Qunari don't mate for life. They don't settle into the monogamous ways that other races do. They grab life by the horns and ride it hard. They indulge lustfully with whomever they please whenever they please. This is the way of the Qun. And it was something Iron Bull lived by since birth, a mentality that is as much a part of him as the majestic horns jutting from his skull. But even so, the ways of the Qun just may end up as nothing more than hazy remnants of his past once he crosses paths with the most unlikely stranger. A woman that, in time, will realize she has managed to tame the Bull and capture his heart in a way no one else ever will.

The Iron Bull is the one used to doing the conquering, but he ultimately becomes conquered by the confusing, alluring, infuriating, passionate reins of true love...
The Bond

Chapter Notes

I'd like to give credit to Ynorka.DeviantArt.com for Iron Bull and Omri Koresh at Cruzine.com for Ayla in the provided image. I in no way own the artwork, but have merely used my meager Photoshop skills to create some rendition of how Ayla and Iron Bull look for my fanfic. :)

Also, for this fic, I decided to descriptively and physically make Iron Bull look more "live-action" rather than "video game". Simply put, the Iron Bull in my graphic/fanfic is more "Romance Novel-esque", which is what I'm going for. He still sounds, acts, and thinks like my beloved, original video game Iron Bull, though. :) 

Another thing: my Bull doesn't wear the brace on his left leg or have missing fingers on his left hand, NOT to say something won't eventually occur in the writing that brings those things. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

WOOOSH!

The Iron Bull's axe rotated wildly through the air. Around and around it went, the blade appearing as a metallic blur. The great Qunari's one normally sky-blue eye appeared dark and piercing as he expertly cycloned his massive body to cut down one Hakkon warrior after another, blood splattering his armor and face like some macabre form of graffiti.

The last one stood a short distance from Bull, Inquisitor Hannibal Luthor, Dorian, and Sera. His lean body was painted in flaky bits of black and white mud, his hazel eyes moving to all four of them while he maintained a battle stance. All of his fellow tribesmen were dead. He was the last. Perhaps, he should...run?

Hannibal shot forward first, his great legs pumping swiftly. For a Qunari, he moved incredibly fast, though he wasn't quite as big as Iron Bull. His majestic horns curled back and up, coated over with silver. His skin was dark grey, and fiery red hair was fashioned into a man-bun, which Dorian had helped with that morning in their hut. Hannibal’s aqua eyes were fixed on the prize like a beast on the hunt—the fleeing Hakkon.

"Guess that means we're going to finish this, hm?" muttered Dorian.

"Good. I still have arrows left." Sera grinned, then she, Dorian, and Bull took flight after the Inquisitor.

Iron Bull took the rear. It was his specialty and the place he always assumed when out with his fellow companions. He wanted to be sure no threats flanked them. His eye was watchful as he moved, and it swept easily from Sera, who ran ahead of him, to the massive tree trunks rising like sentinels all around them. Somewhere in the intermeshed canopy high overhead a bird screamed in protest of something.
“Ya see ‘im, boss?” called Iron Bull.

“There! Across the creek!” Hannibal boomed. He saw their enemy not far ahead but moving fast.

“Agh, I do hate all this running,” Dorian complained, though he wasn’t too far behind Hannibal. A very light, if not playful, grin spread over his face, curling those fine lips beneath his moustache. White teeth etched against golden-brown skin. “Though, I must say, I can never complain about the view.”

Hannibal spared a quick smile over his shoulder. He knew Dorian was talking about admiring his ass.

They ran after the Hakkon warrior at a steady pace. Hannibal found him easy to track, following prints in the mud, broken embrium stalks, and flattened grass. After a few minutes they reached a place where the trees parted into a slightly dim clearing, and beyond that was the mouth of a cave. The Inquisitor held up a hand and curled his fingers into a great fist, signaling his party to halt. His eyes narrowed at the ominous cave’s mouth, decorated around all the edges by arbor blessing. Some of the long, flowy plant tendrils had even been purposefully arranged. A way to try to camouflage the entrance.

“Quiet and messy—or loud and messy. Either way’s good with me,” quirked Sera in a low voice.

“I’m down for loud and messy myself,” Iron Bull mused, giving the petite blonde elf a glance with that one eye. His other eye was slashed by a series of pale scars and hidden behind a patch.

“Aren’t you always?” Dorian shot.

Iron Bull grinned at the pretty man.

“He’s not alone in there,” said Hannibal. “They might have a berserker.”

Dorian’s sigh was drawn out and non-too amused. He made a displeased sound. “I can’t stand those brutes. They smell.”

“Well, we all can’t smell of flowers and fluff constantly like you.” Sera smiled widely at him.

“Pfft. No, I suppose not, but you could at least try.” At that remark, Dorian lifted a brow at Iron Bull.

“What?” The great Qunari shrugged. “I bathed…somewhat…before we left camp.”

“In what?” Dorian returned. “Druffalo piss and horse sweat?”

This earned a low but rich chuckle from Iron Bull. “You like it.”

“No, I most certainly do not.”

“Iron Bull, stop flirting with my boyfriend.” Hannibal glanced at them. He was smiling.

“Sorry, boss.” When Hannibal turned to examine the cave again, Bull puckered his lips and blew a silent kiss at Dorian, who smirked, shaking his head, though Bull could tell he enjoyed the teasing as much as Bull did. If the beautiful little man wasn’t bound at the hip with the Inquisitor, Iron Bull would viciously pursue him until he had no choice but to succumb to the Qunari’s inner charm. Oh, well. Maybe in another life…

“Alright,” Hannibal said, “here’s what we’re going to do.”

(*)

The Hakkon soldiers in the cave were indeed ready and waiting for the group that tracked their fellow comrade. There was a slightly curving throat of stone about fifty feet long before it opened into a spacious cavern. The den had once belonged to some great bear judging by the random piles of animal bones and pelts the Hakkon found when they’d camped the area. There were also a few skeletons that could’ve been human or elf.

“Kra’chka dor ne chas!” Ready for an attack! hissed a warrior that was surely the leader, his sword swapping from hand to hand. His deep, dark eyes gleamed from his black and white painted face.

The half dozen Hakkon did as he instructed. The one that Hannibal and the others had chased looked snarmer now that he had the backup of his comrades. And the Inquisitor was right in his assumption that they had a berserker. He stood a good foot taller than his fellow warriors. His forehead was wide and low-sloped, and his eyes winked like the husks of dead scarabs beneath the overhang of his brow in the ample light of lamps and torches. His mud-painted body was thick and meaty, and he had the flat side of a great blade settled over one shoulder. He grinned, quite looking forward to slashing open bellies and sending guts flying.

At the far end of the cave, opposite the way in or out, a prisoner hunkered in a cage, her once clean dressed caked with mud just as her hair was; she was actually covered with mud from head to toe, and not the kind the Hakkon wore. She was simply dirty from travel and lack of care from her captors. Her slender ebony hands had moved to grip the bars of her captivity and she tilted her head to listen, eyes the color of pale, blue ice going wide.
At first, the silence was so thick that it seemed all one had to do was flick one’s tongue out to taste it. And then the area where the Hakkon had spread into a battle formation erupted in green smoke. They immediately began choking and staggering from the poisoned air. They didn’t see Hannibal, Dorian, and Iron Bull charging into the main cavern, with Sera shifting from stealth right in front of her friends. The spunky elf had her bow up, arrow drawn tight. She fired and the shaft embedded in the eye of the one who might have been the leader. His body thumped heavily to the cave floor. One of his legs twitched frantically before he fell still.

The poison didn’t last long. It had dissipated in less than ten seconds. By that time, Hannibal and Iron Bull had lunged into the fray to engage their enemies. Sera and Dorian kept their distance, dealing out ranged attacks, the handsome mage conjuring a flame-blast that was directed at the single Hakkon enchanter. He was easy to spot, standing behind the others, the magical book of his craft clutched and opened in one hand as he summoned incantations.

Dorian’s rule of combat was to take out the magical enemies in a group first, since they could place wards on their teammates. And speaking of wards…he sent a barrier at Hannibal and Bull, the surge of power shooting through the air and coating them with a short but effect reprieve from any damage. Then he went back to attacking the enchanter, twirling and thrusting his staff, channeling his power through it. Dorian’s attacks melted away at the enchanter until he sank to the ground in a smoking heap. The deceased clearly hadn’t been much of a match for the Tevinter mage.

“Well, he didn’t last long,” Sera quipped and sent another arrow flying.

“I’m not surprised. Men usually don’t last very long when I’m whirling my stick at them.”

“Ha. Good. So good.” She chuffed out some laughter.

“I know.” Dorian grinned at her, then the two of them turned all their attacks on the berserker, who was the only one left standing.

Berserkers were one of the worst enemies because they could absorb so much damage as well as deliver a great deal of damage. And this one was no less merciless than others they’d encountered. He roared as he swung his great blade with such vehemence that both Hannibal and Iron Bull could feel the breeze it created. They both made to parry and dodge the berserker’s attacks, rolling and ducking when he struck.

“AH-HAAAA!” Iron Bull bellowed with delight, enjoying every moment of the fight. There was actually a smile on his face. His axe came up in time to halt one of the berserker’s swings. Both large men were nearly face to face in their power struggle. Bull was huge, but the Hakkon warrior was an absolute behemoth. He growled close to Iron Bull’s face, revealing sharp teeth caked with yellowish filth. Bull grimaced at the smell seeping from between the man’s lips. “You could use a mint.”

The berserker roared at the insult and gave a great budge that sent Bull backpedaling a few steps, though he remained steady on his feet. An arrow landed in the Hakkon’s side and he gasped at it, then mindlessly broke the shaft, leaving the head embedded. He kept on attacking.

“Bloody hell,” hissed Sera.

“The head, love, aim for the head,” Dorian piped, still sending a bombard of magical hits from his staff.

“Oh, stuff it. Can’t go for his head easily with the Inquisitor and Bull dancing all around him.” She drew another arrow and made it land in the berserker’s leg, and he howled, breaking it off like the other.

“Excuses, excuses.” Dorian teased further. He simply adored Sera. He believed his affinity for the elf might stem from the fact that both of them preferred the company of their same genders. They could relate to one other.

Over inside the cage, well away from the battle yet close enough to hear everything, the prisoner listened, head jerking this way and that, trying to follow the sounds of action. She was getting anxious, she wanted out more than anything, and she knew the newcomers would help her. They just had to kill the berserker…

“Hey, Dorian,” Bull tossed at the mage without looking at him, completely fixed on holding off the steadily dwindling berserker, “Stop dickin’ around and send a fireball or something up this guy’s ass.”

The mage obliged by gathering his mana to conjure purplish light around his hands. At first, the power increased as it normally would, swelling and transferring to his staff…and then something happened. Dorian felt his magic pulsate, expanding so quickly within him that he trembled and gasped. It was becoming uncontrollable. Expanding. Inflating. His whole body glowed purple now. And it had happened so suddenly, so quickly.

“What the…!” Dorian cried out.

Before he could do anything, powerless to do anything really, all the gathered power in him surged forward and up, arcing through the cave, channeling in on the berserker, but bounding off the walls and ground as well. The attack wasn’t localized, but sporadic and uncontrolled. A dozen or more lightning bolts sizzled across the cave, each one driving through the berserker, who
trembled in place, muscles taut and eyes rolling in their sockets as he was electrocuted.

To avoid the same fate as that poor fool, Iron Bull and Hannibal had to dodge and roll. After a few moments, the electricity faded away, leaving the berserker crispy and burnt on the cave floor. The air was rank with the smell of his fried flesh.

All eyes turned to Dorian, who was studying his hands as if they were two foreign objects.


Dorian shook his head, frowning. “I-I don’t know. I couldn’t stop the build of power for some reason. I haven’t lost control like that since…” His gray eyes with their hints of lavender turned to Hannibal and he lifted a brow sheepishly, “…the curtains.”

Sera and Bull looked to Hannibal, who remained silent. He certainly wasn’t about to go into the sexual details of his and Dorian’s first night together. Instead, he concentrated on the instance. “What do you think could’ve caused it?” he asked.

“Don’t know, love, but I’ll damn sure be looking into it.”

The group examined the dead scattered through the cave, then began to loot anything of value. The Hakkon weren’t a rich people, but they did have a few pouches of gold on them as well as some freshly hunted nugs and quail eggs.

While Sera was crouched by one of the bodies, she hummed softly to herself, looting it. She caught movement a short distance away and jerked her eyes in the direction. A cage hidden in the shadows.

“Um…there’s…something back here.”

The others moved to her. Hannibal picked up a lantern and approached the cage. There was movement as the creature inside cowered against the far bars, hearing the steps. She wasn’t scared really, just cautious. For all she knew, she might be wrong, and these people were there to steal her away as the raiders had done.

Hannibal lowered and shined the warm light into the cage. What he saw was a person covered in mud and grime, a ruined dress, bare feet, long (normally white?) hair, and luminous eyes the color of blue diamonds. In the places where she wasn’t covered in mud, he saw that she had dark, ebony skin. She was trembling a bit and her vision wasn’t exactly fixed on his, eyes roaming in his general direction but not really focusing. She was blind.

“It’s a female,” Hannibal spoke over his shoulder. “Human. Sera, lock please.”

The elf moved forward and began tinkering with the mechanisms of the lock, producing a small kit from her traveling pouch. As she worked, she spared a few looks at the woman, but didn’t say anything. After a minute, there came a soft snick when the lock disengaged. Sera removed it and swung the cage door open. Slowly, she backed away. “S’alright, you can come out. No one’ll hurt you,” spoken softly.

It took a few seconds of consideration, but the woman slid forward, feet touching the cave floor first, then she moved fully from the cage, and she squatted a moment, letting her legs adjust, as she’d been in the cage for over a day that time. She slowly stood and weaved her unseeing eyes over each shape, leaning forward just a bit.

“I…thought you were blind, but you appear to see us,” Hannibal said.

“I’m legally blind, yes,” the woman’s voice was surprisingly crisp, alert, tailored with good upbringing. “I can barely see shapes, well, shadow-shapes really.” Her blurry gaze had settled on Iron Bull. His vague shadow was big, nearly as big as that berserker, and his head had shapes jutting from either side of it. “Y-you’re a Qunari…”

“Yep.” Bull answered simply, his interest peaked at the woman. She was petite of frame, not overly tall, though at least four or five inches taller than Sera.

“I’m also Qunari. My name is Hannibal. What’s yours?”

Qunari? And named Hannibal? The woman smiled enough to reveal straight, white teeth. “You’re Hannibal Luthor, the Inquisitor?”

“You…know of me?”

“Seriously, boss. Who doesn’t?” Bull chimed.

Hannibal ignored the playful jab and addressed the woman. “Well, you know who I am, but I’ve yet to get your name.”

“Oh, yes, I’m Ayla.”

“How did the Hakkon get you?”

Ayla’s hazy eyes drifted and she became noticeably sadder. She looked in Hannibal’s general direction, though her eyes were fixed somewhere on his chest. She looked like she might cry. “I was traveling with my brother to Redcliffe when we were attacked by raiders. H-he…he…”
sighed and shook her slender shoulders, “…he told me to hide while he faced them, so I did. I ran and felt my way along, but I was caught anyway, as you can see.”

“Hakkon warriors that far east? Though I suppose it’s not unheard of,” said Dorian.

Ayla shook her head. “No, it wasn’t Hakkon who attacked. They were a different group and didn’t speak the Hakkon’s language. They sold me to the Hakkon.” She sniffled as tears slid down her cheeks, cutting tracks in the caked mud. “I just wish I knew what became of Elemir. There weren’t very many of them, and he’s a good fighter. Maybe…maybe he got away.” She sounded hopeful, nodding.

“Yes, maybe,” Hannibal offered gently.

Ayla suddenly stiffened, her head tilting, eyes narrowing. She was listening. “More are coming.”

They all began to hear the unhindered war cries now. Another group of Hakkon was closing in, most likely peeved about their dead left in that clearing, having tracked the Inquisitor and his party to the cave.

“Stay here,” Hannibal gruffed at Ayla, then he and the others moved from the cave to handle the coming foes.

Ayla was many things, but compliant wasn’t one of them. Moving at a steady pace, putting her arms out at times to gauge how close she was to the cave walls and other obstacles, using shadows and shapes to guide her, she followed the passage until she could make out the daylight as a dreamy glow beyond the mouth of the cave.

She stood there and listened to the combat, various figures moving and grunting and cursing, the smell of blood sharp and metallic on the air. One shape did stand out. The great Qunari with his impressive display of horns. Ayla squinted and tried to make his shadow-shape as noticeable as possible while he battled the Hakkon.

Sera and Dorian, keeping their distance from much melee, sent magic and arrows at their enemies, who consisted of a few swordsmen and archers. No berserker this time, thank the Maker. They were down to just a few more Hakkon.

Iron Bull swung his mighty axe and took the head clean off an enemy. He growled as the decapitated thing rolled into some tall grass. He turned to eye the area for another foe to finish, and that one eye fixed on an archer. An archer who was readying an arrow and aiming it at…

The Bull broke into an all-out run for Ayla, who stood just outside the cave, unknowingly in the archer’s crosshairs. The woman saw the Qunari’s shape bearing down on her but was too scared to do anything, so she did the only thing that came to mind and squeezed her eyes shut, much the way a child might do while hunkered under her blanket at night in hopes that the Monster Under the Bed would go away. Believing that simply closing her eyes would make it all vanish.

Iron Bull roared as his arms took the woman and spun her from harm, ready to take the arrow if necessary. But it wasn’t. Hannibal had rammed his sword into the archer’s back, finishing off the last of the enemies. Bull was down on one knee with Ayla in his grip, his long, strong fingers clamped to the bare skin of her arms. They stayed that way for a moment, and then something happened.

Ayla’s eyes widened and she quivered, hit with a dizzying slam of energy, and the Bull began to feel it too, until they both tensed under the pressure. Ayla sucked in a breath at the sensation. It was like someone had placed her on a trebuchet and pulled the handle to send her catapulting at unthinkable speed to some unknown destination. Iron Bull might explain it the same way, since he too was experiencing the sensation. His hands remained clutch to her. He couldn’t break contact then if he wanted to. He was compelled to hold on, his fingers locked firmly to her warm flesh, adhered there by a nameless force.

Light. So much light.

Trees. Mountains. Lakes. Fat clouds zooming across an endless sky. The changes of the seasons. Flowers blooming, dying, and blooming again. Snow and desert. Thunder and lightning. Night and day. The moon and stars and the sun. All pairings that fit together or opposite one another so well, so…naturally.

And then the light dimmed and the world returned.

Both the Bull and the woman shivered faintly. She mewled and he grunted, both with their eyes closed tightly, coming down from whatever ride that was. Dorian, Sera, and Hannibal had no idea what was happening, so they remained watchful and curious.


The Qunari only vaguely heard the Inquisitor. Hannibal’s voice in the back of his mind like an overlooked bottle of old ale sitting on the very back end of a shelf in a cellar. He knew it was there, but he wasn’t concentrating on it. He opened his eye and focused on Ayla.

She slowly opened her eyes as well, squinting at the almost dreadful flood of intensely bright light. The kind of eye-burn one gets when they’d been in a dark room for ages, only to suddenly have the door flung open, allowing luminance to flood in and assault their shaded vision. Her eyes watered and a few tears dropped from their corners…and they widened like twin pale-blue moons,
darting with quick alarm over Iron Bull’s face. She almost yelped. This couldn’t be happening. She could see him! Actually, see him! And not some blurry, blotchy, makeshift rendition from which she had to use her imagination to fill in the gaps. No, she could see every feature of his face. The scars, the eye-patch, the beard stubble, his fascinating eye as it met hers, the gentle way it watched her. It was all too overwhelming for the woman. She gasped and fainted.

The others hurried over. Bull continued to study the woman in his arms, her weight not even the slightest burden.

“What happened?” Hannibal’s concern thickened his voice.

“Dunno.” Iron Bull shook his head. He carefully lowered Ayla to the ground then saw to adjusting his axe across his back. “Strangest thing I’ve ever experienced. I felt…like…I dunno…like I was flying through the ages. Through time…or something. Can’t explain it.” They watched Bull move back to Ayla and gather her in his arms. “And I think she can see now.”

“Why do you say that?” Dorian asked.

“Just then, when we were looking at each other, she focused on me. Her eyes, the pupils, they sharpened, and she was studying me as clearly as you were studying the boss’s ass earlier.” Dorian smirked at him. Bull continued. “She was looking at the details in my face. She looked me in the eye. I’m telling you, she can see now…for whatever reason.” Little did he know that his last statement was only partly true.

Chapter End Notes

This fanfiction is planned to revolve around Iron Bull and Ayla predominantly (I’ve already nicknamed them Aybull in my head, haha), but will have plenty of side-stories and chapters that involve all the awesome main characters of Dragon Age: Inquisition. I will add more tags (and alter them) as I expand on the story and add chapters.

I also would like to add that I’ve read some stunning and beautiful fiction on the site regarding Adoribull (my FAVORITE pairing!). I’ve read the smutty ones, the sad ones, the funny ones, and they are all GREAT, and the reason why I started up this fanfiction. I absolutely love the Dragon Age Universe and am excited to write about it! I hope anyone who decides to read my ramblings enjoys them. :)

Thanks!

P.S. Please feel free to comment. We likeses comments. *in my best Gollum voice* :)


A Stubborn Bull

While the others made swift work of picking through the dead Hakkon for any valuables, Iron Bull tended to Ayla. Well, he really only held her limp body in his arms while she slumbered, overwhelmed by the power that had swept over them both. Bull’s eye grazed the area, his pointy ears keen. He lowered his eye back to the dirty bundle in his grip. He could tell that her hair was pale where the mud didn’t cake it, and it was very long, down to her bottom probably, and it was a very springy, kinky grade. He could see that too. Very whimsical.

“Let’s move,” said Hannibal, and they left the area, heading back for camp.

Bull found himself studying Ayla as she slept, wondering just what her story was, and what the absolute hell had happened back there. Less than twenty minutes after they started trekking, she stirred softly. Iron Bull just kept on moving, his eye forward.

Ayla’s eyes fluttered open, and she could tell it was still daylight from the way the shadows had pulled back some. And she could still feel the sun pressing down when they passed through areas where the forest’s canopy was broken. She just couldn’t see anything. Her blurred vision shifted sideward and up, and she knew that the big Qunari carried her, his stride long and purposefully, making her rock in his grasp. One of those thick arms was hooked under her knees and the other was linked around her upper back, gripped at her shoulders.

She found herself wondering why she couldn’t see clearly. There was obviously something in his touch that had sparked the clarity, and she was anxious to experience it again, even if she had to go through that catapulting ride that came before the vision.

Iron Bull kept his eye forward, going militant and staying silent.

Ayla’s smile came gradually. “So…are you just not going to talk to me?”

Finally, he did look at her. “What’s there to say?”

Her brow furrowed and she tried to focus on him, failed, and gave up. She huffed. “Well, what about that…whatever it was that happened by the cave. Are you…a magic wielder?”

Bull uttered a short laugh, which made Dorian peer over his shoulder a moment to see the Qunari conversing with their new friend. ‘I hate the shit, but, well…I put up with it. To answer your question—no, I’m not a magic wielder. I went to grab you so a Hakkon’s arrow wouldn’t find its way into your carcass, and we had that…experience.’

“Oh,” Ayla said. “What’s your name?”

“Iron Bull…well…I’m known as The Iron Bull.”

“In that case, thank you for saving my life, Mr. The Iron Bull.”

He rumbled with deep, rich laughter, a sound Ayla found appealing. “Just Iron Bull. And you’re welcome.”

She sighed deeply, thoughts switching back to the experience they’d shared, to her swift taste of true sight. Bull was curious too, yet cautious. He couldn’t understand either why she seemed to not be able to focus like she had before. Ayla perked in his stern but gentle grip as a thought occurred.

“We’re not touching.”

“Huh?” One of his brows lifted comically.

She smiled and nodded. “I know that’s it. It has to be. When you grabbed me, you were touching my arms, my bare skin.”

The Qunari warrior thought over it. She was right, he had been gripping her arms, and he fully recalled how he’d been unable to break contact once the whole fast, flickering show of sceneries and instances began.

“May I?” Ayla was already lifting a hand towards his face, since it was the most accessible bare skin she could reach. If he hadn’t been wearing his thin but durable chest plate, she’d have been pressed flush to his gray hide before she awakened.

Bull found himself lost in her startling blue eyes, such a contrast to that dark skin. “Okay,” he answered.

Ayla inhaled and advanced her hand until it contacted one firm, heavily-stubbled cheek. She sucked in another sharp breath when her vision snapped to clear perfection almost immediately, the blurriness and shadows all shrinking back to the edges of her vision until they were gone. Iron Bull watched in amazement as the pupils in her eyes contracted faintly and shifted, and then she was truly seeing him again, eyes roaming over his face with much less alarm this time. Without thinking, only feeling with the soft pads of her fingertips, Ayla trailed up and over his brow, tracing the scars decorating him like badges earned in combat over the years. Her brow furrowed and her face tilted to take in every single detail. She had never seen a face this clearly before, not even her own.
And Iron Bull let her little hand roam, actually taking pleasure in how she seemed to have awakened to a whole new world, a world he’d taken for granted in many ways. It was somewhat endearing, the wonder and disbelief in her eyes while she studied him as if he were the most enormous thing she’d ever seen. Her hand brushed back and over one of his ears, drawing a low growl. It was guttural, feral… and completely unexpected. A Qunari’s ears were very sensitive and played a major role in certain types of sexual stimuli. If the woman didn’t know that before, she did now.

Ayla had gone tense at the sound, eyes fixed on his, almost scared of the way that single eye burned down at her. She hadn’t been with a man before but she knew what the act entailed and had heard similar sounds plenty of times. For instance, the moments when Elemir took her into taverns so they might get a room above. He’d leave her by the fireplace or at a table for only a moment to purchase the key, and it wouldn’t be long before some man approached and tried to coerce her into nightly activities. Her brother always ran them off in quite a hurry, however. Some of them had made little grunts and sexual noises in their sorry attempts at seduction, but none of them had made a sound quite like the Qunari carrying her in his arms now. Not even close. She was blushing profusely at it.

A bird squawked not far off and she turned her head in the direction, thankful for the distraction, not breaking contact with his skin. Her mouth formed a large O of surprise. The trees, the environment, even the sky, which she decided was like the color of Iron Bull’s eye—she could see it all. She spied the backs of the others as they walked ahead—a woman with short blonde hair, a medium-built man with dark hair carrying a long stick on his back, and a tall, horned man whom she knew was the Inquisitor. Ayla swooned, sighed, and dropped her hand, instantly plummeting her back into the gloom. But she didn’t mind. She was used to it.

Iron Bull had been watching her newfound intrigue in silence. He frowned when her hand fell. “You alright?”

Ayla nodded. “This new vision, it makes me tired.” She relaxed in his arms again, head flopping to his chest.

“You do it more often, you’ll get used to it.”

She smiled and quirked a pale eyebrow. “You realize you may have to stay with me then, if I am to do it more often. You might be the only one who has the touch that allows me to see.”

She’d said it jokingly, but the words made Iron Bull stiffen all the same. He hadn’t thought about that prospect, and he didn’t want to think about it now. He was The Iron Bull, no ties to anyone, and he didn’t plan on being tethered to the bundle of muddy rags in his arms either… even if it meant denying her this gift of sight. The boss would no doubt take her with them back to Skyhold, and once that happened, Ayla could get with Solas, Dorian, Vivienne, Morrigan, and any other mages to see if they could whip her up a pair of magical spectacles. And Bull could return to life as usual.

(*)

It was just after sunset when they reached the Basin Floor camp, and Iron Bull had carried her all the way, even when she’d insisted that she could manage. He’d only brushed it off and told her she’d slow them down, which made Ayla go silent for the rest of the trip. She decided that The Iron Bull was quite condescending when he chose to be.

She heard many voices. The bustle of soldiers and scouts. Even someone playing a lute, which made her perk and smile. She loved music just as much as she loved to sing and dance. It felt much safer there, more civilized. Iron Bull took Ayla near one of the fire pits and finally set her down. He looked over her swiftly, before turning and stalking off without a single word. She was mostly blind and trying to pick out shapes, head turning here and there. She spun slowly, only vaguely spying the shadowy forms of bustling soldiers. She was a stranger amongst them, and the most familiar of them all had left her alone. Her face furrowed as she began to slightly panic. A small mewl trembled past her full lips.

“Calm down, woman,” Iron Bull said, and she spun to face him. “Just went to get you some clean towels and soap for the bath springs.”

She pushed firmly at his chest to show her displeasure at being ditched. “Why didn’t you say that before leaving me?”

He laughed. “I wasn’t gone that long. Besides, you’re in camp now, so you don’t need me to protect you.”

She took the items when he handed them over. Their fingers brushed faintly and she was awarded a brief vision of clarity before it was gone again. She’d seen tents, supply crates, and at least a dozen soldiers, though she knew there were more.

“Sera will get you some clean clothes and take you to the springs,” Bull gruffed, then turned and left again.

Ayla frowned as his bulk moved, swallowed by the shadows that closed in once he was far enough away, beyond the limits of her pitiful vision. No sooner than he left, Ayla felt a tap on her shoulder and she faced in the direction. It was hard to make out, but the shape was short and petite, familiar, as was the scent.
“Sera…” Ayla muttered softly. She offered a faint smile.

“You’re right.” The Elf studied her, gripping a set of clothes under her arm. “Ole Iron Balls said ye could see ‘im, but ye can’t see anything.”

“I can see when he touches me.”

Sera grinned. “Say wha’?” A blond brow lifted. “S’weird.”

Ayla’s shoulders rose and fell with a deep sigh. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

“Ah, well. Residual magic left by one of those Hakkon archon-type guys, maybe.”

“Maybe…”

“Anyway, let’s get ye cleaned. Inquisitor wants to talk with ye, but it’ll be later because he’s busy, ye know, with important-people things. ‘Sign this, sign that. Judge a man to lose his head’,” Sera deepened her voice at that last bit to imitate how she believed Hannibal sounded.

The woman’s upbeat manner had Ayla smiling. She couldn’t understand the meaning of some of the rambling, but it was amusing.

“C’mon, you.” Sera took her hand and led her through the camp.

Their skin to skin contact confirmed that Sera wasn’t able to give her sight, and Ayla planned to test the theory with others in the camp as time allowed. Now was time to wash the blasted mud and dirt from her body. Never in her life had she ever been so filthy.

(*)

The Basin Floor camp was actually more like a small town really. It didn’t just have tents; it had some huts left in the area, so the camp was built around them. A natural barrier was formed by a series of massive rock formations, which had then been filled in by tall, sturdy shoring logs. This camp was the main headquarters for the Inquisition in the Frostback Basin.

Holding still to Ayla’s hand, Sera took her down a path on the south end of camp. It cut between some boulders and was lined with torches, and Ayla could barely sense their warm light at the edges of her vision. They came to a place where the path split left and right. Sera went right since that way led to the female bathing area; left was for the men.

Sera snickered inwardly to wonder which one Krem would go to were ‘he’ here.

The springs consisted of a series of pools that were naturally heated, filtered, and circulated by underground vents. Steam rose in lazy tendrils from the water’s surface. Ayla couldn’t see anything much, catching some shadows, but she could clearly smell the minerals and limestone, feel the warmth. There were two female soldiers at the springs too, laughing and talking amongst themselves as they bathed.

“Here ya go,” Sera said, moving Ayla to one of the eight secluded pools. “The water’s just a couple of feet in front of ye, so be mindful of yer step.”

Ayla didn’t move when Sera released her hand. “Are you leaving me?”

“No. Just giving ye some room.”

“Oh…” She still didn’t move.

Sera chuckled. “Shy much? I promise, everything ye have I’ve seen. We all have the same parts here.”

Ayla took in a deep breath and decided the woman was right. No need to be modest. It wasn’t as if she could see anyone. She set the towels and bar of soap down, then peeled off the ruined mess of her dress. The thing was so soiled that it had grown stiff in places. She wrinkled her nose and tossed it aside, glad to be out of it. Then she turned to face the water.

“Careful, watch yer step,” called Sera.

A few seconds later, Ayla was slipping gratefully in the warm depths. The water reached up to just below her breasts. She lowered until she was in up to her chin, unseeing eyes closing slowly at the absolute bliss a warm bath always brought, especially after her time with the Hakkon. It hadn’t been long, but it felt like an eternity. She sighed and dunked fully under, letting the liquid infuse her.

Ayla finally felt past the edge of the pool for a towel. She cautiously found her footing and pulled herself out. Sera could only watch rather greedily as the water cascaded down the woman’s slim body, curved in all the right places, with a small waist. Her breasts were full yet not very large,
and stark white hair reached down to her ass. And what an ass it was, so toned and round.  

A slip of guilt—but only the smallest slip—fell over Sera and she averted her eyes, smiling some. “Feeling better now the grime’s gone?”  

“Much better,” Ayla answered, beginning to towel her hair, dragging the thing along the length of the tresses. It didn’t take long for it to start tightening up, forming a slight poof. It still wouldn’t be completely dry for a couple of hours yet.

Sera stepped forward and handed her the clothes after she dried off. Ayla thanked her and made short work of putting on the panties, slim-fitting trousers that were a little long, and a short-sleeved shirt, which she tucked in the trousers. After cuffing the pants, she pulled on the belt and was done. “Do I look okay.”

“Oh, yeah…” Sera couldn’t stop staring at the woman, those pretty eyes, a shallow dimple on each cheek. She cleared her throat.  

“Um…you wouldn’t happen to have a comb, would you? My hair will become a near unmanageable mess if I don’t comb it while it’s wet.”

“Mm, I can get ye one back in camp, easy. And some slippers too.”

Ayla smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Sera.” Gripping the towels and soap in one hand, she reached the other delicate, dark-skinned arm out for the elf to lead her. “Shall we, then?”

(*)

Ayla heard the lute playing again as they moved up the path back to the camp main. There was much going still, and should she be surprised? The evening was early yet. She remained a few feet behind Sera, connected by their interlocked hands. Ayla took in as much as she could as they moved through the bustle. They approached a group of laughing soldiers, both men and women.


The soldiers howled with laughter.

Ayla blushed at the exchange, knowing the man had been watching her. It wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. She figured she must be somewhat pretty to be able to draw any man’s attention. She’d never seen herself in a mirror, so she didn’t know.

“I’ll get those shoes and comb for ya, then some grub for yer belly. Sound right?”

“Yes, please.” As if to state its own protest, her stomach growled fiercely.

(*)

Ayla…

The woman’s name wouldn’t leave Bull’s mind, nor would the image of her intense eyes. Sitting on a large weapon crate, he tore steadily into a sizable bowl of fish stew, eating slowly. For some reason, he couldn’t stop thinking about the bundle of dirty rags.

The Qunari loosened a snort. Why should he care about her? He didn’t even know her. His mind, as it had dozens of times since earlier, flipped back to that event shared between him and Ayla. He’d felt something unnamable, something that completely surpassed strange. He had a feeling there was more to it than either of them knew.

He sighed greatly with the intention of turning his full attention on his stew, when his eye lifted from the bowl and widened. There she was across the warmth of a few fire pits, seen through the shuffling soldiers, Sera holding her hand to lead her. Bull set his bowl aside to watch as Sera and Ayla shared some words, Ayla nodding. Then Sera left her sitting on a chair, while she hurried off for something. Ayla had begun to skim the shadow-shapes, her lovely—no, absolutely gorgeous—face holding a content expression. Her snowy hair had begun to really fluff out, forming an avalanche of disarray that cascaded over her shoulders and down her back.

“Wow,” Dorian moved from some unseen place and sat beside Bull, a dark brow arched and a grin ever present. “It’s hard to believe that’s what was hiding under all that mud. Lovely.”

Bull grunted and picked his bowl up again, trying to act like he wasn’t looking.

“Oh come now. You can’t deny it.”

Bull swallowed a mouthful. “Yeah, sure. She’s pretty.”

“Pretty?” Dorian chuckled. “Pretty is what you’d call a farmer’s daughter who one day decided to gussy up, don a dress, and paint her face. Ayla is, for lack of a better word, stunning; wouldn’t you say? And not even a speck of makeup it seems. Her complexion is flawless. I wonder what skin cream she uses…” He twisted his manicured moustache with manicured fingertips.

Bull snarled his lips, then slowly turned his one eye on the mage. “If you’re so interested, why don’t you go on over, make your move.” His sarcasm was thick as syrup.
“Ha, you make a good point! And if I weren’t of the ‘strictly-dickly’ variety, I believe I would. You certainly have been keeping your distance from her.” A pretty frown creased Dorian’s brow and his gray eyes flickered in the firelight. “Poor girl. You all but ran from her once we reached camp. Look at her.”

They both turned their eyes across the way to where Ayla sat alone and waiting for Sera to return. She stared down at her hands, fiddling them.

“You’ve spent the most time with her, and she’s probably wondering where you are. I mean, that’s how I would feel—abandoned.” He purposefully stressed the word.

Iron Bull sighed, his broad shoulders slumping some. Damn the ‘Vint for making him face the guilt he’d been trying to fight off. “So… because I was the one who carried her back here, I’m supposed to babysit her, is that it?”

Dorian’s eyes rolled, and he flippantly tossed a hand that was adorned with lavish rings. “You’re impossible at times, you know? All I’m saying is that, of everyone here, the girl knows you best. You could at least make her feel more welcome. It wasn’t long ago she was lathered in filth and locked in a cage, remember? Just… be friendly, you big lummox.”

At that, Dorian rose and drifted away, probably to find himself something to drink.

Iron Bull set his bowl aside again and looked in Ayla’s direction. Sera had returned and handed the woman slippers, a comb, and a bowl of stew. The Hakkon mustn’t have fed her regularly, because she ate quickly but with a daintiness Bull found kind of cute. It was like watching a bird with hands eating. After that, she took to combing at her hair.

(*)

Not long after Ayla finished eating, Sera took her through camp and up a low incline to where the main structure—probably once the hut of a chieftain gauging by its size—had been designated as the ‘war room’ for the camp. This was where Hannibal and other leaders, scouts, and applicable soldiers met to discuss strategies, plans, requisitions, and all other business. Like the war room back at Skyhold, a table sat in the middle of the floor, and a map labeled with various pins and markers was spread across it.

Sera released Ayla’s hand but didn’t move too far away from her. The only other people in the room were Dorian and Hannibal. The Inquisitor was bent over the table looking at something when the women entered. He moved around to stand before Ayla, and she stared up at the shadow he presented.

Silently, Iron Bull had moved inside the room. His tall, broad form leaned to the wall, arms crossed over his bare chest. He rarely wore shirts, but there were those occasions when he had to appear before the Orlesian Court or some other uppity types which required him to be less… wild. His body was solid, muscles rippling in his arms, torso, midriff, sides, and everyplace else that happened to be covered by clothes just then. He was quite a Qunari specimen.

“Are you doing better?” Hannibal’s voice was low and pleasing. Very rich.

“Y-yes, Inquisitor.” Ayla licked her lips. She felt rather nervous then, standing before the famed man who had made such a mark on Thedas. Her hazy vision slipped sideward when she saw another shape step in closer to Hannibal.

Hannibal looked to his side and smiled, placing an arm around the man and pressing his bearded lips into his soft, dark hair. “This is Dorian. I don’t think you’ve officially met him.”

“Ah, yes. The fourth person in my group of heroes.” Ayla’s eyes swayed gently over Dorian’s shape, and she inhaled a deep breath. “I remember your smell.”

Dorian lifted a brow. “My smell?”

She nodded, laughing nervously. “It’s…the way I recognize people. I only have their shadow-shape to go by, and, if they allow it, I also touch their face. And, of course, there’s a person’s scent, their voice. My eyes may not work well, but my other senses are very keen.”

“Fascinating,” Dorian mused as he studied the lovely woman up close.


She took a breath and her eyes strayed faintly while she thought. “It’s difficult to explain. I saw a lot of light at first, then I saw all of these images, some of which I’d never seen with true clarity but recognized. Just bits of scenery—trees, lakes, mountains, a thunderstorm. Everything was moving so fast. I felt like I was falling, but falling forward. I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

“Me either,” Bull’s deep voice came from behind her, making her spin to face him.

Ayla saw that familiar shape, standing right at the edges of her broken vision. She turned back to Hannibal.

“Before you fainted, Bull said that you saw him, that you could focus on him,” Hannibal continued.
She nodded. “I did.”

“But…you can’t see now…”

Iron Bull moved from his lounging stance, closing the distance between him and Ayla in three strides. His large hand gripped gently at her arm, forming the bond of clear sight. The woman shivered at the hot band of his fingers and sucked in a breath at the startling way all the blotches dissipated, allowing her to see everything in the lantern-lit room. Stark blue eyes fell on Hannibal first, taking in his features. Then those eyes swung to the shorter (and prettier) man at his side. He had a moustache, which made her chuckle, and a beauty mark near his right eye. Ayla’s vision zipped to Sera next and she gave a smile that further accented her dimples.

“Freckles. Those are freckles, right?”

Sera nodded slowly, feeling a bit unnerved by whatever magic was causing the once blind woman to see, though she was still intrigued. “Yeeeah,” she answered slowly.

Finally, Ayla looked to Iron Bull, who rose like a living mountain beside her. His heat and scent poured from him in rather pleasant, familiar torrents. He was watching her curiously, recalling the way she’d skimmed her touch along his ear earlier. The absolute explosion of lust that punched him in the guts just then forced him to release her arm. He took a step back. How could he feel anything for this woman? She threatened everything he was, everything he stood for. She might inadvertently try to tie him down into serving as her personal set of eyes.

No, he wouldn’t have it. Nobody would tie him down. Nobody.

Ayla made a soft, perhaps frustrated, sound when his touch retracted. You’d think she had the blight the way he was avoiding her. She faced Hannibal again. “I don’t know why this is happening, Inquisitor. All I know is I’m alone.” Her words quivered as her emotions began to soar. “About two weeks ago, my brother and I were attacked, and I don’t know if he’s dead or alive. I might not ever s-s-see him again.”

Dorian couldn’t take it. He was too much of a softy. He stepped forward and hugged her close for a moment, rubbing her back. “Oh, don’t cry, my dear. You’re amongst friends here, and we’re going to do everything we can to find out what’s going on with your vision, as well as try to find out what has become of your brother.” The mage turned his eyes to Hannibal, hardening them faintly. “Isn’t that right?”

“Of course we will. For now, it’s been a long day. You should go and relax. Since the Bull has the magic touch, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind showing you around camp.”

Behind Ayla, Iron Bull issued a grunt. Moments later she was thrust back into perfect clarity when his hand grabbed hers and linked it to his elbow. Then he led her from the hut.

Ayla was quite aware of her escort’s irritation at having his services volunteered. His stride was so long she had to walk briskly to keep up. But she didn’t really mind since it wasn’t like she couldn’t see where she was going. Her eyes took in the surroundings, the stars above beginning to blink against the canopy of the night sky. She’d never seen them before and was amazed. Bull stole glances at her while he moved, watching how she responded to all the new sights.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” she started.

“Oh, but I do. Apparently, being your guide-dog is part of my duties now.”

“I have never had a guide-dog, and I don’t need one now,” she snapped back at him, her accented voice rising just a bit, a frown etched on her brow.

“Fine.” He gave a stern pull, which swiftly shook his arm free of her grip. Iron Bull stepped back and watched. Yes, he was irritated. Bothered by what the connection to this strange woman could mean.

Some passersby gave the Qunari and snowy-haired beauty curious looks, but no one said anything.

Ayla stared wide-eyed in his direction, detecting his shadow. Her face tensed and she started crying again. “Fine! I don’t need you!” She spun and began to shuffle forward, slender arms out to feel for possible collisions. After a few steps, she tripped over a pair of boots some dumb soldier had left out and tumbled to her knees.

Bull groaned and hurried over to take her arm, lifting her up.

“Leave me alone!” she tried to yank away, but The Iron Bull had an iron grip. It wasn’t harsh or painful, but gentle and warm. “Just go away…”
“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that,” he offered in a low voice, shaking his head. What the hell was wrong with him? He was letting her drive him crazy.

After a moment, having calmed down and wiped her tears, Ayla nodded. “Okay.”

“Friends?”

She smiled up into his sky-blue eye. “Friends.”

(*)

There wasn’t much to see at the camp, and it was all routine to Iron Bull, but Ayla found it all fascinating. They spent almost two hours walking around, sharing small talk about places they’d been, foods they liked. She’d learned that Iron Bull occasionally enjoyed chocomalt balls, which turned out to be one of her favorite sweets too.

They sat near one of the many fire pits now, their bodies close enough that the skin of their arms touched. Nearby someone was playing the lute, a tune Ayla had heard in several of the taverns she’d passed through with her brother. It was a well-known song, and kind of sad, haunting. She rocked side to side with the rhythm, staring at the fire, then started to sing.

“Over the city walls, the soldiers are dying.

Bodies in the fields, covered by the snow.

I feel them, oh, I feel them.

They’re reaching out to me.

I hear them, oh, I hear them.

They’re calling out to me.

Mothers in their yards, crying for their sons.

Fathers search their own hearts, beaten by the blow.

Brothers missing brothers, not another day of fun.

Sisters missing brothers, the one they looked up to all gone.

I feel them, oh, I feel them.

They’re reaching out to me.

I hear them, oh, I hear them.

They’re calling out to me.”

Her voice trailed off, and the lute player performed a bit of a solo before also fading the song. Ayla stared into the flames silently, lost in her thoughts. The song reminded her of her brother.

Iron Bull, who had been watching her raptly since she opened her mouth and the sweetness of her voice drifted from it, blinked, nodding. “That was…nice.”

She laughed lightly, shaking her head. “Oh, it was alright, I guess.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. Haven’t heard many singing voices as good as yours, especially out here on the road. Most I can hope for is Dorian’s unbearable droning once he gets enough drinks in ‘im. Sounds like someone tossed a mountain ram over hot coals.”

Laughter blurted from her.

And Iron Bull found that he quite liked the sound it.

(*)

Five minutes later, he was standing with her outside Sera’s tent. He figured it made sense to have her bunk with the elf. His knuckles wrapped the plank perched outside.

“Yeah!”

“It’s me. I have Ayla here and she’ll be staying with you.”

The flap to Sera’s tent flew open and the elf zipped out, grinning brightly. She’d changed into a sleeping tunic and pants.
“I…hope I’m not intruding,” Ayla said.

“Rubbish. There’s more than enough room for you, love.”

Iron Bull smirked at the elf, not trying to hide her attraction to Ayla. His tongue clicked his teeth. “Hm, ya know…on second thought, I think Ayla would be safer trying to sleep under a dragon. She’ll stay with me.”

This is a mistake, Bull. Let her stay with Sera. You know the elf isn’t going to molest Ayla in her sleep. You just want a reason to keep her with you. Take it back and tell her to stay with Sera.

Iron Bull ignored the inner voice of reason.

“What? Seriously? Rubbish.” Sera stuck her tongue out at him and made a rude sound, then disappeared back inside her tent, spitting curses.

While Sera was displeased about having the slumber party canceled, Ayla was actually relieved. As much as she liked Sera and thought her to be funny and nice in all the right ways, she was reluctant to leave Iron Bull’s side; he was her eyes now. Though, sharing a living space with him might prove a bit weird.

With her hand linked to his arm, Bull took her up a low hill to the place where he’d built his tent. He liked it because it let him look over the camp and there was a stream close by that he enjoyed listening to.

He pulled the flap back for her so she could enter, and he followed quickly, allowing them to maintain their link. She stood in place, examining his quarters. There wasn’t much inside.

Traveling bags, weapons, and some kind of harness that would fit over his torso, armor probably. Most of the space was taken by the sprawl of furs and sheets that was his sleeping area. There were a couple of pillows too.

“Home sweet home, at least for the next few days. Then we head out for Skyhold. Here, give me a moment.”

This time, he actually warned her before breaking their bond. She watched the blur of his shape move about. She heard shuffling and felt a breeze puff against her skin. He gently took her arm and she saw that he had taken off his eye patch and spread out some furs for her next to his.

He had plenty of room for her to sleep on his furs, however. Ayla blushed at the thought. “Thank you. I promise I won’t be a bother.”

“You just stay on your side and we’ll be good,” he spoke with humor in his voice. “Are you even going to be able to sleep with her so close?”

“I happen to be very well-mannered,” she countered with a dimpled smile.

Trying to keep contact with her in a way that still allowed her to move about had proven to be a chore at first, but as the night wore on, Bull found that he was getting good at it. He guided her to her furs, then sat nearby, all without breaking skin contact.

And then came an awkward silence that had them both staring expectantly at each other.

Iron Bull shifted and grinned. “Hey, you wanna see something?”

She lifted a brow, looking playfully cautious. “As long as it’s not something you’re going to remove from your pants.”

“Ayla!”

She laughed. “I’m not a prude. I know about those kinds of things—even if I haven’t…” she trailed.

Iron Bull didn’t like where this conversation was going. It was beginning to veer to the right, heading for that rocky path that opened into the clearing where the ravenous beast of his desire made its home. His burning Qunari hunger. If he wasn’t careful, he’d find himself very stimulated, possibly to the point where he’d have to leave her in the tent while he found a quiet place and sexed his right hand.

He cleared his throat and took the reins of the conversation horse, guiding the creature back towards more innocent pastures. A deep chuckle slipped from his lips. “You have a dirty mind. I was talking about something else.”

“Really? What is it then?”

“Well…it’s mysterious…and funny…and…” his eye squinted as he thought of adjectives, “…sweet…and talented…and very beautiful.” His eye settled squarely on hers, bewitched by them.

Ayla was listening intently to his description of this thing. She perked and bounced with excitement. “Are you just going to keep me in suspense then?”

Iron Bull’s chiseled features softened faintly as he regarded her. Even covered in scars as he was and missing an eye, Ayla found him very attractive. It was something in the way he carried himself, the way he commanded respect with his noble presence alone. She found that her heart
fluttered and her stomach flopped whenever he was close, a towering pillar of heated stone. He made her feel safe. It was alarming, considering she hadn’t even known him a full day.

She watched him reach around, twisting his torso to grab at something on the other side of his bedroll. It was a square thing with a handle on it. He held it out to her. Keeping the one hand against him so she could see, she took the item in her other hand and brought it up to examine it.

“Oh my gods!” she gasped and her hand pulled from Iron Bull’s, shooting to her face; things went blurry for the slightest second while Bull moved his hand to her arm so she could use both hands. Her face. The thing was a mirror and the face staring back at her was her own! “Oh my gods! I can’t—” Her eyes darted all over the mirror. “I can’t believe it! It’s me!” The tent filled with the bells of absolute laughter, then sobs, then more laughter. “Oooh!”

Her reaction was exactly what Iron Bull hoped for. He was taking great pleasure in the whole thing. The way she drew her fingers across her smooth, dark cheeks, her lips and ears.

“Oh my gods! My brother always tried to explain their color to me, but I never imagined!”

“Yes, they’re very…nice.”

After a few more moments, Ayla set the mirror aside, smiling so broadly Bull thought her face might crack. He knew then that he would dedicate part of himself to making sure she reached this level of happiness as often as possible. Her dark lashes lowered and she peered at him through them. “Did you…mean all of those things you said about me?”

“Of course,” he tried to keep his voice as tamed as his demeanor. “I mean, that’s what friends do, right? Compliment one another?”

Ayla sighed and nodded. “Yes, they do.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m beat. I take it Sera didn’t give you anything to sleep in?”

“No.”

Iron Bull broke contact long enough to grab something, then touched her hand. “Here ya go.” He handed her one of his shirts. “It’ll be big, but it’ll do. Let me know when you’re changed.”

At that he slipped from the bedroll and out of the tent, lowering the flap behind him. Once outside, he drew a heavy breath, the kind one draws when they need to fasten a clamp on their desire. He shook his head and ran a large hand over his sandpaper stubble, which was actually longer than he usually let it grow.

What in the hell had he gotten into with this woman? At least, he was trying to keep the friend zone alive and well, establish some grounds between them. This was the best thing to do. He could do that, right, just be friends with Ayla? Mysterious, funny, sweet, talented, beautiful Ayla. He groaned.

“Okay, I’m done,” she called.

Bull turned, reentered his tent, and secured the flap. She sat with her legs stretched out, and he saw that his shirt covered down to her shins. The sleeves were comically long, flopping over her hands. He laughed, removed his boots, and lowered to roll them up for her, taking hold of her hand afterwards.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

She watched him arrange one of the pillows with his free hand so it offered a position that accommodated his great horns. Then he laid back, and she did the same on her bedroll, lying on her side to continue looking at him.

He smiled. “Sleep tight, Ayla.”

“You too…The Iron Bull.”

He chuckled and turned down the lantern, then released her hand.
Grunting.

Heavy breathing.

Strings of Tevinter curses.

Qunari growling.

Dorian’s face twisted with the sweetest ecstasy and he tossed his head back in the pillows, one fine hand buried in the red tumble of Hannibal’s hair. His legs were locked around the Inquisitor’s waist. Hannibal had his face buried against Dorian’s neck. He nipped a place along the mage’s jawline, drawing his tongue hungrily over salty skin. Dorian’s hand drew languidly down Hannibal’s large, muscular body, nails raking hard enough across his broad back to nearly draw blood. He grabbed his boyfriend’s ass, and Hannibal obliged him by thrusting harder into Dorian’s tight, lubricated hole.

Hannibal lifted his upper body to give more unhindered movement of his pumping hips.

“Yes, Inquisitor…fuck me…fuck me…fuck me!” Dorian drawled, eyes hooded by long, tear-stained lashes. Tears of passion. His man was riding him in that hard, steady way that would lead to the creamy end soon. “Oh, yes…my Amatasss…” he purred against Hannibal’s neck.

The Inquisitor could feel the tingle and pressure in his loins beginning to work its way through his body. He growled, nipped Dorian’s chin, then braced himself to really start throwing his hips into it. The mage’s beautiful face was contorted by the swirl of pleasure and dull pain at having his man-cunt pounded. His own throbbing cock was pressed between them, being thoroughly massaged by the friction of their love-play.

Dorian’s legs tightened. “Yes, that’s right. Come for me, love. Fill me up, fill…me…up…” his words huffed out, slammed from him with each thrust. He loosened a none too subtle moan, eyes rolling. The inner muscles of his ass constricted around ample Qunari cock, the wonderful girth pressing against his prostate over and over in just the right spot at just the right pace. He was going to come soon. “Maker’s breath…fuck!”

“Mm…you dirty boy,” Hannibal droned thickly, his aqua eyes fixed on his lover’s gray-lavender gems. He absolutely loved seeing Dorian like this–skin flushed, normally tailored hair all tousled, squirming with pleasure.

“Yes, yes…so fucking dirty!”

Hannibal tensed; it wouldn’t be long before he blew his load. Sweat poured from him, dripping from his brow steadily, sprinkling over his lover. Both of their bodies were slick with the indulgence of wild morning sex, glistening and sticky. Dorian grabbed one of his back-swooping, shiny, silver burnished horns and yanked him down into a kiss that had the mage’s tongue playing wet tag with his, while Dorian’s other hand remained clutched to one solid, thrusting ass cheek.

Knock, knock. It was almost like the beginnings of a crude (or cruel) joke, the rap of someone’s fist to the hut door.


“Um…Inquisitor sir, you wished to be informed the moment we got news of Storvacker’s location. We’ve…um…” the messenger cleared his throat, having heard the sounds coming from the hut as he approached, “…found the bear.”

Hannibal sank to put his and Dorian’s bodies flush together. Pelvis to pelvis, belly to belly, chest to chest. He sighed. “Thanks, I’ll be in the war-room in five minutes.”

“Affirmative, sir.” The messenger left.

Hannibal touched his forehead to Dorian’s and nuzzled his nose, his lips. “I’m sorry, sweetheart…”

“What? No!” the mage tightened his arms and legs around the man. “That can wait! I, however, cannot!”

Hannibal laughed deeply, pressed a few slow thrusts into him, then started to pull back. As much as he didn’t want to leave the warm body of his sexy boyfriend, the business with Stone-Bear Hold was of high importance.

“I was almost there!” Dorian whined, a pout perched on his lips.

“Yes, dear, as was I.” Hannibal sighed and moved from the bed, going to the wash basin. He dunked a clean towel, wrung it well, then started wiping across his body. Some people undoubtedly heard them going at it. Didn’t mean he had to go to the meeting reeking of all-out sex.
Dorian had rolled to his stomach, part of a naked hip and round, tight ass peeking through the tangled sheets. He gave a dramatic sigh and perched his chin on his hands, grinning. "An Inquisitor’s work is never done."

"Nope, never." Hannibal had dried himself and was pulling on his pants. He grabbed his boots and went back to sit on the bed.

Dorian inched up behind him, nuzzling his neck as he yanked the boots on. "Guess, I’ll have to finish without you then, Amatus…"

Hannibal turned, tenderly gripped the side of his face in a large hand, and issued a kiss that made the furnace in Dorian’s stomach flare as if someone had taken a bellows to it. The Inquisitor nipped at Dorian’s full bottom lip, then his chin. "I’ll make it up to you later, promise."

"You’d better."

Dorian watched dreamily as the man he loved took long strides for the door, grabbing his shirt up on the way out, his thick red hair falling just past his shoulders. The mage flopped to his back, drew in a deep, content breath, and stretched as languidly as a feline.

Hannibal moved quickly for the war-room hut, his long, sure fingers buttoning his shirt as he went.

(*)

Other areas of the camp weren’t nearly as lively that morning as inside Hannibal’s and Dorian’s quarters. The sun hadn’t crested the eastern horizon, but it would in less than an hour. It was quiet mostly.

In Iron Bull’s tent, the Qunari’s eye opened slowly at movement against his right side, something warm, soft, curvy…and snoring very lightly. He lifted his head to get a better view. He had his arm outstretched and Ayla had scooted over onto his bedroll. She was snuggled close, her serene face half buried in his arm pit. Her expression insinuated that she seemed to enjoy having it there.

"You are so weird, woman…” spoken in a low voice, though he did smile.

He managed to slip from the bedroll without waking her. She shifted and turned, snoring still. Bull’s eye drifted over her, mesmerized by all that wild, springy hair. She moved again, this time to bend her leg, which sent his shirt rising to the middle of her sweet, dark thigh.

Bull groaned low in his throat.

Snow-capped mountains. Frozen lake water. The breath of an ice dragon. Cassandra’s attitude towards Varric…

He tried to think of as many cold things as possible, because he was quickly becoming very hot. He made short work of gathering his toiletries, a towel, mirror, and razor. He left the sleeping beauty in his tent.

All the way to the stream, Bull cursed himself inwardly. If he had listened to his inner warning last night and let Ayla stay with Sera, he wouldn’t have had to see her all tousled and pretty while she laid there innocently beside him, probably unsuspecting of just how much she affected him. Him!

The Iron Bull, the very apotheosis of control, as far as everyone knew. But no one truly realized how often he fought with the wildness inside him.

He reached the stream in less than a minute and set to bathing and shaving. He’d used the springs once, but found the water too warm for his liking. Besides, the stream was much closer.

(*)

When Iron Bull’s great form slipped back into the tent, he saw Ayla with her legs drawn up, still lying down. She was swallowed up in his shirt, the sleeves flopping over her hands again, having unfurled.

She perked and sat up.

"It’s just me,” he said, putting things away.

"I know. I recognize your shadow-shape, and I can smell you."

"Hey, now,” he protested playfully, "I just came from washing up."

Ayla smiled in his direction, eyes following the hazed blur of his figure while he moved. "I like your smell."

Finished, he turned and moved to sit by her. She was anxious to see again, yet she wouldn’t initiate the bond. Bull clearly noticed her fiddling hands. He rolled her sleeves up again, then rested his fingers over hers.

Her eyes instantly focused on him and her smile broadened. Bull found that he couldn’t wait to be linked to her again, to watch her while she examined everything with awe and excitement. To see the tender glances she gave him at times.
“Sleep well?” he asked.

“Very, thank you. I had thought…’’ her eyes shifted from his for a moment, “…it would be weird staying with you. I mean, you are a virtual stranger, after all.”

“Hm, understandable.” He grinned. “How do you think I felt? I don’t know you either. For all I know, you could’ve been a sex-crazed predator who attacked me while I slept.”

It took her a few seconds to realize he was joking, before she giggled. “Ha-ha, funny.”

There came that silence again—thick with anticipation, curiosity.

Without asking, Ayla lifted a hand to skim slender, dark fingers over his eye patch. She’d seen the scar slashes last night when he had removed the thing. “How did this happen?”

Iron Bull contemplated, then answered, “Defending a friend.”

“He…or she must be very dear for you to make such a sacrifice. Here you are with perfect sight and willing to give up part of it for someone else…” Luminous eyes stayed on his one eye.

Bull found himself so lost in those twin icy depths that he didn’t notice his hand had shifted to graze her cheek, until he felt her soft flesh on his fingertips. His hand hastily went to her shoulder, down her arm, back to her hand.

Ayla trembled slightly at the heat that stirred in her stomach. Her soft lips parted a bit as she watched him.

Bull struggled for control, and regained it. Maintained it. He smiled and nodded. “Yes, he is dear to me. His name is Krem, and you’ll meet him when we get to Skyhold.”

Ayla bounced, her grin returning. “I can’t wait to go!”

“You’ll like it. People are friendly enough. And the scenery—wow. Mountains and glaciers. It’s like being on top of Thedas.”

She listened raptly.

Bull suddenly used his free hand to pull up a pant leg to just below his knee, exposing a very toned calf. “I need both hands for a moment. Hook your leg over mine so you can continue to see, if you want.”

Ayla didn’t move at first, but she didn’t want to lose his gift of vision either. Slowly, she hiked his shirt up until it was just above her knees. She met his eye and saw amusement swirling in its depths. It was almost as if he were challenging her.

“What?” he pressed. “Being modest? Woman, I woke up this morning to your entire body nestled against me, and I could feel…Every. Single. Curve. Trust me when I tell you that putting your leg over mine still won’t make us more intimate than we were then.”

“Hmpf.” She huffed at the dashing, mocking smile draped over his mouth, then she quickly tossed her bare leg across his.

“Hm, the pussy-cat has claws,” he chuckled, then released her hand to reach around and rummage in his traveling bag.

She watched him produce a horn-shaped flask with a walnut half-shell roped to it. He popped the plug, tipped some kind of clear liquid into the shell, then knocked it back quickly. Afterwards, he replaced the flask to the bag.

“What was that?”

“Dhaya berry juice.” She appeared rather clueless, so he continued. “Hm, how shall I explain it…?” He considered, then grinned. “If a man doesn’t want to make babies, he drinks it.”

Now she was absolutely speechless, blushing hard, eyes darting around, averting and meeting his, pretty mouth parted in surprise.

Iron Bull bellowed with laughter, his arms propped to support the casual lean he assumed. The position made the muscles in his arms and shoulders bunch and flex slightly. His torso and arms were adorned with various tattoos, the black ink vivid against his gray skin. He caught the way her eyes swept over his broad chest, and downward to the bricks of muscle along his abdomen, and lower still to the place near his navel where dark hair began to happy-trail down into the top of his pants.

Ayla licked her lips to wet them, then met his eyes. She knew he’d seen her examining his physique. And what a fine physique it was. She suddenly wanted to run her hands along the ridges of muscle on his sides, his obliques. The thought left her feeling decadent but giddy.

Bull tilted his head, bellowing out a short laugh. “You okay? You look like you might go up in flames.” His smile remained. His voice shifted somewhat, sounding more sensuous, Ayla thought. “Do I make you nervous?”

The woman regained her composure. How dare him, thinking he could just throw her off balance like that! She lifted her chin and replied, “N-no. I just…” a pale brow arched, “…never figured
Qunari to take birth control.”

“Hm. Just the males, not females.”

She chuffed and smirked. “So… the men decide… when they want to…”

“Reproduce. Yeah.”

“Figures,” she spat, still blushing.

Iron Bull howled with laughter until his sides hurt. Once the mirth settled, he said, “It’s getting warm in here. Let’s get some breakfast. I’ll wait for you outside.”

At that, the Bull carefully slid his leg from under hers, lowered the pant leg back into place, stood, and left the tent.

Once he was gone, Ayla flopped back on the bedroll. Her heart was flapping like a humming bird in her chest. She stared up at the blurriness of the tent’s ceiling for a moment to catch her breath. Never had she ever felt the sensations bombarding her right then. She had better watch out for The Iron Bull and his seemingly thoughtless charm, lest she find herself caught in a whirlwind from which she might never escape, a storm she just might even openly welcome.

She started to dress.

Chapter End Notes

So... about the Inquisitor and Dorian, what better way to start a chapter, right? :)
Sera sat near one of the fires picking at a plate of meat, bread, and eggs for breakfast. It wasn’t bad, but could use some seasoning, she thought. Her eyes fell on Dorian, the mage was heading her way, wearing a smile that could light the day far better than the sun.

“Ah,” he drawled and stretched, taking in a great breath and exhaling. “What a glorious morning, don’t you think?”

“Fancy pants have his pants invaded? Whore.” She piped, grinning.

Dorian moved closer and lowered his voice. The smile painted on his face was truly debonair. “Jealous? If you’d have gotten fucked as good as I did upon waking, I’d be calling you a ‘whore’ too,” he teased with a wink, then snatched a small bit of meat from her plate and popped it in his mouth.

The two friends enjoyed some more banter before Dorian spotted Iron Bull and Ayla moving through the camp. They stopped at one of the tents serving food, got plates, and headed for the place where Dorian and Sera lounged.

Ayla was glad Bull took her to the stream to freshen up first. The cool water on her face worked to quell the heat the Qunari had stirred, purposefully embarrassing her with his comments and conversation. But his leg had felt so solid and warm under hers. She rather enjoyed the sensation of the hair along his shin brushing against her skin. Holding to his arm with one hand and balancing her plate with the other, Ayla smiled at Dorian and Sera.

“Good morning,” she said.

The elf and mage smiled and nodded in return. Iron Bull sat on a nearby bench, and Ayla lowered beside him, their arms still linked. Reluctantly, she pulled her hand away and began tending to her breakfast.

Iron Bull studied her. “You sure?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine.” She turned a lovely smile at him, her eyes unfocused. “I don’t want to burden you with my clinginess too much. Besides, I’m quite able to feed myself like this.”

“Oh.” He began ravishing his own breakfast.

“So…” Dorian began, his eyes moving steadily between Ayla and Bull, “…you two…slept together?”

Ayla choked on a piece of bread momentarily, then cleared her throat. She looked mortified, her wide eyes looking in Dorian’s direction. “No! We most certainly did not!”

“It’s a play on words,” Bull chuffed, shaking his head at Dorian. “We did sleep together, in the same tent, even if the ‘Vint twisted it to make it sound like something less than honorable.”

“Oh…” Ayla blushed.

Dorian’s laughter was rich and pleasantly mocking. “I can see we’re going to get along just fine, you and I, Ayla.”

She laughed and cleared her throat again.

“Iron Balls snores, doesn’t he?” Sera quipped and grinned. “You…could sleep with me tonight, if ye like.” She waggled her brows, though Ayla wouldn’t see the gesture.

“I…think I’ll remain with Iron Bull, thanks.”

Dorian’s laughter was rich and pleasantly mocking. “I can see we’re going to get along just fine, you and I, Ayla.”

She laughed and cleared her throat again.

“You weren’t so smooth about that one at all, were you?” Bull mused, chuckling.


Ayla smiled as she ate, relaxing more and more around her new group of friends. It was ever obvious that Sera liked her, and that was okay, as long as Sera realized the boundaries and didn’t cross them, and Ayla figured she wouldn’t.

“So, did you hear?” Dorian started. “They found Storvacker. We’re going to rescue her from some Jaws of Hakkon hideout.”

“Good,” Bull said. “Been looking for that damned bear for over a week. When do we leave?”

Dorian shrugged. “Not long, I suppose. Hannibal is discussing some other business in the war-room. I would guess in an hour, maybe two.”

“Ready for this. Send arrows. Set poison. Hakkon go down, then Skyhold bound, I mean, after we finish this deal with Stone-Bear Hold, yeah,” Sera mused.

“Yes,” said Dorian. “We get their bear-god back, and they ally to the Inquisition.”

(*)
After breakfast, Iron Bull led Ayla to the armory. It was a series of tents erected around a small hut. There were weapons of all types sitting on stands and tables. Bows, crossbows, swords, daggers, axes. The soldiers of the Inquisition had all the tools for destruction they’d ever need at their disposal.

They were approaching a person who worked a broadsword over a sharpening wheel. At first, Ayla thought it was a man by the great height and lightly-muscled arms popping from a short-sleeved shirt. But she quickly recognized the softness in the face, the lack of facial hair or even slightest sign of stubble or daily shadow. It was a woman. Her stark blond hair was very short and neatly cut. She saw them approaching and stopped working the wheel, setting the sword aside. When she stood, Ayla saw that she was a few inches shorter than Iron Bull, which made her pretty damn tall for a woman.

She smiled at Iron Bull, then reach out to clasp his offered forearm. “I heard you arrived here two days ago, but I’ve been busy with things and couldn’t find time to swing by.” Bull returned her smile.

“Yeah, s’been a while, Bull. How’s the Inquisition treating you?”

“Oh, you know, it’s all pleasure and little business.”

The woman laughed and it was a rich, friendly sound. She drew her pale eyes over Ayla, who was linked to Bull’s arm, and lifted a brow. “Finally get yerself hitched?”

A blush burned over Ayla.

Bull laughed. “As if. I love to play too much.” His admitted affinity to bouncing between sexual partners. “This is Ayla, just a friend. She’s…special. Ayla, this is Brienne, my sister from a different mister.”

“Hello.” Ayla smiled up at the woman, finding that her scent would’ve given her away if there had been any question as to her gender. She found that men and women had distinct undertones in their scents that identified them, and as long as someone wasn’t masking their scent with tons of perfume or cologne, Ayla could determine their gender.

Bull spoke again. “By special, I mean she can’t see unless I’m touching her. Don’t know why. We’re trying to figure it out, but she’s pretty much blind otherwise.”

“I actually see shadow-shapes, dimly,” Ayla added, trying not to come off as a complete invalid.

“I see…” Brienne nodded, then looked expectantly at Bull, waiting for a punchline.

“I’m gonna be gone for the whole day possibly. I would appreciate if you could look after her until I return.”

Brienne nodded at him almost immediately, flicking her soft eyes back to Ayla. “Yes, of course, whatever ya need.”

(*)

Less than two hours later, Ayla stood beside Brienne. Iron Bull, adorned for travel and combat in his partial armor with his axe over his back, loomed before her. He gripped both her small hands in his.

“Won’t be long. Brienne will take good care of you.”

“I anxiously await your return,” Ayla replied, unsure of what else to say.

Iron Bull lifted a brow, smiling down at her. “Anxiously, huh?”

“Pfft.” She shook her head and smacked his chest. “Just…be safe.”

“Always am.”

Then he released her hands and spun off, striding for the east entrance of camp where Hannibal, Dorian, and Sera awaited. Ayla sighed as his shadow-shape faded from sight. Beside her, Brienne noticed the longing way in which the smaller woman watched The Iron Bull leave, the way he’d stared down at her during their short exchange just then.

Oh, he didn’t think he was hitched, but he was. Brienne grinned.

(*)

The last thing Ayla wanted was to be a burden to anyone. Brienne said she had a bit more work to do at the armory, so Ayla didn’t complain when she found herself sitting in the shade of a lean-to listening to the sounds of camp, while Brienne’s shadow-shape hunkered over a sharpening wheel not far away.

The woman’s work had taken less than an hour to finish. Afterwards, she took off her gloves and went over to Ayla, who’s fractured sight aimed at her but obviously didn’t focus.

“So, what would you like to do, Ayla?”
"I’m not sure. There doesn’t seem to be much to do here.” A smile broke out. “I wish you had some books.”

“Can you read tangerlingua,” Brienne nodded appreciatively. It was translated as ‘language of touch’, since the blind used their fingertips to feel over the small bumps stamped into book pages. She shook her head. “Well… I’m not sure that we have much in the way of literature written in the language, but we could go and check? There’s a group of scientists here doing studies of Frostback Basin wildlife. They may have something for you.”

“Oh, I’d like that very much.” Ayla was on her feet in a flash. She happily took Brienne’s arm. Brienne led her towards the west part of camp. The scientists had set up shop there, using a hut as their main station of operation. The hut’s door was open, so she went in with Ayla in tow. Two men a woman, all Tevinter, were inside. They were discussing something in Tevene when Brienne and Ayla entered.

“Can we help you?” asked one man politely.

“I hope so,” said Brienne. “My friend here is blind, and we were wondering if, out of all these books and things you brought along, you had anything that might be dual-translated into tangerlingua.”

The man perked and smiled. “Ah, I see. It’s interesting that you ask. I’ve actually got a series called Dragons and Their Ways by Jornon Worff. He was a blind dragon extraordinaire that lived over a hundred years ago who used his smell, hearing, and touch to once track down Tedrongazer, a very nasty dragon. There are seven books in the series. I could get them if you like.”

“Yes, please! Thank you!” Ayla gasped. She loved to read. She’d never really read much about dragons, but anything would do right about now. Anything to occupy her mind so she could stop thinking of a certain rakish Qunari. Also, it would free Brienne up to do whatever she wanted or needed to do.

“Okay then.” The man nodded and seemed rather happy about having someone that wanted to read scholarly materials. It took him only a few moments to place the leather-bound books in a satchel, which he handed over to Brienne. His eyes moved between both the women. “Please be careful with them.”

“I will. I promise,” Ayla nodded. “You’ll have them back before I leave for Skyhold with the Inquisitor.”

“Very well. Enjoy.” He waved them off and went back to studying plant specimens.

Brienne took Ayla out into the camp, holding securely but gently to her arm.

“Thanks for doing this, Brienne.”

The large woman chuckled. “Anything for Bull’s lady.”

Ayla’s eyes widened and she opened her mouth like she might deny the claim, but didn’t. Brienne grinned.

(*)

Ayla started the first book and found it a bit dry but decent. The lean-to by Brienne’s station served as her temporary space until Iron Bull’s return. She set the book aside, listened while Brienne worked, napped shortly, then woke up to have lunch with the weapon smith. They talked idly, and Ayla learned that Brienne had met Bull during the Battle of Karsis. They’d been good friends since then.

The rest of the day passed without much incident. Night had fallen and the camp once again settled into an atmosphere of eating, drinking, and jovial fraternization. Ayla was sitting near a fire by Brienne while the weapon smith laughed it up with a few other soldiers over mugs of beer.

“Well, look who’s finally back,” Brienne called.

“Yeah,” Iron Bull said. “Returned half hour ago. Wanted to strip off the armor, freshen up.” He lowered to sit on Ayla’s other side and she hastily wrapped her hands to one solid arm. Her vision sharpened and she saw the heaping plate of food in his hands. “Miss me?”

“Hardly,” she said with a smile in her eyes. “I just need you to see.”

He chuckled and started eating.

“Brienne was very good with me.”

“Mm-hmm. I knew she would be.”

“And Ayla was ever a dear, not a single complaint. I will gladly look out for her anytime.” Brienne lifted her mug in their direction, then swigged and starting talking with her group again.

Ayla turned her attention to Iron Bull, watching him eat. Grinning, she swiped a berry from his plate, which earned her a playful growl.
“Didn’t you have dinner already, greedy?”

“Yes, but the berry looked so good, I couldn’t resist.”

“Right.” He smiled softly at her, continuing his meal. “So, what did you do today?” he asked once his mouth was empty again.

“Oh, not much. Hung around Brienne’s work place, lounged about.” She squeezed his arm, smiling broader. “Brienne was able to find me some books written in tangerlingua. Only some academic stuff about dragons, but well, beggars can’t be choosers.”

Why should he even be surprised that she could read? From the moment she’d slid out of that cage and opened her mouth, it was obvious that she was more cultured than one initially might believe. He nodded, stealing a glance at her. “I’m glad you were able to keep somewhat busy.”

While Iron Bull continued devouring his meal, Ayla’s eyes drifted around the area, taking in everything she could. Every face, all the small bits of conversation she heard when people passed by. She caught sight of the Inquisitor and Dorian, both of them moving through this part of camp to get something to eat as well. The mage met her gaze and smiled, wiggling his fingers at her. Ayla waved back quickly. She watched them find a place to sit and eat. At one point Dorian fed Hannibal berries, and they shared a small kiss.

“You can feed me fruit, if you like.” Iron Bull was grinning at her. He’d finished and set his plate aside.

Ayla smirked at him. “And I supposed you’d like a kiss afterwards.”

He merely grinned.

She rolled her eyes and smacked playfully at his arm.

The evening wore on, becoming busier with activity. It was like this most nights, Ayla supposed. The friendly banter, music, dancing, and singing around the fire pits. She was quite enjoying herself.

Dorian approached and held his hand out to her. The mage had had a couple of drinks, but was far from sloppy-drunk. At this point, he was comfortably mellow. “Come, love! Dance with me!”

Iron Bull’s brow tweaked in amusement. “Your boyfriend doesn’t wanna dance?”

“Bah,” the mage issued a tiny pout, “he’s in the war-room… again.”

“He’s the Inquisitor. Important things to do.”

Dorian sighed, an alcohol-satiated smile hanging beneath that couth moustache. “Yes, yes, I know. Once this whole Corypheus business is done, I’ll have him more to myself. For now, I’ll have to get my dance partners where I can find them.” Again, he offered his hand to Ayla, brow lifting. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you fall.”

She stole a look at Bull, then grinned and took his hand. They spun off to the lively tune of lutes. The woman was actually light on her feet, and Dorian was careful to keep her in the open and away from the fires. Her laughter trilled through the eve as she spun, keeping up just fine with the mage, who held her securely in his arms. Iron Bull’s eye followed her closely, loving the way her lengthy, wild tresses shifted and fanned out while she twirled and danced. The smile fixed to his features was soft and adoring.

“You sure do watch her like you’re hitched,” Brienne said from behind, close to his ear, then sat on the bench beside him.

Bull issued a snort. “As I said, we’re just friends.”

“Yes, you did say that, however, I’m disinclined to believe you.”

He shrugged and grunted. “Believe what you will.”

Brienne took a moment to study Ayla while she danced happily with Dorian. “All the better, then. She’s not your usual type.”

“What type is that?” The Bull lifted a brow.

“Oh, you know—amorous, loose… slutty.” The last word drawled past her lips slowly. She punched him squarely in the arm, then swigged from her tankard, and ignited with laughter.

“Hm. I guess you’re right…” A small smile tilted his chiseled lips, and his eyes followed Ayla as she danced and fraternized. She was so happy. So… innocent, though at the same time, she was knowledgeable about certain things. Just not about the ways of sex. Well, she knew what it was but hadn’t indulged.

Brienne’s eyes flickered beyond Iron Bull, to his other side. “And speaking of slut...”

Ralden, a male soldier Bull had been fucking around with during his time at the Basin Floor camp, sat down right up against the Qunari and pressed a kiss to his lightly stubbled cheek. The soldier was just the type of man Bull liked—medium build and effeminate features. He had hair the color of sand and eyes like pale grass.
“I’ll…just be heading off.” Brienne excused herself with a chuckle.

“ Haven’t seen you in a couple of days,” Ralden said. He nuzzled one of Bull’s ears, which produced a hindered groan.

“Yeah, been busy.”

“I’ve been thinking of you constantly since the last time we fucked,” Ralden purred. “Shall we… head to your tent?”

Bull contemplated the offer, he really did. But the matter was decided when his eye spotted Ayla, spinning around and around in the arms of the mildly drunken ‘Vint. “Actually, I had a long day. Another time maybe.

Ralden was clearly disappointed. He made a disapproving sound and left Bull to his thoughts. And the Qunari warrior stayed buried in those thoughts well up until the time he and Ayla headed back to his tent for bed.

(*)

He was like some dormant behemoth, his great chest rising and falling steadily in the half-dark. Ayla had awakened and was studying Iron Bull while he slept, her hand upon his arm so she could see. It hadn’t taken long for her new eyes to adjust, and she could make him out rather well. He’d left the lantern going this night.

She took her time skimming over the full length of his body, lying on the furs with his arms sprawled, head gently propped on a pillow, bare-chested, wearing some loose-fitting bed pants. Hesitantly, she put a hand out and touched his right horn, the one nearest her, running her fingers lightly over it. The texture was rough in some places, smooth in others. Then she moved her hands to his chest, stealing looks at his face, but his eye was still shut and he continued breathing normally. She traced over one of several tattoos, each one as intricate as the next. One marking blended along his right shoulder and down over the bicep.

Next, she traced fingertips down those obliques, as she had imagined doing the previous morning. They were solid and unyielding, his skin so warm to the touch. When her hand reached his stomach, it stopped, resting on a ridge of defined muscle.

Finally, she took her hand to his face, skimming along the pleasantly rough stubble that he’d grown in the course of a day. Still, he hadn’t awakened. She licked her lips and drew her fingers along his firm jaw, then back along his ear, where she massaged the lobe.

That got his attention. There was sweltering fire in his eye when it opened and focused on hers. The lid had been fully twisted from the jar that confined his desire. The powerful tool of his want had begun to swell uncontrollably in his pants. “Ayla…”

She just stared at him in the half-dark, wordless, though the way he’d groaned out her name sent a shiver racking through her body.

“What are you doing, woman?” he droned thickly.

“I-I was just… looking.”

He gave a chuff of laughter. “You’re doing more than that. You’re being bad.”

Yes, maybe she was. But she felt so compelled to touch him. She cleared her throat and managed to say in a steady voice, “I was looking at your tattoos.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I was!” she protested, then flopped back down beside him and turned over so her back pressed fully against his warm body. One thing was for sure, she wouldn’t need a blanket sleeping next to the Bull. “I’m going back to sleep now.”

He issued a heated groan. There was no way he could return to sleep. “That makes one of us.”

With her facing away from him, Bull wasn’t able to see the self-satisfied smile etched upon her pretty lips, twinkling in her eyes, dimpling her cheeks. That was payback for the way he’d mocked her the previous morning. She knew he’d been awake while her hands moved all over him, just like she knew stroking that ear would get his full attention. After a while, she closed her eyes and returned to slumber, still wearing the smile.

A little tit for tat.

(*)

“Mm…mnng…mmm.” Ayla shifted in her sleep, feeling pressure against her body, pressing her into the furs. Warm and solid. Her eyes flew open and widened.

Iron Bull’s body was partly atop hers, one strong leg set between her knees, thoroughly making it so she couldn’t squirm away. His bed pants leg had been shoved up so that his bare skin rested hotly against that of her leg, allowing her to see. His large hands were planted to either side of her. He had formed a blistering cage with his body, trapping her, and was peering down sultrily, quite satisfied by the alarmed expression on her face, the saucer-wide eyes.
“You did that to get back at me for yesterday, didn’t you?”

The woman didn’t reply, but continued staring up silently at him. He was like a living furnace, there was so much heat pouring from him. Ayla was also very aware of the firm, ample rod of his manhood pressed into her left hip. To assure her that it was, indeed, what she thought it was, the Bull rubbed his body against her a few times, rotating his hips slowly, grinding into her, letting her really feel it. Ayla loosened a small tremble and gasped, actually beginning to get scared. She was tense, keeping her small hands tight to her chest.

Iron Bull grinned. Yes, that’s what he wanted. The fear. His eye stayed fixed on her face, skimming it for any and all reactions. He lowered until his mouth all but grazed her cheek. She could feel every hot breath.

“You know, if you’re going to play my game, Ayla, you had better be ready for the consequences,” he droned deeply against her ear.

She finally unfroze and pressed her hands firmly to his chest. “Get off me,” she hissed.

The beauty and the Bull indulged in a seemingly long staring contest, before he finally rolled away, leaving Ayla sucking in hefty, nervous breaths. His desire was soaring high. Every primal instinct and impulse within him demanded that he take her, touching her in such a way and so intimately that she would beg for him to invade her sweet, untasted body. He certainly had the skills to do it. But, he needed to maintain his control; damn the woman for nearly making him lose it.

“You don’t start things you can’t finish,” he said.

She listened and watched his blurry shape moving about. He yanked off the bed pants and pulled on his trousers, then boots.

“I’ll be waiting outside while you get dressed.”

Then he was gone.
Bull waited patiently for Ayla to finish getting dressed. When she finally slipped from the tent, arms delicately feeling the way, she still looked unsettled at what had occurred between them. She carried a towel and comb.

Probably still feeling that hot, throbbing cock pressing against her, Bull thought. He nearly released a chuckle once more recalling the look on her face when she was trapped under him, as well as the expression she wore now. She wouldn’t even look over at him, let alone touch him.

Ayla knew he was there. She could feel his great presence, smell him. Her glacially blue eyes glanced his way, then she lifted her chin and started walking, going towards the rear of the tent for the beaten path leading to the stream. She progressed slowly, arms out before her, skimming the blurry shadows. She knew the general direction and could hear the water bubbling serenely.

Bull lifted a brow when she eased by. He rolled his eye, following. “So…as you asked shortly after we first met: are you just not going to talk to me?”

The woman issued a snort and kept moving.

He chuckled. “Ayla…”

No answer.

“You’re mad about it? Why? You’re the one who started it.”

“Pff. You’re not the one who was nearly raped in his sleep,” she shot over her shoulder, finally breaking her silence.

Iron Bull’s hulking form shook with genuine laughter. “Oh, please. You know I wasn’t going to hurt you.”

“But you were going to scare me.”

“Yeah. It was just to scare you. Obviously, it worked.” He chuckled some more.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

No, she didn’t. If anything, she discovered that she liked him even more. He had been frightening, but he was right. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her. It was just the majestic way in which he seemed to control the whole situation, making her feel helpless and small. She supposed anyone would feel small lying trapped under him.

“That’s what you get for being a tease,” Bull droned, his voice deep and resonant. “I wasn’t going to do anything while you ran your greedy little hands all over me—driving me wild, I might add. But when you touched the ear,” he issued a groan that was part laugh, “that was it.”

“I’m glad you find this all amusing,” she curtly replied.

“Mm, I certainly do. You’re so easy to rile.”

It was a short straight-shot to the stream, no obstacles really, just an open bank of grass. Ayla reached the edge and carefully kneeled down. She set her comb and towel aside, then leaned forward and splashed her face with water. After she dried off, she started combing at her hair, still feeling too embarrassed to say much, let alone ask him to lend her sight.

Iron Bull figured as much. He’d known the woman for just about two days and had learned early on that she could be stubborn. He lowered on the grass beside her, reached out, and linked his long fingers around her ankle.

Ayla blinked once as her vision sharpened, then swung her eyes to meet his. He was lying on his back with his other hand behind his horned head, his eye watching her casually. Well, since he was unwilling to let the whole intimate scene bug him, she supposed she should do the same. She would certainly think twice before ever again playing ‘innocent’ sex games with him. She instantly started blushing, recalling that hard thickness he’d slowly rubbed against her.

She cleared her throat. “What does that tattoo mean, the one on the right side of your chest?”

“This?” His eye flicked to it, head cocking. “It’s a Qunari combination symbol that says anaan dar ataash, which means ‘victory and glory’.”

Ayla smiled. “Ah, that seems fitting for you. And the one on the other side of your chest?” The woman had taken up a sizable section of her long hair in a fist to pinch it off while she combed vigorously at the ends.

“That one is Qunari is well. It says inwa-ost kata, and roughly translates to ‘I cut down enemies in battle’.”

She chuckled a bit. “Do all of your tattoos have to do with battle and war?”
“For the most part, yes. There’s this one, though…” he gestured to an intricate one that began on his right shoulder, making its way down his arm, “which is Elvhen. It symbolizes the unity that needs to exist between mind, body, and soul, which allows one to maintain perfect control.”

“Ah, control. Now that is all you.”


“Do you have any tattoos about…well…” she stopped combing for a moment to give her arm a rest and fully meet his gaze, “…about someone close to you?”

Bull considered the question, watching her with the greatest amusement. “You mean someone I love?”

“Yes. I mean…I’m sure it’s not uncommon for people to get those kinds of tattoos.”

He laughed. “Oh, you mean like ‘Iron Bull loves Some Random Barmaid’ or something like that? Maybe have a name stenciled across my ass?”

Ayla shook her head at his humor, then laughed. “Yes…or something like that.”

“No,” he answered simply. “In the Qun, we don’t exactly connect with people in that way. Love isn’t something that’s localized to just one person. It’s not really even expressed.”

“So…” she lifted a brow, “you’re polygamists?”

“Um, no, since we don’t get married.”

She leaned forward some now, very interested. “So, you’re not allowed to love in the Qun?”

He sighed, and his eye drifted to the sky as he searched his thoughts for a way to explain to the woman. “Love exists, but to show love in the capacity of becoming attached to another person is not acceptable. The teachings and religion of the Qun is a way of life that puts the entire society above the needs of the individual. If people started forming intricate bonds, bonds of love, they would begin to put the ones they love before the society.”

“Qunari think love is weakness, then?” Her voice held an eager if not appalled fascination. “Sounds barbaric.”

He chuckled deeply. “Yeah. It usually does to those who do not understand it, hence the reason why outsiders are not often welcomed into Qunari territory.”

“I didn’t mean to sound so judgmental. It just…sounds a bit lonely, is all.”

“Yes, well, I’ve lived in it since birth.” He shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

Ayla watched him in silence a moment, then asked. “So what about your parents? They don’t love each other?”

“Don’t know who my parents are. The Tamassrans choose what men and women will mate. Once conception happens, the male is removed and returned to his duties for the Qun. After the child is born, it’s removed from the mother and raised by the Tamassrans, given a designation, then assigned an official role in the Qun at age twelve. Only family I’ve really known are the others raised in my age group, my peers. I don’t have blood relatives or—Ayla, what’s the matter?”

The woman’s eyes were glistening with tears. She shook her head.

Iron Bull sat up and studied her closely. “What is it?”

“It’s…” she sighed, “it’s all so sad.” Her hand found his and squeezed it, tears slipping down her cheeks. “I’m sorry you never knew your parents.”

“That’s just the way it is,” he said softly, then used his thumb to swipe at her tears. He offered a small smile. “No need to feel for me.”

The Qunari warrior was quite surprised when she flung herself forward, slim arms going around his neck, face buried in his shoulder. She hugged him tightly. Iron Bull wasn’t sure what to do, so he did nothing.

Ayla pulled back enough to look into his eye. There was resolute promise in her own wet eyes. “I’ll always be your friend, your family…if you want.” She had grown up without her parents too, but not under the same circumstances as him. That was a story she’d discuss another time. For now, it was all about him and how much it wrenched her heart listening to him casually talk about how he was raised in a virtual cattle farm. At least that’s how she saw it, though there was logic behind the Qun.

She fell back into him, hugging him again. This time, The Iron Bull allowed his thick arms to slowly reciprocate the embrace, his nose and lips nuzzling her fuzzy hair. He shut his eye and let her scent slip into his nostrils, alluring and sweet.

They stayed that way for a while longer before heading down into camp.
Two days later, they were preparing to leave for Skyhold. Ayala excitedly stood just behind Iron Bull, who was locked in a hug with Brienne. He stepped back and smiled at his friend.

“It was good seeing you,” he said. “Perhaps, you’ll make it to Skyhold one day. I’m sure the Chargers would love to see you as well…especially Krem.”

Brienne grinned. “Give him my best. The winds may blow me that way someday, though. Take care, friend.” She leaned close for another hug, speaking lowly. “And you’d better take good care of Ayala.” She pulled back and lifted a pale, blond brow.

Bull shook his head, smiling. “Stay safe.” He turned and took Ayala’s hand, and she waved back at Brienne as Bull led her for the stable to get their mount.

Once there, Iron Bull made short work of securing his traveling bag to the frostback elk he’d chosen. He would’ve gone with a horse, but didn’t want to burden the smaller creature since Ayala would be riding with him. He packed an array of dried foods, bread, cheese, apples, and water skins in the saddle bags, then took the reins and urged the elk from its holding pen.

Ayala waited safely by the fence, looking in his direction yet seeing nothing really but blurs. She took his arm when he offered it. “Wow…” she stared at the mount as they walked for the western gate. “What a lovely creature! What is it?”

“Frostback elk.”

“Ahh,” she nodded and filed the information away in that fastidious mind.

As they approached the gate, they saw that Hannibal, Dorian, and Sera were all on their horses.

Iron Bull looked down at Ayala. “You’ve ridden a horse before?”

“Yes, with my brother.”

“Okay, then. Up you go.” He grabbed her waist and lifted, then waited for her to grab the horn and pull her leg over, settling in the saddle. He stepped in the stirrup, swung his leg, and mounted behind her, taking up the reins. “Comfy?”

Ayala shifted once, then again, trying to find a good position for her bottom since they’d be riding for a while. She wiggled.

Iron Bul gave a groan. “Woman, stop.”

She rolled her eyes, speaking under her breath and over her shoulder, a small hand resting on his to grant her sight. “Is that all you think about?”

He grinned, then clicked his tongue to his teeth, starting the elk forward.

(*)

They took the merchant road northbound, heading through the edges of the forest of Frostback Basin. To the east, seen as a misty veil in the distance, was Cloudcap Lake, and to the west were the Frostback Mountains. Ayala kept getting glimpses of the mighty peaks when the trees broke. She had relaxed in the saddle before Iron Bull and was leaned back into his chest. She tried to stay upright and proper while the elk trundled along, but kept being rocked back into him every time the majestic beast moved. So she just went with it. She was too busy being astounded by all the sights of the Basin anyway. Some large colorful bird flapped above them, soaring up into the trees, and she smiled deeply at it. She would have got Iron Bull to tell her the names of all the colors some time, as many as she could point out. Her brother had taught her some basics though: grass was green, the sky was blue, her hair was white.

The Bull didn’t mind that she’d leaned against him. He was wondering when she’d just give in. A smile hung loosely on his lips as he guided the elk along and watched her react to everything. It was rather cute.

“Is it very far to Skyhold?” she asked.

“No, we’ll be there in two days, three at most if the weather in the mountains gets harsh. It’s up there,” Bull nodded to the Frostbacks looming over the trees.

She nodded and went back to enjoying the world with her new sight.

When the sun was high in the sky, Hannibal stopped them for lunch. Afterwards, they continued forward. They reached the beginnings of the Frostback Mountain Pass right before the sun began to sink beneath the peaks. As per the usual, they set up camp a short distance from the road, nestled in a clearing that was bordered by tall boulders.

The mounts were secured and everyone but Ayala made short work of gathering firewood. Iron Bull left her sitting with the lean-tos. He was close by, however. Shortly after that, a fire was blazing and they circled it nibbling at a dinner of dried goods, apples, and water. Hannibal peered over at Ayala, who had her hand linked to Bull’s arm. Her blanched tresses tumbled in thick, kinky waves around her.

“So, Ayala,” Hannibal began, “where are you from?”
“My brother and I have a house about ten miles south of Redcliffe. Though,” she thought, then smiled faintly, “we often travel with bands of scouts through various towns and camps so my brother can do odd jobs to support us.”

Hannibal, dubbed the Herald of Andraste by many in Thedas, nodded, although something seemed out of place. When they’d first come across Ayla, covered in mud as she was, he had believed they’d found a simple woman who just happened to have the misfortune of being swiped by the Hakkon. Then, she talked and sounded like someone who’d grown up in the courts of Orlais, her accent so crisp and proper. And then Hannibal found out that the woman could read tangerlingua. That certainly wasn’t a common thing amongst the common folk. Hell, it was uncommon enough for the poor to read much, but a blind commoner? No one would’ve ever spent the time or money to teach her anything. And that’s what didn’t make sense. She’d said her brother worked with scouts to put food on the table, so how would he be able to afford the instructor to teach her tangerlingua?

The Inquisitor let it go for now. Perhaps, her brother made good money in his trade. “Do you have friends in Redcliffe that would take you in?”

Ayla considered in silence, then, “Yes…but I don’t wish to go to them…”

“You…wish to stay with Iron Bull.” It was a statement from Hannibal, verified by the glance she stole to the large Qunari beside her.”

Inwardly, Iron Bull tensed. It was that familiar caution that reared its head whenever he thought about how Ayla might represent the loss of his freedom. Before her, he’d felt unhindered, unbound, but now…

Bull listened quietly to the conversation.

“I do have friends back there,” Ayla said, but Elemir was—is my family. I will go to Skyhold, and if nothing comes from the search for my brother…

“You can remain there as long as you like,” Hannibal offered.

“Thank you, Inquisitor.” The lovely woman turned her eyes to Bull. “I don’t mean to be a burden, but you offer me sight, and as far as I know, you’re the only one who can give me what I need.”

Dorian chuckled at her last words, one brow lifting mischievously. “Oh, my dear, you’ve no idea how you taunt the Bull.”

The remark earned the mage a snort from said Qunari.

Hannibal leaned to playfully nudge his shoulder at Dorian. “Behave yours–” His words clipped short and a strangled grunt escaped him. He gripped at his left hand just as the appendage began to ebb with the familiar greenish glow.

Sera, who’d been listening to the conversation as quietly as Iron Bull, grabbed up her bow while shooting to her feet. Her eyes darted about. “Fade rift thingy? Thought we handled all those ‘round here.”

Dorian and Iron Bull did the same, taking stances and searching the area closely, listening. Hannibal was taking sharp breaths, still clutching his illuminated hand. “Don’t…know…”

Dorian wore an expression of the deepest concern. He touched Hannibal’s shoulder. “Love…”

The glow dissipated and Hannibal sank to his knees, head tipping forward, firelight gleaming over his burnished horns. He drew in a few breaths and finally stood. “I…need to lie down.”

They watched him stride to his and Dorian’s lean-to. The mage quickly followed him. After making sure there were no fade rifts or creatures of the fade lurking in the area, Sera and Bull relaxed their weapons.

The elf stretched and yawned. “That was weird, huh?” she said.

Bull just shook his head. “I’m just glad I don’t have to bear the Mark.”

“Times two for me. So, want me to take first watch?”

“No, I’ll get it, Shorty. Go to sleep.”

“Heh.” Sera gave a cheeky grin, then retreated to her lean-to and pulled the flap down.

Ayla, who’d been listening and watching, spoke up. “What was that green light on his hand?”

“It’s a magical anchor that allows him to open and close the fade rifts.”

“Oh…”

Iron Bull and Ayla sat silently and watched the fire, listening to its subtle snaps and crackles. She was glad to have the warmth, as the air had gotten a touch nipper being at the base of the Frostbacks.

Bull smiled gently at her, his eye studying her beautiful face. She looked somewhat tired, eyelids
drooping a bit. “You should head to sleep.”

“No,” she yawned and stretched, “I’m fine.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

Less than ten minutes later, after she’d fallen asleep against his side, he carried her the short distance to their lean-to and covered her slumbering form with furs.
Golden and Handsome at Skyhold

They rose not long after the sun, packed up camp, and headed onto the Frostback Basin Pass. Hannibal and Dorian rode at point side by side, most likely discussing what had happened with the flaring mark last night. The mage was still undoubtedly very worried for his beloved, ever the doting ‘girlfriend’.

Sera rode in the middle, her ears and eyes open for anything out of the ordinary.

Iron Bull and Ayla held the rear. They hadn’t spoken very much since starting the ride, which gave the Qunari time to wallow knee-deep in his thoughts. How could he ever turn Ayla away now that he realized she’d placed her complete trust in him? That in itself told him, for better or worse, he was destined to be tied to the woman. Like she said last night, he was her eyes, allowing her to experience the world as never before. But how the hell was he supposed to lead his life as usual with her tethered to him? He couldn’t just bring lovers back to his quarters with her there. No, the course of his normal routine had been shifted the instant he rescued her from that arrow. Even now, the need to pursue her romantically and the urge to keep her at (literally) arm’s distance battled within him. He had the surest feeling that any romance with her would expand beyond his Qun training, manifesting into something else. Something that had the potential to be good and bad.

Qunari do not love. They cannot. He hefted a great sigh.

“Is something wrong?” Ayla asked.

“No,” he lied.

Ayla sensed his untruthfulness, but didn’t press it. He was a strange man at times, full of jokes and teases one moment, then silent and brooding the next. She decided she would make conversation to lighten things. She did have something on her mind. “Iron Bull?”

“Yes?”

“I was wondering about the Tamassrans. You said they decide who mates with who, yet you also said that the males of your society control reproduction by taking the dhaya berry juice. So the males don’t truly have control?”

“Mm,” he smiled, urging their mount onward. “Ultimately, the male is the deciding factor in conception. It’s part of the Qun’s law that every male begin taking the drink when he’s of child conception age. The Tamassrans may control the population, but there are times when a man neglects to take his dosages, indulges in a female partner, and ends up impregnating her. In those instances, the male is sent to the Ben-Hassrath for re-education.”

“Ben-Hassrath?”

“Yeah. Basically, he’s punished for neglecting his birth control. Any children he sires without the approval of the Tamassrans are still taken from their mothers at birth and integrated into the Qun.”

Ayla pondered the information, then said. “You’re…not with the Qun right now, so why do you take the juice?”

Resonant laughter erupted from him, his warm body trembling against her. “I have no desire to see a bunch of mini-Bulls popping up across Thedas.”

She was glad he couldn’t see the heavy blush burning through her, though she was sure he knew. She nibbled her bottom lip, wanting to kick herself for the surge of jealousy she felt then, knowing he referred to his promiscuity, his indulgence in various sexual partners.

Ayla decided to be daring. “I’m sure women can’t get enough of you,” spoken quietly.

He laughed. “No…and neither can some men.”

“You’ve had…male partners?” Her eyes widened and the blush deepened. She supposed it shouldn’t be surprising that he was desired by men as well, or that he chose to pander to that craving. He was very attractive. She herself had been thoroughly baited by his charismatic sex appeal.

“A few, yeah,” he answered matter-of-factly. His eye lowered to the top of her snowy head. He was smiling. “You don’t agree with that sort of thing?”

“Well…no, that’s not it. I-I was just curious. It’s none of my business, really.”

Iron Bull chuckled at her stammered words. “You’re so cute.”

(*)

For about half the day, they traveled the drumlins bunched against the rising peaks of the Frostbacks. The scenery became less and less diverse, consisting of sparse grass, shrubs, and sheer walls of stone to either side. The road had begun to noticeably incline.

It was late afternoon, and as much as Ayla wanted to stay awake, she just couldn’t manage to
keep her eyes open. She figured it had a lot to do with the bond she shared with Iron Bull, how it
drained her, though she was handling the fatigue better as the days passed. The monotonous
scenery may have also had something to do with her drowsiness. She began to weave, body
slumping, eyelids drooping. She jerked awake with a gasp.

Iron Bull watched her repeat the desperate attempt of trying to stay awake three more times, before
he released the laugh he’d been holding in. Ayla snacked his thigh. Gently, he maneuvered her
into a better position to sleep, sitting across his lap rather than astride the mount.

“Now, isn’t that better?”

No answer.

Bull looked down to see that she’d nestled her face into his chest, eyes closed. She was well on
her way to sleep. He smiled warmly, holding her close while they moved ahead.

(*)

That night, they camped little more than halfway up the pass. At that altitude, it was very cold
and a blanket of snow covered everything. There would be no fire tonight. The group had stopped at a
place just off the path known as Johnner’s Lip. It was a deep indentation cut naturally into the
rock face, a wide eave of stone forming a lip that held back the biting wind. The natural rut was so
spacious that the mounts fit as well, settled at the opposite end. They set their lean-tos up and
shared dinner huddled in a circle, wearing their large coats now.

Dorian took the first watch. He looked absolutely miserable bundled in his furs, the hood dropped
low over his face.

“Come get me up in a little, sweetheart,” Hannibal moved in to hug him close. When the
Inquisitor pulled back, there was laughter in his eyes, written clearly over his face.

“It’s not funny,” Dorian whined. “You know how much I despise the cold.”

“Yet, you traveled from warmer Tevinter climate to come this way.”

“Your point? I wouldn’t have met you otherwise.”

Hannibal did laugh then. “And I very much appreciate the sacrifice you’re making.”

“You should,” Dorian smiled and shivered in his arms, and Hannibal hugged him tighter. “All this
snow and ice—it wreaks havoc on my skin, makes it so dry.”

“Guess we’ll have to get you all lubricated once we get home.”

“Mm…is that a promise?”

“It is.”
The two men shared a deep kiss, then Hannibal turned and disappeared into their lean-to.

Sera was already settled into hers.

Inside Iron Bull’s lean-to, he was lying on his back and listening to the wind. Ayla was wrapped
in her coat and settled right against him, comfortably surrounded by his heat. She snored softly.
The Bull dragged his fingertips across her brow, such beautiful, clear, sable skin. It was so soft it
felt like flower petals to the touch. Whatever bond had formed between them that day was
strengthening; he could feel that. He was quickly coming to realize that no matter what happened,
he wouldn’t leave her, wouldn’t abandon her. For better or worse, he was stuck with her…and
she was stuck with him.

(*)

They woke up to mild morning snow, the flakes drifting lazily from low, toiling clouds. Ayla had
never seen snowfall before, though she’d felt it many times. Riding in front of Iron Bull, she lifted
her arms and flailed at some flakes, her laughter like bells. Iron Bull couldn’t help the smile that
formed. He was actually kind of envious. He wished he could experience all the things that she
was for the first time again.

At mid-day, they didn’t stop for a food break as Ayla had assumed they would. Iron Bull dug an
apple and some bread from the saddle bag and handed it to her. She ate quietly, stark eyes taking
in the snow banks to either side of them. They reached a point where the rock face to the right
abruptly sloped away to reveal the upper frozen fjords, the glaciers.

Ayla sucked in a breath and her eyes grew wide, her face lit beneath the brim of her hood. She
grinned. “There it is!”

Skyhold. It was perched like some stone jewel on a wide plateau, a vision of towers, arches, and
spires surrounded by a crown of majestic, snow-capped peaks. A long, reinforced bridge
connected that plateau to the Frostback Mountain Pass, and they were heading around a gradual
curve that would take them to that bridge.

She bounced some in the saddle and Bull laughed. “Whoa, settle down.”
The path became a bit narrower as they made the last stretch. They passed a guard post. The
soldiers there came to attention when the Inquisitor and his entourage rode by. Two miles later, they reached the bridge gate.

“Hail, Inquisitor!” called the guard in charge.

“Hail to you as well.” Hannibal nodded down at him and other soldiers on watch, each one going to attention respectfully.

The gate was pulled back and a horn resounded from the ramparts above. Hannibal started his mount across the bridge, and the others followed. On the far side, the gate was already being pulled back to allow them entry.

Ayla couldn’t stop moving. She looked over the side of the bridge to the fjords and peaks, then weaved to the side to try and see the approaching gate better.

“Will you settle down?” Iron Bull mused.

“I’m calm, really…well…not really. I’m excited!”

“Yes, I’m getting that. You’ve been shifting all over the place since we came into view of Skyhold.” He chuckled.

Her nose twitched and she narrowed her eyes. “I think I smell fresh-baked bread.”

“You most likely do. There are a few bakers inside.” He sniffed the air and lifted a brow. “Though, I don’t see how you can possibly smell anything from this distance. Qunari have an excellent sense of smell and I can’t detect any bread.”

“I used to be blind,” she grinned. “I’ve had my whole life to hone my other senses.”

“Hm.”

Finally, they were passing through the gates to Skyhold Fortress. The first thing Ayla noticed was the very many people. They walked around casually or tended to tasks. There were vendor booths to the right along the inner wall. A small crowd had gathered to watch their beloved Herald of Andraste return.

Hannibal guided his horse to an open area where a group of stable-hands waited. He dismounted, shouldered his traveling bag, then nodded to one of the hands, who returned the gesture and led the animal away. Dorian and Sera did the same. Iron Bull dismounted, helped Ayla down, grabbed their things, then handed the reins to a waiting stable helper. Bull held her hand in his, seeing as they were both wearing coats and holding hands was the only way to maintain skin contact.

Ayla pushed her hood back, examining Skyhold’s main courtyard. Her skimming eyes stopped when they fell on a man who was striding towards them. He wore a long jacket over his leather pants, thick tunic, and boots, and there was dark fur around the collar of the jacket. He had somewhat wavy, dark-gold hair that was short and well kept. As he drew closer and stopped before them, Ayla noticed his eyes were a few shades darker than that of his hair, and that there was a thin, up-swiping scar on the right side of his mouth. His ruggedly handsome face was brushed with stubble.

“Welcome back,” Cullen, the Inquisition’s military advisor, smiled at Hannibal. He looked over the others, his golden-brown eyes falling on Ayla. He offered her a friendly smile, continuing to watch her while speaking to Hannibal. “Who’ve you brought back with you?”

“This is Ayla,” Hannibal answered. “Ayla, this is Cullen Rutherford. He commands the troops of the Inquisition.”

“Charmed. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Ayla’s expression faltered when the sharpness seeped from her vision, an effect like a window pane being frozen over by blurry, shadowy ice. Cullen was but a shadow-shape now, her eyes unfocused on him. Her brow furrowed and she glanced at Iron Bull, wondering why he’d pulled away.

Cullen, still holding her hand, noticed how her beautiful eyes had lost their clarity. He looked questioningly at Hannibal, who’d seen what Iron Bull did, and knew the selfish reason behind it.

“I’ll explain in the war-room. I take it Josephine and Leliana are already there?”

“Ah, yes,” Cullen finally released Ayla’s hand, and the woman instantly went to fiddling it with her other one. She felt lost and embarrassed. Cullen continued. “They’re standing by.”

“Tell them to give me half an hour. Need to settle things into my quarters.”
“Understood.” Cullen looked to Ayla again, wondering why she suddenly appeared blind. “Um… I’ll see you around, Ayla.”

“Okay…” she uttered and nodded, fractured eyes skimming the ground at her feet.

Cullen moved off.

Apparently, Hannibal wasn’t the only one who’d seen how Iron Bull denied Ayla her sight, all because she’d shared a suggestive glance with Cullen.

“You ought to be ashamed,” Dorian smirked at the tall Qunari as he brushed by with Hannibal, heading to their rooms.

Sera punched him in the arm. “Dick move, Iron Balls.” The elf headed for the tavern where she had a room on the second floor.

That left Iron Bull and Ayla. She turned to face his hulking shadow-shape, a frown furrowing her pretty brow. “Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” He returned, reaching out to take her hand.

When he sharpened into view, Ayla’s eyes narrowed accusingly. “You know what. You purposefully broke contact with me. That was very rude. I was having a conversation with Ser Rutherford.”

He rolled his eye. “If you call eye-fucking each other ‘having a conversation’.”

Ayla huffed. “We weren’t… she didn’t have the propensity for foul language that he did, though she’d heard plenty of it traveling with her brother, “…we weren’t doing that.”

“Right.”

She studied him a moment, then beamed with a smile. “Are you…jealous?”

His sky-blue eye rolled again, and he turned, starting across the courtyard, leading her along. “Why would I be? You can eye-fuck whoever you want.”

Ayla smiled demurely. Oh, yes, deny it as he may. The Iron Bull had gotten jealous back there.

He was taking them for the eastern tower. His quarters were there. Just before they reached the tower’s hanging eaves, a group of children came running around the corner.

“Iron Bull! Iron Bull!” their little voices screamed, their bodies crowding in to surround Bull and Ayla. They knew he had something for them, as he did most times upon returning.

Ayla gleefully looked around all the little faces. She adored children.

Bull used his free hand to rummage in the bag slung over his torso. He pulled out three sacks filled with chocomalt balls, handing the goody bags to three random children. He lowered a bit to be more at their level, then comically narrowed his eye, fixing it over the chosen three. “You better share those with the others. Everyone gets at least one. Understood?”

“Yes, Bull!” they screamed in unison, then moved in to hug on his long, solid legs.

The other children did the same, and Ayla found herself in a mosh pit of youngsters. Then they ran off with their goods, hooting and laughing. Ayla was pleasantly surprised at how Iron Bull handled the children. She loved discovering that part of him; he was actually a big softy. Holding securely to her hand, he moved them under the eaves and through the door of the east tower.
Iron Bull and Ayla climbed the rather wide spiral of steps, passing the first three levels. When they reached the fourth floor, they moved from the stairwell and across a short landing, entering a hallway leading towards the center of the tower. The way the architecture was setup, each floor consisted of a circular hallway with different quarters branching off of it. The east tower had five levels, with eight living spaces per level.

He took them counter-clockwise in the hallway, stopping at the fourth door they came to. Metal jingled when he pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the door, swinging it in. He entered with Ayla in tow, then shut the door behind them.

“Ah, feels good to be back,” he remarked, then released her hand. “Go ahead and get your coat off. I’ll get a fire started.”

Ayla had gotten a quick look at his quarters. It was actually more spacious than she imagined. She’d seen a large bed on the far side of the room, a bay window not far from it. The main wall, constructed of stones and mortar, was gently curved, while the side walls were wooden; his room and all the others were shaped like wide, large wedges, making up the complete circle of each floor. A second window loomed to the right of the fireplace. She made short work of removing her coat, standing still and listening to his movements.

Bull had dispatched with his own coat and tossed it on the bed with his traveling bag. He faced Ayla and smiled, closing the distance between them to take her hand. “Here, have a seat. Won’t take but a moment.”

He led her to a quaint table to one side of the fireplace. There were two chairs, and she sat in one, instantly plummeted back into shadows when he moved away again to make the fire, tossing her coat on the bed as he went.

She smiled, clearing her throat. “It’s nice, your place.”

He chuckled, lowering to one knee before the hearth. “I’ve certainly grown fond of it.”

“I…uh…assume we’ll be sleeping in the same bed?” her voice had grown small.

Bull peered over a broad shoulder at her and chuckled. “Is that a problem? We’ve been sharing the same bed for almost a week.” He could see her blush from across the room. “If you want, I’m sure I could get another bed in here. Wouldn’t be a–”

“No, don’t bother.” Her smiling, hazy eyes were fixed in his general direction. “You’re right. We’re both adults.”

“Mm, that we are,” he rumbled in a way that made Ayla shiver vaguely. The kindling caught, and Bull set a few logs on the growing flame. He turned to her, speaking as he moved, “Though, I don’t see how you sleep with your face buried in my armpit.” He laughed.

She reached for his hand, found it, and saw him clearly. She shared in the laughter. “I don’t sleep that way.”

“Oh, but you do.”

She shrugged. “I suppose… I just like it.”

“You’re so weird.”

Another shrug of her slender shoulders. Ayla turned towards the bay window and quickly scrambled for it, dragging Bull along. It was closed but she could see just fine through the lightly frosted pane. The window offered a view of Skyhold’s gardens and the main part of the castle, to include the fine run of stained-glass windows marking the Inquisitor’s quarters, which rose above everything else. She could also see mountain ridges beyond the fortress walls.

“You were right. The view is just breathtaking.”

“Yes, it is…”

Ayla faced him to see that he was staring down at her with that familiar heat in his eye, that same fierceness she’d seen upon waking up a few mornings ago trapped by the hot cage of his body. She smiled broadly and ducked around him, pulling him to all areas of the room, anxious to see everything. There was a quaint cook station set up by the fireplace. One corner of the room contained shelves, most of which were empty, with the exception of a few books. Beside the shelves was a rod nailed to the wall with some clothing items hanging from it. She studied a thin, foldable barrier made of wood, then peeked around it to see a large tub. She noticed two faucets hovering over the tub, attached to copper piping that came up through the floor.

She looked disbelievingly at him. “Plumbing?”

Bull nodded. “Yeah. It took almost two months after we found this place to get it up and running right. There are a series of huge reservoirs beneath the fortress, which are filled from the natural snow and ice of the mountains. The water is filtered and purified, heated by the boilers. Most areas of Skyhold can get hot water pumped right to ‘em.”
“How does the water...move around?”

“That is actually a work of ingenious design by the previous occupants, though the boss did call in a group of dwarves to help rework it. You see, air is pumped into the piping to form a seal, using these.” His hand touch two mechanisms that looked like levers, one next to each faucet. “You just move these up and down and water will flow because of the air pressure. There’s one for hot—” he tapped the red-painted handle “and one for cold,” he finished, touching the other handle, which was painted blue.

“Amazing...” Ayla reached for the red handle, wrapped her fingers around it, and started pumping. It took ten seconds or so, but the water came, flowing from the one faucet. She could see the steam, feel the heat. She squealed with giggles. “Absolutely amazing! Elemir and I have only been to two inns that offered plumbing, though it wasn’t as intricate as this.”

The plug wasn’t set in the tub, so the water went right down the drain. Skyhold was certainly technologically advanced as far as fortresses went. It contained an efficient, fully integrated plumbing and drainage system.

Bull stood by while she played with the water some more, then they went to sit on the great-bear rug by the fire. She had removed her shoes, as had he. He’d also removed his shirt, which didn’t surprise Ayla. He wasn’t one for having his torso covered for long unless it were necessary. Their hands overlapped in the space between them.

Iron Bull regarded her closely. “Is it everything you thought it would be?”

“Skyhold? Oh, yes. I can’t wait to see more.”

“Good.” He rolled his shoulders a few times, rotated his head on his neck. All the riding they’d done had him tight as a drum. Of course, the flood of sexual tension he’d been experiencing wasn’t helping either.

Ayla moved around behind him, small hands set on his shoulders.

“What are you doing, woman?”

“Massage. You could use one.” She gave his shoulders a test squeeze and laughed. “You’re like one big knot. I give my brother one every now and then. He says I’m the best at them.”

He chuckled. “Okay then.”

Ayla cleared her throat and began. She pressed her fingers in one toned shoulder first, moving them along over his flesh. It was like velvet-covered rock beneath her touch, only mildly yielding. She started to knead that area, moving rhythmically back and forth.

Iron Bull shut his eye and groaned. “Yes, that’s good. Though you could go deeper if you want, harder.”

Ayla tried to get her positioning right, then sighed and settled back on her heels.

Bull looked at her over his shoulder. “Why’d ya stop?”

“Well...if you want me to massage harder, you’ll have to lay on your stomach.”

“Anything for you,” he all but purred in a rich tone, grinning at her.

Ayla shook her head, smiling. He sure enjoyed messing with her. When he was laid out on the rug, his chin set to his folded hands, Ayla carefully maneuvered to straddle his lower back.

“Mm,” he groaned. “You use this position with your brother?”

“Pff! No!” she smacked his back.

“Ah...so only me then.”

Her silence made him chuckle.

“Just calm down and take the massage,” she replied, a smile present on her words.

She started bearing down into his muscles again, applying hard pressure as he’d requested, rolling up and down his back with the heels of her hands, and then with her elbow, which she rotated in a tight circle on a tense nob of muscle just below his shoulder.

“Nnngh...yeah...right there...”

She continued this way for a bit longer before he rolled his head and shoulders again. “That’s good enough, Ayla. Thank you.”

She sat up, watching his back. “Are you sure? I’m not tired.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Okay. Whenever you want a massage, let me know.”

“Are you kidding? You’re the first person I’m coming to.”
She laughed and climbed off his back. Bull turned over to face her. By the Qun, she looked absolutely mesmerizing with her tumbling avalanche of wild tresses, her luminous, sparkling eyes. He sat up to put them closer together, her hand sitting atop his. Beauty and the Bull fell captive to a gaze that had them both staring into each other’s eyes. Ayla’s stomach was turning flips, and not in a nauseous manner. No. She was nervous. Iron Bull leaned closer, his eye fixed on the soft lasciousness of her mouth.

Then the door flapped open. A man of medium build stepped through the entryway, a tilted grin on his hairless face. He had a dark cap of hair, with the sides cut low. His brown eyes twinkled at Iron Bull and Ayla, their faces so close that it was clear they’d been ready to kiss.

“Heard you were back.” The cute man lifted an amused brow. “Didn’t take you long to jump right up a skirt, did it?”

Bull sighed, shook his head, and chuckled. He was actually happy for the interruption. As much as he wanted Ayla for his own, he needed to wipe those thoughts from his mind, needed to keep her at a safe distance. “Ayla, this is Krem.”

(*)

“Dorian…” Hannibal breathed against the mage’s lips. A chuckle slipped from him. “I can’t right now. They’re waiting in the war room.”

“Let them,” Dorian purred. They stood at the foot of the Par Vollen bed in Hannibal’s quarters. Well, their quarters. The man had been taken up mutual domesticity with the Inquisitor a couple of months ago, once they’d established the nature of their relationship. They’d barely gotten up the stairs of the grand tower, set their bags down, and removed their coats before Dorian all but jumped on his broad, hulking lover.

Hannibal rumbled a hot groan, pulling back to gaze down with desire boiling in his eyes. He grinned. “You’re absolutely insatiable.”

“That’s right, I am.” Dorian raised on his toes to nuzzle his love’s full red beard, enjoying the tickle to his mouth and nose. “I want you now,” he rubbed slowly against Hannibal, his hand going between them to stroke the hardness swelling in the Inquisitor’s pants. “…and I know you want me too.”

“Oh, sweetheart, why do you torture me like this?”

“Because I can,” the mage breathed against his lips, eyes narrowed sensuously.

“I can’t right now. I must go meet with my council and tend to other business.” Hannibal grabbed his ass and pulled him closer. “But you can rest assured you’ll have more of me than you can handle later. That’s a promise.”

“Mm.”

They fell into a passionate kiss (for a moment, Hannibal wasn’t sure he’d make it to the war room), then the Inquisitor left his beautiful boyfriend alone, moving back down the tower to the main hall. He took the door leading for the war room, striding through Josephine’s empty office. At the end of the corridor rose a tall, solid wooden door.

Hannibal released the lever, pushed the door in, and entered.

On the far side the war table, standing before a wide band of windows, was Cullen, Josephine, and Leliana. The soldier, the noble, and the spymaster. Each of them was instrumental in the success of the Inquisition. Hannibal had been thrown into the fray suddenly, and if it weren’t for them, he’d be lost. Indeed, it was because of them that he was now being called the Herald of Andraste across Thedas.

“Fashionably late,” Josephine quipped, a knowing smile in her eyes. “Did a certain mage nearly talk you into missing this meeting?”

Hannibal just smiled. “Accurate.”

“I figured.” She chuckled.

“Okay, so, to report on the Frostback Basin,” Hannibal started, “the area is mostly cleared. I believe all fade rifts have been closed, though Scout Laren has his men scrubbing for any we might have missed. The Jaws of Hakkon are still a threat, but we’ve hit them hard enough to effectively scatter their forces.”

“They may regroup in time,” Cullen said.

“Yes, they might, but I’m not out to completely destroy them. I just want them to cease being a threat to our camps and expedition groups.”

“Understood,” the blond man nodded curtly.

Josephine took her chance to jump in. “Inquisitor, a message arrived for you a week ago. An invitation from Lord Draister Wrenz of Val Royeaux. He requests a meeting with you at his home. Apparently, he says he has information you would find valuable.”
“But, he didn’t say what this information was?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Hannibal thought for a moment. “Is there any way to get more information about what he’s offering. I’d hate to travel all the way to Val Royeaux just so a doting fan of the ‘Herald of Andraste’ can tell me how much they adore all the work I’m doing. You recall Madame Sherie DeValle, right?”

Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine chuckled a bit. They did indeed recall how the lavishly rich woman had summoned the Inquisitor to her mansion in St. Cristobal, having him believe she was experiencing trouble with rogue Templars, when all she’d really wanted was to get him in bed. Dorian had been most unamused.

“I can contact my people in the area, have them try to get answers,” Josephine offered.

“No.” Hannibal shook his head and his aqua eyes floated to Leliana. “I would like you to handle this. Discreetly. Send in your crows and try to get scent of what this Lord Wrenz wants.”

She nodded. “It will be done.”

There was a stretch of silence while the three advisors watched him. Hannibal took a breath. “I’m sure Cullen has told you about our newest resident, Ayla. We found her while fighting back some Hakkon; she was their prisoner. She…is mostly blind. She sees some shapes, shadows. But something happened when her and Iron Bull came into direct skin contact, when he grabbed her to keep her from being hit by an arrow. Some kind of link formed between them which allows her vision to clear up.”

Cullen looked thoughtfully at the bank of candles burning at one end of the war room table. He gripped his chin. “So…that’s why they were holding hands. They’re not…together then.”

All eyes settled on the handsome commander.

Cullen’s eyes shifted from the flickering flames when he noticed the silence. He cleared his throat. “I mean…”

Hannibal grinned. “You meant to ask if she’s single? As far as I know, yes. If anything, Iron Bull seems to be irritated by the whole arrangement.”

“I-I…didn’t mean to ask that,” Cullen stammered.

“Yes, you did,” piped Josephine, grinning at him.

“I was just making an observation, is all.” Cullen tried to defend himself, though they were right.

He was interested in the beautiful woman, intrigued by the nature of this bond she shared with Iron Bull. “Do you know why his touch lets her see?”

Hannibal shook his head. “No, but I figure between all the mages and sorcerers living here, they can come up with an explanation.”

“I look forward to meeting her,” Josephine said.

“She’s a nice woman. You’ll like her,” Hannibal replied, then, looked to Leliana. “Ayla was with her brother when they were attacked near Redcliffe. While she was taken and sold to the Hakkon, we don’t know what became of him. I would appreciate if you could put scouts on it. His name is Elemir, and they have a house about ten miles south of Redcliffe. She’s never seen him clearly before, so I don’t have a physical description, sorry. If he survived the attack, he’ll be looking for her. I know I would be.”

Leliana nodded.

“Now, if there’s nothing else to report, this meeting is adjourned.”

No one had anything more at the time, so they dispersed from the war room.

(*)

“So…you really can’t see anything unless you’re touching the chief?”

Ayla shook her head and smiled at Krem, who’d taken a seat at the table, while she and Bull remained on the great-bear rug. “Not much. I vaguely see shadows and shapes.”

Krem’s eyes swung to Iron Bull and he grinned. “Lucky you. Any idea how it happened?”

“Nope,” Bull answered. “But we have some good magical types here. I’m sure they’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Krem’s eyes fell on Ayla again. “Suppose you’ll be sleeping with the Bull, huh?”

Ayla blushed immensely, eyes averting. This made Krem spill a chuckle.

Iron Bull rolled his eye. “Will you just stop. There’s nothing going on. It’ll just be easier for her if she stays in here.”
“Hm,” the lieutenant of the Chargers shot his eyes to the bed, then back to the couple. He was visibly enjoying the teasing. “Easier for her, convenient for you.”

“Ya know, I think it’s time for you to go.”

Krem howled with laughter, standing. “Yeah, yeah. Ya comin’ to Herald’s Rest later for drinks? Could bring Ayla to meet the gang.”

The woman perked and nodded. “Oh, I’d like that!” She stared at Bull in a way that made her eyes seem larger and more pleading.

The Qunari thought she looked like a kitten begging for a treat. He chuckled. “Sure. We’ll be there.”

“Good then.” Krem headed for the door, turning when he reached it. “The Chargers will be stoked to meet the boss’s new girlfriend.”

“She’s not—” Bull started, but Krem had already chuckled himself out the door, shutting it after him.

Ayla held a wide smile. “She’s funny. I like her.” She’d learned a little bit about Cremisius ‘Krem’ Aclassi during his visit. He was Iron Bull’s second in command and he came from Tevinter. Ayla hinted the femininity of Krem’s true gender in the undertones of his scent, but she could also visually see how effeminate his features were. He looked very androgynous, attractively male or female.

Bull lifted a brow and gave a tilted smile. “Krem’s been living as a man for some time, so it’s ‘he’.”

“Oh, yes…I understand.”

“Being a woman was just never in his blood, you could say.”

“I get it.” Ayla nodded, her tresses shifting over her shoulders. “I have a friend back in Redcliff who is the same. A man trapped in a woman’s body.”

“Yeah,” Bull smiled softly at her. “That’s exactly what Krem is.”

“I can see why you love him so much. He’s very endearing. He keeps you grounded, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. He and the Chargers are pretty much my family.”

She grinned. “I guess that makes them my family now too, hm?”

“Looks like it. You’re stuck with us.”

The fire had managed to disperse its heat comfortably through the room. The smell of burning embers was subtle and pleasant, a fragrance that always reminded Ayla of autumn, her favorite season. Once again, there was only the two of them, and she was no fool as to what had been about to take place before Krem barged in.

Iron Bull had been ready to kiss her, and she’d been ready to accept it. Gods help her, she wanted him to hold her close and kiss her in a way that made stars burst across her vision. She wet her lips, drawing her eyes openly over his bare torso. Then she threw all caution aside and tossed herself forward against him, arms around his neck, her warm curves flush to his rock-hardness, soft lips mashed to his. She’d never kissed anyone before, so she hoped it wasn’t too awkward.

Awkward…wasn’t exactly the word Bull would’ve chosen. Sudden. Unexpected. Disarming. Those were good words. Above all, it was completely welcome. He immediately sent a sexy groan against her lips, his tongue flicking for a taste, his arms trapping her to his chest.

His control. He was rapidly losing it…but he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t let her in like this. Too close. Loss of freedom. He moaned thickly. By the Qun! His cock was instantly swollen, wanting nothing more than to be released from the confines of his pants and buried in her to the balls. He had to stop, now, or he wouldn’t.

Iron Bull performed a smooth, quick maneuver that sent her rolling gently to the rug, with his body partly atop hers. He was drawing in deep, steady breaths, his heart beating quickly. “No.” He peered down hotly at her with that one steely eye.

Ayla licked her lips, gazing up at him. Her hair a fan of white disarray around her. “Why?”

“Just…no.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s all the answer you’ll get, woman. I’m not taking you to my bed and that’s that.”

Her blush was vague but present, a brow lifting as she chuckled. “I just wanted a kiss and nothing more.”

“With the Bull, you always get more.”
She sighed and finally wiggled from under him, still touching his hand. “Very well. What shall we do now?”

The man stared incredulously at her. He shook his head. “You,” his brow quirked, “need to take a cold bath.”

Ayla giggled.

“I’m gonna make us something to eat.”

Bull broke contact, rising to leave her on the plush softness of the bear rug. Ayla laid back on it, listening to the crackle of the hearth fire and him moving about the room. He was putting on his boots and a shirt.

“Going down to the vendors for some vegetables. Meat. Fruit. Bread. Try not to trash the place while I’m gone.”

Ayla heard the door open, then shut, the sound of his footsteps as he left. She chuckled to herself. She’d heard the irritation as clear as crystal in his voice. Was he upset about her moves on him, or about the fact that he didn’t want to act on those moves? She couldn’t tell. Her heartbeat began to steady out. She could hardly believe she’d done that!

Well, so much for not playing ‘innocent’ sex games with him.
When Iron Bull returned less than twenty minutes later with the goods for dinner, he found Ayla still lying on the bear rug. She sat up when she heard him enter. The Qunari locked the door after him, his long legs taking him to the table, where he set down the groceries.

Before sitting next to her, he removed his boots, his shirt. Then, he touched her hand. Ayla’s vision snapped to clarity and she saw that he was smiling softly at her. He had a bundle in his lap.

“Got you something. I figured you were tired of running around in pants. After all, we did find you in a dress…”

Ayla perked and anxiously took the bundle, unfolding it. Inside the cloth was an emerald-green dress, a color of the likes she had never seen. She held the item up, draping it to her chest.

“It’s another kind of green, that color.”

“It’s beautiful! Thank you.”

“I didn’t know your exact dimensions,” Bull said, “but it looked like it should fit.”

“I’ll try it on. I’d like to bathe first, however.”

Another awkward silence. Bull cleared his throat. “Okay, you do that while I whip up some stew.”

They stood and, with her walking behind him holding his hand, went to the segmented, foldable wall that served as a divider between the bathing area and the rest of the room. She watched as he placed the stopper into the hole in the center of the tub, then started to pump the levers to produce hot and cold water.

Iron Bull turned and studied her, the little mysterious woman who seemed to have gotten bold enough to start sexually taunting him. And he would do everything he could to keep her at bay. He gestured to a basket not far from the tub and a short table that had some items on it. “Towels and soap. Oh, and you’ll find some undergarments with the dress. Wouldn’t want you to get drafty, now would we?” He winked his eye.

Ayla laughed. “No, certainly not.”

The tub had filled to more than halfway before Bull stopped the faucets, securing the levers. “Is that okay for you?”

She bent to test the water, skimming her fingers across the surface. “It’s just fine. Thanks, Iron Bull…”

The Qunari saw the way her eyelids lowered and she watched him through the webs of her lashes. He lifted a brow, then narrowed his eye. “Are you eye-fucking me?”

Ayla smirked. “You put it so harshly.”

“But that is what you’re doing, right?”

She merely smiled, her cute dimples standing out.

Bull shook his head, feeling the heat rising in his loins again, not that it had truly dissipated since he left her to get groceries. She’d pretty much determined that he would have a date with Lube and Righty later…or he could just pay a visit to one of his usual fuck-buddies. But, no…that’s not what he wanted. He wanted her, though he fully believed indulging in her would somehow trap him in a way that he feared most. A romance between them would put into question thirty years of Qun upbringing, Bull knew this, felt it.

*A Qunari does not love.* Those words cycled through his mind over and over. It was what he’d been taught, what he’d been conditioned to believe.

He just couldn’t understand why Ayla should affect him this way. She was no different than any other woman he’d found attractive, right? That was a lie. She was every bit as different. That’s why he was so thrown off by her.

Ayla moved closer to him, her hand pressing to the hard plain of his stomach. “Will you kiss me now?”

“You need to stop tempting me.” His voice was as sultry and warm as the light spreading from the hearth.

“You obviously want to kiss me. Why don’t you just…do it?”

His senses were reeling. All he could smell was her staggeringly alluring fragrance. He would never mistake it, not even in a crowded room. His eye slowly shut, then snapped open, and he gripped her arms tightly, pulling her body as close to him as he could. Barely contained desire burned in his eye.

“Kissing you is the least of what I wanna do,” he breathed against her lips. “And even if I did give
in to you, woman, I highly doubt that you are ready to ride the Bull.”

Ayla didn’t try to pull away as he squeezed her to him. He was hot, hard, and throbbing in his pants again. She felt it distinctly through their clothing. “I- I only want a kiss.”

“But that’s not all you’re gonna get,” he growled fiercely, making Ayla shiver. “Now, take your bath. Dinner’s in thirty minutes.”

He released her, leaving her standing behind the folding wall, feeling a bit cooler now that he’d pulled away. Ayla smiled softly and started to undress. “I’m going to get my kiss.”

“No, you won’t,” he tossed back immediately.

She stifled a laugh. A few minutes later, she was sinking down into the tub, relishing in the hot water. She began humming a soft, pleasant tune.

Iron Bull sat at the table using a cutting board and sharp-edged dagger to ferociously chop veggies and meat, tossing them in a pot as he went. He stole glances at the folding wooden wall, wondering why the woman behind it was so damned infuriating.

Lube and Righty later. Yep.

(*)

Ayla tried to examine herself as best she could in Iron Bull’s traveling mirror, maneuvering the thing this way and that with one hand, while her other hand rested on his bare shoulder.

“You know, I think we should get a full mirror in here.” She nodded.

Bull’s features held a soft smile as he sat at the table and watched her spin and work the mirror, trying to get a good view of her dress. He had to admit that he’d done pretty damned good picking the size. It clung just right to her curves, the bodice doing well to accentuate her slim waist and rounded breasts. The skirt flared just the smallest bit, draping down to her ankles. She was wearing the slippers Sera had given her back in Basin Floor camp.

“Okay, I’ll get a mirror for you.” He decided he could only take so much of all the girly primping. A large hand swiped the mirror from her and set it to the table. “You look fine. Trust me, you’ll be turning more than a few heads.”

Ayla warmed with a blush.

“Ready?”

She nodded, then wrapped her hands to his bicep as he lifted his tall, broad frame from the chair. They left his quarters, exited the east tower, and began walking across the yard. Night had fallen and the sky was speckled with many, many stars. They appeared even closer at this altitude. Ayla noticed that Skyhold’s nightlife was just as bustling as its daytime. Vendors still peddled their wares to potential customers, calling out their offerings to attract buyers. Her eyes remained on a wide set of steps that turned as it rose, leading to the great doors of the castle main. The place where the heart of the Inquisition had meetings, where the Inquisitor himself sometimes occupied a throne to pass judgments. The undercroft, the main gardens, the library, the Inquisitor’s quarters—all those areas could be accessed through those doors.

Ayla wondered if she could get Iron Bull to give her a tour of that area tomorrow. She shivered a bit at the frigidness, so chilly out that their breath could be seen as thin, white puffs on the night air. She hugged closer to his side. “You’re not cold?”

“Nah.” The Qunari was shirtless, wearing only a pair of leather-enforced pants, boots, and his tattoos. “I mean, I would get cold eventually, but we’re just going to the tavern, and it’s warm enough in there.” He grinned rakishly down at her. “Besides, Qunari run hot.”

One trim, pale brow lifted. “You’re telling me? Sleeping next to you is like sleeping with a furnace…though I do quite like it.”

“Behave yourself, woman.”

Ayla giggled.

(*)

“Oh, for Maker’s sake, Varric, stop cheating,” Cassandra tossed across the table.

“How am I cheating exactly?”

“You know how. You’ve played some of those cards already.”

The dashing dwarf merely grinned at her. “I mean, I would get cold eventually, but we’re just going to the tavern, and it’s warm enough in there.” He grinned rakishly down at her. “Besides, Qunari run hot.”

One trim, pale brow lifted. “You’re telling me? Sleeping next to you is like sleeping with a furnace…though I do quite like it.”

“Behave yourself, woman.”

(*)

The two of them, along with Dorian and Blackwall, were playing Wicked Grace in a corner booth of the Herald’s Rest. The barmaid, a pretty thing with red hair and full boobs that nearly spilled from her bodice, swung by to refill their mugs.
Dorian leaned casually in his seat. He sipped his drink, then pinched at one tip of his moustache. His kohl-lined eyes narrowed faintly in Varric’s direction. “I’m inclined to believe Cassandra, as I’m sure we’ve all fallen victim to your cunning, if not tricky, slips of the wrist.”


Varric’s smile morphed into something more secretive; it was slightly tilted and touching one corner of his fine mouth. “Looks like a mutiny at this table. Maybe I should pull out a violin and play a song for the sore losers.” He chuckled.

“I just find it strange how you seem to win most of the time,” Cassandra said.

“Guess I’m just that good.”

“Or that tricksy,” entered Blackwall.

Cassandra’s gaze shifted and fixed on a place across the busy room. The others followed her line of vision and saw that Iron Bull and Ayla had entered. The Bull had spotted the Chargers in their usual place not far from the hearth and was steadily making his way to them, the woman gripping his arm. Ayla was busy being delighted by the atmosphere of the place. Her eyes swung all about, making her thick curtain of hair flail about her shoulders, down her back. A bard was in the middle of a song, singing as well as playing her lute.

“She’s cute,” Varric said.

“I second that.” Blackwall nodded.

Cassandra spoke to Dorian but kept watching as the couple moved through the room. “Is it really true that she needs to be touching Iron Bull to see clearly?”

“Yes,” the mage nodded.

“Poor girl.” Cassandra made a face.

Iron Bull made sure to keep Ayla close while they slipped through the crowd. A few glances at her told him that she was enjoying herself, and the drinking hadn’t even begun yet. He reached the cluster of tables where the Chargers lounged, laughed, talked, and drank.

Krem noticed and his eyes brightened a bit. “Well, well. Finally made it.”

“Like I would miss a night of drinking with my buddies. Chargers, this is Ayla.” Iron Bull said. He then began gesturing around the group, making introductions. “Ayla, this is Skinner, Rocky, Stitches, Dalish, and Grim. You already know Krem de la Krem.”

The Chargers regarded her in silence, all eyes drawing curiously over her.

Ayla cleared her throat and broadened her smile. “Hello, everyone.”

There was an array of greetings and mugs lifted her way.

Grim grunted deeply, and Ayla lifted a brow at him.

Iron Bull chuckled. “Oh, don’t mind Grim. He’s not very vocal, but he’s harmless.”

Another grunt came from the man.

Ayla nodded, smiling. “I see.”

Bull lowered to a cushioned bench against the wall and Ayla sat beside him. Apparently, Krem had already told them about the bond between their leader and her. She spent the first few minutes of their company having questions tossed at her, some of the same ones she’d already answered regarding the link, her own background. Ayla had learned a little about the Chargers as well. Both Skinner and Dalish were elves, obviously by their appearance, and while Dalish had lived under the nomadic ways of her namesake, Skinner had grown up in the cities living amongst humans and other races. Rocky was from Orzammar, a place Ayla had heard of but never thought she’d ever see. Stitches, nicknamed accurately, was the company’s healer and surgeon. And Grim… well, he spoke in grunts.

Krem grinned and scooted a cup across the table to Iron Bull. The others already had cups filled with their special brew.

Bull nodded appreciatively. His large hand gripped the cup and lifted it.

“Horns up!” They all howled, then drank.

Ayla was pleasantly startled by their shouted toast. Her frost-blue eyes moved around to each of them, immersed in the closeness of their comradery. They talked, joked, and laughed amongst themselves. She looked to Bull. “Was that ale?”

“Huh?” His features held a mellow smile. “Nope. Something we brew ourselves.” He thought a moment, then broadened his grin. “Ya want some?”

“Oh…well…okay,” Ayla perked.
Iron Bull tapped his empty cup on the table to get Krem’s attention; the handsome man had his eye sternly fixed on some pretty lass across the room. “Drop a little bit for Ayla.”

Krem chuckled, pulled out the skin of brew, and poured some in the cup. Iron Bull handed it to her. All eyes fell on the woman as she looked down at it curiously, then smelled it and wrinkled her nose.

“Better be careful with that, sweet thing,” Krem bellowed. “Not too late to put it down.”

Ayla noticed how Bull and the Chargers watched her anticipatorily, smiles on their faces (with the exception of Grim, though the man appeared visibly curious) and laughter on the brink of their lips.

“Bottoms up, then,” Ayla said. She brought the cup to her lips and tipped it back. It was no surprise to anyone when she sputtered, coughed, wheezed, and looked like she might gag.

They wailed with laughter.

“That tastes awful!”

Iron Bull grinned. “Yes, but how does it make you feel?”

“Rather…good, actually.” Ayla did feel more calm and pleasantly light-headed. She smiled slowly.

“Exactly.”

They continued to talk and drink; Ayla had only the one, however. After a while, the same busty redhead who’d waited on Varric, Cassandra, Dorian, and Blackwall eventually made her way to their set of tables, a large flagon in-hand. She smiled sensually at Iron Bull, rubbing fingers over his stubbly cheek. “Glad to see yer back, Bull,” she purred. “Bed’s been cold without ya.”

“Mm…it’s good to see you too, Bertrand.” Bull smiled sensuously at the barmaid. He sensed Ayla’s discomfort, as the woman had somewhat loosened her hold of his arm. This could be just what he needed. Maybe seeing him flirt with others would upset her enough that she’d back off and cool it with her sexual taunting.

Bertrand went about filling mugs at the tables. At one point her round, little butt was facing directly in Bull’s direction, and he stared as lasciviously as he could at it. He even issued a thick groan.

Ayla’s stomach sank and her heart fluttered. So, this was what he wanted. Cheap encounters with some bar floosy. Fine then, he could have them. She stiffly and angrily released his arm, scooting a few inches from him. This put her back in the shadows, but she didn’t care. She just didn’t want to be touching him right then, or to see how wantonly he watched the other woman.

Sitting at their small table, Rocky and Stitches saw the whole exchange. The two men lifted an eyebrow, then went back to drinking. Whatever was going on there was none of their concern, though they were sure they’d be discussing it with the rest of the Chargers later.

Bertrand turned green eyes to Bull, moving close enough to bump her hip against him. She grinned. “My room later?”

“Count on it.” He winked.

Bertrand giggled. She gave only the smallest look of interest to Ayla. She knew Iron Bull was open about his sexual ways and had various partners at various times. The barmaid saw Ayla as just another of his conquests. Bertrand was just happy to get her turn to ride the Bull when she could. She winked at him and left to finish up her shift.

Ayla stood a few moments after Bertrand left, her fractured eyes fixed ahead, chin held steady. “I wish to go back to the room.”

Another silent glance passed between Rocky and Stitches.


“I’m just…tired.”

“Ah.” Krem’s eyes swung to Iron Bull, and the Qunari shook his head, indicating that Krem shouldn’t press the matter.

Bull stood as well. “I guess that means I’m out for the night too, friends. Knock back a few more for me, huh?”

The Chargers hooted and cheered. They bid Ayla goodnight (Grim offered a low grunt).

Iron Bull waited for the woman to reach her hand out for his arm, but she only stood there looking stubbornly ahead. “Oh, for the love of…”

He swooped her up in his arms and she yelped. Ayla could only allow herself to be carried through the busy room, Iron Bull’s stride strong and purposeful.

“Don’t break her!” called Krem after them, sending another burst of laughs through the Chargers.
Bull rolled his eye.

When they got outside, he headed across the yards for the east tower. Neither of them said anything all the way back to his room. Nothing really needed to be said. He’d done what he’d done, end of story. He flipped his door open and took them in, nudging the door shut with his heel. He gently set her to the bed.

Ayla listened to him moving, caught the vagueness of his shadow-shape when he was close enough. Bull had pulled on a shirt, one that buttoned up the front, though he only fastened the buttons to the middle of his broad chest.

“I’m gonna be gone for a little,” he started, the deep tones of his voice seeming to fill the once silent room. “I put enough wood in the hearth to last a few hours, and there’s water and leftover stew on the table.”

He turned and headed for the door.

Ayla stood and took a few staggered steps after him, her voice dry and defiant when she spoke, “So, you’re just going to leave me here like some pet while you go see her?”

Iron Bull didn’t turn around. Inwardly, he believed this was the right choice. He needed to bury himself in a warm body to make him forget his desire for Ayla. He needed a quick, unfettered, unconditional fuck that would nudge aside all the feelings of possession and monogamy the blind beauty evoked in him. That wasn’t the way of the Qun.

“Don’t wait up.”

He left.

Once she heard the door shut, Ayla tossed herself to the bed and stared up angrily at the blurry ceiling. She felt ready to cry, but she arrested the urge. Why should she waste tears on a man who wanted nothing to do with her? However, it wasn’t long before her overwhelming sense of jealousy had silent tears trickling from her eyes.

(*)

Hannibal was glad to be done for the day. Meetings, meetings, and more meetings. He’d be glad when it was all over and he could go back to being just some guy, and not the Herald of Andraste or the Inquisitor or any other title the whole of Thedas seemed to want to attach to him.

He took the last few steps up into his quarters and stopped, his smile forming slowly. The corner of the room near the fireplace contained a sunken pool that was for bathing. There were candles lined along one side of the pool. Dorian leaned lazily back in the water, which was coated by a layer of fragrant suds. He was watching Hannibal with a look the Inquisitor knew all too well.

“Mm…just in time to take a bath with me, Amatus. Come inside…”

At that, Dorian lowered slowly, sensuously, until he disappeared underwater. A few seconds later, he broke the surface, tossing his head back. He ran his hands up over his soaking hair, swiping it from his face.

“By the Maker, you are so fucking hot.”

Dorian offered a heated chuckle. “I know. And I’m all yours. Lucky you.”

“Oh, yes, lucky me,” droned Hannibal. He was already halfway undressed, dropping his tunic to the floor, then balancing on each leg to remove his boots. He strode to the edge of the pool and began undoing his pants, aqua eyes boiling with want.

Dorian licked his lips as his man got naked, then stepped in the water. Hannibal moved instantly against him, both men embracing passionately; they’d been waiting all day to be back in each other’s arms.

Foreplay, kisses, loving words. All of this was exchanged. Afterwards, they took their love-play to the bed. Hannibal laid on his back with his head propped slightly on a pillow to accommodate his fine horns, while Dorian rode him until he couldn’t see straight.

The mage straddled him, working his hips, rotating them expertly to move his tight man-cunt up and down the length of Hannibal’s hard cock. This time there were no interruptions, and Hannibal gritted his teeth and clamped his hands hard upon Dorian’s hips, giving the final few upstrokes that sent streams of hot seed filling the mage. Dorian threw his head back and wailed wildly when his own climax seized him; jettisons of cum oozed from him, pooling on his lover’s hard stomach and chest. He quaked with ecstasy, clenching and contracting around Hannibal’s shaft, wanting to draw out every last ounce of creamy jizz.

Then Dorian collapsed forward, both of them entangled and breathing hard, covered in each other’s fluids. After a while, they cleaned up in the pool again, then returned to the bed. Hannibal was on his back with Dorian nestled against him, his face to the Qunari’s chest.

“I love you so much,” Hannibal said deeply, his arm tightening around his little ‘Vint.

Dorian’s eyes shut and he smiled happily, relishing the words. His fingers drew idle patterns on Hannibal’s stomach. “Could I love you more? Probably not…”
Yet…there was worry and sadness written over Dorian’s features. He would have to leave and head back to Tevinter once they’d handled Corypheus. He’d been a part of something so big and important, reshaping Thedas in ways that affected the whole world. And it was because of the loyal, handsome, sweet, wonderful Qunari he snuggled against now. Hannibal was doing great things for the world, so why shouldn’t Dorian try to do the same for his homeland? It was only fitting, seeing as he’d have a lot of political pull after Corypheus’s defeat, if they defeated him.

It was his duty to do what he could for Tevinter. So…he’d have to leave Hannibal eventually. The thought instantly struck tears in his eyes, made his heart hurt in a way it never had. He loved the man more than life itself.

Unable to stop it, Dorian sucked in a gasp and the tears fell. He trembled against Hannibal.

“Hey…Dorian…what’s wrong, sweetheart?” Hannibal gently lifted his face so they could lock eyes. “Why are you crying?”

Dorian sniffled. He tried to smile, shaking his head. “It’s…it’s nothing, Amatus. I just…love you so much it hurts.”

Hannibal chuckled softly and pulled him in for a languid, slow kiss. “I’m lucky to have you.”

Dorian nuzzled his bearded chin, then laid his head back down. He sighed. He’d have to tell Hannibal, and soon.

(*)

The Herald’s Rest would be open for at least two hours still, but Bertrand’s shift was over. The pretty woman pulled her shawl on and stepped from the bustling establishment into the brisk night air.

Iron Bull had been standing in the shadows to one side of the door. His arms linked around her, pulled her close, and he brought his mouth down hard and hungrily over hers. Bertrand instantly melted into his solid embrace.

Five minutes later, Bull had her pressed against the door to her quarters, located in the south tower. They were lip-locked. Bertrand reached back, grabbed the latch, and pushed her door inward, sending both of them stumbling inside. Bull kicked the door shut behind him. He groaned and lifted her, and Bertrand wrapped her legs around his waist.

She gave a lusty chuckle as he took her to the bed and lowered her to it, his large form covering her. They indulged in steamy kisses, their bodies rubbing together. Bertrand broke away, smiling quizzically up at him. One of her hands wiggled between them to rub on the sizable lump in his pants; it hadn’t hardened.

“S’everything alright, love?”

Honestly, Bull didn’t know. What he did know was that he needed to do this, needed to sway his thoughts from a certain dark-skinned temptress. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

Bertrand’s tongue ran over her lips. “I think you need a good sucking.”

“Mm…I concur.”

At that, Bull rolled and put her on top. She dragged her body down his until she was on her knees between his legs. Like a bad girl opening gifts on Winter Solstice, she greedily undid his pants, making a pleased sound when she released his manhood.

Iron Bull’s eye narrowed hotly as he watched her.

Bertrand licked her lips, then gripped and massaged its flaccid length in her soft hand. She was glad to see that he didn’t stay soft for long; he firmed up nicely, throbbing and pulsing in her grip. She lowered and flicked her tongue to the swollen head and he shifted under her. And when she slid her mouth over the head and suckled, Bull shuddered with a groan.

“Yes, that’s a good girl. Suck it…yeah…”

And suck she did, taking in as much of him as she could. Her saliva coated him sufficiently, creating wet, sloppy sounds as she worked him. Bull rolled his eye and let his head fall back to the mattress. Bertrand slowly pulled back until his cock was free of her mouth. She massaged and stroked it, watching the passion on his face, written in his body language as he languidly rotated his hips under her. While using her hand to work his shaft, she took one of his balls into her mouth, gently sucking it, tickling it with her tongue.

“Ah…shit…that’s so good.”

Bertrand kept on pleasuring him, and it was very much what he needed. Except…that he was still thinking of her, the snow-haired beauty. Bertrand began to fondle and massage his balls, taking his manhood in her mouth again, deeper and deeper into her relaxed throat. Then she started to bob her head, which sent Bull over the edge.

“AAaylaaa…” her name tumbled unexpectedly from his lips. And he opened his eye, knowing he wouldn’t be reaching his happy ending now. He sighed. “Shit.”
Bertrand had stopped the blowjob. She was frowning heavily. “Did you just call me ‘Ayla’? Is that the woman who was sitting next to you earlier?”

Iron Bull ran a hand over his face, shaking his head. How had he allowed that to happen? Sighing again, he met Bertrand’s eyes. “I have to go. I’m sorry.”

At that, she moved back so he could fix his pants. He was gone from her quarters moments after.

And fifteen minutes after that, lying on his back on the grass in a secluded part of the gardens, he was staring up at the stars, his sexual hunger satiated for the moment. It hadn’t taken him long to rub one out. Not long at all. All he had to do was picture Ayla beneath him, taking every hard inch of him as deep as he could go, her beautiful face contorted with desire and pleasure at their joining.

By the Qun, the woman had hooked him. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to take another sex partner again without thinking of her. He remained on the grass for a while, then cleaned up and headed for his quarters.

(*)

Ayla’s eyes opened when he entered. Wearing one of his shirts she’d gotten off the rack, she was on the bed facing the wall. She listened to him moving, so quiet for someone of his size.

Bull removed his shirt, patch, and boots, chugged a cup of water, then lowered on the mattress beside her. Ayla wiggled closer to the wall. She was still upset with him, Bull figured. But that worked. If she believed him to be nothing more than an ass-chasing rakehell, she might stop trying to innocently seduce him. He fixed his pillow behind his head and stared up at the ceiling, watching the fire-cast shadows flicker and play.

“You should go take a bath. You stink of cheap perfume.”

Bull grinned very slowly. “So you’re talking to me again?”

“No.”

He chuckled. “Seems like it.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“Okay then. Goodnight, Ayla.”

She was silent, which didn’t surprise him. He’d grown accustomed to her stubbornness. He found it quite hilarious that she was madly jealous, thinking he’d slept with Bertrand, when he hadn’t been able to do it because all he could think about was Ayla. She didn’t realize the hold she had on him, and he would do everything he could to keep it that way.

For now, he’d let her have her snit fit.

Bull fell asleep with a smile on his roughly handsome face.
Ayla stretched and yawned, the delicious fragrance of bacon filling her nostrils. Some quick
swipes of her hand over the mattress to test her bearings revealed that she was on Iron Bull’s side
of the bed, and there was a sheet over her. She heard the sound of sloshing water across the room
and sat up, eyes fixed in the direction.

Behind the folding wall, Iron Bull stepped from the tub. He was tall enough to stand several
inches above the barrier and could see Ayla sitting up in bed. He pulled the plug from the tub,
then started toweling himself off.

“Good morning. I hope you’re hungry. I kind of went all out with breakfast,” he chuckled.
“Whipped up some bacon, eggs, and a tall stack of griddle cakes.”

Ayla didn’t answer, but she didn’t appear as irritated or angry as she had last night. She tossed
back the sheet, swung her legs over the bed, and carefully began to feel her way towards the table.

Finished drying, Bull wrapped the towel around his waist and slipped from behind the wall. Ayla
could see his shadow-shape and feel his damp warmth. His natural scent was completely
overwhelming, his own distinct earthy, wind-blown musk. She welcomed his warm, strong
fingers when they linked her wrist. Slowly, she looked up to meet his eye, feeling very sheepish
for how she’d acted last night.

Iron Bull only smiled down at her. “Still angry with me?”

“No.” Ayla’s eyes dropped to see that he was nearly naked, only the slip of towel concealing his
man-parts from her. Her blush came swiftly.

Bull chuckled and led her to the table. He sat across from her, then stuck his foot out, sliding it
under one of hers to bring the sight back. The table was covered with all the goods he’d named, as
well as a small bowl of fresh-churned butter, plate of chopped fruit, and bottle of maple syrup. He
made a plate and set it before her, then made himself one.

He dug in, watching her across the table.

Ayla had her eyes averted, looking down at her plate.

“If you’re not angry with me, what’s wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head, then sighed and lifted her starling eyes to his, “Iron Bull…” she started, “I’m
sorry for how I’ve acted. I should just be grateful for the gift of sight that you give me. Instead,
I’ve behaved unacceptably. I…” She lowered her eyes again. “I know that I was tossed very
unceremoniously into your life, and I don’t ever want to impede upon you. I won’t do it. You
should be able to live your life as you did before I entered it. I’m just happy that I can see clearly
because of you.”

He listened keenly. Had she just basically told him she wouldn’t pursue her flirty ways, allowing
him to get back to his usual promiscuity? He believed she had, which was kind of disappointing,
even if it was what he wanted. Or what he thought he wanted.

“I won’t be a hindrance to you,” Ayla said. “You can…pursue all the barmaids you wish, and it
won’t bother me,” she lied, speaking softly.

Bull absorbed her words thoughtfully. He nodded. “Ah. Well, that’s good to know, that I have
your blessings on whom I choose to bed.”

Ayla smirked.

He chuckled deeply. “So…it’s decided. I continue with my life as usual and offer you sight, and
you will be a good girl. No more innocent teasing, trying to get your…kiss.”

She’d picked up her fork and was picking at her eggs. “Yes…”

The Qunari grinned across the table. “Good. Friends then?”

Ayla gradually lifted her eyes from the food to meet his. She nodded.

“Alright. You should eat up. Wouldn’t want you to get hungry during our tour today.”

That brought a smile, her smooth cheeks accentuated with those two perfect dimples. Even then,
after all that talking and promises made over the table, the Bull still burned for her. But this
arrangement, this establishment of boundaries, was just what he needed to keep the beauty at a
safe distance.

“I wish to see the castle main. Can we?”

“Oh, yes, that’s fine.” Ayla beamed. She started eating her breakfast then.

Iron Bull took up his cup of now lukewarm coffee and sipped it, his one eye watching her over
the rim.
An hour later, Ayla sat on a fur-covered bale of hay beneath a tree flanking the training yard. She could hear Iron Bull and Krem sparring a good distance away. To keep the nip of mid-morning air at bay, she wore a shawl over her shoulders, her tumbling hair even working to dull the cold. All in all, she was comfortable, happy to just sit and linger in her thoughts.

Elemir.

She sighed to think of him again as she had dozens of times since they’d been separated. He just had to be alright. Deep down, Ayla didn’t think he’d been killed by the raiders. She wouldn’t know anything until the Inquisitor’s people brought news, if they found anything out all. She could only hope for the best.

She sensed movement to her left, just slightly behind her, and turned. She wasn’t familiar with the shadow-shape of the approaching person. But she recognized the voice when they spoke.

“Good morning, milady.”

Ayla smiled broadly. “Good morning, Ser Rutherford.”

“Please, just call me Cullen.”

“Very well…Cullen.”

He was close enough to distort the light that she could detect, casting a shadow. And his scent—Ayla found it quite pleasing. She secretly took in calm, deep breaths of it, recalling the handsome planes of his face.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“No, please do.”

Cullen lowered to the bale next to her. Neither of them said anything at first. He found himself rapt by her hazed eyes, their sharp color like azure ice. Ayla skimmed in his direction, wishing desperately that she could see his face.

“How are you enjoying our little fortress,” he asked.

“It’s very nice. I find the plumbing system amazing. Even plumbing in other parts of Thedas isn’t this advanced.”

Cullen issued a rich chortle. “Oh, I can assure you that having hot water in a place like this is a Maker-send. The nights can get into freezing temperatures. Can you imagine having to train all day in the cold, only to return to your quarters for a cold bath?”

“Gods, no.”

He nodded, smiling. “Well, that’s what it was like for the first two months. Complete and utter hell.”

“I can imagine.”

Silence settled over them. Cullen’s golden-brown eyes swayed across the yard to where Iron Bull and Krem sparred. “So…you’re just to sit here then until he finishes?”

“Yes, but it’s okay. I don’t mind. I’ve enjoyed just sitting here, listening. Besides,” one small, dark, slim hand reach carefully out until it rested on his thigh, “you came along to keep me company.” She laughed.

Oh…Cullen realized her gesture had been meant in only the most innocent way, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t stirred something primal in him. His eyes dropped to her hand on his leg, warm and welcome. He more than vaguely wondered what her touch would feel like to his bare skin.

“Well, if ever you need—or want—company and I’m available, I would happily indulge you,” he said, probably more warmly than he intended.

Ayla sensed that. Men had hit on her before, and most of them had been completely tactless at it, lacking any true appeal or grace. Cullen was hitting on her like a man of class. Subtle but sure. Assertive yet reticent. Her smile morphed into something demurer, her head tilting as she studied his shadow-shape, having filed it away for remembrance.

“Cullen…?”

“Yes?”

“May I…touch your face? It’s how I learned to see people before this link with Iron Bull. I mean, I know that I saw you in clarity yesterday for a moment, but this will allow me to always remember you, should ever I lose my ability to see.”

Cullen drifted in closer to her, his eyes moving slowly over her loveliness, drinking in her features. Maker's breath, she was a beauty. Flames flickered in his eyes and a smile sat on his chiseled lips. “By all means then, touch to your heart’s content. Wouldn’t want you to forget me.”
Ayla giggled. “I highly doubt that you’re a man who is easily forgotten.”

“As long as you remember, that would suffice.”

Yes, Ayla truly felt the chemistry now. The commander was certainly flirting with her…and she was enjoying it. She lifted her hands slowly, and Cullen took her wrists to guide her touch to his face. Only his eyes moved, scanning her while she used her fingertips to trace along his forehead; down and back over his ears; along both jawlines; around his eyes, nose, and mouth; across his strong-set chin. As Ayla traced the architecture of his face, she was imagining how he looked with crystal-clear vision, and it made her smile faintly. He was just as handsome to the fingertips as he was to the eyes.

She stopped at the place over his lip where the scar lingered and traced over it, then giggled and rubbed at his stubble.

Cullen chuckled. “Heh. I’ve been meaning to scrape that off for the past couple of days.”

“You shouldn’t. It’s quite…pleasant.”

“In that case, it stays,” the tone of his voice had grown noticeably more sensuous. And he leaned a little closer to the ebony beauty.

(*)

“Hit harder!” Iron Bull slapped his bare chest, taunting Krem.

Krem’s eyes narrowed, and he zipped in, landing a blow with the training stick to his chief’s torso as ordered. He followed up with a quick combo, which Bull blocked and deflected.

The Bull chuckled. “You’re not concentrating, Krem de la Krem.”

“You know I hate that nickname,” Krem snarled.

“Then HIT ME and make me shut my big mouth!” Again, Iron Bull slammed his chest with a large fist.

His eye averted to where he left Ayla under the tree. And he frowned. She had been joined by Commander Rutherford, who was sitting so close he might as well have been on top of her. At least that’s how it looked to Bull. His eye twitched.

FWHAP!

Iron Bull went crashing backwards to the ground. Apparently, Krem took that moment of distraction to land his blow. The lieutenant of the Chargers grinned down at his leader.

Bull got to his feet, rubbing his jaw, working it back and forth. “Good shot. Cheap, but good.”

“I take my shots when I can get ‘em, cheap or otherwise.” Krem chuckled, then he followed Bull’s gaze. His grin broadened. “Dropped Ayla for tawdry company, and now Cullen has moved in.”

Bull lifted a brow at him. “What do you know about it?”

“Oh, Stitches and Rocky told me and the others what happened last night, why Ayla wanted to leave. Caught you flirting with Bertrand. Though…why, oh, why you’d would choose her over Ayla is beyond me.”

“Ayla and I aren’t together,” he all but growled. “She can do what she wants…just like I can.”

“So…you’re saying you don’t want her?”

Bull sighed. “I’m not gonna discuss my sex-life with you.”

“Hmpf. That’s a first.”

“We’ll finish this later, runt.”

Krem chuckled and watched his boss head for Ayla and Cullen.

Bull reached them just as the blind woman lowered her hands from the commander’s face. “Hope I’m not interrupting.”

Ayla turned to the sound of his voice.

Cullen regarded him casually. “No. We were just talking.”

“Is that all?” Bull fixed him with the steely gaze of his eye. “Looked like a bit more was going on.”

Ayla believed she heard a hint of jealousy on Bull’s voice, but decided to dismiss it. They had already established where their relationship stood. “I was touching his face so I could see him.”

“Hm.” Bull inwardly worked to keep himself calm. Damn right, he’d gotten jealous. The realization dawned on him that he hadn’t spoken truthfully at breakfast. He did enjoy her sensuous
advances, and he certainly didn’t want any other man receiving them. But he had to remember that this was for the best, if he wanted to keep distance between them. “If you’re ready for that tour…”

Ayla nodded quickly, smiling. “Yes!” She reached for Bull’s hand and he offered it, lending clarity to her vision. Ayla turned those alluring eyes to Cullen. “Thank you for talking with me.”

“The pleasure was all mine, I assure you.” The Commander was relieved to see the crispness in her eyes again. “Perhaps you would like to join me for a walk sometime. I mean, I can’t offer the gift of sight, but I am relatively good company and am always willing to lend an ear.”

“I’d like that.”

“Good.” Cullen took her other hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed the soft, smooth back. “Until later, Ayla…”

Ayla and Iron Bull watched him stride off to his business.

“He’s very nice,” Ayla mused.

Bull grunted, then added, “Yeah, he’s a good guy. Never had much of a problem with him.” Until now, it seemed.

They headed across the yard for a set of stone steps that would take them back up to the main courtyard. Ayla heard horses snorting and neighing and so followed the sound. The stables were nestled back around a bend. She glimpsed a few mounts behind a fence. The woman seemed to be constantly wearing a smile to accompany her new sight, anxious and happy to witness what would be the simplest things to anyone else.

They took the steps, and just as they reached the top and slipped through the overpass formed by the stairs leading into the castle main, a young man stepped out in front of them. It was quite sudden. He wasn’t much taller than Ayla and had corn-silk hair that was slightly in disarray. His eerie, pale blue-gray eyes studied Ayla calmly.

Ayla watched him with just as much curiosity.

The young man tilted his head. “Ah. Harmless yet dangerous. Draining…or expanding. Taking and giving. You should be careful. Powerful ones would be looking for you.”

Ayla just blinked at him, giving a confused look to Iron Bull.

“Ayla, this is Cole; Cole is weird. He’s actually swift with his double daggers, but has this way of coming off real creepy.”


“Uh-huh.” Bull led them off, while Ayla looked over her shoulder at the strange man and saw that he was watching her too.

Harmless yet dangerous... What was that all about? Ayla pondered.

She sent it to the back of her mind for now as Bull led her up the steps into the castle main. The delicious smells were explained once they stepped through the tall, wide entryway. There were a couple of long tables on either side of the main hall and both of them were set with various foods. Just beyond the entry, to the left, a dwarven man had designated the area to work on some plaques that, when put together, made up an image or a scene. The wall where he worked was partially covered by half-done mosaics.

Iron Bull pointed at the rustic statues, pottery, and other items in the hall. “This décor is Par Vollen.”

“It’s Qunari?”

“Yes.”

Ayla chuckled. “I supposed I shouldn’t be surprised. The Inquisitor is Qunari.”

“Well, he isn’t really a Qunari.”

“Um…” she lifted a brow, “he’s gray-skinned, big, and has horns. I think that certainly categorizes him as a Qunari.”

Iron Bull chuckled as they strolled. “Yes, physically, he is of the Qunari race, but he didn’t grow up in the Qun and, therefore, is referred to as vashoth, which is the name for a Qunari born outside of the Qun.”

“Ahh, I see.” Ayla nodded. “There seems to be so many rules and walls and degrees of separation with the Qun. It’s a wonder anyone would want to live in it. It seems so strict.”

“It’s not so bad if you don’t mind not being allowed to get particularly close to people.”

“Well, I do mind.”

“Then I’ll make it a point to never take you to Par Vollen or any other Qunari territories.”
Holding to his arm, hands gripped to the stone muscle of his bicep, Ayla kept looking at all the surroundings, taking note of some people who stood around in fancy clothes and talked amongst themselves. Citizens of Orlais. There were quite a few of them in Skyhold, though the fortress contained a large variety of occupants.

“You like to read, so you’ll love this,” Bull smiled down at her. He took them through a door along the right side of the long, spacious main hall, then up a set of steps to the next level. He pushed open a door and revealed a circular room filled with books.

“The library! Wow!”

It was like trying to control an excited child in a toy shop. Bull thought, as Ayla was in front now and all but dragging him for the nearest bookcase, which rose from floor-to-ceiling. She plucked a book from a shelf and opened it. Bull was chuckling. He’d moved his hand to sit in the delicate place where her neck met her shoulders so she could continue to see.

Ayla smirked and turned the book upside down, then right side up. She couldn’t read it. Her eyes jumped to Bull. “Do you think there are books written dually in tangerlingua here?”

His broad shoulders shrugged. “Dunno. Don’t come in here much.”

“Well, isn’t this a pleasant surprise,” came the all-too familiar voice of a certain Tevinter mage. “Finally get this brute to tour you around?”

“Hello, Dorian,” Ayla smiled at him. She stole a glance at Iron Bull. “He’s being nice about it. I figure I’m lucky to even be able to see at all.”

Dorian, looking as freshened, tailored, primped, and trimmed as he ever did, turned eyes to Bull. “Nonsense. You’re the pretty princess, and it is he who should all but lower to his knees and be thankful that he is allowed to serve you,” he quipped sweetly.

Ayla trilled with laughter. She liked him a lot. He was always so dapper.

Bull issued a grunt, but it was a mild one. He actually didn’t mind the picture drawn in his mind of being on his knees before Ayla.

“So…I hear you’re looking for books in tangerlingua?” Dorian preened his moustache.

“What do you know if any are here?”

The mage grinned. “My dear, this library is my second home. If I’m not seeking the company of friends at the tavern or trying to seduce my handsome boyfriend, this is where you’ll most likely find me. Come along.”

Dorian took the book from her, pushed it back on the shelf, then grabbed her hand and hurried around the rotunda to another section of the library. Bull was right behind them, Ayla’s other hand gripped in his.

“This area and those two areas,” he pointed a finger adorned with a fine ring, “are fictional works that have been dual-translated. They contain printed words as well as tangerlingua.”

“All of these books?”

“Mm.” Dorian nodded.

“Wow…oh wow. I could LIVE in here!” she exclaimed.

Dorian was enjoying her delight. It was quite infectious. He chuckled softly. “I pretty much do. What do you like to read?”

“Oh, some of everything. Before my brother and I were attacked, I had been reading a series called Hard in Hightown by—”

“Varric Tethras,” Dorian finished, all but smirking the name out.

“You’ve read his work?”

“Not the Hightown series, but some of his more…erotic literature.” Dorian grinned, then thought on something. “I suppose I should prod him into releasing another book for his Warrior Women of Denral series.”

Ayla’s eyes widened. “You know him?”

“Indeed. He’s right here in Skyhold actually. He lends his services to the Inquisition.”

“Wow! That’s tremendous! I would very much like to meet him.”

“Oh, and I’m sure he’d love meeting you too, my dear. You’re just his type—pretty and witty.”

Dorian couldn’t contain himself. He reached up a hand to gently flip back a long, wild white tress from her face. It was soft and fragrant. He cleared his throat. “So…about those books…”

The mage took her hand and led her to a section of the fictional area that he frequented when he wanted something racy to read. She began sifting titles, lightly running her fingertips over the raised tangerlingua bumps etched along the books’ spines.
Bull skimmed as well, making displeased faces at some of the titles. “The Warrior’s Woman? Minrathous Love Rogue? To Love a Highlander?” The Qunari pulled one of the books and flipped it open to some random spot in the middle. After a moment he rolled his eye, shaking his head. “Dorian, are you giving her smut?”

“What? A girl needs some spice in her life, a little hot action.” The mage tossed Bull a quirky smile. “It’s not like she’s getting any from you…or is she?”

Ayla boiled with a blush, though she was grinning widely.

Dorian winked at her.

Bull grunted.
The Hunger Grows

After Ayla had picked out half a dozen books, which Iron Bull carried in a satchel slung over his chest, they left Dorian to continue their tour of the castle. The Qunari took her to see Josephine, who was more than happy to make her acquaintance. Iron Bull had told Ayla that the noblewoman Montilyet was the one to see if she ever needed anything special or otherwise delivered to Skyhold.

Ayla found the woman very lovely and cultured, discovering that she was of a prominent family and served as the chief ambassador for the Inquisition. She used her skills and understanding of Orlesian politics to carry out diplomatic matters.

Once they left Josephine to attend work in her office, Iron Bull took Ayla to see the Undercroft. She was rapt by the weapons and armor repository and crafting area. Next, he took her to the gardens, where they found a bench and sat.

Ayla had shifted her shawl, securing it around her waist since the temperature rose just a little since morning. Her fingers played aimlessly over the top of Bull’s hand while she observed the area. Several of Skyhold’s occupants lingered around as well, talking and lounging. “It’s so beautiful here.”

“Yeah, it’s nice. I come out here sometimes just to think, clear my head,” Iron Bull replied. As of late, you also like to find nice, secluded areas in the garden at night to wack your meat, his inner voice chided, drawing from him a secretive smile. He figured he’d be doing a lot of it thanks to Ayla.

Her features dulled a bit and she settled her eyes on him. “How long do you think it will take for the Inquisitor’s people to find out something about my brother?”

Bull shrugged, softening his one-eyed gaze. “I dunno. It depends on how fast the boss can get people deployed, or how easy it will be for them to find clues as to your brother’s whereabouts.” He brought his other hand down on hers. “Don’t worry. They’ll find something.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, that they’ll find out…h-he…he’s…”

“He won’t be.” Bull shook his head. He sighed and moved his hand to her cheek, drawing the backs of his fingers along the soft curve.

Ayla’s eyes lifted to his, and Bull caught his breath at how piercing they were, how utterly mesmerizing. The ever lingering heat she stoked in him began to expand. He just couldn’t help it. Maybe he’d try to find a sex partner later, make another attempt at wiping such feelings for her from his mind. Yes, maybe he would.

For now, he offered a small smile and leaned forward a bit, brow raised. “It’s about lunch time. Ya hungry? Because I am.”

Ayla giggled and nodded. “I could stand to eat something.”

They stood from the bench and headed back to the main hall to the tables laden with food. From a place across the garden, partially hidden behind the gazebo, Morrigan watched them, her golden eyes narrowed faintly.

(*)

Later that night in Iron Bull’s quarters, Ayla drew a bath and was soaking in it, quite happy with the day she’d had. She sang softly, her voice resounding clear and sweet from behind the folding wall.

Bull sat at the table churning out a short correspondence to his Ben-Hassrath operative squadron. They were the ones he checked in with regarding events and happenings with the Inquisition. The squadron fed that information back to Par Vollen. Likewise, they filled him in on anything of interest involving Orlesian noble secrets, which was relayed to Hannibal and his advisors. This was the agreement made when the Inquisitor first approached Iron Bull and his Chargers on the shore of the Storm Coast. He’d made it clear to Hannibal just who and what he was. He was Ben-Hassrath with the designation of Hissrad, which translated to ‘one who creates illusion’ or ‘liar’ in Qunlat. Simply put, Iron Bull was a spy for the Qun, an enforcer of their religion and way of life, as well as protector of the innocent.

He finished the short message and rolled it up. As per part of the agreement made with the Inquisitor, Bull was to send and receive his correspondence through the spymaster, Leliana. He didn’t mind, however, as he had nothing to hide.

Iron Bull stood and stretched, eye roaming to the separator wall. Ayla had gone from singing to humming, water sloshing gently while she bathed. He sighed and strode to the hearth, turning the fish he had roasting on a spit. The bread was already done and cooling off to the side. The ears of corn boiling in a pot over the fire were about done, so he used some tongs to remove them to a plate, which he left on a short table in front of the hearth to keep them warm.

“Dinner’s ready,” he called.

“Smell’s delicious,” Ayla returned.
Five minutes later, she moved around the wall into sight. Iron Bull sat on the edge of the bed using a small apparatus to clip his nails. His eye rose and fixed on the beauty, and he sighed longingly, unable to keep his cock tamed; it had firmed up almost immediately. She was wearing one of his shirts, and it reached down to the middle of her perfect thighs. She had rolled the sleeves up to her elbows. Her pale tresses were secured in an unruly but completely sexy bunch atop her head.

Oh, why did she do this to him? How? Why couldn’t he just get her out of his system?

Ayla put her arms out and began feeling her way towards the table. Iron Bull secured the clippers and went to her. She smiled up at him when their hands linked, and he peered down hotly for a moment before leading her to the table. She sat quietly while he saw to making plates. It wasn’t long before his foot slid under hers so she could see.

They began dining by lantern and hearth light.

“So…I suppose you’ll be going out tonight then?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“To see her.”

“Most likely.”

Ayla nodded, eating slowly. “Well…have fun then.” Like she meant that. Her tone betrayed her, making it obvious how much she disapproved.

Bull decided to indulge her, keep his charade going. A dashing grin tipped his lips. “Always do. Bertrand is very…flexible.” A rich chuckle poured from him.

“I’m sure,” Ayla replied in a clipped voice, then she donned a smile that was both sweet and condescending. “With all the use she gets from you and whoever else, I wouldn’t doubt the limits of her flexibility.”

Iron Bull merely held his smile. She was still jealous. The realization, strangely enough, stroked a chord of dark joy in him. She still wanted him as much as he wanted her. And now they were both stuck in a rough-and-tumble dance, not really sure what to do with their feelings.

Oh, the sweet irony.

He decided to be a real ass. “Who knows? Maybe with a little extra military instruction from Commander Rutherford, you can work on your own flexibility. I just know he’d jump at the chance to loosen you up.”

Ayla stiffened, somewhat mortified at the blatantly sexual turn of their conversation. Her eyes didn’t waver from his and her chin lifted. “And I’m sure I would enjoy it.”

Damn, she was getting good at this, Bull thought, able to meet and elevate the hot tension in his loins with the words she chose. Though, he was vividly picturing the beauty with Cullen, receiving those flexibility lessons…and that quickly sapped away his hard-on.

He popped another bit of fish in his mouth, chewed it, and washed it down with some water. “Think I’m done. Anything else you need before I head out?”

“No.”

Iron Bull pulled his foot away and her shadows returned. He went about putting up the hearth screen, as he had the night before, then pulled his boots on and a shirt on. He made sure to pop his lube and a cloth in one of the deep pockets, just in case.

“I’ll wash the dishes when I get back. Your books are on the stand beside the bed.”

“Arf.”

Bull turned his full frame towards her, brow lifted. “What was that?”

“Arf.”

“Ayla…”

“What? I’m just trying to be a good little doggy for my master who leaves me home every night so he can go romping with whores.” She had moved from the table and was feeling her way for the bed.

Bull sighed. “We already discussed this.”

“Yes, we did,” she snapped, curling on the mattress, then reaching to skim fingers over her books. “Give Bertrand my best.”

Iron Bull just stared at her, not even remotely sure what the hell had happened. He ran a large hand along the back of his neck, then shook his head, sighed, and left.

“Hmph.” Ayla huffed, then began To Love a Highlander, which Dorian insisted was a “very steamy read”.
Iron Bull spent the next four hours sitting in a booth at Herald’s Rest getting as drunk as possible without reaching the point where he’d pass out. The Chargers weren’t there this night, probably off tipping cattle or whatever other things they did. Didn’t matter. He kind of just wanted to be alone for the moment anyway. The environment was pleasing as always, the bard’s songs lingering through the room.

“Ya doin’ alright over here, Bull?” Bertrand’s voice yanked his attention from the hearth, at which he’d been staring dazedly.

“Hm? Yeah, peachy,” he said, then banged his tankard to the table. “Fill it again…please.” His words were slightly slurred.

Bertrand chuckled some. “Um…ya sure? You’ve had a lot tonight, drinkin’ like it’s goin’ outa style.”

“Woman, please…more,” he gruffed, banging the cup again.

Bertrand sighed, then did as he asked. She considered giving him another invitation to her room, but decided against it. She wasn’t sure if she’d be able to handle riding the Bull when he was this inebriated. She’d been with him when he was very drunk before, and while it was something she found mostly pleasurable, it had also frightened her. He had been rougher, harder in his thrusts, and not much into foreplay. Near the end of it, the woman could only simply lay under his powerful, hulking body with her nails clamped into him while he mercilessly rode her to his quaking climax. Afterwards, he’d collapsed his full weight and she had to struggle to push his half-asleep ass off of her.

No, she wouldn’t invite him up tonight. Another time, when he wasn’t so hammered.

“That’s the last one,” Bertrand said sternly, smiling a bit. “I’m cuttin’ ya off fer the night.”

Iron Bull grunted and worked on his latest tankard.

Twenty minutes later, he stumbled from the Herald’s Rest and into the brisk night. He took some deep breaths and belched loudly, leaning to the building for a moment, then he began weaving towards his quarters.

When he finally got there, he pushed the door in slowly and entered. He did his best to make as little noise as possible when he shut the door. His eye raked the room. The fire in the hearth was low but still vibrant, and Ayla lay asleep on the bed. Bull slowly removed his eye patch, shirt, and boots. He smacked his lips a few times and grimaced, pouring himself a cup of water. Once he finished it, he stumbled towards the bed, but didn’t settle on it. Instead, his eye roamed over the sleeping beauty. Her face was so serene in the warm glow of the fireplace, so very lovely. Her hair was a wild nest fanned across the mattress around her. She was slightly turned on her side with one leg bent, which had caused his shirt she was using as nightgown to ride up just enough, giving him an unadulterated view of her slender legs and the supple curves of soft thighs. He could clearly see the gentle, ample swell of the bottom of one butt cheek.

He groaned hungrily and eased his hand over the large, hard lump in his pants, rubbing it slowly, massaging. Perhaps, he should just give in and let her have her kiss, because he was certain he would be able to persuade her into letting him give her more than that. He wanted so badly to bury himself in her, he was beginning to ache.

But he’d never take her against her will. He’d never taken any sexual partner that way.

Iron Bull shook his head and took a deep breath, keeping a tight leash on his lust. He grabbed the sheet at the end of the bed and pulled it over her. Then he took a pillow and went to the great-bear rug before the hearth, stretching out on his back. Within an hour, he was asleep.

The next morning, Bull was snoring heavily when Ayla tripped over his strewn body and fell on him.

“Ooof!” she yelped.

Bull’s eye snapped open and he half sat up, putting him face to face with the woman. He frowned, then winced. His head slammed like an angry band of Qunari were banging drums around inside it. “What are you doing, woman?”

“I was looking for you! I heard you in here but you wouldn’t answer. You just kept snoring.”

Keeping one hand to his arm, Ayla moved to his side on the bear rug. She wrinkled her nose. “You smell like you drank the whole tavern.”

“Heh,” he tried to chuckle and it hurt. “I think I did.”

“Well, I suggest you freshen yourself up, because I wish to walk around some more today.”

“Aaalyaaa…” he droned miserably, laying back down on the rug. “Can’t we just stay in today?”

“No. I want to go out.”
His chest rose with a great sigh. “At least give me another two hours to sleep.”

“No. Now. Judging by the light, it’s already mid-morning.”

Bull’s eye fixed on her. “I’m the one with the sight, so we’ll go when I’m ready.”

Ayla’s eyes narrowed at him, then her whole expression softened and she blinked a few times, lashes batting, giving him that kitty-begging-for-a-treat look again. Tears formed in her luminous eyes.

“That is not fair. Don’t look at me like that, woman.”

She didn’t let up. Her bottom lip trembled as if she might cry.

“Oh…by the Qun, fine.”

Ayla grinned.

“You’re devious.”

“Yes, I can be,” she said.

(*)

After Iron Bull took a bath to scour away the tavern’s atmosphere and lingering ale-scent, he took Ayla back to the main hall of the castle, where they could get something to eat. The woman had been right about the time of day, as brunch was being set out when they arrived.

They made their plates and found a place to sit near a Par Vollen statue. Iron Bull didn’t really eat much, but sipped on some coffee in an attempt to sap away his hangover. The mug was gripped in one hand, while his other hand rested gently on Ayla’s arm. The woman ate delicately of her roast and vegetables.

She was surprised when a dwarf with deeply blonde hair stopped at their table. He had loop-rings in each ear, a medallion around his thick neck, and very roguish smile on his face.

“Heard you wanted to meet me,” he said.

Ayla looked questioningly at him. “I…did?”

He chuckled and held his hand out. “Varric Tethras.”

The woman’s eyes widened and she dropped her utensils to her plate. She took his hand and shook it violently. “Oh my gods, it’s great to meet you!”

Iron Bull watched the display with mild amusement.

“Ayla, right?”

“Yes.”

“Dorian told me you were into my work.”

“Oh, yes. I really love the Hard in Hightown series. Superb mystery. You’re one of the few authors who presses to have their work translated into tangerlingua, which I really appreciate.”

Varric’s smile tipped pleasantly and he bowed. “Always glad to please the fans.”

“Ayla, if you stroke his ego any harder, it’s going to burst out of his pants,” Iron Bull quipped.

“Vulgar as always,” Varric calmly slipped Bull’s way.

The Qunari tipped his mug at him.

“I figured it was a matter of time before you got around to introducing yourself,” came Cassandra’s voice. She moved in beside Varric.

“Just being friendly to our newest Skyhold occupant. Besides, she’s a big fan.”

Cassandra’s eyes moved to Ayla. “Oh, really?”

“Oh my gods, yes.”

The Seeker lifted a brow, studying the white-haired woman. “‘Gods’? As is more than one?”

“Um…yes,” Ayla answered. “I was raised under the religion of the Creator Gods.”

“So you don’t believe in the Maker, in Andraste?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. I-I believe that whatever we choose to call our god or gods, they all serve the same purpose and are seen the same way for the most part.”

“You’re a pagan then, not there’s anything wrong with that.” Cassandra had the most unintended way of looking down her nose at others.
Varric smirked lightly. “This is Cassandra, Seeker of the Chantry. She’s mostly okay, but comes off as a little holier-than-thou at times. Don’t mind her,” he grinned at Ayla.

Iron Bull chuckled deeply, then grimaced and rubbed his temple. He sipped at his coffee.

Cassandra frowned lightly. “I didn’t mean to insult you, Ayla.”

Ayla’s smile was inviting and warm enough that anyone would welcome it. “It’s alright, Seeker. You didn’t. You are of the Chantry, loyal to the teachings of Andraste and the word of the Maker, so I understand your curiosity.”

Cassandra nodded; she greatly approved. A smile slowly formed. “Well, for what it’s worth, I hope you enjoy your time here. If ever I can help you with anything, I will.”

“Thank you.”

They watched the Seeker move off.

“She’s very nice,” Ayla said.

Varric rubbed his stubble. “Heh. You must’ve caught her on a good day. Anyway, I’ll leave you two to finish your brunch. It was a pleasure meeting you, Ayla.”

“You as well!”

The dashing dwarf left.

After they finished their meal, Ayla decided she wanted to sit in the gardens again, so Iron Bull took her. He could also use the fresh air and time to let his hangover dissipate, though he felt infinitely better than he did upon waking.

They were sitting silently and admiring the surroundings when Bull’s eye caught Hannibal Luthor Adaar striding towards them. He knew even before the Inquisitor reached them that he had important news; the seriousness in his aqua eyes spoke as much.

Bull stood, as did Ayla, holding to his arm. They watched Hannibal when he stopped by them.

“Leliana received this message late last night,” he said and handed the parchment over.

Iron Bull unrolled it, his eye skimming steadily. When he was done, he looked very surprised. “The Qunari wish to strike an alliance with the Inquisition? I would have never imagined.”

“Yes, it’s a bit surprising to me and my council as well. How well do you know this Gatt?”

Gatt was the one who’d signed off on the message. It requested the Inquisition’s aid in destroying a huge pending shipment of red lyrium by the Venatori somewhere along the Storm Coast. If this request was fulfilled, the Qunari would ally with the Inquisition.

Ayla didn’t know anything about what they discussed. Her eyes moved between them as they talked.

“Gatt is part of my Ben-Hassrath squadron. He’s loyal to the Qun and just as loyal to his word. If he says they want an alliance, then they do, boss.” Iron Bull nodded.

“Okay, then,” said Hannibal. “I need you in the war room in an hour to go over details. If we’re to meet the shipment on time, we’ll need to leave not later than three days from now.”

“Understood.”

Hannibal moved off.
The war room was more crowded than Ayla anticipated. Though, she’d never attended these kinds of meetings and wasn’t sure what to expect. Usually, it was just Hannibal and his closest advisors present while they discussed the current situation and next moves, but some members of the Inquisitor’s inner circle were there too.

Besides Hannibal, Leliana, Cullen, and Josephine, the others in the room were Solas, Dorian, Varric, the Chargers, Iron Bull, and Ayla. They stood in a loose circle around the huge slab of the war room table. The map spread across the surface showed the territories of Orlais and Ferelden, and various markers were positioned on it.

Cullen pointed to a place along the Storm Coast. “This bay is where the Ben-Hassrath expect the lyrium shipment to arrive. The Venatori will most likely enter around here.” His finger trailed a short distance along the coast to a place where the bay opened into the Waking Sea. “The Qunari dreadnaught Berethlok will be concealed behind the bluffs to the west, ready to attack when signaled.”

“Iron Bull,” Hannibal said, “you, me, Varric, and Solas will make our way here”–he pointed–“to the signal fire. The Chargers will take position here on this lower hill top for the secondary attack.”

Since he wasn’t talking out strategies for the moment, Cullen took a moment to flick his eyes in Ayla’s direction. She held lightly to Iron Bull’s arm, but her eyes were on the commander. Cullen’s expression softened a bit, hinting at a smile. Ayla blushed and looked away, only to meet his warm brown eyes again.

Iron Bull nodded slowly. He considered something, his eye falling on Hannibal. “Seems like a sound plan, boss. It’ll have to be executed to perfection, though. Both Venatori encampments need to be destroyed simultaneously to keep them from reforming and concentrating their forces.” The great Qunari looked to the Chargers. His Chargers. His most treasured friends. They’d be in the open and vulnerable if shit went downhill. Bull would just have to trust in Hannibal’s judgment.

Hannibal looked to Dorian. “Love, we’re going to be gone for at least a week, maybe two. Would you mind watching after Ayla until we return?”

Dorian perked and he smiled broadly. “Of course not.”

“Okay then. You’ll be moving into Iron Bull’s quarters with her for the duration of our absence.”

The mage’s eyes floated over in Ayla’s direction. “Ooo, how fun. It’ll be like an endless sleepover–full of pillow fights, makeup, and boy-talk.”

Ayla chuckled softly at him.

Iron Bull shook his head, but smiled at the man. “Thanks, ‘Vint. I appreciate it.”

“Nonsense. I’m more than happy to lend my services.”

“It’s all set then,” Hannibal said. “We leave for the Storm Coast day after tomorrow.”

The meeting broke up, with everyone filtering from the war room. As she and Iron Bull headed down the corridor that cut through Josephine’s office, leading to the main hall, Ayla looked over her shoulder for Cullen.

And he wasn’t that far behind her and Bull. His smile broadened when they met gazes. He winked at her.

Ayla giggled.

Iron Bull looked down at the woman on his arm, then over his shoulder. He smirked at what had her attention, then faced ahead again. “Well, if it isn’t Commander Flexibility.”

Ayla jerked around, her eyes burning up at him, narrowed faintly. “You’re the one who started that.”

Bull couldn’t really argue there. She was right. He’d thought mocking her about his encounters with Bertrand was a good thing at the time, but it had backfired.

“Hello, Ayla.” Cullen had hastened his stride to fall in on her other side.

“Cullen…” She found her heart had begun to speed its pace at the sound of his voice. “How has your day been?”

“Hm,” he feigned as if thinking very hard, “good for the most part, rather boring and more of the same. Though, seeing you has made it considerably better.”

Bull rolled his eye. The three of them had come to stand in the main hall. “Please…” he muttered.

Ayla ignored him, giving her attention fully to Cullen. “Perhaps, we could go for that walk you
“Absolutely,” the commander brightened, extending his arm. “I was just going to grab a bite to eat now. Join me, then we could walk around some afterwards?”

She nodded, making her pale, fluffy hair bounce. “I’d like that.” She turned her eyes to Iron Bull, who appeared more than a little unamused with their flirty exchange. “Don’t wait up.”

At that, she linked her arm through Cullen’s, her small hand sliding from the heated muscle of the Qunari’s bicep in the same instant. Her vision lost its clarity, but she didn’t mind. She could see the familiar, edgeless shadow-shape that was Cullen. And the attractive masculinity of his scent assailed her nostrils.

Ayla offered him a dazzling smile, “Shall we?”

Cullen obliged by slowly leading her away.

Iron Bull was left staring quite jealously after them.

(*)

Several hours later, once evening had fallen, Bull slowly paced his quarters. He’d returned there not long after Ayla went with Cullen and fell into a welcome nap, sleeping off the last of his hangover from the previous night.

He went to the bay window and scanned the area below, hoping to see some sign of that intensely white hair. But…no. He paced a bit more, then reclined on the bed with one of the dual-translated books she’d gotten from the library. He didn’t last more than ten minutes trying to read through the ridiculous, wanton, trashy smut.

So, he set the book back on the nightstand and laid there looking up at the ceiling. A few minutes passed and he started pacing again.

(*)

It wasn’t until two hours later that Cullen finally walked her back to Iron Bull’s quarters. They were laughing their way around the fourth floor corridor. He’d told her a joke.

“I heard that one from one of my soldiers,” he mused. “I hope it wasn’t too vulgar.”

Ayla shook her head. “You forget, I share a room with Iron Bull, all but chained to his side so that I may see. I’ve heard much worse.”

Cullen loosened a rich chuckle and nodded. “Yes, you have a point there.”

They stopped outside Iron Bull’s door, dropping into a tense but not unpleasant silence. Their bodies were close enough that Ayla could feel the heat shedding from Cullen’s tall, muscular figure. Her eyes were fixed somewhere on his chest, and she could feel him leaning in, as if charged particles of desire bounced between them, drawing them closer.

The commander wondered if she might let him kiss her. Or would she feel uncomfortable, perhaps thinking it too bold a move? He decided to test those waters carefully. His hand rose and caressed her smooth cheek, then fingers slipped under her small chin, gently lifting it so he had better access to that perfect, full mouth. Ayla didn’t pull away. In fact, she was leaning into him as well.

That was all the confirmation Cullen needed.

Right before their lips met, when the commander had only to flick his tongue out to taste her, the door swung open. Iron Bull’s huge form filled the entry, one hand propped on the jamb. “It’s about time.”

Ayla drew back from the impending kiss; Cullen’s eyes slipped shut a moment and he groaned. The man smirked at Iron Bull, who answered with a self-satisfied smile.

Ayla reached out, her hand falling on Bull’s naked chest. Her eyes lifted to fix clearly on Cullen and she offered a rather sensuous smile. “Thank you for a wonderful day, Cullen. I can’t wait to do it again.” She leaned in and pushed a kiss to the corner of his mouth, right against the scar marked there. “I’ll see you later.” The woman ducked past the Qunari and into the room, beginning the normal routine of feeling her way around. She was getting quite good at navigating the space.

Iron Bull’s eye was locked on Cullen. The commander didn’t falter, returning the stare full-on. Bull shut the door in his face and locked it. Cullen shook his head and chuckled at what he recognized to be a very jealous Qunari. He left the east tower feeling quite satisfied, tingly even. One word danced through his thoughts. One name.

Ayla.

(*)

While Ayla bathed, Iron Bull lay silently on the bed, waiting. He was wearing a pair of rather clingy, black briefs. The underwear reached down to the middle of his solid thighs. They were designed expertly enough to accommodate his rather sizable man-package, which hung unprovoked and flaccid to the left.
Ayla finished up and moved from behind the wall, feeling her way to the bed, once again dressed in one of his shirts. She mentally made a note to pick up a few bed-gowns someday. Bull watched as she climbed on the foot of the bed, then crawled up to her side. She messed with her hair some, securing it in a messy bun, then finally touched his arm.

They locked gazes, frosty-blue eyes to sky-blue eye.

She smiled, a white brow tilted. “Not going out?”

“Don’t feel like it.”

“A…poor Bertrand. Won’t get to–how did you put it–ride the Bull tonight.”

Bull chuckled softly, shaking his head. “Are you really that jealous?”

“A?” she snapped back, eyes narrowed.

“Pff. Of Cullen?” Bull smirked. “I’m happy for you. He’s nice. He’ll treat you good. I wish you both a brood of fat, happy babies together.”

Ayla exploded in laughter that trilled through the room. “You are jealous.” She smacked his arm.

Bull didn’t answer, which confirmed her observation.

“Though, I don’t understand why,” she said. “You’re the one who decided you didn’t want me.”

Bull was watching her softly, the familiar heat gathering in his eye. He flicked that eye downward along his body. “Ayla, if I didn’t want you, that wouldn’t happen.”

She looked where he indicated and instantly inflamed, her eyes widening just a bit at that manly center of him. In his briefs, it had gotten thicker and longer, a solid pipe lying along his thigh. She was alarmed at the shock of heat the sight of his throbbing erection sent to her core, causing a gradual moistness there. She’d reacted to him this way several times.

She yanked her vision back to his and saw that he observed her like some primal, feral beast might examine its mate before pouncing on her.

But there was Cullen. Handsome, kind, sweet, funny, Cullen. She had really begun to like him. She didn’t want to risk ruining what might bloom between her and the commander, all because the Qunari wished to torture her with his indecisiveness. One moment he wanted her, and the next he was pushing her away to find his sexual release with other people.

No, she wouldn’t be toyed with.

Ayla took in a breath, then shook her head. “It’s too late for that. You’ve already made up your mind about who you want…and it’s not me,” she said in a small, shaky voice. Damn him. She was still very much attracted, but she wouldn’t admit it.

She reached across his chest and grabbed her book from the nightstand, then settled in place beside him to read. She narrowed her eyes, noticing that her bookmark wasn’t where she’d left it. “Have you been reading this?”

Bull cleared his throat. “No.”

Ayla gave a sideways smile, then continued reading.

Iron Bull was inwardly kicking his own ass. He was getting in over his head with her. It was only going to become more complicated. He wouldn’t be able to remove his feelings for her, he knew that. She was the one he’d always feared would come along. The one that would change him, make him rethink (or even abandon) everything he knew of the Qun. The one he would fight for. Long for. Die for.

He was falling in love with her. By the Qun, he could honestly say that he did love her. And still he continued to deny and fight it. He lay there on his back watching the ceiling while she read her book.

What the hell was he going to do?
A Heritage Uncovered

The next day, Bull was in a quiet mood. He didn’t speak much, except when Ayla prodded him to. He was too busy cogitating over his whole issue with the woman, about how he would handle it. And he was just as lost as before he fell asleep last night.

Currently, the two of them moved through the main hall of the castle, having just eaten some lunch. She said she wanted to visit the stables to see the horses and other mounts, perhaps touch and feed them, and Iron Bull had only smiled softly at her eagerness to do something so simple. So innocent.

As they approached the tall, wide entryway leading from the hall out to the main courtyard, Ayla pointed to a door on the left. “What’s through there?”

“That’s the atrium. If you look down through the library’s rotunda, you’d see it.” He issued a low chuckle. “Solas has turned it into his personal library and archive for ancient Elvhen stuff.”

“Solas…” she pondered. “He’s the elf who was in the war room yesterday, right?”

Bull nodded.

Ayla stopped and yanked on his arm, looking up hopefully. “Can we stop inside? I’d like to see his collection, that is…if he wouldn’t mind.”

“Nah, I don’t think he’d mind. Though, you should be prepared for some very dry conversation about spirits and the Fade.”

Ayla giggled. “Sounds interesting.”

Bull smirked. “Um…he’s actually quite boring, but I’ll take you if that’s where you wish to go. Anything for you…”

The two of them stood there staring into each other’s eyes for drawn out moments, before Ayla cleared her throat and pulled at his arm to start in the direction of the atrium door. The woman had gotten a little warmer. She could never deny her feelings for the Qunari. She just wished he would’ve shown more interest in her. Then, just maybe…they could’ve been more. Perhaps, they still could be.

But there was Cullen.

She mentally shook herself. No, Iron Bull didn’t want her. He’d made great efforts to resist her, in fact. That didn’t mean she could just stop caring about him, that she could keep the blood from rushing to her face and intimate parts whenever he was close. Hulking and warm, bombarding her with that stifling scent of his, making her want to run her hands all over that wonderful, solid, imposing body…

“Ayla?” That was the third time Iron Bull had called her name. He’d opened the door for her and was waiting for her to go through.

“Huh?” She was yanked from the decadent recesses of her mind, where she had been playing out exactly what she wanted to do with the Qunari.

He had an arm out, signaling her to go before him. His eye focused warmly on her, a smile on his chiseled lips.

“Oh…y-yes.”

She moved by and he followed her through a short hall that spilled directly into the atrium. Solas’s little hangout. There was a desk in the circular room’s center. It was covered in various items—figurines, scrolls, books, inkwell, quill. Tall candelabras were set along the wall, lending light to the space, and a natural luminance spilled in vaguely from the library windows on the level above. There were other shelves and tables positioned about containing many more artifacts, books, and other mystical things.

Even before Bull and Ayla fully entered the room, they heard the voices going back and forth.

“Solas, darling, I realize that you have this irrational urge to be present every time the Inquisitor goes to retrieve any kind of Elvhen goods, but I assure you that I’m quite capable of going into that tomb for the statue of Ahime Anta,” Vivienne said coolly, looking down her noble nose at him.

Both the mages were trying to convince Hannibal to choose between them when the time came to go for the artifact, which wouldn’t be until sometime after the Inquisitor returned from the Storm Coast.

The elf remained almost expressionless, though anyone who knew Solas would notice his irritation with the woman. “I have more experience with Elvhen artifacts, so I would be the logical choice.”

“So you think,” she said. “My own experience in dealing with such things isn’t something to be taken lightly. May I remind you that I have spent years studying Elvhen scriptures, and have
conducted a great deal of research on ancient Dalish artifacts.”

“And may I remind you that I am an elf who has grown up surrounded by such things.”

Vivienne rolled her eyes. “Elves are so stubborn.”

Hannibal’s aqua eyes had been going back and forth between them. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. It was like watching academic sibling rivalry. “Okay, look. I think both of you are well-versed in Elvhen knowledge. Once I decide whom I’m taking, I’ll let you know.”

They both nodded at the Inquisitor, then all three of them gave attention to Ayla and Iron Bull, who’d been standing near the entry foyer listening to the exchange.


“I’m…Ayla.” She offered a small smile, feeling a bit intimidated by the woman.

“Hmm, yes. I know. I–” Vivienne’s words clipped short and she winced…then began to tremble.

Solas cried out and began to quiver as well, both he and Vivienne slowly sinking to their knees. Beside Bull, Ayla had also started shaking, but she didn’t go to her knees, nor did she appear to be in pain. The woman’s eyes had widened as the sensation of pin-pricks surged through her limbs, like her arms and legs had been asleep and blood was beginning to circulate through them again.

Hannibal’s eyes swung to the three of them in alarm and he took a step back. The anchor pulsed green a few times, making his hand glow faintly, but it didn’t do more than that. “What…what’s happening!”

Iron Bull was just as confused. As much as he tried to keep hold of Ayla, whatever phenomenon was occurring gradually forced him to release her, shunning him away, sending him backpedaling into the wall, where he crashed into a stack of books. “Ayla!”

The white-haired woman started rising from the floor until she levitated a couple of feet above it, head tossed back, eyes glowing white, arms outspread, hair billowing on an unseen wind. And then two pale, illuminated streams of energy began flowing from Vivienne and Solas into Ayla, seeping from their bodies into hers, making her eyes glow even brighter.

Solas shuddered and gasped, sinking further to the floor.

Vivienne appeared to be in just as much pain, only a short breath from completely passing out. She gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes at the hovering woman. She shot a hand out, using her last reserves of power to send a feedback loop down the band of energy connecting her to Ayla like some enchanted umbilical cord.

Ayla cried out as she was thrown back against the wall, sliding to collapse face-down in a tumble of wild hair and skirts.

As suddenly as it had started (whatever it was), it ended.

Iron Bull rushed to Ayla and pulled her in his arms, swiping her hair back from her face. She was dazed but conscious. “Ayla…” he breathed, then clutched her close.

