this seal unlock, then?” asked Mahanon, studying the fragments in his hand. He had
found a second one at the base of a statue, and seemed to be attempting to work out how they
would be reattached. “It looks like there are several more pieces.”

“While in the Fade,” said Solas, a bit delicately, “I learned that there is a separate chamber in the
lowest level, a place held apart from the other crypts. They called it the Tomb of the Emerald
Knight, and I believe this seal is the key to its door.”

“Why did one knight get his – or her – own separate tomb?”

“That remains to be seen. Perhaps the answers lie within. But why the Red Templars think there
would be anything in there which could serve their master, I cannot begin to guess.”

Down and down and down, through the halls, through the crypts. There were chambers to explore,
Behemoths to annihilate, seal fragments to find. Cassandra wondered how many ages it had been
since living figures had last walked the corridors of Din’an Hanin. She felt a sense of nameless
dread which told her they were the first in many, many years. (Well, the first barring the Red
Templars, of course. But all things considered, with minds and bodies alike devastated by red
lyrium and bound to Corypheus, she wasn’t sure Red Templars could really be called alive.) They
found wall plaques dedicated to Falon’Din, and epitaphs revealed only by glistening wisps of
veilfire, and a magnificent altar to Mythal. Throughout the entire structure, Cassandra was filled
with a pervading sorrow for so much that was lost – lives lost to bloodshed, people lost to time.

“Hunted, haunted, hallowed,” murmured Cole, feeling her strange anguish. “Memories faded, no
one left to remember them where dreams go to die.”

At last, with nine fragments reassembled in Mahanon’s hands and every last Red Templar in the
building decimated, they stood before the door leading to the Tomb of the Emerald Knight. “This
is it,” he said. “Whatever Taven hoped to find, it’s in here.” Warily, he put the seal into position
and eased open the doors.

The tomb was cavernous, their footfalls echoing throughout the chamber. There were veilfire
torches which, when lit, summoned undead to battle, including a revenant. “Toria was almost killed
by one of those bastards,” Mahanon muttered, pulling one of his daggers from the thing’s body.
“What in Mythal’s name are they guarding, anyway?”

“The treasure of this chamber,” Solas remarked, gesturing. “Look.”

With the undead dispatched, a strange altar had risen up from a lower part of the floor, enabling
them to walk to it. A scroll hovered in the air before the altar, some ancient magic the likes of
which Cassandra had never seen. She moved to the altar itself, where a grotesque and almost
monkeylike figure crouched, and slowly read out the plaque which adorned it. “Cry for the past - it
shall claim us all, for here rest our saviors newly slain. Others lie beyond our reach, so we
remember. Let the true name burn away and enter Din’an Hanin, the place where glory ends.” She
paused. “Solas, what exactly does the name of this place mean?”

“Just as it says – the place where glory ends,” he replied. “Din’an means death, or end, and Hanin
means glory. It’s a fitting name for an exalted tomb.”

She nodded, and peered at the plaque again. “It’s a list of names,” she said. “An incomplete list, by
the look of it, but these are apparently the elves who are buried in this chamber.” Her tongue was a
bit halting over the Dalish names. “Andrale, whose song inspired. Soran, with bow in hand. Siona,
who kept the bridge. Talim, who saved the child. Rin, who led them out. Ilan, who kept watch.
Elandrin, whom we betrayed.” She blinked. “Betrayed? And his name is a bit separate from the
others too, as though we are meant to pause before reading it.”

Mahanon, frowning now, reached out to grasp the floating scroll. He unrolled it and scanned the contents, green eyes widening. “It’s an account of Red Crossing. When the elves attacked that town, it prompted the Exalted March of the Dales.” He sounded nothing so much as awed.

“Sadness, sorrow, too much hurt,” Cole interjected. “The pain is old, older even than some of the trees. I cannot heal it.”

“I know, Cole.” Mahanon nodded at him. “Solas, Cass – listen to this. Red Crossing is nothing like we all think it is.”

“I have often suspected as much,” Solas remarked mildly. “What does it say?”

“Elandrin, our brother. Falon'Din guide you,” he read. “Maker guide you.”

“Maker?” Cassandra repeated. “Why would they invoke the Maker?!!”

“Let here the truth be kept, lest you be remembered a traitor, or our sorrow seem a passing woe,” Mahanon continued. “Though you swore to serve our people, there were those questioning your heart.” He shook his head. “It’s a love story, of all things.” He recounted the details of how Elandrin, an Emerald Knight, had fallen in love with a human woman in Red Crossing named Adalene. His fellow Knights feared that he would renounce his vows to the elven people and swear allegiance to the Chantry, and went to bring him back into the fold. Instead they encountered the woman, and mistook her approach for an attack. This led to Elandrin himself dying at the hands of the humans, with the body of his beloved in his arms. The scroll also contained the letter Elandrin himself had written to Adalene, saying that he would swear himself to the Maker if it would satisfy the people of her village, but that it didn’t matter either way because his faith wouldn’t change.

“Rest now as our honored brother once more. A wreath of daisies at your brow, the letter she carried in your hand. Whoever guides you, whoever guides her, may your souls meet once more in the Beyond.” He lowered the scroll, and looked at Cassandra. “That could have been us, once upon a time.”

“I asked you once if there was room in your faith for the Maker as well,” she said, softly. “That was... wrong of me, perhaps. Your faith is your own. I would not ask you to surrender your beliefs for love of me.”

“I wouldn’t ask it of you either.” He moved to her side, angling his head so their foreheads could rest together for a moment. “I think the gods – mine, yours – are who they are, and they know that we are who we are. I think they made us for each other. Maybe we’re Elandrin and Adalene’s second chance, in a way.”

“There is something oddly comforting in that notion,” she mused. “But what matters most is that we’re together, in the here and now.”

“And now... what to do with all of this?” He lifted the old papers in his hand.

“Taven would want the Dalish to have those,” said Solas. Cassandra couldn’t argue, but she felt compelled to point out that the Chantry would likely also take an interest.

Mahanon shook his head. “Taven and his friends lost their lives to reclaim this for my people. We should take it to Keeper Hawen; he can make sure other clans learn the truth. We were more to blame for the events of Red Crossing than we’ve ever wanted to believe, and we need to acknowledge it.”
Cassandra stowed the ages-old documents in her pack, and with one last look at the deathly quiet tomb, they made their way back up the stairs. On one of the lower levels, a wall had completely worn away – most likely one of the points of entry for the Red Templars they had killed. Rather than continuing back through the entirety of Din’an Hanin, they opted to escape its confines into the lush inviting forest beyond the broken wall, and return to camp from there.

“Such was the plan,” she said with a sigh.

She and Solas were back at Skyhold, and trying their best to relate the adventure to Josephine and Leliana. She hadn’t felt so tired in ages. Cole had returned to his place in the tavern rafters, as he was rarely of much use in a mission debriefing, and Mahanon... she didn’t want to think about where Mahanon might be.

“What happened next?” Leliana urged her.

“We were ambushed,” Solas replied. “At least, you might call it such. We were woefully unprepared to contend with Venatori, Red Templars, and a red lyrium giant. At least when we faced a similar party during the scouring of Suledin Keep, we were in greater numbers. Four against such a collective... we were lucky to escape.”

“I disagree,” said Cassandra flatly. “We were allowed to escape. In all the confusion, the truth is that I do not know what became of Mahanon. We reconvened on the far side of the river, Solas and I, and Cole joined us there easily enough. But of the Lord Inquisitor there was no sign. We waited, and when he did not appear we returned to the site of the ambush to try to discern what happened - but everyone was gone. He never came to the Direstone camp where our mounts were kept, and finally we decided it would be best to return to Skyhold in case there was news.”


“We have received word from Cullen,” Josephine added. “He and Victoria and their party should be reaching Skyhold by nightfall.” She paused. “And Victoria is unlikely to take this news well. Oh dear.”

“Could Cole tell us nothing?” asked Leliana. “I know you’ve said he cannot ‘read’ the Inquisitors the way he can read other people, but surely he could give us some intelligence.”

“All that he would say was that Mahanon is alive,” Cassandra replied. “More than that he said he could not discern; perhaps he is unconscious. But Cole can sense that he lives.”

“At least we know that much. What could they possibly do with one Inquisitor?”

“I daresay a ransom demand is unlikely,” said Solas, “unless the demand is for the other Inquisitor. With the Anchor divided between their hands, eliminating one would be insufficient for Corypheus’s purposes. He would need both. As long as one Inquisitor remains alive, he can yet be thwarted. It’s possible, therefore, that his people will continue to keep Mahanon alive until they can acquire their remaining quarry.”

“That is decidedly not comforting, Solas,” said Josephine.

“It was not meant to be comforting, Ambassador. It was meant to be a caution.”

As Josephine had correctly predicted, Victoria was the only one in all of Skyhold who could possibly match Cassandra in her level of distress over Mahanon’s absence. The younger woman
seemed to be consumed by a whirlwind of emotions – fear, anger, sorrow, confusion. Cassandra could relate.

For a few days, they could really do nothing but wait. Thanks to the efforts of Victoria’s party in Val Royeaux, Dagna had been given some sort of recording crystal which she was fairly certain they could use to more or less spy on Calpernia. Both of Corypheus’s generals were wandering around free, and Mahanon was not, and Cassandra was agitated. But until the crystal yielded something, they could only kill time.

It wasn’t what she wanted to kill, but it would have to do.

Arguably, Victoria had even more reason for agitation than Cassandra herself, as she learned when the two women finally sat down for a private conversation. (‘Private’ was never entirely private, what with Cole popping in and out at intervals – he could sense their pain and would have alleviated it if he could, but the only way to do that would be to make them forget. He wouldn’t.) Cassandra listened with a hand over her mouth as Victoria related all the details of the canceled hanging in Val Royeaux. The tranquil anger of the bailiff, the shock of the crowd, the revelation that Blackwall wasn’t Blackwall at all... it was horrifying.

“He’s a beast,” she managed finally, lowering her hand. “How can we ever look at him the same way again? To do what he did – to evade justice by hiding under someone else’s name – it’s monstrous!”

“He could have continued hiding, Cassandra,” Victoria pointed out. She sounded a little miserable. “He finally owned up to it. He saved Mornay from an unjust death.”

“One man’s life hardly balances out his crimes! He murdered children, for Andraste’s sake!” Cassandra shook her head. “What are you having done with him?”

“Orlais owes us a few favors, and they have no real desire to keep him there. Cullen’s made the arrangements for him to be returned to Skyhold for judgment.” She sighed. “Not a court I look forward to holding, I assure you.”

“And what will you do then? Will your compassion override your sense, as it so often does?” The words were out before she could take them back, and she saw the flicker of liquid pain in the younger woman’s eyes. “I apologize. That was unworthy, of you and of me.”

“It’s probably what Mahanon would have said too,” Victoria replied, a touch dryly. “I haven’t yet decided what will happen to him. I need Non’s judgment to temper my mercy.”

Cassandra shook her head. “As I said to him – what would we have you be other than what you are? If...” She clenched her teeth briefly. “If it pleases you to release him, I won’t be the one to argue. But I must ask you to understand that I can never truly accept him as part of the Inquisition again.”

“For what it’s worth, Cullen agrees with you. I guess we’ll see.” She sank back in her chair, drumming her fingers on the arm restlessly, and sighed. “I miss him.”

“I know. I do as well.”

Victoria smiled sadly at her. “He really loves you, you know. He’s very silly when he wants to be, and his pranks with Sera can be out of control, and he and Bull drink too much together I sometimes think. But he’s a good man, and you mean everything to him.”

“I am not easy to love. I know this,” said Cassandra. “I push people away without meaning to do
so, because I do not wish to suffer again. I have loved and lost too many. But he was... persistent, and I am grateful.” She studied the Lady Inquisitor – the sun-darkened complexion, the light eyes, the determined erectness of her posture despite an obvious desire to slouch. “He loves you very much too.”

Victoria looked somewhat faraway for a moment, as though seeing things which weren’t actually there. She gave a tiny chuckle. “Did he ever tell you how we met?”

“He said you saved him from possibly drowning on the crossing from the Free Marches to the Conclave.”

“Right, because they wanted to put him off the boat as a stowaway. Then after I got him away from the crewmen who were threatening him, we hatched a scheme for him to pretend to be my bodyguard.”

“Hold on,” said a new voice, and they turned to see Varric approaching. “Easy, Seeker,” he added, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. “I was just coming to check on our resident sweetheart here, and I couldn’t help overhearing. I’d like to hear that story.”

“Do you mind?” Victoria asked Cassandra.

“Well, it is a good story,” she admitted. “And I have never heard it from your point of view.”

“Great,” said the author, claiming a chair. “Don’t mind if I take notes. I may use this in a book later.”

[Editor’s note: Well, how did you think we got the first chapter so detailed?]

Two days passed, days in which Cassandra and Victoria both frequently vented their frustrations and sorrow on unfortunate training dummies. Then, as they were training side by side in aggravated silence, a runner came in search of them both.

“Your Worship! Lady Pentaghast! Sister Nightingale requests your attendance immediately – something about a crystal. She said you would understand.”

Victoria sheathed the Sulevin Blade and took off at a run, Cassandra hot on her heels. They almost tripped over one another scuttling up the stairs to the rookery, where Leliana sat waiting patiently for them. Josephine and Cullen were already there – they were all to hear the news, it seemed. “What – what have we learned?” asked Victoria, glancing from one face to the next. “We smuggled the other memory crystal into Calpernia’s camp?”

“We have,” Leliana replied. “Here.” She was seated before Dagna’s peculiar device, and as she fiddled with something on it, ghostly images of Calpernia and another individual emanated forth and took shape before beginning to speak.

“Ugh. Even honey can’t sweeten felandaris,” Calpernia complained.

“I’ll keep trying,” said the other woman.

“You are no slave, Linnea. I’ll add another spoonful myself, later.”

The images vanished, and Victoria tilted her head thoughtfully. “Calpernia seems to be treating her
“Felandaris and honey? What do you suppose that is about?” Josephine wondered.

“I am uncertain,” Leliana replied. “But while I found it interesting, this is what we all must hear.” She touched the device again, and this time, the figures which smoked into the room were those of Calpernia and Corypheus. It took everything in Cassandra not to draw her sword.

“Master! Forgive me, I didn’t expect –”

“The time for your possible ascension draws near,” Corypheus interrupted. “Tell me of your preparations.”

“They go well enough, although I’m distracted here.” She sounded slightly petulant. “If I could train at the shrine...”

“Only Dumat’s faithful may enter,” he replied, more severely. “Continue as before. Or would you see the Imperium’s rebirth stalled by your lack of focus? Or perhaps it should be Samson who is the Vessel.”

“No! I will be ready,” she protested. “As the Vessel, and Tevinter’s champion.”

“Corypheus seems to be playing his generals against one another,” Cullen remarked.

“Yes, but it sounds like Calpernia is doing this for Tevinter – not Corypheus,” said Victoria. In the image, Corypheus seemed to have left Calpernia’s presence, and she was stalking around the area, grumbling to herself.

“Another deflection. And... why, a dwarven bauble. As if mine was miraculously returned to me! I wonder who might possibly be listening in on my conversation. Well, it certainly can’t be the Lord Inquisitor, who lies bound and gagged and in our power, so it must be the Lady! Let’s give your new owner a glimpse of her fate. Venatori! We leave!”

Calpernia evidently shattered the crystal, and Victoria let out a gasp as though she had held her breath during the magister’s final comments. She blinked, and a tear escaped; she brushed it away irritably. Cassandra tightened her jaw, putting a hand on her friend’s shoulder.

“That is all the crystal recorded before she found it,” said Leliana, gently. “But I think it may be enough. A shrine to Dumat, Corypheus said, where Calpernia is forbidden to go.”

“Dumat was the god Corypheus served, right? The Archdemon of the First Blight?”

“I forget sometimes, Lady Inquisitor, what an avid student of history you are. Yes, that is correct.” The spymaster smiled slightly. “Truly a fitting god for Corypheus.”

“I’d bet anything that there’s something in that shrine that Corypheus doesn’t want Calpernia to see.” Her frustration was starting to shift into anger. “And I’d bet anything else that Mahanon’s there too.”

“It does seem probable,” said Cullen. “The intelligence we gathered through your defeats of the
Red Templars throughout the Dales also indicate the existence of this same shrine. It’s implied that Samson has been using it as his headquarters.”

“Which could mean that part of the reason Corypheus doesn’t want Calpernia there is so she doesn’t think he’s favoring Samson over her,” Josephine remarked. “I doubt Samson has shifted his theological allegiance to a dead god, so he would not be one of Dumat’s faithful, and yet he has been granted entry.”

“I doubt that’s all of it, but it certainly could factor in,” agreed Leliana. “But yes, I suspect that they’re using it to imprison Mahanon. Or if not, we will find information there which leads to where he is being held.”

“Then we’re going there,” said Victoria.

“Out of the question!” Cullen blurted. “I will go. I’ll take a party and infiltrate. You are staying here.”

“I most certainly am not staying here.”

“But you are at the most risk, Lady Inquisitor,” said Josephine, not unkindly. “Solas told us that as long as you remain alive, killing Mahanon does Corypheus no good. He must have you both dead. They would lure you to this shrine to ensure it.”

“And what if Cullen’s party finds a rift there? Or on the way?” she countered. “I’m the only one left who can deal with them! Don’t you understand? I have to go – I have to know.” There were tears threatening in her eyes again, and Cassandra could see that Cullen was having a hard time watching that.

“Victoria is right,” she said. They all looked at her. “We cannot in good conscience expect her to stay behind, waiting and wondering – about Mahanon, and about you, and about anyone else who goes. If their positions were reversed, you know that he would already be halfway to the shrine.”

“Please,” said Victoria, and she was addressing the comment solely to Cullen now. “Please. I can’t stay here. He’s my brother. Maybe not by blood, but he’s more of a brother to me than Aloysius has ever been. And he needs me now.”

Cullen sighed. “I don’t like it, but I can’t fault your reasoning, either of you. The three of us will go, then.”

“You mean four,” said a new voice. They turned to look at the staircase, where Dorian was leaning against the wall with his arms folded.

“How long have you been there?” Josephine exclaimed.

“The entire time. When the Lady Inquisitor and the Lady Seeker tear through the library in a mad dash to the rookery, it’s a clear sign that something unusual is afoot. So I followed. And if you think for one second I’m allowing you to leave me behind, young lady, you don’t know me half as well as you think.”

“They’ve already taken one adopted brother from me – I am not risking the other one!”

“My dear girl, you are going up against a magister from Tevinter. Don’t you think it would be a smart move to take along the only member of the Inquisition who actually hails from Tevinter, who associated with magisters for most of his life?”
“He has a point,” said Cassandra. “Perhaps four is better – safety in numbers.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” said yet another voice, and as a startled Dorian moved aside, they saw Varric standing a few steps below him.

“I suppose you followed us too?” Cassandra narrowed her eyes at the dwarf.

“You’re always quick on the uptake, Seeker. Anyway, I need to get all the details firsthand so I know exactly how to exaggerate them – so if you’re set on going to that shrine, Eyebrows, I’m going to be right behind you in the saddle.”

“Should we just issue a general invitation?” Cullen grumbled. “This is getting out of hand.”

Victoria wiped her eyes. “You’re all... I would never have come this far without any of you. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us yet,” said Varric. “First we have to actually survive this.”

“Fair enough. The drinks are on me when we do.” She managed a smile.
Chapter Thirty-Five: Guarded in Riddles

To Lady Josephine Montilyet, Ambassador to the Inquisition

Dear Lady Ambassador,

I am given to understand that you are massing your allies for a final push against the dark forces which tore the sky asunder. Please allow me to pledge a retinue of my own personal soldiers to your cause as you prepare to march. If this plan is agreeable to you, I shall dispatch the soldiers to Skyhold with all possible haste. The Inquisition is truly doing the Maker’s work in these efforts to rid the world of this menace. May the Maker and His Bride bless you and keep you in your every endeavor. I shall continue to pray for the success of the Inquisition.

Yours in the Maker,

Prince Sebastian Vael

Dear Mother and Father,

I am well and I hope you are likewise. I would say that I am homesick for Starkhaven, but in truth, I rarely have much time to think about it. Skyhold is a busy, busy place. They keep us on the run at all hours – I mean that rather literally, since I’m employed here as what’s known as a runner.

Most of the time it’s cheerful work. The Inquisition members are very pleasant and also very appreciative of our efforts. However, sometimes it gets downright silly to be carrying messages to
and from the different parts of the fortress. Master Tethras penned a guidebook for each of us to read when we started our duties, and I find myself sort of wishing I’d taken its contents a bit more seriously. A vast deal of what he warned us about in the book is accurate – it’s written quite comically, so it’s easy to think he was joking, but I’ve learned he was not. When I come home I’ll show it to you so you have some idea of what I mean.

The three members of the advisory council are arguably the worst in this regard. I say this with the greatest respect. Commander Cullen, Lady Montilyet, and Sister Leliana all really have a tremendous regard for one another; more than one person has commented that the two ladies in particular are like sisters, and that they and Lady Pentaghast all treat the commander as though he’s their younger brother. He blusters a bit but you can tell he enjoys it. However, I recently had to be the one to run around the castle with a series of messages regarding a weekly meeting that Lady Montilyet insists on having with the other two. They drink tea and eat cakes and talk about their assorted concerns. Both Sister Leliana and Commander Cullen insisted that they were too busy to attend the soiree, and yet they were equally insistent that the other attend because neither of them wanted Lady Montilyet’s feelings to be hurt. This trading of missives literally took four hours. By the end of it, they both went and Lady Montilyet was made completely happy.

It’s exasperating, but at the same time it’s terribly amusing. Everyone in Skyhold feels the same way. My shift is due to start shortly, so I must conclude here so that I have time to grab something to eat and drink before I begin – that’s one of Master Tethras’s recommendations which I quickly learned to take very seriously!

Your loving son,

Seamus

To the Lady Inquisitor, my dear daughter,

We were quite delighted to receive your last letter. As I’m sure it comes as no surprise for you to hear, everyone in Ostwick holds you in the greatest esteem; they are always eager for news of your exploits.

The Lord Inquisitor sounds charming. Your remarks on his romance with Lady Pentaghast came as something of a surprise, but I have heard it said that she is a woman of striking countenance and fierce prowess in battle. One does not lightly become the Right Hand of the Divine, after all. It is extraordinary that she would engage in such a relationship with one of the Dalish, but your own favorable comments on your counterpart give some insight as to how it might have come to pass. I know he means a great deal to you, and it is a matter of comfort to us to think that you are not alone. Maker only knows we have lost enough of our kin to all of this, considering how many Trevelyans serve in either the Templars or the Chantry itself – not to mention those who accompanied you to the Conclave. We offer our endless praise and thanks that you were spared, and found the strength to lead the righteous to victory.

What you tell us of Commander Cullen is most intriguing. Your father bids me invite you, when your schedule permits and the world is in less dire straits, to bring the gentleman to Trevelyan Terrace for a visit. We are eager to make the acquaintance of all of your friends, but perhaps him most particularly.

With great pride and affection,

Mother
Dear Varric,

This is likely to be the last letter you have from me for a little while. I hope it finds you well. As I write this, Fenris and I are approaching the Anderfels. I took a roundabout route through Orlais and from there crossed to Nevarra, which is where he caught up with me as I wrote you last. Now we sit in an inn on the outskirts of nowhere, preparing to enter the Blight-damned end of the continent and make our way to Weisshaupt. Fenris sends his regards; the dog does too.

I know you don’t like it when I mention him, but I can’t help remembering that Anders was from the Anderfels. Anders wasn’t even his real name, that’s just what everyone called him. I wonder if he even remembered his real name anymore by the time we met him. I wonder a lot of things about him, to be honest. How much of what he ever told us was the truth? How much of what wasn’t the truth was stuff he believed anyway? I always thought it was strange that the two things he claimed about himself that sounded the most outlandish – that he was possessed by a Fade spirit and that he had been personal friends with the Queen of Ferelden – were the two things I knew for a fact were true. We met Justice for ourselves, and our encounter with Nathaniel Howe proved the other part even before you went off gallivanting with King Alistair. So if the two ridiculous things were true, does that mean that the smaller things were also true?

I made the comment to your Inquisitors that I don’t really know if there ever was just an Anders. If there was, I think a lot of that man disappeared before we ever met him. And it’s sad, because what little we did get to know of him was really a pretty nice guy. (Fenris would be annoyed that I say so.)

I miss our Kirkwall days, Varric. I miss them almost as much as you do – and almost as much as I miss you and my sister. Speaking of whom, I really don’t know how long this visit to the Anderfels is going to take. First we have to find our way to Weisshaupt, and everything I know about the Anderfels tells me it’s pretty inhospitable and travel goes very slowly. Then when we finally get there, we have to talk to the First Warden and convince him that we’re not just making all this up. He will listen to reason, I’m sure, but it might take some time. Then we have to find our way out again.

My point is, it could be a long time before I see either of you again. I know Bethany is safe with Sebastian, but I also know my sister and I know she’s getting restless. Probably lonely, too; Sebastian’s a sweetheart but anybody around him has to compete with both Andraste and Starkhaven for his attention. The Inquisition won’t need you forever, so I’m asking you a serious favor (unusual for me, I know) – as soon as you’re able to get back across the Waking Sea, please go to Starkhaven and take her home. With the Circles dissolved, and once Corypheus is dead for real, she should be safe enough. With you I know she will be. Aveline has the key to our house, and you can both stay there if they’ve given away your room at the Hanged Man.

I’m sure they won’t. They wouldn’t want to upset their favorite patron.

Be careful, Varric. Give my best to the Inquisitors, and say hello to everyone I met while I was there. I’ll send word when I can, and I’m rooting for you all.

Always,

Hawke

[Editor's note: I'm always careful. At least, as far as my girls know. Let's not tell them otherwise, okay, Scholar?]
We March As One

Chapter Summary

The mission to rescue the Lord Inquisitor is on.

Chapter Notes

I had hoped to finish this sooner, but as it turns out, merging "Before the Dawn" and "Under Her Skin" is actually quite the undertaking. Bless everyone who posts playthrough videos on YouTube, because without all of you this would not have been possible.

You probably already know this, but for those who don't, the Ardent Blossom is a flower crown helmet found in the base game. You have to do some very odd things to acquire it, which I've skipped here for the sake of brevity. I just thought it would be kind of hilarious to have everyone be totally confused by Victoria wearing it. (Bull's reaction was specifically requested by Tk.)

Chapter Thirty-Six: We March As One

[Editor’s note: Scholar wants to know why my notes started showing up much more frequently as the story progressed, and she thinks you might want to know too. Well, early in the document, this was really her baby, you know? I was kind of along for the ride and she was doing just fine. But the deeper into things she got, the more questions she had, and the more I realized she needed to draw on my memories as well as the actual records. And I don’t go lending those to just anybody, you understand, so I had to make sure they were being handled properly. No offense, Scholar. You take direction well. Anyway, that’s why you’ve been hearing from me a lot more lately – the whole thing has become pretty personal for me, and it’s going to get even more personal as we go. You’ll see what I mean.]

“Where’s Eyebrows?” asked Varric.

Cullen, adjusting Ferdinand’s bridle, glanced over at the dwarf. “She had to go to the undercroft. Apparently Harritt and Dagna have something else for her.”

“Playing favorites, are they?” asked Dorian, his tone forcibly jovial. “Everyone’s going to start getting a bit grumpy if they keep giving our dear Lady Inquisitor all the presents.”

They were just inside the gate of Skyhold, below Cullen’s tower – the three of them plus Cassandra – awaiting Victoria’s arrival so that they could venture out in search of the Shrine of Dumat. Leliana, Josephine, and the Iron Bull were also on hand, just to see them off; Cullen had some private notions about Bull’s presence but he wasn’t about to voice them. As for Cassandra, her
countenance was like iron. She had left the red hart she normally rode in the stable; she was astride Mahanon’s beloved Mythal’enaste instead. “You’re going to ride, um, him?” Cullen inquired.

“Scarlet can wait here,” she replied. “I want Mahanon to know that his horse is unharmed.”

“For a given value of unharmed,” Varric muttered.

“Why not let Varric ride the hart, then?”

“Curly, I don’t ride alone unless it’s an absolute necessity,” came the retort. “Helping to bring the horses back from the Cradle of Sulevin, sure. This, not so much. I’ll keep my place behind the lady of the manor, thank you.”

“Speaking of whom,” said Leliana, glancing at the stairs leading down from the upper bailey, “here she is now.”

They all turned and watched as the ‘woman in white’ descended slowly. Cullen ached for her; her rigid posture and mirthless countenance spoke volumes about how she was feeling. The skirtlike cape of her armor danced a bit in the wind, and her steps were deliberate and almost formal. But what caught everyone’s attention was her newest piece of attire; rather than a helmet, her dark auburn hair was crowned with a ring of flowers.

It was Bull who first spoke his confusion. “...the fuuuuck?”

Dorian immediately slapped his arm. “Quiet. She’s adorable.”

“Are you ready, Lady Inquisitor?” asked Josephine in her softly polite way.

“As ready as I’m likely to be.” She shrugged, her expressive face doing little to deny her distress. There was an awkward pause, and she sighed. “Before anyone asks, it’s called the Ardent Blossom. It’s Orlesian. Some fop an age or so back thought it would be a great idea to go into battle with nothing on his head but lyrium-infused flowers. One of our scouts found it and brought it back, and they decided it would look better on me than on Mahanon.” She smiled slightly.

“It’s very... festive,” Dorian offered with a little grin. “Lyrium-infused, did you say?”

“That’s what Dagna said. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Harritt roll his eyes quite that hard,” she added. “But the damn thing works, according to everything they were able to learn about it. I’d let you take a closer look but our dear arcanist insisted on sort of weaving my braids around it. It’s not coming loose any time soon.” Victoria shrugged. “I guess we’ll be testing it soon enough.”

Cullen followed her with his eyes as she approached Falon, lifting a gloved hand to caress the velvety bits of his nose not covered by his armor. “It’s a long journey I ask of you again, my friend,” she murmured. “And I don’t know what awaits us at the end of it.”

As she moved to mount, he stepped up beside her. “May I assist you?”

Victoria turned, and he could see the gray eyes churning like an incoming storm. “If you like,” she replied, quietly. “Thank you, Cullen.”

“Always.” He grasped her waist and, gently, hoisted her into the saddle. A moment later he had boosted Varric up to his usual place behind her, adjusting the crossbow accordingly, and the dwarf gave him an only slightly mocking salute of thanks.

“Let’s move out,” said Victoria. She reached up and fingered one of the leaves of the Ardent
Blossom. “Leliana, Josephine – we’ll send word as soon as there’s any to send. Or perhaps Cole will do it for us, one never knows.” Cole was the only thing bringing any ease to her mind at all, Cullen suspected, with his assurances that whatever else was happening, Mahanon yet lived.

“Good luck,” said Josephine, fervently. “We will pray for your swift and successful return.”

“Thank you.”

The Shrine of Dumat, according to the intelligence their scouts had recovered, lay in the northern reaches of Orlais, due north of Val Royeaux. They reached the city after a day and a half of hard riding, stopping there largely for the sake of the mounts. Cullen and Victoria left the others for a time and went to investigate the situation at the jail.

“We did, at your request, appeal to the Empress for Blackwall’s release,” he told her, a scowl curling his scarred lip. “My understanding is that she has agreed to release him to our recognizance, so he’s probably on his way to Skyhold by now. But we’ll check.”

The guard on duty initially spared Cullen the briefest glance. His mask made it difficult to tell just what was in his mind. However, as he turned his head and took in the sight of Victoria in her white armor, he shot to his feet so quickly that his chair overturned and the table nearly did likewise. “Y-your Worship!”

“Good afternoon,” she said, in the most pleasantly neutral tone Cullen had ever heard her use. He stifled the urge to chuckle. “We’re passing through the city on our way to another destination and we wanted to inquire after the situation concerning Thom Rainier.”

“Rainier left this morning, my lady. Orders of the Empress herself. I – I’m not sure where they’ve taken him, I’m afraid.”

“That’s all right, my questions are answered. Thank you. As you were.”

Back out in the sunlight, Cullen caught her hand gently. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do with him once he’s returned to us?”

“Honestly,” she replied, looking a little guilty, “I’ve had a hard time thinking about anything except getting Mahanon back. I’ll figure it out, I will, but it’s difficult to focus right now. I know I need to do better.”

“Victoria.” He stopped, still holding her hand, forcing her to stop with him. “You don’t have to be strong every second of every day.”

Her jaw clenched – not in anger, he quickly realized, but in a desperate attempt to school her emotions and keep them from showing on her expressive face. “And what happens when I’m not, Cullen? What then? I’m the torch-bearer for the entire Inquisition. When things go wrong, they look to me. Yes, I do have to be strong all the time.”

“You’re not alone, you know.” He took a step nearer, never relinquishing her hand. “I’m here. I’ll help you.”

“I know. I know you will.” She sighed. “You’re wonderful. But you… you can’t help me, not the way I need to be helped. And until we get Non back, I am alone.”

Cullen was suddenly reminded of something he had thought many months earlier, when Mahanon and Victoria were preparing to go their separate ways in order to appeal to both the mages and the
Templars. They were the Heralds of Andraste. No one else could ever be to them what they were to each other. “I understand,” he said, quietly. “Really, I do. And I’ll do whatever needs to be done to get him back for you, I swear it.”

She nodded, exhaling through her nose. “I love you,” she remarked. It came out almost abstractly, as though she wasn’t giving it much thought even as she said it. “We’d better get back to the others. The sooner we head north, the sooner we reach this accursed shrine… and if we don’t find him there I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Night was falling when, some five days after they left Skyhold, the rescue party reached the Shrine of Dumat. They dismounted at some distance from the compound’s entrance, not wanting to endanger the mounts, and crept through the growing darkness. “For a place one assumes Corypheus wants to keep hidden,” Dorian muttered, “they certainly have enough torches lit, don’t they?”

“He wants it hidden from Calpernia, at least,” Victoria replied. “The question is, why? What is he hiding here that he doesn’t want her to see?”

“It is far, far too quiet,” Cassandra said flatly.

“Famous last words, Seeker,” Varric warned her.

Cullen looked around warily, shaking his head. “A shrine to one of the Old Gods. So few still exist,” he mused.

They moved forward slowly into the empty entrance courtyard, where the ancient stone floor was shrouded in mist and the statues glared at them as they passed. “Look,” Cassandra hissed, pointing. On the far end of the courtyard, at the top of a flight of steps, two massive dragon heads flanked the door leading into the shrine proper. Victoria winced slightly as her left hand started to crackle; sickly green light was emanating from both of the metallic heads, radiating in a sort of slant to connect with one another.

“It’s an unopened rift,” she said quietly. “They managed to seal the shrine with a rift. As soon as I get close enough, it’ll open, and we’ll be fighting demons.”

“You know what that means, right?” Varric looked up at her uneasily.

She nodded. “It means that you wouldn’t have been able to get into the shrine without me,” she said. “Just as we suspected. It’s a trap… they knew we would come, and they knew I wouldn’t let you leave me in Skyhold. They were counting on it.”

“And that,” said Dorian, encouragingly, “would suggest that Mahanon is definitely inside, because what better lure for a trap than live bait?”

“Quite right.” The Lady Inquisitor reached behind her head and drew the Sulevin Blade from its scabbard. “Let’s deal with these nasties and find him, fast. The sooner we leave this place, the better for everyone.”

She approached the dragons, glancing from one to the other. “Be ready,” she warned, lifting her arm as she drew near the top of the stairs. The strange green light connected to her palm almost at once, radiating blindingly as the rift tore itself open. She yanked her hand away to break the bond, allowing demons to start pouring from the new gap in the fabric of reality. Almost at once a hailstorm of bolts descended on the scene; Cullen glanced up to see that Varric had taken position on one of the high points along the side of the courtyard, and was doing his best to give Victoria
some cover as the battle began.

It was barely a challenge, he thought. The demons were not especially powerful, though that could be a matter of comparison; they’d all grown stronger since the days of Haven, after all. Nor were they terribly numerous, even once the temple was broken open and their party worked their way inside. A few shades, a few terrors and wraiths, hardly anything even worth mentioning. “We must be getting good at this,” Varric snarked. “I’m barely breaking a sweat.”

Dorian gazed around in some fascination at the interior. “The Dragon of Silence. That was what they used to call Dumat,” he said. “All the Old Gods were dragons, you know, that’s why we have them in so much of our architecture. It’s almost a shame this place has been left to rot. You can tell it was beautiful, once upon a time.”

“There’s a downstairs,” said Victoria, pointing. “We should investigate that first.” She paused, examining a red crystal on a nearby shelf, and a moment later they could hear Corypheus’s voice.

“Samson is eager; Calpernia stands ready. It remains to be seen which will ultimately serve me, for both have failed me once.”

“Another recording device?” Cullen wondered.

“It seems Corypheus has been collecting his thoughts.” Her tone was flat and unfriendly.

“There is another one here,” said Cassandra, pointing. Cullen wondered how many there would be in all.

“Did the others never return from the Black City? There is no record even of our names.”

“Come on... this way.” They headed down to the underbelly of the shrine, Victoria marching in the lead. There was a determined set to her shoulders that even the delicacy of the Ardent Blossom did little to soften.

The demons they fought as they made their way down were stronger. Pride, despair, rage – Cullen had confronted them all, time and again, just as the others had. (He had confronted them in his heart more often than the others did, perhaps, and he was well versed in their tactics.) Dorian’s staff twirled in the air before slamming down into the inlaid floors, echoing with bursts of power as lightning crackled around his head. Cass and Victoria kept their backs toward one another, trying to prevent the demons from sneaking up on them.

The dust settled, and Varric bent to scoop up a few gold coins abandoned in the stairwell. “Nice of them to leave us a tip,” he deadpanned.

Victoria, meanwhile, turned her attention to a third memory crystal. “I recited the old verses. How easily they come, even after so long a slumber. Yet still I do not feel the presence of Dumat – hear no whispers, no commands. Silence has fallen.” She stared coldly at the relic, her figure tensing; Cullen suspected she wanted to smash it, and also suspected that she wasn’t sure why she would want to do such a thing.

“Silence has fallen,” she mused. “But didn’t you call Dumat the Dragon of Silence, Dorian? Wouldn’t silence be, you know, normal?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, my dear.”

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter. I’m trying to make sense where there’s no sense to be had.” She shook her head. “Let’s keep moving. I feel very sure that we’re heading in the right direction.”
“D’you think maybe... I’m not trying to sound too much like Cole,” Varric added, “but maybe your hand can kind of ‘hear’ Mahanon’s?”

Victoria paused, apparently mulling over the question. “I don’t really know. Maybe. Maybe that’s why I’m so convinced I know where he is – maybe the marks call to each other in a way we don’t understand.” The notion seemed to cheer her some. “If that’s the case, maybe he can sense that we’re getting close. Maybe it’ll help him.”

“It can’t hurt, Eyebrows,” he assured her.

“That is a lot of maybes,” said Cassandra, dubiously. “But I hope you’re right.”