Hannibal tended to Solas and Vivienne, both of whom were weakened and confused. “What the hell happened?”

Vivienne glared Ayla’s way. “It…it was her. She was…draining us.”

Hannibal’s gaze darkened and narrowed at the pale-haired woman. “What did you do? What was that?”

Cradled in Iron Bull’s arms, Ayla shook her head, her eyes skimming to each of them. “I—I…don’t know what…”

Hannibal didn’t like what had occurred just then. Not one bit. He took a step towards her, visibly angry. “What are you!”

Iron Bull growled deeply, ready to protect her at any cost.

(*)

By the time the light-show had begun, the occupants of the library had already gathered around the rotunda balustrade to watch in fascination. This included Morrigan and Dorian. The sorceress rushed for the stairs that curled down to the atrium. Dorian was right behind her.

Morrigan exited the stairs into the room, golden eyes locking on Ayla. “I know exactly what she is.”

Everyone turned to the sorceress.

“Have you ever heard of a people called the Jado?” Morrigan asked Ayla calmly, taking a few more steps into the room. She appeared very cautious.

There was silence while everyone listened.
“No…” Ayla shook her head, then thought over it, brow furrowing. “Are…they the ones responsible for the link between Iron Bull and I?”

“Hm,” Morrigan gave the smallest of smiles, “I’d say very much so. They existed for a very long time, up until about two hundred years ago, when they suddenly vanished, dispersed to the winds. You see, the Jado were a very mystical people. They’re the only community in Thedas that birthed what are known as Oonas. An Oona could be male or female, and they were always blind or predominantly so. What made Oonas special was their ability to siphon or amplify the powers of magic wielders, such as mages and sorcerers. You, my girl, are an Oona.”

Ayla watched her with puzzled, silent disbelief. She shook her head. “No…I couldn’t possibly be…something like that…”

“You are, indeed.” Morrigan nodded.

“If they existed so long ago, how do you know so much about these Jado, Morrigan?” Hannibal asked, suspicion lingering thickly in his voice.

“Because I have walked among them. You forget, Inquisitor, that I have traveled the ages, moved through time and the Fade in ways that most never will. I…” her eyes wandered a moment, “…was there when the Jado began to blend from existence. They spread themselves around Thedas, living under new identities, though that didn’t completely destroy their bloodlines. They disappeared in this way to keep power-hungry mages and sorcerers from exploiting them for their Oonas.” Her eyes flicked to Ayla. “I picked up on her power signature not long after she arrived, believing it to be that of a Jado Oona. So I’ve been following her, waiting to see if she’d manifest it, which she did, as I’m sure she has inadvertently done throughout her life.”

“You should’ve come to me with this,” Hannibal said, clearly displeased.

“I wasn’t completely sure, so I didn’t wish to bother you with trivial uncertainties, Inquisitor. The truth of the matter is this: Ayla has the potential to be more powerful than any mage any of you have ever seen. She can siphon power and use it as her own…or she can amplify it, which is why the Oonas were exploited—for their amplification ability.”

“Well, that explains what happened to me in that cave the day we rescued her,” Dorian entered thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. “She…amplified me. She must’ve triggered your mark as well on our way back to Skyhold,” the mage said to Hannibal. “Fascinating.”

Vivienne was back on her feet now. The woman looked very displeased. “How is that fascinating? She almost killed Solas and me.”

“Always the over-exaggerator,” Morrigan chuffed. “She didn’t almost kill you; she was extracting your power. If she had succeeded in fully draining you, you’d have only been rendered unconscious. Your power would recharge itself in time.”

The First Enchanter rolled her eyes. “Because that sounds so much better.”

Solas was actually quite curious. “I agree with Dorian. It’s rather fascinating. I would be interested in learning more about her gift. It might be able to help the Inquisition.”

Hannibal had considered it too. He nodded. “Morrigan, since you know the most about Ayla’s power, you’ll be responsible for working with her so she can learn to control it.”

The dark-haired sorceress smiled slowly, nodding. “I’m more than happy to do it.”

“I’m sure you are,” chimed Vivienne, nose lifted.

Ayla had been gnawing faintly on her bottom lip, thinking heavily over it all. She spoke to Morrigan. “You said this all had something to do with the link between Iron Bull and I. How?”

The Qunari had helped her stand, and she was once more gripping his solid arm to lend her sight.

“As I said, all Oonas have broken sight,” Morrigan started. “That is their weakness; it’s a consequence of wielding such power, a way to balance them. There is a force, a natural mechanism within them that binds their life-spirit to that of their Chosen Warrior, the one who will be their eyes and their sword. Their protector. The bond isn’t something they can control, but rather something that just happens upon touch. It’s random and unpredictable. The bond between an Oona and his or her warrior is all-binding. It connects them in all ways. In most cases, their Chosen Warrior becomes their…she grinned and met Iron Bull’s single-eyed gaze, “…mate.”

The Qunari’s eye shifted down to Ayla, who slowly looked up at him. He was almost smiling at her blush…and at what Morrigan’s revelation about Ayla’s heritage could mean. In most cases, their Chosen Warrior becomes their mate. That, at least, gave him some hope that he hadn’t yet lost her to Commander Flexibility.

Ayla had to look away from the absolute warmth and softness in Bull’s eye, smoothed over his scarred but attractive face. What was she going to do? She cared for Cullen, but her feelings for the Bull completely overshadowed anything she felt for the commander…or anyone else.

She sighed.

She was stuck someplace between a Cullen and a hard Qunari.
That night back in Iron Bull’s quarters, Ayla sat on the great-bear rug wearing one of his shirts, her hair tumbling around her while she listened to the fire snapping, felt its welcome warmth, saw the vagueness of its glow at the edges of her shadowy sight.

Iron Bull was finishing up his bath. He dried off and pulled on some bed pants. Silently, he settled on the rug behind her, his hand sliding over hers. “You okay?”

She nodded after a few moments.

“That wasn’t much help?” He couldn’t help but notice that she had dried herself and dressed in a long whiff of that pretty hair, taking up some in his hand, gently letting it fall through his fingers.

“Yes,” she answered softly. “It’s just…” She shook her head. “I’m nothing but a burden to you… and a danger to everyone else.”

“I’m… Ayla…” he droned thickly, “that’s not true. You’re just… different.” He smiled and chuckled some.

She grew slightly angry at the whole situation again. “I mean, wasn’t it already enough that I was blind? Now I’m a blind freak.” She gave a short, dry laugh.

Bull sighed and maneuvered so he could gently tip her face around, making their eyes meet. “You’re not a freak. So you have this… power, or whatever. It’s just another step in your life you’ll have to take and live with. You’re still you, though.”

Her shoulders sank a bit, tension releasing. He had such a way of making her feel safe, secure, and like the most beautiful, desirable creature in the world. Before Ayla knew what she was doing, she moved against him, looping her arms around his neck, bringing their torsos and lips together. She didn’t hold back in the kiss she served, trying to taste all of him at once.

Iron Bull was surprised but definitely not ungrateful. His arm looped her, holding her securely to him, while his lips blazed against her own, teeth nipping, tongue flicking. He released a trembling, wanton groan when she began to rub her body slowly against his, growing more brazen. Then he slowly leaned her back, putting his body partly over hers the same way he had back in the tent that morning to teach her a lesson for teasing him. He continued their kiss.

Ayla didn’t know what to do. All she knew was that she didn’t want the sparks of pleasure shooting through her to end. At the same time, she didn’t want to go any further. Her hands ran up and over his hard, powerful arms, and she gasped and tossed her head back when he nipped her chin and raked his teeth over the graceful swoop of her neck. She was growing very moist in her treasured spot, feeling his solid, throbbing girth rubbing against her there.

Her eyes flew open. “Bull…”

He pulled back, a storm of desire brewing in his eye. “Yes,” he breathed.

Oh, she didn’t want to stop… but she had to. Everything was just so confusing now. “I… I’m sorry.”

At that she began to move from under him, and he sighed greatly but didn’t keep her pinned. He rolled and fell to his back on the rug, smiling heatedly. So, she was still uncertain about what to do with the Qunari. The fact that she initiated the kiss and might have even gifted him with her flower told Bull exactly what he needed to know—her feelings for him ran very deep.

Commander Flexibility had better watch out, because the Bull was still in the game.

He hefted another great sigh, watching her feel her way to the bed, settling on it, pulling the covers up to her little chin. He grinned and just laid there. He needed to cool the fuck off before he followed her to bed.
The Hidden Love

On the days when the Inquisitor was to embark on one his missions or adventures, Skyhold’s kitchen staff always prepared what had been officially named the Heroes Breakfast. A great feast of morning-time goods was cooked up and served in the great hall. The Inquisitor and the group who would be traveling with him, along with their significant others and closest friends, were the first to indulge, then the rest of Skyhold could swing by for whatever they wanted.

Ayla sat at one of the long tables beside Iron Bull, one hand on his arm. She had a fork in the other hand picking slowly through her meal, eyes sweeping the gathered group. There was Hannibal and Dorian at one end of the table. All of the Chargers took up the other end. Solas and Varric sat across from her and Bull. Some others at the table included Lady Montilyet, Leliana, Sera, a man Bull had pointed out as Warden Blackwall, and Seeker Pentaghast. The man named Cole had taken up a place under the table. His arm would snake slowly from below and grab things from his plate randomly. He was a strange, strange fellow. Basically, the breakfast was prepared for those about to leave, but most of the Inquisitor’s inner circle ended up attending. Cullen wasn’t there, however. The commander was no doubt out with his troops, first to rise and last to slumber.

Everyone conversed and laughed amongst themselves, in high enough spirits, and Ayla was happy to see that. She was glad that, even facing dangers untold and hardships unnumbered, they could find the mirth in life, enjoying contentment when they could.

“You should eat something,” Bull said. He had buttered his fourth biscuit, slathered on some blackberry jam, and taken a big bite. “You’re already slim enough. Don’t want you wasting away while I’m gone.” He smiled warmly, still feeling rather amorous after their heated moment last night.

Ayla’s eyes slipped to him. “I’m just anxious, is all.” She returned his smile. “I was this way when you left me before back at the camp.”

“Mm. Missing me already?” The Bull gave her a tender nudge.

“Perhaps…” Her fingers shifted over his arm, rubbing the area slowly.

He leaned his lips closer to her ear, his resonant voice sending waves of heated breath along her cheek, making her shiver. “Careful with the touching. If you keep it up, I won’t be able to leave the table without everyone knowing exactly what's on my mind.”

He was speaking of being aroused, of course. Ayla was no prude. The woman blushed out a smile. “Maybe it’s you who should behave yourself.”

“Nope. Never.”

She chuckled some, clearing her throat, wondering if anyone had heard any of that exchange. Thankfully, everyone was fully immersed in their own conversations.

“Horns up!” cried the Chargers, lifting cups of cider and water.

Bull bellowed with laughter, raising his coffee mug at them. Everyone else at the table raised their cups too. Ayla smiled and sighed. She felt at home here with these people, growing to care about them more and more with the passing days. She stole a glance at the smiling, handsome profile of the Qunari beside her.

She cared about him most of all.

(*)

Two hours later, the party was gathered by Skyhold’s main gate, everyone prepping their mounts which had been brought over by the stable-hands. Ayla stood beside Dorian, the mage giving her a little room while she said her goodbyes to The Iron Bull.

The Qunari warrior held her little hands in his, smiling down softly. “Your eyes and your sword shall return soon enough,” he said.

Ayla rolled her eyes but returned the smile.

Bull chuckled.

“Just be safe.”

“Always am.” Bull looked to Dorian. “Take care of her.”

“Rest assured, she’s in good company.” The mage held a slight smile. He lifted a manicured hand and made to shoo the Qunari off. “Now, go along…before you think to change your mind and whisk the girl back to your quarters for a pre-departure quickie.”

Ayla’s cheeks heated up and she stared over at him. “Dorian!”

He quipped a playful laugh, brow arching. “What? You two still haven’t consummated all the courting I’ve picked up on? Pity.”
Bull just shook his head, then turned his smiling eye to Ayla. "I'll see you soon."

She nodded, and Bull released her hands, moving to his mount. He climbed in the saddle and looked upon her again, longing written clearly over his features. The man had begun to realize that everything he did, every breath he took, every journey he embarked on, was all for her. Not having her close to him had turned into an alien feeling; he had grown so used to their touching, the precious intimacy that she shared with him and him alone.

He clicked his tongue to his teeth and started his horse in procession with the others through the main gate and across the bridge, away from Skyhold. The coming days would have them crossing the lands for the Storm Coast.

(*)

Not long after, Ayla sat in Iron Bull’s quarters reading. Dorian had taken her there so he could go to his and Hannibal’s quarters to grab some things for his stay in the Bull’s room with her. The mage thought it would be easier if she remained there, since he planned on having his arms quite full.

Ayla had gotten through two chapters before the door opened. She smiled and set the book aside, swinging her legs to the edge of the bed. She tilted her head at what sounded like a bunch of struggling, then something clattered to the floor.

"Venhedis!" Dorian hissed softly.

Ayla chuckled. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yes. Just fine. That was only me dropping my favorite comb."

She stood and took a few steps toward him. "You’re only going to be living in here for two weeks at most. How much did you bring?"

"Not much…I don’t think." He grinned. Then he was moving as a shadow-shape by her vision, taking the load in his arms to the table. "The essentials–my hair stuff, makeup kit, a couple pairs of shoes, a few outfits, my latest romance novel. You know, the essentials. Though, I’ll be making another trip for clothes."

Ayla giggled, foggy vision following his blurry form, making mental note of how he looked from the shadows. She would remember him. "Wow, that’s a lot."

"Nonsense," he flipped a hand at her. "A girl–or a gay man–needs these things. They are the building blocks of a high-maintenance existence. One does not simply wake up looking as good as I do." He chuckled.

"Certainly not," Ayla was very amused. She was glad Dorian would be there to keep her company, as she very much enjoyed his presence. "You are very pretty."

"Ah, you flatter me!" He took her hand and led her back to the bed. After she settled on it, he stretched out on his belly across the other end. He grinned mischievously. "So, I noticed you've started a thing with our handsome commander of the troops. I want all the juicy details."

"Well…there aren’t any," she warmed with a blush, shaking her head. "What? It’s true!"

Dorian rested his chin on his folded hands, watching her. He absently kicked his legs up and down, up and down, looking like a chatty teenage girl discussing a cute boy at school. "Have you kissed?"

The ebony beauty thought, and shrugged, then shook her head. "Not really…well, I did kiss him right here—she touches the corner of her sweet mouth—"the other night when he walked me back after a day together.""

"Ooo, audacious. And were you two hugging when you kissed?"

"No. Why?"

Dorian issued a sultry chuckle. "Just wondering if perhaps he left you with something throbbing and hot to dream about."

Ayla’s eyes widened and she burst into laughter, hands shooting to cover her mouth. "Dorian!"

He laughed. She was so cute.

"I regret to inform you that I know nothing about Cullen’s…throbbing hotness."

"But you want to…or perhaps you’d prefer the Bull?"

Ayla found it strange just how easy it was to talk about this stuff with Dorian. He was forthcoming and spontaneous, but very relatable since his personality was so effeminate. Talking with him was like chatting with another woman. She shook her head, looking away. "Iron Bull doesn’t want me. He’d rather find his pleasures elsewhere. And that’s fine. I told him that I won’t
impede on his life, on whatever routine or habits he indulged before I trapped him in our bond.”

Dorian sighed and rubbed her arm. “Dear, you didn’t trap him. You heard what Morrigan said. This bond you have isn’t something either of you could’ve controlled or foreseen. When he touched you that day, it was an act of destiny, two fates colliding in a way neither of them predicted. How do you feel about him?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.” He smiled again and batted his lashes, though she wouldn’t see the gesture. “Well...” she licked her lips, thinking, “I care about him very much. He makes me feel things no other man does...”

“Not even Cullen? He is very hot.”

She blurted low chuckle. “Gods, yes, he is. But...” Ayla shook her head.

“He’s no Iron Bull,” Dorian finished for her, quite enjoying himself, getting into her pretty little head and talking about boys and stuff.

“No...he’s not.” Her face went stern. “But that doesn’t matter. Commander Rutherford is his own person and I’ll never compare him to the stubborn, pig-headed, overbearing creature that is Iron Bull. Cullen is kind, and any woman would be glad to have him.”

Dorian nodded and smiled. Good for her, being a progressive gal. “And right now, that woman is you. Whatever will you do with those men wrapped around your fingers like marionettes on strings?”

“I don’t want to yank anyone around, Dorian. That’s my dilemma. I care about Iron Bull but I’ve begun to care about Cullen as well, and I refuse to let him pass me by while I wait for a stubborn Qunari to wise up.”

“So, you’re going with Cullen then…interesting.”

“...” she sighed. “I don’t know. I suppose I’ll just play it by ear.”

He chuckled. “My dear, that is the best way to play it. Leaves your options open.” He sat up. “So tonight is Wicked Grace at the tavern. You up to go? I mean, if you’re not, I understand. We could stay in.”

“Oh, yes. I wish to go. Besides, I try not to stay in this room so often. I like getting out.”

He clapped his hands once. “Good then! Let’s go to the hall and get some lunch, then we’ll come back here and get your makeup and hair done, pick you an outfit. Hm, I think tomorrow will be a market day. We’re going shopping. Surely you need more clothes; what girl doesn’t? I could use a few new outfits. There are several Orlesian fashion vendors here in Skyhold, so much to choose from. It’ll be fun!”

Ayla just smiled widely listening to the mage spew all his information. She nodded. “I’m sure it will be.” Her eyes lingered in his direction. “There’s still some food stuff here if you wanted to cook instead of going to hall.”

“Ha!” Dorian tossed a hand flippantly. “I don’t cook, my dear. I’m afraid the extent of my culinary skills is making toast and boiling water for tea. Hannibal is the chef in this relationship. His schedule is hectic, but sometimes he surprises me with the most delicious romantic dinners.”

“Oh...”

“Most people assume that because I’m the ‘woman’, I’m the more domestic one.” He chuckled. “It’s a common misconception. Now,” Dorian moved from the bed, then took her arm to guide her, “to the hall.”

(*)

Varric shuffled the Wicked Grace deck, the cards arching and flapping expertly within the bridge of his hands. He grinned across the table at Cassandra, who was watching like a hawk. “What? Think I’m gonna cheat or something?”

“Yes, actually.”

The dwarf chuckled. “Cassandra, Cassandra. Okay, here.” He set the deck to the scarred wooden tabletop, slid it over to her, and tapped it once. “You shuffle.”

The Seeker sipped her drink, then grabbed up the cards.

“Maybe you should shuffle and deal for tonight,” mused Blackwall. “See if his luck changes.”

“Yes, I just might,” Cassandra said, shuffling the cards.

Varric shrugged, holding the most cunning expression. He looked like a man who was very sure of himself. Cassandra would probably never admit it, but she thought he was kind of handsome. He winked at her. “I’m still gonna win.”
The Seeker rolled her eyes.

“Well, looks like Dorian finally made it,” Blackwall said, and his companions looked up to see the mage had entered the rather busy Herald’s Rest with Ayla on his arm.

The woman was no less stunning than both men recalled her being when she’d walked through that door with Iron Bull a few nights ago. She wore a wine-red dress this time that accentuated her comely figure. Some of her thick, snowy hair had been braided and pulled back into a fitting style, and she wore very subtle lip coloring and eye makeup that maintained her natural look.

“I’m sure Dorian’s happy to be her guardian. It’s like having his own personal, living doll to dress up and makeover,” Cassandra mused dryly.

Blackwall chuckled. “Hey, allow the girly-man his harmless pleasures.”

Dorian and Ayla reached the booth and he helped her slide in, then followed. “Good evening, beautiful people.”

“Was starting to think you wouldn’t show up, Sparkles.” Varric grinned at him.

“Tsk, tsk. I just enjoy being fashionably late.”

“Good evening, everyone,” Ayla said, holding a soft smile as her eyes moved around, trying to discern their shadow-shapes in an already low-lit room.

They returned her greetings.

“Ayla,” Dorian said, “I don’t think you’ve officially met Warden Blackwall.”

“Oh…” She lifted a hand and held it out.

Blackwall took and shook it. “Pleasure.”

The woman nodded, smile deepening. “Likewise.” She dragged her foggy gaze around the table.

“All of you travel on adventures with the Inquisitor?”

“Yes,” Varric said, “though I wouldn’t call every journey an adventure. Some of them are just little things that can be equated to rescuing kittens from trees. But most of it is pretty serious stuff.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“Sometimes it is,” the dwarf answered smoothly. “Other times, it’s just listening to Cassandra complain about the weather or the food rations.” He grinned in the Seeker’s direction.

Cassandra smirked, making a displeased sound. She began dealing their first hand of Wicked Grace. “So, Ayla,” she started. “I hear you’re some kind of mage?”

“Not a mage, but a kind of power siphon and amplifier for mages. She can harvest their power as her own or expand her energy into them, enhancing their power.”

She opened her mouth to answer, but Dorian beat her to it. “Not a mage, but a kind of power siphon and amplifier for mages. She can harvest their power as her own or expand her energy into them, enhancing their power.”

“Ayla offered a small, unsure smile and shrugged. The whole thing was still new and uncomfortable for her. “I…am to train with Morrigan, perhaps learn more about my people.”

“Morrigan is…savvy in the ways of magic, but you should be wary. I wouldn’t trust that sorceress further than I could throw her,” Cassandra said.

“Okay…” Ayla’s broken vision averted. She felt like the Seeker was putting her on the spot.

The group played their Wicked Grace game, while the white-haired beauty listened to their banter, laughter, joking, and cursing. After a while, she toned them out to fixate on the bard’s songs and her pleasant voice.

“Well, it looks like you’re all having fun,” came a wonderfully familiar voice that made Ayla perk.

They all looked up to see that Cullen stood table-side, and they all seemed a bit surprised, since he rarely visited the tavern. Besides a casual smile, he wore dark trousers, boots, a cream-colored shirt, and dark-green vest.

“Hm,” Varric mused, smiling at the commander, “I wonder what brings you here, Curly.” His eyes skirted to Ayla for a moment.

The smile merely clung to Cullen’s handsome features. “I thought I’d take a break from all the war room antics, get a little rest and relaxation. I would join you, but you seem to have a full booth. Ayla, perhaps you’d like to join me at another table?”

The woman nodded, smiling in his direction. She found herself trying to pick up his scent in a room that was swimming with various smells.

“Good then.” Cullen stepped back so Dorian could slip from the booth, allowing Ayla to exit. The commander linked his arm through hers and led her to a booth across the room.
Cassandra’s gaze followed them, lingering.

“Hm, they make a nice-looking couple,” Dorian chuckled, primping his moustache.

The Seeker dropped her cards to the table, sliding her slender body from the booth. “I think that’s it for me tonight.”

The three men watched in peaked curiosity as she strode through the room, leaving the Herald’s Rest.

“She seemed peeved about somethin’,” Blackwall said.

“Yeah…” Varric answered. He knew how Cassandra felt about Cullen. Only a blind person wouldn’t see how she blushed and tried to harden herself when she was around him. Of course, her secret was safe with the dwarf.
There was no Iron Bull to interrupt them this time. Cullen had walked her back to the room she shared with the Qunari, though she was now temporarily sharing it with Dorian.

He stared down into her beautiful, unseeing eyes, lost in the eerie, frost-blue depths. Cullen caressed her cheek, then moved in, his mouth slowly seeking hers. Ayla was more than ready to taste him. She had been looking forward to the last time, before Iron Bull abruptly stopped it.

The commander’s mouth was searing and soft when it landed upon hers. Ayla moved against him, linking her arms around his neck, opening herself to receive whatever he would give. Cullen moaned thickly, wrapping his arms around her to keep her body close, his hands buried in the cascade of her hair. Ayla shuddered at the explosions of sensation coursing through her, being so bound up in his scent, his strong warmth. Her hands slid up into the wavy softness of his hair.

Taller, broader. Hulking. One-eyed. And horned.

Ayla caught her breath and slowly pulled back from the kiss. She offered a playfully sensuous smile. “I…I had fun tonight, Cullen.”

“As did I,” he breathily replied, pleasantly winded by their heated kiss. Their bodies were still pressed together and a certain part of him had adequately swelled. He was hard and ready.

Ayla felt the evidence of his arousal, and it made her wetter. But she needed to be away from the incredibly attractive and roguish man. Inwardly, she was cursing Iron Bull. He wasn’t even physically there, yet he managed to insert himself between them again, distracting her from the commander.

“I’ll see you later,” she said softly, then ran a hand across his stubbly cheek.

“I can’t wait.”

Cullen watched the woman feel for the latch, pull it down, then push the door in, closing it after her. “Shit…” he breathed. He couldn’t believe how hard she made him. The commander sighed and headed quickly for his quarters. If he didn’t rub one out soon, he just might come in his pants.

(*)

Dressed in silken bed pants and top, barefoot, and with his dark mane boyishly tousled, Dorian was propped in bed reading his romance novel when the door opened and Ayla entered. The woman smiled demurely, leaning to the door for a moment after she closed it. Then she began feeling her way around.

The mage set his book down, grinning. “You look like you’ve been up to naughty things.”

Ayla chuckled. “Not as naughty as you would think.”

“Mm.”

She reached the divider wall and moved behind it, starting to strip from her clothes. “It’s true. We only kissed…but it was one hell of a kiss.”

Bull’s shirt she’d been using as a nightgown was also slung over the folding wall, she felt for it, snatched it down, and pulled it on.

“Did you at least get the hot throb this time?”

A giggle bubbled from her, and she cleared her throat. “Maybe…”

“Oh, you did. I know it. Such a slut.”

She moved from behind the wall, slowly making her way for the bed. Dorian merely watched the woman navigate her way through the room as if she’d been living there for months rather than days. She reached the bed, climbed on, and settled next to him, lying on her back with a dreamy expression on her face.

Dorian turned on his side, examining her. “Are you sure all you received was a kiss? I know that look. It’s the same one I have after my Amatus has given me a long, hard fuck.”

Ayla snatched her eyes his direction, mouth partly open in mortified mirth. She laughed. “No. Just a kiss.”

“The commander must own a spectacular set of lips to have you looking like that.” He grinned deeply, then tapped her arm. Aimlessly, he lifted some of her hair, bringing it to his nose and lips, and inhaled.

“Yes, I’d say he has a very fine mouth, which he’s quite skilled at using.”
“Mm. Just wait until he uses other parts of his body on you. I yearn to see what faces you’ll make then.”

“Oh, hush!” she giggled.

Dorian watched her closely. “You really are a very beautiful woman, Ayla. Trust me when I say that you’re driving that man wild.”

They talked a little more, then headed to sleep.

(*)

The next morning, Dorian stirred, gradually floating through that hazy place between dreams and the waking world. His eyes slowly opened to reveal that it was very early; the sun still slumbered below the eastern horizon, but it would rise within the hour. Diffused light streamed into the room through both windows. Baby embers flickered in the hearth.

Dorian was on his back with one hand behind his head. He shifted…then froze, eyes enlarging. That gray gaze flew sideward. Ayla was right against him, face buried in his armpit, tumbling hair draped over them both. One of her long, dark, smooth legs was curled over one of his, and he could clearly feel her warmth through his pajamas.

His eyes jerked downward and widened more, if it were possible.

“Oh, my…” the slightest whisper.

One of the woman’s arms was strewn across him, her small hand resting right over his man-parts. Well, partially brushing them really, but that was more than enough for Dorian. Honestly, if he weren’t gay, he would certainly be enjoying himself, but as it were…

Moving slowly, not wanting to disturb her slumber, he reached down and gently gripped her wrist. His eyes jerked to her face to see she was still sleeping. He carefully lifted her hand up and away from his cock, transporting it to his chest. A much safer zone than where it was before.

He laid there for a while staring at the ceiling, listening to Ayla’s steady breaths. A light smile hung to his features. If this was what Iron Bull had to put up with every night, it was an absolute wonder the Qunari hadn’t jumped on her yet.

(*)

Two hours and a short nap later, Dorian woke up to Ayla moving from the bed. The mage moaned and rolled over, burying his face in the pillow. He was so not a morning person. He heard the water turn on behind the wall, which prompted him to finally get up. He swung his legs over the mattress, stood, stretched, and yawned. The mage ruffled his hair, then went to the table to pour a glass of water. He absently peered out the bay window as he drank.

“What’s on the agenda for today, love?”

Ayla was washing her face and freshening up. She turned the water off. “Morrigan. I am to start training, so I thought you’d take me to her after we have some breakfast.”

“Sounds good.” Dorian stretched again. Normally, he might still be in bed, lingering there until midmorning, but he supposed it was good to rise a little earlier sometimes.

Once Ayla was done in the bathing area, he took his turn. In an hour, after careful primping, combing, styling, and eyeliner application, Dorian was ready. They left Iron Bull’s quarters for the main hall.

Something occurred to Dorian once they’d gotten outside the east tower and began walking across the courtyard, which was sparsely populated this early in the morning. His gray-lavender eyes swept sideward to the beauty on his arm. “Do you suppose your brother might also have this power? That he could be an Oona?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it.” She shook her head. “But I don’t think he is. Now that this has all been revealed, I remember certain times where I may have used my power.”

“Once, when I was eighteen, my brother and I were traveling with a mercenary group, mostly rogues and warriors. There was one apostate mage, an elf. We encountered a pair of bears one night. I suppose they were attracted by the light of our fire or the smell of food, and they attacked our camp. We lost two people but…at some point…” her eyes narrowed, “the mage suddenly lost control of her power and ended up creating a massive wall of fire, which engulfed one bear and scared the other away. She never understood what had caused the surge, none of us did. We were just happy it handled the bears. I guess now I know…”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it.” She shook her head. “But I don’t think he is. Now that this has all been revealed, I remember certain times where I may have used my power.”

They reached the wide steps leading into the castle main. Dorian listened closely while she spoke.

“Once, when I was eighteen, my brother and I were traveling with a mercenary group, mostly rogues and warriors. There was one apostate mage, an elf. We encountered a pair of bears one night. I suppose they were attracted by the light of our fire or the smell of food, and they attacked our camp. We lost two people but…at some point…” her eyes narrowed, “the mage suddenly lost control of her power and ended up creating a massive wall of fire, which engulfed one bear and scared the other away. She never understood what had caused the surge, none of us did. We were just happy it handled the bears. I guess now I know…”

Dorian sighed lightly. “You shouldn’t be too hard on yourself. It was because of you that no more of your companions fell victim to a hungry bear that night. And who knows how many other times you might have unwittingly used your power to help?”

Ayla’s broken eyes turned up to him, unfocused and startling. She shook her head. “But I didn’t know what was happening, about this gift. I could’ve killed someone. I could’ve…I could’ve hurt you back in that cave, or amplified you so much that you hurt Iron Bull, Sera, or the Inquisitor!”
They’d gone through the great doorway into the hall. Dorian pulled her off to the side a bit, looking down tenderly at her. “But you didn’t. No one was hurt. And that is what you must remember, otherwise you may begin tumbling into a pit of doubt that will leave you second guessing yourself constantly. Believe me, I know.”

Ayla nodded, her smile returning, if only a little.

“Ah, there we are,” Dorian gripped her chin and shook it gently. “Dispense with the dismal expression.”

“You’re a good friend, Dorian.”

“Oh, I know.” The mage chuckled, then led her to the food-laden tables. After a rather light and chatty breakfast, he led Ayla to the garden.

(*)

Morrigan stood in her little domain of Skyhold, a spacious atrium that branched off the large garden. At the far end of the ancient room, with its worn scarlet rug strewn across the stone floor, was a tall mirror. It rose nearly to the ceiling, looming before intricate stained-glass windows. The Witch of the Wilds examined the contents lying on one of a few tables in the room. Phials and old things. Books were stacked in places, though most were on shelves.

A knock resounded on the door and she turned.

“Enter.” When the door swung open, Morrigan saw that Dorian and Ayla stood in the entryway. She smiled slowly, intensely golden eyes narrowing just a hair. “Ah, right on time.”

“You were expecting us?” Dorian moved into the room with Ayla linked to his arm.

“Of course. Something told me you’d be along this morning.” Morrigan sauntered to them, looking over Ayla’s face. “It took me a day to get them right, but I managed to create something for you.”

The woman lifted a white brow, intrigued. “What is it?”

“They’re called channeling rings. May I…take your hand?”

Dorian’s eyes narrowed. “Channeling rings? Don’t you mean binding rings? You mean to restrict her?”

Morrigan lightly rolled her eyes. She was constantly at odds, it seemed, with the Inquisitor’s inner circle people. She had to admit that each one of the mages—Vivienne, Solas, and Dorian—were some of her least favorite, though the elf was the one most likely to see the reason in what she was attempting to do with Ayla and her power.

“The rings won’t restrict or control her, Altus. They will merely allow her to command her abilities better. Ayla, I wouldn’t do anything to harm you, but you don’t have to do this. Although, I’m sure the Inquisitor was hoping that you’d want to help the Inquisition, perhaps even aid in destroying Corypheus himself….”

Dorian smirked at how the witch had tossed that last line in, playing on Ayla’s sense of honor and empathy.

Ayla thought for a moment, then nodded, her eyes thoroughly moving over Morrigan, copying her shadow-shape to memory. “I’m willing to learn and do what I can to help.” At that, she offered the woman her hand.

“Very well.” Morrigan took it and walked her the short distance to the table she’d been standing over moments before. She picked up one of two simple-looking metallic rings. They were obviously too big to fit Ayla’s slim fingers, but they were enchanted. She slipped the ring around the woman’s middle finger, then watched as it glowed for a few seconds, shrinking to fit perfectly. She put the remaining ring on Ayla’s other middle finger. “There you are. How do they feel?”

The ebony beauty dropped her eyes to her hands, though they appeared as two blotches. She wiggled her fingers. She could barely tell she wore rings at all. She smiled a little. “They fit very well.”

“Good. All they’ll do is make it so you’re less likely to cause any…accidental siphoning or amplification. They’ll help you learn to harness your power, and one day, once you’ve gotten adept at it, you won’t need the rings.”

“Okay then.” Ayla nodded. “When do we start?”

“Anxious to learn, I like that,” said Morrigan. “We’ll start now, out in the garden. I’ve already spread word that the area will be off limits until about noon. I thought our schedule for practice would be four consecutive days a week, from after breakfast to before lunch. Does that sound good to you?”

“Yes.”

“Of course, it’s always up to change, depending on events.”
"I understand."

"This way then." Morrigan carefully led Ayla from the chamber and back outside. They crossed a walkway and took two steps down to the garden. The old gazebo stood off to the right a short distance. The witch's gold gaze slipped to Dorian. "You can leave now, Altus, and come pick her up at lunchtime."

"Hm." Dorian's eyes narrowed at her. "I think I'll just stick around, see how she handles her first lesson."

"Fine. But you should be on your guard, since Ayla will be trying to channel her abilities. There's a reason why I had this area cleared of non-essential personnel. She would be practicing on me. If you suddenly find yourself victim to a siphoning, don't hold me accountable."

"I won't," he riposted, then smiled softly at Ayla and rubbed her arm. "I'll hold her accountable."

He chuckled.

Ayla's stomach was an intricate knot of fluttering butterflies. She was nervous and excited at the prospect of exploring this newfound power in her. And she welcomed Dorian's humor. She offered a small smile. "I'll try to be gentle with you both."

"Alright, Ayla. You stand..." Morrigan walked her to an open place in the garden, near a small cusp of bushes, "...right here. I'll be a short distance away."

The blind woman nodded, slowly skimming the blurred surroundings, listening to birds in trees, the breeze bustling through the castle's eaves. Her skirts rustled gently against her legs.

"Okay, Ayla," Morrigan said calmly, "to start, I want you to relax, close your eyes. Wipe all thoughts from your mind. Take deep breaths and think of nothingness, a deep, dark, endless abyss. Void of sound, void of light..."

"Why does it have to be a deep, dark abyss?" Dorian chimed. He had moved to stand not far from Morrigan. "Why not a blinding, endless light? That can be calming too."

Morrigan sighed and gave him a singeing stare.

The Altus tossed his hands, then brought one in and pinched his thumb and forefinger together, drawing them in a zippering motion across his mouth–his lips were sealed.

Morrigan gave her attention to Ayla again. "Think of the abyss and how it is filled with nothing. No thoughts, no light, no sound."

Ayla's eyes were closed now. "No thoughts...no light...no sound..." she repeated softly, then nodded.

"Now, one at a time, I want you to examine your emotions. Choose one, right now. Happiness, perhaps. Excitement. Anger. Fear. Just one...and manifest it from the darkness. Make it the one single thing that you can see."

Ayla tried those emotions, cycling through them. But it was no use. Concentrate as she might, she couldn't focus on any of them. She sighed, shifted, and shook her head. "I...can't..."

"It's alright," Morrigan coerced. "There are many more emotions and feelings from which to feed your inner power." The witch's head tilted. "Hate, perhaps? Sadness...rage...disgust...ecstasy..."

Ayla felt a small twinge in her limbs, that prickly asleep feeling she'd gotten during the episode with Vivienne and Solas. Her eyes moved back and forth behind their lids.

Morrigan saw the shift. The woman had almost been provoked. "Surprise...anticipation...love..."

Love.

There in the abyss she pictured in her mind, an entity appeared. A certain beautiful Qunari, and he was wearing a smile that warmed her heart, made her melt. The prickly sensation enhanced until it pleasantly engulfed her body. Ayla slowly began to levitate, arms out, head back, hair billowing like a white banner around her.

In that same instant, both Morrigan and Dorian began to quiver, crying out, dropping to their knees. Pale snakes of energy began creeping from their bodies, fusing into Ayla's.

"Good, Ayla!" Morrigan gasped. "Now...calm yourself, blend the emotion...b-back into the da...darkness..."

Ayla's head snapped steady and her eyes widened. The world looked so different now! Or at least...the shadow-shapes of Morrigan and Dorian looked different. They held a soft, pale glow; everything else was still in shadows. And they were in distress! The woman did as Morrigan instructed, pushing the image of love back into the abyss; the Qunari faded into that endless darkness.

And Ayla lowered back to the ground, taking a deep breath. At the same time, she released her siphon on the two mages, allowing them to recover. Once again, they were shadow-shapes to her broken sight, the mysterious glow gone. She remained where she was. "Are you alright?"
Morrigan stood slowly, as did Dorian.

“We’ll survive,” the witch said. Her eyes shifted to Dorian, a slim brow lifted. “Still wish to stick around for her lessons, Altus?”

He brushed leaves from his clothes and smoothed his moustache. “Hmph. That wasn’t so bad, though I’d much rather be amplified than drained. That experience, while alarming and unexpected, had at least left me feeling all bubbly inside.” He smirked and rubbed his temples. “The aftereffects of having one’s power siphoned could be comparable to suffering a blazing hangover.”

“Sorry, Dorian…” Ayla offered softly.

“Ah, my dear,” he smiled a bit, “I was happy to volunteer my services.”

“So, Ayla,” Morrigan approached her, a knowing smile on her lips, “your power-emotion is Love. That actually doesn’t surprise me.”

Ayla blushed faintly.

Morrigan continued. “You remember that feeling, my girl. Remember how you called upon it, commanded and manipulated it, because it is the heart of your control. It is the catalyst that will enkindle your power.”

“Okay…” Oh, she’d certainly never forget or mistake the feeling of love that she’d developed for Iron Bull. It had been steadily and surely manifesting itself in her since they’d met. She mildly wondered if he reciprocated any of her feelings, unaware that the Qunari warrior was actually completely smitten with her.

Only time would reveal just where their estranged relationship headed.
Ayla had been at Skyhold for nearly two weeks. She could hardly believe that such a short time had passed, as it seemed she’d been there longer. Her practices with Morrigan and Dorian were going well, though that morning, about an hour into the session, she managed to amplify Morrigan too suddenly, and the sorceress set a long planter of elfroot on fire. Dorian had found it quite hilarious, pecking tears at the corners of his eyes. Morrigan didn’t find him amusing and muttered some unintelligible curse at the mage.

Practice was cut a little short that day.

Dorian had taken Ayla to the main hall for some lunch. They sat at one of the long tables chatting and eating, when Dorian suddenly grinned.

“Mm.”

“What is it?” Ayla pressed, then popped another blackberry past her luscious lips.

“Oh, just a certain handsome commander coming this way.”

Ayla straightened a bit more, felt for her napkin to blot at her mouth in case any berry juice or other food lingered. She swept a hand along the thick curtain of her hair, which Dorian had fashioned so it was pulled back from her face, accentuating her long neck.

“You look stunning,” the mage said lowly, touching her hand to still it.

A few moments later, Cullen stopped at their table. Ayla clearly picked up his rugged fragrance, blurred vision sweeping over his shadow-shape.

“Good day, Ayla. Dorian.” The commander nodded at the mage.

“Hello, Cullen,” Ayla’s face felt a bit warm. She hoped her smile wasn’t too telling of how excited she was to see him, though they’d just spent time together the day before yesterday, talking and walking around. He’d taken her to the market so she could enjoy the sounds and smells. Afterwards, they sat in the garden for a while under the great tree and indulged in some very intimate lip-locking and embracing.

“Good day to you as well, commander,” Dorian all but purred. He so enjoyed harmlessly flirting with the man, since he responded like most straight fellows did—with an uncertain blush and frazzled expression.

Cullen cleared his throat and ran a hand over his hair. “Um…well…I thought you might want to share company today, Ayla.”

“I’d love to. I was just finishing up here.” She felt for her water glass and took a sip, then grabbed his offered arm.

“You two have fun,” Dorian said. “Oh, and if I’m not in the room when you return later, feel free to go inside and…do whatever.” One kohl-traced eye winked playfully at Cullen, head tilting while he grinned.

“Dorian…” Ayla giggled, shaking her head.

“Well,” Cullen mused, “that would be up to the lady, now wouldn’t it?”

“To be sure,” returned Dorian. “Ta, ta.” He smiled after them, leisurely finishing up his lunch.

(*)

Cullen led her from the hall directly to the gardens and began walking along the bordering path below the eaves. “How is your training going?”

“Well, I think.” A short laugh slipped from her lips. “Though, I believe Morrigan may be more than a little frustrated at times. But she does well to hide it.”

“Oh,” he nodded. “I’m sure she finds you to be a good student. I don’t know her all that well, but from what I observed, she usually doesn’t deal with many people. She gives her attentions to those she deems only the worthiest. I’d say you’re in her good graces.”

“I hope so.” Ayla took a breath, eyes forward, each step she took dependent on where he led her, and she trusted his lead. She shook her head. “I still can’t believe this is happening to me, this power. It’s…such a big a responsibility.”

Cullen listened closely. His other hand tenderly caressed the hand she had linked to his arm. “I honestly can’t imagine what you must be going through, so long as you know that I’m always here for you.”

“Ayla…” Cullen whispered his name.

He stopped their pace and gently turned her to him, pulling her in a hug and bringing his lips to taste of hers. Ayla let herself fall into his sensual domination, feeling as a fish caught on a hook might. She moaned against him and pulled back. She couldn’t understand why she was thinking...
of Iron Bull again, the man who didn’t want her. Or so she believed.

Cullen started them walking once more, but only for a short distance. “Here we are.” He helped her sit at a small table, a table for two. It sat on the promenade bordering the garden. Beside the table was a mid-sized chest. The commander took the seat across from her.

Ayla watched his shadow-shape, squinting faintly at it, desperately craving the clarity only her Qunari warrior could give her. Cullen had opened the chest and pulled out two games; the table they occupied was one of several such places where people played cards, dice, pucks or any number of games.

“Have you ever played Wicked Grace or chess, Ayla?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No…since I would need to see to do that.”

“No, you don’t, my sweet.” Cullen replied, his eyes raking slowly over her. “You’ve never heard of tangerlingua Wicked Grace or chess?”

Her eyes widened. “They actually exist?”

“Oh, yes. Of course, blind adaptations of the two games aren’t common, but they do exist. I, uh… pulled a few favors for Josephine, and she did a special order at my request. A couple of days after you arrived here, I asked her to acquire Wicked Grace cards and a chess set for the blind. That is, if you’d like to learn.”

Ayla’s heart swelled. She wanted to reach out and kiss him again. “Oh, Cullen, you didn’t have to do this for me.”

“I know,” the man’s voice churned forth in smooth, deep tones. He took her small hands across the table, caressing them, “but I’m compelled to do anything I can for you. It’s the way you make me feel. I hope I’m not being too forward…”

She shook her head. “No, you’re not. Thank you for this, and yes, I want to learn.”

“Okay, first thing’s first. Wicked Grace.” Cullen set the deck on the table, then picked the top card. The cards were slightly bigger than a regular deck, and that was to accommodate the tangerlingua bumps pressed into them. He put the card in Ayla’s hand. “You need to learn the layout of the cards, get a feel for them. You’ll notice that one corner of the card has been cut; all the cards in the deck are this way. The clipped corner goes in the top left. This tells you that your cards are right-side up and facing in towards you.”

Ayla nodded intently. She easily positioned the card as instructed.

“Good,” Cullen smiled. “Now, in the top right corner is a number from negative five to positive five.”

The woman delicately brushed the area, her face lighting in a smile. “This is negative three.”

“I can see you’re going to learn this quickly. The name across the bottom edge of the card indicates what suit the card belongs to. There are eight—songs, angels, hounds, serpents, daggers, knights, death, and life. What is the suit of your card?”

She touched along the edge. “It says ‘knights’.”

“So, your card is a knight-minus-three; if it were a positive, it would just be considered a knight-three. Now, I’m going to give you four more cards, since all players are dealt five initially. I’ll also deal myself a hand.”

Ayla listened as the cards slapped softly to the table.

Cullen set the deck aside and picked his cards up, arranging them. “Go ahead and pick your cards up, love.”

She did as he said, lining them so they were right side up.

“Now, tell me what you have,” he said.

“Um…knight-minus-three, knight-zero, life-minus-four, daggers-three, and angels-five.”

“Allright, so as of right now, your hand has a pair of knights, with a numerical of negative three; you simply add the numbers. The other three cards are useless by themselves. The object is to keep drawing and discarding cards to get the best hand possible before the Angel of Death card is played face-up.”

“I see,” Ayla nodded, smiling across the table. “And what cards do you have?”

“Angels-two, serpents-minus-four, hounds-zero, hounds-two, and hounds-five.”

“Ah, so then…you would win this hand if either of us were to play the Angel of Death now… face up…since you have three of the same suit, hounds, and your numbers add up to seven.”

The commander sifted a soft chuckle, nodding approvingly. “You learn fast. You’ll be kicking my ass in this soon enough.”
"I have a wonderful instructor." Ayla’s face turned faintly sideward, her eyes fixed in his direction, gazing at the blur that was him, a sensual smile upon her lips.

"Mm…" The flame had been there from the moment she entered his company, and now it began to surge, burning hotter. "Shall we play another practice hand?"

"Yes, please."

And so, the handsome commander continued his Wicked Grace instructions. He would admit that he was glad to have other activities for them to partake in on their 'dates'. Walking around the fortress was nice, but he didn’t want her to become bored. Wicked Grace and chess would allow them to further expand their friendship, while continuing to grow closer romantically. Cullen Rutherford was a very patient man when it came to courtship. He was all about the slow-burn. If or when Ayla chose to honor him with her sweetest gift, the agonizing, blue-balling wait would have been more than worth it. As her lover, he would treat her as the delicate treasure he saw her to be. Oh, how he longed for that day, but he could wait.

He would patiently wait.

(*)

That day, Ayla had learned the basics of Wicked Grace. She looked forward to possibly playing with the others in the tavern sometime. Cullen had also gotten her started on chess, letting her get familiar with the board, indicating how the slightly indented squares on the board were the pale spaces. Each space had a hole in the center, into which the different pieces pegged. Since it was a much more complex game, he’d only taught her names of the pieces, which were stamped with tangerlingua, though Ayla was aware that they were all shaped differently anyway.

But, well, chess would be another time.

Cullen got her back to Bull’s quarters after they shared dinner in the hall. Once again, they fell into a heated kiss outside the door. Ayla found that she had come to look forward to being dropped off. After a long bout of tangling tongues with the commander, pressing her body into his, breathing in his exhalations, she pulled away.

The commander groaned and smiled down at her. “Allow me.” He pulled down the latch and pushed the door in.

Ayla had expected Dorian to say something witty and sexual…but there was nothing.

“Ah…seems as if your bunkmate isn’t here,” Cullen whispered against her ear.

“Oh…I’m sure Dorian will return soon. He’s just playing matchmaker.” She issued a small chuckle. A thin veil of alarm lowered over her. She’d been fine with kissing and hugging and lingering over Cullen outside the room, but she never thought she’d have the opportunity to invite him in, that they would have…privacy.

Ayla gulped, her heart racing.

“And he’s so adept at it. Would you like me to come inside for a bit? It’s chilly. I could…start a fire for you.”

Start a fire, indeed, Ayla thought. That soft, warm apex of her femininity had already begun throbbing, moistening.

Ayla nodded quickly. “Okay,” she squeaked, blushing deeply, finding herself backing into the room. “A fire would be nice.”

And Cullen was right on her, moving slowly forward.

She was getting kind of heated all on her own, thoroughly excited by the primal way in which he’d prowled towards her, maintaining their proximity. God, he smelled so good.

Cullen chuckled and shut the door behind him. “Alright. Here, let me take your shawl.”

Ayla stood by while he gently removed the item, then felt her way to the table, sitting. Cullen removed his long jacket draping it and her shawl across the other chair. She watched his vague shape moving around, listening, trying to calm her heart and the tingling between her thighs.

He had the hearth blazing in minutes. The commander stood and turned to face her, noting how unsure she seemed, her hands fidgeting in her lap. With her pallid hair tumbling around her, he thought she looked utterly ethereal, especially by the light of the fire. Cullen slowly closed the distance between them, taking her hand. He pulled her gently from the chair, against him.

The rather sizable hardness in his pants throbbed between them, pressing to the place right above Ayla’s feminine core. She released a low mewl, arching into him.

“Do you want me to go…or do you want me to stay?” He whispered against her lips.

She was too breathless to answer with words, so she did so by closing that slip of distance and pressing her mouth to his, hands running up his sinewy chest into his dark-blond waves. Cullen was happy with her decision, but before he could get too excited, Ayla broke the kiss, her fractured gaze shimmering up at him, hearth light flickering in those intense eyes.
“I…would like you to stay, but…I’m not ready for more than this. I-I’m sorry, Cullen.”

He sighed, smiling heatedly at her. “It’s alright, Ayla. We can go as slow as you need to. I’ll wait for as long as it takes.” The commander’s voice rolled forth deep and resonant. He nuzzled her brow. “Will you be alright by yourself?”

“Yes. I’m sure Dorian will return soon. Thank you for lighting my fire–the fire.”

Cullen chuckled richly. “And thank you for lighting mine.” He pressed another tender kiss to her lips, then turned, grabbed up his jacket, and left her alone in the room.

Ayla ran herself a bath. While she soaked in it, mulling over how she would handle things with Cullen when she clearly cared for Iron Bull too, the door opened, then closed.

“You here, love?” called Dorian.

“Yes, bathing.”

“Ah.” He could be heard beyond the wall shifting around, removing clothes, changing into his pajamas. “How did things go with you and the commander. Did you finally get your cherry popped? That’s why I vacated the premises, you know, to give you privacy.”

Ayla’s laughter chimed from behind the barrier. “Yes, I noticed your attempt at providing the opportunity. But no, nothing happened. He started a fire in the hearth, we kissed, and he left.”

“Are you scared to do it?”

“A little…maybe.”

The mage chuckled. He was laid out on the bed. “Well, if you ever plan to ride the Bull at any point, you might want to start with a normal-sized man first.”

Ayla shook her head, chuckling. “These things can’t be rushed or planned. If I choose to be with either of them, then it will just be something that happens.” She finished washing and soaking, moving from the tub to dry off.

“Ha! You keep telling yourself that. Meanwhile, you’re walking around in constant heat because you’ve let all the tension build. Really, love, it’s not healthy.”

Ayla moved around the wall wearing a dimpled smile and one of Bull’s long shirts. Her hair was pulled back in a lengthy, unruly white braid. She felt her way to the bed and moved into her spot.

“What is your obsession with ensuring that I sleep with either of them?”

Dorian fake-pouted, turning on his side to face her, head propped up by his bent arm. “I just want to see you happy.”

“I am quite content, I assure you.” Ayla smiled over at him.

His eyes narrowed and his smile morphed into something more impish. “So you say. But I’ll get you laid yet.”

She giggled and smacked at him. Dorian returned the laughter, then tickled her. Ayla squealed and felt for a pillow, which she swung at the man who was quickly becoming her best friend. Dorian caught her hand, snatched the puffy thing away, then swat her on the head with it. The two of them went on playing for a bit before they settled and slept.

For the duration of the Inquisitor’s, Iron Bull’s, and the others’ absence, Ayla would practice with Morrigan. She would hang out with Dorian, and spend ‘innocent’ quality time with Cullen. All was well in Skyhold.

(*)

Four days after leaving Skyhold, Hannibal and his party had reached the beginnings of the Storm Coast. It was dark and drizzling rain. They’d set up camp on the flat top of a low hill, an ideal place because it gave them a clear view of the road below. To the south, lost in the dark of night and nestled in the valley somewhere in the not-too-far distance, was Crestwood.

Everyone was in their tents now, with the exceptions of Iron Bull and Krem. They sat in the shadows of a wide lean-to. The two of them had volunteered for first watch, and when the trickling hourglass ran down, they’d flip it and let the sand empty again, then they’d wake up Solas and Varric to take the next shift.

Bull stared out over the road. There was nothing. No lantern lights to mark carriages, no traffic. Nothing but the rain.

Krem watched the other direction. He suddenly shuffled and made to move from under the tarp. “Gotta take a leak, chief. Be right back.”

Iron Bull nodded. Once Krem was gone, the Qunari reached into the leather pouch tied to his belt, and carefully pulled something out—a braid-knot of soft, white hair. It was so long that he’d looped it a couple of times. He sighed longingly at it; he’d clipped it from Ayla’s head while she slept the night before he left. Bull slowly shut his eye and held the treasured item to his lips, inhaling it.

By the Qun, he really was in love with her. The question was: what the hell was he going to do
By the Qun, he really was in love with her. The question was: what the hell was he going to do about it?
The Demands of the Qun

“Krem! At your six!” Iron Bull called out.

Krem spun around, his sword and shield ready, eyes narrowed at the glowing, boiling green fissure that had opened on the ground a short distance from him. A wraith materialized from it, sifting through the Veil from the Fade. It screeched shrilly at the man, then began advancing on him. Krem tightened his battle stance, engaging the thing with precise, hard strikes while blocking its blows with his shield.

Solas stood at the edges of battle like a smart mage. One never wanted to find oneself stuck amidst a borage of enemy fire and sword-strikes when one’s main physical defense was a stave. That was the best way to become a dead mage. He sent out a barrier ward over Krem and Grim, who had joined in attacking the wraith. Dalish was near him using her magic to provide guard for their team as well.

Iron Bull’s great axe swung through the air, sinking into the gnarly, slimy chest of a lesser shade, right where its shriveled heart might it. “Ahhh!” He roared, then Spartan-kicked the thing from the end of his weapon. Its body began to wither into black dust when it hit the grass.

The great Qunari’s eye skimmed around, assessing the remaining enemies. Hannibal, Varric, Skinner, Stitches, and Rocky worked on the ‘boss’ of the rift, a powerful but minor rage demon. The creature rose eight feet high and appeared to be composed of liquid flame, which it was shooting randomly at them. The large, flickering green eye of the fade rift pulsed in the center of the clearing. That was the source of all the foul creatures’ power. The demons, wraiths, and spirits fed off the energy of the Fade.

Bull ran over and placed himself between the rage demon and Hannibal, his eye focused on the enemy while he spoke tightly over his broad shoulder. “I’ll cover you, boss. You close that fucking thing.” At that, the Bull jumped in and began attacking.

Hannibal nodded and backpedaled, veering around to face the rift. It jerked and sputtered erratically. Shifting, shrinking, expanding. He tossed his left hand up at portal and concentrated the power of the anchor, the mark. The familiar green beam shot from his palm and into the rift, immobilizing it. A thundering wail emanated from the Fade beyond, heightening, making the rift surge. Then the Herald of Andraste pulled his right arm back, his hand clenched in a fist. He gritted and swung that arm, hooking it at the rift, which exploded.

Disintegrated and closed. Any enemies left in the area screamed as they too decayed into ash, which floated away on the ocean breeze.

Silence.

Hannibal took a few breaths, examining his hand that housed the mark, then he looked around at the others, nodding. They were all still standing.

Varric lowered Bianca. “I really hate those things.”

Solas moved in closer to the dwarf. “I thought this area had been cleared of fade rifts. Perhaps, there are other powers at play here which have caused more to develop.”

“I’ll have the scouts look into it,” Hannibal said. “Right now, we need to meet up with Gatt and get into position. That Venatori ship will arrive in about three hours, according to the report. The Berethlok is most likely already in position. Let’s move.”

(*)

A short while later, they reached the place along the river where the embankment dipped in, forming a secluded pocket behind a cluster of pine trees. Just as they moved into the shade of the tree line, a slender Elvhen man with brown hair and pale green eyes stepped into view.

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed faintly, large hand instinctively going to the hilt of his sword. Iron Bull stepped forward, nodding. “Gatt.”

“Hissrad.” The elf returned, his eyes sifted to Hannibal. “You certainly took your time getting here, Inquisitor. The Venatori vessel should be entering the bay soon.”

“We encountered a fade rift, or we’d have been here sooner. My apologies.”

Gatt issued a curt nod. “The important thing is that you made it.” He began walking along the stony, flat bank of the river, and the others followed. Hannibal fell in to one side of the elf, and Bull walked on the other. “The plan stands as it originally did. There are two Venatori camps that need to be neutralized simultaneously. Each camp has a signal flare in place to let their ship know it’s safe to anchor out. Once we destroy both camps, we’ll light the flares, which will not only signal in the Venatori, but also the Berethlok. The dreadnought is hidden behind bluffs to the west of the bay. Destroying those camps will allow it to bombard the Venatori vessel, taking out the huge shipment of red lyrium.”

“We understand,” Hannibal said. His aqua gaze fixed ahead on the small delta where the river spilled into the Waking Sea. It was somewhat foggy that day and rain still drizzled, coating
everything in a moist sheen. The sun was a dimmed blot of light behind low-hanging clouds.

“Okay, this is where we split,” Gatt said. “One team will go up that hill for camp one, and the other team will circle around that low plateau and surprise attack the camp sitting up there.”

Hannibal nodded. “Bull, Solas, Varric, with me. Chargers, take the second camp.”

“Aye, Your Worship,” Krem nodded, speaking for the group. The lieutenant turned a dashing smile to Iron Bull. “Drinks on me when we get back to Skyhold, chief.”

“Yeah.” Bull returned the smile, which sat soft and adoring on his features. His eye moved to each of the Chargers, whom he cared for very much. His family. He’d die for them if necessary. “Give those fuckers hell.”

Grim grunted his approval.

Then, the Chargers turned and headed in the opposite direction. Bull sighed and followed Hannibal.

(*)

SHLUK!

The flat, highly honed blade of Bull’s axe sank into the skull of the last Venatori soldier, splitting it wide open. Blood rushed from the gnarly gash. The Qunari planted his booted foot on the corpse’s chest to still it while he yanked his axe free. One, lone eyeball hung aimlessly from the shattered face.

“Venatori scum,” Bull growled.

There had been about two dozen enemies all together, a mix of gladiators, tower shields, and zealots. Now their robed bodies littered the grass.

“There’s the signal flare.” Gatt pointed and broke into a jog for the tall pyramid of kindling and sticks.

They all came to rest near it. The large hilltop looked over a great stretch of the beach. They could see into the bay as far as the fog would allow, and they had a perfect view of the bluffs behind which hid the Berethlok.

“Light the fire.” Gatt pointed at it.

“Chargers already sent theirs up. See ‘em down there?” Bull nodded in the direction. Across the way, to the southeast, the Chargers were on the lower plateau. They’d taken the camp; Krem was waving his arms to signal that it was done.

“Allow me.” Solas stepped forward, put out a slender hand, and shot a charge of heat at the structure of sticks. It had been coated graciously in oil, so it caught fire easily. In moments, the flames were a fiery mass of flickering tongues, sending dark smoke into the cloudy heavens. A large wisp of red light, the flare, jettisoned upward.

Now, they would wait. A thick and heavy silence descended.

Water ran in thin rivulets down Iron Bull’s face, dripping from his brow, his bearded chin. His eye skimmed the foggy, open water. After what seemed like hours, though it was more like ten long minutes, the Venatori vessel drifted from the mist like a ghost ship. It was heading for the rendezvous anchoring spot as planned.

And a minute after that, the larger and much more powerful Qunari dreadnought Berethlok broke through the foggy wall in the west. It had already begun engagement maneuvers that would turn it so all twelve cannons along its port side aimed squarely at the enemy ship.

“Well, ain’t that a sight,” Varric mused, taking a few steps forward to watch the dreadnought in action. The oceanic breeze tousled tendrils of his dark blond hair across his wide brow.

“Ya damn right it is, dwarf,” said Bull, a slim smile on his lips.

When the Berethlok was in position, a series of explosions resounded, their booms echoing through the hills and against the mountainside. In almost the same instant, the Venatori ship shattered into flames along its stern and most of its starboard hull, a massive hole blown in it. It suffered a lesser, secondary explosion, then began sinking into the bay.


“I’m with you on that,” Varric chimed. “The less Venatori and lyrium in the world, the better.”

They shared in the mirth of victory, but only for a moment.

Hannibal suddenly spun to glare down the beach. A large Venatori force closed in…and they headed for the Chargers’ position. “Look!”

“Shit,” Iron Bull hissed. His eye shot across the distance to the group he considered family.

Hannibal’s thoughts raced. He looked to Bull. “There are a lot of Venatori. The Chargers…”
Gatt stepped up closer to Iron Bull, eyes narrowed. “Your men need to hold that position, Hissrad.”

Bull’s features darkened as he peered down at the much smaller man. “They do that, they’re dead.”

“And if they don’t, the Venatori retake it, and the Berethlok is dead.”

Iron Bull made a deep, very displeased noise in his throat, turning his large body, presenting Gatt with his stern profile.

“You have to see reason,” Gatt pressed urgently. “You’d be throwing away an alliance between the Inquisition and the Qunari. You’d be declaring yourself Tal-Vashoth.”

The large Qunari remained silent, but turned his piercing eye to Gatt.

The elf moved around in front of him. “With all you’ve given the Inquisition, half the Ben-Hassrath think you’ve betrayed us already. I stood up for you, Hissrad. I told them you would never become Tal-Vashoth.”

“They’re my men.” Bull’s voice was low and dire. The expression on his face was just as frightening. He was a man not to be pushed.

“I…I know,” Gatt shook his head. “And I’m sorry. But you need to do what’s right for this alliance…and for the Qun.”

There wasn’t much time. The Venatori would reach the Chargers in a matter of minutes. Iron Bull sought out his team of treasured friends. They had already taken up battle stances and positions, ready to fight and die. He so did not want to lose them. He turned slowly to Hannibal. It was the Inquisitor’s call.

Hannibal, along with Solas and Varric, had been listening intently to the exchange between Gatt and Iron Bull. He knew it would all come down to his command. He squarely met Bull’s eye when it settled calmly on him. Hannibal knew the man was a sheer powerhouse of control, able to hide what he was thinking most times, but he saw the worry lingering in that single blue eye.

The Inquisitor swung his eyes to Gatt, then back to Iron Bull. As much as an alliance with the Qunari would be of great use to the Inquisition, Hannibal just couldn’t do it. He couldn’t sacrifice the Chargers.

“I care about them too, Bull. Very much.” Hannibal’s face hardened. “Call the retreat. Get them out of there!”

“No!” Gatt protested.

Iron Bull released a long breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He quickly detached the horn from his side, lifted it to his lips, and blew with all his might. Over on their side, the Chargers broke formation and began falling back.

Gatt paced in a circle, shaking his head. “All these years, Hissrad. You throw away all that you are, for what? For this? For them!” He pointed sharply at Hannibal.

Hannibal watched him calmly. “We can make this up to your people.”

“No, you can’t.” Gatt shook his head. He stiffly and angrily stalked off.

They all watched after him, then turned their attentions to what was taking place below on the beach. The Venatori force had positioned themselves and taken aim at the Berethlok. They began sending barrages of magic at it, streams of fire bombarding the ship’s hull, quickly weakening it.

“There’s no way they’ll get out of range,” Bull said softly. “Won’t be long now...”

And he was right. It didn’t take much Venatori magic to send the warship exploding to high heaven, thick pillars of smoke boiling up from the mangled wreckage. They watched it for a while longer, then left the area to meet up with the Chargers.

(*)

Thirteen days after Hannibal and his group left for the Storm Coast, they were once again approaching the outer gate of Skyhold. After the usual salutes and short-talk, the officer in charge ordered the horn to be sounded, signaling the Inquisitor’s return. Then the gate was opened, allowing the party across the bridge to the fortress.

(*)

Ayla and Dorian had just shared lunch in the main hall. She had finished the books the mage suggested to her, so he took her up into the library to pick out a few more. Dorian sat nearby in a cushy, tall-backed chair reading while she skimmed her fingers along the spines of books, reading the tangerlingua. She had become a glutton for smutty romance novels, thanks to the Altus.

The horn blast could be heard clearly through all of Skyhold.

Ayla turned, her blurred eyes widening. “What was that?”
Dorian was already out of his seat and moving for her. He uttered a small squeak, grinning widely, though she wouldn’t see it. “My Amatus is home!”

And that meant Iron Bull was back too. Ayla’s heart stuttered in her chest and a lump of anticipation materialized in her stomach. She almost squealed with joy.

Dorian took her hand and started them down through the castle for the main courtyard.

(*)

The Iron Bull was more than happy to be back. Despite all that had taken place on the Storm Coast, he was content. Yes, he’d pretty much resigned his position with the Ben-Hassrath and would most likely be considered Tal-Vashoth by the Qun, but that was all negligible compared to the alternate outcome. He could’ve lost the Chargers that day, but Hannibal made the call that saved them. And that was a pivotal moment in the relationship between Bull and the Inquisitor. The man had proven his worth and his heart by choosing the Chargers over some alliance. The Iron Bull greatly approved.

The Qunari warrior sighed. He would just have to take it as it came. Though, even if the Qun dismissed him as Tal-Vashoth, it would be in name only, since he still had duties owed. The Qun would call on him to perform those duties in time, he was sure. He wouldn’t be allowed back in the Qun most likely, but he was still working for it. Then again, if he redeemed himself, they might reinstate him.

That didn’t matter for now.

All that mattered was that the Chargers lived and that Hannibal had earned the Bull’s greatest respect. He turned his thoughts fully to a certain snow-haired beauty he couldn’t wait to see again. His eye skinned the courtyard when his mount passed through the gate. As usual, a small crowd of Skyhold’s citizens had gathered to honor the return of the Inquisitor and his band of warriors.

Iron Bull spotted Ayla, looking just as mesmerizing as ever. She stood arm-in-arm with Dorian, who all but danced in his eagerness to get to Hannibal. Bull stopped his mount by a waiting stable-hand.

Across the way, Dorian rubbed Ayla’s arm. “Iron Bull saw you and he’ll be over shortly. I’m going to Hannibal.”

Ayla nodded and chuckled at his anxiousness. She released his arm. Then she took a deep breath and gazed at the shifting, moving shapes of the mounts and people, listening. Her smile brightened when she caught onto a highly coveted shadow-shape, hulking and horned. She inhaled of his scent, finding such safety in it.

Iron Bull took her hands in his.

The sight swooned upon her instantly, and she giggled up at him. “Wow. Nice beard.” It was black and very full, just as thick as the Inquisitor’s.

He chuckled softly, eye fixed caringly on her. “I figured you’d like it. I know how you feel about facial hair.”

“Oh, really?” Ayla’s face tilted, her eyes narrowed so she could peer up through the dark tangle of her lashes.

Bull’s eye squinted and he studied her. He loosened a deep, playful growl. “Woman, are you eye-fucking me?”

“Maybe…” She looked down at their hands, connected. Warm. She met his gaze again and sighed. It felt good to be together again.

Up on the steps leading into the main hall, Cullen watched as Ayla and Iron Bull shared their moment. He couldn’t hear what words were exchanged, but she was obviously pleased that he’d returned. The commander decided her reaction to the other man was caused by the fact that he had the magic touch that let her see. Cullen also decided to ignore the adoration in Ayla’s mysterious eyes, the barely hidden love written in the way she looked at the Qunari.

His decision to ignore those things might just hurt him later.

Commander Rutherford made his way down the steps for Hannibal. Time for war room antics.
Iron Bull pushed the door open to his quarters and entered with Ayla upon his arm. He grimaced at the state of the room. It was mostly clean, but there were clothes draped over the chairs, across the bed, hanging over the folding wall dividing the bathing area from the rest of the room. They were clearly men’s clothes, some of them loud in color, some adorned with many buckles and zippers.

Ayla was grinning, nibbling her bottom lip. “Oh…I didn’t know it looked like this in here. Sorry.”

Bull shook his head. “Dorian better get in here and get this shit before it gets tossed out the window.”

“Oh, be nice.” Like holiday bells, her laughter bounced through the room. “He’ll get it soon. We were in the library when you all arrived and we hurried to the courtyard when the horn resounded. Give him time. He’ll come get it.”

Iron Bull grunted and smirked. He strode to his bed and released Ayla’s hand so he could gather up all the Altus’s stuff in one big swoop. His long legs took him back across the room, where he dropped it in a heap to one side of the door.

Ayla sat on the bed, listening while his large shadow-shape breezed around his quarters, gathering up everything that belong to Dorian, setting it by the door. Then his pace slowed as he finally pulled off his hide coat, then the shirt beneath it, tossing them to a chair. The mattress shifted when he sank on it beside her, loosening a satisfied rumble once he kicked off his boots and socks. He wore only his pants and his eye patch now.

He sighed and laid back across the bed with his hands behind his head, legs stretched out, feet on the floor.

Ayla’s hand, which had been lying idle on the mattress, slid over until her fingers brushed against side, running along the sinewy muscle there. Her vision corrected, and her eyes moved slowly to where her hand touched him, then began tracing gradually over his beautiful, toned, gray body. Gods, she could never get enough of looking at that physique.

“So, you did miss me.”

Ayla’s eyes snapped over, finding that he watched her sensuously. She cleared her throat, lifted her chin, and offered her most innocent smile. “Only in the sense that a blind woman misses her favorite pair of spectacles.”

Bull rumbled with laughter, then moved so suddenly Ayla could only yelp and allow it to happen. He linked an arm around her and pulled her across his body. Her dazzling eyes loomed wider when she was put face to face with the Qunari. Her hands splayed across his chest. She was draped over him in such a way that she straddled one of his long legs, his solid thigh resting between hers. She was tightly pressed against him, both fully aware of the other’s every soft curve and hard ridge.

He groaned and nuzzled her chin. “I missed you, woman…and I know you missed me too.”

A small sound of pleasure tumbled past Ayla’s lips, and the hot center of her tightened, spasmed, and moistened. She was lost, caught completely off-guard by him. She wiggled a bit, intending to remove herself from him, but only succeeded in lodging their bodies closer together.

Bull waited patiently to see what she would do, his eye level and steady, slowly searching her confused features. He smiled hotly. “You can have your kiss, if you still want it.”

Their lips were but a sheer breath from connecting, and Ayla’s eyes were fixed on his mouth, surrounded as it was by the tamed thickness of his beard and moustache. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath.

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Ayla found her resolve by taking a second, deep breath. She opened her eyes and looked Iron Bull squarely in his. “I believe…” she was breathless nearly, “…it’s too late for that kiss.”

At that, she pushed up and away, moving to sit beside him again. Her eyes flicked over the bulge that had expanded in his pants, growing down his thigh like some thick serpent.

“You’re going to make me chase you then.”

The woman smirked, meeting his eye. “I’m not making you do anything! You’re the one who can’t seem to think about anything other than sex!”

“I’m sure. I think you should pay Bertrand a visit later. That should calm you down.” She narrowed her lovely gaze at him.
Iron Bull tossed his hands up and sank fully into the mattress, great chest rising and falling with a hefty sigh. He honestly didn’t know what else to say at that moment. She was determined to thwart his every move and contort his every word into a shield that deflected any feelings she had for him. His features fashioned a soft smile. “Gonna take a bath, get ready for the Heroes’ Dinner later.”

Where the Heroes’ Breakfast was given the morning of the group’s departure on a mission, the Dinner was prepared in their honor the night of their return.

He slipped from the bed, leaving her in shadows, which Ayla was grateful for. She fell back on the mattress with her arms outstretched, listening to him move about, stripping, running his bath. Try as she might, she couldn’t make her brain properly envision Cullen. He just kept turning into a gray-skinned entity with bulging muscles, horns, a beard, and one sultry blue eye.

A few hours later, Iron Bull and Ayla entered the main hall to see that people were beginning to arrive for the dinner. The Inquisitor’s seat at the head of the table and the one to the right of it, which Dorian usually occupied, were both empty. Varric, Solas, and Blackwall sat near each other. Sera was flanked by Josephine and Cassandra. The Chargers were there, of course; couldn’t truly have a party without them. Vivienne had even thought to make an appearance, taking the seat to the left of the Inquisitor’s. Cullen sat across the table from Josephine and was idly engaged in conversation; they laughed about something.

Ayla still felt very riled from Bull’s actions. Indeed, it was safe to say the woman was, for lack of a better word, horny. But she managed to maintain her cool while linked arm-in-arm with the Qunari. She pointed. “Take me to Cullen, please.”

Bull stiffened, but did as she asked, walking her around the table.

“Ayla, what a lovely sight,” the Commander stood and pulled her chair out.

She smiled warmly at him. “Thank you.” Then she released Bull’s arm and felt her way into the seat, which Cullen pushed in a bit once she was settled.

The Bull moved around to the other side of the table and plopped into a chair. He silently started grabbing food items, tossing them to his plate. His eye crept down the table to Ayla and Cullen. She giggled at something he said, as he was going on about the happenings of his day. Bull fixed his eye ahead and began devouring his meal, chewing slowly, trying not to look down the table yet doing it anyway.

Cullen leaned close to her, a loving expression on his face. Then Ayla grinned, running fingers along his stubble-brushed jaw. And THEN the commander eased in to peck a soft kiss to her lips.

At that point, across the table from the couple, Cassandra set her fork down and sipped her water, clearly not amused by the display.

Bull heavily dropped the turkey leg he’d been gnawing to his plate and grabbed up his tankard, tossing back every drop of ale it contained. Then he poured himself more.

Beside him, Varric leaned over a little, his voice low enough to ride beneath the drone of chatter at the table. “Trouble in paradise, huh?”

Bull grumbled deeply.

“Hey, don’t be mad at me. You’re the one who sent her drifting like a leaf on the wind right into Curly’s arms.” The dwarf issued a suave chuckle. “If you hadn’t been so stubborn…”

Bull’s head turned very slowly until his eye locked unwaveringly on the other man’s.

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Bull grumbled deeply.
he wore was his briefs. “It’s late. What did you and the commander do after dinner?”

She chuckled softly. “That’s none of your business.”

“As long as he kept his hands to himself.”

“Oh? And why should that matter to you?” Ayla sank into the tub, water trickling and shifting.

“I just…wouldn’t want him to take advantage of you.”

“Cullen is a complete gentleman. You’ve no need to concern yourself with his conduct.” There was an obvious smile on her face. “I’m surprised to see you’re here. Thought you might be out seducing someone this time of night.”

Iron Bull smirked. She was poking fun. “Nope. Too tired. Tomorrow, I might.” He finished up the letter, then moved to bed, lying stretched out on his back, hands behind his head.

Ayla moved from behind the wall not long after and felt her way to the bed, taking her spot. Her hand slipped casually over, falling upon his toned hip.

His head turned enough to allow eye contact with her. “You enjoy torturing me, don’t you?”

She laughed. “How am I torturing you?”

“You know how, woman. With your grabby little hands.”

“What? I have to touch you if I want to see, Iron Bull.”

“Mm. Sucks for me.”

“Oh, you’ll be just fine.” Ayla giggled, moved to kiss his bearded cheek, then turned over and settled with her back against him, tucked safe and cozy. She wiggled.

Bull rolled his eye and sighed at the way her warm, firm, ample bottom rubbed along his hip and thigh. “Woman…”

Ayla smiled and giggled.

(*)

The children. They were dead. The whole fucking school of them. Poisoned. Their little bodies blue and bloated, left where they dropped, afflicted by the tropical air of the jungles of Seheron. The flies buzzed agitatedly and fed from their carcasses. Bull’s horrible memories continued to manifest themselves in his dreams, haunting him from time to time.

He had both eyes then, his sole designation Hissrad. Those piercing eyes skimmed the carnage, the destruction of innocent youth.

The same poison had been used to kill most of the men in his unit, issued by some fucking merchant, paid well to do it. Hissrad never found him, but had sweet blood-revenge on a Tal-Vashoth stronghold in the jungle.

Running. Sprinting wild-eyed through the dense foliage of large leaves and vines, chest-high grass. Swampy pits of mud. There was no mercy when Hissrad found their camp. His mind shifted into berserker-mode, his axe removing heads from necks, arms and legs from torsos. They came in a horde…but they were unsuccessful in stopping his rampage. No…they died horribly, as they should’ve. Fucking child-murdering Tal-Vashoth scum!

Dead little faces. Innocence lost. Their eyes bulging from their sockets, tongues fat and swollen, jutting from their little mouths. And the flies, for Qun’s sake, the flies! So many of them swarming and feasting.

Feasting on the children. Feasting on Hissrad’s men.

Death, carnage. Decapitated heads. Severed arms and legs. Tal-Vashoth rendered in half by Hissrad’s axe, their innards and guts lying in smoking heaps around the berserker’s hunkered body, while he stared, unmoving. It was a blood bath and he’d been at the center of it.

So much death…

(*)

Ayla was nudged awake by Iron Bull’s tossing body. She slowly turned over, trying to see him in the dark. Her hand reached for his arm and connected, allowing her to see that he still slept, his form lathered by the light of the low-burning hearth.

His head jerked, his eye moving quickly back and forth behind its lid. He made low sounds in his chest, sucking in short breaths at times. His face was contorted with distress. His body jerked again.

Ayla could tell the Qunari was having a nightmare, and a very bad one at that. She wondered what in Thedas could’ve have affected him so much to cause a dream that intense. In the time that they’d been sharing a bed, he’d not had any such episodes, she didn’t think.
“Bull…” she said softly, shaking his arm. “Bull, wake up.”

Iron Bull shifted but didn’t wake. His head lolled left, then right, his great body quivering.

“No…kill…”

Ayla gently shook him again. “Bull, wake–GAH!”

He was up and on her so fast Ayla barely had time to register it. In the same instant that he lurched forward, he jammed his forearm under her chin, forcing her back to the mattress, a maneuver that put a great deal of weight against her throat.

Ayla clutched frantically at his forearm, her eyes wide and terrified. She made a ragged, choked sound, unable to breathe really. She struggled and kicked her legs, staring up into Bull’s unstable, berserker-enraged eye, which lost its blood-lust after a few moments when he awakened fully from the nightmare.

Bull snatched his arm away. “By the Qun! Fuck! Ayla!”

She sputtered and coughed, holding her throat.

Iron Bull sat up quickly and pulled her against him. “Oh, fuck…I’m so sorry.” He sighed, features torn with heavy regret and shame. He was horrified. “Here, let me see.”

Ayla shivered in his arms, quite shaken. She allowed him to lower her hands so he could examine her neck. A wide bruise was already forming over her flesh. It would be purple by the time daylight arrived.

“Ayla, I’m so sorry…” he breathed, then hugged her to him, rubbing her hair, stroking her shoulders. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I’ll be alright.” The woman took a breath and rubbed her neck. She lifted a brow curiously. “What were you dreaming about?”

His features darkened and he shook his head. “The past. My time in Seheron.”

“The war?”

He nodded, still cradling her against him.

“What happened to you there?”

Bull gazed off into the dimness of the room. “A lot of bad shit.”

“Do you…want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “No…not now. I just want to hold you close to me.” He shut his eye and nuzzled her hair. “I could’ve seriously injured you.”

“But you didn’t. I’ll be fine.” Her arms went around him, face buried against his chest.

He sighed. “Next time I look like I’m having a bad dream, woman, just scoot to your side of the bed and don’t try to wake me, okay?”

“You can count on it.”

(*)

When they officially rose a few hours later and got ready to leave the room, Ayla held Bull’s mirror in one hand, her other hand touching his arm. He loomed behind her, silent with self-loathing at what he’d done.

She maneuvered the mirror. “It doesn’t look so bad.”

“Are you kidding? It looks like I tried to strangle you.” The Qunari warrior shook his head, closing his eye, his broad shoulders slumped.

Ayla set the mirror aside and turned to him, small hand going to his cheek. He nuzzled her palm. “It’s alright, Bull. Accidents happen.”

His arms embraced her, eye roaming lovingly over her fine, ebony features. “It’s not alright. This kind of accident could’ve been deadly. You’re not that big. It wouldn’t have taken much more for me to…” He couldn’t even finish the sentence, eye closing again, head lowering.

“Oh, Bull…my warrior,” her hands grabbed his, “Like a friend once told me: you didn’t do anything too serious, and you must remember that, lest you find yourself caught in a pit of doubt that will leave you second-guessing yourself.” Dorian’s words to her two weeks ago. “We’ll move forward and be more careful in the future.”

He finally met her gaze and saw that she was smiling warmly at him. That smile. It was part of the reason he drew breath, why he lived. Iron Bull nodded and offered a slight smile of his own.

They left his quarters and went to the hall for breakfast. Ayla was mildly surprised to see Dorian sitting at one of the tables, a book before him and one fine finger looped through a coffee mug. The mage sipped his brew, his eyes lifting as they approached.
“Ah, there’s my favorite couple, well…besides Arnatus and I.” He grinned.

“What are you doing up?” Ayla chuckled softly. “It’s barely nine.”

“Mm. Maker bless morning sex.” Dorian’s grin broadened, his eyes narrowed. “Hannibal had to get up early, so I coaxed him into some naughty-play before he left for his business.”

“I see.” Ayla sat next to him, still gripping Bull’s hand. The Qunari hadn’t said a word.

“Andraste’s Tits! What happened to your neck?” The mage set his mug down and leaned towards her, examining the bruised area. His eyes swung to Iron Bull.

Bull wouldn’t even look at him. He spoke to Ayla in a low voice. “I’ll be in the training yard.” Then he turned and left the hall.

Dorian gave his attention to her. “Ayla? What happened?”

She told him about the incident, how she’d startled him from the nightmare, and he’d pinned her down for those few precious, breath-stealing moments.

“By the Maker…” Dorian inched closer and pulled her into a hug. A sigh trickled forth. “That’s one negative about Qunari—sometimes they don’t know their own strength.”

“Good morning, Ayla, Dorian,” Cullen’s voice cut in.

Dorian had been so into Ayla’s injury that he hadn’t noticed the commander’s approach. “Good morning…"

“Hello, Cullen,” Ayla’s eyes roamed in his direction, a smile perched on her sweet lips.

It didn’t take long for Cullen to notice the bruising as well. Hell, it was a blatant band of angry purple near the base of her slender neck. He lowered before her to get a closer look. “Ayla, what happened?”

The woman sighed. She’d contemplated wearing a scarf or something to cover the bruise and was inwardly kicking herself because she had decided not to. “It’s…nothing, really.” She tried to smile and talk matter-of-factly, like it wasn’t a big deal, which it wasn’t to her. Besides the bruise, she was fine. Though, seeing Iron Bull like that, caught in the grip of a nightmare that had made him almost look like another person as he pinned her, had scared Ayla. A lot. She hoped she never had to witness it again. “Early this morning, Iron Bull was having a bad dream, about his time in the war. I tried to wake him and…”

Cullen’s face darkened. “He did this to you?”

She shook her head. “It was an accident. He didn’t mean to.”

The commander caressed the soft, smooth curve of her cheek, then rose and stormed from the hall.

“Something tells me he’s going to the training yard,” Dorian said.

Ayla sighed.

(*)

Cullen’s pace was purposeful, his stride long and stiff. When he moved through the high foyer and into the crisp morning, he took the stone steps quickly for the main courtyard, his long jacket brushing against leather-clad legs. His hands clenched and opened at his sides, deep-golden eyes fierce with the anger that boiled in him.

The son of a bitch! How dare he lay even a finger on her! The commander took the gentle curve of steps down to the secondary courtyard, his vision locking across the area to where the Qunari bastard trained with Krem. He started over, moving smoothly for the two men, and when he reached them, one gloved hand firmly grabbed Iron Bull’s shoulder and roughly yanked him around. At the same time, Cullen pulled back his right arm and sent it flying, fist catching the other man hard in the jaw.

Bull’s head yanked about with the force of the blow. He slowly turned his eye to his attacker, and he held no malice. He knew exactly why the commander was there. The Qunari drew his tongue along the inside of his cheek, tasting blood. He wiped a trickle of crimson from the corner of his mouth with his thumb.

Krem stared wide-eyed at the exchange. He didn’t believe he’d ever seen Cullen look so savage.

“If you ever lay a hand on her again, so help me, I will fucking kill you,” the commander hissed, then turned and left. He was so angry that he couldn’t even go back to Ayla just yet, because seeing that bruise marking her lovely skin would only make him return to the yard and bash on the Qunari some more.

“What the hell was that, chief?” Krem was puzzled.

Iron Bull shook his head. “I…accidentally hurt Ayla this morning. I was dreaming about Seheron, and you know how bad it was there. She attempted to wake me, and I ended up…pinning her by
the throat.”

“By the Maker, is she alright?”

Bull sighed, nodding. "A bit of bruising. And I would rather die than ever harm her again.” He broke up their sparring, deciding he needed to go somewhere and mull over the whole thing.
Commander Rutherford decided to bury himself in work for the next two hours; it wasn’t like there wasn’t always work to be done, reports to read, preparations to be made for when the Inquisitor chose to send forces out again. He leaned over the desk in his quarters, a place that was large enough to serve as his office and personal living space. It was on the west wall ramparts and offered a superior view of the yards in that area and the jagged, snow-capped mountains and glacial lake to Skyhold’s west.

He stared at the map of the Emerald Graves spread out before him, but wasn’t truly seeing it. His mind was on Ayla. He was calm enough now to go and seek her out, positive that the sight of her bruised throat wouldn’t enrage him again, urging him to visit Iron Bull for a second round.

Cullen shook his head. That man was dangerous. And he knew his history, the time spent in Seheron, a soldier in what had been deemed one of the bloodiest wars of their time. Both Tevinter and the Qunari fought long and hard for that large island territory, and in the end, after thousands of corpses, the Qunari took control. The maximum suggested tour for a Qunari soldier to Seheron had been two years; Iron Bull spent almost a decade in that massacre, watching his friends and superior officers burn out and go mad or get killed. It was no surprise that the man had nightmares about the place.

Cullen knew all of this because he made it his business to acquire information on everyone in the Inquisition, particularly those of distinguished standing. The simple fact was that Iron Bull, while noble and loyal to those he served, was a dangerous and unstable man. Of course, that was Cullen’s personal diagnosis. And he didn’t want Ayla staying with him.

He sighed and pushed from the desk, leaving his quarters.

As Cullen figured, he found Ayla in the library with Dorian. Today was her off-day with Morrigan. The blind beauty had been quite happy that he came for her, and the two of them went to their table on the garden’s promenade, where he set up the tangerlingua chess board.

They began a game, Ayla delicately feeling over her pieces. She’d been playing for two weeks and had gotten familiar with their shapes, their positions on the pegged board. Her fingers brushed a pawn, plucked it up, and moved it forward.

Cullen mulled over the board and made a move. “Pawn A-2 to A-4.”

Ayla slowly reached to feel where he’d placed his piece. She smiled, nodding, then pondered her next move. From what she’d learned playing with him, pawns were usually the first pieces out, though not always. It just depended on the strategy of the player.

The commander’s gaze swept tenderly over her across the board. That damned bruise. He cleared his throat. “Ayla…I’ve been thinking…”

When he didn’t finish immediately, her eyes lifted and fixed in his direction. “Yes?”

“Perhaps, you should consider moving out of Iron Bull’s quarters.”

“Ayla…” She shook her head, fluffy hair bouncing.

“Why not?”

“Well…because… I need him…to see.”

“Ayla,” he said softly, “you could have your own room and still use his gift of sight. There’s no reason for you to share…quarters with him.”

She sighed and sat back from the board, frosty-blue gaze aimed at him. “You mean I don’t have to share a bed with him.”

“Yes, that is what I mean to say. It is quite strange,” the commander issued a short laugh. “Here you are with one man but sleeping with another.”

“It isn’t like that! We don’t do anything in bed, Cullen.” Her eyes widened. Though…with some of the things that happened between her and Iron Bull, it seemed like it was heading that way at times.

“I know that, Ayla, but it’s still a weird situation. I want you to move out not only to vacate his bed but to keep you safe. If he could do that”—he made a disgusted face at the bruise—“to you, assault you in his sleep, it makes sense that you stop sleeping next to him. He’s dangerous.”

“No, he’s not.”

“How can you say that after what he did? I’m only worried for you, Ayla.”

She sighed and smiled. “I know, but everything is fine. He would never hurt me on purpose. It
was just an accident.”

“Will you at least consider it?”

“No. I’m not moving out of Iron Bull’s quarters.” She tilted her head, quirking one pale brow.

“You don’t have to be jealous, Cullen. He’s just a friend.”

“Love, my jealousy aside, I’m more worried for your safety.”

“I know you are, and I’m very lucky to have you…”

Cullen released a low sigh and smiled, then leaned over the table and kissed her. “It is I who is the lucky one.”

(*)

Iron Bull spent the day avoiding Ayla, and not just because she was in the company of a most doting and adoring commander, but also because he couldn’t bear to look at the damage he’d done. The horrible contusion that marred her lovely neck thanks to him.

Accident or not, he felt like shit. And so he decided to avoid her for as long as he could.

It was about dinner time when he finally returned to his room, positive she wouldn’t be there. She’d been in Cullen’s company a lot and didn’t return to their quarters until late most evenings. He hoped she stuck to that normalcy tonight, giving Bull more time to wallow in his guilt.

He wasn’t hungry and hadn’t eaten much throughout the day. He poured himself some water and stripped down to his briefs. He needed to expend some energy. That would stimulate his mind so it didn’t linger constantly over what had happened. He just kept seeing her pinned under him, his forearm wedged against her throat, the absolute terror in her wide eyes as they stared up at him…

Iron Bull opened the windows, then dropped in the center of the floor and started churning out push-ups. He got fifteen minutes in before a thin sheen of sweat started forming on his body, glossing his brow. Yes, that’s what he needed. To feel his muscles work and flex until they burned. He gritted his teeth, narrowed his eye, and continued.

Up and down, up and down his highly toned body moved, chin up and eye fixed ahead.

Ayla’s face filled his mind. So beautiful…perfect, he thought. She was perfect. She was everything. His everything.

The push-ups charged faster from him. He was unrelenting, determined to make his body ache. Five minutes later, he began to feel the burn he sought. In his shoulders, his arms, ebbing all along his torso. Drops of sweat plopped to the floor under him, showering the wood. Thirty minutes in, his pace was still strong but much slower, each breath drawn deeply and released through his mouth.

Finally, Bull stopped and stood. His great chest rising and falling steadily. He worked his head back and forth, stretching the muscles of his neck, arms, and back. That felt good. A lot of his tension had dissipated, but he was still very pent up.

Very.

He needed to unwind more, and he knew exactly the best way to do that. His hand moved to his cock and massaged it slowly through the soft material of his briefs. The thought of Ayla hardened him in moments. His precious Ayla, off somewhere right now probably sucking face with Commander Flexibility. That thought didn’t turn Iron Bull off, as he was sure it would. He was just too sexually stimulated. He hadn’t been with anyone since two nights before they found Ayla in that cave; the soldier Ralden. Unless one counted the partial blowjob he got from Bertrand.

He released a thick, wanton groan and shut his eye, continuing to rub himself through the underwear. He needed some release. And she probably wouldn’t be back for a few hours yet.

The Qunari locked the door to his quarters, grabbed his lube and a towel, then settled on the bed. If she did return while he was in the middle of sexing his right hand, she’d have to knock; he noticed she left her key on the table. Plenty of time to clean up. He propped the pillows comfortably behind his head, then drew his briefs down to mid-thigh, giving complete, unrestricted access to his sizable manhood.

Iron Bull shut his eye and gripped it firmly, slowly stroking along its throbbing, powerful length. He popped the cap from the lubricant and squeezed a generous amount on his palm, then set the phial aside. He coated his cock, then began rubbing and massaging it, slowly rotating his hips. His masterful fingers drew all the way to the base, up-stroking from the bottom of his heavy balls back to the swollen head.

His other hand viciously grasped the bed sheets, his back arching, head tossing into the pillows, eye closed, his handsome, bearded features painted in sweet ecstasy. The Qunari pictured his ebony angel straddling his hips, her tight, dripping cunt wrapped around him, clenching and hot, his shaft catching on every soft ridge and nook of her inner walls as she slid up and down on him.

“Mm…Ayla…”

(*)
Said beauty was currently in the main hall with Cullen. They sat to one end of a mostly empty table. They’d spent time playing chess, then fell into some heated kissing and embracing in the garden, losing track of time. Now they were catching the tail-end of dinner service.

Ayla nibbled at a sweet roll. Whoever the cook was that made them was quite skilled. She absolutely loved the things.

Cullen cut a bit of steak and popped it in his mouth, eyes on her. He stared lovingly across the table, his expression stern. He’d meant what he said to the Qunari. He would kill him if he hurt again.

“I really enjoy our time together, Ayla.”

“So do I. I must say that I’m growing to like chess more than I thought I would. My brother plays. Perhaps…I’ll get to play against him someday.”

“You will.” Cullen touched her hand across the table. “Nothing’s come up yet, but Leliana’s people are the best. They’ll find him.”

Ayla issued a short nod. “I have great faith in—Oooo! Ahhmn…mmmm…” The tight burst of sensation between her legs hit her suddenly.

She dropped her roll and her eyes fluttered shut, her brow furrowed, face twisted with…pleasure? Her hands gripped firmly to the table’s edge.

“Ayla?” Cullen put his fork down, lifting a brow.

Nearby patrons, a group of chatty Orlesians, had clearly heard the sound that erupted from the woman. They watched her closely. Varric and Solas sat at another table, taking in the scene.

Ayla shifted in her seat, still feeling the warmth in her belly, disseminating through her loins, making her quite wet down there. She opened her eyes and took a few breaths.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she answered the commander, nodding, her unseeing eyes swinging around slowly as she tried to understand what was happening. Then another spike of delight melted through her, making her moan thickly. She shivered in her chair, head tossing forward. Her hands had a death grip on the table still. “Oh…my…gods…”

Something strange overtook her. Like the feeling of being transported without leaving. She clenched her eyes shut and could clearly feel the heat of flushed skin, but not her skin. Someone else’s. The feeling was akin to sharing the same body with another being, another presence. Another soul. She inhaled sharply, brow furrowed. A scent she knew well floated on the air all around her. The familiar, overpowering musk that could only belong to…Iron Bull? Another ripple of luscious rapture pulsed through her loins. Her feminine core quivered and she moaned hotly.

“Ohmygods!”

Ayla’s eyes flew open.

Cullen had moved around the table and helped her from her chair. His eyes flicked to the patrons who watched the episode with keen interest. The commander had not the slightest idea what was happening, but she didn’t appear to be in pain. Oppositely, she appeared to be in pleasure. Ayla’s legs weakened and she fell against him, breathing raggedly.

“Do you need to return to your room?” Cullen asked, arms linked around her.

“I…uh…yes, please.” Ayla blushed profusely.

The commander began walking her through the hall.

(*)

Iron Bull was going full-on now, hand stroking rhythmically along his glistening length, producing wet, squishy noises as his lubed cock repeatedly penetrated the firm grip of his hand and fingers. It wouldn’t be long before he exploded. His body was taut, every muscle standing out as he thrust up into the makeshift vagina that was his fist, meeting his down-strokes in that perfect pace and intensity that would send him over the edge.

“Oh, fuck yes!” he roared.

He sucked in a sharp breath and arched hard, head tossing in the pillows, hips rotating. Then his climax crashed over him like wild surf against a beach. His balls drew up and his cock twitched, before his seed erupted in thick, hot spurts. There was so much of it, splashing over his hard belly, the middle of his chest, cascading down over his hand to provide hot lubrication for the last strokes of his release.

“Mm…shit.”

He wiped his hand on the towel, cleaned the cum off his body, tucked his spent cock back in his briefs, then fully relaxed on the mattress, arms out at his sides, breathing deeply. He stared up at
the ceiling.

“By the Qun, I fucking needed that.”

(*)

Halfway through the main hall, Ayla suddenly lurched, spinning into Cullen. He held her close, examining her face, the pure, joyful pleasure that had overtaken her.

“Oooo...yes! YES!” She arched her body into the commander’s, rubbing desperately against him. She trembled, shuddering. Her hands planted in his hair, yanking their mouths together, her tongue plundering past his lips, wanting to take all the pleasure she could from whatever the experience was. She moaned. “Mm...yes...Cullen...”

Except that it wasn’t the commander who pleasured her. It was Iron Bull. Somehow, she’d been able to share in the experience of his intimate alone-time. The link between them, the soul-bond, had altered, strengthened. That was the only explanation, but how had it happened? Ayla fretted the new and unknown possibilities as she clung to the commander.

Cullen could only hold her while she exhibited what appeared to be sexual climax right there in his arms. As confused as he was, he truly wished he could’ve been part of it. He lifted the spent woman and carried her for the quarters she shared with his least favorite Qunari.

Back over at his table, Varric was grinning broadly. He sipped his ale. “Oh, this place just gets better and better, Chuckles.”

Solas lifted a brow. “What do you suppose happened to her?”

Varric studied his Elvhen friend, then shook his head. “Obviously, you’ve never witnessed an orgasmic woman before. Though...darned if I know what brought it on.”

“Ah, so that’s what it looks like in human females,” Solas replied, his tone even and thoughtful.

“You say that like you have some experience.”

The elf chuffed, his serene features shifting into the faintest of smiles. “Just because I choose not to make my intimate encounters public doesn’t mean I’m inexperienced with the opposite sex.”

Varric just grinned and nodded at him. “Duly noted, Chuckles, duly noted.”

(*)

Lying on the bed, expended and sated, Bull shifted and flinched. He clearly felt lips being mashed to his. A stubbly top lip and chin. Iron Bull felt what he knew to be a man’s hard body hugged against his own, soft, short hair between his fingers. He could even smell the other man’s rugged scent; it drowned him pleasantly.

No, not pleasantly. Not to Bull. But to her–Ayla. He was somehow experiencing her impressions and thoughts. He had the distinct sensation of being with her, the two of them sharing her body, swept up in the heat of her arousal.

The manly lips were Cullen’s.

Bull’s eye flew open and he wiped his hand across his mouth vigorously, but continued to feel those lightly bearded features nuzzled hotly to his.

“What the absolute fuck!”

He sat in bed mulling over it for less than five minutes, when two knocks resounded against his door. He quickly put his lube away, then tossed the cum-soiled towel in with the dirty laundry. Bull swept his eye once about the room to ensure everything looked normal, then he opened the door. As expected, it was Cullen and Ayla.

The Qunari tried to meet her eyes, perhaps gain some clue as to why he’d picked up on her thoughts and sensations just then, but she moved quickly by him into the room, too embarrassed to even say goodnight to the commander.

Cullen’s eyes narrowed faintly when he and Bull locked gazes, then he turned and strode off. Bull shut the door, locked it, and turned to see that Ayla sat on the edge of the bed. She looked very frazzled.

“Um...you okay?”

“I don’t know. Something...happened to me just now, in the main hall.”

Iron Bull sat beside her, and she laid a hand over his, bringing clarity to her vision. “What happened?”

“Well...I’m not exactly sure. I was finishing up dinner when I...began to get these very pleasurable sensations, you know, down there...”

Bull lifted a brow, highly intrigued. He didn’t say anything at first, listening.

Ayla went on. “And...I got the strangest feeling of being...with you, in you, I suppose.” She
shook her head, eyes cast down. She stole a secret glance. "What were you doing in here before I returned?"

He hadn’t expected her to ask that. The look on her face said she knew exactly what he’d been doing, but how could she possibly know about his moment of sexual release? "I was…

exercising."

She watched him closely. "Oh, is that what you call it?"

"Call what?"

“You know what.”

“Sorry. I’m lost, Ayla.” While she was being cryptic, Bull took a moment to gently grip her chin, lifting it so he could assess her neck.

"I’m fine.” Her small hand pushed his away. “Don’t try to change the subject. I know what you were doing in here."

Handsome, rugged features formed a grin and he lifted a brow. “Really? And what was I doing?”

The woman burned with a blush, her skin nearly scorching. She wanted to hit him for the look he was giving her–full of amusement, mirth, and curiosity. “You were…” Ayla took a breath and blurted, "pleasuring yourself.”

Iron Bull’s smile faded and his eye studied her as if she’d suddenly grown a second head. "How’d you know that?"

“So you were?"

“No… I mean… yes… but how do you know?"

“Because I—I’ve experienced it too,” she said softly, eyes averting. “I was dining with Cullen and I felt what you were doing.”

Bull went silent. His gaze roamed contemplatively, then that lone eye fell on her again. “Something happened to me too, after I finished. I got the feeling of being in your body…” The next words came out tight and hushed. “Feeling that man against me, his lips on mine…” He shook his head.

Beauty and the Bull sat quietly for a few moments, reflecting on what was happening between them.

Then he chuckled. “Hm… looks like this link between us has moved to another level, angel.”

Ayla stared at him with wide eyes. “It’s not funny, Bull.”

“Oh, yeah, it is.”

She shook her head. “No. You will just have to refrain from… doing that until we find a way to fix this.”

He lifted a brow, grinning at her. “What? Masturbation?”

Ayla smirked. “Yes! No touching yourself until further notice.”

“Aw, seriously? It’s the only outlet I—” The Qunari cut his words sharply. The only outlet I have for sexual release since I’ve resigned to the fact that I don’t want anyone else but you, woman."

He’d almost revealed the true nature of why he left her alone on most nights, to avoid getting closer. Though, he was now quite ready to toss the charade out the window. “Okay, my cock is hands-free for now, but I can’t promise for how long.”

Ayla shook her head, taking a breath. She supposed she should be used to his blatant, unfiltered tongue by now. “Thanks…”

“Anything for you.”

They met gazes, and Ayla wasn’t even surprised at the flare of heat that spread through her belly, settling in the honey-pot between her legs, making that area tingle. It was the way he watched her, devouring her with that one eye, sitting there looking completely delicious in snug black briefs, every muscle defined. The man’s sexual charisma was simply off the scale, and he knew it. Even now, tied romantically to Cullen as she was, Ayla longed to crawl into Iron Bull’s lap and nestle into his body, taste his lips, caress his horns, nuzzle that beard.

The rich, throatiness of his chuckles drew her from her sexually deviant thoughts. “If you see something you like…”

Ayla cleared her throat, smacked at his arm, then moved from the bed for the tub, disappearing behind the wall.

Bull laughed more, then settled back on the mattress, listening while she ran her water. “Hm, I wonder…”

“What?” she called.
“If you touched yourself, would I sense it?”

Her head popped around the wall, eyes narrowed in his direction. “You can just keep dreaming on that one!”

“Believe me, angel, I will.” He grinned.

(*)

They headed to bed same as any other night. Sometime in the earliest morning hours, Ayla stirred awake. She hadn’t really gone to sleep. Her mind kept rousing over Bull’s question. Would he be able to know if she pleasured herself?

Slowly and carefully, she rolled to her back, putting out just one finger to barely touch upon his arm. She saw that he slept peacefully, great chest rising and falling steadily. Ayla took a breath and broke contact with him, then shut her eyes and ran her hands down her body, massaging her full breasts.

Down over her stomach, where heat had begun to stir.

Lower to the apex of her femininity, which she rubbed through the material of his shirt. She slowly gripped the edges of the shirt and pulled it up above her stomach. Then she slipped a small hand into her panties, sifting through the tuft of pale hair capping her nether lips, which had grown juicy and sensitive.

Ayla sucked in a small breath, sliding her middle finger between those hot lips, finding her little pleasure nub. She shut her eyes and rubbed it, swirling her fingertip around it. She bit down on her lip, rotating her hips.

Beside her, Iron Bull shifted, inhaling deeply. He moaned in his sleep.

Ayla continued stroking her clt, her other hand clutching one of her breasts, squeezing.

The Qunari groaned heatedly, his chuckles tumbling through the dark room.

Ayla’s eyes flew open and she snatched her hand from her underpants. So…it did go both ways.

“No sense in stopping now, woman.”

“Gah!” She turned on her side, scooting back against him again.

“You know, you’ll be able to go right to sleep if you just finish…or I could finish for both of us…”

Ayla rolled over quickly, squinting at him. “You most certainly will not!”


Neither the Beauty nor the Bull got much rest that night. She was mortified by this new development in their link, though that hadn’t stopped her from testing it on her end. Iron Bull was amused by it, already planning ways of using it to enhance their sex-life, because she would give in to him eventually.

At least, he hoped she would.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to thank LadyHawke361 for being the muse for this particular chapter. ;)
Ayla stirred faintly. She could smell food— toasted bread and bacon. She lay on her back, hair tossed around her. Her right side was very warm, so she slowly opened her eyes and fixed them in that direction. She was greeted by a clear view of Iron Bull’s chest, her arm grazing his skin. He lay on his side, head propped on his hand, watching her casually. He wore only the black briefs.

A smile formed slowly on his face. “Morning, beautiful.”

Ayla huffed and shook her head. She returned the smile. “I can hardly be beautiful with sleep in my eyes and my hair all over the place.”

“Mm. Perfect.”

The woman began to heat up at the way his eye made a lingering trail down her body, then back up. Why did he do this to her, play these games? Though, as of late, it hadn’t seemed like his usual inscrutableness. He hadn’t gone out for sexual dalliances the past couple of nights. Still, Ayla had to remember that she was with Cullen, and it was for him that she reserved her intimacy. Iron Bull had missed his chance. At least that’s what she had to keep drilling into herself. There were moments when she believed she would toss all her reservations to the wind and fall into the Qunari’s bewitching charms. But she wouldn’t. Besides, he was a playboy. After he got what he wanted from her, he would probably grow bored and move on to the next warm body.

She stretched and sat up. “You made breakfast. How sweet.”

“Bacon, eggs, toast, nothing special. You slept later than usual, so we missed breakfast in the hall.” Bull reached a large hand out, gently swept back the curtain of her hair, and gripped her chin. He carefully turned and lifted it to see the bruise. The center area was starting to turn a dismal, dark yellow. He sighed. “Oh, angel…”

Ayla moved her hand over his. “Don’t…it’s alright, Bull. It’s in the past. Nothing to be done about it now except to let it heal,” she said softly, eyes fixed fondly on him. She really did care for him. Very much. Honestly, the woman loved him, but damned if she would let him know that. Though Ayla and Cullen hadn’t moved into the sexual realm of their relationship, it had gotten quite serious between them. She was unwilling to jeopardize such a good thing. The man she’d chosen from the beginning had rejected her, taking cheap encounters over the faithful, unflinching love Ayla could’ve offered him, and then decided he wanted her again.

Well, now she would focus on Cullen, and try to keep things as innocent as she could with Iron Bull.

Ayla took a breath, then scooted down the bed, moving for the bathing area. “We need to go see Morrigan.”

“Why?”

“She’s the only person in Skyhold who knows anything about our link, how it works. Maybe she can tell us how to stop this new…development.”

“Hm. Yeah.”

Iron Bull sighed, quite aware of the cold shoulder, the shunning of his affections. Fucking Commander Flexibility had his hooks in deep. He left the bed, sitting at the table. He popped food on his plate, slathering jam on a piece of toast. He took a big bite and chewed slowly, wishing he hadn’t deflected her advances earlier. She had been so willing to come to him. But no, he just had to stubbornly fight the love that had manifested itself between them, so worried about how it conflicted with the Qun and everything he knew. Now, he’d have to work extra hard to win her back, get her to realize he’d made a mistake.

The Qunari warrior wanted her for his mate, Qun be damned.

(*)

They ate breakfast, got ready, and left his quarters. Ayla smiled happily as she walked alongside Bull, small hand linked to his bicep. This mountain day was very clear and crisp, the scents of apple-spice, nutmeg, pumpkin, cinnamon, and ginger wafting from various bakers, hinting at the official arrival of fall.

Her eyes swept up to his handsome profile. “Cullen thinks I should move out of your room. He believes you’re too dangerous for me to remain there.”

“Hm.” Bull kept his eye forward, taking them for a staircase along the eastern wall. It led to the garden. “He might be right. There would be no more…accidents if you had your own room.” He thought a moment, then looked down at her, eye narrowed. “Or did he suggest that you move in with him?”

“No, he suggested my own room.” Ayla giggled, but it was clipped and low. Her features went serious. “But I’m not moving out. I’m staying with you. It’s where I belong. I can just…feel it.”

He issued a nod. “As long as you still feel safe.”
“Safe as ever,” she replied, hugging his arm, face set to his skin. “You’re my warrior. I trust you.”

When they reached the spacious garden, Bull and Ayla headed for the lone gazebo, since it was Morrigan’s favorite place to linger when she chose to visit this part of Skyhold. Dressed in a gown as dark as her hair and with a gothic flare, the sorceress sat on the bench under the gazebo. She was reading a thin, leather-bound book and appeared to be very much immersed in its content.

Her vivid amber eyes flicked up to her two visitors. She conjured the wisp of a smile. “Ah, the Oona and her Warrior. To what do I owe the pleasure?” The sorceress took note of Ayla’s bruised throat, but didn’t question it. She’d already heard about the incident, as it was floating around in the Inquisitor’s Inner Circle. The woman would surely be more careful around the beast-man with whom she shared a bed.

“Well…” Ayla gnawed her bottom lip. “It’s about the soul-bond. It’s…” her pretty brow furrowed, “…changing.”

“Oh? How so?” Morrigan stood, her boot heels tapping hollowly against wood as she proceeded across the gazebo closer to them.

“Well…we can sense each other’s thoughts and emotions.”

“How fascinating…” The sorceress’s eyes gleamed, shifting between the woman and the Qunari.

Ayla sighed, blushing. “But that’s not all. We can sense…other things as well.”

Morrigan lifted a brow, waiting for her to elaborate.

“Personal things,” Ayla added.

Morrigan still waited for the woman to get to the point.

Bull rolled his eye. “I was wacking off yesterday, and she shared in the experience.

“Bull!” Ayla smacked his arm.

He shrugged, tipping a smile down at her. “What? You weren’t gonna say it.”

Morrigan loosened a rich chuckle. “Oh my, that is quite hilarious. Though, I’m sure it adds flare to your bedroom activities.”

“We don’t have any bedroom activities!” Ayla nearly screamed. She looked around quickly to make sure no one was close enough to catch the conversation. She took a breath. “Morrigan, please…if you know anything about this part of the bond…”

Morrigan’s vivid eyes slid sideways as she considered, then she shook her head. “In the short time that I spent with the Jado, I’ve only heard of the bond developing emotionally between an Oona and their Chosen Warrior, not metaphysically or telepathically. Honestly, what I do know is only surface material, dear girl. The Jado were extremely mystical. It would’ve taken me years to truly come to understand them. Unfortunately, I didn’t get much time,” her voice softened, lingering.

“There has to be something we can do to dampen this new connection.” Ayla looked pleadingly at the witch.

“Well…you may be able to use the same technique I showed you for channeling your power-emotion. Meditate as usual, summon your emotion, then imagine expanding it around yourself, like a protective field that keeps your thoughts and feelings in…” her eyes moved to Iron Bull, “…and holds his out.”

Ayla nodded. She appeared disappointed, but would take whatever guidance she could. There was no way she’d be able to get any closer to Cullen, knowing that Iron Bull might be ‘telepathically spying’ on her, not trying to but doing so anyway. “Thank you, Morrigan.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I don’t know if it’ll work. What you need to understand about the soul-bond is that it operates both ways. You are the initiator of the bond, but you don’t solely control it. He can control it as well; it’s a two-way communication. So, even if you attempt to block it with meditation, when he decides to…” Morrigan grinned broadly, “…touch himself again, you may still experience it.”

Ayla just stared at the woman wide-eyed.

Beside her, Iron Bull rumbled with low, hearty chuckles.

“I’ll see you the day after tomorrow to start next week’s lessons.” Still smiling broadly, Morrigan turned and went back to her bench. She was done on the subject. The Great and Powerful Witch of the Wilds had spoken.

(*

In the war room, Hannibal stood with his arms crossed over his broad chest, listening to his council report. Leliana’s people had done well in finding out more about Lord Draister Wrenz’s request.

“It appears to be legit, Inquisitor,” the spymaster said. “I have a spy who has gotten in good with Wrenz’s servants, and one servant, a man named Jorval, revealed that Wrenz had been sneaking
out some nights to attend private…” she cleared her throat, cool green eyes gleaming, “…parties, at which secret meetings occur.”

“Parties?” Hannibal pressed.

Leliana considered, then said, “Orgies.”

Both Cullen and Josephine turned interested gazes on her.

Hannibal’s head tilted, his silver-coated horns shining by the light of candles and lamps. The mid-day glow sifted through the run of stained-glass windows along the far wall, sending multi-colored patterns across the stone floor. “ Seriously?”

“Yes. But the important part of this is the secret meetings. My source reports that they may have something to do with Corypheus, followers of his. My guess is that Lord Wrenz wishes to reveal the true nature of the meetings to you,” Leliana finished.

Hannibal Luthor Adaar inhaled deeply, aqua eyes skirting over the large map of Orlais and Fereldan. So much to be done, and who knew when they’d finally face Corypheus? He nodded. “Alright, Josephine. Send message to Lord Wrenz stating that I will visit his home, but it won’t be for about two months, as there are prior obligations.”

She nodded. “Yes, Inquisitor.”

“Leliana,” Hannibal’s eyes switched to her. “Have you found anything out about Ayla’s brother?”

“Not yet. The trail is cold for my Crows, but they’re still looking. I have assigned them to gradually expand the search out from the Redcliffe region.”

“Alright. Keep me informed.”

They broke the meeting. Hannibal strode through Josephine’s office. So much to be done, and who knew when they’d finally face Corypheus? He nodded. “Alright. Josephine. Send message to Lord Wrenz stating that I will visit his home, but it won’t be for about two months, as there are prior obligations.”

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“Alright. Keep me informed.”

They broke the meeting. Hannibal strode through Josephine’s office. When he stepped through the door into the main hall, he nearly bumped into a guard, who immediately halted and saluted. Hannibal returned the gesture.

“Inquisitor, there is a visitor in the main courtyard who requests your presence and that of Iron Bull. His name is Gatt.”

Just then, Cullen slipped from the door behind Hannibal. The Qunari turned to him. “Are you busy right now.”

“No, why?”

“I’d like you to accompany me to the courtyard. Gatt is waiting.” Both men knew he wouldn’t bring good news, not after the loss of Qunari life due to Hannibal’s decision to save the Chargers over the Berethlok. If he had any ideas of violence, Hannibal wanted Cullen there to help neutralize the situation.

Cullen nodded, and they moved through the hall, down the steps, and started for the sitting area beneath a cluster of trees to the right of the main gate. As they approached, they saw the slender Elvhen man standing in the shade of the trees. Iron Bull and Ayla moved in from the opposite direction; a guard had found and summoned him as well not long after he and Ayla left the garden.

Everyone converged until all five of them stood in a loose circle.

Cullen’s eyes swept instinctively to Ayla, appearing so small and almost coy beside the Qunari, hand hooked to his massive bicep. She met the commander’s gaze and looked away, highly embarrassed about what had happened last night. Cullen decided he would attempt to pull her away after they talked with Gatt.

“Greetings, Gatt,” said Hannibal.

The elf nodded. “Inquisitor, it is my duty to inform you that there will be no alliance between our peoples. Nor will you be receiving anymore Ben-Hassrath reports from your Tal-Vashoth ally.”

His green eyes narrowed at Iron Bull. “Because that is what you’ve officially been deemed.”

Hannibal had expected to hear no less from the slender, pointy-eared man, a messenger sent to relay the displeasure of the Qun. He knew this would be the outcome the moment he opted to save the Chargers.

Bull’s features remained idle. “You under orders to kill me, Gatt?”

“No. The Ben-Hassrath have already lost one good man; they’d rather not lose two.”

Gatt made to move off, but Hannibal’s voice stopped him, “Half the day is already gone. If you like, we could put you up in spare quarters until morning, which would give you most of the day to get down the mountain.”

The elf considered, then nodded. “That would be acceptable.”

“Cullen,” Hannibal turned to him, “would you please see to it?”

“Yes,” the commander replied, then turned to Ayla, offering his arm and a warm smile. “Share
company with me afterwards?"

The woman nodded, then slowly let go of Iron Bull’s arm, grabbing hold of Cullen. She was sure
the commander could see the blush burning across her skin.

Bull sighed, watching Ayla walk off with Cullen, Gatt following them.

“If you love her so much, you should tell her, my friend.”

Iron Bull swung around slowly to face Hannibal, who held a vague but knowing smile. Bull drew
a deep breath, exhaled, and shook his head. “It’s…complicated, boss.”

“Love always is.”

“Yeah…”

Hannibal reached to smack him on the shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll work it out.”

Bull nodded, then crossed his arms over his chest. “Ya know, I never thanked you for choosing to
save the Chargers. It cost a lot to the Inquisition. The Qunari would’ve made a great ally against
Corypheus, offering not only their intel but a superior naval fleet.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Bull. Sure, we lost the alliance, but Krem, Stitches, Grim, Skinner,
Rocky, Dalish—they’re still alive. I meant what I said. I care about them too, and I would make the
same decision over if given the choice.”

The larger Qunari smiled and nodded. “Well, so much for that.”

“Can we smoke out some of your old contacts?” Hannibal asked.

“I’ve sent off a few messages, but they’ll pull their people soon enough. We might be able to
identify the agents who replace them.”

“Alright, sounds good. We’ll take what we can before they completely shut you out.”

(*)

Cullen led Gatt to available quarters on the second floor of the south tower, then he and Ayla left
to stroll through the small but lively market district in Skyhold’s western sector. A group of
children kicked a hide ball around, and the commander stopped his and Ayla’s pace for a moment
to let the young ones scamper by. He chuckled at their innocent mirth.

Ayla smiled at their little voices.

They began walking slowly, casually. Cullen’s gaze swept to her a moment, then forward. “So…
are you going to tell me what happened last night?”

There it was, the question Ayla had been dreading, but knew was coming. Her slim shoulders
shrugged and she shook her head. There was no way she was going to tell him the truth. “I…
um…” She was positive he detected her blush, but she had to turn this in her favor. She deepened
her smile, lowering her eyelashes demurely. She clutched tighter to his arm. “I suppose I was just
very excited to be in your presence.”

Cullen released a soft chuckle. He stopped them again and eased his arms around her. “Ah, I see.
Perhaps, next time you get excited, we’ll find ourselves in the privacy of my quarters,” he droned
thickly, holding her against him so she could feel just how much she stimulated him.

Ayla inhaled his scent in long, steady drags, instantly caught in the sensual net he’d cast. With
Cullen, as with Bull, her sexual senses were always right at the edge, needing only the faintest
stroke to begin stirring. Both men were completely different in their courting approaches, but
yielded the same results in her—she could easily see herself lying with either of them.

Feeling emboldened, Ayla lifted on her toes until her nose nuzzled his pleasantly bristled chin,
then his lips. They shared a tender yet hungry kiss, both wanting to go further, but it was all up to
her. Cullen was sure he’d made it clear that he was willing to take her to his bed, and he was
patiently waiting for her to decide when she was ready.

He pulled back, looking down into hazy eyes the color of pale-blue ice, a visage that currently
saw him as nothing more than a familiar blotch of shadows and contours. “It’s nearly lunch. Want
to grab something, then head to our table for chess?”

Ayla smiled deeply, her tumbling hair shifting around her when she nodded.

(*)

The next morning, Gatt rose long before the sun and started back down the eastern side of the
Frostbacks on the journey to rejoin his Ben-Hassrath squadron. And once the sun was up and
they’d parted in the Heroes’ Breakfast, along with most of the Inner Circle, Hannibal, Vivienne,
Cole, and Blackwall bid farewell to Skyhold and began their travels for the Shrine of Dinendal,
located in the Emerald Graves.
A Tiny, Curly Bunny

The following day, Dorian rolled over in bed, arm instinctively reaching for Hannibal. That quickly, he’d forgotten his love had left on yet another journey the previous morning. He moaned and rolled over, thoroughly entangling him in the sheets.

“Fasta vass,” he cursed, tugging at the covers.

Once he was loose, he sat up, eyes falling on his reflection in the tall, wide mirror in the corner. It had been positioned at the perfect angle to allow the mage an unobstructed view while Hannibal took him from behind. Maker, he loved watching himself get dominated by his big, powerful Qunari.

He smiled softly, sighed, and rubbed a hand back and forth over his tousled hair. He loved that man so much. Next time, didn’t matter what the journey entailed or where it took them, Dorian was going to be very insistent on serving as the mage for the party. Overall, he hated camping, but camping in a tent with Hannibal, he very much enjoyed.

He yawned and stretched, moving from bed, and suddenly grimaced, noting the time of day on the large sundial by the doors leading to the balcony. He was supposed to be meeting with Morrigan and Ayla this morning so the Oona could practice.

Dorian wheezed a miserable groan and started getting ready. A morning person he was not.

(*)

Even before Dorian stepped across the threshold into the garden, he could feel the surge of Ayla’s power charging the air. It was the same feeling he’d gotten in the cave that day, sizzling pleasantly along his extremities, his fingertips. He was happy, however, that he didn’t experience an energy spike as he drew closer, meaning she was doing well at keeping her power contained to her chosen target or targets.

Now, that was only Morrigan. Ayla hovered a couple of feet from the ground, arms out, her hair and gown floating ethereally around her. A glowing white stream connected her and Morrigan; she was amplifying the sorceress.

Morrigan’s being was layered in soft flames since she currently channeled her fire abilities. Her arms lifted above her head, pointed at the sky. Above her, a fiery vortex swirled into existence, swelling and growing, until it was a large twister floating in place over the garden. Dorian watched the whole thing in amazement, the heat of the phenomenon blasting pleasantly over him.

“Now, Ayla! Reverse your energy and siphon!”

Ayla concentrated her control, picturing the actions in her mind. She focused on the glowing entity she could see through the shadows that normally clouded her world. It was Morrigan, the one she was connected to. Summoning her control, Ayla activated her siphon, which instantly took Morrigan to her knees. The swirling funnel of fire shrank, drawn downward bit by bit, absorbed into Ayla’s body, along with some of Morrigan’s magical energy; she was harnessing it, taking it for herself to do with as she pleased.

Dorian jumped aside when a tree about ten feet away exploded into flames, sending out a puff of leaves and small bits of wood. “Ah! Andraste’s Tits!”

Ayla slowly lowered until her feet touched the ground. She took a breath and relinquished the hold of her power, gathering it back until it was contained once again. Morrigan was no longer a figure outlined by a pale glow; she was a shadow-shape.

Deeming it safe enough, Dorian sauntered over to them. “I’m beginning to think we need a larger space in which to practice. That cyclone was rather sizable.”

Morrigan moved to Ayla, touching the woman’s arm to let her know her bearings. “That’s why I cleared this area out, Altus. It’s big enough. As long as Ayla is able to keep a rein on her power and we control ours when she amplifies us, we’ll be fine.” The sorceress eyed him disapprovingly. “Glad to see you could finally grace us with your presence. There’s still about an hour of practice left.”

“Ah, well,” he tossed a hand dismissingly, “drank more than I intended last night, which led to a late rise.”

“Hm.” Morrigan mused. She turned to Ayla. “You’re getting stronger and better at this, my dear.”

“Thanks,” the blind woman smiled broadly. She was glad to be getting such a handle on her power.

“Indeed,” Morrigan continued, “the Inquisitor will be happy with the progress. I’m sure he’ll want to begin plans for giving you a part in the fight against Corypheus. Heaven knows the Inquisition could use you.”

The slender, dark-skinned woman nodded, sighing. “I will do whatever I can.”

(*)
The three of them continued practice for that last hour, and just when they were finishing up, Cullen strode into the garden. He carried a basket with a blanket folded over it in one hand.

Dorian grinned and moved in close to Ayla. “Your golden suitor has arrived,” he said near her ear.

Ayla couldn’t contain the smile that erupted across her face, unseeing eyes slowly skimming. Cullen stopped by them, taking Ayla’s hand in his. “Good afternoon, love.” He nodded to Dorian and Morrigan.

Ayla answered by pulling in close and seeking his lips, and he obliged, issuing a kiss.

“Well, I’ll see you both for practice tomorrow,” Morrigan said and walked off.

“Guess, I’ll leave you two to whatever is you’re planning,” Dorian said, his tone playful. He touched Ayla’s arm. “I’ll get with you later.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely! I haven’t had a picnic in so long.”

“I figured it would be…romantic.”

Ayla giggled, hands caressing up and down his arm. “I’m sure it will be. Where will we have it?”

“Just a little further around the bend there’s a lovely spot. It has a small pond and sits in the wake of a willow. I wish that you could see it. The weeping branches are laden with fluffy, pale sprigs that hang around the tree. It reminds me of your hair.” He leaned his lips into the snowy softness atop her head, inhaling deeply.

“It sounds very beautiful, Cullen.”

“Here we are,” he said. “Give me a moment to set out the blanket, love.”

Ayla stood by as he prepared the spot, then he took her hand and guided her to sit. She fixed her skirt around her legs. Cullen settled beside her and began removing things from the basket.

“Let’s see,” he smiled. “I had the kitchen prepare some tiny cucumber and ham sandwiches. There’s also cheese and fruit, olives.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“And for dessert, chocolate dipped strawberries.”

“I love those!” Ayla reached towards the shape she knew to be him, hand falling warmly on his knee.

“Glad to hear that, because there are plenty of them.” Cullen made her a plate, then took her hand and guided it to the food.

Ayla set the plate on her lap and began eating. She was feeling quite content with the day so far. Except for that one small tree, she had managed not to destroy the garden, and now she was sharing a romantic picnic with her handsome boyfriend. The only thing that threw her off was the way her thoughts adamantly honed in on her huge Qunari protector, the love she carried for him.

Cullen slowly ate at his meal, eyes roaming over her, finding himself to be quite the lucky man.

Iron Bull had left Ayla with Morrigan three hours ago, and while she was busy tinkering with her powers, he’d been sparring with Krem. Then he’d sought out Leliana to discuss the last correspondences from the Ben-Hassrath. The Inquisition might be altering its message routes, depending on if they could determine the names and locations of the new agents that replaced their current contacts.

Now the large, horned man had entered the main hall, moving in from the gardens. He’d gone to retrieve Ayla in hopes of sharing lunch with her, but she wasn’t there. A few random citizens lingered about, filtering back in since the magical practice session was done. Bull’s eyes skimmed the hall and fell on Dorian, sitting with a book and a cup of tea. He approached, halting to tower over the mage.

“Hey, Dorian.”

The mage’s eyes slid from the book to meet the Qunari’s. “Ah, Iron Bull. Looking for Ayla, I assume?”

(*)
Bull nodded. “Know where she is?”

“Last I saw, she was with the handsome commander. He picked her up after practice.” The Altus captured one end of his fine moustache in manicured fingertips. He adopted a roguish smile. “He was carrying what could only have been a picnic basket. I’m sure they’ve gone and found a spot somewhere. Romantic, hm?”

Bull grunted and turned. His long, sure stride carried him back for the garden.

(*)

Cullen chuckled and nipped playfully at her lips again. They’d finished lunch and were now indulging on the strawberries. She’d just eaten one and he could clearly taste chocolate when they kissed. Ayla’s hand drew across his fuzzy jaw, thumb raking over his mouth. With her other hand, she raised a cocoa-covered berry and gently stroked it over his lips. Cullen groaned and bit into it.

“Mm…” he set the bowl of aphrodisiacal fruit aside, already having cleared the other dishes from the area. “You excite me like no other, Ayla.” He grabbed her hand, lifted it to his mouth, and sucked the chocolate and strawberry juice from her fingers.

The woman’s heart raced, never believing in a million years that having her fingers sucked would turn her on so much. A tiny moan slipped out and she leaned into his solid warmth, wanting more, needing it.

Cullen’s hand linked into the luxurious, thick fall of her hair, and he pulled carefully, tilting her head back. He traced his teeth along her small chin, making her shiver, then nuzzled her throat, pressing tender kisses to the bruise that was already beginning to heal.

“Yes…” she breathed, hands burying in his hair.

The commander leaned in, slowly pressing her back until she lay on the blanket, his body draping easily over hers. He shuddered in delicious pleasure, thrusting his hips against hers, rubbing the hardened rod of his manhood into her, longing to be buried in that womanly heat felt beneath her skirt. He ignited another turbulent kiss.

Ayla was quickly becoming lost in the waves he’d generated. She felt like she was in a tiny boat being tossed about on the hot, stormy Sea of Cullen, and at any moment, the little vessel would capsize and fling her happily into the welcoming depths. The pressure and friction of his erection against her soft core made her wetter than she ever remembered getting. She arched her body into him, offering no resistance when he eased between her knees. She quite enjoyed the position, as it put them closer together, and his weight felt so good on top of her.

Cullen had become enflamed. All he could feel and smell was her. He would take her then and there if she allowed, he was so hungry for it. He began to dry-thrust against her, cursing the wretched clothing that kept him from sliding into her. He growled thickly, the push of breath hot upon her lips. One hand cradled her head for his kisses, while the other masterfully gripped at her skirt, taking a handful. He eased it up, slowly revealing her calf, then past her knee. He slipped his hand under the material and locked hot fingers on her smooth, firm thigh, caressing.

Ayla had never reached this level of passion. It was threatening to overtake her…and yet, she didn’t want to stop. She was just so unsure. Gods, she wanted the man, but she wanted another as well. The thought snatched her back from the edge of the precipice into which she’d been ready to leap.

Her hands perched against his chest to stop him. “Cullen…”

The commander pulled back, desire bubbling heavily through his dark-gold eyes as they searched her face, making sure this was what she wanted. His breaths were somewhat labored, heightened with passion, but he smiled softly and nodded. “I apologize,” he chuckled. “I got carried away.”

“It’s alright. You didn’t do anything I didn’t want you to do…”

Ayla smiled lovingly up at him, his features, coloring, and shape all a familiar blur to her; he was just a shadow. She pressed her hand to his cheek and he kissed it.

(*)

There were three paths tracing through the garden. The first path led to a fountain of Fereldan design flanked by benches. They weren’t there, so Bull backtracked and took the second path. Before he reached the small clearing of the willow, he knew he’d found them. As a man well versed in the ways of desire and sexual prowess, the Qunari knew sounds of passion when he heard them.

He inhaled sharply and shifted silently closer to the high, dense wall of bushes following the curve of the path. Not wanting to see but needing to confirm his suspicions, Bull crept along the bushes until he reached the end, his eye falling on the scene.

His stomach flipped and sank.

There they were, the commander fully on top of Ayla, hand clamped to her thigh, rhythmically rocking his weight against her, grinding with unbridled need. Iron Bull had to summon every iota of restraint to keep him from charging over and ripping the man off her.
And then she stopped Cullen, and they shared some words and a kiss. After that, the commander rolled from her and began packing up their picnic.

Bull exhaled the breath he’d been holding. She wasn’t ready to accept the other man yet. Thank goodness for small favors. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before she gave into her natural desires. She was a warm-blooded woman with needs, and he couldn’t expect that she’d hold out forever.

At least for now, she wasn’t ready.

Bull narrowed his eye in their direction, then turned and headed off.

(*)

The next day, once they’d risen, Bull leaned casually back on the bed. They had breakfast and Ayla sat beside him combing at her hair.

"Ayla?"

"Hm?" The woman grimaced and worked furiously on a small knot.

"Would you…like to hang out today?"

She perked and smiled. "And do what?"

"Uh, well…I thought we might go to the market, get you that mirror you want. After that, we could head to the library and get some learning books. I could teach you how to translate tangerlingua to written language, which shouldn’t be very hard for you once you start relating the letters and numbers."

"Really? You’d teach me?" Her face lit up.

"Yep." Bull grinned, rubbing his fingers along her arm.

"Oh, Bull! I’d love that!"

"Okay, let’s get ready then, angel."

(*)

Ayla all but skipped at his side while they strolled through Skyhold’s market, her hand gripping his arm. She never tired of walking through here, examining the wares. Dorian had taken her to an Orlesian tailor to have a couple of dresses made; they’d turned out perfect.

"There," Bull pointed. "That vendor is pretty decent for household goods. His people made my bed, table, and chairs."

He took them over to the series of three tents that made up the vendor’s establishment. Ayla stared in awe at all the pottery, vases, statues, chairs, and many other things. Everything looked well made. They stopped at a section where a dozen full-length mirrors sat on display. Each of them were different shapes with various frames. Ayla’s hand slid down until it fell into his, and he gripped it gently. She crept just ahead of him, moving to each mirror. The seventh one she came to avidly gained her interest. It was rectangular, six feet tall, and its frame was very intricate. A finely crafted set of antlers had been carved across the top of it. Antlers were kind of like horns, right?

She smiled widely, nodding, her eyes skirting to Bull’s reflection behind her own. "This one."

"I like it." He nodded, stepping in closer, until he was against her.

Ayla turned and found herself in his arms, peering up. She didn’t protest when he lifted a large hand and caressed fingers along her cheek.

Bull turned to get the vendor’s attention, and the man hurried over. "We’ll take this one."

"Ah, yes, a fine choice, sir. That will be ten gold."

Iron Bull paid the man, then said, "Please have it delivered to the east tower, fourth floor, fourth room counter-clockwise."

"Yes, sir! Right away!" The man bowed and hurried off. He was heard in the background barking orders at two of his workers to wrap the item for delivery.

(*)

Bull took Ayla to the library next and picked out a very basic text that allowed anyone to learn the alphabet and simple words and phrases in either tangerlingua or the written language. Not long after that, they were back in his quarters sitting on the bear rug actively engaged in the book.

Ayla had been anxious to get learning. She sat before the crackling hearth with her legs tucked under her, the book in her lap. Bull sat behind her, able to see over her shoulder. His hand laid over hers. She was running fingers over the tangerlingua for 'N', the corresponding letter shown in large, bold writing above the raised bumps.
She grinned, shaking her head. “This isn’t as bad as I thought it would be.”

“You’re smart. I wouldn’t expect it to phase you.”

Ayla shivered lightly at the cascade of hot breath against her ear, down the back of her neck. He was very close. She turned a bit to see him better, meeting his gaze, the familiar fire in his eye. Her eyes raked slowly over his features, so dear to her, then settled on his mouth, those finely-chiseled lips. The woman found herself leaning in to him, drawn inexplicably towards his being. Her heart yearned for him, as did her body. Maybe that was it–she was just too pent up.

Iron Bull noticed her advancement, and he leaned in as well. He longed to taste her sweet lips again, to tenderly crush her against his body.

A couple of knocks resounded upon the door.

Never failed, Bull thought sourly. He smiled at her, then went to answer. As he suspected, it was the mirror delivery guys. He stood aside so they could bring it in. He went to Ayla and lent her sight so she could decide where she wanted it. She ended up having it placed to one side of the bookshelf, since it was nice and open there.

Bull thanked the men and shut the door after they left. He went back to the mirror with Ayla so she could admire it some more.

“It really is beautiful,” spoken to his reflection behind her. She faced him, pulled in close, lifted on her toes, and kissed his bearded chin. “Thanks, Bull. I love it.”

He kissed her brow, then fixed his eye adoringly upon her. “Anything for you. Whatever I can give you, whatever I have, it’s yours.”

Ayla was becoming lost in him again. Was she wrong for wanting to kiss him then? For wanting to completely immerse herself in him? She wanted to embrace his shoulders and drape herself to that hard, hulking body. He seemed…different somehow. Not a whole lot different, as he was still utterly and completely the Iron Bull she had come to know. Yet, something in him had changed.

The way he looked at her now, doted on her. It was almost as if…

No, that couldn’t be. There was no way the Qunari loved her. He loved the freedom of his bachelor lifestyle more than anything else, right? Ayla found it all so befuddling. She was alarmed at the hopeful way her heart began racing at such a prospect.

She tapped on a little smile. “Um…shouldn’t you start dinner?”

“Mm, yeah.” Iron Bull took special note of the looks she gave him. Perhaps, he was breaking her resolve down.

He could only hope.

(*)

Once Iron Bull and Ayla shared dinner, he took them to the Herald’s Rest. He hadn’t been there in a few days and Ayla simply wanted to get out and be immersed in the pub environment. She very much enjoyed the bard.

They entered the establishment and saw that it was very lively that evening. Bull chuckled to see the Chargers in their usual area across the room near the fireplace. From there, he could see that Grim and Rocky were engaged in a drinking game.

“There!” Ayla pointed to their left, a booth at the far end. Varric, Dorian, and Cassandra were playing Wicked Grace.

Varric’s gaze shifted from his cards to the Qunari and woman on his arm. He issued a tilted smile. “Evening, Tiny…Bunny.”

Ayla studied him, a curious smile planted, pale brow rising. “Bunny?”

“He has this thing with nicknames,” said Bull, then nodded approvingly, grinning. “‘Bunny’ is quite fitting for you though. All that white, fluffy hair.”

“Yep.” Varric chuckled.

“And you’re Tiny?” She giggled, looking to Bull. “Considering you’re the biggest person I know, I find that comical.”

“Just as it’s meant to be.” Varric replied, then scooted around the semicircular booth. “Take a seat. Curly tells me you’ve gotten good at Wicked Grace, so I ordered another set of tangerlingua cards for our little group.” Grinning, he pulled the deck from an inner pocket, sliding them to Dorian. “Your deal, Sparkler.”

“Oh okay!” Ayla beamed. She moved in to sit beside Varric.

Iron Bull sat beside her. “Deal me in too.”

“The more the merrier,” chimed Varric.

“That’s what they say.” Cassandra dropped her cards in the pile at the center of the table so Varric
could gather the regular deck up and put it away.

“At least with me handling the deck, there’s a lesser chance of Varric swapping cards around.”

Dorian shot a side-grin at the dwarf.

“How many times do I have to tell you? My wins can be attributed to masterful playing. I don’t cheat.”

“Right,” Cassandra smirked at him.

Dorian shuffled and dealt. Everyone took up their cards for the first turn, arranging them. Ayla experienced a little disorientation, as she’d never played the game where she could see the cards. But she adapted quickly. She couldn’t read the cards with her gift of sight, not yet, but she could feel them. It appeared that this evening’s game-time would also be a learning experience, and that pleased her.

The person to the dealer’s left went first; that was Varric. He discarded two cards face-up and took up the new cards Dorian dealt to replace them. Everyone got their chance to discard and replace, and they’d continue doing so until someone played the Angel of Death face-up.

Varric noticed Ayla’s bouncy dance, her broad smile. He chuckled. “You have a terrible Grace-face, Bunny.”

“Huh?”

“You’re supposed to play it smooth so no one suspects what you have, make it so they’ll have to call your bluff. You’re just giving it all away.”

“Let her play her way, dwarf,” Bull piped over the table in good nature.

“Fine, but it’s harder to win without a good Grace-face.”

“Well, I might surprise you,” Ayla said, smiling over her cards. She kept switching back and forth between touching Bull’s arm and examining her cards, looking and feeling. Her hand contacted his skin and she waited for the next turn.

They continued this way for nearly half an hour before Cassandra played the Angel of Death, stopping the game. “Let’s see what we have,” she said, then laid her cards to the table to reveal a trio of daggers.

Dorian had a pair of hounds. He scoffed at the hand.

Bull showed a pair of knights and a pair of deaths, which put Cassandra in the lead.

Varric chuckled and set his cards down. “Read ‘em and weep. Straight flush.” He had all the same suit–angels. His cards were in order from negative three to positive one. “Looks like I take this one.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes. “No surprise there…cheater.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” chimed Ayla, grinning widely. She set her cards down, then touched to Bull’s arm so she could see Varric’s face in crystal clarity. She had all of one suit–serpents. The cards were negative five to negative one. “Wicked flush.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Varric looked disbelievingly at the woman, then rumbled a chuckle.

Cassandra grinned. “Good. I think I’m going to enjoy having you play with us, if only to see the look on his face every time you beat him.”

“Great job, angel,” Bull gave her a playful nudge, nuzzling her hair. Then, his whole demeanor tightened and he glowered towards the door.

Cullen had entered, spotted them, and was heading over.

“Good evening, everyone,” the commander said.

They all greeted him in turn.

Cullen’s eyes fell sensuously on Ayla. “Would you like to get a table with me?”

“She’s here with me,” Bull stated in a steady but firm tone.

“She’s ‘with you’? What is that supposed to mean?” The commander asked sternly, his eyes boring holes into the Qunari.

Bull slowly exited the booth, his massive physique rising gradually, until he towered like a mountain over the shorter man. He wore a dark blue shirt that clung to his great chest and accentuated his bulging arms. “Tonight, the lady is accompanying me.”

The Bull and the Lion stared at each other, each man intent on asserting his masculinity in the situation, neither backing down. Just one searing sky-blue eye against a pair of blazing, non-nonsense deep-gold eyes.

Everyone at the table silently watched the exchange.
“Wow. Who let the Tiny, Curly Bunny into the room?” Varric mused to break the tension. In the original saying, it was an elephant, meant to signify an awkward situation. However, it was quite easy for the dwarf to picture a huge, white, fluffy, mean-looking rabbit looming over the booth, filling the space with its imposing, uncomfortable presence. He could attribute that his vivid writer’s imagination.

Ayla took a breath, sighing. She held to Bull’s hand and could see the whole exchange as well as hear it. “Cullen, I promise you’ll have me to yourself tomorrow. Tonight, I am with my friends, enjoying our time here.”

The sound of her voice softened the commander’s features. He shifted so he could see her more clearly around the wall of Iron Bull. He offered a gentle smile and nodded. “Okay, love. I look forward to it. Shall I pick you up after your practice with Morrigan?”

“Sounds good,” she returned the smile, her sweet lips hooking sensuously.

Cullen bid them goodnight, eyed the Qunari one more time, then left.

Bull chuffed, inwardly very satisfied with how that went. They continued to play cards, talk, and drink. Well, everyone but Ayla drank. It became apparent early on that the woman couldn’t hold her liquor, lightweight that she was.

(*)

Later that evening, Bull lay back in bed. The room was mostly darkened since he’d turned down the lanterns. Only the hearth offered pleasant warmth and low light. Ayla finished her bath, braided her hair, then climbed in bed next to him. She was glad for the heat he emanated.

“You didn’t have to be so mean to Cullen,” she smiled just a little as she pulled close, arm hugging across his middle.

He shrugged, one hand behind his head, the other going to rest over hers. “Wasn’t mean. Just stating a fact. You were there with me. I asked you earlier if you wanted to hang out with me today. So, I spoke truthfully, didn’t I?” He smiled, shifting to see her face where it nestled in his armpit.

Ayla shook her head. He was right. “Yes, you did. But just because he’s my boyfriend doesn’t mean you have to be so unfriendly to him.”

“Oh, yes it does.”

Ayla just smiled and hugged her warrior close, wallowing in the ultimate security and safety only he could give her. She loved him so much, yet he would probably never know it.
The region of the Emerald Graves sat in the valley on the western side of the Frostback Mountains. Hannibal and his party traveled close to the base of the mountains to save time and avoid unnecessary setbacks they might face if they cut through Emprise Du Lion, such as rogue Templars hyped on red lyrium. For the most part, they'd been dealt with, but they still had a few lesser factions scattered in the area, attempting to terrorize citizens.

It was only three days after leaving Skyhold that they reached Direstone Camp, located in the northeast of the Emerald Graves. Evening shrouded the forest around them, making the humongous trees appear as shadowed behemoths against the star-speckled sky. A fat, waxing moon hung in the dark heavens.

Hannibal leaned over a table and examined the map Solas sent with them. The elf had been more than displeased that the Inquisitor chose Vivienne to go over him, though damned if he showed it. He had remained stoic as ever when Hannibal told him the decision. Still, he’d been very willing to help. Artifacts like the Statue of Ahime Anta were precious and being looted by the Venatori, small factions of apostate mages, and rogue Templars. In a time of pending chaos, any ancient items, especially ones of power, were considered treasure. Hannibal got the feeling that the main reason Solas even remained with the Inquisition was to look after the interests of his Elvhen kin and their history, which Hannibal completely understood. However, that also showed the Inquisitor that he'd have to tread carefully where the elf was concerned. He felt mostly okay about Solas, but was wary of someone who spent so much time slipping in and out of the Fade as easily as he drew breath.

A lantern illuminated the map, a replica of the original, which was nearly a thousand years old. It showed a position to the west of the camp where a sketch of a grand tree was drawn onto a slab of stone. That was the door to the tomb that housed the Shrine of Dinendal. His finger tapped it.

“May I bother you for a word, Inquisitor.” It was Vivienne.

Hannibal rose from his lean and faced her. “Yes?”

For a moment, the woman didn’t say anything, then her eyes swung around to where Cole sat by one of the fires. The man was staring into the flames and mumbling to himself in that way the High Enchanter found disconcerting. “Though it’s too late to do anything about it now, I think it was a mistake to bring him along.”

“Oh?” Hannibal’s arms crossed his chest as he watched her.

“Yes. He’s…unstable. A demon–”

“Spirit,” he interrupted, “Cole is a spirit; he was a demon.”

“Regardless, he cannot be trusted.” The noble woman looked down her nose in her usual manner. “Nothing that comes from the Fade can be trusted.”

“Your opinions have been noted, Vivienne, but this was my decision to make. Besides, there’s a reason why I brought Cole with us. Solas’s report about the tomb suggests that it may have a moderate level of residual spirit energy lingering through it. Spirits tend to repel other spirits. Cole’s presence just may keep our unfriendly encounters at a minimum, and I’m all for that.”

She considered his words, then nodded. “I can see the logic when described that way.”

Hannibal watched her shift off. He ran his hand over his face and sighed, scratching his beard. The woman meant well, he truly believed that, but she was consistently infuriating. He wished he could’ve brought Dorian instead, but as masterful as his boyfriend was with magic, he knew all of jack-shit about spiritual stuff, and that’s what retrieving the artifact required.

The Inquisitor’s eyes swept the camp to see that Blackwall sat by himself working on a bowl of stew. He enjoyed the expertise of each member of his inner circle that accompanied him at different times, but Blackwall’s Champion abilities made him a fighting powerhouse in battle. The man could take insane amounts of damage and never seem to falter. There had been one or two times where it looked like an enemy might overcome them, and then the Warden would tear right through their defenses, allowing time for the party to recover and regroup. Hannibal had chosen the way of the Reaver. When he and Iron Bull got together, there was nothing more powerful or devastating than two berserker Qunari in battle.

Hannibal liked Blackwall’s company. He was good-natured and humble, but troubled; Hannibal saw that much. He supposed he would discover what bothered the Warden in time.

(*)

They set out early in the morning, first following a trail west through the great, looming trees, then veering a little to the north, as a run of waterfalls blocked them. They might have taken mounts were it not for the uneven terrain, riddled with hundreds of emerging tree roots in some places. Hannibal was in the lead, with Vivienne behind him. Cole and Blackwall had matched paces at the rear.

The Inquisitor’s eyes and ears were keen, but there was nothing around, just the occasional...
August ram springing from the thickets at safe distances, watching their traveling party carefully. Hannibal found the rush of the falls soothing, detecting soft mist from them when the wind picked up at times. He looked over his shoulder to the others, to Cole particularly. He was recalling the day the strange man had appeared to him at the Therinfal Redoubt...then materialized on the war room table for all to see, having followed him back to Haven. He’d stuck up for the man when most would’ve turned him away, though Varric seemed to have taken Cole under his wing. Overall, Hannibal was happy with the decision to let Cole join them. Like everyone else, he was a little broken and certainly imperfect, and he also deserved a chance.

Hannibal kept pressing forward.

Cole’s eyes jerked to the shifting canopy of branches, so high up, reaching and grabbing for the sky. A tiny smile tugged the corner of his mouth. He thought on something, then reached into his pack and pulled out an apple. He studied the thing clasped in his pale fingers, turning it this way and that. Then he took a bite, chewing slowly.

Blackwall examined him. “Why d’ya even bother to eat, you being a spirit and all?” The question was asked without judgment or scorn, only in simple curiosity.

“Hm...” Cole considered an answer, swallowing. “I may not need to take nourishment, but I like the way food tastes, the textures, flavors. Crunchy, then mushy.” His somewhat gaunt features lit with a smile. “And sweet. That’s an apple. Savory, warm, fleshy—a steak. It tastes good.”

The Warden nodded, listening intently. He held no qualms with anyone in their inner circle, Cole included. He only tried to see everyone for who, or what, they were. Besides, with his history, he knew he was the last person that should ever judge anyone.

Cole took another bite and continued. “I am now. I wear this body and it remembers food, eating. The memories don’t fade, and I don’t want them to. I want to honor them, relive them. So, I eat. It’s helping me assert my humanity.”

“I understand that, friend.” Blackwall turned his eyes forward a moment, and said softly, “We could all stand to be a bit more human at times.”

A short run of silence passed between them.

“Do you know what else this body remembers?” Cole chimed.

“Hm?”

“Sex.”

Blackwall eyed the man, a grin spreading. “Ye don’t say?”

“Yes, it remembers. The body found it...very pleasant.”

The Warden nodded. “Oh, yes, I’m sure it did.” He pat Cole’s shoulder. “Well, if you’re looking to explore that part of your humanity, I might be able to help you when we return to Skyhold.”

The spirit-in-human-form lifted a brow, clearly interested. “How so?”

“Ya know the little barmaid, Idrial?”

“Idrial...” Cole considered, then nodded. “Dark hair, petite, pleasant in her features. Her physique is...nice.”

Blackwall chimed with laughter. “Yes, she’s a pretty girl. Caught her staring at you many times. I think she’d like it if ye talked to her, get to know her better.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Cole shook his head. “Why should she find interest in anything I might say?” he asked, his smooth voice low and doubtful. “I’m just...well...me.”

“Trust me, ye won’t have to do much. Just be nice, be ye’self. Make her laugh; women like a funny man.”

Cole dropped the apple, losing all interest in the fruit. He nodded, taking mental notes. “Nice, myself, laughter.” He looked at Blackwall. “This will lead to sex?”

“Eventually, my friend, I’m sure it will,” Blackwall replied, unable to keep the chuckles in. He couldn’t believe he was having this conversation with Cole, of all people.

“Okay, then,” Cole said, his smile broadening just a little. “I’ll do it. This body remembers sex, remembers how very enjoyable the act is. I wish to experience it for myself.” He cleared his throat and quickly added, “To help assert my humanity better, of course.”

“Ha, yeah. All in the name of humanity.” Blackwall grinned and smacked his shoulder again.

(*)

Before the sun hung directly above, they reached the perimeter of the entrance to the tomb. The
ground around the area was void of grass, dry and rocky. The great stone slab of the door loomed against a moss-covered rock face, partly shadowed by a large, gnarled tree.

Hannibal approached the slab first, studying it.

"The ward upon the entry is firmly in place, but I can disable it," said Vivienne.

The Inquisitor nodded and stepped back. They watched as the High Enchanter positioned herself before the slab, her legs slightly apart, arms out, hands aimed at the stone. She began channeling her magic, the air around her shifting, tossing the tails of her robes. Then her hands began to glow pale green, and at the same time, an image of a great tree appeared on the slab, glowing in the same shade of green.

There was a low, constant grinding of stone on stone as the huge slab retracted slowly into the wall several feet, then slid to the right, granting them entry. A heavy gust of stale, old air wafted from the subterranean passage.

Cole edged forward, examining the opening. He peered down into the darkness. "This place isn’t as angry as I thought it would be. It’s…actually calm. And amused."

"Amused?" Hannibal fell in next to him.

"Yes. The spirits that linger here haven’t suffered wrong-doing. They were laid to rest peacefully. They’re...curious." The slender, mysterious man turned to the Inquisitor. "They want you to take the artifact."

"Well then," said Blackwall, "let’s get the damned thing and not disappoint them. Sooner we’re in and out, the better. I can’t stand going into places like this."

The group slipped into the tomb, moving carefully down the stone steps, which were chipped and broken in some places, but still quite usable. Vivienne used her stave like a lantern, the end of it glowing with ample, pale-yellow light, and Hannibal lit torches when they came to them jutting from the walls.

At the bottom of the steps, Cole took the lead, his head cocked faintly. "This way."

They followed him down a corridor with coffins lining both walls, the names chiseled on stone plaques marking the final resting place of the dead therein. Water trickled from the ceiling, trailing down the walls, lending an earthy, moist dankness to the air. They rounded a bend and instantly noticed how the cobwebs had begun to thicken and become more plentiful.

"Hm. Don’t think we should’ve come this way," mused Blackwall, drawing his sword, shield already up.

"No, this way is right." Cole insisted calmly.

Vivienne took a battle stance, smirking heavily. "Tell that to the giant spiders blocking our path, demon."

Four of the fat, grotesque creatures scurried forward, closing in. Their multiple eyes glistening and black, their many legs bristling with coarse hair.

Cole drew his blades, sliding his eyes to Vivienne. "I’m a spirit, High Enchanter, and if the spiders were already dead, I might have sensed them. But they’re not; they’re alive."

"You have a flare for stating the obvious," Vivienne shot back, then cast a ward that granted them a brief shield from damage. She stayed behind them, using fire attacks, while they engaged the spiders with melee.

Hannibal, masterful with two-handed weapons, had drawn his broadsword and charged in, Blackwall and Cole dishing out attacks as well. Giant spiders were a nasty business, but this set was no match for them; they perished quickly.

Afterwards, Cole moved ahead again. "Almost there."

They followed him to a narrow archway and passed through. They’d reached the main chamber of the tomb, in the center of which rose the Shrine of Dinendal. It was a chiseled stone depiction of two forms melded together, though they shared a singular head that was formed by half of each entities’ face.

Blackwall didn’t like the thing. He peered around while Hannibal lit a few torches on the walls.

The group approached the rising shrine slowly. Sitting in a niche positioned at eye-level was a statue about a foot tall; it very much resembled the shrine in design—two entities sharing one face. The Statue of Ahime Anta.

"Well, let’s get it and go," Hannibal said, then reached for the statue.

"I wouldn’t touch it barehanded were I you," said Cole. His eyes narrowed and he seemed to be listening to a voice or some beguiling song only he could hear. "It wants to be you…or me…or any of us…and make us each other…"

Hannibal just stared at the cryptic man. At times, he found Cole as puzzling as Sera, with her
erratic speech. Even so, he trusted in the man’s warning. Hannibal discovered a while ago that when Cole tried to tell you something, you listened.

The Inquisitor nodded, then looked to the Warden since he had gloves on. “Blackwall.” Hannibal gestured for the man to take the statue, while he opened a sack to catch the thing in.

Blackwall carefully grabbed the statue and placed it in the sack.

With that done, the group left the tomb and headed back for Direstone Camp.

(*)

Back in Skyhold, things were going fairly well. The merchants kept their goods moving in and out, generating revenue not only for themselves, but for the Inquisition as well. Everyone saw to their roles, maintaining order and security for the fortress in the Inquisitor’s absence.

It was late morning on a slightly overcast day, and Ayla lay curled up on the bed with a book, fingers gliding along the pages, feeling the tangerlingua bumps. She was wearing one of Bull’s shirts and a pair of his bed pants, which she’d cuffed a few times and cinched tight for her smaller waist. Her hair was bunched in a messy bun on her head. She just didn’t feel like going out today. She was bloaty, cranky, emotional, and she wanted chocolate.

It had been three days since the picnic with Cullen, and while she was excited for when they’d next get to spend some time together, the beauty was in no mood to be in his presence now, not with certain womanly things happening. Perhaps, she’d seek him out tomorrow for some chess. That would be nice, just having an innocent game-date. No kissing, touching, hugging, clothes-burning, or other sexual things that she currently didn’t feel up to.

She shifted and put the book aside when the door opened, then closed. Iron Bull mumbled something under his breath, thumping across the floor to set the sack of goods Ayla had sent him to the market for on the table. After he kicked off his boots and stripped back down to his briefs, he sat on the bed next to her, his hand drifting to her arm.

Ayla batted her eyes innocently at him, smiling.

“Woman, don’t expect me to go pick that…stuff up for you ever again,” he said, then grumbled, though his eye never lost its loving gaze. “The way the vendor kept staring, you’d think I was buying it for me!”

Ayla giggled. “Oh, Bull. It’s just feminine merchandise.”

He made a disgusted sound. “Like I said, I’m not doing it again. Next time, you’re coming along so you can pick it up. I’ll just be there to supply the coin and serve as your spectacles.”

The woman burst into hearty, trilling laughter, falling back into the pillows. “Aw, big, tough man can handle giants, berserkers, and dragons, but can’t handle one little feminine process.”

“I will fight dragons all day to never have to go buy that stuff again.” He rolled his eye, smiling gently at her.

“Did you get the chocomalt balls?”

“Yes, angel, I got them. I’m male, but I’m not stupid. I got you two bags.” His fingers trailed along her arm.

“You’re the best!” She leaped up and hugged him, then made to move for the bag of goodies and feminine stuff on the table.

“I got it,” he said, going to dig one sack of chocomalt balls out, returning to the bed. He stretched out next to her, initiated contact, then handed her the candies.

Ayla grinned, making short work of untying the string. She opened the bag, slipped her fingers in, and pulled out a nugget of chocolatey goodness, slowly nibbling a bite. Her eyes closed in absolute ecstasy. “Mm…”

Iron Bull chuckled deeply. Though he’d made a fuss about getting the feminine stuff, he knew without a doubt that if she asked him to go again about this time next month, he would do it. Anything for her. Anything for love.
Four days passed, and Ayla had moved beyond her feminine processes. She had taken up Cullen’s company during the past few days, but remained adamant when the commander tried to get too intimate. Very politely, she’d shunned his advances. Cullen was no idiot; he’d dealt with enough women to know. He’d assumed it was a ‘woman thing’, left it at that, and enjoyed the innocent games of Wicked Grace and chess.

But, well, that was done for now.

Ayla sat under the tree by the training yard, wrapped in her shawl and immersed in a steamy chapter of Minrathous Love Rogue. Iron Bull trained with Krem, their wooden practice sticks clacking together, both men grunting and shuffling in the near distance. The familiar horn blast bellowed through the fortress, stilling Ayla’s gliding fingertips across the page. She placed her bookmark, then stood.

Hannibal, Vivienne, Cole, and Blackwall had returned.

(*)

Iron Bull and Ayla reached the main courtyard just as Hannibal’s mount trotted through the wide gate, followed by the rest of the party. As usual, they dismounted and handed the animals over to stable-hands. Everyone but Hannibal dispersed to go get resettled in their quarters; the Inquisitor was all but tackled by his pretty little ‘Vint, and they shared a deep kiss.

“I was barely gone a week, Dorian.” Hannibal chuckled.

“And it seemed like a month,” the mage returned, nuzzling his face into the Qunari’s chest, breathing in his scent. He adorned a fake pout, kohl-traced eyes peering up. “You know I miss you dearly every time you go, Amatus, no matter the duration.”

“Yes, sweetheart, I know. I missed you too,” he growled, grinning.

“You can show me just how much you missed me right now…” Dorian pulled at him, anxious to get him back to their quarters.

“You know I have to meet with my council.”

Dorian sighed, then rose on his toes and kissed Hannibal again. “Fine. I’ll just go slip into something sexy and wait.” He observed the larger man adoringly, then sauntered away.

Cullen, who was quite familiar with the routine by now, stood by patiently while the Inquisitor and his clingy boyfriend shared their moment. He stepped forward when Dorian left, a small smile hanging on his lips. His eyes met Ayla’s for a moment where she stood beside Iron Bull, and the woman was watching him closely.

The commander winked at her, then spoke to Hannibal. “How did things fair?”

“Well,” Hannibal answered, adjusting his traveling bag over his torso. He lifted the sack holding the Statue of Ahime Anta. “Got what we went for.”

“Solas will be pleased to know it wasn’t pillaged.”

“Anything to report?”

“Nothing that can’t wait for the war room,” Cullen replied, arms crossing his chest. “Shall we give you your usual half hour?”

“Yes, thanks. I’ll drop this artifact off with Solas, take my bag to my quarters, then head right down.”

Cullen issued a short nod, and Hannibal left. The commander turned and strode for Ayla and the Qunari towering beside her. His eyes hardened a bit at Iron Bull, whose own uni-gaze narrowed back at him.

“Love,” the commander moved in, arm encircling Ayla, lips finding hers.

She easily accepted the kiss, her free arm linking around his waist; her other hand was clasped to Iron Bull’s. “Can we meet up after you’re done in the war room?”

Bull chuffed, rolled his eye, then turned it elsewhere. Anything was better than standing there watching this. The only reason he didn’t walk away then was because Cullen had to report to the war room shortly, meaning Ayla still needed her Qunari protector.

Cullen smiled down at her. “I’d like that.”

“Okay, I’ll be waiting in the main hall. See you then.”

They shared another kiss, making Bull roll his eye again, then Cullen headed off.
Ayla turned to Bull, tipping on the shadow of smile. “Thank you for being nice, though I knew it took a lot of effort on your part.”

He shrugged. “You’re free to do what you like.” The Qunari began walking them for the wide steps leading into the main hall. He didn’t say anything as they moved, keeping is eye forward.

Ayla stole glances up at his profile, sternly set as it was. She knew him well enough to see he was displeased. “Why are you upset?”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

Iron Bull released a low chuckle, eye resting on her a moment. “Angel, if Cullen is what you like, so be it. It’s your decision.” He worked hard to keep his features cool and collected as he spoke those words, though it was wearing away at him the way she and the commander kept getting closer and closer. But he had his reasons for remaining calm. Since she sought to deter his advances, he would back off just a little, perhaps making her rethink shunning the Bull. He’d learned that with many women, and some men, showing a lack of interest usually got them interested. Once Ayla realized he’d stopped chasing, she just might come to her cute, little blind senses and see that her Qunari protector was the one she truly wanted. They took the steps and entered the hall. “So long as he treats you good, that’s all I care about.”

Ayla watched him carefully. Was he truly alright with their relationship, willing to accept it? The thought was more than a little disheartening. Was Iron Bull beginning to give up? Yes, she was with Cullen. Still, it felt nice knowing she had Bull’s attention as well, though it didn’t seem she’d be able to keep it. She gnawed her lip and let her eyes wander in thought while he led them to a table.

The Qunari would be pleased to know that his plan had already begun to take root.

(*)

Hannibal entered the Atrium to see Solas sitting at the desk in the room’s center looking over some notes. The elf stood and nodded. Like all of Skyhold, he’d heard the announcement horn and knew that Hannibal had returned. Eyes the shade of an early twilight sky flicked to the sack in the Qunari’s hand.

“I take it all went well?”

“As well as can be expected.” Hannibal headed closer and set the sack on the desk. “Cole suggested we not touch the statue with our bare hands. He reacted very strangely to it, even stranger than he ordinarily does.”

Solas nodded, then went swiftly to a drawer and pulled out a pair of thin leather gloves. He slipped them on and carefully removed the Statue of Ahime Anta from the sack. He held it before his eyes, studying the design. “Remarkable. It’s so well preserved, though that could be because of its magical attributes.”

“It’s magical?”

A nod. “Indeed. However, I don’t know the nature of the magic, not yet. I’ll need some time to study it. Meanwhile, I will put a barrier ward upon it to seal its power. That will make it safe to touch without gloves.”

“Alright then. Please keep me informed on whatever you find out about it.”

“I shall, Inquisitor.”

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Once Cullen finished in the war room, he met up with Ayla, and Iron Bull took his leave. She was in the middle of lunch. The commander grabbed himself a plate and settled beside her. After taking in a few forkfuls, he smiled broadly at her.

“I have what could be considered good news concerning your brother.”

Her stark eyes loomed wide in his direction, hands reaching until they settled on his arm. “Really! What is it? You’ve found him?”

Cullen caressed her hand, chuckling at her excitement. “Well, we haven’t found him, but Leliana reported that she had scouts locate and search your home two weeks back. They found nothing of interest, no clues to his whereabouts. But then, a couple of days ago, her scouts backtracked to your home and saw that certain items had been used, such as the hearth, the bed. Some men’s clothing that had been there during their previous scan was missing. Since the place wasn’t ransacked and the locks were still intact, she believes the occupant was your brother.”

“Oh, Cullen,” Ayla voiced shakily. Tears slid down her smiling face. “This is wonderful news!”

“Yes, my love, it looks very promising. Leliana has her people putting up posters in the Redcliffe area with sketches of you, stating your name and that you await your brother here in Skyhold.”

“Please…thank Leliana for me. I know you’re all so busy with much more important things,
facing a war with Corypheus. Yet, you’re all doing so much for me.”

He leaned over the short distance and kissed her. “You’re worth it. I’ll be sure to thank her, though if her schedule slows down some, you might be able to do it yourself.”

“I would certainly like that.” Ayla took a few deep breaths. Elemir hadn’t exactly been found, but she was sure it had been him at their home. She couldn’t stop smiling and would probably do so for the remainder of the day.

Cullen cleared his throat. Her happiness was infectious, drawing a broad smile across his handsome, stately features. “So, love,” he started, “Josephine told me she’s in charge of planning festivities for an All Hallows’ Eve celebration and dance. It’ll be in about two and a half weeks.” He took her hand in his, thumb rubbing tenderly against her palm. “I want to officially ask if you would accompany me, allow me to be your escort.”

Ayla nodded vibrantly, making her pale hair flutter and shift around her shoulders. “I’d love to, Cullen.”

(*)

That night, Ayla wouldn’t find Iron Bull in his quarters when Cullen dropped her off. The towering, physically intimidating, sexually charismatic man had decided to visit the Herald’s Rest. He sat with the Chargers offside of the low-burning hearth working on his second mug of ale.

Bull drank slowly, allowing the numbing effects of the alcohol to gradually infuse him. He didn’t plan on getting straight drunk tonight. No, he wanted to be mostly sober so he could feel the anguish curling around his heart, day by day. He loved Ayla more than anything, but had to watch her kissing and hugging on that golden fop.

He grunted and sipped more ale, eye tracing slowly around the room.

“Should I pour ya one, chief?” called Krem across the table, the handsome man’s brow lifted as he held up a skin of Charger’s Brew.

Bull smiled softly and shook his head. “Not tonight, Krem. Drinkin’ light.”

“Pussin’ out?” Skinner challenged, grinning.

“Just takin’ it easy,” Bull replied, shaking his head.

The Chargers shrugged it off and went back to drinking, hooting, hollering, laughing, and partying, allowing their chief his moment to reflect.

Across the room, Varric and Blackwall sat in their usual semicircular booth. The dwarf shuffled a Wicked Grace deck.

“I wonder if Cassandra or Ayla will show up,” mused Blackwall, swigging from his tankard.

“The Seeker might, but I don’t think Bunny will.” Varric chuckled a bit, the cards arching in the bridge of his hands. “Curly will see to that. And we both know since the Inquisitor came back today, Sparkler’s not coming…at least not to the tavern.”

Blackwall shook his head at the dirty quip.

Varric grinned.

“There she is–dark hair and pleasant features.” Cole materialized on the seat between them.

Blackwall, who was in the middle of drinking, nearly spat ale back into the tankard. He smirked lightly at the man. “Doing the whole appear-from-thin-air thing doesn’t help with asserting your humanity, Cole.”

“Ah, yes. I’ll walk more then.” Cole nodded. His eyes fixed on Idrial, who moved about the room, tending to patrons, filling mugs and tankards, making small conversation.

“Who are we looking at?” Varric asked, setting his deck aside.

“Idrial, the barmaid,” answered Blackwall.

“Why?” Then Varric’s eyes turned slowly to the slender man sitting between him and the Warden. He issued a crooked grin. “You’re interested in her, Kid?”

“I…” Cole considered his response. “Blackwall said she has an interest in me, and I wish to try sex.”

“What?” Varric chuckled.

“We spoke back in the Emerald Graves,” said Blackwall, grinning. “Seems Cole’s body remembers the act, found it enjoyable. I told him I caught Idrial staring at him often, gave him some pointers on how he might get her to bump uglies with him.”

“Bump uglies?” Cole lifted a brow.

“Another term for sex,” said Blackwall.
“Ah...but what exactly is so ‘ugly’ about it?”

Varric shook with chuckles again, shaking his head. “You’ll figure that out on your own, Kid, hopefully. Now, why don’t you go on over and talk to her?”

Cole sighed, peering through his unruly, light-blond hair. “I can be nice. I will be myself. But...I don’t possess laughter.”

“Huh?” Varric eyed him.

“Blackwall said to make her laugh because women like a funny man.”

“Ah.” The dwarf nodded, thinking for a moment. He grinned. “I have a little joke she might like. Tell her this...”

Cole took in a few more helpful tips from Varric and Blackwall, then Blackwall slipped from the booth so he could exit. Cole started across the room in his easy, lithe pace, smoothly sidestepping people who crossed his path without taking his eyes off Idrial. She was at the bar chatting with the tender. The man-spirit’s eyes dropped to admire her legs, then crept up to the place where her skirt swept the backs of her thighs. He stopped behind her.

The bartender noticed Cole, and nodded towards him.

Idrial spun to face him, her eyes lighting up. “Hello, Cole!”

He took a breath. “Good-evening-Idrial-you’re-pretty-and-I-have-a-joke.” The crisp words ran together in one sentence. Cole was nervous, not yet sure how to handle his new sensations. A smile touched the corner of his full mouth, twinkling in his eyes.

“Well...thanks.” The barmaid giggled. “What’s your joke then?”

“What’s the difference between snowmen and snowwomen?”

“Hm...” she tilted her head and tried to think of the answer, then shrugged and smiled. “I dunno. What?”

“Snowballs.”

Idrial’s face melted in mirth and her laughter rang out. “That’s funny! You’re so cute.” She turned to the bartender. “Takin’ a break.” She spun to Cole, took his hand, and pulled him for a small, unoccupied table near the fireplace. She gently pushed at his chest to make him sit in a chair, then she settled across his lap, arm linking his shoulders. “So, tell me about ye’self,” she purred.

Back across the room, Sera had slipped into the booth beside Varric. She, Blackwall, and the dwarf watched the interaction between Cole and his romantic interest.

“Ye know the Fade has gone and froze over when Cole gets more action than you do,” mused Blackwall, drinking from his tankard.

“Who are you tellin’?” Varric chuckled. “But, hey, good for the Kid. Glad to see him embracing his new life.”

Blackwall lightly knocked his cup to Varric’s. “To new life.”

“Bet he scares her off,” Sera snickered.

The three of them continued watching. Maryden the bard struck up another song, strumming expertly on her lute.

By the fireplace, Idrial was grinning softly at Cole, wiggling in his lap, her little hands stroking his wild hair. “Sounds like you have some amazing travels with the Inquisitor.”

“Um...well...” He found it difficult to form sentences or think to form sentences with her sitting on him, though he wasn’t uncomfortable. The man was experiencing a pleasant sensory overload. Cole grinned a bit. “Yes, our travels take us to far places, exotic places. Some of them aren’t so good, like The Fallow Mire. I don’t like it there. The spirits are restless and violent.”

“Ah, I see.” Idrial said, a smile fixed sensuously upon her face. It obviously didn’t bother her that the man she flirted with was a spirit attempting to fit into a human existence by wearing the body of a man who had died some time ago. “I’m really glad you decided to talk to me, Cole.”

“Really?”

She nodded quickly. “I was...too shy to say something m’self, thought ye might not be interested.”

“I am interested. Very.”

“Good then. Perhaps we can spend some time together. I have to get back to my shift.”

“I would like that.”

“Okay...” she breathed, then pushed her soft lips to his, hands in his hair to hold him firmly in place. When Idrial pulled back, she nibbled his bottom lip. “Later, handsome.”
Cole only became aware of his elevated heart-rate and deep breaths as he was watching her move away. He blinked and exhaled. His pale-blue eyes whipped over to find Iron Bull watching from a table on the other side of the hearth. The Qunari chuckled, nodded, and gave the smaller man a thumbs-up. Cole wasn’t familiar with the gesture, but he was smart and perceptive, figuring it to signify approval. He lifted a hand and sent a thumbs-up back.

Bull bellowed in laughter again. “My boy!”

Cole stood and started back across the room. When he reached the booth, Blackwall shook his head, positive he wasn’t the only one who noticed the tent in Cole’s pants.


“Creepy’s got wood. That’s disturbing.” Sera smirked thickly.

Cole looked down at the erection curiously, the onset of tumescence. “Peculiar. It’s never done that before…at least not with me.”

Varric loosened a highly amused chuckle. “Just take a seat, Kid. It’ll go away in a bit.”

Before Cole could resettle in the booth, Sera slipped free, spinning to snatch up Varric’s tankard, from which she drank heartily. She set it back to the table, wiggled fingers at the dwarf, grinned, and walked off.

Sitting at his table, glad to have the Chargers near but also glad they were just letting him sink into his thoughts, Iron Bull watched the flames dancing over the logs in the hearth. He was thinking of Ayla, of course, the woman who had his heart, soul, and life in her hands. He feared her and everything she roused in him more than he would ever fear anything else. At least in battle, he could figure out the enemy’s strategy and take actions to neutralize them. But in love, with her, he felt vulnerable, because there was no way to build a strategy for something like this. She had the power to completely control and crush him emotionally and mentally, which could be far more devastating than any physical damage.

His eye swung to Bertrand, who’d stopped at his table with the refill flask. He shook his head, speaking softly. “No, thanks.”

The barmaid smiled warmly, hugging an arm over his broad shoulders. “Ye wanna come up later? I miss you…”

Again, he shook his head. “I don’t think so, but thanks for offering.”

She sighed, then smiled and caressed his bearded cheek before heading back to work.

(*)

When Bull returned to his room, it was after midnight. Ayla was in bed, the lanterns low, and a fire in the hearth, thanks to Cullen. The Qunari stripped down to his briefs and sat on the mattress, aware that she was still awake.

Ayla reached to touch him so she could see. She offered a small smile. “Did you go to the tavern?”

“Yes.”

Her smile faltered a bit. “To see Bertrand?”

“Mm.” Bull issued a faint shrug, maintaining a slight smile. It was a cryptic response, neither a lie nor the truth, yet both. Sure, he’d gone to the tavern, but not to seek out sex from Bertrand. However, he’d seen her there and turned down her offer. He’d just let Ayla draw her own conclusions. “Gonna take a bath.”

Ayla’s brow furrowed and she nibbled her lip when he moved away. She’d taken several deep breaths, unbeknownst to Bull, and hadn’t detected cheap perfume all over him this time. The woman found herself wondering why he seemed so cool towards her as of late, and she mulled over it until he climbed back in bed a short while later.

Bull settled on his back, one hand propped behind his head.

They lay in silence for a moment, then she reached out to touch him. She asked in a tiny voice, “Are you mad at me?”

He lifted an amused brow at the woman. “Huh? Why would I be?”

“I don’t know. You just seem so…distant lately…” Her slim shoulders shrugged, fingers wiggling nervously along his side.

Iron Bull chuckled. “Distant? How so? I mean, I sleep next to you every night wearing nothing but my underwear. I think that makes us pretty damned close.”

He turned on his side suddenly, studying her, his eye running slowly over her petite figure sexily draped in his shirt. The Qunari kept eye contact as he eased in. He shifted in one smooth motion, putting him between her legs, his pelvis pressed to hers. His large hands were planted to the mattress on either side of her, sinewy arms supporting most of his weight; he would crush her
otherwise. He groaned and rocked his body into her, slowly grinding his hips. The only barrier
between his heat-seeking hardness and her welcoming warmth was their underwear.

“Is this close enough…?” Thick, unadulterated desire layered his voice and clouded his eye.

Ayla hadn’t expected to suddenly find herself beneath him, much the way she laid under Cullen
little more than a week ago. And while she’d enjoyed it very much with the commander, having
Iron Bull’s body in such an intimate position stimulated her in ways she could barely fathom or
begin to explain. Wetness flooded her lower cavity, quickly creating a saturated spot on her
panties; she was sure he felt it through their garments. She moaned and arched into him, the
seductive, horned figure traced by the glow of the hearth, toned muscles rippling.

Bull kept his desire in check, having to gather every shred of his control. He was enlarged and
needy, but that was all she’d get—his hot, throbbing cock rubbing suggestively to that wet cunt.
Yes, he clearly felt her juices through their underwear, caught the intoxicating scent of her arousal.
It made him burn fiercely, though he held back. He grinned, chuckling, then rolled from her,
resettling in his place.

“Goodnight, angel.”

Ayla blinked a few times, lying there on her back. She was left feeling dazed, confused, and on
fire, so sure he would kiss her and elevate their passion, yet he didn’t. Considering she was with
Cullen, she figured it was probably best. Slowly, she pulled in close, snuggling to his side.

Iron Bull smiled up at the ceiling. His plan had already begun to work. Now that he wasn’t
offering, lightly brushing her off, and no longer chasing, she wanted him. The Qunari sighed,
kissed her brow, and wrapped his arm around her. He was so horny that it took two hours before
he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, no character is safe from being ‘smutimized’ by me. Oh, but I do love
Cole, though. ;)
The Gift of Flowers

She wasn’t touching her Qunari protector, but she could see. That’s what the dream world did, allowed the blind sight, their minds projecting interpretations of their experiences. However, Ayla had never experienced anything that would produce this dream.

She stood in the middle of a roughly-grown jungle. It seemed surreal, patched with shadows, an eerie haze of mist curling across the ground, settling in shallow pockets. The vivid orange cast of light from the sky marked the time as just around sunset. A murder of crows exploded from the canopy, cawing up and out into the approaching night.

Ayla jumped and watched the large black birds. Then something roared behind her a short distance off. It didn’t quite sound like an animal, rather a man with animalistic impulses. Instinctively, she turned and ran deeper into the trees and foliage as fast as her feet would carry her.

The man-beast blasted another wail. It was gaining!

Ayla pumped her legs as hard as she could, hands gathered in her skirt, lifting it clear. She hastily looked over her shoulder as she bolted, white mane flowing behind her. She faced forward again and cried out when she tripped over something, tumbling to the jungle floor. Her wide eyes stared at the mangled body–head missing, as was one leg. Before she could scream, the woman clamped her hands over her mouth. When she stood, the scene twitched around her, shifting, fading and melting into something else.

She was still in the jungle, but now she was in the middle of a fight that took place in what appeared to be a camp. She backedpedaled and tripped, scooting to hide behind a crate, peeking out. A lone warrior with majestic horns vehemently and mercilessly swung his great axe, chopping and cleaving his way through what had to be at least three dozen enemies, both men and women. Some of them were Qunari, some were human, some were elves—they were Tal-Vashoth.

Their slayer was Iron Bull. At this point in time, however, he would only be called Hissrad, and he had both eyes. Other than that, he didn’t appear much different than he did now. He was in a battle-blood-rage, swinging his weapon, kicking, punching, cleaving, and destroying everyone in sight. The sounds of their screams and agonizing throws of death was accented by his mighty roars that thrummed through the jungle.

Ayla observed in horror as Hissrad decapitated one man, then picked the head up by the hair, swinging the thing like a mace to bash another man’s face in. He caught a little elven soldier by the neck and bore his teeth, before ripping the man’s throat out, spitting out the chunk of flesh he’d torn loose. They kept going at the wild Qunari, some of them managing to land slices with their blades, but he continued to annihilate the horde.

The scene rippled around Ayla and shifted again. This time, all was quiet, but she was still in the camp. Hissrad was hunkered on one knee in the clearing, staring straight ahead, unblinking, great shoulders heaving with every steady breath. All around him were the mutilated bodies of the Tal-Vashoth.

Ayla’s eyes slipped to a place where something else had been added to the scene. A pile of fly-covered, maggot-infested child corpses. Some had tiny sets of horns, some had pointy ears, others were human. Bloatet and bluish, eyes bulging. She sucked in a breath and sobbed, clamping her hand on her mouth and nose, vividly able to smell their decay. Tears dropped from her eyes as she slowly stood and began moving towards the figure of Hissrad.

She approached carefully, arcing around until she was in front of him, though still about fifty feet away. Very slowly, the Qunari’s head tilted and his eyes narrowed, focusing on her. Then, like the wind, he was up and charging, a long, blood-stained knife in his hand, the intent of murder in his eyes.

Ayla couldn’t move. She was frozen by fear. Right before he would’ve reached her…

(*)

She shook awake, breathing hard. She was nestled against Iron Bull’s side. Her eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness of early morning. Bull’s body jerked and he growled. He was having another nightmare…and she’d somehow just been a part of it. The link must have allowed her to enter his dream.

Ayla slowly scooted away, keeping a small hand upon his arm. She watched him for a while, his body tossing lightly in the dimness, before she managed to fall back to sleep.

(*)

Iron Bull’s eye opened slowly as he pulled gradually from the land of dreams. Seheron. Another nightmare about the atrocities committed, both by him and the enemy. He shifted and stretched, instantly noticing that her small warmth wasn’t flush against him as usual.

He looked over to see that Ayla had moved to the far side of the bed, lightly snoring. She was tucked under the covers since it had been too risky to remain next to him for warmth. Bull sighed.
at the woman, the purest of loves held in his gaze.

He kissed her brow, glad she hadn’t tried to stir him again. “Good girl, angel.”

(*)

An hour later, once Ayla woke up, the two of them sat at the table eating on a breakfast of cinnamon toast and maple syrup that Bull had prepared. The man stuffed more in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. She’d just told him how the bond had connected her to his dream. “What did you see?”

Ayla’s foot slid back and forth across his under the table, the contact granting her vision. She shook her head, not knowing where to start. “I was in a jungle, running from something. I…think it was you.”

“Did you see it?”

“No. I only heard it, growling and panting, chasing.” She took a breath, picking at her food. Iron Bull watched her closely. “What else happened?”

“You were there, but you were different. You had both of your eyes…and you were killing everyone. It was a slaughter; they didn’t stand a chance.” Her voice was soft, and she was observing him with what appeared to be fear. “I saw…I saw…” she bit her lip, eyes closing a moment, “…dead children. A pile of them. Qunari, Human, Elf. I could smell them.…” She put her fork down.

Bull sighed deeply and lowered his fork as well. He nodded. He replied in a low tone, “I don’t remember every moment of that battle-haze, only bits and pieces. I just know that those Tal-Vashoth had infiltrated my squad and poisoned most of them, but not before they killed a whole school of children with that same poison. It sent me into a rage. I…” He hadn’t discussed the details of that instance with anyone other than the Ben-Hassrath he’d turned himself over to for re-education. “I remember running through the jungle for their camp and when I got there, it became a blur. I distinctly recall being found by another Qunari squad. It took them a moment to pull me back.”

Ayla’s face softened as he spoke. Her heart was breaking for him and what he had to endure. Iron Bull looked away. “I’m sorry you had to see that. You must think I’m a monster.”

She shook with a sighing sob, then stood and moved around to sit on his lap, arms going about his shoulders, face nuzzling his cheek. She hugged as tight as she could. “No, I don’t. You did what you had to do.”

His arms embraced her slowly, and he inhaled her sweet scent, his eye closing. He pulled back to meet her vibrant gaze. “How can you even stand to look at me, let alone touch me, knowing what you know about my past?”

“You…love me?”

Ayla hadn’t even realized the words left her lips. She had to regroup and reconcile before he found out how she really felt about him. She smoothed on a casual smile, nodding. “Of course I do. I love all my friends.”

Bull’s sigh deflated slowly. “Hm. Friend. I suppose that’s better than nothing.”

Ayla had begun to get warm perched on his lap, with his hard thighs under her bottom, hugged to his solid, naked chest, his arms embracing her, their faces mere inches apart. She smiled and slowly removed herself, feeling her way behind the bathing wall. “Let’s get ready, shall we? After my session with Morrigan, Dorian and I are spending some time together.”

Iron Bull remained at the table for a moment while she did her thing. A nonchalant smile hung over his features, touching the corners of his handsome mouth and lending a hopeful gleam to his eye. She’d said she loved him, and then tried to cover it up.

(*)

After training and lunch, Dorian and Ayla visited the library. He helped her pick out a couple more novels, then took her up to his and Hannibal’s quarters, where they stretched out side by side on the great Par Vollen bed.

“The Inquisitor won’t mind me being up here?” Ayla’s eyes slipped sideward to her best friend, outside of the relationship she had with Bull, because the Qunari would always be her closest and most trusted companion. They were one. Her hands rested over her stomach and her fluffy plume of snowy hair fanned around her.

“Oh no, love,” Dorian said flippantly. He laid on his belly with his head perched on his hands.
“He’ll be busy all day, and even if he came up here now, it wouldn’t bother him.”

“Mm…” she said, staring up blankly at the high ceiling, studying the shadows her crippled vision offered.

“So, what’s bothering you, and don’t say ‘nothing’, because I know it’s ‘something’. The mage smiled softly at her and it showed in the tone of his voice.

Ayla thought over how to start. She hefted a sigh. “Have you ever been stuck between two men before?”

“Do you mean literally or emotionally? Because, you know, both.” Dorian donned a playful grin.

She chuckled. “In my case, emotionally.”

“Ah. Can’t seem to make up your mind between the Lion and the Bull, hm?”

“I care about them both very much. It just shouldn’t be this difficult to choose one.” She licked her lips and rolled her head so her blind eyes loomed at him. “Cullen asked me to the All Hallows’ Eve festival, and I’ve accepted the invitation. I’ve decided…I may let him have me at the end of the evening…”

Dorian’s eyes widened. He perked and squeaked, wiggling closer to her. “How exciting!”

She tossed her hands up, shaking her head. “I just can’t do this anymore, being caught between the two of them. I need to just choose one. Cullen is…safe, in the sense that I know where he stands and how he truly feels. I know he cares about me, not that Iron Bull doesn’t. But Bull, he…I don’t know. He throws me off. I can’t figure out what he wants from me. So…I suppose I should choose Cullen, right?”

“I can’t make that decision for you, love.” Dorian issued a short, sexy chuckle. “Though, you know what they say: once you go Qunari, you won’t be sorry. It comes down to which one of them you care about more.” He rubbed her arm.

Ayla smiled a little at the saying, though her mind picked over the situation intently. She loved Iron Bull more, but as she’d said to Dorian, she couldn’t gauge his feelings. He was all over the place with her. Did she really want to risk losing Cullen, quite a fine catch for any woman, to take that chance with Iron Bull? Was she willing to?

She nodded, relinquishing a deep sigh. “Cullen it is, then…”

“Either is a good choice, really,” said Dorian. He shifted to lay on his back. “Can I tell you something?”

“What?”

“I seriously considered going to Iron Bull at one time, before Hannibal and I were official. I find Bull very attractive.”

Ayla giggled. “That doesn’t surprise me. So…why did you never, you know, approach him?”

Dorian shrugged. “Never was in the cards, I suppose. Though, if Hannibal had decided he didn’t want to pursue a relationship when I approached him, right here in this very room, I’m quite sure that your Qunari would be mine now.” The mage sighed, thinking. “He’s very sweet and loyal, and he takes great care to be gentle for someone so fucking big.”

They laughed.

“Yes,” Ayla nodded, speaking in a soft voice, “Bull is a gentle giant…if you don’t wake him from a nightmare.”

“Hm. Indeed.” Dorian smiled a little. “But…well…you’ve chosen the Lion.”

Ayla inhaled deeply, releasing a long breath. She stared up at the ceiling, her mind storming with thoughts about just how she’d handle herself on that much-anticipated night, which was little more than two weeks away.

(*)

Blackwall liked his quarters at the stable. He liked being around the mounts, listening to them during the day as well as when they issued snorts and sounds in the quiet dark of night. The animals didn’t yammer needlessly like people did, and this was his main reason for not staying at the barracks or even taking a room in one of towers.

The Grey Warden lifted another saddle onto the spacious table and set to adjusting the clasps and accessories. This kind of busy work let him sink easily into his thoughts, and there was much to toil over. He heard very light steps behind him and turned.

Blackwall’s features lifted with a thin smile. “Hello, Cole. Glad to see you’re walking around more these days.”

“Yes,” the slim man said, peering at the Warden from beneath the wide brim of his hat. “I’ve taken your advice, and it’s truly helping with the assertion of my humanity. Thank you.”
“Don’t mention it.”

“There is…something else you can help me with…”

Blackwall considered, then grinned. “Does this ‘something’ go by the name of Idrial?”

“Yes.” Cole sighed, then began to pace slowly. “I am supposed to meet her shortly but…I feel inadequate.”

“Why? Looked to me like you’re doing alright last night.”

Cole ceased pacing and fixed his pale eyes on the other man. The corners of his mouth held a smile. “Last night was…good. I quite enjoyed the sensations Idrial evoked in me.”

Blackwall chuckled, arms crossing his chest. “Believe me: Varric, Sera, and I saw just how much you enjoyed ye’self.”

“What do I do now?”

“You just go meet with her.”

“But,” Cole sighed, eyes straying before falling on Blackwall again, “I am unfamiliar with human courtship. I’ll be nice, always am. Beyond that, I can’t offer much. What if Idrial feels dissatisfied with my company?”

“Ah, I see. Ye feel like ye don’t have much to offer her.” He smiled and stepped in to touch Cole’s shoulder. “The secret is just to let things unfold as they may. I’ll be the first to tell ye, Cole, and no offense meant, but you are one strange bloke. The fact that Idrial has shown as much interest as she has is a very good sign.”

“You…think so?”

“My friend, she likes you for you. And she wants you. The way a woman wants a man.”

Cole let the words sink in, nodding slowly.

“Before you meet with her, pick her some flowers. There are lots growing around Skyhold. Also, there’s that All Hallows’ Eve festival and dance coming up…”

(*)

Idrial was out in the yard of the south tower hanging up sheets on a laundry line, humming to herself. Her eyes shifted to the side and fell on Cole who was moving towards her. She beamed with a smile, smoothing her skirts.

Cole stopped before her. He wasn’t an extremely tall or large man, but he did stand several inches above her. “Good afternoon, Idrial. I brought flowers.” The man-spirit was glad, at least, that his mind was processing thoughts and forming sentences better than last night.

Idrial eyed the bouquet of flora clutched in one of his hands. It was an array of mountain blossoms–white, pink, lavender, yellow, red, blue. She took them and inhaled their fragrance.

“Thank you. They’re beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like them. I didn’t know what color was your favorite, so I grabbed some of each.”

“They’re all my favorite,” she drawled, moving in until her body-contacted his. Her arms looped his neck.

Cole inwardly swooned at the rush of sensations that assailed him. He was familiar with human anatomy and knew the soft mounds mashing into his chest were her breasts. He quite liked the feel of them against him.

“You can touch me, Cole. It’s alright,” she breathed hotly over his lips, then slowly rubbed her hips to his, stimulating his growing erection.

A very minute sound of pleasure escaped his barely-parted lips, his eyes fixed on hers. Cole lifted his arms and wrapped them to her. He took initiative, lowering until his mouth brushed hers.

“Mm…” Idrial grinned into their kiss, thrusting her tongue past his lips.

Cole was quickly becoming lost in sensations. He was a novice at being human, yet he found that it didn’t take much to conform to the existence.

Idrial pulled back, eyes hooded with passion. “Would you like to come up to my room?”

“Yes,” he replied almost immediately.

She chuckled seductively, then took his hand and pulled him along, and Cole followed like an obedient, grinning puppy on a leash.

(*)

When they entered Idrial’s room, she locked the door after them, then went to put her flowers in the vase in the center of the table. She grinned and went back to Cole, who was still standing
where she’d left him, looking rather boyish and shy.

“Here, let me take that…” She carefully removed his hat, setting it on the dresser. “Come on, hon.”

Cole let himself be pulled to her bed, where she nudged him to sit, then settled beside him. Idrial wrapped her arms around his neck and ignited another kiss. Cole hesitantly hugged her. He moaned when she eased him back on the mattresses, then swept up her skirt and climbed on top of him. The lovely woman giggled, grinding her feminine warmth to his raging hardness.

“Mm…I’ve thought about having you like this many times, Cole.”

“R-really?” It had grown immensely difficult to concentrate.

“Oh, yes,” Idrial purred, rotating her hips. She giggled again. “You look like a little boy. Have you never been with a woman before?”

“Well…no…and yes…but mostly no.”

“Mm, such a mystery you are. It turns me on so much.” The woman lowered to kiss him fiercely, then sat up again.

Cole grimaced. “These trousers, they’re so…uncomfortable.” The whole engorged sex organ thing was completely foreign to the man-spirit, yet he found the tingling and pressure in that area to be highly enjoyable. Instinctively, he thrust his hips against her.

Idrial chuckled sensuously, then began sliding down his body. “Well, then, let’s get you out of them, hm?”

Cole’s eyes had grown somewhat hooded, expectant and anxious for what pleasures she would offer him next. He lifted on his elbows to watch as she worked the ties of his trousers, then threw back the flaps to release his hardened member. The sight of it must have pleased her, because she moaned and licked her lips. Then she gripped its solid heat in her small hand and began to stroke it slowly.

“Oh…” Cole’s eyes widened and his whole body stiffened.

“It’s alright, hon. Relax.”

“That may be difficult,” he breathed, still watching her touch him so intimately.

Idrial stood up fully, stepping back. Her eyes never left Cole’s as she undid her bodice and tossed it aside, then slipped her arms from the dress, letting the garment pool to the floor. Cole could only watch in wide-eyed, open-mouthed fervor as the woman stripped to her panties, noting the pleasant pertness of her breasts. Idrial slowly wiggled from the underwear too, the crotch of them all slippery and wet with her arousal. She stepped from the discarded dress still wearing her knee-high stockings and low-heeled shoes. That was all she wore.

Cole went flat to his back again when she crawled on top of him. Idrial dropped her wet cunt along his hard shaft, trapping it between their bodies, rubbing her juices up and down its length.

“Oh…wow…”

“Wow, indeed,” she giggled, then she reached a hand behind her, gripped him, and guided him into her moist, hot, ready opening.

Cole arched sharply and clenched his eyes shut. He was quivering. His eyes rolled opened and focused on her. “That feels very nice. Ah…”

“Yes, it sure does,” she moaned, then started to ride him. “Oh, fuck yes, you feel so good.”

Stars burst across Cole’s vision. This human experience was by far the best one he’d had yet. So many sensations. His instincts kicked in again, and he began up-thrusting. “Ah…tight…hot…clenching…” he said breathlessly.

Idrial smiled playfully, noting how his arms were out at his sides. She grabbed his hands and placed them on her breasts. Cole grinned sheepishly up at her, the man-spirit quite pleased that he was finally getting to experience sex. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to get lost in ecstasy while the pretty, little barmaid rode him. In a way, it was all beautifully symbolic. By handing over the flowers to her, he had consented that she should have his virginity.
The Dance

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

The All Hallows' Eve festival was one day away, and all of Skyhold bubbled with excitement. Especially the children. They had been designing their costumes for weeks, very anxious to delve into what might be considered a child's favorite time of year...next to Winter Solstice. After all, the only thing better than hordes of chocolates, desserts, scary dress-up, and Jack-o'-lanterns was a midnight visit from the big, jolly, crimson-clad Winter's Saint bearing gifts.

Since the castle was being decorated, gardens included, Ayla's lessons were postponed for the next several days; now was a time for rest and reprieve. She and Iron Bull had spent the morning with him expanding on her conversion of tangerlingua to the common written language, and she was coming along well.

After lunch, she asked him to walk her around the fortress so she could see all the wonderful ways in which it had been prepared for the festival. The gardens would serve as the main area for the children to have their fun and games, including a candy hunt, bobbing for apples, a pie-eating contest, and many other things. Streamers of lanterns crisscrossed above and would be lit tomorrow night. Pumpkins of various sizes has been carved with looming, eerie, grinning faces and sceneries, and they would also be lit then.

The main hall had been transformed as well. All but one of the long tables that lined the walls had been temporarily moved to the undercroft. Groups of smaller tables were set up near the grand foyer and on the opposite side of the room, closer to the Inquisitor's throne. The area upon which the throne perched had been turned into a stage for the musicians, their chairs and instruments already in place. Maryden had been practicing with the band and would perform as well. Up on the overlook where Vivienne had laid claim, chairs and tables had been moved into the area, offering any guests a view of the entire hall. The First Enchanter was very displeased at having the area commandeered for the festival, but she sucked it up. It wasn't as if she had to move any of her things; there was plenty of room.

"Everything looks so perfect," Ayla smiled up at Bull. They were moving down the stairs from the hall into the main courtyard.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Josephine did a great job with this."

They walked along in silence for a while. Ayla took in all the fragrances of fall, the array of cinnamon-spiced baked goods wafting from several establishments. She sighed. This time of year made her feel so nostalgic.

After a moment, Ayla glanced up at Bull, his handsome profile. He seemed bothered by something, as he had been for the last week. His demeanor was more toned down than usual, and he'd left to go out every night as well, returning rather late.

She sighed softly, rubbing his arm, to which she clung. "What's bothering you?"

He stopped their pace and turned to fully face her, his sky-blue eye searching her features. He appeared to be thinking heavily. "I've been having these...thoughts," he said softly. "And they're not my own."

Ayla stiffened. She couldn't take her eyes from his face then if she wanted to. She went completely still.

Iron Bull took a breath. "Have you been intimate with Cullen?"

"What? No!" She drew her eyes about, but no one was around. Everyone was busy with festival preparations.

"Then why do your thoughts and emotions say that you have?"

He looked genuinely dismayed and hurt. Ayla didn't know what to say or do. She just shook her head, wondering how he was picking up anything from her when she'd been working so hard to enforce the barrier between their minds. But then, Morrigan had said that channeling her power to create the mental barrier wasn't guaranteed since the link was a two-way communication. Ayla hadn't slept with Cullen, of course. What Iron Bull sensed was her thoughts on performing the act. He'd picked up on her plans to let the commander have the gift of her flower.

That would explain why he'd been so down for the past week. Ayla had been concentrating and anticipating so raptly on the possible events of tomorrow night, that it had overflowed right into Bull.

She shook her head and licked her lips, eyes finally straying from his face, unable to look at his sullen expression any longer.

"You're planning on being with him soon?"

Her eyes snatched back to his, her brow furrowing with a light frown. "What does it matter to you? I'm with him. Cullen is my boyfriend, and you'll just have to learn to accept it."
Bull swallowed the lump in his throat, locked in a stare with her. “Yeah.” He sighed and faced forward again. It appeared that he was losing her, though he wasn’t ready to give her up. He would never be ready. Whatever happened, whoever she chose, the Qunari would continue to unflinchingly serve as her eyes and her sword. It was his duty. And he knew he would never stop loving her.

His beating, mushy heart! If he didn’t need the damned thing to live, he’d rip it from his chest and feed it to a dragon. The dreadful organ was causing him more emotional grief than he ever believed he could face.

“Could you…please take me to Cullen’s office?” she asked in a tiny voice.

The Iron Bull nodded sternly. “As you wish.”

Hours later, well into the evening, Iron Bull sat at his table near the hearth in the Herald’s Rest. Most of the Chargers were elsewhere. Skinner and Rocky sat nearby indulged in a game of chess, though they were playing it with some strange and wonky set of rules only the two of them knew; chess master Rutherford would find it rather blasphemous.

Bull worked on his third tankard of ale, watching the room and thinking of the woman he loved. Across the room, Cassandra, Dorian, Blackwall, and Varric played Wicked Grace. Cole sat with them, his mind bouncing between learning the game and Idrial. She was working tonight and caught his eye at times as she moved around the room, sending winks and smiles his way, blowing kisses.

“Looks like you got her hooked there, Kid,” Varric mused.

Cole’s eyes slipped to him, his voice smooth and calm. “If you mean to ask if things are going well between us, then yes. She really likes sex.”

Dorian chuckled.

Cassandra just shook her head, and Blackwall grinned. It was no secret in their inner circle about Cole’s crossing into the realm of sexual experience; it had been revealed over the course of the last two weeks.

“You two been going at it a lot, huh?” Varric asked.

Cole nodded. “Fifty-seven. That’s the number of times we’ve had sex so far.”

“Fifty-seven! In two weeks?” Blackwall’s eyes widened. He chuffed and rubbed his beard. “I’d be lucky to get that much in a year.”

“Perhaps, if you mowed that dreadful food trap from your face, you’d get luckier,” mumbled Cassandra.

“Hmpf. Women happen to love my beard.”

“Well, that would explain the long line of them waiting to have their piece of the Grey Warden,” she returned sarcastically, though not without mirth. As much as she disliked the overgrown atrocity he called a beard, Cassandra actually enjoyed Blackwall’s company a lot. He was a good and loyal friend.

Blackwall chuffed but returned her smile.

Idrial approached their booth. “Hello, all.”

They each greeted the barmaid with nods and knowing smiles.

Idrial’s eyes fixed heatedly upon Cole and she took his hand. “I have thirty minutes for a break. Do you…want to go somewhere?”

“Oh, yes, I do,” he nodded, knowing that look in her eyes. He’d seen it fifty-seven times now. The man-spirit slipped from the booth and gladly followed wherever she would lead.

“Wow…” Blackwall shook his head.

They all laughed and continued their card game.

Not even ten minutes later, Cullen and Ayla entered, and he walked her to a table. Cassandra took keen notice of this. The commander positioned their chairs so he could sit right beside Ayla rather than across the table from her.

Iron Bull saw them. It made his guts twist and his heart sink to watch as they laughed and talked, their bodies close, sharing kisses. Ayla appeared so supernal in the soft glow of the candle on their table, basting her delicate features and pale hair with golden light.

The Qunari snorted, downed the rest of his ale, then rose. Long, strong legs carried him from the tavern. He could bear to watch no longer.
Bull swung the axe over and over at sections of log on a chopping block. He’d gone to the lumberyard, located past the stable. Trees were cut down along the Frostback Mountain Pass and hauled up to Skyhold using horses or other beasts of burden. Once in the fortress, the trees were sawed and broken down for building materials and other things. Bull was cutting firewood, anything to keep him busy and exerted.

For over a week, this was where he’d been before returning to his room late at night. He was sexually frustrated and promised Ayla he wouldn’t touch himself for the time being, and he was stressed with having to watch the woman he wanted as his mate find comfort in the arms of another.

Being able to swing an axe at something helped, if only a little.

Shirtless, with every toned muscle working and flexing, the great Qunari pivoted and swung, chopping wood beneath the pale moonlight. When he finally quit and returned to his room, Ayla was in the bed and the room was dim, glazed by hearth-fire. She shuffled and he knew she was awake. Bull wordlessly ran a bath and soaked in it for almost an hour, before climbing into bed.

Ayla hesitantly moved against him, nestling.

Iron Bull sighed and wrapped his arm around her. No matter how much he was hurting inside right then, he would never deny her, never shun her. He nuzzled her brow, then shut his eye and tried to fall asleep.

(*)

Most of the next day passed rather quickly. It was spent with everyone making last minute preparations for their evening attire or, in Josephine’s case, making sure that all the decorations, food, and festivities were spot-on. Bull had to run Ayla to an Orlesian vendor to pick up the dress she and Dorian had designed and her shoes. Well, it was more like she’d put her trust in the Altus to have something nice made.

Bull sat on a settee in the Inquisitor’s quarters, his eye skimming around. He whistled. It was damn nice. He’d never been up there before. But, when you were the boss, it was expected that you lived large. He took a breath and fixed his gaze on one of two side rooms. Dorian and Ayla were in there, the mage helping her get ready. They could be heard giggling and laughing at times.

Bull stood and went to the tall, wide mirror that conveniently angled just right for a perfect view of the bed. He examined his reflection, thinking he looked okay to attend the party, wearing pants, boots, a fine pale-green shirt with long sleeves, and his eye-patch. The door finally opened behind him, and he turned from the mirror. When Ayla walked into the main chamber, she managed to steal Bull’s breath yet again.

She wore a dark crimson dress that had an asymmetrical cut to it, which accentuated her figure. One of her arms was encased in a full sleeve, while the other was bare all the way to her smooth, dark shoulder. The bodice was cut low enough to offer just the slightest glimpse of her cleavage, and the skirt held the smallest flare, falling to right above her ankles, revealing her matching slippers. Dorian had styled her hair so that it swooped to one side, pinned in place and cascading lusciously down her back. To finish, he added a ruby-rose hair clip at her temple.

The mage knew his goal had been achieved by the look on Iron Bull’s face. Grinning, he took Ayla’s arm and led her to the large man, who gently grabbed her hands in his. When Ayla’s vision snapped to clarity, she conjured a blush at the way the Qunari stared at her, then she turned to the mirror, holding still to one of his hands.

She gasped and her face lit. “I…I don’t think I’ve ever looked so nice.” She giggled.

“Nice?” Dorian scoffed in the reflection behind her. “I think the words you were actually looking for are ‘magnificently stunning’.”

“I agree with him,” Bull nodded, though he found her just as attractive all bed-ready, wearing one of his shirts with her hair piled in a messy bun.

Ayla met the Qunari’s eye in the mirror, her gaze roaming over him; he looked quite dashing. She was glad he still wore the beard. She thought it suited him.

“Well, now that you’re done, it’s time for me to get ready,” said Dorian. “Cullen should be here shortly. Maker, he’s going to melt on the spot when he sees you.” The mage chuckled, then hurried off into a side room to tend to his outfit.

Left alone, Ayla faced Bull fully. His eye drank her in slowly as he smiled down.

“You really are beautiful,” he droned, “so very beautiful…”

She was fully aware of the way he stroked his thumbs over her hands, tenderly, lovingly. He hulked at least a foot above her, emanating his fragrant heat. Ayla figured he had to be about
seven feet tall, creating such a dominating but safe presence. It was one of the many things that attracted her to The Iron Bull. He made her feel ultimately secure, because she knew he would always protect her, no matter what. She may or may not ever say it out loud, but watching him destroy those Tal-Vashoth child murderers in his dream had secretly excited her. She knew he would resort to such violence to keep her safe, had no doubt that he wouldn’t even hesitate.

Ayla inhaled deeply of him, one small hand pulling free of his grip to settle on his hard chest, marveling at the powerful beat of his heart. They met eyes again. Bull had been ready to ease her against him for an embrace, when Ayla stepped back some.

She smiled softly. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

“Yeah.” Bull nodded, then released her hand. He left the Inquisitor’s quarters.

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The quintet band and Maryden churned out a merry tune, the high ceiling of the huge hall, allowing the music to carry perfectly through the room. Hannibal moved gradually through the party, shaking hands and smiling at guests, most of which looked familiar. He was a busy man, however, and didn’t get to personally meet every patron that sifted into Skyhold to set up shop and establish trades. A lot of them were Orlesian, having traveled from Val Royeaux, and it seemed All Hallow’s Eve was right up their avenue since they liked wearing masks anyway.

Hannibal finally stopped by a refreshment table beside Josephine. He sighed.

She chuckled and sipped her drink. “Already worn out? The night’s barely begun.”

“I just wanted to get the small conversations out of the way,” he replied, smiling, adjusting the tailored, cream-colored evening jacket fitted to his broad torso. “Now that I have, I should be able to relax and just enjoy the rest of the party.”

Josephine nodded, her lovely face producing a smile. “And you deserve it.”

“You’ve done an excellent job with this. The people of Skyhold needed to be refreshed, to know that life still goes on despite the imminent threat Corypheus poses. This will certainly raise and maintain morale.”

“Yes, Inquisitor, I think it will.”

The party commenced in full-swing, with couples taking to the large area that had been cleared as a dancefloor. They twirled, laughed, and enjoyed themselves as was intended. Out in the gardens, chaperoned by parents and coordinators, children played and ran around for the candy hunt. They carved and painted mini pumpkins, partaking in the games and contests set up for them.

Varric, Cole, and Blackwall moved through the spacious foyer and entered the hall. The three of them stood just inside the great doorway and examined the party. A nervous wave washed over Cole. He wasn’t good at parties, as his time at the Winter Palace suggested. He’d remained on a lone balcony then and waited for instructions from the Inquisitor. He supposed he should feel more at ease at this shindig, since it wasn’t nearly as elaborate, though there were quite a few people. His eyes followed the couples as they swayed and danced.

Cole’s gaze halted when it fell on Idrial. She was hurrying towards them, and she let her eyes roam approvingly over her weird boyfriend.

“Wow, Cole,” she beamed. “You look great!”

“Really?” He ran a hand self-consciously over his hair, which was combed back from his face, accentuating his stark eyes and well-structured features. He wore a gray evening jacket, close-fitting pants, and boots, the whole suit tailored perfectly to his form. The collar had just a bit of height, against which the pale hair at his nape brushed. “Varric and Blackwall picked these clothes and changed my hair.”

“Oh, really?” She eyed the dwarf and Warden, who flanked her man, and smiled at them. “Well, they did a fine job. I like it,” she pulled in and kissed him deeply, then took his hand and led him into the bustling room.

Varric and Blackwall exchanged a smile and headed in as well.

Up on the Overlook right above them, Iron Bull leaned to the balustrade, his eye skimming. It stopped when it caught sight of Ayla, a shining jewel in the room, her arm linked to Cullen’s. The commander was leading her through the soirée, both talking with patrons as they went. He tossed back his drink, then snagged another from the tray as a server moved by him, replacing the full cup with the empty one.

While Blackwall decided to try his luck at wooing some woman he’d spied standing by her lonesome, Varric made his way to one of the refreshment tables, taking up a cup of ale. He saw Cassandra standing not far away, arms crossed over her chest, eyes fixed on something…or rather someone.

The dwarf followed her gaze, though he already knew. Curly. The woman was completely in to him, but damned if she’d say anything or make a move. Varric went over, smiling up.
“Seeker,” he said. “You clean up well.”

And she did. She’d changed her short hair style, removing the braid and combing it down flat to her head, pulled behind her ears. It gave her a classic, elegant appeal. The dress hugged to her superior figure was a deep sapphire. A suggestive slit revealed one of her long legs up to mid-thigh. Varric found himself staring at that beautiful, toned, curvy leg far longer than he should’ve.

“My eyes are up here.”

Varric snatched his gaze to her face, finding that she carried a smile just below the surface of that smirk. He shrugged, offering a dashing grin. “What can I say? When there’s legs for miles, I tend to look.”

Cassandra lifted a brow. “I hope you’re not flirting with me.”

“Hardly, Seeker. Just paying a compliment where one is definitely due. I might have to change your nickname.”

“To what?” Her eyes narrowed down at him.

“Legs.”

“Don’t even think about it.”

He laughed deeply.

Cassandra went back to watching Cullen and Ayla. They were on the dancefloor, spinning in sync with the other dancers to a folkish tune.

“You know, Cassandra, I used to be where you are once. I didn’t say anything and, as a result, I might’ve lost her forever. You need to tell Cullen how you feel…”

Cassandra frowned down at him, eyes narrowed. “What do you know of how I feel?”

“Seriously? You’re gonna stand there and act like you don’t know what I’m talking about?” Varric’s eyes searched her face. “Every time you’re around him, you get skittish as a school girl with a crush. Your eyes light up when they fall on him, the way they’re all lit up now.”

She knew it wouldn’t do any good to avert the conversation with a lie, not with him. Varric was keen on these types of things. Cassandra sighed and her features lost their tight edge. She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter what I feel. The commander seems to have chosen the woman he wants.”

“Ayla?” Varric chuffed a short laugh. “She’s in love with Iron Bull, and she has been for some time, even if she won’t admit it. I watch people. I know. He loves her just as much, and they need to work it out. But you,” he said firmly, “you need to step up. Let Cullen know you’re interested.”

Cassandra listened closely to him. She knew Varric well enough to realize when he spoke from the heart, rather than in humor and mirth. When he was serious, he used peoples’ real names rather than the nicknames he assigned to them. She sighed and looked off thoughtfully.

Down the array of tables adorned with mini-cakes, finger sandwiches, trays of cheese, bread, and fruit, and a whole smorgasbord of other foods, Hannibal wrapped his arm around Dorian’s shoulders, kissing his forehead, breathing in his intoxicating aroma.

“You look beautiful,” the Inquisitor said.

“And you look delicious.” Dorian grinned up at him, then nuzzled his chin.

“I still can’t believe Cole has a girlfriend.” Hannibal chuckled. Both he and Dorian watched the man-spirit and Idrial, who sat at one of the scattered, decorated tables. The woman couldn’t keep her hands off him.

“Yes. I’m happy for him, glad that he’s stepped out and embraced all that humanity has to offer. When I spoke with him a few days ago, he said he doesn’t hear the voices calling for him anymore, asking for release. I imagine that having sex with Idrial served as that last push over the line; he’s more human than spirit now. I don’t think he’ll be able to vanish into thin air for much longer either.”

The mage nodded, listening. His brow furrowed in question. “Do you think he’ll become fertile, able to make babies?”

“I think it’s cute,” mused Dorian. “Everyone needs someone, right?”

“Yeah. I’m happy for him, glad that he’s stepped out and embraced all that humanity has to offer. When I spoke with him a few days ago, he said he doesn’t hear the voices calling for him anymore, asking for release. I imagine that having sex with Idrial served as that last push over the line; he’s more human than spirit now. I don’t think he’ll be able to vanish into thin air for much longer either.”

Elsewhere in the party, Iron Bull gradually moved through the patrons to the lower floor. He’d thought long and hard. He didn’t want things to be strange between he and Ayla, since he was with her for the long haul, regardless of her relationship with Cullen. He cut through the room for them now where they stood chatting and laughing.

Cullen saw Bull approaching and gathered in some of his mirth, his smile fading. Ayla could see the Qunari’s shadow-shape. She smiled warmly at him.
“I…hope the two of you are having a good time.” Bull said deeply, his eye lingering on the beauty, flicking momentarily to the commander. He gathered his pride and began swallowing it one gritty, lumpy bite at a time. “I thought you might want to see your escort.”

Ayla’s heart swooned at the gesture. “Aw, Bull. Thank you!”

Iron Bull reached out to take her hand.

She faced Cullen and got her first clear look at him all day. His ensemble was simple but stately, consisting of a white tunic and black vest, trousers, and boots. His golden hair was neatly combed and wavy as ever. “You look very handsome.”

Cullen chuckled. “I like to think that I clean up rather nicely.”

“You certainly do…” Ayla eased forward and kissed his chin.

Iron Bull stood there, towering over them both, hand clutching hers. Only his eye moved, averting from the sight of their intimacy. Being a ‘good sport’ sure fucking sucked sometimes.

Cullen stepped back. “I’m going to grab a drink. Would you like one as well, love?”

“Yes, please.”

The commander smiled and turned his eyes briefly to Iron Bull. Both men shared an understanding in that gaze. Cullen didn’t appear as hard or unforgiving. Instead, he issued a nod to the Qunari, his way of thanking him for what he did just then, allowing Ayla to see him. Bull nodded back. Cullen moved for the refreshment tables, leaving them alone.

Ayla turned fully to Iron Bull, the demure dimples in her cheeks standing out with the broad smile she gave him. “That really was very nice of you.”

“Anything for you,” he replied, his voice rich and resonant. The band struck up another song, starting with the drum and solo violin. Bull took her other hand. “May I have this dance?”

“Of course…” she breathed, eyes glistening up at him. Ayla hadn’t hesitated to answer.

Bull smiled and led her out on the floor. One of his large hands gripped gently to one of hers, the other hooked at her waist. Ayla’s other hand lift to his shoulder, and she was unable to keep her fingers from caressing over the hard muscle beneath his shirt. The lute and other instruments entered and elevated the tune. They began to spin, slower than the rest of the dancers surrounding them.

Ayla’s eyes left him long enough to take in the great room, the gathered patrons, the way they danced happily around them. She met Bull’s eye again and caught her breath at how much softness and caring she saw, so much adoring. It was pleasantly alarming. She let him pull her closer, their bodies touching.

“You’re a good dancer,” she said.

“Oh, I do alright, I suppose.”

They swayed slowly, round and round. Ayla sighed and let her face rest to his chest. Gods, this felt so good, being there with him, clutched close and safe in their dance. She was lost in him again, completely aroused by the way his body moved with hers. She nuzzled his chest.

Standing by the drinks table, Cassandra and Varric watched as Cullen headed right for them. The dwarf slipped her a grin, but remained silent, waiting.

The commander smiled in greetings to them both, his eyes falling admirably back on her. “Wow…Cassandra. You look…stunning. Your dress is lovely.”

Cassandra cleared her throat. She had never been one to get dolled up, always happy to wear pants, armor, and a sword. “Oh, well…this old thing? I just–” She caught a wry side glance from Varric, the expression saying, Be nice. Take the compliment and return something friendly.

“Thank you. You look very handsome yourself.”

Cullen grinned. “Thanks.” His eyes roamed back across the room to see that Ayla and Iron Bull had struck up a dance. Strangely enough, seeing them didn’t make him angry. He was secure enough to know that Ayla was his, and that Iron Bull was a friend.

Cullen, Cassandra, and Varric struck up some small talk while the song played. When it tuckered off and ended, the commander grabbed up two cups of wine. “Well, if you’ll excuse me…” He turned.

“Curly, perhaps you’ll save a dance for the Seeker before the night’s through.”

This earned the dwarf a sharp look from Cassandra.

Cullen faced them again, wearing a crooked, handsome smile. His golden gaze swept from Varric to Cassandra, who looked more than a little surprised, a blush on her cheeks. He nodded. “Of course. I’d be honored.”

After Cullen was completely out of earshot, Cassandra jerked her eyes down to Varric. “Asshole.”
He erupted into chuckles. “Asshole on a mission. See? He was checking you out. It’s all about initiative. You just be ready when he comes calling for that dance.” Varric winked, sipping his drink.

Cassandra smirked and shook her head. Inwardly, she beamed.

Back across the room, Iron Bull had led Ayla from the dancefloor to a group of tall tables. His eye flipped to Cullen, the man approaching with their drinks. Bull met Ayla’s eyes again, caressing her hand.

“I only want you to be happy…” he said softly.

Ayla examined him curiously, then she was dropped back into blindness when he released her hand and strode off just as Cullen reached them.

“Here you are, love,” the commander carefully slipped her drink into her small hands.

“Thank you…” Ayla nibbled her bottom lip, wishing she could understand what Bull meant by that.

Bull found a place along the wall to watch her and Cullen for a moment. He plucked a drink from a server’s tray as it passed by, downing it in a few gulps.

“Looks like she made an honest man outta ya.”

Bull looked over his shoulder at Bertrand. He shrugged, sighing.

“Oh, Bull,” the barmaid moved in close, but only to touch his arm caringly, “you’ve changed since the day you brought her back to Skyhold, and it’s a good change. You should let her know you love her. Or…” she smiled faintly, “are you just going to let that handsome bloke have her?”

“Not much I can do. She’s made her decision.”

“You can talk to her.”

He grumbled and heaved a great sigh.

“So… I suppose this means you and I… are finished?”

Bull nodded, his stark eye fixing on her. “Yeah. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to stay friends, though.”

Bertrand chuckled just a little. “Of course we’re friends. Always.”

“Good. You enjoy the rest of the evening, Bertrand,” he said, then began moving through the room for the exit.

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An hour after Iron Bull left, Dorian and Hannibal exited the hall. The Inquisitor was smiling broadly, pulled along behind his boyfriend. Night blanketed fully over the land, casting the fortress in secretive shadows. The two of them were looking for a ‘private’ public place to fuck, feeding the mage’s fetish. They disappeared behind the far side of the stable.

Down the way, Iron Bull chopped away at logs in the lumberyard.

(*)

Inside the main hall, Ayla sat at a table alone and listened contently as the evening wore on. Cullen had excused himself a short moment ago to dance with Cassandra. This left the blind beauty to shuffle through her frantic thoughts, so many things running rampant in her mind. She thought of Iron Bull, and the unexplainable feeling she had while dancing with him. Also, she fixated on her plans for after the dance, to partake in the most intimate of acts with Cullen. Gods, she was so nervous. She trembled vaguely even now.

On the dancefloor, hands clasped, with his other hand on her waist, and her other hand on his shoulder, Cullen and Cassandra spun to a tune that was a bit slower. He had always found the Nevarran woman to be very distinguished and attractive, if not overly serious at times. This evening, however, she wasn’t just poised; she was beautifully regal, even with the traces of scars marring her face. He’d always thought these things of Cassandra Allegra Portia Culagora Filomena Pentaghast, but seeing her up close, smelling her, feeling her in his hands, made her seem more tangible to him. She wasn’t just a rock-hard warrior woman. Indeed, she was quite soft and mysterious on the inside. Cullen smiled warmly at her.

Near them, Idrial had finally coaxed Cole to the dancefloor, though all the man did was move stiffly, allowing his girlfriend to lead. With his hands on her hips and her hands perched to his shoulders, the two of them shared a smile, happily lost in their own world.
After his dance with Cassandra, Cullen went back to Ayla, taking her hand in his. “The dance is nearly over, love, but the night is going strong.” He nuzzled her cheek. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

Ayla inhaled softly, turning her face to brush her lips to his. “Actually…could we…go back to your quarters?”

Cullen just blinked down at her, a little surprised. She’d never asked to go back to his place after any of the dates they had. They would play chess or Wicked Grace, have lunch, go for walks, have picnics, roam the market, feed the horses, and any number of things, then he’d take her back to Iron Bull’s room. Something was special about this time, and he was almost afraid to get his hopes up.

He nodded, returning the kiss, voice low when he said, “Alright…”

He draped her shawl over her shoulders and they left the party arm-in-arm.

Cullen unlocked the door to his quarters and led her in. It was mostly dark, save for the silvery moonlight filtering through the wide window.

“Here you are,” he said and helped her sit in the chair at his desk. “I’ll get a fire going.”

Ayla smiled and nodded. She was a nervous wreck inside. Her heart raced. She couldn’t believe she was about to do this. But, it was what she wanted, wasn’t it? To lay with the handsome commander? She’d certainly imagined it all those times they’d shared kisses and more during their dates. Her mind kept trying to linger on a certain Qunari, however, the way he’d affected her tonight. She brushed it off and concentrated on Cullen and what she was about to do with him. While he worked on the fire, Ayla closed her eyes and concentrated her power with all her might, putting up a barrier around her thoughts and emotions. If she was going to do this, she certainly didn’t want Iron Bull knowing about it, though he most likely already suspected her intentions.

“There…” Cullen stood and faced her.

Ayla could feel the heat of the hearth, nose catching the welcoming smell of embers. She slowly stood and removed her shawl. In moments, Cullen towered over her, his arms wrapping her close.

“I have grown to love you, Ayla, and if you mean to offer me your greatest gift this night, then I will gladly accept it. I will treasure it and you always…” The words tumbled hotly past his lips.

Ayla’s arms went around his neck, into his hair. They locked mouths, their bodies magnetizing passionately together.

Iron Bull entered his room, locked the door behind him, then started a fire. He drew a bath and sat soaking in it for a short while, before finally pulling on a pair of briefs, and stretching out on the bed. He laid there with the braided lock of Ayla’s hair, caressing it while thoughtfully eyeing the ceiling.

He sighed.

Ayla moaned hungrily against Cullen’s lips. She was on her back, lying on his bed. It hadn’t taken long for things to escalate between them, as they’d gotten stirred before. Like during the picnic they’d shared, there was kissing, rubbing, touching, and dry-thrusting. Cullen’s shirt was open, and her hands ran greedily over his toned flesh. He had hiked her skirt up, one of his hard legs between hers.

Cullen’s tongue pushed into her mouth, mingling with her own. He groaned lustfully, nipping her chin. Ayla enjoyed the sensations he gave her, the absolute feel of him, the firmness in his pants pressing against her. She shivered when his hand locked to her thigh. She wanted him badly, her feminine core trembling for it, having grown wet with need…but her heart lie elsewhere.

“I only want you to be happy…”

Iron Bull’s words. And the look in his eye, written clear as ever in the gentle smile that hung on his beard. His expression and actions said that he was giving his blessings to her and Cullen, glad that the commander made her happy. His whole demeanor as he’d held her dearly to him while they danced spoke of a man who was completely in love, but willing to step back so the woman that held his heart could have the man she’d chosen, even if it wasn’t him. The realization slammed her so hard that she momentarily lost her breath, her heart swelling to fill her chest.

Iron Bull was in love with her! The Qunari truly and totally loved her! And she loved him too. Gods, more than anything.

“C-Cullen…please stop. I’m…I can’t do this.”

He pulled back to look down at her. “We can do this another time. It doesn’t have to be tonight.”
“No…I can never do this. I’m so sorry!” she sobbed.

Cullen released a devastated sigh. He was disappointed but not too surprised. He figured a short while back during their meetings, dates, games of Wicked Grace and chess, and walks around the fortress that she might be in love with Iron Bull. There were times when she seemed distracted or even introduced the Qunari into their conversations randomly.

He rolled from her and she sat up, fixing her skirt. “It’s alright, Ayla. I understand. You’re…in love with someone else.”

Tears streamed down her face. She felt terrible for having indulged the commander, pulling him along. “I do care for you very much, but yes…I do love someone else…”

It was true. She was torn between the man she loved and the man she could very well fall in love with…if it weren’t for the man she loved. To be accurate, she was torn no longer. She knew exactly who she wanted.

She sniffled. “I’m so sorry, Cullen. Y—you must think I’m some kind of terrible tease…” she shook with a sob.

His arm linked her shoulders and he kissed her brow. “No, I don’t think that. You just didn’t know what you truly wanted, and that’s alright. You’re only human. Please, don’t cry.” He swiped his thumb tenderly over her cheek. “It’s alright.”

Her glistening eyes roamed over his face, unfocused and unseeing. “I would like it if we were still friends.”

He offered a faint, crooked smile that she wouldn’t see. “Of course, we’re still friends.” He hugged her for a moment, then moved from the bed to fix his shirt. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

(*)

Bull rose from bed at the knocks, stopping at his dresser to tuck the pale braid-knot away. He opened the door and frowned at the hasty way Ayla brushed by. He’d caught a glimpse of her face and knew she’d been crying.

“Did you do something to her?” his eye narrowed at Cullen.

“No,” the commander answered softly. “I never got the chance. You’re a lucky man.” He turned and left.

Bull was a little confused. He shut the door and locked it. Ayla was behind the wall drawing a bath. When she finally came into view half hour later wearing one of his shirts with her hair secured in a thick, loose braid, he was laying on the bed. His eye followed as she carefully moved to the bed and crawled up it. She pulled in close against him, arm clutching his chest, face buried and nuzzling his side.

“I…broke up with Cullen.”

Well, Bull hadn’t expected her to say that; he was quite surprised. He didn’t move, continuing to stare up at the ceiling. The fat, hideous serpent of dread that had been coiled around his heart, feeding off his fear of losing Ayla, finally relinquished its hold. He released a relieved sigh and drew on a broad smile.

He kissed her lovely brow, nuzzling it. When he did finally fall asleep, it was the best rest he’d gotten in months.

Chapter End Notes

The song that Bull and Ayla dance to is entitled “The Kiss” from the Last of the Mohican’s soundtrack. I’ve posted YouTube links to both the folky and orchestral versions of the song. Seeing as it’s Skyhold, they wouldn’t have a complete orchestra in the main hall, so they danced to the folkier version. :)

The Kiss (folk): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk2u25v53FQ

The Kiss (orchestral): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEY7511s7-c
Iron Bull groaned, a wildly guttural sound that originated deep in his chest, wresting its way past his lips. His hand slipped down, grabbing the hardened rod of his manhood, slowly massaging it through his briefs. The lust that assailed him right then was nearly unbearable, and he knew before he even opened his eye that his kuma’ta kalifaar was upon him again.

“Not…now…” Bull hissed, his eye rolling, head tossing in his pillow. He arched, thrusting his hips, one large hand clenching at the mattress. He dragged his tongue over the enlarged hooks of his canines.

His great, gray body trembled with an almost painful need brought on by this distinctly Qunari biological function. He gathered several long, deep breaths, attempting to calm himself, but he’d gone through this many times in his life, as it was a natural occurrence for Qunari males. There was only one thing that would extinguish the effects, quench the aching lust, and allow his swollen cock its release…

Slowly, Iron Bull looked over at Ayla. She snored lightly, lying against his side. Qunari already possessed heightened senses of smell, hearing, and sight. The woman smelled particularly good to him now, especially that coveted area between her legs. His nose twitched, for he could scent it clearly.

“Fuck…” he whispered, rubbing his cock again.

He needed her, had to have her, because no one else would do. The Bull was unwilling to take anyone other than Ayla as a sex partner. And she was done with Cullen. She’d said so last night. Quietly but quickly, he removed his briefs, tossing them to the floor.

Ayla rustled awake to the man settling between her legs, his long shirt that served as her sleeping gown hiked up to her stomach, revealing her panties. She smiled and stretched, wondering when he’d make another move again, because this time she wasn’t saying no. After all the sexual frustration she’d suffered in the past month, she was finally going to have him. She tried to meet his gaze, but he had his head hung so she couldn’t see his face, just the top of his forehead. He had most of his weight supported by his strong, sinewy arms, slowly rocking and thrusting against her, making her quite wet. His great body trembled and he growled, loosening a sound of discomfort. Sweat beaded his brow.

Ayla tilted her head as she looked up at him, small hands running along his arms. “Bull, what’s wrong?” She offered a smile, arching up a little. “It’s alright. I’m ready.”

“You might change your mind,” he rasped.

Her smile transformed sensually. “Why would I do that?”

He sighed, trembling. “Don’t…be afraid.” He slowly lifted his face and opened his eye.

“Ohmygods! Your eye!”

(Oh my, grandmother! What big eyes you have!)

Ayla’s hands covered her mouth and she gasped. Her breathing quickened, eyes looming wide. Gone was his usual light-blue coloring. It had been replaced by a brilliant, hypnotic amber. A shade that resembled honey with a dash of crimson dropped into it.

Bull issued a sound that might be made by some large, purring prehistoric cat, revealing his canines.

“Your teeth!”

(Oh my, grandmother! What big teeth you have!)

She squealed and wiggled under him, growing quite fearful by now. With his wolf-eye and expanded canines, the man looked absolutely primal.

“It’s…okay,” he said gently, closing his eye a moment, taking deep breaths. “Don’t be scared.”

“What’s happening to you!”

Iron Bull’s amber eye focused on her. “It’s called kuma’ta kalifaar–Qunari heat-lust.” He grunted and shivered again. “Need…you…” He was a sweating, heated, horny mess, struggling to keep control, wanting nothing more in that moment than to bury himself in her. Bull wasn’t sure how things would go, however, considering she was untouched and this would not be the gentlest experience for her.

Ayla listened as he tried to explain. She could tell he was in quite a bit of discomfort, maybe even pain. All the while, he slowly ground his huge body against her. Her eyes flicked down and widened when she saw his cock, resting over her lower belly. She knew it was big, but seeing it unclothed…

Her eyes shifted back to his face and she shivered deliciously. Bull was staring down at her, hot ripples of desire exploding through that one captivating, golden eye. “Sex…will help you, make it
“Yes…please…”

Ayla licked her lips, then rubbed his arms again. Well, this wasn’t exactly how she pictured having The Iron Bull for the first time, but she was willing to do it. Her heart raced in her chest. She nodded, then said in a small, breathy voice, “Okay.”

Bull searched her face, looking for a sign that she might change her mind. Ayla smiled gently and ran her hand over his bearded cheek. He hefted a sigh of relief, then pulled back from her, watching her subtilly as he gripped her hips, long fingers catching the panties, pulling them down and off. He easily ripped open the shirt she wore, the item falling away to reveal her full nudity, which he admired with awe–her flat stomach and full breasts with their pert, dark rose-caps. She made short work of yanking the remains of the shirt off, tossing it somewhere.

“Oh, Ayla…”

He lowered to clamp his mouth on one nipple, tonguing it expertly, then drifted to suckle the other breast. Ayla gasped and cried out. She had dreamed of this for so long it seemed. Her hands gripped and dragged over his shoulders, his horns, touching every part of him that she could.

Bull inched down her body, face nuzzling the small tuft of white hair over her femininity. He shuddered with unbridled desire as he inhaled greatly of her cunt, then traced a couple of fingers between her nether lips, drawing a hiss and moan from her. He was relieved to find her moist and slippery. Her sweet lubrication would make their joining much easier.

He was ready to explode. Carefully, he repositioned himself between her legs. Ayla shivered when his thick shaft rubbed to her wet heat. Iron Bull set a tender kiss to her full lips, his tongue delving into her mouth, tasting her. He was breathing hard when he pulled back to look in her eyes.

“No…Just take me, my warrior,” she breathed, small hand caressing his cheek.

Bull donned a gentle, loving smile, turning his face to kiss her palm. He nodded. “As you wish.”

He lowered to put their bodies flush together, then reached a hand between them, gripping himself. Ayla’s eyes widened when the head slid over her opening, then prodded against it. She mewed and cried out when he thrust once, stretching her tiny hole and putting him half way inside her. The woman squeezed her eyes shut and clamped her fingers to his shoulders.

“Relax, Ayla…” Bull tried to calm her.

She whimpered and bit her lip.

He was very aware of her discomfort and crying, but that didn’t keep his pace from quickening or his thrusts from growing in magnitude, becoming so powerful after a while that the headboard slammed the wall. Grunts and growls poured from him as he rode her, randomly biting and nipping. His single, primeval goal was to expend his seed into her and release the sexual tension gathered in his loins caused by the kuma’ta kalifaar. And he was getting close, sensing his climax just over the horizon.

The entire bed shook terribly while he took her. Bull tensed and shut his eye tightly. “Fuuuck!” he roared, giving one last, strong push of his hips to put him as far as possible inside her while he ejected his hot, thick load.

He continued thrusting slowly after the release, his chest heaving, body quivering with delicious post-shocks. He finally buried his face in her neck, kissing it.

Ayla sobbed lightly, trembling under him. The whole thing had taken less than ten minutes, yet it seemed like much longer. She stopped crying when he finished, still feeling him pulsating inside her, spilling his seed. There was so much of it that it began to ooze through the seal created by the tightness of her around his shaft.
Iron Bull eased back some so he could see her face. He sighed and tenderly kissed her tears. In one smooth motion, he withdrew his steadily softening flesh, settling beside her. Ayla winced and opened her eyes.

He embraced her to his chest. "I’m so sorry. I had hoped our first time would be more romantic. I tried to be gentle, but…”

She drew on a shaky smile, resting her chin on her hand so she could look at him. His eye and his teeth were back to normal. "It couldn’t be avoided really. It’s okay.”

Bull shook his head, his face written vaguely with wonder. "Why are you so understanding of my ways, of what I am?”

"Can you not see it?” Ayla only continued to smile softly at him, crystal-blue gaze roving over his handsome features, before settling on his eye. "It’s because I love you.”

"By the Qun, woman, I love you too. I reckon I have for a while. I was just too…” he trailed off.

"Stubborn?” She laughed.

"Yeah. Too stubborn to give in...at first. I was reluctant to get involved because of life in the Qun; it doesn’t support relationships like ours. So...I pretended like I was meeting with Bertrand when I actually wasn’t, to keep you at a distance.”

"But you’re no longer part of the Qun.”

"I still have obligations to it, missions that they can call on me for.” His eye momentarily wandered while he pondered over that final assignment for which he had yet to be summoned. When they called on him, he would answer, but he wouldn’t go through with it. These thoughts were for another time, "I didn’t leave the Qun on my own; I was expelled because I earned disapproval. This means I am Tal-Vashoth only in name, not in the truest sense. In a way, I still serve the Qun. Should they call me back for duty, I wouldn’t be able to take you with me.”

Ayla’s heart lurched at the thought of being separated. Her eyes searched his face anxiously. "Why couldn’t I just go?”

"No,” he answered sharply, face hardening momentarily. He stroked her hair, brushing fingers along her cheek. "No matter what happens or what is demanded of me, I’m not leaving you. Not ever.”

She sighed, smiled, and kissed his chest.

"Naaremma…” Iron Bull whispered, holding her against him, his eye fixed lovingly on hers.

Her head tilted curiously. "What does that mean?”

"It’s Qunlat. It means ‘Little Woman’.”

Ayla giggled, nuzzling his chest.

"Naaremma-Kadan…Little Woman of my Heart.”

"Oh, Bull…” she leaned up, met his lips, and delivered a warm, slow kiss. When she pulled back, she was smiling. "So…explain this heat-lust to me. Why does it happen? Does every Qunari go through it?”

"It only affects males and can begin at any time once they hit child conception age. Every male goes through it. Some only experience it a couple times a year, others multiple times a month. It varies.”

He stretched and relaxed, one arm behind his head. "It only affects males and can begin at any time once they hit child conception age. Every male goes through it. Some only experience it a couple times a year, others multiple times a month. It varies.”

"How often do you?”

He shrugged. "Two or three times a year. Many scholars and scientists have studied the phenomenon for centuries. Most of them believe the kuma’ta kalifaar is a primal survival mechanism handed down to us from Qunari of ancient times, ensuring that our race carries on. When it hits, men certainly feel it; it cannot be ignored, though there are degrees of intensity. For me, I was already pent up, as I hadn’t taken a partner since we met. Thus, my...roughness. It is an instinctual need, and all Qunari men will eventually find a warm body to bury themselves in to relieve and disperse the effects of it. Rubbing one out won’t do the trick.”
Ayla listened, considering his words. Her eyes narrowed. “So...what will you do when it happens again and we’re not together, if we happen to be apart because you’re on one of your missions or something?”

He bellowed a laugh. “Then I will hold it, woman, until we are together. Besides, it won’t be nearly as unbearable as this last one; that was the worst. I won’t be pent up now that we’re having sex.”

She laughed softly, wiggling against him, peering at him through her lashes. “Are you eye-fucking me?” He grinned.

“Mm. Hopefully, I’ll be doing more than that,” she purred.

Ayla considered, examining the stickiness of his seed between her thighs. The pain of their first joining was now a dull throb, but she was very tender from the pounding he gave her. She produced a soft smile and kissed him, nuzzling his beard. “Perhaps, I will wait. Right now, I think I’ll clean up.”

She eased from bed, walking carefully for the bathing area, hands out to gauge distances and limit collision.

Iron Bull sat up, watching her beautiful, naked form with flooding, overwhelming love, noticing her faint limp. “I’ll be gentler next time, Naaremma.”

“I know, my love,” she called from behind the wall. A moment later, water was being ran into the tub.

Smiling softly, he stood, yanked up his briefs, and pulled them on. The Iron Bull could hardly believe she was finally his, after weeks of yearning, emotional turmoil, and physical deprivation. The fight had been real, and he’d won her from the clutches of Commander Flexibility. No offense to Cullen; he was a good guy, just not the guy for his Naaremma. She was Iron Bull’s and he was never going to let her go.

While she bathed, he changed the bedsheets, then started making breakfast. Once he got some bacon sizzling in a pan at the hearth, Bull went to the dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out the horn-flask of dhaya berry juice. He popped the cap and prepared to pour his daily dosage in the walnut half-shell, only to stop. He stared down at the flask, thinking long and hard, stealing a look over his shoulder to the bathing area.

Coming to a pivotal decision, one he had never considered before crossing paths with his ebony beauty, The Iron Bull recapped the flask without taking a dosage. He replaced it to the drawer with the intention of never taking it again.
Honeymoon Delights

The beauty and the Bull sat across the table from each other leisurely eating on a breakfast of
griddle cakes, bacon, and hashed potatoes. She was bathed and wearing another of his shirts, her
freshly-combed hair falling in a poofy avalanche over her shoulders and down her back. Her foot
rubbed slowly over his, small toes curling and wiggling.

Chewing on a mouthful, Bull lifted his eye from his plate to see her watching him. Desire pooled
in her lovely gaze. He chuckled. “If you’re hungry, you should probably eat something.”

“I am hungry, but not for food.” Ayla answered heatedly, her smile accentuating the dimples in
her cheeks. Her foot started inching up his shin to his knee, then along his inner thigh, until her
toes fell upon the hard throb beneath his briefs. “It feels like you’re hungry too.”

Iron Bull inhaled deeply when she contacted that sensitive part of him. His eye didn’t falter from
hers, nor did his smile waver. “When it comes to you, woman, I’m always hungry.” He released a
short chuckle. “The difference is that I can control myself long enough to enjoy an actual meal,
while it seems as if you cannot.”

Ayla huffed and laughed. She leaned forward and narrowed her eyes challengingly. “Right, Mr.
Cool-Calm-and-Collected. Where was all your precious control when you were on top of me a
short while ago?”

“I was at the mercy of unpreventable biological functions, so that doesn’t count.”

“Oh, it certainly does count, my love. Always walking around like you’re so contained, when in
fact, you’re often on the brink of losing control.” Ayla continued massaging her foot over his
hard-on, running her tongue languidly along her lips. “It must take so much willpower to
constantly refrain from giving into your wild Qunari urges. You are truly a remarkable man, my
warrior.”

The Bull shut his eye a moment and groaned. When his gaze met hers, there was clear desire
flickering in its sky-blue depths. “Mn. Now you know my secret, Naaremma.”

The way he richly drawled out his nickname for her made Ayla’s loins quiver and her womanly
core wetter with arousal. She reached across the table to take his hand, then moved from her chair,
going to him.

Bull sat back so she could plop into his lap, her arms instantly going around his neck. She nuzzled
noses with him, then initiated a searing kiss. “I want you…” she purred.

“Sure you’re up to it?”

“As long as you’re gentle, I’ll be fine.”

Bull nodded, smiling adoringly. “As you wish.”

The man hooked one arm under her knees and the other at her back, easily lifting her small
weight. He took them to the bed, where he laid her down, slipping to the mattress next to her. Bull
merely rested on his side, propped on his elbow, drawing his eye lazily along her body.

Ayla issued a soft frown, clearly expecting to be sexed by the man. “Well? Are we going to do it
or not?”

The Iron Bull chuckled. “I’ve waited a long time for this, woman, and I won’t be rushed.”

“But, we’ve already done it!”

He sighed and nodded. “I know, and while I will always cherish our first time, Naaremma, that
wasn’t the way I pictured it.” He glided fingers oh so lightly down a bare section of her thigh,
over her knee, sparking a satisfied smile at the goosebumps that rose over her smooth skin. “I wish
to give you the pleasure you deserve.”

The warmth that crept through Ayla was making her drunk with desire. The man was so masterful
with his hands, touching her in minute ways, yet yielding such pleasant reactions. She sighed and
wiggled against him, kissing his chest, nipping it.

“Then pleasure me…” she said lowly, seductively.

He watched her for a few moments, smiling, before leaving the bed, taking a few steps to the
dresser. Ayla watched his shadow-shape with avid curiosity, wondering just what her man was up
to. She followed his blurred figure to the foot of the bed, and clarity was returned when his fingers
linked her ankle.

Bull had removed his briefs, his raging erection standing out from his body, bobbing stiffly. Ayla
marveled at the size of it, wondering how he’d managed to fit all of that hard flesh into her. She
drew a curious expression when their eyes met, noting the wide leather bands fitted over each
rugged horn. They were snug yet not too tight, covering the horns up to where they curved.

Her lips tipped a smile. “What are those?”
"Horn-slips."

"What are they for?"

"To keep you comfortable."

A stark, white brow lifted. She was quite curious now, enjoying the anticipation. "Comfortable for what?"

"You’ll see." Bull grinned, then eased onto the bed.

He set a tender kiss to her ankle, nipping the delicate bone there. His lips roamed up her leg, nuzzling her calf, teeth raking her knee, beard brushing her thigh, leaving a trail of kisses as he ascended. Ayla shifted and moaned, eyes glued to him as he worked. Her body tingled with need. When Bull reached the shirt, his eye connected to hers while his fingers leisurely undid the strings. She lifted her bottom so the man could pull the shirt up and off, dropping it over the edge of the bed.

Now she was naked before him again. Iron Bull’s eye raked hungrily over her. "I am so fucking lucky."

Ayla giggled, rubbing her body to his when he settled beside her. Her nails dragged down his chest, over his stomach. The beauty drew a breath to gather her nerves, then closed her small hand around the firm, pulsing instrument of his desire, her eyes locked to his. His ravenous groan excited her immensely, encouraging her. She began to stroke his cock slowly.

Bull let this continue for only a moment. He grabbed her hand and moved it away, shaking his finger at her. "No. This is all about you for now."

"Well, I want to touch you…" she nearly whined.

He set a kiss to her pouty lips, grinning. "And you will, later. For now…" Bull dropped his face against her neck, nipping and tracing his tongue to her skin. His hand roamed over her belly, dipping down so that he could slip a finger between her moistened nether lips, thrumming the little nub that controlled her pleasure.

Ayla's head fell back into the pillow, her eyes rolling shut. She began thrusting her hips to meet his skillful touch, hand even falling upon his, guiding it.

This continued for a few minutes, before he gradually moved his hand, simultaneously lowering on the mattress. Ayla’s hands dragged over his shoulders, then his leather-sheathed horns, her heavily-hooded eyes fixed on him, wondering what he’d do now.

Bull grinned as he gently parted her slender legs, lifting them. He positioned his body so her legs rested over his mighty horns, protected from their rough surface by the horn-slips. He then eased slowly forward, which pushed her legs further apart and opened her cunt wide for him. His eye focused on her from between parted thighs.

Ayla watched wide-eyed as he easily maneuvered, locking himself in place so that she wouldn’t be able to escape, pinned by his unmoving strength and those horns, with all of her lady business there for him to plunder. It had been performed so smoothly that there was no doubt he’d obviously done it many times before. He lay on his stomach, large hands gripping her bottom.

The Qunari gave her a rakish grin, then lowered his face, and darted his tongue for a taste of her sweet honey-pot. "Mm…” He toyed with her clt.

"Oooo…gods…yes…” Ayla tossed her head back into the pillow, little hands tightening into fists, toes curling at the surge of sensation he gave her. “Bull…”

He continued to dish out oral pleasure, highly enjoying her reactions as he changed the pace of his prodding tongue, circling it around her little pleasure nub. Ayla bucked her hips and released a long wail of rapture, her hand reaching down to claw at him, only able to reach his head from that position. Bull chuckled richly, flicking his eye up to watch her wiggle and writhed against him. He used his thumb and forefinger to push her lips apart for better access, then jabbed his tongue into her dripping hole, lapping up her female juices. He carefully took her clit between his lips and sucked it.

"Oooofffuuuck…”

Iron Bull stopped and lifted his face to set a highly amused smile upon her. She must’ve really liked that, because he’d never heard a curse word slip from her lips before. It appeared that today was a day of firsts.

Ayla snapped her head forward, rotating her hips. Her face was pleading. “Don’t stop…”

And so he continued, diving right back into her delectable cunt. As he tongue-fucked her, his large hands held and kneaded her ass. Ayla grabbed hold of her breasts, rocking her hips against his prodding, swirling, licking, teasing tongue. The pleasure was almost too much, elevating her in ways she had never imagined. She was going to come.
"Yes! Bull, yes, don’t stop!"

He’d found her outer g-spot, so he kept working it. When her legs stiffened and her knees locked, firmly trapping his horns between her thighs and calves, Iron Bull knew she was only seconds away from her climax. It started with quick shivers and low, drawn out moans, then her hips bucked.

"OH... MY... GOD!"

Bull pulled back and massaged quickly at her clit with his thumb. He was unprepared for the short jettison of juices she released, splashing against his mouth, dripping from his beard. He licked her from his lips. “A squirter? Mm, Naaremma, you never cease to amaze me. I fucking love it!”

Chuckling, he pulled back, dipping down to allow her legs to rest on the mattress. He watched his woman as she lay there, twitching and spasming in the throes of her climax, little hands gripping at her breasts. Bull removed the horn-slips, tossing them to the floor. He crawled up the bed, settling his weight between her legs, lowering his body, bringing them face to face.

He kissed her brow.

Ayla opened her eyes, still rotating her hips, feeling all warm and slippery. “Mm, my love.” She embraced him, wrapping her legs around his waist, ankles locked. “Please…”

“Please what?” He nuzzled along her jaw, kissing her throat.

“You know,” she moaned, trying to maneuver her hips so she could impale herself on the hard Qunari cock between them. But Bull had his body low enough on hers that all she could do was feel the throbbing head of it right at her entrance.

“No, I don’t. You have to tell me exactly what you want me to do, Naaremma,” his voice came out resonant, pleasantly authoritative. He obviously knew what she wanted.

Ayla raked her nails over his shoulders, aroused beyond all understanding. No one had ever made her feel the kind of wanton need the way Iron Bull did, and no one ever would. “Please…” she begged, “fill me. I want you inside me now.”

He chuckled. This was why he ultimately preferred female partners over male ones. The softer sex was always ready for more, multiple orgasms. They were very fun to stimulate. Now, of course, for the rest of his days, there would only be one woman, his beautiful Ayla. The Bull reached his hand between them, positioned himself, and slowly eased into her soft, dripping tightness.

“Oh, yes…” her eyes rolled closed as he filled her with every long, thick inch. The pressure was pleasantly welcomed this time, and she clamped around it.

Bull’s body shook with a powerful groan. He locked mouths with her, dipping his tongue inside, upon which Ayla hungrily sucked, moaning into his mouth when he began thrusting slowly. She knew that if she’d been with him before his kuma’ta kalifaar, she’d would’ve handled that wild ride better. But their second joining was such a contrast to the first time. Where that had been frantic, unfettered sex, this was making love.

She bit softly at his shoulder, grabbing his ass.

Bull obliged her, putting just a bit more power behind his thrusts. He also rested some more of his weight on her. He was very skilled at gauging these kinds of things. He put his whole body into play, every muscle flexing and constricting as he pushed against her, hips rotating.

Ayla felt the same build of sensation as when Bull worked her lower lips, only this time it was made complete by his manhood that filled her with its wonderful girth. Having him inside her felt so much better this time. She was lost in his scent, his heat, the beautiful, gentle way he rode her.

Then, she was exploding again. Her nails dragged over his gray skin. “Bull… I’m… yessss!”

He felt her clenching and pulsating around him, signaling that she wasn’t far from another release. Bull had been on the brink of his own climax, but held and moderated it until she got hers. As she melted and trembled under him, he lifted his chest and planted his hands to the bed, riding her a little harder, throwing the raw power of his body into his hips, sending wave after wave of tingling ecstasy crashing through her.

“Oh yes. Here it comes…” He groaned and pushed in deep, closing his eye while he filled her for a second time that day.

Afterwards, he lowered his body back to hers, but didn’t move from her yet. He remained stuffed happily in her tight space, both of them still rolling their hips in post-climax, spent.

Bull stroked her hair, setting sweet kisses along her lips, cheek, and neck. “This is how I pictured it, Naaremma, with you singing for me... not crying.”

“Mm... I love you.”

“I will always love you.”

Ayla grinned up at him. “Is there anything you can’t do?”
He thought for a moment, nuzzling her throat. “Hm. I can’t carry babies…but other than that, no.”

They both chuckled. Though, unbeknownst to her, there was much foreshadowing in his answer.

(*)

Ayla sat on the bed reading while Iron Bull took a bath. The couple had decided they would stay in their room for at least the next two days, so he’d go to the market for food and anything else they thought they’d need.

When he finished cleaning up, Bull dried off, pulled on a pair of briefs, and his pants. He grabbed up his boots and a pair of socks, sitting on the bed. Ayla was on him in an instant, her slender arms hugging him from behind, lips pressing to the back of his neck. She inched around to his front.

“Oh, you shaved it off.” She pouted softly and brushed her cheek along his smooth jaw and chin.

Bull chuckled, pulling on his other boot. “Yeah, it was getting a bit itchy. I don’t see how the boss wears a full beard constantly. Or Blackwall, for that matter. His is pretty epic compared to the one I had.”

“I found it dashing.”

“Mm…” he pulled her into his lap, nuzzling her throat. “I know you did, and in two weeks, you’ll have your grizzly Bull back.”

“You’ll regrow the beard for me?” Ayla grinned playfully at him.

“Woman, I would do anything for you. Anything…”

They shared another heated kiss, then Bull pulled on his eyepatch and left for the market.

(*)

The hulking Qunari stepped from the eaves of the east tower into the late morning sunlight. The day was brisk, but clear and mostly cloudless. He was shirtless, and the cool air was welcoming to his heated, flushed skin. As he made his way for the market district, grinning all the while, he noticed the after-party clean-up crews, removing streamers, lanterns, decorations, and rubbish from the ground. From the looks of the morning after, Josephine’s party had been quite a success.

Iron Bull reached the market and went through the usual vendors, stopping first for some bread and cheese. He went to a different baker to pick up a few sweet rolls for Ayla. He got pheasant, ram meat, and a little more bacon. His last stop was for fruits and vegetables.

“What can I get you, sir?” the vendor asked, preparing a small cloth bag.

“Hm…” clutching his bag of groceries in one hand, he used the other to rub thoughtfully at his chin. “I’ll have half dozen each of those red plums, dragon fruits, ap–Aaaahhh,” his words blended into a sultry, deep groan, and his eye rolled shut. He almost dropped his bag.

The vendor watched him curiously. “Are you…alright, sir?”

Bull grinned, shook his head, and opened his eye, turning in the direction of the east tower. “Woman…” he said thickly, then faced the vendor, speaking quickly. “Apples, a small basket of blackberries, potatoes, carrots, a head of cabbage, snow peas.”

The vendor filled the order as swiftly as he named the items, placing them in the bag, though his brow was raised suspiciously at the Qunari’s behavior. He seemed to be experiencing sexual pleasure.

“What will that be all, sir?”

“Yeah.”

“Three gold, please.”

Bull flipped him a five-gold piece, then snatched up the bag of produce. “Keep the change.” He broke into a jog back for his quarters.

(*)

He unlocked the door and flung it open, instantly shutting and locking it behind him. He set the two bags down. Ayla was on the bed facing him, slim legs open, one hand inside her panties. His shirt hung loosely on her, sliding off one lovely shoulder. She moaned and rotated her hips, hand moving quickly to massage her clit. She bit down on her lip, smiling wantonly in his direction, barely able to see his shadow-shape at that distance.

“I almost didn’t get all of our groceries, naughty girl,” Iron Bull said, resonant voice layered heavily with lust. He kicked off his boots, yanked off his socks, then pants.

Ayla giggled. “Perhaps, I deserve a spanking.”

“Just what I was thinking.” He removed his briefs and eased onto the bed, right between her legs.
The two new lovers made love again…and again…and again.

(*)

Later that evening, they lay in bed naked with her nestled against him, drawing lazy patterns over his hard chest and stomach with one finger, pressing random kisses to his skin.

Ayla smiled, shut her eyes, and hugged him tight. “Mine.”

“That’s right. All yours.” Bull nodded, smiling warmly. He thought on something, and it was something that had occurred to him even before they’d reached this physical milestone in their relationship. “There…is a way to truly make me yours and you mine.”

She lifted her head, locking her eyes to his, a satiated smile over her features. “How?”

“Do you trust me?”

Ayla considered the question, face turning to the side a little, eyebrow edging upward. “Yes…”

Bull’s lips parted, and Ayla watched his canines enlarge, invoking instant alarm in her. His eye, however, remained its usual color. He sensed her fear. “It’s alright, Naaremma.”

“What…?” she began, staring at his teeth.

“Mizraa-teth,” he said. “Total Qunari mating bond. It can be done by males and females. When I bite you, I’ll transfer some of my essence to you and take some of yours into me. You would always carry my scent right under your own, and I would carry yours. Other Qunari, or anyone keen enough to pick up the scents, will know you belong to me…and I belong to you. They’ll know that we are one and are not available to anyone else but each other. It’s actually not allowed in the Qun, hasn’t been openly practiced since the earliest days of the Qun’s creation, though there are some who have done it. I suppose you could say it’s the closest thing Qunari have to marriage. There’s also the creating of two necklaces from one dragon’s tooth, which we would wear to show our devotion to one another. But mizraa-teth is a chemical and biological bond, making it all-binding.”

Ayla listened raptly while her beloved explained the process and its history. Her eyes widened, glistering, and her heart quickened. “Did you just ask me to marry you?”

Iron Bull smiled. “Hm. I guess I did, yes.”

“I accept!” she squealed and threw her arms around his neck, face tucking under his chin. “I’ve pictured myself married, but always thought I would be with my brother forever, growing into an old maid.” She gave a short, humorless laugh. “After all, who would want to marry a useless blind woman, right?”

“Oh, Ayla. You’re not useless. You’re smart, beautiful, resourceful, witty, and a whole bunch of other things. You’re more valuable than you know. And I’m sure that if your brother had ever lowered his guard long enough to let any men near you, you would find yourself married by now. Though, I’m glad he kept beating them away, or you wouldn’t be mine.” He held her dearly for a moment, then rolled to put her under him. The backs of his fingers glided along the fine curve of her cheek. “Are you ready?”

Ayla took a short moment to gather herself, small hands roaming all over his hard body. Her heart slammed in her chest. The thought of being pierced by those teeth didn’t appeal at all, but she wanted this more than anything, knowing that the mizraa-teth would make The Iron Bull fully and totally hers. She took a deep breath and nodded.

“In this bite, I give myself to you and carry you with me, now and forever,” the Qunari vowed, his deep voice just above a whisper.

Bull lowered and pressed a kiss to the spot where her neck swooped into her shoulder. His mouth fastened and he bit down, drawing a clipped scream from her, which quickly dissipated into a luscious moan, her nails clamping to him. Ayla closed her eyes to receive the binding gift of his bite.

A handful of seconds later, he retracted his teeth, tongue lapping over the twin wounds. There had only been small trickles of blood. Iron Bull went to his back again, resting at her side, arm linking her when she snuggled in close.

They lay there silently for a minute or so, before he smiled and said, “There. Can you scent it?”

Ayla wasn’t Qunari, but she’d gotten her keen sense of smell from being blind all her life. She opened her nose at her own scent, then smiled, giggling. “Yes! I can smell you on me…in me. It’s so strange. It’s like…” she thought about how to explain it, “you’re a part of me.”

Bull nodded, smiling. His nose was open as well. “And I scent you in me. We are one, woman.”

“So…we’re husband and wife now?” She grinned.

“If that’s how you prefer to look at it, sure. I suppose down the line, if you want, we could always do things the human way—a wedding, you in a white dress, flowers, a party, me carrying you over a threshold, and all that stuff. I’m game for that if it’ll make you feel better about our joining.”
“I’m just fine with the Qunari way.” She pecked a kiss to his smooth chin.

He chuckled. “Good. I know it’s not nearly as fluffy and ceremonious as a human wedding, but it is just as binding, maybe more so.”

Ayla shut her eyes and blissfully snuggled into him. She smiled suddenly in realization, “Dorian… I couldn’t understand why I always got the hint of Hannibal’s scent faintly mingled with his own, even when they weren’t standing together, and I smelled Dorian the same way on him.” She uttered a soft laugh. “I understand now. They’re married, in the Qunari sense.”

“Yes,” Bull answered. “They share the mizraa-teth and consider themselves life-mates.”

Beauty and the Bull continued to lay in bed, talking and enjoying each other’s warmth and caresses. They made love again, before he saw to cooking up some dinner.

(*)

Iron Bull and Ayla had been in their quarters for three days, making up for all the sex they hadn’t had, becoming closer and closer. They’d shared lunch and were now sitting on the great-bear rug before the hearth. She was clad in one of his shirts and he wore a pair of black briefs. He was giving her more lessons on translating tangerlingua to the common written language, and it was going well, even with all the kissing, nuzzling, growling, and suggestive looks in between.

A knock came at the door.

“Hm.” Bull’s eye went to it, then he nipped her chin and stood, striding across the room. Ayla was right with him. He unlocked the door and opened it.

There stood Hannibal. His red hair pulled up into a man-bun, looking handsome and stately as ever with his regal, back-swooping horns. His aqua eyes moved from Bull, who rose almost half a foot above him, to Ayla. The woman’s arms hugged around Bull’s middle as she pulled close, peaking around him. The Inquisitor smiled broadly. “Oh, well…”

“Need somethin’, boss?” Iron bull returned the smile.

“Um…no, not really. Haven’t heard from either of you in a few days and wanted to check up. I… can see why now. I’ll just leave you two to enjoy your…” his stunning aqua gaze settled on Ayla and he inhaled deeply, then looked back to Bull again, “…honeymoon. Congratulations.”

As a Qunari, the Inquisitor caught the intermingling of their scents and knew they shared the mizraa-teth.

“Thanks, boss,” Bull beamed.

Ayla offered a blushing smile, hiding her face against his tattooed arm. Hannibal nodded and walked off. Bull shut the door, locked it, and carried his woman to the rug. Instead of delving back into her lessons, they decided to delve into one another.
When Chuckles Says "Don't Touch", Do NOT Touch

For five days, Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull remained in their quarters, and Ayla found them to be the most exquisite, wonderful days of her life; Bull could say the same. They shared a love that not many would ever experience, made even stronger by the soul-bond and the mizraa-teth. Iron Bull knew without a doubt when he touched her and locked eyes that the woman loved him beyond words, and that made his big ole Qunari heart go all squishy. Since they'd made it official, Bull had inwardly kicked himself many times, wondering why in Thedas he'd worked so hard to keep this from happening, knowing that there had been the chance of losing her. All because he'd been stubborn. But it was a learning experience, he supposed, one from which he'd acquired a very important lesson: never deny the heart; it knows best.

Ayla was his now, in every way, and he was hers. The Qun help anyone who ever thought to come between them, because Iron Bull's wrath would be fierce. The man had no problems killing anyone or anything that meant to harm her or take her from him. They would be thoroughly destroyed.

On the sixth day, they slept in late, making love for the better part of the morning, before they ate a light breakfast, got ready, and finally left. It was overcast but pleasant out. They walked leisurely around Skyhold's grounds, with her bundled in her shawl and holding to his bare arm, nuzzling it.

“I still don’t see how you’re out in this chilliness without at least a shirt.”

“It’s all this hot blood pumping through me,” he said, fine lips tweaking a smile.

Ayla’s eyes narrowed up at him mischievously. “Considering the part of you that finds itself engorged most of the time, it’s a wonder you conjure any heat at all.” She nipped his arm.

Iron Bull shook his head, smiling down at her. “Stop being bad…unless you wish to return to the room. I’m game, ya know.”

“I’m sure you are.” She giggled softly, stark eyes taking in the surroundings, knowing no one could hear their conversation, but self-conscious anyway. “Is that all you think about? We’ve been going at it for five days.”

“Woman, you’re the one who started it. I merely made the offer to finish it.” He grinned.

Ayla couldn’t deny that, even after all the sex they’d had, she wanted more! He was just so delicious in so many ways. She had grown a little slick in her panties. However, she was intent on being out and about. She cleaned her throat, then perked. “Oh, I never did get to see Solas’s collection of artifacts and things, because of…well…what happened that day.”

“Wanna go now? Grab lunch afterwards?”

“Sounds good.” She smiled broadly up at him, leaning into his warmth.

They headed for the castle main and the atrium.

Up on the western wall standing a short distance from the side entrance to his quarters, a gentle breeze ruffling his golden waves, Cullen saw them. It was more than a little heart-wrenching to watch, the woman he thought would be his so happy and playful with the Qunari. Yes, he was jealous, but not overly so. He supposed he should’ve seen this coming, since all the signs had been visible. Ayla hadn’t been willing to go to the next level with Cullen because of her ultimate connection to Iron Bull; the Qunari had won her love long before she and Cullen met. He would just have to be more careful about putting his heart out there for the trampling.

The handsome commander heaved a sigh, hardened his features, and left his post to tend to business.

(*)

Bull moved from the short hallway into the atrium, Ayla falling just behind him, gripping his hand. Solas stood over his desk holding a cup of tea. Tendrils of steam rose from the brew. The elf’s eyes lifted, and there appeared to be a smile floating in them.

“Good afternoon,” Solas said, his voice smooth and tailored. He set his tea down. “Can I help you with something?”

“Ayla wanted to see your place, take a look at your collection of artifacts and stuff,” Bull said.

“Only if it’s no bother, Mr. Solas,” Ayla added promptly, stepping forward to be more at her mate’s side.

The elf smiled. “Mister’, she says.” A very short chuckle ebbed from him. “That makes me feel older than I am. No need to be so formal. Please, just Solas will be fine.”

She nodded and smiled. “Okay.”

Solas looked around the atrium. There were shelves of items, tablets, figurines, scrolls, and other things lining the curved wall. The place was lit amply by a few lanterns and candelabras. “You may look around, but refrain from touching anything. Not only are these items irreplaceable, some
of them are also magical, and I don’t know how they all work yet.”

“Oh, I won’t touch anything, I promise,” Ayla said, her smile broadening.

Solas issued a nod, then went back to his observations of the scroll on his desk. He moved between the main atrium space and a small side room as he worked.

Bull let Ayla lead them about the atrium, pulling her with him so she could examine a tall, ancient-looking pot. It was slender and chipped in places with dirt caked up one side. She leaned in to get a better look at the images painted on it—some Elvhen figures in flowing robes, arms raised at a yellow orb Ayla assumed was the sun.

“This is so interesting…” she mused.

“Hm.” Bull’s attention was elsewhere. He had little to no interest in this kind of stuff. Once you saw one geriatric Elvhen artifact, you’d seen them all. That was his thought on it. His mind drifted to other things, such as his decision to stop taking the dhaya juice. It only needed a few days to disperse from his system, didn’t take long. It had been five days, which was more than enough time for its suppressing effects to wear off. Hell, for all he knew, his seed was potent again, the little swimmers no longer dormant.

The Qunari allowed his mind to linger and mull over the possibilities of the near future, not paying attention as Ayla pulled him along to another ancient item.

Her eye caught on something, a statue. It sat on a shelf at her eye-level. Ayla narrowed her gaze at it, thinking it to be a most peculiar item. It was two bodies blending and weaving into one another, sharing one head created by half of each entity’s face.

She stared at it for a long while, eyelids lowering just a bit, seeming to become hypnotized by it. An unheard force, something within the figure, was calling to her. It urged her forward, her small hand lifting. Behind her, Iron Bull was still lost in his thoughts and didn’t see her approaching the Statue of Ahime Anta. The moment her fingers brushed the artifact, a quick pulse of pale blue shivered across its surface, marking the diffusion of Solas’s protective barrier.

Unseen, on the back side of the statue, a set of glyphs lit up, glowing violet for a moment, activating the magic contained in the item. Then the glyphs dimmed out.

“Ayla,” Bull said lowly, finally paying attention again. “He said not to touch anything.”

The woman jerked around to face him, and when their eyes met, they both shivered simultaneously, experiencing a strange sensation. They might describe it as observing one’s self from outside one’s body, like looking in a mirror but not. Within a few moments, the feeling passed.

Solas slipped back into the atrium from the side room, holding a few more scrolls, which he set to his desk. He glanced momentarily at them.

“Hm…” Ayla blinked, shrugged, and went to another ancient artifact. She gave a few more curious looks to the two-bodied, one-headed statue, however.

As much as Bull loved her and wanted to give her everything she desired, he inwardly wished she’d hurry and appease her curiosity. He hated all this magical shit. But he silently served his duties without a single complaint. He was her eyes, her sword and protector, and now her husband. Nope, no complaints from him. He merely smiled lovingly while she made her way about the atrium.

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Just as they finished lunch and were about to leave the main hall, Dorian sauntered up, arms crossing his chest as his pretty gray eyes swept between the two of them. That kohl-traced gaze settled on Iron Bull, and the Altus grinned. “I’m sure you have something to do in the training yard or other important tasks to which you must tend. I’ll just steal your wife away for a bit,” his eyes trained playfully on Ayla, “seeing as she has much explaining to do.”

Iron Bull sighed and smirked lightly, shaking his head. “Fine. I’ll leave you to your girlie talk.” The Qunari leaned in and kissed her brow. “See you in a little bit.”

“Okay.” Ayla lifted on her toes to kiss his chin.

Dorian watched in high amusement as the couple elongated their temporary separation, their hands lingering in a clasp while they pulled apart. He chuckled and shook at Bull. “For Maker’s sake, off with you. You’ve had her to yourself for five days, now it’s my turn.”

Ayla giggled, and Dorian linked his arm with hers, leading her through the hall for the door near the throne that led up to his and Hannibal’s quarters. Iron Bull looked after them for a moment, before turning in the opposite direction. He figured he would find the Chargers and let them know their chief was officially a one-woman man. Though if Dorian knew, they and the whole Inner Circle probably already heard the news. There was certainly going to be some partying at the Herald’s Rest tonight.

(*)

“So you married The Iron Bull.” Dorian said when they settled side by side on the great Par
Vollen bed. It had become their favorite spot to share talks and such. He was on his stomach, chin on his folded hands.

Ayla lay on her back. She chuckled. “I figured Hannibal would tell you.”

“He tells me everything. You can imagine my ultimate surprise, especially since I thought the plan was for you to sleep with Cullen after the dance.”

“Well…” she sighed to think of Cullen, shaking her head, “the commander and I almost did do it, I stopped him because I realized Bull loved me, that I wasn’t going to be just some notch on his belt. And I’ve always loved him, so I broke up with Cullen.

“Hmm…” Dorian listened closely. “Yes, the poor man. I noticed that he looked rather distracted the past few days, then it all made sense once Hannibal told me.” He grinned. “Where did he bite you?”

Ayla turned her head, pulling back her shawl. Dorian leaned in to examine the two little dots, which were scabbed over and healing nicely. “Did it hurt?”

“Only for a moment.” Ayla turned her broken gaze to him. “After it was done, I realized why you and Hannibal had intermingled scents.”

The mage’s grin widened. “Ah, yes, you with your exceptional sense of smell due to your blindness. I clearly recall when he proposed the mizraa-teth, and while I can’t smell anything, Hannibal can.” A dark, sculpted brow lifted. “Want to know where he bit me?”

“Where?”

“High up on my inner thigh, very close to certain parts.”

“Really?” Ayla chuckled. “That couldn’t have been comfortable.”

“On the contrary, love, it was one of the most erotic experiences I’ve ever had.” Dorian waved his hand. “Enough about me. Let’s talk about you. I want to hear everything.”

“Well, Cullen took me back to Bull’s quarters when I broke it off with him, and I told Bull about it as we headed to bed. The next morning, I got awakened by him climbing on top of me. His eye was this strange color and his teeth were bigger—”

“Kuma’ta kalifaar?” Dorian interrupted. “Your first time with him was during his heat-lust? You poor dear.”

“I assume Hannibal has gone through it while you’ve been together.”

“Oh yes. Twice. I absolutely love it and look forward to it.” His head tilted, expression shifting into one of empathy. “How did you enjoy it?”

Ayla chuffed a short laugh. “I didn’t. He wasn’t as gentle as he wanted to be. He said it was because he was pent up; he hadn’t been with anyone since we met. There was a lot of biting and growling, and I was just glad for it to be done. It didn’t last very long, thank gods.”

Dorian rubbed her arm. Being on the receiving end of a Qunari’s heat-lust was already rough on a sexually seasoned partner. He could only imagine how it had been for Ayla, the untouched creature she was, a little less than half the size of Iron Bull. “No, it doesn’t take long for them to disperse the effects of the kuma’ta kalifaar, but it is such a wild and wonderful ride. When the Bull’s comes upon him again, you’ll enjoy it more, trust me.”

Ayla grinned at him. “We did it again later, lots of times, and he was much more reserved and gentle. I very much enjoy sex with him now.”

“I’m sure his cock is huge,” Dorian mused.

She blurted a chuckle. “Well, he is a big man.”

“My dear, that means nothing. I’ve been with men almost as big as Iron Bull, and one or two of them left much to be desired…” He took her hand and stuffed his pinky in her grip, wiggling it while making a funny face. She wouldn’t see the face, but she’d understand the insinuation.

“Really!” Ayla fell-out laughed.

“Oh, yes. Just because a man is big doesn’t mean he’s big everywhere.”

“I guess not.”

“So…how big is the Bull?”

After a secretive and somewhat shy smile, she said, “I would say ten or eleven inches, easily…and pleasantly girthy.”

“Mm, I would imagine nothing less.”

“And…Hannibal?”
Dorian chuckled softly. “Oh, about the same. I suppose it’s a Qunari thing. All the men must be hung like horses. Lucky us.”

They laughed deeply between themselves, enjoying their chatty girl-time.

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That night at the tavern, Varric, Blackwall, Dorian, and Cassandra sat in their booth indulged in Wicked Grace. The atmosphere was friendly and welcoming, a bit busy. The wood of the place seemed to be eternally infused by the tang of ale and ember smoke. Maryden sang a lovely tune and strummed her lute, making eyes with Krem. She and the lieutenant of the Chargers had started up a relationship.

It was Idrial’s day off. She and Cole sat at a table in a secluded corner on the second floor making out. The woman was on his lap, running her little hands over and through the pale-blond wildness of his hair. She pulled back slowly, nipping his bottom lip, rubbing her nose to his.

Cole had grown quite used to her attentions and he found them very much to his liking. When he was more of a spirit, just beginning to explore the possibilities awarded him for choosing to pursue humanity, the man had never considered that he might form a relationship. At least not like the one he had with Idrial. Yes, he had the Inner Circle with whom he was familiar, sharing adventures, having talks. But to have this kind of connection with another person, a woman, made Cole begin to realize how deep the responsibility of being human was. It meant caring about those around you, the people that had become your friends, acquaintances, or lovers. His eyes skimmed Idrial’s pretty face, and he knew he would do whatever it took to keep her safe, to make her happy, to be the best man for her. But…what did this all mean?

The man-spirit, though probably more man by now, looked questioningly at her. His smoothly accented voice was low and rich when he spoke. “How do you know…if you love someone?”

Idrial’s breath caught in her throat and she pulled back to stare at him. She smiled and sighed. “Ye just feel it, right here.” She touched her hand to his chest, over his heart. “When you wake up in the morning and all you can think about is that person, being with them, seeing them smile, touching them, ye most likely love them. They make you happy, and you know you’d do anything for them…”

Cole took a moment to consider her response, letting his mind digest it, his eyes swinging to a random place. He nodded and met her eyes again, enjoying the warmth of her breath. A slight smile touched the corner of his full mouth. “Then…I think I love you, Idrial.”

The woman’s eyes widened and she hugged him tight, his face buried in her neck. She pulled back to draw him into a long, passionate kiss, her body rubbing to his. “Oh, Cole! I love you too!”

“Yes!” She nuzzled noses with him, then grinned and repositioned herself so she straddled him on the chair.

“Oh…there’s a man two tables away looking at us,” his eyes slid in the direction, then focused back on her. He was smiling boyishly. “Perhaps, we should retire to your room.”

Idrial kissed him again, nodding. “Our room.”

“Yes, our room.”

She moved from his lap, took his hand, and the two of them hastily maneuvered through the tavern. Just as they left, stepping into the cool night, Iron Bull and Ayla were on their way inside.

The Qunari chuckled after them. “Doesn’t take much to figure out where they’re going.”

Ayla blushed, but smiled up at him. “No, it doesn’t.” She slowly drew her hands up and down his bulging arm, then kissed it, luminous eyes peering up through her dark lashes.

Bull growled huskily. “Now is not the time to eye-fuck me, woman, because I have no problem carrying you right back up to our room for a Bull-ride.”

“You most certainly will not.” She giggled. “We’re already here, and I intend on enjoying some time out.”

He chuckled. They entered the Herald’s Rest and headed to what could pretty much be called the Chargers’ corner, to one side of the hearth. The whole gang was there, whipping up smiles and greetings when their chief and his lady arrived.

“Well, there’s our happy couple,” piped Krem. He’d pulled his eyes away from Maryden for the moment.

Iron Bull sat on the padded bench against the wall, and Ayla settled beside him. “From the looks of you, I’d say you started the party without me.”

“Yep,” chimed Skinner, tipping her cup at him. “Plenty of brew left though, chief. Worked up a new batch a week ago, popped it open for tonight.”

“Well, then, pour me some.” Bull chuckled, taking up his cup, lifting it.
“Horns up!” They cried mirthfully, then drank.

Grim didn’t say anything, though his expression seemed a little softer to Ayla. They met eyes and the silent man nodded to her; she thought she even saw the touch of a smile on his lips. The woman offered him a lovely, dimply smile.

“Ahh, more!” Bull tapped his cup at Skinner. He looked over at his wife, grinning. “Want some?”

Ayla quickly shook her head, making a disgusted face. “No, thank you. I think once was enough for me.”

“Aw, c’mon, Naaremma. This is a celebration of our joining. You have to drink something.”

“Well…” she pondered, smiling, “…I suppose I could go for some blackberry wine.”

“Then that’s what you’ll have,” he said softly, brushing his lips to her brow. “Be right back.”

Ayla was cast into warmly-lit shadows and shapes when he moved away and across the room for the bar. She sat there listening to the Chargers conversing and laughing, while she swayed and hummed to Maryden’s tune. Not even a minute after Bull left, someone else sat in his place, and by his scent, it wasn’t anyone Ayla was familiar with.

Her unfocused gaze lingered in the man’s direction, who was so close that she could feel his warm breath on her face, one side of his body against her. She cleared her throat and scooted away a bit.

The Chargers had all stopped talking and were studying the man who was attempting to pick up their chief’s lady. Rocky opened his mouth like he might say something, but Krem lifted a hand to stop him, grinning, talking low enough for the Chargers to hear. “Don’t say anything. This’ll be funny.”

So, they watched.

The dashing stranger, leaned a little closer. “The name’s Killian. Killian Jones. What should I call you, love?”

“Ayla…though, you may not want to sit there.”

“Why not? No one else is sitting here.”

No sooner than the man said that, a hulking shadow slowly approached, and one highly unamused eye burned down at him. “You’re in my seat.”

Killian scoffed but visibly went on guard when he turned to see the huge, horned man standing over him. “Who are you?”

“A very protective husband.”

Ayla shook her head. “I warned you not to sit there.”

Killian’s eyes flipped from Iron Bull to the beautiful, white-haired woman, then back to Bull. “I…uh…didn’t realize she was bound in matrimony. No ring.” He grinned and stood. “I’ll just be on my merry way. Good eve, then.”

Bull’s narrowed eye followed the man off, before he growled and sat, initiating contact with Ayla, who took her cup of wine.

The Chargers exploded in laughter.

“See his face when the chief walked up?” Krem howled. “Classic!”

Iron Bull smirked. “You all just gonna sit there while she’s harassed?”

“Oh, c’mon,” said Stitches. “Guy was harmless…and that was funny.” He chuckled.

“Yeah, yeah.” Bull grumbled.

Ayla smiled and nuzzled his chin. “He was just being friendly, my love.”

“He can go be friendly somewhere else…or risk having both arms and legs broken in multiple places. He can hit on whoever’s mate he wants, just not mine.”

“So protective,” she purred, wiggling her body to his side. One dark, delicate finger traced along his pointy ear. “I like that.”

He chuckled softly, releasing a low growl. “Behave yourself, Naaremma-Kadan.”
The couple continued sharing the company of friends, partaking in drinks, conversation, games, and laughter well past midnight, before they retired to their quarters for the night.

(*)

Upon waking each morning, Iron Bull had a set order of operations he performed—stretch, yawn, and junk-shift. So, he did just that. He stretched and yawned. His hand lowered over his naked body to perform the junk-shift, but his ample Qunari manhood wasn’t sitting along his thigh and hanging to the left as usual. In fact…

It wasn’t there at all!

His eye shot open while his hand swiped frantically over his genital region. He sat up quickly and fixed a wide gaze on that area of his body, breathing hard. Nope, no cock. Just a white tuft of hair. And ebony legs, feet, stomach.

“What the…?” Bull brought his hands up before his eyes. His little, smooth brown hands with their cute little nails. He gasped at the boobs protruding from his chest. “What the fuck!”

He touched his throat. The voice that left his mouth wasn’t his. It was Ayla’s. He rapidly covered his right eye, then the left, back and forth; he could see out of them both. Beside him, along his right side, someone shifted. Bull slowly looked, mouth falling open, eyes widening. It was him, or rather his body, lying on his back nude and lightly snoring. And if he was in Ayla’s body…

The Qunari took a few breaths. There was an explanation for this, and until it could be found, he had to stay calm for them both, because something told him she certainly wouldn’t be. He hesitantly touched her arm, finding it completely unsettling to feel so dwarfed by himself. Bull shook her.

“Ayla,” he said in her voice, but with his inflections and stresses, her regal accent gone. When she didn’t wake immediately, Iron Bull shook harder. “Ayla, wake up.”

He watched as she lurched, then sat up quickly, riled from her slumber.

“…but I didn’t steal your apples,” Ayla said in a groggy, resonant Iron Bull-voice, only with her accent. She stretched and looked down her body, able to see the long, muscular legs, highly-toned stomach…and a cock! She screamed but it came out bassy and deep rather than shrill, huge gray hands flapping wildly. “I HAVE A THINGY! OHMYGODS, I HAVE A THINGY! IRON BULL, I...HAVE...A...THINGYYYY!”

“Yeah…it’s mine,” he said.

Ayla finally looked to her left and saw herself staring back at her. Her eye widened further.

“Ayla, calm down. It’s me. It’s Bull.”

Calm down? Did he really think that would work? She screamed again and backed away, right over the side of the mattress, thumping to the floor. She proceeded to panic further, standing and scurrying across the room, unable to see anything but shadow-shapes, and even that was hindered since she was down an eye currently. She spun and tripped over Iron Bull’s boots, crashing to the floor again, where she huddled and started sobbing.

Iron Bull watched the whole display from the bed in silence. There wasn’t much he could do in his present state. She needed to get a grip before he approached, or he might find himself accidentally tackled. He was less than half her size now, and she was a mostly blind woman in the body of a three-hundred-pound Qunari warrior. He moved from the bed and walked slowly towards her where she hunkered and cried, clearly extremely frightened and disoriented.

“It’s alright, Naaremma. Calm down, please,” Bull smirked lightly. “I find it quite unsettling to see myself like that. The Iron Bull doesn’t cry.”

Ayla gathered some deep breaths, massive shoulders heaving. She could see his shadow-shape as he closed in. She didn’t move when his small hand fell on her arm, bringing clarity to just her right eye. Iron Bull took her large hand, urging her to stand, and she did very slowly. They stood there for a moment, bodies swapped, getting a bittersweet taste of how it felt to be the other. Bull stared up at the mountain of muscle that was his own body. The one eye fixed on him was filled with confusion, fear, and uncertainty. Just when he thought he’d calmed Ayla down, she swooned, swayed, and fainted.

Iron Bull had to quickly leap aside to keep from being crushed by his own huge mass as it fell like a downed tree.

“What. The. Fuck!” he swore, voice sweetly gruff and high-pitched. He sighed deeply and wondered how they’d fix this, since he already figured he knew what had caused it.
When Ayla finally came to, it took a little more coaxing from her husband to calm her. She pulled on a pair of his briefs and he slipped into one of his shirts, which hung loosely over his newly acquired Ayla-body. Bull stood before the tall mirror, examining himself, shaking his head.

“Un-fucking-believable,” he said.

Ayla slipped slowly back into the reflection just behind him, hand gripping his. The moment her vision cleared up and she again saw herself wearing his Qunari body like some tailored suit, the woman mewled and ducked from sight, out of the reflection.

“Stay calm, angel. We’ll fix this.”

Ayla slowly eased back, making contact, looking down gravely at him. “How? We don’t even know what caused it?” she said, resonant, accented voice quivering.

The two of them studied their reflections again.

“It was that Elven thing you touched yesterday, I know it.” Bull chuffed and touched the sides of his head. It felt so damned weird not having the familiar weight of his horns up there. “Solas said not to touch anything, but what do you do? You, being a hard-headed woman, go and touch things anyway. Now, look what’s happened. I’m cockless and you’re missing an eye. I hope you’re satisfied, Naaremma.” He expelled a dry laugh, completely void of any true humor.

Ayla sighed deeply and hugged strong, solid arms around him, pulling him close the way a child might smug a coveted stuffed animal toy. “I’m scared.”

“And I’m being crushed,” Bull struggled in the bear-hug, smiling gently. “Easy, woman. You’ll have to work on controlling that strength.”

“Oh,” she gasped and loosened the loop of her arms, but didn’t let go. Nope, she might’ve been the bigger one for the moment, but he was still her rock, her stronghold. She needed the emotional security only he could offer her right now. “I’m sorry, love. What should we do?”

“Well, I think we need to tell the boss what happened first, then he’ll go with us to Solas, where you can tell the elf about your straying hands.”

Ayla’s great shoulders slumped and she looked away at some random thing, knowing she’d done bad by not listening to Solas’s instructions. “Okay…” she mumbled.

Getting ready that day turned out to be a grueling challenge. They started with Ayla first, since she posed the bigger (literally) of the two difficulties. The woman insisted on wearing a shirt, but after sending a horn tearing through one garment, Bull convinced her that his body was warm enough to keep her comfortable. So, she finally decided on pants, boots, and his eyepatch, which he helped secure into place. There was a little trick involved, since it needed to be attached to his right horn.

Iron Bull got ready relatively easy, slipping into one of the dresses Ayla owned, with her help. He pulled on a pair of slippers, then moved back to the tall mirror, grimacing. Ayla was right with him. His hair was a lovely, wild disarray of whiteness around his shoulders. He grabbed at it, trying to secure it back, but it was too thick and fluffy.

“Gah, I don’t see how you deal with all this hair, Naaremma. I’m about ready to chop it off.”

“You most certainly will not cut my hair!” she roared in her accented Bull-voice.

He laughed. “No, I won’t. I love it…on you.”

“Here, let me fix it,” Ayla said, smiling down at him. Bull stood by and examined the oddly humorous reflection of himself easily forming one thick braid from Ayla’s hair. “There.”

He sighed deeply. “It’ll do. C’mon, angel.”

For a moment, they just stared at one another, unsure of how to proceed, seeing as Ayla normally linked her little hands around his forearm. Iron Bull blinked up at her, once again experiencing the overpowering way in which his hulking figure made him feel so small.

His eyes raked over her, his head barely reaching the top of her chest. “By the Qun, this is how you see me? I’m fucking huge.”

Ayla blurted a laugh. “No, you think? Here, just link your hands to my arm like we usually do. It’s the most comfortable way to go about it, my warrior.”

Bull hesitantly reached to lock his hands to the hard, rippling muscle of her arm. “This is so weird.”

“Hm. I think I like this, being so high up, this big,” she giggled. “No one would ever mess with me. I would only have to punch them and they’d die.”
The Qunari chuckled. “Don’t get used to it. I’m getting my body back.”

“What if…” Ayla panicked, eye shooting down to him, “…we’re stuck like this.”

“Let’s hope not, because we would never be having sex again.”

She grinned. “Oh, yes we would.”

“Don’t think so, woman. Besides, there’s got to be a way to reverse this, and Solas will know how. Let’s just get to the boss.”

They left their quarters to face the world for the first time in their swapped bodies.

When they stepped from the east tower a few minutes later, they stopped right past the hanging eaves, skimming the yard and surrounding area. They both wondered if anyone could tell just by looking at them that they weren’t who they were supposed to be.

So far, no one said anything.

Bull took a breath, cracked his head on his neck, then started them for the castle main. “This feels so weird. I’m so…little. I haven’t been this small since I was ten.”

“Or perhaps my body is normal-sized, and you’re just big,” Ayla returned.

“Hm.” He spared a look over up at her, doing a double-take. Bull smirked thickly. “Do you have to walk like that?”

“Like what? This is how I always walk.” Her steps were short and delicate, large left hand floating daintily in the air. “Besides, it’s not like you’re ‘walking’ my body any better. You could soften it up a bit, make it not as manly.” Ayla giggled.

“Not likely, Naaremma.”

As they rounded the yard and approached the steps into the castle, they saw the gathered crowd around the high, double-door entrance. They slipped through the bodies and went in. On the far side of the room Hannibal sat on the throne, and a man was in chains before him, flanked by guards. At least they wouldn’t have to go looking for the Inquisitor—he was performing a judgment on this late morning.

Bull and Ayla worked their way closer. She looked down at her husband and asked lowly, “What is this?”

“As head of the Inquisition, the boss has the vested power to pass judgment and serve sentencing to anyone who has acted against the Inquisition.”

“Has he ever…had anyone killed?” Her eye widened, handsome face softening even more.

“Since me and the Chargers have worked for him, just one guy. Did some really nasty shit. He got what was coming to him.”

“I see…”

They watched and listened as the sentencing came up.

Hannibal sighed and rubbed his temple. Some of the things he had to judge at times were honestly quite unbelievable. The man before him now was obviously more than a little mentally unstable, and not in the mass-murderer way, but more in the lock-him-in-an-asylum-and-toss-the-key way. The Herald of Andraste leaned forward slowly on the throne.

“Okay, Pelod Bruendil, farmer of Ferelden. Because you disagree with the reassembly of the Inquisition and its presence in the south, you took it upon yourself to enter one of our camps and proceeded to…” Hannibal’s gaze slid to Josephine, who only shrugged, a smile on her face. He sighed and fixed his eyes on the accused again, “…engage in an orgy with two goats and a sheep to display your displeasure.”

A low wave of laughter ruffled through the hall.

Hannibal merely blinked at the guy. “Is that about right?”

Pelod Bruendil, a rather skinny and gaunt man with large eyes, twitched and sniffed, lifting his chin. “Damned Inquisition, taking over the land. If goats must be fucked to stop you, that is what will happen.”

Somewhere in the crowd, Iron Bull chuckled. “This guy’s lost his shit.”

Ayla nudged him. “That’s not funny!” she said in a deep, properly accented whisper. “He’s obviously disturbed.”

“That’s putting it lightly.” Bull quipped.

Hannibal shook his head and scratched his beard, smirking at Josephine, who stood off to the side with her record scroll, laughter on the tip of her tongue and glistening in her eyes. “Okay, Farmer Bruendil, here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to release you on the grounds of free speech, since we all have the right to think, feel, and say what we please. However, I’m having all the
small livestock removed from your farm until further notice. Engaging in sexual acts with animals is unsanitary and...completely uncalled for."

The Inquisitor signaled for the guards to move in.

"Release him. See that a detail leaves tomorrow to transport him down the mountain, back to his farm, and that they remove all animals smaller than druffalo and horses from the premises."

The guards nodded, leading a baffled-looking Pelod from the hall, probably wondering what he’d have sex with once the animals were gone.

It didn’t take long for the crowd to break up. Hannibal just sat there on the throne, shaking his head. He eyed Josephine when she approached. "That was the worst one yet. I’m looking forward to the day when these judgments are done."

The lovely ambassador chuckled and pat his shoulder. "But you handle them so well. Some of the expressions you have makes it even funnier."

"Glad my irritated discomfort amuses you." He smiled faintly. His aqua eyes swung from her to Iron Bull and Ayla who had walked up. He donned a smile at the couple, then narrowed his eyes; they seemed a little different. Perhaps, it was the timid way Iron Bull clung to Ayla, or Ayla’s straightforward, steady gaze. "Good day, you two. Is everything alright."

Iron Bull in Ayla’s body crossed his arms over his chest. In her husband’s large figure, Ayla shifted a big hand so it rested gently along his neck, maintaining her vision.

"To be honest, boss, things are far from alright," answered Bull.

Hannibal’s head tilted a bit, slowly, while he studied who he thought to be Ayla...even though Iron Bull’s words and inflections carried on her voice. He stood and went closer. "Iron Bull?" He stared down at Ayla’s body.

"Yeah."

Hannibal jerked his eyes to Iron Bull’s body. "Ayla?"

She grinned back sheepishly in answer.

The Inquisitor’s gaze swung between them a few more times and he swiped his hand over his beard. "I...wow. Is this for real?"

Josephine stepped closer, mouth opened in disbelief, listening and staring.

"Afraid so." Bull nodded. "I would never even pretend to look so soft and helpless. No offense, Naaremma."

"None taken. I just want this fixed."

"What the hell is this! What happened!" Hannibal demanded.

"Well...you see, my wife likes to touch magical elf shit..."

(*)

Solas’s twilight-hued eyes were narrowed and fixed on the swapped couple, swinging slowly between them. Hannibal stood nearby. He’d walked them to the Fadewalker with the quickness, where they explained the unfortunate situation. Solas had then immediately slipped on some gloves, re-enchanted the Statue of Ahime Anta with a barrier, and placed the thing in a locked glass case. It sat in the center of the desk.

Solas paced a moment, then spun to them. "I specifically said not to touch anything."

"It was her," Bull said.

"You’ve made that clear enough.” Ayla nudged him, miscalculating her own strength. He stumbled lightly. She immediately panicked and pulled him close. "Oh, I'm sorry, my love!"

"Too tight, Naaremma."

"Oh." She loosened the hug.

"What are we going to do about this, Solas?" Hannibal asked.

The slimly-built Elvhen man huffed lightly, shrugging, shaking his head. His smooth, serenely handsome face was carved into a mask of displeasure. ‘Honestly, I’m not sure. I hadn’t even begun to scratch the surface of the statue’s power before this”–he flicked a hand at Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull–“happened." Solas took a breath and softened his expression. “I sent word to some colleagues of mine in the Exalted Plains about the item a couple of days after you brought it back. I requested any writings they might have.”

"That was three weeks ago,” Hannibal said. “No word yet?"

"Afraid not, but that may be because of the high level of bandit attacks along the merchant roads.”
Hannibal nodded. “Right. Okay, Solas, I want you to get with Josephine and Leliana. Between the three of you, I’m sure you’ll be able to find a more expeditious route for getting those materials here faster. Anything would be of great assistance.” His aqua vision sifted to the swapped couple. “I need this fixed as soon as possible. Iron Bull is of little use to us as a warrior in this state.”

“Understood, Inquisitor,” Solas replied.

Hannibal turned fully to Bull and Ayla, a smile spreading slowly. “Until then, I suppose you two can continue to get acclimated to your new bodies. Ayla, your practices with Morrigan are on hold for the time being.”

“Great,” Bull grunted.

Ayla groaned.

(*)

Iron Bull figured it wouldn’t take long for his and Ayla’s magical mishap to spread through the Inner Circle and, consequently, the rest of Skyhold. Before evening had begun to settle in, the sun a blazing blotch of orange just behind the jutting western Frostback peaks, they’d been approached by Dorian, Varric, Sera, Krem, and Dalish. Each of them had stared at the couple with amazement, smiles, and some laughter.

Ayla laid on her back on the bed in her and Bull’s quarters, slightly peeved that she couldn’t easily curl up on her side due to the horns jutting from her head. She was wearing pants and the eyepatch, clutching a pillow close, unseeing eye fixed on the ceiling.

Iron Bull moved about the room preparing a dinner of roasted, seasoned salmon steaks, vegetables, and dinner rolls. He had changed into the shirt and pants Ayla got back in the Basin Floor camp. He found the dress to be too cumbersome. Tomorrow, figuring he’d be stuck in her body for a while, he would visit a clothing vendor in the market, pick up some small tops, pants, and a good pair of boots.

He turned over a slender shoulder from the cook station at the hearth, eyes falling on his wife. Bull chuckled. “Ayla, it won’t do any good to lay about sulking over this. It is what it is for now. Once Solas gets his materials on that statue, he’ll figure out a way to switch us back. You should try to lighten up, angel.”

Ayla’s great chest rose and fell with a heavy sigh and her blind eye eased in his direction. “I should’ve never touched the stupid thing.”

“No argument from me.” He laughed, and the sound of it suited him, even though it was in her voice. It was a smooth, hearty sound, unlike Ayla’s trilling laughter.

“I’m sorry I got us into this, my love,” she said softly, remorsefully.

“Oh, Naaremma, if there’s one thing I’ve come to expect from you, it’s that I will never cease to be amused. We’ll just ride this out. C’mon, dinner’s ready.”

She chuffed and sighed. “I’m not hungry.”

Bull went to the bed and sat on the edge, touching her tattooed arm. They locked eyes and he smiled softly at her. “Come eat dinner, woman. I won’t have my body wasting away.”

“Fine.” She sat up, putting them face to face. Ayla eased in and nuzzled her nose to his, eye closing.

Bull knew she wasn’t looking for sexual contact; that would be too weird for them both. He was very familiar with his wife and understood she wanted to be comforted and held. He rose on his knees and wrapped slender, dark arms over her massive shoulders, holding her head to his chest.

“It’ll be alright, Naaremma. You’ll see. This will all get fixed faster than you know.” I fucking hope so. Because this whole arrangement is completely throwing me off.

Ayla pulled back to settle her eye on him again. She slowly moved in like she might kiss him, and right before their mouths touched, Bull swayed back.

“I’m…sorry. I can’t do this,” he said.

Ayla released him, arms crossing self-consciously over the muscular expanse of her impressive chest. Her head dropped, eye straying from his. “You don’t find me attractive…”

“In your body, I do. But…well…you’re in mine at the moment, and the whole thing is too weird for me.” Iron Bull hugged her around the shoulders. “It’s unsettling to think of getting intimate with you right now, even for a kiss. I’m sorry, Naaremma-Kadan, but I just can’t do it.”

She nodded and met the vivid, crystal-blue gems of his eyes, staring back into her own lovely face. “I understand. It is very unnerving. Let’s hope we won’t have to be in these bodies forever then.”

“Well, if we did, I’m sure we’d eventually become physical again. But…” He grinned big. “…not gonna happen. We’ll get fixed.”
Ayla smiled broadly, nodding. “You’re right. We will. I love you, my warrior.”

“I will always love you.” Bull hugged her again, then moved from bed, pulling her along. “Now let’s have some dinner and head to the tavern. I imagine there will be more stares and questions. Best to get it all out now.”

Ayla groaned and rolled her eye. “Yeah…”

(*)

“…And all because you touched that statue?” Blackwall mused. He, Varric, Dorian, and Cassandra had halted their Wicked Grace when Qunari-Ayla and Human-Iron Bull entered the place, going to the Chargers. Now, they all sat at the tables and benches by the hearth in a semicircle around the couple speculating and tossing questions. “It’s a good thing Cole warned us about touching it. I could find m’self swapped with the Inquisitor, Cole, or even Vivienne right now.”

Cassandra issued a wry smirk. “That woman is insufferable. I’d rather be Iron Bull any day.”

The group laughed, though she was being quite serious.

“This is all so farfetched that I hope you don’t mind if I use it in another novel I’m working on,” Varric said, grinning.

Bull looked over at Ayla. “That would be up to my lovely wife.”

“As long as you split profits with us,” Ayla quipped, chuckling. She was very happy that Bull coaxed her into getting out for the evening. The company of friends lent her further comfort during this strange time.

“Deal.” The dwarf leaned back casually in his chair, short legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles.

Dorian’s lovely eyes narrowed when he grinned, sipping from his drink. Hearth fire reflected in those gray-lavender pools. “I’m curious to know how the sex will be now.”

Ayla blushed profusely, trying to hide her face against Iron Bull but failing since she was so big. The others chuckled and hooted.

The Qunari smirked a bit. “Oh, there won’t be any of that. Gotta draw the line somewhere.”

“You might like it,” the Altus pushed, primping his moustache.

“I doubt it,” said Bull.

“So…guess this means no sparring for the moment, eh, chief?” Krem asked.

“Nonsense!” he answered. “Just because I’m in this body doesn’t make me useless. I’ll see you in the training yard tomorrow, runt.”

Blackwall burst into laughter. “Sorry, but that sounds so funny coming from Ayla’s lips, in her voice.”

Ayla studied her husband. “You’d better be careful fighting in my body.”

“I will, Naaremama. Krem de la Krem will be gentle, won’t you?” Bull flicked a grin at the lieutenant.

“Yeah, sure.”

Most of the Inner Circle continued to speculate and comment on Ayla’s and Bull’s situation for nearly the remainder of the evening. The Qunari and his lady bid them goodnight well before midnight and retired back to their room.
Greetings, From One Fadewalker to Another

The couple had gone through a lot of tossing and turning before they finally fell asleep. Ayla lay on her back in the usual place, between Bull and the wall, her horned head resting in a pile of pillows. Iron Bull wasn’t used to having such a small bulk and became cold in the night. He curled on his side with his back pressed to her for warmth.

Ayla shifted, stirring fully awake. When she opened her eye, she clearly saw the ceiling because Bull’s bare thigh touched her own. She stretched, seeping a low groan. Her eye traveled downward and settled on the morning wood in her briefs. She was quite taken aback by it, stiff and throbbing, pointing up and to the right, lying against her groin. Hesitantly, she took a finger to it, poking.

And she was surprised at how good that little bit of contact felt. A welcoming, warm tingle spread through her Qunari loins. The woman grimaced and made a face. She pivoted her large body so she spooned around her husband.

Bull’s eyes opened slowly and he grunted. “I hope that’s not what I think it is,” he said groggily, then flipped to his back. He stared up at her.

“Can’t you just…do something?” Ayla whined.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Like, touch it, or something.”

Iron Bull laughed. “Don’t think so. You’re wearing the cock, so it’s your problem.”

Ayla rolled her eye, then narrowed it. She suddenly slipped one leg between his and shifted her body so she could grab his hands. Bull now found himself securely pinned beneath his own massive size, though she was doing well to keep from crushing him. The solid heat of his own erection pressing into his hip was unnerving.

She grinned at him. “It is my body.”

“Well, I’m wearing it right now, so that makes it mine. This is not happening, woman. I damn sure won’t be fucked by myself,” Bull said, a short laugh easing from him. “And with you at the reins, this body would never walk right again, since you have no idea what to do.”

Ayla smirked. “I have a pretty good idea. You just stick…you know…things in places.”

He laughed a bit more, struggling to free himself. “No. I don’t care how horny you are or my body is, we are not doing this. You have two hands. Pick one, woman.” He was inwardly thanking any and all gods that ever existed for bringing his kuma’ta kalifaar to him a week ago. Bull couldn’t even begin to imagine how this would play out if it struck while Ayla was in his body.

“Oh, so it’s okay for you to jump on me in my sleep, but I can’t do it to you?”

“In your own body, yes. In my body, not a fucking chance. Get off me, Naa remma. You’re creeping me out.” Iron Bull chuckled up at her.

Ayla sighed and rolled from him, flopping to the mattress, leg shifting to touch Bull’s for skin to skin contact. She looked down her solid, rugged, toned, tattooed, sculpted gray body to the hardened thickness straining against black briefs and groaned. “I hate this…and I have to pee.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what you get for touching that statue.” Bull grinned and sat up, moving from bed. “C’mom. Get your pants and boots on, and I’ll take you down to the privy. That’ll help get rid of it.”

(*)

The morning was still young. The vendors were just now beginning to open for business. To save time, since he was anxious to get some clothing more fitting to his tastes, Iron Bull suggested they have breakfast in the great hall. They got ready and left their room, heading there.

Out in the yard, Ayla smiled down at Bull. “What shall we do today, my love?”

“Hmm. Don’t have much planned, besides getting more clothes and some sparring with Krem. I have one hell of a job ahead of me getting your body attuned to handling a weapon.” He grinned up at her, caressing her sinewy arm when she stiffened.

“Planning on going into battle sometime soon?” Ayla lifted a brow, the deep, accented tones of her voice carrying a hint of worry.

“No.” Iron Bull chuckled. “But you never know when you’ll find yourself in a fight. No telling how long we’ll be in these bodies, and I like to stay prepared. So, I’ll keep training.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Though, do be careful, husband. I don’t have any scars really and would like to keep it that way.”
“I will, Naaremna.”

Before they entered the great hall, Ayla smelled the fragrance of sweet rolls coasting on the air. It made her stomach growl. She hadn’t eaten very much yesterday and was feeling the hunger pangs kicking in. She licked her lips.

Across the room, sitting at a table with a plate of toast, a cup of tea, and a book, Dorian smiled and waved them over. Once they made plates, they headed to his table. The Altus’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

“How are you two feeling this morning?”

“Definitely not like myself,” Bull answered.

The response pulled a short round of laughter from Dorian, who sipped his tea. “I’m sure.”

“I’m actually feeling a little famished,” said Ayla, who yanked up a sweet roll and began eating.

“Mm.”

Bull kept his little hand on her arm so she could use both of hers to eat. With his other hand, he forked up some eggs. “I have a high metabolism, so you’re going to need to eat regularly. I once went nine days living on a berry-and-nut mix during my time in Seheron. I lost over fifteen pounds and almost passed out multiple times. That hunger was the worst.”

“Mm…” was all Ayla said, nodding. The woman was forking in scrambled eggs now, followed by a whole piece of bacon, which she devoured in three bites. Once her mouth was empty, she buttered a biscuit, spread jam on it, then ate the flaky, yummy thing in four bites. “I can understand now why you eat as much as you do, my warrior. I’m starving.”

Iron Bull chuckled. “Yeah.”

Dorian eased back in his chair, leaning to the side, one leg crossed over the other. He smiled at Ayla. “Have anything planned after breakfast?”

She chewed and swallowed, shaking her horned head. “No.”

“Good. We’re going upstairs to talk then.”

“Okay.”

As Iron Bull tended to his own meal, his gaze focused across the table on Dorian, noticing the way he watched Ayla. There was something feisty in that mage’s eyes, something mischievous. Bull wondered if he truly wanted to know what thoughts ran rampant in the little man’s mind.

A short while later, once Ayla had gotten her fill, she and Iron Bull stood face to face at the end of the table.

“I’ll see you later, angel,” the Qunari said.

“Okay…” she said softly, clearly disappointed at the little wedge stuffed between them because of the body-swap, making it difficult to display any intimacy. Ayla offered a small smile down at him.

Bull sighed while they locked gazes. She was his wife, his beautiful treasure, and she needed him more than ever now. There was zero chance he’d ever feel right about engaging in sex with her while they were like this, but he supposed he could allow a little more closeness. He softened his expression, caressing her large hands in his, palms lightly callused from years of weapons wielding.

“C’mere, Naaremna-Kadan,” he said, lifting on his toes, face pointing up at her.

Ayla’s smile broadened and she leaned down to nuzzle noses with him, reveling in the warmth. She closed her eye, holding him close.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” she answered.

The couple shared another nuzzle, then Bull pulled back, leaving her in Dorian’s company.

(*)

In a woman’s body or not, Iron Bull was completely male. Within thirty minutes of leaving the main hall, he’d settled on a vendor, picked out some shirts, tunics, pants, and boots, then gotten the items back up to his and Ayla’s room.

He pulled on a long-sleeved, dark-red top, tucking it into a pair of knit pants. The boots he’d chosen were closely tailored, fitting up his slender calves. The whole outfit was functional and appealing, showing off his small waist and inviting curves.

Ayla had fashioned his hair into a braid that morning, and it hung past the middle of his back, swinging rhythmically with his long stride. He’d tried the training yard, but hadn’t seen Krem, and when he’d tried the barracks, which is where the Chargers were shacked up, Rocky said the lieutenant had spent the night at Maryden’s and given Bull the location.
The Qunari went to the north tower, fifth floor. He rapped knuckles to the bard’s door. He heard muffled talking on the other side, two voices. A few moments later, the door opened a crack, revealing Maryden’s face.

Bull smiled at her. “Good day. I’m looking for Krem.”

“Yes,” Maryden said over her shoulder, then slipped back so Krem’s face could replace hers.

The lieutenant grinned. “Morning, chief.” His brown eyes drew over Bull’s outfit. “Nice. Didn’t realize you were serious about sparring.”

Yep. Training yard in twenty, runt.” The corner of his mouth lifted into a completely Iron Bull smile; the expression could honestly be called more handsome than beautiful.

Before Krem could protest, Bull walked off.

(*)

“This has got to be the strangest thing you’ve ever experienced,” Dorian remarked. He lay on his side on the huge bed, head propped on his hand.

Ayla’s long and tall body was stretched out beside him, her arms folded behind her horned head. She sighed. “I still can’t believe it’s happened. I can only imagine if Elemir saw me like this. I mean, I already know he won’t be happy to find out I’ve married Iron Bull, but to find me in his body… This is so insane.”

Dorian laughed. “Things could always be worse, love. On the one hand, you’re trapped in someone else’s body; on the other hand, that body is so large and intimidating that you effectively deter unwanted people because of your size and stature.”

“Yes… I suppose that could be a positive.” Ayla continued watching the hazy shadows of the ceiling, the only view awarded her by her broken sight. She grinned over at him. “I could just see you getting trapped in Hannibal’s body.”

“Ha! Not something I’d like to endure.”

Silence settled between them, and for those long seconds, Dorian let his eyes roam slowly over The Iron Bull’s huge, chiseled body. Donning a playful smile, he suddenly scooted close and climbed on top of her, straddling.

“Dorian! What are you doing?” Ayla’s blind, sky-blue eye widened.

“I’ve always wanted to do this, and I’ll never get another chance.”

She erupted in deep, trilling laughter, quivering under him. “I’m not going to let you molest my husband’s body, especially while I’m in here.”

“Oh, I have no intention of doing anything serious, love. Just… looking.” The mage lowered his face closer to hers, skimming her handsome features closely. The fine bands of her lips, her pointy ears, a strong chin that was brushed with stubble. “Remarkable…”

Ayla laid there and let him get his look. She stiffened when she felt the warmth of his breath on her cheek, across her lips. His shadow-shape loomed before her one-eyed blurriness. She was quite unprepared when his lips met hers. What surprised her more was that she didn’t stop him. It was pleasant and gentle, and his moustache tickled her top lip. She began to kiss the Altus back, a familiar heat building at the center of her, spreading outward. And just below that rising passion was her power, igniting, excited to life by Dorian’s actions.

For Dorian, it wasn’t about sex or even desire. It was about taking a once in a lifetime chance to do something daring, something he’d never get to do otherwise. That’s why he stole the kiss. He smiled against her lips when she began to kiss him back… then he snapped his eyes open as his body hummed, gathering his energy, while also channeling her own thoughts and feelings.

Desire equals heat; heat equals flames. Dorian’s hand shot out towards the run of long windows leading to the balcony. He couldn’t stop the ball of flame that flew from his palm at the draperies, setting them on fire.

“Fasta vass! Not again!” He sat up, still atop her, summoning an arctic breeze, which he focused on the thankfully mild flames, quickly extinguishing them.

“What happened?” Ayla stared up at his blurry shape.

“Nothing serious. Set the curtains on fire. It’s out now.”

Her eye flicked in the direction she knew the windows to be. “Um… how are you going to explain that to Hannibal?”

“Oh, I’ll think of something. This isn’t the first time those drapes have suffered such a fate; remind me to tell you about the first night between my Amatus and I sometime.”
“Okay…” she said.

Another bout of silence passed between them.

Dorian grinned broadly and poked her chest, wiggling his hips. “Mm…ten or eleven inches, indeed.”

Ayla had become aroused with the man on top of her, not that wearing Iron Bull’s wood was new to her. She smiled fiercely, cheeks reddening, at the same time bucking and rolling her hips to toss her best friend off. “You are such a bitch. Don’t ever do that again.”

They burst into laughter.

Bull had some time to spare while he waited for Krem to get to the training yard. He pushed the door to the weapon shack in, standing there with his arms crossed while he skimmed the racks. He grinned when he spotted what he was looking for. The axes. He went to the weaponry and examined the selection.

The first axe he chose turned out to be too heavy for him, and he couldn’t even get the damn thing off the rack. He had totally overestimated his wife’s body. She had most likely never done a day of physical labor in her life and possessed no weapons training, obviously. Her muscles were firm but not toughened. Simply put, she was as soft and feminine as they came.

Iron Bull sighed. He’d have to work on that, at least a little bit.

The fourth weapon he tried turned out to fit just right. It held some weight, acceptable balance, and a reinforced grip. The haft wasn’t overly long, perhaps about three feet, and the butt was narrower than his usual preference, lending a slim but sharp blade edge.

The Qunari took the weapon out into the training yard. There were a couple of other pairs sparing in different areas. He found an open spot and assumed a battle stance, one small hand on the grip, the other positioned high on the haft. To start and let his new (and hopefully temporary) body warm up, he performed a few light swings, pivoting with the weapon, letting its weight bring him around. To Bull, breaking in a new axe was like taming a wild stallion. You had to gain its trust, let it know that you would wield it well and bring it victorious through battle. Eventually, the axe would become an extension of yourself. That’s how he thought of it.

He swung again, bringing his body around in a cyclone. One revolution…two…three…gaining momentum. Then, he dropped his stance, allowing the axe’s flat blade to slice shallowly into the ground. He had to be patient with this, or he could put too much stress on Ayla’s body; he needed to work steadily towards his goal. Bull undug the axe, pulling it free with a light tug. Taking some breaths, rolling his head on his shoulders, all but smiling at the burn he was already getting in his muscles, he took up another stance, maneuvering the weapon left and right, left and right. His footing was light, matching and complementing the actions of his upper-body.

Across the yard, on his way to tend to something or other, Commander Rutherford spotted Ayla’s slender figure working out axe positions and rudiments. Her body was clothed in sleek pants, calf-hugging boots, and a form-fitting shirt. Her white mane was pulled back in a braid that nearly reached her bottom.

Oh, Cullen knew all about the body-swap. He’d seen the couple briefly yesterday when they were out and about. Still…he couldn’t deny how it excited him to see her with the weapon, wielding it with such skill, transformed into a warrior overnight, even it was Iron Bull controlling her body.

Bull swung and spun, bringing the weapon to a halt. He locked eyes with Cullen, lifting a brow.

“Eyes back in your skull, commander. On the inside, I’m a hundred percent Iron Bull.”

Cullen smirked thickly. “Clearly,” he remarked, then continued to his destination.

Krem passed the commander, moving into the training zone. He grinned after the handsome, blond man. “Forming a thing with the Lion of Skyhold?” He inquired jokingly.

“You’re a funny little man.”

Krem bellowed with laughter. He sat by while his chief practiced a bit more with the axe, after which Bull set the weapon aside so they could engage in some hand-to-hand sparring.

Fadewalking was easy for Solas. It came very naturally, as he was a mage and mystic who’d spent great amounts of time studying that reality where spirits dwelled. Regular people also entered the Fade randomly when they slept, though the place would be nothing but a dream-world to the less aware, to those who had neither the skill nor training to gain lucidity while in the Fade.

This was Solas’s mystery. He was a Dreamer—one that could freely walk the Fade and remember the experiences.

He roamed the halls of Din’un Hanin currently, drawing up the place in his thoughts, making it
manifest around him. The Fade was a place of surreal proportions and most things were possible there. It was also a meta-spiritual representation of the waking world, the real world, and that’s why many parts of the Fade were vague or distorted.

The elf moved along the stone corridor, everything tinted in a soft green hue. He passed a set of stairs that was broken, inverted, and traveling up into a dead-end. In some places, upside-down archways separated the walls. But Solas didn’t find this disturbing. He was used to seeing such inconsistencies in the realm of dreams and spirits. His interests in Din’an Hanin was for the knowledge of history that it contained. It was the final resting place of the Emerald Kings. Few had physically gone there since the fall of Halamshiral.

Solas suddenly stopped, sensing…something. Another consciousness, perhaps?

The tall stone walls of the tomb shivered around him, and so did the floor. Then it all sifted away in a haze, putting him in blackness, but only for a moment. When the Fade filled in around him again, the scenery was one the elf found very familiar.

He stood in the Fade’s version of Skyhold’s garden. Most of the plants were dead, the fountain slowly spewing green-tinted liquid. The gazebo that served as Morrigan’s second home was covered in vines, dried and dead. A single red rose sprung from a planter not far from him, and he stared at it before shooting his gaze up. There was no sky, not in the Fade. Only an ever-shifting veil of swirling mist.

Ahead of him, the door to Morrigan’s quarters opened, letting green light spill across the promenade. Solas’s guard was high, as the activity he’d detected, the other coherent presence, had gotten stronger. His eyes narrowed and he went to the door, standing off to the side, peeking into the room that he knew housed Morrigan’s magical things, including her Eluvian.

He skimmed the room’s innards, settling on the tall, magical Elvhen mirror, a doorway to any number of places. Solas’s eyes widened faintly when a figure stepped from the Eluvian. A man, that much Solas could tell. He began walking for the door, so Solas slowly eased back along the wall until he edged into a little nook.

The stranger didn’t see the elf when he slipped from Morrigan’s atrium to the promenade, taking the few steps forward that put him in the garden. Solas couldn’t see him clearly. He just had to know who the man was. So, he moved from hiding, silently going forward to watch, getting a much better look.

The man was dressed in black leather pants, boots, and an intricate, sleeveless vest-tunic that was also black, tailored low in the neck to reveal a solid chest brushed with dark hair. Finely-crafted bracers adorned each sinewy forearm. He was tall and broad, his body attractively muscular. His skin didn’t seem to be tinted green, unaffected by the coloring of the Fade; it was nicely tanned, olive. His thick, dark hair was cut short and neat, a bit longer on the top than it was in the back and on the sides.

The man in black strode casually to the planter holding the rose, which, like him, maintained its vibrant red color, untouched by the green of the Fade. Only something otherworldly, maybe even godlike, could appear as this man did amidst the spirit world, Solas knew. He watched the man, or entity, caress the rose, before he finally turned, fixing Solas with a surprised smile, though the elf clearly saw the malice in his rich brown eyes. Solas sensed the man’s devious nature as evidently as he felt the magic surging through himself.

“Oh…” the man said, perching one hand on the hilt of the sword sheathed at his side. “Didn’t realize I’d be meeting someone this time around. Color me startled.” He oozed a deep chuckle.

Solas took in as much visually and mentally as he could. This man, or whatever he was, was a threat, and his intentions wouldn’t be good. “I could say the same. I don’t meet many in the Fade that aren’t dead.”

“The Fade? That’s what you call this place between worlds?”

“Yes…” The elf had moved gradually closer. He was taking in the man’s features. By human standards, he would be considered very handsome. He had a medium beard and moustache, and a silver earring shaped like a dagger dangled from his left ear. There was a symbol on his belt buckle, the profile view of a helm (of Spartan design, but Solas wouldn’t know that. There were no such things as Spartans in Thedas).

“Ah. I call it the Void.”

“Fitting, I suppose. What is your name?”

The strange man was very keen, smart, and calculating. He saw the way Solas examined him. He issued a somewhat dark grin. “Don’t you worry about that just yet, Bold-Bald-and-Beautiful.” A resonant chuckle escaped him. “I think it’s time for you to”—the man lifted a fine hand and flicked it Solas’s way—“wake up.”

(*)

Solas’s eyes opened, and he blinked. He sat up slowly. Whoever that entity was—because Solas was sure he wasn’t human—he’d managed to displace the elf from the Fade. No one or nothing had ever done that before. He had powers well beyond Solas’s comprehension.

One thing was for sure, and that was the entity’s foul intentions. He had to let the Inquisitor know
about this encounter, because they might have something more serious than Corypheus to deal with.

Solas sighed and looked around his quarters, a simple dwelling located in the north tower. It contained a table and chairs, some shelves of books, racks for his clothing and staves. The fire in his hearth had burned down, but was still pleasantly warm. Once the new day started, he'd inform Hannibal of the strange Fadewalker.
“Bull! I told you to be careful with my body!”

“It’s just a few minor blisters, Naaremma. Can’t stop that from happening, messing with weapons and such.”

The couple sat on the bed with Ayla holding one of Bull’s small hands, her single eye studying the palm. The soft pads at the base of each finger had been reddened and tender last night before they went to bed, and this morning she’d awakened to see that small blisters had formed. She huffed and glared at her husband.

Iron Bull chuckled, shaking his head. “It’s not as serious as you think. They’ll clear up in a few days, once I get used to the axe.”

She continued giving him the stink eye, dark eyebrow lifting.

“Okay, okay, woman.” The Qunari produced another round of laughter, nuzzling noses with her. “How about I get a thin pair of gloves to help with the blistering.”

Ayla thought a moment, then smiled. “Very well.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m only doing this for you. I am your sword, after all. If something were to go down right now, I’d have to be able to protect you. I mean, you’re in my body, but you’re still pretty helpless, Naaremma.”

“I…suppose I hadn’t really thought about that…” She nodded, pulling him in for a long hug. “You’re right, and I appreciate that you look after me.”

Bull grinned, folded in the grip of his own arms, though she was getting better at controlling his strength, gauging its potential. “Someone has to.”

The couple had breakfast, then started their day. Ayla wanted to be taken to Dorian, and Bull would head to the training yard, then pay a visit to Leliana for any updates on the replacement Ben-Hassrath agents.

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With his hands braced to the desk in his atrium, Solas stared down at the sketch he’d made. It was of the image he’d seen on the entity’s belt buckle, which had gleamed silver against a black background. The helm. His eyes flicked up when Hannibal entered.

“Josephine said it was urgent that you speak with me.”

The elf nodded. “Yes. I must tell you of my experience during a trip into the Fade last night. I encountered…something.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. He edged closer, his solid Qunari build towering half a foot over the slender man. “Something?”

Solas pushed from the desk, pacing for a moment, shaking his head. He focused on Hannibal. “I don’t know what else to call him. He was dressed in black, with dark hair, brown eyes, and facial hair. Hm…” A short stint of pondering. “I had thought he might be of Tevinter, given his features. His skin tone was very much like Dorian’s, tanned. But…I don’t think he’s human.”

“Could he have been a spirit?”

“No. His energy wasn’t ‘dead’, it was very much alive, and very powerful. I sensed malcontent running all through him.” Solas’s gaze leveled on the taller man’s. “He’s very dark of intentions, Inquisitor. I would dare to say that he could be just as dangerous as Corypheus, because where Corypheus is trying to attain godhood, I believe this ‘man’ already has. He pushed me from the Fade with the flick of his wrist.” The elf looked away, mulling over the encounter again. “In that instant, I felt all my power and magic seep from me, inhibiting my ability to channel the Fade so that I may remain lucid within it. He displaced me.”

“I take it…that’s not a good thing.” Hannibal knew damn well it wasn’t good. He’d known next to nothing about the Fade and what lingered therein, until he met Solas. The elf was a master on the Fade, and if another entity had managed to kick him from that spirit realm, then that entity was a force to be reckoned with.

“It is unsettling,” Solas said. He turned to the desk, moving to the other side of it so Hannibal could get a good look at the sketch. “He wore this symbol on his belt buckle, a helmet of some sort. Does its design look familiar?”
The Inquisitor stared down at it, then locked eyes with Solas. “No, can’t say that it does.”

“I’ve tried cross-referencing it to armor-types in the books we have on hand here, but haven’t found a match. I’ll keep looking.”

“Okay. In the meantime, you need to be careful accessing the Fade while we figure out who this guy is.”

Solas nodded curtly. “Understood.” He had every intention of playing it safe, though he also intended to seek the entity out. His thirst for knowledge, his inexplicable desire to understand things, wouldn’t let him sleep on this, literally.

Solas planned to search the Fade again tonight to see if he’d come across the man again. Perhaps, he could learn something vital about him, starting with his name.

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It was time for twelve o’clock reports. Cullen was a man of military promptness and order. Though, he wasn’t without faults, as his previous lyrium addiction would indicate. It had been hard, but he’d kicked the habit with the help of his friends and colleagues. The Inquisitor had earned much respect and approval from the commander having enforced the decision for Cullen to quit taking the addictive drug, when he could’ve encouraged him to keep taking it.

For the most part, he was beyond the lyrium, though there were spare moments when he almost believed he craved it. Ghost withdrawals. They were minor, however, there to remind him of a time when he’d been weak and broken.

The commander’s long coat flapped at his legs as he moved by the training yard for the barracks to meet with his lieutenants for those reports. He stopped and his eyes fixed on Cassandra, who practiced with a training dummy. The toned woman had taken a stance and was jabbing and slicing her sword masterfully at the straw and burlap target. Her body executed quick and precise movements, spinning and dodging.

Cullen found himself staring at her. The lovely Seeker had actually been the main person tending to him during the laborious stretch of his withdrawal. She’d stayed in his quarters tending to him for five days straight while he sweated and shivered it out, and he could never thank her enough for being there for him. He smiled faintly, thinking of their dance, the way she’d been looking at him. She was a remarkable and beautiful woman. He supposed his dedication to duty first deterred him from seeing it, so used to keeping things professional, formal.

Cassandra halted and shook her arms out, head lolling on her shoulders. She froze when she saw Cullen watching her. The man heated with a light blush, rubbing the back of his neck, offering a smile. The Seeker returned the expression, then went back to practicing.

Iron Bull was leaving the training yard to meet up with Leliana. He stopped by Cullen, peering up in amusement at him with Ayla’s sparkling, mysterious eyes. “So, this is what you do, hm? Mosey on by the training yard to ogle hot warrior women?”

The commander turned slowly and looked down at the Qunari in Ayla’s beautiful body. He shook his head, rolling golden-brown eyes, then walked off. Bull chuckled after him, continuing to the Spymaster. With his back to Bull and Cassandra, the Lion allowed a vague smile to touch his features. Sure, he’d lost Ayla to an overbearing, infuriating Qunari, but he still had a life to live. Moving on was always tough. He’d do it gradually.

As he headed to meet his lieutenants, Cullen couldn’t stop thinking about how nice Cassandra’s ass looked in her pants back there.

(*)

Iron Bull ascended the last few steps that curled up to the atrium loft above Skyhold’s library. The place where Leliana and her people had set up shop. It had been nicknamed the Watchtower, which was quite fitting considering it was the headquarters of a spy network. He’d been up there several times, though not so much since he’d been deemed Tal-Vashoth.

His eyes roamed the rotunda. About a dozen crows watched him from their cages, piping out a squawk here and there. Besides Leliana, who sat at her desk looking over papers by lantern-light, four others occupied the Watchtower currently.
Bull approached the Spymaster and leaned to a wooden beam, arms crossing his chest. “Just checking in to see about the Ben-Hassrath replacements.”

Leliana didn’t look up immediately, only continuing to skim the documents before her a few moments longer. When she did finally turn, her mouth curled into a smile, eyes roaming over him. She’d heard about what had happened. She’d been so busy with things, though, that she hadn’t yet gotten a chance to see the swapped couple.

“You wear her nicely.”

“It’s certainly a change, going from being the biggest person in Skyhold to this, but I’ll hold up.” Iron Bull nodded, features lifting a smile.

“How is she doing?”

He uttered a short laugh, the lantern’s light casting warmly over him. “She’s been struggling with trying to quell that voracious Qunari libido, but doing good otherwise.”

Leliana’s head tilted as she studied him with her alluring green eyes. She chuckled. “Trying to jump on you, is she? Giving you a taste of your own medicine?”

Bull smirked thinly over his smile. “Hey, I’ve lived with that libido for a while. I know how to control myself.” He thought for a moment, shaking his head. “There are times when I feel helpless around her. I don’t think she would ever try to take sexual pleasure from me while we were switched, but if she did, I’d be fucked.”

“Literally!”

“Yeah.”

They shared a bout of laughter, before Leliana reined in the mirth a bit. She turned to her desk and grabbed up a slim piece of paper. It was somewhat curled as if it had been rolled up tightly. She handed it into Iron Bull’s slender, brown fingers.

He squinted at it. “Encoded.”

“Yes, but we’re working on breaking it. I believe it may be the names of at least two or three replacement personnel in your Ben-Hassrath circle. They’ve begun swapping out your old contacts.”

“Hrm.” Bull nodded and handed the paper back. “Once we get some names, I’ll let you know if there’s a chance any of them could be turned to ally with me, hence, the Inquisition.”

“It won’t be long. I’ll keep you updated. Likewise, if you have any information…”

“I’ll keep you posted,” said Bull. He moved from his lean against the beam, nodded to her, then turned to leave.

“Try not to get raped,” Leliana called after him, grinning.

Bull chuckled and disappeared down the curl of steps.

(*)

That evening, Ayla lay on her stomach on the great-bear rug reading one of the romance novels recommended by Dorian. One large hand perched under her lightly bearded chin, while the other skimmed fingertips across the pages. She wore only a pair of briefs. Her long, muscular legs were bent, swinging slowly back and forth, toes wiggling and curling.

Iron Bull moved about the room seeing to dinner. He looked over his slender shoulder at her from the cooking station, a warm smile sliding over his face. “Naaremma, those pages are filled with smut and sex. How do you read that?”

Ayla shrugged, smiling. “It’s not like my husband gives me sex these days. I might as well read about it.”

“Oh, we aren’t getting into that again, woman.” He laughed.

“Yes, I know. Honestly, I think it would be weird too, but that doesn’t mean I can’t imagine.” Ayla’s unseeing eye loomed in his direction, and she fixed him with a sensuous grin. “You could at least come snuggle with me.”

“I will. After dinner.” He turned back to the cooking station, stirring at the stew, which was nearly done. “Your body gets cold easily because you’re so tiny. I’m looking forward to curling up next to you for some heat.” Bull chimed a hearty laugh, facing her again. “And because I love you.”

(*)

Seheron.

Back into the memories of that particular hell Iron Bull was thrust. He dreamt of the jungle again, moving at a full run through the thick, tall grass and foliage. It was nearly dark out, the sky dimmed and the sun absent.
A child’s scream echoed from somewhere…everywhere.

Iron Bull, or Hissrad as he would be called in this time, stopped running and narrowed his eyes, listening. Things had gotten quiet. Too quiet. His vision yanked sideward to a place where the jungle broke and the plant-life peeled back. He could see light through the opening, warm and inviting. So much better than the haunting darkness that always accompanied these nightmares.

Slowly, he moved for the opening, into it, pushing branches and huge, tropical leaves out of his way. His feet snapped over twigs and sticks as he crept forward. His eyes widened when he stepped into a clearing. It was sunny, the sky blue and void of clouds. The colors here were vivid and dreamy. Low, soft green grass waved in a gentle, warm wind. A lazy stream weaved its way like a liquid snake through the clearing, and it ebbed a tranquil bubbling sound.

And lying near the stream, strewn languidly across a spread-out blanket with her white hair tossed around her naked body, was Ayla. Her head turned so she could lock eyes with him, offering him a beautiful, dimpled smile.

“Good, you found me,” she said.

Iron Hissrad Bull drew closer, looking down when he felt the grass under his bare feet. He was suddenly naked too and sporting a raging boner. Grinning, he met her eyes again, lowering to the blanket beside her.

“How…is this happening? Is this your dream or mine?”

“Our.” Her small hand caressed over his face. Ayla frowned lightly, more of a pout. “You don’t look like you, my warrior. You’re not Hissrad; you’re Iron Bull.”

“Oh, yeah…” He closed his eyes and focused, nudging all thoughts of Seheron to the back of his mind. Once he did that, his countenance shifted—a few more scars appeared, as well as his slashed left eye and eyepatch. Now he was Iron Bull, more battle-worn but no less handsome. He grinned at her as he stretched out and traced the backs of his fingers across her smooth, flat belly.

“Better?”

“Much.”

The couple relished in this new dimension of interaction. Ayla had spent most of that day wondering if their soul-bond would make it possible for them to share a lucid dream. She didn’t see why not; it appeared that, with just a little concentration and open minds, it would work. Here, in their dreams, they could enjoy one another, since the body-swap was complicating things in the waking world. They would be themselves here, and she could also see freely.

Licking her lips, Ayla reached out to brush fingers down his chest, across his hard stomach, lowering until they locked on his pulsing manhood. It was so hot and lively in her grip. Iron Bull’s eye rolled shut and he groaned when she began stroking its thick, hard length slowly. Even the sensations in their dream world were strong; they might as well have been awake doing this, he thought.

“Mm, Naaremma…” he drawled hungrily, rotating his hips into her grip. His eye opened and watched her working him.

Ayla’s eyes narrowed heatedly. She maneuvered to her knees, then pushed at his chest, signaling him to lean back on his elbows. So he did. She positioned herself between his legs, tossing her hair over her shoulder so she could lock gazes with him as she lowered her mouth close to the huge gray cock in her hands. Flashing him a playful smile, Ayla flicked her tongue out for a taste of the shining, swollen head. His flavor was heady and delicious. She took the tip of him in her mouth.

Bull groaned and shivered, determined to keep his eye on her while she blew him. The sight of his angel performing such sexual deviance thrilled him immensely. Oh, she would definitely be doing this in the waking world, once they got switched back. He’d make sure of it, even if he had to beg. Though, he knew he wouldn’t. She was enjoying it as much as he. He watched as she took as much of him in her mouth as she could, her sweet, soft lips stretched around its girth. She managed to get a little more than half his cock in before he felt the back of her throat. She slurped and sucked, using her little hands to stroke the rest of him, getting him nice and juicy.

“By the fucking…Qun…yes! Oh, Ayla…”

Bull couldn’t take it, he swung his head back to the blanket, eye closing, hips thrusting gently. If he continued watching her any longer, he was going to unleash his seed. She looked so fucking sexy sucking him off. Hell, he wasn’t going to last long either way. He allowed her oral attentions to carry on for a few more minutes, before he sat up and gently pulled her away, up his body. Holding her close, he rolled to put her beneath him.

Ayla gasped excitedly, wrapping her legs around his waist. “Fill me, my warrior. Love me…”

And he did. He slid slowly into her warm, snug, wetness. Quivering wonderfully as she shrunk around him. Bull pulled out quickly, quelling down the release he had working up. It loomed right there at the edge. He opened his eye and smiled handsomely down at her.

She wiggled her hips and giggled. “Too much for you, husband?”
“Yes,” he answered immediately. “Too fucking much. The things you do to me, Naaremma. My control has been jack shit since you fell into my life.”

“Mm…good. I love you just as well untamed.”

“I know you do. Such a bad girl.”

“I want you…now…” she whimpered and pouted, arms clutched to his shoulders. Ayla gripped his head and eased it down for a searing kiss, prodding her tongue into his mouth, drinking deeply from him.

Iron Bull eased his cock into her again, drawing a sharp hiss of pleasure from her. He clamped down on his control, holding his release off. Beneath the pleasant sun on a perfect summer’s day, the Bull and his lady made languard, perfect love.

He rode hard against her, throwing his hips in a way that sent shockwaves of pleasure coursing through Ayla, starting at her sweet epicenter and working outward to the rest of her. She moaned openly, the sound riding above the soft trickle of the stream.

Bull growled and nipped her neck. When he pulled back, he stopped thrusting and narrowed his eye across the quaint clearing. “What…?”

Ayla also stopped up-thrusting, ankles locked behind his knees for leverage. She craned her neck, looking up to follow his gaze. They both watched as a naked, sexy dream-version of Dorian moved towards them. He’d slipped through the tree line. His expression was serene and sensuous, his eyes holding no semblance of “true” life. Unlike them, he wasn’t consciously there. He was just a figment of the shared dream.

Bull looked down at her, clearly amused. “Really?”

Ayla smiled sheepishly, shrugging.

“Well…if that’s what you want…”

The couple observed dream-Dorian as he settled on the blanket next to them. He instantly moved into their warm bubble, caressing along Bull’s solid arm. The mage eased down and snagged the Qunari into a long kiss, nibbling his lip.

“Mm…” Bull indulged this carefully. He opened his eye and found Ayla watching them avidly. She was enjoying it. He grinned at her. “Wow, Naaremma, you’re a freak in the sack.”

“Only in our dreams.”

He chuckled and nodded, then was pulled back into a kiss by dream-Dorian. Iron Bull started thrusting into her again while kissing the man. Dream-Dorian shifted back and forth between the couple, kissing Bull, then Ayla while they fucked, running his hands sensuously over their bodies. They continued this way for a bit, before Ayla stopped Bull and gestured for him to roll off, so he did.

“I want to see you…with him,” she whispered at her husband’s pointy ear, then nuzzled and nibbled the lobe.

Bull shivered, yanking her against him for a hot kiss. They shared a passionate stare, then he released her and wrapped his brawny arms around dream-Dorian, who fell against him unquestioningly. The mage kissed his way down Bull’s chest and stomach, taking his cock in his mouth, sucking Ayla’s flavor from it.

The Iron Bull was very much in heaven right then, sharing a lucid dream with his wife that allowed him to have his cake and eat it too. He’d always found Dorian extremely attractive and he’d dreamed of having him in the past, but this dream was the most vivid. It seemed so real. That was thanks to his wife and her wonderful gift, the bond between them. He knew that they’d never do anything like this in the waking world. No, that was just for the two of them. But it was nice to know she was open to it in their dreams.

Oh, this opened SO many doors. The sex would certainly never get boring, though Iron Bull doubted it ever would with his little angel, whether they had the dream-link ability or not.

Dream-Dorian mewed and positioned himself on all fours, wiggling his hips while using his steamy bedroom eyes to beg at Bull. Ayla had taken her hand between her legs, stroking her clit, watching. Iron Bull smiled lovingly at her, then moved around behind dream-Dorian. One large hand grabbed the mage’s hip, while the other gripped his Qunari cock and guided it into the mage’s man-cunt, which was readily open and lubed. Had to love dreams.

Bull sucked in a sharp breath and closed his eye. “Fuck…” Dream-Dorian was tight and hot… and he felt like Ayla, which didn’t surprise Bull since he’d never been with the man. It was natural that his mind conjured the sensation of being buried in his wife, which was perfect to him. He began thrusting, slow and deep, making the Altus cry out hungrily, riding back against Bull’s movements. As he rode the other man, Bull locked eyes with his wife, who had quickened the pace against her clit.

Ayla scooted forward and into a position that put her legs to either side of dream-Dorian. She laced her fingers in his dark, soft hair, locking eyes while she kissed him, then gently pressed his head downward. The dream version of the Altus knew what she wanted, and he moaned in
pleasure while the Bull pounded him, lowering his face into Ayla’s cunt. He tongued her
ravenously.

“Oh my gods…” Ayla swooned, tossing her head back, wiggling to meet his tongue-thrusts.

The triad formed a rhythm between them—Iron Bull’s powerful pushes trembled through Dorian,
rocking him and his tongue into Ayla. It was almost like he fucked her through the mage.
Husband and wife locked gazes in the throes of their sexual dream encounter, Bull thrusting
harder and faster. All three of them were moaning, groaning, and growling, getting closer to the end.

Bull couldn’t hold out any longer, the sight of the beautiful dream-Altus eating out his gorgeous
wife had done him in. His balls tightened and he gripped the man’s hips firmly, closing his eye as
he drove his way into climax, dumping seed into dream-Dorian’s man-cunt. At the same time, the
mage trembled around him with his own release, and Ayla quivered and squealed, sending a
short jettison of her woman-juice squirting against dream-Dorian’s fine lips, which he lapped at.

They collapsed against each other, spent. As suddenly as dream-Dorian had appeared, he
vanished, and Ayla pulled close to Iron Bull. He held her dearly to him, smiling up at the sky.

“I was…certainly not expecting that,” he said.

Ayla smiled and kissed his chest. “Only in our dreams…”

“Yes.”

Ayla’s eye fluttered opened first, then Bull awakened. The windows revealed that it was in the
earliest vestiges of morning, still quite dark out. He was curled against her side, wallowing in the
warmth of his own great body. They didn’t say anything for a few moments, only staring up at the
ceiling, listening to the soft snaps and pops of the hearth fire; their dream had left them feeling
deliciously sated, like they’d truly just shared wild, wanton, filthy sex between the two of them
and Dorian Pavus.

Iron Bull shifted to his side, propping himself on an elbow. He grinned at her in the cozy dimness
of their room. “Dorian?”

Ayla blushed in the darkness, though he clearly saw the break of her smile. She shrugged.

“Dorian, though?”

“What? I can’t help the contents of my dreams. Besides, he is very attractive.”

Iron Bull chuckled. “Yes, he’s gorgeous. I was just surprised at how willing you were to let him
join us.”

The woman’s blush deepened. “I didn’t hear you protesting about it.”

“Nope.” Bull grinned. “It was just a dream, after all. It was fun.”

“It’s just…since you revealed to me that you enjoyed the company of men as well, I have pictured
you with him several times. It was quite…exciting to watch…” she said in a low, sensuous voice.

“Mm, I could tell just how much you liked it.”

“As long as we keep it in our dreams, I suppose there’s no harm in exploring those kinds of things
every now and then.”

“Damn right, only in our dreams. Because if another man physically touches you, I will kill him.”

The Qunari linked an arm over her broad chest, hugging tightly, then leaned in to nuzzle noses
with her. “Now…let’s try to go back to sleep. And this time, don’t pull in any others, Naaremma.
I want you all to myself.”

Ayla quaked with deep, giddy giggles, though she knew he was quite serious about neutralizing
any men with sexual intentions towards her.

Elsewhere in Skyhold, another was indulged in an exciting dream sequence, though it was devoid
of anything so sensual as what the Qunari and his lady shared. Solas had entered the Fade in
hopes of tracking the being he’d encountered the previous night.

The ‘man’ had a strange energy about him that Solas couldn’t decipher; he couldn’t tell what he
was, and that irked him most. The elf decided to avert his mind and only partly channel the Fade.
This would make his interactions within it less controllable, but it would also open his thoughts
wider. It could be thought of as casting a looser, larger net in the sea to catch a certain fish. There
was a higher chance to snag the trophy he was looking for, the other Fadewalker, but there was
also the risk of catching random items as well.

Solas stood perfectly still and the darkness and mist shifted around him, melding away and
refocusing as the scenery changed and morphed.

Skyhold’s garden.
The great foyer of the Winter Palace.
The Black Emporium.
Upon that hilltop on the Storm Coast where he’d lit the flare to signal the Berethlok.
Din’an Hanin, tomb of the Emerald Kings.

So many places the elf had gone, which meant there were many possible locations to search within the Fade. Solas shut his eyes, taking in a sharp breath. When he opened those twilight-hued pools, he sent them skimming in wonder at the place in which he found himself.

The architecture was like nothing he’d ever seen. Fat columns lined the perimeter, reaching up to towering heights. The chamber was so large that Solas couldn’t see its ceiling; it was fully doused in shadow. That was mostly because of the low light offered in this realm. Mute and green, almost dismal.

The floor was constructed of great tiles and patterns as were the walls, depicting images and paintings of faces the elf had never seen. Strange writing accompanied it, also foreign to Solas. He spun slowly, stopping when he spied someone across the expanse of the floor, on the other side standing at the base of a large statue, facing it. The huge, chiseled marble figure was a man in flowing robes, his head back with fierce features glaring up at the heavens, one arm raised and holding a bolt of lightning.

Solas slowly moved for the person by the statue, his steps tapping minute echoes on the floor.

The man grinned, though the elf wouldn’t see it with his broad, leather-clad back turned to him. “Ah, you again.” He turned slowly and fixed enticing brown eyes on Solas. “You know, I didn’t really notice it before, but there’s something about you. For a mage, you have a lot of power, though not quite that of a god.”

“Is that what you are, a god?” Solas halted a good distance away. No need to get too close.

The dangerous, attractive man in black issued a chuckle that bounded pleasantly through the open chamber. He decided to answer a question with a question. “You’ve never been to this part of the Void, have you?”

“It is not familiar to me.” Solas’s eyes carefully followed the man, who’d begun circling him.

“Welcome to my world.” He grinned, raising solid arms. “At least, the Void’s version of it. This,” his eyes scraped about, “is a temple of Zeus. King of the Gods in my part of the world.” He sneered a bit as he said this, features darkening for a moment. “But, well…he’s grown old, weak. Obsolete. His time is coming. The Twilight of the Gods will claim him; it will most likely claim them all…”

The man’s voice tapered off, and he appeared to be thinking heavily on something. He met Solas’s eyes again, head tilting, waiting.

The elf had a barrage of questions. He didn’t know where to start first. He was just excited to have made contact again, to be learning something about this entity. And he had come to find out he’d somehow crossed into an area of the Fade that served this man’s world.

“Did you bring me here, to your realm’s…Void?”

“Yes. I sensed you looking. Searching for me. I know when people are calling out to me. Comes with the package.”

“What is this Twilight of the Gods? It doesn’t sound pleasant.”

The man laughed deeply. “Doesn’t sound pleasant? Yeah, I’d say it very fucking much isn’t. Bold-Bald-and-Beautiful. It’s the death of the gods. Well, not me. I believe I’ve found a place where it’ll never reach me,” he said gravely, features suddenly hard and dire.

Solas examined him closely, realization dawning on him. “You mean my world.”

The man grinned. “Quick-minded. I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“Why enter Thedas? It certainly can’t be any better for you, since we have our own great threat to conquer…or to be conquered by.”

“Oh, yes. That Corypho-asshole, right? Guy’s weak-sauce. I’m not concerned about him. I’ve been watching your world for a while now. Sure, he’s causing some damage, but it’s not a big deal to me. Either he’ll destroy the peasants or this Inquisition I’ve heard about will destroy him. If they don’t, I’ll kill him. After all,” and here he grinned very broadly, “what does Thedas need with a false god, when it can have a real one?”

Solas’s eyes narrowed. “So you are a god then.”

“You bet that smooth, pale head of yours I am.” He lifted his arms, the shadow of a smile forming over handsome features. “Ares, God of War.”

The war god pointed a manicured hand at the elf, waving it. His deep, rich chuckles followed Solas back into the waking world.
Chapter End Notes

The Spartan helm sketch is NOT my property and was retrieved from here: http://blog.spoongraphics.co.uk/tutorials/illustrator-techniques-turn-sketch-vector-art

The Ares image was created by me using Photoshop. :)

**For readers who aren't familiar, Ares (the way I'm portraying him) is a character from the television shows Xena: Warrior Princess and Hercules: The Legendary Journeys. He, and any other characters of the Xenaverse, will NOT be tagged for this fanfic, as doing so would reveal too much to future readers. Instead, I've inserted the "Guest Star" Alternate Universe/Crossover Characters tag to the story, which lets anyone interested know that there's some AU things happening, but that the story still centers around the Dragon Age Universe and its characters. :)**
Paint it Red

The war room.

The atmosphere was heavy in silence while the occupants looked around at one another, all pairs of eyes fixing on Solas. Other than the elf, Hannibal, Morrigan, Leliana, Cullen, and Josephine were present. Late morning sunlight pushed through the colorful mural of the stain-glassed windows.

Solas’s expression was calm, yet there was a graveness painted thinly over it. “His name is Ares, and he’s a god from another realm, the God of War. That much I could gather during our second encounter. He’s been watching our world and knows what’s going on with Corypheus. He said he isn’t concerned about the Darkspawn, however.” The slender elf sighed, eyes fixed on Hannibal. “As a matter of fact, he brushed the threat of Corypheus off as easily as you or I would shoo a fly. This should tell you without a doubt, Inquisitor, that he’s potentially the greater threat. He said that if we don’t kill Corypheus, he would do it. I believe he means to assert himself as a god into our world.”

Hannibal’s chest puffed up and out when he sighed. “For the moment, Corypheus is our primary threat. It’s his forces and followers terrorizing the land.” He took a moment to think. “You said that he pulled you to his part of the Fade. Did he tell you the name of his world?”

“No,” Solas said. “Our conversation didn’t last long enough for me to get many questions asked or answered. I’m sure I can find him again.”

“According to him, he’s a God of War,” entered Cullen. “This indicates that there may be other gods in his realm, such as a God of Love or God of Harvest, or any number of them.”

Solas nodded. “You’re right. There are others, though I don’t know how many. He spoke of them and something called the Twilight of the Gods that could possibly be their undoing. That’s why he’s in Thedas, to avoid the doom of this Twilight. I have a theory on how he managed to settle on our world during his travels through the Fade, which he calls the Void.” The elf turned to Morrigan. “Your Eluvian. I believe its power created a beacon of sorts, a ripple in the Veil between our world, the Fade, and Ares’s world, and he sensed it.”

“How did you draw this conclusion?” Morrigan replied coolly, pale arms crossing her chest, vivid eyes fixed on the elf.

“When I first encountered him two nights ago, I was in the Fade’s version of Skyhold, the garden. I was led to your atrium. I watched as he stepped from the Fade-Eluvian.”

She nodded. “Then, I would say your speculations are warranted.”

“If he’s been watching our world and he knows where Skyhold is, then, perhaps, he’s been watching us...” Leliana added.

“I doubt it,” Solas said. “He didn’t seem to notice me when we first met. I think it was just by chance that I happened to catch him lingering around Fade-Skyhold. But, I do think we need to consider that he’s begun watching us now that he and I have spoken.”

Hannibal sighed. “First Corypheus, and now war gods from other dimensions. Maker, help the whole of Thedas.” He straightened, aqua eyes moving to each person in the room. “For now, we move forward and keep preparing to meet Corypheus in battle, because that day creeps towards us gradually. Solas, you’re the expert on the Fade, and I know you will continue to seek out this Ares, but I urge you to take the greatest care in doing so. If you gather any more information about him or his world, I want to know immediately.”

The elf nodded his head once. “Absolutely.”

Hannibal adjourned the meeting and they filed from the war room.

(*)

Ayla and Iron Bull managed to enter a state of slumber again, which allowed them to play around in their dreams a bit more. It was just the two of them the second time. No dream-Dorians or anyone else. Just the Qunari warrior and his lovely wife.

Since they rose that morning, the couple had shared several knowing looks and smiles, more than a few embraces and even some kisses. This surprised Ayla, since she knew her husband was uncomfortable with intimacy while they were in each other’s bodies. The shared lucid dreams were a way they could be together, and it was a plus that the sex they had while in the dreams left them feeling as languid and refreshed as any sex they’d had in the waking world. Neither of them would choose dreams over the real thing, but for the time being, it was more than adequate.

They entered the main hall hand-in-hand, Ayla sporting her swaying, feminine walk, while Bull’s stride was sure, purposeful, and masculine. The two certainly made an amusing sight. They sat down for a late morning meal, holding hands and feeding each other fruit. Ayla chimed a soft giggle and pecked a kiss to Bull’s lips.

Dorian stepped from the wide doorway leading to the upper chambers belonging to him and Hannibal. He saw them, smiled, and sauntered over. The Altus’s tailored brow rose slowly at the
display the couple made.

“Well, well. Aren’t we all lovey-dovey this fine morning.” His grin broadened devilishly. “Finally
start having sex, hm?”

Bull and Ayla stared at him for a moment, before they shared a look and smile. The Qunari issued
a short, humored chuckle, eyes raking over the man. Ayla averted her eye, face appearing soft and
demure despite having several scars and a light beard. A gentle smile curled her lips.

Dorian’s eyes narrowed. “You two are acting weird.” His attention fixed on Ayla. “And are you
blushing?”

“No,” she blurted, though she obviously was.

“Ah, well, the rosy tint spreading across your pale, gray cheeks says otherwise, but I won’t press
the matter…for now.” Dorian winked, grinning. “Ta-ta.” He went to fix himself a cup of tea and a
serving of toast, then disappeared off to the library.

Iron Bull chuckled over at his wife. “You gonna tell him?”

“I don’t know.” Ayla shrugged, features still warm with a blush. Her smile deepened. “I think I’ll
just keep it between us, my love.”

“I agree. Like you said—only in our dreams. Speaking of which, I’m down to go take a nap in a
few hours if you are.”

Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull shared a round of low, secretive laughter.

(*)

Hannibal was never too busy to see to the needs of those in his inner circle. Next to Dorian, they
were his closest companions, riding through the wild adventures and dangers of this crusade with
him. Josephine, Maker bless her, held several positions at Skyhold and with the Inquisition. Aside
from being the one who recorded notes from the war room meetings and served as ambassador to
relations between the nobles of the Orlesian Empire and the Inquisition, she’d somehow also
become Hannibal’s unofficial secretary.

When he checked in with her, as he did a few times throughout the day, Josephine told him that
Cole was looking for him. So, the Herald sought him out not long after the meeting with Solas and
the others regarding their new ‘friend’ Ares.

Hannibal’s long stride carried him across the eastern ramparts. He saw Cole sitting on a wide
portion of the inner wall, one leg bent with his arm resting over it. The Qunari stopped behind
him, then eased up to sit on the wall as well.

“Good afternoon, Cole.”

Very light-blue eyes remained on the yard below, skimming it slowly, thoughtfully. “I think I’m
useless to you now, to the Inquisition.”

Hannibal watched him closely. “What do you mean by that?”

“I’ve lost my ties to the Fade. Not only have the voices, the calls for release, eluded me, but I can
no longer manipulate space; I can’t vanish.” Cole’s gaze finally shifted around to meet the other
man’s, his voice lowering. “I knew it would happen. The reality of it has settled, and I feel a
little displaced.”

“Have you spoken to Idrial about it?”

“I tried to, but she doesn’t understand, can’t understand, as you would.” Cole smiled softly and
watched the yard again. “She knows what I am, or rather, what I used to be, because I’m a man
now. I am human, though still with much to learn. She has loved me since before my
transformation, caring about me regardless. I love her too.”

Hannibal smiled and nodded. “I’m very happy to hear that, Cole. You deserved a chance and you
took it. But why would you think you’re useless to the Inquisition now?”

“I can’t help with the Fade any longer, can’t guide you through it. That was…my function.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. You’re definitely needed around here. You’re still a very able warrior and
quick of mind, sound of judgment. The Inquisition needs more people like you. Besides, Solas is
quite capable of handling Fade-related issues.” Hannibal took a moment to ponder. “Are you
saying this because you…wish to leave?”

Cole’s silence spoke in volumes. “I had thought about it. I just don’t want to let you down.”

A large gray hand fell on the smaller man’s shoulder. “You could never do that, my friend,
whether you decided to stay or leave. It’s up to you, though. What do you want to do?”

“I wish to stay, to fight.”

Hannibal grinned. “Good. Then, stay.”

Cole’s face conjured a serene smile. He was looking more robust these days, his maturing
humanity adding a little more color his usually pale skin; he sported a faint peach-like glow, the darkness under his eyes had withdrawn, and he didn’t appear as gaunt. His stark, blond mane was still boyishly tousled, however. He looked like a healthy human male in his mid-twenties or so. The man-spirit was just a man now.

(*)

Three days later, sitting in his atrium, Solas avidly read the documentation from his Dalish contact about the Statue of Ahime Anta; Leliana’s people had done a fine job of expediting the package once they found the courier who carried it. Apparently, as Solas suspected, it had been delayed because the courier had to keep altering his route to avoid bands of raiders and some rogue Templar groups.

Solas was glad to finally have the information. It arrived very late the previous night, and he would’ve dived right into it if he hadn’t been so anxious to search the Fade for Ares. He hadn’t found him, though. He figured the God of War could evade him easily if he wanted to and would only reveal himself when he saw fit.

The elf’s eyes slipped up to the rotunda of the library, spotting the first rays of morning light easing through the windows there. The Inquisitor would be arriving shortly, no doubt, to see what he’d found. And he’d found a lot. Aside from discovering just what Ayla and Iron Bull had to do to get switched back, Solas also got a little more backstory on the Statue of Ahime Anta. It was part of a set. There were two other magical figures—the Statues of Galhandir and Neris Nel. They were a triad of Alteration statues. Ahime Anta literally translated to “change face” in Old Dalish, which would explain what happened to Ayla and Iron Bull when the woman touched the figure, then met his eyes shortly thereafter. The alteration effects of Galhandir and Neris Nel were unknown, as their locations had yet to be revealed.

So much information.

Solas sighed, sipped his tea, and kept reading.

(*)

Perhaps an hour later, Iron Bull stirred in his sleep. He and his wife had shared a wonderful dream-link, and it showed in the gentle smile on his beautiful brown face. He shifted comfortably against Ayla’s large, warm body.

Bull flipped to his back and reached his arms and legs outward, stretching. It was then that he frowned, feeling sticky wetness between his thighs. He sat up and glued very wide eyes down his body. His own large shirt he wore as a night gown was stained crimson at his crotch. His mouth dropped open in horror, because he knew exactly what this was.

The Qunari groaned heavily, shaking his head. Stern displeasure was stamped over his features. He held his hands up, glaring at the blood. “You have got to be fucking kidding me!”

Ayla roused and opened her eye. She sat up, fixing a sleepy gaze on him. “What? What’s the matter, my love?” Then, her eye swung to see for herself. “Oh…”

“Oh? All you have to say is ‘Oh’!”

Ayla’s smile spread slowly. “What else am I to say,” she replied, accented voice pouring forth in resonant tones.

“ Aren’t you supposed to know when this shit is about to happen? I mean, you could’ve warned me or something, Naaren. Seriously, this is so disgusting.”

“Oh, excuse me. I’ve been so busy, you know, being trapped in your body that it must’ve slipped my mind,” she returned in blatant sarcasm. The smile still hung. “It’s actually nice not to have to go through it for once.”

“It’s not funny, woman! Do something!”

“Hmm, I believe you once said to me, dear husband, that since I’m wearing the cock, your morning wood is my problem. Well, since you’re wearing the cunt, that,” her eyes flicked to the reddened shirt, “is your problem.” She shook with trilling laughter.

“Ayla!”

“Oh, calm down, my love. It’s just a simple female process.”

“Well, I’m not female! Do something!”

Ayla chuckled again, then stretched. “Technically, love, you are. Firstly, you need to get out of that shirt and take a bath. There’s still plenty of the stuff you bought last month, and I’ll help you use it. We’ll go get some more later.”

Bull sighed. “I can’t fucking believe this.” Mumbling every Qunlat curse word that came to mind, he moved from bed for the separator wall, arms up and out, face twisted with a grimace. He instantly started the water going for a bath.

“You’ll be fine. It’ll only last about four or five days.”
Ayla decided to lay back and revel in the moment, grinning. She was never going to let him live this down.

(*)

Iron Bull was in no mood to make breakfast, inwardly fuming at what he had to endure being in his wife’s body. Once he changed the sheets on the bed and set all laundry outside their door, the couple got ready and headed to the great hall for food. Skyhold employed several dozen housekeepers who not only tended to the castle grounds, the castle itself, and maintenance and cleaning of all buildings, they also handled laundry services for the Inquisitor and his Inner Circle. It was nice knowing the boss.

Sitting in the hall, Ayla ate heartily, her plate piled with food. Iron Bull picked at his, frowning. She laughed, sipping her water. “Oh my gods, you act like it’s the end of the world.”

“It is. The Iron Bull does not…” he rolled his eyes, “…do this.”

“It appears he does.” Ayla bellowed with more laughter.

“Stop rubbing it in, woman.”

Not long after they finished their meal, Hannibal had them summoned to the war room.

(*)

Hannibal, Leliana, Cullen and Josephine stood across the table from the swapped couple.

“I have some good news,” the Inquisitor started. “The information Solas requested was delivered last night, and he’s had time to go through it. Seems the effects of the Statue’s power can be reversed by drinking from one of three enchanted fountains. The closest one is around the Storm Coast.”

Iron Bull’s arms crossed his chest. “That’s it? We just drink water from some fountain and it swaps us back? Thought there’d be more to it. I’m glad there isn’t though.”

“Well, there’s a little more to it. The fountain is hidden in a series of caves, behind a sealed door, but Solas has directions and should be able to get through the door,” Hannibal said. “Also, before you drink from the cup, both of you must provide a few drops of blood to the liquid.”

At his last sentence, Ayla flicked a knowing smile down at Bull, which he fully noticed and huffed disapprovingly at.

Hannibal continued. “Solas said that’s really all that needs to be done, then you two sleep it off and wake up back in your own bodies. If all goes well, it should work. I would have us leave out immediately, but there’s a high-profile guest visiting. They’ll be departing in five days, which means we leave for the Storm Coast in six. Does that sound good to you two?”

Ayla bounced giddily in place, large hand connected to Iron Bull’s smaller one. “Oh, yes! I can’t wait to be back to me again.”

“Sounds good, boss. I just want this fixed as soon as possible.” He smirked, then tossed, “Got my period this morning.”

Ayla released a mortified gasp, swatting him.

“Ow. Why’d ya do that?” Bull rubbed at the shoulder that received the non-too gentle blow.

His wife glared down at him, her single sky-blue eye narrowed. “No need to let the whole world know my business!”

“You business! Woman, as far as I’m concerned, it’s my business now since it’s happening to me!” Iron Bull returned, eyes fixed ahead. He was very nearly pouting. ”It’s so disgusting. No one should ever have to go through it.”

“It’s not disgusting, you brute. It’s natural,” Ayla retorted, then laughed deeply at how pissy he was about the whole thing.

Bull groaned in dissatisfaction. “It’s nasty.”

Hannibal ran a large hand over his hair, unsure of how to respond to the turn in conversation. “Well…aside from the impending threat of a war god, some minor Templar attacks along the Western Pass, which have vaguely hindered supply shipments to our camps in that area, and a menstruating Iron Bull, I’d say things are going fairly well.”

Bull grunted and rolled his eyes. “I’m leaving.” He turned, stalking from the war room with Ayla holding his hand, snickering.

“I have to admit,” Josephine began, brown eyes glimmering, “this is the most intriguing thing I’ve ever seen. It’s so strange, them being in each other’s bodies.”

“I couldn’t imagine being a woman,” said Cullen.

Leliana turned fully to the commander, brow lifted. “Oh? And why is that?”
“Well, some female processes *are* rather revolting.”

“Because waking up with morning wood constantly and walking around with a penis-tent in my pants all day is a much better option?” The Spymaster and Josephine laughed their way out of the room, leaving the Inquisitor and the Lion at the war table.

“Hm.” Hannibal patted him on the shoulder. “Women one, Cullen zero.” The Qunari ebbed robust chuckles, leaving as well.

Cullen smirked thinly after him.
It was the night before the party would set out for the Storm Coast on a little journey to fix Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull. The Wicked Grace group sat in their usual booth playing and conversing. Even Hannibal was there this night, sitting between Blackwall and Dorian; Cassandra and Varric sat on the ends, putting them directly across from one another. They went around the table, switching cards.

“I’m sure Ayla and Iron Bull can’t wait to leave tomorrow,” said the Warden, snatching up the card Cassandra dealt to him.

Dorian chuckled. “I spoke with her earlier. She’s more than excited. I really can’t imagine going through what they have.”

“As long as you don’t go touching any magical statues,” said Hannibal, giving his mate a playful nudge.

The mage’s nose wrinkled. “Rest assured, I will not, Amatus.”

The table livened with everyone’s laughter.

Cassandra went around the table again, dealing the desired swap-out cards, taking two for herself. She set the deck aside and picked her cards up, not really satisfied with her hand yet. While she studied it, Cullen moved through the room for the bar, having just entered. Her eyes followed him. She watched him take one of the tall chairs at the counter and order a mug, upon which he sipped, his back to the rest of the room.

When Cassandra looked over at Varric, she was not surprised to see that he watched her while she observed Cullen. The dwarf nodded encouragingly. Gathering herself, Cassandra set her cards down and slid the deck over to Blackwall. “I’m taking a break. You deal.”

“Alright,” he said.

She eased from the booth and headed over to Cullen, and they all watched as she took the seat beside him, striking up a conversation.

The roguish dwarf grinned broadly, nodding. “Varric Tethras: author, entrepreneur, matchmaker,” he announced, drawing up light laughter from his comrades.

(*)

“Mind if I join you?” Cassandra asked.

Cullen pulled his gaze around to her, eyes widening just a tad. He offered a soft smile. “Of course not. But only if you let me buy you a drink.”

“Sure. Who am I to turn down free ale?”

Her response made Cullen chuckle. He got the bartender’s attention. “One for the lady, please.”

A short moment later, a mug of brew was served before the Seeker. She grabbed it up, taking a few gulps, then set it down. “How have you been?”

“Well, I suppose…considering…”

“Oh…’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that I was speaking about what happened with Ayla.”

“No, it’s alright.” Cullen sighed, a hindered smile tugging at his features. He stared down into his drink for moment, then looked at her. “I can’t say I was too surprised. I should’ve seen it coming. It was obvious to everyone that she’s in love with Iron Bull. Everyone but me. Or rather, I just didn’t want to see it.”

He shrugged.

Cassandra only listened silently. “At least it sorted itself out before things got extremely…serious.”

“Yes,” he chuffed a short laugh. “At least that much. But, well, things happen as they do for a reason, don’t you think?”

The Seeker found herself lost in the intense depths of his eyes. She nodded. “Yes.”

“The best thing to do when the tough gets going is find a good pub and toss back a few, hm?” At that, Cullen emptied his mug.

Cassandra chuckled and did the same.

“Tender, two more please,” Cullen said.

When they received their beverages, they toasted and knocked them back. The two of them remained at the bar drinking, conversing, and laughing, not even realizing that nearly two hours had passed. They were nice and lit by now, though not exactly drunk.
"You know, Cassandra, I think you’re the only woman who could drink me under the table, should we have a contest."

She laughed. "I don’t doubt it. I’m known for being able to hold my liquor."

Cullen let his booze-sated gaze rake slowly over her, taking in her loveliness while thinking about the dance they shared. He sighed. “Thank you for spending time with me. You’re fun to be with.”

“Of course, anytime,” Cassandra’s voice ebbed out softly. She wasn’t blind to the way he watched her, and it made her skin blush further. Aside from caring for Cullen during his withdrawal phase, she’d never been this close to him, shared these kinds of moments. “I’m always here if you wish to talk…or do…anything else…”

They locked gazes.

Cullen wasn’t even the littlest bit surprised that he’d grown very aroused.

(*)

The commander backpedaled quickly into his quarters, with Cassandra’s body pressed to and partly wrapped around his. The woman kicked the door shut after her, hands buried in his fine waves. Their mouths blended together hotly, with teeth and tongues coming into play. Cullen’s lips trailed downward to capture her chin, grazing its smoothness.

Cassandra shivered wantonly, moaning, head tossed back, eyes rolled up into their sockets. By the Maker, how many times had she dreamed of this! Cullen lifted her up and she twined her legs around his waist, bringing their lips together again while the man carried her to his bed, lying her down. He lowered his body onto hers, rolling his hips against her, letting her feel just how much she’d excited him. And Cassandra could certainly feel it, the rock-solid heat of his sex rubbing hers through their clothing. She had grown moist already, while they were on their way to his place.

Cullen groaned into their kiss, then pulled back to meet her glistening eyes. His fingers stroked the soft swell of her cheek, along her scar. “This isn’t going to be rebound sex for me, Cassandra. I’m not that kind of man…” his words were but a warm whisper upon her face, eyes searching hers to make sure she understood.

He didn’t want this to be a one-time deal.

The Seeker hotly thrust her hips up into him. “I know what kind of man you are, Cullen Rutherford. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Her words made his heart swell. Some women preferred brief, occasional encounters, and Cullen knew everyone had their needs. But she was willing to pursue more than that with him. He nodded, then slowly pulled back, just enough to allow him to sit up, her legs spread wide around him.

Cassandra watched in wicked delight as his long, sure fingers unlatched the neck clasp of his long jacket. He eased the item off, letting it go to the floor. Then he undid his tunic, yanking it up and over his head, tossing it as well. This revealed his hard, toned chest. It was brushed finely with golden hair, which traced its way down over his solid abdomen and into his pants. The Seeker ran her hands over his hot flesh, her increasing desire making her quite heady.

Cullen slipped from the bed and went to the hearth, where he made short work of starting a fire. Alluring heat and romantic light settled through his quarters. He turned to face her, a pleasing, half-dressed silhouette against the flames. His eyes widened when he saw that she was naked and sitting with her legs tucked under her, watching him avidly.

A slow grin pulled over him, eyes traveling appreciatively over her. Her breasts were full with rosy nipples, her muscles defined but not detracting from her feminine curves. “Mm. I had hoped to peel every strip of clothing from your body myself.”

“I’ll let you do it next time.” Cassandra purred, grinning at him.

The commander kept eyes on her while he pulled off his boots, then undid his trousers. He didn’t remove them immediately, but instead lowered them just enough so they clung barely to his narrow hips. This gave the faintest glimpse of the dark-golden hair that framed his hardened sex.

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Cassandra was enjoying the striptease. She licked her lips and moaned hungrily.

Cullen chuckled and dropped his pants, stepping from them, and she sucked in a breath at the sight of his stiff cock. It was nice and ample with just the right amount girth. It only took three long strides to put him at the bed. He eased to the mattress, Cassandra drawing him into her open arms, yearning to have the heat of his body along hers again. Cullen leaned her back, thoroughly pleased at how easily he fit between her legs.

The Seeker and the Lion sparked another longing kiss, inhaling each other’s hot, panting breaths. Both were starved for the pleasure and company of another person, thirsty for it the way a weed in the desert screamed for water. She bucked her hips, feeling his throbbing flesh rub against her feminine region.

Cullen’s lips grazed hers and he stared down at her, caressing her hair, skimming her features. “I mean it, Cassandra. I’m looking to go further than this.”
“As am I.” Her tongue flicked out to taste his lips, eyes watery with passion. “Now, fuck me already, commander.”

“Mm…” He chuckled and lowered his face to nip her throat, while finally guiding himself into her welcoming, wet sheath. A powerful groan wrangled its way from deep within. “Oh…Maker, yes.”

Cassandra cried out, clenching her inner walls around him. He felt amazing inside her, filling her completely. It had been a while since she’d taken a man, a few months, but the last lover hadn’t roused even half the desire in her that Cullen did. She locked her ankles around him, hands clamping to his thrusting ass. She bit his shoulder.

Cullen buried his face at her slender throat, groaning as he rode her. The couple’s lovemaking was hot and anxious, yet still tender and heartfelt. They moved and pushed against one another, their bodies growing slick with their sweat and sex fluids. The commander’s pace hastened, and Cassandra knew he was near. She was right on the edge, relaxing her body to the point where every one of his thrusts pounded through her, creating delicious shockwaves of ecstasy.

“Ah…Cullen…yessss! Harder!” One hand gripped harshly at his curly-wavy mane; the other had nails clamped to one of his solid, flexing buttocks. She began trembling with release, cunt muscles gripping and massaging all around his buried shaft.

He shut his eyes and braced himself, dropping his hips into her savagely. Her climax drove him home. Cullen stiffened, his entire body drawing taunt. “Fuck, yes…” he hissed as his seed spewed forth into her.

They remained connected at the hip for a while afterwards, enjoying the warmth of each other and the fire. Cullen finally pulled back to meet her eyes. They both smiled, nuzzling noses, then he rolled to her side. They lay there looking up at shadows dancing on the vaulted ceiling.

“Cassie–can I call you ‘Cassie’?” He grinned over at her.

She regarded him with a sensuous gaze. “You and only you...and only in private.” The last thing she needed was Varric getting hold of this nickname.

“Didn’t know you had that in you.”

“I could say the same of you, commander.”

Cullen pulled her close, nuzzling her brow. “Will you stay the night?”

“Yes, though I’ll need my sleep since I’m leaving tomorrow.” She smiled playfully, kissing his chin.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that, my dear Cassie. I’ll let you get your rest. I promise not to touch you for the remainder of the night.”

Cassandra’s head jerked up and she fixed him with a wry expression. “No one said anything about that, commander. In fact,” the beautiful Seeker climbed on top of him, hands planted on his chest. She peered down with heat kindling in the brown pools of her eyes, “I’m hungry again. Right now.”

Cullen grinned. “Oh, boy…”

(*)

Those six days couldn’t have passed quicker for Iron Bull. He’d hardly gotten any sleep last night. The Qunari was more than ready to have his body back, glad the whole womanly thing was behind him. And he did not plan on ever experiencing that grossness again.

The party consisted of Hannibal, Dorian, Iron Bull, Ayla, Solas, Sera, and Cassandra. They’d finished the Heroes’ Breakfast an hour ago and now readied their mounts in the main courtyard. Bull and Ayla tended to the Frostback elk they’d ridden up to the fortress. The creature didn’t seem quite as big now that she was in her husband’s hulking form. With Bull holding her hand, Ayla ran the other large hand along the animal’s haunches, and it answered with an approving chuff.

“That’s everything, Naaremma.” Bull had gotten the last of their stuff secured to the elk. “You ready to go up?”

“Yes…but…how are we to sit in the saddle?”

He chuckled. “You’re in the back this time and I’m in front.”

“But, I don’t know how to handle a mount!”

“You won’t have to. I’ll steer the elk. Now, you go up first.”

“Okay…” she answered, then positioned one foot in the stirrup. Bull kept hold of one of her hands so she could see the horn. She was thrust into shadows when she gripped it with both hands and pulled herself up into the saddle. Ayla waited, her eyes drifting down to where she knew her husband stood.
“Lend me your hand, Ayla,” he said gently, and she did. He grabbed hold and she easily lifted, aiding him into the saddle. Iron Bull smoothly swung his leg, putting him in front of her. He slipped the back end of the reins into her hands, then positioned his hands right before hers so their skin touched and allowed her sight. “Comfy back there?”

“For the most part, yes. But what happens when I get sleepy?” she pouted.

Iron Bull laughed. “You just have to suck it up. I get to ride along now and take the naps,” he joked.

Ayla rolled her eye.

The others were getting mounted up as well.

Not far off, Cassandra adjusted her saddle, changing the position of the stirrups. She turned over her shoulder to see that Cullen watched her, and they shared hidden smiles. He was always there to see the party off and to greet them when they came back. It was part of his duties and responsibilities. The difference this time was that he wasn’t just seeing his friends and associates off, he was also saying a temporary farewell to his newfound lover.

The commander closed the distance between them, going near enough so that her ears alone would catch his voice. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this, but be careful out there…Cassie.”

Cassandra turned to fully face him, pleasantly cocooned in his ruggedly-scented heat. She stared into his gorgeous eyes a moment, then suddenly took his face in her hands, connecting their lips for a lingering, delicious kiss. She nuzzled noses with him, grinning. “That’s to ensure that you miss me terribly.”

Cullen adorned a dashing smile, clearing his throat. She’d completely thrown him off-guard. “I assure you that I already do.”

“Good.” Cassandra caressed his cheek, highly attracted to the very short beard he sported. It was more of a scruffy fuzz. She turned and mounted her horse, winked down at her lover, then coaxed the animal towards the main gate.

Cullen sighed deeply after her, wondering how he’d ever managed to overlook the opportunity to start a romance with her. To think, the love he’d been searching for might’ve been right under him the whole time.

The others were somewhat surprised by the pairing of the Seeker and the Lion. Dorian made eyes with Cassandra when she passed, gaze narrowed and a rakish grin planted. Oh, they were going to have a little talk later.

Ayla drew on a soft smile at the couple. It made her heart feel good to know Cullen had moved on. He was a wonderful man and, honestly, if she had met him before crossing paths with Iron Bull, she’d probably be married to him now. The commander was a great catch, and Ayla was sure Cassandra knew that.

“I’m so happy for them…for Cullen,” she said in a low voice.

Bull had started their mount for the gate. He nodded. “Hm. Yeah, they look good together.” He tossed a smile over his shoulder up at her. “At least I don’t have to watch him moping around drooling after my wife anymore.”

“Oh, hush. He hasn’t thought of me that way since we broke up.”

“So you think.” Iron Bull chuckled softly, recalling the day he’d caught the commander watching him in the training yard.

Ayla just rolled her eye, smiling.

The party departed Skyhold, en route for the Storm Coast.

(*)

Going down the mountain was always easier than trekking up. Hannibal stopped them at Johnner’s Lip for a quick break and some lunch, then they continued onward. A foot or so of snow blanketed the ground, and it had been trampled and muddied where it fell to the road due to the traffic in and out of Skyhold.

“How ya holding up, angel?” Bull asked as their elk trundled along.

“I’m good.” She sighed and smiled. “I just wish I could relax.”

A chuckle fizzled from him. “Too bad you can’t.” Iron Bull stretched and leaned back into the warmth of his own great body, glad for it. Even though he had on Ayla’s heavy coat, the cold still nipped away at him, and the only thing that battled it was being nestled into her. “You really had it good when we traveled before. I’m very comfortable right now.”

This earned the Qunari a groan and tender hug. “I’m sure you are. Well, soak it all up, husband. Once we’re switched back, I get to reassume my place as your helpless little wife that will require all of your attentions and who also gets to ride in the front, lazily enjoying the view.”
Bull grinned. “And I look forward to it, Naaremma. Though, it’s not like I can completely zone out. Someone has to guide the mount.”

They traveled along the Frostback Mountain Pass, having to ride in single-file for most of the day, as the trail was too thin in places to risk doing otherwise. There was a secondary trail that intersected the main one, and it was used for when large shipments were brought in and out of Skyhold, as it was wide enough for the carriages and logging caravans. Of course, that path added about three more hours of travel. Ayla smiled at the view they had to the left, once the road unfurled from between the rocky slopes. Their altitude was noticeably lower, and coniferous trees and foliage spotted the mountainside, thickening down into the valley.

When the road finally broadened out, Dorian guided his mount to the side and slowed it until Cassandra caught up to him, then he fell in at her pace. The Seeker looked over at him, lifting a brow at his grin.

“What?” she said.

“Oh, I think you know what.”

Cassandra produced a soft chuckle, eyes skimming the backs of Hannibal, Sera, and Solas, before slipping sideward to Dorian. “Yes, Cullen and I are together.”

“Mm, yes, I saw that, my dear,” he replied suavely, gray-lavender eyes twinkling. His head tilted. “Just how ‘together’ are you? Like stolen-kisses together or…” his grin thickened devilishly, “…pelvis-to-pelvis together?”

Her fine lips pursed a thin smile. “What do you think?”

“With the kiss you gave him before we left, I’d opt for the latter.”

“Well, then,” Cassandra tweaked a brow, “you have your answer.” She wasn’t trying to hide her new relationship with Cullen; Skyhold was too small to do that, and everyone would know eventually anyway. It actually made her feel good to make it known where she and the commander stood. They now knew he was hers.

“Tsk-tsk, you are so bad. I rather like this side of you,” Dorian said, smiling at her.

She chuckled. “Right.”

The party had dinner while they traveled; Hannibal didn’t stop them. The sky was a mural of endless blue blended into twilight purple meshed into burnt orange along the horizon; the sun was down. It was well into night when they finally reached the clearing at the base of the pass where they’d set up camp. They used the spot regularly and had a hidden cache in a crevice between two large boulders. There was dried goods, water, and a dozen lean-to kits; Johnner’s Lip and the other resting areas outside of the Inquisition camps had been supplied and set up the same way.

Iron Bull was glad to be done traveling for the day, and not for his own sake, because he could go all night. He was trained and conditioned to do it. His concern was for his wife. Two or three times she’d weaved in the saddle, jerking forward to put a bit of weight on him; she was exhausted.

Once they got off their mount and secured it with the others, the Qunari led her to a fallen log to sit. Ayla stretched, watching him with hooded eyes.

“I’m sleepy,” she said, wrapping her arms around his waist, face nuzzling into his belly and chest.

“Yes, I know, Naaremma. You just sit here for a little, okay? I’m gonna help with the fire, then get our lean-to up.” He smiled tenderly, taking his lips to her scarred forehead. The poor woman. For someone not made for this kind of travel, she really was hanging in there.

“Okay…love you…”

“I will always love you,” Bull replied softly, then eased away.

Within ten minutes, a fire was going, and another ten minutes after that, with Solas’s help since being in a smaller body meant he couldn’t do the heavy-lifting alone, Iron Bull had a lean-to erected. He strode to the fire where Ayla laid on her back, head propped on her sleep roll.

“C’mon, angel. Let’s get you to bed.”

She sighed and stretched, yawning, then she rose and took up the sleep roll, moving with him to their lean-to. As soon as she unfurled the bed of fur and laid back on it, Ayla fell asleep, snoring softly.

The Qunari man studied his own slumbering form. This had been one hell of a wild ride, and easily the wildest one he’d ever taken. His beautiful little wife had managed to turn his life upside-down, inside-out, and head-over-heels, so much so that he was now wearing her body. How crazy was that? But, it would be over soon, which he was ecstatic about. Even through it all, though—fighting a horny Ayla off at times when she’d had the vague idea of trying to penetrate him with his own cock, getting used to being smaller and physically weaker, and even that whole womanly processes thing—Iron Bull’s love for her never faltered.

It had grown considerably stronger, in fact.
Seeing the world from her view made him appreciate how absolutely lucky he was to be hers. Ayla could’ve had anyone, yet she chose him, had given herself and her heart completely to The Iron Bull. And he loved her more than he would ever love anyone or anything else, himself included.

Smiling, eyes shimmering with contentment, Bull leaned in to kiss her brow.

“Rest well, Naaremma-Kadan.”
Shortly after the sun rose, Iron Bull returned to his and Ayla’s lean-to. He’d taken the last watch, not making any excuses even though he was in his wife’s frailest body. They were down from the mountains now, and he wasn’t nearly as cold, though he’d worn the coat during his watch. The morning was climatically warmer, but still brisk being so close to the mountains, so he retired the heavy coat for Ayla’s shawl.

Bull brushed back the barrier of the lean-to, a plate of flat bread, cheese, an apple, a plum, and dried fish in one hand. He smiled at the sight of his wife. She’d flipped to her stomach and managed to find just that right spot where her face nestled into the small pillow, allowing an unhindered position for her great horns. Bull favored the position as well at times. Ayla had also removed Bull’s heavy coat, eye patch, and boots sometime in the night; she still had on his shirt, pants, and socks. The interior of the lean-to was pleasantly warm, made so by the immense amount of heat emanating from her husband’s magnanimous Qunari physique.

“I really am a furnace,” Iron Bull mused. He sat beside her and touched her arm, giving a few shakes. “Ayla, wake up.”

She stirred, stretched, lifted her head, and squinted her lone eye at him. She grinned. “Good morning, my love.” The woman found his hand, making contact. She spied the food and sat up. “For me?”

Bull chuckled, handing the plate over, then he stuck a hand under the hem of her shirt to touch along the rigid muscles of her side. Doing this maintained skin contact so she could eat with both hands.

“How did you sleep?”

She nodded, chewing a bite of apple. “Good. Just really hungry.”

“I know. You didn’t eat much before you tanked out last night. I hope you’re feeling more refreshed.”

“I am, thanks!” the rich bass of her voice chimed forth. Ayla gobbled some of the bread and cheese. She leaned over and nuzzled him. “You take such good care of me.”

Bull sifted a chuckle, tugging on a doting smile. “It’s my duty…as well as my pleasure.”

The couple shared a kiss.

Less than an hour later, camp was dismantled and the party took to the Merchant Road, heading north.

(*)

Within two days of traveling, they entered the main vicinity of the Storm Coast, marked by towering hills and lesser mountains. The area was lush and robust with life, green and bountiful. Rivers and streams coursed through the valley, heading inevitably for the coast to pour into the Waking Sea.

Hannibal and Dorian rode at the head of the party, leading them along a beaten path that would merge into the main route. Gentle shadows encroached when they entered a place where the tree lines thickened to either side of the path. Thin shafts of midday sun filtered between the trunks and branches of the forest, though there was an abundance of dense shadows.

One thing Iron Bull completely appreciated about his wife’s body was the keen sense of smell and hearing it possessed; he was sure it surpassed his own. He might not have detected that almost inaudible twig-snap up the low embankment and back into the foliage on his right. Bull’s eyes slowly veered that direction to catch a quick shifting of shadow. He swung his gaze leftward and saw at least four other shadows creeping about. His eyes narrowed, and he refrained from loosening his axe from where it was secured behind Ayla, across the rear of their mount.

They were about to be ambushed.

“Ayla,” he said steadily, keeping his expression smooth, “I’m gonna need you to stay calm. Just keep looking forward and don’t say a word.”

He felt her stiffen against him, her breaths picking up. To answer, she issued a low mewl. The woman didn’t like how casually he’d spoken. She wanted to skim their surroundings but did as she was told and kept her eye forward.

Bull hastened their mount just a little to fall in next to Solas. He spoke matter-of-factly, voice low. “We have company.”

Solas knew the drill. He nodded, continuing to look ahead. “I just noticed. Sera has as well.”

Bull’s gaze shifted to Sera on her mount in front of them. He was very familiar with the quirky Elven woman’s battle-readiness. She was on edge and prepared to release her bow on the mark.

He nodded to Solas. “Okay, then. Let’s do this.” Bull looked forward and called out, “Boss, jokes
at three and nine.” Threats to the right and left.

A moment later, Hannibal returned with, “Understood.”

Everyone knew what was about to happen. Everyone but Ayla. The woman continued looking forward, braced for it.

“Wrap your arms around me, lean forward, and hold on as tight as you can to the saddle horn, Naaremma.”

She did as her husband said.

“HA!” Hannibal’s call boomed, and he kicked his mount into a full run.

The rest of the group did the same, drawing up the beat of many hooves to the ground. Ayla yelped when Bull got their elk galloping, the animal bucking under them. She understood immediately why he’d instructed her to hold on and lean, putting her into the mount’s movement rather than against it. Of course, now she couldn’t see anything by swirling shadows melded with hints of light here and there as they sped along the road. Iron Bull finally looked directly into the tree line on both sides of them. Whoever was in there knew they’d been discovered and was bolting to follow.

Hannibal erupted from the trees into a clearing and instantly swerved his mount around the creek’s bend. They followed his lead, racing their way along the flat, pebbly shore and shallow water.

“It’s blocked!” called Cassandra.

“Venhedis!” Dorian swore, eyes taking in the barrier of thick fallen tree trunks.

Hannibal scowled, turning over his shoulder. He counted about a dozen figures pursuing them on foot. The Inquisitor let up on the reins, yanking his mount around to face them. He quickly dismounted, drawing his broadsword. “We’ll have to fight them.”

Dorian assumed a battle stance near him, his stave out and ready. He’d begun to channel his power, hands glowing faintly with a pale purple hue.

Sera, Solas, and Cassandra had readied themselves too, prepared to face down the approaching people if they proved to be enemies.

Iron Bull clutched his smaller axe in one hand. He touched upon Ayla’s skin, and she widened her eye at the group bearing down on them. Her vision whipped down to Bull.

“It’s alright,” the Qunari said. “Do as I say and you’ll be fine.”

Ayla clutched securely to his hand.

They waited until the group arrived. There were eleven of them, four of which were female, each of them wielding a sword or blade of some sort. They all wore the same type of armor, and it was of no make Hannibal and his team had ever seen. It was dark, constructed of hide and steel. What Solas noticed right away was the style of the headgear a few of them sported. It had the same design and mohawk plume as that etched into Ares’s belt buckle.

One of the strangers moved out in front of the others. He wore a crimson band around his upper arm, probably marking him as a higher-ranking soldier in their faction. Green eyes gleamed menacingly from his tanned face. A ragged scar marred him, crossing over his right eye, crooked nose, and left cheek.

“Well, well. What we got here?” His eyes roamed openly over the females in Hannibal’s group. “Trying to cross our territory without paying the toll?”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed further. “Toll? This is free land. There are no tolls. Who are you?”

“Name’s Resentius…and there most certainly is a toll, friend.” The man propped his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “Been in this place for a few weeks now and still haven’t gotten used to you horned sons-of-a-bitches, though haven’t seen many of you around these parts.”

Resentius’s group bellowed and rumbled with a round of laughter.

“We’re not paying a toll,” Hannibal answered, the promise of death hardening his aqua eyes and his voice.

“Is that so?” Resentius pointed his sword at the large, red-haired Qunari. “You don’t want to pay with gold, so now you’re gonna pay with blood. Take ‘em, men! Be sure to get the big one! I want his horns as a trophy.”

Ayla’s eye loomed and she panicked. “Uh-oh. I’m the ‘big one’, aren’t I?”

“Yep,” Bull answered. “You just stay back here, Naaremma. I’ll protect you.” He quickly led her to a spot behind some small boulders, where she hunkered, peeking around to see nothing but blurs against the dimness of her broken vision. She could hear and smell though.

Fighting broke out quickly between the two groups, with Hannibal engaging the one named Resentius. He turned out to be quite skillful with his blade, dancing around the Qunari, blocking and sending blows, which Hannibal countered.
Sera decided to go with her dual blades since they were in closer combat. Solas and Dorian immediately put protective wards and barriers on their friends, then set about sending magical attacks. Using her blade and shield, Cassandra remained near the mages, serving as their guard, keeping enemies off them.

Bull stepped forward, his long, white braid swaying behind him. He wore a light leather chest armor with a sleek attachment that ran down his left arm, offering further defense. As per his promise to his wife to help preserve and protect the palms of her delicate hands, Bull also wore a pair of flexible fingerless gloves. He spun his axe slowly, the shards of his crystal-blue eyes shifting between the three enemies closing in on him—two men and a very muscular woman. One of them tried to go for Ayla’s position where she hunkered and peeked.

Iron Bull maneuvered to put himself between her and them. “Don’t worry about her. Focus on me, fuckers.”

The female blundered a laugh. “‘Her’? Don’t look like no woman to me, but if it is, she’s the ugliest one I’ve ever seen. Captain wants those horns, either way.”

Her companions laughed.

One male bandit drew his eyes over what he believed to be a very attractive, ebony warrior woman. “Aw, aren’t you a pretty, little thing. Maybe I’ll take you back to camp with me and we can mess around a bit, eh?”

Iron Bull growled, features darkening. “Wrong answer.”

The female was the closest to him, so she was the first to die. He charged at her quickly, a battle cry trilling from him. The woman brought her sword up to parry Bull’s axe swing, and she wasn’t prepared for the amount of power and skill behind the attack. It staggered her, just as Bull knew it would. Being smaller worked in his favor in moments like this, since he would probably get underestimated, which is exactly what happened.

The Qunari roared and spun, catching the woman in her thigh with his axe, the sharply honed blade hacking through pants, skin, and muscle, cracking the bone. Bright red blood jetisoned from the gory wound. She screamed, dropped her weapon, and flopped to one leg. With not a shred of remorse in his eyes, The Iron Bull, pivoted his body around, delivering a swing that cleanly removed the bitch’s head from her shoulders. It thumped off somewhere, landing in a puddle of creek water. Her corpse sank to the ground, blood draining from the neck-stump.

“LAMIA!” One of her comrades screamed.

The other one was already moving in on Iron Bull. Last mistake he ever made. “You fucking little bitch! I’ll kill you!”

His anger worked against him, because he swung in wild arcs that Bull easily thwarted and blocked. The Qunari had an almost maniacal grin on his face, drawn into the bloodlust like a bee lured into a field of fragrant wild flowers. He took his opening and kicked the man harshly in his unprotected groin. When his foe sank to his knees, winded and red-faced, Iron Bull axed him in the chest.

The second man decided to take his chances with the huge, horned figure hunkering behind some nearby boulders, his one eye staring blindly at the action. Resentius’s man had his sword raised, poised and ready to bring it down.

Bull snarled, loosened his throwing blade, and sent it at the man. He caught the thing in the back and fell forward, sliding to a halt a few feet from Ayla. Her eye skimmed wildly about; she could smell the intense tang of blood.

Resentius blocked more of Hannibal’s blows, frantically looking around at his own people. Including himself, there were only four of them left, and he’d seen the undeniably skillful way the white-haired woman had downed Lamia, Helnes, and Corth. It had been swift, relentless, and masterful.

“Retreat!” he called, backing away.

His three remaining soldiers withdrew, all of them running up the stream banks and into the trees.

Making sure it was clear and that no other enemies lingered, skimming up and down the creek bed, Bull yanked his blade from the corpse’s back, wiped it on the dead man’s pants, then sheathed it. He went to Ayla and took her hand, starting them to the others. Ayla’s eye enlarged at the carnage. She’d been around fighting and such before, but had never actually seen the gore, aside from when she’d witnessed the wrath of Hissrad in Iron Bull’s dream. Seeing it in person was much more unsettling. She shuddered at the bodies her husband and the others left.

Bull didn’t try to shield her from the scene. She needed to know exactly what kind of world they lived in and see the fate of enemies they faced. He caressed her large hand, looking up at her. “It’s either us or them, Naaremma…and I won’t let it be us,” he said gravely.

Ayla nodded and tried to ignore the corpses, which was difficult when there were seven of them scattered across the area. She squealed and leapt aside to avoid contact with Lamia’s head.

Sera continued keenly observing the tree line along the shallow banks, her bow drawn now. She
spared quick looks over her shoulder to her friends.

“Watching you effortlessly hack our enemies into bits does get me quite riled,” Dorian churred smoothly at Hannibal, the corner of his full mouth tugging into a smile, then he smirked down at his attire. “Though, I could do without the blood on my boots.”

“Priss,” tossed Sera.

“Guilty as charged.” The Altus stepped over a corpse, its eyes staring lifelessly up like two faded specks of stone.

Hannibal smiled some and shook his head at his mate, then made his way to where Solas kneeled examining one of the other bodies. The elf reached to grip the medallion around the dead man’s neck, yanking it free. He stood and studied the item in his palm, the sun’s muted light glinting over its silver surface.

“I think it’s safe to say that we know who these soldiers belong to,” Solas said, eyes swinging to Hannibal. “They wear helms like that found on Ares’s belt buckle, as well as jewelry bearing the same image. The mark of the God of War.”

The Inquisitor took the medallion and glanced over it, before handing it back to the elf, whom he figured would want to add it to his collection of things. Hannibal sighed. “So, he’s begun transporting his factions into our world? You heard what Resentius said—he’s not used to seeing Qunari, that he’d arrived a few weeks ago.”

Solas nodded. “So it would seem. When we came to this area to meet with Gatt for the Qunari Alliance and dispose of the Venatori, we faced that lone fade rift.”

“Yes, that was a strange occurrence, considering we’d already cleared this region of them.”

“Perhaps, the Veil was agitated because of Ares’s activity in Fade. He might be opening his own portals between his world and ours, bringing his people through. The Veil is fragile in several areas and the smallest disturbances could cause fade rifts.”

“That’s a viable observation,” said Cassandra. “What are we going to do about this war god?”

“There isn’t much to be done for the moment,” Hannibal answered. “He seems to have the power to evade us, certainly to destroy us if he wanted to. You haven’t seen him in the Fade lately, have you, Solas?”

“No. Still nothing. He eludes me. There were a few moments where I thought I sensed him, then it was gone.”

“Sounds like he’s toying with you, dickin’ us around,” Bull entered. “But, like the boss said, not much to do for the moment. I’m betting he’ll come to us soon enough. We just need to be ready for him.”

“Agreed.” Hannibal moved for his mount, securing his broadsword. He climbed in the saddle.

“Let’s get out of here, in case our friend Resentius has ideas about regrouping.”

The party didn’t even bother to loot the bodies. They left the carrion for the crows and bandits. (*)

There was still an hour or two of daylight left when they reached the Driftwood Margin Camp. Ayla’s hands were positioned on the back end of the reins with Bull’s guiding, keeping them in contact. Her eye drew around when they entered the main clearing.

“Wow…” she breathed. Beyond the camp, rising above the emerald hills and carved right from the mighty mountainside itself, was a hummngous Dwarven figure. It was poised atop a pyramid of the natural, step-like columns that marked many parts of the Storm Coast. The figure had a great double-sided war hammer lifted over its head. “That’s pretty amazing. I’ve come up this way with my brother before, but never got to see any of this, obviously.”

Bull chuckled, guiding their mount to the holding pens. “Yeah, dwarves have some of the most magnificent structures and architecture in all of Thedas, next to the Qunari.” His grin broadened.

“There’s just so much of the world I’ve never seen, even when it was right before my eyes, all around me. I hope to see as much as possible.”

“Well, once this is over, you’ll get your share of travels, since you’ll be with me and the Chargers. We don’t usually sit in one place for long, but, well…then the Inquisition crossed our path, and here we are.”

Ayla’s arms tightened around him. “And I’m glad it happened that way. We might never have met otherwise.”

“Funny how things work, hm? Never saw myself as a married man.”

She smiled at the top of his white head. “I hope you’re not regretting it.”

Bull huffed a laugh. “Not even close. In fact, woman, if we had met ten years ago, I would’ve married you then, Qun be damned.”
“Hm. Well, I would’ve been twelve at the time, and you twenty, so I don’t think marriage would’ve happened immediately.”

“Fine. I’d have given you four or five years, then bitten you and made you mine.”

Ayla giggled. “I suppose I would have been old enough by then.”

Bull halted the elk. He climbed down first, then stood aside so Ayla could slowly maneuver down. They removed their bags and Bull’s axe, then he secured the animal by the water and food troughs.

Since Ayla was currently the muscle, she easily slung their two bags over her torso, while he carried the weapon. Holding to her hand, Bull led her through camp. He’d been there a few times.

“Now to get a tent,” he said with a grin, eyes skimming to a certain part of the camp. It was a low hill nestled against the cliffs near a very small waterfall created by a fissure in the rock face. It wasn’t as far as he usually liked to be from the rest of camp, but it was secluded enough.

He left Ayla in that spot while he found two requisition soldiers and got them to set up a tent. It took about thirty minutes; they did this often and were quite efficient with it. Iron Bull laid out the furs and blankets that would serve as his and Ayla’s bed and arranged their things in one corner. Ayla sat outside while he did this. She smiled when he took her hand and led her inside, and she instantly settled on her back to the sleeping area.

“Ah,” Ayla sighed, closing her eye a moment. “Feels good to rest. I plan to get to sleep earlier than usual tonight, since I know the Inquisitor will have us up nice and early for the fountain.” She grinned and slinked her hand out to contact his, seeing his shadow-shape beside her. “Just another day or so, husband, and we’ll be back to ourselves! I can’t wait!”

“Mm, me either.” The Qunari’s eyes adopted a sensual playfulness. “There’s a reason I put us up here. It’s further away from the other tents.”

“Oh, really? And why is that?” Ayla lifted an amused brow.

“If it works and we wake up in our own bodies in two days, I don’t want everyone to hear all the sex we’ll be having, because I am going to jump on you, woman.”

Rich chuckles tremored from her. “Not if I jump on you first!”

“Indeed.” He laughed heartily with her.

(*)

“Who do those fucks think they are, huh, killing most of my crew…?”

Resentius paced furiously through the largest hut of his camp, his quarters. He and his people had killed the bandit group who occupied the place not long after Ares brought them to this new world. All that remained of his people now were the three who’d fled the scene with him and three others who had been assigned to stay behind and secure the camp.

“We’ll get them,” Resentius scowled, eyes roaming the last of his crew. “They’re still in the area, to be sure, and once we find them, they’ll wish they’d never fucked with us.”

The God of War flashed into existence in a pulse of pale-blue luminance, his impressive form leaning to the doorjamb, muscular arms crossed over his chest. “Strong words. Still got your asses kicked though.”

“Lord Ares!” Resentius instantly bowed his head, saluting. His crew did the same.

The God of War whistled and drew his eyes over them. “And then there were seven.”

“You…saw us fighting that group by the creek?”

Ares nodded at Resentius. Being divine, he had the power to reveal or stealth himself at will. “Yep. I stayed long enough to watch you turn tail and run off.” The god had examined the fighting from ground zero, arms crossed and enjoying the action while he stood very close to the one named Dorian. Once Resentius retreated, Ares had rolled his eyes and vanished off to other things.

“Why did you not help us?”

The god eased from his lean, features hardening as he moved closer to the man. The others in Resentius’s crew backed away cautiously, their gazes shifting expectantly between Ares and their leader.

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“Help you?” Ares began, then exploded angrily, “Help you! Are you fucking kidding me? There were eleven of you against them, and you still failed. Let’s get something straight, Resentius.” The God of War stopped before the man, towering several inches above him, a hard hunk of tanned flesh adorned in black leathers. “I don’t interfere in the affairs of mortals unless I think it’s necessary… or unless it directly affects me. I’ve given you the resources to expand yourself as a warrior and gain glory in my name—Weapons, reputation, soldiers… Hell, I’ve even brought you to a whole other world that is here for the taking. What more do you need?”
“I…I’m sorry, milord.” Resentius stood with his head bowed, taking the verbal beating in silence. He didn’t want to piss Ares off any more than he had, which was only mildly for now. “I didn’t mean to show disrespect.”

“Mm.” Ares’s piercing brown eyes narrowed, lips pressing a thin line. His expression lost a little of its edge, and he sighed. He gripped Resentius’s chin and lifted it so their eyes met, then smiled almost endearingly, shaking his head. “Mortals—you’re like little children, always needing guidance. Well, daddy’s gonna make it all better. You’ll have more troops by tomorrow. Make sure you don’t lead them into something they’re not ready for.”

“Thank you. Thank you, Lord Ares, praises unto you.”

“Do you know who that was you faced back there, the horned one with the red hair?”

Resentius shook his head.

“That was the Inquisitor of this world. His name is Hannibal Luthor, leader of the Inquisition I told you about.”

“He’s…an able warrior.”

Ares nodded in agreement. “Everyone in his party is an exceptional fighter,” he said, then gripped his chin a moment and produced a distasteful look. “All but the huge, horned one; don’t know what his deal is, but all he did was hide behind a rock. Oh, well.” He shrugged it off.

“Shall we engage them again, milord?”

“No. Don’t bother. They’re the ones battling Corypheus, the wannabe god.” He droned deeply with laughter. “Let them be…for now. They can keep each other busy while I continue to set up shop. I want you to concentrate on training and recruiting. There are thousands of Thedosians who could be persuaded to follow me. This world is torn by a holy war of lost gods, false gods, and gods that never existed. Their Chantry has fallen, their Circle of Mages broken, their Templar ranks divided. Now is the perfect time to unite the people under a force that can truly lead and protect them—me.”

Resentius’s head nodded slowly as he began to understand the true weight of Ares’s plan. He smiled a bit.

“Go south to an area called Crestwood. There are more than a few rogue Templar factions and apostate mages there, as well as hordes of bandits and deserter soldiers. There are villages and towns full of hopeless souls who will join you and honor me. All you need to do is convince them. Shouldn’t take much. Their world is on the brink of destruction, with Coryphy-fuck’s demon spawn breaking through from the Void. Make a name, become a force to be reckoned with, and the recruits will come. Make sure all the land knows my name and that I am a true god, and that I’m here to protect them from the false god. I want you to start building temples.”

“This will all be done, Lord Ares. But…what happens when these Thedosians demand to see proof of you and your power?”

The God of War grinned. “Don’t you worry about that. I’ll be making appearances as I see fit. Before you even reach most of this land, its people will have heard of me. When they see others following and worshipping me, they’ll fall in line to do the same.”

Resentius chuckled and nodded.

“Make me proud,” Ares said, then his tall figure shimmered over with blue light and he disappeared.

(*)

Solas sat on a bench by one of several fires spotting Driftwood Margin Camp. He’d taken in a very light meal, as he didn’t eat much normally. He watched the flames in silence, enjoying the almost hypnotizing effect, calming. It helped to prepare him for the Fadewalk he’d initiate that night.

The elf stood, stretched his lithe form, and headed to his tent. It sat amongst the trees and not so close to the others. Solas enjoyed his privacy. Not to mention, he’d occupied a tent near Hannibal and Dorian once and regretted it. The sound of them having sex tended to disrupt one’s concentration.

He pulled back the flap of his tent, stepped inside, and instantly froze.

Ares was reclined on the elf’s sleep roll, leathered legs crossed. The single lantern cast warm light over his attractive figure. He put a finger to his moustache-capped lips, smiling. “Don’t bother alerting your friends, Solas. They can’t see or hear me; only you can.”

Solas peered over his shoulder, then moved fully into his tent and secured the flap. He hadn’t expected such a meeting. Tense with curious caution, he sat across the tent from the God of War. “You know my name.”

“Yeah. Watched you and your group eat through Resentius’s crew earlier. Impressive.”

The questions were already swarming through Solas’s head. He took a breath and started simple.
"How long have you been watching us?"

"Only recently. I decided to center in on your aura in the waking world. I was there when your party stopped not far out of Skyhold for a lunch break a few days ago. That’s where I got your name and the names of some others. The second time was during your run-in with Resentius.”

Ares cocked his head to the side. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What’s the deal with that huge Qunari, the one who seems to need the protection of that gorgeous, white-haired Nubian?"

"Nubian?"

"Oh, in my world, they’re a race of exotic, dark-skinned people.” The war god grinned devilishly. "They create some of the most beautiful women you’d ever want to see; they make wonderful bed-mates."

Solas lifted a slim brow. "I…see. As to the woman you described, her name is Ayla…only she’s not herself at the moment."

"Oh, really?" Ares’s interest was highly peaked.

"The Qunari’s name is Iron Bull. They’re married. A couple of weeks ago, she touched an Elvhen artifact that switched her into his body and him into hers. We’re on our way to a place that contains a fountain which will switch them back."

"Ah. That would explain the cowering behind the rock.” Ares lifted a hand and conjured an extravagant chalice of liquid ambrosia, which he sipped. He snapped the fingers of his other hand and made a cup of steaming tea appear beside Solas.

The Elvhen man eyed the brew, but didn’t touch it.

Ares laughed a bit at his reluctance. “Solas, if I wanted you dead, you would be. Besides, I wouldn’t use poison. Not my style. Too boring.”

“I have particular requirements about tea; I only drink a certain kind.”

Ares tailored a handsome grin and nodded at the cup. “Go ahead. I think you’ll find that it’s your favorite blend.” He sipped his ambrosia, watching the man closely.

After some considerable thought, Solas took the cup, lifted it to his face, and inhaled the steam rising from its dark brown surface. It certainly smelted like the Dalish lisse tea he favored. His gaze lifted and settled upon Ares’s, and he slowly put the rim to his lips, sipping.

“Remarkable,” the elf said. “It tastes delicious. How did you know?"

“You doubted my godly powers?” Ares chuckled.

“If I did before, I do no longer. Now, I’ll ask something of you.”

“Go ahead.”

“What are you planning to do in Thedas?”

“Let’s just say, I’m going to clean up the mess that’s been created by this ‘holy war’. Simply put, your world needs order, Solas. I aim to be that order.”

“You want to do the same thing as Corypheus then, assert yourself as a conquering god over this world. I’d hardly call that creating order.”

“That stung; it really did.” Ares sipped his drink. “I’m nothing like Corypheus. I don’t want to destroy your world, nor do I want to leave a heap of bodies in my wake. See, people have this idea that just because I’m the God of War that I’m all about destruction and evil and domination, that kind of shit. But, I’m not like that at all,” he smiled widely and clicked his tongue to his teeth. “Well, not completely, anyway. As a true god, I know it’s all about the people. People are necessary for my survival, as they are for any true god. Their belief and devotion fuels what I am. Corypheus wants to destroy everyone; I want to save them, become their One True God. I will protect them…in exchange for their allegiance to me.”

Inwardly, Solas was excited by the information being obtained from Ares. He’d have much to report to the Inquisitor later, since he now had a better idea of what the god wanted in Thedas, though there was still a lot holes to be filled in.

“I assume that Resentius and his people aren’t the only ones you’ve brought over to Thedas?”

“You assume correctly,” Ares nodded. “There are other groups. I’m sure you and your Inquisition will begin to notice them soon.”

“I see.” Solas took a few moments to gather his thoughts, sipping his tea. “Besides mine and yours, how many other worlds have you been to?"

“Hm…” The God of War squinted his eyes in thought, then shrugged and smiled. “Lots. My pointy-eared friend, I have been to realities where great metal birds and horseless carriages
transport people to destinations in record times. I’ve even been to worlds where massive ships take
to the stars and travel the vastness of space. I’ve traveled to the past, the future, and everywhere in
between.”

Solas was nearly giddy with all this new information. His eyes flicked to the ceiling of his tent,
then back to the glinting brown gems of Ares’s eyes. “Traveling the stars? How is that even
possible? There’s nothing beyond them.”

Ares uttered a low chuckled. “Oh, but there is. There’s so much out there. I came across a place
called the Q Continuum once, where the species living there possesses godlike powers, though
they aren’t gods.” The god grimaced thickly, recalling that encounter vividly. “They’re annoying.”

“You have traveled the ages in ways I could only imagine, yet you align yourself to a lowly
Fadewalker like me,” the elf said, the tones of his voice calm and resonant, brushed by his refined
accent. “Why? Why have you sought me out?”

Ares emptied his chalice and made it disappear. Slowly, he sat up, and that put him much closer to
Solas, as the tent wasn’t terribly big. He reached out and placed fingers along the elf’s smooth
cheek. Solas stiffened at the contact, but didn’t move. He merely held the war god’s stare.

“I sense great power in you, Solas, a potential you haven’t fully reached. I’d like to get to know
you better.”

Solas smirked. “I’m not sexually attracted to men.”

The God of War rumbled a chuckle. “I’ve been known to dabble in such relations, but that’s not
what I was implying. I only touched you so I could align better with the power of your aura, sense
it more.”

“I see.”

Ares removed his hand, nodding. “It’s been a pleasure talking with you, Solas. I believe you and I
could be good allies.” He winked and vanished.

Solas’s gazed moved slowly around the interior of his tent. He was definitely alone. He drew in a
deep breath and sighed it out. How in the Heavens were they going to handle Ares? He sipped on
the tea left by the God of War.
From the Veilfire Comes the Remedy...or Does It?

They left the camp while it was nice and early, yet still bright out. They took no mounts this time since they’d be going up into the hills for most of their traveling. Besides, the cave Solas led them to was only about two hours away.

The elf walked ahead of the group with Hannibal. Dorian was on his lover’s other side.

“I spoke with Ares last night,” Solas said.