Cullen glanced at her, and immediately felt a stab of guilt. He had been so diverted by how much Victoria was suffering, he’d all but forgotten how much pain Cassandra must surely be feeling. She was like a sister to him, in some ways, and yet he’d managed to overlook her sorrow. As they followed their Lady Inquisitor farther down the stairs, he moved to walk at her side, and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“He’ll be all right.”

“I think,” she said quietly, “I have some notion now of how you must have felt in the hours after Haven fell.”

“I doubt it’s quite the same thing,” he said, his voice pitched equally low. Varric and Dorian were flanking Victoria, giving them space to speak privately. “I didn’t love her then, and it was bad enough. If it were to happen now...” Cullen couldn’t finish the thought. He shook his head. “He’ll be all right,” he repeated. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Victoria pushed open a set of double doors, revealing a darkened chamber beyond. The only clear light source was a strange dome in the middle of the floor, nebulous and almost aquatic in appearance, like the sun shining on a silver river. As they drew near, it became very obvious that there was a man inside the dome. He wore a hood like the Venatori, but all black, and he was mumbling instructions about lighting a burner and adding an ingredient to a potion. He stopped, slowly raising his head at their approach, and muttered some dissonant verse Cullen had never heard.

“Dorian, what’s going on here?” Cullen asked.

“That’s a containment spell, and a powerful one,” the mage replied. “The prisoner appears to be a magister, but why?”

“What is this? Who are you?” Victoria asked, walking up to the dome and studying the prisoner intently.

“Magister Erasthenes am I,” he replied. His voice had a crackling, otherworldly echo to it. “A scholar of Tevinter. To Corypheus I am bound, to answer every question - gah!” He winced in evident pain. Whatever was holding him in place was torturing him; Cullen had to restrain himself from interfering.

“For Calpernia's sake,” the magister gasped, “I am lost.”

They all exchanged puzzled glances. “Corypheus did this to you on Calpernia's behalf?” asked Victoria.
Erasthenes shook his head slowly, as though it were very heavy. “She knows not.” He groaned again. “I am a ruin, the jeweled husk when the butterfly leaves. I was the greatest scholar of the Old Gods in Minrathous - no, in the Imperium,” he corrected himself proudly. “One night, he came to my door. For my relics, I thought. My writings and runes... But instead, my slave went to his side. Calpernia. To become the Vessel, and save Tevinter.”

So Calpernia had been a slave, and this had been her master. “Well,” Cullen mused quietly, “that explains her sympathy for slaves as we saw in the recording crystals.”

Victoria was frowning. “If Calpernia's this Vessel, what are the contents going to be?”

“I do not know. Augh!” Erasthenes was writhing a bit as he spoke. “Power! It must be some sort of power – like Urthemiel’s, arisen in flame.”

“Is that why Calpernia joined Corypheus? To save your empire?”

“Yes.” In halting words and miserable tones, Erasthenes explained as best he could that Calpernia’s goal was to see Tevinter reborn, under the leadership of Corypheus, so that she could free the slaves and raise them up to new heights as she herself had been raised. “Bring a new order, with a heart of steel. She could do it, if she were not the Vessel.”

“Why would being the Vessel mean she couldn’t do it?” Dorian wondered.

Erasthenes made no reply; he seemed wholly unaware of anyone but Victoria, who stood right in front of him. Her face was a mask of sympathy for his suffering, though her eyes were still hard. “If Calpernia's the one Corypheus wanted, why do this to you?” she wanted to know.

“For practice.” Erasthenes made a wry sort of grimace. “Corypheus crafts a Vessel, for whatever power he seeks, yes. But he does not need his Vessel to have free will. About her these same chains will fall – iron to cage lightning. My binding is the poor pencil sketch. Calpernia will be the masterpiece.”

“So that’s the secret Corypheus hides from her,” Cullen mused. “The reason he won’t let her come here. He doesn’t want her to see her old master in the role she herself will assume – power without free will.”

Erasthenes lifted his head and looked pleadingly at Victoria. “The chain has broken me, friend. No wings can raise my mind. Please, breach the circle - its wards will trigger. I will be dust and light. Free.”

“Or it will kill us all,” said Cassandra, warily. “Corypheus is not above placing such a trap.”

For the first time, the magister seemed to hear someone speak other than Victoria, and he shook his head again. “Corypheus's circle will hold its destruction within. Tight, tight. No fear. Only freedom.”

“But what of Mahanon?” asked Lady Inquisitor. “Did you see where they brought another prisoner, an elf? He’s here, I know he’s here. Please, tell me!”

“Beyond. He lies beyond,” Erasthenes replied. He didn’t seem capable of moving his hands, but he arched his neck in order to gesture behind himself. “To reach him, you must breach the circle and set me free. The way lies behind me.”

Her shoulders sagged with clear relief. “Yes. Yes, I will release you. Thank you. Be at peace, Erasthenes; suffer no more.”
Her right hand, trembling slightly, reached out to the shifting surface of the magical dome. It shattered with one touch of her fingertip, like a soap bubble bursting in midair, and what had once been the magister was as quickly reduced to smoke and ash, and dissipated in the breath of a wind no one could feel upon their skin. Beyond the platform where he had been bound, in the darkest shadows of the room without light, they could barely make out the shape of an unconscious figure.

“Non?!”

Victoria moved at once, but Cassandra was faster. “A light,” she called as she sprinted to the far side of the room, “we need a light!”

“Will this do?” Dorian opened his palm to reveal a small fireball, which sent rays of light scattering along the walls.

“Yes, thank you,” Cass muttered, dropping to her knees and pulling Mahanon into a sitting position. She cradled him carefully, even as shaking fingers clumsily drew a potion bottle from her belt. “My love, wake up,” she urged him.

As Victoria joined them, kneeling on his other side, Mahanon’s eyes cracked open, and he stared blearily at Cassandra’s anxious face. “Mm... ma vhenan’ara,” he mumbled. “I knew... I knew you’d find me.”

A smile such as Cullen had never seen her wear broke across Cassandra’s features. “Of course we did.”

“Nonny?” Victoria’s voice was tight with the tears she was denying. His head lolled a bit on his shoulders so his gaze fell on her.

“Ma da’vhenan, you shouldn’t have come,” he said quietly. “You should... you... by the Creators... what is on your head?”

Victoria burst out laughing and glanced over at Cullen, Varric, and Dorian. “He’s going to be just fine,” she said, and in the flickering light of Dorian’s magic they could see that her cheeks were damp.

Mahanon could barely walk. He was injured, of course, that was to be expected, and he was fatigued and desperately hungry. “They gave me water, occasionally,” he said in a thick voice, letting Cullen help him get upright. “They didn’t want me dead.”

“Why?” Victoria wondered. Mahanon had one arm across Cullen’s shoulders and the other across Dorian’s, and she was carrying Dorian’s staff for him; it gave off a small amount of light, as did the lightning rune in the pommel of the Sulevin Blade. These were their only torches as they made their way slowly across the large chamber.

“Waiting on orders from Corypheus. Samson said...” He paused, thinking. “Samson said the mark was his to take, so I was to be kept alive until he came. And they knew... they knew you’d come, Toria. Wanted you to find me alive before... before they killed us both.”

“Won’t they be disappointed, then,” she retorted, opening the door.

“Eyebrows, what have I told you about the witty one-liners?” Varric all but tore Bianca from his back as he stepped into the stairwell, where a handful of Red Templars were waiting.

The flurry of activity which followed was something of a blur to Cullen. He hastily lowered
Mahanon to the floor in a corner, where Varric stood guard, and Victoria tossed Dorian his staff before launching herself into the fray. As the battle raged, however, he caught snippets of what the Red Templars said.

“Knew you’d come, Lady Inquisitor! He was counting on it!”

“Samson got clear?”

“Aye, he escaped as we agreed.”

“Shame he missed the Commander! Would have been a touching reunion, I’m sure!”

He knew I was coming? Cullen wondered, even as he cut down the man – or what remained of the man – who said it.

“Curly! We got problems!” yelled Varric. As Cullen turned, he saw the dwarf put a crossbow bolt into the chest of a Red Templar, but too late to stop him from starting a fire. Flames were starting to appear all throughout the building.

“In there!” Cassandra shouted, pointing at a door. “They came from in there!”

With Varric still keeping watch over the weakened Lord Inquisitor, the other four broke through the door. It opened into a dead-end chamber filled with large growths of red lyrium, where fires had already been lit. Only one living creature still remained.

“Hello, Lady Inquisitor,” said the man. He lay in a half-upright position on the floor, and blinked at them in a pleasantly neutral way.

“You know me?” Victoria asked.

“This is Maddox – Samson’s Tranquil.” Cullen knelt and peered at him. “Something’s wrong, we need a healer.”

“That would be wasteful, Knight-Captain Cullen,” he replied. “I drank my entire supply of blightcap essence. It won’t be long now.”

“Maddox, why? We only wanted to ask you some questions.” Victoria looked aggrieved.

“Yes... that is what I could not allow,” he explained. “I destroyed the camp with fire. We all agreed it was best. Our deaths ensured that Samson had time to escape.”


“Samson saved me even before he needed me. I wanted to help.” The Tranquil’s head listed forward then, chin landing on his chest as he took his final breath.

“We should search the camp,” said Cullen. “Maddox may have missed something.”

“We should hurry,” Dorian pointed out. He was extinguishing flames as best he could with magic. “Mahanon needs food and rest.”

“What about Maddox?” Victoria asked. “He deserves a funeral.”

“I don’t disagree,” Cullen replied. “I’ll send someone to tend to him, when we’re back at Skyhold.” He picked up a paper, and his eyes widened. “It’s... it’s addressed to me.” It was from Samson; he couldn’t even bring himself to look at it just then.
“He knew I was coming and that you were coming with me,” said Victoria grimly. “One wonders what else he knows about us.”

“Never mind it just now.” Cassandra was returning from the next room, with a strange collection of tools in her hand. “I found these – the fire hasn’t quite damaged them.”

“These are for safely working with lyrium,” Cullen said, peering at them. “I’ve never seen their equal, in truth. Let’s get them back to Dagna; if Maddox used these to maintain Samson’s red lyrium armor, she may be able to find a way to unmake it.”

As they collected Varric and Mahanon and started to make their way back through the building, the fires ignited by the Red Templars were growing. “We need to move quickly,” said Dorian. “I don’t have enough lyrium left to extinguish the whole thing – and those flames are climbing the walls. We’ve got to get out of here before the ceiling comes down.”

“Cullen, carry Non,” said Victoria. “He can’t run in this condition, and we’ve got to move.” The structure was starting to tremble around them, and as the ancient tapestries and curtains fell victim to the spreading flames, thick black smoke started to choke the air. “Go! Hurry!”

With the fire licking at their heels, they hurried through the main vestibule toward the door which had been guarded by the rift. The night sky was obscured by the billowing smoke as they rushed into the courtyard, gasping for clean breaths. But even here there was fire, as it crawled out of the burning building and scorched the dust which had settled on the ancient stones, finding the Red Templars’ ramps and crates and defensive structures to devour. Desperate to escape, they pushed and clambered their way past the obstacles. Cullen thought his heart might explode in his chest as he, doing his best to bear the weight of Mahanon, brought up the rear. Victoria’s white leather armor screamed in the night, a beacon in the smoke and ash; somehow the dragonskin rejected both and retained its color.

They reached the gate, and despair almost took hold. “They must have locked it once we were inside!” Cassandra exclaimed, railing against the metal bars.

“Out of the way, Seeker!” With all the finesse he could summon to his thick fingers, Varric pulled out his lockpicks and set to work. “Give me some space – I’ll get this open in – there! Run!” He shoved the gate open, and the little company poured out into the darkness.

“Falon!” Victoria shouted, gazing around in a kind of terror. “Falon!”

A frantic sort of equine shriek answered her, and she bolted in the direction from which it seemed to come. The horses were agitated, eyes rolling wildly as the fire erupted higher into the night, but they didn’t run. Cullen rushed to Mythal’enaste, trying to ignore the disturbing visage as he eased Mahanon into the saddle and helped Cassandra to settle behind him. “Can you ride for both of you?”

“I’ll manage,” she replied, taking the reins. “Help Victoria!”

The Lady Inquisitor pulled herself into Falon’s saddle, and Cullen ran to boost Varric. “Let’s get out of here,” he said, whistling for Ferdinand. “Ride hard for the south until we’re at least out of sight of this place. It looks as though Maddox gets his funeral pyre without our help... may the Maker have mercy on him.”
**Bear the Light of Day**

Chapter Summary

With their precious quarry obtained, the rescue party heads back to Skyhold. An unpleasant scene awaits them there - and so does a surprise for Varric.

Chapter Notes

If you haven't read the side volume "Across the Waking Sea" yet, you should do that now. The end of that story dovetails with the end of this chapter.

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**Chapter Thirty-Seven: Bear the Light of Day**

The rescue party ultimately had to stop before they got very far, on account of Mahanon. Although Cassandra had forced a healing potion down his throat to tend the worst of his injuries, he needed food – and proper rest, not sprawling on the dusty floor of an ancient relic and daring to take only snatches of sleep.

They rode south, as Cullen directed, for probably the better part of an hour before calling a halt. Dorian reined in the chestnut he was using and slid from the saddle in order to assist Cassandra with the beloved bulk of her Inquisitor. “Let’s make camp,” he said. “This poor fellow needs to lie quietly for a spell.”

They hadn’t bothered bringing tents; pitching and dismantling tents would have cost precious time on the way to rescue Mahanon, so they had sufficed themselves with bedrolls under an open sky. Now, Dorian found himself somewhat regretting that they didn’t have at least one, for the elf’s sake. “I imagine he’d be more comfortable with some shelter over him.”

“Never mind it,” said Victoria. “We’ll make do, at least until Val Royeaux. Once we reach the city we’ll take a couple rooms at one of the inns. We can send for a healer and nurse him properly for a day or so, and send word to Skyhold meanwhile.”

Varric was rustling in the packs. “Field rations aren’t the best under normal circumstances,” he grumbled. “And Hunter’s circumstances are anything but that.”

“It’s better than nothing,” Mahanon croaked, “which is largely what I’ve been enjoying for who knows how long. They’d give me water sometimes, and a piece of bread or something once a day. They didn’t want me dead until you came.”

“I still can’t wrap my head around that,” Cullen admitted, cobbling together a stack of wood – or whatever he could find – for a campfire. “Not that I’m ungrateful, of course, but what difference did it make whether you were alive when we found you or not?”

“I could hear some of their conversations when they thought I was unconscious,” Mahanon
explained. “Apparently, Corypheus has developed a theory that we don’t have separate Anchors, Tor. Rather, he thinks that we have the same one, split between us. If they’d killed me, you would have known – or at least he thinks you would – and if that were the case, there’d be no reason for you to come to the shrine. So they had to keep me alive long enough to lure you.”

“I guess it makes as much sense as anything else we know about the marks.” She shrugged, pouring water into a small bowl. As Dorian ignited Cullen’s pile, she added some herbs to the water and set the bowl near the fire. “Let that heat up a bit. Makeshift tea,” she explained.

Dorian arranged one of the bedrolls on the opposite side of the fire, and the two women assisted Mahanon in settling into it. “If I ever complain about sleeping in one of these again, somebody smack me, okay?” he murmured. “This is a luxury compared to the last however long I’ve been gone.”

“Over two weeks, nearly three,” Victoria informed him, finger-combing the hair back from his face in a gesture that was more motherly than little-sisterly, Dorian thought. “The longest weeks of our lives, may I add.” She glanced at Cassandra with a small grin.

“Without question.” The Seeker nodded. “We’ve shielded your clan from the news, but there have been some disturbing reports from Wycome. Before we set out, Josephine sent some of our scouts to investigate; hopefully she’ll have news when we return.”

“Here you go, Hunter,” said Varric, crossing the camp with the rations in his hands. “Don’t eat too fast, you’ll overwhelm your stomach and it’ll all come back out the way it went in and that would completely defeat the purpose of feeding you.” He cracked a smile, which Mahanon managed to return.

“Thanks,” he said, letting Cassandra prop him up into a sitting position so he could eat. “Really. All of you. Thanks for coming to find me.”

“No chance of us doing less, Nonny,” Victoria assured him.

By sunrise, they had each gotten a couple hours of sleep and Mahanon’s color was closer to normal. He even insisted he felt well enough (once he’d drunk another health potion to satisfy Cassandra) to ride his own horse properly. “I can manage, honestly. At least until our next stop,” he promised.

“I’m still riding behind you,” Cassandra said.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, ma vhenan’ara.”

Victoria rolled her eyes, chuckling. “Poor Mythal’enaste hasn’t quite known what to make of your absence, Non,” she noted. “I think your return is a relief.” Indeed, the nightmare horse seemed rather excessively pleased to have its master back, pawing at the ground with one forehoof and snorting. Victoria’s Falon kept his distance somewhat, eyeing the other animal with what might be described as wariness.

Once everyone was mounted, they set off for Val Royeaux at a more relaxed pace than their initial flight from the shrine. “Well,” said Mahanon, “now that I’ve got more of my wits about me again, I can ask this properly. What is that thing on your head, Tor?”

She laughed, and repeated the explanation she had given before they left Skyhold. “According to Dagna, they thought it would be prettier on me than on you,” she teased. “I think that, once I get it carefully extracted from my hair, you should try it on so we can test this theory.”
“I am the pretty one,” he teased back. “Everyone says so. Well, except Cullen.”

“Define everyone,” said Varric, laughing.

“Excuse me,” Dorian cut in, “but I am prettier than either of you. Maybe I should wear it.”

“If you’re both prettier than I am,” Victoria retorted, “then maybe I should just keep it. You’re starting to make it sound like I need all the help I can get.”

Dorian chuckled quietly to himself as everyone, except for Victoria herself, looked at Cullen. “What? I – that is – you don’t need help,” he said, flustered.

“Thank you.” Her lips twitched with amusement.

[Editor’s note: At this point, I decided to explain to Scholar that while yes, the horseback riding was fun – well, for a given value of fun – and the conversations were enjoyable, it wasn’t really interesting enough to include all of it here. I don’t remember everything we discussed, after all, and it’s not like what was said made it into the historical record. All you have to know is that nobody fell off their horse, we kept each other company, and eventually we got to Val Royeaux. She’s giving me a bit of a hard time about being impatient, but how important are these details?]

As they had discussed, in Val Royeaux the rescue party took three rooms at a reputable inn. It was a bit of an awkward arrangement; except for the Inquisitors themselves, none of them were accustomed to sharing sleeping quarters, or at least not on a regular basis. In the room reserved for the two ladies, Cassandra (accompanied by a rather nonplussed Cullen) prepared to do battle with Victoria’s hair and unwind the braids holding the Ardent Blossom in place. Meanwhile, Dorian and Varric assisted Mahanon in getting settled in one of the rooms and sent one of the pages for a local physician to come and check on the Lord Inquisitor.

“If you don’t mind my curiosity, Mahanon,” said Dorian, “how exactly did you get captured?”

“Well, we went to Din’an Hanin to assist the elves, but they were already dead.” He shook his head. “Remind me to have some of our people go and give them a pyre. We were going to do it after we finished clearing out the building, but we were ambushed at the exit. They managed to isolate me from the others using some kind of fire spell, I think – I don’t know enough about magic to be sure, but there was a lot of smoke so that’s my best guess. Anyway, that’s really all I remember. I passed out, or got knocked out, one of those; when I came to my senses again, I was tied up and bound for that wretched place.”

“Yeah, not the most scenic trip from what I saw,” said Varric. He was scrawling a letter, by the look of things.

“What are you doing?”

“Just getting ready to send a note back to Skyhold. Let them know we’re alive and that we all made it to Val Royeaux in one piece,” he explained. “Figure Eyebrows is a little busy getting her new bauble detached from her head, so I’ll take care of it for her. Anything else you think needs to be said, Hunter? You want me to mention that pyre?”

“If you would, please, Varric,” Mahanon nodded. “Better to take care of it as soon as possible. Normally the Dalish bury our dead, and plant trees over the site, but with as thick as the Emerald Graves already are I don’t honestly know if there would be room.”

“We’ve got a couple of our people stationed outside in the Belle Marche,” Varric said, adding the
“I’m sure at least one of them has one of Nightingale’s feathered friends handy, so this should get to Skyhold well before we do. You want anything while I’m downstairs? Tea or whatever?”

“More than anything I want sleep in this nice comfortable bed,” Mahanon replied. “But a hot meal when I wake up would be amazing. Even just some soup.”

“You rest, the boss lady and I will take care of things.” Varric folded up the message. “I’ll go check on her and then have this sent back to the castle.”

With the dwarf out of the room, Victoria’s honorary brothers looked at one another. “How was she, really?” asked Mahanon.

“That depends on which she forms the basis of your inquiry,” Dorian replied. “If it’s Cassandra, she spent much of your absence punching things. If it’s Victoria, she was a bit more inclined to mope – although I can assure you that she enjoyed quite a bit of percussive therapy as well.”

The elf chuckled. “I suppose I can’t say I’m surprised, on either score. It was good of you to come along, you know.”

“I know, I’m quite magnanimous. It’s one of my many splendid traits.” Dorian chuckled. “Victoria tried to forbid me – she said the Venatori had already taken one brother and she wasn’t risking the other – but she couldn’t dissuade me and in truth, she didn’t try terribly hard. I was a little surprised she permitted Varric, however.”

“I’m a little surprised Varric volunteered.”

Dorian shrugged. “According to him, it’s for the book he’s eventually planning to write about all the sordid details of the Inquisition. Far be it from me to question the motivations of a bestselling author.”

Over breakfast the following morning, Dorian had a complaint to lodge. “Varric, tonight we’re trading rooms. I cannot endure another night with the commander.”

“I beg your pardon?” Cullen lifted his eyebrows. The four men were collected around a table in a corner of the inn’s dining room, waiting for Victoria and Cassandra to appear.

“You hardly shut up all night! It nearly drove me mad!”

“Oh.” He chuckled. “Sorry about that, I should have warned you. You know, my first roommate when I joined the Templars put in a request for a room change too. He was complaining that I talk in my sleep.”

“You do,” said Victoria, coming up behind him. She and Cassandra took their seats, and it was only as she put her napkin in her lap that the Lady Inquisitor realized she’d spoken out of turn. “I mean, good morning.”

“Wait, wait, what?” Mahanon looked indignant, and playfully outraged. “How are you in possession of this knowledge? When did you learn this?”

“A few weeks ago.” Her cheeks very nearly matched her hair, but she held his gaze almost defiantly.
“And I missed it?”

Varric almost choked on his breakfast, laughing. “You want the details?”

“No, of course not! But I swore I was going to tease her when it happened, and now you’re telling me I missed my chance!”?

“Sorry, Nonny,” she replied sweetly. “Not my fault you weren’t in the room when I got back. Now, can we please not discuss this any farther?” She glanced at Cullen, who was very carefully not looking at anybody, and reached for the bread basket.

“I feel so cheated,” Mahanon complained.

“So do I,” said Dorian. “How could you not tell me?”

“We’ll talk later.”

[Editor’s note: Most of our time in Val Royeaux really wasn’t that entertaining, but there was no way I was going to skip this bit. Hunter spent the rest of the day pretending to sulk. It was hilarious.]

It was almost a full two weeks after their departure that the rescue party returned to Skyhold, and the welcome was like nothing they’d yet seen. Cole, evidently, had alerted Josephine and Leliana to the group’s approach, and by the time they crossed the bridge and passed through the gate, a large contingent of soldiers, scouts, and Inquisition members were waiting to cheer their arrival.

“They missed you, Non,” said Victoria, fondly. “Everyone’s been worried about you.”

“I’m touched,” he replied seriously.

“Welcome home, welcome home!” Leliana’s tone was warmer and more effusive than usual. The grooms came to tend the mounts, and it seemed like half the population of Skyhold filed past the Lord Inquisitor in order to shake his hand. He wore a slightly incredulous smile throughout the whole thing.

“Forgive me, Inquisitors, for interrupting,” said Josephine. “I realize that Mahanon is still in need of care, but...” She sighed. “There is still the matter of Blackwall.”

“I’d almost managed to forget,” Victoria muttered. “Is he here, then?”

“He arrived yesterday. We did not wish to spring it on you the moment you returned, but Leliana and I agreed that it should be handled as soon as possible.”

Mahanon nodded. “Da’vhenan,” he said, “I’m really not up to this. Can you judge him on your own? I’ll support your decision.”

“You – you will?” She looked bewildered; Dorian couldn’t really blame her. “After everything at Adamant, you would let me deal with this alone?”

He chuckled a little. “I’ve been thinking about it, and you’re exactly the right person to handle it,” he said. “I’ll stand beside you, if you want, but you do the talking.”

Victoria’s expression was still unconvinced, maybe even a little wary, but she shrugged. “All right, then, let’s get this over with. Josephine, if you would make the arrangements, we’ll convene court in ten minutes. I need to comb my hair.”
The instant she was out of sight, Dorian turned to Mahanon. “I can’t say my surprise is much less than hers. What brought this on?”

“Well, I know something that she doesn’t,” he replied, “which is that Blackwall is – shall we say – a little bit sweet on Toria. Not enough to press the issue, or even enough to make him send her tokens like he used to send Josephine, but enough that her verdict will hit him harder than anyone else’s could. Remember the day we watched her spar with Cullen, and Cole was reading someone’s thoughts? ‘Maybe she’s my punishment’?”

“Oh, Maker, I’d forgotten that.” Dorian lifted his eyebrows. “But you know what sort of sentence she’s likely to hand down, don’t you?”

“I do. It’s sort of my point,” said Mahanon. “Orlais would have taken his head and that would have been the end of it. I’d probably send him to the Wardens. But Toria? Toria will *forgive* him. And to a man like Blackwall – or Rainier, or whatever we’re going to call him now – that forgiveness will be harder to accept than any condemnation.”

As he usually was on the particular subject of the Lady Inquisitor, the Lord Inquisitor was absolutely correct. She sat in the throne, still in her dragonskin battledress, though her hair hung loose and she was unarmed. Her posture was a bit more rigid than normal, and her expression regretful. Dorian dimly recalled having once thought she looked more like a girl pretending to rule than an actual sovereign, and he realized with a jolt just how much she had grown into her role. Almost too much, really. Mahanon stood at her side, his hands behind his back, waiting patiently. He was as relaxed as his condition permitted. The stained glass wall behind them glowed with sunlight.

The prisoner was presented, and Josephine’s voice as she announced him was nearly heartsick. Dorian pitied her; the courtly flirtation she and Blackwall had shared was certainly over now, along with any pleasure she had derived from it. Blackwall himself couldn’t even look at anyone as she spoke. “The decision of what to do with him,” she said, “is yours.” She walked away, not even waiting to hear what that decision would be.

Victoria gazed at Blackwall, her mouth more downturned than usual. “I didn’t think this would be easy,” she said quietly, “but it’s harder than I thought.”

“Another thing to regret,” he replied, raising his head at last. “I’m told this was your doing, Ladyship. I accepted my punishment. I was ready for all this to end. Why would you stop it? What becomes of me now?”

Victoria glanced up at Mahanon, who merely nodded, and then turned her gaze back on the prisoner. They stared at one another for a long moment, brown eyes locked on gray. His expression was troubled and pensive, almost pleading in its way, as though he was begging her to be harder on him than he knew she was capable of being. Hers was filled with sorrow, and soft determination; more than that was hard to read, as the sunshine struck her hair from behind and left her face faintly shadowed.

“You have your freedom,” she said at last.

As gasps echoed through the hall, Blackwall blanched. “It cannot be as simple as that.”

“It isn’t,” she replied. She leaned forward a little, studying him. “You’re free to atone as the man you are – not the traitor you thought you were or the Warden you pretended to be.”
“The man I am?” he repeated bitterly. “I barely know him.” His tone softened somewhat as he continued. “But he - I have a lot to make up for. If my future is mine, then I pledge it to the Inquisition. My sword is yours.” He paused, tilting his head slightly. “If I'd said anything less, would an arrow from the rookery have snuffed me like a candle?”

Dorian, standing next to Varric, growled in his throat. “Perhaps not, but if you don’t speak more respectfully you may find yourself confronting a ball of lightning.”

“Easy, Sparkler,” said Varric, giving his arm a pat. “She’s got this.”

Victoria didn’t deign to answer the question. She gestured to the guards, who came to undo Blackwall’s restraints. “Take your post, Thom Rainier,” she said, and only when he had walked away did she sink back into her chair and put a hand to her forehead. “Maker, never make me judge the misdeeds of a friend again.”

“You did well, ma da’vhenan,” Mahanon assured her.

“Thanks, Nonny.”

Once the Lady Inquisitor had regained her equilibrium, and the court had dispersed, they both left the dais. Mahanon returned to their tower, to get some more rest, while Victoria rejoined Dorian and Varric. “That was bracing,” she said in a tone of forced cheerfulness.

“I imagine so. Are you all right?” Dorian put his arm around her shoulders for a moment.

“I will be. Perhaps I’ll go to the practice yard and spend some time hitting things, that seems to help.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with the Seeker,” Varric joked, and they all chuckled.

“A moment, Lady Inquisitor, if you please,” said Josephine, gliding over with a sheaf of papers in her hands. She was still visibly upset by the whole Blackwall thing, but her voice was steadier. “There’s been a development of which I thought you should be informed.”

“Is something wrong, Josephine?” asked Victoria.

“No, not at all. Varric, the Prince of Starkhaven is a friend of yours, yes?”

“By some definition of the term. Why?”

“Just before you all departed for the Shrine of Dumat, we received a letter from Prince Sebastian. He has been on friendly terms with the Inquisition almost from its inception,” she added. “We accepted his offer to send a contingent of his own military to assist with the final push against Corypheus.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised. I call him Choirboy for a reason,” said the dwarf.

“Well, they’ve just arrived,” she reported. “Fifty soldiers... and one mage.”

The change to Varric’s expression was almost comical, Dorian thought; he’d never seen his hirsute little friend look so taken aback. “One mage?”

Josephine smiled. “They’re collected just inside the main gate, so that the soldiers can be briefed by our commander and assigned quarters.”
“Andraste’s sanctified ass,” Varric muttered, and started for the door.

Dorian glanced at Victoria, who had started to giggle. “I assume you know something I don’t? For shame,” he teased.

“I have a suspicion, anyway. Let’s go see if I’m right.”

They followed Varric out of the keep and down the stairs, then passed under the bridge to the second flight of stairs leading down into the lower bailey. The Starkhaven-garbed soldiers were following some of their Skyhold fellows to the barracks, and a cloaked figure stood to one side watching them leave. As Varric paused at the top of the ancient stone staircase, the figure reached up to push back their hood, revealing a young woman’s head. A mage’s staff was strapped to her back.

“I knew it,” the dwarf muttered. Raising his voice, he called, “Sunshine!”

The woman turned, and a smile broke across her features. “Hi, Varric!” she called back.

“What are you doing here?”

She paused, as though thinking, then spread her arms. “I missed you.”

He gave a bark of laughter and shook his head, then started to descend. She crossed the yard in a few quick strides, meeting him when he was near the bottom; on the second step from the ground, he was at eye level with her, and she laughed as she threw her arms around him for a moment. To Dorian’s genuine surprise, Varric not only made no objection, he wrapped his own arms around her in return.

His companion drew back and put her hands on Varric’s cheeks. “It’s been too long since I saw your face,” she said fondly, still smiling.

“It’s gotten a little more battered since the last time it was in front of you,” he acknowledged. “Yours is as pretty as ever, though.”

As Dorian and Victoria neared them, Varric turned. There was something - Dorian was hard-pressed to describe it, exactly, except perhaps to call it a bit of brightness - in the dwarf’s countenance. “Sorry, manners,” he said pleasantly. “Lady Inquisitor Victoria Trevelyan and Dorian Pavus - allow me to introduce Bethany Hawke. Sunshine, meet Eyebrows and Sparkler.”

“Oh, so this is the younger Hawke!” said Dorian, comprehension dawning. “That explains why you would be so happy to see Varric.”

The Hawkes both had glossy black hair and eyes the color of fine brandy, but the similarities ended there. Bethany was of a slighter and more delicate frame than her rough-and-tumble older sister, with elegant hands and a sweet mouth. As she moved up onto the step beside Varric, it became apparent that she wasn’t too much taller than the dwarf; he came up to about her shoulder, or perhaps even a little higher. She was garbed in blue mage robes, and a heavy ring hung around her throat on a sturdy chain of braided gold. One hand rested on her hip, and Varric folded his arms, and there was a trace of impudent delight in both of their expressions.

“I’m very glad to meet you both,” Bethany said. “Varric’s told me so much about the Inquisition in his letters. With your permission, I’m here to help.”
Artist's interpretation of Varric and Bethany's reunion, by Tumblr's Lavilsa
“Welcome to Skyhold,” Victoria said with her usual warmth. “Varric, why don’t you show her over to the tavern for something to eat after her long journey? I’ll speak to Josephine about finding a room – I’m sure we’ve space for you somewhere.” She chuckled.

“Good idea, Eyebrows.” The four of them climbed the stairs back to the upper bailey, and while Victoria and Dorian turned to make their way to Josephine’s office (and, he suspected, gossip a little), Varric guided Bethany in the direction of the Heralds’ Rest. “It’s no Hanged Man, of course, like I told you in my letters – but it’s pretty good. Before we go in there, though, you want to tell me what you’re really doing here?” He squinted up at her.

“I need a reason?” she asked, smirking playfully. “I missed you and I was worried about you… and when Seb said he was sending soldiers to help, I figured it would be a great opportunity for me to come help too.”

“Fair enough. Your sister sent marching orders anyway – I was supposed to come and fetch you back to Kirkwall after all this is over,” he admitted. “You saved me a trip. If you stick around here we can just go home together. Plus, now I don’t have to try to describe everything in my letters anymore, because you can see it for yourself.” He chuckled. “It’s good to see you.”

Her smile turned luminous. “It’s good to see you too. I’m so glad to be here, I’m half convinced I’ll wake up and find the whole thing is actually some sort of dream.”

“I’ll show you around after you eat. Trust me, the noise and the smells should be enough to prove that neither of us is dreaming.” He led her into the tavern and over to the bar. “Cabot, boss lady’s orders – the new arrival needs something to eat. Is there any bread and cheese left?”
“Probably, if that kid in the attic didn’t swipe it for the squirrels or something.” The bartender gave Bethany a brief once-over, and nodded as though satisfied. “Be right back.”

“Oh, just so you know, Sunshine,” said Varric, “Bull spends most of his time here in the bar. I know you’re not fond of Qunari, and you’ve got better reasons for that than most, but I promise he’s okay.”

“I trust you,” she said. “If your letters are anything to go by, everyone here is just fine in my book. I almost feel like I know them all already, amusingly enough.”

“You’ll like them. Most of them, at least.” He chuckled. “Those are his Chargers over there, or at least the core group of them. Krem likes to stand on his chair now and then, but he’s a good kid. And – oh, here comes Tiny now.”

The mercenary captain carefully wove his way through the room, occasionally ducking his head to keep from smacking his horns on the chandeliers. “Varric, were you there for the judging? What happened with Blackwall, or whatever we’re calling him now?”

“Until I’m told otherwise I’m going to keep calling him that.” Varric shrugged. “You know Eyebrows. She pretty much told him ‘don’t do it again.’ Sparkler said Hunter decided to let her kill with kindness, or something like that. He was there, he can probably give you better details. I couldn’t see much over the person in front of me. Sunshine, this is Tiny – the Iron Bull. Tiny, meet Hawke’s sister Bethany.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Bethany replied with a small smile, biting her lip just slightly. “Varric’s told me a lot about all of you, so it’s nice to put faces to names.”

“Your name’s come up now and again too,” Bull replied. “He didn’t mention you were so cute, though.” He grinned. “Welcome to Skyhold. You came with that group which just arrived from Starkhaven, right? I think I saw you down there.”

Her smile widened at the compliment, and she nodded in response to his question. “Yes, the Prince of Starkhaven is a friend. I’m sort of under his protection at the moment, so to speak. When I heard he was sending a retinue, I all but insisted on coming along.” She laughed.

“Well, good. Now that we’ve got the boss back, I imagine they’ll be gearing up for the big push into the Arbor Wilds. I’m no fan of magic, but having an extra mage in the ranks probably won’t hurt.”

Varric frowned. “Wait, I’m not -”

“Bread and cheese,” Cabot interrupted, putting a plate on the bar. “Should hold you til there’s actual supper to be had.”

“Oh, right. Thanks.” Varric passed the plate to Bethany, then accepted the two mugs Cabot pushed at him. “Come on, let’s go sit down. I’m not sold on you coming to the Arbor Wilds, Sunshine.”

“The reason I begged to be included in Seb’s group was so I could help, Varric. I’d like to help if I can,” she insisted gently. “Why don’t you tell me a bit more about this ‘push into the Arbor Wilds’ and then we’ll take it from there?”

“All right.” They sat down near Bull and the Chargers’ usual spot, and went over the basics while she ate. “Our intel shows that there’s some ancient elven temple in the Arbor Wilds, and Corypheus has been attacking those all over Thedas in the hopes of finding… something. Nobody seems to know exactly what. So right now we’re sending out messages to our various allies and
telling them to head down there with all due haste to take on the Venatori and the Red Templars and whoever else is involved, to try to slow their efforts. We’d have left ourselves by now if Mahanon hadn’t been kidnapped.”

Bethany nodded slowly, digesting this information. “And you… do you think Corypheus himself will be there?”

“Yeah, we do. Which is the main reason I’m not sold on the idea of you going.” Varric’s expression was unusually serious. “He already tried to kill you once. And maybe he’s past that, since it seems like he just needed your father’s bloodline to unlock his prison in the Vimmark Mountains, but what if there was more to it? I don’t want you or your sister anywhere near him.”

“I can understand that, really I can. But I want to help in any way possible. And besides, I didn’t come all the way from Starkhaven just to sit in Skyhold the entire time, beautiful though it is,” she added with a slight smile.

“I know.” He sighed. “Tell you what. There’ll be a base camp in the Wilds, with our hospital tents and healers and stuff. I won’t object to you coming along as long as you stay there. Sound fair?”

She tapped her chin thoughtfully for a moment. “I think I can agree to that,” she replied, her smile widening. “When do we leave?”

“Day after tomorrow, I think. Sort of depends on Hunter and how well he’s recovered from everything he’s just survived.” Varric pushed the plate at her. “Finish up, and we’ll go check on him so you can meet him.”

Mahanon was, much as Victoria had been following her mishap in the Cradle of Sulevin, sequestered in the Inquisitors’ tower. He looked a little bemused to meet Bethany lying down, but with both Cassandra and Victoria on hand to insist that he stay put, he didn’t have much to say about it. “Well, as I’m sure Toria would say, any friend of Varric’s is a friend of ours. We’re glad to have you.”

“Thank you. I’m happy to be here, Lord Inquisitor.” Bethany smiled. “And also to hear that you’re recovering from your ordeal.”

“Oh, please, just Mahanon. ‘Lord Inquisitor’ is for Orlesian nobles and other people I don’t very much like.” He winked.

She giggled. “Just Mahanon it is, then. It’s wonderful to meet you all. Varric’s giving me the grand tour – it’s lovely to finally see the place I’ve heard so much about, and the people who inhabit it.”