Hannibal turned to him, continuing forward, boots crunching over rocks and grass. “He finally allowed you to find him in the Fade, which means he’s getting bolder.”

“It wasn’t in the Fade that we met. When I retired to my tent last night, he was inside, lying on my bed.”

“Oh,” Dorian chimed smoothly, a grin accompanying the vague lift of his brow. “A man in Solas’s bed? Never thought I’d see the day.”

Solas’s wry expression made the Altus shake with chuckles.

“Why didn’t you call out?” Hannibal asked, features serious and stern.

“It wouldn’t have mattered; he said he’d made himself visible and audible to only me. I had no reason to disbelieve him. So, I sat, and we talked. The first time he encountered us was when we left Skyhold on this journey. He was also in stealth when we faced Resentius and his people.”

Solas’s eyes fixed ahead in thought, their periwinkle depths holding a bit of worry.

“What’s wrong, Solas? What did he say?”

The Elvhen man looked at the Inquisitor. “He knows the extent of damage done in our world—the fade rifts, the indecisiveness of the Chantry, Circle of Mages, and the Templar Order, all of it. He knows Thedas is hurting, and he believes that by asserting himself as a One True God for people to believe in, he can make things better.”

Cassandra’s ear was open. She walked not far behind, scowling. “There is only the Maker. Who does this Ares think he is, that he can come to our world and challenge our ways and beliefs?”

“That’s exactly it, Cassandra,” Solas answered, looking over his shoulder as he spoke. “We have our beliefs. He is a walking, living god. I mean no offense to those who put their faith in the Maker, but I have yet to see any physical proof that he ever even existed. Though, if he has or does,” the elf looked forward, voice churning out softly, “it would be nice were he to appear to the world right about now. Because if he doesn’t, this world may soon be changing its allegiance to the God of War.”

Seeker Pentaghast was reluctant to believe his words, but she knew they were true, based on his reports. “Maker help us, then.”

Solas continued. “Ares and I spoke for longer than a few minutes this time. He talked about how he’s traveled to a countless number of worlds, fantastical places, where great ships travel among the stars. He’s moved through time as simply as you or I would walk through a room. Inquisitor, I’m not exactly afraid of him, but more afraid of the kind of damage he could potentially do to our world. He plans to unite the people of Thedas under him, gather most of them as followers. He said Resentius and his people are just one group of many that he’s already brought from his world. We’ll be seeing the influence of Ares’s presence soon, of that I have no doubts.”

(*)

Dorian’s pretty eyes eased over the cave’s entrance. It was wide, jagged, and overall menacing. The shadows beyond its maw were impenetrable. To either side of the cave, water tumbled down the black stone in continuous torrents. “I hate spiders, and this place just screams, ‘Look at me! I’m a giant-spiders’ nest!'” he waved manicured hands dramatically.

Cassandra chuckled at the Altus. “You really are too girlie for some of this.”

“At moments, I am, and I’m not ashamed to admit that.”

Iron Bull chuckled.

Ayla was with Dorian; she didn’t like the look of the place at all. A constant damp-smelling breeze churned from the cave. She could scent other things in that breeze, not just moss and stagnant, mineral-rich water. There was also the decay of death.


The woman hadn’t realized she’d dug her heels in. Sighing, she moved forward, eye roaming slowly through the darkness as they passed inside. It didn’t take long for her vision to adjust. There were very thin shafts cutting up through the cave in places, letting mute daylight in to cast over the floor.

Veilfire was a gift of the Elvhen mages, developed and perfected by them long before even the Tevinter Imperium came to be. It was named so for its pale green color, and was highly efficient, as it didn’t require wood or oil to fuel it. A skilled enough mage could easily summon it from any of the hundreds of braziers placed in areas all around Thedas.

“Allow me.” Dorian stepped forward, focused his magic, and ignited the brazier.

“Here,” said Cassandra, having pulled a torch from the bag slung to her torso.

The Altus took the torch and lit it, continuing forward beside Hannibal. “I guess this means we’re looking for a surface bearing the mark of a glyph, hm, Solas?”

“Yes. The map insinuates that this system of caves runs deep. We’ll have to use the veilfire to follow markers leading to the hidden passage of the fountain.”

Sera’s cute, freckled countenance held a scowl, eyes darting about. “This place would goosebump Andraste’s tits, creepy as it is. Not a fan.”

“I’m with ya there, Shorty,” mused Bull, holding to Ayla’s hand, the woman keeping as close as she could without clipping his heels. “The sooner me and the missus drink from this enchanted pool and ditch outta here, the better.”

They moved at a careful pace. The slightest sounds they made, any words they shared, rebounded off the cave’s rocky surfaces, tapering out hollowly. Ayla looked behind them at the darkness that had infringed, the light of day offered by the main opening left far behind.

When they reached a place where the chamber split into four corridors, Dorian heedfully approached each path, holding the veilfire torch up. The wall just inside the third path ebbed with a glowing, pale red symbol.

“This way,” the Altus said.

Hannibal instantly moved with him, serving as protector to his little boyfriend. If anything jumped out, it would face the red-maned Qunari first. They ventured forward through the system of passages and caverns, and after they’d found their seventh hidden symbol, they realized they were on the lip of a jutting ledge.

“Looks like we’re climbing down.” Bull nodded to the ladder attached to the stone wall to their right. He met Ayla’s eyes and gave her a reassuring smile. “It’ll be easy. Just feel your way down the rungs.”

“Okay. It sounds simple enough,” she replied and shivered. She was very frightened and didn’t like being in there.

Solas had conjured an illumination spell, turning the top of his stave into a guiding light. He attached the staff to his back and approached the ladder. “I’ll go down first, then you can toss the torch to me, Dorian.”

“Right.”

Solas peered over the edge into the darkness. With the glow of his stave and the veilfire, his eyes adjusted quickly. He saw the stone-littered floor. He opened his ears fully to listen, but heard nothing unusual.

They waited while the Fadewalker descended.

“How’s it looking?” Hannibal called.

“There’s nothing. Drop the torch, Dorian.”

Dorian positioned the thing so it was clear of Solas, then released it. Once it clacked to the cave floor, the elf grabbed it up, then shifted away from the ladder, watching the darkness while the others followed.

Bull and Ayla were the last two left above, and he wasn’t leaving her up there. “Go ahead, Ayla. Just hold tight and take your time.”

She took to the ladder, moving steadily. Iron Bull had begun to descend once she got far enough down. He dropped from the ladder when she moved clear.

Onward they went, following the ancient markers. No one could tell just how long they’d been in the caves; there was no way to distinguish it without some form of daylight or even an hourglass, neither of which was available.

“Seems like we’ve been in here for hours,” Cassandra spoke lowly.

“We probably have, two at least,” Dorian answered.

“Yeah…and no arrows sent yet,” Sera added, eyes narrowing. “S’not right. Somethin’s sour about it.”

“Let’s not jinx things.” The Altus smirked thinly at her. “I’m glad not to have faced any creepy, crawly cave creatures. Ha, try saying that five times fast.”
Sera did, intent on remaining calm. “Creepycrawlycavecreatures. Creepycrawlycavecreatures. Creepycrawlycavecreatures…” All the while, her large blue eyes tried penetrating the concealing shadows.

Iron Bull’s chuckle, though issued in Ayla’s higher voice but brushed with his inflections, roamed richly through the cavern. “Keep it together, Shorty.”

“Blah.” Sera remarked. “We don’t belong here; no one does. Meals. Meals for cave creatures and magical shite, that’s what becomes of dumb-dumbs venturing to these places. Blah.”

Again, Bull laughed. “You’re so cute when you’re jumpy.”

Sera raspberried her tongue at him.

They continued their advance, taking another ladder down at one point. After what seemed an eternity, to Ayla at least, the party entered a room that was strung with layers of spider webs. They clung to the walls and ceiling, thicker in some places than others. Chunks of glowing blue stone jutted from the cavern walls randomly, lending an eerie light.

“Spiders. I knew it,” Dorian said, face pinched in disgust. His hackles were up, as were everyone else’s.

Ayla whimpered softly, pulling even closer to Bull.

Everyone drew their weapons, moving further into the sizable cavern, with Dorian wedging the torch into a small crack in the wall to preserve it.

“Stay calm,” Hannibal spoke, gaze swinging slowly about. “I don’t hear anything. This might just be an abandoned nest.”

Silence fell heavy as an iron blanket.

Ayla shifted and furrowed her brow. She snatched her eye down to her arm and screamed. Three spiders were scurrying up it. Disregarding any kind of order, the woman yelled hysterically, stamping furiously in place, arms flapping. “Get them off me! Spiders! I HATE SPIDERS!”

The others turned to her, while Iron Bull swiped at the creatures, crunching one under his boot.

“Calm down, Naaremma. They’re little and harmless.”

She shivered, running her hands up and down her arms. “I still hate them.” She grabbed his hand, and her eye stared beyond everyone, looming to huge proportions, mouth dropping open. She loosened a roar of fright.

Everyone whipped around to watch as a very large arachnid lowered from the cover of web-work across the cavern’s ceiling. Its body was bulbous and fuzzy, the pattern on its abdomen a mesh of purple and yellow. Its hairy, segmented legs wiggled slowly, a half dozen eyes set on the invaders of its nest. The creature screeched when it landed.

“Spread out!” Hannibal ordered. He was sure the spider was a queen, given its coloring and size.

Four lesser giant-spiders scurried from the webs along the walls, closing in on them. Ayla squealed, moving behind her husband, who’d already taken a stance.

“You know the drill, angel.”

“Yes. I stay here, try not to get killed.”

“Exactly.”

Bull crept forward and engaged one of the smaller enemies. Dorian and Solas once again handled the protective wards, then resorted to fire spells, which worked quickly against the lesser spiders. Hannibal, Sera, and Cassandra had formed a loose circle around the queen, attacking at will. The huge spider spun quickly, focusing on the Seeker, and Cassandra lifted her shield in time to keep a stream of corrosive saliva from contacting her.

There were so many enemies attacking that the queen couldn’t concentrate on just one, and in time, they wore her down, finishing her. They cautiously approached her downed carcass, Hannibal prodding it with the end of his broadsword. Satisfied, he unsheathed his knife and set about removing the venom sac.

“This will come in handy.”

Ayla grew frantic when she didn’t hear fighting any more, left in hazy shadows by the nest’s entrance. “Iron Bull!”

“I’m right here,” he answered gently, grabbing her hand a second later. He grimed up at her. “Wanna go see it up close? Pretty neat.”

“Ugh, no.” Her eye settled on the dead spider queen near the center of the cavern, and she shivered again. “Disgusting things…”

Iron Bull chuckled.

Once they’d scavenged the queen’s body, Dorian went to take up the veilfire torch again.
“The entrance to the chamber of the fountain is in here somewhere,” Solas said.

Dorian nodded and began walking near the walls. Cassandra and Hannibal hacked away at the streamers of webs for him so he could see the stone. The Seeker slashed at a section of web during their search, and a mummified humanoid husk tumbled out. It had been cocooned in there for some time.

“Like I said, dumb-dumbs becoming meals.” Sera tossed.

They continued slashing at the webs for a little longer, before Dorian called out, “There! The symbol!”

Cassandra saw to removing all the stringy tendrils of webbing masking what was obviously a large, square, moveable section of stone. The hidden door. The Seeker grimaced, resorting to tearing at the spider-spun curtain with her gloved hands. When she finished, she stepped back to let Solas ease forward.

The elf skimmed the symbol. It was different from the others, standing out against the stone, emblazoned in a brilliant violet, same as the unseen glyphs that lit up on the back of the Statue of Ahime Anta when Ayla touched it. The purplish color was an indicator that the magic of the spell contained within the artifact was elementally lightning-based.

Solas’s eyes squinted faintly and he lifted his hand palm-out, facing the sealed entrance. The air around him crackled with energy. He was summoning his electricity mana. He shut his eyes and began to chant in Elvhen.

“Entrime maquen an, tovra at i quetta o Ahime Anta, er o nelde. Lav esse ana eless nen ana tovra at mana. Palime… palime…” Entrance requested, reverse the word of change face, one of three. Allow access to healing waters to undo what was done. Open… open…

The group watched as lightning force trickled from Solas’s hand, attracted to the glyph, spreading out from it until the entire stone slab shimmered with violet luminance. An archaic, grindy sound accompanied the movement of the wall as it slid slowly aside, granting them entry. The first thing they heard once the door stopped moving was the bubbling of water.

Hannibal took the veilfire from Dorian and assumed the lead, advancing carefully into the gradual decline of a short passage. When he passed into the chamber, he saw that, like the previous one, there were various-sized chunks of glowing blue stone flecked through the walls, lending tranquil light. Bright green moss carpeted the ground in places. The room was empty, except for the circular fountain in the center. It was carved and crafted of obsidian. Three tall statues rose from it, spouting water down into a shallow pool, and each figure held a little shelf upon which perched a simple copper cup. The wall on the far side of the fountain was chiseled with three ancient symbols arranged in a triangle.

“Ahime Anta,” Solas spoke, proceeding closer to the fountain. He stopped by the sculpture composed of two intertwining bodies that shared a single head; it was as tall as he. “This is the one whose cup you must drink from.” The elf turned to Iron Bull and Ayla.

“I assume the other two statues are part of the triad,” Hannibal said.

“Yes,” Solas nodded. He recognized them from their drawings in the notes his contact sent. “That one—he pointed—‘is Neris Nel. The other is Galhandir. Their physical statues haven’t been located.”

Sera made a rude noise, tongue flapping between her lips. “Knife-ear magical history equals boring. These caves equal unsettling. I don’t plan to be a meal; s’time to scat. Let Iron Balls and Pretty drink so we can leave.”

Solas smirked at her, his head shaking vaguely. He also rolled his eyes, but the gesture was so faint, it might not have been detectable. “Iron Bull, you’ll need your knife. You and Ayla need to add a few drops of blood to the cup before you drink.”

“Right.” Holding his wife’s large, gray hand, Bull edged closer to the pool, the figure of Ahime Anta. Giving a glance to Solas, he took the cup from the ledge, held it under the plume of water spraying from Ahime Anta, then replaced it to the ledge. He unsheathed his knife and flipped her hand to show the palm. “You ready, Naaremma?”

Ayla’s eye shivered in light horror. “But… she sighed, resigning to the fact that this was the only way to get them back into their own bodies. “Yes. Do it.” She squeezed her eye shut, lips pressed tightly, face scrunches for the impending pain.

Bull set the thinnest part of the blade to the meatiest part of her palm and sliced quickly. Ayla yelped and jumped a bit, but found that it stung a little. She opened her eye, watching as Bull held the cup under her hand to catch some drops of blood from the slim cut. He set the cup back on the ledge, sliced himself in the same manner, then added the droplets. He swirled the liquid around and met Ayla’s gaze, smiling excitedly.

“Bottoms up.”

She returned a trembling smile. “Horns up, you mean.”

He chuckled. “Yeah.” Then he took the copper vessel to his lips and drank half the contents. He
handed it Ayla, and she finished it off. The cup was returned to its shelf.

The party—everyone but Sera—watched in silent anticipation, as if the change would happen immediately. The quirky elf rolled her eyes. “Sun down, sun up. That’s how it works, yeah, Smoothy?” She eyed Solas.

“Yes,” he replied calmly, never one to get too riled by her brashness. It was simply her way.

“So, then, let’s be gone from here. I hate here.”

Hannibal chuckled softly. “Alright, Sera. We’re through. Back to camp.”

(*)

They’d spent just as much time in the cave as they had traveling to and from it. When they got back to camp, there was still about an hour of good daylight left, and by the time Iron Bull and Ayla cleaned away the grime of the caves and made their way down into heart of camp, night had fully fallen.

The couple found a spot on a bench by one of the fires. Bull made them some plates, and they enjoyed their meal with soft banter, both ready to brim over with excitement. Afterwards, he made her some cocoa, and she sipped on it happily, listening to the softness of some soldier’s lute-song.

Bull’s eyes skimmed the camp, falling on Sera. She stared silently into another fire pit across the way, the flames lapping and casting mysterious shadows over her freckled countenance. He was good friends with her and knew something was truly bothering her. She’d been rather reserved during the trip, when she was usually full of jokes and snippets.

“I’ll be back in a moment, Naaremnuma. Gonna talk to Sera.”

“Okay.” She bounced, drinking contently of the cocoa.

The Qunari lifted his slender, five-foot-seven frame from the bench, striding over to the Elvhen woman. Though, if Sera could have her way, she’d probably elect to become human. She’d lived with them most of her life, abandoned and forced to live in the Elvhen Alienage of Denerim, which was nothing more than a slummy ghetto that housed more elven citizens than it should; it was overpopulated. Sera had spent time in an orphanage there up until she was adopted by a human. She’d never seen anything ‘good’ come from being an elf, and so rejected and despised her true lineage. Bull had joked with her on several occasions that she should be proud of those pointy, little ears, while wigging his own at her. He wasn’t down for the magical part of Elvhen culture, but he did find that they were an extremely resilient and noble people. He wished Sera could see a little of that. Perhaps, then, she wouldn’t be so full of subconscious self-loathing.

He lowered to the bench beside her. “Hey, Shorty.”

“Hey, ye’self,” she replied, voice level and somewhat disconnected.

“I know something’s rubbing you wrong. Wanna tell me what it is?”

Her eyes fell to her lap and she sighed. She shook her head. “Nothin’ you can change.”

“Still, it’s good to get it out, Tell me.”

Her eyes slowly lifted to fix on the fire again, and the smallest, almost undetectable, of smiles touched her lips. “You have friends, right? I mean, not just people y’see on the day-to-day, but people who actually hold your feelings. Aside from Pretty, you have friends.” She looked over at him.

Bull nodded a few times. “Yeah. I have Ayla, the Chargers, you, and some others in the Inquisition, maybe some still left amongst the Ben-Hassrath.”

“Then, you’d feel it inside if you lost them, those friends, especially Pretty. You wear love like a tight suit; it chokes you and cuts you up the ass, but you enjoy it anyway.” She chuckled softly, then went serious again. “I care about some people the way I care about you; you’re a friend. I…” she sighed, “I got a message two days before we left Skyhold. Some Red Jenny pals that were really close…well…pushing up daisies now. Ambushed.”

Iron Bull sighed, arm going around her shoulder. “I’m sorry about your friends, Shorty. I really am. I know they must’ve meant a lot to you, seeing you sulk like this.”

“Yeah.” Sera studied the flames for a long while, then shrugged. “Ah, well. S’pose it’s the fate of everyone. Life—it passes like butterflies, and we’re all in a big field with nets, trying to catch the good parts.” Her shoulders slumped. “Until we catch an arrow instead, or a blade to the guts.” Her eyes glistened when they met his, searching his crystal-blue depths. Sera shook her head. “Why do we even bother, I think sometimes? Why…?”

“Because those butterflies make life worth living. Way I see it, we’re all just passing through, and the people we care about, the ones we lose, they’re waiting in a better place. A place where none of the stuff happening here even matters. At the same time, everything does matter while we’re here. We live to honor and remember the dead, Sera. You’ll see your friends again. Until then, you have friends right here, right now, that care about you. I’m one.” He grinned and tightened his arm, the embrace not nearly as solid and dramatic as it would be if he were in his own huge body.
Sera released a long exhalation, tipping her blond head to his white-haired one. She smiled softly. “I love you, Iron Balls.” She narrowed her eyes menacingly. “Better not tell anyone I said that.”

The Qunari chuckled softly. “Yeah, yeah. I won’t.”

Things settled down in Driftwood Margin Camp. Ayla was anxious to get to bed, so she and Bull retired to their tent shortly after his heart-to-heart with Sera. Shirtless, wearing only a pair of bed pants, Ayla sat with her legs apart and Bull positioned between them. He wore one of his large shirts as a nightgown, facing away from her. Ayla’s pants leg had been pulled up so Bull’s hand could rest upon her skin, letting her see while she combed at the thick, curly mane cascading down his back.

Smiling, done combing, Ayla set to braiding it. “Just a few more hours! I can’t wait.”

“Mm, you and me both. If I were in my body, I’d have a hard-on right now.”

Laughter tumbled from her. “I’m sure you would, dirty old man.”

“Hey, I’m only eight years your senior, so not that old.” His grin turned very wicked. “But definitely dirty.”

She laughed some more. Then they settled on the furs, Bull snuggling against his own ginormous body for the last night…hopefully.

As Leliana had promised to the Inquisitor, the poster sketches of Ayla that stated her description, that she was looking for her brother, and present location, and that he was looking for his dear sister, were missing for almost three months.

Elemir was in Milgren, a large, prosperous town that sat somewhere between Lothring and South Reach, nestled at the base of the Southron Hills, west of the great Brecilian Forest. His fear of never finding her had long-since surpassed his seething anger at losing her to begin with. Those fucking bandits had been smart about the way they handled things. When the five popped out on the road and ambushed, Elemir engaged them and yelled for Ayla to flee. He hadn’t counted on three other sets of them being in place to carry out the rest of their plans.

When Ayla ran, one group captured her. The other two sets of bandits staged false trails. By the time, Elemir fought of his attackers and ran for his sister, she was gone and he didn’t know which way they’d taken her. He’d found two trails indicating they moved on foot, and one that was clearly made by a horse-drawn carriage. He disregarded the carriage, since it’d be the easiest one to catch up to, and picked one of the other trails. After half hour, it became cold, so he backtracked to try the other foot-trail, which also ended with nothing. At that point, Elemir figured they’d used the cover of a nearby river to get away, or had probably hidden in any number of secret caves.

Either way, they took his sister. The person he cared about most. He’d been searching ever since.

He decided to try out east since the river flowed that way. That put him where he was now—in Milgren. The town got a lot of its money from mining and prostitution, no surprise to Elemir. He’d been approached three times since he entered on the main road, a mysteriously hooded figure wearing the garb and leather armor of a Ranger.

He approached the porch of the Silver Pony Pub, slipping through the warm pools of light cast by lampposts. A starry sky draped the world like a blanket above. Elemir pushed the door, entered, and went directly for the bar, taking a seat. He peered from the shadows of his hood, skimming faces, looking for one that was of a lovely, ebony tone, with unseeing, diamond-blue gems for eyes. Her stark hair would also give her away.

But…she wasn’t there.

“Whatcha need?” The tender asked. She was an older woman with faded red hair and stern features.

“Hot tea, thank you.” Elemir nodded, placing the money on the counter.

“Comin’ up.”

Elemir waited until the tea was before him. He sipped it, then sighed, letting his eyes skirt around. His gaze stopped, narrowed, then widened, and he hastened from his stool, going to the wall near where a group of patrons played Rings.

There, nailed to the wood, was a poster. It read:

Lost woman, named Ayla, is in search of her brother, Elemir.
He was last seen near Redcliffe. A reward is available for any information.

Ayla currently resides in Skyhold.

Above all the text was a pretty accurate sketch of her. Elemir’s eyes flooded with tears, though they didn’t fall. A shaky hand lifted and he ran fingers over her image.

"Ayla… my sweet Ayla!"

Thank the gods, she was alright! The only reason Elemir didn’t leave for the fortress then was because very wild and dangerous things stalked the night this far west, creatures that called the dense, enigmatic region of the Brecilian Forest home.

The man’s heart swelled so fiercely, he was sure it would burst through his ribs. He’d leave at first light. He couldn’t wait to hold her tight to him, because was never letting her go again.
Behind the Scenes: The Iron Bull and Ayla

Okay, all you wonderful readers who are enjoying this journey with me. I came up with a comical idea while in bed last night. I thought it would be entertaining to “pepper” my story with random out-of-character behind-the-scenes tidbits, you know, to see another side of the wonderful Dragon Age cast. I’d like to think of these short chapters, as I post them, as a kind of “DVD Extras” type of thing.

With that being said, I hope you enjoy this one and the others that I release throughout the story. And again, thank you all for reading. You guys are great. :)

Iron Bull and Ayla sat on a dark beige couch in the staging area. The Qunari wore a pair of loose-fitting jeans, a long-sleeved, torso-hugging knit shirt, eyepatch, and a pair of Chucks. She was dressed in skinny jeans, knee-high boots, and a blazer top, her thick, luscious hair pulled up and back. Ayla sat right against his side, hand on his knee.

The wall behind them was covered with a giant poster mural showing all the main characters of The Fic, with Skyhold Fortress looming in the background. Ample lighting spread comfortably over the area. The Interviewer sat in a cushy chair at a camera-friendly angle from the couple. He smiled deeply.

“So,” the Interviewer started, “Beauty and the Bull. It’s so cool having you here. I mean, I’m a HUGE fan of The Fic.”

“Pleasure to be here,” Ayla’s crisp, delicate accent churned through her words.

“Yeah, what she said.” Bull grinned.

“You guys are one of a few actual out-of-story couples, right?”

“Yes. Been married seven years,” the horned man answered, smiling lovingly at his wife.

“Is it true that you met when she was just seventeen?”

“Yes,” the couple answered in unison, nodding.

“And also that you were pregnant with your first child before you were eighteen?” The Interviewer prodded, anxious for juicy tidbits.

Ayla blushed.

“Yeah…about that…” Iron Bull chuckled. “I was all for waiting; she was only a few months from eighteen. But, well…she showed up at my apartment one evening wearing a little trench coat…and an even littler, silky red thing under that. So…” He shrugged broad shoulders, grinning handsomely, “she was The Borg, and resistance was futile.”

Laughter filled the area, all three bellowing with it. As per the law in Thedas, sixteen was considered a legal, consenting adult. Once a person reached that age, they could marry and have sex with whomever they pleased. So, her age at the time was of no concern to a twenty-five-year-old Bull.

The Interviewer’s eyes skimmed to Ayla. “It’s gotta be nice playing the love interest of your real-life husband, fairly easy.”

“Oh, it is. There are times when I forget the cameras are there and really just see him as he is out-of-story.” She laughed. “And I almost mess up the scene, because I’m like, ‘Bull, did you pick up the baby from daycare?’ or something like that.”

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The Interviewer chuckled.

“Yeah, I get those moments too,” Bull added, hands shifting to accommodate his conversation.

“There are actual takes of me stepping out-of-story with the dialog, like the time we were fighting a dragon and I said something along the lines of, ‘I’m about to get in my truck and run that fucking thing over.’ I drive a big truck, so…”

“Both of you do.” He cleared his throat. “I know you guys don’t have a lot of time here, but I really want to ask you about the whole body-swap thing. I was totally not expecting that to happen, as I’m sure most fans of the Fic weren’t. Ayla, I’ll start with you. How did you feel about that? How did you handle it?”

The lovely woman exchanged a grin with her husband, who had linked a thick, solid arm around her, locking her to his side. She took a breath, eyes swinging about thoughtfully. “Um, honestly, when I read the script and got to that part, I was like…’really?’ But, at the same time, I was very excited about the part, because it would allow me to portray my husband as he would act inside of my body. The best part about the swap sequence was that I didn’t have to pretend to be blind
when our characters weren’t in contact. The hardest part, to me, was masking my accent and speaking the way my husband does, forming the words and sentences with his vocal inflections. Otherwise, it was very fun.”

“The axe-work you did in The War Machine and previous scenes in Skyhold was pretty sweet. Who’d you train with for those sequences?”

Ayla perked and tapped Bull’s knee. “None other than my husband, the axe master. It was great being the warrior for once.” She donned a lovely smile.

“And you looked fucking hot swinging that thing around, I’ll tell you that…” Bull droned smoothly, nuzzling lips along her cheek.

The Interviewer cleared his throat, smiling. “Um…so…how did you like the swap sequence?”

Bull turned his attention to the man. “It was definitely interesting. Like she said, the hardest part was getting her accent down, her little girlie movements and gestures. Oh, fun times.”

“Did you enjoy the scene with Dorian where he trapped ‘Ayla’ for a kiss?”

Bull exchanged smiles with his wife. “Mm…yeah. He’s a nice-looking fella, a good friend in and out-of-story. The dream sequence that the three of us shared was actually something that the missus and I had talked about more than once before it was even brought to the table. We were thoroughly surprised and more than a little elated when we got the script for that chapter. When we recorded the scene, it was pretty intensely…hot.”

“Indeed, it was…” Ayla wiggled against his side, hand roaming up his thigh.

Bull growled low in his great chest.

“Um…” The Interviewer watched while the couple engaged in a heated kiss. He looked at the camera, flustered, blushing, and grinning crookedly. “I…think we’ll go ahead and conclude the interview then. Thank you both for joining me and I look forward to seeing more of the Fic.”

“Yeah, Horns up and all that, man.” Bull rose quickly from the couch, gathered his wife in his arms, and moved swiftly for their dressing room.

Ayla giggled sweetly.
The Iron Bull stirred, making the gradual shift from slumber. He stretched, yawned…and hesitated before taking a hand to his groin for the junk-shift. He sucked in a breath and grinned broadly when his grip fell over his manhood—ample, flaccid, and hanging to the left.

“Ah, thank the fucking Qun,” the words poured from him on waves of relief.

The Qunari opened his eye. Once he took in the view, extremely delighted to find gray skin over hard muscle, long legs, large hands, and big feet, Bull touched upon his horns. He finally eased to one elbow on his side and grinned at his sleeping wife, who was settled close against him snoring peacefully.

“Mm…” His growl was needful and hungry. He drew fingertips along her arm. “Naaremma, wake up.” Iron Bull spoke just above a whisper. He was already beginning to harden.

Ayla frowned at first, displeased at being roused, then her eyes flared open. She blinked a few times and quickly flipped over to her back, staring up at him. Grinning, she performed the same checks as he, even squeezing her breasts. “Thank the gods! It worked! We’re fixed!”

“Yes. So…what do we do now?”

The heat had begun to rise in Ayla, starting at the secret center of her, traveling outward, until it flushed her dimpled cheeks. “Oh, you know what, dear husband,” she purred and flung her arms around his neck and shoulders, urging him to roll atop her.

Bull didn’t hesitate, capturing the soft, fleshy bands of her lips with his, drawing his tongue delicately over them. Ayla moaned and wiggled, having missed the dominating press of his weight, the masculine solidity of his magnificent physique trapping her beneath him. The woman indulged their kiss with unbridled passion, locking her legs around his waist.

It wasn’t long before he was substantial and throbbing within his bed pants. She’d grown equally aroused, slippery between her legs. Iron Bull, being the sly one, had decided not to wear panties last night, so he knew all he had to do was lift the large shirt for direct admission to her tight female entrance. He kissed his way along her cheek to her neck, nipping tenderly, while rocking his weight against her, hands inching the shirt up and out of the way.

When he drew back and rose to his knees between her wide-spread legs, Ayla took initiative and clawed at the drawstring of his bed pants, aching to have him inside her. She tossed the flap aside, and his cock instantly popped free, stiff and inviting. She licked her lips and laid back, grabbing his hips.

It intoxicated Iron Bull to see such blatant sexual need in her beautiful, luminous eyes. He shared a love like no other with an amazing woman who cherished him as he was—faults, scars, missing eye, and all. She wasn’t afraid of his Qunari ways, having taken the harsh ride of his kuma’ta kahfaar like a champ, when he thought just seeing his amber eye and enlarged canines might’ve frightened her off. She’d allowed him to marry her with a bite. Ayla wouldn’t have gone through with any of that if she didn’t truly and unconditionally love him, the same way he loved her. He knew he was one damned-lucky bastard.

Bull watched her fondly as he lowered his pants enough so they wouldn’t hinder them, down to the middle of his thighs. He settled his weight back on her, pushing slowly into her tight heat. His great body trembled against her, eye shutting. “Ah, shit yeah. Feels so good,” he whispered across her lips.

“Mmmmyeeeah!” Ayla’s cry of ecstasy wasn’t a low one. “Oh, my love, yes…” She thrust her hips up to meet his.

The couple made hard, fervent love in the early morning hours.

(*)

While the spot Iron Bull had chosen in camp was somewhat private, it wasn’t as secluded as he thought. The sun rose an hour ago, and not long after, Solas and Hannibal emerged from their tents. The elf was almost always the first to get up when he was in the traveling party. The main reason the Qunari wasn’t still in bed was because of his anxiousness to be on the road back to Skyhold. Also, he’d given his Tevinter lover quite the workout last night, and Dorian still slept. Otherwise, Hannibal would probably have gotten awakened in the middle of the night for sex.

The Inquisitor sat by the fire at the bottom of the low hill atop which stood the tent of Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull. Solas also occupied a bench at the fire, tending to a small portion of berries, sliced apples, and flat bread.

A heated roar came from the tent, followed by a series of high moans, both voices singing their sex-duet back and forth. Grunts and wanton yelps followed, as if the two vocalists had hastened the pace of their lovemaking.

Hannibal sipped his coffee, eyes swaying to lock on Solas’s across the fire pit. He grinned.

Solas lifted a brow, looking up the hill for a moment. “Sounds as if they’re back to normal.”
“Ah! Ah! Ah! Bull, yes! Right there…yeees! Ah! Ah!”

“Oh fuck, angel!” An unhindered, guttural growl came from the tent, followed by a deep, long groan.

Solas shook his head, stood, and moved off, wishing he had some more of the tea Ares gave him. Hannibal laughed richly.

(*)

They’d pulled off all clothing, and Bull had rolled and positioned himself under her. Ayla sat atop his thighs, their bellies and chests together, her slim legs locked around him. This position buried him so wonderfully deep in her, and she clung to him as he thrust up. She tossed her head back when release tremored through her.

Iron Bull’s arms captured his lovely wife to him, her perky breasts pressed tightly to his chest. As usual, he was always ready to come before her, but fought it until she’d reached her climax. Her womanly tunnel clenched and tightened further around him like a soft inner fist, and that was his cue to let go. Gripping her hips, he lifted her up and down on his throbbing rod, all slick and glistening with her juice. He did this quickly, slamming ripples of rapture through her shivering body, escalating her climax, while ushering in his own.

His teeth clamped carefully to her little chin and his eye squeezed shut. “Oh fuck, angel!” He shuddered with a heavy groan, ejecting hot, potent seed into her.

They rode and rubbed against one another, lingering in the sensual moment. Ayla unwrapped her legs, allowing him to lay back. She repositioned herself so she rested atop him, straddling, his cock still buried inside of her.

She grinned down at him, her body slowly rising and falling with his every great breath. “I think they heard.”

“I don’t care. Let them hear my Naaremma sing for me.”

“Hm…you were ‘singing’ quite loudly yourself, my love.”

“Yeah…well…” They shared in a round of laughter, then Bull sighed, shaking his head. “I’m so glad that’s over. Your initial response when you woke up in my body, though, was fucking hilarious. ‘I have a thingy! I have a thingy!’” he mocked his wife, stirring with low chuckles.

Ayla laughed as well, swatting his chest. “Oh, hush. It certainly didn’t feel funny at the time, but looking back on it, I suppose it kind of was.”

“Damn right, it was.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a tender moment. Ayla blinked, brow furrowing. Tears gathered in her normally broken gaze.

“What’s wrong, Ayla?” Bull frowned softly, touching her cheek.

“I’m just…so happy. I mean, I was happy before, when it was just Elemir and I and our friends, but I never imagined that I would experience *this* kind of happiness. I was so sure Elemir would be stuck with me for the rest of our lives, still taking care of me once he decided to settle down.” She shook her head, voice lowering. “Then he would have not only a wife and children to look after, but his old maid sister as well.”

“That’s not going to happen.” The Qunari stroked a large hand down her back, gliding fingers through her hair. “You have a husband who will take care of you now.”

“I know, and you make me so happy, Iron Bull, happier than I ever thought I could be. I love you so much and never want us to be apart.”

“You complete me, Naaremma-Kadan. You mean everything to me, and I couldn’t see myself without you,” he said softly, arm tightening around her. They rubbed noses. Her mind was unshielded then, completely open to him. Bull could clearly feel the warm infusion of her happiness via their unique link, and it made him smile and clutch her closer.

Ayla sighed, nuzzling her face under his bearded chin, the facial hair having thickened to what it was before he cut it little more than two weeks ago.

The couple enjoyed the moment a while longer, before Bull chuckled and stirred. “As much as I’d love to lay here with you all day, we need to get moving. The boss is being generous; I’m sure he knows what we’re doing in here and is giving us some time. But we should get ready to leave.”

“Ugh…” she sighed dramatically, then rolled aside so he could rise. She flipped to her stomach and nestled in the furs.

Churning a handsome grin, Iron Bull playfully smacked her naked ass. “Up, woman.”

Ayla yelped and smirked lightly at him. Bull pulled on his bed pants, then slipped from the tent to fetch water from the trickling falls. They cleaned up, got dressed, and packed their bags.

(*)
Back to being the ‘muscle’ of their duo, Iron Bull carried both their bags and the axe he’d used while in Ayla’s body. They headed down the gentle slope of the hill, Ayla’s hand linked to his forearm.

He chuckled and studied the weapon. “Man, this thing is so little. It’s like a twig with a butter knife on the end of it.” Of course, he was exaggerating.

Ayla smiled up at him. “It suited the job, kept us both safe.”

“Yeah, it did. Think I’ll keep it for old times’ sake. I’ll have to get another one to hold me until we get back to Skyhold, though. There’s no way my big ass is gonna go swinging this tiny thing around.”

She bubbled with laughter.

Hannibal met them at the bottom of the hill, his intense aqua eyes shifting between them. “Judging by the sounds of pleasure I heard earlier and the huge grin on his face, I think it’s safe to say you’re both back to normal now?”

“Oh yeah, boss. The Bull is definitely back.”

Ayla’s sparkling vision swooped away from Hannibal while she blushed.

“I’ll admit that I thought you’d be, well, not really suited to battle while in her body, but you handled yourself pretty damn good.”

“Heh,” Bull smiled broadly. “What can I say? I’m a warrior at heart, and we always find a way to bring it on the battlefield.”

Hannibal chuckled. “Indeed.” His eyes skimmed about. “Everyone else is up and nearly ready. We’ll be leaving within the hour. I suggest you two grab some food before that.” He left them to tend to some things.

“I could certainly go for some breakfast,” Ayla said.

“Morning sex certainly works up an appetite, doesn’t it?” The Qunari drawled sensuously, making her blush and giggle.

They made plates—bread with plum jam, sausage, and hashed potatoes—and found a place around a fire pit. Bull scarfed his down, and Ayla ate daintily at hers from the shadows of impaired vision. He touched her hand.

“I’m going to get a more suitable weapon. Be back in a moment.”

“Okay, love.”

He rose and strode for one of the two weapon depots in the camp. The closest was near the requisition tables. Bull approached the large, open-face tent, ducking inside. The officer on duty nodded, and Bull returned the gesture. He went instantly to the racks of axes, already setting his sights on one. It was fairly large, something he’d definitely like, with a long, notched haft. The butt contained a deadly array of spikes, making the weapon appear part axe and part maul.

Iron Bull smiled as he carefully removed the weapon from its rack. He found the weight of it comfortable and well-balanced. He flipped it up and studied the wide, flat blade, drawing a thumb along the edge. It was a little dull, but nothing a good whetstone wouldn’t correct, and after grabbing up one of the sharpening stones from a nearby basket, Bull left the tent to find an open place.

He spun and arced the axe, performing his signature cyclone move. He nodded, satisfied.

“New cuts?”

Bull turned to face Sera. He chuckled richly. “Eh, it’ll do, until I get home to my baby.”

The Elvhen woman went closer, having to crane her neck once she fell into his great shadow. “Glad yer back in that gray skin, back to you.”

“Me too.”

“I…um…” Her large eyes slid sideward, and she nibbled her lip. Sera looked at Bull again, smiling softly. “Thanks. For last night. I needed it.”

“Any time, Shorty.”

“Yeah…so…okay.” She spun and moved off.

An endearing smile sketched over Bull’s features as he looked after her. If ever he had a little sister, he was sure she’d be like Sera—funny, dangerous, balls-to-wall, quirky, and tough as old leather.

(*)

By the time the sun was high overhead, marking the approach of noon, Hannibal and his party were long gone from the Driftwood Margin Camp, on their mounts and riding along the shore of
the Waking Sea. When they came to the Valley Road, they veered inland and took its winding length south along the river, weaving between the green hills and low mountains.

Ayla sat contently before her husband on their elk. She was safe, warm, and protected. She was loved. Snuggling back into him, she sighed.

Iron Bull shifted the reins to one hand, using the other to rub slowly along her thigh. "Mm, we should've packed a dress or two for you, Naaremma. Easy access."

The woman hit at him, giggling. A pale brow edged up. "Easy access for what? It’s not like we’d do anything atop this animal."

“Oh, you’d be surprised what I can do while in a saddle,” he purred by her ear.

Ayla shivered, growing warm and ready for him yet again. She was glad they rode at the end of their entourage; no one could see how wantonly she rubbed her body to his. “With you, I don’t think I’d be surprised at all.”

Low chuckles reverberated from him. He took his eye forward and steered them along. Skyhold-bound they were.

(*)

Resentius stood with hands on his hips by the open gate of his camp, eyes skimming the replenishment of troops Ares supplied him, lined up and ready to move out. The God of War certainly came through when he promised something. They were thirty-strong now, which was twice as many people as before. And the god had added a few bonuses to this set of soldiers—two war machines and two colossuses.

War machines were soldiers who’d gained enough of Ares favor and trust that the god bestowed them with power amulets. The mystical items gave them the ability to shoot either fire or electricity from their hands, depending on the element infused into the amulet. Ares created the war machines to be able to battle enemy mages they encountered in this new world of Thedas. They wouldn’t be as powerful as this world’s mages, but they’d be able to hold their own and possibly kill any of the weaker ones.

Colossuses were quite comparable to the Berserkers found amongst the Jaws of Hakkon. Huge, powerful, and very dangerous, they wore heavy armor and were more machine than man, following any orders given them by an authorized master. Right now, Resentius was that master. Though, the colossuses would disregard him completely if Ares commanded them to; the God of War was their true commander. They were once normal men. Hephaestus, God of Fire and the Forge, had been killed not long after the Twilight of the Gods began, so Ares assumed control of his forge. The war god used it to create the colossuses from those normal men, turning them into big, mindless, battle tanks. They only lived to fight.

Resentius moved to stand before the two colossuses awarded him, staring up at them. They were even bigger than that Qunari with the impressive horns in the Inquisitor’s group. He grinned darkly, thinking that the next time he crossed paths with that bastard, he’d sic the colossuses on him, because he still wanted that trophy set of horns.

For now, they’d go south for the place called Crestwood as Ares ordered, scooping up recruits and believers, expanding their numbers. When they reached the region, Resentius would get people on building the first temple to the God of War.

He hopped on his mount and urged the creature away from camp, and the troops followed, their procession heading steadily away from the Storm Coast.

(*)

The briskness of pure mountain air was enough to invigorate anyone’s lungs. It was what Cullen enjoyed most about being in Skyhold, the rush he got from residing in the fortress’s high altitude. Once he made himself a steaming cup of coffee at the cooking station in his quarters, the commander slipped outside, walking slowly along the battlements of the western wall. He’d had lunch an hour ago, in the main hall, and wanted to relax for a bit before doing his rounds of the soldiers.

He stopped at a wide embrasure, a break in the wall between the merlons, and looked over the large lake, its perpetually frozen surface powdered by snow. It was the main source of water for the fortress, pumped in through the undercroft, to the purifiers and furnace-heated storage tanks below. Beyond the lake, ridging along the slopes through an opening in the mountains, massive glaciers angled towards the valley far below, gradually adding to the lakes and rivers down there. Cullen found the chain of life to be quite astounding. It felt nice to take time and appreciate those kinds of things.

He sipped his coffee.

Then the Inquisitor’s announcement horn blared through the settlement; they’d been away for little more than a week.

The commander sighed and grinned. Well, so much for that moment. On the upside, Cassandra and the others had returned. He took another sip of his coffee, then tipped the rest of the steaming liquid over the wall, down into the icy ravine.
By the time he made it to the main courtyard, the procession of travelers was filing through the main gate, halting their mounts in an open area for the stable-hands. Cullen stood by, arms crossed over his chest, while everyone dismounted and removed their personal effects from their horses, or, in Bull and Ayla’s case, Frostback elf. His gold gaze met Cassandra’s, and a warm smile passed between them. She knew the drill and decided to stand by while her lover made his rounds.

Cullen went to the towering Qunari and slender ebony woman first, vaguely humored eyes roaming between them. “I hope it worked, and you were able to get fixed.”

Iron Bull nodded at him. “Yep.”

“That’s a relief,” Cullen replied, his smile shifting to touch the corners of his mouth, gaze meeting Ayla’s, “because it would be a shame if you were forced to live out the rest of your days with that mug.”

Ayla chuckled softly, clutching closer to her husband’s arm, their hands clasped.

Bull smirked lightly at him, though he was quite aware that the man joked around. “Suck it, Rutherford,” he replied calmly, then led Ayla off towards their quarters.

Cullen laughed softly in their wake, then approached Hannibal. “Anything interesting happen out there?”

“Oh, yeah. I have some news involving our resident God of War.” Hannibal’s eyes shot sideward. “Solas, I would like you to attend the briefing as well, since Ares has chosen you as his liaison between us and him for the moment.”

The elf nodded. “I’ll head to the war room as soon as I drop my things in my quarters.” He moved away.

Hannibal looked to Cullen. “Half hour.”

“Half hour, aye.” The commander replied. He nodded to Dorian and Sera when he passed them on his way to Cassandra, saving her for last.

The Seeker instantly pulled him against her for a kiss, drawing her thumb across the scar striking the corner of his fine mouth. “Miss me?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I missed you too,” her breath formed hot puffs in the chilled air, cheeks touched with an appealing rosiness. “Once you’re done with the briefing, you’ll find me in your quarters. I’ll be wearing your favorite outfit.”

“Absolutely nothing.”

He groaned when she pulled in for another longing kiss, then she was gone, striding off, hips softly rolling. Cullen licked his lips, staring after her for a moment. He took some hefty breaths, trying to calm the desire she’d kindled. He finally shook his head and made his way into the castle main.

(*)

While Iron Bull and Ayla crossed the yard for the East Tower, children flooded them, something the Qunari was used to. When the children heard the horn, knowing he was with the returning party, they made sure to linger around the entrance to his tower.

Bull howled with laughter as he and his wife were swarmed. “Whoa, whoa. Calm down, little ones.”

Their mirthful voices hooted and squealed, tiny hands groping at his pockets, reaching for his and Ayla’s traveling bags, which he carried. He also had the tiny axe and regular axe slung over his back.

“Okay, hold on.” He reached into his bag, digging around, making a big show of it, eye narrowed thoughtfully. “Hm…”

The children laughed at him.

Ayla, holding to his other hand, smiled broadly as she watched.

“Ah, there it is.” He produced a sack of lemon drops, acquired from the Driftwood Margin camp. He switched it to the hand Ayla touched so he could pull the tie from it. Bull held the open bag down low for the children. “Take only one. Don’t be greedy. Sharing is a good thing.”

“Yes, Bull!” they cried.

He’d been brought up with groups of children his own age that looked after each other, cared for by their “Tamas” or the Tamassran equivalent of a mother. All he knew was sharing with others, as it was one of the founding beliefs and ways of life in the Qun. Looking after your fellow Qunari made them better and stronger, which made the Qun better and stronger.
Ayla’s vibrant eyes drew between her husband and the children as they each took a pale-yellow sourball from the bag. She studied the man she was bonded to. She didn’t believe it was possible to love him any more than she already did, but it was. He was so beautiful inside and out, just as kind as he was deadly.

Bull caught her staring at him and offered a boyish smile.

Ayla stroked her thumb tenderly over his large hand.

When the last child stepped up and put her hand in the bag, she gasped and sadness tugged over her little face. “No more!”

Bull studied her, shaking the bag. “Uh-oh. That’s not good.”

The child’s eyes watered up.

“How’s it goin’?” Iron Bull said softly, then dug in his traveling bag again. “Hm. Where is it? I know I put it in here…”

The child watched intently, bright eyes gleaming. She giggled.

Bull yanked his hand from the bag, an individually-wrapped nugget clutched between his thumb and forefinger. The paper was lavender and somewhat fancy, which fit the gourmet piece of candy inside—a chocolate and caramel truffle layered with blackberries and strawberries. He held it up before his eye. All the children stared at the lavish candy, listening while he spoke.

“This,” he started, gaze fixed on the little girl, “is a very special piece of candy. It’s a wish pellet. Before you eat it, make a wish, and one day it’ll come true. At least…” he formed a funny face, grinning, “according to the powerful witch who gave it to me. I dunno… it might turn you into a frog instead!”

The little girl giggled, the other children laughing as well, enjoying his story. The Qunari warrior set the candy into the child’s palm, then rubbed her head.

“Thanks, Bull!” she cried.

The children scurried off as quickly as they’d come.

Iron Bull chuckled, shaking his head. He looked down at his wife. “I was saving that piece for you, but well…”

“And I’m glad you gave it to her,” Ayla said, then hugged to his sinewy arm, the hard muscle fully detectable under his thick coat. “You’re very good with children. I know you’ll be an excellent father once we have our own someday.”

“Hm…” was all he said, smiling softly, as they started up to their room. It pleased him that she was at least thinking about having babies with him, because if things went as he planned, they would have one on the way soon enough.

(*)

The earlier part of the day had the travelers resettling back into life at Skyhold, and things were going rather well. Some of the citizens had decorated their doors and window sills for the approach of the Winter Solstice holiday. It was about a month away.

Solas and Hannibal briefed Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine on events at the Storm Coast, with emphasis on Ares and his movements, his plans to rule over Thedas as a living god. As much as they needed options to deal with him, they didn’t really have any then. Solas would continue to engage the god when he could, learn as much as possible, though he’d obtained quite a bit of information since their first meeting in the Fade.

Unsurprisingly, Iron Bull and Ayla hopped right on each other not long after stepping into their quarters, and they spent most of their time in bed, up until the start of the Heroes’ Dinner. The couple entered the hall and headed for the long, food-laden table where pretty much all the inner circle sat. The beauty wore the emerald dress Bull got her not long after she’d first arrived in Skyhold. The Qunari was shirtless, in pants, boots, and his eyepatch. The black tattoos inked across his torso and arms stood out vividly against his gray skin.

Dorian, who sat to Hannibal’s right, in the first chair going down the table, waved at Ayla. There were two seats open by him. Iron Bull led her over, and she sat beside Dorian, Bull taking the seat on her other side.

“I saved you a spot,” the Altus said, sipping his drink, the lavish rings on his fingers catching the light of the chandelier, glinting.

Ayla chuckled. “You’re such a good friend.”

The group enjoyed good company and good food, not knowing that the party was about to get very interesting.

(*)

A flicker of electric light announced Ares. He appeared in stealth in Skyhold’s main courtyard.
Night had fallen and the light of lanterns and torches spotted the ground. The ground. Ares’s eyes flipped down to it.

“Muddy,” he said, arms crossing his chest. That wasn’t a problem, however, since gods didn’t get dirty. Grime didn’t cling to divinity. He let his eyes roam, taking in the architecture, the space. He certainly liked the location, high up in the mountains. Reminded him of home somewhat, of Olympus.

A pair of soldiers talking and walking across the yard moved right through him, unaware of his presence. Smiling, the God of War, turned to the steps leading into the main hall.

(*)

Ayla didn’t believe she’d ever been this content. She was in the company of friends and her wonderful husband, and her brother was out there somewhere, by Leliana’s reports. Life was good. Keeping a small hand draped to her husband’s arm, she listened and smiled as he and Dorian went back and forth about some dragon fight they had a little while before Ayla came along.

She reached for her water, sipping, and when she lowered the cup, her eyes skirted down the table and across the room, narrowing. A figure in dark attire had entered the great foyer and was striding confidently down the center of the room. He examined the Par Vollen décor as he went, nodding in approval.

Ayla gasped and her eyes widened. A group of Orlesian patrons walked right through him on their way out the door, like he wasn’t even there. “Who…is that man?”

Iron Bull followed her line of sight. “Which one?”

“He’s right there. He’s tall, wearing black leather, dark hair, a beard…”

Bull frowned slightly. “I don’t see him.”

Solas, who sat across the table and down a few seats, heard the woman. He quickened, eyes flying in the direction she indicated, though he wouldn’t see the figure either.

The God of War tilted his head at Ayla, studying her like a child fascinated with a bug. Ares stopped at the end of the table. “You can see me.” A statement, not a question.

Ayla’s eyes remained steady on him. She could sense his power. “Of course, I can see you.” To the others, it looked as if she spoke to no one.

“Oh, fuck it.” Ares decloaked, sending a ripple of surprise around the table and the hall. He was only concerned with Ayla in that moment, though. “Well, that’s very peculiar. How special of you,” the war god’s smile spread slowly. He was clearly intrigued, studying her. “You have a magnificent energy flowing through you, beautiful. Didn’t notice it until now.”

And that was probably because she hadn’t been in her own body before, Ares figured.

“Inquisitor,” Solas said calmly, “It’s him; it’s Ares.”

This put everyone at the table on-edge even more.

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed, figuring that’s who the man was. “Finally, we meet. What are you doing here?”

“Don’t mind me. Just checking out the real estate.” The war god’s eyes skimmed appreciatively over everyone at the table. “The females in your world are so hot…and some of the men too.” Sultry brown eyes swung back to Dorian.

Hannibal was standing now. “What do you mean by ‘checking out the real estate’?”

“Don’t concern your little, horned self with that.” He moved around the table towards Ayla, putting Bull on higher alert. “I want to know more about you, this …power you have.”

“Iron Bull shot to his feet. “Stay away from her!”

Before Bull could make another move, Ares snapped his fingers, and the huge Qunari froze in mid-action. His single sky-blue eye followed Ares until he moved around behind Bull, into his blind spot. Dangerous growls rolled heavily from him. The others watched in silence as the God of War leaned in very close to Ayla, who cowered into Bull, alarmed and scared by whatever Ares had done to him.

Dorian was getting an up-close look at the God of War. He wisely remained in his chair, unmoving.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m not going to hurt you. I just think, well, you could do much better than his guy.” He wagged his eyebrows up and down a few times and put Bull’s shoulder, making the Qunari’s growls intensify. “I would take very good care of you.”

At that, Ares linked his arms around her and pulled her to him, and Ayla yelped, trying to get away. When Hannibal and Cullen made to retaliate, the god turned a hard sneer upon them.

“Don’t. Sit.”
Reluctantly, they did as he said, easing back into their chairs, knowing he had the power to do very bad things.

Ares turned his attention to Ayla again, confused as to why her eyes were unfocused, shimmering up at him with tears. He took a moment to study her face, his quick mind piecing and backtracking. It didn’t take him long. He gripped her wrist and pressed her hand to Iron Bull’s bare arm, which instantly brought the clarity back. He watched her pupils shift and center on him, eyes looming from her frightened face. Ares removed and replaced her hand a couple of times, watching her sight come and go.

“Huh. Now that’s interesting.” The God of War decided to release her, and she clung to her Qunari husband, trembling. “I’ll be seeing you again, beautiful.”

They watched as Ares strode on long, powerful legs to the end of the table, random patrons scooting and scattering away from him. He skimmed the inner circle again, offering a roguish smile. “Until later.” Crisp light flashed up the length of his tall figure, vanishing him from sight.

A second later, Iron Bull unfroze, pulling his scared wife into his arms. His eye burned angrily from the sever edges of his face. He was fucking pissed. “Oh, that asshole’s gotta die, boss.”

“He smelled very good,” said Dorian, then ran a hand over his hair, mumbling, “I mean…you know…for a tall, dark, and handsome villain. Uh…forget I said anything.”
That night’s Heroes’ Dinner was cut short, crashed by the God of War. The moment Ares vanished, Hannibal ordered everyone into the war room, and that’s where they were now, standing around the massive slab of the strategy table. All of the inner circle, the Chargers, and even Idrial. Being the romantic interest of Cole Idrial. Being the romantic interest of Cole made her part of the circle. Multiple voices churned at once, but Cassandra’s rose above all.

The Seeker tossed her arms in the air while she talked, her words astute and tempestuous. “Inquisitor, this God of War has made himself known openly, not only to us but everyone else in Skyhold, appearing like that. And his display of power? How are we to counter that!”

Hannibal shook his head. “I don’t know. Perhaps, this,” he lifted his left hand and it gave a quick pulse of green light, “can be used to fight him.”

“The Anchor?” Cole spoke up. “But it is merely a way to seal tears in the Veil, to close or open fade rifts. It’s doubtful whether it will be useful against Ares.”

Solas’s gaze eased from the former spirit to Hannibal. The secrets within the elf were fathomless. He knew things about the Anchor and its source of power that he’d yet to share with the rest of his group. And for now, he would continue to elude them. “The Anchor as it stands alone may not do much, but it might be used indirectly against the god.”

“How so?” Hannibal’s stern eyes fell on him.

“The Anchor has the power to manipulate the Veil, which ties to the Fade, which ties to Ares’s own world. If we could locate the portal he used to come to Thedas, his primary way for traveling between our worlds, we may be able to seal it with the Anchor once he’s in his own world, locking him out of ours.”

The Inquisitor nodded. “It’s the best thing we have for now, though we’ve got some work ahead of us to be able to execute such a plan. The hardest thing will be determining when he’s in his own world.”

“I agree,” Solas said.

Dorian gripped his chin. “That’s a bit of a long-shot. The Fade is quite vast. We don’t even know where to begin searching for this…central doorway.”

“My eluvian,” Morrigan entered the conversation. “I think that’s a good place to start investigating, since Solas saw the war god emerge from the Fade’s version of it.”

“I was thinking the same.” Solas nodded.

Hannibal generated a hefty sigh, shaking his head, large hand swiping slowly down his face. “Okay, then. But we need to tread carefully. Ares’s power surpasses anything I’ve ever seen. Solas, please do some investigating of the Fade-eluvian, see what you can find. We’ll start small, simple.”

“Alright,” the elf answered.

“Another plus to this is that Bunny can see Ares in stealth, so that’ll make it difficult for him to sneak around when she’s present,” Varric added.

Hannibal issued a nod. “And that brings me to another thing. Since Ayla’s power was revealed, she’s been practicing and getting very good wielding it. I’m making it official now that she will be helping in the battle against Corypheus and Ares.”

“What? No!” Iron Bull’s eye narrowed into a hard slit and he shook his head. “I don’t want her near any of that shit!”

“Bull, please…” Ayla said softly, trying to calm him. She offered a little smile when he turned his eye down to her, taking the edge from his features. “It’s alright, my love. I want to help, and I know we’ll have a better chance with me using my power.”

“But…” The Qunari shut his eye, holding her to him a moment. “How am I to fight and protect you out there? It’ll be all-out chaos on the battlefield when we finally face Corypheus. You won’t be safe…”

“Have faith in your inner circle, Bull,” Hannibal said. “We’ll all help keep her safe. Cullen and I will discuss formations, as I intend to have Ayla joined with some of the mages, amplifying them.”

Vivienne huffed and rolled her eyes. “I will not be joined to her. I have no intention of letting her drain me again.”

“Are you ever going to get over that?” Morrigan countered, turning to the Grand Enchanter. “It was an accident, and she didn’t know what she was or the power she possessed at the time. She’s grown very masterful in controlling and channeling it.”

“As I said—I won’t be joined to her.”
Morrigan scoffed, lip curling at one corner. The woman was impossible at times. The witch looked to Hannibal. “I would volunteer to join with her, but my place will be elsewhere.” She said no more, revealing nothing about the power and knowledge Flemeth had instilled within her back in the clearing at the Altar of Mythal.

“I will connect with her,” Solas said.

“As will I.” The Altus smiled a bit, taking Ayla’s hand for a loving squeeze. “We’ve been practicing together all these weeks, after all. I trust her.”

Hannibal nodded. “Good then. Morrigan, you’ll oversee organizing practice between the four of you.”

“Very well, Inquisitor.”

Ayla’s involvement in the coming conflicts had been decided; she would aid directly in the fight. Vivienne greatly disapproved, while Morrigan greatly approved. Solas approved. Varric, Cole, Blackwall, and Cassandra slightly approved. Dorian approved mostly because Hannibal did, and he trusted in his Amatus’s choices. Sera disapproved because, well, magical shite. She also thought Ayla was too squishy to be out amidst battle and that she might get hurt.

Iron Bull completely and utterly fucking disapproved, but he knew there was nothing he could do to stop his wife or change her mind. Her heart was too big for that. His countenance darkened and that single blue eye focused on Hannibal. “When the time comes and anything—*I mean anything—happens to her, I’m holding you accountable…boss.”

“No, Bull, you won’t,” Ayla rubbed his arm. “I’m doing this of my own accord. I wish to fight for my world same as everyone. It’s my right…and my duty. If something happens to me, you won’t blame the Inquisitor or anyone else, yourself included.” She offered a smile quickly at the dismay blooming over his features. “But nothing will happen. We’re going to kick Corypheus’s ass. You’ll see.”

A round of hindered laughter rumbled through the room.

Bull shook his head, chuckling at her. “You’re something else, woman, you know that?”

Dimples formed when her smile deepened. “Indeed.”

The Qunari warrior lifted Ayla in his arms and strode from the war room. Hannibal was the only one who hadn’t laughed. He was too busy mulling over what he’d seen in Iron Bull’s eye when he threatened him. He’d seen the promise of blood and sweet vengeance.

He’d seen the ghost of Hissrad.

Regardless of Ares’s visit, life went on in Skyhold. The next day, Iron Bull left Ayla with Dorian after brunch so she and the mage could spend time together, though the Qunari had been very reluctant to let her out of his sight with the lingering threat of the God of War. But there was more to it than that. Ayla’s life had been in such a state of topsy-turvy lately that she’d completely overlooked the approach of Winter Solstice and wanted her best friend to help her pick out a gift for Iron Bull. She was sure Dorian would have good ideas; he had such an eye for that kind of thing.

“Oh, I know exactly what to get,” he said as they walked arm-in-arm across the premises for the market, eyes gleaming with a smile.

“Hopefully, not a weapon or something like that. He has so many knives and things already. I want this to be special.” Ayla grinned. “This is our first Winter Solstice holiday together.”

Dorian chuckled and patted her hand. “Fret not, my dear. This will certainly be a gift from the heart that isn’t the usual fair, where he’s concerned.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“You recall the portrait above the hearth in my and Hannibal’s quarters, the one you asked about when Iron Bull brought you up there to get ready the night of the dance?”

“Oh my gods, yes. Such beautiful work, so lifelike. The artist really captured both of you extremely well, especially the eyes. Just lovely.” Her diminished gaze widened and she snatched it over to him. “A portrait? That’s brilliant! But…” She nibbled her lip in thought. “How am I to make it a surprise when Bull must pose for it?”

“That may not be as problematic as you think. Lucien is extremely talented. You just tell him what you want and let him go from there.”

Five minutes later, they reached the dark-yellow tent of said artist. A dozen pieces of his work stood on easels around the entrance. Ayla couldn’t see, but there were different sceneries, as well as one of a farmer with his prized druffalo and one of milky-skinned beauty partly draped in fine blue material with a child suckling from her breast. Each work was highly detailed, with spectacular coloring and shading.

Dorian and Ayla entered the rather spacious tent. There were a least a dozen other paintings
leaned and stacked inside. One corner served as Lucien’s work area, and he occupied it currently, sitting on a cushioned stool before a bit of canvas perched on an easel. He was in the sketching stage of a work in progress, looking back and forth between the canvas and the lazy, fat cat draped listlessly on the table across from him. The feline’s green eyes peered from its fluffy calico fur, lingering calmly on the man.

The artist’s attention shifted to the two who’d entered, and he smiled. “Ah, Lord Pavus, how good to see you.”

“And you as well. I’ve brought a friend who wishes to employ your services. Ayla, this is Lucien Po; Lucien this is—”

“The blind beauty, wife of The Iron Bull,” Lucien finished, nodding. “I know exactly who you are. It’s nice to officially meet you.”

A smile sifted over Ayla. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too. Thanks to my husband’s touch, I was able to see the gorgeous portrait you made of Dorian and the Inquisitor. I would like to have one made of my husband and I as a gift to him. The problem is getting a pose without him knowing.”

“Oh,” Lucien said thoughtfully, setting the thin stick of sketching charcoal aside. The cat huffed and swiped its fluffy tail, but remained sprawled on the tabletop. The artist stood and went to stand before Dorian and Ayla, wiping his hand on a rag. “Well, I don’t need much time to capture the essence of you both. Comes easy to me. Though, it would be nice to have at least half an hour to really be comfortable.”

The three of them pondered a moment in silence.

Dorian suddenly grinned. “The Herald’s Rest. I think you may be able to get away with obtaining the visuals and time you need if you caught the couple there, Lucien.”

“Dorian, that’s a great idea!” Ayla bounced in place, excited to have such a unique gift to give the man of her world. “I’m positive I could get him there tonight.”

“Yes, this could actually work,” Lucien said, tipping a smile. “I’ll find a place not too far from you both and get what I need.”

“Oh, it’s going to be just perfect. Thank you!”

The artist chuckled at her. “Well, it hasn’t been started yet.”

“How much do you charge, to include your fee for taking time to visit the tavern?” she asked.

“It depends on the canvas size. The large one, like that I did for the Inquisitor’s quarters, is fifty gold. The medium, which is the normal size, is twenty-five, and the small canvas is ten. For you, no extra charges.”

“Thank you!” Ayla’s crystalline vision edged about the tent in thought, studying the haze of shadows and blurry shapes. “Hm. About how big is the medium one?”

“Two feet by two feet,” answered Lucien.

“Oh, yes. That’s quite sizable.” Ayla giggled. “Our quarters aren’t that big, but they’re comfortable. I have the perfect place for the portrait, right above the hearth. It’ll be just lovely…” She nodded resolutely, mind made up. “I’ll get the money from my husband, telling him it’s for his present, which isn’t a lie.”

The three of them concluded their business, and Dorian and Ayla left for the library.

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Later in the day, it began to snow, the temperature in the mountains having reached just the right conditions where the big, fat flakes could stick to the ground and rooftops. Ayla sat on a pillow in the spacious sill of the wide bay window watching the snowfall. Twilight blanketed the land now, the sun having retired behind the western peaks. Iron Bull leaned to the wall by her, holding her hand.

“I’ve never been able to experience the winter season like this before,” her accented voice ebbed while she watched, holding an enchanted smile. “It really puts me more into a Winter Solstice mood.”

Iron Bull listened, smiling. He gave her warm, little hand a tender squeeze. “Yes, there’s something about this time of year that gets me excited. We don’t have stuff like holidays in the Qun. Every day is taken at face value, though there are feasts and celebrations held in the name of victory over enemies.”

Ayla swung around to face him. She stood and wrapped her arms around his middle, laying her face to his naked chest. “Well, you at least got to celebrate something while you were growing up there.” She pulled back to look up at him. “I know that I’ve…spoken disrespectfully about the Qun and your way of life in the past, and I’m sorry for that, my love. In those moments when I see you interacting with the children here, I realize that you were well cared for, treated with kindness; it reflects in how you are with others, especially the children. I mean, I assume you had a good childhood.”
He nodded. “Yes, I did. Had everything I needed, as did the other children. The Qun, like any other community, isn’t perfect, but it’s very efficient. The Qunari gained and maintain their power and status because of how strong the Qun is. Putting the society’s needs above those of the individual may seem binding and restrictive to most people, but it works.”

“Apparently, it does. It produced you, after all, and you’re one of the kindest, gentlest men I know.” She kissed his chest, tracing her finger along one of several scars sketching his skin.

Bull chuffed a somewhat dry laugh. “Yeah…as long as I’m not going through the kuma’ta kalifaaar or attacking you in my sleep.”

“You have a point,” Ayla said, chuckling. She lifted her face, and Bull gently cupped it in his large hand, lowering his lips upon hers. The pleasant warmth of their quarters came from a steady fire in the hearth.

Ayla released a yearning, sexual sound, rubbing her body to his. Iron Bull grinned and linked an arm around her, hoisting so her little feet dangled several inches above the floor, her slender form captured securely. She giggled and nuzzled noses with him, while he took them to the bed, laid her out, and draped her with the solid heat of his body.

They kissed passionately for a moment, before Ayla stopped him, smiling up demurely. “I want to go out. Let’s head over to the tavern.”

The charming Qunari groaned and buried his face against her throat to shower it with kisses and tender nips, then pulled back. “Mm. Sure you don’t wanna stay up here mating like rabbits for the next couple of days?”

Ayla chimed with giggles. She honestly did just want to stay in the room with her sexually charismatic husband, but she needed Lucien to get his sketches for the portrait. “We can start that tomorrow. Tonight, the Herald’s Rest.”

Her husband studied her, an amused smile curling his fine lips and romantic lantern light dancing in his eye. “Okay then, Naaremma. As you wish.”

(*)

The coming of the snow officially marked it as ‘cold enough’ for Iron Bull to start wearing shirts. Sure, as a Qunari, and a huge one at that, he naturally ran warmer than others, but that didn’t mean he was immune to chilling temperatures. His heat could be sapped away as easily as the next person in this weather. Bull found himself comfortable enough in a fitted, long-sleeved top, though, as he and his lady approached the Herald’s Rest.

Wrapped snugly in her shawl, Ayla clung to his arm, her little hand captured in his. Her lovely face constructed an affectionate smile up at him. “It’s nice to see that you get cold like the rest of us, despite your freakish resistance to this nippiness.”

“Mm.” Bull conjured a sly smile. “I’m…actually a little chilly right now. How about we return to our room so you can warm me up?”

“I will later, I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

Ayla chuckled.

They entered the establishment, and Ayla waved down the left to where Varric, Dorian, Blackwall, and Sera played Wicked Grace in the group’s usual booth. Cassandra wasn’t present, and both Bull and Ayla could guess the reason–Cullen.

The Qunari smiled warmly when his eye fell on the Chargers, settled in their place near the hearth. He turned his uni-vision down to Ayla. “Wanna stop at the bar for anything?”

“Um…yes,” she smiled. “A cup of–”


The tavern saw most of its traffic at the week’s end, and it was quite busy in there tonight. As Iron Bull moved them for the bar, weaving between people, holding securely to her hand, Ayla skimmed around, wondering if Lucien Po lingered. All she had to go on was his shadow-shape, his scent, and his voice, and that was enough for her. She sighed inwardly, gnawing her lip. Ayla hoped they hadn’t missed him, as she already felt she was infringing upon him with this special request.

They reached the bar and Bull smacked a large hand lightly to the nicked and worn surface of the wooden counter, grinning at the tender, whom he knew well. “Cabot! You old, skirt-chasin’ dog! A cup of blackberry wine for my lady, eh?”

The dwarf smirked, snorting a short laugh. He moved closer, drying out a cup as he did. He looked up at Bull and Ayla from behind the bar. “You’re the last person to call anyone a skirt-chaser, though you were wise to give it up for such a lovely lass.” Cabot winked at Ayla.

She smiled in return, then went back to skimming the room, and Cabot saw to pouring the drink.
A very slim man with spiky blonde hair and green eyes fell in next to Ayla. He leaned to the bar casually. “When you have a moment, tender, I’d like an ale please.” The man met Ayla’s eyes. And she grinned, looking quickly over him. It was Lucien; she could tell by his voice, and she was beginning to pick up traces of his scent on top the organic woodsmoke-and-ale smell permeated into the very walls of the establishment.

Lucien issued a slight nod and smile, gesturing to the rectangular satchel in his hand. His sketch materials. Ayla returned the nod. A second later, her husband was leading her across the room to settle on the padded bench by the Chargers, and it didn’t take long for conversation, jokes, laughter, and drinking to ensue. They really were a close-knit bunch, the Captain and his Chargers, Ayla thought. She was very happy that he’d assembled them and that they’d all grown so fond of one another. She would easily bet that Krem and the crew had helped tug Iron Bull from what could’ve been a fathomless pit of despair, considering what happened to him at Seheron. Being with them had been a part of his mental and emotional healing process.

Ayla stroked his hand, and Bull gave her his full attention, setting a kiss to her lips.

“Get a room!” howled Krem, then he erupted in laughter.

“If it were up to me, we’d be in our room right now,” Bull replied, voice rolling out richly, “but my wife wanted to come down here and hang with you ragamuffins.” He chuckled.

“And I ever so enjoy the company of the Chargers,” Ayla said quickly, lifting a dimpled smile. “You’re my family too, after all.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Rocky said, raising his cup.

The rest lifted their drinks, crying as one, “Horns up!”

Ayla said it too, giggling. She sipped her wine, her eyes swaying to the cozy table where Lucien faced them, doing a good job of not appearing conspicuous while he acquired what he needed to create the gift portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull.

Whether in a dream or in the waking world, Ayla always enjoyed intimate time with her husband. She decided to summon him to that same clearing where they’d indulged in the threesome with Dorian–in the low, soft grass beside a tranquil stream. She stood beneath the perfect gleam of the sun wearing his long shirt. The makeshift nightgown and her wild, tumbling tresses stirred with the vaguest of warm breezes.

Ayla watched the dense tree line, hoping Iron Bull would be able to detach himself from the Hissrad nightmare and find her. He had half-dozen other times since their first dream-link. She perked and smiled when the foliage shifted and bristled, parted from the other side by large gray hands. He stepped through, grinning at her. Aside from his eye patch, he wore a pair of fine black silk bed pants. His bare feet settled silently in the grass when he started walking for her, his stride a bit different than usual; it seemed to hold more of a swagger. Ayla anxiously traversed the grass to meet him.

She fell into his arms, their lips colliding for a kiss. But…something was off. The mouth melded to hers didn’t feel like Iron Bull’s. Her eyes flew open and she jerked back, face going aghast.

It was Ares! His muscular arms locked her to a toned, bronzed chest brushed with dark hair that coursed down enticingly over his stomach and into those silk bed pants. The God of War rumbled a chuckle.

“Let me go! Where is my husband!” The woman struggled, but to no avail. The god was strong, unrelenting.

“Oh, I’ve shut him out of this part of the dream. Last I checked, he was hacking people to pieces in some jungle.” Ares grinned, nodding. When the god entered her dream, he sensed her mate’s consciousness floating in there too. This link they shared was extremely powerful if it allowed them to share lucid dreams. “He really is an immaculate warrior, such raw power and finesse with that axe of his. Mm, I have great plans for him.”

Worry washed over her. “What plans?”

“Tell me what you are.”

Ares’s expression was a handsome mixture of amusement, amazement, irritation, and lust. He was used to getting what he wanted. Ayla watched his mouth as it curled into a devilish smile, and he waved his hand. The scenery around them blurred and flickered, much like it had when she’d come across Hissrad the first time she entered Bull’s dream. When everything snapped to clarity around them, they were in a spacious room with arching windows overlooking a perfect forest scenery at all angles, the sky baby-blue and spotted with puffy clouds. A low fire spontaneously ignited in the hearth, the black pelt of some large feline draping the stone floor before it.
circular table in one corner contained various food and drink. And against the wall opposite the windows was a very big bed covered in red silk sheets. Ares let go of her, vanished, and reappeared reclining in the pillows on the bed, a golden goblet of ambrosia in one hand. He sipped, eyes settled on her.

"Where...are we?" Ayla spun slowly, taking in the room. She gasped at her attire. It had changed too, into a short, revealing lacy red thing.

"A dream version of my main dwelling back on Earth." He drank from his cup again. "I’m gonna need you to answer my question, Ayla. What...Are...You?"

She lifted her chin, remaining silent and watchful.

"Hm. Didn’t think it would be that easy. Luckily, I always have backup plans." His grin melded into something a bit more evil and he snapped his fingers.

Iron Bull appeared fastened to a table in another corner of the room. The wide wooden surface was tilted on a pulley device, putting him in a standing position, his wrists and ankles caught firmly in shackles. The Qunari was bare-chested, sporting two working eyes, and disoriented. A few seconds before, he’d been destroying child-murdering Tal-Vashoth. He was lucid now, linked in with Ares and Ayla.

"Bull! Let him go!"

"You..." The Qunari seethed, glaring at Ares. His features shivered, flickered, and changed so that he no longer looked like Hissrad, but Iron Bull, eye patch appearing over a more battle-worn face.

"Yeah, me. Okay, so this is how it’s gonna go.” The God of War looked at Ayla from the bed. "You tell me exactly what you are, or I start cutting on your man here. And before you go thinking this is just a dream, let me tell you that the damage I do to him here will occur in the waking world. I’m standing over your naked, sexed-out bodies as we speak." He grinned.

Tall, leathered, and scoured by the light of the hearth in their quaint quarters of Skyhold, Ares slowly twirled the blade in his hand, examining the couple. The knife had been forged by Hephaestus, the finest, most divine metalwork. It was very sharp and could flay flesh with the slightest pressure.

The God of War smiled and lowered the blade towards Iron Bull’s body, both the man and his woman glowing faintly from the sleeping ward placed over them, keeping them imprisoned in the dream with Ares’s projected consciousness.

"Don’t tell this fuck anything, Ayla."

Holding a somewhat excited expression, Ares swiped his hand dismissively through the air. At that same moment, an invisible knife blade slashed across Bull’s chest, down his sternum.

Ares caused another slash, this time along Bull’s side, and the Qunari warrior hissed and grimaced.

"Please! Just stop it!"

The war god narrowed his eyes. "I’m done fucking around. The next one’s gonna open him up ear-to-ear.” To prove his point and scare her further, Ares lifted his hand and the invisible blade poked at one side of Bull’s throat, drawing blood, which trickled down over his chest. He really didn’t have any intention of killing the Qunari; nope, he had plans for the big buck. He just figured this would really scare her. She was the gullible type, Ares knew.

"Okay! Okay, please stop! PLEASE!"

"Ayla..."

"It’s not worth you dying over, Bull!” She took a breath. “I’ll tell you what I am, then you’ll let us go from this dream.”

"You have my word. Now,” Ares smiled handsomely and patted the mattress beside him, “come here so we can talk.”

Iron Bull yanked and pulled against his restraints.

Ayla’s eyes darted to her husband, who shot unseen fire from his single eye at the God of War, then she slowly went to the bed, climbed on, and sat beside him. Ares scooted over so he was right against her, and Ayla rolled her eyes.

"You are so damn beautiful, you know that?” The war god mused, sipping his ambrosia, long legs crossing casually, body stretched out. The backs of his fingers drew a masterful glide along
her smooth, dark thigh.

“I am going to fucking kill you,” Bull said, almost too calmly.

“Not likely, though I do love that fervor.” Ares gave his full attention to Ayla. “Now, what are you?”

“I’m an Oona,” she began, voice soft but sharp and angry. “My people thrived a long time ago, but have since then scattered and blended with other peoples. They were called the Jado. People like me, mystical ones, were born sparingly. We…”

Ayla’s countenance faltered with pause.

“Go on,” Ares urged gently.

“We have the power to temporarily siphon energy from magical entities, wielding it as our own. We can also…” she sighed deeply, “…amplify the power of magical beings, such as mages.”

“Or perhaps a god?” Ares rapty listened, absorbing each bit of information hungrily. Producing another enticing smile, he made his goblet vanish, then smoothly grabbed Ayla close and rolled, putting her beneath him, pinned by his warm, perfect, immaculate weight, one of his long legs easing between hers even as she tried to lock her knees. “I think you should join me.”

Bull’s enraged roar hammered through the room, his eye wild and glaring. He strained with all his might to get loose, growling ferally, chest heaving with each breath.

“Off! Get off!” Ayla quickly swiped up at him, nails catching his cheek, striking three angry red slashes. She struggled to remove him. A wave of sickening dread washed over her, being able to feel the hard length of his cock laying against her.

Ares chuckled, head tilting while his eyes roamed her slowly. The scratches healed completely, leaving no evidence they ever existed. “Mm, you are a spitfire, aren’t you?” He lowered his face like he might kiss her.

Ayla whimpered, turning to avoid his lips.

“You are so fucking dead.” Bull’s features hazed and shifted back to those of Hissrad. The only thing he saw was red then, painted all over that godly bastard.

“Oh, calm down, big guy.” Humor laced Ares’s features. “I’m not gonna do anything. At least, not in a dream. When I have her, I want it to be real.” he drawled, making sure he stared right into Hissrad’s eyes as he said that. “Now, as promised, you two can go.”

Ares lowered his mouth to Ayla’s for a gentle, teasing brush, while outside the dream, his physical self lifted the slumber ward and vanished from their quarters.

(*)

They woke up simultaneously, with Ayla frowning, shivering, and wiping harshly at her lips where she still tasted Ares and felt the tickle of his moustache. Iron Bull captured her in his arms, clutching dearly, stroking her hair.

“It’s alright now,” he said softly. “It’s alright.”

Ayla drew back to examine the cuts inflicted by the war god. “Oh, Bull.”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry,” calm and smooth, his words churned out. He pulled her close again and hardened his expression, allowing his eye to rake slowly through the room, looking for that meddlesome, leather-clad little bitch.

(*)

The first thing Bull and Ayla did at first light after getting ready was seek out Hannibal. He and Solas spoke in the elf’s Atrium of Mystical and Fantastical Things. The Inquisitor wanted to check on the progress Solas made in investigating the Fade-ehuvian, but the slim man had been unsuccessful in learning much when he’d Fadewalked the previous night. He’d entered the spiritual realm’s version of Skyhold, approached the magical mirror, but was unable to go through it or activate it just then. He’d keep trying though.

Now, the mage and Hannibal listened with high interest as Bull and Ayla recounted the events of their night.

“...And now that fucker is invading our bedroom and our dreams like some voyeuristic perv!” Iron Bull bellowed angrily. “If we ever find out how to kill this sonovabitch, I volunteer to land the blow that finishes him. Basra jor itwasit.” The fucker will fall, was roughly what his Qunlat translated to.

Hannibal shook his head and ran a hand over his hair. “There’s got to be some way to counter him, some kind of limitations he and the gods of his realm have. Until we find some clue of that, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Besides wanting to seduce you, did he reveal any other interests, such as how he might use your power?” Solas inquired.
“No, he didn’t.” Ayla shook her head, then her eyes widened some. “He did say that he had plans for Iron Bull, but didn’t expand on them.”

“Seems this asshole has all kinds of things brewing in his mind,” the Qunari entered. “We need to stay on high alert.”

“I agree with that. I’ll have Cullen further tighten security around the fortress to keep an eye out for anything,” Hannibal said.

(*)

The God of War was, indeed, a busy man. Once he left the happy couple, he retired to the Void to think over what Ayla revealed to him, already conjuring ways in which to utilize her power. However, his main reason for entering the realm of dreams, memories, and spirits this time wasn’t because of the snowy-haired beauty.

A certain red-maned Inquisitor had inspired Ares to do so. He needed to find out more about him. During his visit at their dinner table, he caught the very vague pulse of green light around Hannibal’s left hand, sensed the energy emanating from it. He’d also sensed it before while he watched them take on Resentius’s party from the cover of stealth. The energy was very similar to that which filled the Void, or Fade as Thedosians called the place between worlds.

Ares stood still, focusing on Hannibal’s life-signature. From the green mist and murky shadows, various scenes built themselves around him, then melted and tore themselves down to build another…and another. It was like flipping through a book that he was a part of, hopping instantly from story to story.

The war god stopped the shifting when he found himself in a memory of Hannibal, Iron Bull, Solas, Varric, and the Chargers engaging a ragged, pulsing green portal in a clearing. This snippet happened during the time they’d traveled to the Storm Coast to meet with Gatt, stopping the Venatori’s red lyrium shipment and severing their routes in that area. Before they met with the Elven Ben-Hassrath agent, they came across a fade rift.

Ares crossed his arms over his chest and watched it play out. Several hideous demonspawn rose misshapen and vile from the ground. Solas offered healing and protection wards, then attacked with his wizardly powers. The war god observed appreciatively as The Iron Bull swung his mighty axe, taking out an enemy to protect Hannibal. The Inquisitor lifted his hand, the one infused with the energy, and pointed it at the portal, sealing it, causing any remaining enemies to vaporize.

The God of War grinned slowly. “Hm.”

A moment later, he vanished from the Fade.
Two days passed without incident or Ares encounters. This didn’t work to put Iron Bull at ease, however. He’d been replaying the visual in his mind of the god draped over his wife, putting his lips and body on her. All Bull could do then was fight against his restraints, helpless to protect the woman he loved. Sure, it had all occurred in a dream—a dream controlled by Ares—but the Qunari hated how easily it was done.

The sigh he expelled carried the weight of his worry, his concern for Ayla’s well-being. When he first joined up with the Inquisition, he’d been somewhat fretting the confrontation they’d ultimately have with Corypheus. Now, he was looking forward it, wishing it was once again the only thing they had to face. The God of War had stepped into the picture and shown them that some geriatric Tevinter Magister with delusions of being a god wasn’t their biggest threat.

He lay on his back on the bed with his hands behind his head, legs stretched out and crossed, eye on the ceiling. Ayla, who reclined next to him reading a novel, huffed and closed the book, then reached over him to set it on the nightstand. The woman removed his oversized shirt serving as her nightgown and tossed it to the floor. Her hand grabbed and rubbed at his manhood beneath black briefs, and even in a softened state, it more than filled her grip.

“Mm…” This thoroughly tugged Iron Bull from his thoughts. His brow arched as she climbed on top of him.

Ayla wiggled her hips, eyes adhered to his. She was excited by how quickly he hardened under her, beginning to slowly thrust his hips upward. The two of them had been in their room mostly for the last two days, enjoying a little time between all the madness since things were about to pick up again. Ayla would start practice with Solas as well tomorrow. She was happy to have time for just her and her husband, and took the moments when she could. It was late morning now.

The woman flipped her hair sideward so most of it swooped over her shoulder, rocking her hips with his, meeting his movements. She smiled deeply and leaned down to kiss him, taking his bottom lip in her teeth for a nip.

Iron Bull vibrated with desire, hands finally easing from behind his head to grip her hips. “Being a bad girl…”

“Yes…very bad.”

Ayla nuzzled his bearded chin, then began slinking her body downward, kissing a trail across his chest, the solid plane of his stomach. She reached the waist of his briefs, and mesmerizing eyes peered up at him through her wild, frosty hair, narrowed and playful. She giggled and loosened the single button, then tugged at the smallclothes. Iron Bull’s eye rested avidly upon her, unblinking. His lips had formed a rakish smile. He lifted his hips so she could pull the briefs down his long legs and off. She crawled partially back up his body, straddling one of those hard legs, each swept with a thin layer of dark hair. She lowered and settled her breasts over his thigh.

Iron Bull held his breath when she gripped his virile, stiff sex in her little hands, stroking up and down its abundant length. Ayla took the head between her lips, drawing her tongue around it, and he exhaled that arrested breath, rolling his eye shut. Knowing it would drive him crazy and make his loins enflame with maddening sensation, Bull opened his eye and watched her work his cock. She slowly and licentiously lapped her tongue from the base of the shaft to the swollen head, switching to the other side of that flesh-tower, licking up it hungrily, eyes on him.

Bull shook his head, grinning. “Shit, woman…”

She piped a soft laugh, then lowered her mouth over his wonderful, throbbing member, taking in as much as she could, before bobbing her head and sucking. What she couldn’t fit into her mouth, she massaged with her hand, forming a paced rhythm. Iron Bull trembled, her wet, hot saliva coating him, running down over his balls. He absolutely loved how nasty and sloppy her blowjob sounded.

“Fuuuck, yeah.”

His head flopped back to the pillow.

(*)

Sometimes, it was most unpleasant to be the Inquisitor, the Herald of Andraste, Andraste’s Chosen, or any of the other titles he’d acquired since it all began at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Most of the time, however, Hannibal could say he was happy to be the one at the head of all that. What he liked most was helping people, saving others, or even doing something so simple as lifting morale and spirits.

This was why he’d agreed to give more than a few words of insight for the Winter Solstice Day celebration. He sat in a high-backed chair in Josephine’s office, speaking to the ambassador across her desk.

“I think it should be not so much a ‘dance’ as it should a party,” he said, smiling. “You have to consider the younger citizens of Skyhold. This should be mostly for the children.”
Josephine nodded, jotting down some notes. “Excellent point.” Her exotic eyes lit and she smiled broadly. “Perhaps, we could ask Iron Bull if he’d like to dress up as Winter’s Saint, since the children already love him so much.”

“Yes, let’s do that.” Mirthful chuckles ebbed from the Qunari. “I hope he says yes, since it’ll be funny to see him in that red suit.”

The two of them laughed some more.

A solid knock came at the door, then it swung in and Cullen entered. He appeared both excited and unsettled at once. “I’m sorry to interrupt. Inquisitor, a man has arrived claiming to be Ayla’s brother.”

Hannibal stood. “Claiming to be? You don’t believe him?”

“I…um…you should see for yourself. He’s in the waiting area by the main gate.”

Hannibal’s long strides carried him through the room and out. Josephine’s anticipation was wound up tight, ready to spring out like a jack-in-the-box. She was just as curious about this visitor and quickly fell in with the Inquisitor and the commander. The three of them moved from her office to the great hall, where servants worked in perfect unison to clear out the remnants of breakfast in preparation for lunch in about an hour.

They exited the hall and took the steps to the upper courtyard, then down a second stairwell for Skyhold’s main gate. There, standing in the quaint waiting area where all the benches around the large tree were capped in snow, was a man.

But, how he was of any relation to Ayla mystified Hannibal. They didn’t look anything alike, not even close. Simply put, the man was very fair of complexion, while she was ebony; Hannibal was apt to believe he was more kin to Cullen or Blackwall than Ayla. He wore the light leather armor of a ranger, and over that a cape with the hood currently draped back to reveal somewhat tousled, shoulder-length auburn hair. Beard-scruff covered his cheeks and chin. A bow slung over his back and a short sword of Elvenh design hung from his hip. Hannibal exchanged puzzled looks with Josephine and Cullen. The three of them approached, halting before the man.

“Inquisitor,” the man said, nodding. “Pleasure.”

“Who are you?” Hannibal demanded.

“Like I told him,” a tipped nod to Cullen, “I’m Elemir, brother of Ayla. I saw one of your posters and have come to collect her.” His forest green vision lulled over the area, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, his ultimate love.

“It’s clear that the two of you don’t share the same parents.”

“Yes, that’s correct. Now, before I speak any further, I want to see her. Where is she?”

Hannibal pondered the man. While he certainly had some explaining to do, he didn’t come off as a threat. It was his demeanor, very noble. Ayla said her brother was a simple man who did mercenary work, though there was obviously more to him. One thing common to them both was their accent. It carried the tones and insinuations of fine, rich upbringing. Hannibal nodded.

“Alright. Come with me to the great hall. Cullen, please go and fetch Ayla.”

The commander slipped off for the east tower. Hannibal, Elemir, and Josephine went into the hall.

(*)

The excited sounds of intercourse coming from behind the door gave Commander Rutherford pause. He sighed, gathered himself, and rapped knuckles to the wood surface. He clearly picked up the irritated growl.

Not long following, the door opened a crack to reveal Iron Bull’s face. “Yeah?”

“I have a message for Ayla.”

The woman peeked from the thin opening as well, features flushed, breathing deeply. “Oh…hello, Cullen. What is it?”

“A man has arrived claiming to be your brother. He awaits in the main hall.”

Ayla’s heart seized momentarily in her chest. She inhaled a surprised gasp, eyes going wide. “Elemir’s here! Ohmygods!” The woman hurried away from the door. “Thank you!” She called from someplace in the room.

Cullen smiled a bit, nodding. He turned and left.

Iron Bull shut the door, locked it, and faced his wife. She was flustered, making her way around the room to where her dresses hung near the mirror. She cycled through them with shaking hands, her vision blurred by blindness and tears. It didn’t take long to settle on one, and she snatched it from the hanger, setting it on the bed. She stumbled in all her rushing. Huge torrents of excitement and anticipation coursed through her.

Bull gently grabbed her arm, not only so she could see, but also to steady her. He smiled lovingly.
“Slow down, Naaremma. I don’t think he’s going anywhere.”

Ayla smiled brightly up at him, the shimmering tears in her eyes finally plummeting down her cheeks. “He’s here! My brother is here! I can’t wait to see him!” Her features fished on a light frown. “Ohmygods, I have to wash up first. I smell like sex.”

He laughed greatly. “Yeah, good idea.” Bull sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He figured this day would come. He had no doubts in the tracking abilities of Leliana’s people. When they reported activity at Ayla’s and her brother’s home outside Redcliffe, Iron Bull figured the guy was alive and would show up eventually. He was sure the man wouldn’t be pleased to find out of his sister’s new marital status. “I hope I don’t disappoint too much.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Ayla patted his arm, pulling him with her to the bathing area, where she began pumping a little water into the tub for a quick washup. “El is very nice, you’ll see.”

“I don’t doubt that, but I can’t imagine him feeling anything good about what’s formed between you and me.”

“Hmm…you might be right,” she said, mouth quirking at one corner in thought. “Oh, well. I’m twenty-two years old, a grown woman, and quite capable of making my own decisions. You and I are together. You’re my husband, my life-mate, and he’ll learn to accept it.” She nodded, grinning.

(*)

Ayla took in deep, calming breaths as she and Bull ascended the steps to the main hall, falling into the shadow of the great foyer, which they crossed. Her fingers played and fiddled where they clutched his muscled forearm, eyes sweeping the hall. There weren’t very many patrons about, so it was quite easy to spot Hannibal. He stood by one of the tables with Josephine, Cullen, and a man with longish auburn hair. A short beard of the same hue scrubbed his pleasantly handsome features. As she and Bull approached them, her brow furrowed further in confusion, while her gaze roamed the room, falling back on the man, studying him. He had widened his smile, his eyes glistening.

Elemir fully noticed her sight when she entered the great hall. The realization made his smile falter faintly, tapped by a flicker of sadness. He waited until they stopped before him. “You…can see.”

“Elemir! It’s really you!” His voice and his smell gave him away; Ayla knew them both better than anyone else’s. She released her grip on Bull to see the shadow-shape she’d grown more than familiar with, colorless and featureless. Tears flooded her eyes and she threw herself into his arms, hugging as tight as she could. “Oh my gods, I thought I’d lost you for the longest time!” She frowned and pulled back, touching to Bull again. “We don’t look anything alike!”

“Yes…and I will explain everything to you, well…most of it. Someone else will need to explain the rest, but we’ll speak on that shortly. For now, just let me hold you.” The ‘siblings’ embraced again, Elemir dragging his eyes over her face, smiling with overwhelming love.

“You called Iron Bull my Chosen Warrior, which means you know what I am.” Confusion pooled in her eyes and creased her brow.

“Yes. Here…let us sit.”

Elemir settled across the table from Ayla and Bull. Hannibal, Cullen, and Josephine also took seats.

“Firstly,” Elemir began, “I’d like to thank you for saving my sister. The bandits who attacked weren’t difficult foes, but they were smart. While a group of them engaged me, at least two other groups snatched her and created false trails. I couldn’t decipher the real one.” He sighed and shook his head, then reached across the table to take her hand. “No matter. You’re safe, thank the gods.”

“The bandits sold me to some Hakkon.”

“Hakkon?” Elemir donned a somewhat disgusted face. “They’re known for abducting people, women specifically, to add to their gene pool. No doubt, they were taking you back to their tribe for that purpose.”

“It’s good that the Inquisitor and his party saved me then,” Ayla said, shivering.

“Indeed. Again, thank you.”

“Best thing we ever did,” said Bull, smiling softly at his wife.

“Bull saved me from an arrow, and our link was formed when his hands touched my skin.”

“How do you know what you are?” Elemir asked.

“My power fully activated not long after I arrived here, and a mage named Morrigan picked it up. She’s…” Ayla tried to think of the right words, “…a traveler of the ages. She has actually visited a time when the Jado were prominent and thriving. She learned about the Oonas and their powers, the link they formed to warriors. I learned everything from her.” She exchanged a tender glance with Iron Bull.
Elemir nodded, catching the looks. His eyes narrowed at the man. “So…you’re her Chosen Warrior,” he stated again, this time with barely hindered annoyance.

“Yes.”

Ayla lovingly rubbed Bull’s arm and cleared her throat. “He’s more than that. He’s…my husband.”

“Husband!” Elemir jerked to his feet. His expression was one of anger, displeasure, and devastation. They all watched while the man leaned to the table and lowered his head, shaking it slowly, long hair shrouding his face. He eventually nodded, heaving a great sigh. He sat once more in his chair. “It makes sense. This is the way it usually goes, the Oona mated to the Warrior…” Elemir took a few more moments to digest it. “I lost you for nearly three months, only to lose you permanently…to him.”

“Oh, El. You haven’t lost me, and you never will. Iron Bull is a wonderful husband. He takes good care of me.”

“I’m sure he does.” His green eyes raked harshly over the Qunari, then resettled on Ayla. “I assume…you’ve consummated your marriage?”

Ayla blushed fervently, enlarged eyes shooting to Hannibal, Josephine, and Cullen, each of whom looked away with telltale expressions. They knew that Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull played the game of consummation quite often. The lovely ebony woman was wordless and flustered. “Oh…uh…well…”

Iron Bull lifted a brow, scratching his beard. “Well…um…maybe just…you know…a little bit…I guess…”

“Yes, we have,” Ayla finally spoke up through all the blathering. Her crystal eyes fixed upon her brother’s woodland-green ones. “Lots of times.”

“Ayla, I don’t think he needed to know that much.” Bull offered a crooked, unsure grin across the table.

Elemir snorted, eye twitching. “How was the wedding ceremony?” he asked once he calmed himself enough to speak.

“We were married with the mizraa-teth,” Ayla answered.

“The Qunari mating bite?” he scoffed. “So, you aren’t bound in civil matrimony.”

“Elemir, it is very binding!” she protested.

Elemir regarded the other man closely, studying the way his sister reacted to him, all but glowing with happiness and love. She cherished the intimacy between them. Elemir had no doubts that Iron Bull treated her like the most precious of treasures, as he’d better. “I know you do… and I fully expect that you’ll marry her in our way as well.”

Ayla rolled her eyes. “Oh, El, please…”

Bull smiled. “It’s okay, Ayla. I agree.” He figured there was no harm in getting married human-style, if it would put him on better grounds with her brother.

Elemir nodded briefly at the Qunari, still shocked at the turn of events. His gaze slid to Ayla. “Now, to explain why we obviously aren’t of blood kin. Let me start from the beginning. When I was a child, my parents were killed when invaders broke into our home. I hid, or they’d have killed me too.”

He took a breath, eyes searching the tabletop as he skimmed through his memories. Everyone silently watched and listened, Ayla’s heart already beginning to ache for him.

Elemir continued. “The world can be harsh enough for an adult, let alone a seven-year-old boy, so I did what I could to survive, to include stealing from local markets for food. I was caught by a baker who decided to discipline me his way rather than turn me over to the authorities. Figuring I’d end up in the system and mistreated in some orphanage, he handed me over to his brother, leader of a prominent mercenary band—Roark the Red.” A faint chuckle eased from him, and he shook his head, reminiscing on those simpler days. “A fair man of the northwest. I worked under him, earning an honest living that put food in my belly and gave me a bed to sleep in. I served as a retainer, soaking up the art of combat while doing so. Life was good.

“One day, when I was ten, we were traveling across the land. I stepped off during a break to relieve myself, and on the way to a private spot, I heard crying. I followed it to a narrow crack in the rocks of the hillside. When I looked in, there you were, with this fluff of white hair, blind, scared,” he spoke softly, eyes fixed with so much adoration over Ayla. “It was too small a space
for me to fit in, so I had to coax you out. You told me your name and that you were four-years-old. You said your parents were Shala and Murak, and you lived in Tentar. Of course, you don’t remember any of this.”

Ayla shook her head. She couldn’t recall a time when Elemir wasn’t her brother.

He issued a nod and went on with his story. “I wasn’t about to leave you there. I took you back to my company. The others were surprised but compassionate, which I knew they’d be. Roark took a liking to you and allowed you to stay, making me mostly responsible for you until we got you home. So, we went to Tentar, which was about half a day away, and camped outside the town. Roark intended to seek out your parents at first light, as it was late when we arrived. I decided to take initiative. I left you sleeping in another’s care while I sneaked into the town, found your house. I listened by a window to hear your parents talking…and discovered the truth. They realized you had some kind of power about you and found it to be an omen. Rather than face rebellion and chastisement from the town for having a ‘witch daughter’, they left you out in the woods in that crack in the rocks. They…left you to die,” he finished, voice sharp with rekindled anger. It had happened so long ago, but Elemir grew furious whenever he thought about how they’d abandoned a helpless, innocent little girl.

“They left me…in the woods…?” Ayla blinked at the tears that formed, determined not to let them fall. She shook her snowy head.

Iron Bull expelled a great sigh, sinewy arm closing around her, holding her to him. He shut his eye and nuzzled her hair.

“But…how could they just leave me?”

“Your power scared them. They didn’t know what you are,” Elemir said. “I returned to camp and informed Roark that we couldn’t take you back to them, since you wouldn’t be safe. And so you became my sister. You couldn’t see me, not directly and clearly, as I found out the older you got. You saw blurs and shadows and hints of light, not colors and details, so I knew it would be easy for you to believe we were truly siblings. You were young enough that you eventually forgot what really happened. I kept feeding you the story that our parents died in a bandit attack, leaving me to take care of you. Eventually, in your mind and memories, it became the truth.”

“I see…” the words fell heavily from her lips. “You knew what was happening when we experienced those strange instances, like when the wall of fire killed that bear while we traveled,” Ayla said.

“Yes, I noticed a couple of instances while we were young, as did the company, but none of us knew what to do or what you were…not at the time. It wasn’t until I was twelve that I, and I alone, found out you were called an Oona, mystic of the long-gone Jado people. However, I cannot tell you just yet how I found out your origins. We must travel someplace else for that.”

Ayla nodded resolutely. So, the truth had come out. She was unwanted by her parents, thrown aside so easily. Her life had taken the strangest turn because of that. She stirred a somewhat sad smile, eyes moving between everyone at the table. “It’s unfortunate, my past, but I wouldn’t have met any of you had it not happened. In that, I believe it was meant to be…” Her sparkling eyes met the single blue eye of her husband, and they kissed. She turned her face to Elemir. “What about Joswen and the others? Do they know what I am, about my power?”

“Yes.” A smile lingered on his handsome face. “They’ll be quite thrilled and relieved to know you’re alright. We decided to split up and search across the land. Magnus was the most enthusiastic, positive we’d find you. And, of course, I never gave up hope. Not once. When I saw a poster of you and your whereabouts in Milgren, I sent word to them. They should be meeting us on the road east.”

Ayla frowned. “On the road?”

“I hadn’t figured you to be married when I came here. My plan was to collect you and head east, back home. I see now that those plans have changed.”Elemir looked to Hannibal. “You’ll want to assemble your traveling party to leave at your discretion, Inquisitor, since I’m sure certain people will want to meet you.”

“East?” Hannibal said. “You mean to Redcliffe?”

“No. We’re going much further than that. We’re going to the Brecilian Forest.”

“What could possibly be that far east?” Hannibal asked, his aqua vision fixed securely on Elemir.

“I…cannot say. I can only show you. I promise that you’ll have answers once we reach our destination.”

“There’s the trading post we visit there,” Ayla said, “though, I can’t think of any other reason to travel that way.”

Her brother’s mercenary group was close in the same way the Chargers were. Joswen, Magnus, and Vek were like brothers to both her and Elemir; Sophitia was like their sister. Ayla and Elemir traveled with them often, meeting up in Redcliffe, Milgren, and any number of places to go on their journeys across the land aiding citizens. They converged at and visited the trading post in the Brecilian Forest a lot, more than any place else. Ayla had never really thought much of it.

Elemir regarded her carefully, nodding. “We’re going to a place near the trading post.”
Elemir regarded her carefully, nodding. “We’re going to a place near the trading post.”

“Ayla’s eyes narrowed. “You said we were going home, but also that we’re not going to Redcliffe. Our house is outside the town.”

“Hm,” he nodded again. “There is another place we call home, Ayla. As I said, I can’t speak of it. I can only show you.” Elemir swept his genial gaze to each of them. He truly wished he could say more, but he couldn’t. The vows of secrecy and well-placed magical wards wouldn’t let him. He merely constructed a level smile. “Ayla, you must come with me. I’m sure you’ll be going as well,” he said to Iron Bull.

“Yep. Where she goes, I go.”

Ayla smiled deeply, squeezing his hand.

“Will you please come as well, Inquisitor?” Elemir asked.

There was much to be done and so much happening all at once. Nevertheless, Hannibal needed to know what secret lay in the east, this place that Elemir protected. Ayla was part of their inner circle. Hannibal cared about her and what happened to her. This had now become the top priority. “Yes, I’m definitely going.”

“Alright then,” Elemir said. “I ask that you keep your party as small as possible.”

“Josephine, can you arrange some quarters for Elemir?” Hannibal asked.

“Yes, of course.” The woman met eyes with the auburn-haired man and smiled softly. He returned the gesture.

“That will be fine.”

“Josephine, can you arrange some quarters for Elemir?” Hannibal asked.

“Yes, of course.” The woman met eyes with the auburn-haired man and smiled softly. He returned the gesture.

“Good then. Make yourself at home.” Hannibal stood, tapping Cullen on the shoulder so he rose as well. The Inquisitor went to Elemir and offered a hand, and the man shook it. “I’m glad you were able to reunite with Ayla, that you’re both back together again. She never gave up hope.”

“Not once, brother—not once.” She grinned.

“If you’ll excuse us…” Hannibal said, then he and Cullen moved off.

Iron Bull stood, and when Ayla began to do so, he gently stilled her. “No, Naaremma. I need to speak to your brother alone for a moment, okay?”

“Ya mind?” Iron Bull tipped a brow at Elemir.

“Lead the way.”

The two men didn’t go far, only through the wide doors passing out into the gardens. It was brisk yet sunny. A blanket of snow coated the ground, some of the benches, the planters, and the frozen surface of the fountain. They stopped in a secluded spot on the promenade, silence heavy around them.

“You’re in love with her,” Iron Bull finally stated, his words visualized by hot puffs of vapor on the chilly air.

Elemir faced him. His handsome face hardened faintly with a frown. “What makes you say that?”

“The way you look at her,” Bull said calmly. “It’s the way I look at her, not the way a brother would look at his sister—at least, not in normal circumstances.”

The man wasn’t in the mood to argue, and he figured it would be futile trying to deceive the Qunari. Elemir turned abruptly, eyes the hue of forest foliage skimming over nothing in particular.

“I had always hoped it would be me, that I would be her Chosen Warrior.” He smiled very faintly, sadly. “That, one day, we would touch, and her sight would be granted. I have looked after her and protected her since we were children; I’ve always loved her. I suppose I thought it was logical that it should’ve been me. It obviously wasn’t meant to be.”

“Hm.” Bull listened. “I can totally understand that, and I wish I could say I’m sorry it didn’t work out that way…but I can’t.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be sorry either were it the other way around. An Oona’s life-force senses the compatibility of his or her Warrior; it knows the nature of the person, if they’re good of heart and worthy. Ayla’s life-force linked to yours, unknowingly to her, because it knew you were right—
kind, strong, and willing to put her life before your own. That is the way it works.”

“I love Ayla so much. I would do anything for her.” Bull’s voice was heavy with unbridled, raw emotion. Elemir turned and faced him again. The Qunari peered down unwaveringly with his one eye. “She means everything to me, and I promise to do whatever’s necessary to keep her happy and protect her.”

“I believe you,” Elemir replied in a low voice. He inhaled deeply, then pushed the breath out. “All of this aside, I’m actually a big fan of The Iron Bull and his Chargers.”

Bull quirked a brow. “You’ve heard of us?”

“Yes. I’ve seen posters advertising your mercenary group hammered up in various towns, villages, and cities, offering your services to the citizens.” Elemir’s smile, though slight, was genuine. “You’ve done a lot of good for people, and now you aid the Inquisition.”

“We went where the wind blew us. I’m definitely not complaining.” He grinned.

“You know, you look scarier in your posters.” Elemir gave a wry a chuckle.

“Yeah, well, it seems sketch artists have this need to portrays me as more of a beast than I really am.” He shrugged broad shoulders, a smile adhered to his features. “Works in my favor, though.”

“I’m sure it does.” Elemir wasn’t a short man, but the Qunari was almost a foot taller than him, his massive figure hulking, impressive, and intimidating. His shirt fit tightly over bulging biceps, triceps, and the sinewy expanse of his chest and back. Elemir grimaced when he found himself wondering how Ayla endured sex with the man, then quickly effaced the thought. “You’re much bigger in person than I would’ve imagined.”

“I get that a lot.”

Regardless of recent events or how much Elemir might not have agreed with them, he found that he did like The Iron Bull. He nodded. “If Ayla had to be bound to someone other than myself, I’m glad it’s you. You’re an honorable man and you’ll take care of her.”

“Always.” Bull nodded. His smile thickened and formulated into a good-natured grin. “And just so you know, when it comes to bros night out at the tavern for drinking, fun, and games, I’m the best brother-in-law you could ask for. It’s my specialty.”

“I don’t doubt it. I really don’t.”

They shared a stint of friendly laughter, then headed back indoors.
Burning Ashes of Lost Love Shall Birth the Phoenix of Acceptance

Hannibal’s arms crossed his broad chest. His intense aqua eyes fell on Leliana, then Cullen. They’d both filled her in about Elemir, his and Ayla’s past, at least what he could reveal.

“I’m not sure how to feel about all the ambiguity,” Cullen remarked. “I would certainly move forward carefully with this.”

Hannibal agreed. Just because he wasn’t picking up an air of nefariousness from Elemir didn’t mean he could just follow the man unquestioningly to some unknown, unnamed location in the Brecilian Forest. “Carefully, yes. I’m inclined to think he means no ill will, however.”

“I could send my Crows east, scout the forest,” Leliana offered. “Maybe he means to take you to Denerim. It’s the largest city near the outskirts.”

“No,” Hannibal shook his head, eyes swooping to her. The goldish light from the candle chandelier positioned over war table gleamed over his regal horns. “I wouldn’t bother, since I don’t think they’d find anything. The way Elemir was talking, we’re going to a place that’s well hidden. Besides, I don’t want to falter his trust by spying.”

“I can understand that,” she said. “We have no reason to believe he means to deceive us.”

“And I don’t think he would ever do anything to hurt his ‘sister’,” Cullen added, eyes shifting off a moment while he gathered his thoughts. “Who will you take?”

“There will be me, Ayla, Bull, Solas, Dorian, and…” Hannibal considered, then said, “Varric. I want Solas with me since Ares might contact him again at any time, and I need to be readily apprised of everything the war god has planned.”

“Sounds good.” The commander issued a nod. “To speak off-topic, we’ve gotten promising reports from the Templars deployed in the west. They’ve managed to infiltrate and destroy one of the main Venatori strongholds located near the Abysmal Reach.”

The Inquisitor smiled and nodded. Back near the beginning of the whole thing, he’d had the task of choosing to work exclusively with the Mages or the Templars, and he’d chosen the latter. Josephine hadn’t been very enthused about the decision, even less so when Hannibal announced he’d also be employing them as a free faction with the Inquisition, rather than restricting them to the Inquisition’s will. Solas and Vivienne were also very displeased about the decision, thinking the Templars to be too fractured and dangerous to go unchecked.

Cullen greatly approved of working with the Templars in such a manner, and Hannibal was pleased with the way things were going. All they needed was a chance. There were bad elements to any group, be it Templars, Mages, Wardens, or otherwise. But there were also a lot of good men and women in each of those groups, people like Ser Delrin Barris. He’d been led astray by Lord Seeker Lucius Corin, who’d been replaced by an Envy demon, as was exposed back in Therinfal Redoubt. By gaining the allegiance of the remaining Templars to the Inquisition as partners and not servants, Hannibal had also proven his worth to them, further earning their respect.

It was a decision the Inquisitor would make again if he had to. There had been enough oppression and slavery through the ages in Thedas, and he wasn’t about to trap the Templars into such an existence. Now the Order was gaining its strength, steadily, their veterans heading the frontlines in battles that led to the imminent final fight against Corypheus. Then, they’d have to see about Ares. Hannibal wasn’t looking forward to taking on the God of War.

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Ayla had much she wanted to talk about with her brother, questions that prodded her thoughts, but it could wait until later. All that mattered was that they were together again. Besides, Josephine had been tasked with setting up quarters for the man, and neither he nor Ayla wanted to keep the ambassador from her duties for long. She was a busy woman, possibly the busiest person in all of Skyhold, right next to the Inquisitor himself.

The siblings stood in the great hall facing each other. Elemir snagged Ayla in his arms again, hugging tightly.

She chuckled and squeezed her arms around him too. “I’m so happy you’re here, El.”

“Me too, love.” The man pulled back, his smile casting warmly down at her, eyes grazing her lovely features. “Once I settle my traveling bag, I’ll return so we can talk more. Now that I’ve found you, I don’t want to let you out of my sight.”

“Oh, El. I’m quite safe. I have Bull to protect me.” Ayla’s broken eyesight skirted her left shoulder to the tall, broad blur of shade she knew to be her husband. She couldn’t see the nod of agreement he gave or the adoring smile painted on his rugged handsomeness.

“I know,” Elemir said. His lips brushed her forehead, and he released her. “I’ll see you in a little bit, love.”

“Okay.” Ayla’s grin heightened, causing the shallow depressions of the dimples in her cheeks to stand out more. Defective eyes remained on the featureless blobby, shape of the man she called
brother as he walked off with Josephine. Her hand reached out for Iron Bull, and he took it, snapping the world back into sharpness for her. The woman spun within the safe, warm link of his arms, lifting on her toes to kiss him. She pursed her sweet lips into a smirk. “Big and tall, yes, but certainly not ugly.”

The Qunari conjured resonant laughter. “Not to you, but definitely to him. Hell, if Commander Flexibility’s pretty-boy ass had snagged you instead, Elemir would see him as ‘ugly’ too. He’d think it of any man who dared to touch his sister. I know I would.”

“Well…now that you’ve clarified…” Ayla giggled. “Though, you’ll always be handsome to me.”

“And that’s all that matters, eh?”

“Yes, it is.” The woman allowed her demure expression to shift into a more sensuous form, peering up at him through her lashes, a look Bull knew well.

His eye skimmed slowly around the hall, pointy ears open. He met her simpering vision, picking up the desire brewing in it. He shook his head, smiling. “Now isn’t the time to eye-fuck me, woman. In fact, none of that while your brother’s around.”

“What? Why? He’s not around now.” She clutched tighter to him, feeling spicy enough to grip his muscley, firm buttocks in her little hands.

Iron Bull did everything he could to resist her, to keep his control stern and his desire in check. “He’s in Skyhold, and that’s enough for me. I don’t want to disrespect him by letting him see us…you know…”

“Being husband and wife together?” She said, giggling. “It’s not like we’re having sex in public, Bull. We’re married. It’s okay to show affection, my love.”

“I know that,” his tone lulled forth warm and gentle. He nuzzled her nose. “Just…try not to pour it on so thick for the moment. Your brother’s been separated from you for some time, and he needs to get used to the idea of us. The guy just found out his sister is soul-bonded and married to a man he’s never even met. If I were him, I’d want to tear me apart, seriously.”

“Aw…” she squeaked up at him, ravishing eyes glimmering with love. “You’re trying to be considerate of his feelings. That’s very sweet. I will try to contain myself then.” Ayla buried her face at his chest, taking in his heated, masculine scent. She grinned. “You being so sensitive really turns me on, though…”

Iron Bull loosened a robust chuckle. “Later, woman, I promise you’ll have all you can take.”

The couple kissed, then he took her up to the library to replenish her stash of trashy romance novels, care of Dorian Pavus.

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Once Josephine and Elemir paid a visit to her office so she could check the logs for available rooms, they headed through the fortress for the south tower. There was an open one there on the third floor. The ambassador’s choice contained some strategy; she wanted to put Elemir on the opposite side of the premises from Iron Bull and Ayla, giving both parties some space. The east tower contained a few open rooms, one of which was just two doors from the married couple, but Josephine figured it would be quite weird if Elemir were to walk by their door and hear sexual sounds or something like that, so that’s why she chose the south tower.

The door whined softly on its hinges when she pushed it in, revealing simple quarters that mirrored the setup of Bull’s and Ayla’s. The fireplace, bed, and bathing space were on the opposite sides of the room. A table and chairs perched by the bay window, a square portal that allowed copious amounts of daylight to spill over the floor. Some shelves rose in one corner, along with a rack for hanging garb. The room, like all other rooms, also contained a cook station by the hearth. The housekeeping and maintenance crew of Skyhold tended to the vacant rooms biweekly, but hadn’t reached this one yet, as a micro layer of dust settled over all horizontal surfaces.

Josephine held an arm out, gesturing for Elemir to enter. “I hope the accommodations are good.”

“More than adequate, thank you.” He smiled softly and nodded.

“Meals are served in the great hall throughout the day, but you can also visit Skyhold’s market district to buy items to prepare here in your room, if you wish.” Her hand waved at the bathing area. “I think you’ll find the plumbing here to be quite a godsend. We have hot and cold water readily available to pump.”

“I look forward to a nice, long bath later then.”

At those words, Josephine found a blush creeping upon her, and she didn’t exactly know why. The man was very attractive, perhaps more rugged than her usual fair, yet there was a regality about him that she couldn’t pinpoint. However, she had zero issues picturing him sitting in a steaming tub of water and suds.

The ambassador cleared her throat, bowing slightly. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. If you have any questions…or just want a tour, you know where my office is.”
“Thank you kindly, Lady Montilyet. You are a most gracious host.”

“Oh, just Josephine will suffice. Here you are.” She held out the key and he took it with a terse nod.

“Josephine it is, then.”

She backed from the room, shutting the door after her.

Elemir instantly strode across the room and engaged the lock. Alone. Finally. He’d been holding back his emotions since he found out of Ayla’s connection with Iron Bull, expertly trained to do so as an agent of the Crimson Rangers. But it was overwhelming now, the realization that he’d lost her.

Tears burned his eyes, legs losing their strength to send him to his knees. His hands covered his face. Suffocating devastation seized him. Physically, she was Iron Bull’s now, tied to him with the soul-bond and the mizraa-teth; the other man had tasted of her sweet body as no one else had before him. Emotionally, the Qunari won Ayla’s heart, meaning he had completely won her.

Hot, angry, frustrated tears of lost love squeezed from his eyes. For nearly twenty years, Ayla had been his to covet, love, and protect. This was always a possibility, Elemir knew, and it hurt so incredibly much now that it was happening. She was his no longer. The path meant for her traveled alongside The Iron Bull.

It had taken every shred of will power, restraint, and control for Elemir not to lose it when he realized the relationship. He let it out now, however, leaning with his back to the door, leaking nearly silent sobs under the crushing weight of it all.

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When Elemir met back up with Ayla again half an hour later, neither the woman nor anyone else would ever have known how much inner turmoil he suffered. He had released the bulk of it, though it would be a while before he fully let go, if he ever did. He was happy for the numbness that set in, dulling the harsh edges of the pain. Outwardly, Elemir was calm, his countenance smooth of anger. He smiled down at his sister, the siblings walking through the snowy winter scene of the gardens arm-in-arm. Iron Bull waited back in the great hall, patiently allowing them time to talk.

“I can’t believe how much things have changed in the last few months, how quickly,” Ayla said.

“You’re telling me.” A clipped, dry laugh passed his lips. “It almost doesn’t seem real. If I hadn’t lost track of you, hadn’t let those bastards take you, none of this would’ve happened.” Ayla’s blindness wouldn’t allow her to see the way his features scrunched with disgust or how his green eyes flared angrily.

“Oh, El…” she sighed and leaned her head to his arm. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t make the bandits attack us. It’s just something that happened. And then our paths split for a while…and I met Iron Bull.” An almost dreamy smile glazed her face.

“You truly love him then?”

“Yes, so much.” She chuckled. “I know he seems a little crude–well, maybe more than a little–but he’s a great man. I’m very lucky to have him.”

“He’s lucky to have you.”

“Yes, brother, he is, and he knows that.” Ayla turned her blurred eyes up at him. “You…don’t like him?”

“Actually, I like him a lot. As you said, he’s a good man, and I can sense that,” Elemir answered softly.

Ayla’s grin was bright enough to light a dim room. She squeezed her brother’s hand. “It makes me so happy to hear you say that, knowing that the two most important men in my life will be able to get along.”

“Yes.” He chuckled some. “Joswen and the others will sure be surprised when they find out you’re married.”

Ayla giggled. “Oh my gods, yes! I can just see Magnus throwing one of his ‘silent’ fits, giving my poor husband the third-degree.”

“I don’t know about that. They’ve all heard of Iron Bull and the Chargers too, from the posters and hearsay. I actually think Magnus will be excited to meet him.”

“Here’s hoping.” The genetically unrelated siblings walked silently for a few moments, happy to be together again. Ayla smirked some, tugging his arm. “I keep thinking on the one or two times when I asked you what I looked like, what color my skin was, and you telling me it was smooth and dark. Then when I asked what you looked like, you told me about the same. You must have had a very good reason for lying to me.”

“I didn’t want to do it, love, but yes, I had good reason. We were on our way back east when the bandits attacked. I was going to tell you everything once we reached home, our real home. I felt it
was time for you to know the truth.”

Ayla’s thick, lush curtain of tight, white rings and curls shifted over her shoulders when she nodded. “I trust you, brother, and I look forward to learning everything once we get…home.”

Elemir turned and pulled her into his arms, kissing the top of her head. “I love you so much.”

“And I you, El.”

Only part of the inner circle attended dinner that night. It wasn’t a Heroes’ Dinner, so that was normal. Those that did decide to join Hannibal at the table were mostly curious to see the man who was Ayla’s brother. As usual, word spread like brush fire through the fortress, and the level of surprise upon hearing that the siblings weren’t even related was high.

Hannibal sat at the end of the table, with Dorian to his right and Elemir to his left. Moving down the table, Ayla sat between her brother and Iron Bull. Josephine took the seat beside Dorian. Solas, Varric, Cassandra, and Cullen were also present. The group churned with low chatter.

The Altus sipped daintily of his wine, eyes falling on Elemir across the table. “How did Ayla go so long without realizing that you weren’t truly related? Surely, through all those years, someone should’ve said something that tipped her off.”

All eyes fixed on Elemir.

“That’s a good question,” he said. “I can’t explain certain things, but I can elaborate a little.” His eyes switched between Ayla and Dorian as he spoke. “The house that we occupy outside of Redcliffe serves as a kind of ‘front’; as I said, our true home lies in the east. Our friends in Redcliffe have been…planted there as decoys in Ayla’s life, as they also primarily live in the place I’ll be leading us to.”

“Decoys?” Ayla inquired, brow pinched and wrinkled. “For what purpose?”

“So that you weren’t solely in my presence. They were there to give you other people in your life as a means to maintain the façade.”

“Ryan is one of these decoys?” she asked in awe. Ryan Dirk was the good friend Ayla had been referring to when she and Bull briefly discussed Krem’s sexual identity shortly after Ayla had met the lieutenant. Like Krem, Ryan was born female but had been living as male for most of her life.

“Yes.” He nodded simply. “Him, the Dunfrees, Bran, Zara, Hauer and Breta, all of them, decoys. Their main purpose was to create an atmosphere of familiarity for you, give you the friendships that any person would experience. In short, we created a ‘world’ for you to live in during the time away from our true home.”

“So…they were never really my friends then?”

Elemir offered a smile and nod. “Of course, they are. Their affection for you is as real as yours is for them. Once we get you back to our true home, they’ll all pack up and leave Redcliffe to head home as well.”

“Why go through all the trouble of creating this fake environment?” Iron Bull asked. He yanked a hefty hunk of meat from a turkey leg and chewed, lone eye fixed on Elemir.

The man took a moment to gather and sort his thoughts. “Certain people and myself felt it best to keep Ayla in the dark about the relationship between her and me. The front was created to keep questions from arising until she could be told the truth, both about how she and I really met and her origins as an Oona. There are also other things she wasn’t allowed to know, and those will be revealed back home.”

“That seems like an awful lot of trouble to go through to keep Bunny from knowing the truth,” Varric said from his place beside Solas.

“Bunny?” One of Elemir’s brows quirked.

“It’s his nickname for me. He has one for everyone at this table. I’m sure he’ll find you one eventually,” Ayla offered.

“I see.” Elemir looked to Varric again. “I know it seems like a lot to go through, but we thought it best.”

“All this time…” Ayla mused. “I’ve been living in that house outside Redcliffe since I was eleven and didn’t catch on.”

There were a couple of times where she had been tipped off, by something a villager not part of the façade might’ve said. Elemir had taken the proper measures to re-haze her memories. He wouldn’t tell her about that now, however. He’d save it for the mega explanation back home in the east.

The man looked to his sister. “Actually…you haven’t been living outside Redcliffe since you were eleven; we’ve only been there since you were eighteen, so for the last four years.”
"What? That’s…” Ayla sighed. “How’s that even possible? I clearly remember us leaving Roark’s company to go off on our own. You were seventeen and I was eleven. We moved into the house, and you joined up with Joswen, Magnus, Sophitia, and Vek shortly after, all of us traveling around at times in your mercenary party. I’m…so confused right now…"

Bull dropped the turkey leg to his plate, wiped his hands on a napkin, and wrapped his arm around Ayla’s slim shoulders to comfort her. The Qunari fixed Elemir with his complete attention, as did everyone else, waiting for him to elaborate.

Elemir took a breath and did just that. “You and I left Roark when you were six. I was twelve. You were too young to really remember it. I was approached by Joswen while alone one day. He’d been sent from the east by someone who shall remained unnamed for the moment, under orders to track you down, as this nameless person had sensed you and knew what you were. He told me things that I found unbelievable but extraordinary. So, without so much as a goodbye or a warning, I stole off with you in the middle of the night, and Joswen took us to what we now call our true home. The reason you don’t remember that way is because your memories have been magically altered, though all will be restored once we get home. I promise.”

Ayla sorted through everything she’d been told. Since she didn’t have all the pieces yet, it was still jumbly. “My life is like a broken pane of glass,” she said, offering a vague smile. “I’m very anxious to reach this place you call our ‘true home’.”

“As am I,” Elemir replied. He sipped his water. “I’ve been back once since we got split apart, and that was to report what had happened. Jos, the others, and I have been looking for you ever since.”

“Yes?”

“If I was so happy back in our true home, why bother to ever take me away from it?” Ayla quickly clamped her fingers more securely to Iron Bull’s arm, meeting his eye with overwhelming love. “Not that I’m angry about it.”

The Qunari warrior returned her smile. “I hope not.”

Elemir slowly nodded. “That is, perhaps, the most important question of all—why were you taken from there? You were very happy at home, rather, you are happy. Everything you could ever need or want was provided for you, so it’s not out of dissatisfaction that I took you from there. A person who won’t yet be named decided that in order for you to reach your full potential, you had to be allowed to leave, since you’d never find your Chosen Warrior there.”

He said the last part with a noticeable streak of sadness. He licked his lips and continued.

“You needed to be let out into the rest of the world for the chance to find…him.” Elemir’s eyes flicked to Bull. “Your Chosen Warrior. No Oona is complete without one; the Warrior balances them, and they the Warrior. The truth is that you’ve lived in our true home since you were six. When you were eighteen, it was deemed, after many strong wards were created, that your memories be altered to reflect what you think you remember—you and I leaving Roark when you were eleven, going off on our own, all that. Once the memories were in place, as were Ryan and the others in Redcliffe, I took you from our true home to the house outside the town. As your brother and your keeper, my orders were to protect you while letting you travel the lands with me and the others, giving you monitored exposure to the world.”

However, believing firmly that he would be Ayla’s Chosen Warrior one day, Elemir proceeded to heavily guard and shield her from other people, such as those who harbored magic and, particularly, men. He did so all the way up until the attack that separated them…and landed her right into the arms of The Iron Bull. Literally. Elemir believed with all his heart that if things hadn’t happened that way, Ayla may not have ever found her Warrior, all because of her “brother’s” stubborn attempt at trying to control fate.

“Looks like the bandit attack put you right where you needed to be,” Elemir finished.

“Mm, it sure did.” Ayla grinned cheekily at her husband, whose lips swept her brow.

“Well, there really isn’t much more I can tell you in regards to our home. You’ll understand it all when we arrive.” The Crimson Ranger, though they didn’t know he was part of said faction just yet, cleared his throat, finally taking a few bites of his food.

“Hell, I’m getting charged up to go too,” Varric remarked. “I might end up writing a book about this place.”

He, Solas, and Dorian had been informed already that they’d be in the traveling party.

Elemir jerked eyes at the dwarven man, then chuckled softly. “I doubt it.”

Hannibal cut a bite from his steak, popping it in his mouth. “How have your travels been, Elemir? Getting much trouble from Corypheus’s minions?”

“I came across one of those green portals a month back. I averted it after killing a couple of the creatures that came from it. They just kept spawning from the ground around the thing.”

“Those are called fade rifts,” said Hannibal. “Where was it?”
“Up north, by West Hill. I was working a pattern back around in search of Ayla.”

Hannibal sighed. “Damn things are spreading out further and further from the source.”

“Are you close to finding out Corypheus’s whereabouts?”

“Still searching.” Hannibal’s eyes settled on the man. “Our spymaster, Leliana, has her people working double-time, but the bastard is elusive.”

“I see.” Elemir nodded. “Well, I’ll have to ask my company first, but I’m sure they’d be willing to fight once the battle against the Darkspawn came.”

“The Inquisition could always use the help. Thank you.” A mild glower masked Hannibal’s face. “Have you…come across an entity named Ares yet?”

“Ares? No, can’t say I have. What kind of entity is it?”

“He’s a god from another dimension, and he’s made it clear that he intends to grab our world as his own.”

Elemir listened closely while Hannibal and the others filled him in on everything they knew about the God of War. They told him about each physical encounter, and only parts of a certain dream encounter. The information was just the kind of thing sought after by those in the east, keeping them notified of happenings in the outside world. This Ares might be a threat not only to the rest of Thedas, but also to the hidden place Elemir, Ayla, and many others called home.

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Elemir shook his head, astonishment pinned firmly on his face. He sat in the Chargers’ corner of the tavern with said gang, Iron Bull, and Ayla learning about the body swap. “That’s an extraordinary story. I wouldn’t believe it were there not others present to vouch for its truthfulness.” His gaze swept to Krem, Skinner, and the rest, before settling on his sister and her man. “I’m very pleased it was resolved.”

“So are we!” Ayla piped. “No offense to you, dear husband, but I never wish to experience it again.”

Bull’s lips tipped a smirking smile, eye fixed on her. “You? Suffering through your female processes was far more than any man should ever have to endure.”

“Hmm?” Elemir mused.

Ayla blushed, rapidly shaking her head, waving her hand dismissively. “It’s nothing.”

Elemir met Bull’s eye, and it dawned on him. He made a disgusted sound much like those often produced by Cassandra. “That must’ve been a dreadful business.”


Everyone but Ayla enjoyed low laughter. The woman continued blushing beside her husband, whom she nudged with her elbow.

Elemir stood. “I’m going to get some tea.”

He slipped through the Herald’s Rest for the bar, skimming the establishment along the way. It was bustling, but not as busy as it was during the week’s end. The atmosphere was quaint and somewhat familiar, boasting of closeness and friendship. He was sure the Inquisitor’s group spent a lot time in the place. Elemir edged by Maryden, the bard offering a nod as she strummed her lute, her crisp voice carrying throughout the room.

When Elemir got to the counter, he ordered his tea, then leaned and waited for it. The man couldn’t refrain from watching Ayla and Iron Bull across the room. She’d shifted, sitting draped over his lap. The couple laughed about something and she smacked his expansive chest, then looped her slim arms around his neck and kissed him. Elemir saw how Bull attempted to be more reserved, only holding her securely while her little hands roamed and caressed.

Longing lingered in Elemir’s eyes. He was happy for them but sad that it had gone this way, that she wasn’t bound to him instead. He was still very much in love with Ayla. The more he thought about the turn of events, the more he began to see how the outcome was probably best. Even if he had become Ayla’s Chosen Warrior, the one to grant her sight and be her rightful protector, Elemir knew she would never have seen him as anything more than her brother, not even after she learned that they weren’t related. Romance would never have been an option, which meant she would’ve never fully been his anyway.

His shoulders lifted and he released a sigh. After a nod at Cabot, Elemir set currency to the counter, and the dwarf collected it. He sipped the warm drink.

“How are you liking Skyhold?”

Elemir turned to the familiar voice. His handsome face conjured a soft smile. “It’s quite something. You were right about that plumbing.”

Josephine chuckled. “Glad to hear it.” The woman scanned the room, then thickened her smile.
“Would you like to join me for a bit? I see an open gaming table, if you’re up to some chess.”

“Chess, hm?” He grinned, taking up his tea. “I’d like that. Though, I must warn you—I’m a pretty hardcore player of the game.”

“I’m not as good as I wish to be. Perhaps, I might learn some things from you.”

They traversed the semi-busy room to sit and talk, indulged in chess.

Ayla saw the entire exchange. Her dimples stood out against a knowing grin. “Did you see that? I think Josephine was flirting with my brother.”

Iron Bull chuckled. “Or maybe she’s just being friendly.”

“Oh, I’ve used some of those looks on you. She was definitely flirting.”

The Qunari’s arms tightened gently around her. “Yeah, you might be right. You plannin’ on playing matchmaker?”

“Hmm… I might.”

“Leave things be, Naaremma. If they want to form something, they will.” Bull’s great body trembled faintly with laughter. He found the determination chiseled on Ayla’s lovely face while she watched Josephine and Elemir to be quite comical.

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Of those in the inner circle, Solas was one that didn’t often visit the Herald’s Rest. He could count the number of times he’d been in the place since they arrived in Skyhold on one hand. On this night, having just taken in a small dinner of vegetables, flat bread, and fruits, the mystical elf sat cross-legged on a mat before the hearth in his room. His back was straight, eyes closed, hands resting open and palm-up on his thighs. He wore a simple sleeping tunic and pants.

Meditation. He partook in it every night before heading to bed. It helped to better channel and navigate the Fade. Solas was a master when it came to that place between the worlds; he’d been exploring it for some time, yet there were moments when he was surprised by something new. He longed for those moments. He desired the knowledge, thirsted for it.

He continued breathing calmly, gathering and expelling one breath after another.

“You know, I think a nice cup of tea would be the perfect accompaniment to all that meditating,” Ares’s voice drawled from the shadows behind him.

Solas slowly formed a smile. It clung ghostly and light upon his fine features, almost not present. He opened his eyes in time to see a steaming cup of tea appear set upon a saucer on the floor in front of him, firelight flickering over the liquid’s surface. He picked up the tea and sipped.

“I was wondering when you’d show again.”

Faint bootsteps resounded against wood, Ares approaching. Leather creaked softly when the God of War lowered to sit beside the man. The position allowed them to face each other, his body less than a foot from Solas.

“Miss me?” Ares grinned.

“You’re like a walking book. There’s so much to be learned from you. With that being said—yes, I suppose, in a way, I did miss you.”

“You’re such a pretty little knowledge-whore, aren’t you?”

“Guilty as charged.”

“I like that,” the war god purred deeply, his eyes roaming casually over Solas.

The elf sighed. “I would think you’d have learned by now that I have no romantic interests in you, Ares.”

“Yeah, I get it. You only want me for my body…of knowledge.” He chuckled. “And I promise, I have something you’ll like. But first…” Just to put Solas more on edge, Ares set one fingertip on the man’s hand and swirled it slowly, dangerous brown eyes never leaving Solas’s. “I need to know a little something.”

Haggling with Ares was akin to making a deal with one of the most powerful Demons of the Fade. Solas knew this. He knew it well. But the promise of more knowledge kept him pressing closer to the temptation. “What would you like to know?”

“When I came to your dinner party the other day, I saw the Inquisitor’s hand spark with green light. I clearly felt its power. What is it?”

“It’s called the Anchor,” Solas answered. “Hannibal was infused with it when the first great hole opened the sky.”

“I see. Why him?”
It was no secret about how the Qunari obtained the mark. Bards, including Maryden, had already created songs about it, spreading word all around Thedas. Solas didn’t think anything of providing Ares with the information. “He was the last standing in the Temple of Sacred Ashes, the only one not killed. Corypheus meant to take the Anchor for himself, but it connected with Hannibal instead.”

“Hm.” Ares let the information sink in, nodding. “What does it do?” The god knew already that it was used to close the smaller rifts plaguing the lands. He’d seen that while skipping through memories in the Void. Perhaps, it had other uses.

“The Anchor allows he who possesses it to mend and create tears in the Veil. With it, the Inquisitor is able to close fade rifts.”

“So, it can be used to fully manipulate the Veil between this world and the…Fade.”

“Yes,” Solas answered.

And that is what Ares needed to know. His smile spread on like molasses, slow and easy. “I always enjoy our talks, but I’m afraid I have things that require my attention. A war god’s work is never done. But first, as promised…”

Solas went still, twilight-hued gaze glued to Ares’s hand, which moved towards him, pressing to his face. The god sent his transmission in that touch, hand glowing softly. Solas’s eyes widened at what Ares gave him. A torrential flood of images—places, people, objects, landmarks, experiences. So many things raced through the elf’s mind, becoming part of him. None of it was familiar.

Ares lowered his hand, examining while Solas recovered.

The elvhen man blinked a few times, then his eyes focused on the god. “What…was that?”

“Those are memories of my world. When I summoned you through the Void from your world to mine, I gave you access to my part of the Void. Now, with those memories, you can travel the Void there. So much for you to learn and see. My gift to you, Bold-Bald-and-Beautiful. For, you’ve been of great service to me.”

Smiling a bit smugly, Ares vanished.
Behind the Scenes: Solas and Hannibal

Chapter Notes

Oh, yes. Another behind-the-scenes, featuring our favorite Dread Wolf and fearless Inquisitor. I had great fun writing this one. And... if Jason Momoa were a Qunari, he would be Hannibal. Just sayin’. Woot-woot. *grins*

Once again, the Interviewer sat in his chair, which angled to face the couch. The Fic poster loomed on the backdrop—Skyhold sitting in the Frostbacks, each main character featured in the foreground.

Wearing a pair of charcoal slacks, a matching suit vest over a salmon-hued silk shirt, a pair of fine loafers, and horn-rimmed glasses, Solas sat cross-legged on the couch. He made a funny face at something off-camera.

“What are you doing?” the handsome elf tugged on a tailored smile. “I think the camera is rolling, silly. Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” he said to the Interviewer.

“Not a problem at all. We love this kind of stuff for footage.”

“Oh, shit,” a resonant voice chimed, its owner unseen as of yet. Soft laughter followed, then Hannibal Luthor suddenly jumped into the scene. He waved at the camera and sat beside his boyfriend on the couch. “Waaazuuup!”

The Interviewer performed one of those ‘we bros’ clap-handshakes with the qunari, who looked a bit like a lumberjack with his dark-red flannel shirt, jeans, and boots. His beard was full, flaming hair pulled up into a man-bun.

Solas chuckled, shaking his head. “What were you doing over there?”

“Free donut holes!” Hannibal grinned and pointed to someplace off-camera where a table held an array of refreshments for guests. He pecked a kiss to the cleft in the elf’s chin. “Had to snag one. Hope I didn’t mess up the take.”

“No, you’re good, man.” The Interviewer smiled deeply at them. “So, let me start by saying it’s awesome to have the Dread Wolf and the Inquisitor featured on our couch tonight. You guys rock that in-story stuff.”

“Thanks,” Hannibal said.

“I’m glad to hear you enjoy it,” Solas replied.

“I so didn’t know you wore glasses.”

The elf grinned, shrugged, and nodded. “I’m afraid I can’t see more than two feet in front of me without wearing them. Obviously, I have contacts for the Fic, and I wear them out-of-story sometimes too, but not so much. My eyes get irritated easily.”

Hannibal took Solas’s hand and squeezed, flashing a loving smile. “Yeah, babe is blind as a bat. I think he’s cute with the glasses, though.”

“You would,” Solas chimed.

The Interviewer’s eyes swung between both men with keen interest. His smile deepened. “So, I don’t think many fans of the Fic would ever have put you two together out-of-story.”

“Hm,” Solas began, features as serene and almost secretly content as they could be in-story. “We’re definitely a case of ‘opposites attract’. I’m more reserved and he likes to make a statement.”

“Oh, babe. Reserved, my ass.” Hannibal grinned widely, aqua eyes shifting to the Interviewer. “Don’t let him fool you. He’s a little party animal when he wants to be.”

“I’m sure.” The Interviewer couldn’t hold back his short stint of laughter. “How did you guys meet?”

With that question, both the elf and qunari met eyes, smiles intensifying. Hannibal addressed the Interviewer. “The short of it is he stole my parking spot at the grocery store one day. I sat there for a few minutes waiting for a woman to pack her groceries and her two kids into their minivan. Not even a second after she finally backed out, babe here comes pulling down the aisle and steals the spot before I can get in.”

Solas sighed and rolled his eyes. “Well, it was for good reason. I had a friend who was experiencing some breathing discomfort due to asthma. She couldn’t go pick up the prescription, so I went.” He tipped a slim eyebrow at his lover. “Stealing that spot might’ve saved her life.”

“Yes, I know, hon.” Hannibal continued with the story. “So, he steals the spot, and I’m pissed! I
was yelling at him, cursing and all that as he ran into the store, ignoring me. I parked my car, went in, and tracked him down. I mean, I wasn’t really mad, just astonished at how he jumped in and rudely took the spot. I followed him around the store, waited for him to pick up the prescription.”

“And he kept trying to get an apology out of me, which I didn’t offer at first. I was too worried about my friend to bother with a large, horned, attractive man trailing after me. He said he wasn’t going to stop until I apologized. We got back outside, and I still hadn’t apologized. So, he hopped in my car when I unlocked it, right in the passenger seat, stating he was waiting for that apology.”

The couple burst into genuine laughter, Hannibal linking his arm around Solas’s shoulders.

The qunari turned eyes to the camera for a moment, then the Interviewer. “I ended up riding with him to take care of his friend. Once she had her inhaler and we were sure she’d be okay, he finally apologized.”

“And he asked me out on a date,” Solas finished. “We’ve been together since then. Just over three years.”

“Wow, that’s amazing how you two met.” The Interviewer nodded slowly. “Just goes to show you never know who you’re meant to be with.”

“True that,” said Hannibal. “I love him to death.”

“Oh, Hanni.”

They kissed.

The Interviewer jerked his eyes down to the question and topic card in his hand. “I want to ask about the chemistry between in-story Hannibal, Dorian, and Solas. How do you feel about your boyfriend working so closely with Dorian?”

Solas shifted and made a face, though he still smiled mostly. “Oh, I won’t even pretend it doesn’t make me jealous, watching the scenes and chemistry between the two of them. Dorian gets the romantic part of Hannibal, while I get to play the mysterious elvhen mage who the Inquisitor has doubts about because of his obsession with the Fade. In the end, it’s all fiction, a story created for entertainment, and I’m the one who goes home with Hannibal, so it’s all good.” The grin cast upon his features tipped the corners of his mouth a little more.

“Well, in-story Solas has the God of War to keep him busy now,” said Hannibal, then rumbled a chuckle. “And I know how much you like looking at him. I hear about it enough at home.”

“Mm, yes. He’s quite…nice.”

The Interviewer greatly enjoyed the lovers’ banter. He merely listened, looking contently between them. “How similar are each of you to your in-story counterparts?”

“Heh,” Hannibal said. “The Inquisitor’s more diplomatic than I’ll ever be. He needs to unwind more, take a break. I’m all about the chill.”

“As for me,” Solas spoke up, “like my in-story self, I’m a vegetarian and will only drink a certain kind of tea. In my case, it’s Earl Grey with a hint of bergamot. I’m mostly quiet, like in-story Solas. The biggest difference is our sexual preferences. He’s strictly into elvhen women, and me…well…” He tapped Hannibal’s knee, smiling.

“That’s just great, really. You guys are awesome,” said the Interviewer. “Well, it’s about time to wrap it up. Was there anything else you’d like to add?” His eyes narrowed, face blooming with a knowing smile at Hannibal.

The qunari nodded, then stood. He lowered to one knee before Solas and took his pale, slender hand. The elf’s dark periwinkle eyes slowly widened, his breath quickening. His other hand pulled up to rest over his heart. The two men locked gazes.

“Babe…” Hannibal took a breath, gathering his thoughts, “it’s been a great three-plus years. We’ve been through so much together, and there were times when I didn’t know what to do or how to move on, but you were there to elevate me and pull me forward.”

Hannibal took a little black box from his pocket, flipped it open, removed a gold band, and placed it on the elf’s right ring-finger. Solas’s eyes trembled with tears. He kept listening.

“Having that parking spot stolen was the best thing that ever happened to me. I don’t know what I’d do without you. You’re my everything, and I love you more than life itself. Will you marry—”

“Yes!”

Solas threw himself into Hannibal’s arms, hugging as tight as he could. The Interviewer clapped his hands, nodding and grinning. Applause and hoots came from off-camera too. The engaged pair continue to embrace well after the scene faded to black.
The amount of anticipation built up inside of Solas had reached decadent levels, even for him. The elf was like an active volcano, ready to explode, the surface of his skin nearly crackling with desire to enter the Fade and begin exploring the memories Ares passed into him. Less than an hour after the war god’s short visit, the elf lay on his back in bed, eyes on the ceiling. The hearth fire snapped secretively in its furious consumption of the logs, that and the steadiness of his own breathing being the only two sounds in the room.

Solas closed his eyes and mentally skimmed through the trove of memories. He saw writing on signs and walls that held no meaning to him. Not yet, but he had every intention of learning to read it. The good thing was that, while he couldn’t read the languages of Ares’s world, he knew the names of each place, instance, and person in the shared memories. Phonetically, he’d acclimated to Ares’s language, which certainly had a lot to do with him being a god, able to communicate with anyone, regardless of world. Because Solas had been speaking with the God of War, he could understand when his language was spoken in the memories.

His slim lips quivered a faint smile as he tumbled into lucid slumber, having settled on an instance. He’d start where he and Ares had their first real conversation—that magnificent structure that served as one of Zeus’s temples.

(*)

First, there was darkness, engulfing and purely devoid of all matter. The hazy green glow of the Fade brightened into view. Solas stood amidst the thin fog, observing excitedly as the environment rose from the green mist, building itself into a solid scene, a remnant of history forever captured in the Fade like a moving painting.

He was once again in the temple, standing in the middle of the intricate marble flooring. This time, it was clearly supposed to be daytime, broad shafts of diluted light poking in between the high, fat, fluted columns running across the front of the structure. Solas saw the towering statue of Zeus at one end of the grandiose room, his marble face turned to the sky, lightning bolt clutched in one hand.

The sound of angry yells and curses broke the silence. Solas’s head whipped around so his gaze fixed on the front of the temple again, and he drew in a breath. Across the room, standing just past the columns, were four figures, their backs to him. One he recognized as Ares, and he believed he knew who the others were, because Ares knew who they were. He approached slowly, stepping over the open threshold, stopping at Ares’s right side. Of course, the war god didn’t acknowledge him since he was just an image in a memory. Even then, his golden-brown skin was untouched by the Fade’s murky glow; the other three people retained their natural coloring too, and Solas would still recognize them to be gods without that giveaway.

He waved a hand to pause the memory.

The woman directly to Ares’s left wore a frilly, pink, transparent item over a bra and panties set, along with a pair of gold sandals that laced up her calves. Her blond mane tumbled in ringlets over her shoulders. Solas knew her name to be Aphrodite, or ‘Dite, as Ares frequently called her. She was his sister…and his lover?

Solas studied Aphrodite closely, then attuned his vision to the male at her left. He too had golden hair and was very handsome. He sported a bare chest with a set of white wings tucked at his back. A bow and quiver of arrows with golden fletching hung over his torso.

“Cupid…” the elf voiced.

He skimmed the final figure, a regal and sternly beautiful woman with shoulder-length hair and pale eyes. Her armor was of a make not ever to be found amongst mortal men, etched in gold. Calf-hugging boots rose to her knees.

Solas moved to stand before the woman, whose very air reminded him of Cassandra. Noble and righteous. “Athena.”

He felt almost as if he knew them. He finally turned to face down the expanse of marble steps leading into the temple. A mob of thirty or so citizens had amassed. Their faces twisted by anger and fear, pitchforks and other farm tools clutched in their hands. Solas waved his arm to let the memory resume. Everything unfroze.

“Return to your homes, citizens of Eretria,” Athena said, features firm yet forgiving. “It’s safer there.”

“We’ll do what we want!” Someone shouted. “You gods are all done anyway with the Twilight upon you! Go away! We’re burning this temple to the ground!”

“The fuck you are.” Dire displeasure etched Ares’s devastatingly handsome countenance. He lifted a hand and summoned a fireball, which hovered above his palm. “Go home, mortals, or I’m gonna have a barbeque right here on these fucking stairs.”
"Ares, please," Aphrodite begged, grabbing his arm. She was obviously scared but unwilling to be harsh, unlike her brother. "They’re frightened, is all. Let them be."

"Mom," said Cupid, "I’m down with love and everything, but they’re questioning our power. Maybe uncle is right here…"

"No, he’s not!" The Goddess of Love protested. "Ares, back down!"

He turned his sneer to her, lowering his flaming hand in the same instant. "’Dite, it’s a shame you’re so soft. This Twilight thing is probably going to claim you."

A sigh sifted past her pretty lips. "If it does, at least I’ll die with dignity and respect for myself."

Ares’s broad shoulders trembled when he laughed at her. "Sis, I can assure you that no matter how many of these peasants I have to burn through, my dignity and respect for Yours Truly will never falter." Sweltering brown eyes fixed on the mob.

"I will ask only once more that you return to town," Athena’s voice filled the area. "I won’t be able to stop the God of War, should he decide to attack. This is your last warning." She drew her eyes down the line to Ares, nodding. This let him know she had her support if he did send fire and wrath upon them. She held some compassion for mankind, but in the end, they were inferior models of the god’s themselves. Powerless and weak. She was Athena, Goddess of Wisdom and Warfare, and she would not be disrespected by mere mortals.

Solas observed the whole scene avidly, taking time to scan beyond the hedge-lined clearing of the great temple. The view of the valley was copious and panoptic, showing fields abundant with crops and grazing livestock, dense patches of forest, and a jagged spine of mountains in the distance. As with any part of the Fade he’d gone to, there was no true sky. A swirling layer of hazy green clouds lingered high above.

One of the citizens, a middle-aged man with thinning hair, stood ahead of the others, likely the one who had led them up to perform their little siege of the temple. He looked to both sides at his fellow neighbors and friends, then turned back to the gods.

"Alright. We’ll go."

"Wise move," Ares said, and he and his divine kin watched while the Eretrian citizens retreated, heading back down into the valley.

The scene paused again, but not by Solas’s doing. It was done playing out. The memory-generated figures of Ares, Athena, Aphrodite, and Cupid sizzled away into green mist, leaving Solas to stand alone at the top of the wide steps. In many places, the ground crackled and bubbled with greenish liquid, and hunks of stone and debris of various sizes hovered and floated through the air.

The elf let the scene he’d witnessed sink into his mind to be mentally dissected and digested. From what he could gather, the Twilight of the Gods had stirred up not only an errant fear amongst the immortals, but also a lot of civil unrest as many mortals began to lose faith in their gods.

Solas found this most intriguing and was somewhat surprised Ares had decided to include such memories in his gift transfer. Though, he figured the war god had nothing to truly hide, since he’d already told Solas about the Twilight, however vaguely. With the memories, he could find out more. Perhaps, Ares had made a mistake and inadvertently included something that might help put an end to his plans for Thedas.

Even as Solas thought this, he began to dismiss it. The God of War was very smart. He most likely wouldn’t include anything like that in the precious trove of memories he planted into Solas. Still, the elf would be on lookout. He firmly decided that he wouldn’t reveal the gift to Hannibal unless it became absolutely necessary.

He shut his eyes, scanned his new memories, and searched for another instance or place to explore.

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The following morning, Ayla woke up before Iron Bull, ecstatic to start her day, the earlier part of which would be a bit busy, since she’d be practicing with the three mages. The woman felt her way down to the foot of the bed and climbed off. She stretched and adjusted the knee-length chemise she wore, finally having taken time to get to the market for nightclothes so she wouldn’t need to wear Bull’s shirts any more, though she was sure she’d still do it from time to time. Slowly, she reached the bathing area and ran a little water to wash her face. After that, she took up her stem of bhosan root, one end shaved back and fibrous like a brush. The root was a popular way throughout Thedas to clean teeth and freshen breath. Ayla brushed her teeth with it, gurgling some water behind it. She removed her chemise and began washing up.

Warrior training and combat readiness would forever be a part of Iron Bull; it had turned him into a rather light sleeper. The moment his mate stirred and began moving from bed, he was up. He turned on his side and poised on an elbow to watch her feel her way across the room and behind the separator wall.

“Good morning, Naaremma-Kadan.”

“Good morning, my love!” she chimed.
Bull chuckled. He could picture the smile on her beautiful face. He swung his legs over the mattress, stood, and stretched. "What would you like for breakfast?"

“Oh…something light would be nice.”

“Hmm…” Bull went over to the iron box built into the wall beside the bay window. The coolness of outdoors turned the compartment into a properly chilled place to store foods such as meats, eggs, dairy, vegetables, and fruits. It kept them fresh longer. He opened the hatch and skimmed the shelves. "How about a toasted pofo muffin with butter and plum jam and some apple cider?"

“That sounds perfect.” Ayla loved the way he prepared the flat, circular pastries, making them crunchy on the outside and chewy in the middle.

Bull saw to breakfast. Once they finished and got fully ready, they headed off to start the day.

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Iron Bull dropped Ayla off in the gardens with Elemir, Morrigan, Solas, and Dorian, then made his way to the training yard for some sparring with Krem and Skinner. The Oona knew the drill. She let Morrigan position her in the center of the wide triangle formed by the three mages. She picked up their power signatures easily, each one sending out physical jolts that tingled along her ebony skin.

Ayla had learned to control the urge to siphon or amplify with the use of her power emotion. Love was unquestionably one of the strongest feelings, right next to hate. Neither of them could exist without the other, the balance between them truly a delicate thing.

Elemir observed the magically infused quartet from a safe distance, leaning to the balustrade running along the perimeter’s promenade. He found himself greatly curious to see Ayla in action, to experience her knowingly using her powers rather than accidentally, as he’d witnessed in the past.

“Am I to do anything special before we start?” Solas asked, hands clasped in a scholarly fashion at the small of his back, eyes flipping to Morrigan.

“All you have to do is open yourself to her. She’ll do the rest,” the witch answered. “When she amplifies you, try to keep your power tamed to this area. You’re skilled as a mage, so I doubt you’ll have much trouble doing that.”

“Mm.” Solas nodded. He was feeling quite content this morning; he’d played with what could be considered an early Winter Solstice gift from Ares for quite a while last night, exploring two other locations. He’d discovered that the region over which Ares and his fellow gods ruled was called Greece, and the world itself was named Earth.

“Are you ready, Ayla?” Morrigan asked.

“Yes.” The woman slipped a nod, turning very slowly in place to eye the shadows. She couldn’t quite see the blurry shapes of the three mages. They were beyond the range of her hindered sight. She could feel their powers, though.

The Witch of the Wilds flicked her bright eyes to Solas and Dorian. “Open yourselves.”

The mages observed as Ayla closed her eyes a moment, lifting her arms towards the sky. She suddenly left the grass and rose to hover a couple of feet from the ground, skirts and hair billowing around her. She activated her siphoning ability, head tipping back.

Solas, Dorian, and Morrigan crumpled to their knees as one, faces contorted by the act of having their magic drained, such an overbearing sensation that shocked through their entire bodies. Transparent strands of light surged from them, connecting with Ayla, who began to spin in place. There were many avenues to take when sifting through their magic, and the Oona decided to focus on ice.

Her arms snapped out, palms splayed. She opened her eyes to show that they now glowed white and vivid. Her vision allowed her to see all three mages as palely illuminated entities in a domain of shadows. It was as if she looked at the world in negative, where dark was light and light was dark.

Ayla sucked in a breath and yanked her arms to the sky again, this time causing a ring of thick, sharp ice stalagmites to shoot from the ground, forming a protective barrier around her. She knew the limits of her power and theirs, and to keep from injuring them, she released her siphon but focused on amplifying Solas.

Morrigan and Dorian slowly stood, staring at the ice-protected Oona.

Solas had never been amplified by her before, only drained that day in his atrium. The sensation of having her force poured into him, boosting his power to three or four times what it usually ran, caused the elf to swoon with euphoria. He hadn’t felt this powerful since…

Since before his long sleep.

He grinned, eyes narrowing. His skin crawled with delicious static energy. He decided to channel fire magic, countering the frozen spell Ayla conjured. The elf lifted both hands up and drew upon
his amplified power until he reached the level he desired.

Solas aimed his hands at the ice ring around Ayla and unleashed a blast of fire, smashing a huge gap in the spiky pillars. The Oona clearly sensed the heat yet didn’t panic, as she’d gone through similar activities with Morrigan and Dorian. Ayla reacted by breaking her connection with Solas, dimming his powers back to normal. She lowered to the ground, taking a few deep breaths to center herself.

“Excellent!” Morrigan called. She rushed to Ayla, stepping over bits of shattered ice into the ring. She led the woman clear so Dorian could use his magic to quickly melt away the stalagmites. Morrigan looked to Solas, smiling thinly. “It didn’t take you long to align.”

“No,” he remarked, voice cool and smooth. “I have experience dealing with great amounts of power.”

“Indeed,” she said.

“Everyone’s okay?” Ayla chimed up.

“Oh yes, love,” Dorian answered, then smirked a bit at Solas. “Though, I’m surprised he didn’t manage to singe your eyelashes, given the size of that fireball.”

Ayla giggled. “It wasn’t so bad.”

Elemir no longer leaned to the railing. He stood with slightly widened eyes on the scene in the garden. She’d gotten good at using her gift. He only hoped that those she practiced with were just as masterful and took great care with her.

“Alright then,” Morrigan said. “Let us continue.”

They spent the next two hours practicing maneuvers, spells, channeling, siphoning, and amplification. Once they finished, Morrigan told them to meet again at the same time tomorrow, then slipped off to her chambers. Solas excused himself and headed to his atrium. He had some documents he wanted to look over before he retreated to his quarters to immerse himself back in the Fade.

“Well,” Dorian’s smile eased between the siblings, “guess that leaves the three of us. You’re both welcome to join me for lunch.”

Ayla had her arm linked through Elemir’s. She issued an enthusiastic nod. “I’d like that. You can tell us some stories from before I joined up with you.” Her blind eyes turned up to her brother. “He has so many, and they’re all exciting!”

The Altus ebbed a rich laugh, tossing a hand dismissively. “Well, the stories I have are plentiful, yes. However, it remains to be seen just how exciting they are. I’m sure you’ve had many rousing adventures yourself, hm?”

“A few,” Elemir smiled at the slightly shorter man.

“Good. Then you can contribute to story-time as well.”

The three of them walked the main path through the gardens for the entrance to the great hall. Right before they reached the promenade, the God of War appeared, blocking the way. Dorian barely had time to react, widening his eyes in alarm, before Ares waved his hand and cast the same godly magic he’d used to freeze The Iron Bull in place.

Neither Dorian nor Elemir could move or speak. Only their eyes remained fixed ahead. Patrons hadn’t yet begun to filter back into the gardens since practice ended just a short moment ago, so no others lingered about to bear witness.

Ayla panicked, fully noting how her brother stiffened into a warm, breathing statue next to her. Her nose picked up the familiar pleasantness of leather, heat, and blatant masculinity.

The war god leashed out an arm and pulled her against him, her back to his solid, well-chiseled front.

“Ares!” she cried out.

“Shhh. Don’t panic.” He chuckled a bit, easily securing her while she struggled. Unsure of if she’d be able to see him, he’d cautiously hidden in stealth behind a wall of high, trimmed bushes. Seemed she needed the touch of her husband after all. “I caught some of that practicing. Your power is absolutely amazing. Just being in the vicinity when you activated it made me feel drunk like I’ve never felt before. Gods don’t drunken easily. It was very…” His mouth brushed her ear and sent warm breath cascading down her neck, “…intoxicating.”

“Let me go! What do you want? I told you what you wanted to know!”

“Yes, you sure did. And I figured out just how you can be of use to me.” Ares looked first to Dorian, then Elemir, both of which had eyes fixed on him and Ayla. “Just gonna borrow her for a short moment, boys.”

With the lovely Oona struggling and thrashing against him, slim fingers clawing at the bracer-clad forearm lodged carefully under her chin, Ares made them both vanish from sight.
Iron Bull finished sparring in the yard, then took his ax to the grinding station for a good tweak, buff, and sharpening. After he returned the weapon to his room, he paid a visit to the antechamber serving as Josephine’s office. The ambassador and Inquisitor wanted to speak to him about something.

The one-eyed Qunari stood in the stately room now, towering before the hearth. He had his arms crossed over his chest and amusement on his face. He chuckled deeply. “Um…well…I know who the Winter Saint is. Comes in through the chimney on the Eve of Winter Solstice, leaves gifts on and around the giving table, yeah?”

“That’s right. Would you be willing to do this for the party?” Josephine asked, smiling as widely as she could.

Bull passed debatable glances between her and Hannibal. “I dunno…” He shrugged. “Might be hell trying to squeeze into that red suit.”

“Oh, come on, Bull,” Hannibal grinned and smacked his shoulder. “We can easily have a suit tailored to fit you perfectly. And…it’s for the children. They love you.”

“That’s dirty, boss, playing the kid-card.” He sighed, smiled, and nodded. “But I’ll do it.”

“Good then!” Josephine blurted, jotting notes on her scroll board. “I’ll get right on seeing about the suit.”

Though the holiday season was nigh, people already decorating their windows and doors with wreathes and such, Iron Bull experienced a small slip of sadness. His eye settled on the Inquisitor.

“How’s that thing I requested coming along?”

“Actually, it’s looking very promising,” Hannibal nodded. “Leliana was easily able to find him. The tricky part will be circumventing the city’s security, but I think we’ll pull it off.”

Bull’s massive shoulders rose and sank when he sighed, a smile spreading. “That’s great! I know Krem will really appreciate it. Hopefully, we can obtain the package by Winter Solstice day. That’d make it even better.”

“It definitely seems like—” Hannibal’s features bloomed into an expression of alarm.

Josephine’s eyes went large and round. She gasped and took a step back.

Iron Bull’s face shifted into an angry mask at seeing the war god and Ayla appear across the room, her held tightly against him and trying to get free. Bull roared and made to lunge forward. Of course, Ares wasn’t about to let him or anyone else interfere with his plans.

The God of War waved a hand, instantly immobilizing Josephine and the two Qunari, each of their faces frozen in dire expressions, bodies posed in mid-motion. The exotic ambassador’s note board tumbled from her grip, clattering to the stone floor.

Mild disorientation ailed Ayla, the environment changing instantaneously. One moment she was out in the pleasantly cool gardens with sunlight tracing the edge of her shadowy vision, and the next she was in a hearth-warmed room with a completely different set of blurred shapes, smells, and sounds. Her breath caught in her throat at her husband’s furious roar; she knew it well.

“Bull!” she called.

“Ah-ah.” Ares’s hold on her tightened a bit. “Just calm down, beautiful. Won’t be but a moment. Hold still,” he ordered firmly. His chin lifted and sultry brown eyes settled on Hannibal. “You have something I want.”

The God of War aimed his free arm at the Inquisitor, using the power of telekinesis to send him rising in the air, hovering. Hannibal surely tried to fight, all his struggling in vain since the god had cast immobilization upon him as well. The only thing he could do was set his aqua glare upon the darkly-leathered man.

Ayla’s eyes widened when she detected the familiar sensation of her power being activated, and not of her own accord! Ares was sending his own elysian force at her, bombarding her with it. The war god’s energy was so overwhelming that it charged her.

“No! Stop! What are you doing?” Ayla cried.

Ares didn’t answer her. He shut his eyes to draw upon her wonderful energy, tapping into the part that he desired—the amplification. He drew it into himself. When his eyes snapped open, they glowed white faintly. The God of War grinned, and a thick tendril of pale light shot from his open palm, penetrating Hannibal’s left hand.

Ayla gritted her teeth and ceased to struggle, weakness pouring over her. She went completely limp. Ares continued to easily hold her against him, keeping their bodies in contact until he had extracted that which he came for.

Iron Bull’s growls resounded sharp and brusque, shuddering raggedly from deep within. Anger,
fear, frustration, and helplessness had taken hold of him. He was frozen in a position that let him see everything. His eye jerked quickly between Ares now holding Ayla’s slumped form and Hannibal.

The Inquisitor bore his teeth and closed his eyes at the pain ripping through him, beginning in the hand bearing the blasted mark and electrifying every other part of his being. He shook violently where he hovered, convulsing. He felt like his guts were being sent through a grinder, thinking he’d pass out for sure.

Ares grinned wider when the umbilical of force between him and the Qunari turned vibrant green, the light traveling along the stream as the extraction carried out. The green glow sucked into Ares’s left palm, illuminating that hand. He gently laid Ayla’s unconscious body to the floor at his feet. Her tight, pallid tresses fanned around her. With the flick of his hand, Ares lowered Hannibal back to the floor. The Inquisitor was weakened but still conscious. Breathing harshly, he fixed Ares with a hard stare.

The war god fully stood once more. He studied his hand for a moment, watching it pulse, the power of the Anchor now at his beckon call, his to wield. He sent a pleased smile Hannibal’s direction. “Perfect fit. Don’t worry. I’ll close the remaining fade rifts for you. Can’t have demonspawn polluting my world, now can I?”

Ares’s fiery vision swung from Josephine to Hannibal to Iron Bull, then down to Ayla. He lowered and brushed some thick white tendrils from her dark brow, before he disappeared.

As soon as Josephine and Iron Bull could move, she rushed to Hannibal’s side, and he flew to his wife, gathering her in his arms.

“Ayla! C’mon, Kadan, wake up!” Alarm branded his features, large hands shaking. He sighed with relief when she stirred, hugging her tighter.

The door burst open, sending Dorian and Elemir running into the room.

“Maker, what has he done now!” The Altus saw that Bull tended to Ayla, so he hurried to his lover’s side, helping Josephine lead him to a chair, into which Hannibal sank.

Elemir ran to Bull and Ayla, wanting to snatch her from the man but refraining, as the Qunari was her husband and protector. His green eyes flared, hand stroking her hair. “Is she alright?”

“Yes.” Bull nodded. “The sonovabitch tapped into her power, and it drained her.”

“For what?” Elemir asked.

“He took it,” Hannibal said lowly, voice coated with disbelief. All eyes, except Ayla’s, fell upon him. “The Anchor…it’s gone.”

(*)

Solas spun to his desk and slammed a fist to the surface, making the inkwell tremble and scrolls budge. Behind him, Hannibal, Dorian, Iron Bull, Ayla, and Elemir watched his reaction, the Inner Circle members rather surprised by it, since the mysterious elf was usually so contained and masterful at outwardly controlling his emotions. His shoulders rose and fell steadily, his face a chiseled stone mask of fury.

“Solas…” the deep tones of Hannibal’s voice urged.

“That…wasn’t supposed to happen.” The elf closed his eyes to recompose himself, all the hard edges smoothing out, the visible anger dissipating. He turned. “I’m sorry, Inquisitor. It’s my fault. Ares visited me last night, and I told him what the Anchor is. I never thought he’d be able to take it from you.” Inwardly, he boiled. No one would ever guess, however, by the façade of collectedness he displayed.

“Why didn’t you report that he came to you?”

“Nothing much was exchanged, besides him wanting to know about the Anchor,” Solas lied. Ares had also given him some memory imprints of his own world.

“The good news is that I’m no longer inflicted by the mark, no longer pained by it, and Ares said he’d handle the fade rifts, as he doesn’t want demonspawn flowing into a world he plans on conquering. The bad news is we have no idea what else he plans to use the Anchor for.”

“Indeed.” Solas sighed again. It would’ve been much easier to regain the ancient, Veil-manipulating item from a common man, the elf thought. Now, he’d have to figure out a way to get it from a god. It had been one disappointing mishap after another since he’d ‘awakened’, and he dreaded to see what would happen next.

Iron Bull glared at the elf with his one sky-blue eye. “We need to fucking be able to count on you, Solas. Whatever infatuation you have with this godly asshole, you need to shut it down. He’s obviously clouded your judgement.”

Solas remained indifferent. “I assure you that my judgement is as sound as it ever was.”

“Oh, really? Because, ya know, if it was as sound as you claim, I think you would’ve let us know he paid you another visit,” Bull tossed back, growing visibly angrier. “He violated my wife again!”
Used her power to suck the Anchor right from the boss, draining her! What if he had killed her! Or him! What if–"

“Bull, love, calm down.” Ayla’s hand rubbed at his. “Being angry and yelling won’t solve anything.”

“I concur.” Solas said smoothly, seeming unfazed by the Qunari’s outburst. “The important thing to consider is that Ares now has the ultimate power to control the Veil and can open and close portals at will. He’ll be able to travel much easier through the Fade and between our two worlds.” He quirked a brow. “Or, more accurately, between any worlds connected to the Fade. The ways in which he can manipulate that spiritual dimension have grown exponentially. If we want to stop him before he rises to complete power over Thedas, we’d better do something soon.”

Silence momentarily encapsulated the atrium.

“How are we going to face Corypheus without the Anchor?” Dorian spoke up. “It appears the God of War has taken what was our most powerful weapon to use against him.”

“Also.” Bull interjected, “what’s to stop Corypheus from using Ayla to amplify his power same as Ares did?” He didn’t want her going into the fight anyway, and this was a very legitimate reason to keep her out of harm’s way and off that battlefield. The warrior nuzzled the top of her head.

“Very valid points.” Hannibal drizzled a slow sigh. He added those things to the headaches that had piled up. “Josephine has summoned Cullen and Leliana. I’m going to meet with them all now so we can go over what’s happened. Even though I no longer have the Anchor, I’m still the Inquisitor, and there’s much to be done.” His eyes steadied out on Solas. “From here on, report everything involving Ares immediately.”

“Understood.” The Dread Wolf nodded and issued the answer that was expected of him.

Chapter End Notes

The image of the gods was created by me with Photoshop. The Solas image features the actor James McAvoy as the elf and was created by an unknown artist. I do not personally own or claim any of the images. :)
Heavy was the silence that filled the war room. Hannibal’s broad shoulders seemed visually burdened by it, slumping a bit. He drew his eyes to each member of his council, and neither Leliana, Cullen, nor Josephine had much to say right away. The ambassador had filled them in, and they were still trying to understand how something like that could happen, how Ares had managed to obtain the Anchor.

Cullen’s sigh sliced the quietude. “This is, perhaps, the most unpredictable thing to occur. The Anchor was our greatest hope for defeating Corypheus.”

“This is not something we could foresee,” Leliana said.

The commander’s face hardened. “We could have if Solas had told us about his latest meeting with Ares. I was wary of working closely with any mages on this, and it appears my concerns were warranted.”

“I don’t think Solas meant any harm. The things he told Ares about the Anchor are probably common knowledge around the land anyway—it’s used to open and close tears in the Veil.” Hannibal’s gaze lingered on Cullen. “I believe what bothers me most is knowing that Ares figured out how to harness the power of our resident Oona.”

“Agreed,” Cullen said. “If he wanted to, he could just take her to use as his tool of power and destruction.”

“I don’t think that’s primarily on his mind,” entered Josephine. “Being there while he extracted the mark from the Inquisitor, seeing how gently he handled Ayla even as he drained her.” She shook her head. “No, he doesn’t want to hurt her. Though that’s not to say he wouldn’t. He is a god after all and looking out for himself. Yet…” Josephine replayed the very recent memory of Ares lowered beside Ayla, tenderly swiping hair from her brow before he disappeared. “He’s not like Corypheus, and that works in our favor. As long as Ares thinks we’re playing by his rules, he’ll let us be. He wants to rule over our world not by destruction, but with reverence; he’s a true god. Corypheus is not, and he’s willing to destroy everything in his delusions. He would use the Anchor to enter the Fade at will and send a horde of demons traversing the Veil, blending the Fade into our world. He wants devastation. Ares doesn’t. And that works for us.”

One of Cullen’s brows curled upward distastefully, lips pressing a thin smirk. “It almost sounds as if you’re defending the God of War. I hope his darkly handsome charm hasn’t begun to sway you, Josephine.”

“Hardly,” she replied sharply, returning the smirk. “I only mean to say that of the two, Ares is more likely to deal reasonably with us. Certainly, you haven’t forgotten the lives taken at the Conclave and Haven so soon, commander.”

“I will never forget it.”

“Good, because neither will I,” the lovely ambassador snapped at him. “Ares is very alluring, but I’m not bewitched by his beauty. I just know what I’ve witnessed, and I haven’t seen him commit any acts of mass murder.”

“Not yet,” Cullen said.

“He wants followers, a world of worshippers to believe in him and give him power,” Hannibal’s voice entered. He nodded. “I’m inclined to agree with Josephine on this. A world full of corpses and demons is of no use to Ares, so he’ll tread carefully in preserving the order and balance of Thedas…so long as it bends to his will. I think that he’ll only resort to unhindered violence as a final measure, and that certainly works for us. We’ll still need to figure out a way to deal with him.”

The war council members nodded their agreement.

Cullen cleared his throat. “To veer off-subject. I received word from Briala on behalf of Emperor de Chalons. They have a sizable army of chevaliers awaiting the order to move once we find Corypheus.”

“Good news.” Hannibal nodded.

Usually, Varric kept his ale consumption restricted to the evening hours. However, in times like these, one required the pleasantly dulling effects of alcohol just a little earlier in the day. Dinner service was still a couple of hours away. The dwarf sat in a chair by the grand hearth just beyond
the entrance to the great hall. He tended to linger there when he wanted to do some people-
watching, writing, or thinking.

Right now, he was drinking and watching the flames dance.

“Mind if I join you?”

Varric turned eyes to Cassandra. He shrugged and nodded, producing a soft smile. “Sure, though I
don’t know what a deplorable cad such as myself has done to earn your precious attentions.”

“Leave it to you to jokingly incorporate your self-pity into a serious situation.” She took the seat
beside him, elbows set to the table.

He sipped his ale. “Yeah, well, just seemed proper to sprinkle a little humor over things in light of
the current issue. Shit.” He shook his head. “What are we going to do without the Anchor?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll think of something. The Maker will guide and protect–”

The dwarf shook his head, holding up a hand to stop her. He heaved a tired sigh. “Please, just…
stop. No offense, Seeker, but I’m not in the mood to hear you ranting about how the Maker and
Andraste are looking out for us, how their will guides us and all that. I’m really not.” He drained
the last of the ale from his mug, looking at her. “Before all this demony, darkspawn bullshit, I
believed fully in the Maker, in Andraste even, given I’ve barely set foot inside a chantry
throughout my life. Didn’t mean I disbelieved. Now…” He shook his head.

Cassandra merely watched and listened. She found that she empathized with him. The woman
reductantly reached to touch his shoulder. “I understand, Varric. I will admit that my own faith has
staggered at times during this ordeal, but I will not let it break me. I’m confident that the Maker
will see us through.”

“How do you keep on believing? After everything we’ve seen? We’re battling Corypheus, a
wannabe god, and Ares, an actual god. If the Maker is real, where is he? Why doesn’t he show
himself and stop those two dirt bags from shitting all over Thedas? It’s hard to believe in
something that doesn’t seem to think enough of this world to save it, you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

“More ale it is.” He reached for the flagon and filled his mug again.

“You might as well pour me one.” She smiled faintly.

He chuckled a bit and did as she asked. “Early drinking? My decadence is finally starting to rub
off on you.”

Cassandra chuffed a disgusted sound, smirking harshly at him. “I’ll have to take an extra-long bath
later just to scrub that image from my mind.”

The dwarf’s laughter ebbed out softly. Both he and the Seeker spent some more time drinking and
talking. He was glad she approached him. It was nice to have someone to confide in when things
got even more complicated.

(*)

Later, once the day had slipped away and allowed the night to take hold, Iron Bull sat at the table
in his and Ayla’s quarters. His eye scanned over one of half dozen notes Leliana gave to him
earlier. Their patience had paid off, and they now had solid leads on who the replacement Ben-
Hassrath agents were. Bull recognized each name and designation, and was even close to a few of
them, though he wasn’t yet sure if they could be trusted. They may or may not be willing to align
themselves with him, since he’d been deemed Tal-Vashoth. Leliana’s spies were working on it
now, gauging the situation by sending out cryptic messages that didn’t directly mention their
former Hissrad. They could only wait now and see what became of things.

Bull turned his gaze to the window, staring through the frosted pane at the moon, which hung
huge and bulbous in the vast darkness of night, her wan face marked by craters and gashes.

“It’s late. Come to bed, my love.”

“Hmm?” He wrangled from his thoughts, turning his eye across the room. Ayla lay stretched out on
the bed wearing one of her new nightgowns. The Qunari smiled softly and stood, going to settle in
his place next to her.

Ayla hooked a leg over and straddled him.

Bull sat up so they were face to face. He appeared quite worrisome. “Ah…not tonight,
Naarenma.” His arms enclosed her.

“What’s the matter? Thinking about Ares, aren’t you?”

He sighed greatly, “I’ve never faced an enemy I couldn’t fight, that I couldn’t crush, and it scares
me that I can’t truly protect you from him. After what he did, I can see why your people scattered
to the wind. Fuckers like him would’ve taken total advantage. He can come here at any time and
do what he wants…and I can’t do a thing.”
Ayla took his face in her hands and nuzzled his rugged, bearded features. “Oh, my love. I still feel safest with you. He’s a god, and not a person here in Skyhold can match him, not right now. Even so, he’s not completely invincible; no one or nothing is. We’ll find a way to knock him down a few pegs, somehow.”

“Yeah, and as soon as we figure that out, he’s mine,” Bull’s resonant voice was lathered with tamed anger.

She smiled, rubbing his shoulders. She guided his head to her bosom, stroking along one of his mighty horns. “Don’t worry about it, my warrior. We’re together, and that’s all that matters. I love you.”

“Mm.” Bull closed his eye, tightening his hold on her, taking in long breaths of her scent. “Say that again.”

Ayla giggled and kissed his brow, putting even more feeling into the words, “I love you.”

His head eased back so he could focus on her beautiful face, skimming it. “And I will always love you. Only you.”

(*)

Skyhold was on high alert, but nothing Ares-related happened the next day. Those who would be traveling eastward with Elemir spent that time making last preparations for the journey. It would take well over a week just to get to the boundaries of the Brecilian Forest.

(*)

The following morning, once they’d partaken in the Heroes’ Breakfast with the rest of the Inner Circle, Hannibal, Dorian, Elemir, Solas, Iron Bull, Ayla, and Varric departed Skyhold. The weather up in the mountains was clear, and the road crews composed of guard tower personnel tended to the paths in and out of Skyhold regularly. There had been snowfall a few days ago, and thanks to the crews, Hannibal and his party had no difficulty navigating their mounts downward.

As usual, they stopped at Johnner’s Lip for a break. Hannibal planned to make one other stop along the mountain road so they could reach the campsite at the base of the Frostbacks in good time.

Elemir sat on the worn stump of a log. He drank from his water skin, wishing for a nice cup of warm tea to replace the chilled liquid, but it worked to satisfy his thirst. He allowed his eyes to sway to his sister and her man. They sat on an old toppled tree trunk, the thing made smooth and barkless by weathering over the years. Ayla was right against Iron Bull, bundled in her heavy coat and seeking more heat from him. She caught her brother’s gaze and smiled cheekily. Elemir lifted a fond smile.

“I’ll be right back, Bull.”

The Qunari watched her rise, making her way carefully for the shadow-shape of her brother. He scooted to make room for her on the broad stump. Ayla settled and took his arm, leaning her head to his shoulder.

“This is so exciting, heading off on another adventure that I apparently already know about.”

Elemir nodded. “It’s all strange to you now, yes, but you’ll understand soon enough. I’m anxious for you to know.”

The woman’s smile morphed playfully. “I noticed you partaking in Josephine’s company before we left. Is something…going on between you?”

He laughed a little. “Nothing intimate, if that’s what you ask. She’s a lovely woman, well-educated, and knowledgeable about the circles of Orlesian nobility.”

“So…you like her then?”

“Ayla,” the ranger’s eyes narrowed while he examined her, humor remaining on his face, “what are you getting at?”

“Oh nothing, El.” Her fingers dallied and wiggled over his arm. “I just thought, you know, if you were interested, I could put in a good word with her, though I think she clearly likes you.” She grinned.

Elemir shook his head, tumbling with laughter, auburn hair brushing his shoulders. “The lady is nice, but I think she’s a little too rich for my blood.”

“You never know unless you pursue her.”

“Thanks, dear sister, but I’m adult enough to tend to my own romantic endeavors.”

“I’m only trying to help. I don’t want you to be alone, now that I’m married.”

“Mm. Indeed.” Elemir’s eyes cast in Iron Bull’s direction to find the horned man calmly watching them. He gave his attention back to Ayla, kissing her head. “I’m glad you’re thinking after me, love. I’ll be fine.”
“Okay, El.” She stood from the stump, giving him another mischievous glance. “I think you and Josephine would make lovely babies.” She hurried off, arms out ahead of her.

Elemir huffed a chuckle, shaking his head. He watched Bull meet her halfway, taking her towards their mount. It was about time to head off. Elemir stood, turned for his horse, and saw Dorian standing behind him. The mage looked absolutely frigid with the fur-lined hood of his hide coat drooping over his face. His lavender-gray eyes twinkled at Elemir.

“I don’t see how you’re out here in this retched cold with only that leather armor and a hooded cloak,” the Altus commented. “I’m so cold, I’m beginning to feel it in my eyeballs.”

Elemir chuckled. “That’s some level of cold there. I’m warmer than you think. See the etchings along my chest plate, bracers, and greaves?” He pointed to some of the embroidered writing.

“Ah, yes. It looks like Elvhen.”

The ranger nodded. “My attire is enchanted. It keeps me comfortable in various types of weather. My cloak is as well.” To prove it, he draped the flowing cape back to reveal that the entire inside of it was sewn with ancient writing.

“Ingenious. Perhaps, I’ll consult Solas about enchanting a set of garb for me to use just for the cold.”

“You should. Wouldn’t want your eyes to freeze.”

Dorian found that his smile came easily at the man, and he chuckled. Elemir had the kind of face and demeanor that was easy to fall for. The mage’s kohl-lined eyes batted. “Are you flirting with me? Because I’m sure you know I’m already taken.”

“What? I…uh…”

“Oh, it’s alright if you are. I am quite lovely, after all. Harmless flirting never fails to make a girl feel pretty.” Dorian could barely contain his laughter at the flustered look on the man’s face. He winked at Elemir.

Hannibal walked up, chuckling. “Dear, leave Ayla’s brother alone.”


Elemir’s brow curled upward. He loosened a low laugh, shaking his head, then he too went to mount up.

(*)

Elsewhere, in the Free Marches, a day or so outside of Markham, Ares materialized into view along the side of the road. He examined his hand, which had begun to spark and shudder with green light. It didn’t pain him as it had Hannibal, and that proved that the mystical item wasn’t meant to be worn by simple mortals. Ares found it pleasant, the tingling buzz in his limb.

He’d been busy, but today he would test the Anchor. After doing some quick, godlike sensory things, he’d zeroed in on a fade rift. This one was much further north than the majority that had sprung up across Ferelden and Orlais. The damage done by that schmuck Corypheus was substantial. Thedas was in pretty bad shape, though not quite to the point where it was limping on its last breath like a dog hit by a runaway wagon. Ares would fix it. He had his work cut out for him, making the world suitable to his specifications.

A shiver of elation coursed through him. This must have been how Zeus felt when he began to shape the Grecians and their territory into a world of his own machinations. The God of War had begun to think of this as a similar endeavor, a true test of his ability and worthiness of divinity. He lived for this kind of shit.

Smoldering eyes drew down the road, then the opposite way. He turned to face the tree line and knew the rift lay in that direction, not far at all.

(*)

“Yagmaas! Viihirak sorfosor qisi yeri!” Watch the ground behind you! Arisol, leader of this squad of Ben-Hassrath, called to his fellow Qunari.

Yagmaas spun, and his eyes widened at the bubbling green state of the ground. The horned man dove to safety a second before another darkspawn sprung into existence. He backed towards Arisol. Both Qunari were joined by a dwarf and human, each serving under the Qun. They were heading northeast for Wycome to deliver information to a contact positioned in the city. The contact would relay relevant materials back to Par Vollen. Arisol didn’t plan to encounter one of the demon-spitting portals in this area, since it was so far from ground zero, down in Ferelden.

Gorigor, the dwarf, bore his teeth. “Figures that these things have reached up here,” he said in Qunlat. “If something’s not done, they’ll begin opening in Qunari Territory before long.”

“K’tika!” Sorcha cursed. “Perhaps, this Herald of Andraste should move his ass and do more to stop this impending blight!”
The four of them stood battle-ready, weapons up, bodies positioned. There were half-dozen
demonspawn spread around the rift and they began creeping for the Ben-Hassrath quartet.

“Keep a tight formation!” called Arisol.

“Step aside and I’ll handle it,” ordered an unfamiliar voice from behind them.

Arisol and his people jerked around, eyes moving between the advancing creatures to the tall,
well-built human male in black leather.

“I said move.”

The squad scattered back from the demonspawn to someplace behind Ares.

The war god charged up a fireball and swung his arm at one of slimy, distorted enemies, making it
explode into gooey chunks. He handled the next four in the same way. The last one frantically
slithered around the rift, attempting to dodge its attacker. Ares laughed, conjured a perfect sphere
of flame, then dribbled it in place, his eye on the demonspawn.

The handsome god performed a jump-shot, sending the fireball arcing through the air. “He
shoots!”

The charged orb came down directly on the low-level demon, shattering it into pieces on contact.

“He scores!” Ares howled.

They watched the God of War raise his left hand at the fade rift, summon the magic of the
Anchor, and use it to close the thing. A barely detectable, tinny sound lingered in the glade, riding
across the silence, left in the wake of the screaming portal. It dissipated eventually.

The four members of the Qun examined their savior, who merely watched them back. Ares was
pleased with the looks on their faces—an amalgam of intrigue, awe, and fear.

“How do you speak our language so fluently? Most who do not grow up in the Qun have trouble
with even the simplest phrases,” Arisol asked, sheathing his sword.

The others followed suit and put their weapons away.

“Anha ne-bis ei astaa.” I speak all languages.

“You…are the one called Ares, are you not?”

“The one and only. How’d you hear about me all the way up here?”

“Ben-Hassrath?” The God of War’s head tilted a bit.

“We infiltrate and gain information. One of our squads in the south passed word about new
growing forces, spreading out from the vicinity of Crestwood. These forces say they follow Ares,
the One True God, who fits your description. Is that what you are, a god? You’re certainly not this
Herald of Andraste, who we believed was the only one who could close these evil portals. He is
Vashoth.” Arisol stepped closer, highly curious.

Ares issued a nod. “It’s good that you’ve heard of me. I am a god. To be more precise…”

Ah, here was where things got even more fun. Before Ares began paying visits to Solas, he had
gained quite a bit of insight about Thedas and its religious practices, particularly that surrounding
the Chantry, Andraste, and the Maker; it was the dominant religion of this world. Not long after
he’d first arrived in Thedas, Ares learned about the Herald of Andraste, and how he supposedly
gained some gift from her. Of course, he didn’t believe in all that divine intervention any more
than these Qun-followers did. It was all bullshit. Where it might have once a long time ago,
Thedas no longer had living, walking gods, except the God of War who was intent on assuming
rule. When Ares conjured the plan to take the Anchor from Hannibal, he also decided how he’d
market himself to the citizens of Thedas. Penetrating brown eyes remained focused on Arisol.

“…I am the Son of the Maker, fathered by Him and born from Andraste herself. This,” he lifted
his left hand, the limb sparking green for an instant, “was a temporary gift from my Mother to the
Herald to test the will of mortals. He has proven that this world is worth saving, and so I was sent
forth to claim that which was meant for me, the Anchor. With it, I will save Thedas. Spread the
word. I’m the one who’s going to rid your world of Corypheus, turn things around so you all can
go back to your happy, little lives.”

Arisol and the others remained silent, watching Ares spin away.

The war god moved across the grass, lifting a hand in his departure. “You’re welcome.” He
vanished mid-stride.

(*)

Ayla was so happy that she could relax into the embrace of her husband while they trundled down
the mountain pass. Last time they’d made this trip, she had to be the support since she’d been in
his body. This time, however, she took full advantage and slept through part of the descent.
When they reached the campsite clearing at the bottom of the pass, it was well into evening, the
tarp of night adorned and bejeweled by countless, twinkling stars. The huge, waxing moon
occupied the southern part of the sky. As before, Ayla sat by the fire and waited while Iron Bull
saw to their lean-to.

She was snapped back to clarity at Bull’s touch, giving him a big smile, leaning to his arm. Her
eyes skimmed about to see that the others had pretty much gotten their sleeping areas erected
and set up for the night.

“Here, Naaremma,” Bull said, handing over one of the tart red plums she liked so much. “There’s
also some flat bread, druffalo jerky, and carrots.” He set the plate of goods on a stool to his right.

“Thanks!” she beamed. “This is just what I wanted. How did you know?” She snapped off a little
bite.

“Because I know you.”

She giggled. “Yes, I suppose you do,” the words slipped forth as a sensuous purr.

“Behave yourself, woman,” Bull said lowly, eye flicking up and across the fire pit as Elemir took
a seat and began munching on a light meal himself.

Solus, Varric, Dorian, and Hannibal joined them shortly after. The conversation amongst them
was minimal at first, but soon became more lively, with Varric and Solus having a mild argument
about the plot of one of the dwarf’s books. Solus found it baffling and drawn-out, while Varric
retorted with, “That’s the point, Chuckles. It’s supposed to be that way since it’s a mystery.”

Elemir waited for the laughter to subside. He drew his eyes from Iron Bull and Ayla to Hannibal.

“Inquisitor, I’ve been thinking. How far east do you have campsite caches like this one?”

“At last report from Cullen, the Inquisition’s caches extend to just before the Imperial Highway. I
have a map for the campsites leading up to that point.”

“Alright then. The group I travel with, we have a network of such sites as well spreading across
the land. Once we reach the Imperial Highway, I’ll lead us from there.”

Hannibal nodded. “Sounds good.”

Ayla finished her meal. She enjoyed listening to the others talk, pleased that they were getting
along with her brother. Bull laughed heartily at something Varric said, and Ayla examined his
strong, handsome profile. He was so warm, smelled so good, she couldn’t help it when her hand
roamed down his arm to his thigh, the move subtle enough that no one else around the fire
noticed, so she thought. Elemir saw it.

Iron Bull coughed and cleared his throat, eye jerking to her. His expression told her to behave.
The woman smiled innocently, then stretched dramatically and yawned. “I think we should head
to bed now, love.”

Silence fell around the fire.

The Qunari looked quickly at Elemir and found the man’s eyes fixed on them. He slipped a short
laugh. “C’mon, Naaremma, surely you can stay up a little longer. Night’s still young.”

“No, now.”

Dorian sifted a low chuckle.

Bull wasn’t about to argue with his wife. He smiled softly at her, though he believed he could feel
the singe of Elemir’s green gaze burning a hole in his forehead. “Guess that means I’m out for the
night, fellas. Boss, when’s my watch?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Bull. Looks like you’re going to need all the rest you can get,”
Hannibal replied, grinning at him. “I’ll take first watch, Elemir will take second, Solas, then
Varric. Next camp, you’re back on the rotation.”

“Okay,” Bull said. He stood and helped Ayla to her feet, leading her for their lean-to.

Elemir’s stomach was in knots, his heart in despair. Like the others, he knew why Ayla had pulled
the Qunari away. She wanted intimate time with him, and that was normal. They were together.
The ranger tried to push the conjured images from his mind of what was about to transpire in the
lean-to. He focused on current company and let himself indulge back into the conversation.

(*)

The lean-to was of decent size, the interior spacious, as it should be for someone of Iron Bull’s
stature and proportions. He waited for Ayla to slip inside, then followed and secured the thick wall
of material, closing them off from the rest of the world. A single covered lantern sat in one corner.
Ayla settled on the furs and pulled her boots off.

While Bull was in the middle of removing his own boots, the woman inched up behind him, arms
hugging, lips pressing to his neck. The kisses trailed around to his cheek. She easily dragged
herself into his lap, nuzzling, grabbing at the hard, unyielding muscles in his shoulders and chest.
Her lips crushed passionately to his.

“Ayla…” Bull grunted but chuckled. “No.”

“Mm, I can’t help it. You’re so delicious, and I want you. Besides, it’s been two days!” She pouted.

“Your brother is right outside.” Honestly, he’d been distracted and in a bit of a slump since Ares’s last visit.

“So? I know that he has sex too. There were a few times when we checked into a room at an inn and he, thinking me to be asleep, locked me in the room so he could go dallying for female company. It didn’t take long to begin understanding why he always came back smelling of a woman.”

“That aside, I don’t want him to know we do it.”

She giggled. “He knows we do, silly.”

“I just…don’t want to give him a reason to dislike me, and I think hearing me have sex with his little sister might, ya know, cause that.” Bull smirked softly at her, wispy humor cast over his features.

“Ah. So, you’re saying you don’t want me then?” Ayla didn’t back down, however, hand rubbing his hard-on. She buried her face at his neck, nipping his throat, wiggling wantonly against him.

“You know that’s not it, woman.”

“I promise to be quiet, not a word, lips sealed. Promise…” She repositioned so she straddled him. The Qunari groaned. “I gotta learn to say no to you.”

Ayla rubbed noses with him, hands working on the ties of his shirt. “You’ll never be able to say no to me.”

“Mm, I think you’re right. When it comes to you, I’m completely weak.” Bull stroked her cheek tenderly, eye roaming her stunningly beautiful face. “Such a little thing, and you have the power to easily control me.”

So, he gave in.

The clothes came off in moments, and the couple proceeded to make love by the dim glow of the lantern. The walls of the lean-to were of a thick, opaque material, so Bull wasn’t concerned with anyone seeing them, particularly Elemir. The man had quickly become the least of his worries. Nothing mattered now but the lustful woman under him, his angel and one true love. He released a barely contained, ecstatic moan, most of his weight poised on his strong arms. Bull’s eye fixed on his wife’s pleasure-stricken features while he thrusted into her. The wet, hot reaches of her womanly core clamped tightly around him, giving his robust manhood the most wonderful massage.

Ayla opened her heavily-hooded eyes, looking up at her husband. She drew her hands across his shoulders to his chest, raking nails over the firm flesh. There was so much of him to touch and marvel over, she didn’t know where to start. She never did. He was pleasantly overwhelming. Bull grinned down at her and did a swift maneuver to move his arms under her thighs, planting his hands to either side of her hips. This position hiked her legs up and widened them. It also let him plunge deeper into her. Bull settled his weight, putting them close together. He added a little more power and speed to his thrusts, eye rolling shut.

“By the Qun, Naaremma…” he whispered.

Ayla’s hands went back to his shoulders, clamping down. Her toes curled as he rode her, each slam of his hips delivering a shudder of pleasure through her loins, the heavy sack of his balls smacking against her, adding to the ecstasy.

“Yes…harder…” she breathed.

Bull rumbled a low growl, trying to keep all sounds contained to the interior of their lean-to. He altered his thrusts immediately, dropping his hips with more fervor, stuffing her tiny tunnel repeatedly. He wouldn’t be able to hold back his release for much longer at this rate.

She was melting under him, nearing her own climax. She opened herself to every thrust, accepting them, longing for his sex. His pace was just right, as was his position and force. Iron Bull suddenly delivered a stroke that drew a trembling, luscious moan from her.

“Shhh.” The man gently clamped a hand to her mouth, ceasing his thrusts, pointy ears listening. “Naaremma, you promised.”

Ayla grinned up at him, shrugging. “Sorry, love. You feel so good, I couldn’t help it.”

Bull smirked lightly, shaking his head. He chuckled and kissed her hungrily, continuing to make love to her.

(*)
Solas often took walks from camp when he traveled with the party. It allowed him space to think without worrying about his companions' interruptions. He also enjoyed being in the open woods. He’d ventured a good distance off and currently stood on the banks of a creek. The sprigs of spindleweed growing rampant in the area were soft under his bare feet.

The elf listened closely to the sounds of night. Aside from the trickle of running water, owls hooted and loons chattered in the trees. In the far distance, wolves called back and forth. He would always prefer nature over the vice of modern civilization. The Elvhen people of older times knew how to coexist with the raw environment, becoming one with it.

A content sigh pressed from him…then he quickened with awareness.

“I know you’re here. Come out.”

“Hm. Getting keen on my presence. Are you sure you’re not falling for me?” The God of War’s chuckles preceded him from the shadows, then he stepped into view, illuminated by a beam of diluted moonlight.

“You can continue to believe that, if it makes you happy.” Solas slowly turned to face him. He was frowning. “I didn’t tell you about the Anchor so you could take it.”

“Yeah, about that,” Ares began, easing in smoothly. His eyes gleamed with acute interest, the corners of his mouth hinting a smile. “When I took it from the Inquisitor, I got the strangest feeling of…you.” The God of War inched extremely close to the elvhen man, fragrant heat emanating from his leathered body. He lifted his left hand, examining it while he spoke. “It’s kind of like a warm pair of pants that you wore first, and then the Inquisitor took them and put them on. And now I’m wearing them. I can clearly smell both of you in the fabric, as it were. You…used to wear this thing, didn’t you, Solas?”

The elf remained silent, pretty much confirming his answer.

Ares chortled one of his resonant, maniacal giggles. “I knew there was more to you than you let on. Don’t know what yet, but I will find out.”

“So, what will you do now? Tell the others?”

The God of War towered behind Solas. He leaned in and down just enough so his lips hovered inches from the elf’s sharp ear, voice sultry and alluring. “Oh, no. This little morsel is between you and me.”

Solas continued looking forward. He’d gotten in deep with Ares; there was no way to turn back. So be it. The rift of deceit between him and the Inner Circle had widened even more now, and it would continue to do so. He had no intention of telling Hannibal about this meeting with Ares.
The following morning, Bull eased from the lean-to, rose to his full, intimidating height, and stretched big. He was shirtless, wearing pants and unlaced boots. A huge grin plastered his face. He grabbed up a basin from the grass beside the lean-to and headed through camp for the spring that had formed from a leak in the water table, trickling down from the mountains. Ayla sent him out for some water so they could wash the perspiration of sex from their bodies.

Iron Bull whistled a random tune while he filled the large, bowl-shaped vessel. He finished, turned, and saw Elemir standing a short distance away. Both men locked eyes, hanging in a net of awkward silence.

The ranger drizzled a minute sigh. “Look, I know what you’re doing, and it’s not necessary. You don’t have to tread so carefully with me where Ayla is concerned. Regardless of how I feel about things, you’re her husband. I know you respect her, and I appreciate you trying to show respect for me, but I’ll be fine and will grow to accept it.”

“Oh…” Bull couldn’t begin to imagine what it must be like for Elemir, knowing there was no chance the woman he cared for most would ever be his in the way he wanted. Arriving at Skyhold to find Ayla solidly joined to the Qunari had destroyed that hope. Iron Bull was sure the man would get over it, though. He didn’t seem the type to mope for too long. He grinned and decided to infuse the uncomfortable conversation with humor. “So, I guess that means I can go back to grabbing her ass in public then.”

To display his lack of amusement, Elemir stared long and hard at him.

“Too soon?”

“Way too soon,” the ranger said.

“My bad.”

Elemir smirked thinly and walked off, finding that he wasn’t even mad at the guy. Iron Bull was the kind of man he could see in his squad of Crimson Rangers, fighting alongside him. His demeanor was casual but stern when times called for it. He was honorable and willing to put himself on the line for the team. Overall, he was a good man. So, yeah, Elemir hated the situation, but he didn’t hate The Iron Bull.

Bull watched the man leave, then whistled himself back to his and Ayla’s temporary quarters. When he got there, he carefully parted the opening just a thin slit to make sure she wouldn’t be visible to anyone else. He slipped in and secured the flap after him.

Ayla sat up, blanket clutched in her petite, dark hands, holding the item to cover her nudity. Once he was inside and had set the basin down, she squealed and leapt on him. She bit him rather firmly on his bearded chin, raked her nails down his chest, and delivered a searing kiss to his lips.

“Mm.” Iron Bull laughed. “What’s gotten into you? You’re so feisty lately. The moon’s not full yet, so that can’t be it.”

Ayla giggled, gazing into his eye. She shrugged. “I don’t know. You just make me feel so… special, I guess.”

“You are special, Naaremma. Nothing I do—or don’t do—will change that.”

“I know, Bull. I suppose what I mean to say is that no one else has ever made me feel this way.”

“Good. Because if anyone else does, I might have to kill them.”

She chirped a laugh.

“So, I ran into your brother at the spring. Seems he’s noticed how I’ve been trying to respect the situation. He basically told me to stop walking on egg shells around him. Our relationship shocked him, but he’s getting through it. He understands that we’re married and doesn’t want to infringe by making me think I need to act a certain way. He’s a cool guy.”

“Aha!” Ayla smacked his chest. “You were all worried for nothing. Next time I attempt to drag you off to bed, don’t resist,” she purred, reaching a hand between them, digging into his pants.

“Oh, I won’t.” A dark eyebrow yanked up and he grinned. “You know we don’t have time for that, right?”

“Rubbish. It won’t take long.” Her little hand enclosed his hard, throbbing heat. She nibbled his earlobe, drawing her tongue up to the tip of the pointed extremity.

The Bull rumbled richly and shifted under her. “You’re playing dirty.”

“Yes.” Ayla wiggled down his body and began tugging at his pants.

“Fine, then. Who am I to deny my beautiful wife.” He lifted his hips to make the clothing easier to remove.
When demons and the undead weren’t plaguing the region, Crestwood was actually rather pleasant. Lush and green, it provided ample land for farming and raising livestock. Hannibal Luthor and his forces had cleared the dreaded zombies and darkspawn several months back, releasing the dam to drain Still Water Lake, accessing the caves, and closing the fade rift.

But things didn’t stay quiet all that long.

Resentius and his forces showed up a few weeks ago, recruiting people from various walks of life into his ranks to serve a god they had yet to meet or even see. Today, the commander amassed all the citizens of New Crestwood Village in the square outside the mayor’s house. Ansel Lacroix had taken over the position as head of the village when the previous mayor, Gregory Dedrick, fled in guilt at what he’d done to Old Crestwood. He had flooded the place to get rid of the blight-infected citizens. Thing was, not everyone was infected, and he’d taken it upon himself to kill them all. Dedrick was caught, tried for the crime, and executed by order of the Inquisitor not long after. Ansel Lacroix pushed to have the village’s name changed to New Crestwood.

The mayor’s vision skated nervously around at Resentius’s troops. When their large camp showed up north of the city not long ago, he figured they’d be trouble. He personally knew of four citizens who’d left to join them, something about a new godly order. Word had been spreading through the region about the group. Everyone in the village had either heard talk of it or were talking about it themselves.

The citizens of New Crestwood Village shuffled and stirred, every man, woman, and child tense and frightened. The soldiers put them on alert.

Ansel moved closer to Resentius. “What’s going on here? Why have you summoned us?”

“Just standby, old man. You’ll see.”

Ares’s tall, broad, darkly-clad figure flashed into existence. He’d been in stealth for the past few minutes observing. “Now, now, Resentius. No need to be rude. The man only wants answers.”

He turned to Ansel.

Awe and excitement rippled through the gathered villagers, and they began voicing their thoughts, whispering.

“I think it’s Him!”

“Is that the One True God?”

“He’s handsome…”

“I don’t like it.”

“Probably some power-hungry mage.”

Ares ignored the speculations, eyes set on the mayor. “You and your people have obviously heard of me.” He spun slowly, taking in the crowd, his voice amplified for all to hear. “I am who you all believe me to be. I’m Ares, the One True God to walk upon Thedas, sent to you from the Maker and Andraste, my Father and Mother, to rid the world of Corypheus.”

One man jerked forth, his face angry. “Why should we believe in you or think you’re a god? For all we know, you’re as evil and vile as Corypheus, come to corrupt us all!”

“You’ll hold your tongue!” Resentius unsheathed his sword and took a step for the man.

Ares held a hand up. “Stop, commander,” he said calmly, eyes the shade of heated honey remaining on the irate villager. “Doubt is within his right.”

The God of War, though he would never be called that amongst his followers in this new world, let his eyes roam the watchful crowd. He spotted a girl sitting at her mother and father’s feet and knew she suffered a birth defect that had handicapped her legs. He was a god, and they sensed pain, sickness, death, and any number of miserable human ailments. Ares strode for the little family, and the crowd parted instantly, making a path. The fear-painted faces of the parents pleased the god. The child, however, didn’t seem as afraid. Her innocent brown eyes stared up at Ares. He smiled and lowered to his haunches before her.

“Such a pretty girl,” he remarked, and she certainly was, with her splash of freckles and strawberry-blond hair.

The child returned his smile.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Rebekah, sir…or is it Revered One…or god…” her small voice fumbled out nervously.

Ares chuckled. “You can call me Ares. How’s that?”

“Okay.”

“How old are you? No, wait…let me guess.” The war god donned a thoughtful expression, eyes
narrowing. “Seven, almost eight, right?”

“Yes! My birthday is next week.”

His eyes dropped to her skirts, bundled and tucked around her legs, then swooped up to her parents. “May I?”

The simple baker and his wife took a moment to consider, sharing a look. They nodded.

Ares turned his deceivingly kind smile to the girl again. “Is it okay if I examine your legs, Rebekah? I can help you.”

“O-okay.”

Carefully, the God of War lifted the material to reveal her mangled, twisted limbs up to the knees. One leg was so gnarled, it almost completely inverted, the foot close to being backwards. The flesh was lumped and discolored, pale purple veins striking over the skin. The crowd of villagers shifted in to watch. Ares held his hands a few inches from the child’s legs and summoned his power. A pale-gold glow engulfed the useless limbs, and he ran his hands slowly back and forth.

When the light dissipated. The ugly legs were gone, replaced by a set of new, smooth, unmarked, normal ones. Rebekah yelped and drew her hands to her mouth, eyes watering. “Oh, Maker!” she cried. “Ares…thank you!”

The war god wasn’t prepared when the girl lurched forward and hugged him. For the tiniest fraction of a moment, he nearly let himself get sentimental. Continuing his façade, he hugged her back, then helped her stand. She wobbled and both her parents flanked, taking her arms for support.

Ares stroked the child’s hair. “Happy Birthday.” He spun gradually, addressing the villagers. “Would a god who didn’t care about you, didn’t love you, do something like this?”

Rebekah’s parents threw themselves at Ares’s feet and her father chanted, “Praise Him! Praise Ares! We are your humble servants, Milord!”

That was all it took, because when people were scared and confused, they needed something to believe in. Ares’s display of good nature, flinging his power around, had given them that something. One by one, the villagers followed suit, kneeling and praising a god they’d only heard of up until then. Now, they’d seen him and what he could do.

Ares loved it. “Village of New Crestwood–this season, your crops will be doubly bountiful. Your fields will flow greener than they ever have, your livestock will flourish, you will be free of sickness, and I will station troops here to protect you from enemies and help you rebuild. This I can promise. It’s already done. All you must do is believe in me, worship me as your One True God, for I was sent by the Maker and Andraste to protect you. By giving your allegiance to me, you show the greatest honor to our Maker.”

“Ares! Ares! Ares! Ares!” the villagers began to chant.

Mayor Lacroix spoke up from where he kneeled. “Your banner will fly above our village and our chantry. In your name, we give praises.”

The God of War nodded at him. He spared another look to Rebekah, smiled warmly, waved at her, then vanished. The villagers gradually rose and began to mill about their lives again, chattering avidly about Ares, his promises to them, the way he’d fixed little Bekah’s legs. He would be the talk of New Crestwood for a while.

Fve days of travel along the Western Imperial Highway took Hannibal and his party flanking the south side of Lake Calendad, past Redcliffe, and through the northern Hinterlands. There was still a few hours of daylight left when they reached the city of Lothering. The place served as a hub where the Imperial Highway branched south, east, and northwest to follow the lake up towards The Coastlands. They’d stay in Lothering for the night. Tomorrow, Elemir would assume the lead and direct them to their destination.

Ayla was familiar with the area. She, Elemir, Joswen, and the others stopped in Lothering during their travels. It was a midpoint in the journey from the east and back. A long time ago, the town served as a trading post for Ostagar, a fortress to the south. It had grown into a thriving, merchant-ran community with ties to Redcliffe, generating a lot of revenue from travelers.

The party rode their mounts down the main street, the animals’ hooves clacking over the cobbled surface. Ayla bounced happily, voice lifted so her brother could hear. “Are we staying at Millie’s?”

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“That’s the plan,” Elemir said, smiling over his shoulder. “Depends on how much room she has. It is a bed and breakfast. If she’s not too busy, I think we should all be able to get rooms there for the night.”

“Here’s hoping. She makes the best sweet rolls!”

Bull clicked his tongue to his teeth to keep their mount moving slow and steady. He chuckled at his wife. What made Lothering stand out was its employ of windmills. Many of them spotted the vicinity, built around the perimeter of the town. Paired with the farmland, the mills produced enough ground grains and flour to supply Lothering, Redcliff, and even Milgren further still to the east. The Qunari had been in the town several times, passed through it. Seemed it had expanded a little since he and the Chargers last visited. Once it gained more citizens, which called for more homes, businesses, and other structures, Lothering would begin to qualify as a city. It was already certainly large enough.

The streets bustled with the approach of evening. Hannibal heard folks chattering about the entourage riding through town. He’d picked up the words ‘Inquisition’ and ‘Herald of Andraste’ several times. But no one approached. They kept their distances and observed.

Hannibal and party followed Elemir’s lead, turning left at a wide intersection, in the center of which perched a masterfully sculpted fountain. Hordes of giggles and whistles chimed from a two-story structure on the right. It had frilly red drapes, and half a dozen scantily-clad women hooted and called from the wide porch.

“Hey, boys! We’ve got what you want here. Girls that will do whatever you like!” one called as they passed.

“Stop by! We’ll make it worth your coin!”

Dorian snorted. “I’m sure you would,” he mumbled under his breath.

Hannibal chuckled at him.

“Is that The Iron Bull I see! Of course, it is. No mistaking those horns!” another woman blared, and all eyes in the party fell on the busty, flame-haired vixen who’d spoken. Her ample boobs strained against the corset. “Dana, Sharon! Get out here!”

“Crap…” Bull muttered.

Ayla twisted in the saddle, narrowed eyes glaring up at him. She settled her attention back on the whores.

The summoned women exited to the porch. All three of them were exact duplicates of one another—triplets. “What’s it, Audrey?” Dana said.

“It’s The Iron Bull!”

The other two sisters spread on excited smiles and followed Audrey’s gaze. “Hi, Bull!” they called in unison, waving vigorously.

He flipped a wave, knowing Ayla fumed in the saddle before him. “Hey…”

“You coming by later? It’s been at least six months since we last saw you,” Sharon’s rich voice inquired.

“Nope. I’m a married man now.”

“We’ll see for how much longer,” Ayla quipped lowly, her accented voice tight.

“Huh?” Iron Bull’s eye yanked down to the top of her head.

Back on the porch, the triplets pouted and whined, one of them saying, “Well, that sucks! Bah! He had the best cock!”

Ayla stiffened in his arms.

Bull rolled his eye and sighed. That last remark was the final, devastating knockout blow. He didn’t know what to say, so he remained quiet for the moment.

Varric rode his mount up beside Bull and Ayla’s elk. The dwarf shook his head. “Ouch.”

“Don’t, little man.” Bull kept his eye forward.

(*)

When they reached Millie’s, Elemir went inside to see about securing quarters for everyone, while the others tended to their mounts. Iron Bull highly disliked that Ayla heard the conversation back at the whorehouse. Had he been anticipating the encounter, he would’ve taken a different route to the bed and breakfast.

The Qunari towered over his wife, whose arms crossed her chest, her back to him, crystal-blue eyes staring at the shadows spread before her. Bull knew better than to try and talk to her in public. He’d wait until they were alone, let her get it out.
It didn’t take Elemir long. He exited less than five minutes later. “Since it’s off-season, I managed to get four rooms.” He handed a key to Solas first. “I thought you might like The Arboretum. Its décor contains lots of flora and an actual tree planted in the ground with the floor built around it. The windows overlook the pond and yard. First floor, to the right.” His eyes roamed to everyone. “The bathing rooms are on the first floor as well.”

“That was thoughtful of you. Thanks,” the elf replied. Carrying his traveling bag, he slipped away.

“The Moonrise room for you two. Up the stairs and straight, at the end of the hall.” Elemir handed the key to Dorian, and he and Hannibal left. He turned to Varric, handing him a key. “You and I will share The West Top room. Up the stairs to the left.”

“Grand.” The novelist disappeared for their quarters. The ranger and his sister usually stayed in The West Top. Besides being spacious with a nice view of the town square, it contained two beds.

Elemir finally went to his sister and her husband, quite aware of her displeasure. The ranger slipped Bull a look, then gently grabbed Ayla’s hand, leading her away. When he was satisfied about the distance between them and Iron Bull, Elemir stopped. “Ayla…don’t be mad at him. That was in his past.”

“I’m not mad,” the beauty huffed, face stern.

He tumbled a clipped laugh. “Oh, yes, you are.”

She rolled her eyes.

Elemir was sorry she’d been exposed to that part of Iron Bull’s past, but that was the way of things. He was a man and had been indulging long before he came across her. The ranger could also relate since he’d gone in the same establishment once or twice during their travels. He was very relieved that they didn’t appear to recognize him as vividly as they did Iron Bull. “At least talk with him.”

She snorted.

Elemir sighed and led her back to Iron Bull. The warrior had been waiting and watching patiently. Their two traveling bags hung over his torso and his axe was secured to his back. Elemir handed Bull a key, smiling. “The Honeymoon Suite. Top of the stairs and to the right. Dinner will be served in an hour,” the ranger said, then left them alone.

Bull took her little hand in his, and she didn’t protest. She let him lead her to the room. She scanned the interior while her husband locked the door after them. Everything was spic and span. The large bed contained red satin sheets and pillows, with white rose petals sprinkled over the surface. Several vases filled with the same lovely flower perched throughout the room, lending a heady scent upon the air. The wide bay window faced out over the yard. A small fire crackled in the grand hearth.

Ayla released his hand and put her arms out, making her way to the bed. She sat and waited.

Iron Bull set their bags and his weapon down in one corner, then removed his boots, socks, and shirt, glad that they could finally relax. He settled on the mattress beside her and touched her hand. “Naaremma…”

She recoiled, pouting. “Don’t ‘Naaremma’ me.”

Chuckles resounded from him. “You don’t have to be upset. Yes, I used to visit that…place, but I obviously don’t anymore.”

Several seconds passed and she didn’t reply.

“C’mon, don’t do this. All of that happened before we met. You’re the only woman I’ll ever want.” His words were warm and heartfelt, fingertips tracing down her arm. “You were from the beginning, Kadan.”

Ayla nibbled her lip. She knew she was being unreasonable, that there really was no excuse for her anger. It was the thought of Bull having sex with those triplets, all three at once, that made her furious.

She sighed and fell into him, hugging tight, face buried at his chest. “I’m sorry, my love. I suppose I got a little jealous…” She felt foolish and embarrassed now, her voice minute.

Iron Bull shook with laughter, lifting a brow. “A little?”

She smirked, then fashioned a delicate smile. “No need to rub it in. It’s just…they saw me sitting in the saddle with you. You would think they’d have gotten a clue.”

“Ah, well. That’s just their way, being straightforward. Working girls tend not to hold back.”

“I’ll be sure to prepare myself for the next whorehouse we pass, since I’m sure half the women there will know you as well.”

“Hm…you might be right.”
Ayla smacked his chest and giggled when he rolled her beneath him, intending to steal a ‘quickie’ before they went down to dinner.

(*)

“That is extraordinary,” Millie Von Teese, previously a highly eccentric countess who shed her title years ago to leave all the fluff behind and build her business in Lothering, leaned forward and studied the couple across the long table. She’d gotten a shortened version of how Ayla and Bull came to be paired, the circumstances allowing the woman sight. Elemir trusted Millie enough that he was sure she wouldn’t go spilling Ayla’s Oona status to anyone. “I’m glad you’re able to see now, dearie, that you have someone other than your brother to look after you. Maker knows it’s about time for him to find a wife and settle down too.” Millie grinned and elbowed Elemir playfully.

The dinner table rang with laughter from Hannibal and the others, Solas only offering the thinnest smile, eyes roaming over the spread of goods. His plate contained something akin to a salad, while everyone else’s heaped with meat, potatoes, vegetables, bread, cheese, and everything else.

The handsome ranger shifted and blushed a bit. “Yes, well, perhaps, someday that may happen.”

“Ahem-Josephine-ahem.”

Elemir smirked at his sister, shaking his head.

Millie’s eyes flew to Bull. “And you…”

“Hm?” He stopped mid-chew, meeting her softly stern gaze.

“My Ayla’s a little thing. You’d better be careful with her.”

Iron Bull smiled, finishing the bite in his mouth. “She…handles it well. Maybe you should tell her to be more careful with me.”

More laughter ensued, though not so much from Elemir or Ayla. The man didn’t need mental images of his lost, never-really-possible love sharing intimacy with another man. Ayla was simply embarrassed. She hid her face against Bull’s arm a moment, poking his midriff.

“No need to act shy now,” the Qunari teased, surging up more chuckles from the group, save Elemir, though his face contained the slightest semblance of humor while he tried not to be the odd one out.

Mirth and warmth resided over the rest of the meal, and an hour later, they broke from the dining room to retire for the night.

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Peaceful but too quiet. What the Arboretum room needed was the mystical, enthralling sounds of the night forest to make the environment perfect for Solas. Dressed in sleeping garb and barefoot, the elf’s lean figure lingered by the spacious window. He drifted through his thoughts as they rushed at him one after the other–Ares and his intentions, the war god’s confiscation of the Anchor, Corypheus, his dishonesty to the Inner Circle.

He sighed and turned, going to lie on the bed.

Yes, those were all serious things, but they were manageable. At least, for now. One other thought–no, a burning desire, really–rose above them all. The Fade. The gift of memories from Ares that allowed him to roam as free as the wind between the spirit realms of Thedas and Earth. This was all that concerned Solas now. If he didn’t possess the level of self-control he’d harnessed and mastered over the centuries, he might admit that he’d become addicted.

But no, he had not. He was learning, gathering information. While the currently diminished ‘god’ immensely enjoyed moving through the Fade and experiencing all it had to offer, he was also on a mission to find something in Ares’s world that could be used against him. So, tonight, Solas would enter that netherworld and dream lucidly within it, continuing the search. The God of War had his Anchor, and he wanted it back. It was past due for Fen’Harel to be restored.

(*)

Amphipolis.

The town surfaced and centered in one of the many memories. So, Solas allowed the scene to build around him, rising from the swirling mist. Most buildings were one-story, while some were two, all created from pale stone. And some structures were on fire, the grass roofs of several homes flaming uncontrollably. People suddenly appeared to finish the memory off, the citizens of Amphipolis. They screamed and scattered. Ahead of Solas, down the wide street, the ground exploded and sent dirt and rubble flying. The elf remained still and watchful, and another explosion rocked the area when a hunk of ignited stone soared through the air and smashed into a building.

Solas knew that the town was under attack, the enemy forces sending a barrage of catapulting assaults over the walls. Athena had commanded a sizable part of her army to seize Amphipolis and bring her the child of Xena. The goddess, like most of the others in Olympus, had the idea of killing little Eve to stop the Twilight of the Gods.
But not Ares.

Ares...

Solas ignored the fleeing, terrified citizens while they hustled around and through him. He concentrated on the memory, piecing things together the way Ares recalled it. The God of War wanted to save the child and her mother. He cared for this Xena. And at this time, both of them were in Ares’s temple.

The elven man headed for the structure, which wasn’t far from his position. All the while, Amphipolis’s people ran and screamed for their lives, some of them even dying. When he reached the temple, Solas, pushed the doors in, the dreary rendition of daylight offered by the Fade casting his shadow long across the stone floor. At the front of the room, beyond the short pews and prayer pillows, there was an altar flanked by many candles and a banner bearing the symbol of Ares. Draped across the settee at the base of the altar was the God of War with the woman Solas recognized as Xena strewn across him, wrapped in a blanket. The two appeared very intimate.

Solas went closer, listening to the exchange, though he knew the main premise, because Ares knew.

“Stop playing games, Xena. This is the only way,” Ares’s teeth grazed her chin, and he groaned. “You give me a son, and I’ll keep you and Eve safe from Athena and the other gods. It’s that simple.”

“It’s never that simple with you.” Xena’s vibrant blue eyes peered down at him, her dark hair draped over a bare shoulder. She had to stall. Grinning, she nipped his bottom lip.

“Oh, but it is. You just take that blanket off, I get naked, we bang, everybody’s happy.”

Xena spared a quick glance in Solas’s direction, looking through him at the door. She smiled down at Ares, nibbling her lip.

“You seem antsy,” Ares said. “And I assure you that only I can help you now. Give in.” He began running his hands down her body, to her hips, squeezing her ass.

The passionate pair vanished, and Solas blinked. He hadn’t manipulated the memory. Someone else did.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Solas spun quickly…and found himself face to face with a tall, firmly-muscled, olive-skinned, blue-eyed woman with long, dark hair. She wore sturdy skirt-armor with arm bands and an intricately designed breastplate. Her boots hugged long, fit legs, rising to just above her knees. Solas also noted that the green glow of the Fade had no affect on her skin. Her steely gaze didn’t falter.

It was Xena, and not some memory. She was as real as the elf, lucid within the Fade.

“Shnar cors ut Solas.” My name is Solas.

“Who are you?” she asked again, eyes narrowed. She couldn’t understand him, hearing only jumbled, nonsensical speech, not really a true language at all. It sounded somewhat distorted, twisted, as if he spoke in reverse or a similar strange effect.

“Give it a few moments. You must acclimate to the Fade to recognize my language,” he answered.

“What?” None of it sounded familiar to Xena.

“Just a few more moments…”

“There! I heard the word ‘moments’. Keep talking...please.”

Solas nodded. “Well...I suppose I’ll start by saying that I’m quite surprised to find you here, yet another Fadewalker.”

Xena smiled a bit, her piercing eyes searching him as she listened. His words began to come together into something she could decipher. The last part of his sentence came through clearly. “Fadewalker? What’s that?”

“You can understand me now.”

“Yes.”

Unknown to Xena, this was normal when encountering speech from another realm for the first time. It took a short moment to acclimate to the other world’s common language. Each of the soldiers transported to Thedas would’ve experienced the same thing, had they been confronted with the common language upon arriving through the portal. The temporary language block didn’t happen when Solas first met Ares because Ares was divine and understood all languages.

“Why couldn’t I understand you to begin with, yet you knew what I was saying?” Xena voiced, eyeing his ears.

“Different worlds, is my guess. You just had to wait for the magic of the Fade to affect you, adapt
You to my language,” Solas said. “Ares is the reason I can speak yours.”

Her features darkened. “You know where the God of War is?”

“Are you another god?” the elf only had bits of the memories Ares wanted him to have. Perhaps, he didn’t possess all the information about Xena.

“What makes you ask that?”

“Your skin—it doesn’t take on the green coloring of the Fade. It remains normal.”

“I can assure you, I’m no god,” she said, sneering at the thought. However, the circumstances surrounding Xena’s creation were mysterious and questionable. Years ago, the Furies got wind of some information that insinuated Ares might be Xena’s father; she’d laughed heartily at the story. If she did contain the blood of a god, she’d rather just not know. Overall, they were a malicious bunch Xena didn’t want to associate herself with. There were a few ‘good’ gods, though.

“What are you then?”

“I’m a warrior princess, and that’s all you need to know. Now,” the tall, strong-featured woman gestured at his ears. “What the hell are you?”

His laughter dabbled in small echoes though the Fade-generated room. “I’m an elf. My name is Solas.”

“Okay then, Solas. I have some questions.”

“Please, ask them.”

Xena eased closer. “What is this Fade you speak of?”

“It’s another name for the Void.”

Her eyes skimmed his features, discerning and calculating. “Where is Ares?”

“He’s in my world, Thedas, and he intends to assert himself as a god there. He’s already begun to do so.” Solas’s twilight gaze drifted to a random, shadowy corner. “He’s causing a lot of trouble.”

“That sounds like him.”

“Why are you searching for him?”

Xena sighed, keeping her eyes steady upon the slim man. “Let’s just say we figured he had to have left our world somehow, truly left it. You see, Aphrodite, his sister, is the Goddess of Love, and something’s…happening to her. She and Ares are two of the only Olympian gods who may not be affected by the Twilight. They’re love and war, yin and yang. One can’t exist properly without the other, and they are the basis of all human nature. When he began hiding in your dimension, he sparked a transformation in Aphrodite. He’s not there to balance her…so she’s taken on his traits as well as her own.”

Solas said as little as possible. It was usually more beneficial to listen rather than talk. He would hide the depth of his relationship with Ares from the warrior princess same as he’d chosen to hide it from the Inner Circle. She didn’t need to know that he recognized who Aphrodite and the other gods were, that he even recognized her name and face from some of the memories Ares infused into him. He’d have to tread very carefully.

“Aphrodite is essentially becoming the War Goddess of Love?”

“Essentially, yes.” Xena gave one short nod. “I’m in the Void searching over memories for clues to his whereabouts, but I suppose I can stop looking now, since I know where he is.” Her eyes appeared to harden, the twin chips of blue glass unswaying from Solas. “How did you get to this area of the Void from your world?”

The elf tailored his answer carefully. “I was exploring the Fade one evening and came across Ares. He summoned me to your Fade-realm, pulled me to him, to one of Zeus’s temples. He explained very shortly who Zeus is and that the Twilight of the Gods threatened him and the others.” Solas paused. “I think that if I lead you into my Fade-realm, you should be able to access it in your dream-walks. It may help you discover a way to physically enter my world. If you have the means and ability to stop Ares, Thedas needs you, and your world needs its God of War back.”

“Agreed. Alright then. Take me to your Void…er…Fade-realm.”

Solas held his hand out. “Take it.”

She hesitated for a second, then grabbed the man’s hand.

He closed his eyes and sifted through remnants of memory. He wanted Xena to get a good idea of how Thedas was, the state of the land. What better way to do that than to bring her to the Fade’s version of Skyhold?

Xena’s mouth parted thinly and her eyes studied the curling, shifting mist around them. Amphipolis vanished, leaving them surrounded by hollow darkness that ebbed a faint green.
Then, a garden shimmered into existence, the plants mostly dead, the fountain centerpiece slowly spewing the green muck of the Fade. When everything solidified around her, she released Solas’s hand and turned in place, examining. Over the enclosing walls, she saw a grand tower overlooking the grounds, the Inquisitor’s quarters. The sky above boiled with pale green mist.

“What is this place?”

“Skyhold. It’s where I live for the moment. I’m with a faction called the Inquisition. On top of battling Ares, we seek to subdue another foe, one of our own world, though it appears he’s the lesser of the two threats. Come. I want you to see this.”

Xena followed him across the garden, beyond the old pavilion, to the door of Morrigan’s atrium. Solas pushed it in and entered. Both halted before the Fade’s version of Morrigan’s eluvian. Xena had the strongest urge to reach out and brush fingers to the mirror’s smooth, reflective surface.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it is. It’s called an eluvian. The real version of it lies in Skyhold. Eluvians were used by my people for traveling great distances and between realms long ago. They’re of the purest magic. If you could somehow find a way to connect this Fade-eluvian to the real one, you might be able to use it to enter my world.”

“Hm…” Xena nodded thoughtfully. “If there’s a way, I’ll find it.”

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Solas’s eyes fluttered open. He sat up in bed and looked out the window to see that dawn was an hour or so away. His mind picked through his encounter in the Fade. It had been extremely enlightening. Not only was Ares’s absence causing power instability in Aphrodite, Xena said he might not even be at risk from the Twilight. The war god probably already knew these things, but Solas still intended to mention them when he encountered him next.

Later, the elf would inform Hannibal and the others about Xena, their potential new ally from Ares’s own world.

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Xena woke up in Ancient Greece, lying on her bedroll by the fire. She and Gabrielle traveled north along the borders of Patraian Amazon territory, taking care to stay clear of their land. She sat up and saw Gabrielle staring at her; the bard was on watch.

“Find anything?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Xena answered, eyes peering over the flames that flickered in the pre-dawn darkness. “I know where Ares is. He’s in a whole other world called Thedas, setting up shop to take it over.”

“How’d you find out?”

“I met a man from that world while in the Void. Apparently, he came across Ares while dream-walking.” Her eyes narrowed. “He wasn’t telling me everything though. He was holding back. Regardless, he told me enough. We have to find a way to that world.”

Gabrielle ran a hand over her short-bobbed, blond hair. She studied the item in her palm, a strange amulet on a necklace. “You think Alecto’s Charm will actually work on Ares, once we find him?”

“Oh, yes. It’ll work. All we need to do is get close enough and it’ll sap his godly strength and powers. He’ll be virtually like everyone else. Then we drag his ass right back here.”

The bard chuckled some. “Sounds like the easy part. First, we need to get to this…Thedas.”

“Yep.” Xena yawned and stretched. “I’ll think about it later. Gonna get some more sleep.” She flopped back on the furs, rolled over, and drifted back into slumber.
He cherished moments like this. The quiet, gentle instances. Iron Bull lounged on his side, head poised on a large hand, eye shining love upon his slumbering angel. She sprawled on her stomach, red satin sheet tangled around her. One slender, smooth, dark leg poked from the cover, her small foot brushing along Bull’s shin.

Ayla snored softly, luscious lips faintly parted. Fluffy, untamed white locks tumbled about the pillow and mattress. Bull lifted some of her pretty hair, put it to his lips, and inhaled its beguiling scent, then he chuckled richly at the snoring. She was completely sexed out, having roused him in the middle of the night. She’d wanted it deep and hard, and the Qunari delivered. His little beauty quaked loose four orgasms before she smiled herself to sleep. There were a couple of times where he thought she might call out “katoh”, the safe word if things became too much for her, got too rough. Bull had explained the word during their honeymoon, not long after the first time they had sex. Had he educated Ayla on katoh before subjecting her to his kuma’ta kalifaar, she might’ve called it out then. That instance of his naturally occurring heat-lust had been particularly harsh, due to his celibacy during the unorthodox courtship of the woman. Despite how much smaller she was than him, Ayla had yet to call katoh during their sexual intimacy. She was sturdier than one might believe.

Iron Bull looked over his shoulder to the wide window. The world brightened enough so that shadows receded and the sky lost its early morning duskiness. Dawn hunkered moments away. But he’d let her sleep. He felt famished and caught the smell of biscuits a short while ago. Not long until breakfast.

The horned man inched from bed carefully. He cleaned himself at the wash basin in the corner, though he planned to use the bathing facility before they left. Once dressed, he strode to the door, giving another loving glance to his wife. Reluctance stilled him. Ares was out there somewhere, and the leathered fucker carried some kind of flame for Iron Bull’s mate. He didn’t want to leave her, always wanted her at his side where he could watch her. At the same time, he knew he could only do so much against a god. Bull believed he would leave them be for a while, since he’d stolen the Anchor. If Ares wanted to take Ayla, he could’ve done it many times over by now. It might not be for weeks or even months, but he would drop into the picture again. Hopefully, by then, the Inquisition would have something to fight him with.

Bull exited. He locked the door from the outside. Ayla could unlock it if required, but he was sure he’d return before she awakened. Tugging on a warm smile, he turned and started down the hall. Just as he reached the intersection by the stairs, Hannibal came into view. He was alone, no Dorian.

“Mornin’, boss. I take it your old lady’s still sleeping too.”

The handsome Inquisitor dropped a soft laugh. “Yeah. Funny humans–think they can keep up with the sex drive of a Qunari.”

“Right.” Iron Bull joined the laughter, shaking his head. “Ayla does give me a run for my money, though.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

They reached the stairs and descended to the spacious lobby of Millie’s quaintly decorated domicile. They hooked right, moving through the den and into the dining room. The Qunari weren’t the only two up early. Neither seemed very surprised to see Solas sitting at the food-laden table. His plate contained an array of fruit.

Bull sat, grabbed a plate, and began heaping it with food–three biscuits, a few sausages, fruit, scrambled eggs, butter, jam. He ladled a bowl of honey-cinnamon porridge and dumped fruit in it. His eye fell on Solas across the table, the elf studying him, his expression a mixture of humor and fascination.

“What? I’m hungry.” The Qunari started eating.

“So it would seem.” Solas picked up a berry and popped it in his mouth. His eyes swept to Hannibal, who had also sat and began making a plate. “I have something to report regarding Ares.”

“What is it?” The aqua gems of Hannibal’s eyes latched to Solas.

“I met another Fadewalker last night, one from his world. Her name is Xena and she’s looking for him, to bring him back to their world. From what I gathered, she knows of ways to battle Ares and counter his actions.”

The Inquisitor pondered the information. “This is definitely good news. But...how did you meet this woman? The way you’ve explained the Fade, she would’ve had to have been in our region of it, or you would’ve had to have been in hers, in Ares’s region.”

Solas was prepared for that question. “Yes, you’re correct. When Ares brought me to the Temple
of Zeus the second time I saw him in the Fade, he gave me access to wander the Fade of his world. I didn’t realize this until last night, when I found myself in some city that was under attack,” he lied. He’d been exploring Earth’s Fade for some days now. “I recognized the writing on the shopfronts and posters as that I saw in Zeus’s temple.”

“So…you’ve never been to that part of the Fade until now?” Hannibal asked.

“No,” Solas lied again.

“Tell me more about this Xena? Who is she to Ares? Another god?” Hannibal ate a forkful of seasoned potato hash.

Iron Bull wallowed in silence, chewing, his eye steady upon the elf.

“She’s not a god,” Solas answered. “I had thought so myself, seeing as her skin wasn’t affected by the glow of the Fade. She said their world is experiencing an imbalance because of Ares’s absence. I’m sure she’ll do whatever she can to help us, since it helps her. A god she may not be, but I did sense great strength and determination within her. She must be extraordinary if she can lucidly walk in the Fade. It takes a special kind of person.”

“And you’re definitely a special kind of guy, right, Solas?” Bull mused, still watching the other man with calm calculation.

“I wouldn’t say special so much as gifted, perhaps.”

“Hm.” The Qunari issued an upnod. He commenced eating, half his food already gone.

Solas focused on Hannibal. “I brought Xena over to our part of the Fade, to Morrigan’s eluvian there. I believe she might be able to use the mirror to physically enter our world. The task will be next to impossible, however, if she doesn’t have access to a vast amount of power.”

“You don’t think she has such a means herself?”

“If you ask whether I think she’s a mage or her world’s equivalent, the answer is no. I sensed nothing magical about her, but rather something else.”

“Something ‘special’,” Bull quipped.

Solas’s features visibly tightened. He grew weary of the man’s patronizing tone. “Yes. Anyway, Inquisitor, I’ve shown her the mirror and given her access to Thedas’s Fade. I intend to try and meet with her again, obtain more information and see how she’s faring on her end.”

Hannibal smirked. “I hope her intentions are good, because I think Thedas has seen enough power-hungry warmongers coming from other worlds.”

“I believe she’ll help, if she can get here,” Solas’s face shifted into thoughtfulness. “What would truly help is knowing the actual doorway Ares used to get here. If I could obtain that information, I’m positive Xena would be able to crossover. Using Morrigan’s Fade-eluvian is a longshot, at best.”

“Well, it’s the only shot we have for now, so I’ll take it. Thanks for keeping me informed about this, Solas.”

The elf offered a nod and stood. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Once Bull was satisfied that Solas had fully left, he turned his eye to Hannibal. His resonant voice churned forth lowly, “he lied to you.”

“What?”

“When you asked if he’d ever traveled the Fade of Ares’s region before last night, he lied.”

“How do you know?” Hannibal stole a look at the hall down which Solas had disappeared.

“I was Ben-Hassrath, boss. If I’m open to it, I know others are lying before they even know it. Trust me, he’s not telling you everything.” His ruggedly handsome face adopted a dire, deadly frown, and his eye twitched. “The elf’s deceit puts us at risk, in danger. My first concern is for Ayla, and I will destroy whoever I deem a threat to keep her safe. Solas had better recognize this, because I’m quickly losing trust in him.”

The massive, solid Qunari pushed from the table and rose. He turned, set his dirty dishes on the collection cart by the archway into the kitchen area, and headed upstairs, leaving Hannibal to stare after that broad, impressive back.

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That broad, impressive back…

Ayla ran her hands over the expanse of sinewy muscles in fascination, taking in the multitude of scars, his artful tattoos covering some of them up around his shoulders. He had been through so much, her warrior, seen more than his fair share of battle and pain. It made her heart both ache in sorrow and swell tremendously with love. She leaned and laid her face to his skin, kissing it, eyes closed.
The solid link between them sent her currently unshielded emotions seeping into Iron Bull, and water shifted when he partly turned. “What’s wrong, Ayla?”

The couple soaked in a large sunken pool in one of Millie’s two bathing rooms. Each private area contained benches, towels, and toiletries. Decorative lanterns crisscrossed the ceiling, filling the room with ample yet relaxing light. The bed and breakfast was one of several establishments in Lothering that offered indoor plumbing. Water was pumped from furnace-heated storage tanks outside, and they were filled from a nearby well. The Warrior and his Oona had just over an hour before the group headed out to continue east and decided to spend some of that time enjoying a bath.

Ayla’s lips brushed another kiss. “Oh…nothing. I was only thinking about everything you’ve gone through in your life that has covered you in these scars.”

“You’re feeling sad. I can sense it,” Bull spoke softly over his shoulder. “You don’t have to feel that way. Fighting is what I do. It’s who I am.”

She smiled and grabbed up the sponge, getting it nice and soapy. “I know, my darling. Doesn’t mean I can’t worry about you, and as your wife, that is my right.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is.”

Ayla arranged a large clump of foamy suds atop Bull’s head and giggled.

He smirked at his image in the mirror running along the wall, thinking he looked like some weird, cream-topped confectionary dessert. All he lacked was a giant cherry.

“Did you ever have hair?”

A full, hearty chuckle burst from him at the random question. “Why?”

“Just curious, love.”

“No, never have.”

Ayla tweaked a skeptical white brow, grinning. “Not even as a child?”

“Nope. Never grew any on this big noggin. Some Qunari just don’t, male and female.” His grin widened and he teased, “You wish I had a perfect, wavy mane like golden-boy Flexibility?”

Trills of tickled laughter poured from her, trembling through her slim frame. “No! I love you just as you are!”

“Good, Naaremma-Kadan, ’cuz The Bull ain’t growin’ hair up here anytime soon.” He rubbed his head and scattered the suds, drawing another round of giggles. “’C’mon. The man shifted around and wrapped her in powerful arms.

Ayla moaned, settling on him, legs wrapping his waist. She caressed his face in both hands and brought their chests and mouths together.

The Qunari’s beard scraped her tenderly as he nuzzled. One large hand raked through the pale cascade of her damp hair. “You’re so beautiful. I will get you to call katoh,” he whispered resonantly, then dragged his teeth along her throat and issued a seductively feral growl.

Ayla shivered and grinned. “Never.”

“Challenge accepted.”

They made love, then washed up and returned to their room to pack. (*)

Ayla stood by and hummed softly to herself, while Iron Bull secured their bags and his axe to their mount. The great Qunari’s fingers worked at latches and buckles, his eye veering sideward to watch Varric perform his usual awkward struggle into the saddle of his horse, his short legs kicking out when he pulled up and over.

Bull’s shoulders shook in silent, contained chuckles. “Either you need to consider using a step-stool or switch to riding a pony.”

The dwarf’s eyes leveled on him. Very slowly, he raised his gloved hand and quickly snapped up the middle finger.

Bull’s roaring laughter filled the area. “Hey, it would be safer for you.”

“I already have one mother, Tiny. Don’t need a second, but thanks. Though, I guess I should be grateful the best cock in Thedas is looking out for me.” Varric guided the steed into the street and waited, proceeding to rub the creature’s neck to keep it happy.

“That was low, Varric.” Bull’s brow evened into a frown, his eye jerking to Ayla, who’d stopped humming and turned to smirk in his direction. Bull sighed. “’C’mon, Naaremma.”

Everyone saddled up and moved out. Miss Millie waved after them from the porch.
Ares’s eyes raked the site Resentius chose for the first temple to the One True God. The hilltop was wide and flat, presenting an expansive view of the rolling valley and surrounding farmland, green and bountiful. Straight to the west and over the trees, Still Water Lake gleamed like a mirror with the sun’s rays bouncing off it. Just a little south of there, tendrils of smoke seeped upward from the chimneys of New Crestwood Village.

The banner of the One True God billowed on a post, marking the construction area—a white Spartan helm inside a black triangle that signified the Father, Mother, and Son. A golden sun backdropped the triangle.

The God of War studied the workers, who had finished digging the foundation, working like a well-oiled machine, carting mounds of dirt away in wheelbarrows. He nodded, pleased. “Great work, Resentius. Things are coming along well.”

“I’m glad you’re pleased, Milord.” The commander’s striking green eyes swooped to the god and he grinned. “It’s almost laughable how easy these people are. I won’t lie; I thought you might see a bit more resistance.”

Ares chuckled. “A god is only as strong as his followers. Fortunately for me, I’m a god of war, and war is in everyone’s nature, be it here, Earth, or any other world. People can’t live without it, which means they can’t live without me. I’ve only given Thedosians another source of hope, where they might not’ve had any before.”

“You understand people well.”

“Yes, I do. Continue to hold it down here. If you require my presence, you need only to speak my name, as you know.”

Resentius nodded, and Ares vanished.

The God of War reappeared at the place he’d made his unofficial dwelling while in Thedas. Villa Maurel. The Emerald Graves served as home to the sizable estate. Ares came across it during his explorations, finding Freemen of the Dales corpses strewn about. The Inquisitor and his party had cleared the estate of the troublesome group several months back. Set deep in the forest, nestled in the trees, the war god saw it as a suitable place to call his own until further notice. He’d transported servants, male and female, from Earth and recruited many Thedosians to tend to his desires. Soldiers and guards roamed the grounds, watching the perimeter; they stayed in the rather fancy barracks.

Ares’s sure stride carried him through the humongous master quarters, past a fireplace sporting a mantle as tall his him. He grinned at the rather pretty man lounged in the sunken bathing pool, his sand-colored hair damp and curling seductively around his ears, pale-green eyes dancing happily at Ares. It was Ralden, the soldier Bull had been fooling around with back in Basin Floor camp right before he met Ayla. The man deserted the Inquisition shortly after that and joined up with the God of War. Ralden had gotten close and learned the truth when Ares opened a portal before him to transport people from Earth. The god wasn’t sent by the Maker or Andraste. He’d come from another world to impress his ways upon Thedas…and Ralden was okay with that.

Water chortled and sloshed when he moved to the edge of the pool and set his pretty face on his hands. “Have a long day, handsome?”

Ares tipped his head sideward, producing a sultry smile. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.” He fingered the latch on his fine tunic and eased it off, letting it drop to the floor. He balanced on one leg, then the other, removing his boots. The god could’ve just willed his clothing to disappear, but sometimes it was nice to feel tangible, to do things like a regular person would. Besides, he knew it drove his bed mates wild when they got to watch him strip clothes from that exquisite, solid, toned body.

“Mm…” Ralden’s eyes raked slow and hungry over Ares. “Things are going well in Crestwood then?”

“Yes. Eating out of my hand.” He undid his pants and peeled them off.

Ralden licked his lips, watching Ares step into the pool, prowling through the water towards him. Ares groaned and yanked the man close, his lips coming down hard upon Ralden’s. The smaller man moaned, fisted hand mashed to the god’s hair-brushed chest. Once again, he allowed Ares to do very bad yet wonderful things to his body, enjoying every second of it.

Xena didn’t yet know how she’d charge the eluvian in the Void as Solas suggested, though she did know where to start. She needed to return to the Aponi Amazons. Not only were they guarding Xena’s daughter Eve, Yakut, the shamaness would probably be able to help. Her power was strong. She’d liberated the tribe from Alik, an evil woman who’d used her magic for personal gain.

For that reason, the warrior princess and the battling bard traveled north. While they moved along the road, Xena suddenly stopped, ears open and searing blue eyes scanning.
What is it?" Gabrielle’s hands instantly went to the hilts of her sais.

“Thought I heard something.”

Both women listened, and Gabrielle’s eyes widened faintly. “Yeah, I hear it. Through there.”

Securing their mounts roadside, Xena stroked Argo’s face and the horse chuffed, then they headed between the tree trunks and dense foliage. They got less than a hundred feet in, and the plants opened into a clearing. The women untensed, smiles spreading on.

Hanging upside-down from a thick branch by lassos around their ankles, Autolycus and Joxer bickered back and forth.

“Well, if you would’ve did as I said and stuck to my lead instead of veering off somewhere, we wouldn’t be hanging here like two ducks for the slaughter,” Autolycus said gruffly.

“What can I say? My warrior instincts kicked in and I was only following them,” Joxer said.

“Ha! Warrior instincts are no more a part of you than boobs are a part of me! I knew I shouldn’t have let you come along.”

“Hey! I–”

“Cool it down, fellas,” Xena interrupted, her face etched in humor.

“Xena, Gabrielle, thank the gods,” Autolycus said, his face reddened from dangling as they were.

Joxer grinned, his eyes flicking to Gabrielle. The man had been in love with her since they met. He knew he’d never have a chance. However, that didn’t mean he could erase the feelings. “Hey, Gabrielle…and, uh, Xena.”

Gabrielle laughed. “Joxer.”

“What are you doing up this way?” Xena asked.

Autolycus squirmed. “You gonna cut us down or what?” The thief painted on a debonair grin. “I’d do it myself, but, well…” He pointed to his knife lying in the grass.

“Answer me first.”

“We were looking for you two,” Auto said. “We heard you’re trying to help Aphrodite by searching for Ares. Thought we’d lend a hand.” He smirked. “I was traveling alone, but numb-nuts here started following me a few days back, so I let him stick around. Someone’s gotta look out for him.”

“Hey, I can look after myself.” Joxer protested.

“Riiight.” Auto’s eyes veered to him.

Xena laughed, released her sword, and hacked the rope. Both men cried out as they crashed to the ground.

(*)

Two nights after leaving Lothering, they camped down at one of the cache sites used by Elemir’s people during their travels. It was located at the end of a well-hidden path about quarter of a mile into the trees from the main road. Hannibal was pleased to find it as well stocked and supplied as any Inquisition cache.

Tents went up and a fire started. They sat around and made conversation while eating. Ayla rested one hand on Bull’s arm so she could see, happily munching on a tart red plum. The woman was overcome with a sense of elation; this camp was familiar. Since they’d reached Lothering, everything in their travels was more familiar to her. She’d traveled this region with Elemir, Joswen, and the others several times. Her thoughts tried to conjure up the place to which her brother led them. If she’d been there before, she should be able to remember, but she couldn’t.

Ayla jerked from her thoughts when Iron Bull shot to his feet, grabbing his axe up in the same instant. Her eyes widened, vision snatched away to leave floating shadows trimmed by vague firelight. “What’s happening?”

“There’s somebody out there.”

The others took their cue from the giant man, rising and becoming weapon-ready. Iron Bull’s senses were impeccable. If he said they weren’t alone, then they weren’t. All eyes skinned the heavy shadows of the forest perimeter, the camp veiled in silence. A tone of whistles resounded from somewhere in the night.

Elemir relaxed his sword, sheathing it. “It’s alright. You can lower your weapons.”

Ayla gasped, her face igniting a smile, unseeing eyes lulling about. She recognized the whistles. Her brother and the others used the calls to signal one another.

They all looked to Hannibal, waiting for his instructions. The Inquisitor finally nodded, lowering his sword. Bull, Solas, Dorian, and Varric stood down. The thickets shuffled softly around the
camp, in various positions. One by one, five others stepped into view, converging closer to the fire. An elf with dark, smooth skin stood ahead of the new group, his hazel eyes fixed on Elemir, then Ayla, and his smile dragged on slowly.

“I’m so happy to see you, little sister,” the elf’s voice rang out deeply.

“Joswen!” Ayla quickly stood. She fumbled for skin contact with Bull, fingers latching to his large hand. Her clear sight took in the quintet.

Joswen’s mouth opened, hanging in utter surprise. His gaze zipped between Ayla and Elemir, the others appearing just as astounded. “She...can see us! And that means he’s...” Joswen’s eyes settled on the great Qunari whom she touched.

“Yes,” Elemir said. “She knows what she is, the history of her people, about the charade at Redcliffe, but that’s all she knows, until we get east.”

The elf slowly nodded. “Understood.” He smiled broadly at Ayla.

“Bull, please take me over.”

The horned man did as she asked, leading her to the newcomers. He lingered behind her so she could look over them anxiously. She didn’t recognize their faces or features, but she knew smells, voices, and shadow-shapes. An excited breath rushed from Ayla and she released Bull’s hand, letting the familiar blurs fill her vision.

“Oh, Joswen!” She flung forward into his arms, and the man hugged her tight. “It’s so good to see you, all of you!”

The others–except for one young man, half human and half qunari–bunched in around the snowy-haired beauty. They embraced her in long-awaited greetings, their voices all jumbling together. Iron Bull had to step back a few paces while they huddled his wife.

“So! Vek! Swooning in happiness to see her friends, she hugged them both. They were like her family. Ayla turned to the last familiar presence and beamed. “Maggy!” The woman linked his middle and squeezed, face pressed to his chest.

Magnus chuckled heartily and wrapped her in a crushing hug. “You’re still the only one I let call me that. Oh, I missed ye, love.” He kissed the top of her head. His brown eyes swung coolly to the Qunari and he grinned. “So, The Iron Bull is your Chosen Warrior. Didn’t see that one coming.”

Ayla eased back, smiling up at him. “Yes. He’s also my husband.”

“Husband!” Magnus, Joswen, Sophitia, and Vek exclaimed in unison, all eyes swinging from Ayla to Iron Bull.

“…We…” Ayla blushed profusely. “…share the mizraa-teth.”

“Yes, I can scent it,” came the voice of the fifth person. He stood outside the huddle, watching with keen amusement.

Ayla reached for Bull, and he captured her hand. When her vision snapped to clarity, the Oona scanned the faces of her makeshift family more closely. “You’re all so...pretty.” She giggled and they laughed, then Ayla looked beyond them to the fifth person. “Who are you?”

“That’s Ozra. He joined our party little over a month back,” Elemir answered for the man. Her icy-blue eyes swept over his features, noting that he wasn’t as tall or broad as Iron Bull or Hannibal. His build and height were more like Cole’s, muscular yet slim, and his skin held a slight tint of gray. Ayla’s brow arched and she smiled. “You’re small for a Qunari.”

“That’s because I’m half,” Ozra returned the smile. “The other part of me is human.”

“I see,” Ayla mused. “Very interesting.”

Hannibal stepped forward. “It’s nice to meet you all. Please, make yourselves comfortable. This is Dorian, Solas, and Varric. I’m Hannibal Luthor, the Inquisitor.”

Hannibal figured they would know who he was by reputation alone, which they did. There weren’t many throughout the land who didn’t know his name or his titles—Herald of Andraste, Inquisitor, Andraste’s Chosen. Once they settled around the camp, Elemir’s people offered more proper introductions of themselves. There was Joswen, known as the elven man who’d led Elemir and Ayla away from Roark the Red’s company all those years ago. He was the leader of the group, with Elemir as his second in command. His weapon specialty was rogue archer.

Magnus Bjorksen, a human battlemage, wielded both stave and sword. Twelve years older than Elemir, he befriended him and Ayla shortly after they arrived at the place in the east. Magnus came from a noble family with land in The Anderfels. Rather than remain at home and claim lordship, thinking it would make him lazy-minded and fat in the gut, he left at age nineteen to do more with his life, including studying in the Minrathous Circle for two years. A strange series of events landed him in the destination to which they currently headed. Many throughout the land
knew him as Magnus the Brave.

Sophitia MacLamont, proficient with a sword and shield, came from farmers. Her mother died when she was young and her father a few years after. She had two older brothers, and one of them held no moral restraint when it came to visiting her room most nights to put his cock where it didn’t belong. Sophi wound up killing him with his own sword. She left with not a single regret. After being on her own for months, she found a home…in the east.

Vek Stonetree, master of two-handed weapons, hated being underground, and a dwarf admitting that might as well exile himself, since he’d be treated like a pariah anyway. So, that’s what Vek did, against his father’s wishes. He left Orzammar in his mid-teens and instantly got into mercenary work. He was skeptical when Joswen approached him, but followed him east anyway. Best move he could’ve made.

As for Ozra…

Ayla was extremely intrigued by him. She cleared her throat, arm linked with Iron Bull’s. She spoke over the flames. ‘I…don’t mean to bother you, but I’m curious about your background, being half qunari and half human.’

“It’s alright. What would you like to know?”

“Where did you grow up and how was your childhood?”

Ozra chuckled. “Well, I was born in the Qun.”

“Really?”

“Yes. If you know anything about the Qun, then you know they don’t approve of intermixing in the society. Not only was I half-and-half, I was also illegally created, product of a human father and Qunari mother.” He grinned a bit. “My parents chose to make me without the consent of the Tamassrans. So, I was taken from my mother, naturally. My father was re-educated by the Ben-Hassrath, and so was my mother once she birthed me. My parents were well on their way to becoming Tal-Vashoth–defiant and growing weary of living under the Qun. When I was two, they tracked my designation, found out what Tamassran I was under, and abducted me. They fled the Qun and never looked back, raising me in Wycome.” That was a city in the Free Marches located on the coast of the Amaranthine Ocean. “It’s very nice there.”

“You sound like you miss it.”

“Oh, I do, and I visit when I can. My parents still live there.” He nodded, smiling.

“I’m very happy to hear that you still have them both.” Ayla’s visage faltered some, taking on a bit of sadness. She didn’t remember her parents, and they’d left her in some woods to die anyway, so she supposed she shouldn’t feel too bad. “Do you ever think about rejoining the Qun?”

“Nah. Can’t miss what you don’t remember. Besides, I have a very good life as it is.”

“Hey, don’t knock the Qun, kid,” Bull voiced. The light of the flames flickered over his face and in his eye. He appeared amused. “It’s not perfect but it does offer order, and some people just need that.”

Ozra tipped a nod. “You’re right, and if my parents had left me there, I’d probably still be well-off. As it were, I grew up elsewhere, and I’m happy with it.”

“Fair enough,” Bull said. His eye flicked to Ozra’s left, and a dark brow eased slowly upward. “What?”

Magnus was grinning at him. “I just can’t believe Ayla’s Warrior is The Iron Fucking Bull.”

Vek smirked against his smile. “Calm down, take deep breaths.” The dwarf leaned forward, elbows on his knees and eyes on Bull. “He’s a big fan of you and your company. For him, meeting you is like one of those religious zealots coming face to face with the Maker or Andraste…ummm…no offense to any Andrastians here,” he quickly added. “You’ve basically made his life complete since you’re practically family now.”

“I…see.” Iron Bull looked to Magnus. He smiled but remained mostly serious. “I’m nothing special, just me. Not afraid to do the work same as the next man…or woman.” His gaze flicked to Ayla and Sophitia, not wanting to exclude their gender. He knew Ayla was extraordinary and didn’t doubt the other woman’s quality.

Ayla tugged his arm, then lifted her face to nuzzle his beard. “You’re special to me.”

Joswen, Magnus, Vek, and Sophitia weren’t used to seeing Ayla display intimacy with anyone. There just hadn’t been the chance for it, not with Elemir’s constant guard against possible suitors. She was their little sister, though it seemed she wasn’t so innocent anymore. This was something they’d have to get used to, as it had always been a possibility–Ayla finding her Warrior. And that pairing, Oona with Warrior, almost always found the two mated.

There was much to talk about around the fire that evening. Hannibal’s people shared their backgrounds and stories with Elemir’s. The hour grew late while they conversed beneath the starry sky. They eventually broke it up and retired for the night. There was still quite a bit of traveling left in their journey to the eastward mystery destination.
Joxer

Autolycus
Chapter End Notes

For any readers who have never watched the show Xena, Autolycus and Joxer are regulars in the series. Autolycus is a usually suave and self-centered thief, but a good guy. Joxer is more like the kind-hearted comic relief who tries hard to be a warrior, but fails at every turn. In the end, these two awesome characters contributed a lot to the show. :) 

Disclaimer: None of the above images are owned by me, with the exception of Hannibal Luthor. :}
When the hour grew late last night and everyone decided to break to their tents, Elemir, Magnus, and Sophitia doubled back to the deserted clearing where five horses grazed. The newcomers' mounts. They were secured with the horses (and one hart) of Hannibal’s party.

With such a large group now, the three watch rotations were done in pairs. Iron Bull wasn’t even remotely surprised that Magnus volunteered to take the last watch with him. They shared tales of battle and adventure and a little more information about themselves. The Qunari described Skyhold to the battlemage since he displayed more than a little interest in the fortress. Magnus’s line of questioning took a turn right into Iron Bull Land, the man wanting to know even more about him. Bull indulged his curiosity and mild case of hero-worship, but only in the humblest sense. Overall, the Qunari found Magnus to be quite pleasant. He was smart and kind-hearted, true to himself and those around him. Bull knew they would be good friends.

Near the end of their shift, Solas emerged, up with the sun as usual. Within the hour, everyone else awakened. Bull helped Ayla get their things ready and he deconstructed their tent, then the couple sat on a crate and shared breakfast.

On the other side of camp, Ozra, Vek, and Magnus finished breaking down a tent. The half Qunari’s gaze kept veering to Ayla. He grabbed up his dual blades and secured them to his back, speaking lowly to Magnus, “Why didn’t you tell me she was so beautiful?”

Magnus chuckled softly. “I didn’t think to do so because, while she’s very lovely, I see her as my little sister. And even if she wasn’t bound to The Iron Bull, you wouldn’t be able to get anywhere near her. Elemir would see to that, as would I.”

“Me too,” entered Vek, face hardening a bit. “She’s a sister to us all, and you’d best start seeing her the same way.”

“Calm it, shorty.” Ozra held his hands up defensively and drew on a smile. “I only observed her beauty, nothing more. My intentions are merely friendship. Besides…” His vivid teal vision swung across camp to where Ayla sat with her huge Qunari husband, “there’s no way I would ever challenge him.”

“Wise.” Vek nodded, smacking him on the back.

Low chuckles drifted from Magnus.

A short distance away, Hannibal finished securing his traveling bag to his horse. He stood there afterwards, looking perhaps a little dazed while he studied his left hand.

“Is something wrong, Amatus?” Dorian approached, easing in close. He laid fine fingers to his lover’s arm, letting his eyes search the larger man’s face.

“No…not really,” Hannibal said, his smile small and unsure. “It feels strange not having the Anchor, and while I’m glad it no longer plagues me, I’d rather it was bound to me than Ares.”

“I see.” Dorian said. “I’ll admit that I’m also happy you don’t have to carry the damned thing anymore. Actually, happy is an insufficient word. I would say I’m absolutely ecstatic. I may not be an expert on ancient magic, but I do know that thing was consuming you, one morsel at a time. It would’ve become unbearable for you down the line. It’s wonderful that you’re rid of it, yet, as you said, it doesn’t bode well that Ares possesses it now.”

Hannibal wrapped his arms around the mage, the one he’d pledged his life to, sealed with a bite. Few people got Dorian. Upon first meetings, he came off as self-absorbed, pompous, high-maintenance, and condescending. This was Hannibal’s first impression. Being high-maintenance was the only true thing on the list, and he wouldn’t have the mage any other way. He quickly realized the smoke screen for what it was—a barrier Dorian created to keep from being disappointed. Hurt. The two of them had talked a lot since they made it official, and Hannibal learned that the mage suffered not only the emotional and verbal abuse of his father, but had also been physically assaulted by men he’d entrusted himself to. A few years ago, one such man tricked Dorian into an orgy in which Dorian was the center piece. The Altus had been rendered magic-less by a charm ward, then raped by the bastard and his two friends repeatedly.

Hannibal laid there in bed that night and listened to the recounting while Dorian hugged close and cried, mascara tracing down his cheeks. The Qunari knew he would do everything in his power to make him happy, keep him safe. The man really was a delicate thing when he wasn’t being a bad-ass mage on the battlefield.

“I love you.”

Dorian’s beautiful features dawned an adoring smile. “Aren’t I just so lovable?”

“You are.”

They indulged in a kiss. When Dorian pulled back, his stunning eyes carried a flick of mischief.

“You’re mine later.”

“Actually, I’m yours all the time, but yeah, I get it.” Hannibal grinned.
“Mm.”

Before they commenced the journey eastbound, Ayla told Bull that she wanted to ride with Magnus until the first break, and he led her to the other man when everyone started mounting up. They were less than an hour into travel now, and Iron Bull assumed his usual position at the rear, guiding the elk along. In between listening to the environment and observing the landscape, he found himself staring ahead at Magnus and Ayla. She leaned back comfortably in the man’s arms, giggling at something or other every so often while they talked.

Iron Bull’s eye rolled to the right when Elemir’s horse fell in pace next to him.

The ranger’s chuckle crept forth, soft and edgeless. “Now you know how I feel when I watch her with you.”

“Hm. I won’t deny that I’m a little jealous.” Bull issued a low laugh.

“After me, Magnus is the next closest to Ayla. She believes she met him when I joined up with Joswen’s party shortly after she and I moved to the house outside Redcliffe, according to the false memories. In truth, she’s known him longer than that. He was the first person we met when she and I got to the place in the east, though she doesn’t realize that yet. He befriended us, took us in. He was twenty-four at the time, and I twelve. He quickly became the big brother I never had.”

Elemir’s eyes drifted to Magnus’s back. “Ayla instantly fell fond of him and he of her. For a little girl, having another big brother was grand.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was, considering how her parents left her.” Bull nodded. “I knew soon after meeting her that she had a lot of love in her life, and I’m very happy about that. The jealousy I’m experiencing right now is minor. It stems from the fact that I have been the one closest to Ayla since we found her with the Hakkonites.” He tugged on a crooked, boyish smile.

“You’re her brother, and I’ll never take your place in her heart. So, I’d say we’re equally close to her.”

“I’ll take that.”

They shared another smile.

Up ahead, Ayla gripped at Magnus’s hand, fingers wiggling and seeking input, stimulation. She would be able to see if she rode with her husband, but it was very reassuring to be in the saddle with the battlemage, whom she’d ridden with before many times. She just needed immersion in the familiar—the sounds, sensations, and smells of her family.

“I was so relieved when Elemir sent word that he’d located you.” Magnus nuzzled the top of her head. “I won’t lie to you—this old man shed genuine tears. My sweet Ayla.”

“Maggy…” she giggled.

He lightened the mood. “So, how does it feel to be married?”

“It’s wonderful.”

“I don’t need to ask if he treats you well; I know he does.”

Ayla sighed dreamily. “He’s a wonderful husband and a great man.”

“Good, good.” Magnus looked over his shoulder to see Iron Bull and Elemir having a friendly talk at the back of the train. He faced forward. “Hey, you recall a couple of years ago when we were traveling and that tree trunk suddenly fell across the road? We had to take a detour—”

“Through the shallow swamp! Oh, I hated that!” She laughed brightly. “My dress got so heavy with mud.”

“Yes, the blasted swamp. The reason that tree fell was because you amplified me, though you obviously didn’t know that at the time. The rest of us did. I wasn’t expecting it, didn’t have my mental and physical wards up to shield against it. My power swelled almost uncontrollably, and I shot out a blast of lightning, took the tree out.”

“I’m so sorry, Maggy…”

The battlemage gave her a loving squeeze. “No, don’t you worry. It wasn’t your fault, and no one was hurt. So, everything’s good.”

“I’ve been practicing with my power. Back in Skyhold, a mage has helped me control and harness it. She’s also the one who taught me about the Jado and what I am. Her name is Morrigan and she’s extremely—”

“Morrigan? Gold eyes? Black hair?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

Deep and highly amused were Magnus’s chuckles.
“You know her?” Ayla asked.

“We’ve had a couple of…run-ins,” he replied, eyes ahead. Blond-silver hair blew across his brow in the conjured breeze. “I met her while studying in Minrathous. She’s quite a woman.”

The Oona donned a ludic smile. “You two were close?”

“Hm, you could say that.”

Two more days of travel put them in the Milgren vicinity. They crested a low hill on the Eastern Imperial Highway and beheld the valley lands nestled along the rolling, rising Southron Hills. Beyond the farms was Milgren, known as a mecca for mining, gambling, and prostitution. They started for the town.

Joswen pulled his horse up between Hannibal’s and Elemir’s. “There’s still at least four hours of light left, but we’ll stay in Milgren, Inquisitor.”

“Alright.”

“When we start up tomorrow, are we going through the mines or around the hills?” Elemir asked Joswen.

“We usually take the mines when we don’t have Ayla with us, but to save time, I figured we’d do it for this trip.” The elf’s eyes veered to Hannibal. “If we travel a steady pace, it takes no longer than two days to traverse the mines. They are vast.”

Hannibal nodded. “I’m game for the quickest route. I do need to get back to Skyhold as soon as possible. Many things require my attention.”

“I understand,” Joswen said.

“I’m curious,” Dorian spoke up from behind them, guiding his mount along steadily. “Does this place you’re taking us to have anything to do with Aut’lu Mena?”

Joswen and Elemir exchanged a look, and the ranger answered him. “Somewhat.”

Aut’lu Mena. The elvhen words translated to “lost time zone”. For centuries, Aut’lu Mena had been regarded as a place to avoid. The region lingered in the most eastern sector of the Brecilian Forest. It had birthed many superstitions throughout Thedas as a place where people became disoriented and sometimes completely lost, never to be seen again. Some legends even spoke of a race of soul-eaters that occupied the mysterious area, and they fed on those who dared to venture within the deepest reaches of the forest.

Dorian smirked, tossing sarcastically, “Great. And here I thought I had nothing to worry about during this not-so-little trip. Everyone’s heard the stories surrounding that part of the Brecilian Forest. Only the foolish go traipsing foolheartedly into it.”

“I have to agree,” Hannibal said.

“Please, don’t worry. You will understand when we reach our destination,” Joswen replied, perhaps sterner than he wanted. He sighed and added, “We cannot speak more on this. You must be patient.”

The Inquisitor and his mate met gazes, and Hannibal could clearly see the wariness and displeasure floating in Dorian’s eyes. He was feeling a little uneasy himself. But he trusted their new friends, and the level of anxiousness within him soared. He couldn’t wait to see what secret awaited.

As planned, they stayed in Milgren that night, easily getting rooms at one of the many inns.

Dawn arrived, and the travelers rose, packed their things, had breakfast, and left Milgren on the back road. They didn’t meet a single traveler on this path, because it led to Grozmare Mines, and no one went there these days except the expert adventurers who meant to use it as a way through the hills like Hannibal’s and Elemir’s people would.

It was still early enough that the sun hadn’t crested the Southron Hills. They’d left their mounts with a stable master in town. There was no way the creatures could traverse safely through the subterranean circuit of passages and pathways. Everyone stood outside the entrance to the mines. Old equipment and wheelbarrows lay warped and decrepit about the area, abandoned decades ago.

Clinging to Iron Bull’s arm, clasping his hand, Ayla sifted a shaky mewl. She hated the idea of going into the caves.

Dorian’s eyes swept to her. “Yes, my thoughts exactly.”

“It’ll be okay, Ayla,” Bull said softly, offering a tender smile down at her.

“I’ve been through here twice with my brother and the others, but we usually go south around the
hills when I travel with them and use the Brecilian Passage.” The woman sighed. “I wish we were
going that way.”

Bull gave her a comforting squeeze.

Joswen turned to face them. “If we stick to Thorrinvlad Trail, the main path, we should be fine,
though there are some areas where it gets to be a few feet wide. In those parts, remain close to the
wall. We’ll make camp a short distance beyond the Dinrost Falls, and emerge on the other side
about half a day after that.”

“If all goes well, you know, no setbacks or detours,” Varric said.

“Yes,” Joswen said. “Let us go.”

The ebony-skinned elf turned to the mouth of the cave leading into the Grozmare Mines, his
strong legs carrying him forward. The others followed.

“Dark Thunder,” came Solas’s tailored, accented voice.

“What?” Varric looked up at him.

“Dinrost is Elvhen. It translates to ‘dark thunder’.”

The dwarf grunted. “Dark Thunder Falls, eh? I don’t write horror, but if I did, that would make
one hell of a book title. Not feeling good about this at all, Chuckles.”

Solas smiled slimly. “You’re a dwarf. You’re supposed to be content to dwell within the rock.”

“Yes, right, and comparing me to the rest of my kin is like me comparing you to Sera. I like the
surface and you’re not a self-loathing product of human brainwashing that believes elves are a lost
cause.”

“Hm…point taken.”

The initial tunnel into the mines was about five feet wide, a hundred meters long, and low enough
that Iron Bull had to hunker a little bit. The man scowled. “Hopefully, tight spaces are limited in
this place. Don’t want to be scraping my horns.”

“This and the exit passage are the tightest spaces in our trip,” Magnus over his shoulder. He
grinned in the dimness. “Don’t worry, big guy.”

“Well, that’s comforting.” Bull remarked, then peered back to the bright point where they’d
entered. He wasn’t afraid but, damn, he hated going subterranean.

They moved from the low passage into an open cavern. A veilfire brazier jutted from the rock to
their right. Magus went to it, summoned his power, and called forth the green flames. Joswen,
Elemir, and Varric lit torches.

“For this to be a Dwarven system of mines, it’s clear the Elves have been here,” Varric said.
“Dinrost Falls and veilfire?”

“Yes, but you have to remember our people carved this place out thousands of years ago, and it’s
been mostly abandoned during half that time,” Vek replied as they began moving forward. “Elves,
Humans, Qunari—they’ve all passed through here and laid claims in some way. At its core,
however, Grozmare is distinctly Dwarven. You’ll see what I mean once we get further in.”

“Ah.”

“I can feel the history buried here,” Solas spoke up. “It lingers in the rock, crawling up the walls.”

“You know, being cryptically creepy is Cole’s forte, and you should leave it to him.” Dorian
pressed a smirk at the elf.

“I find this place interesting. I may try to visit it in the Fade at a later time.”

The Altus flipped a hand at him. “That’s all fine and dandy. For now, could you please cease and
desist with the uneasy talk.”

“Aw, what’s the matter, Sparkler? You scared?” Varric grinned.

“Scared, no. Anxious, yes.”

“It’ll go by fast,” Sophitia said. She was a woman of few words and had spoken the least of the
group since they all joined up.

“Not fast enough,” Dorian mumbled. Hannibal gave him a gentle nudge followed by a smile.

Vek was right. As they progressed, it became more obvious that the place was Dwarven. The
below-landers were known for their technology, specifically a glowing type of half ore, half stone
called lumin. Lumin wasn’t magical, since dwarves weren’t magical by nature. The stones were a
product of secretive alchemical practices the little people had mastered eons ago. They used them
to pave floors and walls so the surfaces emitted a constant glow in various hues.

Varric was born in Kirkwall and had never been to Orzammar, and he most likely never would
since he was part of a disgraced family that wouldn’t be accepted back there. He’d heard stories, plenty of them, from his father and brother, and while he had no desire to live in an underground kingdom, he had great respect for what his people built. They possessed unparalleled amounts of ingenuity. Varric beheld the dark yellow slabs of lumin lining the chamber through which they walked. He looked up and saw only darkness, the ceiling was so high.

Something loosened a shrill, echoing cry, and that was followed by the patter of many flapping wings.

“Bats. I hate bats,” said Dorian.

“You hate anything that’s not kittens, rainbows, and flowers,” Bull teased.

“You’re point?”

The Qunari chuckled.

For an hour, the group pressed forward. Joswen stopped them for a break at a place where the path diverged in three separate directions. Iron Bull led Ayla to one of the many chunks of stone formed by fallen columns so she could sit. Ahead of them was a chasm, and the bridge across had given way long ago. On the far side, a huge carved face loomed from the cliffside, parts of it eroded and broken off, a dwarven lord. A cave served as its mouth, leading to some other part of the vast mines.

“This place is amazing,” Hannibal’s words echoed faintly.

Vek smiled, tipping his head back to swig from his water skin. “Wait ‘til ye see the Falls. They’re quite a sight. Traveled through here several times, and they always put me in awe.”

“Ooo, I’ll actually get to see them this time!” Ayla chimed. She looked to Bull. “The way the others explained it, they sound like the most wonderful thing.”

“You’ll love it,” Magnus said. The battlemage took a few steps towards the bridgeless chasm, peering down into the darkness, listening to the constant breath from deep within the rock.

Hannibal turned to Joswen. “Which way do we go from here?”

“The path to the right.”

Ten minutes later, they left the resting spot, traveling a pleasantly wide path that had obviously been taken many times as beaten as it was. It curved eventually so that they veered away from the great, yawning gap to their left. They reached a place that was more refined, not just a tunnel blasted into the stone, but a high-ceiling corridor. Statues of posed dwarven figures lined down both walls, evenly spaced. Most of them were intact, while a few had broken and crumbled from their pedestals, unsuccessful in their bout against time—or perhaps other causes.

“This place is called Khaz eron Thrummaz,” Joswen’s deep voice bounded up and out, carrying off down the passage. “It’s Dwarven for ‘Hall of Kings’.”

Iron Bull took note of the rusty swords and shields strewn about. “Looks like a pretty good fight happened here. Been a while though.”

“No one knows exactly,” Joswen said. “I’m sure that at one time, before my group and I began traveling this trail, there were bodies to go with those weapons, and they’ve long since faded to dust.”

“That still looks kinda juicy,” Bull said lowly.

They stopped to examine the area. The horned man noticed dark smudges of crimson on the corner of one fallen statue. Elemir and Joswen took the lead, moving slowly and cautiously around the hunk of stone to see that three corpses laid heaped behind it. They were badly disfigured, eaten down to the bone in most places, with some pale skin and scraps of clothes clinging to them. Ayla could clearly scent the decay. She hugged closer to her husband.

“Goblins.” The single word left a sour taste on Ozra’s lips. He pointed. “There, on the wall…”

Elemir held the torch out so they could see the scratchy-looking characters, written in blood.

“It’s their language,” the half qunari said.

Varric looked uneasily at him. “They have a written language?”

“Yes. It’s very simplistic and consists of sketches mostly. I’m no expert, but I’ve seen this before. Those corpses are goblins. They were eaten by their own.”

“Can we…just go now?” Dorian’s voice was hard and low in volume. His eyes studied the path behind them, then ahead.

“Cannibalism?” Iron Bull’s eye fixed on Ozra.

The shorter man nodded. “When food is scarce, goblins are known to feast on the…weaker citizens of their tribe.”

“Usually, they stay down low,” Vek said. “All the times we’ve taken this shortcut through the
mines, we never encountered them.” His hand wanted to go for his sword, instinctively. “They must be very hungry.” The dwarf’s voice sifted out as a whisper.

“Again…can we go now?” Impatience coated the Altus’s tone.

“That’s a good idea,” Solas said.

Joswen started them onward. The level of wariness within the group had heightened. Khaz eron Thrumnaz terminated at a set of wide stone steps, and they moved down to the path, which bent out long to the left, putting them right along the chasm again. Chunks of lumin glowed in the rock face across the darkness, with smaller bits paved into the path itself. The elf halted and turned, addressing Hannibal and his people.

“This is where the path gets thinner, no more than five feet wide until it swings back inward. We’ll be traveling this stretch for almost an hour, so let’s break here for a few minutes. Relieve yourselves, take in water, whatever you need. This is the most dangerous part of the trail, and we won’t be stopping.”

(*)

Single-file and with a few feet of space between them, the party members traversed The Talon, named so by human travelers to describe the long curve created by the narrow section that swung out and around to join back up with the trail. The Talon was disconcerting because it overlooked the abyss.

Ayla had traveled it four times total, and each time, she’d been immersed in shadows, gripping her brother’s hand, running her other hand gently over the rock wall to her right or left, depending on which way they headed. She’d had smell, hearing, and touch to let her experience The Talon as Elemin led her along. Now, she walked behind Bull in the same manner, their hands clasped, hugging the wall as closely as she could while maintaining a good pace. Only this time, she could see. Magnus walked behind them to spot her, as he’d done the other times.

“Oh…” Ayla’s mouth parted and her eyes beheld the darkness, just a short distance away. She gulped and took in a sharp breath. “This is one time where I wish I didn’t have sight.”

Iron Bull carefully peered around at her. Being so broad and with such a large horn-span, he had to be mindful of scraping them on the rock. For him, five feet of walking space was like trying to balance on a wooden plank. He supposed he couldn’t complain, however, since he preferred the openness of The Talon to those tiny, low tunnels and passages that made him feel as if his big ass would get wedged in.

“It’s alright, Naaremma,” he said softly. “Just keep a tight hold of my hand and continue walking. You’re doing good. I got you.”

Bats hollered and flapped from below, carried on the updraft of a damp-smelling breeze.

Dorian scowled, his robes whipping around his legs. “Amatus, I know you have business and such back in Skyhold, but I must insist that we take the long way back once we’ve visited this mysterious location.”

Ahead of him, Hannibal chuckled. “Whatever you want, my love.”

(*)

Like Joswen said, the narrow path converged with the main trail within the hour, and they hit a gentle incline that curled to the right. Foliage began to spring up–some grass and weeds here, sprigs of elfroot and embrium there, nobs of different fungi.

There also came the constant rumble of water.

“The Dinrost Falls.” Ayla grinned up at Iron Bull. “They’re not far now.”

Joswen led them down a bit further still, the passage becoming narrow for the last hundred feet, forcing them into a single line again. They slipped through an opening that was far too low for Bull’s liking, putting them in a spacious cavern. Plant-life thrived there, growing up the walls as far as they could see, until the shadows above swallowed everything. A run of waterfalls poured from the cliffs on the far side, forming a semicircle and forcing the trail to run to the right.

The Dinrost Falls were a spectacular thing to behold, and the dwarves had decided to enhance their presence by embedding various colored hunks of lumin in the rock behind them. Dim lights of different sizes shimmered behind the coursing cascades of water, lending an almost otherworldly tone to the cavern.

“Wow!” Ayla breathed. “It’s beautiful!”

“It sure is something,” Bull smiled down at her.

“I’m happy you get to see it.” Elemin moved close and kissed her cheek. “I’ve always wanted you to.”

Hannibal’s people observed the Dinrost for a moment, then they continued. The path was much wider, though they still had to tread carefully, since it fell away on one side. The fall wasn’t nearly as drastic, however, as that back at the Talon. Perfectly clear pools of water spotted the cave floor.
twenty or thirty feet below, created by the falls. The dwarves had embedded lumin stones in the bottom of some pools in several areas, adding to the etherealness of the place.

“If we didn’t have to endure that gaping maw at the Talon, I wouldn’t mind using this shortcut on the way back, just so I could see this place again,” Dorian voiced softly.

“I know what you mean, Sparkler. Definitely my favorite part of all this so far.”

The mage slipped Varric a smile, but the mirth was short-lived.

Joswen held up a hand to halt them, his prominent features hardening into a scowl. He released his bow and an arrow. “Ahead.”

Ozra readied his dual blades, teal gaze taking in the horde of goblins blocking the path. “Shit.”

The others entered battle mode instantly. Iron Bull instinctively placed himself ahead of Ayla, keeping her mostly behind him.

“Behind us!” Sophitia called.

More of the creatures were filing on the path, dropping down from the ceiling on ropes as lithe and agile, crawling up from below, skittering down the walls too. The eerie sound of clattering teeth filled the area, the goblins eying the group of delicious morsels with hungry yellow eyes, licking their lips. Some of them screeched excitedly.

“Form up!” Hannibal ordered. “Joswen, your people take forward, mine will handle the rear.”

“Understood.”

The warriors assumed their places.

Iron Bull led Ayla to the rock wall and his eye fixed solidly on her. “Stay right here, Naaremma, no matter what you hear.”

“Alright,” she answered shakily.

The man stroked her cheek and hurried into formation with the others. Plunged instantly into shadows, Ayla cowered to the wall, blind eyes dragging up the path to where her brother, Jos, Vek, Maggy, Ozra, and Sophi began to engage the goblins. Her eyes swung the opposite direction where her husband, Hannibal, Dorian, Solas, and Varric took on another horde.

Joswen poised to the side of his group, letting arrows fly, catching one goblin in the eye as it shuffled at them, screaming, somewhat emaciated hands outstretched, its ribs showing beneath the tattered rags it wore. He sent an arrow into the throat of another goblin.

Ozra and Sophitia covered the right half of the path, the woman expertly using her shield and sword, holding the things back. She swiped, dove, and stabbed, burying her blade in a soft, pale belly. Magnus, Vek, and Elemir covered the outer edge of the path. The battlemage wielded his blade then, staff secured to his back. While he was a creature of magic, he enjoyed swinging his broadsword in combat more, though if it looked like they’d get overwhelmed, he would switch up and go elemental on the ugly, little things.

On Hannibal’s side, he and Bull took point, two Qunari reaver powerhouses spinning and slicing through the horde of chittering teeth and sharp claws. Dorian, Solas, and Varric formed a line at their rear, attacking at will.

Iron Bull roared and swung his great axe, cleaving a goblin nearly in two, the thing’s mushy guts exploding from its ravaged torso, splattering sloppily to the ground. He flipped his weapon and used the haft to harshly budge a few of them back, kicking out to catch one in the face.

“These little shits just keep on coming!” he yelled, his eye shooting upward to the shadows. “More inbound! They’re running down the wall! AHHH-haaaa!” The Bull taunted his enemy, then cycloned his axe around several times, killing seven goblins in a matter of seconds. He managed to steal a look back at Ayla, who was right where he left her, listening with frantic, enlarged eyes. She was safe so he kept fighting.

A second after Iron Bull’s attention left the woman, one goblin poked its head up over the far edge of the path. It looked left to Joswen’s group, then right to Hannibal’s. They were all occupied. It focused on the scared, huddled woman ahead, her back to the stone wall. Slowly, the goblin pulled itself up onto the path, followed by two others. The three of them crept for her, licking their ragged, thin lips, sharp teeth glistening with saliva.

Ayla’s mind was on her husband mostly. She knew he was a master on the battlefield, yet she would always worry for his safety in times like this. Her dulled vision was fixed in his direction, listening to him and the others. Movement, subtle and faint, caught the edge of her foggy sight, causing her to reflexively look that way. Her breathing quickened. She could make out one or two shadow-shapes advancing on her…and they weren’t familiar. She gasped.

But before she could scream, the lead goblin attacked, leaping forward. It took hold of her fluffy hair and yanked, forcing her to her knees. The other two grabbed Ayla’s arms and they began dragging her for the edge. The woman screamed, kicking her legs. Everyone looked her way when they could. Elemir’s heart raced. He and his group were completely swamped with the creatures. Still, he started hacking his way through them as quickly as possible so he could tend to
his sister.

Iron Bull immediately spun and his eye widened wildly. With his back to them, a couple of goblins jumped and latched themselves to his body, one of them biting down on his arm. The Qunari’s enraged war cry trembled out powerfully. He charged for the wall running along the path, turning at the last minute to mash the goblins into it, effectively dismounting them, then he sprinted for Ayla.

Even as Bull hurried towards her, Ayla began to act on instinct, fear. She activated her power siphon, directing it towards the first source of magic she could think of—Magnus. The battlemage immediately crumpled to his knees, groaning, eyes squeezing shut. Ayla’s body glowed as she harnessed his energy. The goblins were quite surprised when all three of them lifted into the air with their intended prey, spinning slowly in place. Then, she discharged the power, delivering a forceful kinetic blast, the radius great enough to send Bull flying to his back. The three goblins scattered in multiple directions…and Ayla tumbled over the ledge, splashing into the water below.

Iron Bull bolted to his feet. “NOOO!” He dropped his axe, running for the ledge while unlatching the armor from his chest and left arm. Icy dread like he’d never experienced seized him when he saw her floating beneath the surface, backlit by the gentle glow of blue lumin stones. Bull leapt in.

When Ayla hit the water, the breath was knocked from her, but still she kept her mouth tight, fighting the urge to inhale. She sank towards the glow that trimmed the edges of her blind sight, arms spread, dress billowing around her. Her lungs burned for the gift of air, longed for it, but before she gave in and took a breath, a solid arm linked her and she was being pulled upward, away from the pretty light.

They broke the surface and Ayla instantly gasped in some air, coughing and sputtering. She flailed weakly. Iron Bull shuddered with relief. She was breathing.

“It’s alright, Ayla. I got you. You’re safe now.”

The man swam them for the nearest rocky bank, lifting her in his arms when the water became shallow enough. He sat and held her close, nuzzling. Bull was rattled. He could’ve lost her just then, and it was the most sinking, scary, empty, alarming feeling in the world.

Ayla clung to him, the subterranean climate eliciting shivers from her. “I n-n-never learned t-t-to sw-sw-swim.”

An incredulous expression drew over Bull’s features, and he shook his head at her, smiling gently. She seemed rather calm, considering she could’ve drowned. “We’ll have to fix that then.”

Up above, Elemir and Dorian stood at the edge. The sounds of fighting were still present as was the goblins’ chatter.

“Is she alright?” the ranger called, his face frantic.

Bull nodded. “Yes. Just cold and a little shaken.”

“Thank the Maker,” Dorian breathed.

“What’s going on up there?”

“The goblins have been thinned enough that they’re beginning to retreat,” Elemir answered. “This is only temporary, however, so we need to move forward. They won’t take long to regroup.”

The Qunari nodded again, then rose, taking a soaked Ayla up in his arms.

(*)

Little more than two hours of travel got them to what was called the Crossroads. It was a huge area, the platform shaped like half a circle, a good vantage point because nothing, not even goblins, could sneak up on them. Seven paths webbed out from it, leading into the vast network of passages and tunnels created by the dwarves of ancient times. Some of the paths were crumbled and broken, destroyed, denying all travel. Lumin stones lined the ground and the rock walls.

Elemir’s people had a cache there too, behind a hidden panel of stone. The ranger pressed a secret sequence of blocks in the wall, and the stone slid in and to the side, revealing a spacious compartment. From there, they retrieved sleep rolls, dried foods, water, and stocked wood. It wasn’t long before a fire burned. Sophitia doubled as a healer. She tended to the bite on Bull’s arm, applying herbs and poultice so it wouldn’t get infected. He thanked her after she bandaged it.

Once Ayla’s people took some more time to fuss over her, making sure she was alright, the woman settled on a low stone beside her husband. She sighed. “Again, I’m so sorry, Magnus. I…”

“It’s okay there, love. You did what you had to. The goblins would’ve eaten you otherwise.” He offered a tender smile.

Iron Bull’s arm hugged her closer. “You need to get out of those clothes. I guess we both do.”

All eyes went to the couple, and Bull realized the only sound came from snapping embers in the fire pit. He rolled his eye, smirking at them.
“I didn’t mean for it to sound that way.”

“Yeah, sure you didn’t,” quipped Varric, presenting a small smile.

“I can dry your clothes, if you like,” Dorian offered. “A simple, low-level fire spell will do the trick. Of course, you’ll have to take them off first.” He grinned.

Iron Bull’s eye fixed on a fallen shamble of large stones less than a hundred feet away. It had been a statue once and would serve as a suitable barrier for privacy. He hefted his and Ayla’s traveling bags, then led her for the spot.

She stood by silently while he removed one of two extra dresses and a pair of panties from her bag, and a backup pair of pants from his. Iron Bull saw that she looked a little disheartened. His large hands gripped her shoulders, rubbing.

“Naaremma?”

She shook her head. “I’m so useless sometimes. I can’t fight, I can’t swim, and without you, I can’t even see. I will always need someone to protect me because I can’t do it myself. I’m so… weak…” her voice trailed.

“Hey, now. Don’t talk like that.” Bull wrapped her in the warmth of his arms. “Yes, you’re physically delicate, but you are not useless. I need you just as much as you need me, Kadan.” His eye fixed very seriously upon her, the backs of his fingers drawing along the perfect curve of her jaw. “I can’t live without you, for a man cannot live without his heart.”

Ayla’s eyes brimmed with tears, and she snuggled into his chest, face buried. “Why do you always do this, make me cry with your lovely words?”

“Woman, I only speak what’s true.” He chuckled softly, holding her dearly to him, eye closed.

(*)

The last half-day of their trip was uneventful, save for a run-in with three giant spiders, which Dorian found most unamusing. They emerged from the other side of Grozmare Mines with a few hours left before complete nightfall. Down the hills and beyond the moors spread the immense, lush green beauty of the Brecilian Forest.
The Secret of the Brecilian

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It grew dusky by the time they reached the Brecilian Passage. Taking the road south would wind them down and around the tail of the Southron Hills back west, and going north would eventually land them in Denerim, with about four days of travel. Joswen led them eastbound along the Passage, cutting through the moors. Ahead and to the north and south, thinner areas of the Brecilian Forest covered the land, many of the trees towering and majestic like those found in the Emerald Graves, though these were more the redwood variety.

They left the moors, abandoning the road when it turned north, traversing a spacious field of high grass, going directly for the forest. Darkness had encroached the land by the time they entered the tree line, having officially reached the Brecilian.

“Just a little further to the outer campsite,” Joswen said over his shoulder, watchful eyes skimming everyone in the party, lingering on Solas. He knew certain people would be pleased to see him. Joswen wondered at the coincidence that Solas should be chosen to accompany this journey.

Linked at the arm with Iron Bull, Ayla observed all she could. The smells and sounds of the Brecilian Forest weren’t all she had to go by now. The place really was beautiful, even shrouded in night’s shadows. Her piercing eyes lifted to behold the moon hanging beyond the treetops. Distracted, she tripped and stumbled on an extended root. Bull’s sharp reflexes kept her on her feet.

“You alright?” he asked, then added softly, “You’re getting tired. Here…”

Before she could protest, Bull lifted her in his arms. Ayla sighed. “You don’t have to carry me, my darling. I was looking up at the sky when I should’ve been looking ahead.” Her smile produced lovely dimples. “You’re already carrying our bags and your weapon.”

Iron Bull chuckled, eye swinging to his wife, clutched securely to him. “I promise you, I’m fine. Besides, Joswen said it won’t be long.”

“No, it won’t be. It never is when we travel this direction for the trading post.” Ayla stole a quick glance and saw none of the others really paying attention to them. She looped her arm around his neck, caressed his strong, handsome, bearded jawline, and nuzzled her lips to his. She traced her finger along one pointed ear and whispered, “Tomorrow night’s camp will have tents.”

Bull couldn’t hinder the fire that began as a little flicker in his loins. He worked to keep desire’s flames from burning too brightly just yet, summoning his disciplined control. He lowered his voice too. “Mm, nice. I might have to gag you, though, to lessen the noise.”

Ayla giggled, drawing Elemir’s attention. The ranger spared a look in their direction.

There was no discernible path upon which to travel. Joswen and his people seemed to just know where to go, and that made sense because they’d journeyed within the Brecilian Forest many times. Of Hannibal’s group, disregarding Ayla, Solas was the only one who’d gone there before, though it had been many years since the elf ventured into those lush, lively thickets, and that had been to travel within the northern sector in route to Denerim. Not even during his existence as Fen’Harel did he have much reason to go into this forest with its grandiose trees and overtly whimsical atmosphere. He’d heard the stories of Aut’lu Mena, but had dismissed them as superstitious lore created by highly imaginative minds. Being there within the Brecilian’s boundaries again, Solas was rediscovering the ancient beauty of the area. It very much reminded him of a time when elves weren’t the defeated, underestimated, mistreated beings they’d grown to be. The Brecilian Forest was, strangely, more like home.

(*)

That night, they assembled camp in a very well-hidden cave. A high, dense wall foliage with vines wrapping and weaving through it made a natural barrier in front the mouth. Joswen stepped into this greenery and disappeared for a moment, grabbing on some rope, which he tugged. The middle section of the foliage wall swung up and in, granting passage.

Elemir entered first, and everyone else followed. Magnus was the last in line and once he entered, Joswen did, releasing the line to bring the movable plant barrier back down. The cave was bare and plain, clean. Cache crates lined one curved wall, containing weapons, blankets, extra armor, clothing, dried foods, sleep rolls, and other useful things. The supplies included two barrels of fresh water. A fire pit marked the center of the large cave, old ashes scattered within it. One other passage attached to the cave, providing access to a lesser cave containing a mineral pool. The area was used for washing up, if desired, rather than for drinking water.

Iron Bull’s eye roamed the space, encroached predominantly in darkness with only Dorian’s, Solas’s, and Magnus’s staffs generating light by way of luminance spells. Where their glow hit the stone walls, the Qunari saw that natural air chutes provided steady ventilation. Ayla had never seen the details of the cave, though she’d camped there many times. Her teeth flashed white in the semi-dark, a bright smile.

Bull lifted a brow, her smile infectious enough that he conjured one of his own. “What?”
Oh, nothing. I’m just happy to actually see the journey this time. The Brecilian Forest is so beautiful. I had always heard the owls calling out, and tonight I got to see them with their glowing eyes sitting on low branches.” Ayla squeezed his hand, face set to his arm, eyes on his. “Because of you, I can see it all. Thank you.”

His chuckle coursed out in resonant waves. “I’m honored to be your eyes.”

She answered with a soft giggle.

“Okay, you know the drill, Arrows,” Joswen addressed his people. “Let’s get a fire going. I’ll trek forward a bit, get a report from the scouts and send word ahead.”

“Right,” Elemrí said. “Vek, Ozra, you’re with me.”

“You guys going to get firewood?” Varric queried.

Elemrí nodded.

“I’ll go too then. I like making myself useful.”

“Yes, take advantage. It’s such a rare occurrence for him, being useful,” Dorian tossed in good nature, sending a half smirk, half smile at Varric.

The four men left the cave, with Joswen falling in after them. Bull put his and Ayla’s bags down so she could sit on them while he tended to their sleeping spot. He joined Magnus by the array of crates, the battlemage already digging himself out a bedroll. Iron Bull removed two, took them to a place around the fire pit, and set them up. He led Ayla to hers, and the woman immediately removed her boots, glad to have her feet in the open.

It wasn’t long before the others returned with fuel for the fire. Dorian flicked his wrist and ignited the pit by sparking the kindling. Flames shoved back the darkness, painting elongated shadows on the cave wall. Bull wasn’t on the watch rotation that night. He made a hefty plate of dried goods, bread, and fresh plums, and once he and Ayla shared it, they settled in. Bull stretched his long form out on the bed roll. With her furs right next to his, partly overlapping, Ayla curled into his side, wrapped in a blanket. She wiggled her toes happily, staring blindly into the flames, eyelids getting heavy.

Iron Bull slipped one hand behind his head and studied the rock ceiling. His mind churned over and over the tumble she took into that pool, how he could’ve lost her…just like that. A great sigh seeped from him, silent but felt by Ayla. The woman rolled over to face him, touching a bare part of his arm. She merely smiled softly in the dimness. The couple shared an understanding, communicating with feelings and mental inflections, the link initiated by her. He was experiencing anger, fear, and guilt, and Ayla mentally assured him that everything was fine, sending calm vibrations. Bull’s lips swept her brow, his eye fixed on her. No matter how many emotions emanated from him, love overpowered them all. She felt it as clearly as if she stood beneath the sun on a perfect summer’s day, enjoying the welcome heat on her skin.

Ayla reciprocated the potent emotion, then cozied into his side and fell asleep.

Bull shut his eye but slumber eluded him for the moment. He listened acutely to the others talking.

Hannibal addressed Solas across the fire. “Have you encountered Xena again?”

“No, but I’ve looked for her.” This, at least, was true. The elf had spent almost every night in the Fade, hoping to learn more about the warrior princess firsthand.

“And what of Ares? Has he paid you any visits?”

The others around the fire listened secondarily to their conversation, treating it kind of like background noise. Elemrí’s group had been briefed about the God of War and his intentions, though they’d yet to come face to face with any of his minions. Solas didn’t miss the accusatory flare in Hannibal’s questions. His eyelids lowered faintly, periwinkle depths unswaying from the Inquisitor. The elf expertly kept his voice calm and loose, though the words formed tightly on the back of his tongue. The Qunari was suspicious, and Solas needed to alleviate that mistrust.

“I haven’t seen him. The Anchor was a tremendous gain, and he’s no doubt learning how to use it, gauging its boundaries and abilities. I don’t think he’ll make contact for a while, though I could be wrong.”

Hannibal’s firelit features untensed after a moment, and he nodded. He wished Iron Bull sat at the fire with them so he could get a look at Solas’ face, his eyes, perhaps determine if he lied or not. He kissed Dorian goodnight, then headed outside with Sophitia to guard the hidden cave entrance for their watch. When it was time, they’d wake up Solas and Ozra.

What the Inquisitor didn’t know was that his one-eyed friend listened closely to the exchange where he lay on his back. From what Bull could tell, Solas spoke true. The tones and small details in the sound of his voice revealed as much. Still, the slender man hid something from them, and that made Bull uneasy.

The Warrior tuned down everything else and focused on his Oona’s soft snores, her face partly buried in his armpit, breaths expelling in gentle, warm puffs.

(*)
In Ares’s world, over three weeks passed since Xena and Gabrielle met up with Autolycus and Joxer. The passage from Greece to southwestern Siberia was a physically grueling one. The warrior princess and the bard traveled to the cooler place a few times on business with the Aponi Amazons that occupied part of a vast forest there. That’s where they headed now, back to Yakut’s tribe and Xena’s daughter Eve.

Xena rode Argo in pace with Gabrielle’s mount. Each of them wore heavy coats and winter gear. Gentle snowfall fluttered the world, gradually adding to the two feet that already caked and coated everything. Tall, piney trees rose to either side of the road, their needled branches laden with ice and snow.

“It’s beautiful up here, huh?” Xena said.

“I like it.” Gabrielle smiled brightly over at her.

“Are you kidding? I hate snow. I’m freezing my coconuts off back here,” called Autolycus, glaring forward from under the fur brim of his hat (he had the same low tolerance for the cold as a certain Tevinter mage).

Joxer rode beside him. He grinned like a loon, tongue out and head tilted back.

Autolycus smirked at him. “What are you doing, goofball?”

“Catching snowflakes. It’s fun. You should try it.”

“Um…no…thanks.” The handsome thief slowly shook his head at the other man. “Sometimes I wish I was as blissfully ignorant as you.”

Joxer shrugged and went back to snaring big, fluffy flakes.

Xena and Gab laughed over their shoulders at the two guys. They’d been riding through Aponi territory for the past few hours, and Xena knew what to look for—very subtle markers carved in the trunks of certain trees. She’s spotted three so far. And just like clockwork, as she suspected…

A group of women dressed warmly in various types of furry garb sifted onto the road ahead of them, and most looked familiar to both Xena and Gab. The warrior princess lifted her hands and performed the proper greeting by pressing her palms together, then twisting and rolling her wrists.

One Aponi stepped forward, her booted feet crunching through the snow. She smiled broadly.

“Welcome back. I’m sure Eve will be very happy to see you.”

“Good. I’ve missed her so much. How’s she doin’?”

“Quite well,” Loziq said. “Running things, as usual. We’d expect no less, considering whose daughter she is.”

They laughed, then Loziq’s gaze narrowed at the men. “Who are they?”

“Friends.” Xena gestured to them. “Autolycus and Joxer. They wanted to help in the situation with Aphrodite. I know where Ares is, but I’m going to need a Titan-sized miracle to get there. I think Yakut could help.”

Loziq’s stride carried her closer to the men, and she peered up at them. A moment passed before she nodded, eyes roaming over Autolycus. She grinned. “We don’t usually allow penises into our village, save for the ones that are born there.”

The roguish man chuckled. “Well, then,” he tipped a nod to Joxer, “it’s safe to let this guy in, if you know what I mean.” He winked.

“Hey!” Joxer frowned. “I’m very…” he cleared his throat, “…manly.”

Loziq and the other Amazons laughed, then she continued. “But, as friends of Xena and Gabrielle, it would be an honor to have you as guests, though we’ll be keeping your weapons for the duration of your stay.” She waved an arm quickly, summoning a guard forward, to which both males handed their swords and other blades. Loziq winked at Autolycus, then turned on her heel.

“Aponi, move out.”

Hubba-hubba.” Autolycus waggled his brows, nudging his mount forward with the others.

(*)

They left the main road and traveled for half an hour through the forest. The snow wasn’t as deep in this area due to the denseness of the trees; their proximity to one another shielded the forest floor from much of the snow. Xena and her people had dismounted and led their horses through the surreal landscape of slender, ash-colored trunks.

A wolf howled in the distance, and Joxer’s head jerked in the direction. He gulped.


“Uh…no, not at all. I was just…um…you know…testing out my reflexes.” Joxer nodded. He decided he needed a change of mood. “So…you think we’ll be able to get to Ares?”
Auto’s dashing features dropped noticeably, veiled in seriousness. “Honestly, I don’t know. Xena said he’s in a different world. A different world. I mean, it’s not impossible, but I would say it’s damn sure improbable.”

“Hm.” Joxer nodded. “Say we find a way to this other world—would you go?”

“Yes. You saw what’s happening to Aphrodite, and she’s one of my favorite gods, so I want to help her. Also, I want to help Xena. I’ve been in some sticky predicaments from which she got me unstuck. At the very least, I owe her my life. She’s a great friend. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“I hear you. I feel the same way. I might not be the best warrior, but if they manage to open a door to this Thedas place, I’m going with them.”

Autolycus had to admire the tenacity and dedication of the other man. Joxer genuinely wanted to help, though his questionable blade skills probably wouldn’t get him very far. If Xena, Gabrielle, and other people hadn’t been there at the right time, the walking hazard of a man would’ve met the end of someone’s blade a while ago. The one thing Joxer did have going for him was the love he carried for his friends; it was unflinching.

The terrain shifted after a while, inclining. Loziq’s group took point and rear, guarding all sides. They traveled the low hill until they rose high enough to see above the treetops, the forest spreading for miles and miles in all directions. Now, of course, without the cover of the trees, they felt the bite of the wind. Luckily, the path led between two rocky banks, leveling out and trailing back into more dense forest. They were close to the Aponi village, indicated mostly by the camouflage guard posts nestled in the trees. Smoke rose and dispersed into the whitewashed sky.

They reached the main gate, warrior women standing on duty atop it and on the ground. All eyes examined Joxer and Autolycus incisively, some of the women even sneering.

“Tough crowd,” Autolycus spoke under his breath.

They passed through the gate into a plaza-like area. Lodging huts and stables sat to the right. Xena nodded in greeting to the Aponi who came forward to take Argo’s reins. She waited for Xena to remove her traveling bag, then led the horse off. Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus did the same.

“Don’t cause any trouble, fellas,” Xena’s potently blue eyes fixed on the men. “I’ve vouched for you, so if you do get out of line, I’m the one who has to answer.”

She hardened her eyes but didn’t relinquish the thin smile. “And you’ll have to answer to me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Joxer and Autolycus said at once.

“Good. C’mon.” The warrior princess turned, her heavy, long, dark coat flaring. She fell in next to Loziq with Gabrielle to her other side. “I would appreciate if you informed Yakut that I request an audience with her. For now, I’m going to see my daughter.”

“Will do. I’ll come get you when she’s ready.”

“Thanks.”

Xena’s stride was long and sure. She tipped nods of greeting to those she passed. Others unofficially saw Xena as Amazon in the sense that she was a great warrior who happened to be a woman. She’d never been part of a tribe, but, under extenuating circumstances, Gabrielle had. Long story short, she’d accidently killed an Amazon queen years ago and had to take her place, then she was challenged and chose Xena as the warrior to represent her and fight in her place. Upon Xena’s victory, Gabrielle was deemed safe, but demoted to Amazon princess, while another, more suited woman took the throne. Overall, the outcome served everyone’s needs.

They reached a hut with plumes of smoke floating from the hole in the center of the roof. Xena’s heart swelled and she smiled greatly, opening the door.

“Xena!” Amarice grinned from where she kneeled over a simmering kettle. The others filed in after her, quickly filling the one-roomed domicile, but it was spacious enough to accommodate them. Joxer didn’t lower enough and bumped his helmet on the doorway. He growled. “Gabrielle, Joxer! And…?”

“Autolycus, Rogue and Thief Extraordinaire.” He grinned broadly, bowing.

Xena rolled her eyes, smiling at him. “Keep it in your pants, Prince Charming.”

“Just being friendly, Xena. Being out in the sticks doesn’t mean one should put his class and mannerisms on the back burner.”

Amarice chuckled. She pointed at the crib. “It’s about time for Eve to get up. She’ll love having her mommy to wake up to.”

Xena almost released a giddy squeal. She quickly removed her coat, then squatted by the fire to warm her hands, rubbing them together, her eyes lovingly fixed on the crib and the child nestled in her blanket.

The others watched in silence as the warrior princess went to the crib. She began by tenderly rubbing the baby’s back to rouse her. Eve shifted and awakened, coughing once.
“Oh, yes, mama’s sweet girl,” Xena cooed, picking her up carefully. She cradled the child to her bosom, lowering into a chair.

Eve gurgled, then smiled brightly, her pink, dimpled hand grasping at the dark fall of Xena’s hair. The woman’s eyes glistened with love. She hugged her child close, shutting her eyes, pressing kisses to her hair and brow. “Mama missed you sooo much, yes she did.”

“It’s times like these when I remember that Xena’s actually as soft and real as the next woman on the inside,” Autolycus remarked in a hindered voice, smiling at the warm scene along with everyone else.

Xena spent nearly two hours enjoying her daughter, catching up with Amarice, and settling in. Amarice hadn’t always been an Amazon. When the beautiful woman crossed paths with Xena and Gabrielle two years ago, she was overzealous, reckless, hard-headed. She’d always been searching for someplace to fit in, and with the help of her new friends, she met the Aponi. She passed their trials and the tribe welcomed her; she’d been living there happily ever since.

Of course, things never stopped long. Not for Xena. She showered Eve with kisses and left Amarice’s hut for the abode of the village shamaness–Yakut. Yakut’s place, circular like the rest of the housing, held more space. That’s because part of it was designated for her special meditation sessions. Members of the tribe visited her daily for such sessions, needing reprieve from physical stress or simply seeking spiritual elevation.

The two guards posted outside the door issued nods, and Xena reciprocated the gesture. She ducked just a bit, slipping through the curtain of beaded ropes, the little bits of shell and animal bone tinkering and tapping together. The inside was dim but legible. Yakut sat on a mat by the fire pit, eyes gleaming beyond her headdress.

“Welcome back, Xena,” the shamaness held her arms out.

Xena lowered on the mat in front of Yakut. She grabbed the other woman’s hands in greeting. “Gabrielle and I didn’t plan on returning so soon but, as I’m sure Loziq has already reported, we’ve located Ares.”

“Yes, she did.” Yakut’s head tilted. The lieutenant relayed the shortened version Xena recounted on their way to the village. “He’s in another world? How fascinating. And what of this otherworlder you met in the Void? What was he like?”

Yakut’s curiosity brimmed. She’d traversed the Void several times, but only when it was necessary. As a being of magic, the spirits and demons that lingered there automatically centered on her, and some of them weren’t very friendly, burdened by evils done to them that were never acknowledged, never atoned. Though she found the Void helpful for finding answers, dark as it could be at times, Yakut wasn’t very fond of the realm.

“His name is Solas, and his people are called elves. We talked for a short amount of time, but I’m sure humans occupy his world too, and probably other races.”

The Aponian mage’s eyes anxiously scoured Xena’s face. “What did he look like?”

Xena shrugged, lips quirking a smile. “Bald, pale, pointy ears. I suppose by elf or human standards, he could be considered handsome.”

“Ah…” the shamaness nodded slowly. She inhaled a deep breath and released it. “Alright, I need you to give me every detail from the moment you encountered…” she paused to recall, “…Solas in the Void, his suggestion for getting from our world to his.”

“Okay.”

So, Xena filled her in completely, specifically about Solas giving her access to his part of the Void, and that ancient room in Skyhold that currently served as home to something called an eluvian. The powerful mirror might be activated and opened by energizing its Void version.

(*)

The Brecilian Forest shown with a completely different kind of beauty in the daylight hours. Where nightfall highlighted an almost haunting environment painted in endless violets, fluorescent greens and blues, pockets of swirling mist, blinking fireflies, and nocturnal creatures calling back and forth, the forest’s days were filled with tranquil golds, rich greens, and a slew of other brilliant colors, as well as the constant tweets of songbirds. Gilded shafts of sunlight poked through the trees.

It all breathlessly captivated Ayla. She never imagined it could be so serenely gorgeous. Making sure to cast her eyes forward often so she didn’t trip again and give her husband reason to worry and fuss over her, the woman observed the forest in its entirety for the first time. There were trees with diameters so big that they might serve as houses. Massive toppled redwood trunks lay petrified in some places, tunnels carved through that could easily accommodate wagons.

Ayla wasn’t the only one taken aback by the Brecilian’s beauty. Hannibal and his people all studied their wondrous surroundings wordlessly, amazed. The Oona grinned while the entourage moved through a trunk-tunnel, the path laid with rocks. They came to an old stone bridge.
spanning a bubbling aqua-colored steam.

“It gets its color from algae,” Joswen said, pleased that he had people traveling with him whom he could educate about the Brecilian. It’d been a while since he could do that. “Come, friends. There is one more camp before we reach our destination.”

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Just as Ayla whispered in sexual taunting to her husband the previous night, the camp did have tents. And it was much larger and solidly established. Centered around a naturally eroded ring of great boulders, the camp served as a permanent station most likely, given its size and the fact that at least five tents spotted the area. One extra-large tent rose in the middle of all others, its flaps secured back to show a few tables inside, some crates and gear. People hunkered over the tables and conversed. The first thing that popped in Hannibal’s mind was war room. That’s what the tent was.

Many of the soldiers in the camp wore light leather armor and rich green hooded cloaks similar to Elemir’s. As they followed Joswen through camp, Iron Bull absorbed the surroundings, dissecting with his heightened Ben-Hassrath training.

“You notice there’s a lot of elves here, boss?”

“Yeah, though I figured that may be normal, considering Denerim is to the north and these woods are known to house various Dalish sects.”

“That’s what I thought too, at first, but how many Dalish do you know would work so smoothly beside other races?” He arched a dark brow. “They can barely stand city-raised elves, let alone the constant presence of humans, dwarves…” his eye slipped to Ozra, “…and qunari. There’s more going on here.”

“Warriors of all races serve our…home,” Elemir spoke. Auburn hair brushed over his pleasant face, tossed by the breeze, green eyes on Bull. “We’ve learned to set our differences aside and unite for a common purpose.”

“I’m guessing we’ll see just what that purpose is tomorrow, hm?” Dorian queried.

“Yes, when we reach our destination.” The ranger nodded, giving a little smile.

Within the hour, a few more tents went up for Hannibal and his group. Once again, they settled around one of the fire pits, enjoying a meal of fresh fennec stew with skillet bread. Solas, of course, made a meal of various vegetables and fruits.

“That was delicious,” Bull said, setting his bowl aside.

“It must have been, since you had three bowls, love,” Ayla replied, grinning at him.

“Hey, a man my size can only take so much of eating dried druffalo, berries, and nuts. I need more sustenance.”

Laughter hovered around the fire.

A human female stopped outside their friendly ring. She cleared her throat.

“Hey, Gibbs,” Magnus lifted a charming smile at her.

“Magnus.” The woman nodded, then addressed them all. “You guys have dishes? Trying to get them all done so I can head to bed soon.”

Everyone put their dirty bowls, plates, cups, and silverware into the box she carried. After she had everything, Gibbs strode off, mumbling, “I hate dish duty…”

Ayla stretched, small hands reaching to link Bull’s arm. She tugged on it, sending a sensuously coated look at him. “It’s getting late, and you have the perimeter mid-watch. We should head to sleep.”

He grinned at her and nodded.

“Something tells me sleep is the last thing you’re going to get,” teased Magnus, reflected flames dancing in his brown eyes.

“Yeah, you might be right,” Iron Bull returned while helping a wildly blushing Ayla to her feet. The couple bid goodnight, then headed to their tent.

Magnus huffed a sigh, features bearing a wry smile. “It’s still a little strange for me, seeing them together, not that it’s a bad thing. He is exactly what she needed, yet…” the battlemage shook forth a slight chuckle, “I guess I just never thought I’d see the day when my little Ayla would become a woman.”

“Pff.” Sophitia watched him casually across the wavering flames, a smile tilting her lips. “She’s almost twenty-three; she’s been a woman for some years. You boys never stopped seeing her as a child, but I did. Ayla’s reached the point where she doesn’t need us to protect her anymore. She’s found her Warrior, and that was the point of it all, no? Bringing her on the outside to find him?”

Sophi’s words were like a little knife of realization picking back the scab of denial. It struck them
all deeply. She, Vek, Magnus, and Elenir stared a bit sadly into the writhing, whipping fire. Yes, their “little Ayla” was as grown as they were, doing adult things, like not-so-slyly pulling her husband away for sex. It wasn’t something any of them wanted to dwell on, especially, Elenir, but it was a fact. Ayla had the right to live her life like any other person, and in the end, they only wanted her safe and happy. Collectively, they believed she had those things, and more, with Iron Bull.

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Ayla slipped inside and felt her way forward, crawling over the furs of their sleeping space. She removed her boots and waited. Iron Bull ducked into the tent, secured the flap, then sat and kicked his boots off.

“Ah…” Grinning, he laid out on his back beside her. “I’m glad these tents are the big variety. Lots of room.”

“Indeed,” she purred, small hands already wiggling under his shirt, running hungrily over hard, unyielding muscle. Ayla climbed atop him, nails scraping lightly down the velvet-covered rock of his toned stomach. She licked her lips and began undoing his belt.

Bull observed her eagerness, blood coursing through him, making its mad dash for his cock. Ayla rubbed against its hardness, such a welcome sensation to her sensitive lady parts. Her panties were already soaked. Bull raised his hand, letting it roam through the soft avalanche of her hair, its paleness transformed into white-gold by the kiss of lantern light. He sat up, clasped her protectively to him, and captured her delicious lips, dipping his tongue into her mouth. They kissed heatedly, sharing one warm breath between them.

His shirt was specially made, as most of them were, designed with an adjustable flap that allowed for a larger head hole. Ayla undid the tie, pushing the flap aside, and he broke their kiss but not eye contact, pulling the shirt up. The woman giggled and helped when the garment became snagged on a horn in his rush to get it off. Bull tossed the shirt away, a rumble of desire escaped when his lips pressed to her neck, followed by the erotic tickle of his tongue. Explosions rocked through her loins, small hands clamping to his shoulders.

“Bull…yes…”

“Naaremma,” the single word spoken tenderly, lips grazing the patrician swoop of her throat.

They made love slow and hard that night, each of his thrusts plunging to the hilt. He wanted to surround himself with her, become lost in the sweet, light softness he had come to know so well, that he’d come to crave. Ayla answered his unfeigned passion in turn, locking her ankles behind his knees and her arms around his torso. His fingers embedded in the fall of her luxurious tresses, and he very gently tugged. Ayla quivered in his arms, tilting her head back, eyes fluttering closed. A cry of passion escaped when his lips pressed to her neck, followed by the erotic tickle of his tongue. Explosions rocked through her loins, small hands clamping to his shoulders.

Their pace quickened. Iron Bull’s hips slammed into hers; he’d found the rhythm that would bring them both to climax soon. She came first, biting into his shoulder to stifle her moan of release. The Qunari followed her, grabbing a fistful of fur and sheets, head back and eye rolling shut, burying himself as deep as he could go. He barely managed to contain his groan while he exploded inside her. His whole body loosened, trembling with orgasmic aftershocks. He gathered a few steady breaths and opened his eye to find her smiling up at him.

Ayla brought a hand up around his neck, stroking the column of muscle, going to the back of his head. She pulled him down for a lingering, sultry kiss, rubbing noses. Bull eased back to study her face.

“It…really scared me shitless when you went over that ledge. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“I know. I sense that. But everything turned out fine,” she said softly, eyes studying him in the pleasant dimness.

“That time, yes.” His great form sighed against her. “But what if something else happens? I can’t lose you, Ayla. I can’t…”

“Bull, my darling,” Ayla’s hand slid down his face, fingers brushing through his beard, “you can’t worry about ‘what ifs’. You can only do so much.”

“That’s not good enough for me. I’m not just your eyes, I’m your protector. My _job_ as your Warrior and your husband is to keep you safe.” He chuffed. “With the thing back in the mines and Ares, seems like I haven’t been doing so well.”

She conjured a smile. “Nonsense. You do everything you can to protect me, Bull. I told you back in Skyhold that I feel safest with you and I still stand by that. Now, _stop worrying_.

It quelled the franticness in his mind to speak things over with her, to get it out. Before Ayla, never in a handful of lifetimes did he think he’d develop a relationship like this, and he would die
before he gave her up. The other side of that was the overload of feelings that came from loving someone so much. Iron Bull found it stressful always wondering if he could do more to keep her happy and safe. Luckily, Ayla balanced it all when she did the simple things, like listening to him vent.

He kissed her and made to roll off.

Ayla’s arms and legs tightened. “I want to fall asleep with you inside me.” She nibbled his bottom lip, then yawned.

“As you wish.” Bull settled his weight, torso supported by his forearms, chest pressed to hers. A couple of minutes passed, and he groaned thickly, kissing her neck. “It’s not gonna stay soft much longer if you keep squeezing like that.”

Giggles erupted from her. She soon dropped into slumber.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Ayla shifted under him, demure lips curling a smile.

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The following morning, the travelers departed camp earlier than usual on horseback. The paths and trails were wide and clear enough for the mounts. Joswen informed them that they’d reach their destination around the noon hour, and as that time approached, the woods began to open further, the foliage retracting from the trail. Two hours after leaving camp, the path intersected a much broader road. They halted while another group of travelers—humans and elves—rode by in a wagon and two single riders on horseback.

“This is the Valdian Road. It leads to the Valdian Trading Outpost, and that’s where we’re going,” Joswen said.

“So…we came all the way over here to visit a trading hub?” One of Hannibal’s red brows shot up.

The elf flashed a smile of straight, white teeth. “You’ll see. Come.”

They led their mounts on to the Valdian Road and traveled its gradual eastbound curve. The sun hung directly overhead when they saw the first wooden signs announcing the trading post. A short distance ahead, a series of guard towers overlooked the forest and a huge, walled complex built in an open area between soaring redwoods. Iron Bull picked up the bustling sounds of commerce even before they entered the main gate. His eye slowly roamed the complex. There were buildings, huts, tents (lots of tents), and carts. The place was full of vendors, varying in race and gender. Most of the faces he saw belonged to elves, a good number of humans too. They passed a dwarven vendor specializing in axes, and Bull noted the fine craftsmanship. If he could ever find a good dwarven axe with a haft long enough to meet his specifications, he might just buy it.

The former Ben-Hassrath perked in the saddle when he spotted a group of Qunari, three females and a male. They saw him too, and only one of the females nodded. Given the quality of her attire, she was undoubtedly their leader, but they weren’t a group from the Qun. Most likely Vashoth, like Hannibal and Ozra.

Iron Bull returned the nod.

Ayla rubbed his hand and shifted in front of him. “I always knew there was a lot of people here when we came through. I didn’t realize how diverse a group, however.” She smiled brightly. “It’s quite exciting really.”

“Mm,” Bull said, lips nuzzling her hair.

“Okay,” Joswen started. He addressed Elemir. “You know the routine. I’ll go forward and brief them on our visitors.”

“Understood.”

Joswen gently kicked the flanks of his mount, and the horse headed in a different direction.

“This way,” Elemir said. “We’ll secure our mounts and move on foot for the rest.”

The ride to the stables was short, and once they left their horses with the caretakers, they followed Elemir through the sizable trading post. Solas wasn’t Ben-Hassrath, but he was watchful. His vision noted that most of the guards were of elven descent and that all guards, human or otherwise, wore a specific armor, the chest plate branded with a red bird. A cardinal.

“These guards,” Solas said, “they’re of your…organization, are they not?”

“Yes,” Elemir answered. Ozra, Sophitia, Vek, and Magnus had become mostly silent, walking behind Hannibal’s people. “We own the outpost, guard it. We uphold the law and order, monitor the trading foundations established by all the races who pass through.”

The elf nodded. “All the while making what I’m sure amounts to a sizable profit from all the commerce. That’s smart.”
Elemir led them to a less populated part of the outpost, most of the traffic left behind in the central bazaar. There were also more guards present. Every one they passed snapped to attention and issued a fist-over-chest salute to Elemir, to which he nodded in return. They approached another walled-off area with guards posted to either side of the gate. The wooden barrier eased inward for them.

“Where does this lead?” Iron Bull questioned.

But Ayla already knew, kind of. Though she’d dwelled in shadows most of her life, she’d made this journey several times, had come to know the stops, procedures, and formalities by listening recognizing shadows. “This is the special camp, right, El? Where we stay?”

The man sent her a gentle smile, nodding. “Yes.”

This inner area was only partially contained, as they noticed upon moving further in. There was no back wall. Instead, the area blended into the forest, a path cutting through the foliage and thickets, winding down a low incline. At the bottom stood a small campsite. It contained three tents, a fire pit, crates of supplies, and other things. Very simple. There was nothing else around but trees.

Varric turned to look back up the hill, then swung his vision to the camp. “Well, this is a little weird.”

“Please, this way,” Elemir said. The path continued forward on the other side of the quaint campsite. It led even further into the Brecilian Forest.

They followed him into the trees for another hundred meters or so…then Solas began to sense it first, the unmistakable grasp of magic, something much older than him. One by one, the rest of the group started feeling it. The forest shivered and blurred around them, surrounding them with brilliant light that swelled in intensity until it was the only thing they could see, like entering a pocket of existence where the tangible world slowed, then faded momentarily.

“Andraste’s Tits, what’s happening!” Dorian piped.

Hannibal grabbed his hand to reassure him.

“It’s alright,” Elemir said calmly. “You are being granted entry.”

The light eased back like a curtain. They all stood at the top of a low hill looking down into a basin of magnificent beauty. There were many structures varying in size and shape—the homes, businesses, and other establishments of the sanctuary’s occupants. It had all been built in and between the great trees. Five humongous redwoods rose in different parts of this new place, their trunks absolutely massive, with stairwells swirling up to different levels upon which more homes stood. Buildings on the ground and in the trees. Beautiful parks and arboretums decorated the place as well. The Brecilian Forest surrounded the sanctuary on all sides. Above it all was a blue sky streaked with puffy clouds. Very clearly, elvhen voices droned from somewhere in the hidden city, singing.

“This is…” Iron Bull didn’t have words.

“Pretty damn amazing,” Varric finished. He and the rest of the Inquisition party saw that a wall of tightly woven vines and plants loomed behind them now. “Guess we’re not going back that way.”

Beside Bull, Ayla swooned a bit, overwhelmed by the transition. The wards of the sanctuary had reasserted her memories of the place; they were stripped from her every time she left with Elemir and the others. Her vivid eyes widened, growing watery with realization. “I…know Elvhen! I know what they’re saying! It’s a greeting!” A vibrant smile bloomed on her face. “I’m home…”

Elemir, Magnus, Sophitia, Vek, and even Ozra watched Ayla’s reaction with delight, the replacement of her memories. Solas was more interested in what she said about speaking his language.

“Cara tye trulime quet lambe?” Do you truly speak my language?

Ayla turned to him, nodding. “Ni istima o lú o hinya.” I’ve been speaking since childhood.

“Tra’ulia…” Fascinating.

She looked to her brother, her family, eyes skimming them. “I remember everything. But…” Ayla shook her head, making her tresses sway, face painted in confusion, “…there are some things I still don’t understand.”

“I know,” Elemir rubbed her arm. “The time has come to tell all.” His eye flicked beyond her, and he gestured in the direction, broadening his smile. He, Magnus, Ozra, Sophitia, and Vek bowed briefly.

Ayla spun to behold with the others as an elven woman in red attire with flowing crimson locks ascended the hill to meet them. He feet were bare, and the short train of her dress appeared to billow in her wake, floating over the low carpet of moss blanketing the ground. Solas’s breath caught in his throat when they met eyes. He maintained silence for now and tried to look as stoic as ever.

The woman halted before the group, her eyes locked on Ayla, holding an expression of ultimate
adoration. She held her arms out. “My lovely child, it settles my heart to have you back home.”

“Lassalanta! You’re so…beautiful!” Ayla released Bull’s hand and fell into the woman’s tight grip, both women hugging. “I’m so happy to see you!”

“And I you, my dear. I—”

The elven queen sucked in a faint gasp. She pulled back and let her eyes drop for just a second between them, to Ayla’s abdomen. It was in the earliest stages, tiny and brand new, but there was no mistaking the second life force Lassalanta clearly sensed. While it thrilled her that the younger woman carried her Warrior’s child, Lassalanta knew Ayla wasn’t yet aware, early as the pregnancy was. But her man…he intentionally tried to plant his seed. The elf queen knew this too. To cover her surprise, she embraced Ayla again and laughed. The woman would realize soon enough.

“I’m just glad you’re safe.”

Ayla closed her blurred eyes, happily hugging the woman who’d been like a mother to her for as long as she could remember. “It feels wonderful to be home again.”

They broke apart and Ayla took her husband’s hand.

Lassalanta let her eyes rest on each newcomer. She initiated a short mind-link with Iron Bull when their gazes met, slipping a knowing smile.

Virile, aren’t you?

The Qunari blinked when her voice intruded his thoughts, confused by her words, but having his suspicions. He looked quickly left and right, then focused on Lassalanta again. Iron Bull would keep the mental remark between them for now. Lassalanta didn’t plan to say anything more about it, telepathically or otherwise. He and Ayla would discuss it between themselves when the time came.

The elf queen shifted her mind-link to Solas, the familiarity of old friends exchanged when they locked eyes.

Greetings, Fen’Harel. Do not worry, I won’t reveal who you are. In time, you’ll do that yourself.

After some thought, Solas nodded very faintly, the others so busy being glamourized by their surroundings that they wouldn’t notice the gesture. The Cardinal. I had always wondered where you disappeared to.

We will speak later. Lassalanta severed the mental link, then addressed them all. “I am Lassalanta, as you heard, and this is Hald’arun, The Hidden Wood. Joswen and my scouts have told me who you are. Please, come. Let us go someplace to talk. Accumulatively, I’m sure there are a thousand questions floating through your minds.”

Lassalanta began her elegant, graceful descent of the hill into the Wood, and they followed.
Hey, everyone. I just want to put it out there that I’m heading up to Sapporo for the Snow Festival on Monday and will be there for about three days for some R&R. With that being said, the next chapter may be a few days later than my steady once-a-week posting. Though, I’m sure I’ll probably get writing done while up there, since my fiction IS my Rest & Relaxation. :)

I really love the support you wonderful readers have shown since I started this thing four months ago. I’m having a blast and hope you are too. Many thanks to you all! :)
Behind the Scenes: Dorian Pavus

Chapter Notes

Yeah...so, it looks like I did get some writing done during my little R & R. *grins*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dorian the hipster, dressed in a sleek pair of slacks, suede boot-shoes, a button-up shirt with three-quarter sleeves, and purple suspenders. Full, dark hair was swooped into a dashing fauxhawk, lovely eyes traced in kohl. The beautifully handsome man picked a speck of lint from his pants and cleared his throat. Behind the dark-beige couch upon which he’d conduct his interview, the visual for the Fic was a bit different now. It featured Altus Dorian Pavus, posed for battle, gray-lavender eyes narrowed and dramatic, sparks of lightning force igniting his hands, makeup perfect; the other Fic stars lined up in the background, making Dorian the focus.

He eased an almost longing sigh, terribly wishing that his real life was as exciting and magical as the one he acted out. But, such was the way of things, wasn’t it? Couldn’t be satisfied even when you were satisfied. Or maybe that was just him.

The lights above the set brightened a bit, and the Interviewer walked up the short step to the stage. He smiled and took his chair. The cameras began rolling a few moments later.

“Dorian Pavus!” he exclaimed, and they shook hands. “Honor to have you here. It really is. The producers don’t tell me who I’m interviewing until I walk through the door, and they hand me a line of questions.”

Dorian chuckled. “That has to be dreadful, rushing around and such.”

“It’s not too bad. I come in knowing I’ll be having a one-on-one chat with somebody from the Fic, so I kind of like being surprised.” The Interviewer grinned broadly. “You’re absolutely perfect in the Fic and in person. Not a hair out of place.”

“Ah, well, I do try.” He twirled the end of his moustache.

“Alright, so let’s kick this thing off, eh?”

The out-of-character Altus flashed a sweet smile, nodding. “Let’s.”

“Before we get into the practical details of your role in the Fic, your interactions with your coworkers, and other little tidbits, I first want to talk about your involvement with the Young Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual Association. Being bisexual myself, I’ve actually been following some of your work, and you’re doing a lot for the young people.”

“Mm, yes,” Dorian nodded. “Let me start by saying, obviously, I’m gay. Growing up with that realization was confusing, as it would be for any young person. I knew before I was thirteen that I was attracted to males,” he said calmly, eyes skipping off in thought for a moment before returning to the Interviewer. “And, like a lot of people, I tried to hide or deny it, which is why my first sex partner was a girl in high school. I didn’t exactly hate it, but we didn’t stay together long because I simply wasn’t attracted to her, though she was a nice person. This is how I spent high school and some of college, getting into false relationships with females in an attempt to capture emotional and sexual satisfaction.”

Dorian’s words dropped off and he sighed, shaking his head. The smile he lifted at the camera was undeniably gorgeous and could maybe be classified as a hindered “smolder”. Dazzling eyes fixed on the Interviewer, the man completely wrapped in Dorian’s story.

“It wasn’t until half way through college that I said ‘fuck it’ and fully embraced my homosexuality, and it made me more comfortable. I never would’ve been happy with myself otherwise. This led to my work with the YLGBT Association. I attend rallies and assemblies, talking to young people, letting them know that it’s okay to feel lost and confused when it comes to their sexual preferences, and that the reason they’re scared is because they don’t know how others will react to them, and that’s normal. They should never feel ashamed or pressured into doing something extreme, since there will always be groups of people like them with whom they can relate. People they can seek guidance and friendship from.”

Dorian’s words dropped off and he sighed, shaking his head. The smile he lifted at the camera was undeniably gorgeous and could maybe be classified as a hindered “smolder”. Dazzling eyes fixed on the Interviewer, the man completely wrapped in Dorian’s story.

“The important thing is that young people embrace their lives and be comfortable with who they are. That is what’s going to make them truly happy, as I’ve learned, though it took me a while to really grasp. You see a lot of teens struggling with their sexual identities, and some of them think suicide is the way to deal with it. It really breaks my heart to hear of those instances, and that’s why I do what I do, speaking at the rallies and wherever else. I will continue to do it if it’ll keep precious, beautiful lives from being needlessly lost.”

“Wow…that’s some powerful stuff, man. It’s amazing what you’re doing, and that you find time to do it with the Fic going on.”
“Oh, I’m a man of many talents.” Dorian grinned.

“I don’t doubt that.” The Interviewer found himself staring into the lavender-flecked depths of the man’s eyes a little longer than he intended. He cleared his throat. “So, let’s talk more about your relationship status.”


“Well…because I’m sure the fans want to hear about their favorite Altus. I’m with someone. But, if I weren’t…”

“Ah, story of my life, really. I change boyfriends like I change socks, not that I want it that way. Things just aren’t as shiny for me in the romance department as they are in the Fic.”

“So, I take it you really enjoy playing the coveted love interest of the Inquisitor?”

“Definitely. I simply adore Hannibal Luthor; he’s a wonderful costar. I have joked with Solas out-of-story that he’d better watch out, or I was going to steal his boyfriend.” He sifted pleasant, nonchalant chuckles. “They have a great relationship outside the Fic. Finding a guy like Hannibal would be a godsend. He’s such a sweetie.”

The Interviewer nodded, grinning. “When he and Solas were on the show a few weeks ago, I sensed that about him, really outgoing.”

“He is.”

“How’s the chemistry in-Fic between you two? I mean, it looks pretty believable that you’re completely in love when watching the footage.”

“Hm…” Dorian uncrossed his legs and got more comfortable, twisting slightly to drape his arm over the couch-back, cocking his head on his hand. His gaze roamed dreamily around the studio, looking at nothing, mind focusing on the redhead Qunari. Bedroom eyes settled on the Interviewer’s. “For lack of a better word, it’s perfect. The relationship my Fic-self has with Hannibal is exactly the relationship I’ve always wanted. Who doesn’t want a charming, protective, doting, dedicated man to love them unconditionally?”

“Yeah, I hear you there.”

Dorian sighed. “Whenever I’m acting beside him, I feel as if I’ve found everything I’ve been searching for my whole life—a man that won’t take me for granted because I’m beautiful, who won’t take advantage and treat me like shit, then leave in the morning never to be heard from again. Believe me, that’s happened enough times.” Out slipped a dry chuckle. “Being part of the Fic liberates me from that harsh reality. It gives me hope that there’s still the chance of finding true happiness with someone.”

The Interviewer couldn’t help it. He leaned to take Dorian’s hand, squeezing it reassuringly, the tenderness of a friend. “You’re an awesome catch for anyone. Just have to get the right fish to bite the lure.”

Dorian piped a humble, bright laugh. “Never truer words!”

“What about your in-story moments with Iron Bull? Did you like them?”

“Mm…yes. He’s gorgeous too, and so big, which really turns me on. As for joking with Ayla about taking her husband, it would be useless. I wouldn’t be able to steal Iron Bull if she divorced him, he’s that dedicated to her, a real family man. They have two children whom I see at least once a month, since I’m over at House Iron Bull for dinner and barbecues often. I was just there a couple of nights ago and talking with him, and he confided in me that he’s trying to impregnate her again. So, I wouldn’t be surprised if another face is added to the family soon. But…” Dorian winked at the camera, “you didn’t hear that from me, though it would completely work with what’s happening in-story.”

“Really? Wow! That’s awesome! Us fans will certainly be on the lookout for another Baybull.”

Dorian lifted a brow and chuckled. “Baybull? As in baby Ayla and Bull?”

“Yeah, I kind of made that up on the spot.”

“Ingenious!”

Their laughter ensued, and chortles came from off-camera too.

When it died down, leaving Dorian grinning on the couch, the Interviewer said, “Okay, well, I think that’s all the time we have, though I could honestly sit here and talk to you for, you know, ever.”

“Likewise, my dear. I’m sure Corypheus is getting quite impatient at my absence.”

“Corypheus?”

“My cat. I picked him up from a shelter two months ago. I named him that because, like his in-story counterpart, he gives me lots of grief. Little shit has destroyed two of my favorite pairs of
shoes and clawed my Seheron leather sofa. Absolute terror,” he said melodramatically, then sighed, smiling, “but, I love him. He’s a good kitty in the end.”

As they laughed it out, the cameras faded to black.

Chapter End Notes

The model in the image is Rafa Rech. I do not own said image or any rights to it. I just think he makes a beautiful real-life Dorian. *grins*
The further they ventured into Hald’arun, following in Lassalanta’s wake, the livelier things became. Hannibal and his group noticed the diversity amongst the sanctuary’s occupants. Most of them were elves, but there were also humans and dwarves. Men, women, and children varying in age. As of yet, the Inquisitor hadn’t seen any other qunari besides himself, Iron Bull, and Ozra, but he suspected members of the horned race lived in the dwelling, if the half-qunari was any indication. The people they passed stared after them, giving nods and bows to Lassalanta. The lovely elf acknowledged everyone.

Soft moss and grass covered the ground in most places. Some areas were paved in brick, stone, and tile, with wide staircases and spacious terraces for sitting. Lassalanta stopped at an archway decorated by white roses and greenery. It led into an open botanical garden. Cushioned benches and wicker seats formed a circle. Lassalanta lowered into one of the chairs, gesturing for the others to take seats, serenity cast over her smiling features. Her eyes darted to Solas for a moment, and they met gazes, before she looked to the others.

Ayla sat on a bench near Lassalanta, Bull lowering his hulking frame beside her. The usually blind woman continuously absorbed her surroundings, seeing her home in a way she never had before. The smells and sounds were familiar, and now all the blurts, blotches, and fuzzy shadows jumped out in crystal clarity. Ayla spared a tender look to her husband, who smiled reassuringly, squeezing her hand, drawing his thumb along her smooth skin.

When Ayla turned her attention to the elf queen, Iron Bull dropped his eye to her stomach. He caught Lassalanta’s similar gesture up on the hill and was positive he knew what she implied with her telepathic remark. Ayla was with child, though, it baffled him how the elvhen woman could possibly know that. All that remained now was for Ayla to realize the condition herself. Bull wondered how she would react, considering he had stopped taking the dhaya juice and purposefully gotten her pregnant without her knowledge. Whatever her response, once she figured it out, he was ready.

Most times, instances like this produced an uncomfortable silence, yet the blanket of quietude that settled over them all held a pleasant, calming quality. It could be attributed to the environment of Hald’arun, its peaceful, unhurried effects.

Ayla was the first to break the silence. “Lassalanta, please explain everything to me. Elemir spoke as much as he could, but told me I had to wait until we arrived to find out the rest. I…remember my life here, Elemir and I being brought into the sanctuary by Joswen. I also still carry the falsified memories of living outside Redcliffe.” Eyes the hue of frozen azure focused on the elf.

Lassalanta nodded and pat Ayla’s hand. “Yes, of course, my dear.” She cleared her throat. “I was briefed on what you’d been told. Essentially, you were led to believe you lived by Redcliffe since age eleven, when you’d only been living in that house since you were eighteen.”

She cut the rich, rolling tones of her voice momentarily, gathering her thoughts. The elf queen cast a wispy smile and held up her hand.

“Before I go further with that, let me speak on something else. You know you’re an Oona and the base history of your people, learned from the mage Morrigan. What you didn’t know, growing up here, is that two other Oonas live in the Hidden Wood. One is male, and you’ve never met him. The other, however, is over one-hundred and fifty years old, and you are very familiar with her—Shaoiri Moja.”

Ayla produced a full smile, nodding. Many in Hald’arun regarded Miss Moja like a grandmother, kind, gentle, and lovable as she was. “Of course, Old Lady Shaori.” Worry suddenly seized her. “Oh no… Is she alright?”

Lassalanta trilled a short laugh. “Yes, she’s just fine and has several decades more before her, thanks to the power of the Wood. She’s lived here most of her life and made the decision to tie her life force to the place. Doing this will extend the length of one’s existence, but any humans, dwarves, or qunari who do it can never leave—or they will perish.” She paused to delicately sweep crimson tresses back over her shoulder. “Elvhen people can link with Hald’arun without that restriction. I bonded myself to the sanctuary centuries ago, but I will speak on that another time, should you be interested.”

_I am interested._ Solas sent a mental remark.

Lassalanta spared him a glance and the most elusive of smiles. _Later, Fen’Harel._ She spoke once more to Ayla while the others listened on. “Both Shaori’s and the other Oona’s powers are dampened while inside Hald’arun, just like yours. It’s the reason you were never triggered during your time growing up in here. Hald’arun’s wards control this, not I. Like the other Oonas, I sensed you and sought you out, sent Joswen to retrieve you. I knew you’d be safe here, untouchable to those who might think to use you for evil.”

The crimson lady took Ayla’s free hand, eyes going to Iron Bull for a moment, then back to her.

“Shaori is the reason I had Elemir begin your travels from here. She never found her Chosen Warrior, and while she’s fairly content, she’s never been truly happy or complete. An Oona is meant to bond with a Warrior. Failure to do so will cause their power to diminish over time, and what little sight he or she possesses eventually drifts away. Shaori used to be able to detect
shadows, light, and blurry shapes like you, but her vision has been totally dark for decades.” Lassalanta’s porcelain fingers tightened their grip on Ayla’s hand, nuances of tenderness floating in her eyes. “I didn’t want that to happen to you, Vana Hinya.” Precious child, she called the Oona. “I wanted you to experience true happiness, completion, and my heart swells to see that you’ve found it.”

Elven eyes found their way to Iron Bull, and the queen’s lips tipped him a smile.

Iron Bull, like everyone else, examined Lassalanta and his wife, listening carefully.

Understanding the deepness of the situation pushed back a lot of the misty confusion surrounding Ayla. She nodded, then slipped her hand from Lassalanta’s, gripping Iron Bull’s large hand with both of hers. Ayla met his eye. “I’m very happy. I…” she sighed and leaned closer to the Qunari, “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Believe me, the feeling’s mutual,” Bull said quietly.

“What about the boundary surrounding this place?” came Varric’s voice. He didn’t want to be the one to break the moment, but curiosity nibbled at him like crows on carrion. “How does it work, if I might ask?”

Lassalanta regarded the dwarf closely, delivering an easy smile. “That’s one of the first questions people have when visiting here. Hald’arun and the magic surrounding it predates even me. The boundary is very powerful. It’s invisible, expanding out, up, and down around this section of the Brecilian Forest. Whenever random travelers get too close to the boundary, they become disoriented, routed away until they’re far enough from the barrier. The way it works, the magic alters their memories so they don’t ever remember encountering the invisible wall. Once they get so far away, their minds clear back up, and they’re left feeling confused, lost.”

Dorian’s pretty eyes glided to Joswen. “Ah. So, when I asked if our destination had anything to do with Aut’lu Mena, I was right on the mark. The barrier around this place is Aut’lu Mena.”

“Yes,” Joswen bobbed his head once, then looked to the queen so she could continue.

“Very observant,” Lassalanta said. Her laughter filled the area. “The legends and myths people made up worked in our favor. Travelers who encountered the barrier and found themselves off-put, instantaneously in another part of the forest, eventually named the area covered by Hald’arun’s barrier Aut’lu Mena, the lost time zone. People became frightful and learned to avoid this part of the woods. Most traffic comes from traders visiting the outpost.”

“I’m curious where the soul-eaters come in.” The Altus arched one perfect brow, partially smiling.

“Ah, yes. The soul-eaters. I made that rumor up myself ages ago,” Lassalanta sifted more laughter. “It worked to further deter people from veering this direction, though the wards of the Hidden Wood have withstood the test of time.”

“This place is remarkable,” Hannibal said, his aqua vision roaming the sitting area, so picturesque with its array of plant-life growing from pots and weaving around the arboretum archways.

“Lassalanta… All eyes fixed on Ayla. “How did these memory wards work on me? Before now, every time I entered Hald’arun, I…” her brow wrinkled and her eyes strayed while she pondered, “…I forgot the false memories, the ones of living outside Redcliffe, while seamlessly carrying on here.” Thick, pale tresses shifted when she shook her head. “How did all of that work?”

“Well,” Lassalanta started, “In your case, because I created a set of false memories for you, the wards acted a little different. As you now know, you began traveling outside Hald’arun when you were eighteen, while the false memories made you believe you’d never even been here, that you and Elemir had been living outside Redcliffe since you were eleven. You believed that Elemir met Joswen, Sophitia, Magnus, and Vek during that time, when you both actually met them here. Whenever you were brought back and passed through the barrier, Ayla, you regained your true memories, but with a specially formulated addition. You believed that your time away was spent traveling with your brother, Joswen, and the others trading and doing their odd jobs.”

“Sometimes it would be months before we made it back, but you’re saying that the magic of the barrier, of Hald’arun, somehow synchronized my memories to accommodate for the passage of time, which is why I never felt misplaced…” Ayla’s words became more excited with revelation.

“Exactly. Whether you were gone for weeks or months, time was always compensated for. Think of it as when you left the sanctuary, the memories of this place were stripped from you and stored in a bottle, and that bottle was placed on a shelf where it awaited your return. The Redcliffe memories became active again. When you returned, that bottle was taken from the shelf, the memories of Hald’arun poured back into your mind, with the addition I created to make you believe you were just traveling rather than living near Redcliffe.” Lassalanta sighed softly, her hand waving delicately. “That explanation, of course, is metaphorical. I know not a better way of explaining it. As I said, this place far predates me, its magic like nothing I have ever encountered.”

“For visitors who aren’t authorized to remember, to compensate for passage of time on the outside,” Elemir interjected, “the boundary’s magic automatically inserts the memory of being at the Valdian Trading Outpost for however many days had passed while in the sanctuary.”

“What if someone stayed in this place for weeks or even years?” Varric shifted in his chair, eyes swinging between the elven queen and the ranger. “Are they just going to believe they were
lingering at the outpost for all that time?”

“For that exact reason, we have a strict five-day rule we abide by for visitors to Hald’arun,” Lassalanta explained. “Letting people stay longer than that would cause undue disorientation, making the time adjustment in the outside world more difficult and harder to…explain. As for the permanent occupants of the Hidden Wood, only few are allowed to come and go as Joswen and his team do. We do not, however, keep people from leaving. People have made that decision before, knowing they might not ever be able to return. We have separate protocols in those instances.”

“My people and I won’t remember this place once we leave then,” Hannibal deduced, broad frame leaning forward in his seat.

The gleaming mirrors of her serene blue eyes fell on Hannibal. “That’s correct. Your memories of Hald’arun will await you here, should you return. Only Ayla and her Warrior will retain recollection; the time is right for her to remember her home, and he is bound to her. Like the select few who hold the ability to remember, they will never be able to speak the name of Hald’arun. Nor will they be able to speak of what is contained herein. Elemir cryptically told you of this place; Ayla and Iron Bull would only be able to speak of it in the same capacity. Their mouths won’t even physically be able to form any words that mention Hald’arun directly. Five days, Inquisitor—that’s all the time you may remain for this visit.”

“I see.” He nodded.

“So much for that book I planned on writing,” Varric remarked.

Lassalanta smiled slimly at him. “Indeed. Now,” she stood, “as very special guests, I have arranged quarters for each of you in the palace.”

“Ah, the royal treatment. I could certainly stand a bit of that,” Dorian chimed. His eyes narrowed in thought, falling on Elemir. “There is one last question I have about all of this, as most everything else has been answered. When we spoke over a meal in Skyhold, I commented on how it was amazing no one ever tipped Ayla off about the situation. You said you couldn’t elaborate until we got here. So, how did you manage to keep the whole charade from crashing in like a rickety house of cards?”

Everyone observed while the ranger removed a pouch from his pocket, tugged the little drawstring, and dumped a clear crystal into his palm. He picked the item up between his thumb and forefinger. “With this. It’s a magical item called a quarka. Lassalanta infused it with the spell containing Ayla’s false memories.” Elemir set his entralling green gaze on Dorian’s. “There were times when someone made a comment that threw her off, such as remarking on how there’s no way she and I were related because we looked so different, or something to that extent. And she would question it. I’d have to wait until we were alone before holding it close to her, resetting her false memories, so to speak.”

Ayla pointed at the quarka, directing a smirk at her brother. “You were hypnotizing me with that thing?”

Laughter spilled shortly from him. “More like reinserting the spell over you. It’s useless now, rendered so the moment we entered Hald’arun.”

“Do you mind if I have it then, Scruffy, as a souvenir?” Varric grinned.

Amused by the nickname, Elemir smiled, but shook his head. “Afraid not. It is part of Hald’arun, and you, as a visitor, can only take from here what you entered with.”

The dwarf sighed. “Ah, shit. Didn’t hurt to ask though.”

Lassalanta drifted through the circle they formed. “Please, follow me.” Her regal hand glided over a bare area of the archway as she passed through it, and flora instantly sprouted where her fingers graced. A curling green stem wove around the wood, white and lavender flowers blooming from it.

Hannibal’s people once again stared in awe after the elvhen lady.

Iron Bull’s head tilted in comprehension. Lassalanta detected the new life growing in Ayla because she was life. The base of her magic, her power, focused on growth and fertility. Though he’d been expelled from the Qun and would never return to it, Bull knew that a saarebas such as the elvhen queen would be most valuable to them. Just like his lovely, little Oona.

The Inquisitor’s party fell in behind Lassalanta, while the others broke off to their own homes. They’d meet up at the palace later for the feast.

“This certainly explains why you read tangerlingua,” Hannibal said. They traversed a wide, cobbled pathway, the stones coated in a fuzz of moss. “The instant we met, I suspected there was more of a story to you. Not to sound condescending, but from what you told us then, how Elemir did ‘odd jobs’ to put food on the table, I had believed you were common folk, and it’s unusual for them to be versed in tangerlingua. Obviously, you’ve been raised in the finest environment, which explains it all.”

Ayla glanced over at him, keeping in pace with Bull. “I’m glad to know the full truth of things. The false memories made me believe Elemir had taught me to read tangerlingua.” The woman drew a breath and sighed it out contently. It felt wonderful to be home. She remembered
everything as clearly as if she’d never left, so many things that had been stored in the metaphorical bottle on the metaphorical shelf awaiting her return.

Hald’arun appeared to have a good number of occupants. Iron Bull’s lone eye drifted here and there, taking in those they passed. Everyone curiously regarded the visitors and acknowledged Lassalanta with smiles and slight bows, and she reciprocated their respect as she glided by. They reached an open market place, circular and big, set between the trunks of two massive trees, their roots forming natural barriers and supports. The Crimson Queen turned eyes over her shoulder, lifting a smile at the group in her wake. She faced ahead, taking a short rise of steps to another main path, at the end of which rose the grandest, most massive of the five redwoods. Huge, full branches didn’t begin jutting from the trunk until three-hundred feet up. The trunk itself had to be at least two-hundred feet in diameter, its bark tough, reddish, and striated like the other four trees. A wide staircase, partially enclosed for safety, wound up the trunk, disappearing in the first level of spreading branches and leaves. The others also noted that a series of gated lifts moved up and down from the treetops, a much easier mode of ascending than the stairs.

“How in Andraste’s sweet hell could we not see these trees from miles away?” Varric voiced in astonishment, gawking at the gigantic redwoods rising in different sections of Hald’arun.

“Weren’t you listening?” Dorian answered. “The barrier expands not only outward, but up and down as well around this sector of the Brecilian.”

“Oh, yeah. I was so busy having my mind blown that I forgot.”

The mage chuckled. “You and me both. Hald’arun’s barrier must be massive to enclose trees this big. Absolutely fascinating.”

They slipped through patches of shade and sunlight, cast by the sun’s glow seeping through the densely-compacted branches high above. Ayla observed her home in glitter-eyed glee, never believing it could be so breathtaking. The landscape formed terraces to the north, curving around the rim of the sanctuary. On those grassy levels rose many quaint homes varying in shape and size. Some were single-floored; others had two stories. Some were even so eccentric as to be built right into the hillside with large, circular doorways. Hald’arun’s southern sector contained the same clean, layered housing, and many more homes rose around them, in the heart of the city, lining the pathways and avenues.

Children’s laughter erupted, and a group of three little people ran across the path a short distance ahead of Lassalanta. The elf queen smiled and waved at them. “Hello, my darlings.”

“Hi, Lady Lassalanta!” the children exclaimed, waving back at the queen and those walking with her.

The blond human boy and dark-haired elven child were cute, but it was the little qunari girl that stole everyone’s attention, since a qunari child wasn’t often seen outside of the Qun. Wearing a green dress with bare feet, she had striking blue eyes and stubby horns poking up from her mass of curly black hair. She grinned big at the visitors, revealing a gap where she’d lost a tooth, her little hand flapping out waves.

Iron Bull lifted a tender smile at her, instantly reminded of his early years in the Qun. He started off like the others—little, helpless, and needing guidance. The older he got, the more responsibility he assumed as protector and overseer, helping to keep the younger ones in line, cleaning them up, reading to them, playing with them, all the big brotherly things. He very easily imagined the little girl as one of the children he might’ve looked after. Once they passed the kids, Bull’s eye skipped ahead to Lassalanta.

“Are there many Qunari here?”

“No,” she said. “Hald’arun’s total population is nearly two-thousand. There are currently eighteen Qunari, six of which are children, counting the girl you just saw.”

“How many Qunari are there?”

“Do you know her name?”

Lassalanta cast somewhat secretive laughter, turning to give Iron Bull a tilted smile. “I know everyone’s name here. Hers is Suumara. I call her Su for short.”

The Qunari warrior spared a look behind them to see Suumara playing with her friends again, so carefree and happy. She faced ahead and slipped a glance to Ayla, the woman busy taking in the enchanting beauty of her home with a sight she hadn’t possessed before. Iron Bull had never been more sure of his decision to cease the dosages of dhaya juice, and Lassalanta revealed that Ayla carried their child. Seeing little Suumara made Bull realize he wanted to have as many babies as possible with his Naarremma. He would spoil them rotten and love them more than anyone could imagine. Of course, the world needed to be cleared of Corypheus and Ares for a chance at any true happiness. He supposed he could’ve waited to get her pregnant, but the temptation had been too great. Now, he had even more to fight for. He only hoped Ayla wouldn’t be too angry with him once she figured it out. Bull sighed.

“I’ve heard that there were Qunari living in Hald’arun,” Ayla spoke, “but I had never come across them personally, probably because there are so little of them.”

“They’re good people and tend to keep to themselves mostly,” said Lassalanta. “A few of them directly fled from the Qun. Another reason you’ve not come across qunari in all your life here is because they don’t stay long. Many pass through for a few years or less, let their children grow
older, then leave the sanctuary to settle elsewhere. It will likely happen with Suumara too. When she’s more mature, she and her parents will leave Hald’arun. There is only one Qunari who’s never left since he arrived. He’s been here for over twenty years. He is called Jarat.”

Iron Bull picked up his and Ayla’s pace slightly so he could fall in beside the elvhen queen. His eye adhered steadily to her, the sky-hued depths clouded with surprise. “The Jarat? The one who once served as Arishok to the Qun?”

“Yes. I figured you would take great interest in him.”

“Is there a way I’d be able to meet with him?”

“Perhaps later. I’m sure he’d enjoy the company.”

Iron Bull nodded. He looked forward to it, and it was written in his smile. He was barely ten when the incident occurred, the Arishok going rogue, and declared Tal-Vashoth shortly after. They searched for him for weeks and came up with nothing. The man had simply disappeared. Seemed that after twenty years, Bull solved the mystery. The guy probably just couldn’t handle the job. The position of Arishok held many responsibilities, to include making the decisions no one else had the stomach or mental capacity for. It would be interesting to talk with him. Bull added it to the Hald’arun to-do list compiling in his mind.

A ring of short stone steps surrounded the great tree looming before them. They were so close now that they couldn’t see to either side of the trunk. The area beyond the base steps bustled with people, many of which sat around on benches and talked. Some traveled up and down the elegant swirl of steps for business or pleasure within the palace district nestled high in the treetop. Guards stood to either side of the entrance to the stairwell. To the left, guarded by another set of sentinels, sat a series of platforms where the lifts could settle. Lassalanta headed that way, nodding to citizens bowing in her wake.

One lift contained more space than the others, intricately decorated. It was the only lift not in usage, reserved specifically for the queen.

“Milady,” said an elvhen guard, holding the door back for her.

“Thank you.” Lassalanta stepped aboard, taking a seat on the cushioned bench wrapped around the wall. “Please…” She gestured for Hannibal and the others to follow.

They boarded the lift, sitting.

Lassalanta nodded at the guard, and he sent a confirming wave to the lift operator. They began ascending for the treetop, the carriage swaying gently as the reinforced pulley system sent it rising. Hannibal’s party took in the spectacular view of Hald’arun while they climbed. They saw over the entire city once the lift exceeded a hundred feet, and then higher still to behold the sea of trees comprising the Brecilian Forest stretching west, south, and north.

“So, we can still see out. Amazing.” The words tumbled softly from Varric’s mouth, which hung open a little.

Ayla gasped, eyes widening. She pulled on Bull’s hand so he moved to the wall of the lift, giving her a better look. “Ohmygods, we’re so high!” She grinned, watching the people on the ground gradually shrink. She’d ridden the lift more times than she could count. This time she could grasp the perspective of altitude and appreciate the view.

Behind her, Lassalanta inhaled deeply, swooning with elation. She was overjoyed that Ayla had her warrior, that she was complete and content. That was the reason Lassalanta released her to the outside world. She wouldn’t have found Iron Bull otherwise. And he wouldn’t have found her. The elf queen didn’t know him personally, but during the short mind-link she initiated, she sensed that he’d faced much hardship in his time as a soldier. His past haunted him constantly, and his bond with Ayla soothed the monsters in the dark, gave him the mental tranquility he so needed. They were a perfect match.

Solas beheld the scenic view of Hald’arun excitedly, though his neutral expression didn’t reveal his true level of captivation. Most things about the sanctuary reminded him of ancient times. Other than the presence of humans, dwarves, and qunari, Hald’arun depicted a time when the Elvhen race was at its peak…disregarding how the other ‘gods’ mistreated the people, using them as puppets for their own amusement. That was the reason Fen’Harel took extreme measures and erected the Veil, not knowing that such an action would worsen things for elves far more than he could’ve imagined. Somehow, he’d make it right…somehow.

The handsome elf tipped his eyes sideward and caught Lassalanta watching him. The peach slips of her lips quirked a smile. Soft shadows enclosed the carriage when they reached the lower treetop level. The lift slowed, halted, and carefully swung about so it was clear of the protective barrier bordering the loading platform. Every walkway and terrace in the treetops had such barriers.

A guard unlatched the door and swung it outward, offering his hand to Lassalanta.

She stood, grabbed hold, and exited the lift. “Thank you.”

The treetops of Hald’arun were even more impressive than down on the ground. Everyone stepped from the lift to smooth wood flooring. People milled about, tending to various things, though it wasn’t as busy as below. The plaza branched off in three directions, the corridors
twining and weaving through thick, massive branches and leaves, meeting up with other passages. Homes, shops, and other establishments were carved right into the great trunk, the architecture blending seamlessly. Large breaks in the dense leafiness allowed sunlight to spill in warm and pleasant; at night, it would be the moon’s silver glow. Not far from the lift station, an elven woman sat on a bench in a grassy spot, reading.

And ahead of them, in the center of the district, the palace shown like a jewel in the middle of a crown. Constructed in a way that it melded into the tree and its branches, the queen’s home contained many rooms, balconies, buttresses, and windows. Broad, elegant steps led up to it, a set of guards on duty at the bottom of them. A large hole in the canopy hovered over the lavish structure, allowing the smoke of several fireplaces and stoves to dwindle unhindered up into the sky. An observatory tower also rose through the canopy break. Bull intended to make his way up there at some point for the view.

“I can’t wait to see my room!” Ayla tugged at his hand, getting them started for the palace with everyone else.
Descriptive words such as extraordinary and amazing did little justice for Hald’arun. Even if Hannibal and his party could talk about the place once they left, no one would believe them unless they saw firsthand. On the way to the palace, they noted the large structure to the left, reachable by half a dozen wide pathways. Lassalanta pointed it out as the Council assembly hall, though it was used for all types of political and prominent business. Two more tiers of corridors, terraces, platforms, and walkways rose above them, built solidly in the sturdy branches. Those levels supported more homes, shops, parks, and other places.

The guards flanking the stairs up to the palace didn’t flinch or nod when Lassalanta and her guests passed by. Their armor was similar to the rest of the guards Iron Bull saw since they entered, and those guards outside in the outpost—lightly-pressed metal and leather, the crest of a redbird on the chest plate.

They reached the top of the stairs, crossed an open foyer decorated with plants, and moved into the entry hall where three sets grand steps rose to various areas of the house. Roomy corridors traced outward from the hall. A trio of servants smiled and bowed in greeting to them, a dwarven woman and two elven males.

The queen turned to face Hannibal and his people. “This is my home, and while you are here, it is yours as well. Feel free to go wherever you like, though my personal quarters will be inaccessible to you. Inquisitor, Caris will lead you and Dorian to your room. He’ll also see to any questions or needs either of you might have.”

One of the males eased closer to Hannibal.

“Varric, I have assigned Vakissli to you.” At the queen’s words, the dwarf went to Varric, leaving the other male for Solas. Lassalanta addressed the elven mage. “This is Braylen.”

Solas issued a nod of greeting.

“Take a moment to get settled in. I’ll send someone to fetch you all shortly, as the Council would like to make acquaintances, and we will speak more on this Ares from Joswen’s reports. The kitchens are open to you, and tonight there will be a feast for your arrival.” Lassalanta’s attention fixed on Ayla and Bull. “I will take you to your quarters. Until later, friends.” She slipped a look to Solas, then grabbed Ayla’s other hand and began for one of the lavish staircases.

Lassalanta released the Oona’s hand at the top of the flight, but remained at her side. She had her husband to lead her now, and the queen still needed to get used to the idea.

Iron Bull cleared his throat, skimming the simple yet high-class décor. The entire place was certainly ‘elfy’, with its open hallways and arches, the foliage seen beyond the windows holding a vague ethereal glow. “You have a very nice home.”

“Thank you.”

“Does Elemir live here as well?”

Ayla lifted a smile at him, taking initiative to answer. “No. When we first arrived at the sanctuary, we both lived in the palace. He moved into his own place once he was older, and I have a room there, but I decided to stay here primarily. It made things easy since El joined the Crimson Rangers and left on missions often.”

“I see.” Bull nodded. “It makes sense. I don’t doubt that you received the best care in his absence.”

They progressed across the landing, down a highly-polished hallway, and made a right turn.

Ayla regarded Lassalanta while they moved, taking in the familiar smells of ancient wood and the subtle, citrus-scented oil used to maintain it. “Something else has occurred to me.”

The Crimson Lady’s laughter bubbled forth softly. “I suspect you’ll have questions about this place for years to come.”

“How did the truth of me and Elemir not being related never get revealed inside Hald’arun? I mean, I now understand the great measures taken to create the false memories while I was outside. But what about in here?”

“When Joswen arrived with both of you, Elemir’s condition was that the façade of being siblings was maintained.” Lassalanta produced a far-away smile, recalling the past. “Crafty and quick-minded for a twelve-year-old, he was. So, I agreed. The small circle who knew you were an Oona kept to the secrecy and never spoke of the fact that you and Elemir weren’t truly related. The rest of the sanctuary, well…” she gathered her thoughts, “I made it so they simply never questioned it, infusing a magical ward into this place that removed the interest from people’s minds. Yes, they saw the physical difference and obvious lack of blood kinship between you and El, but the magic I created kept them from lingering on it, causing them to overlook it as surely as they’d accept that the sky is blue. Even though you know the whole truth, I’ll keep the ward in place. Minimizes
Bull’s appreciative smile flashed at the queen. “That’s some level of thought control. The Ben-Hassrath Reeducators would be honored to have you.”

“Surprising words, coming from a Tal-Vashoth,” she replied smoothly, holding her smile.

“Mm.” Iron Bull nodded. He liked her wit, and her sense of humor wasn’t bad either.

They reached a set of tall double-doors terminating the corridor, a mural of roses carved into the rich, dark wood. Lassalanta pushed them in to reveal Ayla’s room. Directly across from them, a curved wall of windows and doorways opened to a terrace. Ample sunlight bursting down through the humongous gap above the palace spilled into the room. A fine harp sat on a tile and stone hearth, the mantle chiseled from a slab of marble. In one area, there was a desk and bookcases filled with literature dually written in Elvish and tangerlingua or common and tangerlingua. With her new eyes, Ayla would be able to learn the written language of the elves as well. Shelves of various dolls, a lounging settee, and potted plants were amongst the other items in her room, all of it familiar. Another wide doorway branched from the bedroom into the bathing alcove, the windows in there frosted over to prevent prying eyes but not so opaque as to deny the sun’s rays or moon’s glow.

Iron Bull and Lassalanta stood by in silence while the Oona skimmed her room with a big grin. “It’s perfect.”

“Just as you left it.” The queen swept some of Ayla’s thick hair back over her shoulder.

Ayla narrowed her eyes. Her canopy bed had been replaced by a much bigger sleigh-style one. She turned her smile to Lassalanta. “Well, not exactly as I left it.”

“When I received Joswen’s report via my scouts a couple of days ago, I decided everyone would stay as my guests here in the palace, to include you and your husband, whom I’d heard was quite large. So, I had the bed switched…to accommodate him.”

The younger woman instantly fell into a blush.

Bull chuckled, gently squeezing Ayla’s hand. “That was thoughtful, Your Majesty. Thank you.”

“Oh, none of that.” The fire-haired woman adopted a thin smirk, waving a hand at him. “You are family. Lassalanta will suffice.”

“Alright.” The Qunari nodded, his eye leveled on her. “We’ll have to sit down and get better acquainted sometime. Maybe you can tell me some embarrassing stories about Ayla from when she was younger.”

“Bull!” Ayla nudged his solid middle.

He barked resonant, hearty laughter.

“I certainly have more than a few,” said Lassalanta. She took Ayla’s other hand for a loving caress, then released it. “I’ll leave you two now. There are things I must tend to in preparation for the Council meeting.”

She turned, strode gracefully to the entrance, then backed out, shutting the doors behind her.

Beauty and the Bull stared into each other’s eyes, the quiet conversation of unspoken love. His handsome mouth bowed a very warm smile.

He took a moment to set their bags and his axe down, removing the harness of armor adorning his left arm, shoulder, and chest. “So, you’re a little rich girl.”

She smiled up at him. “Considering that my birth parents abandoned me to die, I think I turned out pretty good.”

He seeped a long whistle while his eye roamed through her room again. “Looks like you have everything you need here.”

She moved closer and wrapped her arms around him, her vision momentarily blurred by lack of skin contact. “So, you’re a little rich girl.”

They kissed, then Bull retracted, taking her hand. He started in one area of the room and worked his way around, looking at all her books, the shelves of dolls. He stopped when they reached the harp. It stood taller than three feet, strings glinting in the daylight.

“Can you really play this thing?”

“Of course.”

“Show me.” Bull caressed her chin, then grinned at her smirk. “Pretty please?”

Ayla sighed, shaking her head him. “Oh, alright.”

Holding a lovely smile, she released his hand and carefully felt her way on the cushioned chair beside the instrument. Once she adjusted her skirts, she scooted forward, setting fingers to the strings, gliding along them, producing rich tones until she found the start position. Ayla’s blind
vision fixed on his shadow-shape, then she began to play.

The song flowed forth steady and calming, her movements precise, unhurried. Bull studied his wife closely, frozen with captivation. Ayla’s petite, dark fingers plucked skilfully along the harp, body rocking forward and back as she moved up and down the strings. A beam of sunlight swayed through the windows at just the right angle, illuminating both woman and instrument, and Bull thought she appeared undeniably celestial. With striking, thick tresses tumbling over her shoulder, swinging while she played, Ayla was as close to an angel as was possible to be. His beautiful Naaremma.

The slow tune lasted only a couple of minutes. Iron Bull wished he could bottle that moment to be replayed whenever and as many times as he wished. Oh, well. The confines of his mind would have to do. In times of hardship and battle, these kinds of memories would center him.

Ayla stood, smoothed her skirts, and held her hands out to him. He came into focus a second later.

“Wow. Just when I thought there was no way you could be more amazing, you prove me wrong.”

Laughter bubbled from her. She shrugged. “It was okay. I don’t practice nearly enough.” He appeared somewhat unsettled beneath his smile. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” The Qunari pondered shortly, then continued. “It’s just…you can do all of this stuff, all cultured and everything. You’re like a princess or something, but, ya know, without the actual title. And I’m…well…I’m just a good ol’ country boy at heart.”

“What are you saying, Iron Bull?” Ayla slid his shirt up so she could keep her sight when her arms went around his middle. She lifted on her toes and kissed his chin, her lips and nose tracing through his beard.

“I’m starting to feel like you married beneath yourself.” Said in jest, but damn if he didn’t believe it was at least a little true. What had he done to deserve such a woman?

“Nonsense. Don’t even joke around like that.” The twin crystal-blue mirrors of Ayla’s eyes shined up at him. “We were meant to be together. I love everything about you, and I’d not change a thing. Nothing at all.”

Low chuckles shook from him. “I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to throw you off. Consider the thought expelled from my mind.”

“Good.”

The couple’s mouths adhered, initiating a kiss that summoned passionate heat blooming through Bull’s loins. Ayla purred into him, slender arms sliding up around his neck. The link of his embrace formed a warm, safe barrier, giving her comfort and reassurance. Bull lifted until her booted feet dangled above the floor. He groaned and broke the kiss long enough to grin in the direction of the bed.

“No, we can’t,” Ayla said, giggling when the huge man started them towards it.

“I’ll be fast.”

“Bull, no! We have to go meet with the Council soon.”

He issued something that sounded like a snort, and Ayla found herself gently laid to the mattress and covered by his hard, hot body. Gods, he was so sexy! She mindlessly fell into his seduction, melting like a snowball set before a hearth. The woman moaned, arching, hands gripping the edges of his shirt. In the middle of drawing the garment up his torso, the doors eased inward.

Both Ayla and Bull snatched eyes to the person standing in the entrance—a very petite elven female with dark pixie-cut wearing a fine, ankle-length dress. Her eyes widened and jerked from them. Iron Bull rolled from his wife, fixing his shirt. They stood from the bed, Ayla taking his hand so she could see clearly once more.

“I…I’m so sorry,” the elf stuttered. “I should’ve knocked first.”

“Or we could’ve locked the door,” Bull muttered.

A smile instantly burst over Ayla’s features. “Isilwyn!” She recognized the woman’s voice. “You’re so cute!” She tugged Bull along for the elf, looping the other arm around her.

Isilwyn chuckled, returning the hug. “It’s wonderful to have you back home, milady.” Her large gray eyes saddened for a moment. “We were so scared when we heard news of the attack on the road and your abduction. But you’re alright, thank heavens.”

Ayla’s height was just above average for a human female, around five-foot-eight, and the top of her head reached the middle of Iron Bull’s chest. Isilwyn stood several inches shorter than Ayla, closer to Sera’s height, and her head barely met the bottoms of his “pillowy man-bosoms”, as Krem referred to the brawny mounds of Bull’s pectoral muscles.

The elf’s eyes loomed up at him.

“Hey,” Bull said, his eye fixed on her. It was always somewhat comical to witness the reactions of some smaller people when finding themselves in his towering shadow for the first time.
"H-h-hello."

Ayla amusedly watched the exchange, clinging to her husband’s arm.

The Qunari warrior laughed, shaking his head. "Is it the horns, eye patch, or the size?"

"Excuse me?" Isilwyn clasped her hands and began fiddling them, eyes swinging between Ayla and the man.

"I’ve been told by different people that my horns or missing eye makes them uneasy, and others say it’s because of how damn big I am. So, what is it for you?"

"Oh…um…" the elf fiddled away, eyes darting about before meeting his single-eyed stare, "well…all three, I suppose."

"At least you’re honest. You have nothing to fear. I won’t hurt you. I’m The Iron Bull. You see, I tackled the article in front because—" He cut himself short and waved it off, having explained the reasoning for his name to people so many times, he couldn’t bring himself to do it then. He grinned and offered his hand. "Just call me Iron Bull—or Big-Tall-and-Ugly. I’ll answer to either."

Ayla sent the ghost of a smirk, and he winked down at her.

A few seconds passed. Isilwyn slowly gripped two of his fingers in her tiny hand and gave a small shake, smiling. "Yes, I know who you are. Lady Lassalanta briefed me after she received Lord Joswen’s report. You’re the Warrior."

"You knew what I was too then," said Ayla.

"Aye, milady. I was specifically chosen by the queen to be your handmaiden and guide because she confided in me to hold the secret, which I have and shall continue to do."

Isilwyn was fifteen years Ayla’s senior. Her healthy lifestyle maintained her youth, as she had not yet decided whether she would bond with Hald’arun. She’d still be able to go and return as she pleased, but it really came down to something deeper. What if she met someone who wasn’t elvhen that could potentially be her mate? They wouldn’t be able to leave if they were bonded with the sanctuary. Or what if they didn’t want to extend their lives and she’d already bonded herself? They would perish anyway, while she lingered on for centuries more. These were only a few of the variables in Isilwyn’s equation. There was still plenty of time to decide what to do. She wanted to leave herself options.

"The queen informed me that I will serve as guide to you both, since you couldn’t see before, and you,” her eyes tipped to Bull, “are completely new to the sanctuary."

"That certainly makes sense,” Ayla said, smiling. “Perhaps, after we’re done with the Council, you could take us to the eastern park. I’ve always wished to see the view."

"Okay. Um…I suppose I should get you both to the assembly hall now."

“Lead the way,” Bull replied, arm sweeping out, gesturing for Isilwyn to proceed. He and Ayla followed the elvhen woman.

(*)

They left the palace and traversed a wide, gradually curving pathway for the Council assembly hall, passing some quaint shops along the way. Ayla drew in a long sniff.

"I know where we are. Ranus’s bakeshop is near." She looked around hastily.

"Yes,” Isilwyn chuckled. “It’s down that way, but we’re going this direction.” She cut left to a branching path.

"We have to stop by there on the way to the park, then. I’ve missed his apple turnovers!"

"Very well, milady."

Iron Bull chuckled. "That café we passed looked very interesting and their bread smelled delicious. Had a nice crowd gathered at the tables. Maybe we could have lunch there first, then get your dessert."

They agreed to it.

When they reached the outside of the structure serving as the Council’s convening place, Isilwyn stopped and faced them. "I’ll wait out here until you’re done, milady. Just go up the steps and straight into the chamber."

Ayla nodded, and she and Bull ascended the stairs into an arched corridor, following it as instructed. The main chamber, shaped like a dome with the top sliced off, was constructed of naturally-twined vines and stone. Tall windows lined the wall in even intervals. A panel of five chairs rose on a tier across from the entry hall and benches neatly lined the room.

"Good afternoon. The Council will commence shortly. Please have a seat with the others." An usher greeted the couple, then gestured to where Solas and Varric sat.
Iron Bull waited for Ayla to sit, then he did the same. His eye cast over at the mage and rogue.

“Two been here long?”

“No,” Varric said. “My guide dropped me off about the same time as Chuckles’s did.”

Solas acknowledged them silently, nodding. Beneath the surface, he itched to speak with Lassalanta. A friend from another era. Well, perhaps, more than just a friend. His crisp periwinkle eyes eased to the entrance at Hannibal’s and Dorian’s arrival.

“Ah, fashionably late, which means I’m right on time.” The Altus’s smoothly accented words came softly. He sat on the roomy bench to Ayla’s other side and grabbed her hand, smiling. “Your home is absolutely wonderful! I don’t know how, but I will make it back for a visit.”

Ayla laughed. “You would be welcomed, Lassalanta even said.”

“Yes, but…” he rubbed his chin and tweaked his moustache whilst thinking, “…there’s that whole I’ll-forget-when-I-leave business. Might prove problematic.”

“Well, I won’t forget,” she said. “I’ll make sure you get to traveler…back east. Of course, you wouldn’t know why you’re coming this way until you get here.”

He droned low laughter. “Hm, it will certainly be one hell of a conundrum. I’m sure you’ll convince me that there’s a good reason I should jaunt out here to the sticks, so long as you get me back here.”

Hannibal sat on the other side of Dorian. He smiled around his mate to Ayla. “I want in too. You’ll have to convince us both.”

A short bout of chuckles passed between them, and then the usher poised regally, one hand behind his back. “The Council will now commence.”

A moment later, Lassalanta entered the chamber, offering a soft smile to the group when she passed. The queen stepped up on the tier and took the middle seat. Four others filed in after her—two elves, a male and female, a male dwarf, and female human. The dwarf and human appeared more seasoned, their hair graying, skin sporting laugh-lines, and some wrinkling. The elves were old too, but aging differently under the binding rules of Hald’arun. They all took seats on the panel.

Joswen silently entered the room, lowering to one of the audience benches. He gave Ayla a small smile and wink.

Lassalanta’s eyes roamed to everyone in the chamber, settling on Hannibal. “Inquisitor, the Council is very honored to have you in our city. We’ve been following the progress of the Inquisition since it was rebuilt by you and your advisors. There is a common enemy that threatens us all.”

“Actually, there are two now,” Hannibal said, standing and moving forward, halting before the Council.

“Yes, Corypheus and the one named Ares.” The dwarven councilman, Lorkonan, spoke up. “Joswen’s reports mentioned him. You say he’s a god from another world?”

Hannibal nodded. “A place called Earth. He came here using the Fade, and can easily travel between our two worlds. He…” the handsome, redhaired qunari sighed down at his hand, aqua eyes hardening, “…took the Anchor from me, the thing I used to close rifts. Commandeered Ayla’s power to do it.”

The Council had heard all of this, the lightest details. Now was the time for further speculation.

“When you had the Anchor, you were a prime target for Corypheus,” Lassalanta said. “Since it is no longer in your possession,” her eyes skipped for an instant to Solas, “Corypheus has most likely already set his sights on Ares. He may not feel the Inquisition to be much of a threat. To him, you were its driving force, the Anchor the only means by which to battle him. And now it belongs to this God of War.”

“I’ve thought about that.” Hannibal sighed. “The Inquisition has grown greatly in forces, with support throughout Fereldan and Orlais, but even so, it is now a secondary threat. Ares wants to do the same thing as Corypheus—assume godhood over the entire world. Granted, his approach isn’t as evil or intrusive as the corrupt, ancient Magister, but I would rather not have him in control either.”

The Crimson Queen nodded once. “We are agreed on this. Is there anything more you can tell us about Ares, things that you didn’t tell Joswen in transit here?”

“Hm…” Hannibal thought for a moment. “We didn’t mention Xena.”

“Xena?”

The Inquisitor’s aqua gaze drew to Solas, and the elf stood, positioning himself before the Council, hands clasped behind his back.

“She’s a warrior from Ares’s world. Like myself, she is quite versed with the Fade, which they call the Void. It’s where I met her while searching for more information about Ares. Her world
has other gods, many of them, and a phenomenon called the Twilight of the Gods threatens their existence. Ares fled Earth and found Thedas, intending to become the One True God here and avoid doom and possible death there."

“How can this Xena help the situation here?” asked Fezaan, the elven female.

The elven male’s name was Genfril, the human female’s Tara.

“She’s searching for Ares,” Solas began. “His absence from their world has caused an imbalance with the Goddess of Love; she’s started taking on his traits, carrying them as well as her own. Xena’s main purpose is to get Ares back to Earth. Because of this, she’ll do whatever’s necessary to help us. She’s also…not like other warriors, Fadewalking aside.”

“How so?” Lassalanta’s curiosity heightened as she watched him.

“She can battle gods. She has great strength. I believe that if anyone can subdue Ares, she can.”

The queen regarded him closely, then looked down both sides of the panel. She focused on Hannibal once more. “As you know, you won’t remember this meeting once you leave Hald’arun, but you will still remember Joswen, Elemir, Sophitia, Magnus, Vek, and Ozra. They are part of a special set of warriors called Crimson Rangers. I wish to have them serve as eyes and ears to this sanctuary, relaying information between the Inquisition and my contacts on the outside. The trading outpost camp you passed through to get here isn’t just a cover for Hald’arun, it’s also one of a dozen sizable bases here in the Brecilian Forest where Crimson Rangers and other forces reside. You’ve heard of the Red Army, I presume?”

“Yes. A faction formed a few hundred years ago from groups of mercenaries, their sole purpose to protect the eastern boundaries of Fereldan.” Hannibal suddenly lifted a grin, chuckling. “Something tells me that’s not exactly how it went, that you have something to do with it.”

Lassalanta’s smile spread on smoothly. “You catch on quickly. I created the Red Army. It began as random groups of warriors looking for a place to belong, a purpose to fight for. I gave them that purpose. While the Rangers are internal to Hald’arun, the Army is external, meaning its members never enter the sanctuary, don’t even know it exists.”

“The soldiers we saw in the trading camp wearing the chest plates with the redbird crests. They’re part of the Red Army.”

“Yes.”

“What are the numbers, if I might ask, in the Army and Rangers?”

“The Red Army is three-thousand strong, and there are less than a hundred in the ranks of the Crimson Rangers.”

“Those are good numbers,” Hannibal said. “And the Council is willing to ally covertly with the Inquisition and offer those forces?”

Again, Lassalanta looked to the other members, each of whom issued nods. She smiled down at the qunari. “You have your answer, Inquisitor. Once you’re back on the outside, Elemir will approach you about it, tell you that the head of the Red Army wants an alliance. You’ll get the details then…since you won’t remember them if I tell you now.”

“Alright. I suspect it’ll be quite weird, but I’m looking forward to setting up the alliance we already have.”

The beautiful queen coasted soft laughter. “Yes, the workings of Hald’arun are very mysterious.”

Before they adjourned, Joswen stepped forward and formally reported about the goblin incident in Grozmare. The Council fully agreed with his suggestion to send troops for clearing the annoying things, leaving signs around the entrances to warn travelers brave enough to take the subterranean shortcut.

(*)

As planned, Isilwyn took Ayla and Bull to the café, where the three of them enjoyed a meal. After that, they strolled around the broad, arboreal pathway to a section flanked by various establishments, including Ranus’s bakeshop. Now, the Oona nibbled happily on her apple turnover while she and her husband followed in Isilwyn’s wake through the scenic environment. Posts with shards of lumin stone attached to them lined the paths, lending light to the more shadowy areas of the treetop district.

They came to a high tunnel of leafy branchlets, bound and landscaped to remain in place. It exited onto a huge terrace of tailored grass, benches, smaller trees, and a flood of golden sunshine from the massive break where the foliage of the great redwood had been cleared and cut away. The view beyond showed a little bit more of the Brecilian Forest, a pleasant beach, and the Frozen Seas spreading out endlessly. A curved, reinforced glass barrier fifty feet high sealed the large park from high winds as well as protected against falls. Ayla popped the last of the turnover in her mouth and chew it away, her eyes big and bright.

“The Eastern Overlook…” she said breathily.

Iron Bull was speechless. He’d never seen a view like it before. Isilwyn walked just behind them
as they headed deeper onto the park grounds, passing a bouncy group of children tossing a ball around. When they reached the barrier, Ayla lifted a hand and pressed her palm to its coolness. Tears shimmered in her eyes, rolling down her cheeks. Bull stared down at her silently, happy he could give her that, the gift of sight. He drew back her hair, and his lips pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Oh, Bull!” Ayla gasped, sniffing. “It’s better than I had ever imagined! This is my favorite place in Hald’arun, and you’ve allowed me to see it. I love you so much!”

She spun in his arms, face buried in his chest.

He chuckled and wrapped her close, voice resonant when he spoke. “I love you too.”

Ayla finally stepped back and wiped her eyes. She regained hold of Bull’s hand and went back to admiring the view. “It’s just so…so…”

“No words, eh? Me either.” The Qunari looked to Isilwyn. “Does the boundary work the same on this side of Hald’arun? I mean, when ships pass out there, how does it work for those onboard?”

“The barrier reaches far up and down the coast and extends a few miles out to sea. It hasn’t happened recently, but when vessels get close enough to it, the effects are similar to what happens to people on land. The passengers get disoriented, and the person steering ends up taking them safely away from this part of the water. The crew and passengers find themselves a few miles from where they encountered the barrier, with no memory of how they got there.” Isilwyn chuckled. “As I said, nothing’s happened lately. Sailors have learned to avoid the waters in this area. Lassalanta even had warning buoys set adrift a mile out from the barrier to warn travelers. There are similar cautionary devices used on land.”

“I see. That’s pretty extraordinary.”

“Aye, it is.” The elf nodded.

Ayla spun slowly, letting her eyes explore the park. She settled on an arrangement of four stone figures posed behind a shrine. Bull didn’t keep her from pulling him along for the ride across the grassy space. A plaque written in common was embedded in the ground at the shrine. It said ‘The Creator Gods’.

“Are these the ones you worship?” he asked.

Ayla smiled. “Yes. I learned the religion from Elemir when I was young. According to the writings, four gods control the land, sky, water, and wind. They are the ones who created the world and all its beauty.”

“Interesting,” Bull said, then jabbed his thumb down the path at another shrine. The statue behind it was hauntingly ominous, a hooded figured whose face was hidden, walking stick in one hand, while the other arm stretched outward, pointing a finger. Beside the figure stood a single carved wolf. “Who’s that?”

Isilwyn spoke up here. “That is Fen’Harel, elvhen God of Rebellion.”

“Ah, yes. We ran across a couple of statues bearing his name back in the Temple of Mythal. None of them looked like this, though. They were just big stone wolves.”

“There is much mystery surrounding the stories of Fen’Harel. He was thought to be a betrayer and liar, though I’d like to believe he was looking out for the elvhen people. Others dismiss him as a naysayer who killed Mythal.”

“You don’t believe that, though?”

“No,” Isilwyn answered. “Not at all. There are two different versions of that story, and I choose to believe the one that doesn’t portray him as the god who betrayed the other gods. He was…for the people.” She nodded and smiled.

“Interesting views,” Bull said. He cleared his throat, offering a handsome smile. “Isilwyn, I think we can make it back to the palace from here. Thanks for walking us around.”

The elf partially bowed, generating a soft smile. “As you wish, milord. I’ll be on the premises, should you require my assistance.” She backed away, then turned and left.

The couple moved from the shrines, heading for the overlook view again. When they were far enough away, Solas stepped from behind a lush grove of tall shrubs. He studied the statue modeled in his honor, the shrine at the base of it covered with depleted candles and offerings of fruit left by worshippers. He wanted to knock it all over, destroy it. He deserved reverence and the loyalty of followers no more than Ares or Corypheus did.

He groaned lowly and slipped off.

Here’s a link to the song Ayla played on her harp, which is called Trip to Sligo.
There are many versions of it, and I personally, like the one by Jesse Autumn best, but couldn’t find that one on YouTube. This version is slower and “amateur”, which actually fits the moment of the scene, as Ayla is no master harpist. Bull just likes to see her that way. :)  

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMFSWDn8FR4
Seeking to Atone for Mistakes of the Past

Seductively wicked light boiled in his single eye while it peered down the length of his strapping gray body, clad only in black briefs and his eyepatch. Grinning at the coy figure of his wife, he playfully tugged at the long, white silk hair ribbon binding his wrists above his horned head. He could easily break loose from the confines, but was content to stay in the role-play.

“Mm…” A vibrating, reverberant rumble of desire. “I’ve been extremely bad, Mistress. As a matter of fact, fucking dirty. I need to be disciplined. Please…”

Ayla batted long lashes at him, a hand snatching to her mouth to stifle giggles, the other remaining on his leg. Her man was full of surprises when it came to bedroom activities. She certainly hadn’t been expecting this, though she did manage to tie that ribbon on him while he wiggled and dry-humped up against her. She flashed eyes down to her getup, a strapless black bra and matching lacy panties. Her gaze trailed slowly up his form, heart racing faster at the sight of his manhood, full and ready inside his underwear.

She laughed and shook her head. “I…I can’t do it.”

“You can make love in a camp with your brother practically the next tent over, but you’re shy about this? It’s just a little light bondage.” Iron Bull slipped her a hot grin. “C’mon. It’s fun.”

“Can’t we just have sex?”

“No. If you want to ride the Bull, then you have to play the game,” he said teasingly. “Better make up your mind fast, Naaremma. Isilwyn will be here in a little while to pick us up for dinner.”

He made his cock twitch a couple of times, pulling at the soft material of his briefs.

Ayla blared out giggles, and her eyes thinned into slits. She smiled wantonly at him. “Fine. You want me to be your Mistress, then I will.” She began by raking nails very slowly up his inner thigh.

Bull shivered. “Oh, yes. This boy has been bad. He needs–”

“Shh!” She said sharply, digging her nails into his skin inches from the tip of his throbbing member. “You will speak only when prompted by me. Do you understand?”

The warrior groaned thickly, their gazes locked, eyes to eye. She climbed atop him, straddling his hips, grinding her womanly heat to his straining erection. He very much liked where this was going.

“Yes, Mistress.”

(*)

Two hours later, after they bathed and got dressed, Isilwyn showed up, but before the slim elf led them down to the dining hall, she requested for Iron Bull to stand still in the middle of the room. He did as she asked, holding his arms out when prompted and raising a curious brow while she dashed around him, using a notched rope to take his measurements.

Ayla sat on the bed combing her hair.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“It’s easy to get clothes for most of your friends during your stay in the city, but we don’t have garments on-hand to fit you or the Inquisitor. So, the Lady asked me to get your sizes; I obtained his already. You’ll both have a couple of sets of shirts and pants ready by morning.”

“Oh…nice. Thank you.” Bull smiled at her.

“You’re welcome, milord.” Isilwyn tucked the rope into a pocket of her gown, grinning. “All done. Off to dinner now.”

“You didn’t write anything down.”

“I don’t need to,” she said. “I remember.”

“Ah.” Bull went to the bed and took Ayla’s waiting hand. His eye dropped to his bare feet and he smirked. He enjoyed the slight warmth infused into the wooden flooring throughout the house.

“Are you sure this is allowed?”

“Of course, my love. I always walk around barefoot here, as a lot of people do.”

“I mean for dinner. It seems kinda…out of place.”

She sifted soft laughter. “It’s fine. Besides, this will make it so we can use both hands to eat.”

“Alright then.” He smiled down at her. “But if anyone says anything, I’m blaming it on you.”

They followed Isilwyn from the room, backtracking the corridor for the expansive landing. Bull slowed their pace to put a little more space between them and their elven escort. Low and
tempting was his voice when he spoke.

“So, she likes to roleplay.”

Ayla grinned, keeping her eyes ahead, voice just as soft as his. “Maybe.”

“Oh, I think definitely.”

“Yes, it was fun.”

“Told ya. Next time, I tie you up.”

“I used to be such a good girl before I met you, the tattooed bad boy.”

“Oh, I still have many ways in which to corrupt you.”

The Oona stifled a giggle.

Ahead of them, Isilwyn cleared her throat.

The couple exchanged smiles, Ayla’s written mildly with embarrassment. The handmaiden heard at least some of their exchange. At the bottom of the broad stairs, they cut immediately to the left and went through an archway to a well-lit corridor. They passed a few rooms, the hallway bending gently to the right. It spilled into a spacious, airy chamber with many windows, through which the last of the day’s light filtered, golden and mute. This was the dining hall. A trio of musicians—lute, flute, and harp—performed softly in one area. Ayla smiled to see people had already arrived, seated at the large, U-shaped table.

Solas sat beside Varric on one end. Joswen, Elemir, and Magnus sat near each other. A regal-looking elf man with long blond hair greeted Isilwyn, Bull, and Ayla with a smile, then led them to the table. He held a hand out, and Isilwyn took a seat across from Solas and Varric. The maître d’elf moved to the outside of the curved table and gestured for Ayla to take the seat to the right of what was obviously the queen’s chair, carved with more intricate patterns than the others and with a higher back. Ayla often dined in that spot, Lassalanta had always done well to keep her close, treating her with high favor, the daughter she never had.

Once Iron Bull pushed Ayla’s chair in, he sat and immediately slid his foot under hers. It had become an automatic reaction and response by now, initiating the physical connection between them whenever possible.

Ayla grinned at the others. “Gods, it’s wonderful to be able to see at my own dining table!”

“I almost can’t believe it, that this day has come.” Magnus said, sipping at his mead. Fine pitchers of the brew and other beverages were available around the table. Dinner wouldn’t be served until Lassalanta arrived. The battlemage tipped his glass at Bull. “I had nearly given up hope that she’d find her warrior. Took your time coming along, huh, big guy?”

The Qunari smiled at him, pouring himself some mead. “If I’da known I was destined to marry the most wonderful woman in the world, I would’ve tried to find her sooner.” His head eased around, eye shining upon his beauty.

They grasped hands, then Ayla reached for the nearest water pitcher and poured herself some. She happily wiggled her toes against Bull’s foot. A moment later, Vek, Sophitia, and Ozra entered, taking seats around the rest of the Rangers. Multiple conversations ensued. Not even ten minutes later, Lady Lassalanta glided into the chamber. The woman rarely wore shoes while inside Hald’arun; there was little need for it. Barefoot and with the short train of her cornflower-blue dress flowing behind her, she went to her seat.

Before she could lower into it, Isilwyn, Joswen, and the Rangers rose in respect. Bull and the others started to do the same, but Lassalanta quickly lifted a hand and smiled.

“Please, take your seats, everyone.” The queen settled with Ayla on one side and two empty chairs on the other. She sighed deeply, examining the Oona. “You look stunning.”

“Thank you.” And she did, her appealing curves captured in a peach-hued gown with short princess-sleeves, the neckline tailored with a slight, seductive dip. The dress’s color provided an elegant highlight to her flawless, ebony skin. A peach ribbon wove through her hair, bound back from her face and shoulders, lending an unhindered view of her neck, which Bull had the strongest urge to bite right then. Beneath the table, their feet rubbed together slowly, producing friction and heat. Ayla slipped him a smile, then looked to Lassalanta, “Isilwyn helped with my hair. It’s been so long since anyone’s messed with it but me. Dorian’s tended to it a few times.”

“Well, you’re home…at least for now. You’ll receive all the pampering we can dish.” The queen chuckled.

Ayla did the same, but cut it short. “I’m not a child anymore. I don’t need people to look after me so closely, and with so much concern.”

“Hm.” Lassalanta’s eyes searched hers and she nodded. “No, I don’t suppose you do, my dear.”

Everyone turned to Hannibal and Dorian when they finally arrived, which was just what the Altus intended. He simply adored being the center of attention. He’d decided to adorn some native garb, wearing a satin knit top, pants, and fine shoes. Aside from the attire, he also wore that I-just-got-a-
great hump from my boyfriend expression, a look the inner circle members had come to recognize instantly.

Lassalanta waved them over.

Hannibal sat in the seat next to her, with Dorian beside him.

"Now that we’re all here, let the meal commence," the queen said.

The trio of musicians struck up another tune, the volume hindered enough to ride beneath dinner conversation. The elf with the long, blonde hair who seated everyone clapped his hands once and nodded to a worker, who disappeared through the archway of the kitchen. A minute later, she and some others came back into the dining hall, pushing carts carrying various plates of food.

The staff went about setting dishes before everyone. Lassalanta and Solas received the same meal, an exquisite array of colorful vegetation, leaf lettuce, and sliced fruit. Everyone else got perfectly roasted meat and vegetables, with little salads served on the side. Baskets of dinner rolls were placed along the table, water and mead pitchers refilled, silverware set out.

Bull grinned down at his food. "This is pretty fancy. Reminds me of a dinner party I attended once in Orlais. Rich guy who loved throwing gold around, letting everyone see how well-off he was. Like the seven-foot gold statue of himself in the front yard didn’t give it away.”

Laughter arose about the table.

"Mm, sounds like the circles I used to tarry back home," Dorian said. "Though, they would be throwing diamonds around and possess whole rooms of golden statues."

"I’ve been to Tevinter, and you’re not far off with that," Magnus replied, sipping his drink. The battlemage lifted a smirk. "No offense, but the Imperium has some of the most pompous, arrogant, money-squandering ass-bags in all of Thedas. Sorry, milady," he said quickly afterwards.

Lassalanta chuckled and picked up her fork. "You’re fine, Magnus. I agree with you.” She ate a bit of salad.

"Oh, no offense taken, I assure you.” Dorian watched him across the table. "My countrymen can be quite brash when it comes to the flaunting of finances. While I do enjoy the finer things in life, I’ve made it my lifelong goal to never be like them—an overbearing, wrinkled old man with all the appeal of a testicle, marinating in delusions of grandeur and looking back on a hollow legacy. No, thank you very much. Not for me.” He lifted his glass, tipped it at Magnus, and sipped his mead.

A stint of silence fell over dinner, then Magnus bellowed into laughter, as did the others. “That’s some description you have there, friend. Your fellow Vints would do well to adopt your outlook. After all, nobody wants to be a testicle.” He laughed some more.

Solas shook his head at all the talk of male genitalia. He did appear very amused, however. His eyes skimmed down the table and met Lassalanta’s, and she deepened her smile.

They commenced eating and conversing. Ayla composed a cheeky smile, drawing her sight to each person, eyes lingering on her brother and other Rangers, euphorically ecstatic to be able to dine with them in this capacity now. Thanks to her kind, big-hearted, handsome husband. Under the table, she slowly drew her foot over his, the action dripping with sexual fervor. When they met eyes, Iron Bull grinned, shaking his head.

Ayla cut a small piece of meat, chewed it up, and turned to Lassalanta. “The male Oona—his name is David.”

"How do you know that?”

“Earlier, after we met with the Council, Isilwyn took Bull and I to the Eastern Overlook. We stopped at Mr. Ranus’s shop so I could get a turnover. He was quite surprised that I could see, as to be expected. He commented on how my situation is just like that of a man named David, who mysteriously gained sight over ten years ago, but who only maintains it when touching his wife.”

“People saw David’s ‘mended’ sight as both miraculous and magical throughout the Wood, and they’ll see yours the same, attributing it as a gift from this strange and mysterious place. No wards were necessary to keep David’s identity as an Oona a secret, since many unexplainable things happen in the sanctuary. He has merely become the Man Who Sees By The Touch Of His Wife. Once word begins to spread about you and Iron Bull, you’ll be seen similarly.”

The queen donned a gentle smile, eating a bit from her plate.

"That’s convenient,” Ayla said, nodding.

"Milady?”

Lassalanta’s vibrant eyes shifted to Solas. “Yes?”

“How did you come to live here, if I might ask?”

Her vision leveled on him. "I have been around for a long time. I lived during an age when the Evanuris shined as gods to the elvhen people.” Of course, he knew this part. He’d been around
too. “And when they disappeared, the gods, it marked the end of an era for the elves. They quickly lost their way, fallen from grace, as it were, and began to scatter across Thedas. I left the Arbor Wilds along with a small group.”

Lassalanta noticed the single, tiny tick at the corner of Solas’s eye. They both knew it was his actions, the placing of the Veil, that had caused the fall. She continued.

“We wandered the lands for a decade. One day, I began to feel something pulling me, urging me eastward. So, I followed the instinct, which brought us to the Brecilian Forest, and this sanctuary. All of us bonded with Hald’arun, but I am…different, and so haven’t aged the same. There were twenty-three of them, and five are still alive, living out the rest of their days peacefully. They are called the Originals and are as highly regarded as myself.”

“It would be an honor to meet them,” Solas said.

“It could be arranged. They’re extremely old and remain in their homes mostly being well-cared for. They all stay right here in the palace district. If I did take you to see one, the meeting would be short.”

“That’s more than I can ask for.” Just being able to see other elves who’d lived during the golden age of their people would suffice for Solas.

“How did you learn of the Jado and Oonas?” asked Hannibal.

The queen gave him her full attention. “About five-hundred years ago, once Hald’arun had been established for several centuries, I began to venture out more into the world, searching for elves and other people who required more than a little assistance, and they would be the ones I brought back here. One day, while traveling through Nevarra, my entourage came across a group of five, one of them a blind man.” Her voice drifted, as did her eyes as she recounted the day. “The power emanating from him was so great, I knew immediately that he was special, and…he made me feel revitalized. I didn’t know what he was at the time, that he had the power to amplify my own abilities beyond anything I’d ever imagined.”

“You…wanted to use him, his power,” Hannibal said softly, aqua eyes studying her.

“Yes,” Lassalanta said simply. “It invoked a mild greed within me I’d never experienced before, sensing the essence of his energy, the endless potential.”

Ayla’s eyes widened and she shook her head. “But you would never do that! You’re a good person!”

The queen smiled and chuckled. “No, I wouldn’t, and I didn’t. However, I did realize that he wasn’t safe, that if I had sensed what he was capable of, other keepers of magic would do the same. And not all of them would be as benign as me. So, after we made acquaintances and talked, I learned what he was and where he came from, a village deep inside the Donarks.”

That was a forested region north of the Anderfels.

“He had been on a journey to find his Warrior. I told him about a special place far east where he could be safe while he searched, and he agreed to go with me. He and his people stayed here for a few years, during which he gave me extensive information about the Jado, Oonas, the bond between them and their Warriors, many things. He found his warrior and left Hald’arun. I never saw him again. I made it my responsibility to check on the Jado, secretly watching, and then they suddenly vanished and blended into the rest of Thedas nearly three-hundred years ago. I’ve been using my connections, resources, and other means to search for Oonas since then. I believe they need to be protected, to have a place where they can feel and be safe, especially with creatures like Corypheus—and now Ares—out there.” The Crimson Queen gripped and lovingly squeezed Ayla’s hand. “That’s why Joswen approached you and your brother all those years ago.”

“I’m very glad you sent for us,” the Oona replied, the misty blue flecks of her eyes fondly regarding Lassalanta. She went back to eating.

“Elemir,” Bull spoke. “I knew not long after meeting you that you were of the ranger type. Your light armor, the cloak, and bow said as much. What’s the history behind you guys? The Crimson Rangers, I mean?”

Elemir lifted a smile. “Like the Grey Wardens, the Crimson Rangers have been present since the First Blight, but faded from sight shortly after the Third Blight. This is because Lassalanta designated them more for intelligence agents that asserted themselves about Thedas, gathering information to report back to Hald’arun.” He grabbed his glass and drank the last of the mead inside it. “While the Wardens take care of the obvious threats, we work beneath the surface. We have an alliance with a chosen group of them, sharing information back and forth. It’s through them that we learned what had happened at Adamant.”

“Wow. There’s so much happening in the world that we don’t realize. This place and the secret behind Aut’lu Mena, the Crimson Rangers. The fact that you, milady, own the trading outpost and make an insane profit to pour into your little utopia. It’s all quite impressive,” Varric mused. He huffed and shook his head, his eyes flickering mirthfully. “Damn shame I won’t be able to write about it. I could make a killing with the critics.”

Laughter rumbled around the table.
After dinner, they all split to their own activities, with Vek and Elemir hanging out on the dining hall terrace smoking their long-pipes. Solas spent a couple of hours earlier walking around the palace district, exploring. To his greatest pleasure, he found that the sanctuary was even more like his old home than he realized. There were shops and businesses that keenly practiced the old ways of blowing glass and crafting tiles. For a while, when he shut his eyes to block out the non-elves, he almost believed he was home. That everything was as it should be.

But it certainly wasn’t.

A very slow sigh drizzled from him. He stood by the windows of his room, watching the beauty of the lumin stone-lined pathways, their glow ebbing through the great redwood’s canopy foliage. Elven voices sang gently, carrying on a mild wind.

Knock-knock-knock.

Solas turned to the door, then went to answer it. The elf who’d been assigned to him, Braylen, stood on the other side.

“Good evening, milord,” he said. “The Lady has requested your presence in her chambers. I am here to lead the way.”

Solas had been expecting this, waiting patiently. He nodded to Braylen, then followed after him. Through the immense house they went, around the second floor corridor to a central set of steps leading up to a pair of large doors. Braylen lifted the brass knocker, dropping it to the plate a couple of times.

One of the doors pulled in, revealing a female elf. Lassalanta’s handmaiden. She stepped aside and let Solas enter. “The Lady awaits on the terrace.” Her arm stretched out, suggesting that he go further into chambers. When he was fully inside, she whipped around him and exited, shutting the door behind her.

The handsome mage progressed slowly, skimming the large area. A circular hearth as tall as him sat in the center of the room, topped by a fine chimney of stone jutting up through the high ceiling. His eyes fell on the bed, then swept to the run of windows, sheer drapes billowing in the evening breeze. He saw her standing beyond, her back to him.

Solas approached, brushing aside the drapes. Lassalanta could feel him there, a mere few feet away, and she shut her eyes when his hands enclosed her shoulders. She spun to lock eyes with him, each lifting their hands, palms gently touching, faces inches apart; this was a greeting saved for someone very close.

“Fen’harel,” she breathed. “I have missed you.”

“I thought you were dead, that you had perished after the fall of our people.” They were alone now and there was no need to hide his emotions, the swell of euphoriant happiness that had been with him since he saw her walking up that low-sloped hill to greet them. It was present on his face, in the slight quiver of his voice. He smiled down at her, leaning in to feel the softness of her skin as his lips brushed her temple.

“I was surprised when I’d heard an elf named Solas had joined the Inquisition, and even more surprised to learn that it was you. What happened all those years ago?”

Solas took a step back from her, gaze going to random shadows down in the beautifully landscaped yard. He grabbed the balustrade, giving his full back. “When I raised the Veil and sealed the Evanuris in a remote area of the Fade, I expended a great deal of power. It drained me. I fell into some variation of Uthenera, sleeping for a thousand years. Three decades ago, I awakened from a glass sarcophagus in a cave deep within the Arbor Wilds.” His voice lowered, lathered with shame. “It didn’t take me long to realize what I’d done to our people. I saw the alienages, the enslavement, mistreatment…”

Lassalanta touched his arm.

Solas shook his head, eyes closing. “I did this to them.”

“You cannot blame yourself, Fen’harel.”

He swiftly faced her. “There is no one else to blame but me. I only wanted…to make it better, to protect them from the greedy ambitions of false gods who were nothing more than very powerful mages. Now look what I’ve done. I’ve destroyed them.”

“No, you haven’t,” the Crimson Queen said sternly, hands gripping his face, making him look at her. “I was with you then. I didn’t object to the raising of the Veil. The others deserved punishment for their betrayal of Mythal. You believe you have destroyed our people, but I think you did save them. Granted, the circumstances of the elven people are less than desirable in most cases, but they are no longer playthings to the Evanuris.”

He snorted. “No. Now they’re slaves in the Tevinter Imperium or trapped in overpopulated, disgusting alienages, with skewed knowledge of the great people they once were.”

“You did the right thing by lifting the Veil. You gave our people the chance to move forward. It may not seem like it to you, but they’ve come a long way. Every day, more and more elves are embracing who they are, who they were. The elves living here know their history. They also
know the real story behind Fen’harel.”

Solas gave a clipped laugh and sighed. “I saw one of the shrines. But I am no god, Lassalanta. None of us ever were.”

“Yes, I know. The people’s hope is most important. You rebelled against entities that sought to enslave ancient elves, ruling them with tyranny. This makes you a beacon of hope, god or not.”

He tarried over her words. There was merit to them, though he would always be humble. “There is another thing. I… purposefully allowed my Orb of Destruction to fall into Corypheus’s hands.”

“What! That’s how he got it! You gave it to him? Why?”

“Once I awakened from Uthenera, I was too weak to open it myself, to gain back my power and the Anchor. It occurred to me that as someone who had physically walked in the Fade, Corypheus had the power to open it.”

Lassalanta nodded, gaining insight as he elaborated. “And he essentially wants the same thing as you—to tear down the Veil and merge the Fade back into the waking world.”

“Yes. What I didn’t realize is that he has an archdemon to which he has bound himself, allowing him to resurrect constantly. He cannot be killed while the thing still lives.” Solas’s twilight-hued eyes met hers, and he shook his head. “It’s all a mess.”

“It certainly is, but not one that can’t be rectified. Ares has the Anchor, and he’s a real god, as you and the Inquisitor reported. He’s Corypheus’s target now, and it’s only a matter of time before they clash in conflict. If the war god is as powerful as you say, he’ll destroy the old magister. The next phase will then be to purge him from our world, and this is where your friend Xena comes in.” She stroked his ear tenderly. “You need to stop worrying, Fen’harel. Take things one step at a time.”

The elf chuckled softly, his arms locking around her. “With all the strategic talk, it appears as if the apprentice has surpassed the master.”

“I could never surpass you. Even though your power is currently diminished, it is much greater than my own.”

“All I have to do now is get it back.”

“Mm, indeed.” Lassalanta lifted her lips to his chin, pecking a kiss to the cleft. “Will you stay the night with me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Solas brought his lips down to hungrily capture hers, his arms clamping her tightly. He easily lifted her, carrying her back inside, striding to the great bed, and laying her upon it. Lassalanta’s fingers worked at the ties of his tunic, and he pulled it up and off, tossing it aside. He draped his body over her, hand caressing her thigh. She moaned and found his mouth again, nipping. Solas grinned.

The Dread Wolf and the Cardinal spent many hours making love by firelight.
“Stop it! Stoooop!” Ayla’s giggles trilled loudly through the room, her body shuddering with them. “Oh my gods, Bull! That one’s terrible!”

The Qunari had her pinned with the covers over her head in a death-oven maneuver. She wiggled and struggled, gagging on the fart. Her warrior had done this to her on previous occasions, and she could never get her arms and legs loose until he relented. Iron Bull blared out robust laughter.

“It’s those little cakes from last night, with the gooey center. Damn things got me goin’.”

“Get off! You’re so disgusting!” He finally released Ayla, and she snatched the covers from her face, sucking in deep breaths.

“Like yours smell any better. They’re particularly foul when you eat those dried apple rings you love so much.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him, features maintaining their smile. “I’ll be sure to load up on them later then so I can pay you back.”

“A woman whose butt bombs match my own. I’d say we were definitely meant to be together.”

They laughed, then kissed. Bull held her to his chest, stroking her hair. “What do you have planned for today, Kadan?”

“Hm. I want to visit Old Lady Shaori. I’ve missed her.”

“Alright then. That’s what we’ll do. But first….”