“You’ll have to join our ‘inner circle,’ as they’re called, for dinner,” said Victoria. “Josephine is finding a room for you as we speak, probably near the library. The mage tower is a bit full, but we always have some spare rooms for visiting nobles overlooking the courtyard, so we’ll most likely put you in one of those.” The Lady Inquisitor smiled. “We gather in the main hall at half past six. You can meet everyone then if you don’t encounter them on the tour.”

“That all sounds perfect, thank you very much. I look forward to hearing everything I’ve missed. Varric gives me some details in his letters, of course, but I’m certain the real thing will be even better.”

“Are we heading for the Wilds soon?” Varric asked. “Sunshine wants to come – I said she can go as far as the base camp, but I’ll feel better if she’s helping with the healers rather than fighting alongside us.”
“Sounds fair,” said Mahanon. “I’m being cleared before much longer, so the wait is almost over. Toria’s precious Commander will head there tomorrow with the bulk of our forces, and we’ll follow the next day.”

“We’ve had word from Empress Celene,” Victoria added, ignoring the ‘precious Commander’ remark. “She’s planning to join us as well. I have no idea why, but they’re her men fighting alongside ours so she’s got as much right to be there as anyone.”

The comment about Cullen was clearly not lost on Bethany; she seemed to be doing her best to hide a grin. “Sounds like we’ll be quite the brigade,” she commented. “But I’m glad to hear that I’ll have a bit of time to enjoy Skyhold before we set out, at the very least.”

“We’ll leave you to your recuperation, Hunter,” Varric said, grinning. “Eyebrows, Seeker, go easy on him.”

“Not a chance.” Cassandra smirked. “He’s put us through enough. It’s his turn.”

“Oh, I’m getting out of here before things get heated!” The dwarf laughed. “But hey, at least you get to be held prisoner in the fanciest bedroom in Skyhold. See you lot at dinner, then.”

Back in the main hall, he looked at Bethany and chuckled. “Well, what do you want to see next? Lady’s choice.”

“Hmm…” She rubbed her hands together as she pondered. “Ah. What about the library the Lady Inquisitor mentioned?”

“Right through here.” Varric gestured at the fireplace. “This is where I usually spend my free time. I like to be warm while I write; if I don’t pay too much attention to my surroundings, I can almost pretend I’m in my rooms back at the Hanged Man.” He led her through the door next to the fireplace, and paused in the lowest level of the rotunda. “Well, Chuckles, ready to add the next section to your mural?”

Solas looked up from his book. “Ah, yes, we’ll be leaving soon, I understand. Hopefully we will be putting this all behind us before much longer.”

“Bethany Hawke, this is Solas – our resident expert on all things that make no sense whatsoever, like the marks on the Inquisitors’ hands. Chuckles, this is Hawke’s sister. We’re on our way up to the library, but I thought we’d stop and say hi.”

“It’s very nice to meet you – Varric’s spoken of you in his letters. He often compares you to my brother-in-law.” Bethany smiled warmly, then glanced around at the walls. “And… you really painted all these murals? They’re fantastic.”

Solas favored her with an approving glance. “I have. This is the Inquisitors’ fortress; these are their deeds.” He paused, and looked at Varric. “Is Hawke married? I don’t recall you mentioning that.”

“Eh, she and Fenris are close enough to it for the term to basically fit. For all I know, they eloped on the run and didn’t tell me about it.”

“I hope not, I’ll be very put out if they did,” Bethany returned with a laugh. “Once we’re all back together again, then they can do as they like.”

Varric grinned at her. “At the very least, you ought to be there. Oh well. We’ll head upstairs, Chuckles, so you can go back to your book.” Solas merely nodded.
Dorian was in his usual place at the top of the stairs. “Allegedly,” Varric remarked to Bethany, once they were within the Tevinter’s hearing, “Dorian does have another room. Somewhere. I can’t swear to it because unless we’re in the field, he’s always here. I think he sleeps in this chair.”

“You make the assumption that I must sleep at all,” Dorian said breezily, looking up from where he had been leaning against the railing. At the sight of Bethany, he inclined his head slightly. “Ah, the lovely Bethany Hawke. We meet again.”

“Varric’s giving me the grand tour of the castle and I requested the library,” she replied with a smile.

“Smart girl.”

“Over there is Grand Enchanter Fiona,” said Varric, trying to be discreet as he pointed. “Insofar as the title means anything anymore. I think I mentioned in one of my letters that she’s usually in here. Anyway, as long as you’re here you’re allowed to take any books you want to read, just check with the guy over by the other staircase. He’s more or less functioning as the librarian. Or you’re welcome to whatever’s in my personal collection; I have some books in my room.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. This is a remarkable library,” she said admiringly, turning to take in all the shelves. As she wandered away from them, Dorian glanced over at Varric and smirked almost knowingly.

Varric merely raised an inquisitive eyebrow in response. “Something on your mind, Sparkler?”

“Oh, nothing in particular. Just observing… drinking everything in. Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look quite so cheerful. Even when Hawke was here, and she was a delight in her own right.”

“Hmm.” He considered it. “That’s… probably true, actually. Well, I call Bethany ‘Sunshine’ for a reason.”

“Indeed.” He continued to smirk, more to himself than anything. “So how long is she staying?”

“Barring any unforeseen circumstances, she’ll be here until we’re finished,” Varric replied. “Big sister has specifically requested that I bring her home to Kirkwall when I go, so it makes sense for her to stay here instead of going back to Starkhaven and forcing me to make the trek there.”

“Mm, I see. Certainly a pragmatic solution.” He pondered for a moment, glancing over at Bethany. “You know, Varric, I noticed something when we went off to rescue the Lord Inquisitor. Naturally, I made no mention of it in the middle of that ordeal, but the question suddenly occurs to me once more – doesn’t one of your books mention Bethany wearing a red scarf around her neck?”

“Oh, yeah, Tale of the Champion. She wore it a lot, right up until she went to the Circle.” Varric paused. “Wait, you read one of my books?”

“Someone was reading it in a tavern I was in once. The writing got better the longer I was there.” He waved his hand slightly. “At any rate, I ask because… haven’t I seen a rather similar scarf adorning your belt?”

“I don’t claim to know what you’ve seen, Sparkler,” Varric retorted. “But I do have a red scarf tied to the belt of my coat, yes. A good luck charm, if you will.”

“Fascinating.” Dorian nodded, looking faintly amused. “I shall make a note of that.” He turned
back to face Bethany as she returned.

“I can see why this is your favorite spot,” she commented with a smile.

“It’s truthfully leagues from what it ought to be. Lady Inquisitor and I had quite the argument about it one day.” Dorian’s mustache twitched with amusement. “But it will have to do, I suppose. Might I ask what your special focus is in magic?”

“I’m a Force mage. I have some training with healing magic, too, but mostly that.”

“Remarkable.” Dorian lifted his eyebrows. “I’ve only a passing familiarity with that particular branch.”

“It’s more common to the Free Marches than anywhere else,” she explained. “The Circle in Kirkwall had a tendency to produce a lot of Force mages, for whatever reason.”

“You and I must have a chat about magical theory sometime. When things are a bit calmer,” he said.

“Whenever you like.”

Only Blackwall was absent from the table when they joined the others for dinner. (Well, and Cole, but Cole was never at the table – he didn’t need to eat, after all.) Varric supposed he wasn’t quite ready to face everyone just yet, and truthfully, he couldn’t blame the man. In two ways, this was helpful; Bethany was able to take his seat without creating any sort of crowding, and the newcomer was enough of a novelty that it helped to curtail the awkwardness that surely must have otherwise arisen.

She endured the questions with aplomb, he thought. Leliana had been somewhat acquainted with all of the Hawke siblings in Lothering, Bethany more than her brother and sister; Cullen, of course, knew her from Kirkwall; Sera wore an expression which suggested that she couldn’t care less. The rest were curious, and asked everything he supposed they might. *Is what Varric wrote about meeting you and your sister true? What brings you to Skyhold? What’s the Prince of Starkhaven like? Can you tell us any good stories about our dwarf?*

Bethany seemed to find the last one particularly amusing. “I leave the storytelling to Varric,” she replied, taking a sip of wine. “But I’m sure he can come up with something you haven’t already heard. Can’t you, Varric?”

“Well, let me think.” He chewed on a hunk of potato, stalling for time. “All right, so you all know that in our younger days, the Kirkwall gang and I ran around at night cleaning up the streets. Before the Deep Roads expedition, Bethany used to join us. One summer night we’re up in Hightown, dealing with a gang called the Guardsmen Pretenders. Our friend Aveline was particularly keen on wiping them out, since she was – and still is – the captain of the city guard. She didn’t take real kindly to anyone dressing up like her people for nefarious purposes.”

He smirked, seeing how the table had fallen silent. The rapt attention was always his favorite part of telling a story. “It was Hawke, Aveline, Sunshine, and me. Hawke and Aveline had a bit of a system – Hawke dual wields, like Hunter, and Aveline’s a straight-up swordswoman, like Eyebrows but with a shield. So if you’ve ever stopped to watch those two dance around each other on the battlefield, you have some idea of how Hawke and Aveline operated.” The Inquisitors exchanged amused glances. “Meanwhile, Sunshine and I are ranged fighters, so we tried to kind of keep a distance and provide cover. And the dog just ran in and out of everything.”
“I miss Rikki,” Bethany remarked.

“I know. Well, in one part of Hightown, there’s this weird path that branches off of a square and basically just leads to someone’s front door. Some of the Pretenders chased the two of us down there – it’s more like a corridor than any sort of proper road. I was in front, Bianca at the ready, and Sunshine here was standing behind me. I guess to them, it looked like I was trying to shield her. So the one in front says to the others, ‘Kill the dwarf, but we can have some fun with her.’” He paused to allow his listeners to react. “I said, ‘If you think you’re going to touch her, you’re dumber than you look, and I didn’t think that was possible.’ I was trying to get an idea for how many of them there were; I lost count at five.”

“You’re exaggerating,” said Cassandra flatly, “just like always.”

“He’s actually not, this time. There were seven,” said Bethany. “I counted later.”

“The ringleader stared at me for a few seconds, with that charming slackjawed expression that suggests a few generations of cousins may have intermarried. ‘That’s why we kill you first,’ he said, like it was obvious. And I replied, ‘What makes you think I’m the one you have to worry about?’ They didn’t get to answer that much,” he added, “since that’s when Bethany decided to show them that the staff on her back wasn’t just for aesthetics.”

Everyone laughed at that. “Well played,” said Dorian, approvingly.

“The ‘fighting crime in Kirkwall’ stories are always some of my favorites,” Victoria remarked.

“Eh. They’re not that great,” muttered Sera. Varric was suddenly reminded of the time she had yelled at him for not being ready to put down an unfinished story and pick up a new one, and had told him to “get a shelf.” Of course she wouldn’t look too happily on Bethany, one of the ‘Kirkwall people’ she felt he mentioned too much. Ah well. Buttercup would adjust; she usually did.

With the meal concluded, Josephine escorted Bethany (and a trailing Varric) up to the room which had been appropriated for her stay. It was one of a series of rooms along a balustrade overlooking the courtyard, with a painting of King Calenhad on one wall and a bedspread patterned in Highever weave. “I’m given to understand that you’ll be remaining with us for some time,” said the ambassador. “I took the liberty of having your things brought up here already, and should you require anything, you’ll usually find a page or guard within shouting distance. Or,” she added with a chuckle, “just find Varric.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Montilyet.”

“Is there anything I can arrange for you in the meantime?”

“Don’t worry about it, Ruffles,” said Varric. “You have enough on your plate right now. I’ll help her get settled, and I showed her around so she knows where everything is.” He grinned. “But I’ll need you to get more paper and ink for me, when you have the chance. Vivienne’s after me to get more work done on the Orlesian thriller.”

Josephine chuckled. “I’ll see to it when we return, if you don’t mind. I’ll be traveling to the Wilds with Commander Cullen and his forces tomorrow.”

“Then maybe you’d better get some sleep. You know Curly’s an early bird.”

“That… is an excellent point.” She turned back to Bethany. “Welcome to Skyhold, Mistress Bethany. We’re very glad to have you here. I’ll bid you both a good night.”
She left, and Bethany set about examining the room and unpacking her small trunk. “I’ll send a letter to Sebastian tomorrow, to let him know we arrived safely,” she mused. “I doubt he’ll be any happier than you to think about me going along to the Arbor Wilds, but maybe telling him that you’re insisting I remain at the base camp will ease his mind. It was no easy chore to convince him to let me come here, I’ll tell you that.”

“Choirboy’s all right. Sometimes.” Varric chuckled. “You need a hand there?”

“No, there isn’t much. I’m almost done.” She pulled out an old portrait of her mother Leandra. “Marianne found this for me when we cleared the slavers out of the house. It was the betrothal portrait when Mother was engaged to the Comte de Launcet.”

“It’s a good picture. You favor her more than your sister does,” he noted.

“Carver and I both took after Mother, in largest part. Sis is Father through and through. We all inherited Father’s hair, though. I wish I had portraits of him and Carver too, but at least I have this.” She set the framed image on a shelf. Outside dusk was falling, and Varric was reminded of something.

“Hey… come with me, there’s one thing you haven’t seen yet.”

Bethany’s expression was curious as she followed him out onto the walkway, and he led her to the roof at the far end. The moon was low in the sky, just rising, nearly full; darkness hadn’t completely covered the land, giving the setting a somewhat ethereal quality. Below them, the courtyard garden was quiet except for the occasional cough or mutter from a guard on duty. Varric perched himself on a ledge and gestured for Bethany to do likewise; after a brief hesitation, she did.

They had done this in Kirkwall, sat together in silence and watched the moon rise while Hawke and Aveline cleaned up their mess. Those weeks leading up to the expedition, clearing gangs off the streets and celebrating victories at the Hanged Man… the world had been simpler then, he thought. He’d had less guilt, she’d had more freedom. Would things have been different if she’d come to the Deep Roads with them? He wondered sometimes.

But she was free now. He couldn’t even tell himself that he wished she’d stayed in Starkhaven where she had been safe. Skyhold was warm – really warm – for the first time since Hawke had left for Crestwood. He took a flask from his pocket and knocked back a mouthful, then offered it wordlessly to his companion. Her fingers closed on his as she accepted it, and the dwarf felt himself grin.

They would win soon, and this would all soon be over. And with Sunshine around, it would be a lot brighter.
Varric and Bethany on the ramparts, by Charlie (The Tevinter Biscuit)
Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Scepter of Redemption

Victoria woke earlier than usual, wanting to see her Commander before he left for the Arbor Wilds. They would be able to steal only a few moments of solitude – if that – but she would take what she could get. “This is a switch, you must admit,” she said with a smile, entering his office. “Usually we’re saying goodbye before I’m off to Maker knows where, and this time I’m the one watching you leave.”

“I know, it’s quite unusual.” He smiled. “But you’ll join us before very long. We’ll bring Corypheus to his knees with this offensive, and perhaps this will be the final push. After that…” He left the unfinished sentence hanging in the air.

“After that, we’ll see what else the world has in store for us,” she concluded. “Neither of us are the type to sit still for long. I’m sure we’ll find something to do. Together.”

“I’d not have it any other way,” he assured her warmly.

Neither would I.”

They walked together down to the lower bailey, where his horse was waiting. Josephine was already in the saddle of a mild-tempered bay mare. “I hope you’re dressed warmly,” Victoria greeted her. “You’ll be going at a good clip, and that wind can bite.”

“Your concern is appreciated, my lady.” Josephine’s demeanor was cheerful, though she adjusted the hood of her cloak all the same. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Surely this will be less worrisome than the Winter Palace.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Cullen said with a wry grin. He caught Victoria’s hand and kissed it, ignoring any onlookers. “Travel safely when you join us,” he told her. She chuckled, watching him mount Ferdinand; if she wasn’t entirely mistaken, he deliberately made the surcoat flare a bit as he swung into the saddle. The effect was not lost on her.
“Good luck, everyone,” she called to the assembled scouts and soldiers, who saluted her as they passed. “Maker go with you all!”

Having watched the advance forces cross the bridge and disappear from view, Victoria’s next objective was breakfast. She made her way through the bailey, nodding at Bonny Sims as the merchant began opening her stall for the day, and climbed the stairs leading into the kitchen. The cook was not in evidence, only some of her assistants, and these didn’t dare question the Lady Inquisitor as she helped herself to some bread and jam and milk. With two apples in hand, she descended the stairs again and made her way to the stable, munching one as she walked and presenting the other to Falon as a morning treat.

“We’ve another long ride ahead of us tomorrow,” she told him, finishing her own apple and allowing him to eat the core. “I wanted to give you a good brushing before we go.”

“You’ve stable hands to attend to that,” a voice noted, and she glanced up to meet the wary eyes of Blackwall.

“I know,” she replied, a bit hesitant. “But there’s something very satisfying about tending to my horse and tack with my own hands. Besides, it’ll pass the time.”

“Can’t object. Wouldn’t if I could,” he amended.

She didn’t quite know how to respond to that, so she nodded and set about assembling what she needed. It was uncomfortable to realize he was watching her, and the longer the silence continued, the more awkward it felt. She didn’t have the heart to ask him to go away, however, so she was determined to endure it.

Abruptly, he said, “I’ve been meaning to thank you.”

“Thank me?” Victoria kept her eyes on Falon’s mane as she groomed him, thinking maybe whatever was happening would be easier – for both of them – if she avoided looking at Blackwall while he spoke.

“For the Warden relics. There are a hundred things that need your attention; you didn’t have to take the time to help me, and yet you did. You aided me in recovering relics of the Wardens, to help them preserve their history - you didn't know I was lying. You believed in me, and now those things will go into the hands of the people to whom they rightfully belong.”

“Oh.” She glanced over to where he stood leaning against a post, watching her. No, he was really watching the horse, she realized. That was safer. “Well, um, you’re welcome.”

“You’ve proven yourself to be an honorable woman, Ladyship. Principled.” His growly voice was subdued. “I’ve great admiration for you, and also for the Lord Inquisitor. I’ve never been more certain in my decision to join you. Thank you for letting me stay and finish this.”

“I would never have guessed that you admire me,” she admitted. That he was grateful she could understand, but admiration was not something she expected.

“Of course I do. You have the world at your feet, myself included.” He grimaced as soon as the words were out of his mouth, and shook his head. “That probably sounds differently than I intended it.”

“It’s all right… I think I understand.” Victoria paused. “How shall I – we – refer to you in the future? Rainier, or Blackwall?”
He looked thoughtful. “I’ve gotten used to ‘Blackwall’,” he mused. “Perhaps we could treat it as less of a name and more of a title - almost like ‘Inquisitor.’ Reminds me of what I ought to be.”

“That makes sense. Everyone needs something to which they can aspire.”

“Exactly.” He looked as though he wanted to say something else, but thought better of it.

As he walked away, another voice murmured, “The name fits more securely than it used to do.” Victoria looked up to see Cole perched on a hay bale.

“Does it?” she asked.

“It used to hang on him, like a too-large tunic he borrowed from someone else. Now he can let himself grow into it. He can heal, untangle the knots and make it smooth. You gave him the chance; he’s afraid of letting you down.” Cole pulled on the brim of his hat.

“I guess we’ll see, Cole.”

With Falon tended and seeming quite content about things, Victoria left the stable and almost ran smack into one of the Skyhold runners. “Begging your pardon, Your Worship!” she said. “I was bid to come find you. Madame de Fer would like an audience, if you can spare a few moments.”

“Certainly, I’ll head up there now. Thank you.”

Slightly mystified, since Vivienne had never before seen fit to summon her, she climbed the stairs to the keep with a growing curiosity. The fortress had come alive with activity while she was occupied with her horse; though a large contingent of the Inquisition forces had accompanied Cullen, the support staff was as busy as ever. Quartermaster Morris was scuttling back to his office from the tavern, having apparently taken a quick break in between processing supply requests, and Gatsi the stonemason was making one of his inspections of the foundation. He hailed her with a friendly “Stone met, Lady Inquisitor” as she passed him.

Vivienne was on the external balcony overlooking the upper bailey, apparently having watched her approach. “My dear,” she said, as Victoria joined her, “I’m afraid I must ask you for help. There is an alchemical formula that I must complete, but I have been unable to obtain a critical ingredient – the heart of a snowy wyvern. I know the timing is hardly ideal, what with our press into the Arbor Wilds tomorrow, but if you could see to it when we return I would be tremendously grateful.”

“A snowy wyvern?” Victoria repeated. “I’m not certain I’ve ever heard of such a thing. I’ll need to know everything you can tell me about it.”

“I had arranged to obtain one,” the First Enchanter explained, “but the chevaliers who were working with me were killed in the civil war. The beasts are quite rare, and exceedingly dangerous; their venom is the most potent of any wyvern. Ordinary hunters would not make the attempt, as the risk is far too great, but you are by no means ordinary. You and Mahanon, my dear, would certainly be equal to this monster.”

“I’ve never heard you speak of alchemy before. What is this formula?”

“It’s a special request from a member of the Council of Heralds. I am still the Imperial court enchanter, after all.” There was something uncomfortable in Vivienne’s gaze; Victoria couldn’t put her finger on it, but it made her worry a bit. “The matter is private.”

“Fair enough, but why do you want my help? I mean, Non is a hunter, certainly, but I’m nothing of
Oh, this beast isn’t hunted for sport, as other wyverns sometimes are. It’s far too deadly for that.” Vivienne shook her head. “In the past, chevaliers were dispatched to either bring down the beasts or drive them away from villagers, but since my chevaliers were killed, I’m in need of someone with martial aptitude.”

Victoria nodded. “All right. As you say, it has to wait until we come back from the Wilds, but I’ll do what I can.”

“I would be most grateful, my dear. I shall give the location of its lair to Cullen, when he has a moment to breathe – I believe I saw him depart earlier, yes?” Victoria nodded again, and Vivienne continued, “Remember, sweet girl, I must have its heart, or the potion will not work.”

“I’ll talk to Non about it. If we’re able to help, I promise we will.”

Vivienne’s dilemma reminded Victoria of something else. Several weeks earlier, she had accompanied Josephine into Val Royeaux, where they met with Comte Boisvert (or so they had initially thought) in hopes of receiving information about why someone was targeting couriers working for Josephine’s family. The result had been the discovery that the House of Repose, the Orlesian assassins’ guild, was fulfilling a very old contract against anyone who attempted to restore the Montilyets’ trading operations to Orlais. It had all been quite strange, and more than a little unsettling. Josephine had come up with something of a convoluted plot to set things right, while Leliana had suggested a more straightforward method – send an agent to break into the House of Repose’s vault, steal the contract, and destroy it.

Victoria had found merit in the latter suggestion, but with everything that had happened since then – Mahanon’s capture not least among her concerns – it had quite honestly slipped her mind. She was ashamed of that fact now. [Editor’s note: The rest of us had no idea there were assassins targeting Ruffles. Until I was helping Scholar with the research for this chapter, I would never have even guessed such a thing. Like I’ve said before about Leliana, I think even her secrets have secrets.] She backtracked through the library and up to the rookery, where Leliana was bent over some reports from her field agents. “Forgive the intrusion,” she said pleasantly, “but I wanted to ask about Josephine. Did Rector have any luck stealing the contract from the House of Repose?”

“Oh, yes. Forgive me, I should have informed you sooner.” Leliana looked up and smiled, almost catlike. “He and his group destroyed the contract, and also picked up some information about certain other targets which may prove useful. I know Josie won’t like it, but I wanted to ask about Josephine. Did Rector have any luck stealing the contract from the House of Repose?”

“Of course. Forgive me, I should have informed you sooner.” Leliana smiled again. “He and his group destroyed the contract, and also picked up some information about certain other targets which may prove useful. I know Josie won’t like it, but I would rather suffer her displeasure than her passing.”

Victoria chuckled. “I quite understand. I should have inquired before this.”

“You’ve had enough on your mind of late, I would think. No one can fault you for dropping a thread now and then when you’re weaving such a complex tapestry. How does the Lord Inquisitor fare?”

“His injuries weren’t very bad – he was mostly dehydrated and malnourished, and utterly exhausted.” The younger woman shook her head. “Cassandra’s been overseeing his care since our return to Skyhold, which I think he’s enjoying more than he wants to admit.”

Leliana couldn’t suppress a laugh. It was almost a giggle, really. “I never thought of Cassandra as the type to nurse someone back to health, but perhaps she takes inspiration from one of her books.”
“And she in turn may inspire something in one of Varric’s, if she’s not careful!” Victoria paused. “Oh, who am I kidding? She would love that.”

“You’ll never hear her admit it out loud, but we both know that is true.” There was another, longer pause. “I have written to the Wardens,” Leliana said finally. “I hear from Elissa occasionally, you know, little notes to advise me that her existence continues. She can never tell me where they are, of course, because they move so frequently, but Morrigan gave me a bit of direction and I sent word to them to ask for their help.”

“What help do you suppose they can give?”

“In truth, I don’t know. But they are Grey Wardens, and Corypheus is a darkspawn, or something like one. I had hoped that they might have some kind of information on how he can be defeated. I didn’t mention it sooner, as you were diverted by Mahanon’s situation, but I had rather hoped there would be a reply before you left for the Wilds. It does not look like that will be the case, unfortunately.”

“Well, I hope they’re safe and that you hear from them soon. If they can offer us any guidance, I’d welcome it.” Victoria wasn’t as convinced as Leliana seemed to be that the Wardens – extraordinary though they were – would be in any position to help the Inquisition. But, she reflected, there was no harm in hoping a little.

“Lady Inquisitor, I was… do you have a moment?”

Victoria had stopped in the library to trade playful barbs with Dorian, but she was surprised to find Solas waiting for her at the bottom of the rotunda staircase. “Did you need something, Solas?”

“Yes. I… that is, I would like to speak to you. Both of you.”

“Mahanon is in the tower; we can go up there now, if you like.”

He nodded. “Please.”

She led the way up the stairs, to where Mahanon was apparently obeying an order from Cassandra and lying down. “Oh, hey,” he greeted them. “You just missed Cassandra, but she’ll be back soon. Is something wrong?”

“That’s actually what I’d like to know,” Victoria replied. “Solas wants to talk to us.”

“A query, if you’ll indulge me.” He gestured to one of the open balcony doors, and the three of them stepped outside into the sunshine. “What were you like, before the Anchor?”

Surprised, Victoria lifted her left hand and studied it. The mark was quiet. She glanced at Mahanon, who shrugged, and Solas persisted. “Has it affected you? Changed you in any way? Your mind, your morals, your spirit?”

“I don’t believe so,” she said slowly.

“If it had,” Mahanon added, “do you really think we’d have noticed?”

“No.” Solas smiled. “That is an excellent point.”

“Why do you ask?”

“You show a wisdom I have not seen since…” He paused, choosing his words. “Since my deepest
journeys into the ancient memories of the Fade. You are not what I expected, either of you.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” said Mahanon with a small grin.

“It’s not disappointing, it’s… most people are predictable.” Solas looked at Victoria. “Humans are shortsighted, brutish, blind to the beauty of the Fade, their minds cast in a duality of black and white. But you have shown a subtlety in your actions, a wisdom that goes against everything I know of your people. Perhaps at times I have accused you of being blinded by your compassion, and yet there is strength in that.”

“I do what I can.” Victoria was more than a little startled by the commentary, though she appreciated the compliment to herself.

“You are modest.” It seemed to please Solas that she was. “So many would use this Inquisition as a blunt instrument in their rise to power. But not the two of you. Mahanon, if the Dalish could raise someone with a spirit like yours, have I misjudged them?”

The Lord Inquisitor shrugged again, his expression unusually serious. “Most of the Dalish care about impressing other hunters with a good shot or talking about how awful humans are. There are only a few who seem to care about the old ways.”

“Perhaps that is it. I suppose it must be. Most people act with so little understanding of the world.” Solas looked thoughtful, and faintly troubled. “Then, too, perhaps it is because there are two of you. You are true equals, and more than merely partners. That is a matter to consider.”

“What does all this mean, Solas?” asked Victoria.

“It means,” he said, slowly and a little sadly, “that I respect you both deeply, Inquisitors. And I have disturbed you enough for one afternoon.” With that he turned, and left them standing together.

After a moment, Mahanon spoke. “Okay, so… what was that all about?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Nonny.”

Cassandra returned to the tower not long after Solas vacated it, and Victoria was perfectly willing to leave Mahanon to her care once more. There was no telling how long it would be before they could have any privacy again, so she gave them what she could while it was an option and made her way downstairs. The day had been entirely too full of serious moments, she thought, and she was desperately in need of something more lighthearted to ease her spirits.

“The thing about the silk dresses, though, is that when you wear one you glide.”

The words drifted across the mostly empty great hall as she opened the door by the throne, and involuntarily, Victoria turned in their direction of origin. Half of a smile curled the left side of her mouth as she realized who had spoken. Varric was in his usual place by the fire, papers strewn all across the table. Bethany was seated beside him, sitting sideways in the chair with her legs draped over one arm and her back against his left shoulder, clutching a few more pages in her hands.

“Glide,” he repeated, picking up his quill. “So something more like… this?” He dipped the pen in the inkwell and scratched it rapidly across a blank sheet for a moment. Bethany peered over his shoulder, and nodded.

“Now you have the idea. And the color is important too, you know. If you want Lady Elizabeth to really be the focus of everyone’s attention in this scene, you need to put her in a color that will
accentuate her features. You mention her topaz eyes and her pink cheeks, so I think maybe a soft rose would – oh! Your Worship, hello!” The mage immediately straightened, turning in her chair to sit more properly.

“Don’t let me disturb you,” said Victoria with a smile. “And please, call me Victoria. Not enough people use my name around here. Is this the Orlesian thriller where Vivienne is the villain?”

“This is it, or at least what wants to be it when it grows up. Sunshine’s critiquing my descriptions of the fashions the Iron Lady insisted I research.” He chuckled. “Well, I guess somebody has to do it.”

“So Bethany gets spoilers. Don’t let word of that spread around this place,” she teased him. “And who is Lady Elizabeth? I don’t remember her being mentioned in the part you let me read, and I thought the villain was a duchess.”

“She is. Elizabeth’s sort of her foil – a younger, more pleasant character that the Duchess can’t stand,” he explained. “I hadn’t introduced her yet when you were reading, but you remember Ser Athras? She’s very important to him.”

“Well, far be it from me to interrupt the creative process.” She leaned on the back of a chair for a moment, watching them. “Are you settling in all right, Bethany? Is the room to your liking?”

“Oh, it’s lovely, thank you. This whole place is extraordinary, it puts the Viscount’s Keep in Kirkwall to shame.”

“What, this old thing? This is nothing, you should see my other castle.” The two women laughed. “Do you need anything, before I give back Varric’s concentration?”

“Oh, come now, Your Inquisitorialness. You couldn’t disturb anybody if you tried,” the dwarf said genially. “You want to sit down?”

She did, in truth, but she somehow felt like she was intruding. “Thank you, but I’m just going around and checking on everyone to see if they need anything before tomorrow’s venture. I’ve checked with Master Dennet, Bethany, he reserved one of the Fereldan horses for you to use.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about that,” said Bethany with a slight frown. “I’ve never actually ridden on horseback. Most of my traveling has been by ship or by wagon, or else by walking.”

Varric frowned. “Maybe I’d better go with her, Eyebrows,” he said. “I know you’re used to having me share your big brute, but it might go easier if I ride the horse and Sunshine sits behind me.”

“That seems like a perfectly sensible idea.” Victoria nodded. “You’ve ridden our horses a few times on your own, I think you know what you’re doing. And we can rig a harness on the side of the saddle to bear Bianca’s weight, like I do with my sword when you’re with me. That way she’s not smacking poor Bethany in the face,” she added teasingly.

“You hate horseback riding,” Bethany reminded him, her frown replaced by an amused smile.

“Varric hates a lot of things,” Victoria told her. “I found out one day that the others keep a running list. You should ask Dorian about it.”

“Please, don’t encourage her.”

[Editor’s note: Even now I sometimes think they get along a little too well.]
Varric and his proofreader, by Ange
Chapter Forty: Misty in Memory

Cassandra had serious reservations about the trek into the Arbor Wilds. She knew, of course, that the timing wasn’t exactly planned, and that there was no way to get out of the matter. With Corypheus on the move, there was no opportunity for delay. Still, if it had been up to her, Mahanon would have been on bed rest for at least a few more days before hurtling back into the fray.

The day of departure found them all collecting slowly in the lower part of the bailey, where Master Dennet and his grooms were bringing out the mounts one by one. She surveyed the scene as she adjusted the bridle on Scarlet; the ‘inner circle’ members were gradually making their way to join them, having first been ushered to eat a proper breakfast by either Mother Giselle or possibly Victoria. Dorian was acting a bit oddly, seeming as though he wasn’t quite sure whether he ought to look in Bull’s direction or not. Bethany had traded mage robes for Inquisition scout armor, most likely to make it easier to ride, and laughed a little as Master Dennet assisted her into the saddle of a chestnut behind Varric. Victoria was adjusting her braids among the Ardent Blossom’s leaves, while playfully scolding Mahanon about not eating enough.

“I’ll leave it to Cass to talk sense into you, since you clearly no longer listen to me,” she teased him. Surprised, Cassandra laughed.

“What do you mean, I no longer listen to you? When did I ever listen to you?” he countered.

“Now you’re just being mean,” she protested, “and Cullen isn’t here to deal with you. Dorian, be a darling and turn Mahanon into a frog for me, won’t you?”

“I’m afraid I’m fresh out of frog spells, Toria, but I promise to leave something unpleasant in his
bedroll later. Will that suffice?”

“I suppose.”

“Pft.” Mahanon snorted. “Like Sera doesn’t do that every time we go somewhere.”

“Stuff it, glowy boy,” Sera called across the yard in a remarkably pleasant tone. Varric, who had been listening to the exchange in uncharacteristic silence, snorted. [Editor’s note: I want to object to this, but somehow I just can’t.]

For her part, Cassandra was relatively quiet for the first leg of the journey. She was observing the group, rather than directing her attention to worrying about the task which lay before them, and amusing herself by coming to assorted conclusions about the Inquisition’s “inner circle.”

Of Blackwall she thought as little as possible. She hadn’t been surprised by Victoria’s pronouncement, and once Mahanon had explained his notion of cruel mercy, she could understand why he had deferred to her as he had. But Cassandra still had no heart to pardon the man personally, and though she would swallow her distaste and fight beside him for as long as duty required it, she would speak to him no more than necessary. He seemed to accept that, as far as it went, and made no effort to engage in much conversation; when he did speak, there were limited parties to whom he would address himself. It was strange, she admitted to herself. There was a sort of unstated penance being served in his soft refusal to inflict himself upon them, and she could almost respect it in a roundabout sort of way.

As if he felt her eyes upon him, Blackwall shifted in the saddle, and Cassandra quickly looked away before he could meet her gaze. It instead fell upon the Iron Bull, whose massive battle nug (it would have been monstrous to force anything smaller to bear that burden) tromped proudly at the center of a small cluster of mounts ridden by his loyal Chargers. Interestingly, Dorian’s own more elegant horse trotted nimbly beside the nug, and the two appeared to be in some kind of clandestine discussion. She wondered about that. Mahanon had remarked to her privately that he thought the two were growing close, and Victoria had more or less confirmed it, but they were apparently trying to keep it from becoming very public knowledge.

Then again, maybe they weren’t trying very hard. She managed to catch some remark about some silk garment which had been left in Bull’s room, and immediately decided she would rather not know.

“You two do realize we can hear you, right?” Varric called. He was doing his best to keep his own horse moving forward in a relatively straight line, though the effort involved was visible on his features. Behind him in the saddle, Bethany had freed one hand in order to cover her mouth, lest she dissolve into giggles.

“What am I supposed to be doing, telling knock-knock jokes?” Varric paused. “Hey, Kid, it’s been a while since we tried. You feeling up to it?”

“I think I can do it.” Cole never bothered with a horse of his own; being mostly, well, whatever he really was, he didn’t need one. He simply materialized every so often as though proving that he was keeping up with the rest of them. “Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Me.”
Varric sighed. It appeared that this was Cole’s usual response. “Me who?”

“You, and I’m telling a knock-knock joke.” The spirit-boy’s expression was an odd mix of triumphant and hopeful.

“Well... that was closer,” said Varric, after a brief pause. “Keep trying.”

Bethany gave up fighting the urge and burst into a peal of delighted laughter, which caused a smile to instantly split the dwarf’s face. Cassandra chuckled in spite of herself. She wasn’t quite certain what was going on; but unlike with Dorian and Bull, it seemed as if nobody else was either. When she had interrogated Varric back in Kirkwall, he had spoken of Hawke’s sister with so much real warmth and affection that Cassandra had come away from the entire matter half convinced there was something between the two of them. She had retained that conviction until she learned about the lady smith who came to Skyhold. This discovery led her to believe she’d overthought the whole thing, seen something that wasn’t really there... right up to the moment where she was actually introduced to Bethany. Now she no longer knew which was the correct presumption.

Cassandra had formally given up on ever understanding Varric, and she was the last person in whom he was likely to confide, so the odds of her figuring out the situation were slim at best. Only one thing, she thought, could be fairly determined, and it was this – having the younger Hawke around made Varric happy. It was that simple. For her part, the Seeker was content to leave it there.

[Editor’s note: And a good thing too. I can imagine how that conversation might have gone, and the Seeker would probably not have enjoyed it.]

As they set up camp for the night, roughly halfway to their destination, Cassandra came to a slightly jarring realization. It had been months since the entire inner circle of the Inquisition had traveled together as a single party. Usually they were divided into smaller groups, trying to cover more ground in less time. It could be said that even the flight from Haven hadn’t been a full party outing, since the circumstances of the moment had forced them to abandon Victoria to the fate she had chosen. While collecting firewood, she strained her memory, and the only other instance she could recall for certain was the trek to the fortress of Adamant. It wasn’t a comparison in which she took any particular pleasure; she fervently hoped the outcome would be better this time.

“A copper for your thoughts, ma vhenan’ara?” Mahanon’s gently teasing voice cut through her ruminations, and she glanced up with a smile as he approached.

“I’m just wondering what is to come,” she replied. “What this newest adventure will mean for us... whether the victory we so desperately seek is finally near at hand. And...” Cassandra hesitated, then plunged ahead with the confession. “And I wonder who among us will not be returning from the Wilds.”

“Ahh.” He nodded. “An understandable question.”

“I want the answer to be we all return, but... nothing is certain.”

“Some things are certain,” he reminded her fondly. “That, unfortunately, isn’t one of them.” He relieved her of some of the wood she had gathered. “Come on... we’ll make this evening a pleasant one. I don’t want anyone dwelling on the dangers that face us; we’ve all been through too much already.”

He led her back to the fireside, where Dorian and Victoria were quarreling (not at all seriously)
about whose turn it was to prepare the evening meal. “Would you really have me inflict gastronomic distress on our companions, my dear Toria?” the mage was asking.

“Not at all, Dorian,” she replied sweetly. “I know you can do positively anything – including make dinner.”