Bull gently dragged her fully on top of him, locking his arms, nipping her chin. Ayla grinned, making no objections to the demands of her husband’s sexual desire, for her own was just as fierce. They didn’t leave her room until late in the morning.

(*)

On the other side of the house, Solas stirred in Lassalanta’s bed, stretching himself awake. His eyes opened slowly to view the ceiling, and he sat up to find he was alone. He churned a soft smile thinking of her, up bright and early to queenly things probably. She would find him later, of that he was certain.

The elf slipped from bed and pulled his pants on. He searched about for his shirt. Muted, golden sunlight pressed through the windows, painting warmly over the floor.

“Ah.”

He spotted the garment lying where he’d tossed it last night. He put it on and left her quarters, intending to bathe once he got back to his own room. Solas silently descended her private stairwell. He nearly bumped into Varric when he exited into the main corridor.

Varric grinned at him. “Morning, Chuckles. That leads to the queen’s quarters, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

The grin deepened. “Just what are you doing coming outta there this early in the day?”

Solas, so good at maintaining facades, watched him stoically. “That is none of your concern.”

“Oh, come on. You can tell me. We’re buddies, right?”

A slim brow rose, an indication of being humored. “I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

Ach…

Solas smirked. “Unlike most of the Inner Circle, I don’t kiss and tell, if that’s what you’re expecting, Master Tethras.”

“So…there was kissing involved then, at the very least.”

Varric released a light sigh and roll of eyes, moving off.

The dwarf glanced at him after and continued exploring the house.

(*)

Shaori Moja lived in a quaint house sub-canopy, down on the forest floor with most of Hald’aran’s occupants. Her abode rested on a patch of plush land where two cobbled avenues intersected. There was a fruit and vegetable market across the way and a park full of children beside that. Isilwyn stopped at the low gate in front of Shaori’s home.

“This is it,” she said, turning to Ayla and Bull, their hands clasped to maintain the bond. “Shall I wait for you?”
Iron Bull's eye jotted down to his wife. This was her world and her call; she could decide what to do. Though, and he knew this well, even outside of Hald'arun, he would always give her room to make decisions.

Ayla reared partly around to set eyes on the greatest of the redwoods rising like an ancient sentinel above the rest of the sanctuary. She hoisted a soft smile and shook her head. “No need for that, Isilwyn, thank you. We'll walk around for a bit once we’re done here. It won’t be difficult to find our way back home.”

“Very well, milady.” The pretty, little elf left them standing there.

Ayla examined the front yard, adorned with a few clay mushroom sculptures and beds of wild flowers. The house itself contained a single level, a drizzle of smoke coming from the chimney. Bull opened the gate and they headed to the door, upon which Ayla knocked. A short moment later, it opened and a middle-aged human woman with kind features greeted them.

“Ayla!” The woman quickly took notice of Bull, then pulled her into a short hug. She studied Ayla closely, disbelief shrouding her face and burning in her eyes. “You can see! How?”

“Hello, Draschelle. Um…it’s a miracle, I guess.” Her mind drew on what she heard of David, how Lassalanta said the people who knew him saw his sight as a gift from the sanctuary. She grinned and clung to her Qunari’s arm. “This is Iron Bull, my husband, and his touch allows me to see. I met him while out traveling with Elemir and the others.”

“Oh, I see.” Draschelle smiled up at him and extended a hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Bull shook her hand.

Draschelle stood aside. “Won’t you please come in? I assume you’re here to speak with Lady Shaori.”

“Yes,” Ayla answered. “Is she available?”

“She’s out back having her tea. I was just on my way out to the market, but will return shortly. I’m sure she’d love a visit from you.”

Ayla bobbed a nod, then she and Bull crossed through the entryway into a living room space that had a fireplace, a table, and a couple of comfortable chairs. A short hall branched to the right, going to Shaori’s bedroom and bathing alcove. They went forward through the kitchen space, out over a porch, into the backyard. An old woman with silver hair down to her knees sat in a cushioned wicker chair beside a table underneath a tree. She hummed softly to herself, smiling, her blinded sight fixed in the direction of playing, mirthful children.

Lady Shaori caught the vague rustle of steps on grass, and her eyes jerked in the direction. “Draschelle dear, is that you?”

Ayla and Bull went closer, with Ayla out in front.

Shaori’s eyes widened and went watery. Her nose picked up the very familiar scent. “Ayla!” She opened her arms wide, holding them out. “Come here, child!”

Iron Bull released her hand, and the shadows set in while she knelt into Shaori’s shadow-shape, eyes closing as they hugged.

The old Oona took another good sniff. “You smell different. Lassalanta told me you had mated.” Her eyes narrowed, looking beyond Ayla, her voice lowering. “Where is Draschelle?”

“She’s gone to the market.”

“Then there is only you, your warrior, and I present?”

“Yes.”

Shaori nodded. Draschelle was a fine and trusted friend, but she didn’t know about the secret of the Oonas or their power. Only a select few did. “Good.” Her milky eyes, a crisp shade of blue distinctly different than Ayla’s, rolled slowly about. “Come forward, boy. Let me look at you.”

When Bull moved closer, Ayla touched upon his arm to regain vision. He gently gripped Shaori’s hands, their texture akin to that of soft, leathery parchment, so very delicate. The old woman pulled herself to stand, proceeding to brush hands along his torso, starting at his stomach, working to his chest, shoulders, and arms. “Oh. You are a big one, hm?”

“Um…” Bull lifted a brow.

Ayla chuckled.

“Bring your face down here, boy.”

The Qunari bent so her hands could shift up to his countenance, where fingertips commenced to trace, giving her an idea of what he looked like.

Shaori grinned. “The Iron Bull. Handsome…even with that missing eye. You have a lot of scars, yes? Seen a lot of battle?”
“Yes, ma’am,” Bull said, smiling softly down at the old woman.

“Mm. That’s to be expected, you being a Qunari warrior, and a big, strong one at that.” Blind eyes rolled in Ayla’s direction, and she issued a knowing look.

A thin blush blanketed the younger Oona, reading the implications in Shaori’s words, the tone of her voice, her wrinkled, cunning smile. Iron Bull merely chuckled at her, amused and intrigued. He highly respected the elderly. They contained a trove of experience and memories. Shaori had been around for more than fifteen decades, Lassalanta said, so she’d certainly experienced a lot. The thing Bull liked most about senior citizens was their lack of modesty, a completely refreshing thing. No lies, no bullshit.

Shaori swept an arm to the other chairs surrounding the table. “Please, take a seat and keep an old woman company for a bit.” She slowly lowered back into her seat. “I’m glad you finally found out what you are. At least you won’t waste and wither like this old woman. Alone and completely blind. You have this handsome young man to balance you.”

Ayla grabbed Bull’s hand once she was in her chair, sighing across the table. “You are not alone, Shaori. You won’t ever be alone.”

Iron Bull dropped resonant chuckles. Oh yeah, he definitely liked the old woman.

(*)

They spent almost two hours with Shaori talking about the happenings outside of Hald’arun. She had the ability to remember the sanctuary when she left, but she hadn’t gone to the outside in many decades, having bound herself to the sanctuary around age eighty. What news she did get came directly from Lassalanta; the queen visited her weekly, when she wasn’t busy or traveling beyond Hald’arun. They also listened avidly while Shaori recounted her younger days, her mind still sharp enough to remember when Lassalanta invited her to the sanctuary. She’d grown up in an orphanage, and the queen herself took her away from the place. Shaori was nineteen-years-old.

Iron Bull and Ayla left her quaint little house with smiles on their faces and laughter on their tongues. Now they walked hand-in-hand down a grass-lined path, in the sun-kissed shadows of one of the great redwoods.

“She’s a lovely person,” Bull said. “I see why you like her.”

“Yes, she is.” Ayla sighed. “I wish…she had found someone, the way I have.”

“Yeah, I know.” He stopped their pace, turning, his eye fixing on her face. Bull cupped her cheek, then eased in for a kiss. Ayla gratefully nestled into him, arms wrapping his middle. They remained that way for a minute.

“Excuse us,” came a man’s voice.

Ayla and Bull broke their kiss to acknowledge him. His blue eyes smiled upon them, as did the green eyes of the slender, leather-clad elven woman whose hand he held. Like Bull and Ayla, neither of them wore shoes.

“We don’t mean to disturb you,” he said. “Lassalanta said we could find you down here, and we just wanted to meet you, well, I mean, officially meet you. Most people in the sanctuary know of you, the queen’s beautiful, blind daughter, though, I guess, not so blind anymore.” He grinned.

“Oh, for stars’ sake, love. Quit yer ramblin’,’” the cute little elf said, a smile emblazoned on her features. “My name’s Legothriel, and this is my husband David.” She took a moment to make sure no other citizens were around with open ears. “He is also an Oona, and I’m his Warrior.”

“I’ve been hoping to meet you!” Ayla’s eyes whisked between the couple.

“Lassalanta didn’t mention she’d told you of us.” David said.

“Yesterday, a vendor in the palace district remarked about a man who was once blind but now sees by the touch of his wife. Before that, when we first arrived, Lassalanta revealed that two other Oona’s live here, one of which I already knew.”

David nodded. “Old Lady Shaori. Um…we were going to grab some lunch at a café not far from
“You can tell us about your bond too.” Ayla turned large, lovely eyes up at her husband. “Is that alright, my love? We don’t have to stay long, if there’s anything you wished to do.”

Bull chuckled softly. “Whatever you want, Naaremema. I’m good.”

(*)

The café spot sat on the natural jut of a rock ledge, the underside of it decorated by ghoul’s beard moss that swayed in the gentle breeze. The two couples were seated by a dwarf with a spray of freckles across her nose. She left menus, got their drink orders, then excused herself.

Beneath the table Legothriel’s foot rested on top of David’s, and Bull’s slid under Ayla’s. Now everyone could see.

David’s smile was bright enough to illuminate a room. “You guys do the foot-thing too. That’s neat.”

“Ain’t it wonderful to be able to see and use both hands to eat!” Ayla grinned. “Well, you two have been together for a while, so it’s nothing new to you.”

“If anything, it just gives her an extra hand to use for swiping food from my plate,” Bull joked, and it got him a love-nudge in the side.

“Tell me about it.” Legothriel nodded, smiling at their new friends. “So, how did you both react to the bond when it happened?” She kept her voice contained to their table. “As part of the small circle of people who know about the Oonas, Lassalanta told us about the link when she received the report from Elemir.”

“You tell them,” said Ayla, eyes flashing upon her husband.

Massive shoulders shrugged, a grin hanging loosely upon his features. “It was more than weird, very unexpected. I saw that she was about to be shot by an arrow, so I ran for her. As soon as my hands contacted her skin, it happened, this feeling like I was being yanked through time or the ages, something like that.”

David rested his elbows to the table, hands clasping while he nodded. “Yeah, quite a ride that was, and so dramatic the way you two obtained the bond.” He chuckled. “Makes the way Lego and I bonded seem pretty boring.”

The lovely elf leaned and nuzzled his cheek. “Oh, t’was anything but that, love. Somebody had to save ya from those awful bullies, right?”

They both laughed.

“How did you realize the bond?” Ayla pressed, leaning forward.

The conversation paused when their dwarven server returned, setting out blackberry-lemonades, water, and an apple-tea respectively to who ordered what. Her friendly smile never faltered.

“Were you ready to order, or should I give you a few more minutes?”

“A few more minutes, if ya will, love.” Legothriel said, sending the dwarf on her way. She picked up where they left off. “I was eighteen and on my way to a training session for the Crimson Rangers, not far from becoming fully decorated into duty. It was being held somewhere in the southern sector and I never go there, never had a reason to, lovely as that part of the sanctuary is. Anyway, I hear a ruckus over in the park and go to see a couple of guys bullying sixteen-year-old Davy, who’s escort had left him on a bench momentarily so he could be alone and read. The bullies had taken his book and were tossing it around. I saw Davy stumbling at them, not knowing then that he was mostly blind and seeing their lumpy, formless shapes. He tripped on a root and fell, and the arseholes ran off. I picked up his book, saw it was in tangerlingua, and realized his blindness.”

“She offered her hand to help me up…and the rest is history,” David picked up the recounting, giving his mate the warmest, most loving smile. “We’ve been together ever since, though we didn’t get officially married until I turned eighteen.”

“Aw, that’s so very sweet,” Ayla cooed, eyes large and gleaming. “I’m so happy you found each other. At least you didn’t have to leave the sanctuary to do so.”

“Yep, my Warrior was here the whole time. It’s good you did leave, though, or you wouldn’t have met Iron Bull.”

“Hey,” Bull droned, smiling, “I’m the lucky one.”

“We both are, my love.” Ayla lifted her face, and they kissed.

The couples decided on what they wanted to eat, and the server returned to take their orders.

(*)

In a completely different dimension, in the Aponi Amazon village, Gabrielle, Joxer, and
Autolycus sat silently around the fire pit in Yakut’s hut. The three of them watched over the shamaness and Xena while they slept to access the Void. Both their bodies laid out on fur mats side by side, chests rising and falling peacefully with each breath.

“So, let me get this straight, and please correct me if I’m wrong,” the handsome thief’s voice ebbed forth just above a whisper. “They’re going into the Void to connect to the Void of this Thedas place, so that they can use some kind of magical mirror to make a doorway to physically enter the other world.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Yep, that about sums it up.”

“Never entered the Void before.” Auto smirked. “But, if I have to, I’ll do it to help Aphrodite.”

“Me too,” Joxer said.

“You’re both good friends.” Gabrielle said lowly, smiling at them in the hazy dimness of the large hut.

The three of them fell back into silence, observing the warrior princess and shamaness.

(*)

Yakut highly disliked traversing the realm of spirits, a place where the magically inclined could visit lucidly, and ‘special’ people like Xena. She clenched a bit tighter to the tall brunette’s strong hand, watching in wonder as the shadows of the Void disintegrated around them, drawing in a darkness that glowed faintly with green luminance.

Solas had given Xena the power to travel to Thedas’s Void by taking her there himself, same as Ares did him for Earth’s Void. She summoned the only place she knew from Void-memory—Skyhold. A partially decrepit rendition of the massive fortress built itself around them. Stone walls and overhangs. Arches, towers, and doorways. And the main spire of the Inquisitor’s quarters with its stained-glass windows overlooking the entire complex.

Xena and Yakut stood in the center of the gardens, the plant-life shriveled and malnourished, the ground cracked and wheezing pale fog in some places. Everything but Xena held a greenish tint. She released Yakut’s hand.

“We’re in Thedas’s Void now, the Fade, as they call it. This place is called Skyhold.” Her voice sounded dreamy, reverberating. This was normal when people spoke in the dimension of spirits.

“The headquarters of this Inquisition you spoke of.”

“Yes.” Xena pointed across the garden, beyond the gazebo. “The mirror lies through that door. C’mon.”

Yakut followed her, standing aside while Xena pushed the door in. They entered and approached the potentially magical artifact, its surface reflecting light but showing no clear images, only a boggle of shapes that could be the two women.

“The eluvian,” Xena said.

Yakut went a little closer. “Yes, I can sense that it has power. Not very much right now, but it could be expanded.”

“You think you can do it?”

The shamaness’s eyes shifted from the eluvian to Xena. “I don’t know. The magic is unlike anything I’ve ever felt, so foreign…yet familiar. I will certainly try, Xena, but I’ll have to study this thing a bit more.”

“Alright. I have faith in you.” The warrior princess looked around quickly, eyes, ears, and extra senses all alert. Hostile spirits didn’t seem to be abundant in this part of the Void, however, that didn’t mean they weren’t near. “We can’t remain here too much longer.”

“Right. I’m on it.”

Yakut approached the eluvian, hands out. Her fingers brushed the smooth glass, trailing to the beautifully engraved framework, getting a feel for the mirror’s power. This would give her a starting point for aligning her magic with it.

(*)

The Eastern Overlook park of the palace district was a popular spot, especially for visitors to the sanctuary. At Ayla’s suggestion, Dorian and Hannibal got their guide Caris to take them there after they had lunch. The Altus clung to his love’s thick, muscular arm while they enjoyed the view of white sand shores and the expanse of the Frozen Seas beyond the clear safety barrier.

“Maker’s breath, I wish we could remember this place once we leave.” Dorian sighed, nuzzling his face to Hannibal’s sleeve. “This would be one of my most cherished memories, having stood here in such a realm of beauty with you at my side.”

Hannibal smiled into the smaller man’s dark, lush hair, inhaling his scent. “The memories will await our return.”
"I know. It just seems almost unfair that we can’t take them with us. Mm, I love you, Amatus.”

“Love you too, sweetie.”

A familiar presence approached the embraced pair from behind while they basked in the moment. A fleck of disapproval shone in her eyes, the same as that she’d expressed when she noticed that Hannibal began to get very close to the Tevinter mage once the Inquisition moved into Skyhold.

“Inquisitor. Dorian.”

Both men spun and didn’t hide their surprise upon seeing her.

“Mother Giselle?” Hannibal’s aqua eyes widened momentarily. He propped a smile that held an air of skepticism. “I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised to find you here.”

“We thought you were bound for Jader when you left Skyhold,” Dorian mused. He noted that the holy woman appeared less defensive against him than she did upon finding out he was the love interest of the beloved Inquisitor. Surely, though, she still judged him to some degree for being Tevinter and queer.

Giselle clasped her hands before her, the draping sleeves of her robe flowing gently. She nodded. “I did go there to oversee refugee relief efforts and help out where I could. Afterwards, I decided to retreat here for a bit.”

“You’re obviously no stranger to the place, since you can remember the way back.”

The woman lifted a smile. “Indeed, Inquisitor. I have been coming here for some time.”

“I don’t suppose you’re willing to tell how you came to first discover Hald’aran,” Dorian pressed.

“It is … an unremarkable story. Besides, you wouldn’t remember it anyway, yes?” She chuckled. “I had heard you were here and merely wanted to talk for moment. Perhaps, you would tell me what’s happening with the Inquisition, the search for Corypheus.”

“Oh, there’s been more than a few developments since you left,” Hannibal said, then held up his left hand. “Your ‘gift from Andraste’—it’s gone. Taken from me by something more powerful than Corypheus.”

The three of them found a secluded set of benches in the park and talked over the many events that had occurred in Mother Giselle’s absence.
Later that evening, Ayla and Iron Bull sat in the palace’s dining hall having dinner and talking. This wasn’t a meal like the one last night, with everyone else present; that had been to welcome the Inquisitor and his people as guests to Hald’arun. Tonight, the hall was less crowded, Varric and Vek occupying one end of the U-shaped table speaking about their travels and such, and Vek telling his fellow dwarf about life in Orzammar.

Hannibal and Dorian entered, taking seats by Bull and Ayla.

“Bet you can’t guess who we ran into today,” the Altus said, pouring himself a glass of wine.

“Who?” Bull’s eye lingered curiously over him.

“Mother Giselle.”

“She’s here too?” The Qunari gulped some water. “Wow.”

“Who is Mother Giselle?” Ayla wiggled her toes over Bull’s foot, gaze skipping between him, Hannibal, and Dorian.

“She’s a Revered Mother of the Chantry. Helped out a lot back when the Inquisition was reforming,” Hannibal said in the middle of making a plate. “When she departed Skyhold a few months before we met you, she went to Jader, then came here.” His eyes swept to Iron Bull. “Apparently, she’s been coming to Hald’arun for a while, has the authority to remember the way back.”

“Ha. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised,” Bull mused, hoisting a smile. “I always felt she was a woman of secrets, the way she was able to easily persuade her contacts in Val Royeaux and Ferelden to aid the Inquisition’s efforts. Did she tell you how she came across this place?”

“No.” Dorian waved a hand flippantly. “She was as elusively stubborn as ever, stating it was a boring story that we wouldn’t remember anyway once we left.”

“Ah, well, we all have our secrets.” Bull spooned up some stew, tearing off a piece of bread to follow.

The four of them talked more about their day, then parted from the dinner hall.

Bull and his Oona headed up to her room. He pushed the door in, and right as they crossed the threshold, Elemir called out from the end of the corridor. They turned and watched the ranger stride forward, his forest-hued eyes appearing more serious than usual.

“Is something wrong, El?” Ayla took a step for him, keeping hold of Bull’s hand.

“No,” he answered, then ironed the hardness from his features as much as he could. Elemir looked the Qunari squarely in the eye. “I merely wanted to inform you that, tomorrow, you will marry my sister in our way.”

“Oh, El! Do we have to do this now?”

Iron Bull chuckled. “Hey, it’s all good. I did promise that I would marry you…‘properly’. Way I see it—second honeymoon!” His grin intensified and he waggled his eyebrows up and down.

Elemir smirked.

Ayla quickly looked away from her brother, blushing only a little. She huffed. “Fine.” She spun to head fully into the room, tugging Bull’s arm, but he halted her.

“You go ahead, Naaremma. I’ll be along in a moment. Need to talk to Elemir real fast.”

The woman’s loving gaze swept over the two most important men in her life, then she nodded and released his hand, putting out her slender arms to feel through the blobby shadows of her room.

Bull turned to Elemir, both men slipping down the corridor a short distance. “She might act like this isn’t a big thing, but I know how much it means to her, which is why I want to do something special.”

The ruggedly attractive ranger scratched at the stubble along his jaw, eyes joting to the doors of Ayla’s room then back to Bull. “What did you have in mind?”

“Hm. Maybe you could teach me to say something in Elvhen, something I could say during the ceremony. I mean, that is traditional for humans, right? Saying something?”

Elemir laughed softly, clearing his throat. “Well, yes, most times.”

“Alright. So, you’ll help me out? I think it would be, ya know, romantic if I could say something in the language of the elves, since she’s so familiar with it.”

“I’ll help you. I’ve set the ceremony to take place in the early evening, so that gives us some time for you to get down what you wish to say.”
“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Any time.” Elemir left him with a silent nod, moving down the hall, around the bend, and out of sight.

Iron Bull returned to Ayla’s room, locking the doors after him. She sat on the bed, waiting. He immediately began stripping, undoing the button flap of his specially-made shirt that Isilwyn took measurements for just last night. He pulled the garment up and off with no issues, removing first one horn, then the other from the enlarged neck hole.

“What did you and El talk about?”

“Oh, nothing. Man-stuff.”

“Man-stuff?” Ayla grinned. She touched his bare arm once he settled on the bed. She climbed on top of him, branding his lips with a hot kiss, before pulling back to stare down.

“Yep.” Iron Bull’s large hands slipped under her skirts, trailing up her smooth thighs to her hips, gripping while he rotated his hips under her. “I needed to ask him a couple of things in regards to human wedding traditions, that’s all.”

“Ah.” She slowly ran her hands down his chest, over the packs of his abdomen, the muscle hard and unyielding. Her touch lingered at the place under his navel where a path of dark hair disappeared into his pants. “Are you up for taking a bath with me?”

“Is that a trick-question?”

The Oona chuckled, going into all-out laughter when he sat up, gently maneuvered her in his arms, then started for the adjoining bathing room. Her arms embraced his broad shoulders, hands running over his sinewy body, lips nuzzling his ear. Ayla sighed and caressed one mighty horn, nipping his neck.

The Iron Bull rumbled a deep, potent growl as her excitement fueled his own.

(*)

Solas shut his eyes a moment, reopening them to trace over the ceiling while he delved in his thoughts. The smile on his face was unhindered, unhidden. He couldn’t be this readable with his associates of the Inner Circle, not if he wanted to effectively maintain the cocoon of lies he’d sewn around himself. No, he could only be this honest with her.

Lassalanta.

She understood him, came from a time when the elves were golden, when many of them lived for centuries on end. The reign of the Evanuris tarnished that golden age, however, the would-be gods casting their tyrannical shadows over the elvhen people, using Vallaslin to brand them like cattle. Modern elves that wore the facial tattoos bearing the marks of the Evanuris had no idea how deep the contradictory went. They thought they were honoring the ‘gods’ by doing so, all the while ignorant to the horrific truth—the Evanuris were conquerors, all but Mythal and Fen’Harel. She had to be near them, leading them alongside the vilest of them all, Elgar’nan. She’d lent a balance to his cruelty, or at least tried to up until the moment he had her killed. Fen’Harel had never really been welcomed amongst them, and this was because he’d purposefully alienated himself, not wanting to be part of an unholy regime whose only purpose was to rule the elves, keeping them in mental slavery. Lassalanta would’ve been the equivalent of a demigod, her power great but not as potent as that of Fen’Harel and the Eight. She studied under her rebellious elvhen lover, drawn to his mysteriousness, his compassion. He helped her hone her power, expand on her potential, and he grew quite fond of her.

How the Evanuris and Fen’Harel came to obtain their exponential power was another story, one that would reveal itself in time.

The Crimson Queen studied him silently while he rested his head in her lap, the two of them on her bed, having shared dinner in her private quarters, making love afterwards. She rubbed his temples.

“What are you thinking about, Fen’Harel?”

“The amount of damage that I have to undo.” He chuffed a humorless laugh. “There seems to be no means to an end.”

“There is, melamin.” My love, she called him. “Getting your Anchor from Ares. That will come in time.”

He lifted a brow. “So I hope.”

Lassalanta chuckled.

The mage shifted to sit. He allowed fingers to skim through the scarlet cascade of her tresses, then over her cheek. “Last night, I attempted to enter the Fade while we slept but couldn’t. It was as if something blocked my consciousness from accessing the realm.”

“Ah, yes. Ever the Fadewalker. Well, you’ll find that it is not possible to reach the Fade while inside Hald’arun. This place exists outside of time and space as we know it and, therefore, holds
no ties to the spiritual realm,” she explained.

Solas issued a thoughtful nod. “I’m not surprised to discover this. The sanctuary is further protected because it lacks a connection to the Fade.”

“That’s right. You said that Ares is an expert at traversing that realm, and if Hald’arun were attached to it, he might find it someday. It’s not possible, however. Neither the war god nor Corypheus will find the sanctuary. Not using the Fade anyway.”

The elf pulled her close. “That means you’ll be safe here, which puts me at ease.”

Lassalanta’s smiling lips found and pecked his. “Was that your roundabout way of saying you love me?”

“Perhaps.”

“You were always so cryptic, Fen’Harel. That much hasn’t changed.”

“I can assure you, a lot of things about me haven’t changed.”

He leaned her back into the satin sheets, covering her body with his, and striking up a kiss that ushered in another round of intense lovemaking.

(*)

Day 2.

Ayla had lunch with her Qunari, then he left her in the dining hall with Lassalanta and Solas, who were also finishing a meal. Bull planned to meet up with Elemir so the man could teach him a little elvhen before the wedding later that evening, though he didn’t reveal that to Ayla. The Oona would spend a few hours with Lassalanta and Solas during that time.

The three of them left the palace and strolled through the canopy on wide pathways, heading for the home of an Original. Lassalanta set it up so Solas could meet one. They reached a place where a private ramp rose at a gentle incline through a shuffle of branchlets. Past that, a short set of steps led to the porch of a home carved directly into a section of one humongous branch, partly constructed of tree and stone. The architecture blended together seamlessly.

Solas took a moment to admire it, then followed up the ramp behind Ayla and Lassalanta.

The younger woman wished she could see more than the amalgam of smooth shadows, but this was like old times, before she met Iron Bull, when the queen, Elemir, and others led her around. She was grateful either way.

Lassalanta knocked on the door. The male elf who answered greeted her with a bow and smile, moving aside to let them all enter. Beyond the foyer was a rise of steps to the second story, a balustrade bordering the entire level.

“This way,” Lassalanta said, moving off to the right and through an open set of double-doors that led directly into a bedroom.

The bed was empty, but beyond the patio doors were two people. One was human. She stood behind the cushioned chair of an extremely old elvhen man, gently brushing his long white hair. His translucent skin showed blue and purple veins right beneath the surface, face puckered with age, wrinkled by the touch of time. Vaguely trembling hands gripped at the blanket draped over his lower body, adjusting it. He continued listening to the birds and enjoying a rather pleasant day.

The queen nodded and smiled at the human woman, taking the brush from her. The servant bowed and left. Lassalanta led Ayla to a chair, then moved behind the ancient-looking man. She started brushing his hair, smiling tenderly at the top of his head.

“Ilthorn, old friend, how are you feeling today?”

The elf’s eyes flickered and he smiled around at her. “Better now that you’re here. Did you bring the elf you spoke of yesterday?”

“Yes,” she said, placing the brush aside so she could pivot his rolling chair around. “This is Solas, and he has a fond interest of all things elvhen, particularly of the ancient sort.”

“Then he’s come to the right place,” rasped Ilthorn, hissing out laughter. “I am pretty damn ancient.” His eyes shifted to the Oona, and his smile broadened. “Beautiful as ever, Ayla. It’s good to see you, dear.”

The Originals knew about the Oonas, but Lassalanta didn’t bother them with every little detail these days. They were just too old for it, which is why none of them had been told about Ayla’s abduction, recovery, or mating. The queen might save the story for other meetings, should the remaining Original’s last long enough. Ayla had visited the homes of the elder ones a couple of times, accompanying Lassalanta while she checked up on them. She knew Ilthorn well, along with the others—Gethlaros, a male, and Ariathra, Natriel, and Ashanna, all females.

“And you as well, milord,” she answered, smiling at the blob of him.

Ilthorn’s attention shifted back to Solas, who bowed his head a moment. ”It’s a pleasure to meet
you, young man. It’s good when youth embrace their history, learn from it.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Solas replied, amused to be addressed as “young”, since he was far older than the silvered elf. “I look forward to hearing anything you would tell me about the ancient times.”

“Very well.” Ithorn’s chuckles were dry and scratchy, like fallen leaves blown across the ground. For the next half hour, he told Solas about when he was young and living in the Arbor Wilds before the fall of Elvhenan, the Elvhen Empire that stretched across the whole of Thedas.

(*)

The God of War had gotten quite used to his new device since he’d taken it from Hannibal. It made navigating the Void between Earth and Thedas all the easier, allowing him to create portals expending less of his own power. Things were going as planned and right on schedule. The first temple dedicated to Ares, the One True God, located not far from New Crestwood, was more than halfway finished. Resentius already had people clearing two other sites to the south for more temples. The god would have establishments of worship erected in the Hinterlands within a month.

Ares used the Anchor to tear a portal in midair, the green opening rippling and flashing before him. He stepped through, leaving his complex in the Emerald Graves to enter the Void. It wasn’t yet nightfall, but Solas was so infatuated by the Fade that he’d enter it at any point in the day, Ares knew. Since the war god stole the Anchor and felt Solas’s presence mingled with it, he’d pondered the reason constantly. He wanted to know just who or what the seemingly trivial mage was. He wanted to speak with him.

The rift sealed behind Ares, and he took a moment to simply listen, undaunted by the realm of the spirits. Chortling and rustling made him turn to see a deformed, slimy thing approaching, creeping its way around a pool of green goop. A lesser shade. The creature contained no evident facial features, save for a gaping maw of jagged teeth and slashes where eyes might’ve been. Ares glared at it, and the shade halted, quickly shuffling in a different direction, away from the god.

He began walking through the semi-formless dimension. It was different traveling through the place physically, rather than via a lucid dream, or in Ares case, astral projection. That was how he’d made first and second contact with Solas, and how he could control the dream-link between Iron Bull and Ayla. Even as a god, lingering too long physically within the Void could be damaging. The only times he truly crossed into the domain was to physically enter Thedas and a few times passing between there and Earth. Ares had starkly noticed the ill feeling blanketing him. No living creature, god or otherwise, was meant to linger there.

But with the Anchor, the uneasiness and strain on his power ceased to exist. This was why Corypheus required the item, to be able to shift between the Fade and living world at will. Ares would tend to that nuisance soon enough. For now…

“So you,” his voice echoed outward. He couldn’t sense the elf then. If Solas was sleeping and traveling the Fade, Ares would feel his presence similar to how a spider picked up the vibrations of an intruder caught in its web.

But there was nothing. No Solas, anyway. He did sense other Thedosian mages. Trivial. No interest.

Ares sighed. He prepared to open a portal out of the Void, when his hand flickered and sputtered with green sparks. It didn’t hurt, only surprised him. He raised the limb, studying it, the glow reflecting in the fierce brown mirrors of his eyes. It was…speaking to him, the Anchor. He turned slowly in place, arm out. His hand ebbed on and off. It began to blink faster as he faced a certain direction, then blared bright and vivid. The war god had to squint at it.

He looked in the direction his arm pointed, towards broken rocky banks, chunks of floating stone. Nothing hadn’t seen in the Void before, but there was something that way. He started walking. Ten minutes later, the God of War slipped into a canyon, the walls close together and oozing green liquid. He reached the circular terminal at the end of the path and was met by an arched opening.

Ares moved close, narrowing his eyes, trying to pierce the absolute blackness of the opening, but he couldn’t. It was like gazing into a vertical pool of ink, the surface shimmering randomly, sealed by a transparent barrier. The Anchor lit his hand again. Hesitantly, Ares lifted his arm, and almost instantly, a blast of energy left his palm. The barrier rippled green momentarily, then disintegrated.

“Now, that’s interesting,” the war god said softly, wearing a fascinated smile.

He stepped forward, right up to the darkness. He put his hand out and dipped it through the portal, gasping when it appeared to swallow his arm up to the elbow. It didn’t feel any different, though. Gathering a breath, Ares stopped through.

And the transition was immediate.

He found himself in a high-ceiling cavern, a set of crude steps leading down into the room, in the center of which sat a small pyramid. Situated around it were seven glass tombs, each tilted and perched on stone pillars, inclined so they weren’t fully upright. Dead vines and moss covered the sarcophagi, making it difficult for Ares to see clearly inside.
The war god turned to the cavern’s mysterious entrance and saw that it was as black as ever, completely shrouding the other side from sight. This place wasn’t meant to be entered or exited. Whoever placed that ward on the entrance had intended it that way. Only the holder of the Anchor had the power to unseal it, the magical thing serving as the key. Ares deduced all of this very quickly. He spun to the room of caskets, moving further inside.

First, he examined the pyramid, made of metal and etched with elvhen writing. He could read it thanks to his swift assimilation of languages. God-thing. It appeared to be a journal of sorts. Ares circled the pyramid, eyes falling on a section of writing:

I will survive. They had to die so it could be.
He has locked us here for eternity,
yet eternity will not come to pass,
for we are dying. This place is poison to us.
But I will live for our vengeance.
I will have the blood of the traitor.
I will kill Fen’Harel.

“Fen’Harel…” Ares mused. He recognized the name from the reading he’d been doing of ancient elvhen lore.

His long stride carried him to the nearest glass coffin, he pulled away the vines, wiping at the glass. A long-dead, mummified grin greeted him, the body draped in ancient, discolored shreds of cloth. Ares tugged away more clinging vines. There had to be something that identified the body. And he found it, chiseled into one of the pillars supporting the sarcophagus. A name: Falon’Din.

Beneath that, tucked into a niche, sat a sphere, probably an object of power once. It was lifeless and void now. The war god bubbled with excitement. He knew he’d stumbled onto something important to this world. He moved to the next casket, then the next.

June and Ghilan’nain. Their bodies just as dry and leathery as Falon’Din’s. The orbs below their names holding no light, no energy.

Ares’s mouth parted in heightened exhilaration when he pulled the vines from the next sarcophagus. The body inside it still lived, eyes closed, chest rising and falling slowly with breaths. He was probably the most beautiful man Ares had ever seen, or elf, at least. Pale hair fell well past his chest, the regal points of his ears jutting through it. The elf’s features were smooth and designed of perfection—strong chin, tapered cheekbones, finely-chiseled lips. He was also quite tall and large for an elf, Ares noted. A delicate crown rested on his head.

“Hello, gorgeous. What’s your name, I wonder?”

The God of War studied the pillar perching up the man’s resting chamber. Calling it a casket would be inaccurate, since he obviously wasn’t dead. The name read: Elgar’nan. And the orb below glowed with glyphs, very much operable. Ares figured he was the one who’d written on the pyramid. He also suspected that the other coffins contained dead people. He was right—Dirthamen, Sylaise, and Andruil, their orbs lifeless as well.

All the names, like Fen’Harel, were part of the ancient writings, and if any of what Ares read was true, then the people in that tomb were once exceedingly powerful. Powerful enough to be classified as gods.

Ares returned to Elgar’nan, the lone survivor of this unlucky seven. He lowered to examine the orb again, light pulsating from it. The artifact was the only thing keeping the elf alive. Ares nodded at the thought. Very carefully, he grasped the magic orb, unseating it from the column. He backed away several steps, eyes roaming over the extremely handsome elf.

Nothing happened. Not at first.

Then, Elgar’nan jerked, lurching forward, his eyes snapping open wide behind the foggy glass, against which he pressed his palms. Ares moved back a few more steps, rapt by the whole scene. The elf’s glacially blue gaze hardened on the war god, and he roared, shoving off the transparent cover of his entombment. The lid crashed to the cavern floor, cracking in several places.

Elgar’nan fell forward, out of the sarcophagus, stumbling to one knee. He remained that way for a moment, breathing deeply, face down, curtain of stark, straight hair swinging around him. Slowly, he lifted piercing eyes to the one who’d released him. He reached for his Orb of Power, visibly in distress.

“Give it…to me,” he demanded.
Ares watched him closely, the green glow taken on by his skin. The elf was dying. “Now, why would I wanna go and do something like that? I think I’ll just hang on to it…for now.”

“How do you…speak”—gasp—“my language?”

The war god chuckled. “Ah, I get asked that a lot. I speak all languages. Elvhen, Qunari, Klingon, Binary, and even Grocery-Store-Self-Service-Checkout-Kiosk; those things can be testy.” He laughed more at Elgar’nan’s confused expression. “Of course, you don’t know about any of that. Not yet, anyway.” His smile darkened.

The elf groaned and shivered, switching to the Common tongue. “Must…find Fen’Harel and… make him paaaaay.”

Ares was no fool. Far from it. The moment he met Solas in the Fade, he’d been intrigued by him. He appeared as a simple mage, but the signature of his power was superior to that of any other mage Ares encountered in Thedas up to that point. And then he took the Anchor from Hannibal, pleasantly surprised to find Solas’s residual ‘scent’ all over it. Putting two and two together involved the tiniest bit of logic.

“Is Solas Fen’Harel?”

“S-Solas?” Elgar’nan slumped further to the ground, but his eyes didn’t waver from the leathered, olive-toned man.

“Bald, pointy ears, has the cutest little cleft right here?” Ares touched the center of his bearded chin.

Elgar’nan’s entire countenance solidified into a pane of stone fury. Were he a dragon, he would breathe flame and deliver ruin to symbolize the embodiment of his anger. “Fen’Harel!”

“So, this is his secret.” Ares shook his head, grinning. Oh, he couldn’t wait to speak with Bold-Bald-and-Beautiful again.

Elgar’nan squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the pain searing its way through his body, prickling at his skin. He didn’t remember the effects of this part of the Fade being so strong before, working on him and the others so quickly. He was drained now, weak, and this likely served as the cause. He focused on Ares again, and the God of War relished the animalistic hatred the elf sent at him, burning in those sharp eyes.

“What…do you want?”

Ares chuckled. “That list goes on and on. No time to talk about it now. Let’s get you out of here, eh?”

He turned and raised his arm, summoning a portal.

The King of the Elvhen Gods cried out and tremored at the pain clenching around him like a fist of knives. He stared at the hand Ares offered, glared at it. This man, this human or whatever he was, would suffer for his mockery. Had he just given over the Orb, Elgar’nan might’ve allowed him a clean, swift death.

But he was in no position to negotiate. He needed out of that terrible realm. A great sigh tumbled from Elgar’nan, and he grabbed Ares’s hand. The God of war yanked him through the rift and out of his Fade-prison.
The portal shrank and shriveled from existence once they passed through it, leaving them in pleasant silence. Elgar'nan released his hold on Ares, rising to his full height now that he was unimpeded by the ill effects of the Fade. He steadily pulled in fresh air, fragrant of flowers and other things. He picked up the sounds of chirping birds and the familiar chatter of people not far off, servants and soldiers of the complex. The King of the Evanuris turned where he stood, savoring the sun on his face and the breeze in his hair. Stern eyes drank in the surroundings—a courtyard containing a fountain, decorated with pillars and statuesque art. Above them stretched an azure sky blotted by fat clouds.

"Where are we?"

"It was once called Villa Maurel. I found it abandoned and made it my dwelling." Ares took a moment to truly look upon the elf. Yes, he was very tall and fittingly broad, his dimensions similar to that of the Inquisitor, though not as thickly muscled. Still very solid and imposing, though. He and Ares stood nearly eye to eye. The God of War hadn’t encountered an elf as big as Elgar’nan since he chanced upon Thedas.

“And the forest?” the towering elf said firmly, his fine elvhen robes shifting silently. He could see the trees beyond one of the high walls. “What is this region called?”

“The Emerald Graves.”

Elgar’nan’s eyes roamed off thoughtfully. “The southern territories. Who are you?”

“So many questions,” the God of War replied, smiling at him. “I suppose I could answer a few more for you, since I get the feeling you’ve been sleeping for a quite a while. I’m called Ares.”

The elf hadn’t even thought about that. His pale brow furrowed. “What is the date?”

“Nine and forty-one, Dragon.”

“What?”

“Ninth century, forty-first year, though it’s very close to the forty-second. Age of the Dragon.”

“None of that makes any sense,” Elgar’nan said, getting increasingly irritated. He swooned and staggered a step. It would take some time for his energy to return and his base magic, though he’d need to open his Orb to reabsorb the power therein. First, he had to get it from Ares.

The war god saw Elgar’nan staring at the sphere in his grip. Grinning, he lifted it before his face.

“I’ll just store this someplace safe for the time being.” The Orb vanished from sight. Ares turned to head inside, striding between a pair of columns into his private quarters. “Follow me so we can chat.”

The former leader of the Evanuris scowled at being ordered around, gathered himself, and went after the man. He would bask in the moment when he gained the upper hand and made Ares suffer for his insolence. Another wave of dizziness assailed him as he crossed the threshold into a very large room that contained a big bed, sunken bathing pool, fireplace, and various furniture.

Elgar’nan sank into a chair.

Ares went directly to a table of beverages. He poured a glass of water, moved to the elf, and held it out. “Drink. And a little later, we’ll get some food in you.”

The elvhen man sneered, disgusted to be so weakened currently.

“C’mon, Blondie. Drink it.”

Several long seconds crept by before Elgar’nan took the cup. He sipped the liquid, coughing once. Ares removed the cup from his grip, setting it to a nearby table. The God of War vanished and reappeared on the bed, his dark leather attire replaced by a pair of black silk pants. Bare-chested, he reclined in the pillows with a chalice of ambrosia in one fine hand.

“Now, to explain why you don’t recognize the dating system,” the war god started, sipping.

“Humans created it based on their religious Chantry figurehead, the Divine. Every hundred years, the current Divine names a new Age, and since you’ve never heard of the Age-dating system, I would conclude that you and the others were trapped in that tomb for at least a thousand years. But I think it was even longer.”

“A thousand years…” Elgar’nan’s body slumped further. The answer hit him harder than he thought. He straightened up, eyes settling on Ares. There hung the slightest, snobby smile on his face. “No matter. I should expect nothing less, considering he meant to lock us away for all eternity. I’m sure my people have prevailed and continued to surpass all other races, that the Empire has remained strong and assertive.”

Ares sipped his ambrosia. “Yeah…about that.” As sneaky and conniving as the God of War could be, he always did fancy the history of other nations, other worlds, and Thedas contained an interesting abundance of it. He’d learned a lot since he arrived there. “Not long after the elves lost their gods—and I’m assuming that’s you and those mummies back there—they went astray,
became warlike amongst themselves. This paved the way for Tevinter to swoop right in and eventually conquer the elves.”

Elgar’nan’s chest tightened. He didn’t flinch while Ares spoke, sitting up straighter in his chair, his face etched in hard lines.

“Tevinter officially declared war on the elves, an army of magisters using blood magic to bring Arlathan down. Your people lost their culture and their freedom; the Vints enslaved them.”

“That…can’t be.”

“Oh, but it is. Elvhenan is gone, and its people have suffered oppression like no other race in this world, as far as I can tell from Thedas’ history. You look like somebody kicked you in the balls, Blondie. Stay calm. Last thing you need is to get worked up after that long entrapment.”

The tall, broad elf wasn’t exactly a good person. Not at all. He and the other Evanuris controlled the elvhen people, but they hadn’t enslaved them, at least not outright. That was all beside the point. Tevinter were lesser people, called quicklings, since their lives passed like a breath compared to those of most elves. Just being in the presence of humans could cause elves to lose their longevity.

Elgar’nan snaked an arm up to snatch the cup from the table beside him. He downed the remaining water. “He did this. Traitorous fool. By removing me and the others from the Elvhen people, he condemned them to be lost and unfocused. He destroyed them, destroyed everything!”

The elf shot to his feet and hurled the cup across the room. It banged the wall and clattered to the floor.

Ares remained steady, staving the desire building inside him. He found the man’s anger quite stimulating.

Elgar’nan drew in long breaths, large, beautifully-manicured hands unclenching finally. He began to chuckle lowly, the sound seasoned with a dash of sinister mockery. “He has spent lots of time wallowing in this mistake, no doubt, being consumed by the guilt, and that’s good. I long to see the look of despair in his eyes before I kill him.” He faced Ares fully. “You know where Fen’Harel is, do you not?”

“Currently, no. He’s usually pretty easy to find, though.”

“Once you have rediscovered his location, you will take me to him.”

Ares released soft laughter. “Firstly, you’re in no position to order me around. Second, even if you confronted him now, you wouldn’t be able to do anything. He would take you down. What you need to do is rest. I promise, you’ll get your chance.”

Elgar’nan’s features formulated a highly-dissatisfied smirk. He lowered back into his chair. “What are you, Ares? Outwardly, you look like one of those Tevinter pigs, but I don’t think such is the case.”

“You’re right. I’m not from Tevinter. I’m not even from your world. I’m a god from a place called Earth. Long story short, I left my dimension due to circumstances I won’t discuss, and came across your fractured world. An old magister who now goes by the name of Corypheus has caused a lot of damage here, and I’m working to repair it, since I intend to become the One True God of Thedas.”

Though he held avid contempt for Ares and would kill him if ever given the chance, Elgar’nan couldn’t deny that the man was extremely nice to look at. His silver-blue eyes peeled slowly over him, taking in the bare golden-brown skin, chest and stomach brushed pleasantly with dark hair. He stood, gradually making his way to the bed, sitting on the edge.

“One True God, you say? We shall see.”

The doors opened inward and Ralden stepped into the God of War’s quarters. His sandy hair and the skimpy pair of shorts he wore were wet; he’d gone for a swim in the pool. The defector soldier stared between his Grecian lover and the handsome elf, both sitting on the bed. Ralden awaited Ares’s bidding, very much hoping he would order him to join them.

“Leave us,” the war god spoke, voice sultry and deep.

“Yes, milord.” Ralden backed up, shutting the door behind him.

“You’re boy-toy?”

“One of ‘em, yeah.”

“Hm.” Elgar’nan stretched and yawned.

He’d just awakened and all he wanted to do was rest some more. It’s what he required for the time being, rejuvenation. Meanwhile, he’d get all the information he could from Ares, learn about this modern world where elves had been so tragically reduced. When the time was right, he would strike.

Elgar’nan lifted his hands and gracefully removed the crown from his head, placing it on the bedside table. He swung his legs up and over, lying back in the pillows, hands folded over his
stomach. "Tell me everything."

(*)

The day passed faster than Bull intended. He still managed to get what he needed from Elemir, his brother-in-law translating a couple of sentences from Common to Elvhen for him. Bull spent two hours practicing them, trying to get the accentuations and inflections somewhat decent. Didn’t want to completely slaughter such an elegant language.

The Qunari now towered over his beautiful lady in her room. He sighed and took in the long shadows of twilight beyond her windows, then grinned down at her. "Won’t be long now."

"I still have to get ready," Ayla said.

"You look perfect."

"No, this is a special occasion, so it calls for a special dress and hair."

Bull chuckled. "Now, you sound like Dorian."

"That doesn’t make it any less true."

He pulled her against him, smoldering her lips with a kiss.

A knock resounded at the doors.

"Come in," Ayla called.

Isilwyn entered, grinning. "We’ll get you ready in no time." The elf spared a glance over her shoulder. "Your friends are on their way up behind me."

The Oona brightened. "Rosansa and the others?"

"Yes. They wanted to come see you yesterday, but Lassalanta told them to wait, give you time to resettled at home. They do not know what you are."

"I didn’t expect that they did," Ayla said. "I shall be careful in talking to them."

Several voices speaking at once reverberated up and down the corridor outside Ayla’s room. Giggles and excited laughter, growing closer. When the group of young woman reached the doors, they pushed through, instantly spotting their friend across the room in the arms of a great, horned man. That didn’t stop them from rushing in to hug around Ayla, effectively backing Bull out of their circle.

The Qunari sighed a crooked smile. The same thing happened when Joswen, Magnus, Sophitia, and Vek reunited with his little lady. She was very much loved, and that pleased him.

"By the gods, it’s about time you made it back here!" Rosansa bellowed, finally drawing away to examine her friend. "We were starting to think you’d never return."

"Yes, well, travelling with Elemir and the others does strike up one’s appetite for adventure," Ayla chuckled. She was blinded and saw them as blurs and shadows. The women watched her move in Iron Bull’s direction, holding her hand out to him. He made the connection, bringing clarity to her vision. Ayla squarely looked upon her four friends, focused eyes gleaming excitedly.

"So, it’s true! You can see!" One of the women exclaimed. From her voice, Ayla knew she was Siobhan. She quickly figured out who the others were too when they began bustling as one, their chatter rising to fill the room. The only one Ayla recognized immediately was Bennmahilda; her shadow-shape was much shorter than the others.

The Oona waited until they finally calmed down. “This is Rosansa, Siobhan, Bennmahilda, and Catnea, my very best friends here in the sanctuary. We all grew up together, for the most part. And this—she gripped tighter to her man’s arm, grinning widely, “—is my husband, Iron Bull.”

Bull looked to each female as Ayla introduced them—human, elf, dwarf, elf. “Hey.”

The women finally took a moment to really acknowledge the Qunari, all eyes somewhat wide and perhaps, Ayla thought, a little unsettled. Inwardly, she laughed. She knew her husband was very imposing, even if he was primarily harmless, as long as he wasn’t provoked, threatened, or believed anyone meant to cause harm to the Oona.

Rosansa broke the silence. “Husband? So, you’re already married?”

“How did you meet?” from Bennmahilda.

“How does his touch allow you to see?” pressed Catnea.

Ayla expected such a barrage of questions. She’d already had to answer them several times since she and the Qunari got together. She shrugged dismissively at the last question and responded, “We don’t know, but I imagine it’s the workings of Hald’arun, that, perhaps, I carried some of its magic outside with me, and the gift was unlocked upon first touch. It’s all a mystery really.”

“Like that blind man ten years ago,” Siobhan noted. “We were all just girls then.”
“Yes, I met him and his wife yesterday. They’re very nice. Now,,” Ayla held a hand up, sighing, smiling, “We can talk and I’ll answer questions while I get ready!”

Iron Bull took that as his cue to hightail it out of that den of estrogen. He quickly lowered his lips to Ayela’s, stealing a kiss. “I’ll see you shortly, beautiful.”

He left, shutting the door behind him. Girlish laughter from various sources honked from inside the room. Bull shook his head, smiling. He headed off to find Elemir and get ready as well.

(*)

‘Getting ready’ for Iron Bull meant slipping into the specially tailored suit Elemir had Isilwyn’s people rush-job for the ceremony; he’d washed up earlier in Ayela’s room. Deep-blue trousers and a silver top with long sleeves that buttoned down the front, the hem reaching to Bull’s knees. He’d be going barefoot. The clothing was fine and of elven design. He didn’t think he’d ever worn something so imperial.

Less than half hour after he left his wife with Isilwyn and her friends, Iron Bull stood out in the palace’s rear yard, the area decorated in beautiful simplicity for the occasion. Streamers of white and lavender flowers hung over the arboretums. There was an array of food and beverage tables, a three-tiered cake sitting in the middle of one. The same trio of musicians who performed in the dining hall tuned their instruments in preparation. Multi-colored lumin stone posts bordered the yard, as well as light lent from a generous number of lanterns. The great break in the canopy showed a cloudless twilight sky of violet and blue hues, the breeze soft and warm.

Bull’s eye drew around to all the guests. Everyone of importance to Ayela was there. Lassalanta, Elemir, Joswen, Magnus, Sophitia, Vek, Ozra. Old Lady Shaori conversed with the queen, who kept sending looks at Solas, the mage watching her from where he leaned to a column sipping a cup of water. New friends decided to attend as well—David and Legothriel. They nodded and smiled at Bull, then went back to talking with Elemir and his people.

Dorian, Hannibal, and Varric approached Bull.

“You look nervous, Tiny. Though, I can’t imagine why you would be, since you’re technically already married to her.”

“Well, you’re far removed from that life, aren’t you?” Hannibal grinned.

Dorian’s kohl-traced eyes narrowed playfully. “Even before they extricated him from the Qunari ranks, Iron Bull hadn’t been living by the laws and expectations of the Qun, and hasn’t from the moment they set him free upon the world.”

“I wasn’t always the perfect Qunari, if that’s what you’re saying, Vint. I’ve…had my indulgences.”

“Most of which were redheads, I’m sure,” Dorian retorted, the grin below his moustache full of mischief.

Bull smirked. “Yeah, let’s just never talk about that ever again.”

The Altus, his lover, and Varric laughed.

Elemir came over and smacked Bull’s shoulder. “I’m going up to get Ayela. Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Bull gulped.

“Remember the lines I translated for you?”

Resonant chuckles sprung forth. “I’ll try not to slaughter the language too badly, but I think I got it.”

“Alright then. You should get in place.”

Iron Bull nodded. He took a deep breath and strode to the quaint gazebo, where a holy man—human—waited. A tall, large mirror stood offside of the place where the bride and groom would meet. The elf who’d served as maître d at dinner apparently doubled as a party planner. He swept around the yard checking the food, decorations, the chairs.

He finally stopped by the gazebo and raised his voice to be heard over the chatter. “Honored guests, please take your seats. The ceremony will begin shortly.”

Everyone filtered to the chairs set up to either side of a pale-lavender carpet, the aisle down which Elemir would walk his beloved sister. Iron Bull couldn’t believe how nervous he was. Like Varric pointed out, he and Ayela were already joined on more than one level, so it made little sense why his stomach seemed infested by butterflies, their little wings tickling the walls of it.

A hand smacked him on the back. “Breathe, big guy.”

Iron Bull turned to Magnus, lifting a smile. “I’ll be fine.”

The battlemage grinned deeply, moving off to his seat.
Bull exhaled a long sigh. His eye spotted Isilwyn and Ayla’s childhood friends hurrying through the great patio doors out into the yard, taking their seats. Isilwyn nodded to the maître d’elf. He returned the gesture, then struck up the band. The guests instantly ceased talking and craned around, all eyes going to the patio doors.

A moment later, Elemir and Ayla appeared, crossing the patio, and the guests suspired in awe. He was dressed quite finely, though he appeared plain and common beside her. Ayla, her hand resting delicately on her brother’s forearm, wore a dress to match the décor. Lavender, with a medium train, the bodice fitted to her torso, the cut very modest around her cleavage, showing not even the slightest valley. The lovely silk and satin garment was sleeveless. Isilwyn fashioned Ayla’s hair into a series of half-braids, each pulled back and up from her face and neck. A wreath of violet flowers crowned her head, and an enormous smile captured her face.

The Iron Bull couldn’t breathe at first, she so becharmed him. Ayla always made a lovely sight, yet he didn’t believe he’d seen her so beautiful as she was then. Maybe it was the occasion. Bull didn’t know; he didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was he loved her and she loved him, and she would always be the most precious, beautiful, perfect thing in his world. He watched her walk the aisle, guided by Elemir, approaching.

Dorian grabbed Hannibal’s hand and held back a squeak of delight. He leaned his lips close to the Inquisitor’s pointy ear, speaking softly. “She looks so magnificent!”

“Indeed.”

“Iron Bull is very lucky.”

“Indeed, times two.”

Ayla heard the appreciative whispers as she moved along. She smelled the food and flowers, caught the half-lit shadows of the evening. And the lute-flute-harp trio perfectly accented it all. She knew they neared the end of their walk when a very familiar shadow-shape formed across her sight. She heightened her smile and held her hands out to him.

Bull took hold of her, slaughtering back the dimness, allowing her to view her wedding in full clarity. Ayla gasped to see him all dressed up, peering down lovingly at her. She spied their reflection in the nearby mirror and snatched a hand to her mouth, lips trembling. There had been no way to see how she looked while getting ready.

“Oh my gods…”

“I know. Beautiful, right?” Bull continued smiling. “I thought you would like to see how perfect you look.”

“You think of everything, don’t you, my love?”

“I try.”

Ayla gazed up at him for a moment, then faced the guests, skimming every smiling, beaming countenance. They were all there for the most part, her family and friends, and she could see it all, her own wedding. The Oona had never thought a day like this would be possible for her, not until she met her Warrior.

She gripped tighter of his hands, standing on her toes to kiss him.

“None of that until after the ceremony,” Elemir called out, making the guests laugh softly.

Ayla blushed, and Bull grinned. They faced the holy man, who began talking.

“We are gathered to witness the union of The Iron Bull and Ayla, where they will solidify their love by joining through holy matrimony, as blessed by the Creator Gods.” The religious figure sent gentle eyes to Bull, nodding.

The Qunari’s eye shifted to Ayla’s features, drinking her in. He cleared his throat. “Tia firi’lo mime hon, ni mel tye ullume. Emme n’er.” 

“Little woman of my heart, I’ll always love you. We are one.

Ayla’s eyes teared up, the woman elated that he learned those sentences in Elvhen in such a short time. That explained why he sought Elemir’s company earlier. Though it was a little broken, she understood every word. She wanted so very much to throw herself into his arms, wrap him close, and kiss the ever-living hell out of him, but would wait until the ceremony was done. The couple looked to the holy man again, and he continued.

He grabbed Bull’s right hand and Ayla’s left, lifting them palm-to-palm. He, then, produced a length of thin white rope from his robes and twined it loosely around their connected hands, placing his hand over theirs.

“Ayla, do you promise to honor, support, and love him, even in times of hardship?”

“I do.”

“Iron Bull, do you promise to honor, support, love, and protect her, even in times of hardship?”

“You bet. I mean, I do.” Soft chuckles from the small crowd.
“Then, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Bull’s vision adhered to her. He looked down at their clasped hands a moment. “You and me, forever.”

“Tén’oio...forever.”

He pulled her against him and their lips locked. The guests immediately went up in cheers. Ayla was determined to give the kiss she’d imagined moments ago, her slender arms linking his neck, body arched into him. She moaned and wiggled, nipping his lip, small hands lifting to clasp his face, finger tracing one keen, pointed ear. The crowd quieted down when the woman didn’t let go of her husband after a few moments. Lassalanta lifted an amused brow at the amount of fervor Ayla exhibited, smiling. She obviously loved the man.

Iron Bull’s desire began to spike. He broke their kiss, grinning down at her while summoning an extreme amount of control to keep his body from showing everyone just how much she excited him. He whispered, “That was a kiss for joining, woman, not for concluding a wedding ceremony. Later.”

“Later, indeed, husband.”

They turned to their guests, treasured friends and family, and more cheers resounded. People flocked in to congratulate. The musicians started up again. Bull slipped the rope that had been placed around their hands in a pocket of his tunic.

Dorian ‘politely’ budged his way forward and grabbed Ayla in a hug and kiss. He sniffed and wiped tears from his eyes. “I always cry at these things.”

Ayla giggled and pecked a kiss to his cheek. She and her husband spent the evening celebrating, indulging in food and drink, gratefully swept up in the merriness of the moment.

(*)

The Oona clung to her husband, her bellish laughter tumbling through the corridor. “Slow down! We’re almost there!”

“I’ve waited all evening to get you back up here.” Bull smiled. He reached the doors of her room, pushing them in. He paused and kissed her, then crossed into the room. “That is a strange custom.”

“What? The groom carrying the bride over the threshold?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s to symbolize their new life together, a fresh start.”

His body shook with chuckles. “Hm. Well, I thought the bride was supposed to wear a white dress too. Something about purity?” He teased.

“Oh, hush.” Ayla playfully smacked his chest. “Our courtship was far from what would be considered traditional.”

“Understatement.”

He set her down, turning to close and lock the doors. He took her hand so she could see. Ayla’s eyes widened. Dimness shrouded the room, warmth and light provided by candles and the hearth. A trail of rose petals led from the door to the bed, sprinkled all over its surface, the entire scene very romantic.

“Oh my gods. It’s as I’ve always imagined my wedding night would be.”

“So, this is important to you.”

The ebony beauty turned, linking her arms around his middle. “Well, it is, but even if we didn’t get to have a wedding, this whole experience, it wouldn’t change the way I feel about you. I was quite happy being joined by the soul-bond and mizraa-teth, dear husband.”

“I know that, Naaremma.” Bull caressed her cheek, fingers gliding along soft, delicate skin. “This ceremony wasn’t about you or me; it was for your family. It makes them feel better about our joining, and I’m okay with that. Regardless of how many ways we tie ourselves together physically, we’ll always be together spiritually. He chuckled softly. “Hell, I’ll get married dwarven-style if they want. I’ll even marry you hanging upside-down from a tree by my ankles. If we’re together, it doesn’t matter to me.”

He barely finished his sentence before she drew him into another kiss, same as the one she’d given him at the altar. Of course, Bull didn’t hold back this time. He groaned and worked his hands over her dress, quite skilled at undoing laces, latches, buckles, and such. Only five buttons ran down the center of her back, luckily. He released them, and Ayla shrugged a couple of times, the dress dropping to a pile of fluff at her feet. She unbuttoned his top, and he removed it. Her hands undid the latch of his trousers. Bull tingly to watch her little hands undressing him. She tugged at the waistline, slowly pulling the pants down over his hips and solid buttocks. Ayla’s tongue glided
over her luscious lips, and she grabbed the center of his masculinity when it popped free. It was so hot and alive in her hand, and she longed to taste of it.

The pants dropped to his ankles. Grinning, he fully removed them and lifted her, walking them to the bed, where he laid her down. Ayla climbed partially on top of him for another kiss, rubbing her breasts down his chest as she lowered. Hungry, she gripped his cock, stroking it. She flicked her tongue over the tip, and he sucked in a breath, body tensing under her. Ayla chuckled huskily. She took half of him in her mouth, Iron Bull groaned, gritting his teeth. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. Ayla dared to swallow more of his manly meat, slowly lowering her head until she managed another inch, tongue slurping the underside of it, tasting his delicious muskiness.

“Fuck…” Bull rotated his hips, eye rolling shut a moment. “That is so good.”

“Mm….mnnnf…” She attempted another inch and gagged shortly, eyes watering.

“Whoa, Naaremma. Don’t hurt yourself.” He smiled hotly at her, amazed and impressed.

Her large, lovely eyes remained on his. Deciding that six-of-ten inches was all she could take, Ayla started bobbing her head up and down, sucking him off. One hand stroked and massaged his balls.

“Ahhh, shit, yes.” Bull trembled and laid his head back to the mattress. Searing ecstasy curled his toes. She’d grown so skilled at pleasing him in this way, though it really hadn’t taken her long to find out what he liked. A spike of electricity shot through his body, gathering in his loins. She was too good. He was going to come soon if he didn’t stop her.

Ayla slurped away, humming sensuously around his shaft. She straddled one of his long, sinewy legs, her breasts rubbing against his thigh. She grinned when Bull suddenly reached for her shoulders, gently lifting until his cock dropped from her lips. It was glistening and hard. Bull returned the grin, bringing her close to him, hand embedded in her wild mane. He claimed her mouth for a fevered kiss, tasting himself on her tongue. He broke the kiss and carefully maneuvered her around to her hands and knees.

The Oona giggled at being handled in such a way, so gently in his powerful grasp. She was blinded for an instant, until his palm touched between her shoulders, applying pressure, forcing her to lay her head down while her bottom remained up and accessible to him. She moaned wantonly.

Bull took a moment to admire the view, her perfect ass. He licked his lips, then gripped her firm cheeks, rapidly rubbing his face between them, setting kisses to both halves. Ayla swooned and laughed. She startled and nipped her lip when his tongue darted over her female entrance. Bull slowly pushed her legs further apart, opening that area further. He growled heatedly, grabbed her hiked-up ass, and proceeded to taste and tease her cunt from behind.

“Mmm…yeah…Bull. Yeesssst!”

Ayla’s eyes rolled deliciously. She clenched the covers, rotating her hips in rhythm, melting. The Qunari moved one hand to his manhood, stroking it. He was going up in flames and wouldn’t be able to hold back much longer. He quickly flicked his tongue, tickling her pleasure nub. She’d grown wonderfully wet and ready. Bull eased back and positioned himself behind her, guiding his throbbing, solid flesh inside. Ayla cried out, welcoming his entry. She found herself flattened to the mattress when he settled his large body over hers, putting his chest and stomach to her back. Bull, of course, didn’t give her the fullness of his weight, only enough to satisfy the sense of domination he knew she liked. He thrust into her slowly, deep. He raked the billowy, pale thickness of her hair back and to the side, revealing her neck and shoulders.

“Ayla, I love you so much,” the hotness of his breath poured over her, brushing her cheek and ear.

Iron Bull kissed along her shoulder as he rode against her. Ayla desperately tried to reach back, grabbing at any part of him she could. He chuckled smoothly, capturing her hand, twining his fingers with hers, his arm lying over hers on the mattress. His teeth carefully nipped the shell of her ear.

“I love you, my Warrior. I….” she sucked in a gasp and groaned, engulfed in the passion only he could ignite, “I…love you…I love you…I love you….”

The Qunari continued making sweet love to her while she sang her song, and it was very late in the night before they fell asleep.
Day 3.

A clear mind and satisfied body led to a revitalized soul. In the early morning hours, before the sun rose to brighten the dark sky, Iron Bull stood on the balcony of Ayla’s room, clad only in bed pants. Aside from enjoying the absolute tranquility of Hald’arun, he’d been doing a lot of thinking, at the center of which was his little beauty. His eye cast over a shoulder to where she slept, hair tossed wildly about the bed, her body sprawled and loose. He smiled, hearing her snores from across the room.

Bull faced the palace yard, going back to his thoughts. There was so much at stake, and not just where he and Ayla were concerned, but for all the people of Thedas. He had a chance to make it better by working with the Inquisition, and he’d give it his all, as planned from the moment Hannibal accepted him and the Chargers into service. But now there was another factor in the equation, one he’d never remotely conceived—Ayla. She’d completely changed things, because Bull knew he would always choose her above all else if ever faced with such a decision.

He sighed.

Behind him, Ayla stirred. She stretched and rolled to her stomach, arm feeling around for her husband. Clouded eyes blinked, drifting blindly through fire-lit dimness. “Bull?”

“I’m right here, Naaremma.”

He returned to her, pulling off the pants before settling back in bed. Ayla instantly nestled into him, a leg draping his. “Why are you up so early?”

“Couldn’t really sleep, doing some thinking.”

“Oh?” She smiled and nuzzled his bearded chin. “What kind of thinking.”

“The serious kind.” He chuffed out a short laugh.

“What is it, my darling?”

“I never saw myself being here, married and in love. It’s…not how I was raised to think or believe.”

Ayla kissed his chest, nipping. “I hope you don’t regret it.”

“Not for a moment. I’m exactly where I want to be. Right now, nothing outside this room matters. Not the war, the Inquisition, Ares, Corypheus. There’s just you and me.”

They locked eyes, and she swept her lips to his, rubbing noses.

Bull sighed and voiced something he’d been pondering since they arrived. “You could stay here. Ares wouldn’t be able to find you.” He also considered the baby she carried.

“I knew you would suggest that,” Ayla said, her features tightening faintly. She shook her head. “I’m not staying, Bull. I’m going with you. I want to be together, and I’m going to help fight against Corypheus…and Ares.”

“I don’t want to be physically apart either, Ayla, but you’d be safer inside the sanctuary.”

“I’ll be just fine with you. We belong together, my love. I’m not splitting up.”

Iron Bull released a heavy breath, detecting the finality in her tone. A soft smile formed. “I knew you were going to say that. It was worth a try anyway.” He stretched and settled in, hand going behind his head.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Gonna grab a couple more hours of shut-eye.”

“Oh, no you’re not.” Ayla’s hand roamed his hard stomach, lowering until her fingers cupped and fondled his flaccid genitals. She nuzzled his cheek, kissing his scarred left eye.

Bull grinned, fixing his sky-blue gaze on her. “It’s like that, huh?”

“It is.”

“Mm.”

Elsewhere in the huge house, an hour or so after the sun climbed from behind the eastern horizon, Hannibal lie naked in bed on his side, head propped up on his hand. Dorian rested beside him on
his stomach, partly covered by a sheet. The Inquisitor’s fingers tickled down the center of the Altus’s back. He kissed the smaller man’s neck.

“Sweetie, wake up.”

“Nnnnhh…” was Dorian’s lazy, drowsy, half-asleep-but-now-mostly-awake reply. He shifted and turned over, stretching fully from slumber. It took only a second for him to understand the reason for his lover’s anxiousness. The amber eyes and elongated canines said it all. Dorian grinned and purred. “Mm, yes. I’ve been wondering when the next cycle would come.”

Hannibal planted his face in the warm, delicate niche where the mage’s jawline met his neck. He inhaled his scent, shivering with intoxication and lust. Dorian gripped his muscular shoulders, tilting his head back to give better access. The previous two times, Hannibal’s kuma’ta kalifaar lasted less than ten minutes, but they were the most intense minutes of sex the Altus had ever experienced. He grinned and moaned, more than ready for the ride.

(*)

When the Inquisitor and his man made it down to the dining hall, they weren’t alone. Ayla and Bull shared breakfast at one end of the table, a couple of servants tending to the meal, replenishing beverages and such.

“Mind if we join?” Hannibal asked.

“You’re always welcome, boss,” Bull said, nodding at the chairs across from him and Ayla. His eye shifted to Dorian. “If you grin any harder, your face is gonna crack.”

“Ha. I could say the same of you.” Dorian looked between the Qunari and his lady.

Ayla cleared her throat, manufacturing a secretly demure smile.

The two couples indulged in idle conversation, enjoying their meal. Near the end of it, Lassalanta entered the hall, and they all greeted her.

“Good morning,” the queen said. She appeared slightly disheveled, an unusual occurrence for her. The beautiful elf’s red tresses were pulled back into a sloppy but appealing braid, and she wore what was clearly a man’s tunic over a pair of loose pants. The top was large enough to fit rather baggily on her slim torso.

Ignoring their stares and silence, Lassalanta made a plate of toast and fruit slices. She set it to a tray, along with a couple of fine cups and a kettle that Iron Bull knew contained lisse tea, Solas’s favorite. A vague smile hung on his lips. He figured Solas was getting some from somebody in the sanctuary, based on the way he’d unwound and mellowed out since they arrived. Bull also caught the looks passed between the mage and queen at the reception last night. Now, it was confirmed in whose bed Solas had been parking himself.

Lassalanta took up the tray and started from the dining hall. She turned before crossing into the corridor.

“I almost forgot. Iron Bull, Jarat has agreed to see you today. This morning, actually. Isilwyn will take you to his home in an hour.”

“That’s great news. Thanks, Your Maj–I mean, Lassalanta.”

The Crimson Queen’s smile deepened and she nodded, leaving the hall.

Iron Bull nodded to Ayla. “You can come along if you want, though the conversation will most likely be about the military, war, body-counts, that kind of thing.” He grinned at her twist of a smirk.

“She can stay with me,” Dorian interjected. “Hannibal’s going to meet with Mother Giselle again so they can swap more information.” Lavender-flecked eyes settled on Ayla. “This will give us some time to catch up on our girl-talk.”

The woman nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

They finished up in the dining hall, then broke off in separate directions.

(*)

Living amongst the treetops seemed to be a prestige thing, Bull figured. From what he gathered, other than the queen, high officials and wealthier citizens made their homes in one of the five great redwoods, though there weren’t any ‘bad’ areas or poverty in Hald’arun. Over the centuries since it was settled, some families prospered in finance and mercantile more than others, and it showed in the way they dressed, carried themselves, and the homes they lived in.

Jarat, like any true Qunari, would find prestige and standing to be irrelevant, because he’d never dealt with it in the Qun. Bull wasn’t surprised to see that Jarat’s home was small, sitting on a fertile patch of grass near a hill that rolled down to the beach. He had no immediate neighbors, the nearest house a thousand yards back along the path. Shade from lesser trees draped over the dwelling.

Iron Bull nodded to Isilwyn, dismissing the woman. He studied the house, slipped through the
open gate, and made his way around back, catching sounds of manual labor. When he rounded
the corner into the rear yard, Bull saw a Qunari kneeling on the ground with his back to him, his
body rocking back and forth, arms straightened, sanding a slab of wood. The man’s dark blond
hair reached his massive shoulders, his double set of horns making a mighty sight. He wore no
shirt, and every muscle of his scar-marked torso rippled as he worked. One wouldn’t guess that he
was nearly twice Iron Bull’s age. He’d bonded with Hald’arun not long after his arrival twenty
years ago, effectively slowing the aging process.

“So, this is what Qunari war minds do in retirement, or should I say…abandonment?” Bull began,
the expression on his face mildly humored.

“You would know of abandoning the Qun, since you did the same, right?” Jarat retorted.
Bull chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Jarat rose and faced Bull, only a couple of inches shorter than the Captain of the Chargers. He
wiped his brow, swigged from a cup of water, then settled crisp hazel eyes on his fellow Qunari.
“Not many of our kind pass through here, and the ones that do are mostly defectors, like me.” His
brow creased thoughtfully, then he smiled. “You’re more than just a defector, based on what I’ve
heard. You’re the Qunari who chose the Inquisition over his own people.”

One of Bull’s eyebrows hooked upward. “Lassalanta sure keeps people informed, doesn’t she?”

“Indeed, she does. She’s very specific about who she shares information with and to what extent.
Since she allowed me entry to Hald’arun, I’ve made only one request, that she relay any news
regarding Qunari visitors and occupants. It’s…” For the briefest moment, Jarat’s handsome face
reflected a touch of sadness, “…the only way to remain connected to our people, if only in the
most transparent sense. I know it must sound silly to you.”

“No, it doesn’t. I get it. Just because you left the Qun doesn’t mean you left the memories behind
of your life and people you cared about. I feel the same way, but I can never go back.”

“I don’t suppose you could, given your circumstances.” Jarat grinned. “I understand you’re mated
to the queen’s blind daughter, that you saved her life.” He’d only ever seen Ayla from afar, on the
arm of the queen, a servant, or that Crimson Ranger brother of hers. Since he too was affected by
Lassalanta’s ward that caused occupants of the sanctuary to overlook the physical differences
between Elemir and Ayla, Jarat had never thought to question their obvious lack of true kinship.

“That’s the short and sweet version.” Iron Bull figured that would come up. He’d give Jarat the
same explanation Ayla had spread to her friends—Hald’arun most likely had something to do with
the link between them, its magic allowing her to see.

Jarat inhaled sharply, opening his nose. “You bit her.”

“Yes.”

The older Qunari laughed richly. He gestured to a table in the shade not far off. “Have a seat, and
I’ll make us drinks. You can tell me all about married life and things on the outside, and I’ll
answer the heap of questions you’re most likely dying to toss my way.”

“Deal.”

(*)

Dorian led Ayla out to the palace’s spacious rear yard, the area once again transformed. There
wasn’t the slightest indication that a wedding and celebration had taken place just last night. The
efficiency of the house crew impressed the Altus. He and Ayla sat on a swinging couch near a bed
of flowers, butterflies dancing around their open buds.

“Such a lovely day in a lovely place,” he said.

“It sure is.” Ayla nodded. She didn’t need to see to know how picturesque the gardens were.
She’d gotten to view them clearly with Bull yesterday and the day before. Her eyes closed a
moment while she let her face bask in the sun’s rays filtering through the gape in the canopy.

“Ayla, I want to tell you something, but you have to promise you won’t repeat it to anyone else.
Not even Iron Bull.”

The Oona’s blind vision turned on him, concern riddling her features. “I promise…”

“I just…really need to talk to someone, and you’re my best friend, next to Hannibal, and I can’t
talk to him.”

“Dorian, what is it?” Ayla reached for his hand, grabbing it.

He silently reflected on his answer, shaking his head, eyes sad. “When this is done, once we’ve
handled Corypheus and Ares, I’m going back to the Imperium. I…have to leave Hannibal…” he
choked out, feeling the tears welling in his eyes.

“Dorian…”

“I don’t want to go, but I must. I’ve done so much here with the Inquisition, and I need to take
some of this knowledge back there, apply it to make my country better. The world is moving on,
and Tevinter, no matter how regal and polished it may seem outwardly, rests upon pillars of chaos
that will inevitably crumble. The government is controlled by corrupt magisters who’d rather line
their pockets and maintain power than actually contribute to Tevinter’s progress. My country
teeters on the brink of implosion. When it goes, it’ll be like tossing crackers into a flock of
ravenous pigeons—chaos, turmoil, feathers, and shit everywhere. The hands holding the crackers
belong to those corrupt magisters. Do you see?”

Ayla sighed, rubbing his hand tenderly. “Yes, I do.”

“Tevinter lingers in a dark age that threatens to devour it, and I can’t let that happen. To the north,
the Imperium has the Qunari, and to the south they have Ferelden and Orlais. Perhaps, I can work
with likeminded officials to eventually convince the Imperial Archon to come to an agreement
between Tevinter and the south.”

“What if the Archon is as corrupt as the magisters working under him? Do you think he’ll listen to
what you have to say?” Ayla asked.

“It’s either that or face the Qunari, who’d rather invade than form an alliance. As for the Archon
being corrupt, I would bet he is to a degree. As the figurehead of that group of piranhas, he’ll need
to appear as underhanded as they are, or he could find himself assassinated. There’s a chance he
might be willing to change things if he had the right backing, the right incentive.”

“And that’s where allying with the south comes in.”

Dorian nodded. “Yes.” He sighed. “Of course, this is all wishful thinking and change on this scale
would take years, were it to happen at all. Tevinter has grown comfortable in its old ways, to
include the use of slavery. Doing away with it, and other things, will rub many the wrong way,
and there will be revolts over it.”

“Great changes do take time and lots of dedication,” Ayla said softly. “I think you could make a
real difference.”

“I do too. But…my Amatus. He’s the love of my life, the man I’ve always wanted but never
thought I’d find. I don’t want to leave him…” A few tears slipped down his cheek and he sniffled.

“Oh, Dorian. Your intentions are noble, but you have to tell him.”

“I will. Soon. Now isn’t the right time. He’s so bogged with everything going on. I’ll tell him
soon. Thank you for listening to me.”

“Of course. You’re one of my best friends. And I won’t say a word.”

“I know.”

They embraced, hugging each other tightly.

(*)

“He sent us through a portal, and when we came out on the other side, we found ourselves in that
cave, our prison,” Elgar’nan explained, partway through the story. He took his time cutting off
another small bite of the perfectly rare steak before him, savoring it.

Ares was in no hurry. He’d been around for ages. The war god’s fascination with Elgar’nan
sparkled in his seductively savage brown eyes. The self-proclaimed leader of the Evanuris was the
one who killed Mythal, not Fen’Harel, as the stories say. To punish Elgar’nan and the others who
blindly followed his treachery, Fen’Harel created a Veil to trap the Evanuris in the Fade.

Remarkable. Ares reclined in his tall-backed chair at the far end of the long table.

The elf continued once his mouth was empty. “There was nothing but seven sleeping chambers
and the pyramid, which was to link us together while we underwent Uthenera. He didn’t calculate
in the fact that we couldn’t survive there, that the environment was toxic enough to kill us over
time.”

“What is Uthenera?”

“It’s an extended sleep. Elves, those who maintained their longevity, induced it upon themselves
when they got bored with life. Some awaken eventually; others do not, deteriorating to dust in
their sleeping chambers over time.”

“Ah.”

“The pyramid is a device common to my people. It would’ve allowed me and the others to share a
dream-state while we slept in our eternal prison, a collective consciousness. That never worked
out, obviously.” He peered indifferently down his imperial nose, along the length of the table,
locking eyes with Ares.

“Because you killed them. Yours was the only orb found with energy still inside it.”

Elgar’nan gripped his goblet and drank from the liquid therein. “I was left with no choice. Once
they’d entered their sleeping chambers, I configured the pyramid to route their power and energy
into my orb, keeping me alive. Only one of us could live to take vengeance on Fen’Harel. I made
sure it was me.”
Ares’s handsome face parted slowly into a smile. "Predatory. I like that. A man after my own heart."

“Oh, please. I can’t steal what you don’t have. We both know that shriveled, hard lump of coal in your chest isn’t a heart. You’re no more capable of truly caring for someone than I am.” Issuing a rather stringent, dry chuckle, Elgar’nan ate another bite of steak.

“And that’s what might make us a perfect match, Blondie.” Ares sent him a wink.

The elf’s eyes narrowed, then rolled. He leisurely commenced his meal.

The God of War droned a round of chuckles.

Gabrielle, Xena, and Yakut finished making preparations and were now inside the shamaness’s hut. Tonight, they’d attempt to wake the sleeping mirror in the Void and get it to open a doorway to the world of Thedas. Gabrielle paced by the fire pit, her shadow chasing back and forth.

She stopped and sent eyes to Xena, who sat on a sleeping mat, Yakut crouched beside her using a stick of charcoal to draw runes on the floor. They would help further extend her power to Xena in the Void. “Are you sure about this? What if something goes wrong? Your life is on the line, Xena.”

“Gabrielle, stop worrying. I’ll be fine.” The warrior princess removed her chakram, setting the circular throwing blade aside. “This goes deeper than me. Look at what’s happening in other parts of the world. Ojor and Khonsou”—the God of War and Goddess of Love in the Nubian region —“Tyr and Freyja”—the Norse God of War and Goddess of Love—“they all appear to be immune to the Twilight, since they are entities of love and war. People feed into them constantly. They’re not going anywhere. Ares isn’t in any danger. He never was. We need to get him back here to balance not only Aphrodite, but the collective of war and love gods.”

“I understand that,” said the battling bard, “but wouldn’t it be easier if Yakut just went in instead?”

The shamaness shook her head. “I would go in Xena’s place, except my powers won’t work in a state of slumber, which is how I’d have to enter the Void. The only possible way I’d physically be able to go there is…” she paused and paled, “through the underworld, what you would call Tartarus.”

“And I’m not gonna allow you to do that,” Xena cut in. She settled back on the mat. “I’m familiar with the Void, I know Ares, and Solas is familiar with me, so I’m going. End of story. Let’s do this.”

Yakut and Gabrielle exchanged looks, then the shamaness nodded. She set a smooth, round stone in the palm of Xena’s hand, closing the woman’s fingers around it. The item served as the main link between the physical and dream worlds. “Once the hourglass runs out, I’ll begin channeling my power through the stone, like you said.”

“Right. That should give me enough time to reach the eluvian.”

Gabrielle swiped Xena’s long, black hair behind her ear, smiling down at her. “Be careful in there.”

Startling blue eyes and chiseled lips carried a loving smile. “Always am.” Xena drew in a few breaths, shutting her eyes.

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The warrior princess once again stood in the Void’s rendition of Skyhold. Chunks of structures had broken off, floating in midair. For the most part, the darkly version of the fortress was intact. Xena’s main focus was the eluvian. She crossed the desolate garden, side-stepping pools of smoky green ooze, making her way to the door of Morrigan’s atrium.

Xena’s shadow stretched across the floor, cast against the Void’s constant green tint. On the far side of the room, looming tall before a cracked stained-glass window, was the eluvian. She progressed cautiously, unsure of what would happen once Yakut began channeling her power. All she could do was wait now.

She looked down at the Void’s version of the stone Yakut stuffed into her palm back in the waking world. “Let’s hope this works.”

Yakut was nervous. Never before had she attempted anything like this. The shamaness’s power, once channeled through the stone, would be Xena’s to wield, and since she was no mage, there was the risk that it could backfire and kill her. The tall, strong brunette unflinchingly accepted that risk. Yakut admired her. She had from the first time they met.

She exhaled slowly through the mouth, preparing herself, both she and Gabrielle watching the hourglass on the floor beside Xena’s slumbering body. When the last grain of sand fell, Yakut lifted her hands in position over the warrior princess’s hand, the one gripping the stone.
“Here goes,” she said softly.

Gabrielle tipped a nod.

The shamaness closed her eyes and summoned her power. An instant later, pale-amber streams of luminescence crept from her palms, forming an energy field around her hands that spread outward until it engulfed Xena’s hand. The runes sketched on the floor to help amplify Yakut’s power began glowing amber as well.

(*)

Xena’s eyes widened at the radiating stone in her grip. She narrowed her searing gaze, holding her arm up, pointing the magical item at the eluvian. She was nearly thrown backward by the force of the energy expelling itself, an amber beam suddenly shooting from the stone at the mirror’s cold, sleeping surface. She dug her heels in, standing her ground.

“Come on! Work, damnit!”

The eluvian’s glass shimmered, flickering, and it began to emit a low humming sound.

“Yes! Come on!”

In the center of the mirror, a tiny point formed and began to swell, enlarging until it was the size of an apple. It swirled and pulsed. The beginnings of a portal! Xena grit her teeth, determination carved into her face. The stone in her hand had grown extremely hot, as if it had been sitting close to a hearth, and was only getting hotter. She tried to block out the pain, to convince her mind that it was all only a dream. Partly, anyway. That didn’t work, and the stone singed her palm now.

“Open!”

(*)

On the outside, Yakut had broken a sweat, shivering with the strain of channeling her energy. Her eyes clenched shut, teeth bared. Xena’s body twitched on the mat.

“What’s happening?” Gabrielle demanded.

“I…I’m not strong enough for this! I can’t—aaah!”

The energy field around Yakut’s and Xena’s hands constricted into a concentrated ball, then flung into the shamaness’s chest, sending her to her back.

“Yakut!” the bard hurried to her side.

“I…I’m fine. Xena…”

Gabrielle tended to her friend, the smoking stone in her hand. “By the gods…” She grabbed a nearby cloth and used it to pry the hot stone free, Xena’s palm red and branded by it. She wrapped the thing and tossed it aside, then shook the woman’s shoulders. “Xena! Xena, wake up!”

The warrior princess’s eyes flew open and she gasped in a desperate breath, jerking to sit. She quickly regained her bearings, eyes focusing on Yakut, who had recovered enough and shifted to a sitting position as well. “What happened?”

“It was too much. That mirror…it might be dormant, a shadow of its true self, but it holds the power of the real eluvian. So much power…” Yakut shook her head. “We need more energy, more than I alone have.”

Xena sighed, eyes skipping off thoughtfully. She winced down at her smarted hand, flexing the fingers. Gabrielle examined it, applying salve. The brunette smiled softly at the concern in her friend’s eyes. “It’ll heal.”

“Once I get my strength back, I can speed it along for you,” Yakut offered.

“Allright,” Xena said. “I’ll get in touch with Solas and let him know we failed the first attempt. He might know of a way to get more power flowing into that fucking mirror.”
On the morning of day five, Solas stretched awake in Lassalanta’s bed to find her watching him, lips pressed into a slim smile. She leaned to kiss him.

“Lovely as ever,” he said, caressing her cheek. The mage’s brow creased. “Something’s bothering you. What is it?”

“It’s nothing.” Lassalanta sighed. “Five days isn’t enough. I want to spend more time together, yet I know you must go.”

“Yes. I have to try and right what I’ve done. Perhaps, if I’m able to regain my power, I can remember the way back here.”

She shook her head. “You won’t have to wait until then. I decided when I was first informed by my scouts of your presence in the Inquisitor’s party that I would allow you to remember the way back to Hald’arun, back to me…” she whispered, words heavy and warm.

“Lassalanta…”

“You will always be welcome here, Fen’Harel. I…” her vision strayed a moment, “…only hope that in your endeavor to ‘fix’ things, you don’t end up destroying the world.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take, if it means our people can be restored to their rightful greatness.”

The queen examined him closely. He’d always been the headstrong type, never to follow in another’s shadow, the reason he had never simply fallen in line to join Elgar’nan like the others, Mythal aside. Lassalanta merely nodded, since it would be useless to argue with him. “I understand.”

Solas donned a smile. “Thank you, for allowing me the gift of remembrance. Not only will I recollect this beautiful place, but also our time together here. I will always cherish it.”

“I know, my dearest. You will not be able to speak of Hald’arun or anything herein by name, and you cannot let Ayla and Iron Bull know that you remember as they do. When you exit the sanctuary tomorrow, act as disoriented and clueless as the Inquisitor and his people. Not even Joswen, Elemir, and the others will be aware that you retain the memories.”

“I understand. I’ll keep it secret.”

“Good. Now that that’s settled, we should get some breakfast. I have something I want to show you.”

Solas stood on the beach partly squinting out at the great blue vastness of the Frozen Seas, named so for the chunks of ice spotting its surface miles and miles out, further south than the naked eye could see in a place where not many dared to sail. The water in this region was rather warm, though, blending with that of the Amaranthine Ocean to the north. Solas’s eyes lowered to watch the frothy surf surge inland, bubbling over his bare feet, before being snatched out to sea again.

Lassalanta let him enjoy the moment, then took his hand, starting them down the stretch of pale sand. To the left, a long hill with various sets of stairs built into the rock led back up to the main part of the city. Ahead of them was a natural bridge eroded into the dark stone. They passed under it, following the gradual curve of the beach into a cove. A couple dozen citizens spotted the area, sitting around on the beach, some of them filtering in and out of a large cave mouth. A group of soldiers guarded the entrance.

“What’s in there?” Solas asked.

“You’ll see,” she replied, smiling. The queen nodded and greeted the citizens they passed, moving into the shadows of lush greenery.

Solas was very interested in what she meant to show him, and before they fully entered the cave, he felt the spike of power, so unfettered and potent, a concentrated version of the magic he detected constantly floating through the sanctuary. His eyes adjusted a moment after they entered the cave. He saw that the walls had been sanded and smoothed out, as had been the floor, intervals of lumin stones lining a wide path.

Lassalanta sent soft smiles over at him, gauging his reaction to the energy, which she knew he sensed. She took him further inside, the path angling downward and to the right, a loose spiral. They reached the end and exit into a circular chamber with ever-shifting patterns of light playing against the domed ceiling. The source of the kaleidoscopic display rested in a divot at the center of the room. Railing had been built around the pit. The guards on duty saluted their queen. Seven
others occupied the chamber, civilians. They stood at the railing gazing down at the hunk of glowing, churning crystal.

Solas’s eyes widened. He released Lassalanta’s hand to move slowly to the rail, gripping it, beholding the clearly magical item below. It looked like a huge, misshapen geode. “What is it?”

“I named it Hon’o Hald’arun.”

“The Heart of Hald’arun,” he said lowly, unable to take his eyes off it.

“Yes. A couple of weeks after the Originals and I arrived here, I found it. I’m not sure how it works exactly, but it is the source of the sanctuary’s power. It’s protected by an invisible barrier and can’t be directly touched.” Lassalanta settled in beside him, speaking softly enough for his ears alone. “It controls the wards over Hald’arun and its boundary. This is also how I infuse my spells through the sanctuary. I transfer them into Hon’o Hald’arun, and it disperses them.”

“Absolutely fascinating.” The elf finally peeled his eyes from the Heart. “Why didn’t you show me this earlier.”

She chuckled very softly. “Because I knew if I’d done that, this is where you would’ve spent most of your five days instead of with me.”

Solas grinned, nodding. “You know me well.”

“Indeed.”

He looked to the Heart again. “It’s the most intriguing magical construct I’ve ever seen. The amount of energy flowing from it is extraordinary.”

The Crimson Queen touched upon his shoulder, drawing a finger along the point of his ear. “I have matters to tend to. Try not to linger in here too long. Enjoy the beauty of the day, love.”

“Yes…” Solas stared at Hon’o Hald’arun, its lightshow generating bursts of color in his twilight eyes. He wished he had more time to study it, but they would depart tomorrow. Therefore, he intended to spend most of the day in that chamber.

Lassalanta smiled again, shaking her head, then turned to leave her lover standing at the railing gazing at the Heart.

(*)

The following morning, the day of departure, Bull awakened not long after dawn, just as Ayla’s room began to brighten with approaching daylight. He stretched, shifted, and drew his eye sideward to her. She lay against him, her back to his side, shoulders rising and falling with each breath. But she wasn’t asleep. This he knew.

“Up before me. That’s a first.” He smiled and rolled, caressing her arm. “You alright?”

“Yes. I just…can’t believe how fast the days went. I want to linger here longer, though I know we can’t do that. I miss my home.”

“I know,” Bull said softly, kissing the smoothness of her shoulder. “You could always—”

“No.” Ayla flipped over to face him. “I’m not staying.”

He chuckled. “Okay then.”

She fizzled a sigh, features sinking. “Once we’ve handled things on the outside, this is the first stop, right?”

“You bet,”

Ayla flopped to her back pouting. “Ugh. I wish we had more time.” The smile that claimed her features was slight. “Suppose I’ll just get up, since I know I won’t be able to go back to sleep.”

“Mm. I can think of something else to do, ya know, other than sleep.” He grinned.

“Oh, I’m sure you can.” She studied him a moment, caressing his strong jaw. “How are your nightmares?”

“I haven’t had one in a while, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be mindful. If I look like I’m having one, you know what to do.”

“Yes. Move to my side of the bed and let you wake up on your own.”

“That’s my girl.”

Ayla chirped a giggle, then narrowed her eyes sensually. She aggressively pushed at his chest, then climbed on top of him.

(*)

Breakfast passed with good vibes, though the tone was less joyful than with previous meals in the dining hall. No one really wanted to leave, yet there were the lingering, growing threats of a
crazed magister and very powerful God of War sending their shadows across the land. The greatest hope was the Inquisition and its allies.

Hannibal noted the lack of Elemir’s presence and the rest of the Crimson Rangers. He addressed Lassalanta about it. “I assume Joswen and his people are getting everything in place for the departure?”

The queen nodded. “Yes. Servants have taken everyone’s bags to the barrier. From there, Joswen will stage the small camp you passed before entering Hald’arun, make it appear as if that’s where you’ve stayed while visiting the trading outpost. The boundary will handle the rest.”

“Change our memories you mean,” Dorian said.

“Yes.”

“Can’t wait.” Sarcasm lightly coated the Altus’s words.

Lassalanta smiled his way. “The disorientation will be minimal, I assure you.”

(*)

An hour later, the group approached the same place where they’d entered Hald’arun, ascending the low-angled hill to the wall of tightly-knit vines and plants. An ample opening parted the foliage now, more woods and the beginnings of a path seen beyond. Elemir, Joswen, and the others waited patiently, quite used to doing this.

Iron Bull stopped by the Crimson Rangers, giving a slight nod and getting nods in return. Ayla held firmly to his hand, the woman wearing one of the dresses she’d brought along for their travels. The others also wore their original attire, leaving their sanctuary clothes packed in trunks up in the palace. Hannibal and his people stood there on the crest of the green hill, taking in the thriving, lush, peaceful beauty of Hald’arun.

“I really hope to make it back here,” said Varric, giving voice to what everyone else was thinking.

“I’m sure you will someday, my friend,” Lassalanta responded, smiling upon him. She edged in closer to Ayla and Iron Bull, eyes sweeping between the two of them, before she pulled the younger woman to her bosom, hugging tight, kissing her brow. Ayla’s arm looped around her.

“Be safe, darling one, and come home soon.”

The Oona nodded.

Lassalanta looked to Bull. “Do whatever you must to keep her from harm.” I know you’ll take care of her…and the baby.

The Qunari hadn’t expected the mental message following the verbal one, but the surprise didn’t show on his face. He smiled softly at the elvhen queen. “I will.” An answer to both statements. Ayla had been his top priority since they met. The tiny, microscopic speck of their unborn child shared that priority, as it lived and thrived only because she did.

The queen moved down the line to Solas, and the two of them locked eyes, so much emotion shared in that instant. She suddenly eased in and wrapped her arms about his shoulders, a slim hand behind his head, pulling him into a kiss. Lassalanta paid no mind to the stares and knowing smiles, especially from Elemir, Varric, and Iron Bull. The three of them realized what was happening between her and Solas a couple of days ago, she knew. But she didn’t care. They would most likely assume that, out of loneliness and simple physical attractions, she and the mage pursued sexual relations. None of them knew exactly how much “Solas” meant to her or who he really was.

When they broke the kiss, Solas sighed and caressed the smooth curve of her cheek.

Return to me whenever you wish, melamin.

I shall. Be well.

Lassalanta stepped back from Solas, examining the group again. “Joswen, keep information current about the alliance between the Red Army and the Inquisition. I expect to hear from scouts at least twice a month.”

“Yes, my queen.” The elf’s vibrant hazel eyes settled on her. “As planned, I will introduce the alliance to the Inquisitor when we’re back on the outside.”

“Okay then. I bid you all safe journey. Varna namar.” Farewell.

Both Hannibal’s people and Joswen’s turned for the opening in Hald’arun’s boundary, filing through it back to the outside world. Behind them, growing distant and blurry, distorted by the magic of the barrier, Lassalanta slowly brought hands to rest over her abdomen. Even if Fen’Harel never returned, she carried part of him in her now, her precious, little treasure.

(*)

There came the absence of sound, the displacement of space and mass, much like what they experienced on the way in. The difference in leaving Hald’arun, however, carried an unseen weight, one that pressed in around them until there was darkness. And then…
Hannibal blinked once, twice, his features holding the expression of a man who’d been in the middle of a sentence but had lost his train of thought and was now attempting to regain it. The Valdian Outpost was the first thing to jump into his mind. They’d been there for five days trading and not much of anything else.Elemir and Joswen had simply told the Inquisitor to be patient and wait while they conducted some kind of business in the area. After nearly a week, Hannibal tired of lingering. His aqua gaze examined the quaint camp, the tents erected for his people.

Dorian sat close by. Varric rested on a crate with an unloaded Bianca on his lap, his cleaning kit beside him. Iron Bull and Ayla sat on a toppled tree trunk, both looking curiously at the others. Solas did the same, watching everyone closely. Joswen and Elemir stood near each other, the rest of the Crimson Rangers nowhere to be seen.

Dorian smacked at his neck, scratching. “Eck, I hate all these bugs. We’ve been here for five days. When are we heading back to Skyhold? Certainly, there’s only so much trading to be done.”

“We did what we came here to do,” Elemir said. “We can leave when you’re ready, Inquisitor.”

Hannibal appeared visibly angry. “So…you brought us all the way over here to trade?”

“Actually, there was other business.”

“Yeah, and I’m still waiting to know what that business is. You said we’d understand everything once we reached the place in the east, but here I am just as clueless as I was five days ago,” Hannibal said, arms crossing his chest. Eyes flicked to Ayla. “What about her? You said she would understand her past and such. Why did you bring us here, Elemir?”

“Inquisitor, please…” Ayla interrupted before he could grow any more upset. She sighed, brow furrowing. She knew she couldn’t simply say what she wanted. The wards of secrecy wouldn’t let her physically form the words anyway. “My brother was telling the truth. I understand everything now.”

Hannibal studied her, a red brow arching. “Just like that? You just…know?”

“Yes. I can’t tell you how I now understand my brother’s obscurity, but I do. Please, you have to believe me.”

“I was under the impression that we were being taken to some wonderful, mysterious place, yet this trading outpost is hardly that,” said the Qunari.

Varric and Dorian were just as disappointed, having high hopes for this great location in the east, only to end up sitting around a trading hub for five days. They empathized with Hannibal’s irritation. Solas remained silent, enthralled by how Hald’aran’s magic had affected them, while he clearly remembered every moment spent therein. He pitied that the memories had been stripped from them, and as Lassalanta advised, he’d have to act like they’d been stripped from him too.

Hannibal turned. “Varric, Dorian, Solas, any of you remember anything else but the outpost?”

All three of them shook their heads.

The Inquisitor turned narrowed eyes to Elemir and Joswen. “You two need to explain this shit. I’m getting angry.”

“Boss, um…” Bull considered his words, “I also understand why we’re here. I can vouch for them, and I’ve always been upfront with you. They’re telling the truth. Something…big happened over the last five days, something you four don’t recall. But you will if you ever return to this outpost.”

“And how do you remember?” Hannibal asked.

“Because I’m linked to Ayla. It’s the only reason I can. Trust me, boss. You accomplished what you came here for.”

Hannibal looked to Elemir, rubbing his temples. He shook his head and tossed his arms up. “Fine, though I feel like we wasted three weeks of travel and hanging around here.”

“No, you haven’t,” Elemir said.

“Ah, yes. This other business you mentioned. What is it?” questioned Dorian.

Here, Joswen took the reins of the conversation. “You’ve heard of the Red Army?”

Hannibal thought a moment, nodding. “Yes. They’re an old faction native to the Brecilian region. They enforce its borders, a military group. What do they have to do with why we’re here?”

“They want an alliance.”

So, Joswen and Elemir shared information about how the nameless, faceless leader of the army wished to aid the Inquisition, with only one stipulation, that Hannibal’s people relay information back to contacts in the east. Joswen and Elemir would oversee the exchange between both groups, and whenever the Inquisition needed the Red Army’s forces, it would have them, against Corypheus, Ares, whoever, or whatever. Once he’d made it clear that Elemir and Joswen would
he held accountable should any trickery arise on the Red Army’s end, Hannibal accepted the terms and the alliance, unaware that he’d already done so a couple of days ago.

(*)

They’d leave the Valdian Outpost at first light, per Hannibal. Night had fallen, and Solas stood at the edge of camp, the flames of the fire dancing somewhere behind him, obscuring his face in shadows as he stared off down the path. It invoked anxiousness within him, knowing that a thousand yards or so further in the ominous woods was the invisible barrier of Hald’arun. He wanted so much to return, to linger there for just a little longer, but there was so much to do.

“Everything alright, Chuckles?”

Solas partially turned and fixed eyes down at Varric. “Yes. I was sorting through my thoughts.”

“Yeah, I feel you there.” The dwarf gave a gravelly laugh. “I wish I could remember everything that supposedly happened since we’ve been here.”

The mage nodded. “As do I. Best not to linger on it, lest you’ll find your mind constantly occupied by it.”

“You should take your own advice then, friend. Looked like you were thinking pretty hard on it.”

Solas’s characteristically serene face blended into a faint smile. “Indeed.” He turned and strode off for his tent.

Varric spent a few moments peering into the gaping darkness of the Brecilian, before he returned to the fire.

(*)

A little later in the evening, retired to their tent, Bull and Ayla cuddled after making love. She rubbed her face to his chest, hand over his stomach. He stared up at the ceiling.

“It’s going to be weird keeping it secretive around them,” Ayla said softly. “We’ve shared conversations and experiences in that place, and I can’t ever talk with them about it unless we all return. So…strange.”

“Yeah. We’ll definitely have to watch what we say and how we say it.”

“Have you tried to speak its name, the place?”

“No. You?”

A pause before she answered. “Yes. To myself, but it’s not possible.” Ayla lifted on her elbow so he could see clearly. She took a breath and tried to say ‘Hald’arun’. Her lips appeared to press closer together, constricted, quivering. “I can think it all I like, yet trying to speak it isn’t possible.”

Iron Bull tried to do it as well and was met with the same obstacle, lips and teeth clamped by magic, tongue restrained by the vow of secrecy. The instant he stopped trying to say Lassalanta’s name, the name of the sanctuary, or anything specifically identifying the sanctuary, his mouth loosened and was his to control again. He chuckled.

“Well, weird as that is, it’s not a big deal, long as we follow the rules.”

“I guess that means I won’t even be able to talk about the wedding with Dorian. He really liked the dress, the decorations.” The woman hefted a long sigh. “Everything about that special night is back there.”

“Not everything.” Bull reached his spare hand to the outside pocket of his traveling bag, digging out the length of white rope used to bind their hands during the ceremony.

Ayla’s eyes brightened, and she took the item, smiling widely. She suddenly looked concerned.

“Don’t worry, Naaremma. I asked your brother if would be okay to take it with us. Since it wasn’t something that could reveal the place, he cleared it.”

“Oh, Bull. Thank you! Now I have a memento of our wedding.” She clutched the rope tight, then set it aside and snuggled closer to her husband. “I love you.”

“No more than I love you. Believe that.”

(*)

Rest and relaxation was exactly what Elgar’nan needed, and the quiet, picturesque beauty of Villa Maurel posed as the ideal environment from which to obtain those things. Ares released him from Fen’Harel’s prison a week ago. Since then, he and the god had spoken a lot. Ares filled him in on current affairs, specifically those surrounding the elven people. They were Elgar’nan’s main concern.

Today, Ares agreed to take him to one of those alienages so he could personally witness the conditions forced upon many of his people. For the time being, Elgar’nan needed to appear as ‘normal’ as possible, and walking around capped in a glorious, priceless, intricately designed crown certainly wasn’t normal. The beautiful elf stood before a tall mirror in his room examining
his reflection. He’d traded in his ancient robes for something more modern. Leg-hugging pants, a fine tunic that fell to the middle of muscular thighs, and calf-high boots. Straight, platinum-blond tresses poured down his back, pulled away from his face. He looked presentable enough.

During the past few days, Elgar’nan also began to feel his base power returning. It was a fraction of his true force, making him naught but a simple mage for the time being. To help channel his powers, Ares provided a stave, a rather fine piece of equipment, its length fashioned of dark wood and light metals, a pyramid-shaped crystal as the centerpiece.

The mage lifted his hands and gathered his energy, quickly and easily forming a coil of electricity between his palms. A group of crows perched on the balustrade of his terrace. Elgar’nan took a few steps towards them, then tossed his arm forward, sending a scattering beam at the birds. Loud squawks and black feathers filled the air, their carcasses littering the area.

Clapping came from behind, and he spun to Ares.

“Good to see your recovery is coming along.”

“Soon, I’ll practice on something a little bigger than crows, the filthy things.”

“So long as it’s not my men.”

“Whatever.” Elgar’nan smirked.

“Ready to go.”

“Yes.”

(*)

They flashed into existence in a shabby courtyard spotted with puddles of muddy water. A great tree rose before them, its branches scraping for the sky. Something about the thing reminded Elgar’nan of an older time. He moved forward, and Ares’s hand dropped from his shoulder. Silver-blue eyes skimmed the writing on a plaque under the tree.

“Vhenadahl,” the elf said. “Strength of the people. Though, this place certainly doesn’t reflect or even emanate any semblance of strength.” He sneered, hair sweeping as he turned and observed the surroundings. “It is a slum.”

“This is the Kirkwall alienage.” Ares watched from behind. “Give your people a break. They’ve endured a lot, and they’re stronger than you think. A large number of them have already joined my ranks.”

Rickety, worn buildings rose along unpaved avenues. Many elves tended to their errands, bustling about. Everyone dressed like low-class servants, some with ripped or tattered clothing. Children ran by, their laughter a welcome disinfectant to counter the grime and absolute dismalness of the place. No one could see Elgar’nan or the God of War due to Ares’s cloaking effects.

“They’re so…diminished.”

“For a guy who claims to be as heartless as me, you sure do sound sad.”

Elgar’nan’s countenance hardened and he faced the god. “Disappointed would be more appropriate. When I ruled the Evanuris and held the adoration of the elves, even the non-nobles were prominent. Having a servant dressed as plainly as the people in this alienage was unheard of.”

“I get it. Not everyone was of high standing, but no one was overlooked, left to degrade. Everyone, regardless of social class, had a place in your society.”

“Yes. We were golden.” Elgar’nan drew narrowed eyes about again. “The elvhen people don’t have that anymore. All because of him.”

“There may be a way to change it, to fix it so your people never had to experience this humiliation, this…degradation.” Ares swooped in, standing just behind the strapping elf. “I might be able to help.”

“For what gain, I wonder,” Elgar’nan mused dryly, eyes rolling. “The best thing you can do is take me to Fen’Harel and let me kill him.”

Ares’s hot chuckles reached one tapered ear. “I think you’re missing the point. He may play a key part in helping to restore the elves.”

The former leader of the Evanuris loosened a disgusted sound. “I’ve seen enough. Take me from here.”

“Mm. So bossy.” He lifted a hand to ease Elgar’nan’s silken hair sideward, revealing his neck, caressing it. Any kind of physical contact was required to teleport him, though it didn’t need to be nearly as intimate. The God of War grinned at the elf’s annoyed sigh and the stiff way he crossed his arms over his chest.

Ares vanished them from the alienage.
Two days after leaving Hald’arun and the Valdian Outpost that served as its cover, the group settled at the camp near the western outskirts of the Brecilian Forest, the one inside the cave. They ate dinner and quieted down for the night mostly. Iron Bull would stand the first watch with Magnus, the battlemage having designated himself the Qunari’s permanent sentry partner. Bull didn’t mind, though. He liked Magnus a lot, and after he made sure Ayla was comfortable and tucked in her sleep roll around the fire, he joined the battlemage outside the cave, both posted to either side of the concealed mouth.

Solas spent the last couple of days neglecting the Fade. Memories of Hald’arun were still so fresh with him that he wanted to lose himself in them a while longer. So, he’d simply gone to sleep those two nights. Tonight, however, he planned to venture into the realm where dreams, spirits, and reality blended. Lying on his furs, the elf closed his eyes and channeled into the Fade.

(*)

Familiarity. Best to start on common ground, a place where both he and Xena had tread within the Fade. Solas conjured a vision of Skyhold, broken and partially decrepit, though mostly intact. He wanted to go exploring using the memories Ares gave him, yet realized the urgency in checking on the warrior princess’s progress with creating a portal. The issue was that he had no way of knowing what time of day it was in her world, if she would only enter the Fade at night while she slept or at random times and often, as he did.

Solas sighed silently, eyes grazing the unsettling version of the fortress’s garden. He would wait for a while, see if she showed. He went to the stone and wood gazebo, lowering to one of the benches beneath it. His eyes shut, and he sent mental summons out into the realm, using his life force to search for Xena’s.

Several minutes passed.

“Hey, I was wondering when I’d see you again.”

Solas opened his eyes, setting them upon Xena. She’d appeared not twenty feet away, clad in her usual dark leathers and bronzed armor. He stood and strode across the gazebo, stepping down to face her.

Xena tailored a soft smile. “Where ya been? I’ve tried reaching you the past several days.”

“I apologize. I had other important business to attend and couldn’t make it into the Fade until now.” The mage noticed concern beneath her smile. “Is something wrong?”

“I showed a shamaness friend the eluvian, told her the plan. We attempted to open a portal using a delicate technique that could’ve worked if she had more power.”

Solas crossed arms over his chest, brow furrowing. “What technique?”

“Even though she’s a person of magic, her powers are useless while she’s in the Void…er…Fade. You probably already know how it is.”

“Yes. I would have to be physically inside the Fade to use my magic herein, not asleep and accessing the realm this way.”

She nodded. “Well, to counter that, to be able to use her magic on the eluvian, she had me holding a channeling stone while I entered this place, and she sent her power through it to me from the outside.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It was worth it, considering what’s on the line—your world, mine.”

Solas studied her closely. “Were you injured?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle. Look, Solas, we need your help. Yakut, the shamaness, is strong, but not strong enough. She needs more power.”

The slender man pivoted, facing the doorway to what served as Morrigan’s chamber in the real Skyhold, the home of the eluvian. His mind almost immediately fixed on a possible solution. Xena stood behind him, shrouded in silence. He turned.

“I may have a way to get more energy focused on the mirror. We have a very powerful one amongst us.”

“Do you think they’d be willing to help?”

“Oh, yes. She will be quite willing. Her husband, however, won’t be pleased about it.”

(*)

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.” The mountain of muscle named Iron Bull scowled across the cave at Solas. It was morning and the party was close to being packed and ready to move out. Bull had
been in the middle of restocking his and Ayla’s traveling bags with dried goods while the elf told them of his encounter with Xena last night, her reports on the attempt to open the portal. “I’m not letting you put her in danger to feed into a half-baked plan you think might work.”

He spun and began forcefully shoving things in their bags again.

Ayla decided to listen for a moment. Her husband had a point, but they needed to hear more. Everyone else stopped what they were doing to look between the elf and Qunari.

“She would be in no danger, Iron Bull. I’d be going into the Fade, not her.”

The Qunari faced him again, arms crossing his chest. “How do you know that? Have you done something like this before?” Sarcastic skepticism coated the second question, since Bull knew he obviously had not.

Solas remained calm, though the urge to send a kinetic blast at the man and knock him on his stubborn, horned ass was strong. He sighed. “We need to handle Ares. To do that, we need Xena. To get her here, we need a portal between our worlds. To get the portal, we need Ayla,” the mage decided to keep it simple.

Bull clearly picked up on the condescending nature of his response. “It doesn’t matter how many ways you dumb it down, the risk to Ayla is still there.”

“There’s always a risk, but this one is minimal. As I said, I would use the same technique Xena and Yakut used on their end, holding a channeling item while Ayla sent her power into it, allowing me to amplify Xena. Ayla would be safe. The portal will open.”

“So you think,” said Bull.

“I know it.”

“The answer is still no. She–”

“I’ll do it,” Ayla cut her husband off. She’d made considerations while listening from her shadow-obscured world.

“Ayla…” Bull went to her.

Solas hoisted an almost unseen smile, and the Qunari wished he could punch the self-satisfied smugness from his face. The mage addressed the Oona. “Thanks, Ayla. I know you’re scared and wish to be cautious, but you will be safe. We can’t do this without you.”

The woman stood and took Bull’s hand. Her beguiling, crisp eyes focused on Solas. “Anything to help.”

Solas looked to Hannibal. “Of course, nothing will be done until we get back to Skyhold and I’ve thoroughly researched the procedures for connecting me and Ayla, as well as collaborated the plan with Xena. She and I have decided to look for one another in the Fade when night falls on both our ends; that tends to be somewhat consistent.”

“All right. I want step by step reports on this, and don’t begin anything until I’ve cleared it.”

“Understood.”

Iron Bull should’ve figured she’d agree to the plan. It was in her nature. He also knew that she’d felt useless many times in her life for being blind and depending on the aid of others constantly. Ayla would most likely agree to anything she could positively impact, a way to compensate for her feelings of being a burden. Though, neither her husband, friends, nor family would ever see her that way.

His single eye eased around, fixing on hers. “I need to finish packing our stuff,” he said sternly, kissed her forehead, then broke contact to do the task.

Ayla stared down at her folded hands. She couldn’t see them now that shadows blotted her vision. She nibbled her lip. Her husband was angry.

(*)

The group departed the hidden camp, traversing beyond the thinned borders of the forest, out into the open. They veered southwest through fields of tall grass to the Brecilian Passage, a well-known, frequently traveled road.

Bull hadn’t said much of anything, merely leading Ayla along, ready to pick her up and carry her if she needed it. She was still going along fine, though. The woman’s eyes skimmed the rocky Southron Hills to their right, and she loosened a shiver. Somewhere in the darkness was the Grozmare Mine, a place of beauty and danger, where she’d had a close brush with death. She shunted the thoughts aside with a curt huff, then looked up at her husband’s sculpted profile.

“You’re upset because I sided with Solas,” she voiced softly, the words accompanied by a beautifully-drooled smile.

“I just…” Bull released a great sigh. “I want to keep you safe. It’s hard to do that when you purposefully put yourself and the–” He’d almost said baby. Almost. But she needed to realize her
condition on her own. He took a deep breath, calming the excitement from his voice before finishing the sentence, “…when you put yourself in danger.”

“It’s worth the risk, helping to create the portal. If it means a possible way of ridding this world of Ares, I’ll do it. Even if the risk were greater, I’d still do it. I’m just one life compared to so many others.”

Bull swallowed the lump from his throat. He didn’t like talking about this, the possibility of losing her. He tried to brighten things with a tender smile, heightening positivity. “I’ve thought about it, and maybe it’s not as dangerous as I think. You won’t be going into the Fade, after all.”

Ayla hugged against him, smiling. “Everything will be fine.”

They quieted down on the subject. It was agreed before they left the camp back in the cave that the utmost caution was necessary, since they never knew when Ares lurked about, though it helped that Ayla could see the stealthed war god when physically connected to Iron Bull. The group continued along the Brecilian Passage, camping in a clearing several hundred feet from the road that night. They’d continue south and around the tail of the Southron Hills, looping up to Milgren so they could retrieve the mounts they left there and restock. Then, they’d head off to the west.

(*)

Three sunrises and sunsets passed, and they made it back to the mining town. Evening blanketed fully over the land by the time Hannibal’s and Joswen’s people checked into their rooms at various inns in the “quieter” part of town, more residential with minimal bar brawls taken to the streets. There was also the lack of prostitution, the working girls and guys concentrated in a bustling district on the other side of town.

As much as Solas enjoyed the natural experience, being out in the wilds to revel in the pureness they emanated, he also loved a hot bath, and he’d gotten spoiled with them back in Hald’arun, Lassalanta’s private quarters. He sank into the tub positioned on a tiled section in one corner of his room, infinitely glad the inn they chose had plumbing. The Inquisitor footed the bill, so no sense in turning down such a luxury.

The hearth-fire snapped, warm light basting through the room. Solas sighed and leaned his head back, eyes closing.

“I’ve never seen you so relaxed. It’s refreshing.”

The elf slowly opened his eyes, lifted his head, and turned it to Ares, who lounged on his bed. Solas smirked. “Why am I not surprised you’re here?”

“I would’ve appeared sooner, but couldn’t get you alone until now. I started sensing you again a few days ago. You kind of…disappeared off the grid there for a little while.” The God of War’s head tilted, eyes aimed through the pleasant dimness at the elf. “It was like you just weren’t in Thedas anymore. I searched the Fade, went to Skyhold, but nothing. Where were you?”

Solas’s visage remained steady. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I mean I couldn’t sense you, and it’s not like you’re hard to find. You do have a very distinct power signature…Fen’Harel.”

Solas’s mysterious eyes widened enough to be noticeable. His first instinct was to begin spouting off questions, assumptions. That would be a foolhardy move, however. Best to see just what Ares knew. “I’m not surprised you figured it out. How?”

“Oh,” Ares drifted a chuckle, “I have my resources. Ancient Elvhen history documents can reveal much.”

“I see. And what will you do with such information?”

“I’m not going to tell your Inquisition buddies, if that’s your concern. Things play out the way I think they will, they’re gonna find out sooner or later.” The god grinned. “Now, back to my question—where were you?”

The mage was somewhat glad Ares found out his true identity. It was a relief really to have that bubble of secrecy between them popped. Solas believed it would make for more interesting conversations. He leaned his head back again, eyes shutting. “I told you, I’m not sure what you’re talking about. I’ve been traveling, as you can see. Nothing special.”

“Pretty little liar,” Ares drawled, eyes raking over what skin he could see of the soaking elf. “You eluded me, hid from me, and I want to know how you did it.”

“You must report every step I take to you?” Solas conjured a smile, chuckling. He liked having the upper hand in this case. “You know, if you plan to be the Almighty One True God here, you should consider not impeding on the simple freedoms of your lowly subjects.”

Ares’s features solidified briefly. There came a stint of silence while he contemplated the man. Solas was toying with him. “You may be able to fool everyone else, but I’m a master of picking secrets from people, and I will find out what else you’re hiding from me, Bold-Bald-and-Beautiful. I will…”
The God of War’s last word lingered on the air, echoing reverberantly until it faded away. In the tub, Solas opened his eyes, staring up at the ceiling. He didn’t need to look over at the bed to know Ares was gone.

(*)

The war god appeared mid-stride back in Villa Maurel, moving through the room. He began pacing slowly, thoughtfully, before the fireplace. On the bed, Ralden halted his masturbation session and rolled to his stomach. Pale-green eyes swayed side to side, watching Ares. He grinned.

“Come to bed. I’ll take your mind off whatever’s bugging you.”

“Mm.” Ares continued pacing. What the hell could Solas be hiding from him? Why couldn’t he sense him for almost a week? He needed answers. The war god stopped, faced the bed, and slipped into something more fitting to the mood—a pair of snug silk black shorts replaced his rugged leathers. He sat at the foot of the bed.

Ralden was on him in an instant, hugging his broad shoulders from behind, tousling his hair, nipping his neck. Ares enjoyed the mortal’s attentions, but his mind hovered on Solas. He stared at the fire until the door to his quarters swung in and Elgar’nan entered. The tall elf wore a robe with a hem that reached his bare ankles. The attire clung to his figure, accentuating his chest and slender waist.

“Have you located him yet?” Elgar’nan voiced, the words hard and authoritative.

“Yes.” Ares hadn’t told him when he began sensing Solas again. He wanted to talk with the elf first before updating Elgar’nan.

“When will you take me to him?”

“Patience, Blondie, patience.”

Elgar’nan sneered.

Ares chuckled, standing. He headed to the elf. Left suddenly empty-handed, Ralden sat back on his naked haunches, watching, listening. He so hoped the pretty man would join them.

“You’ve tuned into my aura,” the god said. Clearly, Elgar’nan sensed his return to the compound. “Looks like you’re warming up to me.”

The elvhen man closed the distance between them, features quickly shifting to one of potent irritation. One hand shot out and grabbed Ares’s bearded face, thumb hooked to one cheek, fingers clamped to the other. This lifted the god’s face, further leveling his eyes with Elgar’nan’s. Ares groaned thickly, a purely sexual sound. He grinned at the elf. They remained gaze-locked for several long seconds.

“I dislike you, war god, and if ever awarded the chance, I will kill you. You’ve toyed with me enough.”

“I’m just getting started.” Ares licked his lips. “Move your hand lower, to my throat, and squeeze.”

Elgar’nan refused to feed into the god’s masochistic deviance, at least for the moment. He dropped his grip.

Ares skimmed his beautifully-crafted features, challenge burning in the brown depths of his eyes. “You’re not afraid of me. That is such a fucking turn-on.”

“Why should I be? If you wanted me dead, you’d have killed me while I slept.” The diminished elvhen god didn’t flinch. “Instead, you’ve invested time into my recovery, given me the resources to thrive, which means you’ve no doubt crafted some plan to use me.”

“Hmm. Maybe there is no plan. Maybe I just want…” he traced a finger down the elf’s chest to his stomach, “…to use you.”

Elgar’nan watched that finger drifting down his body. He lifted eyes to the god’s and leaned closer. “And I’ll let you, right before I end you.” He spun and walked away, his silky hair swinging. The door closed in his wake.

Ares sizzled with desire. The elf was so hot. His body had hardened, offering evidence of how strongly Elgar’nan affected him. On the bed, Ralden huffed and pouted. He’d been so sure a threesome would happen.

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The following morning, the group mounted up and left Milgren behind. They were now on the easy stretch of their journey westward. The grueling part would be going up the Frostback Pass, a trip that typically took about three days, weather pending. It was in the winter months currently, which meant a higher possibility of snow storms in the mountains. A storm could add a day or two to their travels. Hannibal prayed for mostly clear skies and minimal snow once they reached the area. That wouldn’t be for about two weeks.
They took the Imperial Highway, stopping at the campsite where Joswen, Magnus, Sophitia, Vek, and Ozra first made appearances. They traveled hard the next day, intent on making it to Lothering, and they did reach the city very late in the evening. Bull had handed Ayla food in the saddle of their hart since they didn’t stop to have dinner. Once in Lothering, Elemir purposefully took a route to the inn district that completely avoided the whorehouse. At one point, he met Bull’s lone eye, and the horned man sent silent thanks.

They departed Lothering not long after sunrise and a hearty breakfast. By midmorning, they reached the crossroads where the Imperial Highway branched north for Crestwood, south to Ostagar, and west across the top of the Hinterlands for Redcliffe, as the road signs and stone markers indicated.

Dorian and Sophitia simultaneously noticed that someone had defaced each side of the markers with graffiti. The woman guided her mount closer to one rectangular pillar, sprigs of overgrown grass at its base.

“This war god has been busy,” she said.

The Altus’s eyes skimmed the words painting over the marker, “‘Ares, the One True God’. ‘Our savior Ares.’ ‘Ares rules, Corypheus sucks!’” Moustache-capped lips pressed a humorless smile. “Wow, he certainly has been busy. Word of him is spreading quickly. He’ll have the whole world believing he’s the answer to their problems soon enough.”

“Not if we stop him,” Hannibal said.

“As long as I’m the one who gets to land the finishing blow to that asshole,” growled Bull.

The Inquisitor chuckled. “Let’s move.”

The group continued for Skyhold, eager to reach the great fortress in the mountains and settle in from a journey that would turn out to be over a month long, counting their stay at the trading post.
“You’re such a filthy old man. Keep your hands to yourself.” Brown eyes glittered with a surreptitious smile over at her husband, and she smacked his leg.

“That’s why you love me.” Varric adjusted his blazer and winked.

Cassandra chuckled. Her cheeks were clear and unmarked of the scars she sported in-story, added through the expert application of makeup.

Somewhere off-camera a voice counted down, “Three, two, one—action!”

The show was now rolling. The Interviewer grinned broadly at the couple on the beige couch across from him. Varric rested comfortably in one corner, his feet kicked up on an ottoman since he didn’t want them simply dangling over the edge of the couch. Cassandra sat against his side, long legs protruding from the snug confines of a black pencil skirt, crossed at the knees.

“Welcome to the show! Imagine my ultimate surprise when I walked in this morning and was handed the question cards.” The Interviewer’s grin widened at Cassandra.

Varric’s smile tilted knowingly. “I, uh, think you have a little drool there, guy.”

The Interviewer bellowed a round of laughter and cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t be surprised. I’m a huge fanboy of Cassandra.”

“I’ll bet you are.”


“Thank you, both of you, for coming in today.” He shifted, eyes whipping to the cards in his hands a moment, then he gestured to the backdrop of the Fic behind the couch. This time it featured the rest of the cast in the distance with Cassandra and Varric back-to-back, weapons drawn and looking battle-ready. “The Fic doesn’t always portray you two in a friendly light, meaning your characters have a lot of history and conflict, but recently it seems you’ve gotten closer, formed more of a friendship.”

“Definitely.” Cassandra nodded. “I think our in-story personas will always have that strict boundary separating our professional and personal lives, even though there is a lot of joking and innuendo.”

“Well, I doubt our characters will ever get romantically involved,” Varric said. “That’s not the kind of relationship they have, granted there are times when I might say something sexually provocative. Besides,” he hefted a thin smirk, still smiling, “Cullen’s character has moved in and Cass’s character has been pining over him for a while. Now that she has her dream guy, all I can hope for are innocent flirtations.”

They laughed, and Cassandra leaned to kiss him. “Out of Fic, you know you’re the only man for me.”

“How did you end up together, if I might ask?”

Both looked to the Interviewer, and Varric lifted a brow, indicating she start.

Cassandra clasped her hands, eyes roaming thoughtfully, before narrowing on the Interviewer. “It certainly wasn’t love at first sight by any means. The first time I saw him was in an elevator. We worked in the same corporate building; he was new. At the time, I was a marketing director for a well-known software company and he was a legal consultant for some other company in the building. So, anyway, we squeezed in the elevator and started up. He was beside me, and I noticed that he kept stealing looks at my legs.”

The dwarf’s features melded a grin and he shrugged. “Legs for miles. I’m a sucker for those.”

“Then I smelled it,” Cassandra said, making her in-story trademark sound of disgust. “He farted. Stunk the whole cab up. I mean, I knew it wasn’t me, and he knew it wasn’t me, which meant we both knew it was him!”

Surprised bloomed colorfully over the Interviewer’s countenance as he listened. He burst into vibrant laughter, as did Varric. Chuckles even bubbled offset from camera operators, gaffers, mic-holders, and other staff. Cassandra shook her head, but also smiled.

“Really, man!” said the Interviewer.

Varric merely nodded. His laughter sifted off eventually, and he rubbed Cassandra’s arm.

“Needless to say, the way to a woman’s heart isn’t through her gag reflex.”
“No shit,” the woman replied.

The dwarf continued the story. “I had eggs for breakfast that morning, and even though they give me the biggest gas, I love ‘em. So, I went about my workday, finding it more than a little difficult to concentrate because I kept thinking about the beautiful woman I saw in the elevator. Lunch rolls around and I head to the food court on the ground floor, a lot of good café spots there. I ordered a roast beef sandwich and Minrathicana”—a beverage made from very strong coffee grown in northern Tevinter—“then looked for a place to sit. That’s when my eyes fell on her. She sat alone reading on her Kindle and working on a cup of tea. I went over and introduced myself, asked if I could join her.”

“And I had half a mind to send him elsewhere, but I actually found him cute, in a dashing sort of way.” Cassandra’s lips curled a warm smile at the man to her right, arm going around his broad shoulders. “I agreed to let him sit.”

“We started talking and I asked what she was reading. It was book four of Stephen King’s Dark Tower series, and I’d already read all eight books. So, we started talking about the first three,” Varric stated. “Turned out she’d grown as obsessed with the series as I was. That elf has one hell of a way with words and stories.”

“From then on, there weren’t many times when we weren’t in each other’s company. We went on our first date two weeks after we meant, and I grew to love him.”

The couple clasped hands, sharing a smile.

The Interviewer nodded slowly. “Seems the way to a woman’s heart is through Stephen King, then.” He grinned.

“Yep,” Varric said. “Been together for ten years.”

“Awesome story. I love it! So, how do you guys feel about the relationship your characters have in the Fic? I mean, you’re not always on friendly terms.”

Cassandra laughed richly. “Oh, I don’t know. I find it amusing to act alongside my husband in that way. I love giving him flack in-story. It’s such fun.”

“For me, sometimes it’s a little weird, but interesting.” Varric’s gaze shifted to the Interviewer. “Like when I pretty much nudged her in Cullen’s direction, then watched as they got a lot closer. He’s a good-looking guy, so watching a scene where he’s getting it on with my wife makes me a little jealous.”

“So, if he was an unattractive man, you wouldn’t be jealous?” Cassandra queried, brow lifting to accompany the playful tilt of her lips.

Varric thought for a few seconds. He smiled and shook his head. “Nah, because I know you’d always come home to me in the end.”

“Oh, sweetie. You know you’re the only man for me. No one will ever be able to…measure up.”

“Always have jokes, don’t you?” Varric knew she referred to his height.

Cassandra and the Interviewer broke into laughter, and she wrapped her arms tight around her dear dwarf, pressing a kiss to his lips.
The following morning, when it was bright enough to push away the looming shadows of massive trees and allow him to see everything unhindered, Ares returned to the Brecilian Forest. He found Solas and his group traveling from the place once he began sensing the elf again. Somewhere inside lie the secret to Solas’s elusion, the reason why Ares had lost track of him. Be that as it may, the God of War didn’t feel anything particularly special about the region. Sure, it was old—very old—but seemed unremarkable.

He stood on the highest crest of the Southron Hills and stared down the western slope to the Brecilian, arms across his chest, eyes narrowed.

“What happened in there, Solas…”

The god rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then vanished. He reappeared somewhere amidst the ancient, towering redwoods in a very picturesque area. A stream trickled nearby. A wild hart stuck its head up around a grassy knoll, ears flickering while it listened. The war god was in stealth, but animals could sense him. The magnificent creature snorted, turned, and galloped off into the trees.

Ares did his god-thing, sending out a sensor for other-than-animal lifeforms. He picked up many of them—elves, humans, dwarves, qunari. He disappeared again to turn up in a place with a high concentration of people.

**The Valdian Trading Outpost**, read the sign outside the gates of the walled community.

The god’s long, leathered legs carried him in, the post guards unaware of his presence. His eyes beheld the various booths and tents, the different races going about their commerce. Still, nothing seemed out of place. This was just a trading post. He decided to look around anyway, and found it more than interesting when he came to the area at the rear of the post where security was doubled. A set of gates led to another area, which obviously required people to have higher clearance before being granted entry.

“Hm.”

Ares walked beyond soldiers and guards, dressed in either light armor with reddish chest-plates etched with a bird or ranger’s attire. He passed through the gate like it wasn’t there and kept moving, until he reached a path that traced further into the trees, gradually declining. He took a moment to study the little camp when he reached it, then continued.

He got another thousand yards or so down the path before he began to feel something. Mortals might call it a headache, and it was accompanied by tingling across his epidermis, ringing in his ears. He suddenly felt warmer too. The war god stopped moving, slowly scanning the woods. It all looked the same, ahead, left, right, and behind. The path he’d been following was gone, and there was only the forest, trunks rising all around him. He felt weird, too weird.

Ares took a step back, then summoned his power to vanish.

Only it didn’t work.

He frowned and tried again. Nothing. The god lifted his hands and stared down at them, willing a fireball to form, a lightning bolt, anything. But he couldn’t, and he felt it clearly now. His powers were gone. Just fucking…gone.

“What the…?”

“Hey, you! What are you doing here?” called a voice from behind him.

Ares whirled to see the path had returned and three soldiers, all dressed in the armor of the Red Army, two with arrows trained on him, the third with a drawn sword. The war god wasn’t stupid. He’d somehow lost his powers, and something out here in these blasted woods caused it, something he couldn’t sense. He’d never encountered anything like this, so he’d handle it logically. If his powers were gone, his immortality might’ve been sapped too, which meant swords and arrows could kill. He slowly lifted his arms to show surrender.

A casual smile fused over his features. “Guess I got lost, boys.”

“Aren’t you going to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“Yeah, sure you did. You’re coming with us,” said the man with the sword. He jerked the weapon at Ares, indicating for him to move back up the path. The God of War did as commanded, waiting patiently. Right as they reached the little camp on the trail, a sizzle of sensation coursed through him, and he felt refreshed. He knew his powers had returned, just as he figured they would. He stopped and faced the soldiers.

“Turn and keep moving,” ordered the one in charge, sword held up and out. “Now!”

Ares met his gaze and held it while he stepped closer, impaling himself on the weapon, the blade sinking through him, exiting his back, and leaving not a mark nor blood. The soldiers gasped, unsure of what to do. Ares swiped his arm, sending out a hazing spell. They went silent and docile, weapons lowered, eyes forward, faces slack; they wouldn’t remember their brush with the God of War.
Ares glared down the path. Whatever the hell lie in the forest, he didn’t like it. Not in the least. It had the power to render him helpless. He was willing to bet that it was part of the reason Solas and his group eluded him. As curious as he was, the war god knew it would be wise to avoid this area.

Wearing a grave frown, he vanished.

(*)

Lassalanta sat in her tall-backed chair in the dining hall. Her breakfast consisted of fruit and elven sweet-bread. She ate leisurely of it…but dropped the strawberry gripped her slender fingers at the unfamiliar surge of energy that swept over her. Blue eyes widened faintly, then adopted a hint of worry.

Hald’arun’s barrier. Something very powerful and potent had contacted it. Something not welcome. She closed her eyes and synced herself to the Heart. It would show her the entity, reveal the scene of a handsome, ill-intended man in black leathers, and how the barrier affected him.

(*)

BWAAAAH!

The Inquisitor’s announcement horn blared through Skyhold fortress, shattering the mostly silent, chilly setting of early morning. The sun hung in the lowest part of the eastern sky, and that meant dawn occurred not even an hour ago.

Commander Rutherford startled awake, sitting up completely in bed. He could still hear the horn, fading off as it echoed along the Frostbacks.

“Oh, blast!”

He fumbled from bed and started grabbing up his clothes from the floor, pulling things on. Back in bed, Cassandra shifted under the covers, turning over. She chuckled, watching him hurry about his quarters.

“Slow down. They still must make it across the bridge and into the main courtyard. I don’t think the Inquisitor would mind if you were a little late.”

Cullen shot a boyish smile her way while belting his pants. “That may be, love, but I’m the commander. I’m never late.”

Again, she chuckled.

Cullen sat on the bed to pull his boots on. When he finished, he leaned into her, capturing her mouth for a long kiss, nipping. “Keep the bed warm for me, Cassie.”

“Count on it,” she breathed, then smiled as he departed for the courtyard.

(*)

Hannibal inhaled as deeply as he could of the crisp air, picking up the scent of morning bread. He released a happy exhalation as he guided his mount to the section of the courtyard where stable-hands waited. He dismounted when he reached them, nodding in greeting and relinquishing the reins, then removed his traveling bag, slinging it over his chest.

“Aaaah,” Dorian breathed. “It feels so good to be back. That was certainly the longest trip we’ve taken from Skyhold.” The olive-skinned beauty shivered and cinched the neck of his coat tighter.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you all warmed up once I’ve gotten everything out of the way,” Hannibal’s resonant words fell low for the mage’s ears.

“Mm, you’d better.” Dorian nuzzled his beard, stole a kiss, then started for their quarters.

The fire-maned Qunari turned in time to see Cullen striding swiftly for them, having rushed down the stairs of the western wall. The commander cleared his throat, running hands over his hair, attempting to lend some orderliness to the unruly mass. His eyes settled on the Inquisitor.

“Welcome back.”

Hannibal grinned lightly at him. “Rough night, commander?”

“No rougher than the last.”

“Cassandra keeping you busy, huh?” Bull quipped, also conjuring a grin. He’d dismounted and was helping Ayla down from the saddle.

Cullen’s features flickered with mild displeasure. “I won’t warrant that with an answer.”

“You just did.” Iron Bull’s chuckles produced plumes of vapor on the winter air, sifting past his lips. He enjoyed giving the man a hard time, especially since he was the easily-flustered type.

Cullen’s attention went to the strangers, then to Hannibal.

“I’ll introduce all the new faces in the war room; I want them to officially meet Leliana and
“Alright.” Cullen nodded, then added. “Uh…allow me fifteen minutes to make sure the ladies are ready for the briefing. I was…running late.”

Hannibal chuckled. “No problem.”

The commander slipped away.

Holding to Bull’s hand, Ayla took a moment to admire the Winter Solstice decorations adorning some of the buildings. Wreathes hung on doors and over eaves. Streamers of red, gold, and green laced through many of the smaller trees, which had been decorated by bells and ornaments too. Candles lit the sills of most windows. All of it was complemented by a batch of newly fallen snow, most of which had been cleared from the fortress’s main paths and high-traffic zones.

The Oona sighed, smiling. “I love this time of year. I’m so glad we made it back before Winter Solstice.” The holiday was four days away.

“I’ll have to go check on the gift I ordered for you later,” Bull said, lips skimming gently across her smooth, dark brow.

“Oh! I’ll have to do the same!” Excitement infused her voice. She couldn’t wait to see the portrait. “When we get settled in, you can take me to Dorian while you handle your gift and I’ll handle mine.”

He chuckled. “Alright, Naaremma.”

“Bull, Ayla.” They looked to Hannibal. “I want you both in the war room too. We’ll be discussing sensitive things and I don’t want the God of War lurking around. Solas, need you too.”

The elf sent a nod of acknowledgement.

“Gotcha, boss,” Bull replied.

At mention of Ares, Ayla instinctively began darting her eyes about. He wasn’t there now.

Hannibal issued a nod. He turned to Elemir and his people. “Please, follow me. You can set your things in the main hall for now. Once the meeting’s done, I’ll ask Josephine to set you all up with quarters.”

(*)

Thirteen faces in the war room this early morning. The last time that many people occupied the space, Ares had previously made himself visible at the dinner table.

“Josephine, Leliana, Cullen,” Hannibal’s hand shifted to each person during introductions, “this is Joswen, Sophitia, Ozra, Vek, and Magnus.”

Nods passed between everyone.

Josephine’s smiling eyes roamed every face, but fell on Elemir’s, lingering for a long moment. She blushed slightly when his green gaze met hers, followed by a smile. She’d been thinking of him a lot since they left for the east. Their time together spent playing chess and her giving him tours of the fortress had been quite enjoyable. The exotically beautiful ambassador was very happy he chose to return. She cleared her throat and fully engaged herself in the serious conversation.

“They’re Ayla’s family,” Hannibal went on to explain to his counsel. “We met up with them on the road and they accompanied us east.”

Cullen crossed arms over his chest. “What was in the east? Where did you go?”

Joswen and the others kept quiet, though all their eyes swerved to the Inquisitor.

Hannibal paused before answering, his features appearing a little amused. “A…trading post. In the Brecilian Forest. Apparently, we accomplished what we went for, though we don’t remember it.”

Leliana’s brow furrowed, light from the candle chandelier warming through her eyes. “What is that supposed to mean? How can you not remember what you did over there?”

“It’s…complicated,” Hannibal said.

The spymaster turned eyes to Joswen, Elemir, and the rest of their party. “But all of you remember, yes?”

“Theo, Joswen answered. “However, I cannot—”

“You can’t tell us anything about it specifically,” she cut him off, lips pursed skeptically. “We heard it all from Elemir before they left Skyhold, how he could only reveal so much.” Leliana looked to Ayla. “I hope you were able to clear up your memories.”

The Oona nodded. “I was. I understand everything now.”

“But you can talk about it no more than the others.”
“That’s correct,” Ayla answered the spymaster.

Like Cullen, Leliana was displeased about their peoples’ lack of memory at the end of such a long journey, but there was naught to be done about it. At least they’d returned safe.

“Something valuable did come from the trip,” Hannibal said. “I assume you’ve heard of the Red Army, protectors of the Brecilian region.”

Both Leliana and Cullen nodded; Josephine adopted a doe-in-the-lantern-light look.

“Well, they proposed an alliance with the Inquisition, through Joswen and Elemir, and I accepted. They’re a strong force and will fight alongside us whenever we call.”

“And what do they want from the alliance?” asked Cullen.

“They want the threats of Corypheus and Ares neutralized, like us. Common enemy to fight. The only terms their leader proposed is that all communications between the Inquisition and Red Army be done through Joswen or Elemir for now.”

Cullen digested the information, his mind working strategically, as always. “Who’s their leader?”

“I don’t know.”

“Inquisitor?”

Hannibal shrugged. “Never met him…or her…or whoever.”

The commander chuffed, shaking his head. “This is quite unorthodox.”

“Yeah, I know, but that’s the way it is for the time being.”

Cullen exchanged looks with Josephine and Leliana, then turned his golden-brown vision back to Hannibal. “Very well. I expect that the spymaster and I will receive accurate reports and full cooperation in this alliance.”

“Of course.” Hannibal nodded, face hardening. “Now, on to Ares. We didn’t encounter him while out—Solas did and hadn’t bothered to share such information with his companions—but Solas met with Xena in the Fade a couple of times. They’ve come up with a plan to open a portal using Morrigan’s eluvian as it stands in the Fade.”

“That’s great news,” said Josephine. “If Xena can stop him, getting her here should be a priority.”

The Inquisitor nodded. “It is. There are a few things that need to be worked out on Solas’s end. Ayla’s help is needed to open the portal, and he must make sure everything’s safe enough for her to take part in it. He also needs to collaborate with Morrigan. Since this plan involves Ares and he can travel unseen amongst us, do not talk about it outside this room. We’ll only discuss it here, and with Ayla and Iron Bull present because she can see him.”

“Once we’re done here, I’ll covertly begin preparations,” Solas spoke up. “I’ll start with obtaining a proper channeling item, which can be used to link Ayla to me while I’m inside the Fade.”

“Very well.” Hannibal nodded. Aqua eyes slipped to Cullen. “What’s been happening in our absence?”

“Normal operations. Though, about Thedas’s resident God of War, his influence has grown tremendously, concentrated specifically in the Crestwood region and the town of New Crestwood. Scouts from Caer Bronach reported that he has one finished temple dedicated to him in that area, with others being constructed as we speak. His troops have grown to the thousands, and in such a short time.” The commander glowered darkly. “They’re calling him Ares, the One True God, like he’s some kind of savior. It’s despicable.”

“Yes,” Bull interjected, “we ran across a few bits of graffiti on the way back giving one-ups to that dick-face. He has people completely fooled about who he really is, and it’s easy to see why he’s gaining ground so fast. He’s no doubt flaunting his power, closing fade-rifts around the land, and doing little acts of kindness. As much as I don’t want Ayla involved in this portal shit, I’m all about helping Xena.”

A small moment of thoughtful silence blanketed the room. Ayla slowly looked around, seeing no God of War present.

“Before we break, I want to report to you, Iron Bull, that the mission was a success and the
“package” is in route to Skyhold, should be here in another day or two,” Leliana voiced, her face on the verge of a smile.

“Really! That’s great!” Bull beamed.

“Commander, please help get the “package” covertly into the fortress. Do it at night, if possible. Don’t want Krem finding out,” Hannibal instructed.

“It shall be done.”

Hannibal looked to Josephine. “Would you be so kind as to set our friends up with accommodations?”

“Of course, Inquisitor,” Lady Montilyet said, eyes sparkling over Joswen and his people, always making their way back to Elemir, and the man watched her in return.

They broke from the meeting, evacuating the war room.

(*)

Within the hour, Josephine had the newcomers settled, half of them in the north tower, half in the west. Now, she and Elemir approached the same room he’d occupied in the south tower during his stay. They stopped outside the door and she handed him the key.

“Here you are, milord.”

Elemir watched her silently, the play of a smile tugging his lips. “Thank you.” He ran a hand over his already tousled mane, a look Josephine thought he wore quite well. “So…”

“I showed you pretty much all of Skyhold when last you were here,” she said, hands clasped before her, “so, I’m afraid further tours would be unsatisfactory.”

“Ah, you’re right.” El’s smile lingered. “Maybe we could meet for chess later then?”

“I’m much better at Wicked Grace, milord.” The woman almost giggled, watching him intently. She wanted badly to brush her cheek along the short beard he sported. It was at the point where it had lost its bristliness, softer and more appealing to the touch.

“We can play that instead. You’ll have the upper hand, however, since I don’t indulge in the game often.”

Josephine chuckled. “Good. I’ll pay you back for the all chess games I lost.”

They fell into silence, standing in the circular corridor of the tower, the area lit by wall lanterns, scented of worn wood and old stone. The ambassador touched his arm.

“I’ll see you later.”

He nodded, smiling. “You can call me Elemir, you know,” he voiced after her.

She stopped and turned a playful smile at him. “As long as you call me Josephine.”

“Done.”

The ranger stared until she disappeared around the bend. His smile deepened and he unlocked the door, heading into his room.

(*)

Ayla sat bundled in a blanket on the bed. The air in their room held enough chill to see the warm vapor clouds of their breaths. The woman waited patiently in her shadowy realm while her husband made a fire. She caught the subtle dash of his large form as he moved about in near silence.

“What “package” is Leliana talking about?” she finally asked, unable to contain her curiosity. Bull hadn’t said anything about it since they left the war room, and she chose not to ask until they were alone. It was obvious he wanted to keep it as secret as possible.

The Qunari chuckled, his back to her while he squatted and situated logs in the growing flames. “Gnawing away at you, is it? I was wondering when you’d ask.”

Ayla’s eyes brightened and she grinned. “Well, what is it?”

Bull finished up and went to join her on the bed. He took off his boots and shirt, laying back. Ayla draped over him, chin on her hands, eyes on his.

“Back before Krem left home to join the fighting ranks, before he and I met up, he was part of a tailoring family. They did alright, but times got hard, and Krem’s father sold himself into the servus publicus to make sure his family was taken care of.”

“Servus publicus,” Ayla mused. “Those are slaves owned by the state of Tevinter rather than privately-owned, right?” She’d read something about it during her studies back in Hald’arun.

“Yeah.”
“Gods, that’s so terrible.”

“It is,” Bull nodded, hand slipping behind his head. “I’ve been working with Leliana and her spies for months to develop a plan for breaking Marius, Krem’s dad, out of the system. Locating him was easy. I had a few doubts about the extraction plan, but I’m glad it worked. Krem’s a great guy, a big part of my life, and I can’t wait to give him this gift, reuniting him with his old man.”

Ayla sighed against him, gazing dreamily into his features. “You’re so sweet. Krem’s going to love your gift and cherish the friendship between you even more because of it. Now…” her smile stirred into something more mischievous, and she shrugged from the blanket. The woman gripped the bulge of his manhood, rubbing slowly, then went about undoing his pants. She kissed him passionately, “you just lie there and let me love you.”

“Can do.”

The hardening of his body was a near instantaneous occurrence. She had only to look at him with lust in her eyes and he’d be ready. Iron Bull grinned loosely while watching her kiss down his chest, his stomach, and lower…
Ayla was so excited, she all but pulled Bull up the stairs of the Inquisitor’s tower, heading for his quarters. The couple followed in Dorian’s wake, the Altus stealing little smiles back at her while they ascended. He’d gone to their room in the east tower half hour ago to let Ayla know he picked it up for her. When Bull answered the door by cracking it enough to show half his face, followed by playful giggles in the background, Dorian knew he’d interrupted a sex session. However, Ayla insisted on meeting him immediately in the main hall.

So, the couple got refreshed and dressed, then headed down. They crested the stairs of the Inquisitor’s and Dorian’s chambers now. Hannibal was nowhere to be seen, off handling business as usual.

“It’s in the room over here,” Dorian said, striding quickly to one of two doors leading off the primary space. He stopped and faced them. “I’m not sure how you want to do this.”

“Um…” Ayla’s mind worked quickly. She beamed a smile at Bull. “You look that way”—she pointed at the run of lavishly-draped stained glass windows—“and I’ll slip inside while holding your hand.”


Ayla turned to Dorian, smile widening. She flashed another look to her husband, whose eye aimed in the opposite direction. “No peeking.”

“I won’t, Naaremma-Kadan.”

Bull waited silently, handsome face draped in a lazy smile. He clearly heard Ayla’s gasp and squeal. She and the mage held a low, energized exchange while the Qunari listened.

“Ohmygods, it’s perfect! I can’t believe how well it turned out!” Another squeal of delight, Bull’s arm tugging when she bounced up and down in place.

“I know, right! He’s going to love it.”

“I think so too! I can’t wait!” All went silent, then, “Are you still looking away, love?”

“Yes,” Bull replied, smiling. He found that all their excitement had riled his curiosity further, and he was quite looking forward to Winter Solstice Day.

Quickly, Dorian and Ayla slipped from the room, and he closed the door.

“Is it okay to look now?”

“Yes,” Ayla said.

Bull spun and cast his loving eye down at her. “Sounds like everything turned out as you wanted.”

“Oh, yes, it sure did.” Crystal-blue eyes gleamed.

“Good to hear. Now, I need to go pick up your gift. I’m sure it’s ready. I’ll be back shortly. You two gonna be up here?”

“Actually,” Ayla’s gaze swept to the Altus, “I need to get new books. Would you mind taking me to the library?”

“Of course, love.” Dorian gripped her other hand.

“Okay, then.” Bull nodded, kissed his wife, then left the tower apartment.

(*)

Evening at the Herald’s Rest served as one of high spirits and good cheer, despite the troubles plaguing Thedas. Sophitia, Vek, Ozra, and Magnus met up a short while ago, deciding to give the tavern a look. They took up the booth right beside the one occupied by Cole, Sera, Blackwall, and Varric, who were engaged in Wicked Grace. Joswen and his people had gotten to meet most of the Inner Circle earlier that day.

Sophitia slipped from the booth and went to the bar. Her head jerked, tossing blond waves aside and down her back. The warrior woman was glad to have time to just settle down for a while. It seemed like all they did was fight and work. Sophi didn’t expect that they’d have a full break while in Skyhold; she’d feel strange if they did. Truthfully, she liked the job. It kept her mind busy and body moving. It reminded her that she was alive.

“Bartender,” her voice heightened over Maryden’s lute and the constant churn of conversation and laughter.

Cabot spun and looked down the bar at her. “Aye? What’ll it be?”

“A cup of the strongest brew you have.”
The dwarf smiled and nodded. A moment later, he set a mug in front of her.

Sophitia paid him, then drank. Her usually serious features harbored a smirk. “You call this strong?”

He shrugged. “Strongest stuff in this place.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Cabot went about serving patrons. Sophitia lowered to a stool and gulped more from her cup. She figured she’d make her home at the bar for a little while, since it would take a few servings of the ale to give her a proper buzz.

Her gaze flicked to a rolled scroll, caught from the corner of her eye as it was pushed slowly her way over the old wood countertop. Sophi set her cup down and looked from the scroll to the one who guided it, a man with dirty-blond hair combed back from his face. A heavy five-o’clock shadow darkened his cheeks and chin. He wore a plaid top, leather vest, plain pants, and boots, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Sophi didn’t think he was a bad-looking guy, but she wasn’t in the mood to be hit on.

The man noticed the way her features tightened, an indication of being irritated, yet he wasn’t fazed. He tapped the scroll and nodded.

Sophitia lifted a brow. This was different…and interesting. To humor him, she smiled vaguely, took up the scroll, and opened it. Very neat handwriting floated across the top of the paper:

That’s not the strongest stuff in this place.

The woman’s eyes found his again. She chuckled, shaking her head, knocking back the rest of her drink. “Seriously? That’s your pick-up line? Though, I’ll hand it to you, writing it out like that. Made it so much more amusing. You’ve definitely upped your flirting game.”

The man sighed and quickly shook a hand at her. She watched while he removed the flask from his belt, offering it.

Sophi stared disbelievingly at him. “You really expect me to drink that? For all I know, you’re some kind of pervert who spikes women’s drinks and drags them back to your place to have your way.” Her lips mashed into a very thin frown. “No thanks, buddy.”

The man sighed even deeper, eyes rolling in their sockets. He shook his head, then popped the cap on the flask and took a swig. He pulled the scroll over in front of him, produced a finely-sharpened stick of charcoal, and began writing beneath the first line of text. All the while, Sophitia examined him, growing more and more curious what he was up to, his left hand working the writing tool carefully. He slid the scroll to her.

Not drugged. Would I drink it if it were?

When Sophi looked at him again, she found that he once more offered the flask. Her eyes narrowed, then rounded out in realization.

“Are you mute?”

The man hesitated, then nodded.

“I’m sorry if I’ve offended you. I didn’t realize…”

He almost smiled, holding it back, while shaking his hand at her, brushing it off. He grabbed her cup and poured some of the stuff from his flask into it. Sophitia’s shoulders rose and shrank, a sigh of release. She conjured a smile.

“Fine. Thanks,” she said, then tossed back all the liquid. An instant later, her eyes watered and widened, and she coughed. “Andraste’s Tits, that’s rough! Good…”

The man’s eyes smiled more than the rest of his face. He gave her a slow nod and look that said, Told you so.

“More, please?” She asked, holding the cup out to him. This time she sipped rather than downing it at once, coughing. The stuff tasted like ass but was damned potent. “I’m Sophitia. What’s your name?”

The man took his scroll and wrote on it, pushing it her way.

Sophitia’s brow crept up when she read, and she chuckled. “That’s an unusual name. It’s nice to meet you, Grim.”

She held her hand out and he grasped it, giving a shake. Something occurred to her, and she leaned forward, elbows to the bar.

“Your name sounds familiar. You’re part of Iron Bull’s group, aren’t you?” Magnus was the big Bull’s Chargers fan, and he’d spoken of them a few times before they ever met the Qunari.

Grim nodded, and at the same time the door pushed in across the room, announcing the arrival of the rest of the Chargers. They hurried through the crowd, Krem carrying something wrapped in a plain burlap cloth and rope. Something sizeable. Grim’s eyes followed them to the usual place
around the hearth, some of the patrons in that area scattering, overwhelmed by the loud, rowdy, laughing bunch. Krem set the item down in the corner, out of sight for the moment.

“Be careful with it, man!” bellowed Rocky. “Work of art, that thing is.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Krem grinned at him. “It was a good idea getting it. Chief’s gonna love it. Hey, Stitches? Where’s the pastry?”

“I’m on it. Cabot’s holding it in a box behind the bar.” They watched their squad’s surgeon head for the bartender.

Grim looked to Sophitia, standing from his stool. He grabbed his scroll, giving a quick nod to the Chargers.

The woman chuckled. “You…want me to meet them?”

A nod.

“Alright.”

Sophi followed him over. The others had sized her up long before she reached their cluster of tables. Skinner grinned between the woman and her “mute” teammate. “Looks like Grim’s gotta lady-friend. That’s rare.”

“Oh…um…we just met, and I am not his lady-friend. Only a friend—Sophitia,” she replied, her voice harder than she intended.

“Yeah, you’re one of the new folks that came back with the Chief, part of Elemir’s group, eh?” Krem asked.

“Yes. I suppose you could say I’m like a sister to him and Ayla. The rest of us are over there, well, save for Joswen.” Sophi pointed across the room, turning over her shoulder to see them observing everything. She waved them over, introducing them when they reached the Chargers’ corner. “This is Magnus, Vek, and Ozra.”

Stitches returned with a medium-sized box, setting it to the table, and each of the Chargers introduced themselves. Krem’s rich brown vision swerved to Ozra. “You’re certainly the smallest Qunari I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, I am only half.”

The Lieutenant nodded. “Makes sense. Grim, you go tell the Chief we needed him here?”

Grim gave a nod, then took out his scroll, sat, and wrote. He handed it to Krem.

Went up twenty minutes ago. They were…busy. He said they’d be down within the hour.

Krem’s features brightened and he laughed. “Busy, eh? Like rabbits, the two of them.”

Sophia, Magnus, Vek, and Ozra knew he spoke of Iron Bull and Ayla’s sexual activity. Vek cleared his throat, tried to wipe the images from his mind, and settled into a seat. Sophitia dropped next to Grim and thumped her mug on the table a few times. He obliged with a smile so faint it was nearly transparent, pouring more of the Charger’s special brew for her.

Both groups meshed rather well, having more in common than they thought. They continued to swap stories, jokes, good-natured banter, and such until Iron Bull and Ayla finally arrived. The huge Qunari and his wife took the wide, padded bench to one side of the hearth. He grinned around at everyone.

“Good to see you’re all getting acquainted. I’m sure we’ll be working closely together from here until the end of this whole thing,” Bull said. “Now, why in the hell did you call me and the missus down here, first night back and all?”

Krem’s grin turned to Stitches and he nodded. The medic made quick work of lighting a single candle on the large cinnamon roll. Krem picked up the dish, holding it towards Bull.

All at once, the Charger’s yelled, “Happy Birthday, Chief!”

Iron Bull’s great form shook with chuckles. “Ah. I should’ve known you ragamuffins wouldn’t let me forget what an old man I’m turning into. Besides, it passed six days back.”

“Oh, Chief. Thirty-one is young still,” said Krem.

“Why didn’t you tell us it was your birthday, big guy?” Magnus smiled broadly at him across a table.

“Because it’s not really my birthday,” Bull started. “We don’t have birthdays in the Qun, which means we certainly don’t celebrate them. I know the year I was born, but not the exact day. It’s this way for everyone, and it makes sense, considering how children are raised to never know who their birth parents are. The Tamassrans do keep track of every birth, each of which is documented within their Hall of Records. So, if someone really wanted to know exactly when they were born into the Qun, they could attempt to break into the Hall and risk grave disciplinary actions.” He shrugged, smiling a bit. “Never interested me enough to try. I have a roundabout date. The Chargers chose ten days before Winter Solstice as my birthday because it was the day I
Everyone observed Bull in silence, listening raptly. Ayla already knew the story. She’d asked him about his “birthday” not long after they met, revealing that hers was in the first month of Spring, third day. She squeezed his large, warm hand, the palm calloused in places from years of weapon-wielding. Crystal-blue eyes admired the profile of her beautiful husband, face nuzzling his arm. He asked her not to mention his birthday while they were on their way back to Skyhold, not wanting to make a fuss over it.

Bull smiled at her, kissing her brow, then he stood. “All you guys make me a better person. You’re…my boys.”

“Aah, Chief!” Krem wailed and set the cinnamon roll down, going in for an embrace. The rest of the Chargers huddled in to group-hug the massive man.

Afterwards, Bull sat again, took the celebratory pastry, and blew out the candle. He proceeded to share the large, icing-drizzled thing with his wife.

“There is one more thing,” Krem said and nodded to Skinner. The elf shifted to the corner where the wrapped item sat. She might’ve been slender of frame, but she showed little strain when lifting it.

Iron Bull released Ayla’s hand to take the package from Skinner. His eye slid to each of the Chargers, hooded in curiosity, though he could tell what it was before even unwrapping it. “Hm.” A smile formed slowly.

Everyone in the Charger’s corner went silent while they watched Bull remove the rope ties, pulling the burlap cloth loose. Ayla touched his arm on a bare spot so she could see the unveiling too—an axe of Dwarven design, exceptionally crafted to add weight and with a longer haft. It was double-sided, the butt of it studded with spikes. A cross-hatched pattern lined the perimeter of the great blade. Iron Bull’s mouth hung open slightly as he appreciatively studied the weapon, turning it over slowly, already imagining swinging it in the training yard.

His eye fixed closer on the blade and he grinned. A silhouette that looked very much like his head, horns jutting and prominent, had been burned into the metal. “Wow, guys. It’s…it’s…beautiful. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Dalish said. “You’re the best.”

Iron Bull smiled softly. “Let’s get some drinks poured and this party started, hm?”

Krem and Grim began filling cups with the Charger’s brew, and Ayla ordered plum wine. She’d have two drinks before the night was done.

Across the room, Sera, Varric, Blackwall, and Cole had paused their game to witness the birthday cheer.

The dwarf looked to Sera, smiling. “You and Tiny are pretty close. Did you know about his birthday?”

Surreptitious eyes slid his direction, and Sera shrugged casually. “Nah. Never thought about it really. Iron Balls is my friend and that’s what matters, not some day to celebrate popping from your mum’s happy place.”

Varric chuckled.

Cole’s head tilted, pale eyes on the elf. “Happy place. You mean to say vag—”

“Blaaah. Stop, Creepy,” Sera cut him short, eyes rolling. “S’your deal, innit?”

Cole didn’t pursue the conversation. He knew Sera still found his presence uneasy, though he’d admit she had grown less cold the past few weeks, since he’d become predominantly human. He smiled a little and began shuffling the deck.

To his right, Blackwall sat in brooding silence. He’d been that way since they met up to play. Distracted and edgy. Usually, he’d be the first to laugh at the banter between Sera and Cole, yet he’d said nothing much.

Varric, who sat beside him, observed him a moment. “Hey, Hero. You alright?”

“Huh? Oh…yeah. I’m fine,” the Grey Warden answered, though his expression was one of a man who shouldered many worries. He sighed and lifted a fake smile. “I think I’m going to head off for the night. Excuse me, Cole.”

The former spirit scooted from the booth to let him out, then sat again.

Blackwall nodded. “You all enjoy the rest of your evening.” He slipped across the room for the door, brushing by Morrigan, who’d just entered. Her eyes narrowed and she headed for the Charger’s corner.

“What’s with him, ye think?” Sera asked, large eyes on Varric.

“Can’t say, but he’s been acting a little off the past week.”
“Hm,” she mused, then shrugged. Her freckled countenance hardened and she smirked at Cole. “C’mon, already. You’ve shuffled the deck to hell and back. Deal.  Deee-aaall.”

Meanwhile, the Witch of the Wilds made her way closer and closer to her destination, golden eyes unwavering upon Magnus’s back. He was engaged in conversation with others in the group. Someone said something funny and the whole corner exploded in laughter. Magnus noticed Iron Bull’s eye had jerked to something behind him, and he turned to see what.

The battlemage’s smile immediately dissipated and his next breath momentarily snagged in his throat. He knew she was there in the fortress, and it was only a matter of time before the confrontation happened. “Bright-Eyes…”

She smacked him. Hard. “Don’t ever call me that again.”

Quietude seized the corner, all eyes and ears taking in the scene.

“Hello to you too, Morrigan,” Magnus said, rubbing his stinging cheek. He grinned down at her. “Not the greeting I was expecting, but I guess I deserved it.”

“Damn right, you did. I waited for you on that terrace, sitting at a romantic dinner, and you… you…”

“Even if you don’t believe it, I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“No, I don’t.” Morrigan huffed and turned to leave, then spun quickly, golden eyes fashioned into dire slits. “And if you’re looking for a bed to invade during your stay in Skyhold, just know it won’t be mine.” She stormed off, nose lifted, face strict.

Magnus stared after her. He faced the others, brown gaze taking in the curious expressions.

“That didn’t go so well, old man,” said Vek. “What did you do to her?”

“He ditched out on her,” Bull concluded. “She was all dolled up, ready for a hot date, and he didn’t show. That about right?”

Magnus sighed. “Yes. I met Morrigan in my early twenties, when I was studying in Minrathous. We got close. I had to leave suddenly. Her life was in danger, and hanging around put her at risk, but I couldn’t tell her that. Not when the threat… was me.”

“What?” Sophitia sipped her drink.

“Oh, Maggy.” Ayla broke her silence. She brimmed with sympathy for him. “That’s terrible. Though, Morrigan is a powerful mage. I’d think she’d be able to protect herself from your non-magical clone. You should’ve gone to her, told her what happened.”

“You’re right. But my stupid ass didn’t think to do that until it was far too late.”

The Oona’s tender smile came easily. “I wouldn’t say ‘stupid’ so much as I would ‘worried’. You only wanted to protect her, and that’s all you could think about.”

Magnus nodded, smiling. “You’re wise to be the youngest of us.”

“Where is this clone now?” Sophitia asked.

Magnus shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably still lingering in Tevinter somewhere. I haven’t openly been in that area for over twenty years, and the few times that I have gone, I stayed well-hidden, watching my steps. With some luck, maybe he got into an altercation that ended him. I suppose I could try to find him if I really wanted, but I lost interest once I went east.”

The warrior woman regarded him silently for a moment, then said, “Does he have a name?”

“Not at the time. Though, Morrigan is a powerful mage. I’d think she’d be able to protect herself from your non-magical clone. You should’ve gone to her, told her what happened.”

“Yeah, little bird, you’re right. But my stupid ass didn’t think to do that until it was far too late.”

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“I try.” Ayla batted her eyes.

“Where is this clone now?” Sophitia asked.

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The warrior woman regarded him silently for a moment, then said, “Does he have a name?”

“Not at the time. Though, if he’s still alive, I’m sure he’s made one up by now.”

“Might be something to consider down the line, trying to find him.” Ozra’s teal vision lingered on Magnus.

“Yeah, it might.” The battlemage sighed. “Anyway, enough of that. I’ll go talk to Morrigan once she’s cooled off. Wouldn’t want to have the hair singed from my scalp by a fire spell.”

Merriment resumed in the Chargers’ corner. Drinks were poured, jokes were shared, and laughter circulated.
Josephine and Elemir stopped outside the door to her quarters in the north tower. The
ambassador’s warm smile brightened the corridor’s lantern-lit dimness.

“I can’t believe we spent most the night playing Wicked Grace and chess, talking.”

“Don’t forget the wine. I’m definitely feeling it now.” Elemir grinned at her.

Josephine spilled low laughter. “Ah, yes, and drinking. It was…the most fun I’ve had in a while.
Thank you.”

“I enjoyed it too.”

The ranger stared at her. From the first moment they met, he’d felt something special in her. He
liked that Josephine didn’t allow her noble upbringing to overpower her personality. She’d
obviously come from money, but was refreshingly…normal. The lovely woman held little
modesty when talking about things, and she knew how to laugh and have a good time. His moss-
green eyes didn’t falter from hers as she moved in closer. This was the perfect opportunity to end
the night with a kiss, however, Elemir didn’t think he was ready for that step, regardless of what
his body said. He wanted Josephine, but he was supposed to be angry that he’d never have Ayla,
right? It never would’ve happened the way he wanted, and there was the thinnest fraction of a hair
keeping him tethered to that lost hope. He had only to sever it, and he would, just not tonight.

Instead of going for the kiss, the ranger smiled politely and said, “Well, have a good night,
Josephine. I’ll see you tomorrow,” then walked off.

The ambassador exhaled slow and deep. Sexual excitement had her stomach all jumpy. She could
still detect his scent—pine woods and wind. She was sure the smell hovered in his longish auburn
hair, through which she longed to run her hands. Grinning, she unlocked her door and entered the
room.
Feeling rejuvenated, content, and overall high on life, Iron Bull woke up early the following morning. Like always, since the night Ayla began sleeping beside him, he spent several minutes simply watching her, ebony features further softened by slumber, hair a disarray of contrasting white around her. The man rested a large hand over her abdomen, still flat and no sign of a bump. Not yet. Though, she would realize her condition long before it really began to show. Bull drew in a breath and slowly released it. He knew it would be an interesting talk when it came.

Smiling lips branded her brow with a kiss, then he slipped from bed, pulled on his briefs, and started breakfast. A short while later, Bull watched her across the table, her small foot atop his, rubbing. Ayla happily munched away, virtually scarfing the meal down. Almost no chitchat passed between them simply because the woman didn’t leave any room for it, constantly shoveling in griddle cakes, hashed potatoes, bacon, and eggs. Ayla set her utensils down when finished, gulping her apple cider. She hiccupped a cute, little burp.

“Hungry?” Bull projected an amused smile at her, one dark brow lifted.

“Starving! That was so good.” She blotted her lips with a napkin.

Surely, it was the hormonal changes that heightened her appetite, her body preparing itself to nurture another life. The Qunari noticed her increase of food intake during the journey back from the east. “Are you…feeling okay?”

“Yes, of course, love.” Ayla smiled brightly. “It’s cold out, and I do tend to eat more during the winter months. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Just making sure you’re good, Naaremma.” He sipped his coffee, then stood and began clearing dishes. “So, what did you want to do today?”

“Honestly, I think I’ll just hang around the room mostly, read a little, maybe study tangerlingua-to-common later, if you’re up to it.” The Oona carefully stood from the table, feeling her way to the bed, her slender frame draped in one of her husband’s shirts. She shrugged. “The Inquisitor postponed practices with Morrigan, Dorian, and Solas until after Winter Solstice Day, so there isn’t much for me to do.”

“Alright. We can hang here then.”

“Bull, you don’t have to do that. I’m sure you want to go to the training yard and play with your new ax.”

“Well, I had planned to…”

“Then go!” She chuckled. “I’ll be here when you get back. Can we go to the Herald’s Rest tonight? I think I feel like rubbing a victory in Varric’s face.”

Iron Bull laughed over the sound of water running, collecting in a bucket, which he’d pour into the wash basin by the bathing area to do the dishes. Most of the cheer seeped from his voice when he spoke next, “Though, you probably shouldn’t drink anything while we’re there.”

“Why?” She sprawled on her stomach, setting her face in her hands. Mysterious eyes fixed in his direction.

“Well…because…you’re such a lightweight anyway, and you get rather loopy when you drink…” Bull grimaced and mentally kicked himself for that answer. Maybe he shouldn’t have said anything.

Ayla watched him curiously. “So…you don’t want me to drink because it essentially does what alcohol is supposed to do—loosens a person up? Love, what are you talking about?”

He sighed and faced her. “It’s nothing really. I just, um, thought I would refrain from drinking for a while, you know, cleanse my system out. I figured we could do it together. It’s a good way to refresh and keep energized. What d’ya say? No drinking for a while?”

“Oookay…” Ayla replied. “Sounds good. I could use the energy. This time of year always makes me feel lazy, and I have been more tired than usual lately.” She stretched and yawned to accentuate the point.

Iron Bull nodded and chuckled. “Alright then. We are booze-free for the time being. Anybody ask, we’re on a cleanse.”

Laughter trilled from across the room. “A cleanse. That makes us sound so old, like we’re taking prunes or something.”

“Yeah, I suppose it does, Naaremma-Kadan.”

At the basin, Bull smiled a bit while he washed dishes. Afterwards, he made love to his wife, took a bath, and headed to the training yard with his new weapon. The former Ben-Hassrath was glad he’d scraped up some kind of explanation and even happier that she bought into it. Otherwise, he would have to tell her about the pregnancy, since she didn’t need to be drinking now.
Being openly out in the Emerald Graves stirred a much-needed exuberance within Elgar’nan. As bad as was, he found great joy in the forest, the trees, smells, and sounds. It all mirrored the definition of true freedom, transporting his mind back to the time when he ruled supreme over the Elhven kingdom. The forest he walked through had been part of it, as had most of what was now called Ferelden, Orlais, Nevarra, and the Free Marches. But the elves had fallen and lost everything to Tevinter.

His face solidified in frustration and anger to think over it again. He would make Fen’Harel suffer for his grave mistake, created from some annoying need to defy everything laid out before him for the taking. The self-righteous fool.

Elgar’nan yanked the strap of his traveling bag to readjust it, continuing northeast along no discernible path. He’d left Villa Maurel at first light. It was a couple of miles behind him now.

“Where are you going?”

The tall, regal elf stopped and turned gradually, his long, single braid shifting with the movement. “Skyhold. It’s amazingly easy to siphon information from your bedmate. Light flirting goes a long way.”

Ares crossed arms over his chest, eyeing the man. “I wasn’t trying to hide Fen’Harel’s location from you.”

“Is that so?” the elf snapped, peering down his nose in the usual high-and-mighty manner. “I figured you’d discover his primary hangout sooner or later. I just didn’t see the point of telling you, since you’re not ready to face him.”

Elgar’nan sneered and spun, resuming his pace.

Ares fell in beside him. “Be reasonable. What are you going to do when you reach the gates of the fortress? Demand they permit you admittance so you can just stroll right in?”

“Why not? From what Ralden told me during our little chats in your absence, it would be fairly easy to get inside if I arrived under the premise of offering a service or trade, something that could be useful to this Inquisition.”

“Hm. The war god clicked his tongue to his teeth. “Okay, yeah, I can see that. And afterwards? You don’t exactly blend into a crowd, guy. For one, you’re the biggest elf in the world, I’m sure of it. And two, you don’t carry yourself like most elves of today do, you know, with that sad, defeated, broken vibe. You go waltzing up to Skyhold’s gates and you will become the talk of that place in moments. Everyone, including Fen’Harel, will know you’re there.”

“Good.” Elgar’nan continued looking ahead, stark eyes steady.

“Not good. The place will go on alert once Fen’Harel recognizes you. Then, he and his companions will engage you in a fight that you cannot win,” Ares said, his words heavy and ripe with caution. “There are at least three other mages there with power that matches yours, not to mention fighting off blades and arrows, and I won’t even get started on a certain huge Qunari that wields a big ax. You’ll have to fight them all, and you will lose.”

“If I manage to kill Fen’Harel before I fall, then I could die content, knowing I took him with me.”

“Or…you could just not die at all.”

Elgar’nan stopped suddenly and whipped around. His gaze glued to Ares. “Why do you care what happens to me? What do you want from me?”

“Honestly, I like you. I don’t usually get this involved in the affairs of mortals, but I feel it is my godly duty to do so here. You have the greatest potential—”

“Please spare me the humiliation of talking down to me like I’m one of your minions.”

Ares sighed and regathered his thoughts. The beautiful elf was such a diva, so dramatic. He adopted a comely smile, shallow dimples showing on each bearded cheek. “The fact that you think I see you as one of my…minions…is an insult to me. You carry yourself like a god, even though you don’t have that power currently. I see you as an equal.”

“Give me my orb then.”

“I will, in time. Before I do, I need you to understand what I’m trying to do here. I want to change this world to make it better for your people, and if it’s better for them, it can be better for you. They’ll have at least one of their gods back. Think about it: what if Tevinter never moved in and the elves never fell?”

Elgar’nan studied him carefully. “So, you want to change the past. You’ve mentioned that.”

The God of War slipped low, wily chuckles. “Think bigger. I don’t want to just change the past, I want to change the very nature of Thedas. I want to reshape this world.”

The elf was growing confused. His head tilted, eyes narrowing. “What exactly do you have
planned?"

“Can’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“Doing so would negate everything I’m working on. Trust me.”

“That’s asking a lot.”

Ares laughed. “Yeah. Look, come back to the compound, relax, continue honing your powers. I promise you won’t regret where this is going.”

“This? As in you and I?” Elgar’nan gave a dry chuff and roll of eyes.

“Well, I was talking about my plan, but I’m up for whatever,” he drawled sensuously, eyes raking over the elf slowly.

He couldn’t deny that he found Ares completely attractive, and in different circumstances, he would’ve already bedded him. However, Elgar’nan was a creature of deception, and he could clearly sense that the war god had ulterior motives. Still, a lot of what he said was logical, rousing. He about-faced and started back towards the villa.

“Good!” Ares bellowed and took the fallen elf-king’s hand.

Elgar’nan smirked. “What are you doing?”

“Um, I’m so not walking back,” Ares said, his expression and tone saying that he looked down on the notion of using such time-consuming means of transportation.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head as Ares vanished them from sight.

(*)

Solas and Morrigan stood over the main table in her atrium. Hannibal had called a quick, late-afternoon meeting in the war room, summoning the two of them, Ayla, and Bull, getting the sorceress up to speed on the plan to bring Xena over. Solas required a channeling item, and it made sense to approach Morrigan about it since her expertise lie in such things.

“I figured you would have something like what you gave to Ayla while she was learning to control her power early on,” he said, hands clasped at the small of his back. “I could come up with something, but it would take more time.”

“So, you’ve come to me for help,” the witch mused, her voice throaty and mocking, matching the glint in her golden eyes. “Hm. This is truly historic, considering I know you’re not very fond of me.”

Solas nodded. “No, I’m not, however, this is a time where it would behoove us both to get along. We may not be friends, but we both want to…” he considered his words, “…raise the possibility of success for ridding our world of a certain scourge.”

“That we do,” Morrigan nodded. She eyed the magical stones, amulets, and vials on the table. “I’ll have what you require by tomorrow morning. It will need to be crafted specifically to handle such a massive load of power.”

“Very well. Once I have it, we’ll meet with the Inquisitor, Iron Bull, and Ayla in the war room to discuss the next move. Thank you.”

Solas nodded. “No, I’m not, however, this is a time where it would behoove us both to get along. We may not be friends, but we both want to…” he considered his words, “…raise the possibility of success for ridding our world of a certain scourge.”

She dropped a short, dry laugh. “Now, you want to explain? It’s been over twenty years, Magnus.”

“I know…and you haven’t changed a bit,” the battlemage replied, drawing on a roguish smile. “You look just the same.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised about that, knowing what I am. You, however, have gotten a hint of gray, peppering through your beard, at your temples. I might say it made you look quite distinguished and handsome, if I didn’t loathe your very person.”

“Oh, Morrigan, you don’t hate me.” Magnus moved closer. He didn’t push his limits, though, giving her space. “I can feel that much.”

“Can you now?” She dropped a short, dry laugh. “Look, I have things to tend to. We might’ve been more once, but the time has moved on, like I have…like you should.”

“Huh had to leave,” he said desperately, sighing. “I made a mistake and decided to run from it, rather than tell you, and I’ve always regretted it, Morrigan. Will you at least listen?”
The sorceress decided there was no harm in that. She swept by him. “Follow me, and close the
door behind you.” She led him to the gazebo a short distance away, where they sat and Magmas explained the whole business of blood magic and a darkly-inclined doppelganger.

(*)

That night, after a light dinner and some reading on variations of enchanted channeling artifacts, Solas slipped into bed with the full intention of heading into the Fade. He shut his eyes and tuned out everything but the subtle snap of embers in the hearth. It wasn’t long before his breathing evened out and his mind drifted into lucid slumber.

(*)

From the murkiness and shadows rose the familiar, decrepit version of Skyhold’s garden. Solas slowly turned, examining it. That’s when something pink and frilly caught his eye, over by the gazebo. A blond woman and the warrior princess stood in its shadow. They started for him.

Solas recognized the blond, a big smile on her face, each cheek pocketed by a deep dimple. Her minimal attire consisted of a flowing, sheer robe through which the elf saw her provocative panties and bra set. Of course, he knew who she was from the memories Ares gave him, a gift that only he and the God of War knew about.

“Solas, this is Aphrodite,” Xena said.

Periwinkle eyes drew to her, and he nodded. “A pleasure.”

“So, you’re the one helping on the other side. Nice.” She grinned again. “What’s with the ears? You’re so cute! Huggles!”

Before he could stop her, Solas found himself mashed into ample boobies. “Mm. You…smell very good.”

“I know, right?” The reason he could pick up Aphrodite’s immaculate scent was because she physically entered the Fade—Void on her end—to meet him. She’d chosen this method rather than astral projection since it was easier, though she really hated going into the realm either way.

The elf cleared his throat, pulled away, and collected himself. “All of my people have ears like this.”

Xena chuckled. “Now that introductions are out of the way,” she appeared a little less humored, “Aphrodite insisted on meeting you, and she would be part of the group I’m bringing with me if she weren’t needed in our world.”

“Yeah,” ‘Dite said. “I totally wouldn’t mind tagging along, but I don’t think it would be a good thing if both Air and I left.”

“Air?” Solas lifted a brow.

“Ares. I call him Air most of the time.”

“I see.”

“Could be catastrophic or something if I left our world too. I mean, it’s bad enough I have to keep switching back and forth between being a goddess of love and one of war. A total bummer. But, I know you guys’ll fix things.” She beamed a smile. “Xena’s good at that.”

The mage offered a small smile in return. “We’ll certainly do everything we can.”

“Are you almost ready on your end?” Xena asked.

“Yes. I’ll have a channeling item by tomorrow. There will be a meeting shortly after, I’m sure, so we can go over the specifics of the plan again. We should be ready to execute it within the next few days, once I do a few tests with Ayla, make sure she can sync with the item and I can control her power.”

Xena nodded, and silence fell between the three of them. The warrior princess spoke up, “Looks like it’s finally happening, huh?”

“I’m anxious to commence,” Solas said. “Ares needs to be stopped. In less than two months, he’s built his ranks into the thousands and has temples in his name. More and more people are following him.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll stop him.”

(*)

Three days passed without incident, bringing around Winter Solstice Day. Ayla awakened before her husband, a rare occasion, and she was extremely excited. She’d barely gotten any sleep last night. The woman coaxed her wild poof of hair back over her shoulder while she leaned in close to Iron Bull, straddling him.

“Get up! Get up, get up, get up! It’s time!”

The Qunari warrior groaned and shifted under her, but didn’t open his eye. “Ayla, the sun’s barely
up."

“What? I waited until it was in the sky, didn’t I? Come on, Bull!” She grinned and nipped his bearded chin. “Let’s open our presents!” The woman’s eyes jerked to the corner near her mirror where both gifts sat. Dorian suggested having the portrait put in a box to obscure its shape and keep Bull guessing at what it was.

The man slowly opened his eye, one arm moving from behind his head to link around her. They kissed. “Okay, already. Presents it is.”

Ayla squeaked and rolled off, maintaining skin connect so she could see. Bull stretched, sat up, and swung his legs over the side. She waited for him to grab the presents and return to the bed. He smiled lovingly at her. “You wanna open yours first, or should I?”

“I’ll go first,” she said.

Bull placed the wrapped bundle of his gift in her lap, hand brushing her thigh. Smiling broadly, Ayla untied the bow, removed the ribbon, and peeled back the thick paper covering. She held up the neatly folded item. It was a shawl of the highest quality satin and velvet, its hue a royal, lush emerald green, much like the dress Bull bought for her when she first arrived in Skyhold.

“It’s beautiful, my love! Perfect.” Ayla clutched it to her chest, then scrambled in his lap to pepper him with kisses.

“I’m glad you like it. I had it specially made. See there, inside the lining at the top? There’s a little slit with a hood tucked into it. Keep you extra warm.”

“I love it.”

“I love you.” He rubbed his nose to hers, then grinned. “My turn. I’ve been itching to see what you got for me.”

“Yes, go ahead and open it!” Ayla removed herself from his lap, and bounced on the mattress, energized.

Iron Bull positioned the box between them, the thing two feet square. Dorian had gone all out with the wrap job, so much so that Bull almost didn’t want to remove the paper. He took a breath and tore the wrapping off, then flipped up the lid. Cotton and cloth had been stuffed inside to further protect the gift, which he carefully gripped and eased from the box.

“Oh, Naaremma…”

He set the portrait on his thighs, holding the edges of the frame. His lone eye roamed over the image—the two of them sitting on their padded bench in the Herald’s Rest, the stone wall serving as a backdrop. Ayla was looking forward, directly at the artist, her expression demure, happy, and lovely. The artist had Iron Bull’s arm around her, capturing her to his side, while the Qunari’s eye rested tenderly upon her, his face displaying ultimate adoration, as if he looked upon the greatest treasure. The colors of their clothing, skin, eyes, and everything seemed so life-like. The artist had even perfectly depicted the play of ambient hearth light, contrasting masterfully with the shadows, and he’d done it all without obscuring the couple’s features.

“You like it?”

“Ayla, it’s the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“Really?” She grinned.

“Yes.” He appeared to be thinking about something. “That night in the pub, I saw a man watching us from a table. He had blond hair. I thought he was some kind of weirdo, but he was the one who did this, wasn’t he? He has a tent down in the market.”

“Uh-huh. Lucien Po.” Ayla nodded. “It turned out just as I wanted.”

“It is very remarkable, the way he was able to capture us so well.”

“I know;” she said softly, pulling close to him, kissing his arm. “Even inside the portrait, this work of art, I can see how much you love me.”

“Hm.” Bull’s eye met hers, searching the enigmatic blue depths. He kissed her, then smiled and stood. “I have the perfect place for it. One second.”

He moved from the bed, and she heard small shuffles and sounds while he did something. When he returned, Ayla anxiously made contact. A moment later, she saw their portrait centered on the mantle. Nothing had been on the ledge before, and now it had a wonderful decoration.

“It’s a great addition to our room. I think it completes the décor,” she mused.

Bull settled back on the mattress, hand behind his head. “Oh, really? I wasn’t aware this place had a décor.”

“Well, it didn’t really, until I came along and gave it some flare.” Ayla giggled.

“Yes, you certainly did, Naaremma. You were just what the room needed, what I needed.”
“Oh, my love.” She nestled into his side, arm draped across his stomach, one leg curling over his. They lay there a moment, immersed in each other’s warmth and tenderness. Ayla lifted her head and smiled at him. “I suppose you should get a little more sleep, since you’re going to be busy playing Winter’s Saint for the children later.”

Bull issued a sound that was part groan, part chuckle. “Yeah.”
In Loving Memory of Paeloria Aclassi

The Winter Solstice Day party turned out to be much laxer than the one on All Hallows Eve, but still more formal. That night, most of Skyhold’s occupants crammed in and around the main hall, between there and the adjacent gardens that had been spotted with portable pit fires to keep people warm while they enjoyed the festivities.

Ayla and Iron Bull entered the great foyer of the hall, and she grinned at the elaborate decorations. Across the horde of attendees, many of which were children, the Inquisitor’s throne area was transformed into a fantastical scene with a backdrop of snowflakes. A multi-tiered giving table rose behind the throne, laden with various wrapped gifts for the children.

“Wow! Josephine really did a great job putting this together,” Ayla exclaimed.

“Yep. She always does,” Bull said, then grunted lowly and tugged at the long, fake white beard he was forced to wear with his jolly red costume. Of course, it had been tailored to fit him, and he was no overweight, potbellied old man, so he didn’t exactly fit the description of the Winter’s Saint. The suit only worked to emphasize his imposing physique, a wide black belt encompassing his waist.

Ayla giggled. “Oh, love, stop messing with it. It looks fine.”

“Meh. Damn thing itches, though.”

“I still think you should’ve worn the hat too, to complete the look.”

Iron Bull dropped a short laugh. “Nope, it was either one or the other, and that hat looked absolutely stupid, flopping to one side. I think the kids will be fine with it.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” She gripped and massaged at his bicep beneath the long-sleeved shirt.

Iron Bull took a breath and they headed further inside. The moment the children saw him coming, the place filled with anxious, excited laughter and cheers, and they followed him and Ayla all the way to the throne that had been turned into Winter Saint’s chair. Sera leaned against it, waiting. The elf wore an outfit to match Bull’s, only it was a dress with a short skirt. She also wore a floppy red hat and green and white striped leggings. Her little shoes curled up at the toes. She wrinkled her nose at Bull, grinning.

“Ye’re lucky this is for the little ones, or I’d not’ve agreed to help. Seriously.”


“Bah.” Sera stuck her tongue out at him, raspberrying it. She turned to the mass of children. “Okay, then. Settle down and form a line starting here.” She tapped her foot a few times at the single step leading up to the throne’s perch. “No pushing! You’ll all get yer turn to visit Winter’s Saint.”

Bull sat in the throne, and Ayla stood beside him holding his hand.

“Alright, first up.” Sera said.

The little girl that approached Bull was the same one he’d given the ‘special’ piece of candy to the day the party returned from switching him and Ayla back into their bodies. Bull gave his best merry chuckle and pulled her onto his lap.

“So…how’s it goin’, kid? I hope you’ve been a good girl.”

“I have,” she said, grinning, eyes studying him closely. “You look a lot like Iron Bull, Winter’s Saint. I mean, you even have an eye missing like him too.”

“Oh, well,” Bull spared a glance to Ayla, who had her hand on the back of his neck to see; she laughed softly. “You see, he and I are related. We’re cousins. People always tell us how similar we look to each other.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t?” He tickled her middle.

“Nope.” The child wiggled and laughed, shaking her head.

“Ah, well, that’s okay. You can still have a gift.”

On cue, Sera plucked up a wrapped present from the giving table and handed it to the child, lifting a cheeky smile. “Here ya go. Happy Winter Solstice and stuff.”

“Thanks, Iron B—I mean, Winter’s Saint,” she said, then lowered her voice and winked. “I won’t tell anyone it’s you.”

Bull chuckled, nodding. “Thanks.”

He set her down, and she hurried into the crowd with her present. Sera guided the next child up. The Qunari laughed and joked his way through five more children before Josephine, Hannibal,
and Dorian walked up.

"Looks like you’re a real hit with the young ones, Winter’s Saint," Josephine spoke when he got a chance between children. "They’re really enjoying the festivities, and you seem to be the highlight."

"Yeah, well…" Bull scratched at the false white beard, made all the more annoying since he had a real black one underneath, "it’s not so bad. I’m pretty good with kids."

"I can tell." The ambassador smiled softly, watching as Sera led the next one up. He was much younger than the others, perhaps not even two years old.

The elf groaned, and her features hitched in a grimace. "This one’s a bit of a stink-bomb. Sorry."

"Wha—? Ugh…" Bull sighed when she placed the boy on his knee. It was quite apparent that he’d crapped himself. "Aren’t you cute."

The child giggled, kicking his legs, instantly going to tug at the faux beard.

"Sera, gift. Now." Bull very gently pried the boy’s hands loose. He screamed at Bull and farted. Ayla and the others broke into laughter.

"He really likes you, hm?" said Dorian. "Gave you a little something extra."

Iron Bull grunted.

"You’ll have to face these kinds of things once we have some of our own, love."

He grunted again at his wife. "Sera."

Giggling, the sassy elf lifted the child, keeping him at arm’s length as she handed him to his parent along with his gift.

Hannibal chuckled. "At least you didn’t get any on you."

"Yeah. Small favors."

Ayla leaned over the arm of the dragon’s claw throne and pecked a kiss to his lips. "I’m going to go enjoy the party with Dorian while you fulfill your Winter Solstice duties."

"I should be done in another hour."

"Okay. I’ll save a dance for you."

"Lucky me." His one eye took in the love of his life as Dorian began leading her off. He quickly thought of something. "And remember, we’re on a cleanse."

"Yes, my love," Ayla called over her shoulder, disappearing into the crowd. Dorian lifted a brow at her. "A cleanse?"

"Uh-huh. Bull thought it would be beneficial if we stopped drinking for a while to cleanse our systems out. It started the day after his birthday party in the pub."

"I see," he mulled. "Interesting."

(*)

Elemir entered the hall and stood offside of the great doorway for a moment by the fireplace, his gaze idling about the room. Joswen occupied the end of a table, doing his own people-watching. He, like most higher elves, tended to stand alone in functions where most of the participants weren’t elfh; he’d mingle where he saw fit. Meanwhile, Ozra, Vek, and Sophitia sat at a table with some of the Chargers, talking amongst themselves. The ranger’s eyes settled on the one he sought. After clearing his throat, Elemir headed for Josephine. She stood by a refreshment table sipping wine.

He’d done a lot of thinking over the past few days, coming to some conclusions and realizations about himself. He was a stubborn man at times that had let one too many opportunities pass him by because he clung to ideals and hopes that weren’t feasible. Like his love for Ayla. She’d always hold a special place in his heart, but she’d never be more than his sister. It had taken a lot of excogitation to reach that understanding, and he’d finally accepted it. It was time to move forward.

"Good evening, Josephine."

The woman’s eyes widened a bit and she lowered her cup, facing him. "Elemir. I was wondering when you’d show up. You have become my primary chat-buddy, after all." She chuckled. "You look nice this evening."

"As do you, lovely as ever." He ran a hand over his hair. "Can we talk? Somewhere private?"

"Oh, of course." She finished off her drink and set the cup down. "Is my office alright?"
“Yes, that’s fine,” Elemir said, then followed her through the patrons, taking the door from the main hall to said place. He entered, going to the center of the room before turning.

Josephine shut the door. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” he replied, his accented voice pleasantly resonant. “On the contrary, I think everything is right.” He took a breath, eyes sweeping around the lamp-lit inards of her office. “I really like you, Josephine. I know that I’ve been keeping you at a distance, and I have my reasons. Simply put, I was in love with someone once, and that love was never reciprocated. It never could be. While she’s a great person that I care very much about, I don’t love her in that way anymore. I needed to tell you this so that you understand why I never kissed you in those perfect little moments where I probably should have.”

Josephine reached back and set the lock on the door. She slipped closer to him, enjoying his rugged scent. The woman stopped with a sliver of space separating them, looking up into his kind features. “I really like you too, and I understand why you kept your distance.” Her hand pressed to his chest, lips curling up sensuously. “Now is one of those perfect little moments, you know.”

Elemir’s arms linked her close, and his mouth fell upon hers, delivering a kiss that embodied the fierceness of his desire, the passion begging to be unleashed. Josephine gasped, unprepared by the feverish demands of his kiss, but fully enjoying it. She moaned against his lips, burying her hands in his hair, her body leaning into him. She pulled back, and they stared at one another in the dinness, then she anxiously undid the ties of his shirt. Elemir pulled the garment up and off, tossing it, while Josephine went for the latch of his trousers. He worked the buttons of her elegant blouse, untucking it from her skirt.

“Mm…” the woman purred, pulling him into another, potent kiss. She smiled and shrugged from the blouse, dropping it to the floor.

Elemir cupped her breasts, lowering his mouth to suckle the peak of one, then the other, Josephine wiggling and holding his head. She wanted him so bad that she was practically dripping. The lovely ambassador lowered, looking his hands in the waist of his pants as she did, easing them down enough to release his semi-hard cock. She rested on her haunches before taking him, his member in her hands, massage it, watching him. Slowly, she took him in her mouth and began to suck.

The ranger trembled, his body taunt. He stared down at her through the wild fall of his hair, each breath voluminous and resting on a soft, heated groan. She bobbed her head, grabbing his thighs to not only balance herself, but to pull him in and out of her mouth while she rocked back and forth.

“Oh, yes…” he rumbled, tossing his head back, eyes rolling shut.

Josephine was on fire. She’d dreamed of having him this way, in a sexual frenzy. She imagined it slow and gradual too, but this kind of encounter held more mystique, which she loved. Elemir tipped his head forward to look upon her once again, the woman now using her hand to stroke him. He reached for her shoulders, easing her to stand, then gathered her skirts and lifted. Josephine wrapped her legs around him, and they locked mouths again.

“The desk,” she panted.

He carried her to it and set her down. She growled ravenously and swept an arm, knocking books, scrolls, and other things aside. “Fuck me, please…”

Elemir was already reaching a hand between them. The heat of her core felt so good on the head of his cock. He rubbed it against her opening, unbelieving of how wet she was. Slowly, he eased inside, filling her with every hard inch up to his balls.

“Oh, Maker, yes!” Josephine moaned. She wasn’t worried about being heard, not with Maryden and the band filling the main hall with music. Besides, the fortress’s walls were thick. She opened her legs wide, hugging arms about his torso, grabbing his ass.

Elemir started slow and deep, but hastened quickly. A shudder of ecstasy seized him when she dug nails into his hip, raking them up his back. He braced himself, holding her at the edge of the desk so he could plow hard into her. He knew he wasn’t going to last long, not when she was so hot and wet. Josephine was also very sensitive. She hadn’t taken a partner for a while, busy as she’d been with running Skyhold’s behind-the-scenes operations. The pressure and fullness of his flesh thrusting in and out sent her reeling. She gritted her teeth, cried out, and grabbed his hair as she melted and climaxed all around him. Elemir was glad she’d reached her end. A few moments later, he stiffened and rammed himself deep, filling her with his load.

He rested his face in her bosom, both breathing heavily. “By the gods,” he said.

“Indeed,” she chuckled. “That was wonderful.”

Elemir lifted his head, peering down at her, his smile satiated. “It’s been a while for me.”

“Me as well. I suppose we both needed it.” Josephine hugged his shoulders, pulling him down for a kiss. “Let’s get a fire going. We can hide in here for a bit. I’m sure no one would miss us at the party.”

“Hm. I don’t know. You are the gracious hostess who put it all together. There are probably Orlesian nobles out there searching for you right now so they can tell you how wonderful it all
“turn out.” He laughed, easing back to fix his pants. He helped her from the desk, then went about igniting the hearth, getting a blaze going in a matter of minutes.

Josephine had removed a blanket from the closet and laid it out. He joined her, lying back with an arm behind his head. She instantly cuddled against him, face on his chest. They listened to each other’s breaths and the muffled sounds of the party.

“The woman you spoke of—it’s Ayla, isn’t it?”

There came the betraying stretch of hesitation. “Yes.”

“I’m not judging you. I just noticed how you look at her, or used to. It wasn’t with lust, but with… I don’t know…I’ve a devout longing. And there’s nothing wrong with that, seeing as she’s not really your sister. You fell in love with her over time, and it’s easy to see why. She’s extraordinary.”

“Yes, she is,” he said softly, caressing a delicate point behind her ear, nuzzling her brow, “but I see her as only my sister now. Her marriage to Iron Bull was the best thing that could’ve happened, as it helped me further expel the idea of ever having her, since it was never possible anyway.”

Josephine listened quietly, highly interested to hear him speak on such intimate, private things. This meant he trusted her, that he felt comfortable with her. “Is this…a fling for you?”

“No, it’s not, unless that’s what you wish.”

“That’s not what I wish. I want more.”

Elemir gave her a tender squeeze, chuckling. “Then, we will have more.”

(*)

Blackwall stood at the work table in the stables packing the last of a few things into his traveling bag. Party music sifted down from the main hall, and he wished he could partake in the festivities. The weight of his situation wouldn’t let him feel worthy of it, however. He finished packing, then lifted the bit of parchment before his eyes to read over the message for the umpteenth time by lamp-light.

In just under two weeks, Cyril Mornay would be executed for following the orders of a cowardly captain, and Blackwall couldn’t let that happen. Now was the time to atone for the past. He sighed, set the message to the work table, and dropped a horse shoe on it to keep it from blowing away. He slung the bag over his shoulder and went to his mount, the beautiful black horse all ready and saddled. Blackwall led the animal into the open and climbed up, beginning a slow pace.

When he reached the inner gate of the fortress, the man turned sad, intent eyes over his shoulder, admiring the place he’d called home for a short while, a place where he’d made a lot of new allies, friends. The many windows of Skyhold burned with golden luminance from fireplaces, lamps, lanterns, and candles, symbolic of the warmth and comradery Grey Warden Blackwall had grown to enjoy. While the Winter Solstice gathering pressed on and the music churned, he had to go and face his own music, a tune that was dismal, dark, and terrible.

He sighed and started his horse away from the fortress.

(*)

An hour later, Bull reentered the hall, having gone up to his and Ayla’s room to change from the red outfit and white beard into a pair of trousers, boots, and a dark blue shirt. He’d also taken a few minutes to put something in place for later, and he grinned to think of how Ayla would react to it. His eye found her sitting with Dorian, Hannibal, and the Chargers.

Ayla smiled widely when Iron Bull’s hand connected with hers. “There you are.”

“Had to go change.”

“Aw, you looked all jolly and shit with that outfit, Chief. Really had me in the spirit of the holiday,” Krem teased.

“Since you’re fond of the suit, you can play Winter’s Saint next time.”

“Nah. Wouldn’t work so much. I’m not big enough and don’t have the pillowy man-bosoms for it.”

Everyone around the table laughed.

Bull produced a smirk. “Right. You know, even with all the teasing, I’m very happy about the gift I have for you, runt.”

The Qunari had asked Leliana to wait until he’d returned to the hall before bringing the surprise guest in. Now, the spymaster smiled softly as she walked beside a fifty-something-year-old man, crossing the room for their table.

“You didn’t have to get me anything, Chief.” Krem swigged more of his drink.

“Oh, but I did.” Bull’s smile broadened and he nodded beyond the lieutenant, gesturing for him to look.
Krem did so, as did the rest of the group. Ayla held back a squeak of anticipation, clutching dearly to Bull’s arm, eyes sparkling at what was sure to be a heartfelt reunion. Krem sucked in a breath and almost dropped his mug. He set the thing down quickly, taking a few swift steps towards the older man. It was easy to tell they were related; they had the same eyes and facial structures, with Krem’s holding softer edges and lacking a beard shadow.

“Father...” Tears well in the lieutenant’s eyes, “Father!”

Krem all but jumped into Marius Aclassi’s arms, the older man hugging with all his might, both loosening tears. They clung to each other for a moment, pulled back, and wiped their eyes. Marius caressed his child’s face.

“Look at my little girl, my little Paoloria...”

“It’s Cremisius now, father, Krem for short.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Krem.” Regardless, the man was very happy to see his child, who was once a girl who pretended to shave at his side most mornings and preferred boy’s toys to girly ones. A kid who liked her hair short and play-fighting with swords. Marius always knew she should’ve been born a boy, but he loved her no less with the realization. While he encouraged Paeloria to embrace herself, her mother had never condemned it and secretly despised the child as she got older, thinking she’d let the family down because she had no intention of simply falling into a role and marrying some man for financial gain. Marius was glad Paeloria found a place to belong and be herself, though he supposed that little girl was dead now, resurrected into her true self—a handsome, charismatic, smart warrior named Cremisius. “My son...”

Krem sniffled and breathed an excited laugh. “How did you get away from them? I never thought I’d see you again.” He looked back at Bull. “You did this, Chief?”

“I only came up with the idea. Our Lady Nightingale here had her people break him from the servus publicus.”

Krem hugged his father again, then moved to Leliana and hugged her too, the woman chuckling. “Thank you so much. I am in your debt.”

“Nonsense,” Leliana said. “You’re a friend, and I don’t mind helping friends.”

Krem nodded, wiping more tears. He slipped to Bull, staring up at the big man. Ayla released Bull’s arm so he and Krem could embrace for a moment.

“You really are the best, Chief.”

The Qunari rumbled a chuckle. “Yeah, yeah. Go on and get reacquainted with your pops.”

Everyone watched the lieutenant put an arm around his dad’s shoulder, leading him to the refreshments. Conversations sparked up among them once more.

Ayla grabbed onto Bull’s hand, nuzzling his arm. “That was so nice. I’ve never seen Krem so emotional before. I almost started crying.”

“It felt good giving him this and getting his father out of that situation. The man gave a lot of years to those Tevinter assholes, serving as a slave to their Imperium, performing whatever duties they demanded. At least he’s free now and can live the rest of his life in peace, though he can never return to Tevinter territory. He’ll be sentenced to death if caught.”

Ayla sighed. “It works out then, since Krem can’t go back either. I’m sure they’ll be very happy now that they’re together.”

“Yeah.” Bull rubbed a hand gently up and down her arm. Smiling lips pressed to her forehead. “So...I have another gift for you. It’s up in the room.”

“Really? Let’s go!”

“Nope. You’ll get it later, after the party.”

The ebony beauty giggled at his playful expression. “Bull, what is it!”

“You’ll just have to wait.”

She stamped a small foot, smiling. “Fine.”

Bull saw Elemir standing by the refreshment table, sipping a drink. He grinned. “I’m gonna grab some water, Naaremna. Want me to get you some juice or something?”

“Um...” she thought a moment, “A cup of water, some cheese, crackers, and fruit, and a sweet roll. Thanks, love.”

The Qunari left her at the table to retrieve the food and drink. He stopped by Elemir, keen eye on the man while he smiled broadly. “So, you and Josephine, huh?”

Elemir’s brow crept up, and he turned partially to Bull. He kept his silence.

“Yes. Saw you two disappear through the door towards the war room while I was entertaining the
young’uns. You were in there for a while.”

The ranger drank from his cup, chuckling.

Bull continued grinning. “I might have one eye, but I see a lot.”

“Noted.”