“While I bow to your skills at flattery, as well as your very obvious gift for recognizing ability, the truth is that anything you make for our little cadre is always made with love, and therefore is far superior to what I could offer.”

“It’s getting deep out here,” Cassandra heard Varric mutter.

Victoria exhaled noisily. “I know when I’m beaten,” she said with a dramatic sigh. “All right. Vegetable stew it is, made with my secret recipe.”

“Should I be concerned about this secret recipe?” Mahanon teased her.

“Possibly. I didn’t say which vegetables I’m using, after all.”

An hour later, they had finished establishing camp. Tents were erected, water skins were refilled at the nearby stream, and something more or less souplike was bubbling in the cast iron pot by the fire. “Help yourselves and get comfortable,” Victoria invited the company. “I feel like this is going to be a long night.”

“I was thinking something similar,” Mahanon replied, moving to ladle some of the contents of the pot into a bowl. “But you know, I got a little distracted from the idea because I started remembering some of the adventures we’ve had these last few seasons together. When we met on the Queen Madrigal, Tor, I never guessed any of this might be in store for us.”

She chuckled. “No, nor I.”

Cassandra accepted the bowl of soup which Mahanon passed to her, and several minutes later, everyone was arranged around the fire in various positions of tense relaxation. She felt vaguely amused by the contradiction of terms; it sounded like something Varric might put in one of his books. For a time, all was largely silent as their mouths were occupied with eating.

“So as I was saying,” Mahanon said abruptly, as though he’d merely paused to collect his thoughts, “I got distracted thinking about some of the stuff we’ve endured together. Also some of the stuff we’ve endured separately, but that’s a different matter maybe. I thought we could all try our hands at storytelling for a little while, make sure Varric’s got plenty of material for the book I’m sure he’s planning to write about us all.”

“Hunter, I could never put all this in a book. Who’d believe it?” Varric retorted, snickering faintly into his dinner. “But I never say no to stories. Who’s got one to start?”

Nobody seemed to want to go first, so Cassandra relented. “I suppose I could tell you all about how we first found the Heralds after the Conclave.”

“Now that’s a story I’m not sure anyone here has ever heard – including me, and I’m in it,” said Mahanon. “Go on then, ma vhenan’ara.”

“Well, it started in Kirkwall, really,” she began. “I interviewed Varric regarding the whereabouts of the Champion, whom Divine Justinia had hoped might be enticed to accept the mantle of the Inquisitor.” She paused, exchanging slightly hard looks with Varric; it was a bit of a sore spot between them still, though they had come far in learning to forgive one another. Seeing his
expression relax, she gave him a nod and continued. “After he was released, I realized it might be better for the Divine to hear his testimony in person. I also thought she needed to see the chest hair for herself.”

She paused for dramatic effect, rather enjoying the way everyone reacted to that bit. Varric himself looked more startled than anyone. “You’re joking!”

“To tell you the truth,” she admitted, “she had previously expressed an interest in meeting you. She was actually quite a fan of *Hard in Hightown*.”

“Isn’t everybody?” he retorted, but there was genuine delight in his smirk. Bethany, seated nearby, just laughed.

“I tracked Varric down a second time and invited him to accompany me to the Conclave.”

“I guess *invited* is one word for it. Not the one I would have picked, but you’re telling the story.” Varric put his spoon in his mouth, probably to keep himself from commenting farther.

“By the time all was ready, I had met with Commander Cullen and he had accepted the post to oversee the Inquisition’s military arm. It wasn’t intended to be an army at that time,” she added. “Cullen’s experiences in Kirkwall have taught him a great deal about subduing not only demons, but renegade Templars and mages. He was the chief reason the city didn’t entirely fall to pieces after the death of Knight-Commander Meredith. I thought, and the Divine agreed, that he was the ideal person to teach other people how to stop the rebels and hopefully end the war before it got much farther out of hand. So the three of us and Leliana boarded the final vessel which was setting out for the Conclave.”

“But you never actually got there?” asked Dorian.

“Our crossing was a little rougher than we had anticipated, and a storm forced our time on the ship to last a day longer than usual.” Cassandra ate a little soup. “We reached Ferelden and made our way to the village of Haven. The plan was that we would stay the night there and attend the Conclave the following day. Anything you wish to add to this part, Varric?”

“Haven at that time was a little different than most of the rest of you knew it,” he said, setting down his empty bowl. “Much less crowded, for one thing, and some of the people there were a lot rougher than the gentler villagers you got to meet. Hirelings who guarded nobles on their way to the Conclave, that kind of thing. Some of the support staff was already in place – Adan was assisting Master Taigen, who was the real healer, and Flissa had set up her little tavern at Nightingale’s invitation. That’s where I was when the Breach opened,” he noted. “I had just introduced Bianca to one of those hirelings I mentioned, who had gotten way more handsy with Flissa than she appreciated. Right after that little ‘conversation’ took place, everything blew.” Varric shook his head. “When I got outside and saw the mess, all I could think was *not again.* With a glance for Bethany, he added, “It reminded me a little too much of that afternoon in Kirkwall. I don’t think I need to elaborate.”

“No. No, you very much don’t.” She shuddered a little; Cassandra realized that she had more or less forgotten that Bethany had been with her sister and First Enchanter Orsino when the Kirkwall Chantry was destroyed. Doubtless it was a painful recollection for her, perhaps even more than it was for Varric.

“Well,” the Seeker said, finishing her own food and reclaiming the thread of the story, “all was in a bit of chaos for a time. I sent Cullen to assess the damages and Leliana went to see if there were any survivors. She returned with a few of our soldiers and the news that there were all of two
people who had escaped the disaster. This might not have seemed unusual, except that they were accompanied by the report – from multiple witnesses – that they had stumbled out of the Fade. They were unconscious, and we kept them in the cells under the Chantry until they awoke and we could question them.” She gestured to Mahanon, who sat beside her, and then to Victoria.

“We couldn’t tell her much,” Victoria said. “We couldn’t remember anything. We had been eating lunch with my relatives whom I’d accompanied to the Conclave, and that was the last thing either of us could recall. Later, during... during Adamant...” Her voice grew a bit thick. “In the Fade, we were able to recover the memories we lost. But at the time we didn’t know anything, and I honestly thought Cassandra was going to have us executed.” Glancing at her ‘elf brother’ and the Seeker, her smile returned. “Obviously, I’m very happy to have been wrong, for multiple reasons.”

“At the time, that was not out of the question,” Cassandra confessed. “We just wanted so desperately to understand why. How could this have happened? Why would anyone do this? We had no knowledge, then, of the Elder One. All we knew was that the two who had survived were the most likely suspects. But then they risked their lives to help us at least begin the process of closing the Breach, and that suggested their innocence.” She glanced across the way to where Solas watched her with a serene countenance. “Solas had imagined as much from the first. He told me, when we joined him and Varric fighting demons in the valley, that not only were my prisoners not mages and therefore unlikely to have been able to use the sort of magic that such a thing would have required, but he could imagine no mage having that much power.”

“It was the truth,” he replied. “Knowing now what we know of who and what Corypheus is, it makes more sense. But even at the time it was fairly obvious, at least to me, that no single mortal could possibly command so much magic at once. Consider how many mages and Templars we brought together just to undo what was done. Had an ordinary individual attempted to create such a dramatic rupture in the Veil, they would almost certainly have died before their efforts could bear even the smallest fruit. Yet the prisoners lived; by that fact alone, I felt reasonably sure of their innocence.”

“We lived partly because of you,” Victoria reminded him. “Varric told us that when we met – that you helped us survive before we regained consciousness.”

“My role was small. But your gratitude is appreciated.” The elf smiled benignly. “And you endeavored to return the favor, in the Exalted Plains.”

She nodded. “Solas had a friend,” she explained, seeing some curious expressions. “A spirit of wisdom, who was summoned against her will by some clumsy mages. We tried to help him rescue her, but we were too late to undo the effects of the spell they used.”

“You did your best, and more than some would even have attempted. I could ask no more than that.” Solas shook his head. “I would speak no more on this subject, however, if you please. Perhaps someone else has a tale to share.”

There was a slight pause, as though everyone was trying their best to come up with a memory to offer. “Not a story, but I have a question,” said Sera. She pointed at Mahanon. “Never did get the straight of this. How’d you get that scar on your eye?”

“Ah. Well, you probably all know by now that before I came to the Conclave, I was a hunter for Clan Lavellan in the Free Marches,” he began. “That’s why Varric calls me Hunter.”

“Not one of my most imaginative nicknames, I’ll admit,” said the dwarf. “But it works.”

“I can’t argue. Anyway, when I was first out of childhood and starting to learn to hunt, I was
trained both with my knives and with the longbow. Some of us prefer one or the other, some use both, so they teach us both and see what we learn. I was out in the woods looking for game, and I heard rustling in the bushes, so I started advancing. Out popped a bear.” Mahanon grimaced, and Cassandra patted his hand. “That was the last time I tried using a longbow. I was lucky I got to keep my eye, all things considered, and I’ve been pretty terrified of the beasts ever since.”

“No wonder you hate the Hinterlands so much,” Dorian remarked. “We could never decide who was more vociferous in their dislike of the place, you or Varric.”

“To be fair,” interjected Bethany, “this is the first time I’m hearing that Mahanon hates anything. Varric hates a lot of things. So maybe we should give Mahanon this one.”

“Oh, we know,” said Dorian. “We actually tried to list them all one day, some months back. As I recall it took up a large portion of the morning. Caves, water, hills, most kinds of weather...”

“Not again.” Victoria laughed.

“Horseback riding, those weird feet nugs have, and politics of any stripe.” This was Bull’s contribution.

“The Merchants’ Guild as a general rule,” Cassandra offered.

“You do all realize you’re preaching to the choir?” Bethany reminded them, smiling. “I’ve known him longer than any of you! You forgot clean taverns, nature of almost any sort, and food that tastes like emotions. You know, like that Orlesian ham that tastes like despair,” she clarified.

Varric’s lips twitched as he eyed her sidelong. “Laugh it up, Sunshine. I see how it is.” He was, Cassandra realized with amusement, struggling not to smile.

“All right, let’s move to a different memory,” Victoria proposed. “How about meeting Professor Frederic of Serault? That was an adventure.”

“Ooh, the crazy guy who studies dragons? I liked him,” said Bull. “I remember him chasing us all over the Western Approach to get stuff for him, and then he had us put out bait for the dragon! And you two went along with the whole thing!” he added, gesturing at the Inquisitors. “Best bosses I’ve ever had.” He chuckled.

“A sweet man, if somewhat deluded,” Vivienne allowed. “Where is he these days? I was given to understand he agreed to serve as an agent.”

“He did,” Mahanon confirmed. “We have him in Nevarra right now, actually. Ma vhenan’ara’s family has extensive records concerning their dragon-hunting exploits of generations past, and we sent him to do some research.”

“Speaking of agents, whatever happened with Fairbanks?” asked Blackwall. It was the first time he’d spoken all evening, and he looked a little surprised that he finally did.

“Well, we did find the evidence of his noble birth,” said Victoria, wiping the soup remains out of her bowl with a piece of bread. “His real name is Evariste Lemarque. His mother had the misfortune to fall in love with a man who served a rival of her father’s. After her father disowned her over it, and the lover died, she died herself giving birth to the boy. He was born in a place called Fair Banks Cottage, which is why he chose that name for himself. Anyway, the grandfather repented on his deathbed and left everything to his daughter and her child, so it’s all rightfully his and Josephine used the evidence we found to prove it to the Orlesian court. Fairbanks himself was less than thrilled.”
“Why’s that, Worship?” asked Krem, who was clustered with the rest of the Chargers near Bull. “Don’t people usually feel relieved when they come into that kind of fortune?”

“Fairbanks wanted to keep on being Fairbanks, and not Lord Lemarque.” Mahanon shrugged. “I don’t blame him. But it’s worked out well enough. The refugees he was helping were able to move out of the woods and onto his recovered lands, and he’s using a lot of his money to help them get back on their feet. So it was worth it, more or less.”

They continued in this vein for some time; no one seemed eager to go to bed. They told the stories of how other agents were recruited – the Avvar healer called Sky Watcher, who had been impressed with the Heralds when they rescued the soldiers from the Fallow Mire, and the elven soldier Loranil, whose Keeper had to be persuaded that an alliance with the Inquisition (or at least the Inquisitors themselves) would be beneficial to his clan. Michel de Chevin’s chevalier training was of considerable value to Cullen, who had appointed him to a leadership position among the soldiers; he was mentoring some of the younger recruits and seemed to have put certain parts of his past well behind him. Scout Harding was mentioned with almost universal fondness, as the reliable little dwarf had endeared herself to the Inquisition as a whole.

Cassandra found herself studying the faces of each of her companions, although it took her some little time to understand why. She was trying to commit them fully to memory, lest any of them fall. Her gaze traced over the uneven choppy haircut which framed Sera’s young face, the elegance of Vivienne’s cheekbones, the tips of Solas’s ears. Dorian’s mustache quivered with humor as Bull led the Chargers in their mildly tawdry tavern cheer. Cole, having positioned himself near Victoria’s feet, stared into the fire like it held the secrets of the universe. Firelight glimmered in Bethany’s eyes as she – perhaps unaware of his recently uncovered past – spoke to Blackwall about her youth in Ferelden; Varric, unusually quiet, contented himself with merely watching. He met Cassandra’s eyes at one point, and she wondered if he was doing the same thing she was. Sometimes, she had to admit to herself, she and Varric weren’t so very different.

Finally, Mahanon called the group to order. “Much as I’ve enjoyed this, and I’m sure you have too, we do need to rest before we confront the enemy tomorrow,” he said. “I’ll take the last watch, if no one minds.”

“I hope everyone gets a good night’s sleep,” said Victoria, her tone only slightly mournful. “And – well, in case I don’t get the chance to say it before the battle – none of this would have been possible without all of you. You’ve been the best allies we could have hoped to find, and we’re grateful to you all.”

There was a general murmuring, none of which was entirely intelligible; Cassandra wasn’t sure if it was because everyone was drowned out by everyone else, or if some of them were too tired to enunciate properly. Maybe both. “Before those of us not keeping first watch retire,” said Mahanon, putting a hand on Victoria’s shoulder, “I would like to offer something. This is a song among my people, but I’m not so cruel as to start singing.” He paused while a few of them chuckled, Cassandra included. “I’ll speak it to you,” he continued. “Melava inan enansal ir su aravel tu elvaral u na emma abelas. In elgar sa vir mana in tu setheneran din emma na. Iath sulevin iath araval ena arla ven tu vir mahvir, melana ‘nehn enasal ir sa lethalin.”

“And now you’re going to tell us what that means, right, Nonny?” Victoria glanced up at him, her expression affectionately amused.

“I’m going to try. The exact translation is more or less lost to time, but it approximately means that ‘Time was once a blessing, but long journeys are made longer when alone. Be certain in need, and the path will emerge that leads to a home tomorrow.’ There’s more to it than that, but I can never
remember the whole thing.”

“Close enough for our purposes, Hunter,” Varric assured him. “I might need you to write that down for me later, though, I don’t have a clue how to spell half of what you just said.”

“When we get back to Skyhold, I’ll do just that,” Mahanon promised.

*When we get back to Skyhold,* Cassandra thought, over and over, as she followed Mahanon to their shared tent. *When we win, the path will lead us home. How beautiful.*
The Songs of the Cobblestones

Chapter Summary

The press into the Arbor Wilds begins - but with an unexpected twist.

Chapter Notes

Much like the ones at Halamshiral, the chapters taking place in the Arbor Wilds will be split between Mahanon and Victoria, who will be splitting up inside the Temple of Mythal. Then there's going to be an extra chapter detailing the events elsewhere in the Wilds. So stay tuned.

Chapter Forty-One: The Songs of the Cobblestones

Even before they reached the Wilds camp where the forces of the Inquisition were massed, they could hear the fighting. Corypheus, clearly, had done just the same as the Inquisitors, summoning every possible minion to his side. But the Inquisitors had allies, not minions, and the army of the Elder One was facing down not only most of the Inquisition’s soldiers, but also the Blades of Hessarian, some warriors sent by King Bhelen of Orzammar, the forces from Starkhaven whom Bethany had accompanied, and a considerable portion of the Orlesian army. The only ones absent were the Grey Wardens who had been taken under the Inquisition’s wing; they had been sent to bolster the forces at Caer Bronach and Griffon Wing Keep, so that they would be kept carefully away from his terrible influence.

Victoria was having a little trouble with Falon; the nearer they came to the sounds of skirmish, the more uneasy the stallion grew. “Come on, boy. We’ve seen worse than this,” she wheedled. “It’ll all be over soon.” It was a relief to them both when she dismounted, and sent him with the other beasts of burden into the corral being overseen by some of Master Dennet’s apprentices; their riders would journey the rest of the way on foot.

“I’m just going to say what I’m thinking,” she heard Dorian remark as the camp came into view. “I’m not surprised to see Empress Celene here, but in the same ballgown she wore at Halamshiral? I thought Orlesians balked at the idea of being seen in public wearing the same thing twice.”

“Desperate times,” said Vivienne dryly.

Smiling, Victoria shook her head, and turned to greet the approaching captain, who bowed. “Inquisitors.”

“How goes the battle, Captain?”

“We’re holding, barely,” the woman replied grimly. “The Red Templars are fighting harder than
ever with their master nearby. Our scouts saw Corypheus traveling toward an elven ruin to the north. We can clear you a path through his armies.”

“So all you have to do is hold off Corypheus’s worst zealots until we return,” said Mahanon lightly.

“We will not flinch, Your Worships. Not one of us!”

“We don’t doubt it,” Victoria replied. “Just don’t take any unnecessary risks. We want to have enough people for a victory celebration afterward.”

The captain chuckled, and saluted. “Andraste guide you, Inquisitors.”

As she strode away, Morrigan approached the group. She had left Kieran back at Skyhold, in the care of Mother Giselle, and accompanied Cullen’s advance forces into the Wilds. According to what Leliana had told them, she was a skilled shapeshifter and had probably traveled in the guise of a bird. “I wonder,” she said now, in a tone that Victoria couldn't identify, "is it Andraste your soldiers invoke during battle? Or does a more immediate name come to their lips?”

“Another way to let people down if we falter,” said Mahanon wryly. “Thank you for the reminder.”

“T’was not I who raised an army of the faithful to storm this land,” Morrigan replied. She sounded almost amused. “But I digress. If your scouts report accurately, I believe these ruins to be the Temple of Mythal.”

Victoria glanced at once at Mahanon, whose whole aspect had shifted at the news. Mythal, of course, was the elven goddess whom he revered most highly, as he demonstrated both with the vallaslin on his face and the name he had given his prized nightmare horse. “Mythal’s temple?” he repeated. “It might still exist? Intact?”

“Possibly, yes. If Corypheus seeks it, then the eluvian he covets lies within.”

“Mythal was the mother goddess, and a keeper of great wisdom. My people would be eager to reclaim any piece of her which has endured,” said Mahanon, looking not at Morrigan but at Victoria. “We can’t let Corypheus destroy whatever’s left.”

“We won’t, Nonny,” she assured him. “This is important to you, so we’ll see it through.”

Before Morrigan – or anyone else – could comment, they were diverted by the sounds of explosions, and in the distance there was a rising plume of smoke. “Let us hope we reach this temple before the entire forest is reduced to ash,” Morrigan muttered.

They made their way to greet the Empress, who was standing with Josephine. As they drew near, Victoria could hear some of the conversation. “We are aware of the designs Corypheus has on our lives and people, Ambassador,” said the Empress. “You must excuse us, however, if our mind wanders to our beloved kingdom.”

“I pray Orlais fares well in your absence,” replied Josephine.

“It is our return to court that concerns us. Our dear Marquess Briala warns it might align with poor weather.” They broke off, seeing the party approach, and Mahanon hung back to let Victoria be the one to address the Empress. She offered a quick curtsy, to which the Empress responded with a nod. “We are gladdened to see you, Heralds. This day will be recalled for ages. We are privileged to witness the fulfillment of the Inquisition's purpose.”
“The sight of our Orlesian allies risking their lives here humbles us, Your Radiance,” she replied. It felt odd, addressing the Empress of the largest realm in Thedas almost as an equal; Victoria both did and did not like the sensation, which was also odd.

“Your worthy cause would have friends, even if we did not will it,” the Empress assured her. “Men and women of faith serve you. Their favor is no less than our own, their service no less dear. With Orlais at your side, we will see you victorious against Corypheus. May you walk in the light.”

This seemed to more or less dismiss the Lady Inquisitor, and Victoria decided to take the hint. She rejoined the others where they were discussing the situation with Josephine, whose blue and gold ruffles didn’t seem too much less out of place than the Empress’s gown. “Will you be safe here, Josephine?” Mahanon asked her.

“We are well protected,” she assured him. “Should the fighting draw too near, I will of course escort Empress Celene to a more secure location.”

“Well, we’re lending you an extra pair of hands,” said Victoria with a chuckle. “Varric persuaded Bethany to stay here at the base camp and help the healers.”


“Promised not to run off and throw myself into the fray, you mean?” she asked, her tone lightly teasing.

“Something like that. Your sister’s coming back eventually, I don’t want to have to be the one to explain to her that our beloved Sunshine came in second-best in a scrap with a Venatori or something.” He chuckled, but Victoria could see all too clearly the genuine distress in his eyes at the idea. “Just stay here and keep Ruffles company. It’ll probably do her good to talk to somebody sane for a change.”

“For a given value of sane, that is.” Bethany giggled faintly. “I’m actually a little excited to be out here with you all, and I suspect that probably takes a special brand of madness.”

Varric sighed, catching Victoria’s eye and winking. “Clearly Hawke and I have been a terrible influence as well as an amazing one. Ah well. At your order, Your Inquisitorialnesses.”

“That’s a mouthful,” said Bull, who had been giving orders to the Chargers. “Don’t worry too much - my boys are sticking close to the camp as well. Josephine, you need anything, you yell for Krem. That goes for you too, Beth.”

“I appreciate it, Bull.” She glanced at Varric. “You be careful.”

“Aren’t I always? Don’t answer that,” he added. “We’ll be back before you know it.”

Victoria suddenly wondered if she was intruding, so she turned away and caught sight of Dorian, watching the scene and fingerling his mustache thoughtfully. “Never mind it,” she scolded fondly, shooing him. “Come on, we’d best get moving. I wonder where…”

“Where Cullen is? I’m sure we’ll find him soon enough,” Dorian teased, falling in step beside her.

Mahanon led the group through the camp, glancing around in some bewilderment at the setup. He had never been to a war camp of this sort, or of any sort really, beyond the simple encampments established by Harding and her fellow scouts in the wilderness. So he was at a loss to understand the fancy dining table, though he supposed it might have been placed for the comfort of Empress
As they passed some of the siege equipment, he glanced over his shoulder. “I see these trebuchets have been properly calibrated,” he called. “The commander has clearly been here recently.”


As if in response to his comment, they suddenly caught the words of a soldier – a woman who sounded weary, and a little snappish. “Where’s General Cullen?”

“He led the charge at dawn,” someone replied. “Hasn't stopped fighting since. The man hasn't slept more than an hour for two days running.”

“Oh, to have that sort of stamina,” said Dorian, smirking. Mahanon almost choked, although he was amused to see how few of his companions were willing to look in Victoria’s direction. She kept her face largely impassive, though there was a mischievous quirk to her expressive eyebrows that he sort of wished he hadn’t seen.

They left the borders of the camp and entered the Wilds proper, and he was struck almost speechless with admiration for the raw beauty of the place. Massive fungi sprouted near the bases of trees, while vines roamed unchecked over the low-hanging branches. For a moment he forgot why he was there; he was overcome with emotion, imagining what it must have been like to roam these paths in the days of Arlathan, a petitioner making his way to seek an audience with Mythal in person.

The sounds of combat brought him back to the here and now, and he gave himself a small shake. “Listen to how close the fighting’s gotten!” he heard Cassandra say. “It will be worse ahead.”

“If the soldiers aren’t careful with their fires,” Solas interjected, “they’ll do Corypheus’s work for him.”

“Let’s go plug some arseholes!” This was Sera’s contribution, her demeanor unusually cheerful considering her surroundings.

As they advanced, Mahanon thought he felt something almost swirling around him. He couldn’t identify it, exactly, but at the same time it had an exceptionally familiar feel to it. He glanced in Morrigan’s direction and she nodded, almost as if she understood. “Do you sense the magic crackling in the air?” she asked. “Something more powerful than the Red Templars stirs.”

They passed through what might be termed an outpost of the base camp, where a few soldiers were talking about keeping the Red Templars clear of the supply lines. One soldier knelt before an altar to Andraste, and Victoria paused briefly to say a few lines of the Chant with him. “My thanks, Your Worship,” he told her with a smile. “Andraste must surely hear you. I was a pilgrim at Haven, and I saw you emerge from the wreckage to lead us – if the Maker bids me serve you, it will be done.”

She smiled and nodded, and then turned to look at Mahanon. With a slight jolt, he realized she was waiting for him to react, to indicate his displeasure. He shook his head, trying to give his da’vhenan a bit of encouragement. It wasn’t her fault that people saw them as the Heralds of Andraste, after all, and if she could respect his faith in Mythal then he owed her at least that much in return.

Before he could say so, however, they were greeted by another soldier. He was dressed not in Inquisition regimentals, but in the style of armor which suggested he was a Blade of Hessarian.
“Empress Celene's general is just down the hill, Inquisitors,” he reported. “He wishes to join you for the last push.”

“Excellent, thank you.”

They made their way down the hill in search of this general, and Mahanon could feel his blood starting to pump faster in anticipation of the fight. Soon it would be over, and they would be toasting to the memory of the occasion and the victory over their enemy. At least, that’s what he told himself.

“Glory to Andraste and the Inquisition!” shouted an almost delighted baritone. “Glory to Orlais! Inquisitors, the beasts are flanking to the east! We’ll hold, we will hold!”

“That soldier back at the camp said they had no one to send to the east,” Cassandra shouted. “We must hurry and help defend that line!”

They pelted through the undergrowth, spilling out into a small tributary beneath a magnificent waterfall, and tore into the sycophants of Corypheus they found stationed there. The crumbling ruins which dotted the landscape made the terrain somewhat treacherous; felling their foes was no easy matter. “Those were Grey Wardens,” Victoria noted, when the fighting died down a bit. “They must be the last of those who were enslaved at Adamant.”

“If they are forced to obey him, death will be a blessing,” said Cassandra, somewhat flatly.

Farther to the east, under the watchful gaze of a pair of enormous wolf statues, they rushed to aid some Inquisition soldiers fending off Red Templar horrors. “For the Heralds!” one of them shouted, and despite his lingering dislike of the designation, Mahanon found himself warmed by the remark. “For Haven,” the man added, “and the Divine!”

“They fall! The Red Templars fall!” someone else called.

Continuing the press east, the Inquisitors and their companions passed under a massive sequence of fungi that looked like stairs climbing around the trunk of a tree. In the near distance, red tents could be seen. “There, look!” Morrigan exclaimed. “An entire camp of Red Templars!”

“Watch out,” Cassandra warned the others. “They’ve posted archers on the walls.”

This part of the fight was strange indeed, for not only were they contending with Red Templars, but there were unfamiliar elves in the fray. These were like no elves Mahanon had ever met; their armor was peculiar, a design he didn’t recognize at all, and they moved with a speed and alacrity that almost defied description. He longed to allow them to live, to focus solely on the forces of Corypheus – but they gave him no such option, and with powerful reluctance he realized that the elves would kill his friends if they were not removed from the scene.

“Were we just attacked by elves?” asked Victoria, baffled, once the dust had settled.

“It seems this temple of Mythal is not so abandoned after all,” Solas offered.

“Perhaps these creatures are the reason few return from the Arbor Wilds,” added Morrigan.

Further and further east they went, passing ruins from the glory days of the elves. Massive stone stags were draped in ivy, and walls not yet claimed by time created hiding places from which they could strike and save their people. Victoria felt almost feverish as she wiped some carnage from her dragon leather. She kept wondering where Cullen was, and repeatedly counted her companions.
to assure herself that they were all with her still. There was little chatter; everyone seemed content to keep their thoughts to themselves, which was just as well. The time for discussion and celebration would come later.

She was looking forward to it, and part of her wished they could just skip the in-between parts altogether.

“Inquisitors!” cried a new voice, as they found themselves in yet another Red Templar encampment. “The Circle of Magi stands with you!” It was Grand Enchanter Fiona, and they paused long enough to salute her and her people before returning their attention to the fray. With the mages at hand it was quick work.

Passing through an exquisite stone archway guarded by the biggest stone stags Victoria had yet seen, they made their way to another set of ruins, including a building adorned with owl statuary.

Leliana was here, perched atop what might once have been a bridge or even the roof of another building. Wind and exertion had knocked her purple hood askew, giving them a rare glimpse of her short-cropped red hair. “Good hunting, Inquisitors,” she said pleasantly, in between shots with her bow. “We’re keeping them at bay. If you follow the river, it will lead you to the temple.”

“How are our people?” Victoria asked urgently. Her left arm ached somewhat inside its silverite sheath, and she gave it an irritable shake.

“We’re holding our own, I promise you that.” Leliana fired off another arrow. “Cullen leads the forces at the temple gates. Hurry to join him, he may need help.”

“Maker’s breath.” The Sulevin Blade was in her hands almost before she could think better of it, and she took off to chase the river current.

“Toria!” Mahanon called. She didn’t slow down, and he grumbled. “Come on, let’s go catch her before she does something ridiculous.”

“I hate to point this out, Hunter,” said Varric, “but it’s a bit late for that.”

He couldn’t argue the point, so he shifted all his concentration to keeping his eyes on his da’vhenan. It wasn’t too difficult; her white and gray armor flashed in the shafts of sunlight which managed to break through the thick tree cover overhead. As they reached the temple gates, they could hear the din of the fighting, and Mahanon caught the briefest glimpse of Cullen’s familiar surcoat.

Victoria sprinted across one of the ruined ledges, knocking one of the enemy archers into the water flowing underneath. The ‘woman in white’ leaped down after him, the leather flaring as she spun and slammed her blade into a horror before it could properly turn into a behemoth. “Sorry we’re late, Commander!” she shouted.

Cullen finished executing a shield bash; the lack of sleep which the one soldier had mentioned was obvious in his face. But at the sound of her voice, his expression cleared and brightened despite the heavy shadows under his eyes. “Hello, darling!” he called back, cutting down his opponent. “I was beginning to wonder!”

[Editor’s note: No, really, that happened. Apparently that was the moment when Curly finally decided that hiding anything was completely pointless. I could have told him that, of course, but sometimes people have to figure these things out for themselves.]
Mahanon was fairly certain that he wasn’t the only one who had a difficult time maintaining composure at that comment. Varric was openly snickering, even as he tossed a handful of caltrops into the water. “Are they for real?” he asked Dorian, who was nearby.

“Maker only knows,” the Tevinter replied with a laugh. “Look at them.”

Curious, Mahanon yanked one of his blades out of the stomach of a Red Templar and glanced in Victoria’s direction. She and Cullen were sort of spinning around each other in a wild pantomime, their weapons moving almost in sync. “I thought you didn’t dance,” she called teasingly.

“I’ve been practicing!” came the impudent reply.

The Inquisitors’ companions were hard-pressed to keep a straight face, even as they wrought destruction on their enemies. Soon the crimson crystal figures lay scattered in the river, and everyone paused to catch their breath. “Kinda fun, innit?” asked Sera languidly.

“I don’t know if I’d call it fun exactly, but it has been strangely easy,” Mahanon remarked. “Considering how much fighting we’ve heard from a distance, I’m surprised that we haven’t encountered more of Corypheus’s forces as we’ve gone.”

“I was thinking that too,” said Bull. “But your men, and the Orlesians – they’ve been here for a while. They’ve probably done like that soldier back at the camp said, carved a path for us to reach the temple without too much resistance.”

Gigantic stone wolves loomed in the distance, immortal guardians of the gates to Mythal’s temple. Their goal was nearly at hand. Victoria glanced at Cullen. “Are you all right? They told me you haven’t slept much since you got here.”

“I’ll be fine. You go on ahead – Samson and Calpernia must both be inside the temple, and you’ll lose your chance to catch them if you linger.” He put a hand to her shoulder, but before anyone could do or say anything else, there was a small cry of something very much like pain.

Cole, who had been mostly silent throughout the whole adventure apart from a few menacing lines to his opponents, had clapped his hands to his head. “Too many, too much red, they close in! No, they’ll come, don’t be afraid, horns pointing up!”

“What?” This from Bull, whose hackles were almost visibly rising. “My boys?”

“They’ll come, he’ll come, we’ll be all right. Get her to the rear, keep her sheltered, don’t let blue run red. They think we’re outnumbered, we have to hold.” The spirit-boy was almost babbling, his expression paler than usual and filled with terror.

“Damn it!” Varric, who had been peering at Cole in consternation, suddenly blanched. “They’re attacking the base camp!”

“Maker have mercy!” exclaimed Cassandra. “We have to go back!”

“Are you quite mad?” Morrigan snapped. “Go back now, and you lose any possible advantage you might have gained in reaching the eluvian before Corypheus!”

“Much as I dislike to agree with the witch, she is right,” said Solas.

“We’ll split up,” Mahanon decided. “We don’t all need to go into the temple – some of us can head back while the rest of us chase the generals.”
Victoria nodded. “Cole, you head back immediately. Cullen, go quickly and grab any of our people you encounter on the way. Varric, you go with him – otherwise you’ll worry. Vivienne, you’re closest to Empress Celene out of all of us, you’ll bring her the most comfort.”

“Very sensible, my dear, but let’s not waste time.”

“What about me?” asked Bull. “My guys are back there.”

“The Chargers can hold their own, Bull. I have every confidence in them,” she assured him. “We need you with us. Good luck, everyone, stay safe.”
The Unreachable Gate Must Open

Chapter Summary

Inside the Temple of Mythal, the Inquisitors must divide their forces if they want to reach the Well before their adversaries.

Chapter Notes

The author's note on this chapter initially apologized for a delay in updates, which is what Varric references in his own note. When I wrote the story, a few months elapsed between posting the last chapter and this one, owing to my father-in-law's passing and a few other real life problems. Now that the story has been completed, I've gone back and removed any notes I made relating to an update schedule, but I decided to leave his and therefore I felt the need to clarify it.

Chapter Forty-Two: The Unreachable Gate Must Open

[Editor's note: Okay, so we got a little bit of flak for ending that last chapter on a cliffhanger. Gentle, teasing, affectionate flak, of course, but still. And as Scholar will probably tell you in her own notes, we didn’t intend to keep you all on tenterhooks for quite this long. She’s had a rough go of things in recent months, our girl.

Initially, we planned on breaking up these next couple chapters by alternating between the Inquisitors’ points of view, just like the last one. But Scholar thought maybe it would go better – and be easier on her tired little brain – if we gave each Inquisitor one chapter of their own, and then join them together once they’re reunited. So that’s what we’re going to do, and unless I misjudge our readers (who are so clearly shrewd, discerning, and intelligent consumers of media), it’ll make sense.

Oh, and please be sure to check out the latest side volume in this series. Agents Acquired is still in progress, but I think you’ll enjoy it.]

Mahanon led the charge up a set of ancient stone steps, flanked by massive hart sculptures. The Wilds had done their best to lay claim to the structures; verdant leaves and vines crept greedily over the magnificent stonework, curling around spires and draping over stairs like carpeting. As he ran toward the arched corridor leading into the Temple of Mythal, a pair of brilliant blue birds were startled into flight. “This way,” he called over his shoulder. A light seemed to emanate from the far end of the corridor, and he paused to allow everyone to assemble before they made their way inside. They had kept a good pace, but now they walked, uncertain.
“We must be careful,” said Cassandra. “Corypheus is likely to appear before long.”

“I’m counting on it,” he replied.

“I hear fighting ahead,” Morrigan observed. She was right; the sounds of battle were unmistakable. The corridor led them out onto a wide balcony, overlooking the true entrance to the temple; it was cluttered with enormous trees, statues of figures with dragonlike wings, and the bodies of dead Red Templars. Frowning, Mahanon gestured for the others to move quietly to the stone railing, so they could try to hear what was happening without alerting those below to their presence.

They could see both Samson and Calpernia, standing some little distance apart, with some of the Elder One’s other assorted followers. A stone bridge led across a massive river, and defending this was another group of those strange armored elves they had seen throughout the Wilds. “Na melana sur, banallen!” shouted one.

“He’s saying they will never enter,” Mahanon whispered. It wasn’t an exact translation, but close enough; only Solas would know otherwise anyway.

Calpernia, however, seemed to smile at this assertion. “The wretch mocks you, Master,” she said. Corypheus stepped out of the shadows, dropping the body of a dead elf onto the stone floor.

“These are but remnants,” he said, and Mahanon felt his blood chill as he realized he was hearing the monster’s voice. He’d only heard it twice before – once when he and Victoria had tried to save the Divine, and again when they reclaimed their memories in the Fade. It felt strange to be hearing it again, and he glanced at his counterpart, remembering how she had faced him alone at Haven.

“They will not keep us from the Well of Sorrows,” Corypheus continued. Mahanon frowned. From the what? I thought he was after one of those eluvians. He looked at Morrigan, hoping for an explanation, but she too lifted her shoulders and shook her head.

As they watched, something strange seemed to be happening. There were statues on either side of the bridge, and these were starting to crackle, to almost come alive with a pale blue magic such as Mahanon only dimly remembered from very old Dalish tales. Corypheus looked up at them, then back to the elves. “Be honored! Witness death at the hands of a new god!”

He approached the lead elf, but before Corypheus could lay a hand on him, massive shafts of light began pouring off of the statues. They bathed the Elder One in their glow, and as his expression illustrated his evident bewilderment at the unfamiliar magic, his body began shaking and seizing. It disintegrated, and suddenly shattered in an explosion of light and magic. Samson and Calpernia were trying desperately to shield their eyes from the blinding destruction of their master’s form.

“Is it over?” Victoria whispered, once she had regained her senses. “Did the Temple of Mythal destroy him for us?”

“Maybe?” Mahanon shrugged. “Let’s go find out.”

They descended the ancient stairs, weapons at the ready. The elves had vanished from the scene, and by the time the Inquisitors and their friends reached the spot where Corypheus’s tattered remnants lay, both Samson and Calpernia were on the far side of the bridge. They both looked back at their pursuers and smirked, then glanced at one another with more hateful expressions before disappearing into the depths of the temple.

Before anyone could do or say anything, however, there came a distinct hurk sound from behind them, the sound that a person might make upon having a knife abruptly jammed into their throat.
They turned and found a Grey Warden on his knees. “I guess we didn’t find them all in the Wilds,” Bull muttered. The man didn’t look injured, but he was convulsing strangely, as though succumbing to a paroxysm of some sort. Without preamble, the Warden was suddenly launched to his feet, and something that looked horribly like black blood began spurring from his every orifice like a fountain of death. Then he collapsed once again, and resumed twitching, and something red began to emerge from his shaking form.

“It cannot be!” Morrigan cried. But sure enough, the arm that abruptly jutted from the Warden’s body was dark and pointed and nightmarish, not human at all.

“Across the bridge! Now!” shouted Victoria. She too was shaking, probably remembering the last time she’d had to confront the Elder One. Almost as one, the group sprinted across the bridge, glancing back occasionally to see the full figure of Corypheus rise, red-eyed and screaming, from the body of the sacrificed Warden. In response to his tormented shrieks, the dragon appeared out of seemingly nowhere, and chased after them on heavy wings. On the far side of the bridge they heaved their collective weight against a set of doors, slamming them in the creature’s face; even its blast of fire was handily repelled by the magic infused in the doors. Corypheus could not follow, not immediately at least, and it would take him time to find another way.

Time, Mahanon thought, was something they desperately needed.

The doors shone brilliantly gold for an instant, then faded to calming blue before the light within them dimmed entirely. The pattern engraved upon them was oddly leathery, not entirely unlike dragon wings, or so he thought.

Safe for the moment, the group turned their attention to examining their surroundings. The Wilds continued their assault inside the building as they had outside, with trees springing up through cracks in the stone and moss climbing the walls. They followed shafts of sunlight away from the doors and toward a sort of courtyard. “At last,” said Morrigan approvingly, “Mythal’s sanctum. Let us proceed before Corypheus interferes.”

“You said Corypheus wanted an eluvian, but he mentioned a ‘Well of Sorrows’,” Cassandra interrupted.

“Yeah, why’s Lumpy after a Sorrow Well, or whatever?” asked Sera, shifting her bow. “Weren’t we after some poncy mirror?”

“I am... uncertain of what he referred to,” the witch admitted.

“Confidence carries one only so far, it seems,” said Solas dryly.

“Could they be the same?” Victoria guessed. “Could ‘eluvian’ translate into ‘Well of Sorrows’?”

“No.” Morrigan shook her head. “It seems an eluvian is not the prize Corypheus seeks.” She evidently saw a rebuke in Mahanon’s gaze. “Yes, I was wrong! Does that please you? Whatever the Well of Sorrows might be, Corypheus seeks it, and thus you must keep it from his grasp.”

Victoria gazed at the unspeakably old ruins of what was once a magnificent place of worship. The sunlight seemed to beckon them forward, almost welcoming in its way. “Let’s find this Well before Corypheus’s people do,” she said. “I just hope Cullen and the others reached the base camp before things got too disastrous for our people.”

“I want to know how Corypheus returned to life,” Mahanon said crossly. “We saw him die.”
“And his life force passes on to any Blighted creature – darkspawn or Grey Warden,” Morrigan replied.

“Grey Warden,” said Dorian, thoughtfully. “Of course – Grey Wardens! That’s how Corypheus escaped his prison, even though Varric and the Hawkes thought they had killed him! He must have taken possession of one of the Wardens in the stronghold!”

“That would explain it,” agreed Cassandra. “I remember when Varric related the details of the event to me, he mentioned that their Warden acquaintance behaved oddly. He must have been possessed more gently than what we witnessed just now.”

“For a given value of ‘gently,’ anyway,” said Bull.

“Well, maybe this will ease their minds a little when we tell them,” said Victoria. “I think poor Varric blames himself for a lot of what’s happened; at least now we can try to assure him it isn’t his fault.”

[Editor’s note: Oh, Eyebrows. Never change.]

“Bigger question - how many times do we need to kill him?” asked Sera. “It’s a small number, right?”

“Strike Corypheus down, and he will rise anew,” Morrigan intoned.

“For once, I’m relieved I’m not really a Warden,” Blackwall noted sourly.

“‘Tis strange,” Morrigan continued. “Archdemons possess the same ability, and still the Grey Wardens are able to slay them. Yet Corypheus they locked away. Perhaps they knew he could do this, but not how.”

Any further ruminations on the subject were performed silently. The party crossed into a larger part of the outer courtyard, and Mahanon heard Victoria gasp softly at the small waterfalls, the sparkling waterways which lined the walls, and the lush greenery which only added to the beauty of the sanctum. Near the center was a platform of sorts, with low steps leading to it; a series of ornamental squares traced around the edges of this platform, with a broken pillar set on an even more raised area in the center. As Mahanon climbed the steps and put his foot upon one of the squares, it suddenly illuminated with a soft blue glow, and a strange sort of chime echoed through the courtyard.

“It seems the temple’s magicks are still strong,” Morrigan observed. She joined him on the square, peering at the carvings on the pillar.

“Can you read it, Non?” asked Victoria.

He shook his head. “It’s ancient elven writing. I can’t make out much.”

“Atish’all vir abelasan,” said Solas. “It means ‘Enter the path of the Well of Sorrows.’”

“There is something about knowledge,” Morrigan added, peering at the broken pillar. “Respectful or pure. Shiven, shivennen… no, ‘tis all I can translate. That it mentions the Well is a good omen.” She looked thoughtful. “Supplicants to Mythal would have first paid obeisance here. Following their path may aid entry.”

Victoria peered up at the blue sky overhead. “This used to have a ceiling, I think,” she noted, pointing at the crumbling arches which would have once supported a roof. “Where in the temple
are we?"

“The room we stand in is a vestibule, not the temple proper,” said Morrigan. Solas made no comment, though he looked faintly annoyed – perhaps at not being the one to answer the question himself. “To those who knew it, the ritual your counterpart now attempts was perhaps nothing more than a polite knock at the gate. These customs must have been as familiar to ancient elves as bowing to a queen is to you or I.”

Mahanon started walking around the pillar’s base; the squares were laid out in a fairly straightforward manner, and as he stepped onto each one, they grew bright – first gold, then blue, just like the doors had done when they escaped the dragon. “Oh, no. No. This is bad. Rituals are bad,” he heard Sera muttering. “You can’t want this!”

But he did. Mythal was his patron; her tree adorned his face in glimmering green vallaslin, and if he was going to enter her great temple then he was determined to do it in the most respectful manner possible. The tones which arose from each square were discordant with one another, like some sort of badly arranged song, and yet oddly pleasing. As he stepped onto the final square, there was a great final tone, and a rushing sound of a spell breaking.

“The barrier which was cast over the door into the temple has been brought down,” Solas informed him. “Well done. Let us see what awaits.”

Before opening the blue glowing door, however, Mahanon caught sight of a small chamber off to one side of the vestibule. Upon entering, he discovered a wolf statue – not unlike those they had found elsewhere in the Dales. “A shrine to Fen’Harel?” Morrigan asked in disbelief. “Why would this be here? Setting an altar to Fen’Harel in the Temple of Mythal would be as blasphemous as painting Andraste naked in the Chantry!”

“Perhaps you don’t know everything, witch,” said Solas, coldly.

“Let’s just keep moving,” said Victoria, before an argument could brew. “We need to get inside before Samson and Calpernia destroy the place. I think we can all agree that would be bad, yes?”

“Well said, Tor,” Mahanon replied, though in his heart he was as baffled as Morrigan.

Beyond the doors they heard the sounds of explosions. Samson and his Red Templars, and Calpernia and her Venatori, had combined their efforts to blast open the doors leading into the temple. They turned and watched as the Inquisitors’ party skidded to a halt. “Don’t let them enter!” Calpernia commanded.

“Hold them off,” Samson agreed, gesturing to his soldiers.

Mahanon gazed slowly around the area. Red Templar archers were emerging from the shadows on one side; on the other, he saw masked Venatori. “We’re in for a fight,” he said quietly to Victoria, who stood close to him. “Let’s get this done.”

By the time the dust had settled, it had become apparent that both Samson and Calpernia had disappeared, though exactly where was unclear. There was a gaping hole in the stone floor which seemed to lead to the temple’s underbelly, but there was also a magically barricaded door. “There are more floor puzzles,” Mahanon realized. “We’ve got to perform the rituals if we’re to reach the center of the temple, which is likely where we’ll find this Well of Sorrows.”

“Yeah, uh, Boss? I think the baddies jumped down through the hole,” said Bull. “I can hear fighting down there – sounds like they’re wiping the floor with those weird elves. Or the elves are
“wiping the floor with them, I can’t tell.”

“While they rush ahead, this leads to our true destination,” said Morrigan, pointing at the magically sealed door. “We should walk the petitioner’s path, as before.”

“You have an army out there dying, Inquisitors,” Blackwall argued, “while we waste time fiddling with this magic. If jumping down will get us out faster, we should do it!”

“In this case, I must agree with the witch. This is ancient ground, deserving of our respect,” said Solas. He gave Mahanon a pointed glance and added, “Of your respect.”

Mahanon exchanged a look with Victoria. “This is your faith, Nonny,” she said. “It’s your choice to make.”

He appreciated that, but it was a little uncomfortable to have to make the decision on his own. Blackwall made a compelling point. Still, Solas was right about paying respect to Mythal. He gave Morrigan a searching look. “Why do I feel like you’re not telling us everything?”

She gestured for the Inquisitors to move away from the rest of the group, and they followed her to where she could speak without being heard. “There is a danger to the natural order,” she allowed. “Legends walked Thedas once, things of might and wonder. Their passing has left us all the lesser. Corypheus would squander the ancient power of the Well. I would have it restored.”

[Editor’s note: I know, this all sounds a little... contrived, maybe? But this is really the way Morrigan talked. She has this sing-songy kind of voice like she’s reading out of a book. Eyebrows couldn’t tell me everything she said verbatim, of course, but we’re doing our best with what we have. Sorry. Continue.]

Mahanon listened to her speech about the dying wonders of Thedas, how she wanted to restore the Well even though she barely understood what it was. He had to admit she had a point when she spoke of mankind crushing the things they didn’t understand; the fate of his own People was proof enough of that. As he watched, her expression turned vaguely sly. “I read more in the first chamber than I revealed,” she admitted. “It said that a great boon is given to those who use the Well of Sorrows, but at a terrible price. I am willing to pay that price.”

“You don’t even know what it is!” Victoria protested.

“Halam’shivanas. The sweet sacrifice of duty,” said Morrigan. “That was what the pillar said. It implies the loss of something personal for duty’s sake. Yet for those who served at this temple, a worthwhile trade. My priority is your cause, but if the opportunity arises to save this Well, I am willing to pay the cost.”

“Fine. We’re wasting time,” said Mahanon. Blackwall’s words were needling him. “We can’t agree on which path to take - so we’re taking them both. Come on.”

He led the two women back to the others. “This is what we’re going to do,” he said. “I am pledged to Mythal - this is her vallaslin I wear. She is my patron and I will see her honored as is proper.” Solas nodded approvingly. “We’re going to split up and try to divide and conquer. Bull, Dorian, and Cassandra will stay with Morrigan and myself while I walk the petitioner’s paths. Blackwall, Solas, and Sera, you will accompany the Lady Inquisitor down into the underground.”

“I hate magic,” Bull muttered. “No offense, kadan.”

“Should I not accompany you on the petitioner’s paths?” Solas asked. “I am not certain I trust the witch’s intentions.”
“I can manage her. I want you to look after ma da’venan,” Mahanon told him. “She can handle the Venatori and the Red Templars, but I don’t know what these elves might do. You know more about Mythal than any of us; you’re her best chance of making it through the temple unharmed.”

“I can hear you, you know,” Victoria retorted. She smiled, briefly. “You’ll be all right, Nonny? Are you sure?”

“Dorian and I will look after each other,” he assured her. He would have tugged on her braid if it had been hanging loose; failing that, he tweaked her nose, which made her scowl. “We’ll meet somewhere inside. I’ll find you, I promise.”

“Not if I find you first.” Turning, she squared her shoulders. “All right, let’s get down there. Be safe, everybody.”

How long it took him to solve the three petitioner’s paths, Mahanon didn’t know. It seemed to take forever; he had to start over multiple times. One of them required him to pull switches to open gates, and another had three separate areas which had to be reached by jumping on non-enchanted tiles. The whole thing was exhausting, and he kept pleading with Mythal to send him solutions before he collapsed from frustration (and also from hunger, which crept up on him unexpectedly).

At last, however, the final tile was glowing blue beneath his feet, and they again heard the peculiar crash of magic coming to an end. They pushed open the doors, stepping slowly into a large and remarkably well-preserved room. It reminded Mahanon somewhat of the grand ballroom at the Winter Palace, though he doubted Mythal’s followers did very much dancing on the brown tiled floor. There were more statues throughout the chamber, of varying size, all the same – a woman’s body with dragon wings instead of arms.

“’Tis not what I expected,” Morrigan acknowledged. “What was this chamber used for?”

Mahanon froze in place. Something was crawling up the back of his neck, a sensation like errant smoke. “We’re being watched,” he said in a low voice. They arranged themselves before the grand dais of the chamber, where a single hooded elf stood glaring at them. A quick glance behind him told Mahanon that several archers in ancient armor had their bows trained on the group.

“Venavis,” said the lone elf. Mahanon didn’t recognize the word, but the speaker’s vallaslin was nearly identical to his own. “You… are unlike the other invaders. You have the features of those who call themselves Elvhen. You bear the mark of magic which is… familiar, as does the shemlen who even now scurries like a rat through the chambers beneath our feet. How has this come to pass? What is your connection to those who first disturbed our slumber?”

“They are my enemies, as well as yours,” said Mahanon. “The woman of whom you speak is my ally, and we hunt those who have disturbed your slumber.”

The elf seemed to consider this. “I am called Abelas,” he said after a moment. “We are Sentinels, tasked with standing against those who trespass on sacred ground. We wake only to fight, to preserve this place. Our numbers diminish with each invasion.” They watched him pace for a moment. “I know what you seek. Like all who has come before, you wish to drink from the vir’abelasan.”

“’The Place of the Way of Sorrows.’ He speaks of the Well!” Morrigan hissed.

“So... you’re elves from ancient times? Before the Tevinter Imperium destroyed Arlathan?” Mahanon felt almost desperate for knowledge, which this figure from time immemorial could
share.

“The shemlen did not destroy Arlathan,” Abelas corrected him. “We Elvhen warred upon ourselves. By the time the doors to this sanctuary closed, our time was over.”

“Wait, that’s not right,” Dorian blurted. “What are you saying?”

“You would not know truth. Shemlen history is as short as the pool of your years.”

“What did the Imperium do, then? Are you saying it wasn't a war?” The mage looked almost faint with shock.

“The ‘war’ of carrion feasting upon a corpse, yes.” Abelas sighed. “We awaken only when called, and each time find the world more foreign than before. It is meaningless. We endure. The *vir’abelasan* must be preserved.”

“What is this *vir’abelasan*, exactly?” asked Mahanon, urgently.

“It is a path, one walked only by those who toiled in Mythal’s favor. More than that you need not know.”

Mahanon’s frustration was deep. “Our people have lost everything. They need you. They could learn from you!”

“‘Our’ people?” Abelas sneered. “The ones we see in the forest, shadows wearing *vallaslin*? You are no more my people than that shemlen woman in the temple underbelly. And you have invaded our sanctum as readily as her kind has done.”

“We knew this place was sacred. We’ve respected it as best we could.”

Abelas paused, considering. “I believe you,” he said at length. “Trespassers you are, but you have followed rites of petition. You have shown respect to Mythal. Your ally,” he added, “has not.”

“She left my side only at my urging.” There was an instant surge of panic in Mahanon’s mind; he couldn’t tell what this elf might do to Victoria. “We wanted to stop our enemy from desecrating this temple as much as possible.”

“It may be as you say. If these others are enemies of yours, we will aid you in destroying them. When this is done, you – and those you claim – shall be permitted to depart... and never return.”

Relief flooded him, replacing the panic. “I accept your offer.”

“You will be guided to those you seek, and your allies will be protected by our own. As for the *vir’abelasan*... it shall not be despoiled, even if I must destroy it myself.” At these words, Abelas turned and walked out of the chamber.

“No!” Morrigan, in a burst of purple smoke, transfigured herself into a crow and chased after Abelas. Mahanon tried to call her back, but she ignored him.

The archers who had been prepared to fire now lowered their bows, and marched out of the chamber in search of the enemy. Meanwhile, another elf entered from a side door, and muttered in ancient words Mahanon could not understand. She walked with the aid of a staff, and carried a book under one arm, and her gestures made clear what her speech did not; she was the guide who would lead them to their quarry.
Much as when he walked the petitioner’s paths, Mahanon did not have the slightest idea how long they traversed the temple. It was so much bigger than he had imagined – room after room of statues and candles, and mosaic wall art telling the stories of the other Creators. The inner areas of the temple were strangely well guarded against the effects of time, with only a few plants managing to creep in past the magic barriers; most of the structure was still quite sound, and richly embellished with gold accents. Part of him wanted to stay, to live out his years in service to Mythal, but he knew the world needed him too much to allow it.

After a seemingly endless exploration of this jewel of Arlathan, the guide finally pointed them toward a set of doors. They emerged, blinking, into the brilliant sunshine, and almost immediately heard the sounds of fighting and shouting. Mahanon led his companions down a flight of stone stairs. “Fight on! An army of these bastards won’t stop us!” called Samson’s voice.

At the base of the stairs was a river, perhaps part of the same one over which they had crossed the bridge to escape the resurrected Corypheus. The Red Templars were there, slaughtering the ancient elves with fire and blade, and Samson merely laughed as the last one fell. “You tough bastards,” he said, his voice full of something that almost sounded like affection. “A day’s march, hours of fighting, and still fierce as dragons! The Chantry never knew what it was throwing away.”

“Samson!” One of the Red Templars pointed at Mahanon’s approaching group. Samson turned, and snorted.

“Inquisitor. You and those elf-things don’t know when to stop,” he said. “You’ve hunted us across half of Thedas, I should have guessed you’d follow us to this hole.”

“I thought you might like to know that my Lady Inquisitor met your Tranquil,” Mahanon replied. “Maddox gave his life for your cause.”

Samson actually looked genuinely sad. “I told him not to. Well – he died as one of us, then, one of the faithful. Corypheus chose me twice, you know. First as his general, now as his Vessel for the Well of Sorrows.”

“That’s interesting, since he apparently chose Calpernia for the same thing.”

“Calpernia?” Samson gave a snort. “Corypheus said whichever of us reached the Well first would receive the honor. And here I am, and I don’t see her anywhere, do you? So it’s me. It was always meant to be me. That Well holds wisdom, Inquisitor, the kind of wisdom that can scour a world. I give it to Corypheus, and he can walk into the Fade without your precious Anchor.” He turned to gaze up at a rocky promontory where, Mahanon guessed, the Well of Sorrows resided.

“And just what is a Vessel?”

“What else empties a well? I’ll carry its power to Corypheus – one more task that was entrusted to me. You know, being force-fed Chantry lyrium was good for something. This armor makes me a living fortress, mind and body. When I give him the knowledge of the Well, Corypheus will be unstoppable.” He made an odd movement, and the armor started to glow erratically. “It’s a new world, with a new god. So, Inquisitor, how will this go?”

“About that.” Mahanon smirked. “Power’s all well and good, until it’s taken away. I have a little something here. When my friends rescued me from your Shrine of Dumat, they picked up a few surprises.” He lifted the rune Dagna had crafted using Maddox’s discarded tools and twitched his fingers. Samson suddenly fell to the ground, his armor falling away in pieces.

“What did you do?!”
With the armor destroyed, Samson was no match for the Inquisition forces. They cut down his Red Templars, and Dorian used magic to carefully bind the general. “I’ll put him outside – once Cullen finishes his dashing rescue at the base camp, we can arrange for him to collect his old friend.”

“Mahanon, look!” Cassandra cried, pointing. They all turned and saw Abelas, manifesting a stone staircase as he ran, making his way up to the Well of Sorrows. A crow that Mahanon knew must have been Morrigan rushed after him.

“Come on,” said Mahanon, somewhat exasperated, and they all ran up the stairs to join the fray. As it turned out, the Well of Sorrows was a pool – a beautiful round pool of glimmering water, surrounded by a number of eluvians, only one of which remained intact. Morrigan stood between it and Abelas, glaring.

“You heard his parting words, Inquisitor. The elf seeks to destroy the Well of Sorrows,” she said.

Abelas scowled, looking from one to the other. “So the sanctum is despoiled at last.”

“You would have destroyed the Well yourself, given the chance!”

“To keep it from your grasping fingers! Better it be lost than bestowed upon the undeserving!”

“Fool! You'd let your people's legacy rot in the shadows!”

“Enough.” Mahanon could feel a headache forming between his brows, right on the trunk of the tree of his vallaslin.

Morrigan surveyed him coolly. “The Well clearly offers power, Inquisitor. If that power can be turned against Corypheus, can you afford not to use it?”

“Do you even know what you ask?” asked Abelas, incredulously. He turned to study the water. “As each servant of Mythal reached the end of their years, they would pass their knowledge on... through this. All that we were, all that we knew - it would be lost forever.”

“It's better that knowledge remain in the Well, never passed on? You'd rather destroy it?” Mahanon was surprised at the tiredness in his own voice.

Abelas paused. “You have shown respect to Mythal, and there is a righteousness in you I cannot deny. Is that your desire? To partake of the vir’abelasan as best you can, to fight your enemy?”

Something in his words made Mahanon hesitate. “Gifts like this don't come freely.”

“No boon of Mythal was ever granted without cost. The vir’abelasan may be too much for a mortal to comprehend. Brave it if you must, but know you this: you shall be bound forever to the will of Mythal.”

“Bound?” Morrigan repeated derisively. “To a goddess who no longer exists, if she ever did?”

“Bound, as we are bound. The choice is yours.”

Mahanon looked at him, once again feeling the desperate thirst for ancient knowledge that only Abelas could quench. It was strange; he’d never felt it so intensely as he had since they arrived in this place. “Is it possible our goddess still exists?”

“Anything is possible.”

“Elven legend,” said Morrigan, “states that Mythal was tricked by Fen’Harel and banished to the
Beyond.”

“‘Elven legend’ is wrong. The Dread Wolf had nothing to do with her murder.”

“Murder? I said nothing of –”

“She was slain, if a god truly can be. Betrayed by those who destroyed this temple.” Abelas hesitated, and then brightened very faintly. “Yet the vir’abelasan remains, as do we. That is something.”

“Are you leaving the temple?”

“Our duty ends. Why remain?” The ancient elf lifted his hands in a small gesture. “It may be that only Uthenera awaits us. The blissful sleep of eternity, never to awaken… if fate is kind.”

“You could come with us, fight Corypheus,” Mahanon offered, almost pleading. “He killed your people.”

Abelas shook his head. “We killed ourselves, long ago.” And with that, he turned, and disappeared into the depths of the temple.

Mahanon and Morrigan moved to the edge of the Well, studying the little courtyard in which it was housed. “You'll note the intact eluvian. I was correct on that count, at least,” she commented dryly.

“Is it still a threat? Could Corypheus use it to travel the Fade?”

“You recall when I took you through my eluvian, I said each required a key? The Well is the key. Take its power, and Mythal’s last eluvian will be no more use to Corypheus than glass.” She looked thoughtful, gazing at the water. “I did not expect the Well to feel so... hungry.”

“ Seems like that should be a concern.” He frowned.

“Knowledge begets a hunger for more.” Morrigan’s voice sounded briefly dreamy. Turning toward him, she resumed her usual tone. “I am willing to pay the price the Well demands. I am also the best suited to use its knowledge in your service. Of those present, I alone have the training to make use of this. Let me drink, Inquisitor.”

“Just what training makes you qualified?” he asked, frowning.

“I have studied the oldest lore! I have delved into mysteries of which you could only dream! Can you honestly tell me there is anyone better suited?”

Cassandra interrupted, her voice supplicating. “If it is truly between you and her, then let her take the risk. Maker help us all.”

Mahanon turned and stared at the Well. Morrigan was right; it did feel hungry. It was pulling at him, somehow. “That's not just knowledge from the ancient elven priests,” he said, almost absently. “It's their will. That's what Abelas was telling us. The collective will of the priests puts anyone who drinks under a compulsion. A geas. Can't you feel it?

“That would match the legends, but it does not tell us what the geas entails. I would still use the Well, but you are right,” Morrigan conceded. “We must be cautious.”

As surely as if his goddess was speaking in his ear, Mahanon made up his mind. “If anyone is to use the Well, it will be me.”
Morrigan scowled at him. “You will take what little knowledge you can understand and let the rest go to waste?”

“Who’s to say it will be a waste?” he returned irritably. “These are my people. This is what I have wanted to know for as long as I can remember.”

She paused, as though swayed by his reply. “Perhaps it is better this way,” she said finally. “Do as you will with the Well of Sorrows, Inquisitor, but be careful.”

Ignoring the disturbed looks on his friends’ faces, Mahanon slowly descended the steps leading into the pool. It was cool, but not cold, and there was something about the water that was not altogether wet. Was dry water a thing? *Dry* wasn’t the right word, but he didn’t know what the right word was. Giving the others an encouraging smile, he dipped his hands into the water – or whatever it was – and brought some of it to his lips.

It was like drowning in mist, lost in a Fade beyond the Fade, a place that time had never touched. Voices swirled around him, gabbling incomprehensibly; finally, one phrase became clear.

“*Garas quenathra?*” they asked. *Why are you here?*

“Corypheus,” he mumbled uneasily. “A magister wishes to rip the Veil open. I must learn how to stop him.”

The voices continued to whisper unintelligibly. Too many voices, too many words, it all rang in his head like the buzzing of so many bees. “I can’t understand you!” he cried. “Look, will you help me or not?”

The buzzing stopped quite abruptly.

“*Vir Mythal'enaste,*” the voices whispered instead.

*Blessings of Mythal.*
Meanwhile, down in the underground...

Victoria's remark to Calpernia about their clothes is something I've had planned for ages.

[Editor’s note: We’re going to back it up here a few paces, so you can see what our Lady Inquisitor was doing while our Lord Inquisitor was hanging out with his fellow elves. I won’t say I know for sure that she had so much sympathy for Calpernia as what you’ll read here, but knowing Eyebrows like I do, I feel pretty confident that I’m not too far off the mark. And even if I am, she probably won’t tell me.]

“We’ll meet somewhere inside,” said Mahanon. “I’ll find you, I promise.”

“Not if I find you first,” Victoria replied.

It was strange, how much she was worried about Mahanon. She couldn’t even say for certain why; part of it, she knew, was just that she didn’t like being separated from him. Ever since he was captured by the enemy, she had preferred being able to keep eyes on her counterpart. This was true even before then, of course, but the abduction made it a lot stronger. But she supposed it might also have to do with where they were. Mahanon’s faith was as important to him as Victoria’s was to her, and even if she didn’t entirely understand it, she respected it, and she wondered what being in this place might mean to him and how it would affect his choices.

It suddenly occurred to her that she was remembering what she herself had felt when they first entered the Temple of Sacred Ashes. It felt like a lifetime ago, now, but she could vividly recall her emotional response to the grandeur of the place. It was a truly holy site, a place built for the memory of Andraste, to protect her remains and spread the fire of her worship. It had filled her with awe and reverence, but also made her feel somewhat small and humbled. Maybe it was the same for Mahanon now.

He wasn’t likely to say as much, however, and she knew it well. She patted his shoulder in farewell, then gestured for the others to follow her to the edge of the hole left by the blasting.


“Last one in the hole is… something,” Victoria replied, trying to smile.
“It’s not as far as you fell when we were at the Cradle of Sulevin,” Solas offered. She shot him a grateful look; he was right. She could do this. They eased themselves over the ledge and down into the depths.

A lot of the support structure was burning, though the flames were small and not terribly threatening; stone did not easily submit to such a thing, after all, and the fire only had so much room in which to move. They seemed to be in some kind of tunnel, and Victoria wondered if the Temple of Mythal really was a temple. It almost seemed more like a castle, in its way, what with fortifications and hidden passages. Something about it reminded her of her beloved Skyhold, and the comparison warmed her.

The temple catacombs – Victoria didn’t really know what else to call the place – were sprawling. The whole compound was apparently much larger than they initially believed, and she wanted to take more time to study it thoroughly. Unfortunately, they didn’t really have time; the location was positively infested with Venatori and Red Templars, and it felt like there was no end to them.

But as they continued to traverse the subterranean labyrinth, she began to notice something. Weaving through the shadows, lending an occasional arrow to the fray, were the unfamiliar armored elves. There didn’t seem to be many of them, nor would they come too far into the light where she could get a proper glimpse, but it happened over and over. They were helping to take down the enemies, but they weren’t attacking the Lady Inquisitor or her companions.

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“They had no problem coming after us when we were in the Wilds, but now it’s as if they’re on our side.”

“I hardly know what to tell you, Inquisitor,” he replied. “I suspect that their purpose is to guard the Temple of Mythal. What little I have managed to see of their faces indicates that they bear vallaslin of her emblems. It may be that they have come to recognize us as allies rather than enemies.”


For what felt like a long time, they continued to wander. “These are crypts,” said Solas, after they dispatched yet another small group of their adversaries. “Long ago, those of the People who had been especially dutiful to Mythal – most particularly those who died in her service – would have been honored by being entombed in her temple.”

“Blah blah blah,” said Sera. “Ancient this goddess that.”

“Not to detract from our fascinating surroundings, but I think we’re going in circles,” Blackwall said slowly, pointing with his sword. “Look, we passed that urn at least twice – see the scorch mark? One of the Venatori did that.”

“We’re lost?” Victoria tried not to visibly cringe.

“No! Look.” Solas pointed. One of the armored elves stood in the doorway; this one was a bit different than the others, however. She spoke strange words with a distinctly feminine lilt in her voice, and she leaned on a walking stick and carried a book. “She says we should follow her, and she’ll show us the way that the others have gone.”

“The others – meaning Mahanon? Mahanon’s all right?”

“I could not say, but that would be my guess.”
“When in doubt, follow the one who looks like they know what they’re doing,” Blackwall advised. “Let’s go.”

A few minutes later, thanks to their guide, they were climbing a flight of almost hidden stairs back into the main part of the temple, making their way through the gilded halls. The Anchor crackled faintly on Victoria’s palm beneath her glove. “Something about this place feels vaguely familiar,” she said. “I wonder why.”

“Do you remember what I told you and Mahanon after our escape from Haven?” Solas reminded her. “The orb which gave you your marks is elven in origin. Its magic is not wholly unlike that which protects Mythal’s sanctuary. Likely that is the cause.”

“That makes sense. Have you ever been here before, Solas? While in the Fade, I mean.”

“I have.” He nodded, looking – as always – pleased by the inquiry. “I have seen this temple when it was whole and beautiful. I have seen Mythal herself strolling its halls, tall and slender, haloed by the sunlight shining through the windows. I have watched the ancient adherents paying their respects to her, walking the lighted paths like you watched Mahanon do out in the first courtyard.” He paused. “I will give the witch this much credit. She correctly identified the space; it was indeed the temple’s vestibule in ancient days. Those who wished to petition Mythal for her favor waited there for permission to enter.”

Their guide halted, and pointed at a set of doors, and again gabbled at them in words unfamiliar to Victoria’s ears. She could guess the intent, however, and nodded. “Ma serannas,” she said, pleased that she had learned at least enough Elvhen from Mahanon that she knew how to say thank you. The elf nodded, expression inscrutable, and turned to hobble away once again.

The door opened out to a staircase leading down to a river, and it was there that they found Calpernia. She was staring up at what looked like another staircase, created by piling rocks together, which led to a particularly overgrown part of the temple. “So close,” they heard her say. “The Well knows its vessel.” Hearing their approach, she turned to fix them with a glare that could have melted stone, but Victoria was a bit diverted by the fact that the mage wore an outfit nearly identical to her own. Calpernia’s garment had no armor sleeve, and the leather was pure black instead of shades of white and gray, but otherwise they were dressed exactly alike.

“Well,” said the Lady Inquisitor, with an impudent grin she must surely have learned from her counterpart, “one of us is going to have to change.”

[Editor’s note: I can’t absolutely swear that Eyebrows said this. I mean, I wasn’t there. But I like to think that she did.]

From behind Victoria, Sera guffawed at the quip, which seemed to only make Calpernia even more annoyed. She sighed, however, and her tone was not angry or even particularly adversarial; she sounded more tired than anything. “The trials you set me, I have overcome. Samson has failed; he was no match for your precious Lord Inquisitor. The right of becoming the vessel thus falls to me.” She made a little gesture with one gloved hand. “In return for that, I offer a courtesy. Leave now, Lady Inquisitor, or not at all.”

“If you’ll pardon me for saying so, Lady Calpernia, we have things to discuss.” Victoria stayed where she was, motioning for the others to remain still.

Calpernia lifted an eyebrow. “True. I did not think you so civilized. You serve your people; you have one last chance to save them.” She pivoted in order to lift her gaze to the sunlit overgrown
area once again. “The Well of Sorrows overflows with knowledge, power abandoned by those the elves worshiped as gods.” As she turned back to Victoria, there was something almost sweet in her expression. “To walk the Fade without the Anchor – that is what the Well of Sorrows will give Corypheus.”

“Then why isn’t he the one to come and claim it?”

“I will carry it, like a jug brimming, for his use. Can you not see?” She began to pace. “I knew you would take the Well for yourself, to ransack its wisdom to try to defeat Corypheus. I waited to see who would come – you, or your counterpart? It was both of you in the end, but he was good enough to clear Samson from my path. Now Corypheus will know who has truly served him.”

“Corypheus is using you, Calpernia.” Victoria kept her voice calm, wanting things to remain civil. She wasn’t completely sure she was any sort of match for the other woman. “Once you’ve drunk from the Well, he’s going to use a ritual on you. You’ll be a mindless tool, enslaved to his will.”

“That...” Calpernia paused. “Where I come from, idle tales must be proven.”

“Of course. I brought the proof away with me from the Shrine of Dumat,” Victoria replied, pulling a scroll from her belt. “You knew that Samson’s forces had captured my Lord Inquisitor, but you didn’t know where they took him. He was there – along with your master, Erasthenes. Corypheus used the binding ritual on him for practice. This page contains the directions.” She carefully lobbed the scroll to Calpernia.

Calpernia picked up the document and unrolled it, her eyes roving desperately over its contents. “Is that true?” Blackwall asked Victoria, quietly.

“Every word,” she murmured.

“How could you know?” Calpernia asked, lowering the scroll. “And these runes. No one has written in these since...” The dawning of comprehension across her features was like a storm rolling in from the west. Victoria pitied her. “He made so many promises... and every one, a lie! Venhedis kaffan vas!” The scroll in her hand burst into flames; she shook her arm to rid herself of the embers, letting them fall harmlessly into the water near her feet. “He was to give Tevinter a true leader! If Corypheus would misuse me, he’d misuse them too. I was blind!”

“That’s why you joined Corypheus?” Victoria asked, surprised. “To see Tevinter rebuilt?”

“To see her reborn. Slaves allowed their true potential, corruption excised.” Calpernia was almost spitting her words, and her freckled face was creased with agitation. “Tevinter was the cradle of civilization – imagine what her future could be! A crafter of wonders, standing against the savage Qunari, a beacon for all!”

“Perhaps Tevinter does need a strong leader,” Victoria said thoughtfully. Solas made a slight noise of disapproval, but did not contradict her; she chose to ignore it. “Be that woman, while you still can,” she urged her opponent.

Calpernia scowled. “You mock me, Inquisitor. As if you’d let me walk away.”

“You were willing to do as much for me.”

That was true, and they both knew it, and the mage paused. She looked one last time up at the place where the Well resided. “If Corypheus triumphs...” She shook her head. “If any power can challenge him, it lies in the Well. Perhaps its price is too high. But if you can take it... humble him.” With these words, Calpernia turned back to Victoria. “Vitae benefaria, Inquisitor. Do not
follow us.” She gestured to her remaining Venatori. “I will give you some time; I go to confront my master. Then I will return to Tevinter... if there is anything left of me.”

As they watched the group march away, suddenly there came the sound of metal on stone, and Victoria lifted her eyes to see one of the armored elves descending the strange staircase leading to the Well. He paused, taking in the sight of them. “I am Abelas,” he said. “I have left your counterpart to decide the fate of the Well of Sorrows.”

Victoria offered him a brief salute. “We thank you for your help in driving our enemies from the temple.”

“You carry a great burden, shemlen. But you too have a righteousness within you; it is clear on your face. Go now to join your friends, while you can.” He gestured up to where Victoria could just make out Mahanon’s figure.

“Malas amelin ne halam, Abelas,” said Solas.

The figure regarded him solemnly, then nodded before walking away. Seeing Victoria’s puzzled expression, Solas clarified. “His name. ‘Abelas’ means sorrow. I said that I hope he finds a new name.”

“Oh, I see. That was kind.” She turned back to the rocky steps. “We’d better get up there, let Non and the others know we’re all right.”

Solas led the way up to the Well. Victoria had to admit she was a little excited; she was eager to see the thing which they were fighting to keep out of their enemy’s hands. Everything else in the Temple of Mythal had been so very beautiful, she figured this – being the treasure of the sanctuary – must be especially so.

Beautiful it was, but she was a little distracted by the fact that she reached the scene just in time to see Mahanon standing in the middle of it. As she cleared the top step, he dipped his hands into the pool and lifted them to his face.

It was as though he had set off an explosion in the water. Everyone and everything seemed to be knocked sort of sideways by a massive surge, splashed by a water that was not water.

“Non!”

Before she could run to him, try to pull him out of the Well, Victoria felt herself seized by a pair of firm arms and crushed into someone’s chest. “No,” said Dorian’s voice, urgently. “We don’t know what will happen!”

Mahanon lay in the center of the now-empty Well, his body seizing and twitching like he was somehow drowning on land. His eyes were open and vacant; the vibrant green color had been replaced by a dead white. She tried again to go to him, but Dorian still held her back, and she shook her head, trying not to cry. “I can’t look,” she muttered, pushing her face into his soft mage’s armor.

“Maker, please, don’t let it end this way,” she heard Cassandra saying.

After a moment of this, of Victoria trying desperately to shut out all light and sound and convince herself that she was going to wake up in her red velvet bed at Skyhold, she heard Mahanon’s voice. He was mumbling to himself in Elvhen, and she slowly lifted her head from Dorian’s shoulder to see Cassandra hurrying to her beloved’s side. He forced himself suddenly to his knees, one hand on
“‘Non!’ she cried again, and this time Dorian released her and allowed her to join Cassandra. ‘Nonny, are you – are you all right?’”

“He’s not dead, that’s a relief,” said Dorian warmly. “So – good? Bad? I’m dying to know.”

Morrigan was watching Mahanon with a sour expression, but he ignored her, ignored them all in fact, pacing slowly around in the empty Well. There was a peculiar light in his eyes, and a smile played about his lips that Victoria neither entirely understood nor altogether liked. He looked as though he had learned something, but at what cost, she couldn’t guess. Then the smile left his features, and he pointed.

On the same stone balcony where they themselves had exited the Temple of Mythal, Corypheus had emerged into the sunlight. He stared at them, and even at such a distance the pure vitriol was clear in his mangled face. They had stolen his prize; he let out a roar of frustration. As they watched, his body lifted into the air on a plume of black smoke and began rushing toward them.

“The eluvian!” Morrigan cried. Mahanon’s body lit up with a vivid pale blue magic, and after the slightest pause, so did the intact eluvian beside the Well.