Elemir produced a slight smile, watching his brother-in-law fix a plate of food and a couple of drinks, which he took back to Ayla. He examined while a grinning Bull spoke, then Ayla’s eyes widened, and she clamped a hand over her smiling mouth, before her dazzling eyes quickly found Elemir, making her all-out giggle. The ranger assumed Bull told her about him and the lovely ambassador.

Speaking of which, Elemir’s eyes drifted through the room to where Josephine held conversation with a group of Orlesian nobles, ever the prestigious host. Her eyes kept finding him, though, an appealing blush dabbing her caramel-brown cheeks.

The mysterious ranger sifted a low, content sigh. He’d finally managed to let go of the Ayla fantasy, and as his reward, he’d kindled the beginnings of what he knew would be a romance unlike any other. Josephine just might be the one to eventually make him settle down.
By the time Iron Bull and Ayla left the party, most of the children had gone as well, leaving a straggling of adults to finish off the food and drink. The couple rounded the corridor of their quarters, talking as they moved.

The Oona was anxious to see Bull’s other gift for her.

“How ya holding up, Ayla?” he asked. “You’ve been pretty busy the past two days, getting used to the channeling process with Solas.”

“I feel great. I think this whole cleanse thing is already showing signs of working.” She grinned up at him. “I’m not even tired yet.”

“Mm.” The sound rolled like soft thunder from him. “You will be before the night’s through.”

“Oh, really?” she purred.

They reached their door, he unlocked it, and let her enter before him. Bull closed and locked the door, one of his hands still gripped by his wife, who had enlarged eyes on something across the room, some kind of contraption. It looked like a series of straps and a harness, dangling from a short track that had been secured to the ceiling, positioned partly over the bed.

Ayla’s eyes jerked to him, then back at the strange apparatus. “What is that?”

“Your other surprise.”

“Um…okay, but what is it?”

“It’s called a swing.”

“What is it for?”

“You’ll see.”

The solid Qunari walked them across the room, stopping before the bed. He broke contact to strip from his shirt, boots, and socks. Ayla found the familiar, seductive burn in his eye when he took her hand again, gliding fingers along her cheek.

“So, here’s the deal: I’ll play the dominator this time, and you’ll be my good little bad girl.”

“O-okay…” Ayla stuttered, eyeing the swing again.

“You’re safe with me, Naaremma. You know that, right?”

“Yes.” Answered without hesitation.

“Good.” Bull expertly worked the buttons of her dress, his lone eye studying her with an intensity and heat that Ayla could almost feel on her skin. “And all you have to do is say the word if it’s too much for you or if you’re uncomfortable with it.”

She shrugged once, twice, and the dress dropped to the floor. Her eyes held quite the challenge while they gleamed up at him. “I’m not saying the word.”

Bull chuckled. “We’ll see. Now, let’s get you strung.”

At that, he used his free hand to reach for and release a rope, slackening it to lower the body sling to the mattress. Ayla watched while he used that one hand to flip back some straps. The man then turned fully and drew her against the solid wall of his hot body, lifting just a little so their lips could adhere for a kiss. Bull’s mouth curled into a smile. Slowly, he lowered before her, keeping eye contact as he coerced her panties down. Ayla stepped from the undergarment.

“Lie down, my heart,” he said resonantly, guiding her to the mattress.

Ayla wouldn’t deny that she was very exhilarated. The time not so long ago when they played bondage in Hald’arrun would most likely be mild compared to what was about to happen now. Breathing deeply, she lowered to her back so she was positioned correctly. Bull made short work of securing the main straps and buckles that would support her body, then the padded wrist and ankle bands that would keep her arms and legs up. He almost laughed at how hard she was breathing.

“Are you scared?” He kissed her stomach.

“N-n-no.”

“You’re a bad liar, little woman. Ben-Hassrath, remember?” He finally did spill a chuckle.

“Relax.”

Bull eased away, grabbing the leverage rope. He pulled it down, which started her moving up.

“Ooo!” Ayla startled, eyes dashing about.
“It’s alright. You’re safe.”

Once he had her at just the right height, he grabbed one of a few leather handles on the harness and yanked, moving her smoothly along the track, just a little further out from the bed. He secured the leverage rope. Ayla wiggled and mewed. He undid his pants and slowly peeled them off, watching her stare blindly in his direction. The Qunari stepped forward between her splayed legs, grabbed his erection, and quickly rubbed it over her clit.

“Ahhh…” she moaned, writhing.

“Now, I’m going to ask you again: are you scared?”

“No.” She didn’t hesitate that time.

“Good. Are you comfortable?”

“Yes.” Though Ayla’s arms and legs were secured and she couldn’t really do much with them, most of her weight was supported center-mass, by the harness around her torso.

He slipped off, leaving her suspended in the shadows of her broken sight. “Bull…?”

“I’m only making a fire, my heart. You just worry about getting more acquainted with your new toy.” The tone of his words carried a smile. “Relax and let gravity work for you. You’ll enjoy it more. I promise.”

Ayla tried to do as he suggested, letting her body go as loose as she could. She merely hung there, listening to his movements, spinning very slowly in the sling. She couldn’t deny that such deviance had turned her on. Bull was one of a few people she trusted completely, and she didn’t think he’d do anything to hurt her. So, she might as well see what the swing was all about.

Iron Bull got the hearth blazing and stood. He turned to her, his perfect angel, dangling from the ceiling, her thick hair cascading for the floor. The man released a needy, guttural sound and rubbed his hardened masculinity, then went to her. He grabbed one of the leather handholds on the harness, the one positioned over her lower belly, and gave one good tug, bringing her closer.

Ayla gasped, eyes fixed down her body at him, though he was barely visible to her blind eyes. Bull grinned, tickling her nether lips with the head of his throbbing heat again. The Oona moaned and shimmied in the binding contraption, rocking her hips towards him.

“You’ve been a bad girl,” he droned, still teasing her.

“Mmm…yes…” Ayla’s replied in a small voice, this kind of sexual play quite foreign to her. “I want you.”

“I know.” He stepped back and carefully spun her one-eighty, lining her head up with his swollen cock. “But you have to earn the dick. Open your mouth, my bad little girl.”

Ayla shivered, the slight chill in the air paired with her sexual excitement causing goosebumps to rise over her skin. She couldn’t see anything, but she could smell the enticing muskiness of his man-scent. She opened her mouth, wiggling her tongue at him.

“Yes, that’s it.” Bull guided himself to her lips, slipping in a few inches, enjoying the gentle graze of her teeth over the head and shaft. Ayla moaned hotly as his cock filled her mouth very slowly, carefully. She sucked at it. The Qunari grabbed the leather handhold positioned just above her breasts and started rocking her back and forth, giving her motion while she lapped away at him. “Mm. Just like that. Get it nice and wet for you.”

Ayla opened her eyes in the somewhat awkward position. She saw the fireplace, table and chairs, and the folding separator wall, all upside-down. She also caught upward glimpses of her husband’s fire-dimmed face painted in ecstasy, his eye fixated on her while she sucked and he guided. Bull stepped away, removing his cock from her mouth. His hand delicately caressed her face, and he lowered to kiss her fiercely, their tongues tangling, sending him the distinct taste of his manly flavor.

The Oona found herself blinded while he spun her about so he was positioned at her womanly entrance again, rubbing his cock against it, then he slipped into her. She cried out lustfully, eyes fluttering shut while he filled her completely. Bull braced himself, securely gripping the soft leather handhold over her lower stomach, tugging her back and forth, sending him plunging in and out of her. All Ayla could do was hang there and take him. Her head dropped back and she tensed, quickly becoming lost in a storm of passion. He felt so amazing buried in her tight, wet warmth. It didn’t take long for orgasm number one to shake through her.

Bull pulled out just as she sent a short jettison of juices splashing against his groin, dripping down his legs. He gave her a moment, her post-climactic body trembling in the harness.

“Hm, yes.” The Qunari grabbed her ankles and brought them together, swiftly attaching them to one another using hooks and latches on the cuffs. He ducked, maneuvering his horns like a pro, then rose to his full height again. Now, he was between her legs, which were locked at the ankles behind his neck. He loosened the main leverage rope, tugging it slowly until Ayla rose several inches higher and forward, folding her into a partial sitting position in midair. “You’re nice and limber, my little bad girl.”

He tied off the rope and snacked both hands to her ass.
Ayla yelped, moaning deliciously. She giggled. “Yes, I’m so bad. Spank me…please…”

Bull chuckled and obliged, his hits very tamed, delivering the slightest sting to her round cheeks. He suddenly grabbed her hips, lifted, and settled her on his rigid manhood. She slid slowly down it until fully impaled.

“Ah, fuck yes,” he drawled.

The position allowed him to go even deeper, and he tested it gradually, thrusting. The momentum of the swing kept her falling right into him, her butt slapping his loins. Iron Bull made his move and hastened the pace of his fucking as well as the depth of his thrusts. Ayla’s toes curled and she cried out, eyes squeezing shut. She was enjoying the sex, though it now distinctly bordered between just right and a little too much. She’d never felt him this deep inside her before, striking the very center of her. Bull continued pounding as he watched her reaction, feeling her tightness pulsing around his cock. Since he wouldn’t be able to hold back for long in such an erotic position, he made the decision to really let her have it, going further in, were it possible. He gritted his teeth, holding firm to her hips, fucking so hard now that her tumbling, thick white mane swished wildly.

Ayla mewed and bit down on her lip. “Ahaa…ah…too…much…so deep. Ka…ka-TOH!”

Iron Bull immediately stopped, but remained inside her. His arms embraced around her folded body, holding her still so he could see her face in the semi-dark. “Should we stop, my heart?” His words formed an intimate, warm blanket between them.

She opened her eyes, shaking her head. “No. Just…not too deep.”

He nodded, smiling very faintly.

They continued their swing-play until he coerced two more orgasms from her, then released his own. Afterwards, Bull lowered her to the bed, unbound her from the sling, and detached the thing from the track on the ceiling, pushing it under the bed. Now, they lay cuddled on the mattress, tangled and satiated.

The Oona wore a smirk over her smile. “Finally got your katoh.”

“Yes. Told you I would.” He stroked her hair, chuckling. “And now that I know your limit, I won’t cross it again.”

“Is that why you were so determined to get me to say it? So you could see how much I would be able to take?”

“Yes. I’ve done it with people in the past whom I frequented. I’m a lot of man, so I found it effective to know just how far my sex partners could go.”

She gave a wispy chuckle. “It was for my benefit then.”

“That’s right. How did you like the swing?”

“It was interesting…and fun. I would certainly do it again. You’re so good at all this sex stuff.” She giggled, nuzzling his chest.

“Hm. Lots of practice. Lots.”

“When did you first…do it?”

The Qunari pondered shortly, smiling. “I was fifteen, and she was nineteen or twenty.”

“Fifteen?” Ayla lifted her head to make eye contact. “You were just a boy!”

“A big boy. It was easy to pass for older than I was. She took interest in my physical assets, so I indulged her.” He gave a deep chuckle and shrug. “So, when did you first start having sex?”

Ayla’s eyes narrowed, and she smacked at his chest. They both burst into laughter.

(*)

The following day, the couple woke up late and indulged in some lovemaking. Iron Bull made them something to eat. They were talking over the table, playing footsies, and enjoying the meal when a knock resounded at the door.

Ayla remained seated while her husband went to answer it, her ears open to the conversation.

“Boss? What’s up?”

“Emergency meeting in the war room. I need you and Ayla present. Can you be down in thirty?”

“Um, yeah, sure.” Standing in the door wearing a pair of black briefs, Iron Bull examined Hannibal closely. He appeared quite rustled. “What’s happened?”

The Inquisitor sighed. “I’ll explain at the meeting.”

“Okay.” Bull watched him stride off, then shut the door. He returned to the table, sliding his foot under Ayla’s. “I guess you heard all of that.”
“Yes.” Her brow furrowed thoughtfully. “I wonder what’s going on. I hope it’s not something about Ares.”

(*)

Hannibal’s intense, alluring aqua eyes drew around the table to those present—Iron Bull, Ayla, Solas, Leliana, Cullen, and Josephine.

“I was informed this morning by Cullen that, sometime during the party last night, Warden Blackwall left Skyhold, as was recorded in the log by the officers on watch.”

“I didn’t find out until I collected morning reports,” Cullen said.

“For what reason?” Leliana asked the Inquisitor, her gaze sweeping to Cullen.

“We don’t know exactly,” the commander answered, “though it might have something to do with that message we found in the stable.” He gestured to the crumpled sheet of paper on the table.

Josephine grabbed it, proceeding to read: “Lieutenant Cyril Mornay, one of the soldiers responsible for the Callier Massacre of nine and thirty-seven, was captured in Lydes. Like the others who were arrested for their involvement, Mornay insists that he did not know who he was assassinating, and that he was just following the orders of his captain. This captain, Thom Rainier, is still at large. Mornay is to be executed on the first day of nine and forty-two in Val Royeaux.”

“That’s strange,” Leliana said, arms crossing her chest, eyes on the Inquisitor. “I remember receiving that message as part of a routine report about a month ago. I wonder how Blackwall got it.”

“Furthermore, of what interest could this Mornay or Rainier be to him?” entered Solas.

They all thought in silence a moment.

“You thinking of going after him, boss?” Bull asked. “Got eleven days until the new year. Something tells me you’re gonna want to beat that execution.”

“You’re right. I do,” Hannibal spoke deeply. “I don’t know why, but I feel like Blackwall’s reason for leaving is centered on it. But first…” his eyes roamed to Solas, “I need you to go into the Fade tonight and tell Xena we’re ready to move forward with the plan. If all goes well, she could be here tomorrow night. I want to get her to Thedas before going for Blackwall.”

Solas nodded. “I understand.” He looked to Ayla. “Do you feel comfortable enough with the procedure, the way we practiced it?”

“Yes, I’m ready,” she said, drawing her eyes around the room to make sure the God of War remained absent.

Bull’s eye drifted down to her. He really didn’t want her taking part in this portal business, and his worst fear was that she got overly stressed by it, which would be no good for her or the baby. He made a face like a man with a bad taste in his mouth. They had to do this, though, he knew that. He also knew he would be right beside her through it all, ready to disengage her if the channeling process became too much.

“I’ve been thinking, Inquisitor,” Josephine spoke up. “Since you’re going to Val Royeaux, you could also take time to meet with Lord Dreister Wrenz, the man who requested you come see him a couple of months back.”

“I recall. He said he has information about possible Corypheus worshippers or the like. Yes, we’ll check on that too while we’re there.” Hannibal addressed everyone then, looking to each person as he talked. “Alright, give me a couple of hours to gather some more information, make preparations, and put together a team, then I’ll—”

“Ooo, can we go?” Ayla bounced beside Bull, beautiful eyes peering at the Inquisitor, a grin pasted to her lovely face. “I’ve never gone there. It’s not like you’re going for a battle or anything, so I wouldn’t be in the way. Please…?”

Amusement adhered to Hannibal’s features. He smiled and nodded. “Okay, if Iron Bull agrees.”

“Splendid!” she chirped.

Ayla immediately turned her pleading kitty-cat eyes up at him.

The Qunari laughed. “How could I even begin to disagree with that? Yeah, we can go.”

“Splendid!” she chirped.

“I’m sure Dorian will want to go, and I’ll take Sera as well,” Hannibal said. His attention fixed on Leliana. “Would you also accompany the group? I sense that I might require your…expertise. I’m sure Cullen wouldn’t mind supervising the Watchtower until we return.”

“Oh, well…okay,” Leliana said. “I’ll brief my people about it and prepare my things.”

“Good,” Hannibal replied. “Solas, let me know the instant you contact Xena about moving forward. I don’t care what time of day it is.”

“Very well.”
They broke the meeting, filing out of the war room.

(*)

Magnus bent and stretched his arms, limbering them out as he entered the main hall for lunch. The mouthwatering fragrance of roasted chicken had wafted down into the upper courtyard, and he picked it up long before going inside. The battlemage spotted Elemir and Josephine seated at a table. He fixed himself a plate and headed over.

“Mind if I join you?”

The ambassador waved her hand at an empty seat. “Of course not, though I was about to leave myself. There are many things to put in place before the Inquisitor and his party leave for Val Royeaux.” She turned lovely eyes to Elemir, tracing a finger over his hand. “I’ll catch you for dinner, alright?”

“Can’t wait.”

Both men watched her saunter off.

Elemir lifted his cup and drank, his eyes swinging to Magnus, who grinned at him. “What?”

“Nothing. Just happy to see you actually with someone, rather than going to the happy houses for female company.” He bellowed out laughter, then started eating.

The ranger shrugged. “Josephine is special.”

“A damn fine lady,” Magnus confirmed through a mouthful of bread and chicken. “Is it serious?”

“Yes.” Elemir nodded.

“Good for you, brother!” He reached and smacked El’s shoulder. The battlemage’s lips tilted a smirk. “Guess I should be looking for a lady too, huh? Getting old.”

“Did you patch things up with Morrigan?”

“We talked, yes, but I don’t think she’ll ever trust me again. However, we’re at least on speaking terms.”

“Considering what you did, that’s probably more than you deserve, even if you had your reasons.” Elemir offered a soft smile.

“Yeah…”

“Ayla’s going with the Inquisitor to Val Royeaux. I wonder if I should go too.”

Magnus’s expressive brown gaze settled on him, and he chuckled, shaking his head. “Why should you? She’ll be with Iron Bull, right? Her husband? The man who saved her life and kept her safe until she could be reunited with us again. I think she’ll be just fine traveling with him.”

El’s moss-green eyes remained on Magnus while he spoke. Auburn hair shifted across his beard-brushed features when he nodded. “You’re right,” he sighed. “I guess my brotherly instincts to protect her will never truly fade.”

“As they shouldn’t. But she has him now. Besides, you need to be concentrating on Josephine, on your own life and happiness, brother. Ayla’s alright.”

Elemir nodded. He couldn’t deny that his heart swelled to think of the beautiful, smart, fun, noble ambassador.

(*)

Cassandra moaned and rode against him a few more times, a finger tracing his cheek, her mouth clamping to his for another drawn-out kiss. Smiling sensuously, she climbed off and settled next to him on the bed. Cullen grinned lazily, staring up at the ceiling of her quarters.

“You’ve turned me into a deviant, Cassie. It’s the middle of the day and I should be out collecting reports right now. Instead, I’m rolling around naked and sweaty with you.”

“Oh, the scandal,” she laughed, rubbing his stomach.

Cullen followed suit and chuckled a bit as well. He sighed and linked his fingers with hers. “Cassie, what do you intend to do once this is all finished, assuming we defeat Ares and Corypheus? I mean, I know the Chantry has you in consideration for the next Divine…”

Cassandra knew this talk was coming, an inevitable marker in their relationship. She lifted her head, raking eyes over his features. “I’ve decided I’m not taking the position.”

“What? Just like that? You could make a lot of difference as the Divine; you’d be a welcome breath of fresh air to the Chantry.” He shook his head, eyes straying to the window, watching particles of dust drift through rays of sunlight. “Don’t base this decision on me, Cassandra. I don’t want to hold you back from greatness.”
“That’s just like you,” she said in a low voice, eyeing him tenderly, drawing a finger down the scar over his lip, “always willing to step down, even when it’s from something you want or something you believe in.”

Cullen’s gaze found hers.

Cassandra continued. “I didn’t base my decision completely on you and me. I spoke with the Inquisitor about it, and he said some things that really made sense. I think I can do more out in the world, instead of sitting in some lavish chair. Leliana is also up for consideration, as is Vivienne, with the Inquisitor’s endorsement. They’re very different in their views, but each of them is smart and strong, and I think either would do well enough as the next Divine. Even if we weren’t together, Cullen, I’d’ve declined the offer.”

He smiled gently, kissing her hand, caressing it. “I’m glad you made the decision. As the Divine, you could never be with me. I would’ve had to give up the woman I love.”

Cassandra’s breath stilled. He’d never said he loved her before then, neither of them had said it. “Cullen…”

The handsome commander merely grinned.

She hugged him tight, climbing astride him. The warrior woman kissed him hungrily. “I love you too.”

Cullen decided he could afford a little slack, considering how straight, narrow, and prompt he always was. He could just collect the midday reports with the evening ones, and if there were any emergencies, his soldiers would come to him. For now, he blended bodies with his dear Cassie, the two making love again.

(*)

“Bull...love...”

The great Qunari shifted, awakened by her whispers in the dark and her little hand lightly shaking him. “Mm, yes, Kadan?” he grumbled, eye still closed.

“I have to pee.”

“Again? This is the third time in like…” he spied the 8-hourglass on the bedside table, more than half its sand in the lower chamber, “…four hours.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but I really have to go.”

“Okay.” He stretched and swung long legs over the bed, working his head back and forth on his neck, rubbing the thick column of muscle. He spoke while pulling on his pants and boots, “How much water did you drink before bed, woman?”

“No more than I usually do.” She sat on the edge of the mattress, waiting for him to bring her boots.

Iron Bull knew what was up. Those same hormonal changes that had her eating more also sent her kidneys into overtime to support the increase in blood flow, which created urine faster. He wasn’t a genius, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t pick up a science book occasionally. Unknown to his sweet wife, while she’d been hanging out with Dorian or her brother and the others, Bull had been spending a good amount of time in the library since they returned from the east. It was beneficial to know what other effects she might experience with the pregnancy, and he would help however he could, like any good husband.

He delivered her boots, and she pulled them on, then grabbed his hand and shuffled for the door, pulling him along. She stopped long enough to don her new shawl, draping it over her nightgown.

“Maybe you could just start peeing in a bucket we could leave up here in the room.”

“Ew! No.” She giggled. They rounded the corridor quickly, moving down the steps.

“Why? I’d empty it out in the mornings, keep it clean. It’d be much easier than trekking down to the privy every hour in the middle of the night because somebody has a restless bladder.” A smile touched his lips and lingered in his eye.

“Since you put it like that...maybe.”

He chuckled richly, and they stepped from under of the eaves of the east tower, the woman fast-walking for a series of outhouses across the darkened, snowy yard, tugging him behind her.

(*)

Xena’s eyelids lifted, her pupils shrinking in the blue pools of her eyes. She sat up on the mat. Gabrielle and Yakut flanked to either side of her.

“I assume you met with him?” the slender shamaness asked. For the past several days, Xena and Solas had been meeting every night in the Void, keeping each other apprised of conditions on both ends.

Xena grabbed the cup of water Gabrielle offered, drinking a bit. She nodded. “Yes. He said
they’re ready to try executing the plan. Tomorrow night, we’re doing this thing.”
Sophitia hit the training yard early the next morning, grabbing up a piece of toast and some juice beforehand. A few others shared the area, sparring amongst themselves, paying little mind to the dangerously beautiful woman. Holding her shield up, eyes glaring unflinchingly over the top of it at the straw dummy staked in the ground, Sophi circled, one foot crossing the other smoothly. She suddenly whipped up her sword and jabbed forward, pivoting her body effortlessly. She spun and chopped, catching the dummy in its neck area; were it a living breathing person, its head would be on the ground now. She regrouped and shuffled back a few steps, sword twirling.

Once more, she began circling the dummy, and when she was on its far side, she spotted a familiar face leaning against a tree flanking the yard, arms crossed over his chest while he watched the shield-maiden work.

Sophi stopped, slowly lifting a smile at him. She walked over. “Morning. Want to grab your sword and spar? I could use a partner that will try to kill me back.”

Grim shook his head, the mirth on his features but a thin film. He rarely smiled outside the comfort of his group, the Chargers, but found himself doing it a lot since he met her. He took out his scroll and slim charcoal stick, scratching down a message. He held it out to her.

“I don’t think so. You’d only just own me. You’re pretty tough.”

“Where I come from, you learn never to roll over, because there’s always someone waiting to jab a sword in your belly,” she said.

The somewhat rakishly attractive man wrote down a reply.

That sounds…well…grim.

Sophitia chuckled and Grim intensified his partial smile. She did manage to get him to pick up a sword and spar with her for a while. Afterwards, they walked around Skyhold, talking as Grim gave her a tour.

Cole’s mind disengaged from the depths of his thoughts when Grim and Sophitia walked by the stable. The slim, firmly-muscled rogue leaned to the wall just outside the gaping doors. He left Idrial sleeping back in their quarters, up early as usual. Even as a human, he couldn’t stay idle for long. A nippy mountain breeze shifted his already tousled, pale hair, and he turned in the doorway to examine the inside of the stable again.

Blackwall was his friend. Cole wasn’t really all that surprised to learn that he’d left. The man had a long-buried secret within him, but to someone as perceptive as Cole, he might as well have worn the lie pinned to his chest like a flashy broach. Before Cole had even begun to dip his toes into the pool of humanity, the prior spirit sensed what Blackwall was hiding. It had been so strong, so unbridled, almost as if the warden wanted people to know. Cole, being not like others, picked up on it easily. He knew why Blackwall left and kept it to himself, as it was not his place to tell. The Inquisitor would know soon enough.

Iron Bull spent most of the day being especially protective of Ayla. When Dorian sat with them in the dining hall at lunch and asked if the Oona wanted to hang out for some chatty time, Bull strongly insisted that she shouldn’t exhaust herself in preparation for tonight. This might be considered strange, since sitting around talking with one’s friend would hardly be a tuckering activity. The Qunari simply wanted her close to him, and Ayla, surprisingly enough, had agreed without questioning the suggestion.

Now, the two of them were back in their room and had shared a dinner of hearth-baked bread, broiled fish, cabbage, and sweet rolls for dessert. Ayla sat on the bear rug with a book, fingertips gliding over the bumped pages, tracing them delicately. It was a story about an inexperienced, pampered, noble young human woman who, after being kidnapped, ended up rescued by a mysterious, tall, broad, handsome, sexually charismatic Qunari man from the wild north. A hand flipped to her chest and she inhaled dreamily, almost through the part where they shared their first night together around a campfire. When the chapter ended, she sighed and placed her bookmark, setting the novel aside. This was, by far, her most favorite of Skyhold library’s romance collection. She even thought the story’s main character and her husband had many similar attributes.

Ayla’s dulled vision swung in his direction and she stood, holding her arms out as she headed over to the table where he sat. She moved around behind him, gifted with clear sight when her arms embraced his neck. “What are you doing, my love?”

“Trying to write out the name of the place in the east, just to see if I can, but it’s no use.” Iron Bull set the quill to the parchment again. His large hand quivered, jerking the tip of the pen. What resulted were a few unintelligible scribbles. “It’s so amazing, the level of security protecting the place. I even tried writing certain people’s names, and I’m not talking about Legothriel, David, or Lady Shaori. You know who I speak of. No good there either.”
Ayla rubbed his shoulders and nuzzled her cheek to his, smiling. "Yes, and I’m not surprised. Certain people are very smart and have been protecting the place for a long time. They know what must be done to ensure the secrecy."

"You’re right," Bull said. He maneuvered her around to sit in his lap. "It’s about time to head down to Morrigan’s room. You ready?"

"Yes, though…" she made a cute, irritated face, "…I have to pee before we go."


Hannibal stood outside the door to Morrigan’s room, arms crossed over his great chest. He nodded to Iron Bull and Ayla as they approached and headed inside. Only the necessary people were allowed to be present for the task at hand, but that didn’t keep the rest of the Inner Circle from turning up. Dorian, Varric, Vivienne, Sera, Cole, Cassandra, Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine flocked around the gazebo. Others included members of the Chargers and Joswen’s group. They were anxious and curious to see if the portal could be opened, letting the warrior named Xena into their world.

Hannibal’s eyes drew over them, then he went inside and shut the door. “Everyone’s out there. You’d think someone was in here giving birth, and they were all waiting to see the baby.” He chuffed a short chuckle.

"I suppose it is kind of like that, right?" Ayla said. "If this works, Xena will pass from the eluvian into our world for the first time, like a baby from its mother."

Bull only lifted a silent smile when their eyes met, thinking if only she knew the accommodating accuracy of her comparison to her own situation. He led her to a pillow beside Solas, upon which she knelt. The Qunari sat beside her, keeping contact until the procedure started.

Solas laid back on a mat, holding his arm up so Morrigan could slip the channeling bracelet on his wrist. His gaze fixed on Hannibal, who would be controlling the half-hourglass. "Timing is everything, Inquisitor. It won’t be perfect, but I think we’ve gotten it as close as we can. First, I’ll slip into the Fade and meet Xena to ensure she’s also ready and things are in place. Then, I’ll come back out to let you know. Once I head into the Fade the second time, start the half-hourglass, and when the sand is gone, Ayla, you will begin channeling."

To acknowledge the plan that they’d gone over several times, everyone nodded.

Morrigan’s vivid vision drifted across the wine-red carpet to where her eluvian rose, imposing and silent. "I suppose we’ll know it’s working if the mirror lights up. Now, relax and get in there.” One corner of her mouth tilted a smile, while eyes peered down at Solas.

The elf closed his eyes, starting the familiar process of controlled breathing and concentration that would send him to the spirit realm.

(*)

On Earth, Xena and her people made similar preparations inside Yakut’s hut. Magical symbols etched the dirt floor around the mat where the warrior princess would rest. She sat in a chair now at the table with Eve, bouncing the toddler on her knee, hugging her dearly.

“Alright, it’s time,” Xena said. She turned her daughter around and nuzzled. “Mama loves you so much, and she’s gonna miss you, yes she is. I’ll be back soon, my sweet.” The woman sighed greatly and handed Eve over to Amarice. “You’ve done great with her. I owe you a lot.”

"Nah," the lovely Amazon said, smiling. "It’s an honor that you entrusted your daughter into my care. I’ll protect her however I need to, Xena.”

"I know.” Xena nodded, rubbed Eve’s head again, and moved to the mat.

Amarice gave another glimpse to those inside the hut, then left with the baby.

"Okay, everyone knows what to do?” Xena’s voice carried out strong and fierce.

Gabrielle nodded. "I won’t start the half-hourglass until you come back, then head in for the second time.”

"When the sand runs out, I’ll begin channeling my power,” Yakut came in. She sat to one side of the mat, Gabrielle on the other.

"And Joker and I will stand by with the bags here, wait to see if a portal opens,” voiced Autolycus.

"It’s Joxer,” the somewhat scrawny, goofy-looking man corrected, lips pursed irritably.

"Joker, Joxer—potayto, potahdo.” Auto grinned and slapped the man’s shoulder.

Xena leaned back, hands loosely at her sides. Yakut placed the channeling stone in her palm, and Xena’s fingers closed around it. The warrior princess shut her eyes…
…And when she opened them, she was in the same place she and Solas had been meeting. Skyhold’s dilapidated, foggy garden, as it appeared in the Void. Solas stood by the gazebo, the structure overrun by dry, brittle vines.

“Right on time,” he said. “Everything’s ready on my end.”

“Mine too. Let’s head back, initiate, and return here.”

“Very well.”

(*)

Solas shifted on the mat and opened his eyes, which focused in first on Morrigan’s face, as she lingered close to monitor him.

“She’s in place,” he said. “I’m going back in.”

The sorceress tipped a nod of acknowledge. “Be careful wielding Ayla’s power, elf. It can be quite a dangerous thing.”

“Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary. After all, I have much experience controlling large amounts of power.”

Morrigan quirked a brow. “Indeed.”

Solas dragged in slow, silent breaths, closing his eyes. In less than two minutes, he was fully unconscious, and Morrigan signaled for Hannibal to start the half-hourglass.

(*)

Skyhold’s garden and the whole complex appeared around him gradually, blending from the green-tinted darkness of the Fade. Solas turned towards Morrigan’s room and saw Xena standing in the door. He headed to her, and they entered the atrium.

Xena spied the band around his wrist, her fingers tightening on the smooth, somewhat warm stone in her hand. She lifted a smile. “Soon, I’ll get to meet you in person.”

“Yes, should this work, and I think it will,” Solas replied. His hand swept out. “In the waking world, I’m lying on a mat just there. The Inquisitor, Iron Bull, Ayla, and Morrigan are present, waiting for the eluvian to activate.”

Gabrielle, Yakut, and two others are in my world waiting. It shouldn’t be long now.

(*)

Gabrielle’s sparkling-blue eyes jerked back and forth between the half-hourglass, Xena’s slumbering form, and Yakut. The moment the last grain of sand fell, she nodded to the shamaness. “Go ahead.”

Yakut hovered her hands over Xena’s hand, the one clutching the channeling stone. She concentrated her power, generating a pale-amber cloud that spread outward until it engulfed the warrior princess’s hand, making the stone glow.

Standing safely on the other side of the spacious hut, Joxer and Autolycus watched the display silently, the air crackling with the force of Yakut’s power.

(*)

In Thedas, Ayla prepared herself, then began channeling as well, her hands out, palms down. Hannibal, Morrigan, and Iron Bull observed the Oona gathering her force until her hands illuminated with it. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the channeling band on Solas’s wrist, a thick tendril of white light linking her and the elf together. Her luscious hair billowed around her on unfelt wind.

Bull looked anxiously between her and Solas, waiting for any sign of distress.

(*)

Inside the Fade/Void, the stone in Xena’s hand sparked to life, growing exceptionally warmer in her palm, though not searing like the first time she’d attempted the feat. Both she and Solas eyed her glowing appendage. Not even a minute later, the band on his wrist lit up, intensifying so much that he could barely see his hand through the glow.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s focus their power simultaneously on the eluvian.”

Xena nodded, then they lifted their hands, pointed them at the seemingly dead mirror, and unleashed the potent magics of the Oona and the Amazon shamaness. This time, Xena didn’t feel overwhelmed; she had Solas there now to shoulder some of the tremendous power required for the task. They asserted themselves firmly, legs apart, arms extended, fighting the growing tempest of an awakening eluvian. The magical mirror had begun to emit vibrations, against which they had to fight if they wanted to remain standing. They leaned forward into the invisible repeller, beams of energy flowing from their hands, absorbed by the eluvian’s surface.
A grape-sized point of white light formed in the center of the ominous glass and began expanding, enlarging to the size of a melon in a matter of seconds.

"It’s working!" Xena stole a side-glance to Solas.

The mage merely held his concentration, captivated by the display. He’d never imaged the Fade could be manipulated this way, that objects therein shared a tangible connection to their counterparts in the waking world. He supposed it was entirely sensible, however, considering the Fade itself was actually a physical realm, and only a remarkable few would ever be able to truly enter it.

Elvhen eyes widened a tad when the eluvian’s glass shivered like the surface of a disrupted pond, lighting up. The thing was activated.

Hannibal’s initial part was finished, controlling the timing. He moved away from the table, closer to Solas’s body, which twitched a few times in his sleep, his peaceful features scowling. He looked beyond everyone to the eluvian, which had birthed a small glow in its center.

“Look,” he gasped.

Morrigan and Bull followed his gaze to the mirror.

“Amazing! They’re succeeding!” Morrigan’s mouth dropped open.

Ayla moaned and trembled, slender hands shaking in the transfer of power. Her head tossed back, eyes still closed, lips parted. Sweat beaded her dark brow. Bull frowned, hands poised to grab his wife.

“Don’t touch her! You’ll break the link. Leave her be,” warned Morrigan.

“She’s in distress!” He glared over Solas’s body at her.

“She’s doing fine. It’s almost done. Please…leave her.”

Iron Bull did as the sorceress said, though every part of him wanted to stop the process. He decided to trust Morrigan’s judgment, since she was the magical shit expert. His eye slipped from Ayla long enough to observe the eluvian. The mirror flashed to life, turned on from inside the Fade.

At that moment, Ayla sighed and collapsed into Bull’s arms, the man holding her dearly to him, one hand caressing her abdomen. Morrigan caught the tender attention he’d given to her stomach, golden eyes narrowing faintly. She shook her suspicions aside for now, turning to Hannibal, who had begun to approach the eluvian.

“Not too close, Inquisitor. There’s no telling where you’ll end up if you get pulled in.”

The red-haired Qunari kept his distance from the shimmering, scintillating mirror, though he felt compelled to reach out and touch its surface.

Iron Bull stroked Ayla’s hair back from her face, the woman already working to sit up. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said, settling a small hand over his so she could behold the quickened eluvian as well. “Wow.”

Outside the room, the Inner Circle and rest of the group shuffled from the gazebo, the magnificent lightshow visible through the crack under the door. Feeling herself to be above most people, Madame de Fer slipped to the front of the spectators, drawn to the amount of energy coming from the room.

(*)

It began as a speck of hovering light, quickly metamorphosing into a full-blown portal in one corner of Yakut’s hut. The circular vortex released a constant borage of humming palpitations, an unseen force. The shamaness slumped a bit, breathing deeply.

“Jumping Jupiter jackasses!” Autolycus cried, taking a step back, eyes wide. “It actually worked!”

“Yakut!” called Gabrielle over the portal’s hollering voice.

“I’m fine,” she said, then gave her full attention to Xena. “She should be coming out soon.”

(*)

Inside the spirit realm, Xena spoke quickly to Solas. “I need to get back. If there’s a doorway, it won’t stay open for long.”

The elf nodded faintly. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Looking forward to it.”

(*)
Xena’s eyes snapped open. She was a pro at interdimensional travel by now, so it took mere seconds for her to settle. She sat up, dropping the channeling stone, smiling at the vortex.

“Good, it worked,” the warrior princess voiced. She rose from the mat and strode to where Autolycus and Joxer stood, grabbed up her chakram, and hooked the circular weapon to her waist. After doing the same with her whip and securing her sword to her back, Xena shouldered her traveling bag.

Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus had their gear and were ready too. The three of them and Xena approached the doorway between their world and Thedas.

Yakut rose on slightly shaky legs. “Good luck over there.”

Xena faced her, features formulating a chiseled smile. “We’ll be back before you know it.” She turned to the portal again and started moving. The others followed.

(*)

Solas sat up slowly, taking a moment to shed the disorientation seizing him, while Morrigan removed the channeling band. He heard and felt the eluvian’s force before he stood and faced it, beholding its gleaming surface. All that was left to do now was wait, and so he did, standing in line with Hannibal, Morrigan, Iron Bull, and Ayla.

They observed the mirror for a few moments, all but holding their breaths in anticipations. Suddenly, the illuminated surfaced parted, and a figure flew through it, landing on one knee before them. The woman who rose to her full six-foot height steadied striking blue eyes over the diverse group of individuals. She stepped forward just as a shorter blond woman with a toned figure came through, then a man with thick hair and a moustache. The three of them broke apart at the sound of screaming just in time for a fourth person to soar from the eluvian.

“Wooo-aaaaah!” Joxer landed facedown at his friends’ feet. He cleared his throat and took the hand Xena offered. “Thanks.”

“Uh-huh,” the woman said.

Behind them, the magical elvhen mirror flickered, its light sputtering, power fading. It went as dark and unresponsive as before.

Xena’s gaze settled on Solas and she smiled, stepping forward. She was already acclimated with Thedas. Because of that, everyone in the room would understand her. Passing from one realm to the next instantly removed hindrances of the common language barrier between the two worlds, and Xena’s companions would understand and be understood by Hannibal and his people. “It’s great to see you in the flesh.”

He returned the smile and took her hand for a shake. “Likewise.” Solas nodded to Hannibal. “The Inquisitor.”

She shook the Qunari’s hand as well. “Pleasure. As you know, I’m Xena, and this is Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus. They’re as eager to help get Ares where he belongs as I am.”

“That’s good,” Hannibal said. “The more people we have on this, the better. This is Morrigan, Iron Bull, and Ayla.” Of course, Xena’s group already knew Solas by name and description. Joxer, like Gabrielle and Autolycus, found himself staring at Hannibal and Iron Bull, for they looked the most unfamiliar. Besides his pointy ears, Solas appeared human to them, but the Qunari were a race of the likes they’d never seen.

“What are you, like, minotaur people or something?” Joxer asked, completely serious.

“Minotaur?” Bull watched him closely.

“Yeah, you know, part man, part bull?”

The massive warrior’s face blended into a light smile. “I’m all Bull.”

Xena slipped Joxer a look. “They’re Qunari, the people with the horns I told you about.”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

The warrior princess’s attention turned to Hannibal. “If your world operates anything like ours, we don’t have much time.”

“Until what?” he quirked a fiery eyebrow.

“Before Ares realizes I’m here. He can find me anywhere on Earth.” Steely eyes and chiseled lips adopted a cunning smile. “But when he comes, I’ll have something waiting for him.”

Xena pulled a little wooden box from her traveling bag and flipped it open, exposing a smooth purple stone attached to a necklace.

“What is that?” Hannibal asked.

“It’s called Alecto’s Charm, forged by Alecto herself. She’s a Fury, one of the three spirits of
judgment and punishment in my world. This charm will sap the powers of a Greek god when
they’re in proximity to it. The box is carved from the bark of a Tree of Life, which grows golden
apples that can give gods back their godhood and grant mortals immortality. When the charm is
enclosed in the box, it doesn’t work; it needs to be out in the open.”

“I see.” The Inquisitor nodded. “So, you plan to render Ares powerless and take him back. Do
you even have a plan to get back?”

The lovely brunette shrugged, returning Alecto’s Charm to her bag. “Not exactly, but my
shamaness friend on the other side is under instructions to check the Void occasionally so she can
contact me here. I brought her into your part of the Void to evaluate the eluvian. She shouldn’t
have issues traveling between the areas. I figure once we have Ares or are close to getting him, we
can use a similar technique to get back to Earth.”

“That’s a sound way of looking at things. It’s better than nothing,” Morrigan said.

“Well, it’s rather late, and it might be best to continue with strategies and such tomorrow,”
Hannibal spoke to Xena. “Please, come with me. I’m sure the rest of the gang is very curious to
see you and your friends.”

The Inquisitor strode to Morrigan’s chamber door and pulled it open. As suspected, the Inner
Circle, Chargers, and Joswen’s people eagerly awaited the new arrivals, over a dozen pair of eyes
gawking at Xena and her people as they made their way into the garden. They stopped with
Hannibal by the gazebo.

“Everyone, this is Xena. She and her friends are staying with us for a while.” Hannibal’s gaze
whipped around the crowd. “It’s late, so I won’t burden her with names, as I’m sure you’ll all
introduce yourselves soon enough. “Just make them feel at home, show them the ropes, since
they’re now part of the Inquisition.”

Without even being asked, a grinning, friendly-faced Josephine stepped forward, offering her
hand to the warrior princess, nodding to Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus. “Good evening. I’m
Josephine, the ambassador for our cause. I’ll be setting you up with living quarters. I only have
two rooms available right now, so I hope it will suffice.”

Xena liked the woman’s infectious aura. She was kind of heart. “That’ll be just fine. Gabrielle and
I will take one, Autolycus and Joxer’ll shack up in the other.”

“Very well. Please, come with me.”

Aside from Xena’s crew, Hannibal also fell in with Josephine, talking to Xena as they moved
through the garden for a run of steps leading down into the upper courtyard. He pointed beyond
the torchlit area. “Those steps lead into the main hall. You’ll find that a lot of what we do here
centers around the place. Meals are served throughout the day, until the kitchen closes for the
evening.”

“That’s good to know,” said Xena, skimming eyes from the tall doors of the hall to the cylindrical
structure they approached.

Joxer groaned lightly. “I’m actually kinda hungry now.”

“I’ll have some food brought to your rooms to get you through the night,” Josephine replied.
“Breakfast begins early, then goes right into brunch and lunch. Then, there is a few hours break
before dinner is served. That’s pretty much the dining schedule.”

“We appreciate your hospitality, miss,” the warrior princess’s voice came out smoothly.
The ambassador laughed. “Please, call me Josephine.”

“Alright.”

They stopped near the entrance to the stone structure, lanterns hanging to either side of a wide
doorway.

Hannibal cleared his throat before speaking. “This is the north tower. As you probably spotted on
the way over here, there are three other towers, each of which is used for housing like this one.
We’ll do whatever we can to make your time here comfortable. Since Ayla is the only one who
can detect Ares when he’s in stealth, we’ve been holding meetings pertaining to him strictly in
the war room lately so she can look out for the conniving bastard. I hope you don’t mind, but I’m
going to have some guards stationed in the corridors of your rooms, in case he shows up.”

Xena’s eyes burned like flecks of hot sapphire from her tanned, handsomely beautiful face. The
smile she hefted carried a hint of contempt. “That won’t be necessary, Inquisitor. Your soldiers
probably wouldn’t be able to do anything even if he decided to appear. Besides, I can detect him
when he’s around. I’ve always been able to. I can sense him and the other gods.”

“Really? That’s remarkable.”

She arched a brow. “How is Ayla able to see him?”

Hannibal shrugged. “We don’t know why exactly. She just can. However, she’s blind without the
touch of her husband. It comes from a special bond they share, which I can tell you all about over
drinks another time if you like. The short of it is that she can only see Ares in stealth if she’s in
physical contact with Iron Bull.”

Xena took a few moments to absorb his words, nodding. “Ayla is special, to have the gift of godsight. Not even I can see Ares when he’s cloaked; I can only sense him.”

“Yeah, we think she’s pretty special.” Hannibal smiled softly. “She’s the reason we got the portal to open, the power she harnesses. If anyone can get you back to your world, it’s her. Okay, then, I’ll let you all get settled in. Tomorrow, we start really building our plan to get your god of war out of my world and back to yours.”

The Inquisitor waited until they disappeared beneath the broad, shadowy eaves of the north tower, forming a line behind Josephine. Then, he turned and headed up to his apartment.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, everyone. I just want to take time to once again thank you for reading and following my story. I wish I could write on it all day, every day, as there is SO much more in store. But, you know, there’s being a mom, a wife, school, errands, preparing to move later this year, being a mom (oh, wait. I already said that, but my son is the most important thing and should be mentioned multiple times, haha), video games, and all kinds of exciting things in my life besides my beloved writing. To let you in on a little secret, I plan to have multiple parts to this fic down the line, with Beauty and the Bull being the first. So...yeah...this could turn out to be a very long-running thing for me. Hopefully, you all enjoy where it goes.

Thank you. :)
Xena dressed, adding the finishing touch to her warrior attire—Alecto’s Charm. She looped the necklace on, tucking the gem down into her bodice. Aside from giving them the scoop on Ares’s activities, Solas also relayed to Xena that Skyhold’s region was chilly. So, the warrior princess and her group packed their traveling bags accordingly. She pulled her lightweight leather jacket on, the lower hem brushing her booted calves and shins. Gabrielle wore a shorter rawhide jacket that fell to the middle of her thighs.

Neither woman armed up completely, residing within the safe walls of the fortress, yet Xena did hook on the chakram beneath her jacket. It was habitual, familiar. During previous shenanigans with Julius Caesar, her original chakram got broken, causing the loss of her warrior’s spirit, bringing imbalance to the light and dark within her. Ares attempted to take advantage of her then, since she’d also lost her memories of him and how vile he was. With Gabrielle’s help, Xena took on Ares, mending the chakram and her soul. The weapon rarely left her sight.

“Ready?” The tall woman nudged Gabrielle playfully.

“Are you kidding? I’m starving. Let’s go.” The food Josephine had sent up last night was adequate but sparse.

They left their room and rounded the corridor, halting outside another door. Xena wrapped her knuckles to it. “You guys up?”

The door hitched open a short moment later to reveal Joxer’s grinning face. “Good morning!”

The women smiled deeply at their friend. For years, he’d been providing them with loyalty and laughter, a great combination considering he wasn’t much one for combat, no matter how apt of a warrior he thought he was.

“Bah, what are you so bubbly about?” groaned Autolycus, moving up behind him. He rubbed a hand over his neck, massaging it. “Oh, I know. Maybe it’s because you got to sleep in the bed, while I roughed it out on the floor.”

Joxer shrugged. “We flipped for it fair and square, even though you tried to trick me with your cheat-coin. At least you had the fur rug to lay on.” He honked a laugh.

“Oh, yeah. I’m gonna talk to Josephine about getting my own room as soon as possible. Sharing accommodations with you is intolerable. I’d rather sleep in the stable.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Xena inserted, shaking her head. “Work it out until you can get other arrangements. Let’s go. I’m hungry, and we’re meeting with the Inquisitor and his people shortly.”

The earlier hours of Skyhold saw the least amount of action, usually. They found the premises occupied mainly by patrolling guards, soldiers up for their morning sparring routines, vendors milling about preparing to open shop in the next couple hours or so, and even some children running around.

Xena and Gabrielle walked side by side ahead of Joxer and Autolycus. The four of them ascended the stairs into the main hall, crossing the grand foyer. They spared a few moments to peer about, noting the sparsity of the crowd, only a few patrons present for breakfast.

Xena’s eyes fell on Dorian. She’d seen him last night with the crowd. Hannibal noticed her curious stare. His large hand closed over the Altus’s, caressing.

“This is Dorian, my mate.”

“A pleasure,” Xena answered, smiling.

Xena studied the boldly fashioned chair. “You heard the Inquisitor. This chamber serves as many places to them, a dining hall and throne room to name a couple.”

They moved further inside.

Dorian looked up from his toast and tea to spot them. He quickly tapped Hannibal’s hand, mastering a pleasant smile. Hannibal watched them good-naturedly as they approached, gesturing to empty chairs. “Please, have a seat. Help yourselves.”

“Oh, boy. Don’t mind if I do.” Joxer grinned and sat. He grabbed a plate and started piling it with food.

The others took seats, and Xena’s eyes fell on Dorian. She’d seen him last night with the crowd. Hannibal noticed her curious stare. His large hand closed over the Altus’s, caressing.

“Is that a throne?”

“Looks like a giant beast’s foot.” Joxer said.

“I dunno.” Xena studied the boldly fashioned chair. “You heard the Inquisitor. This chamber serves as many places to them, a dining hall and throne room to name a couple.”

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“This is Dorian, my mate.”

“A pleasure,” Xena answered, smirking.

Joxer swallowed a mouthful, remaining silent at Hannibal’s introduction.

Autolycus wasn’t one to ever judge anyone for anything. He firmly believed everyone had a right to do what they wanted. The blatant display of man-on-man relations caught him off-guard only a little, and he said the first thing that came to mind, “Well…nice moustache.” He sipped his tea.
Dorian chimed with laughter. “Thanks. Yours is nice as well, though a little too thick for my personal grooming standards.” The mage detected Auto’s slight discomfort with homosexuality. It was something he’d grown quite used to, peoples’ reactions to that aspect of his life. He found that the best thing to do was expel the awkwardness with a little humor. One gray-lavender eye winked at the thief.

Hannibal chuckled at his boyfriend.

Auto coughed through his tea, clearing his throat.

The Inquisitor’s captivating aqua eyes drew over the newcomers, settling on Xena. “I know you haven’t been here long, but how are finding our world? Is it anything like yours?”

“To be honest,” Xena started, in the middle tonging some bacon to her plate, “it doesn’t seem all that different. I suppose I’ll be able to answer that question better once we see a little more, hm?”

He nodded. “Fair enough. After breakfast, you’ll get to meet some more of my people, and we’ll discuss possible ways to move forward regarding Ares. Looks like he hasn’t detected your presence in my world, since he didn’t show up last night. Maybe, it works differently here, and he won’t be able to sense you.”

Xena issued a muffled grunt of acknowledgment around a mouthful of biscuit.

“That’d be a great reprieve,” spoke Gabrielle. She’d been with Xena a long time and knew how she’d respond. They were soulmates. “If Ares doesn’t know she’s here, we truly will have the element of surprise when it’s time to make our move.”

“Exactly.” The warrior princess swiped the back of a hand over her mouth, having gulped water to chase down the bite of biscuit. “Here’s hoping.”

(*)

Villa Maurel. Always so picturesque, whether blanketed in early golden light or shrouded within the violet shadows of evening. During his stay there, Elgar’nan often wandered the gardens and idled along the perimeter promenade at both times of day. This morning, the tall, regal elf rounded a wall of trimmed hedges and stopped, silvery-blue eyes falling upon the God of War and one of his soldiers. Gradually, with hands clasped at the small of his back and long hair swaying behind him, Elgar’nan approached, listening.

“The Inquisition has several camps throughout this forest, Lord Ares, and we’ve done well in deterring them from these parts. But, since you’ve taken the villa as your main headquarters, it has attracted the Inquisition’s attention.” The soldier, a muscular man with dark skin and a smoothly shaven head, stood respectfully before the god. “Their people have been mindful of the villa’s boundaries, however, and haven’t tried to trespass.”

Ares nodded. “Okay. So, they know someone new has moved in and want to find out who. That about right?” Solid arms crossed his chest.

“Yes. This is private land, and they just can’t walk up on it as they please. The armed guards patrolling the perimeter wear no armor or crests revealing you as their commander, but it’s only a matter of time before they discover this is your domain.”

“I noted the Inquisition’s presence when I first stumbled across the place. I feel it’s remote enough here, though.” Ares’s burning brown eyes narrowed, features on the edge of a smile, like he knew something everyone else didn’t. “I’m not concerned. Keep an eye on their forces and maintain our security. I only need this place long enough to exact my final plans.”

The guard didn’t know what those plans were and he was wise enough not to ask. He bowed and backed away, leaving god and elf alone in the gardens.

Elgar’nan wasn’t afraid of Ares. He and the war god locked gazes as he strode closer, stopping before the dark-haired entity. “I couldn’t help but overhear. What, may I ask, are your final plans?”

Wrapped in warmth and mingled with seduction, laughter drizzled from the God of War. “I already told you once, Blondie. Revealing my plans will compromise things.”

“Ah, yes, you did.” Ever the bold one, Elgar’nan lulled in closer to him, staring with unflinching resolve. “However, I believe I’ve proven myself to be mostly loyal, a person in whom you can confide. You said so yourself, we’re the same, you and I. There is no one else in this world who will understand you like me, no one else who can understand what power comes with being a god.” He flipped a large, fine hand casually on the air, smiling down his angular nose. “It’s not like you can confide in that pretty man-gina of yours. He has the brains of a chicken and, therefore, lacks the capacity to truly talk to you on your level.”

Ares groaned sexily. “You certainly know how to talk to me.”

“I will admit that, even though you mock me at times and refuse to give me my Orb of Power, I no longer want you dead.”

“Really?” The war god hoisted a handsome, debonair grin. He gently traced a finger along Elgar’nan’s ear. “Finally ready to come to my bed?”
The towering elf rolled his eyes. "I’ve yet to reach that point, if I ever reach it. I merely mean to say that you can really trust me, that it would be in your best interest to do so. You need someone like me."

“What makes you think I don’t already have someone I can really trust?”

Elgar’nan’s deep laughter filled the space between them. “Resentius? I don’t doubt his loyalty to you, though he’s only a sword, a warrior. He has not the mind to understand you. What you need is a confidant."

“And why should I trust you as this confidant, Blondie?”

The elf quirked a brow. “Isn’t it obvious? I was feared, respected, hated, and loved by my people. I ruled them with an iron fist and a stern will. Now, I find myself in a world that has long since etched my presence into the annals of history. I am obsolete here, alone. I have no allies, but potentially a great number of enemies, were people to find out who I really am and what I did to Mythal. You don’t have any allies either; you’re surrounded by sell-swords and people you’ve managed to glamour into thinking you’re working in their favor, when it’s all obviously for your own gain, like it was for me. You need me, God of War and, as much as it disheartens me to say, I need you. You have the means to restore me.”

Ares and Elgar’nan maintained their stare. The war god finally nodded. “You make a good point, and I might let you in on a few things. First, I need to—”

The god’s eyes widened, aimlessly darting while thoughts dashed through his mind. He frowned thickly.

Elgar’nan’s head tilted. He withdrew a few steps. “What is it?”

“I…no! It can’t be…” his words drifted. “How did she…when…?” He shook his head, receiving her spectral whiff clearly now, sending his god-senses tingling off the charts.

“I don’t understand.”

Ares’s eyes jerked to him, his frown intensifying. “I sense an old ‘friend’. She shouldn’t be here in Thedas, and I must know how she managed the trip. I know why she’s here. She came to drag me back to Earth.”

“Is it wrong to say part of me hopes she succeeds?” Elgar’nan droned.

Ares snarled. “She won’t. I have to go.”

Before he could vanish, a large elvhen hand grabbed his arm. “Take me with you.”

"Why? This has nothing to do with…” As the words and thoughts came together, realization fell over Ares. He nodded. “Fen’Harel. You think he could be behind this?”

“Don’t you? Why else would someone randomly come from your world, someone you say is here to stop you? It should be obvious that traitor has something to do with it, perhaps with the aid of the Inquisition. Take me with you,” Elgar’nan repeated.

The war god’s mind was focused on one thing then—Xena. Every time he’d faced her on Earth, she had managed to prevail. She’d seen through his trickery and plans. Not this time. Thedas was his, and he would kill her if necessary to keep her from boggling what he had in store.

“Fine. I’ll take you, but if this is because of Fen’Harel and he’s there, with her, you can not engage him, not now. It won’t be the time or the place. Promise me you won’t.”

The stately elf made sure his gaze glued itself to Ares’s, that the god would be able to detect every sparkle and swirl in those artic depths, so he could see that Elgar’nan spoke true. “I won’t, I promise.”

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“This region here, Crestwood,” Xena mused, hovering over the large map on the war room table, finger set to it. Not only could she and the others understand the common language, they could read it as well. The link between their worlds was a mysterious and wonderful thing. Her eyes flicked to Hannibal. “You say this is where Ares’s forces are concentrated?”

“From what we’ve gathered, yes, though his influence has spread to various parts of the south over the past month. His poisonous gospel is spreading quicker than brushfire.”

“Then most of his recruits are there, then his main base might be in the area,” Xena said, standing up straight again. Leliana, who stood to her left, let eyes slowly climbed the length of the tall, imposing woman with her dark jacket shifting around her. “On Earth, Ares has a place he frequents, a well-guarded castle that doubles as a temple. We need to find that place here.”

Hannibal nodded. “I agree. I’ve had all Inquisition camps reporting regularly on suspicious activity in their areas, on the lookout for him. It shouldn’t be hard to find where he operates from if he’s as open about it as he was in your world.”

“And now that you’re here, we have an even greater chance of finding him,” added Solas. Even though Ares gave him the gift of his memories from which Solas could visit hundreds of places in
Earth’s part of the Fade, the elf wanted the war god gone. He’d really made Solas angry by taking the Anchor. His Anchor. His eyes narrowed. “I will do whatever is necessary to help expunge his presence from Thedas.”

A flicker-flash of blue electric announced Ares. He’d caught that last remark as he and Elgar’nan phased in, standing between everyone and the door. “Ouch. That hurt, Solas. I thought we were cooler than that.”

Tension instantly filled the war room. Iron Bull bore his teeth, rumbling a guttural series of growls, instinctively backing Ayla behind him. Her wide eyes peeked around his arm. Hannibal and his advisors, Xena and her group—they all regarded Ares with scowls.

Solas’s main interest wasn’t in the God of War, but the one who’d appeared with him. He and Elgar’nan locked eyes, the smaller elf’s mouth parted in what could be described as morbid surprise, his breath refusing to pass normally for a gathering of seconds. But he kept his composure.

As did Elgar’nan. He was so excited, so angry, and so hungry for blood, that he all but shook. While they wanted to confront each other then, both former elven gods silently shared the mutual desire to keep their true identities secret for the moment. If revealed, Elgar’nan would only become a prime target for the Inquisition, while Fen’Harel would completely lose their trust, which wouldn’t help if he wished to continue using them to get his Orb of Destruction from Corypheus’s possession.

No. For now, the ancient archenemies gripped tight their tongues and held their silence, staring each other down.

Ares started clapping very slowly, shaking his head. He was extremely impressed. “Bravo. Bra-fucking-vo. I don’t know how they managed to get you here, Xena, but I’m gonna send you right back.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Ares,” she replied calmly, unflinching.

His features exploded into a harsh frown. “You’ve foiled my plans in the past, but I will not allow you to interfere here, do you understand me! You, your little sidekick, the loser, and Mr. ‘Stache are going back!”

The God of War lifted his arm, waving his hand through the air. He blinked and did it again. A portal was supposed to appear and suck them up, sending them to the holding cells in Villa Maurel, where he’d keep them until he could rig a proper portal to whisk their asses back to Earth. But…nothing happened.

Ares gasped and growled. “What have you done?”

Xena grinned, reached into her bodice, grabbed the necklace, and dangled the magical gem. She dropped it back between her breasts. “Gotcha.”

“Alecto’s Charm,” he snarled. “Fucking figures.”

Tight, charged silence settled through the war room, the Inner Circle members unused to seeing someone put Ares in his place or face him so confidently. Xena truly was an asset to their team, as they were already beginning to see.

Bull’s eye yanked to the warrior princess, then back to Ares. “So, his powers are gone?”

“Temporarily, yes.”

He was on Ares in an instant, tackling him to the floor, huge hands around his throat. Left in her shadows, Ayla stared wide-eyed after Bull, hands hanging in the air where previously they touched upon his arm. Elgar’nan lurched aside to avoid them, surprised at Ares’s incapacitation. This wasn’t anticipated. He’d been counting on the god’s protection, and now neither of them were able to take on the Inquisitor and his friends. The elf stayed put, however, eyes flashing blue fire at Cullen, who’d hurried forward with a sword pointed at him.

“Don’t move,” ordered the commander.

Elgar’nan watched him indifferently, then looked to Ares, who was pinned and being strangled by a huge Qunari.

Ayla addressed her husband in a small voice. “Bull…what’s going on?”

The Qunari worked himself into a more advantageous position, knee on Ares’s chest, weighing him down. The war god struggled but was no match for such brute strength. In Bull’s mind, each moment the sonovabitch disrespected Ayla played over and over—sexually assaulting her in that lucid dream after learning what she was, commandeering her power to take the Anchor, draining her. A slow grin spread on, while his large hands clamped tighter at Ares’s throat, squeezing.

Iron Bull leaned down so he could see the instant when the life melted from his eyes. “Look at you. You’re nothing without your power. You’re a weak, little bitch.”

“Bull! What are you doing?” Ayla called out to him, hearing Ares sputter and croak. “Stop, please…”
The warrior continued strangling, baring his teeth, eye wild with loathing. “I told you I’d kill you, didn’t I?” he whispered harshly.

The God of War’s legs flailed, his face going a vivid shade of red. He gripped at Iron Bull’s iron clasp around his neck and couldn’t budge it. Brown eyes rolled up into his head.

“Just die, you sonovabitch, die!”

The others watched silently, unsure of what to do. It wasn’t as if the Inner Circle cared if the war god lived. Josephine clamped a hand over her mouth at the scene. It was quite brutal. Elgar’nan had already begun to form an escape plan in his head and would execute it as soon as an opening presented itself. Ares wasn’t Elgar’nan’s favorite person, far from it, but the elf believed he was the only one in this world who could help restore him. He greatly hoped the god could get out of this.

“Xena…” Gabrielle’s eyes went to her friend.

“Yeah, I know.” The warrior princess finally stepped forward. “You can’t kill him.”

“Watch me,” Bull said over his shoulder.

“No, I mean, you really can’t kill him. The charm doesn’t make him mortal, it only saps his powers and superhuman strength. He’s still a god.”

Bull choked as hard as he could then, the muscles in his arms standing out strictly. Alas, flushed in the face as he was, features puffed and swollen by Qunari-induced asphyxiation, Ares was no closer to dying than he was thirty seconds ago. Bull breathed a disappointed sigh. He was so looking forward to suffocating the fucker’s last breath.

Xena’s hand touched his shoulder, and she spoke softly, understanding why the man would take such actions, “Let him up, Iron Bull.”

With a thunderous roar, the Qunari yanked his hands away and stood.

Coughing and gripping his bruised throat, Ares shakily got to his feet. Bull decided to get one more in, uppercutting the shit out of him, sending him thudding to the floor. It took the god a moment to recover from the blow, which undoubtedly would’ve at least rendered a mortal man unconscious.

When Ares made it to his feet again, he smiled and rubbed his jaw, blood trickling from the corner of his busted mouth. “You hit like a battering ram. Good thing I can’t lose any teeth.”

“But you bleed, and that’s enough for now. Once you die, I’ll be completely satisfied,” Bull growled between his teeth.

Ares chuckled. “Such bitterness, big guy.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but you won’t be able to kill him. We need him alive in our world,” Xena spoke.

Bull’s dire frown turned from the Amazon to Ares, who grinned and shrugged. He backed away, resuming his place by Ayla, his eye pasted to Ares as he moved, holding the promise of vengeance.

Xena looked to Hannibal. “We’ll need someplace to hold him…and his friend.”

The Inquisitor’s attention shifted to Elgar’nan now that Ares had been subdued. “Who are you?”

The massive elf’s head tilted faintly, and he stared down his nose while holding a tailored sneer. “Who I am is of no importance to you, but I shall tell you my name anyway. I am called…” here he paused, sending icy eyes to Solas, “Esgal’Arad.”

‘Esgal’ was another word for screen or a veil, and ‘Arad’ translated to ‘royal’. The name roughly came out as ‘Royalty from the Veil’, and Solas immediately understood why Elgar’nan chose it.

“What is your connection to Ares?” Hannibal asked tightly.

Elgar’nan uttered an arrogant, short laugh, brow lifting. His eyes swept to Ares. “If he had his way, it would be physical. As it were, professionally, we share common interests.”

For a moment, Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. “And what interests are those?”

Elgar’nan offered nothing but silence and an uppity smile. He looked in Solas’s direction to find him staring.

Leliana’s stern green eyes glared over the table at Ares and the elf. “There are ways to get information, Inquisitor. I assure you, I can get him to talk.”

Hannibal nodded at the Spymaster. “I have no doubts you can. For now, we just need to secure them.”

Elgar’nan’s eyes shifted to Ares, and the war god focused on him, reading something in those stark depths. When the elven man was satisfied that Ares got the message, he made his move, kicking out at Cullen’s sword, sending it clattering to the floor. In the same instant, he lifted his
hand, concentrating his power on the grand chandelier hanging above the war room table, shooting a fireball at it. The wooden thing burst into flames, its ropes snapping, and it crashed down.

Hannibal, Leliana, and Josephine jumped back as the fiery ruin smashed across the table top, instantly setting the map and other documents on fire, hot wax and burning splinters flying. Joxer, Gabrielle, and Autolycus dodged as well, and Bull tugged Ayla to him, retreating from the flames.

The distraction was just what Elgar'nan and Ares needed. The two of them turned to the door, threw it open, and bolted into the passage.

Xena growled and ran after them. One-hundred feet. That’s about how much distance Ares required to put between himself and Alecto’s Charm before the affects subsided. Then, he’d need only a second for his power to recharge.

“Josephine, Leliana, get someone in here to put this fire out!” yelled Hannibal. “Cullen, with me!” He sprinted after Xena.

Iron Bull stood aside while Solas, Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus followed, then he led his wife to safety.

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Ares and Elgar’nan dashed through Josephine’s antechamber. The war god spared a look over his shoulder to see Xena close on their trail. They hurried into the main hall.

“This way!” Ares said. “We need to put more distance between us and Xena!”

Elgar’nan ran after him, robes billowing. They slipped through a side door and out onto a promenade, running into the gardens. Ares didn’t know exactly where he was going. He’d visited the fortress in stealth a few times to spy and that was all. They cut around some tall bushes. Ares saw that the warrior princess still followed, leaping and charging her way for them.

“Up the stairs,” the god said.

Elgar’nan did as he ordered. “I hope you have a plan.”

“Just keep running.”

They ascended two flights to the top of the east wall, the ramparts. Ares snarled, pushing some guards out of the way. He and Elgar’nan reached a wooden door set in one of the guard towers and yanked it open. The inside looked like a storeroom, by the barrels and crates it contained. They exited the door on the far side and reached a place where the wall turned left, except that soldiers were already moving in from that direction.

“Shit,” hissed Ares. He and the elf turned to see Xena, Hannibal, and the others emerge from the storeroom, approaching slowly.

“Just give in, Ares,” Xena said. “Come back to Earth where you belong.”

Ares glared at her. “My place is here. This is my world now. You need to go back.”

“Aphrodite cannot serve as both Love and War. She’s unbalanced! She needs you.”

He gave a dismissing chuff, waving a hand. “She’s been whining about having no excitement in her life the past few millennia. Well, now she’s got it. She’ll be fine.”

Elgar’nan and the god retreated until their backs pressed to cold stone. The elf looked desperately over at him. “Vanish us or something!”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I don’t have my powers right now.” The war god spared a look behind them, to the break in the bulwark, the opening of a merlon. His face hardened and he climbed up. “Come on.”

“What are you doing?” Elgar’nan’s eyes dashed from Ares to their would-be captors.

“Just come up here.”

The elf took a breath and climbed up. His long, pale hair flapped in the mountain wind. He turned and looked over the drop, to the enormous fall and icy ravine below. Elgar’nan faced the enemy again. Particularly, his eyes sought out Solas, narrowing.

“I hope you don’t hate me for this,” Ares said.

“For getting me captured?”

Ares laughed, shaking his head. “No. For this.”

He hugged muscular arms around Elgar’nan and used the strength of his powerful legs to fling them both over the side of the wall. The elf’s scream echoed through the Frostbacks. Hannibal and Xena rushed to the place where they went over, climbing up to see.

(*)
“DO SOMETHING!!!” Elgar’nan yelled as they quickly descended, their arms locked around each another. On one side of them, Skyhold’s stone walls gave way to ancient, frozen rock, the bottom of the ravine zooming closer.

“Wait for it!”

With less than a hundred feet before they’d splat in the chasm, Ares gained the familiar tingle of being recharged. He vanished them, and they materialized on the bed in his quarters at the villa with Elgar’nan on top.

The God of War grinned up at him, all signs of Iron Bull’s assault and attempted murder gone. “I’ve pictured having you like this many times.”

Elgar’nan spat an Elvish curse, smacked him, and climbed off.

(*)

“They disappeared,” Xena voiced, finally stepping down from the merlon. “Dammit. We had him.”

“He’s knows you’re here now, and that throws a rock in his cogs,” Hannibal said.

Xena nodded. “That’s for sure. He wasn’t expecting me to show up in Thedas, so he’ll have to rework his plans to account for my presence. That buys you a bit of time. With the charm, he can’t just pop in uninvited either, and that works greatly in our favor.”

The Inquisitor sighed, his breath expelling as white puffs in the chill air. “Let’s move this back inside so we can talk more. We’ll use Josephine’s office until the war room is cleaned up.”

The group moved from the wall, but Solas stayed behind for a moment, staring at the place where his nemesis stood moments before. Ares had some explaining to do, and he would later. The mage turned and headed for Josephine’s office with the others.
The pursuit of Ares and the stranger caused a small uproar through Skyhold. The Orlesians chattered about it now out in the main hall and the gardens. Most of them witnessed firsthand how the duo sprinted by, chased by the Inquisitor, Xena, and a trail of others. Now, the entire Inner Circle filled Josephine’s office. Joswen’s people and the Chargers were as much a part of the Circle as anyone else, especially at this stage in the game, and each of them was present.

Small murmurs and conversation bustled around the room, speculations about the war god and his friend. Hannibal silently watched everyone for a moment from his place before the cold hearth, arms crossed over his chest. Dorian stood beside him.

“Alright, quiet down,” the Inquisitor’s resonant voice called. He continued when he had everyone’s attention, beginning with a sigh. “This has happened quicker than I anticipated, but we’ve moved to the next stage. Since Ares didn’t show last night, I thought maybe he wouldn’t be able to sense that Xena is here. Seems it just took a little time for him to realize her presence.”

“Aqua eyes narrowed faintly. “The war god has proven that he’s bolder than Corypheus, and apparently even more powerful. Still, thanks to Xena, we have something to subdue him with, the charm. I think it’ll keep him at bay while we prepare to face him again.”

“There’s something you should know about Alecto’s Charm,” Xena entered, once she was sure he finished talking. “If Ares manages to touch it, he’ll neutralize it.”

“He has the power to do that?” asked Cullen.

“Yes.” Xena nodded once.

“And how exactly does that work?” Dorian’s lovely eyes fixed on her. “Surely, something as powerful as the charm can’t simply be rendered useless by touch.”

“That’s just the way it is,” Xena said. “The touch of any Greek god will steal the power of the charm. It would become as useful as a piece of costume jewelry.”

“That…would be bad,” Varric voiced.

Hannibal eyed him. “Yeah, which is why the charm will remain in Xena’s possession, though she offered to let me hang on to it.” He addressed her then, “You’re the most familiar with Ares and how he operates. It’s only logical.”

“Alright,” Xena said.

Hannibal amplified his voice to be heard clearly by everyone. “It’s only going to get harder from here, more dangerous, and I know that each of you will give everything you have in the coming fight. We still don’t know where Corypheus is hiding, but he’ll show up. He has no choice but to do so if he doesn’t want to lose his place to Ares as the ‘one true god of Thedas’.”

“An upside to this is that Ares is very powerful and wants Corypheus gone. He’ll do whatever he can to make that happen,” Josephine said. Her gaze shifted for a moment to Elemir, and she moved closer to him.

“We’ll just have to keep preparing while we wait,” Hannibal said. “Dorian, Iron Bull, Ayla, Leliana, and Sera,” he looked to each of them, “we leave for Val Royeaux tomorrow.”

Bull’s eye slipped across the room. “Solas, you obviously know that Esgal guy, the way you were staring each other down…”

The elf knew it was coming. He also knew it would be reckless and unwise to lie to them. Well, to completely lie, anyway. He nodded. “Yes, I have dealt with him in the past, during my travels.”

“How the absolute fuck did an elf that big keep from becoming some kind of worldwide celebrity? Seriously, he’s the size of a Qunari. I’d think even I would’ve heard of him,” pressed Bull, eye tamed on the elf to gauge his responses, searching for lies.

Solas kept calm. “Perhaps, because he’s very skilled at being secretive.”

“Kinda like you, huh?” Bull stared him down.

Solas’s features ticked the tiniest smirk, highly disapproving.

“What kind of history do you two have?” Hannibal asked.

“With all due respect, Inquisitor, I will not go deeply into it. We had a disagreement that eventually transformed into an all-out hatred of one another,” Solas replied evenly. “The important thing to know is that he cannot be trusted. He is as power-hungry and nefarious as Ares, though I am quite curious to know how they crossed paths.”

Curious, indeed. He’d hidden their prison well, deep within a particularly remote sector of the Fade. He never anticipated that Ares would simply stumble upon it, though he probably should
have, considering the war god had stolen the 'key'.

Hannibal’s eyes went to Iron Bull, then Solas. Since that morning in Lothering, at the breakfast table in Millie’s where Bull revealed that the elf was lying about something, Hannibal’s trust in Solas had dwindled a bit. The fact that he didn’t want to elaborate on his dealings with Esgal’Arad only elevated the Inquisitor’s suspicions.

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The rest of the day passed in relative silence inside Skyhold. Silent in the sense that nothing of interest happened. Children still played tag in the yards and had snowball fights. Vendors still tended to their commerce. Warriors still sparred. Life went on. Iron Bull and Ayla decided to eat in for dinner, so he prepared a tender cut of lamb, potatoes with butter and spices, corn on the cob, and rolls.

Bull ate slowly, watching her devour the food on her plate like it would vanish at any moment. He chuckled softly. “It’s not going anywhere, Ayla.”

“Hm?” Eyes flew up to him, her cheeks puffed out, filled with part of a dinner roll. She chewed it and swallowed. “It’s delicious.”

“I get that, but you need to slow down.”

The woman smirked and went back to eating.

Iron Bull’s loving smile appeared a bit distracted. He hadn’t eaten as much of his food as he usually did. The burden of his thoughts had sapped some of his appetite. When she finished, he cleared the table and washed the dishes. They settled on the great-bear rug in front of the fireplace afterwards with her wrapped in his arms, both staring at the flames, listening to wood pop and snap.

“You were really going to kill him, weren’t you?” she asked softly.

“Yes.” Bull sighed. “He was right there. I had him.”

Ayla turned in his arms to see his face. “Iron Bull, my darling, you don’t have to seek vengeance on him because of me.”

“I most certainly do. You’re my wife, and he…he…” He frowned. “Well, you know what he did.”

“In the end, Ares didn’t hurt me.”

“He could have.”

“But he didn’t.” A sigh tumbled from the Oona, and she nuzzled him. “As much as I don’t like him and it wouldn’t make me sad if he died, I don’t think exacting revenge on him is the way. I want you to promise that you won’t try to kill him again.”

“Ayla…I can’t promise that.”

“Assuming you found a way to not only drain his power and strength but also make him mortal, would you truly kill him, knowing that his death could destroy countless other lives in Xena’s world?”

They locked eyes. Iron Bull considered what she asked for long while, then sighed, shaking his head. “No, I guess not.”

“Of course, you couldn’t, my love. You have a good heart.” Ayla’s dimples stood out when she smiled.

Bull glided fingers back along her cheek, through thick, tight, snowy ringlets. “It beats for you, only you,” he whispered, his smiling lips capturing hers for a kiss.

Someone knocked at the door.

Bull issued an irritated groan, and pulled away, standing. Ayla listened while he crossed the room and opened the door. The Qunari grinned broadly.

“Hey, Krem de la Krem! What’s up?”

Krem smiled and shook his head at the nickname, running a hand over his hair. His eyes skimmed Bull’s attire, only a pair of cotton bed pants. “Um…is this a bad time?”

“Nope. Whatcha need?”

“I just wanted to talk for a moment. Can I come in?”

“Sure.” Bull stepped back and further opened the door to let his lieutenant enter.

Krem’s eyes went to Ayla, the woman sitting on the fur rug dressed in a short-sleeved, pale-blue nightgown that covered her from neck to ankles, hair tumbling over her shoulders and down her back. Her startling, blind vision fixed in their general direction. “Good evening, Ayla.”
“Hello, Krem.” She grinned and waved.

Bull lowered next to Ayla, pulling her into his arms. One large hand indicated the table, and Krem took a seat. “How’s your father settling in?”

“Oh, he’s good. In the library right now splurging on his love of books. He’s just happy to be alive, to be free,” Krem’s voice tapered off, cracking a little. He was still emotional at being reunited, understandably enough. Brown eyes swept around the couple’s quarters, falling on the portrait above the hearth. “That’s some great work there. When’d you have it done?”

“It’s a gift from Ayla for Winter Solstice.”

The woman chuckled. “Dorian and I formed a plan so the artist Lucien Po here in Skyhold could get what he needed to make it.”

“It sure is something. He really captured you two.” Krem nodded shortly.

A round of silence passed between them. Iron Bull watched his lieutenant carefully. “What’s bothering you?”

Krem released a slow sigh. “It’s nothing really. I, uh, just wanted to let you know I’ve decided to…to leave the Chargers once everything’s done. Once Ares and Corypheus are taken care of. My father and I are going to get a place in the country, a small farm maybe, and settle down. Maryden might also come along, since she and I have gotten closer.” He shrugged, looking away from the stung look on Bull’s face.

Bull stiffened, and Ayla sensed it. He finally nodded. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“Father’s getting old, ye know? Doesn’t need to be ripping around the land with me, so I’ll just stay with him.”

The Qunari hoisted a smile. “Well, it’s not for a while yet, right? So, no long faces.”

“No, not for a while.” Krem tipped a crooked grin. “I’m sorry to dump this on you, Chief. It’s just…I’ve been thinking on it all day and wasn’t going to be able to sleep until I spoke to you.”

“I understand. Did you tell the others?”

“Not yet. I wanted to talk with you first. I’ll gather ‘em up soon enough and let them know my decision.” With that, Krem stood, striding for the door. He turned to Bull and Ayla, the Qunari already rising to see him out. “Have a nice night, then. And don’t keep him up too late, Ayla. You two are leaving tomorrow, yeah?”

Krem chuckled himself out of the room, while Ayla shook her head, smiling after him. Bull locked the door, then led her to the bed, where he stretched out to stare up at the ceiling and she cuddled against him.

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High-class chamber music pleasantly drifted through Villa Maurel’s entertainment parlor, a string trio situated near the patio exit. Elgar’nan couldn’t stand most things about humans, though he’d admit they created a fine and elegant type of music. He stood in the middle of his room, the area lit with a few candles, a lamp, and the fireplace. At his sides, hands clenched into fists.

“Ares, where are you? I know you can hear me. Where are you, dammit? Come to me now!”

“You know, you elves are a bossy lot, though Elgar’nan is definitely more of a diva than you.”

Solas spun and watched the God of War walk from the shadows gathered in one corner, refreshed and looking as if his one-sided brawl with Iron Bull had never occurred. “When did you release them? Have any of them regained their godly powers? Where—”

“Whoa. Slow down,” Ares said, arms crossing his chest. “I think the best thing to do is take you to Elgar’nan. He’s more equipped to explain the…” he paused to seek the right wording, curling a hard smile, “…situation involving the rest of the Evanuris.”

“Agreed. That is why I called you here, so you can take me to them,” Solas replied tightly.

“Alright. I figured you’d be calling me after what happened earlier, and you should know that I’ve gotten Elgar’nan to agree on civil communication.” Ares eyed him sternly. “This means there will be no fighting, no fireballs and all that flying through the air, fucking up my place. The two of you are just going to talk, and then you’ll listen to what I have to say. Do you agree to the terms?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Oh, you won’t be needing that,” the god said when Solas moved to grab his stave. “Leave it. Take my hand.” He held it out to the elf.

(*)
Elgar’nan turned slowly, doing better to temper his emotions at the sight of his nemesis. “Fen’Harel. Finally, we’re free to chat. Care for a drink? Oh, wait. You don’t drink,” he mused, his tall form gliding through the room for a settee, where he lowered and sipped his wine.

Solas remained where he stood, while Ares settled in a chair, leathered legs outstretched, crossed at the ankles, and eyes moving between both elves. “Out!” He boomed, and the musicians instantly stopped playing, scurrying from the room. “Relax, Solas—or should I call you Fen’Harel?”

The slender man spared him a glance, then focused on Elgar’nan. “Where are the others?”

“Ah, yes, the others,” he started, appearing as bold and snide as ever. “Hm. Where are they, indeed? When you trapped us in the Fade, it began to drain us, to kill us. We knew we didn’t have much time.”

“I supplied resting chambers and an orenute”—the mystical pyramid-shaped item that was to link their minds together while in Uthenera so they could share a dream state—“which should’ve allowed you to sleep.”

“How thoughtful,” Elgar’nan replied almost too sweetly. “The thing is, that never would’ve worked. That part of the Fade was too poisonous for us to survive either way.”

Solas’s eyes narrowed. “Yet, here you are.”

“We decided that at least one of us should live to have vengeance.”

“More like you decided.”

Elgar’nan sipped more wine, the stem of the glass clutched between his fingers, the vessel resting in his palm. “Yes, you’re right about that,” he said flippantly. “I decided that I should live. After all, I am—was—the King of the Evanuris. I arranged it so that while we were in our sarcophagi, my Orb of Destruction drained their orbs to keep me alive. I would not have had to do it, were it not for your meddlesomeness, Fen’Harel. I don’t know why you believed the elves weren’t well-off. Like any other people, they need guidance. They need to be led.”

“You sound like Ares.”

Elgar’nan snorted. “There’s no need to insult me.” His eyes shot momentarily to the war god. “No offense to you.”

Ares grinned, features casual and amused. “Ha. None taken. Listening to you two go back and forth reminds me of a good daytime soap opera. Please, continue.”

Both elves displayed mild confusion, as Ares often said things that made no sense to them, references to other worlds and such likely.

Solas dropped a hefty breath, a staggered sigh, shaking his head. “I…never meant for anyone to die.”

“As long as you realize their deaths are on your hands. They’d be alive now and Arlathan, our great empire, would still be standing strong, were it not for you.” He twisted a pleased smile when Solas’s features sank, making him appear even sadder. “But, that’s all in the past. It’s time to think of what’s happening here and now.”

Ares spoke up. “What if I told you there’s a way to restore your people, to make it so the tragic, pitiful past of the elves never happened, that they could be as golden as they ever were?”

Solas was no fool and would, therefore, never really trust Ares. However, the words that flowed from his trickster tongue held quite a bit of intrigue. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m afraid I can’t give you details, not just yet, but there are things in the workings. Eventually, I’m going to need your help. I need to know you’re with me when it’s time to make my move.”

Solas deliberated over what was said, thinking carefully on his reply. “Something tells me I won’t have much of a choice either way, no matter if I agree to help you or not.”

The God of War leaned forward in his seat, fingers gripping his bearded chin. He rumbled a low chuckle. “You’ll just have to trust me, won’t you, Bold-Bald-and-Beautiful.”

The slim mage wrinkled his nose at the situation, sighing. Ares did possess the Anchor, and perhaps his plan involved using it. Solas was sinking deeper and deeper into the well of deceit and lies, but if there was a chance his people could be restored...

(*)

The next morning, after an early rise and a hearty breakfast, Hannibal and his party set out from Skyhold. Xena stood beside Cullen in the lower courtyard watching the horses file out. She turned to him when the gate lowered.

“How long do you think it’ll take them to get back, commander?”

“It will depend on how long it takes to handle business in the city as well as traveling conditions.
This is the season for snow storms in these mountains. Should they encounter one on the way down the western slope, they might get delayed a day. Usually, however, a trip to Val Royeaux and back takes less than two weeks.”

Xena nodded thoughtfully. “My people and I will pitch in here however you need.”

“That’s good to know. I think I’ll just continue to familiarize you with our world, the people it contains, diplomatic relationships and such. Should prove useful to you, knowing how to approach non-humans.” The man sprang a handsome smile. “There are many cultural differences.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. So, where’s the training area? I’d like to see the skills of those I’ll be fighting alongside.”

“This way.”

They started from the lower courtyard.

(*)

Ayla loved the snow. She liked watching it fall from the slatey, low ceiling of clouds above. It was one of her favorite sights since she’d bonded with Iron Bull. It had been two days since they left Skyhold, lucky not to have hit a storm on the way down from the mountains. They traveled across The Dales now, en route to the next Inquisition camp. Evening wasn’t far off. She shifted and stretched in the saddle in front of Iron Bull, wearing a lighter jacket fitting of temperatures in the valley.

“How ya doin, Naaremma?”

“I’m good. Tired. I’m looking forward to reaching camp so I can eat. I’m so hungry.”

“Mm.” He chuckled, shifting both reins to one hand so he could dig in the saddle bag. “Here.”

Ayla grabbed the apple and smiled. “Thanks, my love. This should hold me until then.”

“Let’s hope so,” Bull laughed some more. “We’ll need to restock on traveling food, since you’ve eaten most of it. We run out, I guess you’ll have to eat the elk.”

The creature upon whose back they rode chuffed and blared a sound of protest.

The couple chuckled.

(*)

That night at the camp was quiet. Hannibal tended to his usual, making rounds, receiving first-hand reports and updates. Leliana accompanied him for most of it. Dorian lingered in his and Hannibal’s tent primarily, coming out for a little food and more than a little drink. He’d be nice and toasty by the time his Amatus returned. Sera got comfortable with a group of soldiers playing Wicked Grace. She wasn’t the best player, but she was good at bluffing, which made it rather easy to win a nice little purse from them.

Bull and Ayla sat by one of the fire pits. He’d finished eating and now sipped on a perfect cup of creamy, rich, hot cocoa. He loved the stuff, but it was hard to find a good blend. This one came from Halamshiral, containing the slight tang of full-bodied coffee. It was damn delicious.

His eye lingered amusedly on Ayla, his hand resting gently behind her neck. She’d eaten two hearty plates of roasted chicken, potatoes, and carrots, and currently munched on a tangy red plum. She reached for the little bottle of fire-pepper sauce and shook some onto the fruit, then ate it, humming happily to herself.

A smirk ghosted his smile, brow lifting.

Ayla saw him staring. “What? It’s good. It’s the perfect mix of tart, sweet, and spicy. Want some?” She held the hot sauce-doused fruit out to him.

“Um, no. That’s all you.” Bull shook his head.

She shrugged and continued eating.

(*)

A short while later, they headed to their tent. Bull stripped and laid back, waiting for her to do the same. When she was done, Ayla made contact, settling close to his hot, naked body. The Qunari groaned sensuously and kissed her. She returned the kiss, but only for a moment, stilling him when he started to roll over on her.

“I’m sorry, Bull. I’m really tired tonight.” Ayla’s crisp eyes looked up at him in the dimness. She stroked a hand over his bearded cheek.

He smiled tenderly, nodding, knowing that this, along with her random cravings for strange stuff, was due to the pregnancy. Since they’d made it official, she’d never turned him down for sex. “I understand. Traveling always wears you down.”

“Yes,” she sighed, smiled, and stretched, nestling close.
Bull pulled the covers up over them, then settled to his back. It wouldn't be long now. There was no way she'd be able to ignore her condition for much longer. He smiled, eventually falling into slumber with her.

(*)

“Bull…”

“Mm…” he riled awake, opening his eye. He could tell it was still dark out. The man whispered his response, “What’s wrong, Naareemma? Gotta pee?”

She moaned, and it sounded utterly miserable. “I think I’m going to be sick. No, I am going to be sick.”

That got him alert and moving. Iron Bull quickly pulled on his briefs, and grabbed her hand, wrapping the covers around her. Ayla groaned, her other hand clasped over her mouth, the inside of which had grown juicy with bile and saliva. He yanked back the tent flap and hurried them out into the darkened pre-dawn. She lurched once, then twice. Bull got her around to the side of the tent, facing outward, and a second later she bent over and gagged, spewing the contents of her stomach all over the grass. He held her hair back, while she clutched the covers to her bosom, keeping her nudity covered. She trembled a few breaths and threw up again, coughing.

Ayla inhaled and exhaled evenly. She finally stood fully erect, shoulders slumped.

Bull kissed her brow. “Feeling better?”

“Y-yes.”

“I’ll get you a towel. One moment.”

She waited while he slipped in the tent, then came right back, handing the cloth over. She wiped her mouth. Bull grabbed her hand to lend sight, then gave her a water skin. She tilted her head back, pouring some in her mouth, swishing, spitting.

“Thanks.”

“Heh, what’s a husband for, if not holding back his wife’s hair while she’s puking?” Though his tone was humorous, the Qunari’s expression harbored a little concern. He couldn’t do this anymore. “C’mom, let’s go back inside, if you’re sure you’re done.”

Ayla nodded. “Yes, I should be good.” She tried to smile. “It’s probably all this stress and excitement. Xena’s here now, and we could be facing Ares and Corypheus any moment.”

He held the flap open for her. She sat on their bed roll and immediately started pulling at her hair, drawing it over one shoulder, eyes wandering off in thought. Iron Bull lowered beside her, his thigh pressed to hers.

The man took a breath and said, “Ayla, when was the last time you bled?” He didn’t ask the question to obtain an actual answer. He already knew it had been a while, and now it was time for her to put the pieces together, sooner rather than later.

Her head snapped around, and she made a disgusted sound, smirking thickly at the blatant and private question, though she shouldn’t have been surprised. He was her mate. Ayla thought on it, shaking her head. “I didn’t. You did while you were in my body. Actually, I’m a few weeks late…” And then it dawned on her. Dazzling eyes widened and she drew a long, shaky gasp. “You stopped taking the dhaya juice! When!”

Iron Bull didn’t look at her for a moment, somewhat ashamed but not really. “The day we started having sex.”

“Why!” she demanded.

The man looked squarely at her. “Because I knew before we ever got physical that I wanted to have babies with you. So…I stopped.”

Ayla crossed arms over her chest, glaring at him. “Well, that explains the cleanse and why you’ve been treating me more fragile than usual. Though, that would mean you knew I was pregnant.”

Bull nodded. “I’ve known since we visited the east. A certain someone spoke to me with their mind when we first entered, confirming with just three words that they knew you carried our child.”

“What three words?”

He grinned. “‘Virile, aren’t you?’ That’s what they said to me. At first, I didn’t fully understand, but I recalled how they examined you right before that, when you hugged. Their eyes lingered over your midriff. I caught it.”

“And I didn’t, though I suppose I wouldn’t have if you and I weren’t touching at that moment.”

Ayla moved both hands to her belly, still relatively flat. She stared down at it, caressing. “How could I not know? I should’ve at least been able to sense it from your thoughts, our bond.”

Iron Bull wrapped his arm around her. “As you said, Naaremma, there’s been a lot going on. On
top of that, you’ve never been pregnant before, don’t know what to expect, so it was easy to overlook. And let’s just say I’ve gotten good at masking my thoughts and emotions from you when I truly want to.”

Ayla pulled back to look him in the eye, shaking her head slowly, astonishment painted over her features, eyes narrowed. “This was part of your plan? Getting me pregnant so I wouldn’t be able to join the fight when it came?”

He didn’t answer immediately. “Not at first, but it occurred to me that if you were with child, there was no way you’d be going out to battle.”

“I can’t believe you.” A small hand smacked his chest. “I cannot believe you.” She wanted to scream with all her might at him, but kept her voice low and between them. “I will not be stuck on the sidelines. I have obligations to help our friends. We’ve been practicing and training together so that I may stand with them against our enemy! They’re counting on me, and this isn’t going to stop me, Finn!”

An uneasy silence entered the tent, bringing with it an air of ominousness, like a dark precursor.

“Finn?” Bull’s eye squinted at her. “Who’s that?”

Ayla shook her head. “I…don’t know…but I got the strangest feeling just then. I don’t know anyone with that name.” Another thoughtful silence passed, before she brushed it off, frowning lightly. “Don’t try to change the subject. I’m fighting when it comes time to do so, and that’s that. Though…I suppose you’re not completely at fault. It’s not like I was taking the dhaya juice while in your body. With everything going on, I was completely distracted. Come to think of it, I never once saw you take it after we made things official.”

Iron Bull smiled softly, pulling her against him again. “I think you got pregnant that first morning after we switched back. Is the thought of having children with me so bad?”

“Oh, my darling.” Ayla snuggled into her husband. “Of course, it’s not bad. I very much want to, it’s just…things are so dire right now.”

“Are you still angry?”

“No. I’m scared.”

“You don’t have to fight, Ayla. You can go back east, where you and the baby will be safe.”

“I can’t do that,” she replied very softly, shaking her head. “Don’t you see? Our baby is in danger either way, whether I stay and fight or not. The whole world is in danger. If we don’t stop the threats, it will be born in a world under the rule of either Ares or Corypheus, and it’s looking more like the former. At least if I fight, we have a better chance to win. Should we prevail, the baby and all of Thedas has a future far brighter than if we lose. I have to fight, Bull. The others cannot know of my condition. They’ll certainly try to remove me from battle.”

“You won’t be able to hide it for much longer. The way you’re taking in food, the weird cravings, pissing like a horse, and now nausea. They’ll find out soon.”

“Then, let’s hope we face our enemy before I’m too big to move. Promise me you won’t tell the Inquisitor or anyone else. I’ll do it when the time is right, if they don’t find out beforehand. Promise me.”

The Qunari’s great figure sighed. “Alright, I won’t tell.” He held her close a moment, then leaned over the bedroll to dig something from his traveling bag.

Ayla studied the little wooden toy dragon he set in her hands. It wasn’t done, still needing a bit more detail and refinement, but it was impressive. “You…carved this?”

“Yes,” he said and smiled. “Been working on it for a couple of weeks.”

“Boy or girl, I know they’ll love it, Bull.” Ayla sighed and fell limply into him, hugging.

He rubbed her shoulder and leaned back, taking her with him, and they resettled. “I love you both more than anything, you and Little Bean.”

She chuckled softly at his nickname for the baby, hand draped over the muscled plane of his stomach. “I know, my warrior, I know…”
Chapter End Notes

I do not own any of the images depicted. Iron Bull’s pic was found randomly. The woman in Ayla’s pic is Gambian model Melvin, and the awesomely androgynous female model depicting Krem is Rain Dove.

I swear, I’m like totally crushing on Krem now. LOL.
“Hey, look here.”

Dorian turned and frowned softly into the high-definition mini-cam pointed at him. “Is that thing on? Are you recording me?” Absently, he traced a finger back over his hair, making sure not a strand was out of place.

“Trying to,” Warren Mallory, the actor portraying Ares in the Fic, replied and grinned. Both men stood by a fountain in Caldoria Botanical Gardens. Warren arrived a moment ago, while Dorian had been there for almost half an hour lingering around the gardens with other guests and awaiting admittance into the section where the wedding ceremony would take place. The taller, broader man put his camera back in the bag slung over his chest, then held his arms out, spinning slowly. “How do I look?”

Dorian’s vision took in every bit of him, and he heated up faintly. The man looked quite yummy in his dark blue suit, the jacket open to reveal a matching vest, tie, and white shirt. He cleared his throat, primping his moustache. “Not bad. Nice suit.”


“Oh, nothing. Just didn’t figure you’d show up.”

“Hell, I was surprised I even got an invitation, seeing as I’m not as close to the main group of you. I’ve knocked back a few with Hannibal a couple of times though.”

Dorian chuckled. “Come now. You’re practically family, as much trouble as you’re causing in-story.”

“Yeah, well, just because I play a villain doesn’t mean I’m not a decent guy outside of the acting.”

“Mm, I’m sure.” Dorian’s fingers found his bowtie and fiddled at it, watching Warren. They lingered in anticipation-charged silence.

“It’s good to see you could make it, Warren,” came another voice. They turned to see Ayla and Iron Bull stopping by them. Ayla looked stunning, as always, fitted in a stylish, maroon dress, her thick hair pulled up and back. She smiled and continued. “Hannibal said you messaged him a couple days back saying you weren’t coming because of some business up in Kirkwall.”

“Oh, yeah, that.” The Tevinter-born man shrugged casually. “Eh, let’s just say I…thought I knew who I was involved with, and I was going to go up there to surprise him, you know, with flowers, candy, the whole shebang. Only to find out he wasn’t as serious about the relationship as I was.” Warren chuckled dryly, shaking his head. “Before I got on the plane, I received a Facebook message containing a picture of him and some guy in a kissing-selfie. His way of telling me we were done, I guess.”

“Wow, what a fucking dick,” Bull said. The suit he wore hugged his huge form just right, biceps and impressive chest bulging against fine material.

“It’s all good, man. I should’ve seen it coming,” Warren said, features brushed softly with a smile, which blossomed into a big grin. “Enough about that, though. I hear you two are actually expecting a little one? Should work well with the Fic.”

“Yep, adding a third face to the brood,” Bull replied proudly, arm going around his wife. Their seven-year-old son and four-year-old daughter were with Ayla’s parents. The ceremony wasn’t going to be very long, and those attending consisted of Fic cast members, the parents of the grooms, and a few other close friends.

“Well, congrats.”

Ayla’s stark eyes lit happily at Warren. “Thank you.” Her gaze jerked behind them to where the rest of the guests were finally filing in. “Let’s go! I want to get a good seat.”

“Okay, babe,” Bull said, and they headed in.

Warren and Dorian walked behind them.

“I’m really sorry about what happened with your ex,” the out-of-story Altus remarked stiffly, hoping he didn’t make Warren uneasy with the statement. “If anyone knows about shitty relationships, it’s me.”

The attractively tanned man chuckled and nudged him. “C’mon. You’re uber-hot. You could have anyone you want.”

“Says the uber-hot guy who got dumped,” Dorian chuffed, features humored.

Resonate, rich laughter filled the air, and Warren nodded. “Okay, okay, touché.” A little silence
passed between them. “So, you think I’m hot, huh?”

“Pff. You know you are.” They reached the archway of greenery and flowers to the wedding party, perfectly trimmed hedges flanking the wide path. “I’m sure you’re not ignorant to your looks and how others react to being in the presence of such a gorgeous man.”

“Um…” Warren tilted a boyish smile.

“Blushing, are you? It’s cute.” Dorian winked.

They reached the end of the decorated path to the main designated area, stepping through the threshold. It was spacious yet quaint, just right for the kind of ceremony Hannibal and Solas had in mind. Guests stood about chatting and sipping drinks. A caterer oversaw the tables of food and the cake, everything covered until after the ceremony. Just to the left of Dorian and Warren was a table situated neatly with gifts, beside which stood Josephine, wearing a cute, emerald-green dress.

She waved them over, grinning. “How sweet! You two decided to come as dates! You guys look great!” she cooed.

This caught Dorian off-guard. He cleared his throat and nearly fumbled for the words. “Well… uh…we’re not…”

Warren hooked his arm through the smaller man’s, meeting his flummoxed gaze. He winked and smiled, causing Dorian to relax. Warren looked to Josephine, “Yeah, well, it seemed only fitting that I show up with the fairest of them all, right? I am the God of War.”

The trio shared a laugh, Dorian sneaking small looks at the man by his side. He didn’t know how to slow his heart from the gentle gallop it achieved since Warren linked arms with him. He’d never really gotten to know the man out-of-story, never thought he’d be so…charming in real life. By the Maker, he certainly had the looks, but to be an overall package? That would be nice. And Dorian wouldn’t get his hopes up. The guy was most likely as superficial and “temporary” as most other men Dorian dealt with. He decided to play along, since there was no harm in that.

The alternate persona of the Inquisition’s ambassador flicked her sultry brown eyes from one man to the other. “You didn’t bring gifts?”

“Oh,” Warren answered. “My gift is an online thing.”

“Really! Mine too!” Dorian beamed. “I arranged a private chef for them, three times a week for a month. He’ll cook them breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“Nice. I managed to get Hannibal to spill where they’re honeymooning. The Jamaican Isles off the south coast of Seheron. Very beautiful area. White sand beaches and warm, crystal-clear water.”

Warren’s vision moved between Josephine and Dorian. “Anyway, let’s just say they’ll get a nice surprise when they arrive at their hotel and find out they’ve been upgraded to the Royal Suite complete with the royal treatment.”

Dorian’s hand went delicately to his chest, a couple of rings adorning his fine fingers. “What a gift,” he breathed.

“Indeed,” said Josephine. “They’re so lucky. I wish I was going. Joswen and I went to a bed and breakfast in The Anderfels for our honeymoon. It was so peaceful and lovely. Seems so long ago.” The couple had been married for several years. The strong-featured man received his part in the Fic due to his striking appearance and his affiliation with Josephine.

“Where is the other half of Jos-Two?” quirked Dorian, smiling.

“Around here somewhere. If the refreshment tables were open, you’d probably find him there.” She giggled.

“Well, shall we get to mingling, love?” Warren’s smooth voice drifted out, his eyes on Dorian, who merely stared up at him once again wearing his flabbergasted face.

“Um…okay.”

“Talk to you later, Josie,” Warren said, then suavely pivoted and led Dorian off. He spoke when they were further away from the woman, his tone holding humor. “You need to loosen up some.”

“And how am I to do that? Everyone will now presume that we’re together.”

“Ah, well, let ‘em.” Warren chuckled.

They walked by a string quartet who was settling in, testing their cellos and violins, tuning them. To the right was the seating area—a few neat rows with an aisle cutting down the center. At the front rose a small pavilion decorated with white flowers and ribbons. Hannibal waited there with the priest. The in-story Inquisitor’s striking aqua eyes fell on them and he grinned, giving an up-nod. Warren and Dorian approached him, unlinking their arms so Warren could give a “bro” handshake to Hannibal.

“Well, well. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised you two hooked up.”

Dorian smirked and spoke before Warren could. “We’re not together. We’re just…friend-dates.”
Hannibal lifted a red brow, amusement sketching his features. “Friend-dates. Okay.”

“It’s true,” Warren replied. “Didn’t even come here together. Met up outside. I took his arm and commanded that he be my date for the occasion.”

“I see.” Hannibal nodded. “You guys look awesome together anyway.”

Dorian shifted from one foot to the other, twisting his moustache, a thing he did when nervous, embarrassed, or uneasy. He cleared his throat and lifted a soft smile, eyes roaming over the flame-haired man. “You look very handsome, Inquisitor. Your tuxedo fits like they sewed you into it.”

Hannibal chuckled. “Hey now, no Fic-talk here. This is a time to not even think about it. And stop giving me bedroom eyes. Solas is already jealous of our in-story relationship as is.”

“Hm,” Dorian mused. “I’m the one that should be jealous. He has you for real and is about to marry you.”

Warren took his smaller hand, smiling. “Well, you’re stuck with me now, so accept it.”

Again, Dorian’s heart fluttered and raced. Why was the man teasing him so? Of course, it was all meant in jest, but it almost seemed borderline cruel. Getting his hopes up, if only a little. He sighed and allowed his smile to deepen. “Oh, goodness. Whatever shall I do?”

The two men’s gazes adhered, and time appeared to slow while each of them contemplated the feelings they harbored for the other. Hannibal’s deep voice pulled them back.

“Ceremony’s about to start. You two should take seats, hm?” He saw the tiny spark between them, desperately trying to ignite the kindling, and it made him smile further. Hannibal knew Dorian’s past relationships had been more destructive than anything, eating away at the man’s trust in other people. He didn’t know much about Warren’s relationship history, but he’d had drinks with the guy a few times, and he was confident enough in their friendship to say he was nothing like his Fic counterpart. Warren was a good guy. Hopefully, he’d be good for Dorian.

Both men sat with the crowd, finding seats on the right side in the third row. Dorian decided not to question what was happening between them. He’d address it later, since the quartet had struck up the wedding march. The crowd fizzled into complete silence and everyone turned over their shoulders to watch as Solas was led down the aisle by his father. It was easy to tell they were related. Solas wore a tailored white tuxedo, which contrasted perfectly to the black one Hannibal wore. The tails of his coat were longer, reaching to his calves, symbolic of the train on a bride’s gown, Dorian guessed. The elf looked stunning, lavender eyes fixed on the man he loved as he proceeded.

Fifteen minutes later, Solas stood with his back to everyone and tossed his bouquet into the crowd, ushering in cheers and laughter. Dorian, of course, didn’t catch it, adding to his wedding day blues. He was happy for them, but sad for himself. He’d never meet the right guy.

Now, the alter-Altus found a spot by the open refreshment tables, sipping champagne and watching Warren move through the guests, mingling. He shared words with Varric, Cassandra, Cole, and Elemir, each of them bunched in a chatting group. Then, lavender-flecked eyes followed the muscular hunk of man over to Hannibal, Solas, and their parents. The Qunari’s folks were human, as he was adopted, and Solas was the younger spitting image of his father, but with the softness of his mother’s eyes. Dorian perked when the man made his way back over.

“You’re comfortable working parties, I see.” He finished off his drink.

Warren chuckled. “It’s a skill I’ve built up over the years. Would you believe I was shy as a schoolboy up until my late teens?”

“I can’t imagine.” Dorian couldn’t help when his eyes roamed the man, devouring him. Alcohol made him even bolder, certainly more amorous. He set his glass down to a section of the table for empty ones, then grabbed a full one. “Cheers.”

Bull and Ayla walked up, the great Qunari rumbling with chuckles. “Better slow down there, buddy, or we might find ourselves digging you out of the cake or something.”

Dorian chuffed. “I don’t plan on getting sauced, and I’d need something stronger than champagne if I did. Besides, I took a taxi here so I could get my drink on, so let a lonely, old hag have her fun, hm?”

“Yeah, that’s where it helps to have a pregnant wife. She can’t drink, so she can drive, while I get nice and lit.” Iron Bull grinned.

Ayla narrowed eyes at him. “Oh, so that’s why I’m pregnant now, because you need a designated driver?”

“I’m just gonna shut up now.”

The woman loosened up, feeling bad for snapping at him. He was such a big sweetie. She smiled and grabbed his arm, hugging close. Bull kissed the top of her white-locked head.

Warren smirked lightly, reading Dorian’s vibe as surely as if it were scribbled in a book. The man
had been hurt more times than he cared to admit and was content to push people away. His large, warm hand gripped and massaged Dorian’s shoulder. “C’mon, don’t be like that. This is a happy occasion, after all.”

“What? I don’t look happy?”

“You look annoyed.” Warren said simply. The classy string section was only there to provide the wedding march for the more effeminate groom. Now, a deejay started up something more upbeat, ‘It Must Be Love,” by elvhen artist Alan Jackson. The handsome man grinned. “I love this song. You’re dancing with me.”

“But…” Dorian frowned when Warren carefully removed the champagne glass from his fingers and set it to the table. Then, he grabbed Dorian’s hand and pulled him to the dancing area.

Ayla and Bull smiled after them, and she remarked, “They really do look great together, hm?”

“Yeah.”

Other couples hit the dancefloor too, including the grooms. Warren firmly gripped Dorian’s hip and tugged him close so their bodies touched, their hands linked. He started singing along with Mr. Jackson, grinning broadly while he expertly moved his body, leading their dance.

“First, I get cold and hot, think I’m on fire, but I’m not. Oh, what I pain I’ve got. It must be love. There’s nothing I can do. All that I want is you. Look what I’m going through; it must be love…”

The chorus came in and Warren spun his partner around smoothly, pulling him in close again, hips swaying, their bodies flush together.

Dorian’s stiffness eventually subsided and he let the man lead, a delicate hand perched on his broad, solid shoulder. He chuckled, shaking his head. “Warren, you’re absolutely the silliest man I know.”

“Now, there’s the smile I want. You can call me War. Most of my friends do.”

“Ha. So fitting, considering your in-story counterpart.”

A quick shrug. “Guess, I was born to play the role.”

“So it would seem.” Dorian watched him closely, trying to find the slightest hint of lesser intentions or ulterior motives in that roguish, bearded smile and the glimmering brown gems of his eyes. But he could see nothing. It all seemed so…genuine. Alan Jackson and his band played on.

“What are you getting at?”

“What do you mean?”

“There has to be a reason you’re coming on to me. Perhaps, you think you’ll get a quick fuck after the party? Because if that’s the case, I’m not interested.”

“Dorian….” Warren stopped their pace, and they stood amidst the other dancers staring into each other’s faces. He shook his head. “I don’t want anything from you. I just like your company. I like you. Truthfully, I have since I joined the cast. Up until recently, I couldn’t act on any feelings because, well… I was with someone. And I’m not the cheating type,” Warren suddenly smiled down at him, head tilting. “Is that why you’re acting like this? Already got me pegged out as a playboy, huh?”

The out-of-story Altus drizzled a sigh, looking down. “I’m… sorry… it’s just, I haven’t had the best luck with relationships. It’s always been easy come, easy go.” He met Warren’s eyes again.

“It’s alright. I get it. As you heard earlier, been hitting a few rough patches myself.” The backs of manicured fingers stroked Dorian’s cheek. “How about we go on a real date and see where it goes from there.”

“Oh… alright.”

“Good! What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Besides washing my hair, nothing.”

“Okay, I’ll pick you up at seven. We’ll go out to dinner, then bowling afterwards. I’ll give you my cell number before we break from here.”

Dorian blinked a few times. That went fast. “Bowling?” He chuckled. “Haven’t been in a while. I’m afraid I won’t be much competition.”

“It’s all good. I do it for fun, not competition.”

“Alright then, War. It’s a date.”

Though he was scared at the prospect of putting himself out there again, of facing the possibility of heartbreak, Dorian also experienced a rejuvenating excitement. Warren had proven already that he was several steps above other guys, but they’d have to go on more than one date for Dorian to see what he was really about.

The new couple danced amongst friends and enjoyed the wedding party, reluctant to leave each
other’s side for the remainder of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a link to “It Must Be Love.” One of my faves. :)  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpdpvkyufm4
The next day started like most other days when out on the road—up and at ‘em early. Bull got a decent amount of rest, but he knew the same couldn’t be said of Ayla. Usually, her soft snoring served as a monotonous metronome for him, lulling him to sleep. All through the remainder of the night, three or four hours’ worth, there had been no snoring. The woman tossed and turned beside him, unable to get back to sleep. Now, with the sun still low in the eastern sky and translucent tendrils of mist creeping across the grassy plain, Ayla sat on a fur-covered chest near a fire pit. She stared at nothing really, her mind still processing the pregnancy. Her abundant, kinky white tresses tumbled wildly down her back and over her shoulders. She looked slightly disheveled and exhausted, but no less beautiful. The hint of a smile poked her lips, hands resting in her lap, resisting the urge to caress her abdomen.

The Iron Bull glanced at her several times while he restocked their traveling bags, securing them and his weapon to the hart’s saddle. He knew the whole situation unsettled her. It was a new chapter for them both, starting a family. Despite finding out about it the way she had, Ayla was happy. Bull saw it even now while she sat alone waiting, the revitalizing sheen of impending motherhood draped over her.

He spared looks about camp, then headed over, lowered to his haunches, and took her hand into a loving caress. “You ready to eat something now?”

Ayla’s entrancing eyes sharpened with his touch, focusing on him. She wrinkled her nose, shook her head, and offered a smile. “No.”

“You have to eat, Ayla,” Bull said lowly.

“I will. Just not right now.” Her gaze darted about, voice kept low to avoid nearby ears. “My stomach’s doing better and I do want to eat, but I don’t want to press it.”

“Alright. You can chow in the saddle.”

The beauty relented to her doting husband, shaking a few nods.

Thirty minutes later, the group mobilized, heading more north now, the most direct route for Val Royeaux. Once or twice, before the Inquisition established forces and gained a couple of camps in the Heartlands, Hannibal had needed to travel south around the bend of the Waking Sea and past Val Foret to reach the great city. Now, having gained several alliances, agents of the Inquisition could use ships to cross the Waking Sea to Val Royeaux on the opposite shore. This cut at least two days of travel when leaving from Skyhold.

Ayla leaned back into Bull’s warmth, hand touching his as it clutched the reins. She stared ahead, willing her stomach to settle itself, though it was naught to comply. She huffed and moaned softly, shifting.

“Need me to stop?”

“Yes,” she said under her breath. “Please…now…”

“Whoa, whoa,” Bull called out calmly while tugging the reins, bringing the animal to a halt. He quickly dismounted, helping her down from the saddle. The two of them hurried for a copse of tall grass and bushes, Ayla already tasting sourness in her mouth.

On the road ahead of them, Sera stopped her horse, which prompted the others to stop theirs. Her perky brow furrowed. “Thing’s alright?”

“No,” bellowed Bull, tall enough to rise several inches above the foliage. Ayla crouched at his feet puking, some of which was dry heaves since she hadn’t eaten much. The Qunari held her hair. His eye veered back to the road. “It’s something she ate last night. Not sitting well. Go on ahead. We’ll catch up.”

Sera nodded. “Right, then.” She nudged her horse on.

Hannibal, Dorian, and Leliana did the same, though the spymaster contemplated things a moment more beforehand.

(∗)

They rode on past Lydes, a city of great beauty and nobility like Halamshiral to the east of it, further down the Imperial Highway. Hannibal decided it would be less convenient and more controversial to stop there for the night, so they’d head to an Inquisition camp on the shores of the Waking Sea, a little further ahead. Even though the city was a few miles away, the gift of sight allowed Ayla to see the many lights igniting it as evening encroached.

“It looks like a chandelier,” the Oona remarked.

“That place is like a well-kept, middle-aged whore. Looks pretty from afar, but you get close enough, view it in the right lighting, and you’ll see all the cracks filled with makeup, the trickery of illusion. Then you wake up to find your coin sack missing.”

Ayla chuckled and shook her head. She turned partially to see him, arching a white brow.
“Speaking from experience?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Bull said, a wry smile dangling his features.

“Fair enough.” Ayla stretched and took a deep breath. “Can you pass me another plum?”

The man chuckled, reaching in the saddle bag. He handed her the tangy, purple-skinned fruit. She’d been munching on little things throughout the day. “Good to see your appetite’s panning out.” He lowered his voice more. “Should I get out the hot-sauce too?”

“No. I’ll wait until we’re in our tent for that.”

“Good idea if you want to keep it secret.”

The thing about secrets, however, was the more you tried to hide them, the more likely they were to reveal themselves.

(*)

Stars peppered the night and blinked against the tarp of the sky by the time they reached the camp. The area was wealthier, and it showed in the settlement’s quality. A semicircular wall of logs enclosed it, reaching almost all the way down to a spacious dock where two medium-sized vessels floated, bobbing gently up and down. Tents had been neatly arranged in tiers curving to follow the wall and descending towards the shore. Some of the tents were larger, designated for higher ranking individuals. The one where the Inquisitor and his mate would stay loomed on the west side of camp, a couple of guards posted outside.

Ayla wiggled her fingers in Bull’s grip, eyes following a group of soldiers walking by. “Their armor seems different.”

“They’re chevaliers, Emperor Gespard’s troops. The boss helped him acquire the throne from Celene and holds dirt on him, so Gespard has been very cooperative.” Iron Bull chuckled. “He has chevaliers posted up and down the coast where it lies in the Heartlands, hardening against hostile forces.”

“I see. He wants to make sure his city and its subsidiaries are secure in the case of a Corypheus attack.” Ayla concluded, nodding.

“Exactly. You’re really getting an eye for this stuff, Naaremma.”

They reached their tent. Not as big as Hannibal’s and Dorian’s but still very spacious, the ceiling high enough that the Qunari could stand at full height. He held the flap open, entering after her, set their bags and his axe down, then unfurled the large sleep roll of furs, upon which Ayla settled with a sigh. She removed her boots and yawned.

“I’m so hungry.”

“Really? You spent half the day keeping your stomach in check and you’re suddenly hungry?” He chuckled deeply.

She shrugged, grinning, blinded without his touch. “That’s the way it is. I’m hungry now. Starving, in fact. I believe I smelled cornbread and fennec stew on the way over here.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll go get you something.”

“Make it a big bowl of something.”

He rumbled more laughter. “Should I just bring the whole kettle?”

“If they’ll let you,” she returned, appearing serious as ever.

“Woman, you’re too much sometimes,” Bull mused, shaking his horned head. “One second.”

He stepped out, and a moment later returned with a bucket, which he set near her. He grabbed her hand so she could see.

“Just in case.”

Ayla smiled and tugged on his arm to bring him in for a kiss. “You’re too good to me.”

“No such thing.” Bull nuzzled and eased away. “Okay, be right back.”

Once outside, he gathered in a long, expansive breath and released it slowly, his eye roaming the large encampment, blotted as it was with torches, pit fires, and lanterns. The bustling of soldiers came constantly. Iron Bull spared a look back at the tent holding his wife and child, smiled, then started for the grub area, marked by a run of open-faced tents not too far away. More than a few men, chevaliers, eyed him carefully when he passed, some of them scoffing as if being on the same side as a Qunari rubbed them wrong. Bull was used to people seeing him that way, the stigma of his race, but it didn’t faze him. He proudly carried the weight of it. Whenever he entered a room, he was the most dominating presence. Most people were either afraid, awestricken, wanted to fight him, fuck him, or any combination of those things. He was The Iron Bull and that was his life. The premarital days were gone; he didn’t regret it. He had the most beautiful treasure as a wife, and soon he’d be a father. This was what he lived for now.
“Iron Bull, may I speak with you for a moment?”

He stopped his long, strong stride and turned to face Leliana. She mostly only spoke with him when serious matters were at hand, though he noted she didn’t appear as foreboding as she could be. She looked a little amused. “What’s up?”

The spymaster backed into a spot between two tents so they wouldn’t be out in the open, the shadows offering privacy. Iron Bull’s head tilted, and he followed, staring down at her.

“Planning on telling the Inquisitor she’s pregnant any time soon?” Leliana curled a slim smile.

His eye widened. “What…how did you…?” He stopped and sighed. “Well, I figure if anyone noticed, it would be you.”

“I started to suspect her condition a few days before we left Skyhold. Watching her when you two dined in the hall, she took in a lot. She’s been looking drowsy as well. And Josephine says you can also see it in her face; it’s slightly rounder from all the eating.”

“Josephine knows too?” Bull would admit that he’d noticed the small weight-gain as well, which could easily be written off to the inexperienced or unknowing eye as ‘winter weight’.

Leliana nodded. “We talked about it.”

“Geez.”

“You didn’t answer my question. When are you going to tell the Inquisitor? Ayla’s part of our battle plans, and he needs to know.”

Iron Bull planted a large hand on his head, rubbing it, features on the edge of a grimace. “I can’t say anything to him. Ayla made me promise not to. She’s determined to be in the fight.”

“It’s true that we could use her power to turn the tides, but she should be thinking of the child she carries first.”

The man tossed his hands in the air, muscles rippling throughout his torso. He rolled his eye. “Right! Tell her that. I tried, and she played her wife-gets-the-final-say card. Maybe if you said something…”

The spymaster shook her head, green eyes smiling. “I won’t get in the middle of it, but you should try harder to change her mind. It’s not like she’ll be able to hide it for long anyway. Better to let Hannibal know now so he can reform the plans accordingly.”

“If only it were that easy. You don’t know how stubborn my wife can be.”

A low, husky chuckle drifted forth. “I don’t doubt it. I’m sure you’ll think of something.” Leliana slipped by him, and right before she exited the shadows to rejoin the busy camp, she said softly over her shoulder, “Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

Bull watched her leave, then resumed his mission of securing food for Ayla.

(*)

He reentered the tent to find that Ayla had fashioned her long, thick hair into a braid, which hung over her shoulder. She leaned back in the pillows, humming a soft, alluring tune and rubbing her stomach.

Bull set the tray of foodstuff down and secured the flap. “You know Little Bean’s too small to hear you, right? I don’t think he even has ears yet.”

“What makes you think the baby’s a boy?” Ayla sat up, mouth beginning to water at the smell of cornbread. “Maybe it’s a girl.”

“Well, I’ll love either one just the same. Hm,” he thought, settling beside her, pants off so his bare leg contacted hers, “I can see teaching a daughter how to use an axe.”

They laughed and Ayla took her big bowl of stew into her lap. She crumbled the cornbread into it and started eating, though not as quickly as she had been lately. Doing so had begun to give her heartburn, or maybe that had something to do with the pregnancy too.

Bull ate a little of his, then said softly, “Leliana knows.”

Her eyes flew up from the bowl to him. “What! You told her?”

He raised his hand in defense. “No, no, I didn’t tell her. She saw the signs and drew her own conclusion. Seems she noticed things about you days ago, like your appetite when we ate in the hall, and she says your face looks fuller.”

Ayla gasped, setting her bowl aside. Dainty hands gripped her cheeks, gently pinching them. “She thinks I’m…fat?”

Iron Bull chuckled and sighed, setting his bowl down as well, eye trained on her in the warm lantern glow. “Not fat, just…you know…fuller.”
“Which means ‘fat’. Oh my gods…” She closed her eyes a moment, then focused on him. “Give me the mirror.”

“Ayla…”

“The mirror, Bull.”

He knew he couldn’t argue with the intense burn of her electrifying blue eyes, so he pivoted to his side of the bedroll, dug in his traveling bag, and produced the item. Ayla took it and slowly brought it up to examine herself. She blinked at her reflection, tilted her head this way and that. Her cheeks appeared a smidgeon rounder. Shrugging, she handed the mirror back to him, and he secured it.

“See, you look just fine. Beautiful as ever.”

“I really have gained a little, though I usually do when it’s cold out. Gods, how could I have missed these signs?”

He stroked her cheek tenderly. “Don’t worry about it. You don’t need the extra stress. Finish your dinner, Naaremna. You’re still hungry, aren’t you?”

Ayla’s face blossomed into a smile. “Is the sky blue? Of course, I am.” She picked up her soup and started eating again.

“Leliana, like me, insists that you tell Hannibal. He needs to know of your condition so he can plan around it.”

She uttered a sound of annoyance. “I’m fighting with the others, Bull. I already told you.”

“Okay, I understand that, and I don’t think the boss’ll try to keep you from doing so since it’s ultimately your decision, but you need to be sensible here, Ayla,” Bull reasoned, the rich tones of his voice carrying softly between them. “In the case that you can’t stand with the mages, he has to be able to form a backup plan. What if something happens during the pregnancy that keeps you off your feet?”

Truthfully, Ayla had been struggling internally about when to tell Hannibal about it. He was the leader of the Inquisition, and informing him immediately was the right and responsible thing to do. She nodded finally.

“Alright,” she complied. “I’ll tell him after we’ve finished in Val Royeaux. There’s no need to dump more on his plate before then.”

Iron Bull released an inaudible sigh of relief. Once she told Hannibal, the rest of the Inner Circle would find out, and the more people who knew, the better. One of them should be able to make her see reason where he could not, convince her to voluntarily bench herself from the battlefield. She and Dorian were close. Perhaps, he’d be able to do it.

The Qunari watched her lovingly while she ate, then picked up his bowl and recommenced as well.

(*)

The following morning, Ayla and Bull approached the ship that would carry them over the water, their boot-falls clapping the dock. It was a mid-sized cruiser class with a double mast, the top deck spacious enough to comfortably accommodate over a dozen passengers. Supplies had been loaded the night before, yet some dockhands tended to last minute preparations.

The couple stopped at the wide gangplank connecting the ship to the pier. Ayla’s fingers wiggled restlessly on his forearm. Bull smiled down at her.

“Ready for this?”

“No,” she said, brow flattened and unamused. “I’ve only ever been in a rowboat on a lake with Elemir, as you know, never anything this size, and certainly not out on the sea. It makes me sick just looking at it,” spoken under her breath.

“It’ll be over before you know it.” Bull drew his thumb over the back of her hand.

“He’s right,” came Dorian’s voice, he and Hannibal halting beside them. “We’ve taken this voyage a few times. The winds seem to favor us today, and this crossing of the Waking Sea is narrow. Shouldn’t be more than six or seven hours until we reach Val Royeaux.”

“Great,” the Oona mumbled.

“Ready for this?”

“My dear, those lovely ebony features of yours are looking a bit pallid, and we have yet to set sail.” Smiling, he stepped closer to his bestie, head tilted as he studied her. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” Ayla conjured a pleasant expression, though she wrestled to keep her stomach where it belonged. At least when she got sick—yes, when, because there was no way she’d keep from puking—she could blame it on seasickness. “I’m tired, is all.”

Dorian grinned beneath his moustache and bumped his hip to hers. “Then you shouldn’t have let
that husband of yours keep you up so late. Shall we board?” The man pranced by, traversing the gangplank.

Hannibal, Bull, and Ayla followed. Both Leliana and Sera were already on the ship.

Ten minutes later, the vessel parted with the pier, thick ropes loosened from the bollards by dockhands and pulled aboard by ship crewmen. Ayla sat on a covered crate out of the way on the main deck, Bull beside her. The motion of the ship was more rhythmic than being in a rowboat on a lake, but that didn’t work to settle her stomach. Luckily, there were plenty of buckets about and the portside wall wasn’t far off.

Iron Bull’s arm embraced her, and Ayla leaned into him, eager to see everyone bustling about the ship, getting it underway, yet irritated that she couldn’t just enjoy it because of the nausea. She mewed lowly, sounding to Bull like an injured cat.

“Should I grab the bucket?”

“No. I’m not there just yet.” She quipped a laugh. “But thanks.”

The couple remained in that spot watching and listening. Sturdy cloth snapped when the sails were released and caught wind, and dockhands called out back and forth. Captain Voorhis issued some commands, then strode by them, taking the portside steps to the stern. Ayla watched as the shoreline drew further away, gathering refreshing breaths of salty air.

“You didn’t eat much this morning, Naarremma. Maybe you should try to eat something now.”

Everything had been going well enough until he mentioned food. Her stomach bubbled and bile filled her mouth. Ayla stood quickly, and Bull was with her, moving to the closest bucket. She squatted before it, Bull keeping her long braid clear while she vomited. She toweled her mouth clean when finished, moving slowly back to the crate with Bull, hugging into him.

Dorian went over. “Poor dear. My first few times on the water were spent with my head inside a bucket as well, or hanging over the side. I hope it doesn’t get too much worse for you.”

“Me too,” Ayla said softly. “I do feel a little better, though. I suppose I just won’t try to eat or think about eating until we get where we’re going.”

“You should at least drink some water if you won’t eat.” Bull’s arm tightened around her.

“Yes, water would be good.”

“I’ll get you some.” Dorian left them for a moment, then returned with a cup.

Ayla took the thing by its handle and sipped. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, as always. Take it easy and keep breathing deeply. This open sea air always helps to calm me when I feel even the slightest hint of upset stomach.”

The woman lifted a tired smile, then closed her eyes and sighed, nestling further into Iron Bull.

(*)

Like Dorian said, signs of land sketched across the northern horizon sometime in the afternoon, and two hours after that the ship was pier-side. The instant Ayla stepped off the gangplank, she took a huge breath, smiling. She and Bull stood aside so the others could disembark.

“I feel much better being back on land,” she said, eyes swinging up at her husband for a moment, before shifting over the docks and the rising buildings of the city beyond. “It’s very lovely here.”

Iron Bull shrugged. “Val Royeaux’s not bad, though it does have its moments of civil unrest and shrouds of noble deceit, like every other city in Orlais. I will say that it’s rather safe here.”

“And let’s not forget the shopping,” entered Dorian. “The markets have some of the best fashion this side of the Waking Sea, though a far cry from the impeccable tastes of Tevinter.”

“Yeah, despite having a foul, slave-oriented system, those Vints sure know how to match the perfect sweater with the right pair of shoes,” Bull returned sarcastically.

Dorian hoisted a tapered brow. “Tsk, tsk. I never said we mastered the art of social graces, only that we possess the best fashion sense.” He winked at the Qunari.

Bull smirked, shaking his head.

“It’s already early evening,” Hannibal said, “So, I think the best thing to do is get settled into our rooms at the hotel and get some rest and relaxation. We have two days until Momay’s execution. Tomorrow, Leliana, you and I will go to Lord Wrenz’s home, talk to him, see what he has to say.”

Leliana nodded. “I’m sure the execution will be in the central court. That’s where they usually take place. I think I’ll head around there once I drop my bag in my room and look for any signs of Blackwall.”

“Alright,” the Inquisitor replied.

“Think I’ll find a pub, get toasted out of m’knickers,” Sera piped and grinned cheekily.
Checking into Hotel Charmant proved to be a fast process. The staff was always on standby for the Inquisitor since he and his group stayed there when visiting the city. Hannibal and Dorian agreed to meet Ayla and Iron Bull in the lobby in ten minutes so they could all hit the market together, then everyone split off to their rooms. It turned out that the couples’ rooms were next to each other.

Bull unlocked their door, closing it after them. Ayla allowed him both hands so he could set their things down, then resumed her grip of his arm.

“It’s just lovely!” The woman pulled him about the spacious quarters, going to the run of tall windows overlooking the hotel’s central gardens. The structure was essentially a big square, with rooms facing inward and others facing the tidy, paved streets lined with shops, cafes, and homes. Bull and his lady stepped out to the terrace, and Ayla took a deep breath.

He chuckled. “Yes, it is.”

“Getting rooms for everyone here must be costing the Inquisitor quite a bit.”

“It’s definitely nice to know the boss. Don’t worry, it’s not costing him anything. Inquisition’s funding this trip, like all business trips.”

Ayla’s smile came easily at his wide grin. “Ah, I see.”

“How’s the nausea?”

“Strangely enough, it’s gone, for now. I’m a little hungry.”

“Good. You need to eat to keep up your strength.” Bull hugged her against him, peering down into her sparkling eyes. “We’ll grab something while we’re out at the market.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The two couples left the hotel and headed east down Avenue Francois. Evening rolled in imminently, the sun’s last vestiges basting everything in golden and crimson light, the sky clear and violet.

“You’re going to love this shopping plaza,” Dorian said excitedly, pretty hands flipping on the air as he spoke. “It’s the best for clothing in this sector of Val Royeaux, hands down.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” beamed Ayla.

“Mm. Oh, I have the perfect store for you—Claire Dupree’s. Her designs are exquisite. We’ll get you a couple of new dresses and shoes to match.”

The Oona giggled, giving a soft squeeze to Bull’s hand.

The market wasn’t far off, about a ten-minute walk, and it was quite busy with patrons, many of them masked, as was normal in Orlais. Dorian sprung off from his partner to peruse, dragging Ayla with him, which automatically dragged Bull too. This left Hannibal alone.

The Inquisitor smiled after them, then examined the busy plaza. Sinewy legs started him for the window of a shop specializing in clothing for big and tall men. Fingers gripped his chin as he scanned the outfits poised on wooden mannequins.

“You can’t let Dorian leave for Tevinter.”

“Huh?” Hannibal spun to face the owner of the gravelly voice.

An old man. He had to be at least eighty-something, from the extreme wrinkling, and he used a tall walking stick to aid him. His wavy silver hair reached just past his shoulders, a well-trimmed beard set over his face. His clothing suggested he had fine tastes and, therefore, might be from a rich family. Hannibal also sensed something oddly familiar in his eyes.

“What are you talking about? He’s…not leaving.”

“Yes, he is. After you’ve faced the war god, handled Corypheus. He’ll decide to return to his homeland to try and fix it, convinced he must do so because he sees all the good you’ve done for Thedas. But, it’s the wrong decision. He needs to stay with you, he must…” the old man rasped out. His eyes, hazed and slightly milky with age, had been a clear, twinkling gray in his younger years.

Those eyes skimmed over Hannibal almost lovingly, or so the Qunari thought.

“How do you know all of this?”

“Fasta vass!” the old man swore in Tevene, appearing increasingly familiar. “Just listen to me, Ama-” he broke the word. “Inquisitor. You must stop him from going.”
Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you? What’s your name?”

The elderly citizen considered his answer, then sighed, straightening a bit, his leathery features softening even more with obvious tenderness for the hulking, broad, handsome Qunari. “Dorian Pavus.”
Hannibal stared incredulously at him, not sure what to believe. The old man suddenly dropped his stick, drew in, and pressed into the Qunari, arms hugging around him. His wrinkled hands worked their way to rest in a familiar position on Hannibal’s hips, gripping tightly and with an abundance of longing. His smaller frame shook as he sobbed, and his face slowly cozied in another familiar manner to a certain place on Hannibal’s chest, making the top of his silver head brush back and forth against the underside of the Inquisitor’s fully bearded chin.

Hannibal caught his breath, emotion tumbling over his features. His arms finally closed around the old man, and he took a long drag of his scent. There was the unmistakable faintness of Hannibal’s own essence mingled with it. The bond of mizraa-teth. He was Dorian.

“My love…?”

“Mm. I never thought I would see you again,” Dorian-older drawled, voice coated with the rasp of age.

They stayed that way for countless, timeless moments. Hannibal had never been so confused or uncertain in all his years. All he knew was the man in his arms was definitely his beloved. He shut his eyes and traced lips through his silvered mane.

“Well, I will admit I’ve had fears of you leaving me for a younger man, but…” the words of a youthful Dorian fell hesitantly upon the air.

Hannibal and Dorian-older broke their hug to face him, the young mage holding a keenly interested expression. One of his dark, finely-tailored brows lifted high and the ghost of a smile dallied his lips. Iron Bull and Ayla observed the scene anticipatorily, awaiting answers from the Inquisitor too.

“Ah, to be young again.” The old man dropped a few dry chuckles. “I remember now. I did come back to find you, to get your wallet since I’d left mine in the room.”

Dorian-younger crossed arms over his chest. “Mm, yes, actually. That is why I’m here. Though, that doesn’t explain how you know that or who you are.” Gray eyes hardened and swung to Hannibal.

“Um…we need to go somewhere and talk,” said Hannibal so seriously that his mate’s rousing mask of anger shifted into one of concern.

“Agreed,” old Dorian said and turned to reach for his walking stick.

Iron Bull, always a sucker for helping the elderly and kids, quickly went for it without breaking contact with Ayla. He handed the stick over.

“Thanks, Iron Bull.”

The Qunari observed him. “We know each other?”

The old man merely smiled, and waved them along, moving across the plaza for a quaint café. He reached into one of the deep pockets of his long tunic and pulled out a flat crystal discus with a smooth edge. A fraction of it was colored blue, while the rest was transparent. “We must hurry. I’ve been waiting around for over two hours, and this timepiece”—he flashed the disc at them—“is already more than two-thirds depleted. I have less than an hour to talk. In here.”

“Timepiece?” Hannibal said. He walked beside the older version of his lover, the younger Dorian striding close to his left listening intently. “I’ve never seen anything like that. Doesn’t exactly look like your run-of-the-mill sun dial.”

“It’s…not exactly common.”

They reached the café front and were greeted instantly by the maître d’. The air of upper bourgeoisie lingered thick around him, the way he peered down his long nose and clean-shaven features at them. “A table for five, is it?”

“Yes,” Dorian-older said, voice like sand scattering over old parchment. “A table for five, is it?”

“ Booth in the back would be nice. Chop-chop.”

The host smiled and bowed. “As you were, milord. This way please.”

The group followed him, making their way towards a cozy spot. Hannibal was familiar with the place. He’d had meals with Dorian there a couple of times and even had a chat about humanity with Cole in the establishment once.

Ayla’s stomach gurgled. Not the sick kind of gurgle, but the anxious for food kind. She and Bull walked behind everyone else. She tugged on his arm, her voice low, riding beneath the banter of customers and pleasant lute music.
“Something wrong, Naaremna?”

“Um…I don’t think. It’s just…” her eyes flashed ahead to the old man, “…I feel like I know
him. It’s weird, right?”

“Nah. I feel something off about him too, but not really threatening though.”

“Mm.” Ayla nodded.

The maître d’ stood aside with his arm extended, inviting them to sit. “Here you are. I’ll have a
server sent over immediately.” He bowed and left them.

So, there they were, watching each other silently for a moment, then the old man started. “I know
the rest of you are wondering who I am, or feel as if you already know me. It’s because you do.
I’m Dorian.”

Bull and Ayla exchanged a look, then stared skeptically at the old man. Dorian, however, squinted
at him, leaning forward to see him clearer around Hannibal, who sat on the padded bench between
them. The Altus’s gray gaze loomed wide, mouth dropping open. “Andraste’s Tits! What witchery
is this? How is this possible!”

Old Dorian waved a hand, smirking. “I always was the dramatic one. Keep your voice down.”

“I…I don’t understand.”

“You’re not the only one,” entered Bull, his single eye flicking between the aged and current
Dorians.

Ayla’s hand went to her mouth, taken aback. “I knew something was strange. It’s in your eyes.
Oh, Dorian! How did you get so old and how are you here?”

The senior man laughed a bit. “It’s a natural occurrence, my dear. Happens to most people over
time. I’m from the future.”

Both Hannibal and young Dorian immediately went on edge, speaking simultaneously.

“Alexius…”

Old Dorian shook his silvery head, hand waving dismissively. “No. This goes far beyond
anything he ever could’ve done, though his work had great potential. That aside, this isn’t about
him. I honestly can’t say much, only that which I have specifically come to say.”

“Apparently, he doesn’t want you to leave for Tevinter, though he has yet to explain why,” spoke
Hannibal.

Old Dorian’s frosted gaze moved to his younger self. “I know you wanted to tell him in your own
time, but I had to take the chance to come back when it finally presented itself. In my reality, after
we dealt with Ares and Corypheus, you—I—chose to return to the Imperium and—” He stopped
when a male server walked up.

“Good evening, lords and lady. What can I get for you?”

“Nothing,” senior Dorian almost snapped. He had little time and wanted to talk.

“Actually,” Ayla intervened, raising her hand a bit. “You can bring a platter of bread, cheese, and
fruit, a side of roasted lamb and vegetables, and water. Oh, please include a few plums if you have
them.”

The server wrote on his little scroll. “As you wish, milady. It should be no more than ten minutes
to prepare.”

“Thanks.” Ayla beamed, stomach growling again.

The server slipped away, leaving everyone to stare at her. Old Dorian smiled knowingly.

The young woman cleared her throat, eyeing them all back. “What? It’s for everyone. I didn’t eat
lunch, so I’m hungry. Please, continue with your story. It’s quite riveting.”

“Where was I…ah, yes,” old Dorian picked back up where he cut off, “I left to return to the
Imperium, and everything was going well. I can’t give details, but you, Dorian, should know that
you’ll do great things for Tevinter. Or rather, you would have. I’m here to warn you against
leaving Hannibal. Stay with him.”

“Why? Why do you want him to stay?” Hannibal asked, brow stitched seriously. “If he’s bound to
do so much good for his country, why try to keep him from it?”

The old man trembled a sigh and his eyes became juicy with tears. He reached a hand out,
grabbing Hannibal’s. “To save you. You see, yes, I was doing very good, influencing the right
people and gaining ground in the Imperial Senate, working to change age-old laws that would
make Tevinter better.” He smiled as if remembering something far off. “You and I remained
married, though we had a long-distance relationship for almost five years. While there are those
inside the Imperium that want to see it changed to keep up with the times of our world, there are
also those who fight that change. The deceit never dies, sadly enough. As I said, nearly five years
after I left the south and returned home, I got detained and I couldn’t contact you. Certain people
took that moment to spring a trap, sending word that they wanted peace talks between the Inquisition and the Imperium. They were very insistent, and when you tried to contact me but couldn’t due to my detention, you decided to go up there, right into their ambush. They…”

Dorian-older cut short and sobbed, squeezing Hannibal’s hand. Tears leaked from his eyes.

“They killed you,” his words came nearly inaudible. “They made me watch as they…beheaded you.”

Ayla pulled closer to Bull, a spike of dread sending chills over her.

Dorian-younger gasped and clung to Hannibal’s other arm, face in distress. “Amatus…”

Hannibal sighed and tried to digest the huge chunks of what-the-fuck that had just been stuffed down his throat. He took a breath, then wrapped arms around both Dorians, the older one crying into the Inquisitor’s tunic, while the younger stared worriedly into his aqua eyes. “Okay, let’s just calm down. Well, the good thing is you came back to warn us, so when it comes time, I won’t take the invitation from the Imperium.”

Dorian-older pulled back and wiped his eyes. “I don’t trust that to be enough. It would just be best if I—if he—never left you in the first place. Forget ever going back.”

“No,” Hannibal said. “I won’t let Dorian miss the chance to help his country. It’s everything he’s always wanted.”

“I don’t want to lose you, Amatus,” the lovely Vint said pleadingly, then his face hardened. “I won’t. It’s not negotiable. I’m not leaving.”

“Dorian…” Hannibal sighed. “We know how to counter it, thanks to…” eyes veered to Dorian-older, then back to his lover, “you.”

“Nothing in this world is worth losing you, not to me. Tevinter be damned.”

The Inquisitor wasn’t ready to label the issue ‘done’ and pop it on a shelf. “We need to talk about this some more, later, between the two of us.” He then addressed his man’s older self. “Though, we’re grateful for the warning.”

“How did you manage to travel back here?” asked Iron Bull, intrigue knitted firmly across his face. He frowned. “Does Ares have something to do with it?”

The old man’s rickety shoulders rose and slumped when he sighed. He shook his head. “I can’t speak on it.”

“Are we still friends?” piped Ayla, eyes gleaming curiously.

“Dearest, we’ll always be friends.” Dorian-older smiled at her, though a glimpse of sadness momentarily stole over him.

“Where do we live?” she pressed. “Are our homes near each other’s?”

“I really can’t say anything on it. Temporal anomalies, parallel ripples, time distortions, that kind of thing—it’s all like something out of Star Trek really?” He mumbled that last part, eyes straying while thoughts rapidly swooned through his mind.

Hannibal lifted a brow. “What’s a…star track?”

“Venhedis. Forget you heard that. It’s nothing. Look,” the old man’s eyes lingered between his younger self and the man he’d lost, “you just have to trust that not returning to Tevinter will keep the tragedy from happening; it was nearly fifty years ago for me. Everything was great, then I lost you, and in that, I lost myself. The Imperium is working on techniques to strip mages of their powers as we speak; it’ll be stabilized in a few years. They’ll use it on me after they kill you. I fell hard, so hard,” he paused to take a breath, eyes fixed on the covered candle in the center of their table. “I…got addicted to razza, was shooting it into my veins every other day. I slept with any men who would have me. One night, I found myself at the top of Karynda Bell Tower in the heart of Minrathous, ready to throw myself from it, but it was memories of you, Amatus, of us, that pulled me back.”

“Maker…” Dorian-younger breathed. The old man’s grief was so potent that it encroached everyone at the table.

Geriatric Dorian continued. “My heart ached like it never had, the void so deep. Even now, with several decades of time between me and that fateful, horrid day, the wound hasn’t scabbed. Losing the love of my life broke me in ways I never could’ve imagined.” He looked to young Dorian. “It will destroy you the same way if you lose him, which is why you can’t risk leaving his side. You may not be able to contribute to Tevinter’s progress, but you can be happy like we’ve always dreamed with the most wonderful man if you just…don’t…go.”

“I’m sorry that happened, Dorian,” came Hannibal’s throaty voice, heavy with emotion. He took the old man’s hand again, “but as I said, I won’t just let him toss away the opportunity. We’ll figure something out.”

The old man chuffed a dry laugh. “Always so intent on making things work for everyone. That’s how gallant you were…are…my Amatus. Fine, should you”—eyes swung to Dorian-younger
—"decide to return to Tevinter, remain keen on your surroundings and the alliances you forge. Keep a close eye on a man named Vittorio Ruhland. He’s the one behind the plans to trick Hannibal, and he’ll pose as a friend to you, or as friendly as any Tevinter noble can be," he sneered. "And Amatus, no matter what messages you get from the Imperium, no matter what they say to draw you there, never go."

"Alright," Hannibal said softly.

"Vittorio Ruhland," Dorian said thoughtfully. "Never heard of him."

“And you won’t now. He’s a nobody as far as faces in the Senate Publicanium go. He’ll become more prominent later, gain more influence.”

Dorian nodded. “Noted.” In his mind, though, he’d already decided he didn’t want to leave Hannibal. Not for anything.

The group lingered in silence for a moment, then the server reappeared with yummy-smelling dishes. As disheartening and tear-jerking as future-Dorian’s story was, the urge to consume large quantities of food was strong in Ayla. Blame it on the baby. She was the only one to fix a plate and slowly start munching, eyes moving around the table at the others.

Dorian-older pulled the crystal discus out again, all but a tiny slip of it colored blue now. He sighed heavily, grabbed his stick, and stood. “I’ll be pulled back to my present in a few minutes. I need to go someplace less populated. Will you come with me, to say good-bye?” he watched Hannibal steadily.

“Of course, I will.” The large man got to his feet. He bent to kiss Dorian-younger’s cheek, nuzzling, whispering, “Be right back.”

“It was nice to return here, in this moment, seeing everyone as we were,” Dorian-older smiled at Bull and Ayla.

“Would the future us remember this day?” Ayla said around a bite of cheese and bread, brow furrowed, creased with high interest.

“No, time travel—this kind of time travel—doesn’t work that way exactly. Only you in the here and now will carry the memory of my visit.”

“Ah…” she nodded, ate more food.

“Good-bye, my friends.”

The Inquisitor and old man made their way from the table, through the café, and outside.

Bull whistled, head shaking. “This has been one fuck of a day, huh?”

“Tell me about it,” Dorian replied, rubbing his temples. “Consider my mind thoroughly blown. I need a drink. Waiter!” he called out, waving a hand.

(*)

Hannibal and the withered, aged version of Dorian moved around to the side of the café, into a lantern lit lane that was secluded enough to pass as an alley. The old man looked up and down the way, then at Hannibal.

“Based on what you said to Ayla, about time travel, your future won’t be changed, will it? Regardless of what we do?”

“Sadly, no. Even with the warning and your life saved, my present will remain the same. But my past self, he’ll have you. That’s why I came back, to prevent your death and spare him the everlasting heartbreak.” Dorian’s smaller, leathered hands gripped Hannibal’s, the two of them standing very close. He smiled dreamily. “Remember how we talked about adopting children someday?”

The Inquisitor hoisted a gentle smile. “Of course. It’s just like yesterday to me.”

“Oh, right. Well, make sure it happens. At least two or three. It would make me…him…very happy, having young ones to care for,” He lifted Hannibal’s hands to his lips, nuzzling them. “You don’t really know just how much you meant to me, how much you mean to him. You were my world, just as you are his in the present. He cannot lose you, he can’t…” Dorian pulled in, lifted his face, and they locked lips for a breathtaking moment. “It feels so good to hold you, feel you, and smell you again. I’ve gone to bed every night for fifty years, dreaming of this moment, and I have finally gotten it. I’ll never let it go. I love you so much, Hannibal, and I will even after the last breath has wheezed from my lungs.”

“Dorian…sweetheart…I love you too.” The Qunari swallowed the emotional lump caught in his throat.

Then, with his hand on Hannibal’s cheek, Dorian-older began to fade, going transparent, melting completely from sight.

The Inquisitor staggered a few steps, until his back pressed to the brick wall of the building behind him. He leaned there, breathing deeply.
Air shifted faintly around Dorian—older, the past blending away to complete darkness all around him for but a few seconds, before the shadows dissipated like a curtain drawn apart at a play, revealing a totally different set. A place he’d grown very familiar with over the years.

The chamber of Hon’o Hald’arun. The large, geode-looking object rested captivatingly ominous in its smooth crater before Dorian, surrounded by a protective rail. He looked down at the circle of runes chalked onto the floor, in the center of which he stood. A smaller version had been drawn on his forearm with enchanted paint, linking him to the main one so he could travel between timeframe dimensions. He closed his eyes and sighed, reveling in the fresh, amazing sensation of seeing Hannibal, if only for a short while. The former Altus had the choice of bonding with Hald’arun years ago, but decided against it, wanting to live a normal lifespan, the better to be with his Amatus again sooner.

"Is it done?" came a voice from behind him. "Were you able to warn them?"

Dorian turned, smiling. "Yes. Thank you for your help. I owe you one, Gwyn’Harel, all of you. A big one."

Gwyn, slender and fit, physically appeared as the female doppelganger of Fen’Harel, formerly known as Solas. She even possessed a faint, shallow cleft in her small chin. The young woman, like her mother, had hair of red flame and eyes like a clear summer sky.

Gwyn chuckled. "Nonsense. I’m glad to help, as I’m sure mother and father are too.” She turned a lovely smile over her shoulder to the Crimson Queen and Fen’Harel, standing close to one another and watching their daughter the only way proud parents could, with lights in their eyes and joy in their hearts. The three of them had used their power, some special conjuring, and the amplification of Hon’o Hald’arun to send Dorian back.

"What will you do now, my friend?" Fen’Harel’s question came smoothly.

Dorian breathed a pleased sigh. "For starters, I think I’ll just go sit these old bones down and watch the sunset. I have new memories of my old love, and wish to lose myself in them for a while."

Fen’Harel nodded, his smile slim but sympathetic. He’d known the Tevinter man a long time, and they’d gone through a lot to end up where they were now. A lot. He hoped their past selves would too be able to overcome the hardships approaching them, for Ares was going to cause a nearly insuperable amount of trouble.

The Royal Elvhen Family of Hald’arun watched their old friend hobble away on his walking stick, a soft tap resounding with each step, echoing against the chamber walls.

Not much eating happened back in the café, save for Ayla, but there was a lot of conversing and speculation. They left the establishment and starting walking for Hotel Charmant.

"The way the old Dorian was talking," Bull started, "looks like we’ll be victorious over the God of War and the god wannabe."

"I’m thinking the same," Hannibal said, "but I feel like it won’t be an easy victory or that the victory will come at a great cost."

Dorian remained quiet, his mood sunk. It must’ve been a dire and morose time for him to pass up an evening of fine dining and shopping. Still, it settled him to know that something was coming, that they’d be able to prepare for it. He had both hands gripped to Hannibal’s arm, and he tightened his hold. Hannibal clearly felt his worry. He pressed a gentle kiss to his tanned temple.

When they reached the hotel, they took the lift to the third floor, rounded to their corridor, and parted ways, each couple retreating to their room. Bull stoked the fire in the hearth, while Ayla went to the bed, sitting on the mattress, little feet tucked under her. The tall, muscular man stood and turned.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, going to sit on his side of the bed, removing his boots.

"Alright, I suppose," Ayla voiced softly. "I’m still processing the encounter with old Dorian. I have so many questions, questions he should know the answers to."

"Like what?" Bull yanked off his socks, tossed them aside. He stood to undo his trousers, slipping them down long, solid legs. He lowered to the bed again to finish taking them off.

"How do we defeat Ares in his reality, if we defeat him at all? He said we dealt with Ares and Corypheus; he never said we defeated them."

"Mm, that would’ve been a good question, Naaremma," Bull said, swinging his legs up and laying back with hands behind his head. He crossed his ankles casually, watching her. "Too bad he couldn’t tell us much."

"Yes…" she nibbled her lip.

The man saw her worry and understood it. She didn’t need to stress though, especially not in her
condition. He smiled broadly. “If the others knew about the baby, I would’ve asked the old Vint if he could give us the gender.”

Something in Ayla sparked and the sadness melted from her face, replaced by a playful smile. Her eyes zipped his way and she reached to touch him, fingers falling over hard abs, brushing his toned flesh. “And I would’ve pinched you! I don’t want to know until he or she pops out!”

Iron Bull bellowed rich laughter. Ayla smirked and moved in, straddling his hips. She rocked her inviting, soft heat against the instrument of his desire, already beginning to firm up beneath her. Fingers dipped into the waistband of his briefs teasingly, the Oona smiling coyly down at him through the pale cascade of her hair. Bull growled sensuously, keeping his hands behind his head. He lifted a brow.

“Sure you’re in the mood to ride the Bull?”

“You know I am,” Ayla purred, grinding her hips, loving the sensation of his hardened sex to the sensitive nub between her netherlips. She was deliciously wet and grower wetter by the second.

“Not gonna throw up on me, are you?” He grinned.

She smacked his chest, then dashed in to nip it, kissing her way up his neck, to his bearded chin. Their lips met, and Bull’s hands finally moved so he could lock his arms around the love of his life.

(*)

In the next room over, the Inquisitor and his man lie in bed too. The Altus wore his silk pajamas, the well-recognized sign to his partner that he wasn’t in the mood for anything lusty that night. The smaller man stared up at the ceiling, clutching a pillow to his chest.

Hannibal, however, wasn’t going to let the encounter with Dorian’s older self snuff out the desire that hit him fully once they got back to their room. He wore nothing but a partial boner and a heated smile, lying on his side, head poised on his hand. Greenish blue eyes raked over his lover, a gray hand tickling the human’s belly.

“I take it no boom-boom?”

Dorian rolled eyes, but conjured the wisp of a smile. “No. No boom-boom. Not tonight, Amatus.” He shuddered a sigh. “I can’t stop thinking about it. The pain I went through from losing you.”

Hannibal moved close, warming the whole side of Dorian’s body with his own. He cupped the man’s face, thumb tracing the beauty mark high on his right cheek, an inch or so out from the corner of his eye. “You’re not going to lose me, sweetheart. I promise.”

Those words did make Dorian feel better, but not chipper enough for him to rip off his night clothes and let his husband do wonderfully decadent things to his body. He closed his eyes a moment, reveling in their little bubble of intimacy.

“So, you weren’t going to tell me of your plans to leave, not until the last moment?” Handsome Qunari features appeared somewhat hurt.

The lovely mage dropped a sigh, shaking his head, tongue fiddling for the words. “I… I was going to, Amatus. Soon. I guess it kind of took me fifty years to finally get around to it. Do you think he was really me and not some kind of trick?”

“Oh, course, he was you. No question about it. I could smell my scent all over his, the way I smell it on you because of mizraa-teth. His touch, his eyes, the way he kissed—he was definitely you.”

“You kissed him?”

“C’mon, you can’t be upset about that. I mean, he’s you. And it was only an innocent goodbye kiss.”

“I suppose you’re right. I could tell it added fire and life back to his soul, seeing you again, being able to touch—”

A muffled yet very audible moan came from the other side of the wall. Female. Yes, yes, yes, yeeesss! Bull, oh my gods, yes! Harder! And deeper grunts, growls, and groans accompanied her invigorated vocals. Rhythmic knocking started behind Dorian and Hannibal, most certainly caused by headboard to wall.

The two men listened for a moment, then laughed.

“At least someone’s getting lucky,” Hannibal quipped.

“You’d think a place this posh would have thicker walls. If they were any thinner, we’d be able to actually see them.”

Chapter End Notes
For anyone who may be wondering how Ayla’s pregnant mannerisms can leap around so much—tired, hungry, nauseous, hungry, horny, nauseous, horny, tired, hungry, terribly nauseous, etc—it’s very possible. This was me during my pregnancy with my son, who’s just about three now. My husband can certainly attest to this. :)

Somewhere between eight and nine, Iron Bull and Ayla finally got out of bed. The woman made herself a bath in the large porcelain tub. She soaked in it now, most of her hair piled and secured atop her head. Bull decided to wash up using the basin, since he knew joining her in the tub meant they wouldn’t be leaving that room for a while; they’d be all over each other again. And that worked against their schedule. Ayla wanted him to walk her around the city so she could witness as much of it as she could during their stay.

Blinded in shadows traced around their edges by faint light, the level of vision she’d known for most her life, Ayla relaxed and pointed one foot in the air, fragrant suds and water running down her smooth, dark leg.

“Mm.” Bull toweled off, watching her.

She smiled in his direction. “I know that groan, and you’re not getting in here.”

“I’m tempted though.”

Ayla giggled.

The Qunari’s long strides carried him to the bed where his clothes rested. He plucked up a clean pair of black briefs, pulled them on. “Have you thought anymore about what happened in the tent?”

“You mean when I called you ‘Finn’? Yes, I have.”

“And you’re sure you don’t know anyone by that name?”

She nodded, shifting in the water. “I’m sure. I don’t know anyone personally named Finn, but there is a well-known author, Finn Kaldor. He writes horror, and I’m not fond of the genre, so I’ve never really read his stuff. I tried to read one of his books when I was younger, seeing as he’s a writer who has works translated to tangerlingua. I kept getting to places where I’d literally yank my fingers back from the pages, he got so graphic with the gore.”

“Hm,” Iron Bull mused. “You’re certain you’ve never caught the name elsewhere, in a side conversation or something?”

“I’m certain, my love.”

“There has to be a reason you called me ‘Finn’ out of the blue like that. And then, a couple of days later, we have an encounter with Old Man Dorian. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“You think…it ties together?” Ayla turned in the tub, arms folded over the rim, her chin resting on them.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure how.” He sighed and ran a hand over his head. “I dunno. It all feels damn strange.”

“That it does,” she agreed. “I’m sure the answers will present themselves eventually. Could you please hand me a towel, love?”

Iron Bull took up one of the thick, soft, absorbent cloths and approached her, placing it in her outstretched hand.

“Thanks.” The woman produced a dimpled smile and stood, water and bubbles slipping down her naked form. She felt his sultry stare and the heat of his nearness. “Oh my gods, go calm down somewhere.”

Husky chuckles resounded from him. “Hey, I’m keeping my hands to myself.”

“We’ll see for how long,” she returned, carefully stepping from the tub.

Bull watched greedily while she towed off from neck to toe, then dropped the cloth at his feet and glided by, hips swaying seductively, arms out to feel the way. “You are such a tease.”

She grinned at her husband, sitting on a settee to apply moisturizing cream to her skin. “And you are being such a good boy by keeping your hands to yourself.”

“Oh, I can be bad if you want.” He fully faced her, hands on his hips, legs apart, cock amply solid. The hard shaft laid to the left inside his briefs, hugging his thigh.

Ayla’s demure smile broadened. “I’m certainly looking forward to you being a bad boy later. For now, food. Then we tour.”

He groaned and his shoulders slumped. “Yes, dear.”

(*)
The couple made their way down to the hotel’s dining room a short while later. Tall windows curved partially along the wall, offering a picturesque view of the plaza square on Avenue Francois, a great fountain positioned in the middle. Long tables laden with various food and drink sat against the opposite wall, overseen by servers and chefs. Ayla decided on a crispy, chewy waffle, bacon, and fruit. Bull stood by while the man at the cook-station prepared him a huge omelet stuffed with meat, vegetables, and cheese. The Qunari moved further down the table and popped a couple of biscuits on the plate too. They grabbed cups of water and settled in a booth facing the windows.

Though it was highly unconventional for such a public, upscale place, husband and wife decided to each remove a boot and sock so Ayla could rest her little foot on his. It was the best way for them to enjoy a meal with both hands, and if anyone noticed and said anything, Bull would handle it.

“Mmm, this is so delicious,” Ayla hummed, forking another bite into her mouth.

“Seriously, angel, how can you even taste the waffle under all that syrup? Maybe you should toss it a floatation device.”

“Oh, hush. I can taste it just fine.”

“Want some? It’s pretty damn good.” He gestured his fork at her, a gooey omelet bite resting on it.

Ayla wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “No, thanks. Not really feeling eggs right now. As a matter of fact, I don’t even want to smell them. Get it away, Bull.”

He laughed, then shifted to seriousness. “You getting nauseous again?”

“I… I don’t know.” She ate more of her waffle. “Maybe a little, but not much.”

“Does this mean I have to give up eggs for the next seven months?” The Qunari warrior grinned at her, playfully nudging.

“No. It just means you should refrain from eating them in my presence for the time being.”

“Aw, my poor little woman, all sick and shit.” A powerful arm linked her shoulders, gave her a loving snug.

She smiled, then cleared her throat. “Shh. Dorian’s coming.”

Iron Bull turned his eye to the wide main entryway to see the Altus descending the short run of steps, heading for the food tables to grab a cup of tea and a slice of toast. He went to their booth and slid onto the opposite bench. His eyes slimmed into teasing slits.

“The next time Hannibal and I find ourselves in a room adjacent to you two, I’ll pray it has thicker walls.”

Ayla blushed coyly.

The Iron Bull shrugged, a rakish smile upon his chiseled features.

Dorian lifted his cup, watching steam drift from the dark-amber liquid. He sipped. “It’s not even all the moaning and grunting that kept me up.”

“I could say ‘don’t worry about it’ or some other attempt at comforting you, but I know it won’t work,” Bull said. “He’s your mate, and you just got a visit from your future self delivering news of his demise. It’s heavy shit, Dorian. Long as you know you’ve always got people to talk to. You’re not alone.”

A mild smile hooked the Altus’s mouth. “Thanks, Iron Bull.”

Everyone was so distracted by their conversation that they didn’t notice Sera. She slipped into the booth beside Dorian, snatched up one triangular half of his toast, and nibbled it, grinning.

Dorian frowned. “Was it so hard to stop by the tables and get your own?”

“No. Just wanted yours.”

Ayla giggled and ate more of her waffle.

Dorian smirked, then sipped his tea. “Did you hear of the encounter?”

“Hm.” The elf’s bright eyes widened faintly, and she grinned from behind her freckles. “It involve a skinny brunette and a naked dwarf with one leg?”

The other three exchanged highly curious and deeply amused looks, before Dorian said, “Uh… no…”

Sera shrugged. “Ah, well, forget I said anything then.”

“This is why I won’t go drinking alone with you,” quipped the mage.

“Psst. You’d like it. Well, I mean, if you weren’t attached to Red-and-Horny.” The elven woman snickered.
“Hannibal and I happen to have a great relationship.”

“No doubt. So, what’s this about an encounter?”

(*)

While Dorian, Iron Bull, and Ayla gave their insight and views about Dorian-older’s visit, Hannibal was speaking to Leliana about the same. The two of them had veered from Avenue Francois ten minutes ago, heading north through the city for Lord Dreister Wrenz’s home.

“And you have no idea how he got here?” Leliana’s green eyes slid to Hannibal momentarily, then whipped forward.

“No. He wouldn’t reveal that.”

“How can you be sure it wasn’t some kind of trick?”

“If you’re implying that he might not have been an older Dorian, I’ll tell you like I told my husband—there was no mistaking his scent or his touch. He was definitely Dorian.”

They crossed an intersection between buildings, and the midmorning sun ignited Hannibal’s red mane, half of which was tied back in a ponytail, the rest falling loosely just below his shoulders. Leliana nodded quickly. “I don’t doubt your instinct or your senses, so if you say it was him, it was.”

“I’m not the only one. Ayla has keen smell. She caught his scent too, as did Bull.”

The spymaster shook her head and sighed. “Looks like another hurdle to deal with. I could use my network to get information about the ambush.”

“Nah, don’t bother. It’s not set to happen for at least five years, and your people wouldn’t find anything anyway. This guy Vittorio Ruhland is a nobody right now. He doesn’t even know he’ll plan the ambush yet.” Hannibal followed her lead, turning onto a smaller side street, much more residential. “The best thing to do is to stay mindful of what we’ve learned from future-Dorian, but to also keep it between us: you, me, Dorian, Bull, Ayla, and Sera. And I’ll tell them that, not to go spreading it around the rest of the Inner Circle, or anyone else. The less people that know, the better. Wouldn’t want it to get leaked and back to Tevinter. The past is already changed with future-Dorian’s warning.”

“I agree. I’ll not say a word.”

Not even five minutes later, they reached the two-story home of Lord Wrenz. They stood on the street studying it, as boringly lavish on the exterior as the other homes up and down the block. Well-kept beds of flowers lined the walkway up to the wide steps and porch. A small fountain sat on the grass, some birds perched on its rim.

“Did you tell him we were coming?”

“No,” Leliana said. “I spent part of the evening scoping the central court, where they’ve erected the gallows. I didn’t even get a message to my spy contact working in his home yesterday. I figured we’d just drop by.”

“Hm.”

“Why do you ask?”

Hannibal’s aqua vision slipped to the gate. “It’s opened.”

Sure enough, the wrought iron barrier was unlatched, swung in a bit. He took the first step forward, pushing in the gate when they reached it. Both scanned the tidy yard, listening.

“You hear that?” Leliana said softly.

Save for the ambient sounds of the city, Hannibal could discern nothing coming from the house. “I don’t hear a thing.”

“Exactly. It’s too quiet. Mid-morning and no servants or yard workers moving around?”

Minutely, Hannibal grumbled low in his throat, the kind of sound a beast of prey would generate if it sensed something wrong in its surroundings. Slowly, he approached the porch, going up the stairs. Fueled by instinct, he pulled out his long-knife, walking carefully.

“Door’s open too,” he whispered, then grabbed the handle and slowly pushed it inward.

They stood in the threshold, shadows arching over the finely-tiled entryway floor. The spymaster pulled out a knife as well, moving silently with Hannibal when he waved her forward. Down the hall a short distance the room opened into a great foyer, revealing a wide staircase that branched left and right to the second level. Arched doorways led to an entertainment parlor, sun room, kitchen, and other spaces. They searched the area and found no one, finding themselves back in the foyer.

“There’s death here. I can smell it,” Hannibal voiced lowly. He and Leliana stood at the bottom of the steps peering up, then they began ascending. “It’s really strong now.”
They reached the second-floor landing.

“Yes, I can sense it. I know death well. There, the door at the end of the hall.”

It stood ajar, and shafts of sunlight spilled out over the floor. The closer they got, the more Hannibal suspected they’d find a bit of a mess. The coppery smell of gore filled his nostrils. They reached the door and entered only a few steps.

“By the Maker,” Leliana breathed.

“What the hell?”

A bedroom. And on the bed, naked as the day he was born, lay a middle-aged man, his torso split from groin to sternum, innards scattered all about the mattress. Symbols painted in blood marked the wall above the headboard. The dead man wasn’t alone. Strewn throughout the room were the bodies of all the servants, elves and humans, though none were butchered as the man had been. They didn’t seem to have any physical trauma.

“Frallia…” Leliana sheathed her knife and went to one of the deceased, lowering to brush dark hair from the woman’s lightly bloated, bluish face. “She was my contact amongst the servants for Lord Dreister.”

“I assume that’s him.” Hannibal nodded at the mutilated stiff on the bed.

“Yes.”

“Based on the rate of decomposition, this couldn’t have happened more than two days ago, not ripe enough to have been longer than that.” The Inquisitor spared a look down the shadowy hall behind him. “I think someone knew we were coming. Someone other than Frallia. It can’t be coincidence that this happened just before we reached Wrenz. Somebody obviously didn’t want him to talk. You might have a spy in your spy ranks, Leliana.”

She stood and faced him. “That is an unsettling thought, but not impossible.”

Hannibal gestured to the bloody symbols above the bed. “Those look familiar, don’t they? They’re Venatori—blood magic,” He sighed, shook his head, and ran a large hand down his face, gripping his beard a moment. “We can assume that whoever did this is a Corypheus loyalist, the crazy sons of bitches.”

“They were very skilled to have created such a mess and not have it all over the house. I didn’t see any blood downstairs, or even outside this room.”

“Me either. Well, there’s not much we can do now. Let’s notify the authorities.”

(*)

Hannibal and Leliana spent almost three hours answering questions and spilling all they knew about the murder scene. The story they agreed upon was that they’d been summoned by Lord Wrenz because he wished to invest funds into the Inquisition’s efforts, and when they got there that late morning, they found him and his servants dead.

It was after two when Hannibal got back to his room at the Charmant. He didn’t expect to find Dorian lounging in the tub, book in hand. The Inquisitor locked the door, striding to sit on the bed.

“Amatus, so glad you’re back. You’ve been gone for a while,” the Altus purred, then his brow lowered. “What’s wrong?”

“Lord Wrenz is dead.”

“What?” He jerked to sit up in the tub and water sloshed about. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Something seemed off when Leliana and I got to his home. It was too quiet, for one. We went in, looked around, and found the guy upstairs in his bed gutted like an animal. All the servants working at the time of the slaughter got killed too, poisoned the authorities think. Their bodies were scattered around the bed.”

As Hannibal spoke Dorian slipped from the tub, dried himself, wrapped the towel, then sat on the bed next to him. “That’s horrible. They have no clues leading to who might’ve done it?”

“Only one: Tevinter blood magic symbols were painted in blood over the bed.”

Dorian stiffened. “The Venatori.”

“Could be one of Leliana’s people. They’re the ones on the inside of this, the only ones who knew Lord Wrenz contacted us.”

The Altus muttered a curse. “It never ends, I suppose. Just more shit dropped in the chamber pot.”
He lifted and scooted onto Hannibal’s lap, looping his arms around the Qunari’s neck. “You just be careful, my love.”

“Mm. I will.” Strong arms held Dorian close.

Later that evening in the hotel’s dining hall, the whole group sat around a table, and the others listened while Hannibal and Leliana gave news of Lord Wrenz’s demise.

(*)

The following day, many miles away in Skyhold, metal clanged and clashed in the training yard. Sword to sword, one warrior woman against another for a late morning spar. Xena pivoted and parried Cassandra’s attack, and when the warrior princess spun to avoid, the Seeker performed a swift charge, catching Xena in the side with her shield.

Xena scrambled back a few steps, twirling her sword, fierce blue eyes on the other woman. She grinned, enjoying the invigoration of battle. She ran forward and launched into the air, doing a front somersault, arms out. She soared right over Cassandra’s head, her trilling, trademark battle cry ringing through the yard. The Seeker went to turn as Xena landed behind her, but wasn’t fast enough to avoid the solid right hook that sent her staggering.

Breathing hard from the workout, just as her opponent was, Cassandra rubbed her jaw, smiling at the woman.

“You’re pretty good,” Xena said. “There aren’t many who can land a blow on me, in sparring or the battlefield.”

“Your skills are remarkable. I’ve never been much for acrobatics myself, though I do hold my own well with both feet on the ground.”

“That you do. I like a strong woman.”

“Hm…” Cassandra arched a brow and cleared her throat, catching the homosexual innuendo, though, unknown to her, Xena liked men as well. It became clear not long after the Earthlings’ arrival that Xena and her blond friend were deeply connected. The Seeker merely continued smiling. “Gabrielle seems like just that.”

“Indeed.” Xena nodded.

“I caught a lot of that sparring session.” Cullen finally came forward, moving next to Cassandra. “I’d hate to make an enemy out of either of you.” He smiled handsomely.

The Seeker pressed a kiss to his lips.

“Have lunch with me?” he asked.

“I’d like that, but the representatives from the Grand Cathedral await. I’ll be spending most of the day with them, filling them in about what we know of Ares, what actions we’ve taken, plans, et cetera.” Cassandra went to the sword rack and replaced her training weapon.

“That makes sense,” said Cullen, “seeing as you’re the Right Hand. It’s good that the Chantry is taking a stand against the war god. His presence threatens its whole existence. I’ve no doubt we’ll gain full support from the Chantry in our efforts to stop him. The Inquisition’s presence is the least of their threats now, with Ares waging a holy war, rapidly converting those previously loyal to the Chantry over into his One True God religion.”

“Exactly.” Cassandra chuffed. She ran fingers through the fuzzy collar of his long coat, eyeing him sultrily. “I’d love to have dinner together, though. My quarters at eight.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The commander and Xena watched her saunter off.

“She’s one hell of a woman. Tough,” Xena’s smiling eyes turned to him.

“That she is. Well, I don’t suppose you’d like to take a reprieve from your training to join me for food?”

“Sure, why not.”

They started from the training area for some stone steps leading to the upper court yard.

“What are Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus up to?”

Xena hoisted a thoughtful expression. “I’m not sure. Last I saw of Gabrielle, she was at the stable. She likes horses, feeding them, brushing them. Autolycus spent most of the night drinking at the Herald’s Rest, which means he’s probably just now getting out of bed. Joxer was in the dining hall this morning. I saw him start a conversation with Varric.”

“Seems like everyone’s getting to know one another, and that’s good.”

They found seats in the hall, ate a quick lunch, then Cullen took her to the gaming tables on the garden promenade. Once they sat, he dug a board and box of pieces from the holding basket beside the table.
Recognition lit Xena’s features. “Chess.”

“You have the game in your world?”

“Yes, though the pieces look a bit different. They always do though, depending on who crafted the set.”

“I had thought to introduce you to the game. Since you’re familiar, would you fancy a match or two?”

Xena’s sharp gaze remained on him. “That a challenge?”

Cullen chuckled. “It’s so hard to find a worthy opponent in the fortress, though Elemir is extremely good, as is Solas. So, yes, I suppose I am challenging you.”

She produced a slim, slow smile. “I should warn you that I’m also very good at the game. Haven’t lost many.”

“Alright then, you take white,” Commander Rutherford said, pleased to possibly have some more competition. He began setting up his pieces.

She did the same. “You mentioned Elemir. What exactly is the story behind him and Ayla? They’re obviously not from the same tribe.”

“When he was ten, he found her. Four years old, blind, alone, and scared in the woods. She’d been abandoned by her parents because they were frightened of her power, didn’t want to face the wrath of their village because of their ‘witch’ daughter. He took her in, raised her as his sibling. For most of her life, he’s kept their obviously lack of a true blood bond secret, saving it for the day when she finally found out who and what she is. An Oona. Very powerful and able to amplify or drain the energy of magical entities, such as mages.”

A shadow crept across Xena momentarily. She watched him over the table. “Or gods. That’s why Ares has his eye on her.”

“Yes,” Cullen said. “The truth all came out to Ayla not long after she met Iron Bull. He, the Inquisitor, Sera, and Dorian fought off a group called Hakkonites and discovered her locked in a cage, their captive. That day she touched Iron Bull, and they formed a soul-bond, allowing her to see only when in skin-contact with him. It’s something Oona’s do, bond with the one their life force deems worthy enough to be their protector, their Warrior.”

“That’s extraordinary.” Xena gripped one of her pawns and made the first move.

(*)

While people were enjoying lunch and chess matches in Skyhold, the approaching hour of noon carried a more solemn air in Val Royeaux, or at least it should have, seeing as a man was about to be executed in a matter of minutes.

The Inquisitor and his group stood amidst the gathered crowd in the central court. A lot of the Orlesians seemed happy about the execution, some hooting to get on with it. One man yelled, “Dangle the carrion pig already!” Hannibal and Leliana were of a like mind, both skimming for any sign of Blackwall. He had to be there somewhere.

“Are they really just going to hang him?” Ayla’s eyes shot up to Bull. She tightened her hold on his arm.

The warrior took his eye to her. “It’s the way things are done. He committed a crime, killed a lot of people, including kids.” He looked to the gallows again. The guilty party knelt below the nooses, staring vacantly ahead, the hangman lingering near him and guards on standby. “He’s getting what he deserves.”

The Oona mewled. “I don’t think I can watch this.”

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“You’ve seen people get killed before,” Bull said.

“This is different. This isn’t a battle or an attack. He’s helpless and…oh forget it,” she said softly, features saddened. “What about his mother? Do you even care about how she would feel, knowing her child, her baby, was going to be executed? No, you don’t, because you can be insensitive at times!” Her eyes watered and tears slipped free. She sobbed.

Bull stared silently down at her. He looked to see the others staring at her too. Ayla’s emotional outburst stemmed from the hormonal changes. Bull and Leliana knew that; the others didn’t yet. Sighing, the Qunari hugged her closer, trying to calm her down. “It’s alright, Naaremna. You don’t have to look.”

The messenger standing up on the gallows began to talk, drawing the crowd to a hushed volume. “Cyril Mornay, 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?”

Murmurs shifted through the crowd.

Mornay remained silent.
“Very well,” the messenger said, and the hangman snatched Mornay to his feet, placed the noose around his neck, and tightened it. “Proceed.”

The hangman went to the lever, preparing to pull it and open the trap door beneath Mornay, which would send the man to a dangling, strangling doom.

“Stop!”

All heads whipped around to the keeper of that voice. A man of medium height, solidly-built, searing eyes, and a grizzly beard. He was dressed in dark attire, melding from the crowd, moving up the steps of the gallows. Mornay’s eyes widened.

Out in the mass of people, Hannibal frowned. “Blackwall.”

“What the hell is he doing?” Bull gruffed.

Speculating whispers simmered through the crowd, and the messenger spoke up from behind his mask, “A Grey Warden.”

Blackwall stopped in the center of the gallows, a place that was to serve as the macabre stage for Mornay’s last performance, swinging from a rope and kicking around while he strangled, unless the fall through the floor were to snap his neck.

The Grey Warden faced the people, eyes scanning and falling on the Inquisitor and his group. Then he addressed everyone. “This man is innocent of the crimes laid before him. Orders were given, and he followed them like any good soldier. He should not die for that mistake…”

Blackwall looked over his shoulder to Mornay, downtrodden and withered by guilt and remorse, ready to meet his Maker.

“They find me the man who gave the order,” the messenger pressed firmly.

The warden didn’t flinch from the messenger’s steady stare, his eyes burning from behind the mask. Sighing, the warden faced the crowd again. “Many have come to know me as Blackwall of the Grey Wardens, but I’m not him. I never was. Warden Blackwall is dead, and has been for years. I… assumed his name to hide from who I really am, like a coward.”

“You…after all this time…” Cyril Mornay’s first words since he’d climbed the steps to face the gallows. He stared at the man previously known as Blackwall.

That man turned fully to Mornay. “It’s over. I’m done hiding.” Again, he pivoted to face the crowd. “I gave the order. The crime is mine. I am Thom Rainier.”

The crowd erupted, making whispers crescendo into all-out blaring, the loud chatter of a couple hundred voices.

“Shit,” Sera said, her large eyes gone even more luminous.

“This explains a lot.” Hannibal shook his head. Shortly before he and the group left for the place in the east, Blackwall came to him wanting to talk. So, they did over drinks at the Rest. Blackwall had been more angsty than usual, talking about an instance when he was a kid and failed to help a dog from being tortured by other kids. He didn’t save it. The way he could’ve kept General Callier and his family from being slaughtered.

Up on the gallows, guards moved in to secure Thom Rainier, leading him away for the prison.

Hannibal looked to Dorian, Sera, Bull, and Ayla. “You four, hang out somewhere.” Eyes fixed on the spymaster. “Leliana, I need you with me.”

Chapter End Notes

I do not own the image of Greek model Paraskevas Boubourakas. I just thought he would be an awesomely hot modern depiction of Blackwall/Rainier. :)
It’s No Surprise that the Altus Already Knew

It didn’t take much to get the guards to let them into the prison. Being the Inquisitor came with many perks and a lot of authority, though it wouldn’t be enough to just take Rainier out of there. A long, eerie creak split the air when the guard on duty pulled back the barred door leading to the holding cells.

“You have ten minutes, sir,” he said.

Hannibal gave an acknowledging nod and looked to Leliana. “Wait here.”

She watched him go inside, then turned and walked off a few paces to give them space.

The Inquisitor moved slowly, eyes swaying left and right. There were little barred windows high up. The floor was broken in places, bricks and stones misplaced. Moist moss blanketed some of the torch-lit surfaces, and the sound of trickling water came from some place in the shadows. He reached the last cell on the left and stopped, staring at the man sitting on the plank inside with his head in his hands.

“I don’t even know what to call you now,” said Hannibal, resonant voice carrying through the area.

“You’re not supposed to be here. You should go.”

“I’m not going anywhere until we talk.”

“Fine then, Inquisitor. What would you like to talk about?”

Hannibal’s face solidified angrily and he quickly lunged closer to the bars. Rainier’s profile floated in the gloomy shadows of the cell, the nearby torchlight barely reaching him, and he stared ahead now.

“You know what I want to talk about, Blackwall, so don’t screw around with me.”

“I’m not Warden Bl—”

“Yeah, Thom Rainier. I heard all that.” Hannibal drew in a deep breath. “What happened to the real Blackwall?”

Rainier stiffened, his face sculpted in dire lines and edges. His eyes went to his folded hands, then the floor. “The Deep Roads, after the Fifth Blight. He and I were together, working to secure one of many entrances leading down there. I wasn’t a Warden yet, but working under his mentorship. We reached an abandoned mine and entered, and that’s when we heard the calls coming from further inside. T’weren’t stable though,” he spoke in soft, pained tones. “The walls crumbled and collapsed around us. I jumped back in time; he didn’t. Rubble covered him, killed him instantly. I dug him out and saw it was too late. So, I took his effects, his name, everything that identified him as Warden Blackwall, and I became him. We shared dark hair, he and I, blue eyes. As scattered as the Wardens were, he’d been alone for many years, and it was easy to assume his identity. I retreated from that collapsed mine shaft and found another way inside using a cave. I helped the men that were trapped in that tunnel, fellow Wardens. I instantly became a hero amongst them, earning the Silverite Wings of Valor.”

He stopped. Mocking chuckles came from the cell.

“Valor. A word that implies heroism. Valiance. Gallantry. Words wasted on me, for I am a coward.”

“Cowards don’t venture back into unstable tunnels to help people.”

Rainier’s face whipped about, and he fixed eyes squarely on Hannibal. “But they do give the kill order on unarmed civilians…the children…” he shuddered and closed his eyes, looking at the wall across from him again.

The Qunari moved closer. “Blackwall—”

“That’s not my name.”

“Rainier. You made a mistake. We’re all entitled to make one every once in a while. Maybe you’ve suffered with the guilt long enough. You should learn to forgive yourself.”

“I will never forgive myself.” Again, and very slowly, his head turned to Hannibal. “Do you forgive me, knowing what I did, how I allowed those people and their children to be slaughtered? Could you!”

There came a short pause. “I already have.”

Rainier snorted. “Then you’re a fool.”

“I know what kind of man you are. You’re honorable. You’re dedicated to your friends and you would die for them. Hell, you jumped in and saved my ass plenty of times. What happened in the past shouldn’t define you. I’m going to do everything I can to get you out of here.”
“No, you won’t.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Bla—Guy Formerly Known as Blackwall, you’re my friend. We’ve been solid since the day I tracked you to that lake in the Hinterlands. You’ve never let me or our friends down and have always given your best. I don’t see a monster or a murderer in you. And I’m not leaving you here to be executed.”

“Maybe it’s for the best. I need to die for what happened to the Calliers.”

“Blood does not need to have blood, my friend.”

Rainier sighed. He wouldn’t look Hannibal’s way anymore. He was done talking.

Hannibal watched him for a long while, then spun and left the holding cell room. The guard locked the main doors, then gestured for the Inquisitor and Leliana to follow him from the prison. Through the dungeon-esque interior, through pools of dank torch glow, up a couple flights of stone stairs. They kept moving until Leliana and Hannibal were back at the well-guarded entry yard out in the midday sun.

He didn’t speak until they’d left the premises completely and were walking back for Hotel Charmant. “He wants to be left in there, to be executed.”

The spymaster slipped him a look. “What do you want to do?”

“He’s done so much for the Inquisition, for this world, for them, the ones that want to execute him—I won’t leave him in there to die, no matter how hungry for atonement he is. I want to get him out and back to Skyhold. If it’s judgment he wants, he’ll have it. I will judge him.”

She dallied in her thoughts, then nodded. “Understood. I have a way to get him out, but you and the others need to leave the city tomorrow. I can’t have it look like you had anything to do with… what I have planned.”

One of Hannibal’s thick red eyebrows arched. “What do you have planned?”

“The less you know, the better.”

(*)

That evening, after the dinner hour but not too late, Hannibal summoned the group to his and Dorian’s room. They stood in a loose circle there now. Well, almost everyone.

“Where’s Leliana?” asked Bull.

“She’s…taking care of something,” Hannibal said.

“They’re gonna hang Fuzzy-Face, aren’t they.” Sera spoke softly, nearly too inaudible to hear clearly.

“Not if I have anything to do with it.” Hannibal’s eyes leveled on her.

Bull’s eye narrowed at his fellow Qunari. “That why Leliana isn’t here? She’s up to something involving Blackwall…uh…Rainier.”

Dorian had heard everything from his husband earlier. He entered the banter. “We don’t know what exactly, but she suggested we leave tomorrow. She doesn’t want her plan to blow back on Hannibal, which means we all need to be gone from here quickly. There won’t be a trial for him since he confessed openly and revealed who he is. His execution is set for one week from today.”

“The escape rate from the cells of Val Royeaux’s prison is extremely low. Let’s say Leliana pulls it off, gets him out. What then?” Bull said, hand caressing over Ayla’s, which had tightened its grip on his forearm.

“She’ll get him back to Skyhold, and I’ll judge him. Since I don’t know any of Leliana’s plans, I can’t give you more than that. All of you need to be ready to go at dawn. I’ll arrange for the kitchen to prepare traveling food. We’ll meet in the lobby and leave for the ship. I suggest you all head to bed early.”

“If you do decide to have some pre-bedtime fun, try to hold it down, hm?” Dorian slipped mischievously, eyes fixed on Bull and Ayla.

“Just for that, we’re gonna be extra loud,” Bull mused, partially smiling.

Ayla tagged his arm, blushing.

(*)

The darkness held a silver lining in the eastern sky at such an early hour, a heavenly preamble to announce the dawning sun. Dorian stood on the terrace and watched the indoor plaza garden three stories down. Quiet, destitute of hotel guests at this hour. The occasional employee passed, readying things for when people started to rise.

“You have everything, sweetheart?”

Dorian spun and passed through the sheer, billowy curtains back inside. He went to Hannibal and
nuzzled his beard. “Yes,” he answered, then secured his stave to his back and pulled on the traveling bag. “Ready.”

Hannibal donned his bag and broadsword, and they exited the room, heading down to the others. Of course, when they reached the lobby, Leliana was nowhere to be found. Hannibal knew that if he went to her room right then, he’d find it empty. She’d gone underground, as was her way when the need arose. They wouldn’t see the spymaster again until she returned to Skyhold.

Ayla awakened that morning feeling like crap and throwing up. She loathed to get back on the ship, and when they did an hour after leaving the hotel, she found a place by the buckets with her husband and tried to tame the sickness as best she could until the vessel was at least out on the open water again.

(*)

They were moored back at the docks in camp by late afternoon. Shortly after that Bull and Ayla reached their tent, and she collapsed on the bedroll, gathering large breaths. Bull set their things down, then gave his full attention to her. The man pulled off his boots and went to unlace hers, carefully removing them. He took off her cotton stockings too, allowing her feet to breath.

Ayla sighed and smiled down at him, able to see clearly with him holding one of her bare feet. She wiggled her toes.

“Your ankles are swollen,” he said.

The woman examined them, then smirked. “You’re right. My feet look like wedges.”

Iron Bull blared a round of laughter. “Here…” He started to massage one small, puffy foot. “How’s that?”

Ayla relaxed and her eyes rolled shut. “Oh my gods, amazing. Thanks, love.”

“Anything to make you comfortable.”

“Oh, so you’re my slave now?” She grinned playfully at him.

The Qunari gazed sensuously at her, rotating his thumb with firm gentleness into the arch of her foot. “I think I’ve been your slave since the day we met. In a good way.” He winked.

Ayla slowly sat up, eyes staying on his. She reached for his hand, caressing it. “I love you.”

Iron Bull didn’t need to verbally respond. The way he watched her spoke it all. He opened himself to their link, and she could feel the flood of love coming from him, like a dam had broken, pleasantly overwhelming her with the warm, powerful emotion. She moved into his arms, hugging as tight as she could. Bull did the same, mindful not to squeeze her too hard.

Ayla stayed nestled in his muscular, masculine fragrance for a while, then pulled back. “I should go talk to Hannibal, tell him about the baby.”

“Yes,” Bull said. “You wanna go right now?”

“Yes. I just want to get it over with…after my massage, that is.” She giggled at the humored smirk he produced.

Twenty minutes later, the couple approached the Inquisitor’s large tent. The guard outside nodded to Bull and let them pass. Openings on the ceiling—covered by sheer, transparent material—allowed ample light to pour in. Dorian lounged in a chair munching on grapes, and Hannibal stood over the table looking at unit reports.

The Altus perked at their arrival, smiling. “Well, well. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Ayla looked up at Bull, fingers wiggling nervously on his forearm. He waited for her to state her reasons for coming. She looked to both Dorian and Hannibal, the Inquisitor now standing fully, arms crossed over his chest, a smile on his face. “I…need to tell you something.”

She hesitated.

Hannibal moved around the table, his voice soft when he spoke. “What’s wrong, Ayla?”

“Well, nothing’s wrong. It’s just…I’m…pregnant.”

“Ha! Told you!” Dorian beamed, dropping the remaining grapes in a bowl and snapping to his feet. He poked at Hannibal’s arm. “Told you, told you!” The mage grabbed Ayla by the shoulders and pulled her to him for a hug, his cheek to hers.

“Yeah, you did,” Hannibal said.

Ayla drew away from the Altus a bit, confusion branding her face, eyes swinging between him and his husband. “You knew?”

“Dearest, of course I knew. It all kind of dawned on me during the Winter Solstice party,” Dorian mused, grinning. “You kept me company while Iron Bull did his Winter’s Saint thing. When we went to the refreshment tables, you made yourself a huge plate of chopped fruit…and sprinkled fire-pepper all over it, then didn’t so much as flinch about it while I watched you dig in. After the
fruit, you got an apple tart and put that hot powder all over it too.”

Ayla blinked. “I hadn’t even thought about it. I just recently realized I was with child.”

“You were throwing up on the road to Val Royeaux before we even boarded the ship, and I think that was the deciding factor for me,” Dorian said. He tweaked his moustache, twirling the end of it. “Hm. And while I know no woman ever wants to hear others acknowledge any added weight to her figure, you’ve certainly gotten rounder in places. Your face, for instance.”

“GAH!” the Oona frowned and stamped her foot. “Why does everyone keep calling me fat!”

“No one’s calling you fat, Ayla,” Hannibal broke into the conversation, attempting to diffuse the woman’s quickly soaring emotions.

“I believe my best friend just did.” Striking blue eyes narrowed at the Altus.

Dorian waved a hand flippantly. “I did no such thing. I merely pointed out that you wear motherhood well. Besides, I think your husband would agree that—”

“Nope. Don’t pull me into this,” Bull said in his own defense. Dorian wasn’t the one who slept beside the woman every night, virtually joined at the hip with her, meaning the Vint wouldn’t suffer from the backlash later and Ayla’s emotional wrath. “You brought it up, and I have nothing at all to do with it.”

Ayla turned her enlarged doe-eyes up at Bull, voice soft, “So, you agree with him. I’m fat.”

“I didn’t say that all, Naaremma. I think you look beautiful, glowing as a matter of fact.”

“No… I’m… faaat,” she whimpered. Tears quickly filled her eyes, and she hugged into her husband.

Iron Bull sighed and glared, large hand rubbing up and down her back. “Thanks a lot, Dorian.” The man’s attention focused on her, lips curling into a dashing smile. “You are not fat, not even close. You’re pregnant; there’s a big difference. Honestly, you could stand to gain a bit more. I mean, it’s not like our baby’s gonna be little. You need all the extra cushion you can get.”

In some strange, heart-warming way, Bull’s words made Ayla feel better. She smiled up at him. “Okay.” The woman quickly looked to Hannibal, mild remorse taking hold. “I’m so sorry, Inquisitor. I know we have a battle to fight, and I never meant for this to happen now.” Ayla’s vision slipped accusatorily to Bull, since it was he who single-handedly decided now was a great time to start a family. All she saw was ultimate love in his eye, and she couldn’t even stay mad for more than five seconds.

Hannibal shook his head, a hand touching tenderly to Ayla’s shoulder as he smiled. “You don’t have to apologize for something that naturally happens. I’m very happy for you and Bull. Though I don’t recommend that you stand with the mages, assuming the fight comes while you’re still with child. It could be weeks, months, or even years off. I know you want to help, and that I can’t stop you.”

Ayla’s relief showed in her deep sigh. “Thank you. I still want to fight.” She felt Iron Bull stiffen, his toned forearm flexing beneath her palm. Eyes jerked to him. “But only if I’m able.”

“I understand,” Hannibal replied. “When Dorian brought his speculations to me about your condition, I began thinking of ways to plan around not having you in battle. In any case, whether you’re there or not, Morrigan wouldn’t be bonded to you for long. She has other responsibilities in battle. That would leave Solas, Dorian, and Magnus linked to your power, as Vivienne’s made it clear she’s not interested in linking.”

“Maggy…” the Oona murmured. She’d nearly forgotten that they had him too now. She gave a short nod, a curt smile. “He should begin practicing with us once we get back. It won’t take much for him to acclimate to my power, seeing as he’s had a lot of experience blocking it.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Hannibal said. “Why don’t you go and get some rest. You were really puking your guts out on the ship.”

She groaned. “Yes, please don’t remind me. Could we keep the pregnancy secret until we get back to Skyhold? I’ll tell everyone then.”

“Of course,” the Inquisitor said.

Just before Bull and Ayla turned to exit the tent, Dorian moved forward and hugged her again. “I’m going to be an uncle,” the Altus cooed.

Ayla giggled. “Looks like it.”

She and Bull left. Half an hour later, she was sound asleep in their tent.

(*)

Josephine tightened her legs around Elemir’s waist, arms clamped to his shoulders, holding him to her. They’d just climaxed and laid tangled in one another on his bed. The ambassador’s hands buried in his hair, mouth finding his for another kiss. She nibbled his lip.
Elemir smiled. “Not going to let me up for water?”

“No.”

“But I’m parched.”

“Too bad. You have to stay right here in bed, with me,” she purred.

The ranger thought a moment. “Well, if I can’t get water, I can’t get revitalized. If I can’t get revitalized, I can’t give you that second round you want.”

“Hm. Since you put it that way, go and hydrate.” Josephine’s legs dropped to either side of him. Her arms fell away as well, and she stretched languidly. The woman chuckled when he nipped her chin and slipped from bed.

Elemir went to the table and poured some water, downing it. He poured a little more and drank it slower, moss-green eyes on the window, the duskiness of night beyond. He was thinking of Ayla, of her safety. He’d protected her for a long time, and it was normal that he still harbored the need to do so. Elemir trusted Iron Bull, however. He knew the man would take care of her. He set the empty cup down and turned to Josephine. She watched him with partially sated eyes, her brown body dampened by a thin sheen of sweat.

He grinned at her. “I’m nice and replenished now.”

“Good. Get back over here.”

“Gladly.”

He went a few steps before someone knocked on the door. Josephine pulled the sheet over her naked form. Elemir strode to his pair of discarded pants and tugged them on. He opened the door a crack and saw Cullen standing in the hall.

“Sorry to bother you,” said the Commander, “but you have a visitor. I’m sure he’s a representative from the east. His attire is much like yours. He awaits just outside.”

Elemir nodded. “I’ll be down in two minutes.” He closed the door and started plucking up his clothes off the floor, dressing.

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes. There is a liaison from the east here to see me.”

“Isn’t Joswen also authorized to talk between our two sides?”

Elemir turned his soft smile to her. “He is, but he’s put me in charge of it. He’ll only really step in if I’m occupied.”

She pouted. “You were occupied.”

The ranger’s chuckles rang through the room. “While I’d love to stay right here, I somehow don’t think he’ll see my sexual relations with you as a matter of great importance. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

The ambassador smirked, chuckling. “You’d better. It’s already getting chilly without you.”

Elemir finished dressing, pulled on his cloak, and headed downstairs. He spotted Illian instantly upon exiting the south tower. The elf moved for him, pulling back his hood. “I bring a message from those in charge.”

(*)

The following morning Elemir caught up with Joswen in the dining hall. He sat with Magnus and Vek. The ranger told them what the messenger relayed while they ate. Lassalanta, mentioned only as “a certain someone in the east”, sent word that the God of War had physically contacted Aut’lu Mena, the barrier surrounding Hald’arun. The sanctuary also remained unnamed. Ares now knew something lingered in the forest. The positive part was that contacting the barrier weakened him, stole his power until he was out of range.

“Good,” Vek said lowly, leaning forward to contain his voice to their ears only. “He’ll think twice about going in that area again.”

“Or he might return to study it.” Magnus suggested.

Elemir shook his head. “I don’t think he will. He’s not an idiot. He knows his presence was sensed, and that if he tries to make any moves, whatever’s behind that barrier will be waiting. Without his powers, he’d be defenseless. My guess is that he’ll avoid the area.”

“Or he might return to study it.” Magnus suggested.

Elemir shook his head. “I don’t think he will. He’s not an idiot. He knows his presence was sensed, and that if he tries to make any moves, whatever’s behind that barrier will be waiting. Without his powers, he’d be defenseless. My guess is that he’ll avoid the area.”

“At least for now,” said Joswen. Deep lines creased his brow, highlighting the frown. Vivid hazel eyes went to each man. “Ares has the Inquisition to worry about for now, to include Xena, so he’s preoccupied. If we don’t defeat him, he’ll eventually go back to the place in the east. That’s what I would do in his position. The curiosity would be eating at me, like I know it’s nibbling at him. He’ll go back.”

Each of them silently contemplated the consequences of Ares obtaining access to Hald’arun, to
Hon’o Hald’arun. The sanctuary was a bountiful source of power. He’d only abuse it if given the chance.

Vek growled. “He’ll not get in. We’ll kill the fuck first. Don’t care if his world needs him. If ever his mind sets on taking our home, he will die.”

Joswen nodded at him. “That he will.” He looked to Elemir. “Come. Let us speak with Commander Rutherford. He is the one in charge while the Inquisitor is away, and he also stands in for their Spymaster. He could’ve elected to be present while you spoke with the messenger, but instead let you talk privately; he didn’t have to allow us that. We need to brief him now.”

“What do we tell him?” Elemir questioned, his gaze stern. “He’s never gone to the place in the east, and even if he had, he most likely wouldn’t have been allowed to remember.”

“We’ll tell him the truth, but on our terms. We’ll tell him the Red Army sent word that the God of War was spotted in the Brecilian region, though for what purpose we know not. Clean, simple, and truthful,” Joswen said.

The strong-featured elf stood from the table, as did Elemir. They left the main hall for Cullen’s office.

(*)

With his eyes closed and his ears opened to the sounds of night birds calling back and forth in the forest surrounding Villa Maurel, Elgar’nan lost himself in the warm, fragrant water of a bath. The elf sat in the center of the sunken pool in his room, hair rolled into a bun. It felt wonderful to unwind and block the world out for a bit, though the feeling retracted when the water shifted, and Elgar’nan detected the presence of another behind him.

His eyes rolled open. “Do you ever knock?” The elf turned to face Ares.

“Not really.” The God of War was just as naked, the water distorting the view below his waist. He wore a debonair smile and a veil of sensuality. “I wanted to see you. I haven’t in a couple of days, been busy.”

“Yes, you are quite the busy body.” Elgar’nan turned away, presenting his back again, chin held high. He ran the sponge down one toned, pale arm. “Get out of my bath.”

Ares gripped his shoulders, moving closer.

The former Elvhen king stiffened, his scowl dire yet handsome. “What are you doing? I said leave.”

“Calm down, Blondie. You need someone to wash your back, don’t you? Hand me the sponge.”

Elgar’nan sighed irritably. He shook his head at the unfettered, absolute gall of the god. At the same time, it would be nice to get a proper scrub. He flung the sponge over his shoulder, and Ares caught it. The god began slowly washing his back.

“Do you really think you can trust Fen’Harel?” Elgar’nan asked.

Ares chuckled, close enough that the elf could feel his breaths on the back of his neck. “I trust him slightly less than I trust you.”

“As you should.”

“If you mean to ask if I think I’ll find myself trapped in a Fade-prison, then no. Fen’Harel doesn’t scare me.”

“What about Xena? Does she scare you?” Elgar’nan droned, his voice smooth and melodious. He turned and locked eyes with the war god.

Ares had the strongest urge to pull the man against him. This was their most intimate moment to date, and the atmosphere was just right, if only Elgar’nan would relent. “Honestly, I’m warier of her than anyone else in Thedas right now. She’s…” his thoughts dappled in the past, in moments when he’d faced Xena and lost, “…special. I have never in my entire existence encountered a warrior with so much fire, intense enough to turn steel into ash. If she had ever followed the path of the Gods, fully indulged her dark side, Earth would’ve fallen to its knees before her. She would’ve made all the gods bow.” He shrugged and rolled his eyes. “But she chose to go all righteous, fight for the people, yada, yada, yada. Still, she’s not one to be underestimated.”

Elgar’nan listened closely. “Sounds like you love her. How touching.” The elf glided through the water, stepping out. He took up his towel and dried, forming a perfect silhouette against the flames in the tall hearth.

“Ares chuckled, close enough that the elf could feel his breaths on the back of his neck. “I trust him slightly less than I trust you.”

“The God of War chuckled. “Guess I’ll just have to keep trying. Sweet dreams, Blondie.” He vanished.
Elgar’nan sat at the vanity and stared at his reflection for a while, brushed in the golden light of candles. Still beautiful. At least that would be a constant, his beauty, even if he never got his power back. That was one of the “gifts” he and the other eight received from the Artifact, never aging. Their godly powers had been the ultimate gift that launched the nine mages into supreme control over the Elvhen people.

Though old age would never claim him and he’d remain as gorgeous as he’d been for the past few thousand years, Elgar’nan was no longer immortal. Swords, fireballs, and lightning bolts could injure or kill him. This he knew. Which was why he had to get his Orb of Power from Ares.
The party returned to Skyhold four days later, sometime right before lunch. As usual, they were met by stable hands who took the horses and Bull’s hart away. Everyone but Hannibal dispersed to their quarters to drop of their traveling gear. The Inquisitor stayed behind to talk with Cullen. The commander wasn’t alone. Xena was with him. As leader of the Earth squad, it was her responsibility to keep her people informed.

“Where is Leliana?” Cullen scanned the yard again and the main gate, thinking that perhaps the spymaster straggled slightly behind them.

“She stayed behind to tend to something,” Hannibal said.

“And Blackwall. Did you find him?”

“Oh, yeah. We found him, and I’ll go over the details in the war room.”

Cullen nodded. “Alright. Josephine’s already standing by.”

“I’ll be down in thirty.” Swirling aqua eyes went to Xena. “I take it you’ll be present? I won’t need to summon Ayla if you’re there with the charm.”

“Yes, I will,” answered the warrior princess. “We have a little news regarding the God of War.”

(*)

“Wow, I would have never suspected,” Josephine said, disbelief worn like a thin veil over her features, lips slightly parted. “I suppose that does, however, explain a lot about him. I just never saw this coming, him being Thom Rainier.”

“None of us did.” Hannibal looked down the refinished table at her. Luckily, personnel quickly snuffed the fire caused during the escape of Ares and his elven friend. The table sustained only surface damage. The Inquisitor thanked all the stars in heaven that nothing of true value had been destroyed, like old documents. All maps had been replaced and everything looked like it did before Esgal’Arad’s fiery storm.

Cullen went more serious than usual, arms crossing his chest. “I’ve never had any issues with Blackwall before, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to trust him again, considering Leliana pulls through and gets him back here.” A crease parted his brow while he thought on something. “What would we call him? Blackwall isn’t his name and calling him Thom Rainier is out of the question, since either of those names would bring attention to him.”

Hannibal shook his horned head. “I don’t know. One thing at a time. We have to get him back first. All I know is I’m not ready to give up on him.”

“You may not have many options, Inquisitor,” spoke the commander. “By now the word of his lie may have spread far enough that the Grey Wardens have heard it. Leliana might be able to save him from execution in Orlais, but it could prove in vain should the Wardens find out the ‘impersonator’ didn’t die on those gallows. They’ll want him if they find out.”

Hannibal shook his horned head. “I don’t know. One thing at a time. We have to get him back first. All I know is I’m not ready to give up on him.”

“So then they don’t find out.” Little flames produced by candles flickered and flashed in blue-green depths. Hannibal’s face hardened. “If he makes it to Skyhold, I’ll offer to let him remain with the Inquisition. His only other option would be to go on run, into hiding from the Wardens.”

Xena stood by in stoic silence, following the conversation with no trouble. This guy Blackwall wasn’t Blackwall, assumed the man’s identity, and could be hanged if not transported back to the fortress. “I’m looking forward to meeting him. I can tell by the way you all speak of him that he’s kindhearted, regardless of his mistake. I’m not exactly without my own demons.”