“Through the mirror!” he ordered the others. Morrigan, knowing best how the things worked, went first, and the others followed her swiftly. The Inquisitors lingered briefly, turning back to see the Well refill with a glassy substance that was even less like water than the liquid the pool had originally held; the figure of a woman rose from this, hovering between them and their pursuer like a guardian. Then Mahanon pushed Victoria through the eluvian, and they found themselves in the Crossroads again.

Of the entire party, Morrigan had brought only the Inquisitors to the Crossroads. When first they spoke of the journey to the Arbor Wilds and what Corypheus might hope to find there, she had shown them her own eluvian, which she had rebuilt over a course of years. Just as before, the Crossroads was silent and still, littered with countless eluvians in various states of repair. Mahanon used his newfound wisdom to close the one through which they had escaped the Temple of Mythal, and the group followed Morrigan to the eluvian she knew well how to open. Moments later, they were spilling out of the other side, safe once again within the walls of Skyhold.

“Well, that’s one way to get home quickly,” Bull remarked. He gave a little shudder.

“The others are still back in the Wilds,” Victoria realized. “We’ll need to send them a message, let them know that we’re all right and that we’re here. They may as well return as fast as they’re able.”

“And here I was hoping that was going to be the end of all of this,” said Mahanon, watching their companions walk out of the room and into the sunshine of the courtyard.

“Speaking of the end of all this…” Victoria turned and started smacking him repeatedly in the arm. “Don’t you ever do something like that again!”

“Hey! Stop that!” Mahanon protested. He glanced at Cassandra for help, but she merely laughed.

“I’m sorry, my love, but I agree with Victoria,” she said. “You gave us a terrible fright.”

“I thought I was watching you die, you great lump,” Victoria continued scolding him. “Remember what you said to me after Haven? ‘Whether we live or we die, we do it together’ – and then you go and do a thing like that!”
“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!” He caught her hands before she could smack him again, but he was laughing too. “Never again, I promise.”

“Good.” Any sulking in her expression was offset by her relieved smile.
Chapter Summary

Remember that third group that split off before the Temple? Want to see what they're doing?

Chapter Notes

Oh, he was cranky with me in this chapter, as you'll see.

EDITS: An anonymous reader called "Random Pedant" left a comment advising me that I had the age of Empress Celene listed incorrectly in this chapter, and also back at the ball. I confirmed that they are entirely correct and have made changes accordingly. It's not a huge impact on the plot, but I do like my work to be accurate. I can't believe my editor didn't catch that! ;) Thank you, Random Pedant!

Chapter Forty-Four: Field and Forest Shall Burn

[Editor’s note: Would you believe Scholar almost published this without letting me tell all of you what happened when we got back to the base camp? Just because it’s not part of the official historical record doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be shared. But in her defense, she didn’t expect it to be quite as riveting as the stuff in the temple. I have to wonder what this document would look like if she hadn’t had the good sense to enlist my assistance in preparing it. Anyway, she knows better now, so here’s the story.]

Cole had vanished, presumably to go on ahead and assure those in the base camp that help was on the way. Cullen, Varric, and Vivienne continued hurtling through the overgrown greenery of the Arbor Wilds, pausing as needed to aid in minor skirmishes.

“Grand Enchanter!” Cullen barked, catching sight of Fiona and some of her mages. “Return to the base camp as quickly as you can, please, we’ve had reports of insurgents there!”

“Right away, Commander!” Her tone was almost cheerful; it occurred to Varric that this might be the first time since the Breach was sealed that the woman had felt useful.

“Madame Vivienne,” Cullen continued, as they ducked under some low-hanging vines, “get Empress Celene and Josephine out of harm’s way, please. You’re probably our best line of defense for the two of them.”

“Excellent reasoning, darling.”

“Varric, you -”

“Never mind me, Curly. I know what I need to do.”
“...right. Understood.”

The crackling air was filled with the stench of burning vegetation, and Varric’s eyes watered. He brushed at them irritably, almost stumbling as he did. “Who made the ground vertical?” he grumbled to no one in particular.

It took roughly a dozen years, or at least that was how it felt to the dwarf. They came across minor altercations, helped to dispatch stray Venatori and Red Templars when needed, but somehow that base camp had been moved to the other side of Orlais. Finally, however, as his chest began to ache from running and Bianca was almost protesting the sheer amount of work he was making her do, they caught sight of Inquisition banners. Well, *partial* banners, at least, with their scorched tendrils fluttering in the breeze.

“Those beasts are going to burn the entire Wilds to the ground at this rate,” said Vivienne darkly. “They’re trying to close off escape routes for our people, I expect.”

Even as she spoke, however, there came a rushing sound like that of the river which meandered through the Wilds, as though it had suddenly decided to reroute itself in order to quench the blazes. No such thing had happened, of course, but something was decidedly at work to battle the fires. Abruptly, Varric laughed.

“Guess those Venatori aren’t used to contending with a *force mage*,” he crowed proudly. “Sparkler did say it’s not a common form of magic in Tevinter, and I guess he wasn’t kidding.”

The scene which greeted their eyes as they entered the camp proper was nothing short of pandemonium. Tents were burning, and in the distance, it sounded as though the Inquisition’s mounts were screaming in terror; Varric distinctly heard the ear-splitting bugle of Cassandra’s red hart. He lifted Bianca and sent a bolt into the exposed throat of a Red Templar whose armor was hanging askew. “Sunshine! Ruffles! We’re here! You all right?”

“Varric!” Bethany’s voice could just barely be heard over the cacophony of battle, and with the smoke that swirled through the humid winds, it was nearly impossible to see her. A second later, a flash of magic cut through the haze just enough that she could spy him across the camp and she lifted her hand to get his attention. “Yes, we’re all right. If you can call this ’all right,’ anyway.”

He shouldered his way over to where she stood, unleashing a few more bolts along the way. “The Iron Lady’s going to get Ruffles and the Empress out of this,” he reported, “and Curly’s directing his troops. The Chargers still around? Tiny might lose his mind if anything happens to them.”

“They’re fine, they’re over on the far side of the camp. Well, what used to be the camp.” She gestured with her staff. Her free hand sought Varric’s shoulder, as if she were growing a bit exhausted and was using him as a support. “We didn’t bring too many civilians, of course, but they’re doing their best to protect the ones who did come.”

“Good. Now, let’s show these guys a thing or two about how we do things in Kirkwall, shall we?” He advanced the magazine on Bianca with a thoroughly satisfying click. “Or as Aveline once said to your sister, let’s bust some heads like the old days.”

Defying the sounds of the skirmish around her, Bethany laughed, a smile crossing her tired features and reinvigorating them. “I can think of nothing better,” she replied, her own weapon at the ready.

“There’s my Sunshine.”

While Cullen set his men to work trying to salvage supplies, and Vivienne made it her priority to
get Josephine and the Empress to a safer position, and Cole… actually, Varric wasn’t too sure what Cole was doing at any given moment. But while they were all doing what they were doing, he and Bethany took up position in approximately the middle of the whole thing. Standing back to back, surrounded on all sides by the sycophants of Corypheus who were closing in, they unleashed nightmares in the form of impossibly accurate crossbow bolts and every stunning spell in the books. The air was ignited with the fresh scent of scorched flesh and plant life, the crossbow bolts sang funeral dirges for their every target, and

[Editor’s note: Let the record show that Scholar took the manuscript out of my hands at this point. She said the exaggeration is all well and good, but it would make her look ridiculous when this thing went to print. I like this girl, but she’s got a lot to learn about what sells a story. But fine. Now you get the slightly less exciting version, and if you don’t like it, blame the author. I am but a humble editor, after all.]

Smoke continued to flood the camp, punctuated at intervals by coughs and cries from both friend and enemy. Bethany was doing her best to keep the fires at bay, but she was fairly alone in her efforts; being the only force mage in the Inquisition, she was the only one equipped to handle such matters. Fiona and her people were on hand, though, and meeting the Venatori spell for spell.

“Varric! Bethany!” Cullen shouted, shouldering his way over to them. “Vivienne was able to get Josephine and the Empress away from the area – they’re with the horses now and preparing to escape. My men can cover them, but I need the two of you to stay here and keep the enemy diverted. Are you all right?”

“We’re fine, Cullen,” Bethany assured him, lowering her hands for a moment. “Do what you need to do. We’ll take care of these louts.”

“Like old times, eh, Sunshine?” Varric asked, crouching to quickly reload Bianca.

“In some ways, yes.” She chuckled faintly.

“All right. We’re counting on you,” the commander said, nodding. With some reluctance, he left them to continue battling the flames and the fiends as he went to oversee the exodus of Empress Celene.

It occurred to him, dimly, that the Empress of Orlais had been on her throne for as long as he could remember – only sixteen years old when she was crowned, some twenty years ago. The stories about her varied widely; she had outmaneuvered her cousin, she had framed her royal uncle for an assassination plot, she was soft on elves, she was not soft on elves. Which parts were true and which were not, there was no way to know. Even now as he looked at her, golden hair turning pale with age, sapphire skirts rippling over the horse’s saddle like a waterfall, he didn’t entirely know how to feel about this woman.

Not that his feelings were of likely concern to her, but still.

“Josephine! Are you ready?” he called, seeing her settle onto the back of her own mount.

“As I can be,” she replied, adjusting the hood of the cloak she had hastily donned. The wind whipping through the Arbor Wilds was warm, even sultry; but the farther they got away from the tropical woodlands, the cooler it would feel.

“Captain,” Cullen continued, turning briskly to his nearest officer and feeling chagrined that he had managed to completely blank on the woman’s name, “escort the Empress, the ambassador, and the
First Enchanter back to our previous campsite. I left a few of our men stationed there; we’ll follow as soon as we’re able.”

“Yes, Commander!”

As their small contingent fled the scene, he turned in time to see a blur of purple and silver burst from the shadows. Leliana had chased a few of her fellow archers back to the base camp and was now firing on the enemy. “Did the others make it to the Temple?” she wanted to know, once he was near enough to speak.

“Last I saw of them, they were heading inside.”

“You look exhausted, Cullen.”

“I can sleep when we’re safe.” He wouldn’t, of course, and he suspected they both knew that; he needed to know for certain that Victoria was alive and well before he would succumb to the lure of sleep.

“See that you do,” she replied, kindly. “But first, let’s get rid of this infestation.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself.” Cullen chuckled.

How long the battle raged, he couldn’t tell. Time hadn’t had much meaning for him since he reached the Wilds, and with his beloved Lady Inquisitor somewhere in the depths of the Temple of Mythal, it held even less. Smoke wound through the trees and obscured some of the light, making it almost impossible to guess the time by the position of the sun. All they could do was continue to fight.

And then something happened that they didn’t anticipate.

Some of the scouts positioned nearest the Temple, ordered to wait and watch for any sign of the Inquisitors, came on the run to report strange sounds and flashes from within its ancient grounds. “A lot of light – some screaming,” said one, “and something that sounded like a massive rush of water. And then we saw him, ser! The Elder One!”

“You saw Corypheus?” Cullen repeated.

“He left the Temple and disappeared into the Wilds!”

This, the commander thought, might explain a few things. Sure, a number of the Venatori and Red Templars lay dead around them, but the onslaught was weakening. If Corypheus had failed in his mystery objective in the Temple, and fled the area, then it would make sense for his loyal minions to be chasing after him. “Anything else?”

“Samson, ser!”

“What about him?”

“Our people are bringing him! As near as we can tell, he tangled with one or both of the Inquisitors and they handed him his arse.” The scout chuckled. “We found him unconscious and bound with magic outside the Temple. One of our mages says they think it’s Lord Dorian’s spell, it has his ‘signature’ – whatever that means, I don’t speak magic.”

“It’s all right, I know what you’re saying. Was there any sign of the Inquisitors or our other people
who went into the Temple?"

The scout shook his head. “Nothing, ser. Far as we can tell, they’re still inside.”

Before Cullen could respond, there was a burst of heat from the far side of the camp, or what remained of the camp, and a flickering that suggested yet another fire had been started. “Get clear of the area,” he told the scouts, drawing his sword and heading in that direction. He could hear cries of pain and fear coming from the depths of the swirling dark smoke, and he wasn’t entirely sure what he was going to find.

Just as quickly, there was a rushing sound, and the wind seemed to gain strength even as a metallic sort of clang rang out again and again and again. He slowed his gait, trying to get a sense of where the fire might be, straining his ears for a sound that suggested nearby friend or enemy. The smoke before him loomed ominously, obstructing his view, but he could almost feel (rather than hear) the sensation of many pairs of feet running, and at least one or two bodies meeting the charred ground.

Leliana joined him, an arrow at the ready. “I saw Fiona,” she reported, “and directed her to get her mages back to the paddock area. We may need to give this up for lost.”

“I just wish we knew what size of a force remains,” he replied. “The scouts said that Corypheus fled the Temple, so at least some of his followers must have given chase. But how many are still here?”

“I don’t –” She broke off, raising her bow. A pair of silhouettes were moving through the smoke, heading in their direction.

“Hold your fire,” he hissed, even as he lifted his sword. More silhouettes could be seen, vaguely gray outlines through the thick air, but the rush and the clang reached his senses again, and three of those silhouettes seemed to fall and not rise again. The pair continued moving, growing larger with each step nearer, and then the smoke parted almost like a curtain to reveal a mage in scout’s garb and a soot-smeared dwarf, wearing almost identically self-satisfied grins.

“If the Red Templars aren’t dead on the ground, they’re on the run,” Varric informed him.

“Not bad for a day’s work,” Bethany added, giving her staff an almost artistic spin in her hands before slotting it into its holster on her back.

[Editor’s note: You know what, Scholar, I take back everything I said. That was pretty good. Maybe not exactly how I’d have done it, but still. Pretty good.]

By the time Cullen rounded up the remaining Inquisition forces to take a head count, figured out who would stay to keep an eye on the Wilds, and arranged for Samson to be transported back to Skyhold to await judgment, night was closing in. They had to wait for morning to make their way to the encampment where he and Leliana could reunite with their fellow advisor.

She had a messenger bird and was impatiently waiting to share its intelligence with them when they arrived. “It seems that what caused Corypheus to abruptly depart was our Inquisitors themselves escaping the Temple,” she reported. “They are already back at Skyhold and urge us to join them as soon as possible.”

“How did they manage that?” asked Leliana, baffled.

“The eluvian which Lady Morrigan theorized was the Elder One’s goal was indeed within the heart
of the Temple. It was not his actual object,” she added, “but the Inquisitors deprived him of what he truly wanted – something called the Well of Sorrows, on which they will brief us more completely when we return – and used the eluvian to escape. From wherever the mirror took them, they were able to reach Skyhold through Lady Morrigan’s own eluvian that she brought to the castle when she joined the Inquisition.”

“And they’re... they’re all right?” Cullen wanted to know.

“The entire party returned safely,” she assured him. “Victoria herself sent the message.”

“Oh. Good.”

“What of our people? And what of... him?” She gestured to where Samson, who had regained consciousness but remained imprisoned by Dorian’s spell, sat in furious silence.

“He will feel the weight of the Inquisitors’ judgment, whatever it is,” Cullen replied. “Our people are largely safe. There were casualties, of course... the great inevitability of war. Some of our scouts remain in the Wilds, and when they report that it’s all clear, we’ll make arrangements to recover their bodies and whatever Inquisition property we can.”

“What of Calpernia?” Leliana wanted to know. “Wasn’t she also in the Temple?”

“The Lady Inquisitor mentions her briefly in the letter,” Josephine explained. “She says only that she had a standoff with Calpernia, who renounced her loyalty to the Elder One. Why she would do that, I do not know, but I’m sure we will hear it at the briefing. In any case, Victoria allowed Calpernia to depart unharmed, and feels confident that she will hinder the Inquisition no longer.”

“Then we’ve got him on the run,” Cullen exulted. “He’s lost his demon army, his dead empress, his prize inside the Temple, and now both of his generals. We’ve stripped him of most of his advantages and reduced the size of his forces.”

“It is a victory,” Leliana hesitantly agreed, “but we cannot celebrate yet. A cornered animal is often the most dangerous. Corypheus may indeed have lost everything now, but that also means that he has nothing left to lose.”

Just as she’d been there to see him off, Victoria was in the lower bailey to welcome Cullen back to Skyhold when he returned. He’d ridden a little way ahead of the rest of the group, but Cole had apparently alerted her to the arrivals. “I’m getting a little tired of adventures,” she remarked, taking Ferdinand’s reins to steady him and allow the rider to dismount. “What do you say we cancel this war and go on an extended picnic instead?”

“I can’t say the idea doesn’t appeal to me,” he replied with a chuckle. “However, you don’t have the best track record for peace and quiet. No offense.”

“None taken. I made the same suggestion to Mahanon and he said that if we tried to go on a picnic, Corypheus would send a horde of fire ants.”

Cullen paused, trying to picture that. “I’m not sure that sounds like something Corypheus would actually do, although it certainly sounds like something Mahanon would say.” Shaking his head, he watched her send the horse away with one of Dennet’s men. “And you’re really all right?”

“A few bumps and bruises, nothing worth mentioning and certainly nothing that elfroot didn’t fix.” She smiled. “I think I’ve drunk so many elfroot potions in the past year that I’m actually starting to like the taste.”
“Is that why you pick so much of it when you’re out in the world?” he teased.

“My feelings about elfroot are classified, serah.” She turned to greet Varric and Bethany, who had dismounted their own horse and come to join them. “Well, Bethany, we did promise you adventure when you came. Are you two all right?”

“None the worse for wear, Eyebrows, don’t worry,” Varric assured her. “Everybody else get back all right?”

“Yes. I think you’ll be glad you missed the Temple, on the whole. It was very...” She paused, searching for just the right word, then shrugged as though giving up. “Confusing.”

“We’ll have to go over it later so I can make notes,” said the author.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go sleep on a proper bed for at least twenty minutes,” said Bethany with a yawning laugh. “I’m very glad everyone’s all right.”

“Cul, when you have a moment,” said Victoria, giving the mage a nod, “Madam Vivienne would like to speak with you. She needs to mark something on one of your maps for me.”

“She already did,” he replied, walking with her to the steps leading up into the keep. “Last night, in the camp on the way back here. A snowy wyvern? Is that wise?”

“She is the court enchanter. It sounds like it’s important.” She shrugged. “All I know is what she told me and I promised I would try.”

“Not Mahanon?”

“I originally planned to leave the task to ‘Hunter,’ I admit,” she acknowledged. “But I want him to stay close to home for a day or two, and this needs to be done as quickly as possible. He...” She flinched. “He did something in the Temple with which I’m still not entirely comfortable, and I just think I came out of the whole thing in better shape than him. I’m sure he’s fine, on the whole, but it’s weird to me. We’ll explain everything when we brief the council.”

“How soon would you like to do that?” Cullen asked. The days of barely sleeping were starting to make themselves known to him, and a distinct heaviness was settling into his shoulders.

“Later. You need to rest first, and I intend to see that you do.”

“My Lady Inquisitor is a harsh mistress,” he noted, amused.

“You can say that again,” said a new voice. Mahanon joined them as they crossed the threshold into the castle hall, and followed them as they continued their trek to Cullen’s office. “I assume, ma da’vhenan, that you’ve informed our big scary commander that I’m to be confined within Skyhold’s walls?”

“Something like that. I haven’t explained why, yet; I want him to get a few hours of sleep before we tell the whole story.” Victoria chuckled, then sobered. “You brought Samson back with you, Cullen?”

He nodded grimly. “I gave instruction for him to be taken straight to the dungeon when he arrived – I rode only a little way ahead, he should be there by now. When you’re both ready, you can sit in judgment.”
Chapter Summary

Leliana reads her mail.

Chapter Forty-Five: Fire Is Her Water

[Editor’s note: This chapter might end up being a little on the short side. It’s Scholar’s first time trying to show the Nightingale’s point of view, and neither she nor I are entirely comfortable with it. But with all the letters that our spymaster had waiting for her after the adventures in the Arbor Wilds, there was really no one else whose point of view would make sense for this part of the story. Bear with us, please.]

Leliana found, upon her return to Skyhold, that she was somewhat deluged with correspondence.

This wasn’t exactly shocking, of course. It was part and parcel of her trade, messages coming and going all day long – intelligence, hints, clues, coding and decoding. But she hadn’t been entirely prepared for some of it at all.

The first item to which she turned her attention was a response to her efforts to contact the Heroes of Ferelden. Thanks to Morrigan’s tip, Sister Rejeanne had been able to reach out to the wandering Darrian and Elissa, and the response was... bulky, actually.

Sister Leliana,

The Heroes of Ferelden made contact; they left a letter for you, and one to deliver to the Inquisitors, and another to be delivered privately. They also send goods from their travels that might be of use. We have included them in this missive.

Yours in service,

Sister Rejeanne

The goods in question were a pair of belts, with silver griffon buckles. Mildly amused, Leliana picked up her letter and perused it.

My dear friend Leliana,

Darrian undertakes to write to the Inquisitors while I pen this to you. I’m sure you have already told them why we are out in the world as we are, but something tells me he will reiterate it all the same. You know how he is sometimes.

If our own mission were less urgent, we would come and assist you. But of course, if our own mission were less urgent, I would never have left Ferelden.

I don’t know what will come. Your war on the Elder One, our war on the Calling... there is
something about all of it which feels strangely final. Maker willing, it will be final only in the best possible way. I keep you and your Inquisition in my prayers daily, as always.

A small rumor has reached my ears, meanwhile, that you and Lady Pentaghast are being considered as possible successors to Divine Justinia. I know how important she was to you, and also how humble you are when it comes to matters of faith. If this is the path which you decide to take, my friend, know that Alistair and I will support you.

Lest Darrian forget to mention it in his own letters, we enclose a pair of belts for the Inquisitors, or for whomever they feel may best benefit from their use. They each bear a fairly rare enchantment which will boost the wearer’s health, making them less vulnerable in battle. I’m only sorry that we have no means to send anything greater without weighing down your runners excessively.

I must conclude so that we may send our letters together. Darrian is also sending something for Morrigan and Kieran. Andraste guide you, dear Leli.

Ever your friend,

Elissa Theirin, Queen of Ferelden

Smiling, a little sadly, Leliana shook her head and set aside the letter. She had a locked box where she kept all of her messages from the Queen, and this would join them before long. First, though, she turned her attention to the other letters in the bundle. The one for Morrigan was sealed; Darrian had apparently grown a bit more circumspect in the years since the Blight. She chuckled quietly to herself, recalling his less than discreet visits to Morrigan’s tent in their campsite. No, she would leave that message unopened.

The letter for the Inquisitors, however, had no such restrictions on it and she felt sure that she could read it without infringing on anyone’s privacy.

To Their Worships, Inquisitor Trevelyan and Inquisitor Lavellan:

I write on behalf of myself and Warden-Commander Cousland, having received the message from our dear friend Leliana with regards to the Inquisition’s undertaking against Corypheus. We wish that we had helpful information regarding him, but due to our own limited training during the Blight, we know less of ancient darkspawn lore than do most Wardens.

We are engaged in a search of our own. As Leliana may have told you, all Grey Wardens who do not fall in battle eventually fall to something known as the Calling, a magic that preys upon our connection to the Blight and the darkspawn. Rather than such foul magic eventually leading to my death or Queen Elissa’s, I have determined to find a way to negate this Calling and save all Wardens from its effects.

Elissa accompanies me with some regret. Rest assured that if she could, she would help your Inquisition more personally, because we agree that the danger of Corypheus and the Breach approaches the threat of even another Blight. Regardless, she agrees with me that we must uncover a cure for the Calling if ever she wishes to see her king again. She begs you to keep Ferelden safe until she can return to his side; she tries to keep it from me, but I know that her thoughts are with Alistair at most every moment. For her sake, even more than for my own, I hope to conclude our mission very soon.

I have also included a note of a personal nature for Lady Morrigan and Kieran. Please, take care of my family. Morrigan is stronger and wiser than anyone else I have met, and I would not go
through such effort to escape my own Calling to lose them to your Inquisition.

As we have little useful information to offer, please accept the accompanying gifts instead. If, in our quest, we find anything that may be of use to you in your fight against Corypheus, we will send it to you immediately.

Yours,

Darrian Tabris, Grey Warden of Ferelden

As she lowered the parchment, Leliana found herself wondering where ten years had gone. She hadn’t quite known what to make of the Wardens when she met them, any of them. Alistair was bluff and kindly, endearingly awkward, a little puppyish in some ways. His infatuation with Elissa became increasingly difficult to hide, much to everyone else’s amusement. She was everything to be expected of a proper lady of the court, but also fearless and fierce, trying to hide her shattered heart beneath a veneer of duty and determination. And Darrian had kept his secrets, not showing regret for the past he’d been forced to abandon. He preferred to worry about Elissa, to lend his strength to the daughter of the murdered teyrn; it was many months before Leliana had known anything of his disastrous almost-wedding. That it had been Morrigan who ultimately came to have his heart was a shock, though not as much as the fact that she had given hers in return.

Leliana chuckled softly. Ten years. How much had they all changed? Wynne was gone, of course, though her mage son and his Templar sweetheart now worked as distant agents of the Inquisition. Oghren had married and had a child before turning Warden. Shale... she hadn’t heard from Shale since Wynne’s passing, but she was likely still searching for a way to become a dwarf again. Zevran was still Zevran, with the occasional note. Darrian and Morrigan were parents. Alistair was King, Elissa his Queen. And she…

She was what she was. What Marjolaine, what Elissa, what Justinia had all made her. She liked to think that Marjolaine’s influence was long gone, but she knew it wasn’t true. In her heart, Leliana saw her old mentor and lover mocking her over her every kill. Elissa’s effects on her had been gentler, kinder, and these were the ones which had faded most as she served as the Left Hand. There was, she sometimes thought (or perhaps hoped), a little of Elissa in Victoria. In a way, she was almost counting on that comparison to be true and not something of her own imaginings; Elissa was too far away to help her now.

She went for a walk to the courtyard. It wasn’t a place she went often; the spymaster preferred to remain in the shadows, and the courtyard was always filled with sunlight. Leliana was surprised that Morrigan had chosen it for her usual spot, but on balance it was reasonable to think that this might be more for Kieran’s benefit than her own.

“Hello,” he said, seeing Leliana’s approach. He bore a strong resemblance to his mother, though there were traces of his father in the boy as well, and a double-headed griffon emblem gleamed on his chest. “You’re Leliana, I know you by your hair. Mother told me you might come to see us.”

“I knew your mother a long time ago,” she replied, amused. “And you’re Kieran, yes?”

“I am.” He brightened suddenly. “Mother said you were writing to Father. Did he write back?”

“He did, and he sent a letter for you and your mother. Where is she?”

“She’s – oh, there she is.” Kieran turned, and pointed at a raven sitting on the edge of the well. It uttered a sort of exasperated caw and flew toward them, morphing back into Morrigan’s usual form.
as it approached.

“Some things never change, I see,” said Leliana.

“Indeed, they do not. What brings you into the gardens, then, spymaster?”

“I’ve a letter for you from Darrian. He and Elissa sent word to the Inquisitors that they’re unable to help with the fight against Corypheus, as they’re too far away, but they offered what assistance they could.” In truth, Leliana hadn’t really thought they’d be able to do very much. “He meanwhile sent this for you and Kieran.” She handed over the sealed envelope bearing Morrigan’s name. “I’m sure it bears a greeting for you from Elissa too.”

“Very likely.” Morrigan almost smiled. “And the seal is intact, I see. ‘Tis always reassuring to know that one’s privacy will be respected, even if it comes as a surprise.”

“You do not trust me still, after all these years?”

“Practicality, nothing more. The fewer persons one trusts, the less likely one is to be betrayed. I trust only two individuals in all things, and that has served me well.” After a pause, she relented slightly. “That said, I was reasonably certain I could depend on your sense of what is proper in this matter.”

In spite of herself, Leliana chuckled. “You know, I’ve sort of missed you, Morrigan.”

“How very fortunate for me, then, that the spymaster’s aim is terrible.”

Back in the rookery, Leliana turned her attention to the remaining letters. A status report from Charter at Caer Bronach was swiftly answered, as was a request from Baron Desjardins for more supplies for the people of Sahrmia. But the final message in the pile sent her reeling.

To my dear Leliana,

If this letter finds you, then I have gone to the Maker’s side, and my faithful Left and Right Hands must carry on my work without me. I cannot foretell who will take my place, or if you and Cassandra will continue in her service.

Whether you do or not, however, I implore you to return to Valence. I have secreted a final gift for you there, in the halls of that Chantry where you and I both knew such peace. It is vital that you retrieve this item, as it is for you and you alone.

May Andraste guide your steps, now and always.

Justinia

For a few minutes, all she could do was hold the letter, reading it over and over. She was perched on her chair in an almost birdlike manner, and her skin prickled as though her every extremity had gone to sleep.

A letter from Justinia. Now, all these long months since her death - Maker, it was nearly an entire year - this letter had at last found its way into her hands. From where had she sent it? To whom had she entrusted the duty? And what could possibly be hidden in Valence that was so important for her to collect?
She would go, of course. That was hardly in doubt. But it would attract attention. She and Cassandra were the chief contenders for the role of Justinia’s successor, after all. (Not her replacement, for no one could replace her, but one or the other of them would likely inherit her role and take it farther.) Leliana hadn’t discussed it with Cassandra as yet; but, knowing her friend as she did, she thought it improbable at best that the Right Hand would be comfortable with the post.

Would she, though? Could she do it?

Possibly. Yes, on the whole, it was entirely possible.

She needed more time to consider it, however, and with the threat of Corypheus looming over Skyhold still, time was not a luxury she had. Nor did she have the benefit of counsel, not really. Josephine was dear to her, and an excellent consultant for many subjects, but she was no Chantry sister. Cullen, too, had earned a place (if a somewhat snarky and teasing one) in her affections, and he understood the ways of the Chantry better than Josie might - but he was scarred, damaged by his experiences. She remembered too well the terrified young recruit she and the Heroes of Ferelden had found in the Fereldan Circle, imprisoned by a magic barrier and tormented by demons. He had grown since then, of course, and in spite of what he had seen his faith was intact; still, there would be limits to how much he could help her in this.

*I need Elissa,* she mused, with the tiniest of smiles. *Her unshakable compass would guide me.* But Elissa was far to the west, in lands unknown, beyond even Leliana’s reach.

The closest thing she had was sitting downstairs on a throne.

Leliana didn’t usually attend the judgments. There wasn’t a need; her scouts kept her informed of what passed, and the Inquisitors had enough strength between them to make even the most difficult of decisions look easy. But she went to observe the sentencing of Samson.

Cullen, rather than Josephine, was overseeing the matter. She couldn’t blame him; Samson’s betrayal of the Templar order was a very personal thing, after all. Indeed, as the hearing continued, it seemed more like Samson and Cullen were arguing between themselves than paying heed to either Inquisitor. Perhaps this was the reason they chose to assign him as they did - an informant for the Inquisition, with Cullen as his handler and interrogator.

To some extent, Leliana didn’t entirely care. As long as justice was meted appropriately, that was what mattered. Samson would never be able to hurt anyone again. In truth, to judge by the tired sag in his face, he had no desire to do much of anything anymore. Cullen would deal with him; her objective was the Lady Inquisitor. “When you have time,” she said, “I would appreciate it if you would pay me a short visit in the rookery. I need to speak with you about something.”

It caused her no astonishment when Victoria appeared less than half an hour later, looking just a little bit anxious. By that time Leliana had resumed her seat, folded her hands with her elbows propped on the table, still turning over Justinia’s words in her mind. When Victoria approached, she nodded at the paper. “A message from Divine Justinia,” she said quietly.

“That’s a shock,” said Victoria. “Are you all right reading it?”

“That is a shock,” she agreed. “Thank you for the concern, Inquisitor, but I am.” She looked at the paper, now folded to obscure its words from curious eyes. “This letter was written months, perhaps years ago, to be delivered to me if she died. I’ve heard of such contingency plans,” she added, thoughtfully. “A sudden death often leaves many loose ends.”
She glanced up at Victoria’s young face. There was something about the Lady Inquisitor which suddenly reminded Leliana not of Elissa, but of herself, many years ago. It was more to do with appearance than personality, but the resemblance both warmed and chilled her as she considered it. “I am to go to Valence,” she said, “a small village on the Waking Sea. There is something hidden there.”

“Do you know what you’re looking for?” Victoria asked.

Leliana shrugged. “I imagine it’s something which would very likely benefit the Inquisition, and must be kept from falling into the wrong hands. If I’m lucky, she will have instructions for me.”

“Well... I’ll help in whatever way I can.”

“Wonderful.” Leliana stood. “I was hoping you would agree to come with me to Valence.”

That the Lady Inquisitor was startled by the request was obvious. “It’s not that I’m unwilling,” she said after a moment, “but I must make a trip to the Exalted Plains for Vivienne first. I gave my word.”

“Could Mahanon not do it in your place?”

“I wanted him to remain here and rest.” Victoria looked thoughtful. “But he would be the better choice, if he’s in good enough health. Let me discuss it with him and Cassandra, and possibly Solas. If they agree that he’s well enough to go, I’ve no doubt he’s willing, and then I’ll be free to accompany you to Valence.”

“I must leave quickly - by tomorrow at the latest,” Leliana said, “but if you can meet me there... try not to delay, please. If what is hidden there is as valuable as I think, we’re not going to be the only ones looking for it.”

“I’ll join you as soon as I possibly can.”
Great Were the Lamentations

Chapter Summary

Sera fights with Mahanon over elfy things. And feels bad. But Dorian sets a good example.

Chapter Notes

Sera's probably my least favorite Inquisition member, I admit it. So I wasn't sure how I'd do, writing from her viewpoint. But I think it worked out okay. Varric gave it a thumbs up, anyway.

Chapter Forty-Six: Great Were the Lamentations

Sera wanted to laugh about it, but she really couldn’t. Maybe if things had gone differently, it’d be as hilarious as she wanted it to be. Instead, she had to be worried instead of laughing, and she didn’t appreciate that in the slightest.

Mahanon wandered up to her room above the tavern, as he did regularly, and normally that was all right. He wasn’t a stuffy noble like Her Gracious Ladybits; she could actually have fun with him. (All right, so Her Gracious Ladybits wasn’t that stuffy. If she were, Mahanon wouldn’t be so attached to her. That counted for something.) But she was prepared for his arrival this time.

“Oh, hi, yeah? Listen, stand there. Right there.” He did, looking just shy of baffled, and his green eyes widened when she pointed an arrow at his face. “Now,” she continued, “about Mythal.”

“Sera,” he said after a pause, “I don’t know what reaction you want, but can this be it so we can be done?”

“Hmph.” She lowered her bow. “All right, so maybe it’s still you. Someone needed to do something.” Seeing him blink, she scowled. “You went wading into a ‘Well of Sorrows.’ Who hears that and thinks, ‘Well, dunk a butt, let’s have a go!’? I mean, even mad old Abelas said the elves destroyed themselves!” Setting her weapons aside, she muttered, “Only believable bit in a sea of clear demon bait. It makes messing with their relics real stupid.”

Someone had told her - Dorian, maybe - that Victoria had lit into Mahanon when they got back to Skyhold, after he’d made them all run through the mirror thing. Sera had hated that mirror business with every fiber of her being, so she was glad to hear that someone had yelled at him. Victoria probably hadn’t done a very good job of it, though. She was too soft.

“So,” she continued, a bit more cheerfully, “test done. You’re still you. We can leave these lies behind.”

“You thought aiming an arrow in my face was a good test?” His eyebrows did their funny arch
thing like they did when he couldn’t quite decide if something was a joke or not.

“I heard once that if you’re possessed, the demon will defend itself against attack,” she explained. She hesitated. “Sounds stupid to say it out loud. I don’t know! I don’t know demons, but at least if it’s true, the arrow’s right there.”

He kept looking at her with those weird eyes of his, green like the mark on his hand, and she had to avert her gaze. “I’m sorry, yeah? Morrigan’s probably got better ways, but who can trust her?”

Mahanon shook his head, looking annoyed. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“Fine, all right.” Ew, this felt almost weepy. “Sorry I don’t know how to deal with rubbish no one was meant to.”

This didn’t seem to help. “You seem pretty certain. You don’t believe anything from Mythal?”

Oh, frig, he was going elfy.

The High and Mighties were setting off in different directions again. Victoria had promised Vivi that she’d hunt down some leathery beast in a swamp or something, but suddenly Leliana had taken off for a little port city in Orlais and she wanted Lady Inquisitor to follow her. So Mahanon was going to go hunting instead. He seemed mostly happy about it, wanting to get out of the castle. All the plans were laid out over breakfast the day after Sera’s fight with Mahanon.

Dorian would go sparkling off to Orlais with Victoria, because that’s what he liked to do, while Bull would pick up his greataxe and traipse away with Mahanon. Sera was pretty sure she’d heard them ‘saying goodbye’ that morning, which was not something she really wanted to try to imagine - the sounds were bad enough. Anyway, of course Cassandra wanted to go with Mahanon, and Solas decided he needed to tag along to make sure he didn’t do anything else stupid and dangerous.

“Well, if nobody minds, I think I’ll stay here,” said Varric. “Valence sounds nice, it would be good to walk on a proper city street again, but if I don’t get cracking on the research for this Orlesian thriller, the Iron Lady might light a literal fire under my ass.”

“A colorful notion, Varric darling,” Vivi replied, “but you know I wouldn’t do such a thing. However, if the idea keeps you at work, then by all means continue to believe it. I trust that the Duchess will be similarly inclined?”

“Something like that. She’s got a nasty streak as wide as the Elfsblood River.”

“I can hardly wait to see for myself.” She nodded approvingly. “Bethany, dear, do make sure he remembers to give me a mask inlaid with opals.”

“I’m taking my proofreading assignment very seriously, Madam de Fer. I’ll see to it.” Sera still didn’t know what to make of Varric’s pet mage, but she was easy enough on the eyes, if you could get past the magic bits. And at least she had enough sense to keep her magic bits out of sight most of the time. Besides, it was sort of hard to hate somebody who oozed niceness out of every pore. Bit annoying, really; still, anybody who was friendly to the girls who did the laundry was all right in Sera’s book, and she’d seen for herself that Bethany was. As a bonus, ever since she’d come to Skyhold, Varric had stopped talking so much about the rest of his Kirkwall people all the time.

[Editor's note: You’d think I talked about them nonstop the way Buttercup used to complain. I’m pretty sure I didn’t mention any of them more than once a day, and that’s a generous estimate. Of
course, she also used to get annoyed with me for not being more of a dwarfy dwarf, so I don’t know what to tell you. Meanwhile, I’m going to see what Sunshine thinks about being called “Varric’s pet mage.” ]

Sera suddenly realized that Mahanon hadn’t invited her to come with him. Usually he did, of course, and they spent the ride to wherever they were headed throwing funny bits back and forth to each other. But he was still mad at her for not being elfy enough, or smart enough to get what happened in Mythal. Probably he wasn’t too happy about the arrow test either, but she could understand not liking a pointy thing in your face. The other parts she didn’t understand.

“Sera.”

It was Victoria speaking. “Yeah?”

“Would you like to come to Valence? I have to go to the Chantry with Leliana by myself, but Blackwall’s going to be accompanying Dorian and me for the trip, and you two are good company for each other.”

Sera frowned. This sounded suspiciously like pity, and she hated pity. But she did like getting to spend time with Blackwall, even if he wasn’t really Blackwall after all (that whole thing was confusing), and she liked Dorian even though he was a mage and also a noble, two things she didn’t like. Besides, she didn’t want to sit around the castle waiting for people to come back. Maybe there’d be a bandit raid or something that she could pepper with arrows. “Yeah, all right.”

Varric had claimed a table in the tavern instead of his usual spot by the great hall’s fireplace. He was there when Sera came down from her room, and had papers spread all over the place; Bethany seemed to be trying to sort them into piles that could be understood. The demon was there too, and she ignored him as she went to grab a drink before heading to the stable. Their conversation, however, reached her ears as she started for the door.

“Hey, Kid, what would a pride demon say to weaken a warrior’s resolve?” Varric was asking. “I need something that gets under her skin.”

“Her?” Bethany repeated. “Wait, who’s this?”

“New character. Somebody Athras is assigning to protect Lady Elizabeth,” he explained. “Got anything for me, Cole?”

“Does she use a big sword, or a sword and shield?”

“One of the big two-handers, like Lady Inquisitor’s. This character’s based on her a little bit.”

“Oh. ‘The next time you imagine him touching you, someone you love will die.’”

Varric and Bethany exchanged glances. “Well, that went a little dark,” said the dwarf. “Who’s ‘him’ in this?”

“She knows who he is.” The thing was sitting under the table. “Does that not work for your book?”

“No, it works great. Just glad you’re not that kind of demon.”

Sera rolled her eyes. Well, if Varric wanted to take writing advice from it, that was his problem. She gave them a half-hearted wave and went to find Her Gracious Ladybits, maybe tell her that Varric was putting her into a book.
Nah, not hers to tell.

Valence was on the far side of the Waking Sea, so they set off on horseback to a port due north of Skyhold. Sera hadn’t been on a boat in some time; it interested her to smell the water again, feel the waves smacking the sides of the ship. The Waking Sea was narrower in Orlais than in Ferelden, which helped, and the captain assured Lady Inquisitor that he’d have them in Valence’s port by sundown the next day. “It is an honor to assist the Left Hand of Andraste,” he said, and she smiled and thanked him and well, at least one of the big hats could be counted on not to go all elfy, Sera thought.

The ride there seemed to take forever, but maybe that was because none of them really knew what they were going to be doing there anyway. Even Victoria, who was going at Leliana’s request, didn’t know how to explain exactly what was happening. “All I know is that she received a summons to come here and find something that Divine Justinia left for her,” she said, “and she believes it will be something valuable enough that other people will want it.”

“Are you sure you should be going inside by yourself?” Dorian wanted to know. “It will be hard for us to protect either of you from outside.”

“I know, but if you take up position outside the cloister, you can watch for anyone else trying to get in there,” she replied. “I’m armed; I’d be surprised if Leliana wasn’t armed as well. We should be all right.”

“What is the significance of going to Valence?” asked Blackwall. He was starting to get his voice back, Sera thought; some of them probably still didn’t like him too much, but he was getting better about talking in front of the others.

“Well, Divine Justinia used to be Revered Mother Dorothea, and I believe this is the Chantry where she used to serve,” said Victoria. “Leliana spent time there when she was a young novice, maybe that’s how they first met. More than that, I have no idea.”

Valence was pretty in places, sort of like Leliana. They left the dock and walked quietly through the darkening streets; the sun was setting and one of the moons was rising, so seeing wasn’t too hard yet, but it would be before too much longer. A few moments later, they were staring up at a tidy little white stone Chantry. “Smaller than some I’ve seen,” Sera remarked. “Kind of like that. Like the Chantry here hasn’t gotten too big for itself yet.”

“Well... wish me luck,” said Victoria. “Hopefully this won’t take very long.” With a nod and a slightly worried smile, she entered the Chantry, leaving the other three looking at each other in the growing twilight.

They were quiet for a time, which bothered Sera; she didn’t want to be quiet. Quiet was dull, and unnerving. Frig. She looked at the two men. Blackwall was leaning against the wall, arms folded, eyes partially closed, but she wasn’t fooled - she’d seen him do that many times. He played oblivious to the rest of the world so they wouldn’t know he was watching. Dorian, meanwhile, was pacing up and down, occasionally conjuring a little ball of fire and playing with it before sending it away again.

“You two are killing me,” she complained finally. “Could somebody please talk? It’s too quiet!”

“Very well,” said Dorian, before Blackwall could open his mouth. “I’ve been thinking.”

Blackwall groaned. “This should be good.”
“I was about to say,” said the mage, “that you’ve been too hard on yourself, Blackwall.”

Blackwall and Sera both looked at him in surprise. “Too hard on myself?” the un-Warden repeated. “Is this setting up a punchline?”

“You’re not the thug I thought you were,” Dorian continued. “You’re not the thug anyone thought you were.”

Blackwall nodded at Sera. “Here it comes.”

Dorian huffed. “My point is, you should let yourself off the hook. I know bad men, and you’re not one.”

This was nothing like what Sera had expected Dorian to say, and it was clearly not like anything Blackwall had expected either. He did that soundless gaping thing, like a nug trying to catch its breath or something. “I’m not sure how to respond,” he said finally.

“Of course not.” Dorian smirked. “Let’s not go crazy with defying expectations.”

They fell silent again for a time - Blackwall apparently digesting Dorian’s remarks, Dorian pulling out a small book and occupying himself with it. Sera did about nine cartwheels on the empty street before she got too dizzy to keep going. After a little while, though, Dorian (who had apparently been thinking about something he’d said a few months ago) put down his book and picked up the conversation. “I imagine I hit a nerve with the whole ‘murderer Grey Warden’ business.”

Blackwall looked up, one eyebrow lifted. “Are you speaking to me?”

“Well, I don’t think he’s talking to me, now, is he?” Sera retorted.

“Yes, you. Blackwall, or whatever your name is.”

“Blackwall will do.” He shrugged. “What about it?”

“I’m just saying, I understand wanting to atone for one’s actions.”

“Is that so?”

“Enough to know when I’ve stepped in it. So... I apologize.”

Blackwall was stunned speechless for the second time in less than ten minutes. Sera was trying desperately to come up with something funny to say about that, and she was almost sorry that Varric hadn’t come along because he would have managed it. [Editor’s note: Are you trying to butter me up for something?] She watched him walk down the street, stumbling just a little bit like he’d had a taste of dwarven ale or something. While he did that, the Chantry doors opened, and a young Sister - couldn’t have been much older than Lady Inquisitor - came running out looking like the Maker Himself was chasing her. Sera guessed they were probably almost done with their errand, if that was the case.

Finally, though, he came back and looked at Dorian. “You didn’t have to apologize to me.”

“People who say that to me are usually wrong,” Dorian replied airily.

“I am a murderer. And I escaped my past to become a Warden, like many others before me.”

“Obviously the original Blackwall saw something in you. I respect that.” Dorian shrugged. “Obviously our dear Lady Inquisitor sees something in you as well. I respect that even more.”
“And you... you abandoned your life of privilege,” Blackwall mumbled. “For the sake of principle alone.”

“I didn't like that life.”

“It was wrong of me to lump you in with peers you hardly resemble.” The un-Warden shook his head.

Dorian gave him an odd smile, and - to Sera’s amusement - offered a hand. “Truce?”

“Gladly.” They shook.

“Oh, look at you two,” said a new voice, and Sera turned to see Victoria standing in the doorway. She was watching Blackwall and Dorian with a smile on her face. “Finally burying the hatchet. I’m so proud.”

Back in Skyhold, Sera went to the kitchen. Frigging Lady Emmald and her frigging cookies. She didn’t know what she was doing, she just wanted to try to make things all right again.

They were awful. She was sure of it. But they were all she had. Once they were done and the horrid little raisins were staring up at her like half-melted bug eyes, she tucked them into a basket and went to find the Inquisitors. Mahanon had gotten Vivi her lizard gizzard, or whatever it was she wanted, and they weren’t staying long - she wanted them to go with her to wherever she was going. But one of the scouts told her that first, they were delivering their reports to Cully-Wully.

She lingered outside the door, listening as they spoke. Apparently they’d already told him what they needed him to know, and instead they were listening to him now. He was ranting about Samson. Sera decided that she couldn’t blame him for that; Cully was uptight, sure, but he was one of the good guys. Samson could have been like him but instead he did stupid things. “My sympathy,” Cullen told the Inquisitors, “is for those he betrayed. It will extend no farther.”

“You’re letting Samson get to you,” said Mahanon.

“And what if I am?” Cullen asked, but he sighed. “The red Templars needed to be torn down. We’ve broken Corypheus’s army. I might have known some of them.” He paused, and she could see him rubbing the back of his neck. “If my life had gone differently, I might have been one of them.” He shook his head. “Do either of you ever wonder what would have happened if you had not been at the Conclave? If you’d never become the Inquisitors?”

“A life without the two of you?” Victoria replied, looking from one to the other. “Never.” And then they all laughed, because of course they did, because the leaders of the Inquisition were a bunch of soppy saps - but frig if they didn’t love each other.

The Quizzies came out, then, before she was ready for them, and she almost dropped the basket. Mahanon raised an eyebrow. “Sera?”

“Hey, you two. You have time? It’s not a question, let’s go,” she blurted.

“Go? Go where?”

Frig, he was still all elfy mad. “Look, I’m sorry about the - about the stuff. I want to make it right, got something I want to do for you. Just come, you won’t need your gear.” She glanced at Victoria. “You come too.”
“Er - if you like.” Her Gracious Ladybits looked a bit puzzled, but she nodded, and nudged Mahanon.

“Oh, all right.” He sighed. “Just... no more talk about Mythal, okay? Agree to disagree?”

“Sure, we’ll go with that, I guess. Come on.”

She led them through the upper part of the tavern, ignoring Cole, and down to her room. “We’re climbing on the roof?” asked Victoria.

“Yes. Out here. Look, I made these.” They sat down and she passed them the basket of cookies.

“We’re eating on a roof,” said Mahanon.

“They’re horrible, right?” Sera laughed, plucking a cookie for herself and watching as they did likewise. “And raisins! Ugh! I frigging still hate cookies!”

“The cookies are fine, Sera,” Victoria said, in that way she had when she was lying through her teeth to be nice. “But what’s this all about?”

“All right, it’s like this.” She started breaking up her cookie and tossing little pieces to the birds down below so she wouldn’t have to look at them. “I got caught stealing when I was little, yeah? You get alienage or worse for that, but the Lady Emmald took me in. She was sick and couldn’t have children, I had no parents, it worked out. Anyway, she gets a year sicker, so I ask her about cookies. Because mums make cookies, and I can pass that down, or something.” Frig, this felt teary again. Stop it. Get angry instead. “Turns out, she couldn’t cook. She missed that talk with her mum. The ones she ‘made’ she bought and pretended. Aw, right? Well, no, she was a bitch. She hid buying them by keeping me away from the baker. She did that by lying that he didn't like me, didn't like elves. She let me hate so she could protect her pride. I hated him so much, and I hated…”

“...you hated being an elf,” said Mahanon, slowly. “I think I understand now.”

He sounded like he did, anyway. “Well, she died, and I hate pride. Pride cookies. But this - this is great, and you're great, and I felt bad, so I thought... maybe, me and you and you could make some, I don't know, ‘us’ cookies? Because then I could like them again? Ugh, it's stupid.”

“You know what?” said Victoria, after a short pause. “That would be great. But, uh, no raisins next time, okay?”

“Wait, really? Because it seemed frigging daft every step to me.” Sera chuckled, and sighed. “Suppose it's not really about them. I hate learning lessons, makes my stomach hurt. But making cookies... it’s like family, yeah?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it's like family.” Mahanon poked her in the shoulder, gently. “We’ll make cookies sometime soon. Can we get off the roof now?”

“Oh, yes, please! Smells like bird and dank.” She laughed. “This part, not a good idea. Thanks, yeah?”

“Sera, anytime.”
Chapter Summary

Mahanon follows Morrigan through the eluvian in search of her son. He finds himself face to face with his goddess.

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Varric's writer, Mary Kirby, who arranged for me to have my copy of 'Hard in Hightown' autographed by Varric himself. And yes, he addressed the autograph to "Scholar." (I'm being completely serious here. Look at the TV Tropes page for this story, it's on the Trivia page.)

Chapter Forty-Seven: Into the Dream They Strode

Mahanon’s emotions were jumbled as he returned to Skyhold. On the one hand, he was glad to have made peace with Sera, and to have gotten the white wyvern heart that Vivienne needed so desperately. On the other hand, however, it had been more than a little disheartening to discover the reason why she had needed it, and to watch as she administered the theoretically life-saving potion to her beloved Bastien only to lose him anyway. They had, according to what she had once told Victoria, been together for many years. She had even been good friends with his wife, who had apparently known about and didn’t mind their relationship.

(He had a little trouble wrapping his head around that, but shemlen nobles tended to do things in very odd ways. Even Victoria had her quirks, after all. Anyway, he didn’t really need to understand it; he just needed to respect it, which he did.)

They reported, briefly, to the council; Morrigan was present, as she always was these days. She made no comment on their recent adventure, but before they parted, she did ask that they come and speak with her when they had a moment. Mahanon shrugged it off, following Victoria back to their quarters.

He felt strange. Tired, in a way that he didn’t recognize, and not the sort of tired which could be alleviated through proper rest. Nothing ached, except perhaps his heart, and there was no ill feeling, just a deep weariness he couldn’t describe. Apparently it was visible on his features, because his counterpart was watching him as they started shedding their armor. “What is it, Nonny? You don’t look well.”

“And I don’t feel it, ma da’vhenan. I don’t know why. I’m not sick, I’m just...” He gestured vaguely. “Lathbora viran.”
She shook her head. “You never taught me that one.”

“I know. It’s hard to give its exact meaning, but basically it means I feel a want I can’t explain. I want something and I don’t know what it is,” he replied. “Possibly it’s something I can’t ever have. That’s not even the right way to describe it, but I honestly don’t have better words.”

Victoria hesitated. “Do you think... it’s something to do with the Well?”

Mahanon paused in the midst of removing his blades, and looked at her. “I don’t know. Maybe. That might explain why I don’t know what it is.”

“I have an idea,” she said, gently. “You’ve barely gotten to see Cassandra since you came back from the Exalted Plains. She’s probably just what you need right about now. Go down and cut her an embrium from the herb garden, like you used to do, and have a bit of time alone. I’ll look over these letters that have been piling up for the last few days, and if there’s something that requires your attention, we’ll review it later.”

“Ma serannas, ma falon.”

It really was a very good idea, Mahanon thought, making his way through the great hall. He waved at Varric and said hello to Gatsi while opening the door leading out to the courtyard, nodding at various individuals who saluted as he passed. But as soon as he stepped into the sunshine, he knew something was wrong.

Exactly what it was, at first, eluded him. The air was temperate and only faintly breezy; from his vantage point near the herb pots, it was deceptively easy to forget that the Frostback Mountains lay immediately outside of the castle walls. No one appeared particularly distressed. The gazebo was empty, no chess game in progress, but Morrigan and her little boy weren’t in their usual spots near the structure. He moved in that direction and suddenly understood the source of the strangeness - the door to the unused storage room, the one where Morrigan kept her eluvian away from prying eyes, was standing wide open.

As he reached the threshold of the room, it became very clear that something, indeed, was incredibly wrong. The eluvian was normally dull and quiet, a simple mirror like any other. But now it had been activated, its almost blinding reflection alight with intense power. Leliana stood there in its glow, her expression perplexed and frightened, though this abated somewhat as she turned to see him.

“Inquisitor, thank the Maker!” she exclaimed. “Morrigan chased after her son into the eluvian, she was terrified!”

“What? Why is the eluvian open?”

“It was open when I arrived.” She shrugged helplessly. “Morrigan said only that Kieran did it, and then she ran into the mirror. I have never seen Morrigan like that!” Dimly, Mahanon remembered that the two women had known each other many years earlier.

“When did this happen?” he asked, looking at the glass that was no longer glass.

“I found her here only moments ago. Please, you must go after her! I will go and find help.”

“Victoria is in our quarters,” he told her. “Bring her here, and stand ready. I don’t know if anything can come out of the eluvian while we’re in it, but best be prepared for anything.” With that, and feeling a strange pull that he couldn’t define, he stepped forward through the portal.
Mahanon fully expected that he would find himself in the Crossroads.

That was, after all, where the eluvian normally led. When Morrigan had shown it to him and Victoria for the first time, that was where she had brought them; when they had all escaped from the Temple of Mythal, that was where they had gone. But as he stepped clear of the eluvian’s shifting surface, he realized that he was somewhere very different - and a little too recognizable for his own liking.

“This is the Fade,” he said to himself, gazing around at the familiar greenish cast and bizarre floating rocks. Everything was broken and surreal, just as it had been the last time he was there. He had, naturally, hoped that the visit from Adamant would be the last time he ever had to be there, but it seemed like fate had other plans for him. Again. But how could the eluvian have brought him to this dark place? Could it go anywhere?

On the plus side, he had crossed through the eluvian so soon after Morrigan that she was easily found. “Go back!” she called, seeing him approach. “I must find Kieran before it’s too late!” There was something like a sob in her voice, a vulnerability he would never have imagined, and he ignored the dismissal and made his way to her side.

“Why would Kieran do this?” she asked, miserable and bewildered. “How could he do this?” She shook her head. “If he is lost to me now, after all I have sacrificed... please, Inquisitor, help me look for him.”

How long they searched, Mahanon didn’t know. But it seemed to feel differently for him than for Morrigan; while she kept moving away from him to peer into this area or down that path, he didn’t. Something... pulled at him. His steps were sure, his direction unwavering, and he didn’t know why he knew where he was going (because in the Fade, no one should really be able to say they know where they’re going), but he did. Soon they crested a hill, and went down the other side, and in the not-very-far distance…

“There he is!” Morrigan sounded ready to cry with relief.

“What’s with him?”

Morrigan almost froze. “That’s... no. It can’t be.”

They approached, warily, the spot where Kieran stood with the stranger. She was an older woman, her white hair shaped almost into horns, her tall and languid figure sheathed like a blade in leather armor, the shoulders of which were adorned with feathers like the ones on Morrigan’s own clothing. Kieran didn’t seem frightened of her; on the contrary, he was doing something with a ball of magic that seemed to please her. The double-headed griffon emblem on the boy’s chest flared in the light of the spell. He turned as they drew near, and a smile crossed his face. “Mother!”

Morrigan, however, was looking not at her son but at the woman who knelt at his side. “Mother.”

Smirking, the stranger got to her feet. “Now, isn’t this a surprise?” she remarked, and her voice seemed to curl around Mahanon’s ears like he was meant to recognize it. As he drew nearer the
woman, he could see that her eyes were hawkish and yellow-golden, very much like Morrigan’s.

“So,” he said slowly, “this is all some kind of... family reunion?”

The older woman chuckled. “Mother, daughter, grandson. It rather warms the heart, does it not?”

“Kieran is not your grandson,” said Morrigan, heatedly. The vitriol in her tone was unmistakable. “Let him go!”

“As if I were holding the boy hostage.” Morrigan’s mother shook her head. “She’s always been ungrateful, you see,” she added, directing this comment at Kieran.

“Ungrateful!” Morrigan spat. “I know how you plan to extend your life, wicked crone! You will not have me, and you will not have my son!”

Mahanon took a step backwards as Morrigan summoned some kind of blue-white magic to encircle her arms, evidently the beginning of a spell. Her mother, meanwhile, sighed. “Be a good lad and restrain her,” she said.

It took a second for Mahanon to realize she was talking to him.

Morrigan’s mother lifted her own arm, and her eyes flashed a pale crystal blue. By the time he understood what was happening, his body had moved on its own, and he was dragging Morrigan backwards. “What are you doing?” she demanded, equal parts outraged and bewildered.

“I don’t know!” He released her, bringing a hand to his head, which suddenly and very briefly ached. The pain was gone as quickly as it had flared, and he almost had to wonder whether it had existed in the first place.

“Of course you know,” said Morrigan’s mother, patiently. “You drank from the Well, did you not?”

Both Mahanon and Morrigan stared at her. He could feel the hairs on his arms rise as the skin prickled with sudden comprehension. “You... are Mythal,” said Morrigan slowly.

In spite of his shock, and almost desperately aware of the vallaslin on his face, Mahanon dropped briefly to one knee. “It’s very nice to finally meet you,” he said, and his voice was brimming with the awe he felt.

Mythal seemed amused. “You see, girl,” she told her daughter, “those are manners. I had hoped your time with the Wardens would teach you some; the young lady was ever so polite. But it seems you still require a demonstration.”

“I require nothing from you but your death,” Morrigan replied shortly, while Mahanon stood. He still didn’t quite know what was going on, not really, and he longed to talk to Mythal alone. Maybe she’d let Morrigan and Kieran go, and he could finally ask her all the questions he’d wondered for as long as he could remember.

“You tried that once already, and see how far it got you?” Mythal replied, amused. However, she then patted Kieran on the back, and he smiled and ran to his mother, who clutched him so tightly that she lifted him clear off of the ground. In spite of his confusion, Mahanon smiled; Morrigan truly loved her son.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” he said, once they broke apart. “I heard her calling to me. She said now was the time.” And with that, he turned, and went back to his grandmother’s side.
Morrigan stared at the pair of them. “I do not understand.”

“Once,” said Mythal, “I was but a lonely woman, crying out in the lonely darkness for justice. And she came to me - a wisp of an ancient being, and she gave me all I wanted and more. I have carried Mythal through the ages ever since, seeking the justice that was denied to her.”

“Then... you carry Mythal inside you?” Mahanon ventured.

“She is a part of me, no more separate than your heart from your chest.”

Even as she continued to explain herself to her daughter, Mahanon thought back to what Abelas had told them at the Temple of Mythal, that Mythal had been murdered. By whom, he couldn’t imagine; she had been, after all, a powerful goddess. More than that, she had been a mother to her people, and they loved her still. But if by ‘murdered,’ Abelas had meant that something had stripped her of her power and reduced her to, as this woman said, a wisp of her former self... well, that might explain a lot. Whoever she had once been, this woman had evidently been human, and that would account for the fact that Morrigan was as well. Kieran was half an elf, but they always looked like their human bloodlines; he’d always supposed it was nature’s attempt at hiding them from those who would look down on such things.

He looked at Mythal, and she gave him something not entirely like a smile. “What do the voices tell you?”

The voices. Oh. The Well. He closed his eyes, listening across the ages as the unfamiliar whispers joined the cacophony of knowledge. “They say you speak the truth,” he admitted.

“Truth is not the end, but a beginning,” she counseled. The look she cast at him seemed favorable. “So young and vibrant. You do the People proud, and have come far. You may call me Flemeth.”

“My goddess.” He felt the urge to kneel again, but ignored it. “If Mythal is part of you, why haven’t you helped us? We’ve called to you, prayed to you.”

To his surprise, she looked genuinely regretful. “What was could not be changed,” she replied simply.

“Well - what about now? You know so much!”

“You know not what you ask, child.” Her voice was a little harsher.

“I know the name Flemeth,” he continued. “My people call you Asha’bellanar, ‘the woman of many years,’ and speak of your legend.” Even as he recalled the legend, and the mention of a spirit which came to give Flemeth vengeance, he thought of how he could never have imagined that the spirit was Mythal.

“One day someone will summarize the terrible events of your life so quickly,” she replied dryly. It sounded like something Varric would say. “But yes. I was that woman.”

“Help me understand. Why did Mythal come to you?”

The woman of many names looked oddly pleased by the question. “For a reckoning that will shake the very heavens,” she replied, speaking of vengeance, and again he thought about what Abelas had said. “Things happened that were never meant to happen. She was betrayed, as I was betrayed, as the world was betrayed!”

“So,” he said, and something told him this was the last question he would get to ask, “do I serve
you now because I drank from the Well?”

“Is that how you see yourself? A servant?” Flemeth laughed. In truth, he sort of did; after all, it was her vallaslin he carried on his face. If he was meant to serve her, he at least had gotten started young. “I have no commands for you - at least, not yet.”

Mahanon was sort of used to his life not going according to plan, although this was perhaps a more exaggerated example than most. And considering what he had already survived in the course of the past year, that really was saying something.

Now his goddess stood before him, an elven deity merged into the body of a human woman, and he hardly knew what to think. He listened as Morrigan, all the defiance gone from her voice, softly explained that this was not the original body with which Mythal had merged; that body had long since died, but it had borne a daughter, and the daughter’s body had been taken by both Mythal and the spirit of the original woman, Flemeth, Asha’bellanar. So it had continued through the ages, with each body’s daughter eventually claimed by the conjoined entities. Morrigan had somehow discovered this, and that was why she had fled from her mother, from the world, hiding herself away - in the Crossroads, he suspected - where she and her son could be safe. It seemed that Morrigan was the first of her lineage to have a son rather than a daughter, at least as far as she knew.

Why Mythal wanted Kieran required more explanation. Mahanon’s mind was whirling, and he knew he wasn’t done having new information pushed into it, so he was doing his best to keep it all straight. Part of him wished that Victoria would find them; between the two of them, they could probably sort it out. But he was on his own, and indeed, it was entirely possible that the eluvian had slammed shut behind him when he entered the Fade.

“He carries a piece of what was, snatched from the jaws of darkness,” Flemeth reminded her daughter. “You know this.”

Mahanon looked at Morrigan, whose shoulders had begun to slump. Here, it seemed, was the answer to a riddle that had puzzled the world for the past decade. Not much was understood about the Grey Wardens, but one thing was known - killing an Archdemon was supposedly always fatal. Yet the Queen of Ferelden had done it, and she still lived, and this was why. Kieran had been conceived on the eve of the battle, and when the Archdemon was slain, its soul - the soul of the Old Tevinter God of Beauty, Urthemiel - had been transferred to the wisp of life that had begun to grow within Morrigan. Her lover Darrian had consented to it, so that none of them would need to make that sacrifice; whether the other Wardens knew what he had done, Mahanon wasn’t sure and didn’t want to inquire.

“That was then,” Morrigan concluded. Her voice shook as she added, “Now... he is my son.”

Kieran had been largely silent throughout the whole thing, but now he looked at his mother sadly. “I have to, Mother.”

“You do not belong to her, Kieran! Neither of us do!”

“If Kieran is so special,” Mahanon ventured, “why didn’t you come for him before this?”

“I did not know where he was! Morrigan cleverly hid him from me... until now.” Flemeth smirked at her daughter.

Even as Morrigan gasped, Mahanon knew the answer. It was the Well of Sorrows, the heart of the
Temple of Mythal. By disturbing the wisdom of ages, he had unwittingly brought everything into Mythal’s - and therefore Flemeth’s - sight. And yet if he had not done it, Morrigan herself would have. Flemeth chuckled quietly, giving voice to almost the same thought. “Be thankful you did not drink, girl. Imagine being bound to your dear mother for all eternity!”

Morrigan was on her knees, staring at her son. He looked not at her but at his grandmother, who favored him with a smile. “As you wish,” she replied, in answer to a question he hadn’t asked out loud. “Hear my proposal, dear girl.” Morrigan got to her feet. “Let me take the lad, and you are free of me forever. I will never harm or interfere with you again. Or keep the lad with you, and you will never be safe from me. I will have my due.”

“He returns with me,” came the immediate answer.

“Decided so quickly?”

“Do whatever you wish. Take my body now, if you must,” Morrigan replied simply, “but Kieran will be safe from your clutches. I am many things, but I will not be the mother that you were to me.”

Mahanon watched Flemeth’s face, and was a little surprised to see the hurt mirrored there. It seemed to cut him on a level where he couldn’t bleed. Then she turned to Kieran, and took his hands. A ball of silver-blue light seeped from his chest, floating gently through the air until it reached Flemeth’s armored body and melted into her skin. As the light faded, she smiled at the boy.

“No more dreams?” he asked hopefully.

“No more dreams,” she promised, releasing him. Watching him return to his mother’s side, she added, “A soul is not forced upon the unwilling, Morrigan. You were never in danger from me.”

Morrigan glanced at her in surprise, but Flemeth had turned her attention to Mahanon. “As for you, Inquisitor, there is an ancient altar deep within a shaded wood,” she said. “Go to it. Summon the dragon that is its guardian. Master it in combat, and it is yours to command against Corypheus. Fail, and die.” Her lips curled slightly as she drank in the sight of the three of them for one last moment.

Then she turned and strode away, ignoring her daughter’s plea for her to wait. Mahanon watched until she disappeared into the Fade.

When they exited the eluvian into the room where it was kept at Skyhold, Victoria was standing there in full armor, the Sulevin Blade in her hands. She relaxed visibly as she looked from one face to the next. “We didn’t know what might come out of the mirror,” she explained, sheathing her weapon. “I couldn’t come in to find you, it was closed. You’re safe now?”

“All is well,” said Morrigan, lifting her hands to seal the eluvian again, before turning to her son. “Are you all right, Kieran?”

He pursed his lips in thought, his dark eyes sad. “I feel lonely,” he said. She nodded, and smiled in apparent understanding, and gestured for him to return to the courtyard.

“Where were you?” Victoria asked. “What happened?”

“Maybe the three of us should find a place to discuss it together,” Mahanon replied. “I still have a couple of questions myself.”
“I suppose t’would be as pointless to try to hide anything from the Lady Inquisitor as it would be to try to keep a secret from either of the Wardens,” Morrigan allowed. “When one learns a piece of truth, the other will soon be informed of it. It has ever been thus. I will consent to the discussion, provided it goes no farther than the three of us.”

“Yes, of course,” said Victoria, visibly mystified. “Our quarters might be the best place for such a thing, in that case. That is, if you’re comfortable leaving Kieran to his own devices in the meantime.”

“I shall send him to the library. Your Tevinter friend often suggests books for him to read. Once he is settled, I shall join you; kindly see that one of your balcony doors remains open and I will admit myself, rather than trouble your guards.”

They watched her leave the room, and Victoria glanced at him. “I take it this has been one of those days.”

“Let’s just say that I have a lot to tell you, ma da’vhenan,” said Mahanon.
The Fires of the Dragons' Children

Chapter Summary

Mythal told Mahanon to go get a dragon, so he does.

Chapter Notes

This was originally supposed to be from Bull's point of view, but for the life of me it was like pulling teeth to write it that way. I decided to try giving Bethany her debut chapter instead, and lo and behold, it worked like a charm. She has some thoughts, too, which I didn't plan but they work.

Chapter Forty-Eight: The Fires of the Dragons’ Children

“So... we get to go fight a dragon?” Bull asked eagerly. “Another one?”

The Inquisition’s inner circle was gathered for the evening meal, as Victoria so often liked them to do, and Mahanon had just finished regaling them with the explanation of his plans for the next day. As a result of his having drunk from the Well of Sorrows, he had been directed by Mythal - the very goddess whose emblems were etched onto his face - to travel into the southern wilderness and master command over a dragon in her service. Bethany had to wonder how Varric was going to explain that when he wrote about the Inquisition, which he was still considering doing.

“It’s not the same as in the Western Approach, Bull,” Mahanon replied patiently. He looked, and sounded, tired, though at least faintly amused. “We’re not killing this one. We’re just...”

“Beating it into submission until it agrees to work for you. I get it. When do we leave?”

“Well, I need a few more volunteers.” Mahanon’s amusement was stronger. “Anyone?”

“I’m afraid I’ve too much to do just at present, darling,” said Vivienne. “Much as I’d love to assist, I’m expecting a visit from my dear Bastien’s family.”

“And I’ve promised to be here to greet them as well,” Victoria added apologetically. “But I don’t think you really need me for this, do you?”

“Probably not. Well, maybe if I were going to use live bait,” he teased, “but I don’t think it’ll be needed.”

“Thanks a lot, Nonny.”

Cassandra, of course, wanted to accompany her beloved to this mysterious destination, and Sera
decided that she wanted to go as well. “Be interesting to see just how we take down a dragon without actually taking down a dragon,” she said around a mouthful of bread.

“Solas?” asked Mahanon. “I might have need of your wisdom in this.”

“If you think I will be of use, then I shall certainly join you.”

Bethany, who was sitting quietly in her usual place beside Varric, toyed with her napkin for a moment. “Could I come?” she asked finally, and most of the heads at the table swiveled in her direction. “I mean - I’ve never seen a dragon up close, I wasn’t there when my sister killed the ones she’s fought in the past. And I do have some healing magic, it might be helpful.”

Varric was frowning, and that didn’t surprise her. But he didn’t say anything, and that did. Cassandra, on the other hand, gave a small chuckle. “Are you allowed to go?” she asked, in what was easily the most teasing voice Bethany had ever heard her use.

She laughed. “Well, there are no bars on my windows and I’ve been told I may come and go as I please. So I think I am.”

Varric sighed, which caused a few Inquisition members to trade looks of profound amusement. Bethany elected to ignore them, waiting for him to speak. “Hunter? You need me along too?”

“No, I think this will be a sufficient party,” said Mahanon, smiling. “If you’re not eager to get back out into nature, I could leave you here with Dorian to keep an eye on ma da’vhenan.”

“Oh, how delightful,” Dorian quipped. “We’ll have a tea party in the Inquisitors’ suite and share all the good gossip.”

“...that doesn’t sound too bad, actually. Just make sure Sunshine here stays out of the line of fire, all right?” He glanced at her. “I’m just saying, if something happens to you, your sister will kill me first and ask questions later. It’s a self-preservation thing, you understand.”

“Of course.”

“It’s settled, then. Meet me in the stables after breakfast tomorrow, the four of you,” said the Lord Inquisitor. “I’d like to get there as soon as possible - the voices from the Well say they can tell me how to find the place, and it shouldn’t take us more than three or four days to get there and back.”

“You sure about this, Sunshine?”

Bethany supposed she should have known Varric wouldn’t simply let the matter lie without discussing it at least a little farther. Poor dear, what would he do if there were no one here to worry him?

[ Editor’s note: I’d probably have fewer gray hairs. ]

She merely chuckled, checking over her equipment one final time. “I’ll be fine, Varric. We’ve both dealt with worse things than this. Besides, the situation being what it is with Mahanon and the Well, maybe we don’t have to fight the dragon very much at all.”

“Hm. Yeah, I guess that’s possible,” he allowed. “This is just a lot of… weird. It’s like Hunter hears voices all the time and they just… mumble at him, or something. I think that’d drive me crazy.”
“You always say that your characters do that to you,” Bethany reminded him. “That they talk to you inside your head.”

“I don’t think that’s the same thing.”

“It might be. We don’t know. Though I think I understand why Victoria was so upset with him, now - she must worry about him almost as much as you worry about, well, everybody.”

“I’m really good at it, what can I say?” Varric paced around her room, while she finished packing, and paused at the small desk which served as her dressing table. The Tethras signet ring sat next to a candle; he picked it up and played with it for a moment. “You taking this too?”

Bethany glanced at him to see what he meant. “Of course. I like having it on the chain around my neck, the weight is sort of comforting.”

He chuckled. “I find it a little too heavy for my tastes, but to each their own.”

“Besides, my dwarf sent it across the Waking Sea. It would be a shame if I didn’t carry it around with me.” Her voice was playful. “It went all the way to Starkhaven and back.”

“And you managed not to lose it, which is more than I can say for my idiot brother.” Varric shook his head. He didn’t comment on the ‘my dwarf’ remark, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. “All right. You’re gonna give me all the details when you get back, right?”

“A full after-action report. Every detail I can think to offer. Should I bring back samples of the wildlife? Drag along a sketch artist to capture an image of the dragon for you?” She was straight-up sassing him now, and to her profound satisfaction, he laughed.

“You want to go to the trouble of hauling pretty flowers back here, I won’t be the one to stop you. I’d hold off on the sketch artist, though.” He shook his head again, putting the ring back on the desk, and started for the door. “Don’t sit up too late going over my story notes.”

“It’ll be difficult to sleep if I don’t find out what you’ve cooked up for Lady Elizabeth and Ser Athras, but I’ll do my best. Good night, Varric.”

“Sweet dreams, Sunshine.”

Bethany shut the door behind him, still chuckling to herself. *I love my dwarf,* she thought, amused.

[ Editor’s note: Oh, don’t act surprised, Scholar. Everyone loves me. You know that better than most. ]

“This is it,” said Mahanon.

They made what Bethany guessed was pretty good time in their trek to the altar of Mythal, arriving in the late afternoon. Mahanon had brought his bizarre sword-stung horse to a halt in the middle of the forest and dismounted, gesturing for the others to do likewise. On foot, they led the mounts to where they could be tethered to trees along a small river’s bank, to graze and drink and rest as they liked, and then the riders followed an overgrown path that the Deth Nug, at least, would have found impossible to navigate.

Now, at the end of the path, they found themselves standing at the entrance to a strange grove. It was bounded on all sides by a stone wall, similar to those of other Dalish ruins they had seen in the Arbor Wilds, but remarkably intact. Time had not eroded this structure, nor had anyone dared to
vandalize it. Vines crawled along the walls, and vibrant plants were visible inside, but it remained intact and sound.

“You think so, boss?” Bull asked.

“I’m sure it’s here.” Bethany longed to ask what the voices were telling him, but didn’t quite dare. It seemed almost too... personal. His expression was serene, however, as he led them into the walled grove. “Keep an eye out.”

“It’s beautiful,” she remarked, gazing around them. Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed somehow greener than the rest of the forest. At the heart of the grove was the altar they were seeking, with a massive stone statue of a woman whose face was deliberately carved as to be unrecognizable. Bethany had long ago met Flemeth, in whose body Mythal apparently resided now, but how the goddess had looked in the days of Arlathan was anybody’s guess. The figure had no arms, only wings, and the altar around her was draped in vibrantly colored flowers and greenery.

“This is all that’s left of the altar,” said Mahanon thoughtfully. Bethany wondered what else there might once have been - she thought the place was untouched by time, but maybe she was wrong. She watched as the Lord Inquisitor peered closely at the carvings and read aloud an inscription. “‘We few who travel far, call to me and I will come, without mercy, without fear.’ Hmm.” He backed away a pace or two.

“Cry havoc in the moonlight,” Solas intoned. “Let the fire of vengeance burn. The cause is clear. A very old invocation, and perfectly translated.” Bethany couldn’t tell if he was also reading or simply speaking his thoughts; the carvings made no sense to her at all, and with Solas, one could never really be sure. Varric, she knew, sometimes became annoyed with his inscrutable manners.

Whatever was the case, it didn’t seem to matter to Mahanon. He turned around, and started shouting at the trees and rocks and sky. “I’m here, Flemeth,” he called. “Just as you told me. If I must master a dragon to fight Corypheus, then send it.”

The request was almost immediately answered with a screech. “Anybody ever tell you to be careful what you wish for?” Sera retorted, putting an arrow to her bowstring. As they watched, a yellowish-green dragon appeared from seemingly out of nowhere - which, all things considered, was not entirely impossible - and alighted almost delicately in the grove. It hesitated only for a few seconds before sending a fireball in their direction.

The ensuing fight was strange. They were after the dragon to wound it, and wound it a lot, but not enough to kill it. It felt wrong, in a way, that they had come into the dragon’s sacred grounds and were now attacking it; they just had to trust that Mahanon was correct in believing this was Mythal’s will.

Besides, if they didn’t fight the dragon, it would simply kill them. Flemeth had warned Mahanon of that.

The Iron Bull, Bethany realized vaguely, was apparently taking Varric’s words to heart and doing his best to keep himself between her and the dragon. When there was an opportunity later to be amused by this, she would be; but in the course of the fight, she could only try to return the favor by hurling her minor healing spells at him and anybody else who seemed to need them.

Finally, however, the barrage of fire breath seemed to come to a halt. The dragon gave a little hop, and then a few more, wheeling around and staring Mahanon full in the face. He held its gaze, lifting his chin, and it made a noise which was almost like a bark as it shook its head a bit. Next to Bethany, Sera raised her bow to fire another arrow, but Mahanon looked back and waved them off.
Everyone lowered their weapons, taking a couple steps backward.

“Anybody know what’s going on?” Bull rumbled.

“No idea,” Sera replied. “Guess we’ll watch, yeah?”

Mahanon walked toward the dragon, still maintaining eye contact, and it lifted its head and screamed full in his face. It was strange; the air seemed to shimmer, as though they could see the scream. The elf sort of nodded and then, suddenly, a kind of blue-white essence started pouring off of him, forming a kind of halo around him.

“That’s magic,” Bethany muttered. “But Mahanon’s not a mage...”

“It is the Well of Sorrows which does this,” Solas replied quietly. “It is demonstrating to the dragon that Mahanon serves the same mistress that it does.” The cloud of magic continued to emanate from Mahanon, coalescing around both him and the dragon, forming a sort of connection between them and slowly turning the dragon’s eyes blue.

As abruptly as the magic appeared, it dissipated. The dragon lifted its head again, snorting, and walked past them all as though it no longer saw them. With a mighty rush of wings, it took to the skies again, and Mahanon watched as it flew away.

“Are you all right, my love?” Cassandra asked warily. “Why did it fly off? Will it come back?”

“I’m fine, Cass. The dragon will come when I summon it.” Mahanon paused, and added, “Only once. But that’s enough to fight Corypheus. I have my dragon.”

“Swell,” said Bull. “So what do we do now?”

Their leader thought for a moment, or more accurately, listened. “Let’s collect our mounts and bring them in here. The voices tell me we can camp here for the night - nothing will harm us within these walls.”

“Yeah... still weird,” said Sera. “No offense.”

He chuckled. “None taken. Sorry if I’m a little too elfy.”

They herded the mounts into the clearing and established a camp and a fire pit on the far side of the grounds, away from Mythal’s altar. There was no reason to be any more disrespectful than absolutely necessary, after all. “Bull,” said Bethany, as they set up the cooking equipment, “I just wanted to thank you. I noticed you were trying to protect me from the dragon’s fire and it was very kind of you.”

“Oh, hey, no problem.” He gave her a saucy sort of grin. “Not that you couldn’t hold your own, but we don’t need to give Varric any more reasons to complain, right?”

She giggled. “Well, I can’t argue with that. But thank you all the same. You’re the nicest Qunari I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah, well... considering your track record, I’d say the bar’s pretty low on that one.”

“Oh. Er... sorry?”

“Nah, it’s all good.” He bumped her shoulder playfully. “You’re the second prettiest mage in the Inquisition, if it helps.”
Bethany burst out laughing. “After Dorian, I presume?”

“Never been with a mage before, it’s been an adventure. You know, one time he got so excited, he set the curtains on fire!” Bull took a turn at laughing. “Ah, he’d hex me for telling you that. Don’t mention it to him.”

“My lips are sealed.”

[Editor’s note: And so they were, right up until we started writing this scene. I can’t believe Sunshine was holding out on me all this time.]

“So... what happens now?” Cassandra wanted to know, once supper was made and they were all sitting down to eat. “We return to Skyhold, of course, but then?”

“Hopefully, when we get back, there’ll be some intelligence about where Corypheus went when he fled the Temple of Mythal,” Mahanon replied. “According to Cullen, he basically ran away once we passed through the eluvian. We don’t know where he went, but he pretty much abandoned his troops. Cullen thinks he wouldn’t have been able to help them much anyway. He’s bolstering the castle defenses while we’re gone, since most of our soldiers are still on their way back from the Arbor Wilds.”

“There’s still the matter of Samson, too,” said Bethany. “You and Victoria will have to pass judgment.”

“We already did.” Mahanon paused, and looked at her. “Weren’t you there?”

Surprised, she thought for a moment. How had she missed that? “Oh! No, I wasn’t,” she recalled suddenly. “I went down to Redcliffe for the afternoon with a few of the soldiers, and I forgot all about the judging. Victoria sent a replenishment of herbs to the healer at the crossroads, and I offered to be the one to deliver them.”

“Did you know him, in Kirkwall? I know you knew Cullen.”

She nodded. “A little. He was kicked out of the order before we met him the first time. But later, after my sister became Champion, he was reinstated. There was... an incident. Varric probably tells it better. An alliance of mages and Templars had some unfounded issue with Marianne, and they kidnapped me out of the Circle as part of a revenge plot.”

“He told me about that,” said Cassandra. “When I interviewed him.”

“You mean interrogated,” Bethany said, but she made a point of keeping her tone light and teasing. Varric had forgiven Cassandra, which was good enough for her.

“Ugh.” Cassandra smiled briefly, however. “I got the feeling there were certain parts of his narrative which he would just as soon not have discussed, and that was one of them.”

“It wasn’t fun. Part of the reason he tells it better is because I was unconscious for most of it,” Bethany clarified. “But Samson was the one who went and got Cullen and told him what was happening, and Marianne recommended he be reinstated after he helped that way. He was so happy to carry the shield again, I really don’t know what happened to him to make him follow Corypheus. I guess when things went badly in Kirkwall... a lot of the Templars were displaced, just like the mages.”

“From everything I hear of Kirkwall,” said Solas, thoughtfully, “it seems as though it has been through more than its fair share of hardships. Yet you and Varric are both deeply fond of it.”
Bethany shrugged. “Whatever else it is, it’s home, for Varric. It was for my mother, too. Bad things happened there, but when we go back, maybe we can make things better. We can try, right?”

“An admirable sentiment.” The older mage nodded approvingly.

“The Jennies are still in Kirkwall,” said Sera. “Heard a rumor your sister used to help ‘em out. That true?”

“It’s true.” Bethany nodded, smiling. “We all did, a little. Kirkwall had a lot of gang activity and we helped to quiet it. They used to thank us for that and tell us that ‘we like a clean city to play in.’ I never did quite understand what that meant, but we were on the same side so it didn’t matter much.”

Sera guffawed. “A clean city to play in. I like that.”

They reached Skyhold late the following day, which was just in time for Mahanon to briefly meet the family of Vivienne’s lover as they were about to leave. Bethany, meanwhile, made her way to the main hall of Skyhold, where Varric was poring over his story notes. “I come bearing all the details you can stand,” she said, pulling off her cloak, “and the news that Mahanon has his dragon.”

“Great. So all we need now is Corypheus,” Varric replied, looking up with a grin, “and bam - dragon fight. Should be something to see.”

“I still don’t understand why we need a dragon, to be honest. It was an interesting trip to be sure, but what was the point?”

“Well, Corypheus has a dragon of his own,” he explained. “From what Eyebrows told me, the voices Hunter got from his dip in the Well told him that this dragon is how Corypheus is staying alive. They actually saw him get killed inside the Temple of Mythal, but he just hopped into the body of a nearby Grey Warden and kept going.”

Bethany gasped. “So that’s how he got out of the prison!”

“Yep. Poor Larius.” Varric shook his head. “Anyway, this dragon of his is the key, somehow, so if we can kill the dragon, it’ll stop him from playing the same trick again and he’ll be vulnerable. Don’t ask me how it works, because I don’t get it. But this is what I’ve been told. We just have to find Corypheus, now.”

“So soon this will all be over?”

“In theory, at least. Then we’ll have a party - Josephine’s been keeping the plans for one in her pocket for months. After that, there’ll probably be some loose ends to tie up, but the worst should be behind us at that point.” He paused. “I hope.”
The Shadow of a Distant Storm

Chapter Summary

The beginning of the end.

Chapter Forty-Nine: The Shadow of a Distant Storm

[Editor’s note: Here we go.]

Victoria and Dorian met quietly for tea whenever her workload permitted it, usually once every couple of weeks or so, and they would gossip in complete confidence. He was better at gossip than Mahanon; she, meanwhile, had a reliable source in Cullen, who was usually able to give her quite a bit of whatever the rumors were in the soldiers’ barracks at any given time. With Dorian, she enjoyed a level of unreserve that she didn’t often experience, and no subject was off limits as long as they were both willing to discuss it.

(She knew a little more than she might have liked about his developing relationship with Bull; however, that was less because of Dorian’s gossiping and more because Bull had a tendency to talk about it regardless of where he was or who might be listening. And if he didn’t, Cole sometimes did. Victoria was never entirely certain whether Blackwall ever actually did tell Cullen about a certain incident involving Bull, Dorian, and the war table, but for her beloved’s sake, she hoped he hadn’t.)

In Mahanon’s absence, as Dorian had suggested, she invited both him and the resident novelist to join her in the Inquisitors’ suite for tea and talk. “I suppose,” she said, when he joined her ahead of Varric, “that we’ll have to rein it in a little bit this time.”

“Darling Victoria, I can’t imagine what you mean,” he replied grandly, taking his usual seat. “Oh, wait, yes I can. You mean we have to stop ourselves from gossiping about Varric himself?”

“Yes. We can only talk about him behind his back.” She laughed. [Editor’s note: Et tu, Eyebrows?]

“Very well, if you insist. Is anything else off the table, or just that one particular question which everyone in the Inquisition is trying and failing to answer?” The mustache quivered playfully.

“I think just that one. I wouldn’t want you to burst, after all.”

“I hope you appreciate the sacrifices I make for you, my dearest Lady Inquisitor.” His eyes danced as he helped himself to a biscuit.

“Always,” she assured him. “But what’s keeping Varric?”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” called a voice, and a moment later, Varric’s head appeared as he came up the stairs. “I hope you don’t mind if I take notes. I never know where I’ll get a story idea.”

“Far be it from me to deny my favorite author,” Victoria said with a grin. “Especially if I get a sneak preview.”
“I don’t usually do that, but for you, I might make an exception.”

Mahanon returned in time to greet Vivienne’s guests from Ghislain. Victoria quite liked them; they were both terribly respectful, fascinated by their surroundings, and somewhat reluctant to leave. She was more concerned about her Nonny, however, who hadn’t seemed quite the same to her ever since the Well of Sorrows. He spoke in the Dalish tongue more often than ever, and frequently she caught him gazing off into the middle distance, apparently listening to the voices from the Well.

They bade farewell to the Duke and the Grand Cleric, who went to pay their respects at the Inquisition chapel, and Vivienne presented Mahanon with an enchanted ring. “I commissioned this from the Formari – the greatest enchanters in all of Thedas – for you, as thanks for your hunt of the snowy wyvern. There’s a matching necklace coming for you, my dear Lady Trevelyan, but it was delayed.”

“You’re too kind, Vivienne. That’s very considerate.”

“No at all, my dear. Once, it was customary for Circle mages to craft enchantments for their staunchest friends and allies – and you, both of you, have been as much to me.” She smiled. “I must go see to my guests. Another time, darlings.”

Victoria followed Mahanon up the stairs to their room, and waited while he changed out of his armor. “How did it go at the altar?” she called, sitting on her bed and sort of leaning around the divider. “Did the voices tell you where to go? Did you find this guardian?”

“My goddess spoke the truth to me. I invoked her name and the dragon appeared before us, just as she said it would,” he replied. She heard the clunk as he carefully tossed his sheathed daggers onto his own bed.

“So... what was it like?”

“Well, it was a dragon, like I said. Not as big as some of the ones we’ve seen, actually, and it was a sort of golden-green color, like a summer afternoon.”

“Golden-green,” she repeated. “I like that. So is it going to help us?”

“I will be able to summon it in battle just once, and it will help us defeat Corypheus’s dragon.”

“Good. That thing still haunts my nightmares once in a while.” She listened, but he didn’t say anything else. “What about you? Are you all right?”

“Halami’shivanas.” His tone was a little wistful, almost dreamy. “Lathbora viran. I am well.”

“Common tongue, please, dear. My Elvhen is not good.” In fact, he’d all but stopped teaching her, except at throwaway moments. She didn’t fault him for it, though, since there hadn’t been a lot of free time available for such a thing. They were a little busy, these days.

“Sorry, I keep forgetting. Halami’shivanas is the sweet sacrifice of duty,” he explained. “I serve my people, and my goddess, and what happens to me doesn’t really matter so much.”

“Allow me to disagree,” she retorted. “And the other thing?”

“Lathbora viran is harder to translate. Basically, it’s a longing for something you can’t ever really know - like being in the Temple was for me.” He emerged from the dressing area in what Varric liked to call his pajamas. “There’s a sort of homesickness to it, for lack of a better description.
Don’t worry so much, ma da’vehenan. We have our dragon, and the voices tell me that Corypheus will not hide. We’ll have him very soon.”

Sooner than they expected, in truth.

Mahanon had something to eat, but insisted that he didn’t need to rest. He was eager to update the advisors on everything that had happened. “We have the dragon,” he informed them (and also Morrigan). “We can match its power, and he’ll lose his ability to regenerate.”

“Then all that remains,” said Cullen slowly, “is to find Corypheus before he comes to us.”

“We’ve been looking for his base since all this began, with no success.” Leliana sighed a bit.

“His dragon must come and go from somewhere.”

“What about the Deep Roads?” Josephine began. The rest of what she was saying was lost to Victoria, however. She was driven to her knees by the sudden, overpowering ache in her left hand, like the veins were abruptly set ablaze. Forcing herself to her feet, she realized that a sickly green light was pouring through the windows behind the advisors, who had all turned to stare at it in horror. Both her own Anchor and Mahanon’s were crackling with light and emerald fire.

“It seems Corypheus,” said Morrigan softly, “is not content to wait.”

“He’s in the Valley of Sacred Ashes,” Victoria managed. “He’s reopened the Breach!”

“You either close it once more, or it swallows the world,” Morrigan replied.

“But that’s madness!” Josephine protested. “Wouldn’t it kill him as well?”

“At this point, I’m not sure he cares,” said Mahanon. “We’ve taken everything from him - his generals, his allies, the Well. It’s just him and his dragon. He probably sees this as a gamble worth taking, and he knows that we’ll come.”

“Inquisitors,” said Cullen, and Victoria could hardly bear the tone of his voice, “we have no forces to send with you. We must wait for them to return from the Arbor Wilds.”

“He knows that,” she replied sadly. “We have to go now, before it’s too late.”

“Send word to any of our people in the valley to pull back,” Mahanon directed. “Don’t let them throw their lives away.”

“It will take you at least two or three days to get there,” said Leliana, “if I judge the position of the Breach correctly.”

“Then we need to leave as soon as possible. Our closest companions should be ready to march at first light.” Victoria paused. “Nonny, we should tell them ourselves. We owe them that much at least.”

“And... and what should we do?” Josephine ventured. “Here at Skyhold, I mean.”

“Besides bolstering defenses?” Mahanon paused, and his gaze grew unfocused for a moment. Then he smiled. “I don’t suppose you have anything planned for a victory celebration, by any chance?”

Victoria gave a small sigh of relief. There was the Mahanon she knew.
The companions were, naturally, a bit rattled to hear that they were leaving so soon. Victoria couldn’t blame them. It was a long walk through the fortress to meet with everyone individually, possibly for the last time.

Varric was first, just because of his proximity to the council chambers; then Solas, who accepted the news with a calmness none of the others could match. Dorian. Vivienne, whose guests had departed in basically the nick of time. Blackwall. The Iron Bull. Sera. Cole. They all responded with varying unease and determination, but they would all go. “We’ll take him down one last time, just like we’ve done every other time,” said Bull. “Everything he’s thrown at you, at us, we’ve tossed back in his face. Don’t worry about a thing, bosses, we got this.”

“Thank you for everything, Bull.”

At Mahanon’s own request, they saved Cassandra for last. It made sense, Victoria thought, and the three of them walked up to the ramparts to talk privately. “Victory in the Arbor Wilds,” Cass remarked, gazing out at the reopened Breach, “and now this. Do not underestimate Corypheus, either of you, for you have yet to fight him one on one. Or two on one,” she amended, smiling faintly. “But you will get your chance.”

“We’ll face Corypheus together,” Mahanon assured her.

Her smile became more evident; Victoria admired the way it softened the older woman’s features. “There is not a man I would be more proud to fight beside.”

“Don’t give him a swelled head,” Victoria said lightly, and Cassandra laughed. They walked along the battlements to a dead end.

“Not long ago,” Cass mused, “this was impossible to imagine. You, a trusted friend.” She nodded at Victoria. “And you, the man I love. Victory close at hand. The time has come to consider what will come next.”

“As long as the three of us are together,” said Mahanon, “I don’t think I even care what comes next.”

“We’ll figure it out,” said Victoria. “I’ll leave you two to have some time alone.”

That was only half her reason for leaving, however. It took a little searching, since he wasn’t in his office, but she finally tracked down Cullen in the little chantry off the courtyard. He was on one knee before the statue of Andraste, several candles lit, and was reciting the Chant of Light from memory. She lingered in the doorway for a long moment, watching the glow of the candles burnish his golden hair.

“A prayer for you?” she asked finally, when he reached the end of a canticle.

“For those we have lost,” he replied, getting to his feet, “and those I am afraid to lose.”

She couldn’t fail to catch his meaning. “You’re afraid?”

“Of course I am. The time came... so much more quickly than I expected,” he said. “You’re being thrown into his path again. Andraste preserve me, I must send you to him.”

Victoria hated the pain that was etched in the lines of his face. “There’s nothing to worry about,” she said, opening the collar of her shirt and exposing his coin on its chain. “I have luck on my side, remember?”
It worked, a little; Cullen chuckled. “That’s less comforting than I had hoped,” he admitted, opening his arms and letting her bury herself in his embrace. “Whatever happens, you will come back.”

She couldn’t tell if he was trying to convince her or himself. Maybe it didn’t matter. “Is that an order, Commander?”

“No, but as one of your advisors, I strongly recommend it.” He sighed into her shoulder. “The thought of losing you... I can’t.”

“You won’t.” Blessed Andraste, she pleaded silently, please don’t make me a liar.

The night passed too quickly. On some level, Victoria really envied Mahanon; yes, he was going into battle just as she was, but he would have his beloved Cassandra at his side every moment. She had to leave Cullen, force him to wait and wonder if he would ever see her again. She didn’t resent it, of course, but she was only human, and she did envy her dear friend for the comfort that Cassandra could give him on the field.

“Good morning,” she greeted her friends, tucking one last bit of hair around the Ardent Blossom. There were smiles of varying strength, return greetings both soft and loud. “Well. I guess this is it, but... before we go, I - we - just want you all to know that we couldn’t have gotten this far without all of you. You’ve been the best friends and allies we could have had on this... incredibly bizarre journey and we are grateful to you all.”

“Mas enasalin lasa revas evanura,” Mahanon added. They all (except, of course, for Solas) looked at him quizzically, and he shrugged. “I’m not sure of the exact translation. The voices said it. But I think it means something about leading us to victory, so it seemed appropriate.”

“You know, Hunter, when most people talk about hearing voices in their heads, it’s not considered a good thing,” said Varric dryly.

Victoria chuckled. “All right, if we’re all done sassing each other... let’s get moving.” She turned to accept Falon’s reins from the waiting groom, and patted the horse’s nose. “One last ride, love. Then we’ll have a good long rest. I promise.”

The advisors and Bethany stood near at hand to say farewell. “Go with the Maker,” said Leliana. Glancing at Mahanon, she added, “And Mythal. I don’t think we’re in a position to turn down anyone’s blessings right now. May everything that can hear our prayers guide you on your way.”

“Also, if you don’t come back, I’m eating your share of the tiny cakes Josephine ordered from Val Royeaux,” Bethany added.

“We are going to have words about that, Bethany,” said Cullen lightly.

“You can have all of those - what are they called? The Exquisite Misery?” The corners of her eyes crinkled impudently as she eyed the commander.

“I think I’ve had more than my fair share of misery from Orlais, thank you!”

Victoria glanced at Varric, who was waiting to be lifted onto Falon behind her. He caught her eye and winked. “All right, I guess we’d better come back, if only to make sure you two don’t get into some kind of fight over whose sweet tooth is the biggest. Come on, somebody help me up onto this barded brute.” As he was settled into the saddle, Victoria could hear Varric murmuring for her ears only. “They’re trying to make us smile before we go - just in case that has to be the last memory
they have of us.”

“Then let’s give them that,” she replied quietly. Pushing a smile onto her features, she lifted her hand to wave. “We’ll see you all in a few days. Don’t eat all the good things before we get back.” Her gaze lingered on Cullen’s face for a few seconds before she turned, shook the reins, and started the line of mounts forward through the gates of Skyhold.

*Here goes everything.*
Conductor of the Choir of Silence

Chapter Summary

The final showdown, and what came afterward.

Chapter Fifty: Conductor of the Choir of Silence

[Editor's note: I won't be interrupting this chapter with notes. I know you want to read it. If anything doesn't make sense, just wait, because there's a little epilogue to follow and Scholar and I are going to enjoy it.]

Cole could never feel anything coming from Corypheus that wasn’t awful.

Pain. Anger. And underneath, there is fear. Wanting, waiting, wondering for so long. Where is my god? Where is everything I ever believed and knew? Why, why, why?

He was there when they arrived, leaving their mounts at a safe distance and racing toward the ruined temple, where a handful of Inquisition scouts were attempting to defy him. He summoned demons pulled from the Fade the pain the pain and they attacked the loyal people, and the Inquisitors and their friends rushed in to save them.

Corypheus stood within an arched doorway, holding his crackling magic orb. It feels like Solas. “I knew you would come,” he told Mahanon and Victoria. He bowed, mocking, arms spread wide and eyes never leaving their faces, his own full of disdain and disgust.

“It ends here, Corypheus,” said Mahanon.

“And so it shall.”

The magic was a bright and blinding blur as he raised his arms. Around them the ancient building trembled and tore itself from the ground. Scout Harding lost her balance and tumbled to the side, staring up at the piece of land which carried the Inquisition members into the sky. The ground and the building fragments charred in midair, turning black and burnt and broken, arranging themselves to look as the Black City itself looked.

“You have been most successful in foiling my plans,” said Corypheus, watching as the Inquisitors struggled to regain their balance, “but let us not forget what you are. Thieves, who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Interlopers. Gnats.” He was snarling, surly, glowering at them all.

“We shall prove here, once and for all, which of us is worthy of godhood.”

“We didn’t come here to become gods, Corypheus!” Victoria snapped. “Just to stop you!”

He paused, confusion etched on his mangled malevolent murderous face. Cole watched him, trying to hear, trying to feel. He could be sure only of the monster’s bewilderment, as though the idea that the Inquisitors were not interested in becoming gods had never dawned on him. There was no
chance for anyone to say anything, however, for above Corypheus the purple dragon crawled into view. It snarled, seething, staring at its prey.

Victoria was shaking, but stood her ground. “Nonny! Hurry!”

White-blue light flashed in Mahanon’s green eyes. As the nightmare beast began to make its way forward, a second dragon burst into the scene in a blaze of yellow-green glory, knocking the other askew. They tangled in the air, tumbling, turning, toppling out of sight.

Corypheus hissed. “You dare.”

The Inquisitors looked at each other, in that silent speaking way which only they understood, and the Anchors on their hands and their hearts were more blinding to Cole than they had ever been. With a nod of understanding, they rushed forward, and the others quickly followed.

It was a long climb. A long fight. Fierce, frenetic, full of fear and fury.

By the time it was over, both dragons lay dead. The one which served Mythal had given its life for the cause, leaving the other weakened enough that the companions could finish the duty of destruction. Corypheus taunted them all the while.

“Look at you!” he called mockingly to the Inquisitors. “Wearing slave markings on your face with pride! You are nothing. A race of sniveling cowards that shrank before Tevinter power! And a little *soporati*, nipping at the heels of her betters? All you love will be ground under the Imperium’s heel!”

“Why does everyone call me little?” asked Victoria, dryly. “I’m not that short for a human.”

“He’s getting personal,” Mahanon snarked.

“Just like when we woke him up,” Varric replied, chuckling. “I swear his real power is monologuing.”

“He was the High Priest of the Dragon of Silence and he doesn’t know how to stop talking,” Dorian added.

“You will be dealt with harshly, Tevinter!” Corypheus called, as though he had heard Dorian. Perhaps he did. “The Imperium suffers no traitors!”

“Your Imperium will never be mine, monster,” came the reply.

They continued the chase, up the stairs, around the corners. Corypheus was getting desperate, daring, determined not to die. He hurled insults and spells with equal recklessness, not really caring which of them he hit. *Rattus* he called the elves, and Varric was a *beardless Stone-worshipper*, and Cassandra’s head would be on a pike before the Grand Cathedral. The Iron Bull’s race was not a race but a mistake.

For Cole he had a name which he had heard too many times to be troubled by it. “Begone, demon! I shall plunge your essence into an abyss from which it will never return!”

“Never,” Cole replied, disappearing and reappearing behind Corypheus and raking a dagger down his back. It didn’t kill him, of course, but it hurt. Making Corypheus hurt was all right. Other people had to be helped, healed. Not him. The monster grew weaker by the moment, for every time he fled, they followed, found him, made him taste more pain.
Abruptly he was gone, up to the very highest part of the ruins, like a cat hiding away to lick its wounds. “Stay here!” Mahanon barked at the companions, even as he and Victoria gave chase.

“Are they mad!? They cannot face him alone!” cried Cassandra. Maker, not like this, don’t take them from us now. Don’t take him when we have come so far.

“This is how stories go, Seeker,” said Varric, taking a healing potion from his belt and pushing it into her hands. “Drink that. Of course they have to face him alone. The hero and the villain have to have their final confrontation.”

“But what if -” She couldn’t finish the statement. A magnificent bolt of glimmering, glowing green light shot into the air, into the very heart of the Breach, and the sky shuddered as though it might fly apart. Then it faded, and the clouds drifted lazily around the gaping hole which was no longer in evidence.

“They did it,” said Vivienne. She sounded almost astonished; she always believed that they would, and yet she didn’t, at the same time.

“Everybody grab something solid!” Varric yelled suddenly. The false Black City which Corypheus had created could not remain in the air once he was defeated, and it began to tumble, crumble, plummet beneath their feet. How high they were, how far they fell, no one really knew. But then it was over, the ground solid beneath them once more, and they began to pick themselves up and check for injuries.

“Is everyone here? Everybody in one piece?” Bull grunted. He moved to help Dorian, who had been shunted aside by a piece of falling rock and had the wind knocked out of him. “Come on, kadan, you’re all right.”

Solas broke away from the group and went up the stairs. “Should we follow?” Blackwall wondered.

“No,” said Cole. “He goes to find something which can no longer be found.”

“You mean they’re... they’re...” Sera couldn’t say it, and in her shock she apparently forgot that she was talking to Cole directly.

“Not that. It is something else which has died.”

“Ugh. Weirdy. Stop talking to me.” Her voice was immediately more like its usual self.

“Inquisitors!” Cassandra could no longer suppress the urge. “Are you alive?”

And then they appeared, walking slowly, leaning on one another. Mahanon’s face was bleeding, and Victoria limped slightly, but they were alive and whole and there. They descended the steps carefully, their gazes sweeping over the collected companions, counting them to make sure everyone was all right. Beyond them, Solas stood in the archway, but as Cole watched him, he quietly slipped out of sight. Take care of them, Cole. It will be all right.

“Victorious, I see,” remarked Morrigan, who had come in her bird form to help them if they needed her. “What a novel result.”

“And you survive,” added Cassandra, directing a beautiful smile in Mahanon’s direction. “Thank the Maker.”

“And it seems that the Breach is finally closed,” Morrigan added, as everyone turned their eyes
“So... what do we do now?” asked Bull.

Mahanon and Victoria looked back at the place where Solas wasn't, and then at one another. “We go back to Skyhold,” he said, and she nodded.

“We go back to Skyhold,” she echoed. “Let’s go home.”

“Josephine.”

The ambassador looked up from the book she was not reading, startled. “Cole?”

“It is over. We won. They won.”

“Oh - truly? Oh, oh, thank the Maker!” She looked ready to weep. “I - thank you for coming to tell me. We can have the celebration ready when they return. Will they - will they be here soon?”

“As soon as they can. By tomorrow night. Solas is gone,” he added.

“Gone?” repeated Leliana, coming into the room in time to hear this. “Where has he gone?”

“Where we cannot follow. He will always be our friend. It was not supposed to be this way but it is.” Cole blinked at her. “He is sad. But it must be.”

Cullen came into the office at a run. “The Breach - the Breach is closed,” he reported breathlessly. “Oh - Cole - you’re here?”

“Corypheus is dead and all of our friends survive. They wanted you to know - they wanted you to not worry. They will come soon.”

He left Skyhold and returned to the others, appearing quite abruptly on the back of Dorian’s horse. “I told them you were coming,” he informed the Inquisitors. “They are ready for you. They needed to know.”

Victoria chuckled. “Thank you, Cole. I guess Josephine can have that party she’s been planning, now.”

“Yes. Tomorrow night. She has invited many friends to celebrate with you.”

“Are there any tiny cakes left, or did Curly and Sunshine eat them all?” Varric wanted to know.

“I didn’t think to ask.” Cole thought for a moment. “Aching, anxious, unable to eat. No, they didn’t eat them. They had no appetite. Now they will.”

“We should stop in the soldiers’ camp outside the fortress,” said Dorian, “and change back into our more relaxed attire. I for one am no admirer of partying in armor. Victoria, do be sure to let your hair down for the occasion, I have it on good authority that someone prefers it that way.”

“Duly noted, Dorian, thank you.”

One of the moons was full and bright behind the tallest tower of Skyhold when the Inquisitors and their closest companions walked through the gate into the lower bailey the following evening. Most everyone in the castle had turned out to welcome them, applauding wildly as they paraded
slowly through the crowd. Our heroes, our hope, they saved us, they saved me. The world almost fell but they stopped it in time.

The three advisors, meanwhile, stood on the stair landing above, watching the process. Josephine and Leliana were exultant, excited, effervescent, but Cullen was quieter. Softer. More serene. She came back. His eyes were trained on Victoria as the group climbed the stairs to the upper bailey. The companions waited there; Scout Harding came to join them, and the Chargers, and Bethany in a blue dress Cole had never seen her wear, and they all watched together as only the Inquisitors climbed to where the advisors waited.

As if they had planned it, the spymaster, the ambassador, and the commander all bowed to the Inquisitors, who looked a little embarrassed by the gesture but kept smiling. Mahanon stepped forward to shake hands warmly with Cullen, almost like a brother. Then he turned to meet Victoria’s eyes, and gave a little nod in Cullen’s direction as if to say well, go on, everyone is waiting. She just laughed and, seeing Cullen extend his arms to her, she went into them without another word. The cheering from below was deafening.

The celebrating ran deep into the night. Cole flitted around the main hall, sometimes seen and sometimes not, listening as the Inquisitors thanked their friends for all of their work. They had plans, too, to discuss.

Dorian was going back to Tevinter, but not just yet. He and Bull were still together, and it made them both smile. Bull had his Chargers and the pain of leaving the Qun was still there but it hurt less every day. Cassandra wanted to rebuild the Seekers; Mahanon would help her. Sera would stay where she could help the little people. Varric was thinking of writing a book about them all. Vivienne had plans to go back to Orlais, while Blackwall wanted to stay and keep being Blackwall. Leliana would be crowned Divine, and had already chosen her name - the people would call her Victoria too. Josephine fretted, worried that the party wasn’t good enough, and yet there was so much joy in her mind that the worry was almost a laugh. Cullen was content to stay simply Cullen, so long as he didn’t have to do it alone, and Victoria would make sure of that. It was good. It was all good.

There were things to remember and things to forget, but right now the remembering was what mattered.

And I will remember you, the wolf who prowls the edges. You walk alone, now. You helped me but you would not let me help you. So I will remember you instead, even when everyone else has forgotten.

In the distance of his mind, he thought he heard a quiet thank you.

Morrigan and her strange little boy (not as strange anymore, not since he met his grandmother) were leaving. She made a formal farewell and departed into the wilderness, giving no indication of where they were going, but she was not lost and she would not return.

Cole was curious, so he decided to follow. She took her eluvian from Skyhold and hid it deep in a secret place in the forest, where she could make the magic hide it from eyes that were not her own, and they went into the Crossroads. That was not its real name, he knew that now, but it no longer had a real name so she could call it what she liked.

Most of the mirrors in the Crossroads did not work. They were broken, or their keys were lost, or Morrigan didn’t know how to open them. Cole watched her open one that she could, and she and Kieran walked through it. They emerged in another forest, far from Skyhold in the unfamiliar west,
and there they turned into birds and flew. Cole did not fly, but he did not need to fly; he simply waited until they landed, and went where they were.

In a clearing they found a cluster of warriors, all clad in Grey Warden armor, standing around talking to one another. The grizzled dark-haired Bowman had put a blush on the blonde elf mage’s face yet again; the dwarf with the braided red beard cackled maniacally, while the other dwarf with the casteless brand just shook her head. As Morrigan approached, they quieted. For her, the salutes were somewhat formal; for Kieran, the smiles were friendly and genuine. That suited her just fine. They need not love me as they love my son. It is enough that they would welcome him.

“There you are,” said a warm and familiar voice, and Kieran broke from his mother’s side to run to the outstretched arms of a black-haired elf with a smile like sunrise. The other Wardens chuckled fondly as Darrian Tabris spun around, lifting his son off the ground. “Have you been good for your mother?”

“Yes, Father!”

“He’s missed you greatly,” Morrigan observed.

“As I’ve missed you both. You got my letter, I presume?” Darrian returned Kieran to his feet.

“Yes, and Leliana was discreet enough not to attempt to read it. I’ll even admit that it was good to see her again, although I’m still a little shocked that she’s been selected as the new Divine.”

As Kieran’s parents embraced, Cole followed the boy further into the clearing. A little way beyond her companions, one more Warden sat alone on a log, examining some documents. The woman was petite and elegant, in a way that almost belied her strength. Sunlight filtered through the trees to weave itself into the braids of long chestnut hair coiled at the nape of her neck, and glimmered in the double-headed griffon on her breastplate. She was distracted; she hadn’t even registered the new arrivals. When Kieran drew close, she glanced up in surprise, her bright blue eyes wary for an instant. Then a warm smile of recognition broke over her features, and she set aside her papers and held out her hands to the boy. “Hello, sweetheart,” she said. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“Hello, Aunt Elissa.”
The Hollows of Their Footprints

Chapter Summary

The author and the editor talk after the story is done.

Chapter Notes

We did it! We made it! Oh, Maker, I can hardly believe it but it's true! This epilogue is actually not really necessary, but it amused me so I decided to write it.

The sequel we discuss here really is going to be coming, but because of everything I've got going on in the next few months, I probably won't start posting it until the summer. It's going to cover all of the DLC adventures, plus some original content that I dreamed up. In the meantime, however, I have another Inquisition AU that I've been picking at during odd moments and I'm going to post that. It was a case of the story not leaving me alone until I wrote it down; Varric trades his editor's position for that of narrative character, and it's... well, let's just say it's pretty different from anything I've ever written or even read.

Thank you SO much to everyone who stuck with me all the way through this - my readers, my beta readers, the artists whose work appears in the various chapters, and everyone who offered me their support. I'm so grateful to everyone who read and reviewed and encouraged me. You helped me get here and I appreciate it deeply. Enjoy the last silly scene, and keep an eye out for more nonsense from me!

Epilogue: The Hollows of Their Footprints

“Is there anything else?” Varric asked tiredly. No, not tired, just bored.

“Some correspondence. You have a letter from the Merchants’ Guild.”

“Put it on the pile.”

Seneschal Bran rolled his eyes a bit, with what might be called a long-suffering kind of sigh. “And one from the Prince of Starkhaven.”

“Put it on the other pile.”

“And one from Comtesse Rutherford.”

“Oh, I’ll read that one.” The dwarf accepted the scroll and unrolled it eagerly. “You can go,” he added, glancing at Bran over the top of it.
“Yes, Excellency.”

Varric’s guest watched patiently while he read his mail. “Good news, I trust?” she ventured after a moment.

“Very good. We can expect Eyebrows and Curly here in time after all. I was afraid they weren’t going to make it.” He rolled up the letter again, looking satisfied. “Looks like they’re paying a visit to her parents in Ostwick, and then they’ll come here.”

She looked at her notes. “Well, I think we can safely say we’ve wrapped up the story. What happened to everyone?”

“Well, I had Cole talk about it a little in that last chapter. Most of the gang didn’t leave immediately, except for Vivienne. Things having gone down the way they did in Orlais, and with Bastien, she decided to resume her post in Celene’s court. Moral support for the empress and that sort of thing.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“And Solas was gone, obviously, so the Inquisitors were down two mages at a shot. Sunshine had to involve herself in everything a little more than I would have liked.” He chuckled. “She enjoyed it, though.”

“That’s good.”

“Leliana couldn’t run off right away to be Divine. She had to get some of her people ready to fill in for her, mostly Charter and Harding. I think Eyebrows is still to this day a little shocked that she took the name Divine Victoria, but Nightingale thought it was an appropriate thing,” Varric mused. "She didn't just name herself after the lady boss, but also after the whole victory over Corypheus. It works, I guess.”

"And the others?"

"Blackwall stuck around for a while, but then he went off walking the world doing his atonement thing. Sera had some work to do with her Jennies, and I couldn’t even tell you what Cole was doing at some points. Eventually some of us got on a ship and came to this side of the Waking Sea, which ended up being fairly important.”

“Important to you or important in general?” she teased him.

“A little of column A, a little of column B. But we’ll get to all that in the sequel,” he added. “If I don’t miss my guess, we should have just enough time to write it before people start showing up for this party.”

“Sequel?” she repeated, startled. “You never said anything about a sequel.”

“Of course we have to have a sequel, Scholar!” He chuckled, enjoying the expression in her eyes. “How else will the readers know what happened during that business with the Avvar? And the Deep Roads? My return to Kirkwall? Not to mention the whole Exalted Council nonsense. I mean, if nothing else, you’re going to want to know about how Eyebrows became Comtesse Rutherford, am I right? And if you want to know, then other people probably do too.”

“Well, yes, fair... but you really think we can get it done in time? This is a pretty big event you have planned, and I don’t want to interfere.” She looked doubtful.
Varric shook his head, chuckling. “We can get it done. We might not do a lot of sleeping, but we can get it done. Besides, the event details are being handled by someone I trust completely.”

“But it took us this long just to do the first story! What makes you think we can get an entire sequel done in time?”

“We’re writers, Scholar. It’s what we do.”

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