At one point in Xena’s past, she’d been a terrible warlord, had looted, killed, pillaged, and crushed whole armies and villages. Slaughtered the innocent. Ares called it her “greatest hour”. Xena saw it as her weakest. When she spotted the pinpoint of light in the darkness, she’d followed it and watched it expand, leading her to Gabrielle. The bard had grown on her in many ways. Gabrielle was love. Redemption. It was she who’d pulled Xena forward, who anchored and balanced her.

The warrior princess offered a smile. “Leliana will pull through. I know it. Both your friends will return.”

“Yeah, I think so too.” Hannibal reciprocated the smile.

“There is something of importance I’d like to report, Inquisitor,” Cullen said. “It’s about our new allies in the east, the Red Army. We received a messenger a few days back who said the war god was spotted in and around the Brecilian territory.”

“He must’ve been watching us. Did he attack?”

“No,” Cullen answered. “As of the messenger’s visit, all he’s done is show up and observe.”
“What is this place in the east that I keep hearing about?” Xena asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” said Hannibal. “Only a select few know what it really is, and others must travel to it before they understand it. I went with a group right before you got here, but I don’t remember being there. Apparently, that’s one of the stipulations.”

Intrigue boiled in her eyes. “Sounds like pretty solid security measures to me. If no one can talk about it or remember it, then chances are the place will remain hidden. Efficient.”

“Yes, it is,” Hannibal replied, then looked to Josephine and Cullen. “You should also know that Lord Wrenz is dead, and I think the Venatori had something to do with it.”

Hannibal told them the details.

(*)

Ayla ran hands down the front of her dress, nervously smoothing it. She fiddled the buttons of the bodice again. Her reflection in the intricate, body-length mirror stared back anxiously at her. Thick white hair was secured from her face with pins. It tumbled in a full, voluminous cascade. Iron Bull stretched out at her feet, fingers linking one of her mildly swollen ankles. The man chuckled and lifted her skirt enough to reveal a smooth calf, which he kissed.

“You look fine.”

“You don’t think this dress makes me look too fat?”

“Naaremma,” her nickname came smooth and husky, “how many times do I have to tell you that you’re not fat?”

Ayla’s slim shoulders lifted and dropped. A quick, deep sigh. She smiled down at him. “I know. I just feel like it’s a little tight in the waist. My face isn’t the only place to add some weight. There’s a bit more on my middle now. Maybe we could go to a tailor tomorrow so I can get fitted for a couple of new dresses.”

“Whatever you want.” The hot bands of his lips left another kiss on her leg, his beard tickling her skin. “You sure you’re ready to tell everyone?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “It will get out soon, and they might as well hear it from us.”

He nodded. “Alright.” Then, he stood and wrapped her in his arms, holding her to his broad, naked chest.

The couple indulged in a kiss that sent shivers all over Ayla. Delectable, sensual tremors. She pulled back, poking him in the stomach. “You should put your shirt and shoes on. It’s time to go.”

Iron Bull grinned and didn’t release his hold on her, smiling down. “It is the first day back from traveling. We could stay up here, get in bed, and keep each other warm.”

“Mm. I like that plan, which is why I don’t want to stay long at the Herald’s Rest. An hour, maybe two. We can visit long enough to give the news.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The Qunari lowered his mouth to hers, tasting the perfect sweetness of her lips. Soft and supple. Then, they finished getting ready and left for the tavern.

(*)

Most of the gang was there. Hannibal and Dorian weren’t, to no surprise. The Inquisitor usually wasn’t, busy as he was up into the evening hours. The two of them were most likely up in their quarters heavily engaged in a mad sex session. The Chargers’ corner thrived with life. All the Chargers were there, along with all the Arrows, Joswen’s people. Joxer and Autolycus sat amongst them, laughing, drinking, hooting, and hollering. The warrior princess and battling bard were nowhere to be seen.

Skinner smiled and stood when Bull and Ayla arrived. “Keeping it warm for ya, Chief.”

“No need for that,” he said, smiling. The man and his wife lowered to the padded bench. “What you can do is pour me up a cup.”

“You got it.” Skinner grabbed a glass, flipped it right-side up, and filled it half way with Charger’s brew. She handed it to him, grinning.

“Thanks.”

“No prob.” The elf looked to Ayla. “You gonna try your luck with it again?” She laughed.

The Oona shook her head and exchanged looks with her husband. “Actually, we have something we want to say.” She gently nudge Bull with her elbow.

He had his lips curled and ready to attach to his cup for a drink, but refrained. “Okay, okay. I’ll do it then.” The large man rose to his feet, and Ayla stood at his side. “Yo! Attention, please.” The music played on, and all other activity outside of their corner continued. Everyone who was part of the Inner Circle—Varric, Cole, the Chargers, the Arrows, Xena’s people—hushed and listened.
Bull cleared his throat. “Ayla and I just wanted to let you know we’re expecting a little one.”

An explosion of cheers filled the corner, drawing curious eyes in their direction. The Chargers and Arrows simultaneously rushed in. Many hugs and congratulations passed between them and the married couple.

When it was Magnus’s turn, he did his best to get his arms around both Ayla and Bull at once. He smacked the man on the shoulder and pressed a kiss to the woman’s soft cheek. “I’m so happy to hear that! My little bird, truly all grown up. May happiness and health shine upon you and the child.” The battlemage looked slyly at Iron Bull, voice lowered a tad, a surreptitious smile hanging. “Didn’t waste any time, eh?”

Bull chuckled. “Life’s too short for that.”

“You’ve had a bit to drink, Maggy,” Ayla said. Prominent was the blush mingled with her smile.

“Yes, you might be right about that, little bird. Youthful still is the night. I predict more drinking to come.” Again, he kissed her cheek, then made way for the next person.

Sophitia.

She made a squealing sound as she moved in and grabbed Ayla tight, hugging. The warrior woman pulled back and studied Ayla, eyes lingering on her stomach. “I can hardly believe it! How far along are you?”

“A month and a half, two months.”

“And you look beautiful!” Sophi’s gaze slipped to Iron Bull. “You be sure to take care of her and the baby well.”

“You can count on it.”

The woman smiled up at him. “How are you handling it so far?”


“Bull!” Ayla elbowed him.

The man laughed deeply. Sophi did the same. “What? I’m only telling her how it is. And I would have it no differently, Naaremma.”

Ayla sighed and hugged arms around his waist.

After Sophitia slipped back, Elemir approached. Unlike everyone else before him, the ranger didn’t immediately go in for the hug. He observed the couple, his smile mild and loving. He finally stepped in and embraced his sister.

“You’re glowing,” he whispered against her ear, then eased back a bit. “I never thought I’d see this day before you bound to Iron Bull.” Elemir looked to the Qunari. “Now, with a child to bind us, we will be more than just kin by marriage. We will truly be brothers. Congratulations to you both.” He held his hand out.

Iron Bull nodded and took his wrist, and Elemir’s fingers latched to his. It meant a lot to the Qunari to hear those words. “Brothers.”

Ayla’s heart swelled. She couldn’t remember feeling happier. And now that Little Bean had been made known, the small weight pressing on her was gone. Time to move forward.

(*)

On the fifth night after returning from Val Royeaux, Hannibal awakened to knocks on the door at the bottom of the staircase leading up into his and Dorian’s quarters. The mage stirred next to him, flipping over to bury his face in Hannibal’s chest.

“Nngh…what do they want?” rasped Dorian.

“I’ll be back.”

The Inquisitor scooted to the edge of the mattress, from under the covers. While he pulled on his pants, he examined the night beyond tall windows, fat flakes stuck to the glass. It was snowing again. Hannibal studied his spouse, who was already dropping back into slumber. He turned and headed down the stairs, undid the latch, and pulled the door open.

There stood the one man that seemed to never sleep, always ready to stand his duties. Cullen.

“What’s going on, commander?”

“Leliana’s arrived, and she’s brought Rainier with her. I told them to wait in the war room.”

“Did you wake Josephine?”

“No.”
“Good. There’s no need to bother her since this won’t be an official meeting. Let me finish dressing and I’ll head right down.”

(*)

It wasn’t often that war room meetings took place in the early, predawn hours. Hannibal entered the room and shut the door after him, experiencing an almost dismal sensation. Instead of being lit by daylight, sending various pools of color over the floor and table, the stained-glass windows were dark and opaque. Cullen had lit a couple of lamps. He, Leliana, Hannibal, and Rainier appeared to blend into the shadows of such low lighting.

“I’m glad you could save him,” Hannibal started. “How did you do it?”

Thom Rainier spoke up before she could. “By sacrificing another in my place.” His hair was wild, skewing across his brow, partly hiding his eyes, though Hannibal could very well see the blue mirrors aimed at him. The ex-warden shook his head, clearly disapproving of whatever actions Leliana chose to take.

Hannibal’s vision swung to Leliana. He waited.

“He’s correct,” the spymaster said. “Another did hang in his place. A prisoner of war being kept by my forces in an undisclosed location. The man committed great crimes, killing a few of my people. We learned a while back that he has a family, a wife and two sons, and I knew we might be able to use that against him.” Leliana hardened. She didn’t flinch, further accentuating her dangerous nature. “We threatened to kill his family if he didn’t die on that gibbet.”

“Leliana…” Hannibal blinked, couldn’t finish his sentence.

“In a time of war, we do what we must. You wanted Rainier out of the prison, and he stands before you now.”

The Inquisitor’s sigh was silent, acquiescent. “The guards would’ve certainly noticed that they were about to hang a completely different man. How’d you get by that?”

“It wasn’t easy,” she replied, green eyes flashing from the dimness. “It took some bribing of the inner guards, the ones directly watching Rainier’s cell. Simply put, magic was used to alter the prisoner of war’s face to match Rainier’s. He was then sneaked into the prison, Rainier was drugged and sneaked out. Couldn’t take the chance that he’d warn the guards. The prisoner of war kept his silence and went to the noose believing his family would be killed if he didn’t comply. I received word the following day, once we were well away from the city, that the body went to the crematorium. No one realizes that Rainier still lives.”

“I realize it.” Rainier slowly brought his eyes up from the lantern at which he’d been staring. “Now, I must live knowing yet another has died for my mistakes.”

Hannibal blinked, couldn’t finish his sentence.

“Okay, so you made some mistakes. I can assure you the vermin that hung in your place did things which would make you look like an altar boy by comparison. He was a piece of trash, and he served his purpose. His family has been anonymously compensated in the form a sizable amount of gold, accompanied by a letter in his own hand stating he never wanted to leave them and sending his love. I allowed him to write it before he went to hang. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You should be happy you’re alive.”

“If he hadn’t cooperated with you, would you truly have harmed his family?” Rainier asked.

A short pause and narrowed eyes, then, “I would’ve delivered to him one of his wife’s fingers every hour until he agreed to the terms. Though I have a feeling it only would’ve taken one, just one finger.”

Leliana’s cold response sent a shiver down Hannibal’s back. He, Cullen, and Rainier didn’t know what to say to the woman. Not much was known about her dealings in the underbelly of the operations. No one really knew what lengths she traveled to get the job done, only that it got done. One thing was for certain, none of the men in that room would ever forget how expressionless and calculating the spymaster appeared while she spoke of what she would’ve done to the deceased’s wife. Silence seemed the best option, until Rainier broke it.

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe I didn’t need saving?”

“Too bad,” Leliana said bluntly, voice abrupt and cold. She turned to Hannibal. “He’s been delivered as you asked. I’m going to bed. I’ll brief you further in the morning.”

Hannibal, Cullen, and Rainier watched the woman stride stiffly off. The sound of the door closing after her left a hollow ring in the air.

Rainier focused on Hannibal. “So, now you’ll judge me. Doesn’t matter what you decide. I deserve worse than death for what I’ve done.”

The Inquisitor’s wide, prominent brow evened out. He was frowning heavily. “Leliana’s right. You need to move past this.”

“It’s not that simple,” Rainier retorted.

“Let me ask you: how many children have you killed?”

Hannibal’s features dulled. He said nothing.
“That’s right,” Rainier’s voice lulled through the shadows, “None. You didn’t have to watch their young bodies fall, the life draining from their eyes, their blood staining the ground. I knew even as we did it that it was beyond incomprehensible, but still I allowed it, the eradication of a man and his bloodline. And I have carried its burden. You should’ve just left me there to die. Take me to my cell.” It didn’t even matter to him that the order had come from one Ser Robert Chaupis, ally to the Grand Duke who now served as emperor of Orlais. Therefore, he wouldn’t mention it. 

Cullen looked away from the man. He couldn’t say that he’d blatantly murdered innocence either, but he knew Rainier was hurting from it. He sighed. 

“Cell?” Hannibal said. “You don’t have to be locked up. You can return to your loft in the stable.” 

Rainier approached him, his voice tight. “I said take me to a cell. It’s where I belong.” 

“You know what—fine. You want to sit in a cell until your judgment, so be it. Commander, could you see to it? And post a guard outside.” 

Cullen nodded. 

Thom Rainier laughed dryly. “No need for a suicide watch, Inquisitor. I had plenty of opportunities while on the way back here to send myself to hell. The truth of it is that I’m too much of a coward to do it. Living with what I’ve done is far more torturous than any eternal suffering believed to await the wicked in death.” He went to Cullen. “Lead the way, commander.” 

(*)

Though fully against having Rainier spend the night in the dank, dark cold, Hannibal allowed it. Skyhold’s prison hadn’t seen a prisoner in centuries probably. The people he judged had either been killed, released back into the world with fines, released to other authorities to deal out their final sentences, or dead (in the case of late Empress Celene). 

Hannibal still put a guard on watch and had him rig a portable fire pit outside Rainier’s cell, the door of which was shut but not locked. The prison area still underwent renovations, parts of it crumbled and exposed to the outside. Mountain wind swooped through, licking everything in that open area with its sharp, cold tongue. 

Another guard came sometime in the night to relieve the first. Now, he stood from his chair, went to an uninhabited corner, pulled his pecker out, and pissed. Afterwards, he returned to the chair and rubbed his hands over the fire. 

Inside his cell, Rainier sat against the wall, knees drawn up, huddled. He shivered a bit, but wouldn’t freeze to death, thanks to the fire. It kept him warm enough, despite his distance from it. He hadn’t slept. Didn’t want to. All he’d see were the faces of dead children anyway. He spared a look at the guard, noticed how early morning light crept in through the broken walls. Warm exhalations formed tiny clouds on the nippy air. 

Metal whined. The sound of the outer door swinging open. The guard immediately stood at attention. “Sir.” 

“As you were,” said Cullen. He stopped outside Rainier’s cell, his long coat shifting around his legs, the fur collar bristling in the breeze. “It’s time. The Inquisitor has breakfast waiting for you before the judgment.” 

Rainier groaned lowly as he stood. His ass was half-asleep and his lower back throbbed. The cold was kind to no one, and cold stone was even less forgiving. The man stretched his neck, tipping his head left and right. “How nice.” 

Cullen ignored the sarcasm. In his job, he’d dealt with that and more. One gloved hand grabbed a rusty bar and pulled the cell door open. He gestured for Rainier to exit, and the ex-Warden did, moving silently by him. Cullen turned to the guard. “You’re done here. Secure that fire, get yourself some breakfast, and head to your rack, take a few hours of sleep before your next watch on the wall.” 

“Yes, sir.” 

Commander Rutherford and Rainer left Skyhold’s prison. The walls of the stairwells hung with lanterns. When they reached the main floor, taking the door on the right into the hall, they found Hannibal sitting at a table. He was the only one present. Because of its delicate nature, no one outside the Inner Circle and guard detail would be allowed to attend Rainier’s hearing. No unauthorized civilians. The huge entryway doors had been secured. 

Rainier stared at Hannibal, finally moving forward. Ogling the small spread of food, he couldn’t keep his stomach from gurgling. He’d not eaten since earlier yesterday. The man grabbed up a piece of bacon and stuffed it in his mouth, following with a few bites of biscuit, crumbs speckling his beard and moustache. He poured a glass of water, drank it quickly, and swiped a hand over his face a few times, removing food remnants. 

Hannibal watched him silently. He gestured for a chair. “Why don’t you have a seat? There’s no hurry.” 

“No, I’m good. Let’s get this over with.”
“Alright.” The Inquisitor spoke to a guard across the room, standing post by the door leading to Solas’s atrium. “Let them know we’re about to begin.”

The guard nodded, and his armor made little clanks and taps when he moved. He disappeared through the door. He came back a few moments later, followed by a line of others. Solas, Dorian, Varric, Xena and her people, Iron Bull, Ayla, Josephine, Leliana, Cassandra, Sera, Cole, Idril, Vivienne, all the Chargers, and all the Arrows.

Thom Rainier faced them, letting eyes rest a bit longer over the warrior princess. She and her group were unfamiliar. The others, however, he knew well. He’d come to see them as colleagues, friends.

Hannibal settled in the dragon’s foot throne. Josephine, holding her scroll board, went forward and began the formalities of introduction. “For judgment this day, Inquisitor, I must present Captain Thom Rainier, formally known to us as Warden Blackwall.”

Cullen strode forth and placed a hand on Rainier’s arm, indicating he move closer to the throne. The ex-warden stopped at a good distance, and Cullen backed away, leaving the man and Hannibal to stare at one another.

Josephine continued. “His crimes…well…you are aware of his crimes. As I’m sure you also know, it was no small task getting him here, but the decision of what to do with him is now yours.” The ambassador stood aside, giving Hannibal and Rainier the floor.

The Inquisitor sighed. “I’ll keep this short and sweet. Everyone here knows what you did, the impersonation of Warden Blackwall, the order you gave on the Calliers. That’s not what’s in question here. The matter of real importance is atonement. Do you wish to atone?”

Rainier’s shoulders faltered, sinking. He looked down at his hands, closing his eyes. “Leaving me to die at the gallows would’ve been a fitting atonement. Instead, another died in my place.”

“Yes, and now you’re here. You live. If I had to make the call again, the decision would be the same. So, I ask you again: do you wish to atone?”

Rainier’s pained eyes lifted to Hannibal. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Good. Then I sentence you…to freedom.”

In the gathered crowd that stood by in the ghostliest of silences, Ayla took a sharp, relieved breath, smiling. Her fingers wiggled upon Bull’s arm. She liked Blackwall or whatever his name was. She knew he was good and didn’t deserve to die.

Thom Rainier observed the Inquisitor, somewhat confused. “You’re letting me go? You won’t demand anything of me, like eternal service to the Inquisition or something else similar?”

Hannibal shook his head, leaning forward. “No, my friend. You need to live. You seem to want to suffer, and living will give you that. Having life also gives you time to work through the guilt. I can only hope you find peace someday. You will atone as the man you are, not the man you were or the Warden you pretended to be.”

Rainier licked his lips. “I barely know him.”

“So then you’ll get to know him.”

“He….I….have a lot to make up for.” Rainier’s eyes reared and he turned slowly to look over the faces of his comrades. His attention went to Hannibal. “If my future is mine, then I pledge it to the Inquisition. My sword is yours.”

Slight hung the smile upon Hannibal’s lips. “I’m glad to hear you say that. We could use you here. We need you. There is another matter. As you can see, I’ve closed this judgement from the public, and with good reason. Warden Blackwall is dead and the man that was posing as him was hung in Val Royeaux a short while ago. Leliana brought you back under the cover of night, a good move. Word hasn’t spread yet of what you did and your untimely demise on the end of a rope, but it would be wise if you didn’t stay in Skyhold.”

“Where would you have me go?”

“I’ve been thinking on it all night. There’s an abandoned cabin a couple of hours from here, just up the path from Johnner’s Lip. That will be your new home for now. It’s not far from the fortress and within a few minutes of the nearest guard post. We’ll still be able to keep fully in contact. It offers you privacy. You’ll head there at once with a detail to help get the place livable.”

Rainier nodded, considering this. “It’s a good idea. Thank you.”

“I’m not finished.” Hannibal stood from the throne and traversed closer. “As I said, Blackwall’s been dead for a while and Rainier was executed. This means you need a new name. I’ll give you some time to think on it.”

“No need,” said Rainier softly. “I have one. It was my father’s name: Ryder. That’s what I’ll go by from here on. Not Ryder Rainier. Just…Ryder.”

“It’s a good name, my friend.”
“He was a good man.”

Hannibal gripped his shoulder, squeezed it reassuringly. “It’s time to move forward.”

“Forward.”

The Qunari moved to a nearby table and picked up a folded item. He gave it to Ryder. The man held it up before his eyes, a cloak and hood.

“I’ll come visit in a couple of weeks, once you’re settled in. Put that on. Don’t need to have unnecessary people seeing you leave.”

“Right.” Ryder donned the item. He peered around the room, his face partly in shadow, concealed by the copious hood.

The crowd of Inner Circle members broke, allowing the man now known as Ryder to stride by them. Hannibal gestured to some sentinels, and they opened the great hall doors so the mysteriously caped figure could exit.

Within the hour, Hannibal stood in the upper courtyard and watched Ryder’s mount gallop through Skyhold’s gate, followed by the small group that would help restore the old cabin.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I do not own the image of Greek model Paraskevas Boubourakas used to portray Ryder/Blackwall/Rainier. :)
Time moved on. A month of it, to be exact. Cullen, with Xena at his side, seeing as she knew how Ares operated, continued training the Inquisition’s troops. Friendships deepened between the warrior princess’s people and their Thedosian allies. Ares and “Esgal’Arad” had been neither heard from nor seen, though rate of growth for the God of War’s new religion skyrocketed. From reports gathered through intel, followers of the One True God numbered at least twenty-thousand and growing. New temples were popping up across the land and existing chapels converted.

Many towns and villages now pledged their allegiance to Ares, who continued to sell them his lie, while promising to restore order and rid the world of Corypheus. There was talk that Ares set his sights on Val Royeaux next, intending to convert the central city to his religion. If he managed to succeed, it may serve as a highly damaging blow to the Chantry. Val Royeaux had long been an upholding force for Thedas’s most popular religion, and flying Ares’s banner over their chapels would undoubtedly convert surrounding cities, perhaps to include Halamshiral. Of course, the Chantry would not sit by and let that happen. The Templars, led by Knight-Commander Delrin Barris, had moved in to solidify security around Val Royeaux.

Now, Sera guided her mount along the overgrown path leading to Ryder’s cabin. A repetitive sound caught her ears as she approached the quaint structure.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

She rounded the bend to see the ex-Warden at a chopping block cutting firewood, his back to her. He wore no shirt, and the muscles in his arms and torso rippled. The start of spring was still another month away, yet the chill in the air contained not much of a bite. No wind. And it was clear, the sun out and beaming. Snow had begun to melt. Icicles hanging from the cabin’s eaves dripped constantly, a testament to the minor rise in temperature.

Ryder sat the ax down, gathered up some wood, and turned to see her. After a short pause, he walked the stack to a bin and dumped it in. He donned his shirt, pulled it on.

Sera had secured her mount and moved for him. She smiled crookedly and tried to break the ice with humor. “Nice pecs. Might find you attractive if I fancied the stupider sex.”

The man chuckled. “ Took you long enough to come check on me.”

“Wanted to give you some time.” A quick shrugged. “Well…maybe…me some time too. Besides, Quizzy’s”—one of the many nicknames she had for Hannibal—“been visiting. Tells us all you’re doing well.”

“Aye. He’s come by a couple of times, keeping me in the loop, shooting the breeze. That why you’re here?”

The elf shrugged again. “I…uh…just wanted to see you, ye know, us being friends.” Large eyes skimmed about. “Did good with the place. How’s it living here?”

“I make due.”

Sera hoisted a cheeky smile. “It’s strange, you having a new name. Never knew that Rainier guy, but you were always Blackwall, to me.”

“Well, it’s Ryder now, Sera.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Her eyes rolled. “Except, that doesn’t feel right, not yet. Can I just keep calling you Fuzzy-Face?”

He laughed deeply, shaking his head. “Sure. Though, if I shave this off, what will you call me then?”

Sera pondered, grinning. “I’d think of something good. Something to do with babies’ bottoms… maybe. So, yeah, Fuzzy-Face for now then.” She dug into her traveling bag and produced a flask. “I brought fun stuff, courtesy of Krem. Let’s drink and play cards.”

“ Doesn’t taste very good and I’m sure it could strip rust from metal, but it does the trick,” Ryder said, smiling down at her. He agreed, holding out an arm to indicate she head inside before him.

They spent a few hours hanging out.

(*)

Fire. The element raged inside Morrigan, brought to surface and amplified by Ayla. The Oona stood in the center of the four mages—Morrigan, Solas, Dorian, and Magnus. She hovered several inches from the ground, spinning slowly, hair and skirts billowing. Her cloudy vision was darkened, save for the four blotches of white light representing her magical counterparts. She concentrated on Dorian, amplifying him too, then Solas. The three mages each channeled their power of flame, arms up and aimed at the fiery vortex swirling above Ayla.

The Oona continued concentrating, teeth vaguely gnashed. She drew a breath and reached out to Magnus finally, instantly infusing him with her energy, boosting his own power. The battlemage joined the others in raising his hands, working with them to strengthen and control the vortex. This was what Morrigan called an endurance test. Ayla would continue to moderate the amplification,
while they steadied and evened one another out. This would help them function better together and align to the auras of their fellow mages and Ayla.

They held it for thirty seconds…forty-five…a minute…then more.

Ayla trembled and gasped, dropping to the ground, skirts in a disarray around her. The funnel of fire dissipated. The mages rushed in. It was Magnus who lowered to the grass and pulled the Oona in his arms.

“Ayla! By the gods!”

“I—I’m fine, Magnus, really.” The woman made to stand, and he helped her to her feet, hands on her shoulders to keep her steady.

“What happened?” Dorian voiced worriedly.

Ayla’s head veered in his direction. He was close enough that she clearly smelled the pleasantly mild cologne he favored. A smile appeared, very soft and tired. “I was used to amplifying three mages at once before. I know Maggy’s been practicing with us for nearly a month, but I just feel a little overwhelmed today.”

The mages exchanged looks.

Ayla couldn’t see them, but she sensed what they were thinking. She huffed. “It’s not because of the baby. We’ll both be fine. I didn’t sleep well last night, that’s all.”

“I see,” Morrigan said, slim-fingered hands perching on her hips. Golden eyes studied the Oona. “In either case, I believe we’ll call it quits for today.”

“But—”

The Witch of the Wilds cut Ayla’s words off. “No buts, my dear. Practice is done. We’ll convene again in two days, give you some time to rest. We’ve been working good together, and I think we’re as ready as we’re ever going to be. I might also mention that… she paused, “…I most likely won’t be linked with you for long during battle, since I’ll be fighting elsewhere. You’ll only have to maintain three mages once more.”

Ayla’s blurry, shadowed sight aimed at Morrigan. “Where else will you be fighting?”

“Corypheus’s red lyrium-tainted dragon. She’ll be tending to it, am I right?” Dorian entered, kohl-traced eyes falling on Morrigan.

“Yes,” the cunning sorceress answered. “It will need to be disabled before any damage can be done to the Elder One, seeing as he’s bonded his lifeforce to it. Now, off with you all. Meet here again in two days, same time as always.”

Her dark skirts shifted when she spun away, across the garden for her atrium.

Solas moved off as well.

Magnus linked his arm with Ayla’s. “You ready for some lunch, little bird?”

“Yes, actually. I’m very hungry.”

The battlemage chuckled. “I think it’s the baby mostly.” He looked to Dorian. “Joining us?”

“Oh, sure. Why not?”

(*)

Cullen, Hannibal, and Josephine stood between two housing structures staring at the stone wall of one. Silence encroached them while they eyed the messy but intelligible graffiti scrawled in pale yellow paint:

Airiez rulez, Criffus sux

Hannibal pursed his lips and popped them, running a hand over his beard. Not only was he surprised, he was irritated. “Spelling obviously isn’t the culprit’s strong suit. It was probably some kid who doesn’t understand the seriousness of the situation.”

“Or perhaps a dimwitted adult.” Offered Josephine. “Or even an adult trying to make it appear as if a child did it.”

“For what purpose?” Hannibal said.

She shrugged. “I’m only speculating.”

“I’m inclined to believe it was children too. Word of his ‘good deeds’ has spread far and wide. Perhaps, some of the youngsters find him favorable.”

“On the upside, they don’t find favor with ‘Criffus’.” Josephine chuckled softly, truly tickled.

Hannibal looked at each of his advisors. “Keep an eye out and ears open. The last thing I need is Skyhold occupants inciting a movement in the name of Ares, the One True God. Josephine,

Aireez rulez, Criffus sux

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please get someone to remove this immediately.”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Hannibal and Cullen left. The ambassador studied the juvenilely executed graffiti once more, chuckled, and went to assign someone to tend to it.

(*)

The Mark of Ares.

The night Solas summoned the God of War to take him to Elgar’nan for an actual reunion instead of that awkward public encounter in the war room, the slim elf agreed to accept the mark. It was done by the war god pressing his hand to someone’s chest and linking with them. The recipient would then know when Ares wanted to talk or summon them. Since Solas decided to team up with the war god, he figured this was a safe way to communicate. To be safest, Solas only summoned him when he was outside of Skyhold’s walls, away from Xena, Alecto’s Charm, and even Ayla.

The game had turned to one of solitary satisfaction. In other words, Solas was out for himself, his plans. And it seemed that allying with Ares—though he never thought he’d admit it—was the soundest course of action. He had a greater chance of reinstating his powers and god-status, of being able to walk about freely as Fen’Harel once more.

The elvhen mage veered from the main path to a grass-laden trail about a quarter mile from the fortress. He continued ahead until he reached the secretive glade where he’d met with Ares two other times in the past month. He stopped in the center of the area, a layer of snow blanketing the ground, capping the small boulders and toppled tree trunks.

Solas lifted his face to the sky, letting the midday sun warm it, before casting a sigh. “You wanted to see me?”

A moment later, Ares materialized not far from him leaning against a bare, smooth tree. The war god’s eyes flicked over the elf. “Do you ever wear shoes? I’d imagine you’d get cold feet.”

“Rarely. What do you need?”

“Right to business. Understandable.” Ares moved from the tree, going closer. “I wanted to give you a heads up. I’m going into Skyhold tomorrow with a very important announcement, and since we’re on the same team, I want you to be prepared.”

The mage’s countenance tightened and his chest swelled excitedly. Adrenaline began to slam through him. He could only imagine what the god was up to. “What kind of announcement?”

“Don’t worry. Nothing involving you and your identity. You’ll find out with everyone else. I promise, it’ll be very helpful.”

“That’s not telling me much. You said yourself, we’re on the same team. Why the secrecy?”

“Because I can,” Ares said simply.

“Obviously,” came Solas’s stiff reply. He didn’t bother to disguise his irritation. “Is that all, or is there another reason why you’ve graced me with your presence?”

“Actually, there is one other thing. Have you devised a plan yet of how you’re going to get that charm from Xena?”

Solas clearly disliked working with the war god, even if he seemed the best bet for reaching his goal. He nodded faintly. “I believe I have. I only hope she doesn’t get seriously injured. You realize once I go for Alecto’s charm, I can no longer stay with the Inquisition. They’ll know of my betrayal.”

“Yes,” Ares said, voice smooth as Halamshiral caramel, “and there are quarters awaiting you at the villa. I’ll let you know when the time is right.”

“Fine.”

The God of War’s head tilted, blazing brown eyes on the elf. He grinned. “Cheer up, Fen’Harel. You’re playing for the winning team.”

“Then, why do I feel like I’ve sold my soul to a demon?” Solas’s features went stoic and harsh.

“As far as gods go, I’m actually not that bad.”

“If that’s what you want to believe…”

“You’ll see.” Ares flashed a handsome smile, winked, and disappeared in a crackling of blue electricity.

(*)

That evening, after dinner and a bath, Ayla curled up in bed next to Iron Bull with a book. The text was written in common, and with his touch and the lessons he’d been giving her for the past few months, she could read it. Not yet quite as fast as she could with her fingertips, but she was
The Qunari lay there contentedly watching the ceiling, listening to her soft breaths. The resonance of his voice cut the warm silence. “I heard there was an incident during practice today.”

“Hmm?” Ayla said vacantly, caught up in her novel. She was immersed in a scene where the dashing pirate and equally handsome yet highly dangerous archvillain engaged in a swordfight on the sea-sprayed decks of a great ship, the damsel eagerly awaiting her hero’s victory.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Huh? Oh…yes…of course.” She bookmarked the spot and set the novel aside.

“I have a deal with Morrigan to keep me informed about the practices, and she briefed me when I dropped by after finishing in the training yard. I know Dorian and Magnus would cover for you, so can’t trust them to give me all the news, and Solas and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms, as you know. Morrigan was the only logical choice.”

“It was nothing really. I faltered, most likely because of the strain of powering four mages. It’s nothing, my darling.” Ayla kissed his chest.

Bull sighed. “I wouldn’t call collapsing nothing. You know how I feel about your decision to stay in the fight. If I had it my way—”

“Yes, I know. I’d be barefoot and pampered, stuck in this room until the baby was born.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Ayla rolled her eyes, her small fist punching the muscle-lined plane of his stomach. She smirked, then smiled. “You’re so primeval.”

“No, I’m just trying to keep you safe. You know that, Ayla.”

“I know you are. But as you said, it’s my decision.”

He grimaced, then shifted and eased a bit down the bed, turning on his side. His face lined up with her stomach, which held a minor swell. At three months into the pregnancy, she barely showed. Iron Bull rubbed her belly, kissing it. “Sorry, Little Bean. I’m trying, but mommy’s being difficult. Maybe you could give her a few kicks in there, make your opinion count.”

Ayla burst into giggles. “Stop trying to turn her against me. Besides, she’s too little for me to feel her movements.”

“I’m telling you, it’s a boy.”

“Maybe.” A bit of worry suddenly sketched her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m…a little scared. Qunari do have horns. I know you aren’t born with horns, but my imagination has been getting the better of me lately.”

He laughed. “Qunari infants have tiny bumps on their heads marking the places where the horns will eventually grow. We don’t start growing them until around age two, three for the late bloomers. You have nothing to worry about. Qunari babies are just as smooth and squishy as any other baby when they pop out.”

The Oona shook softly with chuckles. She cradled his head for a moment. “Thank goodness.”

Bull scooted back up and resettled beside her, placing a large hand on her belly, studying it. “It almost seems unreal. I never knew my parents, and you were so young when you separated from yours that you don’t remember them. Yet, our child will have both of us.”

Ayla’s small hand came down over his. “Yes, he or she will.” A little silence, then, “So…what happens if I’m close to having the baby or I’ve already had it, and your kuma’ta kalifaar comes around the same time? Maybe I won’t be able to…um…help you. I mean, I definitely wouldn’t feel like having sex with you. What would you do?”

The Qunari held her eager gaze. He drew in a big breath, exhaling, “Hmm, yeah, I’ve thought about that. There are…ways to deal with it. How about we just handle things as they come, eh?”


He saw that she wasn’t prepared to back down, so he shrugged and reclined, hand behind his head. “Well, there is what we call the ‘stroke and poke’.”

One of the woman’s full white brows arched slowly. “Stroke and poke?” She smiled timidly. “Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not.”

“Tell me. Please?” she said, batting large eyes.

Iron Bull chuffed and cleared his throat. He chuckled. “I can’t believe I’m actually talking about
this with you. It’s not something you just discuss.”

“Come on, tell me!”

“Basically, I would get myself right up to the point of explosion, then slip into a living body to finish it off.”

“Oh my gods!” Ayla trilled with laughter.

“Told you it’s a very weird subject. But you asked, so I acquiesced.”

“I’m almost sorry I asked.” She went serious again, voice leveling out. “We have to face the fact that you might have to use this”—she struggled to say it with a straight face—“stroke and poke on someone other than me.”

Bull frowned. “No. I can handle it.”

“Oh, really? The last time you went without for an extended amount of time and your heat-lust came around, you were a mess.”

“That was different, and you know why.”

“How long have you gone without satisfying the heat-lust under normal conditions?”

“Naaremma, why are we talking about this? You reached the stage where paranoid, jealous pregnant-brain has kicked in?” He appeared humored.

“It’s not funny, Bull. I’m just trying to prepare myself for the possibility that you might have to…” she took a breath, “…go outside of our marriage to relieve the heat-lust. Answer the question.”

“Okay, alright. Please, calm down. No need to get excited over nothing.” The Qunari took a moment to ponder. “A week and a half. My unit was under orders to secure a stronghold in the jungle and remain in stealth until given the signal to attack. To further shit on my parade, kuma’ta kalifaar kicked in three days into the assignment. I held it off fine for the first five days. By day seven, my concentration became severely compromised. All I could think about was, well, you know. There was a qunari female in the unit. I didn’t know her well, but she offered to…help me. I turned her down the first time. When she offered again, I was on day eleven, and I didn’t refuse.”

Ayla nodded. “I see. Eleven days,” she said, voice small. A slender arm hugged over his middle, face nuzzling his chest.

“Ayla,” he started, “don’t worry about it. Whatever happens, we’ll handle it, okay?”

“Okay.”

Bull kissed her brow, and the two of them lay there in silence for a while, before heading to sleep.

(*)

The Valley of Sacred Ashes, once home to the Temple of Sacred Ashes where Divine Justinia V, many mages, and many templars lost their lives. There was no temple now, the restored structure having gotten destroyed during a conclave to end the Templar-Mage war. All that remained was blackened ground, jutting stone, burnt remnants. Commander Rutherford’s collaborative efforts saw all charred bodies and exposed red lyrium removed, the deceased buried and the poisonous rock secured.

The sun hovered just above the eastern Frostback peaks. Standing there, tall and darkly-leathered, Ares peeled eyes over the devastation. He could still smell smoke and magic in the air, though it had been months since the explosion. It was by miracle alone that Hannibal managed to walk away from it. One powerful green miracle.

He lifted his left hand, flexed the fingers. The Anchor sparked. He grinned, then went serious.

“Hiding like a coward. That’s about all you’ve done through this whole thing. Hide.”

Ares fell into silence, letting the words rest.

“I know you can hear me, Corypheus. I also know that I have something you want.”

Again, Ares raised the hand bearing the Anchor.

“You’ll get your chance to take it soon enough, false god, that I can promise. You should know that as soon as I leave here, I’m going to the Inquisition to tell them where your little hideout is. I suggest getting your fighting force in order if you haven’t already, Cor. I’m coming for ya.”

At that, the God of War’s perfect form fizzled from sight.

(*)

Oh, yes. Corypheus was there and listening, his fortress cloaked in the Valley of Sacred Ashes, as the Inquisition would soon know. The mangled looking magister glared silently at the magical viewing basin in the center of his main chamber. There upon the wavering surface was the one named Ares, come to mock him at his own doorstep, every word like hammer strikes on an anvil,
feeding the forge of rage.

But the Elder One held fast to the notion of his impending victory.

“Milord, your orders?” came the voice of one of his higher minions, Vinjaron Shallos. A dedicated servant to the new world order, subsequent member of the Venatori.

Corypheus slowly turned to the man, who’d conditioned himself long ago not to shudder as his lord’s grotesque appearance. “I have walked in places known only to gods who don’t even exist, survived and conquered the wraiths of weakness and immortality. This…thing…from another world will not sway me from my destiny.” Yes, he’d been studying the one named Ares closely, had minions posted in the Earth invader’s ranks. “He is intent on trying to destroy me. He will be present when the fighting begins, and I will seize that moment to crush them all at once.”

The Elder One appeared unfazed by Ares’s threat. Battle would come sooner than he’d planned. So be it. He turned and moved, footfalls tapping vacantly over ancient stone. His quarters sat at the top of the crumbling castle. Half a wall was gone, revealing the reddened sky in the pocket of space he’d hidden his stronghold. Behind him, curled on the platform of a tall spire, the dragon with which he’d bonded flapped its great, leathery wings and watched, smoke drizzling from large, wet nostrils. Corypheus clasped his hands at the small of his back.

“Send word to all forces to converge. It is time.”

“Yes, milord.”
"Though I Walk Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death..."

Sparring with Krem or any of the other Chargers was fun. Not only was it great practice, it allowed them to really take a go at their solid mountain of a boss without worrying about injuring him. Iron Bull was very good at blocking and parrying.

But, sparring with Xena reminded him of being out on the battlefield. Bull found the woman’s agility and skill greatly exceptional. They’d crossed weapons in the training yard several times during the past few weeks.

“Come on, big boy. You think you can hit me?” Xena taunted, wearing that wild grin and piercing eyes. She enjoyed the challenge. The Warrior Princess circled him.

Bull made sure to keep his stance forward, his left foot tight to the ground, while his right pivoted. Rich chuckles accompanied his broad grin, his singular eye trained on her. “Oh, I know I can. Just don’t want to add to the bruised ribs I gave you yesterday.”

“Lucky hit,” she tossed, then loosened a battle cry and zoomed forward. Xena’s sword arc through the air, very controlled and contained. Bull blocked the strike with the haft of his axe, stepping backwards. Xena immediately regained her guard.

Both warriors went back and forth with their swings, jabs, parries, and dodges, so masterful in their field that the faux battle appeared almost like a dance. As usual, since they began sparring, a small crowd of Cullen’s men had gathered to watch. This late morning, Ayla sat bundled in her shawl on a covered bale of hay beneath the bordering trees, book in hand, fingers skimming the pages. She’d be at practice now if Morgan hadn’t cancelled it.

Gabrielle sat near the Oona honing the tips of her sai. She’d gotten the twin weapons from a place in the far east back on Earth. The battling bard didn’t like taking lives, but when she did, the sai proved most effective at doing so, made for precision puncturing jabs. Mostly, she chose to use the blunt hilts.

Xena went in on The Iron Bull, each strike fast and precise. All her picking paid off, gaining her an opening when he went to block his right side. It was then that she executed a roundhouse kick, catching him on the left. The Qunari grunted and staggered, quickly bringing up his axe, keeping her at bay.

A sudden darkly-clad presence appeared on his right (Xena’s left), and he spun to it, instantly getting enraged. Multiple gasps went up across the training yard, loud, stirring murmurs. Gabrielle jumped to her feet, on alert.

“Sonovabitch,” Bull growled, going for Ayla. The Oona sensed something amiss when everyone started bristling about and so stood from the hay bale. Small hands gripped to her husband’s arm, and wide eyes fell on Ares, the war god standing casually in the middle of the fighting area with Xena.

Ares smiled slimly at Bull, the man positioned protectively in front of Ayla. “Don’t worry. I didn’t come to cause trouble, big guy.”

“Fuck you.” Bull glared.

Xena dropped her fighting stance, and steely blue eyes leveled on Ares. “What do you want? It must be something important since you came here willingly, right to me, knowing I have the charm.”

The God of War’s eyes slipped to her. He attempted to conjure a fireball, lightning bolt, or anything. Couldn’t. “Yep. Looks like you’re right. I came offering very important information to the Inquisitor. Take me to him.”

“You think I’m gonna just do what you say?” Xena said through tight lips. She dropped the sparring sword, tossed back the flap of her long jacket like some old west gunslinger, and put her hand on her chakram.

“Careful, Xena. That might be the one thing in this world that can kill me in this state.”

“Here’s hoping she sends the ring-weapon at you then,” Bull said dryly.

Ares rolled eyes at the large man, then focused on Xena. “Take me to the Inquisitor. Trust me when I say he’s gonna want to hear this.”

(*)

Commander Rutherford had been up on the wall making rounds when he did a doubletake at the scene in the training yard. He dashed along the ramparts for the steps and made his way down. Xena and Ares watched him approach, one hand on the hilt of his sword. “What’s going? Why are you here, Ares?”

The war god released an overexaggerated sigh. “Oh, for the love of… ME, take me to Hannibal. I’m pretty harmless right now, guy.” He said to Cullen, then grinned. “You could always sic the Bull on me though, if you’re unsure.”
Cullen glanced to the Qunari and saw that he possessed a mighty itch to jump on the war god, perhaps to pummel him some more, at the very least. He finally nodded. "Fine. Turn around and start walking. I believe you know how to get to the war room."

Without another word, wearing a darkly smile, Ares turned and began a casual, long-legged pace through the fortress. Cullen, Xena, and a couple of guards flanked him. The Warrior Princess was extra careful to keep the god at her front so he didn’t try anything, such as going for the charm on its chain around her neck, tucked down in her bodice. Iron Bull and Ayla joined the procession, falling at the rear.

“What do you think he’s up to?” the Oona asked, worry coating her voice.

“I dunno, but I don’t like it,” Bull said. His eye remained ahead and on the war god’s leathered back.

Ares’s appearance caused a stir, naturally. As he headed for the wide stairs into the main hall, Skyhold patrons—soldiers, merchants, and children—stopped what they were doing to stare and whisper. The God of War smiled at them in passing, hearing his name slip from several mouths. Good. They knew who he was, and chances were that some of them had already considered joining him, and eventually, they probably would.

Up the stairs, through the great foyer, and into the sprawling main hall. Again, the sight of the war god drew forth startled gasps and bouts of whispering. Varric, who sat at the table by the fireplace to the right, quickly stood. Confusion riddled his features at the line of people following Ares, Cullen with his sword out and aimed at the god’s back.

Varric fell in beside Iron Bull and Ayla. “What the hell’s going on? Why is he here?”

“Says he has something to tell the boss,” Bull said, massive shoulders shrugging.

The dwarf scowled. “Nothing good ever came of visits from that prick.”

“I hear ya.” The Qunari nodded.

Ahead of everyone, Ares breezed by a group of Orlesian ladies, who shrank back at his approach. He grinned, giddy at the thought of being feared. He reached the door leading towards the war room, pushed it inward, and slipped into the antechamber, Josephine’s office. The ambassador sat at her desk conversing with Hannibal about something. Both stood swiftly, and the Inquisitor growled, before losing some of his edge. With Xena there and wearing Alecto’s charm, Ares was mostly harmless.

“Do I need to ask what you’re doing here, or are you just going to tell me?” The silence inside the room was so heavy that Hannibal’s words dangled resonantly on the air. “Seeing as you’re walking around instead of simply appearing in here, I’m guessing you let yourself be subdued for a reason.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and gather your people,” Ares said. He kept walking towards the war room, his voice filling the corridor in his wake. “I’ll be waiting in here.”

Xena didn’t bother to follow him right away. He wasn’t going anywhere. She, like the others in the room, looked to Hannibal.

The Inquisitor stared after Ares, the great wooden war room door whining slowly inward at the end of the hall. Aqua eyes swung to Cullen and Varric. “Can you two please round up the others?”

The dwarf and commander nodded and hurried to wrangle the rest of the Inner Circle.

(*)

Ares leaned casually to the great slab table. He idly studied his nails, the ring on his finger. The war room had never been so packed, everyone gathered around the table. The entire Inner Circle was present, including Idriel, who’d been with Cole when Varric came calling. The Chargers and the Arrows, all there. Cullen and Vivienne were the last to enter, the commander shutting the door after them.

The God of War spared a glance to Xena and Gabrielle to his right, then to Hannibal on his left. “Looks like we got the whole gang. Good,” he started and turned to the windows, pointing at a clear section of the stained-glass. “What’s over those peaks?”

No one said anything.

“Anybody?” Ares pressed, eyes gliding around the room to the many faces. They stopped on Ayla, and the smile he produced was deceitfully warm. “Motherhood suits you, by the way.”

The Oona sucked in a breath, hand going to the small lump of her abdomen. “How did you…?”

“God-thing.” There was that, and the fact that Solas gave him the news via one of their meetings.

Bull’s body went taut. “Don’t you dare speak to her.”

Ares merely smiled. He addressed the room again, smirking. He shook a finger at the not so distant peaks. “Anybody?”
“The Valley of Sacred Ashes,” said Leliana. Her hard gaze didn’t falter from the god.

“Bingo!” Ares pointed at her. “The very place where your Divine Justinia the Fifth got blown to hell. Do you know what else is there, or rather, who else?”

“Will you get to the point, Ares?” Hannibal scowled.

Ares huffed, eyes rolling. “You guys are no fun.” He faced the windows again. “Corypheus.”

Now, this got murmurs shifting through the room. “What?” Hannibal went closer to him.

“He’s been hiding right under your noses. A few weeks back, I detected a fluctuation of energy from the Void, the Fade for you Thedosians. I zeroed in on it, tracked it, only it wasn’t exactly coming from the Fade, but from a source drawing its power from the realm. Corypheus is channeling the Fade to fuel a magical cloak around his hideout, which I’m guessing is some old fortress he’s transmigrated from elsewhere.”

The God of War went back to leaning on the table. Loud chattering struck up. Hannibal took a few moments to analyze the news. “Quiet!” Everyone stopped talking. The Inquisitor looked to Ares. “How do we know this isn’t some kind of trick?”

“Well, you don’t, but you should probably ask yourself why would I do so. I came here to let you know that the reason your enemy has proven so difficult to find is because he’s hiding in plain sight, more or less.” Ares examined him closely. “We both want him gone, and I’ve given you his location. If you don’t believe me, you can just sit here and wait for him to come.”

Xena signaled to the two guards present. “Secure him.”

Ares laughed. “Don’t think so. You’re gonna let me go.”

“Why would we do that?” The Warrior Princess spoke tightly.

“I paid a visit to the false god before coming here and told him I’d be informing the Inquisition of his whereabouts. He knows you’re coming, just not when.” Straight teeth and full lips formed a handsome smile. “Wouldn’t be much of a battle if you took him by surprise, and what self-respecting God of War would enjoy such a one-sided fight?”

“Right,” Xena said. “But that still doesn’t explain why we should let you go?”

“Corypheus can control when to lower his cloak. You let me go, and I’ll disable it when the Inquisition is ready to march on him. Simple as that.”

“That’s why he was so willing to come here. He has a bargaining chip,” Bull said, his lone eye a cauldron of sky-blue flame that burned with loathing for the war god.

“Bingo. Now—release me.”

Xena considered the offer, though it wasn’t up to her. It was up to Hannibal. She met the Inquisitor’s eyes and saw that he too wrestled with the next move. Once again, they had Ares at their mercy, and left with no other choice but to comply.

Hannibal finally nodded. “Let him go.”

The guards stood down.

Ares smiled triumphantly at Xena. “You wanna put that charm away so I can get going?”

“Not a chance,” she said, then turned to leave the war room. Xena had the small, enchanted wooden box in the deep pocket of her jacket, but stowing the power-sapping charm inside to block its effects would make them all vulnerable, giving Ares the opportunity to try and take it. Instead, she continued walking until she reached the courtyard, far more distance than the required one-hundred feet.

Back in the war room, Ares stood tall and proud amidst the Inner Circle members, whistling a tune until he felt the familiar revitalizing shockwave of his power returning. He addressed the Inquisitor. “You know where he is; he knows you’re coming. Get your forces together, and when you’re ready to engage him, call me. I believe you know my number.”

The God of War disappeared.

Even though Solas had been given a heads up, he was as thoroughly surprised by Ares’s news as everyone else. The elf carried an air of elation, however, not worry. The time was near. He was another huge step closer to getting his Orb or Destruction away from Corypheus, and he didn’t care if it was the God of War or the Inquisition to help him do it.

“Do you think he’s telling the truth?” Leliana asked.

Hannibal shook his head, doubt scribbling his face. “I don’t know, but you heard what he said. What reasons would he have for lying?”

“I think he speaks the truth,” entered Cole. All eyes went to him. “Since we encountered Ares, his actions have never been misleading. Blatant and arrogant, yes. But never unclear. I am no longer connected to the Fade and am mostly human now, yet that part of me still lingers. Based on Ares’s past actions and extracting what we know of his motives, I think he’s telling the truth.”
As much as I hate that fucker, I have to agree with Cole,” Iron Bull said. “Every move Ares made has been precise, except when we caught him off-guard with the charm the first time. Wasn’t expecting that. Otherwise, he’s been pretty consistent. He popped right in here and took the anchor from you like he’d been planning it for a while, he’s converting people to his ridiculous religion in record numbers, and he knows we share a common enemy. He’s definitely telling the truth about Corypheus being over there.” The Qunari glanced through the window at the peaks.

“Right,” Hannibal replied, nodding. “I’m inclined to agree. Commander, prepare your messengers. We need to send word to Knight-Commander Barris and Emperor Gaspard. Joswen, you need to get word east as well, though I imagine it would take a while for Red Army troops to get here.”

The hard-bodied elf stepped forward. “There are two hundred soldiers on standby camped on this side of the Southron Hills. This eliminates the journey all the way from the Brecilian. I can have them here in ten days, maybe less.”

“Really?” Hannibal quirked a flaming eyebrow. “I didn’t know this.”

“You’re a busy man, Inquisitor, and I’ll only bother you with details when necessary.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get them here. I’ll get people to start setting up camp in the clearing before Sharpbend Pass. That’s where all the troops will have to amass. There’s no room for them all in Skyhold.” Sharpbend Pass was a wide road leading into the Valley of Sacred Ashes from the south. Hannibal spun, making sure to meet everyone’s eyes. “Keep this silent. I don’t want rumors and panic arising. Once troops start to arrive, we’ll let the fortress’s occupants know what’s going on. It’s not like Corypheus won’t know what we’re doing when main camp goes up.”

(*)

And so it began, the official launch of the campaign against Corypheus. Before, the Inquisition had been moving around the land strategically like pieces on a chess board, getting into place, unknowing of when or where the Elder One would make his final move. Now, with Ares having forced both sides’ hands, the legions of good and evil marched where their leaders ordered.

A week after Ares delivered the message to Skyhold word of battle started spreading quickly. Many of the Orlesian nobles packed up and headed back to Val Royeaux or Halamshiral, and it wasn’t, as they said, because they didn’t believe the Inquisition wouldn’t be victorious, but because they worried for their safety being so close to the battle grounds. Families with children did the same, traveling the mountain road down into the valley, where Hannibal set up abundant tents and supplies in a camp that might qualify as a small village. A handful of merchants left as well. Hannibal wasn’t surprised about the exodus. He agreed with it. Didn’t need civilians caught up in the bloodshed if it couldn’t be contained in the Valley of Sacred Ashes. Better to be safe than sorry.

Joswen had ridden off for the east the same day Ares told them about Corypheus’s hiding place. As promised, he returned within ten days, leading nearly two-hundred men and women of the Red Army for the large encampment at the mouth of Sharpbend Pass, their armor chest plates bearing the brand of a red bird, a cardinal. Cullen had gotten word to Knight-Commander Barris, and he and the Templars arrived a couple of days before the Red Army. Emperor Gaspard’s chevaliers were less than a day away, trudging up the mountain now.

Corypheus’s forces were also on the move. Inquisition scouts reported massive activity coming from the north and west as hordes of Venatori converged at the upper road into the Frostbacks, on the opposite end from where Skyhold was accessed. The blood magic wielders ascended, taking Cutler’s Pass into the Valley of Sacred Ashes from the north, setting up camp on the far side.

A large black bird soared above the enemy camp, scoping it from a distance.

(*)

Back in Skyhold, sitting on the bench beneath the gazebo, Morrigan drifted in a trance. She stared straight ahead, her eyes glossed over as if covered in a milky film. In that moment, she was linked with the black bird, seeing what it saw, feeling the strict mountain wind on her face, tousling feathers she didn’t really have. Her head jerked observantly.

“There are many of them, Venatori, rebel mages,” she reported.

Hannibal sat to one side of her, Cullen on the other. The qunari spoke. “Can you get an estimate?”

“Is there any sign of Corypheus?” Hannibal pressed.

“I do not see him, but he’s there. The bird senses it, I sense it. The entire Valley is barren, open, and he’s cloaked within it.”

Hannibal nodded and touched the sorceress’s arm. “Okay, that’s enough, Morrigan. Thank you.”
She blinked once, twice, and the film over her eyes was gone. They were normal once more, gleaming and golden.

“Sounds like they have quite a large force,” Cullen said. “And that’s not counting any dark spawn Corypheus might release once the fighting starts.”

“Or the dragon,” Morrigan intervened. “It’s imperative that it be dispatched as quickly as possible.”

“And I’m sure you’ll do everything you can to make that happen,” Hannibal said. A dire cloud hovered over them. He smiled a bit, attempting to punch a few holes in it and let the light pour through. “Of course, the rest of us will do whatever we can to help.”

The sorceress didn’t feel like smiling, so she refrained, issuing a curt nod. “I’m sure. May whatever gods you believe in have mercy on us all. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” she rose from the bench in a soft rustle of fine materials, “I must go up on the wall to retrieve Gaunter.”

Gaunter was the big black bird. A raven. Even as Morrigan traversed through the fortress grounds, he flapped his expansive wings, spread them wide, and glided home.
Within three weeks of Ares forcing both the Inquisition and Corypheus’s horde to finally face one another, Hannibal and his people had managed to get everyone and everything into place. The camp they erected at the mouth of Sharpbend Pass riled vibrantly with warriors, nearly two-thousand of them. It was late in the day, the sun an orange blotch below the western wall of snow-capped mountain ridges.

At the back side of the camp, the perimeter furthest from the entrance to the pass, Hannibal and Xena stood side by side observing the soldiers. Behind them Ryder and a dozen others saw to unloading supplies and arrow crates from wagons.

The Warrior Princess’s eyes eased around to him. She gave an approving nod. “You have a good-sized army here, and they’re well-trained. I’ve been in enough battles to know.”

“I agree,” Hannibal said. “I do feel confident going into this, but at the same time, I know we need to tread very carefully. Neither we nor Corypheus truly have the element of surprise; each side knows the other is coming.”

“Honestly, I’ve found battles like this easier to fight. We still have advantages he may not be expecting, like Ayla and the mages. They make a very formidable force.”

“Yes, they do. And I’m sure Corypheus has some tricks of his own. We won’t know until the fighting starts.”

“That’s true,” Xena said.

Hannibal smiled softly at her, then peered over his shoulder to where Dorian made it his business to oversee movement of the crates, making sure they were stowed neatly. The qunari’s smile deepened, so loving and warm for his husband. He looked to Xena again. “You know—you, Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus aren’t obligated to fight in this battle. You’re here for Ares, not Corypheus. He’s the Inquisition’s problem.”

The tall woman nodded. “We know that and we’ve talked about it. We’re going to fight. Besides, we are part of the Inquisition for the moment.”

“Okay. I’m more than happy to have you all, though…” he squinted and tipped his head uncertainly, a crooked smile hanging, “…I’ve seen Joxer sparring in the yard, or at least trying to. I’m not so sure he belongs on the battlefield, no offense.”

Xena chuckled. She looked to her left to the place where Gabrielle helped the field medics prepare bandage kits. Joxer was there too, helping, staring at Gabby on and off. “None taken. We’ve tried beating into his head that he’s no warrior, but he insists on believing he is. If you haven’t noticed, he’s infatuated with Gabrielle, has been since the day she and I met him.”

“Yeah. And she loves you.”

“Yep. I love her too. She means everything to me.”

“I know.”

Xena took a breath, crisp blue eyes straying thoughtfully. “Joxer’s a good man with the kindest heart, but he’s apt to get killed if he goes out there. Hell, he’d likely be dead already if he didn’t have his friends watching his back, but don’t tell him I said that.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” Hannibal laughed resonantly.

“You don’t need to be concerned. I’ll handle him.” The Amazonian woman already knew how she’d keep her clumsy goofball of a friend from the fight.

“Alright.”

Cullen walked up. He respectfully waited until he was sure he wouldn’t impede on their conversation. “Inquisitor, I received word from the forward scouts that the pass remains clear and ready for our descent, just a couple of miles down into the Valley of Sacred Ashes.”

“Thanks, commander. The plan still stands. We march at dawn.”

“Very well. I’ll do another round of the troops.” Cullen nodded to him and Xena, then spun to his duties.

“He’s a meticulous fellow,” Xena said, “so particular about things. It’s good that you have someone like him in charge of your fighting forces.”

“Yeah, Cullen’s great. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“Ah.” The Warrior Princess grinned. “You ever try a go at him?”

For a moment, Hannibal only stared at her, a little taken aback. His smile spread slowly. “You mean…romantically?”

“Yeah. Obviously, he’s only into women. I simply mean to ask if you’d ever consider him as a
mate, you know, if you didn’t have Dorian, and Cullen liked men?”

Hannibal cleared his throat, chuckling. “I will admit that he’s an attractive guy, but not my type.”

“Oh, really?”

“He’s a little too rugged for me.”

“I see. You like to be the hard one.”

“Yeah, you could say that. Dorian isn’t soft, by any means. He’s…” Hannibal pondered a moment, “…effeminate, and that’s what I like.”

“Well, you have good taste. He’s sweet.”

Hannibal spared another long glance at his love, being all bossy and high-maintenance. “Yeah.”

“I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable with the questions. I figured we could use some distraction right now, some idle chit-chat.”

“Oh, no,” Hannibal said. He took a deep breath of refreshing mountain air. “Actually, talking to you is like talking to another man. Weird, I know, but it is.”

Xena grinned. “I get that a lot. So, I’ll meet up with you later. Gonna check in with Gabrielle.”

Hannibal bobbed a nod, watched her stride off. He could totally see why Iron Bull said she’d be of the Qunari race were she native to Thedas. Tall, solid, strong, imposing, and exotically beautiful. All she needed was gray skin and a set of horns.

The Inquisitor stood there and skimmed his surroundings.

(*)

Only a few more crates to go, then Ryder would take a break. Using his legs, not his back, he carefully lowered the heavy wooden box of arrows where Dorian indicated. He turned, wiped his brow, and started back for the cart. As he approached it, a trio of chevaliers walked up eyeing him suspiciously.

“Is there a problem?” Ryder asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” the leader spoke, rubbing his chin. “You see, I attended a hanging about two months back in Val Royeaux, and the not-so-lucky prick on the end of the rope looked a lot like you, and I mean a lot. Murderous thug named Thom Rainier.

The man previously known as Blackwall and Thom Rainier before that regarded the three men coolly. “That’s interesting. My name is Ryder.”

“So you say. What do you think, boys? How’s it possible we appear to be talking to a dead man?” The leader looked left and right to his comrades.

“It’s quite a peculiar thing, Benjamin” said one.

“Maybe we should report him to the Emperor after we win this battle,” said the other.

Benjamin the chevalier smirked harshly at Ryder. “Yes, maybe we should.”

As much as he wanted to slam a fist into the man’s face, Ryder maintained his control and calm.

Having heard most of the exchange, Hannibal intercepted. “You heard him. His name’s Ryder. So, step down. Of course, you could always report what you think you know back to Gaspard, but I can promise you he’ll dismiss it without a blink.” And he would, especially since Hannibal and Briala held quite a bit of leverage over him. “You’d best get back to last preparations.”

Benjamin LeBrock wasn’t so fond of Hannibal Luthor the qunari Inquisitor, but he’d do as the horned bastard recommended and step down. He didn’t need any bad reports getting back to the Emperor. He chirped a whistle, signaling his men to follow, and the three of them stalked off.

“Thanks for stepping in. I was fairly close to knocking his front teeth out.”

A low chuckle eased from Hannibal. “No worries. Those guys’ll forget about it soon enough. They’ll learn to accept that Thom Rainier is dead.”

(*)

A couple of hours later, unessential personnel began loading up on the carts so they could go back to Skyhold. Idrial was part of that group. She stole a look over her shoulder at the two dozen or so that had come from the fortress to help with manual labor and other preparations. The pretty little barmaid’s head reared around and eyes landed on Cole again. They held to each other’s hands.

“I could stay the night with you,” she said.

“No,” he answered, shaking his head. “It’s safest for you back in Skyhold.”

Cole took a deep breath and tried to smile. The act seemed out of place, and he felt like that
awkward, off-step person he was in the beginning of his humanization—at a loss for words, unsure. Since he’d gotten close to Idrial, allowed himself to be swept up in their romance, Cole had been experiencing these episodes of unsureness and wordlessness. He supposed it was normal, though. He supposed it was love.

He gave her hands a firm squeeze, looking down at their intertwined grip.

Idrial swept into his arms, kissing him passionately. “You just come back to me, you hear?”

Cole smiled tenderly. “That is certainly the plan.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They broke apart reluctantly, and she went to one of the five wagons. The artist, Lucien Po, had come to help at the war camp. He offered Idrial a hand, pulling her aboard. A few moments later, the wagon started. Idrial and Cole kept eye contact until the horse-drawn vehicle rounded the bend out of sight.

(*)

Night rolled in as subtle as a shadowy veil. The surrounding peaks, both near and far, formed gloomy, jagged humps in the distance, looking like the rigid spine of a gargantuan, slumbering leviathan. A couple dozen fires and many torches lined the camp grounds. Guards stood watch on all sides, positioned halfway through Sharpbend Pass as well. Things were mostly silent, everyone settling in and saying prayers for tomorrow.

Inside their tent, Mr. and Mrs. Iron Bull neared the apex of their lovemaking, the familiar, tingling heat building up between them. Bull was in a sitting position, while Ayla rode on top, her legs wrapping his waist. Their bellies and chest mashed together in the frenzy and fervor, his arms holding tightly, moving her up and down on his solid, throbbing member as he thrust upward. Ayla locked her arms around his neck, swooning and exploding, his heat filling her over and over. She trembled a cry of ecstasy, leaning back to expose her neck. Bull groaned, shivered, and gathered her in, raking teeth down the swoop of her throat. He nipped her chin. And then he was exploding too.

Afterwards, they settled down. He held her close, and she nuzzled her face into his neck, her ebony features satiated and soft. Neither of them spoke for a long, lazy while, listening to the voices of camp outside, muted and dampened by the thick walls of their tent.

Iron Bull’s great chest lifted and sank in a sigh.

Ayla swung luscious hair over her shoulder and cuddled closer, hugging tight across his middle.

“I’ve never been this nervous going into battle,” he said, voice mellow and deep. “I was seventeen when I joined the warriors in a real fight, got my axe slicked in blood for the first time. Even then—young and green around the horns—I wasn’t nearly as worried as I am now.”

“I’m sorry, my love.” Ayla caressed his freshly-trimmed cheek. His beard was just long enough to form a fine black fuzz. They met eyes. “I know you’re worried about me, and I’ll be alright.”

“You know, I thought that when you revealed the pregnancy maybe someone else—like Elemir or Dorian—might be able to convince you to withdraw from the fight.”

“I’m closest to you, husband, and if you couldn’t convince me, what made you think anyone else could?”

“I suppose it’s far too late to bother another attempt at changing your mind.”

The Oona smiled softly. “It is.”

“Yeah,” he nodded grimly, “I know.”

Seriousness snapped upon her features, stealing over their delicate perfection. “Bull, you can’t go into this fight worrying about something happening to me. You need to be at your best, your sharpest.”

“I know,” he said again, gliding fingers along her cheek. “You just know I won’t be far away. I’ll be watching.”

“You always are.”

They drifted into a dizzying kiss.

(*)

Around one of the fires of the camp, Sophitia and Grim sat and talked. Well, she talked, while he communicated using pantomimes and his quill and scroll. Their conversation consisted mostly of speculating on the coming battle, the enemy on the other side of the pass camped down in the Valley of Sacred Ashes. Both were very able warriors and had been preparing for this moment, and both planned to come out of it alive.

Sophitia sipped her tea when the conversation took a break. Grim watched her appreciatively, his
eyes roaming the lovely picture of her profile, skimmed as it was by firelight. When she lowered the battered and dented little mug, he reached out slowly, and Sophitia didn’t move while he stroked a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. Over the past couple of months, she’d softened up to him. They’d been hanging out a lot, talking, though he hadn’t really said much about his past from before he joined the Chargers—not anything really—and she hadn’t tried. The lovely woman did tell him about her life on the farm, being poor, molestation from her oldest brother, and how she killed him with his own sword, then left not long after.

Grim smiled broadly, glad she didn’t cringe from his touch. He picked up his scroll and quill, writing something.

You know I like you, right?

She reciprocated his smile, lips parting and teeth flashing almost coyly, Grim thought. “I’ve… gotten that impression, yes. I like you too.”

Do you think after this is all over, we could get to know each other better?

“I’d like that.” Sophitia said softly. She eased in and planted a quick kiss on his lips. Playfulness was seen saturating her eyes when she pulled back. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Grim.”

He just smiled, nodded, and watched her slip away.

Not even Grim’s Charger company, his dearest friends whom he saw as family, knew the true roots of his past. They would know once they all got back to Skyhold though, because he planned to tell Sophitia all about it, which meant he had to tell them too. He’d never felt for anyone else what he felt for Sophi, and while he couldn’t say it was love at first sight or anything so fairytale-ish, Grim did sense the manifestation of a spark that first night he approached her in the Herald’s Rest. He’d come to deeply care for her, and if he wanted things to go any further, he had to spill his past. So, he would.

The mute man spent another hour lounging by the fire pit, before retiring to the tent he shared with Stitches.

(*)

No horns announced the dawning of the sun, as was customary back in Skyhold. Instead, the unshakable, constant beat of war drums dragged the slumbering awake. All the soldiers readied themselves one final time, consuming light breakfasts and standing by for word from the Inquisitor.

They didn’t have to wait long. Hannibal Luthor took a deep breath, drew back the drape of his large tent, and exited with Dorian at his side. Both were completely suited for battle, Hannibal’s armor catching glints in the early light. All eyes fixed on the pair as they moved through camp to the most focal point, around which everyone converged.

The Inquisitor waited for the mass to settle before speaking loud and robust.

“I know that no one here ever thought that one day they’d find themselves at the brink of a war quite like this one. I know I didn’t. But, here we are.” He revolved gradually, eyes raking over the sizable ranks. Small clouds puffed from his lips as he talked and dissipated in the chilly mountain air. “I see many fine men and women coming together to fight against a scourge that threatens to poison our world into darkness. The light that emerges from these circumstances is that we, the many races of Thedas, have been drawn closer together in our plight against a common enemy, an old creature that has no place here. And if Corypheus wants to take the world, then he has to go through us, and we sure as hell aren’t going to make it easy!”

Many cheers and battle cries filled the air, rallied by the Inquisitor.

Dorian grabbed Hannibal’s hand and squeezed it, gray eyes glimmering tenderly at his tall, handsome beloved.

Hannibal smiled down at him, then addressed the army again. “Form ranks! We march now!”

(*)

Hannibal, Dorian, Cullen, Delrin Barris, and Leliana headed the long train of warriors traveling through Sharpbend Pass. The first group of soldiers were the Templars, their banner flying strong. Behind them was the Red Army, headed by Joswen and Elemir. Next, were the chevaliers, then the army of free men, which was composed of the Chargers, the Arrows, and everyone else who simply wanted to fight. Many of the Inner Circle warriors walked back there as well.

Iron Bull’s agile eye swept upward, examining the crests of the high, rocky bluffs to either side of them. He couldn’t shake the feeling that some of Corypheus’s people lurked up there, waiting to ambush, which made little sense, since the Inquisition had sentinels positioned on the bluffs halfway down the pass, put in place to keep such an attack from happening. Still, the Qunari was watchful.

He looked down at Ayla, her hand clasped with his. She wore her light winter coat, the bottom half of her face buried in the full fur collar. To be as efficient as possible, she didn’t have on a dress then, but a thick pair of pants, a loose shirt, and fur-lined boots up to her knees. Bull made sure she was dressed to be out there, protected from the elements. As warm-bodied as he was, he still decided to wear a little more than usual and was quite comfortable in a heavy shirt with a high
collar to block the wind. The great axe, gift from the Chargers for his thirty-first birthday, was secured to his back.

Bull sighed and looked forward. He had the worst case of butterflies-in-stomach of any he’d ever had. His mind was fixed on protecting Ayla no matter what. Her and the baby.

Ahead of the couple a short distance, Xena, Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus walked side by side. Strangers in a strange world. Marching with an alien army into battle with alien enemies. It almost held some air of hilarity that their common link to all of it was Ares, a god of war from their own world. Each of them had run-ins with the war god multiple times and knew that he was capable of some very diabolical business.

When comparing Ares with Corypheus, one might only be able to judge such based on their physical power, since both were equally evil. With Corypheus, his darkness could be seen in the shapes of demons and nightmarish creatures, not to mention his own grotesque appearance. Ares was certainly much prettier to look at, but his level of evilness was the same. Like Corypheus, he wanted to shape the world as he saw fit to serve his own self-interests and dark desires. In the end, no matter how superior the old magister thought himself to be to the God of War, he didn’t understand or failed to realize that Ares was an entity far older and far more powerful than he, at least when some vice like Alecto’s Charm wasn’t rendering the god temporarily powerless. And even items like that had their limits when pitted against a true god.

Autolycus lifted a brow at Joxer. “How ya doin’ there, champ? Looking a little green today. Literally.”

“M-me? I’m good.” Joxer gulped, nodding, trying to appear calm. However, his guts were in knots.

“Oh, really?” Auto said, not buying it for a second.

“Joxer, maybe you should stay behind,” Gabrielle spoke, tossing her head to urge deep blonde hair from her brow. Like Auto and Xena, she knew the man wasn’t really a warrior. In his heart, sure. But in a real fight, no way.

“No, Gabrielle. I’ll be alright. I just need to get some circulation going, you know, blood pumping, work up my warrior-haze.” Joxer conjured a smile so boyish and soft that the bard’s heart swelled fearfully for him. He just didn’t belong in battle. “You’ll see. Once I’m out there, I’ll be fine.” He hoped. Joxer gulped again.

Gabrielle looked to Xena on her left, expecting her to jump in and say something. But the tall, prominent woman said nothing, sparing a glance at Joxer, who she could tell was a nervous wreck. Xena shrugged and pointed her eyes forward again, listening and observing.

(*)

Sharpbend Pass wasn’t extremely long, and two hours after marching from their base camp, Inquisition forces reached the exit into the Valley of Sacred Ashes. Hannibal took a small group of soldiers forward, carefully crossing that spacious, rocky threshold to the place where it all began for him, the Inquisitor. The place where he encountered the malicious wrecking ball of Fate that had turned his life into a steaming pile of rubble, though he would soon meet many new friends and allies to help him rebuild from the chaos.

The Valley of Sacred Ashes appeared as ominous as ever, ruined and burnt out, nestled in a huge crater caused by the explosion at the Conclave. What put Hannibal and the others who could see into the Valley on edge was the lack of activity. No enemy army, only a barren stretch clean across to the head of Cutler’s Pass.

Hannibal stiffened, ready to draw his sword. Aqua eyes roamed the entire empty valley. “What the hell?”

Cullen and Leliana were right with him. The commander approached on his left. “I don’t understand. How could they have moved an entire army so quickly, the camp and everything? They were there just yesterday, according to reports from Morrigan’s bird.”

“And they still are.” Ares’s words announced his presence. He appeared in front of them, arms crossed over his chest.

“The cloak.” Hannibal said.

Ares nodded. “But don’t worry about that. Get your forces in place and I’ll handle the rest.”

The God of War scanned back through the pass at all the soldiers. Xena was in there somewhere, far enough away that Alecto’s Charm couldn’t affect him. He turned and started striding further into the valley. The sky above toiled with thin clouds, breaking every so often and allowing beams of sunlight to jab through.

(*)

The God of War had been scoping out the Valley of Sacred Ashes long before the Inquisition’s army reached it. He’d found the perfect vantage from which to watch the mounting battle—a high, jutting stone ledge far out of reach of arrows, magic blasts, or any other projectiles, and certainly far enough away that Xena wouldn’t be able to render him powerless with the charm. She was smart, and chances were that she wouldn’t take the thing off in battle.
It was up on this remote ledge with a view that Elgar'nan stood, tall and regal, bundled in a long coat with a noble collar enclosing the length of his neck. Platinum hair caught the breeze and flew like a banner behind him, while stringent blue eyes watched the figures of Ares, Hannibal, and the Inquisition army move around in the distance below. Soldiers began quickly spilling from the mouth of the pass and lining up in formation.

The large elf shot eyes to the right at the apparently empty side of the valley. He waited for Ares to do his thing.
By the time Xena exited the mouth of the pass, Ares was twice the required distance away so the charm wouldn’t work on him. She, Gab, Auto, and Joxer moved to one side so the rest of the army could exit and get formed up. The Warrior Princess stared at the war god, who had come to stop with his back to the Inquisition. Something pale caught the corner of her eye, and she flicked her gaze in the direction, squinting faintly up at a ledge. That had to be Esgal’Arad. Ares had brought his elven friend along and tucked him safely away from the battleground.

Xena looked to Ares again. He was damn right to assume she wouldn’t remove the charm. That would only give him the opening to take it from her. She’d play it safely, give the distance he needed to do his part, and if he didn’t want to be sapped of his power, he’d stay back when things went down.

Vek, Sophitia, Ozra, and Magnus stood not far from Xena and her people, doing the same as everyone else, watchfully regarding the empty Valley. The Chargers walked up and stood with them.

All the forces comprising the Inquisition army maneuvered fluidly into place, with the Templars serving as the first line of defense, their armor flashing dully in the dismal, gray light. There were more of them than the Red Army, chevaliers, and standalone warriors, and each of them had a tiny phial of processed lyrium on his or her person and would drink it when the time was right. This would make them less susceptible to magics both dark and light. Knight-Commander Barris wanted to eventually make it so the Templars wouldn’t need the substance, but being under the thumb of the Chantry demanded that it be so for now.

Barris stood at the front of his Templar troops, eyes doing down the line. He watched and waited. Meanwhile, Dorian, Solas, and Magnus converged on Iron Bull and Ayla. The Oona trembled faintly in her boots, and it wasn’t because of the cold. She was warm enough. Fear traced its way down her spine while she observed the huge valley, the reality of the situation hitting her hard enough to temporarily knock the air from her lungs.

“You don’t have to do this, Ayla,” Bull urged. She appeared very unsettled, and he could sense the spike in her fear.

She took a breath. “No, I’ll be alright. We can do this.”

“Damn right we can, little bird,” Magnus entered.

Sophitia, Ozra, Vek, and Krem walked up. They, along with Iron Bull, would be the defensive line for the mages and Ayla.

(*)

Xena watched Ayla, the mages, and the warriors that would provide protection and cover for them all make their way to the rear of the ranks. They assumed the formation they’d been practicing for months, with Ayla in the center and the mages spaced evenly around her, and the warriors enclosing them. Right now, Iron Bull stood in the middle with his wife, holding her hand so she could see.

All eyes were on Ares a couple hundred feet away. He’d raised his arms and conjured up a green glowing aura around his person. The energy of the Void mingled with his own godly force. Xena turned to Joxer and went to place a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a moment?”

The scrawny fellow jerked eyes from the God of War to her. “Um, yeah, sure.”

He followed her back towards the pass, and they stopped just inside the mouth of it. Xena faced him. “Joxer, you know I think you have…fine potential as a warrior, and I—”

His eyes widened and he held his hands up, cutting her off, voice quivering excitedly, “I knew this would happen someday, you and me on the same wavelength, two great minds, one thought!”

“Oh, really…”

“Yes! This is amazing! We finally clicked as warriors!”

Xena bellowed a sigh. “Joxer, I’m truly sorry to do this to you.”

Puzzlement stitched over his face. “Huh? Do wh—?”

He was cut off when Xena swiftly jabbed a spot at the base of his neck with the middle and fore fingers of one hand, using her art of pressure points to induce unconsciousness. Joxer’s eyes abruptly shut and he melted to the ground at her feet.

Autolycus and Gabrielle approached, both in on her plan to keep Joxer out of the fight.

“You think he’ll be okay here?” Gabrielle voiced, brow furrowed with concern.
“He should be,” Xena said. “He’s out of the open. Gimme that rope.”

Autolycus stepped forward and handed the coil over.

Xena took it and lowered to quickly tie Joxer’s wrists and ankles, making sure to slip some cloth between his skin and the rope. When finished, she grabbed under the slumbering man’s arms and Autolycus took his legs. They carried him just a little further up the path, perching him in a comfortable position.

“Sleep tight, my friend. This is for your own good,” Xena said. She tossed his sheathed sword across the path, a good thirty feet away.

The three of them headed back to the battlefield.

(*)

Ares had worked up an enormous sphere of green energy, drawn from the Void using the Anchor. Its ominous glow illuminated the gravelly ground and reflected freakishly in the brown pits of the god’s eyes. The entire Inquisition army watched as Ares raised his arms, charging the energy ball, then drew back and pushed forward, sending it flying across the valley.

The orb raced ahead like a grounded green comet, and when it was little more than half way through the expanse, it encountered an invisible barrier, a massive dome. The barrier rippled and shivered, giving the warped effect of matter bending and twisting, then it sputtered away, revealing Corypheus’s army. There were many ranks of them, mostly Venatori, and some rebel mages taken by the sway of the Elder One. Calpernia would have been there too, had she not fallen at the Temple of Mythal. Vinjaron Shallos had stepped up to take her place. To one side of the valley, resting nearly against a sheer face of rock, was the old fortress Corypheus had been using as his domain. Ares was correct when he assumed the Elder One translocated it from elsewhere. It was a section of ancient elven ruins from deep within the Arbor Wilds. He found it mysteriously appealing, reflective of an age and era where gods, or the idea of gods, truly mattered, so he acquired it.

The mighty red lyrium-tainted dragon joined to the Elder One sat obediently on its looming platform of the ruins, sending a tumultuous shriek through the valley. It spread its wings and shook them.

There, at the head of his army, towering and deformed, was Corypheus. His dark robes brushed the ground, the ancient, resilient material appearing meshed and sewn throughout his mangled flesh, as much a part of him as his own head. The demonic, bony plates thrusting from his cheeks shifted when his scowl deepened. He had hoped to lure the Inquisition closer, then overwhelm them in a surprise attack, but the thing named Ares interfered. No matter. He would crush them all, and those that did not fall there, on that desolate battlefield, would succumb to the darkness when he ascended to claim the empty throne of the gods.

The Elder One skimmed the many soldiers of his enemy, then rested his fierce gaze on Ares and Hannibal, the Inquisitor having walked up to the God of War’s side. Corypheus lifted a knobby arm, the Orb of Destruction clutched in his nest of spindly, long-nailed fingers. Red jolts of electricity crackled around the ancient, super-powerful artifact. When he spoke, his voice carried easily through the valley, amplified a hundred-fold, filling the area.

“And so, it begins, vermin. You all stand upon the threshold of a new world, a world in which I will be revered as the One True God. History will not remember you for your victory, for you shall not be victorious. You will not even be remembered for your failure.” Scared lips thinned out and a crooked nose twitched. “You will be remembered as the first of many to fall in my reign, the fickle-minded bunch that dared to believe they could stand against me and prevail. Your demise will remind all who think to oppose me that such is unwise, that serving me is the only way. And you, the one called Ares, you should have stayed in your own world. Now, you will die in a foreign one. We shall prove here, once and for all, which of us is worthy of godhood.”

Corypheus’s arm shot up and he channeled archaic magic into the Orb of Destruction. A thick red beam blasted from it straight up into the sky. The clouds toiled, bubbled, and brewed, beginning to swirl. The sky suddenly broke and flashed green. He’d reopened the massive portal that Hannibal closed several months ago, only this time, it wasn’t just some green hole in the sky. It was to be the main gateway for all the demons of the Fade. That realm was split into many sections, and not all were inherently evil, and some were even poisonous, such as the area Fen’Harel imprisoned the Evanuris, unknowing of the long-term effects it would have on them. Other parts of the Fade were quite evil and malicious, serving as home to many types of demons and dark spawn. These were the places for which Corypheus opened the great portal. He would flood the world with his minions.

Up above, the grandiose eye of the green portal gaped, and from it came the howls and screams of many evil things. For now, all Corypheus could do was summon the portal. He couldn’t bring the creatures through yet, couldn’t merge that part of the Fade into this world. He needed one last thing—the power of the Anchor. Once he killed Ares, he’d easily be able to extract and absorb it.

The Elder One swept an arm forward, and his army started charging the Inquisition.

(*)

Ayla’s large eyes loomed even more when Corypheus and his army appeared on the far side of the valley. Her breaths quickened at the dragon and its thunderous roar. She gripped closer to
Bull. The Qunari knew it was going to be a treacherous fight, and so didn’t want her there, but now it was truly too late. He supposed he could’ve tried harder to keep her away from it, maybe bind her the way Xena did Joxer. He was willing to suffer the wrath of her anger later, when it was over. But that time had long passed, and the mages needed her. That much was true.

Iron Bull’s arm tightened around her and lips nuzzled her hair. “It’s gonna be okay. It has to be…” he whispered.

Elenir ran over to them. He pulled his sister close, and they embraced. The ranger stared lovingly down at her. He looked to Bull. “Keep her safe, please, keep her safe.”

“I will kill anything that comes. Know that.”

El’s eyes went to Ayla, Corypheus’s voice filling the valley with his short spiel. The man hugged her again, then took his place back with Joswen and the Red Army.

Then the shaft of light shot into the sky, opening the doorway to evil.

In was in that moment that Knight-Commander Barris ordered the Templars to take their lyrium. He did the same. This allowed them to absorb and neutralize most magic. Cullen watched them drink their phials, the tiniest voice in the back of his mind attempting to convince him that he needed a drink too. But never again. He drew a hefty sigh and looked forward, sword drawn, shield up. The Lion was ready.

(*)

Ares and Hannibal listened to Corypheus, the war god’s expression only slightly amused. Both their heads tipped back to observed the vortex swirling into existence.

“Hm, wasn’t expecting that,” Ares said matter-of-factly. He grinned around at Hannibal. “Looks like it’s starting. Better get to my spot for a better view.” He vanished.

Corypheus’s forces charged.

Hannibal took big breaths, drew his broadsword, and raised it high. “To victory!”

The Inquisitor broke into a run across the valley for the wall of Venatori, and his army followed.

(*)

Ares appeared with Elgar’nan up on the lone ledge.

The prior king of the Evanuris spared him the faintest glance, keeping attention mostly on the valley, the two large armies now charging one another, the battered, ancient, crumbling fortress, and…

“You didn’t tell me the old magister had a dragon.”

“Ah, yeah, that.” Ares crossed arms over the expanse of his broad chest. Leather hummed smoothly with the movement. “Here’s hoping the Inquisition can take it down, since they won’t be able to kill Corypheus otherwise.”

“Can’t you just kill it, then kill him?”

“Where’s the fun in that? I got us this prime balcony seat so we could watch a battle.” The god chuckled. “Oh, wait, I must remember that as a mortal, you can’t begin to understand the true intricacies of war and what war means to me. I thrive off it. War is a necessary part of life, and when moderated, controlled, it serves its purpose well—separates those who deserve to rule from those who find themselves unfortunate enough to be ruled. War is in the nature of all people. Elves, humans, dwarves, qunari, Klingons, woo-hoo, those Klingons.”

“Who are these Klingons?”

“They live in another dimension. Point is, all dominant, sentient life, be it humanoids, photon-based, or otherwise, are prone to war and strife. I’m here to moderate it, and as long as beings battle one another in whatever dimension, universe, or world, I will never die. I will always exist.”

The God of War grinned handsomely and raised his eyebrows, gesturing to the battlefield.

Elgar’nan observed.

(*)

Back in Skyhold, those who’d stayed behind had gathered on the walls to gawk at the vortex that bubbled once more over the Valley of Sacred Ashes. Tears gathered in Idrial’s eyes, yet didn’t fall, and she grabbed hold of the rose figure on the chain around her neck. A gift from Cole.

“Be safe, my love. May the Maker watch over you.”

(*)

For miles and miles out that great green gash in the cloudy heavens could be seen. The families in the camp at the bottom of the Frostbacks and the soldiers there to guard and protect them all stared up at the mighty peaks, the toiling portal.
The ground vibrated as both sides charged. Ayla stared in horror as Corypheus’s forces came. Ice encased her veins, made her blood freeze. She was paralyzed with terror, her nails digging into Bull’s arm.

The Qunari warrior had found his calm center. All he had to do was picture Ayla slain in this mess and it rallied him like nothing else, because he knew he’d never let it happen. He looked down at her, speaking quickly and clearly. “It’s going to be alright, Naareema. Breathe, concentrate. Stay focused. We will protect you.”

His words acted as a warm brand, searing away the icy doubt and fear enough so that she could move. Ayla nodded up at him.

Bull gave her hand a tight squeeze and kissed her. “I love you.” Then, he physically seemed to harden, his whole person transforming into a weapon of destruction, his face going dire and fearless. Bull’s eye jotted to the mages, then to those who would help him protect them. “Form up and keep it tight! We move forward slowly and as a group, on my word!”

Krem, Sophitia, Vek, and Ozra spread apart accordingly, while Dorian, Solas, and Magnus formed a triangle around Ayla. Bull finally released her hand to take his place in formation. For a few seconds, the Oona swam in blotchy shadows, eyes wide, ears open to the drum of thousands of feet on the ground. She closed her eyes and concentrated on Bull’s voice, his calming advice. Taking some deep breaths.

“Are you ready?” Ayla called to the mages.

“Yes,” Solas replied. He was in a stance with his staff held out before him, elven eyes narrowed, brow lowered.

“Whenever you are, love,” said Dorian.

“Let’s do this, little bird.” Magnus had his staff out too. As a battlemage, he also wielded a blade, as indicated by the broadsword sheathed on his back. It would only be moments before the two armies collided, as could be seen beyond the small sea of Inquisition warriors. Magnus gritted his teeth. “Gah, just another fucking day.”

Ayla summoned her power, and each of the mages instantly lit up against her otherwise darkened world, represented by stark white shapes. She could tell who was who. Magnus stood in the middle, with Dorian and Solas to the sides, all relatively equidistant from her, just ten feet or so. Ayla slowly rose until she hovered several inches above the ground, and the mages would feel themselves tingling, amplified by her gift. When the group progressed, the Oona would be carried along like a kite, floating with them.

Morrigan was nearby. She watched them form up, then hurried off, eyes on the dragon in the distance. It still sat on the fortress, a great living gargoyle breathing smoke and flame.

The hard patter of boots and the many voices from both sides blended into a dark cacophony, and the Inquisition’s forces could not be deciphered from Corypheus’s. There was only the massive, angry voice of battle in Hannibal’s ears, his own war cry contributing to it, though he couldn’t even hear himself, the sound was so overwhelming.

And then they clashed, the two armies. Shields, armors, and blades bouncing of one another.

Hannibal swung his broadsword, decapitating a Venatori minion, the first of many who would die by the Inquisitor’s hand that fateful day. He brought his blade up to block another foe, kicking out. The Venatori were classified as Tevinter supremacists with no official hold in the Imperium, and each of them was skilled enough at fighting. Some of them, however, were also mages. One such mage stepped ahead of the others, raised her staff, conjured a surge of electricity, and sent it into the Inquisition army.

Hannibal ducked and dodged, as the strike smashed into a group of templars, most of the blow absorbed by their armor and shields. The Inquisitor quickly turned about, surrounded by fighting. He was looking for Corypheus, and he saw him, towering above everyone else, perhaps a hundred paces away. He growled and began slashing his way towards the Elder One.

Corypheus’s face lifted to the sky, and he veered around. He waved an arm to summon the dragon from its perch. The creature flapped its wings and took off. The Elder One then used his power to open a smaller portal across the battlefield. Demons began writhing from the green light of the Fade.

Side by side, Joswen and Elemir battled the enemy, the ranks of the Red Army having separated into smaller divisions of ten, picking their way through the battlefield, which was quickly becoming strewn with the fallen.
Elsewhere on the battlefield, Rocky axed some enemies down. The dwarf, Stitches, Dalish, Skinner, and Grim formed a tight circle, picking their foes off. And then, right in front of them suddenly loomed a gaping hole in mid-air, green luminance spilling from it. Slimy, grotesque beings emerged, half a dozen.

“Fucking hell,” sneered Skinner, her bow up, arrow aimed.

Dalish growled, slim lips parting to show her teeth. The apostate elf—though she would never admit to it, preferring instead to be thought of as a “back-up archer”—charged her staff and shot a fireball at the creatures, blowing a nice, juicy chunk out of one.

“Ha! They’ll die just like everything else!” Rocky called. He gave Grim a nudge. “Let’s say we handle ‘em.”

Grim nodded, tightened his stance, lifting his sword, then advanced with his brethren in arms.

(*)

Vivienne’s wind attack gusted forth with the masterful swipe of her staff. It collided with a group of Venatori, blowing them backward. The mage regrouped.

“Nice one, Iron Lady,” Varric drawled, letting a couple of bolts fly. The modifications made to Bianca allowed six shots before a reload. He had his blade on hand in case combat got too close.

Vivienne parried her weapon, taking down a foe. She lifted a brow down at the dwarf.

Sera’s arrows whistled outward, as true as Varric’s bolts. The petite elf turned here and there, taking out as many as she could. “This is crazy, this is crazy, this is crazy—Oh! Right through the eye, that one!”

Cole and Cassandra were close by, fighting back to back.

(*)

“Autolycus! Behind you!” Gabrielle yelled.

The handsome thief twirled, sword up to deflect the blade of his attacker, a Venatori male with wild eyes, diluted by the lies of the Elder One. Auto kicked out, catching the man in his knee. He howled and crumbled to the ground, giving Autolycus the chance to jam his blade in the guy’s chest.

Auto turned afterward and gave Gab a thankful nod, which she returned.

Xena, a master of combat and all it entailed, kept her eyes partly on Gabrielle and partly on the battle. The Warrior Princess loosened the chakram from her hip, wound back, and sent the ring-blade frisbeeing into the enemy. It whirred gently as it spun through the air, slicing a few throats before returning to its commander. Xena caught it, hooked it back on her side, then returned to sword combat.

(*)

Dorian, Solas, and Magnus converged their amplified powers to conjure a great ball of flame. It hovered ahead of them, easily the size of a boulder. As one, they smashed it down into the horde of Venatori, killing ten or so of them. The move required a great deal of energy on Ayla’s behalf, and the three of them knew they’d have to use such attacks sparingly so as not to overwhelm her.

Iron Bull pivoted and swung his axe, taking an enemy’s arm off. While the man screamed in terror and blood gushed from his ravished body, the Qunari fluidly flipped his weapon and used the spiked butt of it to crush his face in. He turned when there was a moment to do so. “Ayla, how are you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” she answered, voice strong and unstrained. The Oona blinked and focused on a bright whiteness in the shadows, aside from the three mages surrounding her. “What is that?”

“Some kind of portal,” Dorian said. He tried to spot Hannibal in all the mayhem, but couldn’t.

Maker, please let him be alright.

“It’s a fade-rift,” Bull said, growling low in his throat. His eye squinted in the direction of the thing. “The Chargers are there. We need to help them!”

“The only way to help is to close it, Chief,” Krem said, voice raised to be heard. “The Inquisitor can’t even do that anymore.”

“We might be able to collapse it ourselves, with Ayla’s help.” Solas’s smooth words. He addressed the Oona. “You’ll need to intensify the amplification to all three of us so we can overload it.”

“No!” Bull snarled. “She could get hurt!”

“Bull, it’s okay. I can do it,” Ayla said and nodded. “Let’s help them quickly.”
The Qunari warrior chuffed, shaking his head, and she couldn’t see how dry and unamused his features were. “Alright. Let’s move. Stay tight. Forward!”

The Oona, mages, and their protectors started for Corypheus’s portal and the Chargers, who currently engaged the enemies spilling from it.

(*)

Depending on the level of force used, pressure points could keep a person unconscious for upwards of an hour. For Joxer, it lasted about fifteen minutes, just long enough for the battle to begin and be thoroughly underway without him.

The scrawny man stirred and his eyes opened slowly. It didn’t take long for the dinness to creep back from the edges of his vision. He sat up and clearly heard the clangs and clashes of metal to metal, the constant rush of voices. Fighting.

Then, Joxer remembered he’d been talking to Xena moments ago. He realized his ankles and wrists were bound, and he was back inside the pass. He felt the coldness of the rock through his jacket and pants.

He smirked. “Dammit, Xena.”

She doubted him, like the others. Didn’t think he had what it took to fight. But she was wrong, and he’d show her that. First, he had to get loose. Joxer looked around, seeing only stone walls. His sword laid on the ground across from him.

“Great.”

He wouldn’t be able to reach it to cut himself free, not easily anyway. Luckily for him, Xena had neglected to check under his battered chest plate. The man managed to get his bound hands in the right position, and it took a bit of wiggling and finger hooking, but he was able to get the little knife.

Joxer slid the blade carefully under the rope and started pushing it back and forth.
The whole time Joxer worked away at his bindings, he listened closely to the roar of battle careening back through the pass. He heard what sounded like the screams of a huge, beastly creature and the constant clangoring of swords. It must’ve been a doozy of a fight.

For ten minutes, maybe a little less, he sawed the knife back and forth, until the ropes at his wrists snapped apart. He quickly unbound his ankles, scrambled to his feet, ran for his sword, then flew down the enclosed path. The man was not prepared for the scene that awaited him when he rounded the slight bend.

Joxer’s mouth fell open slowly, his eyes widening.

At first, he was so overwhelmed that he couldn’t tell who was Inquisition and who wasn’t. He saw a very tall and unpleasant-looking figure near the middle of the warzone, and he knew that was the Corypheus guy everyone was talking about.

And there was also the dragon. It soared over the warriors, unleashing jets of fire on the Inquisition, sending some men screaming and writhing to a gruesome death. The dragon flapped its black webbed wings and gained altitude, where it began circling and shrieking.

“Oh, Zeus, help me…” Joxer whispered. He took a breath, clenched tight the hilt of his sword, and ran down into the fray.

Once close enough, it didn’t take long for the enemy to fixate on him. A single sword-wielding Venatori came at him, waving his weapon quickly, perhaps trying to throw Joxer off. If only he knew all the fancy footwork wasn’t necessary, since Joxer wasn’t all that much of a warrior. Still, the goofy, noble-hearted man didn’t flee. He faced his Venatori attacker fully, sword up and ready.

The Venatori growled and charged him.

Joxer mumbled a curse and backpedaled quickly. He tripped over a dead body and stumbled, twisting around. He landed on his ass and froze as the enemy closed in, ready to impale him.

But it wasn’t to happen. Not then, anyway.

A figure in black, armored in just the right places, got between Joxer and his attacker. It was Ryder. He smoothly brought up his shield to deflect the Venatori, throwing his weight into it to knock the enemy off balance. While the robed man was staggered, Ryder pivoted and thrust his blade into his loathsome belly. Two other Venatori rushed in to avenge their fallen ally, and Ryder killed them just as swiftly.

Joxer watched all of this silently, secretly envious of the fluidic way the handsome, bearded man moved, the way he seemed to be married harmonious to the art of combat. Ryder turned to him, eyes like flecks of blue flint. He offered a hand, pulling Joxer to his feet.

“You should probably take cover somewhere. I doubt I’ll be around next time to save you.”

Ryder returned to battle, charging for the nearest group of enemies.

Something inside Joxer faltered. It was the familiar taunt of doubt. Sure, he was determined to fight, but everyone was right when they advised him to find a new profession, one that didn’t involve killing. Because he was no damn good at it. He’d killed two people in his whole life, both bad. One had been on accident (he’d been fleeing and pulled a barrel of ball bearings over in his wake, which the guy slipped and slid over, taking a tumble into the spear booth nearby, where he got impaled). The other time had been to protect Gabrielle during a fight a couple of years ago. One enemy meant to sneak up behind her, and Joxer tackled him with his knife out. The blade ended up in the guy’s chest. His death haunted Joxer for weeks. That should’ve been an obvious sign that he needed to put his sword down. Couldn’t even kill a bad guy without lingering on the act.

Maybe Xena was right. Maybe they all were. Maybe it was time to accept that no matter how much he wanted it, he’d never be grade-A warrior material. Tartarus, he wasn’t even grade-F.

Joxer stood amidst the fighting, locked in place by the chains of fear and doubt around his ankles.

(*)

Ares was enjoying the fight, the carnage and destruction, all in his name. None of them realized that their battling greatly served and further empowered the God of War. Sultry brown eyes skimmed below, sharply catching the instance between Joxer, his attackers, and the dark wonder who stepped in to save the puny fellow.

“You gotta be kidding me. Be right back,” Ares said, then vanished.

Elgar’nan stared at the place where the god once stood, curious as to where he’d gone. His attention fixed on the battlefield, scanning it.

(*)
Everyone spoke in tongues, the fray surrounding him appearing to proceed in slow-motion. Joxer looked down at the sword in his hand, tightening his grip on the hilt. His face hardened. He wasn’t the best warrior, but he’d be damned if he ran like a coward while his friends—while Gabrielle—was still out there fighting.

Joxer bore his teeth, raised his sword, and broke into a run for the nearest enemy.

He stopped short, however, when Ares appeared in front of him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The God of War spoke.

The man frowned. “Out of my way, Ares.”

“You’re gonna get yourself killed.”

The tall, handsome rogue closed in, touched Joxer’s shoulder, and they dissipated from the battlefield.

(*)

When the war god and the aspiring warrior fizzled back into view up on the ledge, both Joxer and Elgar’nan were equally surprised. One the elf’s trim eyebrows rose peculiarly upon the pale smoothness of his forehead. Joxer stared at the towering elf for a moment, blinked at the battle below, then glared at the God of War.

“Take me back down there, Ares!”

“Why? You got a death wish or something? It’d be a miracle if you lasted two more minutes.”

“What do you care, huh?”

Ares gave his thoughts a bit of consideration. “Hm. Maybe, sometimes I don’t mind rescuing the occasional poor, helpless bunny from a wolf’s den. I have a heart, somewhere deep down.” He grinned.

“Right,” Elgar’nan quipped.

“Besides,” continued Ares, “who would make me laugh if you got yourself killed? Now, put that sword away and watch. I’ll take you back once it’s over.”

Well, that was that. There wasn’t much Joxer could do, as he could find no way down from the rock ledge. Behind them was sheer mountain face, the stone to the sides just as smooth. Harboring a growing dislike for the war god, Joxer resigned and observed the fighting in the valley.

(*)

Inquisition forces cried out and scattered as Corypheus’s dragon swept down from above. The mighty creature snagged up a Red Army soldier in its claws, carried his squirming body high up, and crushed him. The dragon dropped the corpse, and it plummeted to take out two more soldiers.

(*)

Down on the ground, Morrigan found an open, clear area to the side of the fray. The sorceress focused her mana, eyes closed and arms raised. She began glowing, doused in golden light, which expanded and expanded. When the light died out, a great dragon stood in place of the woman. Dragon-Morrigan. Her body rippled with deep purple scales, except at her breast where the scales were more a goldish tint. Perfect horns swirled from her large head. Bright eyes took in those around her.

All soldiers in the area, Inquisition or enemy, stopped the fighting momentarily to stare horrifically at the second dragon.

Dragon-Morrigan roared, ran a few steps, making the ground tremor, then flapped her wings to take flight. She went to engage Corypheus’s evil pet.

(*)

“Whoa! I really wasn’t expecting that!” Ares howled excitedly.

The God of War, Elgar’nan, and Joxer watched on avidly as the new dragon formed below, took flight, and attacked Corypheus’s. Both beasts collided in mid-air, using their sharp claws and teeth for offense. Dragon-Morrigan suddenly twisted and used her strong tail to whip her enemy. The other dragon back-flapped, going into a fluid roll. It sped off, leading her on a chase.

The three on the ledge got an up-close view of both dragons when they zoomed by, making Elgar’nan’s long mane billow.

Ares chuckled, pleased. “I must say, I have never seen a battle like this one.”

All Joxer could think of was Gabrielle. He prayed that she stayed out of the beasts’ way. The evil one had been blowing fire, plucking up Inquisition soldiers, and mangling them until Dragon-Morrigan came along.

(*)
Corypheus’s eyes narrowed across the field where someone was summoning great orbs of fire and mashing them down on his forces. The Inquisition mages were quite powerful, it seemed. But… there was more to them. Carnage on this level was nothing new to the Elder One, and he easily blocked it out, training his thoughts over the sea of brawlers, fixing his mind on the source of energy.

Familiar energy. Something he’d not experienced for several centuries.


The Elder One’s eyes widened faintly, then squinted evilly.

*Where did they find her?*

It mattered little now. Perhaps, if he’d known about her before all this, he would’ve tried to obtain and use her for his own purposes. Soon, though, he’d be unstoppable, the amount of power granted to him significantly more than what an Oona could give him via amplification. The woman was useless now, and she could die with the rest of the Inquisition pests.

(*)

At the line where both armies converged, Leliana and Cullen fought the enemy. The commander danced around one Venatori, jabbed him in the side quickly, and chopped the head from another before the first Venatori even fell to the ground. Leliana covered his back, using her bow to pick off foes.

Delrin Barris fought bravely with his Templars. He used his shield to push back a couple of Venatori, and when a rogue mage sent a fireball his way, Barris deflected it with the shield. His greenish-hazel eyes caught Hannibal hacking his way forward, closer and closer to Corypheus, who simply stood his ground, staring across the battlefield. Hannibal needed a better opening, and Maker or whatever gods guide and protect him in his stand against the Elder One.

The Knight-Commander rallied the men and women around him. “Templars, to me!”

Those that were not engaged in combat pulled in to Barris, forming up, their shields lifted.

“Focus there!” Barris shouted, using his sword to gesture at a concentrated mesh of Corypheus’s soldiers. “We’ll spearhead forward and clear a path for the Inquisitor! Go, go, go!”

Barris and a dozen Templars charged ahead, cutting their way across Hannibal’s path, removing any in their way. Hannibal saw what they did for him. He nodded quickly at Barris in thanks, continuing to run for Corypheus. He stopped about twenty feet from the old magister, circling him slowly.

Corypheus’s spindly fingers clenched and unclenched. “Inquisitor—a title of standing meant for a man of high stature. Yet, you are merely a simpleton. This is reminiscent of our time in Haven, is it not? Surrounded by death and fire. You couldn’t save the people then and you won’t save them now.”

“Enough with the speeches already.” Hannibal brought his sword up. “Let’s finish this.”

The Elder One laughed, truly amused. “Yes, let’s.”

He pointed the hand clutching the Orb at Hannibal and red spikes of electricity shot from it. Hannibal dove aside to avoid the attack. The bolt of energy struck a cluster of fighting Templars and Venatori instead. Hannibal regained his footing. He knew he wouldn’t be able to damage Corypheus with his dragon still in-play, and Dragon-Morrigan was seeing to that. In the meantime, someone had to keep the Elder One distracted.

Hannibal’s eyes swiftly jotted about. He saw a clean, open shot to the wide steps of the old elven fortress. He sprinted for them.

Corypheus turned in pursuit, bellowing a growl. He swiped a few Inquisition warriors aside like flies; they happened to be in his way. He fired a stringent beam of energy at Hannibal, and it blew apart one of the stone steps, barely missing the man, who continued into the fortress. Corypheus chased him upward.

(*)

Ayla floated along quickly with the group, tethered between Dorian, Magnus, and Solas. Iron Bull, Krem, Sophitia, Vek, and Ozra covered the mages and the Oona, battering enemies back as they made their way closer to the rest of the Chargers.

Stitches saw them coming and smiled grandly, growing more confident. “Chief’s here, with company!”

“Good!” wailed Skinner. She let another arrow fly at the gaping portal, and it struck one of the slick, slimy lesser demons. “We could use the help!”

Iron Bull chuckled harshly, sparing another look behind him to Ayla. She was safe and covered.

“What? Can’t handle this without the old man? It’s okay. I know how much you guys need me.”

“You know, for once,” Rocky started, pausing to slash his axe blade into a darkspawn’s nasty
The Qunari again looked to Ayla and the mages. “Start working on that portal. No matter what happens, don’t let up off it! We have you covered.”

So, the magical ones began. Ayla concentrated her power further into the three mages, amplifying them much more than she normally would. She grimaced and shut her eyes, hovering steadily in the air. She knew she wouldn’t be able to hold it long.

Solas brimmed with so much power that he started to feel as he had a thousand years ago, when he openly went by the name Fen’Harel. He spared a look to Dorian and Magnus and saw that they too harbored immense energy, granted to them by the Oona. The elf made sure to speak loudly when he ordered, “Focus your lightning element into the rift!”

Magnus and Dorian did as he said, and all three of them aimed their staves at the portal, sending beams of electricity forth.

The warriors stayed clear of the electricity while fighting off the foes.

(*)

In all the dismal grayness of an overcast day, the bright flash on the battlefield caught many eyes. Corypheus noticed and spun around, peering through a massive gash in the fortress’s wall. It was the Oona and some mages. They were trying to close his portal. He considered going down there to end them.

Nearly at the top of the decrepit stairwell, Hannibal too saw what distracted Corypheus, and he also knew the magister might interfere. He tapped his sword to the stone wall loudly. “Hey! This way, you ugly sonovabitch!”

Corypheus turned swiftly, eyes like two burning coals narrowing at the Inquisitor. He decided to go for the horned man, climbing the last of the steps. When he emerged in the open, on the top level of the fortress, he saw that Hannibal had taken up position on the far side, sword up, stance ready.

The Elder One raised his hand and a red bolt shot from it. Hannibal took cover quickly, bits of dust and gravel exploding near his face when the bolt struck the toppling column behind which he hid. He didn’t know exactly what he was going to do, but he knew he had to do something. There weren’t very many places to hide up there.

The roars of two great beasts shattered the air, and the dragons soared by overhead, battling it out. Corypheus’s dragon managed to ram Dragon-Morrigan, making her fly into one of the fortress’s jutting spires. She howled and dipped, before catching her balance, flapping her wings.

Corypheus induced another level of his power. He transported to Hannibal’s position, and was quite pleased by the surprise saturating the man’s face to see the Elder One suddenly appear before him. Corypheus swung and his solid fist caught Hannibal squarely, making him stumble sideward. He landed on the stone floor, winded, and his sword clattered to rest several feet away.

The Elder One took two steps, reached Hannibal’s fallen figure, and kicked him in the ribs.

The Inquisitor growled, rolling with the blow, breathing hard. “Fuck…”

“Is this how you wish to die, groveling in the dust and dirt? Stand if you can.” Corypheus kicked him again.

(*)

Just when Varric thought they might actually be making a dent in Corypheus’s army, more of them swarmed in. The dwarf fired his last chambered bolt, then smoothly ejected the link. “Shit. That was my last one!”

Cassandra bore her teeth and kicked a Venatori soldier from the end of her sword. The woman brought her shield up, looking quickly to Varric. “We have to keep fighting!”

“I know that, Seeker,” Varric said gruffly, dropping Bianca to the ground so he could unsheathe his sword. “I’m just not as good with a blade.”

“You want me to protect you, is that it?” she quipped, purposefully giving him flack. She roundhoused another enemy.

“I certainly ain’t gonna turn down the offer.” Varric engaged a Venatori, slitting his femoral artery. It helped to be short sometimes. Other times, it could work against him, since his head was right at hand-level.

Seemed a Venatori would take advantage of this. With Varric’s back turned, the Elder One’s servant sliced at the dwarf’s back.

Varric gasped, stumbling forward.

“Varric!” Cassandra called. She screamed a battle cry and charged his attacker, sinking her blade into him. She lowered beside Varric, who remained on one knee, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Looks like a flesh wound, not very deep. Lucky for you, your attacker was stupid enough not to
hit anything vital.”

He winced. “Yeah, lucky me. Stings like fuck, though.”

“It’s going to until we can get it bandaged.”

“Is he alright?” Sera ran up to them, large eyes darting about.

“I’ll live, Buttercup.”

The elf grinned, the expression haunted by fear. “I’m not sure if any of us are going to live through this.”

Even as she said the words, a group of twenty or more Venatori rushed forward, and Cole was closest to them. He worked his double blades, taking down one, then another, diving, and dodging spryly.

Some quick footwork took Sera forward, and she let arrows fly at the Venatori, but they continued progressing. And Cole was getting overwhelmed. As skilled and fast as he was, Sera knew he wouldn’t hold out long in the middle of that thickening horde. She hadn’t been fond of Creepy for the longest time, and then she came to realize that, like her, he had no other place to be but right there with the Inquisition, nowhere else to truly fit in. Weirdos and outcasts, the two of them. Sera still couldn’t say that she fully liked Cole, but she would admit that he had become…well…like family.

Family.

The elf secured her bow, released her dual-blades, and rushed into the fray, chopping down enemies until she reached Cole, the two of them going back to back. “You’ll have to step it up, Creepy. They almost got you.”

“How observant. I’m pleased that you came to my rescue,” Cole retorted much in the same playfully sarcastic tone that Varric used on Cassandra. He knew that Sera was still getting used to him, and that she lived by a code that wouldn’t allow her personal feelings to get in the way of what was right.

“How! Someone has to!” Sera blared. She and Cole continued to do what they could.

Cassandra stayed near Varric, fighting for the two of them, though she was quite impressed with the dwarf’s determination. He’d picked his sword back up and was chopping enemies down again, despite the wound across his back.

(*)

Back over at the portal, Bull and his group appeared to be thinning the demons out. Less and less of them were popping from the misty green void. The edges of the portal were crackling and white now because of the mages and Ayla channeling concentrated electricity into it.

Iron Bull’s eye fixed on his wife. He saw that she trembled with the effort, the strain of keeping her powerful energy pumping into the mages.

“What. The fuck. Is that!” Ozra’s turquoise eyes went extremely wide.

Iron Bull whipped around to watch with the others as another demon slithered from the vortex. A master shade. It looked like the lesser ones, but was much larger with a dozen eyes plastered on the misshapen lump of its head. Strings of slobber dangled from the long, glistening teeth that filled its grinning maw. The thing opened its mouth wider and made a terrible wailing noise, the flaps of its rotting lips trembling. It appeared to examine those before it, focusing on Ayla behind a wall of warriors and mages.

The shade lunged forward for the Oona’s position.

Iron Bull was ready. He roared and stepped in. “Here! Over here, you piece’a shit!”

The shade spun to him and snarled. It swung one of its long arms, the hand on the end of it about three feet long and capped in razor-sharp claws. Bull jumped back to evade, circling the thing.

Rocky and Stitches joined the Chief, while Dalish, Grim, and Skinner formed up on the creature’s other side. They all worked to distract it while the magical ones concentrated on the portal.

(*)

Corypheus couldn’t be in two places at once, powerful as he was. He stared down at the winded, squirming Inquisitor on the floor before him. His mind went out to the master shade on the battlefield below.

*The Oona. Kill her. Stop them from closing the portal.*

(*)

Those of the Inner Circle fought bravely. They didn’t hold back and gave every ounce of will and strength they could muster. Even so, some of them would not survive the carnage.

“There’s too many of them!” cried Cassandra, still swinging and jabbing,
Vivienne used a combination of melee and magic to dominate the enemy.

A short distance away, Sera and Cole fought with everything they had, slashing away at the Venatori, blood staining their clothes and weapons, speckling their faces, dyeing their hands. Cole swung and stumbled, every breath he took tearing through his lungs. The aches and pains of humanity. A Venatori took that moment to try and kill him, but she failed; Cole brought a blade up to impale her.

And then the horde shrank away some, leaving Sera and Cole in a sizable opening. The elf quickly understood why. One of the Venatori mages had stepped up, a fireball gathering in his hand. Cole was down on one knee, and the mage meant to end him by way of the blazing orb.

Sera couldn’t let it happen, she just couldn’t. She gritted her teeth and dove outward right when the fireball was released, and it was she who took the blow. Slammed by the magic attack, her body spun in midair, twisted like a ragdoll, landing near Cole.

Cassandra, Varric, and Vivienne saw it happen.

A brazen shriek shook the area. Dragon-Morrigan. She flew low enough to use her front paws on the gathered Venatori group, scattering them about easily, killing two or three. She immediately went back to the sky to continue fighting Corypheus’s dragon. If only she’d been able to come a few moments sooner, but this was how things usually tended to work out.

The area was cleared now, mostly, not congested by Venatori scum.

Cole shuffled for Sera. Her back was to him and she lie partially on her side, arms and legs flailed. He didn’t need to be a spirit to know that she was dead even before he laid his hand to her shoulder and carefully rolled her over. The man sighed grievously and closed his eyes a moment.

Sera had taken the fiery blast to her left side. The light armor and material of her tunic was singed away, crumbled and burnt, the flesh of her shoulder and that side of her face charred down to the bone. The elf’s remaining eye stared lifelessly up at the sky.

Vivienne, Cassandra, and Varric now stood over Cole and the fallen Sera, silent and stunned. They all knew that in their line of work, something like this could happen at any time. To see it happen—well, it was quite a shock.

Cassandra’s eyes flew around, noticing that the enemy was already beginning to regroup. “There will be time to grieve later. We still have a battle to win.”

“She...died for me,” Cole said. “For me.” He sighed, sheathed his blades, then hoisted Sera’s body in his arms. His gaze settled on Cassandra. “Once I remove her from the field, I shall resume fighting.”

The three of them watched him stride for a section of the battle zone that held nothing but ruin and corpses.
While Krem, Sophitia, Ozra, and Vek defended the magical ones, Bull and the rest of the Chargers kept the master shade busy. The creature loomed nearly ten feet high, its fat shadow sliding across the ground as it maneuvered. It spun about in a psychotic frenzy, unable to concentrate on just one of its attackers because they all lunged and provoked it constantly and at different times.

This was Iron Bull’s intention, to keep the thing’s attention from Ayla. Everyone else mattered too—of course, they did—but she was his primary concern. She was the only one out there that couldn’t wield a weapon to protect herself, and even if she could swing a sword as masterfully as Xena, the Qunari would worry after her. However, she couldn’t. She was helpless without her husband and the others protecting her.

The churning vortex suddenly belched a huge pulse of light.

The master shade froze and began quivering, looking like an enormous, foul mound of gelatin. Green beams reached from the eye of the portal and latched on to the creature, lassoing it, pulling it back for the Fade. Anything else of that realm, any other demons or spawn, would also be captured by the beams, reeled for the portal like fish on the end of a line. The master shade wailed angrily.

“It’s closing! Keep on focusing!” yelled Solas.

With the shade mostly immobilized, the warriors were granted a few moments of down time, though they remained on guard, weapons up. The demonic entity writhed and struggled. It made one more mad dash forward, swiping its large hand out.

Sophitia was caught off-guard by the shade. It gripped one of her legs, taking her off her feet, and as it was sucked back for the shrinking tear between worlds, it pulled her along with it. The woman screamed, heat and pain erupting on her calves and shins where the shade’s razors dug.

Before Iron Bull could jump in to be the hero, Grim bolted forward. His eyes locked with Sophi’s and in that instant, everything slowed. He had never been more focused in battle than he was then. Grim’s hard gaze shifted from the woman’s terror-stricken face to the shade. The thing slid backwards on its belly now, if it had a belly, and its head was low enough to easily reach. Grim dove on it and began jabbing his sword into the demon’s putrid eyes, slime and pus exploding from the destroy orbs right into his face. But he didn’t care. He had to save Sophitia.

The master shade howled and chortled. It released Sophitia, then clawed for its head, ramming three of its four razor-like nails into Grim’s torso, giving enough pressure that it punctured the man clean through, jabbing into its own face several inches.

“No!” Sophi wailed.

Grim immediately flopped free to the ground. The shade made a series of deep clicking sounds and huffs, probably its version of laughter, and it didn’t stop even as it sucked back into the Fade and the portal collapsed.

Battle still boilled around them, but it was growing less and less audible, the voices dying as the warriors expired on both sides.

The cuts on Sophitia’s lower legs were an inch deep and they stung. She half dragged, half stumbled for Grim, dropping beside him, pulling his head in her lap. She stroked his hair and smiled down at him through a veil of tears. “It’s going to be alright,” she choked out, nodding quickly. “It will, you’ll see.”

Grim returned her smile. He couldn’t feel much of anything, only a distant, encompassing cold. He coughed and blood bubbled past his teeth and lips.

Iron Bull and the Chargers closed in. The Chief stared down disbelieving at Grim, the three puncture wounds on his torso bleeding profusely—one of his lungs, a place very close to his heart, and somewhere down in his guts. All vital areas.

The Qunari lowered and tightly clasped his friend’s hand, his heart wrenching.

Stitches, skilled as he was with a scalpel, thread, and poultices, knew there was nothing he could do. Dalish’s hand covered her mouth and tears streamed down. Skinner stared at the scene, determined to remain hard and unshakable no matter what. She’d cry later when she was alone. Krem and Rocky regarded it all silently, devastated as the others.

Ozra, Vek, Magnus, Dorian, Solas, and Ayla closed in, the Oona positioned protectively amidst them. She couldn’t see anything but the vaguest shadows and shapes, but she could hear quite well. Sophitia was injured and Grim was down. The snowy-maned woman leaned tiredly on Dorian.

The darkness had just about closed in on Grim. His breathing quickened and he smiled more to see all the people he cared about standing over him. He held dearly to Bull’s hand, eyes roaming to each person. “I…love you guys…m-my…fam…famil-ee…” he released his last breath, body going limp, eyes blank and lightless, and blissfulness forever captured on his face.
Dalish gasped a sob.

Stitches hugged an arm around Skinner, and she didn’t blink, didn’t move.

Rocky touched gently to Dalish’s arm, rubbing.

Krem went to one knee, hand on Bull’s broad, hard back. The lieutenant sniffled and brushed wetness from his cheeks.

The Qunari’s one good eye went blurry. He swiped away the tears before they could fall. “Rest well, my brother, rest well.” Not once had he or any of the Chargers ever heard their fallen comrade talk, never experienced his resonantly accented tones. This, here in his last moments of life, was the only time. They’d always speculated that, perhaps, Grim chose silence for personal reasons, and maybe one day he’d break that silence and finally speak. It was the saddest shame that he’d chosen now to do it.

Sophitia cried and continued rubbing Grim’s hair.

(*)

Dragon-Morrigan pulled her thick, scaly legs and arms in and soared over the valley, on the defensive now from Corypheus’s dragon. The sorceress looked over her shoulder to see her opponent closing in fast, its mouth open and readily poised.

Her eyes loomed and she rolled to dodge the stream of fire sent from the other beast. One of her wings got singed and she roared, flapping it quickly. This caused her to lose balance, and she took a deep dive. The red lyrium-tainted dragon stole that moment to ram her. Dragon-Morrigan crashed into one of the high stone walls flanking the valley. Her great body slid to the ground, glowing as it descended. The light swelled, then died off, revealing the woman back in her normal form. She lay there unconscious, scrapes and bruises hashed across her face and arms.

Corypheus’s dragon bellowed great roars of triumph and took to circling overhead.

(*)

“Stand up!” Corypheus’s shadow stretched over the ancient stone floor of the translocated Elvhen ruins. He glared down at Hannibal.

Hannibal reached for his broadsword, clenched fingers to the hilt, and jabbed the blade downward. He used the sword as a crutch upon which to pull himself upright, legs shaky.

Corypheus had given him quite the beating. One side of his face was slathered in blood from a gash on his cheek, that eye nearly swollen shut. Every breath hurt due to all the kicks he’d taken to the guts and ribs, and one of his shoulders was dislocated. No way he could properly swing a sword if he wanted to. This was what he needed, though, Corypheus’s attention mainly on him.

The vortex swirling over the valley had grown nearly double in size, the shrieks and screams of evil things much louder, closer. The Elder One and the Inquisitor faced each other.

“Look at you, all but defeated, yet your eyes still hold the arrogance of one who believes he will be victorious. You have courage, this I will admit.”

Hannibal spat a little blood sideways, sniffed, and grinned. “Either way, one of us isn’t leaving this battle alive.” The man wasn’t afraid to die. He was quite ready to. What did scare him was the thought of leaving Dorian alone. His dear, sweet husband was strong, but Hannibal doubted he’d take it well should his Amatus die during the fight, if the detailed explanation from Future-Dorian was any indication.

Still, the Altus just might have to lose him for the chance that they could prevail.

Hannibal stood up straighter, staring down the Elder One.

Corypheus raised his hand and started to charge the Orb with red electricity. “It is time to end this.”

A flash and crackling of air shivered to the side of them.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Ares said, glaring at Corypheus. “Wow, man, you’re even uglier up close.”

Just like that, the old magister lost all interest in Hannibal. He turned fully to Ares, harboring a sneer. The two of them started to circle. “Ah, finally you’ve come—the thing called Ares. And just what is it you think you’re going to do?”

“What am I going to do? How about this!” Ares’s eyes shot to the low flying dragon. He raised his arm and sent a jagged blue energy spike at it, destroying half of one webbed wing.

The dragon screamed in agony, falling like an unseated baby bird from a nest, spiraling, flailing. It crashed to the battlefield.

“You owe me one, Inquisitor.” Ares winked at Hannibal.

“Nooo!” Corypheus shot the red electricity he’d been building up at the war god.

Ares took the blow to the chest, flying back into a stone wall. He got to his feet, laughing. “Nice.
My turn.” A huge bluish energy ball soared at the Elder One, spinning him about.

The God of the War and the would-be god went back and forth, blasting at each other with their powers. Ares wasn’t used to things not dying when he hit them with one shot, so Corypheus’s resilience came as a welcome surprise. It had been a long time since he’d taken on anyone remotely close to his own power-tier.

Hannibal scrambled aside, taking cover behind a partially fallen wall, watching them go at it. He pulled himself to his feet and got to a spot where he could see the battlefield. Inquisition forces had begun attacking the dragon.

When the dragon fell, it captured the attention of both armies. Morrigan had worked it enough to weaken it some before she was knocked out of the fight, and Ares had basically turned the huge creature into a lure. It shuffled around and cried at its ruined wing, serving as nothing more than a sizable piece of bleeding meat in a pool of piranhas. Inquisition soldiers prodded and stabbed at its legs and hind quarters, though it managed to breath flaming death on some of them.

Iron Bull and the others in his fighting group watched the dragon attempt to protect itself. The Qunari held Ayla close, hugging tight. “You did great, Naaremna-Kadan, but you’re done fighting. Dorian, take her over there, behind those rocks. Stay with her. Magnus, help Sophitia get there as well.”

Ayla latched to his arm, hand finding his for skin contact. She looked up pleadingly. “Where are you going?”

“The dragon. I’m gonna end it.”

“Doing so will make Corypheus killable,” Solas added, as if the Oona needed to be reminded of that critical fact.

Ayla knew it had to be done. She nodded and sighed. “Be careful, my love.”

“Always am.” Bull caressed her cheek, touched her lightly-swollen belly, then turned to the dragon.

“We’re with you, Chief,” Krem said. He, Skinner, and Rocky were ready to engage the enemy. Stitches and Dalish had already started to carry Grim’s body to a place where it would be easier to find, the battlefield a death zone littered with hundreds of corpses.

Solas slipped away and ran for the fortress.

Iron Bull’s eye scanned left and right to the Chargers who flanked him. He looked ahead at the injured, howling dragon, and shifted his grip on the great axe. “Let’s do this.”

The Qunari took off for the dragon and the Chargers followed.

The dragon saw them coming to join the small group of attackers, and it seemed to narrow its enormous, glistening yellow eyes.

“Skinner, Rocky, break left! Krem, you’re with me!” Bull called, swerving to the right.

Confused by the maneuver, the dragon tried to follow both teams, and while it was distracted for those few seconds, Bull swung and chopped its hind quarters. The creature wailed, stumbling around. Bull had faced dragons before. He knew what to do. He had to wait for it to begin its attack, and so didn’t move when the thing reared up. Bull only dove aside when the dragon’s large front paw slammed down, making dust and debris cloud the area. Krem stayed well out of reach, ready to attack at the slightest opening.

On their side, Rocky and Skinner attacked while the dragon was focused on Bull and Krem. The hardened elf sent arrows at the sensitive, penetrable areas around the beast’s leg and arm joints. Aiming directly for the head, chest, or back would be futile, with arrows at least, since those parts were highly armored.

The dragon reared about and glared.

“Oh, shit.” Rocky, and the rest of the Chargers, had faced a dragon only one other time, under the command of their Chief, and it was Iron Bull’s expertise that had gotten them all through it alive. The dwarf, like Bull had moments ago, waited until the beast went to strike, diving aside to evade.

Iron Bull focused sharply. He knew that now was the time to finish it. Krem’s mouth fell open as he watched the Chief charge forward, and scramble up the dragon’s back, using the plates and scales of armor shingling its hide for hand-holds. The dragon immediately began to shake and toss, trying to dismount the intruder from its back. But Bull held strong. He got all the way up to a place behind its head, strong thighs clamping to the useless, ruined wing joint. The Qunari stretched his body and drew the axe back for his finishing blow. He brought the weapon around hard, chopping into the kill-zone at the base of the dragon’s skull, severing the spinal cord. The creature instantly went silent, collapsing.

Bull’s footing faltered some and he jumped to the ground. He turned to the still, lifeless dragon.

Inquisition soldiers cheered and raised their weapons to the sky. Krem and Rocky did the same.
Skinner stared at the beast but made no sound.

The remaining soldiers in Corypheus’s army started to push back for Cutler’s Pass, in retreat. With the dragon dead, the Elder One was vulnerable. They knew it was wise to get out while they could. Regardless of who won—be it the dark lord or the Inquisitor—their fight was over.

Sword raised as well, Cullen rallied the Inquisition forces, which now clearly outnumbered those of the Elder One. He pointed his sword at their fleeing backs, an order to continue driving them away. At the commander’s feet laid the corpse of Vinjaron Shallos. The Venatori collaborator had proven to be not much of an opponent.

(*)

Behind the cover of large rocks, far from any fighting, Magnus tended to Sophitia’s wounds.

Ayla stood beside Dorian, listening and looking in the direction of all the ruckus. “What’s happening?” Her heart raced.

“Iron Bull slayed the dragon,” the Altus said. “He was magnificent. I wish you could’ve seen it.”

The Oona’s features bloomed a huge, sad smile. She hugged Dorian. The mage’s eyes now fixed on the rising ancient elven ruins, the dilapidated castle. A lightshow passed back and forth up there—flashes of electric-blue and jolting-red. He dearly hoped Hannibal was okay, that he’d be able to kill Corypheus now that his dragon was dead.

(*)

Solas quickly climbed the stone steps. When he reached the top, he cautiously peeked around the low, broken wall to examine the scene. Both Ares and Corypheus were engaged in a battle of powers and wills, each planted solidly, hands up, shooting constant fat energy streams that collided somewhere between them, creating an expanding white light orb. The elf saw Hannibal across the way sitting limply against a half-toppled column, holding his side and watching everything.

“Give it up. You can’t beat me,” Ares taunted.

Corypheus snarled, leaning into his red energy beam, channeled through the Orb of Destruction in his grip. “I can and I will!” The Elder One proceeded to give it everything he had. He would kill the one named Ares, take the Anchor, and claim the world as his own. That was his destiny. Something inside him twisted, and he felt empty for a moment, chilled to his core. The dragon! He was no longer linked with it. They’d killed it. His eyes went wide.

Corypheus’s energy beam sputtered and broke, allowing Ares’s beam to punch squarely into him, making him fly to his back. Still, he clenched tight to the Orb as he got to one knee. From his observation place, Solas waited excitedly for it to be done so he could go for his Orb.

Ares slowly approached the Elder One, peering down his nose at him. He lifted his left hand and summoned the power of the Anchor. “This was what you wanted—”

Corypheus reached a shaky arm for Ares.

“—and now I’m going to give it to you.”

The God of War placed his hand on the forehead of the fallen Elder One, fingers splayed, and greenish light spreading outward. Corypheus began to tremble as Ares surged and overloaded him with a mixture of his power and that of the Anchor.

The old magister’s eyes rolled up into his head and he roared, “Not like this! I have walked the halls of the Golden City, crossed the ages! Dumat! Ancient Ones! I beseech you! If you exist—if you ever existed—aid me now!”

“No one can help you.” Having bonded closely with Anchor and learned its power, Ares intensified it one last time. Corypheus’s howl of despair and failure shattered through the valley. His whole body became lit by green fire, that consumed his geriatric flesh, and his flickering ashes sucked in towards Ares’s hand, where the Anchor formed the pinpoint of a rift that swallowed every dry scrap of the Elder One.

The Orb of Destruction fell to the stone floor, blackened and shattered in four pieces. The green eye swirling in the sky shrank into itself and out of existence, leaving everything blue and cloud-hazed, normal as ever. And the demonic screams from the other side had ceased.

It was done. By the Heavens, it was done. Hannibal got to his feet. He’d seen it all, amazed at the amount of power exuded by both the war god and the Elder One. He shuffled forward, wincing at the efforts due to his injuries. Solas finally moved from cover. He looked devastated.

Ares closed the distance between himself and them, holding a wily smile. “Really, you guys were just taking too long with that. It was getting rather painful to watch. But hey, your boy Ares is here to help. See? I’m not such a bad guy…except when I am.” He chuckled and his grin darkened. “Anyway, kids, I got what I came for. I’ll be seeing you around.”

The God of War turned and walked off, vanishing mid-stride.

A few seconds later, Joxer appeared before them. He took a moment to orientate, then hurried
forward to Hannibal’s side, slipping the larger man’s arm over his shoulder for support.


“Ares,” Joxer said, smirking. “He took me off the battlefield, made me watch from up on some ledge. That Esgal’ Arad fella was up there too.”

“I see.”

Solas moved slowly forward to the place where Corypheus spoke his last words. He dropped to his knees and clutched at the pieces of the Orb.

With Joxer’s help, Hannibal went up behind him. “Solas…”

“The Orb…”

“I know you wanted the artifact saved. I’m so sorry.”

“It is not your fault.” The elf stared sadly at what was left of his Orb. He sighed and set the pieces back on the floor. They were little more than hunks of old, lifeless metal and stone now, the magnificent power once contained all dissipated, absorbed by Ares. Solas stood, periwinkle eyes sweeping the valley below, the bodies everywhere. He faced Hannibal and Joxer.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” Hannibal said.

“It was not supposed to happen this way, and no matter what comes, I want you to know you shall always have my respect, Inquisitor.”

Hannibal considered the elf’s words carefully, the meaning hidden behind them.

“Inquisitor, are you alive!” came Cassandra’s voice from below. She, Cullen, Leliana, and Ryder emerged from the stairwell.

“Just barely,” said Joxer, helping the man move forward.

“I’m fine.” Hannibal nodded. Cassandra hurried forward to support under his other arm. “How are things looking below?”

“Corypheus’s forces, what little are left, have retreated back into Cutler’s Pass,” spoke Cullen.

“Shall I have soldiers pursue and hunt them down?”

“No,” said Hannibal. “Let them go. Without the Elder One’s influence and leadership, they don’t have much of a purpose now.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re no longer a threat,” entered Ryder.

Hannibal nodded. “I know, but for now, we’re good. Corypheus is gone. Ares destroyed him with the Anchor after you all killed the dragon.”

“That was Iron Bull mostly,” Cassandra said. “Either way, it’s over. But…we lost Sera…and Grim.”

“Oh no.” Hannibal’s shoulders sank. Aches racked his body, though the one in his heart was now especially relentless and heavy. His gaze yanked to the Seeker’s. “And Dorian? Is he okay?”

“Yes. He’s downstairs waiting, said he couldn’t bring himself to come up and see if you were still in one piece.”

The Inquisitor dropped a humorless laugh, shaking his head.

The group headed back down through the old fortress, though Solas remained above for a while and contemplated hard on his next move. It wasn’t one he wanted to take, but his choices were limited.

When Hannibal and the others emerged from the stairwell, they found that the rest of the Inquisition’s forces—a mixture of Templars, Red Army, chevaliers, and rogue warriors—awaited in hushed whispers, watching and anticipating.

Dorian hurried forward, wrapping his arms tight around his husband. “Amatus!”

Hannibal smiled, winced, and groaned. “Easy, beautiful. I’m sure I have at least one broken rib.”

“By the Maker…” Dorian let up some, taking over for Joxer as a crutch.

Gabrielle and Xena exchanged a look. The bard stepped forward. “Joxer? How did you get up there?”

“Yeah. I thought those ropes would hold.” Xena eyed him.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” he said softly.

Cassandra and Dorian slowly walked Hannibal forward. The horned man gathered a big breath, determined to be heard, though his abdomen throbbed like crazy with every movement.
“Corypheus is dead and victory is ours!”

It started as applause, then escalated into cheers. Some even tossed their helmets into the air. This was a great win for them, for the world. The Inner Circle, though tight before, had grown even closer, through loss and hardship. Ayla closed her eyes and hugged more to Iron Bull, and the man’s arm held her gently to him. Vivienne’s eyes slid down to Varric. She placed a hand on his shoulder and offered a light smile when their gazes met.

“Careful, Iron Lady,” the dwarf said. “You go getting soft on me, and I’ll have to find you a new nickname.”

The beautiful, brown-skinned mage chuffed and smirked.

The Chargers, the ones who remained, had gathered in around Skinner. As tough and hard as the elf was, Grim’s death would probably be hardest on her. Joswen and his Arrows stood close together as well, glad they hadn’t lost anyone, though Sophi had gotten some deep lacerations on her legs. Cole had tended to Morrigan while she was unconscious. The sorceress was awake now, a little battered, but okay.

This day would be spoken of for centuries. The day Corypheus fell and the brave ones who faced him. However, the stories would say that Ares, the One True God, had delivered the killing blow, delivering Thedas and all its people from evil.

Now, it was time to gathered up the dead, have bodies shipped back to families and loved ones. Funeral pyres would be prepared for Sera and Grim.
The Worst Has Passed...Or Has It?

One day after the battle at the Valley of Sacred Ashes, Hannibal and the rest of the Inner Circle returned to Skyhold. Passing through the security checkpoints and grandiose gates, they were greeted with relieved smiles, clapping, whistles, and cheers. Runners had been sent to the fortress and down from the mountains moments after victory to deliver the news, and soon all of Skyhold’s occupants would return.

Josephine and Idrial stood by in the entry yard as the horses filed in, each woman anxious to see her mate. Cole dismounted and barely got his arms open before Idrial dove into them and tightly embraced him. Josephine just about did the same to Elemir. She kissed him deeply, wiping her eyes.

“I knew you would pull through, I knew it,” breathed the ambassador.

Elemir’s moor-green eyes harbored a bounty of tenderness. He caressed her cheek. “You were on my mind the whole time. All I could think about was never seeing you again, and I knew I would do anything to prevent that, anything to win the battle.”

Josephine closed her eyes and relished his warm embrace. When she opened them again, sadness swooped in. She watched as the others got through the main gate and had their mounts tended to. A wagon came to stop, and Josephine saw the two covered bodies it contained.

“I’m so sorry we lost them, Sera and Grim.”

“Yeah, me too,” Elemir said softly.

Hannibal, Cullen, and Leliana approached.

Without even thinking about, Josephine drew in and linked her arms as far as she could around the three of them. “Glad you all came through safely.” She skimmed to see that pretty much everyone else was there, dented and banged up some of them, but alive.

“Two broken ribs,” Dorian piped and moved in beside Hannibal. “Try not to squeeze him too hard.”

“I’ll heal fast. Qunari always do,” Hannibal said.

“Shall we meet in the war room in half an hour?” Josephine inquired.

“No,” Hannibal shook his head. “We’re taking the next three days off, all of us. We need rest.” He cleared his throat. “Did you take care of what I asked?”


He took a breath, swallowed the lump in his throat, and nodded. “The ceremony will take place this evening then.”

(*)

Right about the time when the sun sank just low enough behind the mountains to still emblazon their peaks with crimson light, everyone in Skyhold gathered to attend the funerals of Sera and Grim. Both their bodies lay solemnly on their pyres, cold and so pale that their flesh held a vague purple tint. Stitches tended to the ruined side of Sera’s face, applying a bandage dress to conceal the grizzly wound for the viewing. She appeared serene, her bow lain over her torso, hands folded over it. Grim gripped his sword.

Fire pits lined the yard, spreading their glow over saddened faces, making flames flicker in many pairs of disheartened eyes. Iron Bull, Ayla, and the Chargers stood around Grim’s pyre, getting one last look at their fallen brother. As they retracted back into the crowd, Bull stopped and turned to Sera’s pyre. Linked arm-in-arm with Ayla, he walked over to the deceased and touched her pallid, icy hand.

“I hope we meet again, Shorty. Rest well.”

The Qunari and his wife took their places again.

Hannibal stepped forward, one hand resting on his battered and bruised ribs. Dorian observed him, ready to go forth and support him if needed. Hannibal stopped between the two pyres, taking a long moment to let eyes lay over Sera, then Grim. He addressed the gathered attendees in somewhat choked words.

“I’ve never been one for ceremonies, so I’m just going to say what’s in my heart.” Hannibal sighed greatly. “When I first met Sera, I found her very straightforward, a little annoying, and I thought she talked in circles,” he started, smiling a bit to remember that evening she lured him and his party to a courtyard in Val Royeaux under the guise of Red Jenny. “But, the more I listened to her, the more I realized that Sera spoke more sense and truth than anyone else I’ve ever met. She could be brash about things, as was her way, but no one could argue that she had a great heart.

And Grim—I met him during a fight at the Storm Coast, along with the rest of the Chargers. He wasn’t a man of many words. Actually, I don’t think he said anything at all, at least not verbally.
He spoke with his actions, constantly putting those he cared about”—Hannibal’s gaze went to the Chargers, then Sophitia, the woman’s eyes shimmering with tears—“before himself. Both he and Sera will be greatly missed, and their ultimate sacrifice will never be forgotten.”

Finished, the Inquisitor nodded to Skinner and Cole. The elf gathered herself, moving forward. At Cole’s side, Idrial squeezed his hand, then he too strode from the crowd. Both he and Skinner removed torches from a firepit. He went to Sera’s pyre and she went to Grim’s. On Hannibal’s gesture, the final, devastated swipe of his hand, they each set fire to the remains of their friends.

The fire blazed quickly, feeding on dry kindling and oil.

Cole stepped back and watched as the flames engulfed Sera’s body. She’d given her life to save him, and he’d never forget it. Now, with her gone, the man could look back on all those moments she’d been snappy with him, insulted him, and he saw them for what they were—her gradual way of accepting him into her bubble. Cole knew Sera truly didn’t like him in the beginning, but as the Inner Circle tightened, she started not to mind him as much. She wouldn’t have thrown herself in front of that energy blast if she didn’t think Cole was worth saving.

Idrial’s warm hand slipped into his, and he looked down at her, feeling lucky to have been given the opportunity to explore and experience humanity, to have been given a new lease on existence due to Sera’s sacrifice. And he wouldn’t waste this life. He was going to do everything he could to make it better, for himself and Idrial. He pulled her close to him.

Maryden started a hauntingly melodic song, vocals only, to close the ceremony, and it was the raw emotion in her voice, which broke a couple of times, that finally forced Skinner to let go. The petite woman cried openly as the bodies incinerated, and ignited bits of ash caught in the chilly mountain updraft, fluttering for the sky.

The Chargers—minus their Chief, who watched with his wife from a short distance off—surrounded Skinner and hugged her.

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Later that night in Bull’s and Ayla’s room, the hulking Qunari stood shirtless and brooding by the window, looking down into the courtyard at the pyre embers. Freshly bathed, her tresses combed to fluffy kinkiness, Ayla rested in bed looking towards the fireplace, catching the hazy, dimmed light of the flames. The night seemed extra frigid. With the last month of winter slipping by, this was usually how the weather went, though it was much less forgiving at such a high altitude.

The Oona wiggled her toes and climbed under the covers.

Iron Bull’s eye found her from across the room. “Are you cold, angel?”

“A little, yes.”

He went to the hearth, chucked two logs into it, turned down the lamp, then settled in bed with her. Ayla eased against him, snuggling. It didn’t take long for the chill to dissipate. She curled a leg over his, toes skimming his shin.

“Your feet are like ice.”

She smiled just a little. “I can’t help that I get cold easily.”

“Yeah, most women do. At the same time, you all seem to have the same tolerance for very high levels of heat. When I run a bath, it’s perfect; when you run one, I can’t sit in it because it’s like lowering my ass and balls into a vat of hot oil.”

Ayla couldn’t help the laughter that blurted forth. She always did enjoy his square, meat-and-potatoes kind of humor. She had from day one. The woman knew him well enough to recognize that he was attempting to cover his grief with stints of comedy. Also, she could feel it ebbing from him, the sadness. She went serious again.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked in a tiny voice, hand stroking his toned stomach.

“There isn’t much to talk about, Naaremma,” he answered, mindful to keep the bite from his words. Bull never wanted to seem disrespectful to her, not ever. She was only trying to help. “I lost two people that were dear to me. That’s about the end of it I suppose.”

“We all lost them, Bull, though…you knew Sera and Grim longer than I did. I still cared about them very much, and it’s hard accepting that I’ll never see them again. This all still feels unreal to me.” Ayla shivered, brow creasing as she thought over things. “Tomorrow, can you take to me to see Cullen?”

“Why?” A dark brow lifted.

“I wish to talk with him.”

Iron Bull couldn’t pinpoint the reason behind his sudden jealousy spike. Maybe it was because of the history the three of them shared, the fact that Ayla had been romantically, though not sexually, involved with the commander. No, that was exactly the reason. It took him a long moment to reply. “Alright.”

“You are okay with me going to see him, aren’t you?”
“Yes. I know you’re still friends.”

Ayla shifted and rolled to her back, hands resting on the bump of her abdomen. She was nearly four months in now. “Do you think she has ears yet?”

Bull’s thumb grazed gently over her brow, pushing through her hair. “It’s possible that he does. I read through a medical book on fetal stages for human babies, which I assume is about the same for all other races, and it said that babies can start to hear around eighteen weeks. That’s little more than four months, so yeah, he can probably pick up your singing now.”

“Still convinced the baby’s a boy?”

Bull nodded. “I know it.”

“If you say so.” Ayla turned over and nuzzled his side. She was at that stage in the pregnancy where getting comfortable in bed was starting to become a chore. “I’m going to laugh at you when the baby pops out with a vagina.”

“Well, one of us is right. Why don’t we bet on it? If it’s a boy, I get to pick his name. If it’s a girl, you can pick hers.”

“Any name I want?”

“Yes.”

“Hm,” Ayla said, contemplating. “I guess I’ll start looking through names then, since I’m going to win.”

The response drew the tick of a smile and a light chuff from Iron Bull. “You have a fifty-fifty chance. The odds look both good and bad.”

“I’m feeling lucky about it.”

He placed his hand between them, rubbing her belly. “You better be a guy, Little Bean, or you’ll end up with a name like ‘Rainbow’, ‘Flower’, ‘Frilly’, or something like that.”

“Oh, hush.” Ayla poked him in the side. She settled in again.

Bull did the same. He remained awake for about an hour more after she fell asleep, thinking of Grim and Sera.

(*)

While Iron Bull and Ayla turned in rather early for the night, some others decided to commune at the Herald’s Rest. Hannibal insisted the establishment remain operable since it served as a central meeting place, and right now, in the wake of victory against Corypheus and the loss of many good warriors, people needed a little alcoholic numbing.

Inner Circlers were there reflecting on what happened, occupying the entire area around the hearth. Most of the Chargers and the Arrows, Xena, Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus. Sophitia sat on a bench between Skinner and Rocky, hands wrapped around a mug filled halfway with Charger’s brew. She was on her third serving.

Maryden played and sang a lighter, softer, more solemn tune in the background.

Sophitia swigged another mouthful of the harsh drink and stared at the candle in the center of the table. All was silent until she spoke. “I was falling in love with him.”

Magnus’s eyes flipped to her, as did all others.

“I was in love with him. He was—he was kind, and funny, and smart. He respected my space, my thoughts and opinions, and I enjoyed our talks very much.”

The warrior woman trembled a laugh that was blanketed by sadness.

“Oh rather, he wrote and I spoke. Figures that I finally found a man worthy of my time…and I didn’t give him my time, won’t ever get to now. Figures…” Tears slid down Sophi’s cheeks and she drank some more.

Skinner looked slowly over at the woman. She reached out and cupped slim fingers to Sophi’s hand, speaking softly. “Grim loved you too. He told us several times that you made him feel happy, that you are such a strong-minded woman. He didn’t know how he should approach you. You should know that Grim has never come to us about any woman, not that he hadn’t partaken in the company of others. He was just never serious about any of them, not until you. In our eyes, you are Grim’s lady, and that makes you one of us.”

Sophitia stared at Skinner while she spoke, the tears ever streaming. She nodded when the elf finished. “Thank you for telling me that.”

“You’re welcome.”

This was the most dismal the Herald’s Rest had ever been, the usually merry environment encroached by a blanket of sadness. But they would move forward, because even though Corypheus had been eradicated, there was still a certain god of war who meant to assert himself as
the supreme ruler of Thedas, and he was well on his way.

(*)

Ayla knew that the best time to catch up with Cullen was around noon. His mornings were the busiest times for him, as she’d picked up quickly during the course of their relationship. She and Iron Bull reached the door to the commander’s quarters up on the western wall. The Qunari noticed how she took a moment to smooth her dress and adjust her hair before knocking.

It took a few moments before the door opened. Cullen finished chewing and swallowed. His gaze moved slowly between the two of them, and he cleared his throat. “Um, good afternoon. What can I do for you?”

Bull said nothing, letting Ayla do the talking.

The woman stepped forward a bit, clarity of sight allowing her to admire the very familiar details of Cullen’s features. “I wanted to see you, to talk to you. I could come back another time if you wish.”

“No, no, please. Come in. I was just having a bite to eat.” The commander stepped aside.

Ayla looked up at Bull. “I’ll catch up to you later, my love.”

The Qunari’s eye jerked to Cullen, then back to his wife. He nodded. “Alright then.”

Ayla released his hand and took Cullen’s arm. Being sent to the shadows, she didn’t see the confused look he gave Iron Bull, nor the acutely jealous stare Bull gave before turning and striding off.

Cullen shut the door. He had a small fire blazing in the hearth to ward off the chill, though it was beginning to warm up a bit. His quarters were militantly tidy, the bed perfectly made, weapon freshly cleaned and sharpened, boots polished. A partially eaten sandwich sat on his desk.

“So…” he started.

Ayla stepped closer and hugged around his waist, face buried in his chest. Her body shook with sobs.

Cullen didn’t know what to do. He sighed and hugged her back, eyes closing, lips grazing her soft, fragrant hair.

“I’m so happy you made it out of that battle alive,” she said shakily, pulling back to set broken, wet eyes up at him. “It all happened so fast, people dying, so much death, and you were at the front lines of it. I was so worried for you. I needed to see you, to hold you. I... I still love you, and I know I always will. Not the same as before, but you mean a lot to me.”

The commander sighed. “I will always love you, Ayla, regardless of what happened. We’ll always be friends. I worried for you too out there, but I knew you’d be alright, that Iron Bull would make sure of it. He has his faults and weaknesses, but he has many strengths. He’s changed a lot since you enriched his life, and I will forever envy him for being the one you chose. However, things happen as they do for reasons I cannot fathom, and I’ve never been so happy as I am now.”

“With Cassandra?”

“Yes.”

Ayla closed her eyes and hugged him some more. “That’s so good to hear, Cullen.” She pulled back enough to grip his face, tenderly running fingertips over it to ‘see’ him. She smiled crookedly, not wanting to feel sorrowful, yet unable to help the heaviness in her heart at their recent losses. “When you finish your lunch, will you have time to play a little chess with me? I miss our time together.”

Cullen smiled and nodded. “Of course.”

(*)

Like he’d done a few times before, Solas slipped from Skyhold and went to the secluded clearing to meet with Ares, having felt the god’s summoning potently throughout his person. It wasn’t painful by any means, but was more like an infatuation or a non-volatile addiction. Whenever Ares wanted to speak with the elf, Solas got the strangest urge to be in his presence, and his mind flooded with thoughts of Ares, images of his finely-bearded face, mental whispers of his name.

Allowing the war god to bond with him seemed sound enough in the beginning, but Solas now regretted doing it and would demand he remove the link once they no longer had to sneak around. Sharp periwinkle-hued eyes regarded Ares darkly as he appeared from thin air.

“It’s time.”

“Now? The Inquisition has just defeated Corypheus—”

“Thanks to me.”

“—and we have suffered the loss of two close friends.”
“Suffered? You?” Ares chuckled and stepped in closer. Shadows from trees around the perimeter fell over him. “You don’t have any friends here, Fen’Harel. You don’t even like them.”

“I do see most of them as allies.”

“You were using them to get your orb back.” The God of War noted the tiny tick of the elf’s features. “Yeah, I saw that burned out mess left on the floor after I fried Corypheus. It looked very familiar to Elgar’nan’s orb, so I asked him about it. He confirmed what I began to suspect. Anyway, it’s time to make your move.”

The voice of sound reason camped out in the back of Solas’s mind again pleaded for him to deeply consider the consequences of the actions he was about take, while the more tempting voice of convenient logic spoke above all, telling him that this was what he needed to do if he ever wanted to reach his goals. Even it meant throwing away the friendships and alliances he’d made while part of the Inquisition.

The elf nodded. “It shall be done.”

A broad smile spread over Ares’s face. “Good. I’ll be standing by.”

(*)

That evening, Iron Bull and Ayla entered the main hall, not as full or lively as it could be at that time, mostly because the Orlesian noble squatters (as Bull called them) hadn’t returned to the fortress yet. The couple made plates from the spread of offered food and found seats. They automatically removed one shoe and positioned their feet with hers atop his.

Bull watched her curiously across the table. “You were with Cullen for a while today. What did you two do?”

“Talked about things mostly.”

“Such as…?”

Ayla looked up from her plate to meet her husband’s eye. He appeared calm and indifferent, but she knew he was uneasy about her spending time with the commander. She smiled tenderly at him. “About the battle, the loss, our friendship.”

“I see.” The man forked a piece of steak into his mouth, chewing slowly, his eye on her. “Is that all you did, talk?”

“Well, we played chess for a bit.” Ayla tilted her head at him, brow rising. “Bull, you don’t have to worry about Cullen and I. Neither of us would stray from the one we love. I’m with you and he’s with Cassandra.” Her small foot glided back and forth over his, and she adopted a contained smile. “I suppose I feel a little of the same whenever I see you talking with Bertrand.”

Iron Bull picked up the fire that settled in her eyes and he knew they would have sex when they got back to their room. The thought of carnal indulgence had been nonexistent since they won the battle and were still processing the loss of both Sera and Grim. But they’d indulge tonight.

He offered a heated smile. “You have nothing to worry about. She knows she and I are done. She knew that even before I married you.”

(*)

Before executing his plan, Solas made rounds through the fortress, slipping through the shadows mostly unnoticed. He rarely visited the Herald’s Rest, and when he passed by the windows that night, he saw Gabrielle sitting in a booth with Dorian, Varric, and Cassandra. Xena was nowhere to be seen. Hopefully, she was in her room, since it would be easier to do what he must.

Not even five minutes later, having climbed the winding steps of the north housing tower, Solas knocked on Xena’s door. It swung open almost immediately. The Warrior Princess towered several inches above him. Her attire was more relaxed at that hour, her armor lying across a chair. She wore the soft leather corset and skirt, a pair of short pants beneath. Long, tanned legs reached down from the skirt, bare of socks and boots. Alecto’s charm hung around her neck.

Xena smiled and stepped back to allow him inside. “Good evening, Solas. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

The mage entered her quarters, skimming the innards. He saw that her sword and chakram sat over the table, and didn’t think she’d go for the weapons, but it never hurt to be cautious. Especially with a person like Xena.

She closed the door.

Solas clasped his hands behind his back. “I wanted to talk to you, about the Fade, well, about your part of it. Aside from Cole, there’s no one else in the fortress with whom to talk about such things, and he has never been to your side.”

Xena chuckled. “Well, I’m no expert, but I have entered the realm a few times. What did you want to know?”
During that exchange of words, the elf casually made his way across the room, putting enough distance between him and Xena. When their eyes met, she sensed something in his that threw her off, and before she could act on it, Solas yanked an arm forward, sending translucent energy. It cocooned her, making her immobile. She couldn’t move or speak, sinking to her knees, wide blue eyes on him.

“I’m sorry, Xena, so sorry,” Solas’s shoulders sank momentarily in a heavy, unrestricted sigh. He wished such measures weren’t necessary, because he really liked Xena. She was true to herself.

“Ares, it’s done.”

Xena’s eyes twitched and skirted left when the God of War appeared in her room. If a stare could wield the physical power of a sword, he’d be cut down right then, she was glaring so hard. Ares felt his omnipotence swiped away upon zoning into the area, the work of Alecto’s charm. He slowly moved closer, grinning.

“Aw. You know I hate seeing you on your knees. Usually,” Ares drawled. He reached carefully for the gem around Xena’s neck, clamping it in his palm. Pale, golden light engulfed his hand for a moment while he neutralized the charm’s effects. Long fingers unfurled and he dropped the now useless bauble between her breasts. Seconds after that, Ares’s power returned. His eyes went to Solas. “You never disappoint, Fen’Harel. Thank you.”

Solas sighed, looking anything but pleased, his face sad but hardened. “Get me out of here.”

Ares smiled slowly, closed the distance between them, touched the elf’s shoulder, and they disappeared.

Without Solas there to hold the magic bond around Xena, the woman regained mobility a few seconds after they left. She immediately pulled her boots on, grabbed her sword, and chakram, then hurried from her room.

She raced across the yard for the main structure, intending to head straight for Hannibal’s quarters. Iron Bull saw Xena enter, all but running down the center of the huge room, towards his and Ayla’s table.

He frowned as she passed. “What’s going on?”

Xena turned to them, lips mashed into a thin, irritated line. “It’s Solas. He’s working with Ares.”
Most everyone was already gathered in the Herald’s Rest, and whoever wasn’t present was summoned to the homely pub. Xena and Hannibal stood in the middle. She’d told Hannibal what happened and now informed the others of Solas’s treachery. The Warrior Princess yanked the gem from around her neck, tossing it to a tabletop.

“So, this is useless now.”

Silence encroached the room. The tang of hearth smoke and old ale, a strangely comforting combination, lingered constantly on the air. Hannibal stood at an angle that cast half of his tall, broad form in shadow, and firelight glazed over his silver-burnished horns.

“I can’t believe Solas would do this,” he said.

“Can’t you?” Bull cut. “He’s been acting funny since he met Ares in the Fade. I told you that day at Millie’s that you couldn’t trust his ass, that he was lying to you, hiding something.”

Hannibal’s narrowed aqua gaze slid to him. “Yeah, and I took your warning seriously, Bull. I just never figured it would be this, him aligning with Ares.”

“There’s another thing,” Xena entered. “Before they vanished, Ares referred to Solas by a different name. He called him…” she took a second to make sure she got it right, “…Fen’Harel.”

Vivienne and Morrigan instantly perked.

The Witch of the Wilds stepped closer, golden eyes on Xena. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes.” She watched Morrigan closely. By the reactions of several in the room, she figured this Fen’Harel to be of great importance. “Who is he?”

“One of the Evanuris, the pantheon of ancient Elvhen gods,” Morrigan explained. “There were nine of them—Falon’Din, Andruil, Dirthamen, June, Sylaise, Ghilan’nain, Mythal, Fen’Harel, and their king, Elgar’nan. Some legends say that Fen’Harel killed Mythal, while others say that the two of them were united against Elgar’nan, and he set to destroy them both, having succeeded in killing Mythal. Fen’Harel then rebelled by using a great power to lock them in the Fade, denying the elvhen people their gods, ushering in their fall. It’s muddy to say, either way. The scriptures and historical documents have been tampered with and altered various times.”

“What do you think?” Hannibal asked, turning fully to her.

Morrigan quirked a brow. “I think it’s not impossible that Solas could, in fact, be Fen’Harel. However, the Evanuris have been gone for over a thousand years, to include him. It may not be a coincidence that he showed up shortly after the first portal opened in the sky.”

“Damn right, it’s no coincidence,” said Iron Bull. “You said he wanted to get that artifact from Corypheus, boss, but it got destroyed when Ares killed the old fucker. And not even three days later, Solas joins up with Ares? You know why that is, right?”

“He wanted the artifact,” Ayla entered, voice mingled with revelation. “He wanted to use the resources of the Inquisition to help him obtain it.”

“Bingo.” Bull nodded. “Something tells me that thing, that ball Corypheus had, was some kind of relic that might’ve been able to restore Solas’s power, if he is some old elvhen god.”

Dorian shook his head. “Wow. And with the artifact destroyed and Ares in control of the Anchor, which had been the only strand of true power at our disposal, aside from Alecto’s charm, he decided to join up with the one person who might be able to give him back his godhood.”

“Ares,” seethed Xena.

Silence. Thick and potent.

“So,” Varric spoke, “there’s nine gods all together, and we might have had one amongst us for nearly the past year. Do you think the other eight are here too, I mean, out in the world somewhere trying to get their powers back?”

“That’s a viable question,” Vivienne said. “One that needs to be thoroughly explored.”

Sitting between Gabrielle and Autolycus, Joxer appeared to be thinking hard over something. His forehead wrinkled a bit and he gnawed his lip. “Hey, do you think that Esgal’Arad guy might be one of the other gods?” He looked to Morrigan. “You did say that one them was named… Erla… Evan… Erba…”

“Elgar’nan,” finished Hannibal, mouth vaguely parted. He didn’t like what the implications were. “That makes a lot of sense, Joxer.”

The goofy-looking man wasn’t as dense as people thought, he just wasn’t much of a warrior. He smiled a bit to be acknowledged in a positive light.

“A whole lot of sense,” Bull entered. “Boss, you remember how he and Solas stared each other
down that day in the war room?"

"Yeah, I do. Solas didn’t want to go into detail about how they knew each other, said they had a
disagreement a long while back, or something to that extent."

"A thousand years back, if they’re who we think they are," said Morrigan. “If Solas is Fen’Harel,
then Esgal’Arad is quite possibly Elgar’nan. They were constantly at odds in all versions of the
ancient scriptures and stories. This does not bode well, Inquisitor."

“Understatement,” quipped Varric under his breath.

The lovely sorceress continued. “Let’s just say that Fen’Harel managed to secure the other
Evanuris away in the Fade, as was written in one version of events. If Elgar’nan is out and about,
that means the other seven may be free as well."

“As it stands currently, two of them are allied to Ares,” said Cullen, arms crossing his chest.
“What I don’t understand is why? Could they possibly believe he intends to restore them? Surely,
they know that the war god’s agenda is to make himself the One True God of Thedas, with
certainly no plans to share that rule with any other gods.”

“Maybe he’s promised them that he would if they aided him,” Xena entered. “Ares is known to
trick others and lie to get his way.”

“If the other Evanuris have been released from the Fade, Ares had to do it with the Anchor
somehow.” Hannibal thoughtfully ran a hand over his head. “It can’t be coincidental that not long
after he took it from me, he shows up here with an elf that could be Elgar’nan or any of the other
former gods. What the hell is he planning?”

“There isn’t much we can do now but wait and fortify,” said Cullen.

Hannibal nodded, acknowledging him. He focused on Morrigan. “I need you to check Solas’s
quarters and the atrium, see if there are any clues.”

“Alright.”

“I will assist her,” Vivienne offered, though it was more of a statement.

“And I will place an alert on the wall, enforce security,” Cullen said.

Hannibal issued a quick nod. “I was just about to suggest that. There’s no telling what else is
coming our way.”

(*)

Fen’Harel stood in the center of the large, richly decorated room Ares had prepared for him at
Villa Maurel. The hearth, tall as he, glowed with flames. The war god had transferred some things
from Skyhold’s atrium and all the elf’s personal belongings from his old room.

It was done now, and there was no way to turn back. Fen’Harel didn’t regret his actions, only that
he had to deceive and manipulate people he’d come to think of as friends, the Inquisitor especially.
That man had gone through a lot, tossed into the middle of something he had not the faintest idea
about, and he’d been ready to sacrifice himself to defeat Corypheus.

“Is everything to your liking?”

Fen’Harel stiffened. He’d been lingering so heavily in his thoughts that he hadn’t sensed the God
of War’s presence. He turned slowly. “These are my private quarters, and I would appreciate if
you showed respect like a decent person and knocked on the door.”

“That’s fair enough.”

The elf’s vision strayed to the corner of the room where all his things from Skyhold sat. There
wasn’t much, only his stave, some items of clothing, and several boxes of scrolls and stuff. Before
going to Xena’s room, Fen’Harel packed those things up, and after Ares vanished him from the
fortress, the god immediately went back to retrieve the small, specified amount. A quick in and
out, able to use stealth without worrying about detection really or having his power yanked away.

“Fen’Harel,” Ares started, and the mage didn’t bother to correct him. Everything was out in the
open now, and there was no further need to hide his identity. Solas was gone and Fen’Harel—in
name only, certainly not in power—had returned. “You can go wherever you want in the villa.
Hell, you don’t even have to stay here if you don’t want. You’re not a prisoner.”

“I know this.”

“Very well.”

Fen’Harel spied the darkness of night through the floor-to-ceiling windows. He fully faced Ares.
“I want you to remove the link between us. It’s no longer necessary.”

The God of War’s chuckles eased forth warmly. “Aw, and here I thought we were forming a true
bond. Getting tired of hearing my voice in your mind?”

“Yes,” he said, no hesitation.
Ares lifted a hand, palm out and faced at the elf. In a smattering of seconds, he dissolved the mental link binding them. 

“You should know that my only reason for leaving the Inquisition and joining you is because I know you can restore me. That’s surely the only reason Elgar’nan remains here; he also knows you can give him back his godhood.”

“Oh, Bold-Bald-and-Beautiful,” Ares droned playfully, “I know that’s why you helped me, and you’re right. I’m probably your best bet for getting your full powers back.”

“The question is: do you even intend to restore either of us?”

Ares’s gaze leveled out on him. Hearth flames reflected against the brown glass of his eyes. “I said I intended to restore the Elvhen people to glory, to make it so they never suffered the demoralizing past pushed upon them by Tevinter. I never really said I’d turn you back into a god.”

Calmly, Fen’Harel moved through the room, he lifted one of the boxes transported from Skyhold and placed it on the table by the windows. He very casually rummaged in it, removing a smaller wooden box with a glass front. The elf unlatched the box and hesitantly removed a statue that depicted two intertwined bodies winding up to one shared head. Holding the Statue of Ahime Anta carefully by its base, Fen’Harel turned to Ares and slowly approached him.

“So…I assume you lied then,” said the elf. He knew how to play Ares’s game, and allowed his long-lashed eyes to narrow suggestively, trim lips capturing a handsome smile.

Ares’s gaze studied him keenly. Sometimes Longshanks was the only one who picked up on the very fine shifts in his demeanor. However, he paid little attention to the carved stone figure in the elf’s grip, lost as he was in the mortal man’s eyes. “I might’ve been a little misleading, yeah.”

Fen’Harel stopped before him. Inwardly, he steadied himself to maintain composure. He lifted his free hand to Ares’s bare, tanned arm, tracing his touch down it. “You should really try sticking to your word sometimes. People might like you better.”

The God of War rumbled a groan, eyes following Fen’Harel’s roaming hand. “Are you coming on to me?”

“Hardly. I’m only attempting to hold a conversation.”

“Oh, really? I think it’s more than that,” the god drawled. He stepped closer and put his and Fen’Harel’s body all but an inch from touching.

Fen’Harel’s eyes narrowed. He shook his head. “You’re not my type. I prefer smaller, less hairy, and lacking the male genitalia.”

“You’re a little tease.”

The war god froze for a second, his sight losing focus. He blinked and shook his head.

“Are you alright?” the mage studied him calmly, wondering if physical contact between two parties and the statue was all it took. That seemed to be the case with Iron Bull and Ayla based on their recollections.

“Yeah…” Ares replied slowly. “Got a strange feeling for a sec there.”

“Maybe you should go lie down.”

“Gods don’t sleep, Earth gods anyway.”

“You don’t say.”

The two of them stared into each other’s eyes, then Fen’Harel spun away, going back to the table to replace the statue. Ares’s gaze studied the smaller man.

“Are you hungry?”

Fen’Harel faced him. “A light meal sounds agreeable.”

“Kitchen’s on the other side of the courtyard. Dinner’s been served already, but there’s plenty stored in there to pick from.”

The mage forced a smile. “How considerate.”

Ares grinned hotly at him. “I felt that spark between us, and I’m gonna get in those little elvhen pants of your soon enough.” He winked and vanished.

Fen’Harel smirked, then hoisted a minute smile. If this worked, Ares would definitely find himself in the elf’s pants alright, though not in the way he might desire.

(*)

Unrest and unease claimed Skyhold once again, and all because an ancient elvhen god in hiding decided to ally with Ares. Despite that, Iron Bull found that his chances of slipping the bull-ride to his wife hadn’t vanished. Ayla jumped on him when they finally retired to their room.
Dorian wasn’t so lucky, not that he was expecting much sexual performance from his mate, who was busy recovering from two broken ribs. While the Altus eventually went to bed, Hannibal moved between Leliana’s station in the Watch Tower, Cullen patrolling up on the walls, and Morrigan and Vivienne down in what used to be Solas’s atrium.

The Inquisitor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose as he entered the room.

Vivienne turned from a shelf she’d been searching. “You don’t look good, dear. Perhaps, you should retire and get refreshed.”

The Qunari grunted. “No, I’m fine. As the saying goes, I’ll have plenty of time to sleep once I’m dead.”

Her full lips curled the depiction of a humored smile. “Suit yourself. But you do realize that it’s possible for sleep deprivation to lead to death. Not a commonality, but a possibility.”

“Noted.” Hannibal reciprocated the smile, wiping a hand tiredly over his face. “Where is Morrigan.”

“I’m here.” A mesh of pale skin and dark attire, the sorceress reentered the main atrium from the side room where Solas stored extra things.

“Did you find anything of interest, any clues?”

“No clues, really.” Morrigan answered. “All of his personal belongings were gone from his room, and it appears that he took some scrolls from this collection.”

“That’s not all he took,” entered Vivienne. “The Statue of Ahime Anta is missing as well. It used to sit in a box on that shelf.” She pointed. “We’ve searched every inch of the space and can’t find it.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine why he’d want to take that blasted thing with him,” said Hannibal, smirking.

Morrigan crossed slender arms over her chest, vibrant eyes narrowing. “I have some ideas, and they aren’t very reassuring.”

“Well...” she started, the cloth of her garb rustling gently as she paced slowly, “…Solas—or rather, I’ll just call him Fen’Harel—had the goal of getting that artifact to regain his power, so we believe, and it was destroyed. Logic dictates that he would seek to get his power back through other means. What if he intends to use the statue to switch himself into Ares’s body, the same way it happened between The Iron Bull and Ayla? If it works the way he wants it to, he could find himself wielding the power of an entity that is observably more powerful than any of the ancient elven ‘gods’ were. They were mages with an extreme amount of power; Ares is actually a god.”

“Even if he got the war god’s power, what motive might he have for taking it?” Vivienne posed, frowning at an afterthought. “Do you think he intends to try and rule Thedas in Ares’s place?”

Hannibal shook his head. “No. That’s not Solas’s…Fen’Harel’s…style. There’s something more behind why he wants his power back so badly. There’s just too many variables to consider before we could deduce a reason for his actions.” The man sighed again. “This is giving me a headache. I think I will take your advice and retire for the night, Madame de Ferr.”

“That you should, Inquisitor. I believe I will do the same, as there isn’t much more to gather here.”

Morrigan watched the two of them leave, then went back to searching through the atrium.

(*)

Elvhenan did not fall.

Elvhenan. Did. Not. Fall.

It was this singular alignment of words that accompanied Fen’Harel to slumber every night, causing his particularly active brain to conjure up the same grandiose dream. The great central elven city of Arlathan, a mecca of prosperity and culture. The structures rose stories above the ground, mingled with huge, old trees and lush foliage. This was a time when the world was younger but still very aged, and the elven people had an unmatched synchronicity about them. They were the epitome of life. Even then the dwarves weren’t so far behind in their great civilizations. Qunari were right with them economically, and the humans were just beginning to obtain true culture and refinement.

This great empire did not fall.

Not in Fen’Harel’s dreams.

He stood on the lip of a massive terrace gazing proudly at the treetops, through which vibrant sunlight pushed. This was the world as it should be, the world as it was. An intricately designed structure of stone pillars and superior architecture hovered behind him, the central temple of the Evanuris, each of the nine gods carved in marble across the front.
Fen'Harel closed his eyes. He only opened them again when a hand touched to his arm, gaining his attention. His smile spread warmly for the crimson-haired demi-god at his side, and he embraced her close. Lassalanta held him dearly. All was right.

Until the shadows encroached at the edges of his sight, drawing him from slumber to the waking world.

(*)

Blink.

Blink. Blink.

This was the strangest waking Fen'Harel had ever experienced. Usually, it was gradual, smooth. The elf’s sleeping state seemed almost snatched from him, like a rug yanked from under one’s feet. He’d been in his mind’s recollection of Arlathan with the only woman he could ever love just a few seconds ago, and now he stared at a hearth holding a low fire.

He shifted and water sloshed around him, warm and layered thinly with suds. He looked down, issuing a gasp at his broad, tanned chest brushed with dark hair, and he studied his large hands adorned with a couple of rings, rings he knew to be familiar.

Soft hands slinked over Fen’Harel’s shoulders, and even softer lips planted a kiss on his back. He spun quickly, nearly jumping from the sunken pool. He smirked, grimaced, made a disgusted sound, and cringed away from Ralden.

“What’s wrong, babe?” the ex-Inquisition soldier batted eyes worriedly and inched closer, hands out.

“Don’t touch me, please.” Crisp brown eyes narrowed.

Ralden grinned, continuing to progress. “Mm, a game, is it? You’re going to play hard to get.”

Fen’Harel backed himself against the edge of the bathing pool, and just when the smaller man’s hands would’ve fell on his chest, he turned and scrambled out. Water cascaded down his form, soaking the stone tiles. Ralden folded his arms over the edge of the pool, smiling up sensuously. He licked his lips. The elf clapped hands over his naked (and sizable) privates.

Ares, wearing the body of Fen’Harel, clad in his sleeping attire, flashed into existence in the center of the room. He looked very amused.

“Luuuuucy! You got some ‘xplaining to do!” the god howled in Fen’Harel’s voice, though with a Ricky Ricardo accent. He laughed wildly.

The elf, now stuck in Ares’s body, without the powers he was so counting on gaining by using the statue, sighed grievously. “Damn.”
Elgar’nan’s chuckles resonated slowly from him. He stood around the table in Fen’Harel’s room drawing silvery-blue eyes from the small wooden, glass-front box and statue inside it to Ares and Fen’Harel.

“Oh, but this *is* grandly entertaining,” the tall elf mused.

Fen’Harel did *not* find it all that entertaining, but he supposed that this was what he deserved for attempting to do something with so many unknown variables behind it. A sigh drizzled from him. He’d adorned a pair of pants and a tunic. Earthy brown eyes rolled.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it wasn’t,” Ares said, peering up at him, arms crossed over his chest. “It’s obvious you intended to switch bodies with me and gain my power, and this little statue was supposed to be your means. This is what happened to Iron Bull and Ayla, right? The reason you were in Storm Coast that night I appeared in your tent? You told me, and I quote in your exact words, ‘A couple of weeks ago, she touched an Elven artifact that switched her into his body and him into hers. We’re on our way to a place that contains a fountain which will switch them back.'”

“Yes,” Fen’Harel replied tightly.

“Where did you even get this artifact?” Elgar’nan flipped a large, delicate hand at the little box.

“In the midst of all the Venatori and corrupt mage and templar factions rising all over Thedas, the Inquisition discovered that many ancient Elvhen tombs were being pillaged for whatever treasures, literature, and artifacts they contained. I received word from a connection of a hidden location that might contain valuables, so I relayed this information to the Inquisitor and insisted we secure it before it could be plundered. He and a small group went for the Statue of Ahime Anta, and shortly after it was brought to Skyhold, the incident happened between the Qunari and his wife.”

Fen’Harel found the sound of his voice to be a foreign sensation, crisp like Ares’s voice but with his own stately accent.

“Yeah, yeah. Then you all left Skyhold for the Storm Coast and this fountain, to which you will take me. It has to be near the camp you stayed in,” Ares said, authority ever present in his words.

Fen’Harel’s face gained a noticeable hardness, an air of defiance.

Elgar’nan saw all of it as an opportunity. He quickly interjected. “Tell him nothing. He will get his body back once he gives me my orb.”

This made Ares turn slowly to the tall elf, brow hiked up vaguely, mouth on the verge of a smile.

Fen’Harel peered hard at Elgar’nan. “You say that as if you are still king of the Evanuris and truly have some semblance of power over me. We have never been on the same team. Why would I want to work with you now?”

“Because *we*, Fen’Harel, want the same thing. We want to be restored, and once I have my power, I promise to do what I can to help you get yours back.”

The elf in his Greek god physique chuckled dryly, shaking his head. “It is laughable, your level of desperation. I would sooner put all my trust in Ares than give an inkling of it to you. You killed Mythal, slaughtered her like an animal, and you think I will simply overlook that and all the other vile acts you committed?”

Elgar’nan dismissively waved a hand. Bright morning light had begun to churn through the tall windows behind him. He moved closer to his archnemesis, the pale, straight curtain of his perfectly combed hair swaying down his back. “That is ancient history, Fen’Harel. We must think of now.”

“I am thinking of now.” The elf turned to Ares. “You’re going to give me Elgar’nan’s orb.”

“Sneaky as ever,” Elgar’nan sneered.

“Oh, will I?” Ares’s trimmed elven brow lifted higher. “I will find the fountain. Can’t be that hard. It’s probably in some cave or grotto.”

“You’re right. There is a cave that leads to it, but you will have to traverse a vast system of tunnels and caverns, a virtual labyrinth. It took hours to find the fountain. And then there is also the mapping of symbols coded randomly throughout the labyrinth. I know exactly how to get through it. But first, you will give me his orb.”

“Hm.” Ares strolled closer. “I must say, *this* is the side of you I had hoped would manifest itself eventually. So demanding, so sure, and all the more attractive in that tall, dark, and handsome body.” He winked, then clicked his tongue. “But you know what? I will not be acquiesced by you. No deal.”

“So, you wish to stay in my body?”

“Honestly, it’s not so bad. You take very good care of yourself, though you could use a tan.”
Fen’Harel figure shimmered and shifted as if viewed through a tank of water, and was replaced by that of Ares in his usual form. Clad in black leather, dark, luscious hair, brown eyes, earring, all of it. He grinned, and his voice sounded as usual when he talked. “Luckily for me, I can take whatever form I want. It’s a shame you didn’t know then what you know now, Fen’Harel. I’m not sure how it worked for the ‘gods’ here, but on Earth, a god’s power is tied to their consciousness, to the force that allows them to exist. Maybe you should’ve consulted with Xena before executing this plan, since she and I have exchanged bodies more than once during our illustrious history, due to her meddling.”

The hulking, hard-bodied, olive-skinned elf heaved, and his shoulders sank. Well, this was an all-time low.

Ares continued. “Seeing as you’ve gotten yourself into a pickle, you handsome devil, I’m restricting you to the villa grounds. You’re wearing my body and I want it back. I don’t need something happening to it until then. Now, if both of you plotters will excuse me, godly duties call.”

Ares disappeared.

(*)

The road to obtaining humanity was a puzzling one, as Cole discovered more and more each day. Before helping the Inquisitor escape his own mind in Therinfal Redoubt, Cole had been little more than an extension of the Fade, a byproduct of the realm’s very existence. There was no specified goal, only to carry on in the name of the mage who was left to die in a tower, a man whose likeness he took, along with some faint memories and sensations.

Now he was his own person. A real person with a real life, a companion, friends. None of these concepts had ever been considered a possibility to the spirit-Cole. To the man-Cole, however, they had become necessities, dependencies, what he might think of as “sweet weaknesses”. These things that made him human now made him vulnerable, and at the same time, he would do anything he could to keep them because they also gave him strength. Hence, sweet weaknesses.

Being human meant the cold in the air gnawed at him enough to warrant a small coat. Cole stood in a section of the gardens where two memorials had been erected. Nothing too big, just short stone pillars with the names of Sera and Grim chiseled into them. Several candles and bales of withering flowers surrounded them. Cole took a knee before Sera’s and set down a single white wildflower.

He said nothing, not verbally anyway. All the words he’d ever wanted to say to the elf ran through his mind, along with their shared comradery in her last moments, fighting back to back, her tosses of humor while they engaged Corypheus’s horde. Cole knew he would’ve done the same for Sera if things were opposite. The man couldn’t understand why her death was affecting him so much, to the point that he hadn’t really slept since the battle. In a conversation with Idrial last night, she said it was just being human. She also suggested that he go to the Herald’s Rest to seek the company of his friends, if only for small talk or wicked grace, and maybe he would tonight.

Grass rustled. His ear twitched, and pale eyes shot to their corners. He knew who it was before they stepped forward and kneeled to place flowers on Grim’s grave. Skinner. She, like Cole, had been visiting the memorials since they went up. They’d crossed each other more than once.

Cole stood. He offered a solemn nod when their eyes met, then turned and stalked off.

(*)

Morning began to meld into noon, as indicated by the sun’s arc across the sky. Since Ares vanished off a couple of hours ago, Fen’Harel had been restlessly skulking about. He did so now out in the back gardens, walking barefoot along the pool. Soft, tailored grass replaced stone tiles as he made his way towards one of the high walls surrounding the complex. When he was little more than five feet from the wall, he bumped into an invisible barrier. Ares said he’d been restricted to the villa, and Fen’Harel wanted to test his limit. It appeared he’d found it. He tried again to go forward, even using his mage-magic against it, and to no avail. The barrier went left and right, curving to follow the layout of the huge yard. If he could fly, he would find that it wasn’t just a wall, but a dome.

“Well, well. Look at us now,” came a mocking voice.

Fen’Harel turned his smirk to Elgar’nan. “What do you want?”

“I want to be who and what I was before all this.” The beautiful elvhen man raised his arms, mouth twisting a crooked smile, eyes veering around. “But that doesn’t seem likely to happen at this rate. We are both under the thumb of a god of war from another world, one that has traversed through time and between domains in ways we never have. We are now the equivalent of those inferior creatures that once revered us as their gods and saviors.”

“I never wanted to be revered.”

“That, Fen’Harel, is obvious. At the same time, you didn’t deny the Gift when it was given, you didn’t walk away. No. You accepted it just like the rest of us.”

Fen’Harel’s eyes fogged over while he poked around in his memories. It had to be over two-
thousand years ago that he and the other Eight, an established circle of magic wielders, found that hidden chamber containing an artifact of the likes they’d never seen. The Cube. He could clearly recall each of them standing around the ten-foot-tall, glowing geometric thing, feeling its calming aura and warmth on their faces.

“You’re thinking of it now, aren’t you?” Elgar’nan’s voice drew him back to the present.

“Don’t you?”

“All the time,” said Elgar’nan. His tall form lingered close to Fen’Harel. “It chose us to receive its power. It turned us into gods and gave us purpose.”

Fen’Harel, not normally eye-level with him and only able to be so now because he was inside Ares’s taller body, stared him down. “Maybe it did choose us, and maybe we ultimately disappointed it by misusing our gift. We were meant to help the Elvhen people. Instead, we mentally weakened them, made them believe that they needed us to live. We…destroyed them.”

Elgar’nan lifted a brow, shaking his head. “You destroyed them.”

Fen’Harel closed his eyes a moment, the familiar feeling of distraught overtaking him.

Elgar’nan’s eyes raked over his handsome Ares-face. “What happened to you, Fen’Harel? You used to be like the rest of us, content to lead the sheep, and then you changed.”

“I realized we were wrong. We were abusing our power.”

“So, you rebelled for the people. How noble.” The dry, unconcerned expression on Elgar’nan’s face accompanied his sarcasm. “In trying to change things, you destroyed the very people you wanted to liberate from our perfect regime.”

“Things were not perfect,” Fen’Harel spat.

“There were some flaws, yes, but we were golden. And now… the towering elf shrugged, “… now we are Ares’s puppets.”

The two of them stared at each other quietly. Birds chattered back and forth through the great trees of the Emerald Graves. Fen’Harel spoke lowly and with narrowed eyes. “Have you come to me because you wish to truly ally against the war god?”

Elgar’nan’s brow furrowed. His searing eyes burned from the pale construct of his face, flicking casually around, and when he talked his voice held an underlying defiant flavor. “Oh, heavens no. Why would I ever think to defy Ares, the One True God.”

Fen’Harel swiftly caught on. He’d been careless to say something so brazen about Ares out loud. The war god could be in stealth anywhere and at any time, and Elgar’nan smartly played it as such. Fen’Harel finally nodded. “Yes, you’re right. That would be foolish.”

“Mm.” Hair swaying behind him, hands clasped at the small of his back, Elgar’nan smoothly walked away.

(*)

Almost two more months passed. The Inquisition received no direct threats from Ares, though it was apparent that the god had gained many more followers. It should’ve posed no surprise that parts of the Tevinter Imperium gave in easily. They were a people solely about the three P’s: power, position, and prestige. All Ares had to do was appeal to the right individuals, promising them those things, and he quickly gained access to Qarinus, Carastes, Neromenian, Vyrranthum, and Marothius, all lying east of the Nocen Sea. This showed Ares’s tactical finesse because each city was close together. Their governments were central to Tevinter, but now their chantries flew the One True God’s banner and had been converted in his name. Eventually, he would make his way around Tevinter’s shores to gain Marnus Pell, Vol Dorma, Asariel, and finally Minrathous. Minrathous served as home to the Imperial Chantry, headed by one called the Black Divine. Once the war god penetrated that central church, Tevinter would be his.

During all this converting, Fen’Harel remained in Villa Maurel, hearing about everything from the talks he and Ares had. He’d kept the elf apprised since he wasn’t allowed to leave the grounds. But he’d grown too restless. He had to leave, to get out of there and go anywhere. East, preferably. Though, how would he be accepted by Lassalanta? He’d broken trust with the Inquisition, which she’d certainly gotten word of by now, and he wasn’t even in his own form.

He paced his room wallowing in these thoughts for a while, then finally went to the central ballroom. The huge space contained a hefty throne of stone draped with furs. Torches lined the walls. At this time of day, light poured generously through high-arched windows. Ares leaned casually in the throne, one leathered leg hung over the side. Ever the gracious god, he had set aside designated times at which his “subjects” could meet with him and express their concerns or otherwise. Fen’Harel imagined this was how it went back on Earth too.

When Fen’Harel entered, barefoot as usual and wearing a fine, long tunic and pants, the half dozen warriors and peasants spied him with nervous awe. Aside from having a clean-shaven face and luscious hair that had grown long enough to partially hide his human ears, he looked exactly like their One True God. Ares easily maintained his usual look of short dark hair, tapered beard, dark leather, and an earring. Fen’Harel’s backfiring trickery was no secret, and Ares never intended it to be. People needed to see what could happen if they ever decided to try something
stupid against him.

The God of War smiled richly, gorgeous lips bending at a playful angle. “Fen’Harel—what can I
do for you this fabulous spring day?”

“I want my body back.”

Ares tipped a brow, amused. “Is that so? Well, you know what you have to do.” He swept a hand
at his subjects, speaking evenly and without too much bite. “Enough for today. Leave us.”

They quickly departed the chamber, and guards pulled the doors shut after them.

Ares turned in his immaculate seat to study Fen’Harel full-on, waiting.

The elf gathered what pride remained and slowly moved forward. He glued his eyes to Ares’s and
sank to one knee, taking a breath, his voice tight and refrained. “Ares, One True God, I—” He
sighed, swallowing. “I apologize for what I did, for my trickery, and I should not have done it. I…
humbly beg you to allow me to take you to the fountain that will give you back your form and me
mine.”

“Hm.” Ares nodded, fiery brown eyes smiling. “See? Was that so hard?”

When Fen’Harel first switched them and Ares restricted him to the villa, the elf thought he’d be
able to hold out until the god caved and made some kind of offer, even after Ares merely changed
Fen’Harel’s body so he could look normal again. That lasted a week before the elf gave in and
agreed to take Ares to the fountain. The war god then decided he didn’t want to change back until
Fen’Harel got down on his knees and begged for it. The elf held out for nearly two months.

“I’ve done what you demanded.”

“Mm. That you have.”

Fen’Harel rolled his eyes. “Just take us to the Storm Coast.”

Chuckling, Ares slipped smoothly from the throne, approaching. “Anything for you, you
handsome devil.”

(*)

All of Skyhold’s occupants had returned. All the workers, the bakers, the armorers, the merchants,
the artists, the children, and of course the Orlesian squatters. Iron Bull posed on his side, propped
on an elbow, his gaze resting on a six-months-pregnant Ayla. Vibrant morning light filled the
windows and lent generous illumination to their quarters. The Qunari brushed fingers down her
arm again, and she stirred.

Ayla yawned, her eyes fluttering open to behold her husband’s handsome smile. A smile sporting
enlarged canines. And his eye held the startling amber color. Her gaze widened momentarily, then
she smiled and lifted a hand to his face, caressing over his scarred left eye. She went for his ear
and massaged the lobe.

Bull groaned. “I hope you’re up for it.”

She giggled. “Why wouldn’t I be? We just had sex last night.”

“Yeah, but you were queasy earlier yesterday, and I don’t want you to feel obligated.”

Ayla lifted a stark white brow. “And just how else did you think you were going to relieve the
kuma’ta kalifaar, my darling?”

He shrugged, capturing a playful grin. “Use the stroke and poke? Or I could always ask Bertrand
to help me. She would.”

The woman frowned and punched his chest. “Not funny.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry, Naaremma.”

She chuffed.

Bull cleared his throat, brushing wild hair back from her face. “Good thing is it’s nowhere near as
bad as the last time.”

Ayla maneuvered to toss a leg over him, forcing him to his back. Both were already naked, and he
was throbbing and ready. She smiled down at him, rocking back and forth, rubbing her
moistening heat along his shaft, teasing. One small hand touched to the swell of her belly.

“I don’t worry, I won’t hurt Little Bean.”

“I know,” she said sensuous, then lifted her hips and slowly eased down on his solid cock.

Iron Bull trembled and growled, hands clamping to her ass. He started thrusting up into her,
meeting her rolling motions. This was not a time when he’d be able to hold back so she could
reach her climax first. The process of kuma’ta kalifaar wouldn’t easily grant him the option of
such a courtesy. Once her soft, tight, wet warmth embraced him, he lost the ability to hold back.
Ayla knew that, and she happily enjoyed the ride while it lasted, hugging around his neck and
shoulders when he sat up. She closed her eyes, smiling up at the ceiling as her husband raked teeth
down her neck, sending a growl vibrating against her flesh.

He was close to release, and they’d only started five minutes ago. Their lips met hungrily and
exchanged a slew of frenzied kisses, and their eyes locked.

“Aaah…ahhh…yes…” Ayla moaned.

Bull’s hands tightened on her hips and he thrust up hard, holding her down on him while he
exploded. “Mmm…Ayla.”

He spasmed. Ayla rode against him, examining his face. She caught the moment when the heat-
lust dissipated and the amber wolf’s eye faded to its original soulful blue. His canines retracted.
The Oona took his face in her hands and kissed him deeply, then climbed off, settling next to him.

“Why couldn’t it be that fast the last time? It certainly would’ve made it easier on me,” she
remarked, smiling.

“Hm,” he said in a sated tone, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, an arm around her.
“If you want, I’ll be ready for another round in ten. I hate to leave you unsatisfied.”

Ayla laughed brightly. “No, it’s okay, Bull. I’m fine. I’ll just get mine later.” She kissed his chest,
nipping.

“Okay then.” He stroked her hair for a while, then leaned to reach into the nightstand drawer,
pulling out the little dragon he’d been working on. It was finished now, all painted and coated
with wax. “What do you think?”

Ayla took the toy and examined it, her heart melting at the sight of it, knowing it was for their
baby, who’d be there soon enough. “It’s beautiful. You really put a lot of detail into it.” She
carefully handed it back, then shifted so she draped partially upon his chest, gazing into his eye.
“You’re going to be such a wonderful father.”

“I hope so. I really am looking forward to it, more than ever.”

“I know you are,” she said softly, “and that’s why you’ll be so good at it.”

Iron Bull took a big breath and exhaled, Ayla rising and falling with the swell of his chest.
Dimples formed on her cheeks to accentuate a blissful smile. “Yes, but I’ll never get tired of
hearing it.”

Stitches wasn’t a bona fide doctor in the sense that he held no official licensing, but he knew a lot
about medicines and surgery, and even a bit about pregnancies. As Ayla progressed through hers,
he’d made recommendations, such as what foods to eat for proper vitamins, going so far as to
prescribe her vitamins too. He’d also suggested she continue to stay as active as she could, which
was why she and Iron Bull now walked through the merchants’ area, browsing. Walking was a
great way to keep the Oona’s circulation regulated. She gripped to her husband’s arm, pointing at
items here and there.

Halfway up the south wall, sitting on some steps, Cole watched them, very curious about the
woman’s rounded and clearly enlarged belly. Since the couple announced their pregnancy, Cole
had become almost infatuated by the prospect that he might be able to father offspring someday.
And why not? His humanity was pretty much fully inserted by now, so maybe his body was
capable.

He rose and headed off for Idrial, knowing exactly where she was. So close to noon, the pretty
little barmaid was at the Herald’s rest preparing for when the establishment opened in a few hours.
Cole silently pushed the door in and entered the room. Light flooded through the windows making
golden shafts crisscross the floor. All the chairs were up on the tables, save for a spot by the bar.
Idrial sat there folding napkins.

Cole headed for her.

“’Ello, Cole,” said Cabot from behind the bar, polishing away at glasses.
The young man nodded and the corner of his mouth lifted a smile.
Idrial looked up and beamed. “What are you doing here, love?”

“I just came to check on you, well…I wanted to talk.”

Concern flooded Idrial’s eyes and caused her brow to wrinkle. “Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.” Cole sat beside her. He took her hand, “Do you think…” He hesitated,
trying to decide how he wanted to phrase the question. “Does the prospect of reproducing with me
appeal to you?”

Idrial’s eyes widened and flew to Cabot, who stared with arched brows at them.
The dwarf cleared his throat, setting down the glass and towel. “It’s about time for me to take
m’break anyway.” He grabbed his jacket, pulled it on, and exited the tavern.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. Sometimes I slip back into my blatant ways.”

“No, no, it’s alright,” Idrial said, smiling softly. She lifted her hand to his jaw, fingers swooping along the fine angle. “So…you want to know if I would like to have children?”

“Yes.”

“I have thought long and hard about it, and I decided not long after we got together that I would very much like to.”

Cole’s whole body tensed. He’d been holding his breath. He grinned broadly. “Good, because I want to as well. I want to be a father.”

(*)

Directly after lunch, Hannibal, Josephine, Ayla, and Bull stood at the fortress’s main gate along with Joswen, Elemir, Sophitia, Vek, Ozra, and Magnus. It was time for the regal elf and his group to head back east and into their duties under the realm that lay hidden there. All of them but Magnus. The battlemage had officially joined up with Hannibal’s party for a while, and would feed information back to the east via a network of contacts located across the land in Redcliffe, Lothering, Milgren, and Gwaren. The contact in Gwaren linked directly to Hald’arun, though this was known only by those allowed to remember that mystical place.

Elemir folded Ayla into his arms, holding her tightly, eyes closed. He stepped back to look down at her. “I will miss you dearly, little sister.”

“I’m going to miss you too, El,” the Oona mewed, voice trembling, eyes already juicy with tears.

The ranger smiled gently. “You’ll be fine.”

She sniffled, nodding.

He turned to Iron Bull, and they both grasped forearms.

“She couldn’t be in safer hands,” spoke the Qunari.

“I know, my friend. Take care.”

“Be well,” Bull replied.

Elemir then stepped before Josephine. The ambassador had been twiddling her hands, waiting anxiously for her turn. Her eyes were red from crying through the earlier part of the day. She melded easily into his arms, willing herself not to cry.

“I’ll be back through here before you know it,” Elemir said.

Josephine sighed. “I wish you didn’t have to go, but you have duties, and I understand.”

“You’re strong, so you’ll get along well without me here trailing after you like a puppy.”

They both laughed, then Josephine said, “I rather like you trailing after me.”

“I love you. See you soon.”

“I love you too.”

They kissed passionately while everyone stared on silently, Ayla with joyful tears at seeing her brother with someone. Gone was her fear of him being stuck caring for her, never to get a life and love of his own. Things had worked out just peachy.

Once Joswen and the others said their goodbyes, they mounted up and headed out. Sitting in her saddle, features a little drawn, Sophitia clutched at the place near her throat where a little pendant once hung on a silver chain. She’d draped the necklace over Grim’s memorial when she visited it that morning.
An hour after Joswen, Elenir, and the others departed from Skyhold, Hannibal gathered some of the usual personnel in the war room. The Inquisitor stood at one end of the lavish table, his aqua vision resting upon Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine to one side. Across the table from them stood Iron Bull, Ayla, Morrigan, Magnus, and Xena. Corypheus might be gone, but there were still other threats to consider. For one, a very ambitious god of war.

“I know you all have things to tend to, so I’ll make this meeting as succinct as possible,” started Hannibal. “Ares is snatching up followers and real estate quicker than we anticipated. He already has half of Tevinter in his favor, and now he’s beginning to spread more into Orlais and Ferelden. As most of you may not know”—he looked to the group on his right, those not on his advisory council—“Verchiel and Lydes have ceded to Ares. Leliana got an official message yesterday.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Bull rumbled. “Verchief’s ran by squabbling, traitorous nobles that would sell out their own kin for money and status. And Lydes—well, the leadership had been up for grabs until you stepped in and helped Duke Remache’s brother take charge.”

“Yes, and it appears old Jean-Gaspard has stabbed us in the back for our help,” said Josephine. “He’s crooked to the bone, though his troops did help greatly in the battle against Corypheus.”

Hannibal crossed arms over his great chest. “Most people do what they do for power, so I suppose I shouldn’t be shocked at how quickly Jean-Gaspard agreed to fly Ares’s banner. As of right now, those are the only two large cities in the south that have converted. Halamshiral and Val Royeaux are secured, as are Jader, Kirkwall, and Highever.”

“Though,” Cullen entered, “we have received a recent message that indicates Ares may be going in for Jader soon. He started in Crestwood, which is south of Jader, and his influence is highly concentrated there, even more than around the Emerald Graves where he has his fortress. Jader’s military forces are limited. They sent soldiers to fight against Corypheus and lost many, and they also sent some west to further strengthen Halamshiral. Now they have very little to protect their city.”

“Which is why I’ve decided to take some troops to the Inquisition camp near Jader to reinforce the city,” Hannibal said. “If Ares gets even one or two more of the larger cities in this region to join him, he could amass enough soldiers to overthrow the Inquisition.”

“When do we leave, boss?”

The Inquisitor’s eyes moved to Iron Bull. “So, you’re volunteering to go?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going too then,” Ayla piped.

Bull smirked down softly at her. “Naaremma…”

“What? It’s not like we’re going into a battle.”

“Not that you know of,” the Qunari retorted.

“From what the Inquisitor said, we would be going to give Jader the forces it needs to protect itself. Doesn’t sound all that dangerous.”

“Woman, you need to stay here and take it easy.” His eye flicked to her protruding midriff.

“A little travel would be good for me. I still have a few months before the baby’s due and I’m quite capable of enduring the trip. Besides, it wouldn’t take but a week or two to get there and back, right, Inquisitor?” Ayla batte the eyes at Hannibal.

He and the rest of the room had been merely listening to the couple go back and forth, everyone silently putting money on Ayla for the win. Hannibal smiled a bit, nodding. “Yes, not that long of a trip.”

“See?” The Oona smiled up at her husband. “I’ll be fine. I can be packed within the hour.”

Hannibal chuckled. “Um…well…okay then. We’ll actually be leaving tomorrow morning.”

“Good,” Ayla chimed.

Iron Bull sighed, shaking his head.

“Inquisitor, would it be alright if I accompanied the party as well?” asked Xena.

“Yes, of course. I’ll need to inform Cole and Varric that they’re going too. And then there’s Dorian. He’ll want to come as well.”

“I’m sure he will,” drawled Morrigan, golden eyes capturing a teasing expression.
Hannibal smirked at her. “I need you to work closely with Leliana while we’re away. She’s the eyes to the outside world and you are our resident expert on ancient elvhen gods. There’s no telling when Ares will show again or if he’ll have an empowered Fen’Harel and other Evanuris with him when he does.”

“That happens, I’d say we were royally fucked, boss,” Iron Bull mused.

“That’s right,” Morrigan said, eyes narrowing. “I take things very personally when it comes to my innermost feelings, and you hurt them.”

Morrigan’s pace was unhurried as she moved down the stone corridor, through Josephine’s office antechamber, and back into the main hall. As she moved for the side door to the gardens, she stopped short and rolled her eyes. Magnus had zipped ahead of her, blocking the way.

“What do you want, Magnus?”

“You’ve been avoiding me. I only want to talk, to get everything out, feelings and all.”

“I thought we already did that.” Morrigan’s arms crossed her chest, and she watched him, unamused. “I hope I’m not the reason you decided to remain in Skyhold.”

“Well, part of it, yes.”

The sorceress huffed and made and move around him.

“Morrigan, please wait,” he said, lightly grabbing her hand.

She stiffly spun around, eyes sending burning daggers at him. “There’s nothing to say.”

“Can you at least forgive me? I’m sorry for leaving unexpectedly all those years ago, I really am. But I felt like I had no choice.”

“You could’ve just told me what was going on.”

Magnus sighed and rubbed a hand over his hair. “Yeah, I could’ve. I should’ve. I know that now. Look, Morrigan, I know things will never be the same between us, and I’d never expect that, but I don’t want us to be enemies.”

She dropped a short laugh. “We’re not enemies. I just don’t like you anymore.”

“Talk about a woman scorned. Sheesh.”

“That’s right,” Morrigan said, eyes narrowing. “I take things very personally when it comes to my innermost feelings, and you hurt them.”

“I know, and I wish I could take back what I did.”

She snatched her arm from his grip. “Well, you can’t. What’s done is done, and it cannot be undone. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The woman lifted her chin and left him standing in the great hall.

A sigh seethed slowly from Magnus as he watched her disappear through the door.

Trekking through a labyrinthine system of caves, caverns, and passages required sturdier gear than a tunic and pants. Before he and Ares vanished for the Storm Coast, Fen’Harel donned a pair of boots and traveling jacket. Three hours after arriving at the cave, the elf had led the war god to the chamber of the fountain. The huge spider’s corpse was still there, partially decayed, and Ares had zapped a couple of smaller ones in the area.

They stood before the fountain, the tall Ahime Anta statue spouting water. Ares gestured to the copper cup sitting on the statue’s single shelf. “We just have to drink from it?”

“Yes, but there’s one thing we must do to make the reversal work. We each need to add a few drops of blood to the liquid before drinking.” Fen’Harel produced a small knife, cut his palm, and added the blood.

Fen’Harel took the little copper cup, filled it from the water spout, and held it out. Ares positioned his hand over the liquid and let a few drops fall in. The war god then took the cup while Fen’Harel produced a small knife, cut his palm, and added the blood. Ares swirled it around, staring down into it. He handed it to Fen’Harel. “You first.”

“You don’t trust me?”

Ares held a hand up, then pressed and sank the thumbnail of his other hand into the flesh of his palm, drawing a thin line of blood.

Fen’Harel quickly took the little copper cup, filled it from the water spout, and held it out. Ares positioned his hand over the liquid and let a few drops fall in. The war god then took the cup while Fen’Harel produced a small knife, cut his palm, and added the blood.

Ares swirled it around, staring down into it. He handed it to Fen’Harel. “You first.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“A sigh seethed slowly from Magnus as he watched her disappear through the door.
“I suppose that’s understandable.” The elf’s eyes fixed on Ares while he raised the vessel to his lips and drank a mouthful, swallowing.

Ares took the blood-tainted water from him and did the same. He set the cup back on its shelf. It instantly reset to a clean and empty state. “So, what now?”

“Now we wait. We must sleep through the night, or rather I must. If it worked correctly, I’ll wake up in my body and you’ll get yours back.”

“Well then, let’s hope it works.”

Ares took another look around the spacious cavern with its carpet of luminescent moss and ancient, unknown symbols on the walls. He remembered the way there, should he ever need to visit the fountain again. His hand touched to Fen’Harel’s shoulder, calling up the displacement field that transported them from the labyrinth and back to Villa Maurel.

(*)

Another day passed and succumbed to the embracing arms of night. The moon was three-quarters full, floating dominantly in the sky. Ayla sat on the end of the bed fixing her long hair into a thick braid. When finished, she carefully scooted up the mattress to Iron Bull’s side. The man was busy looking through a pediatric information book.

Ayla wrapped an arm over his bare middle, gaining sight. “What are you reading?”

“Baby book.” He grimaced. “There’s so many things that can go wrong, so many ailments and sicknesses that babies get. The whooping cough, for one. If not treated carefully, babies can die from it. And then there’s black fever, or woodland mumps.”

Ayla chuckled a bit, snatched the book, and set it behind her. “You shouldn’t worry so much about those things, my love. They’re not commonalities. I’m sure our baby will be just fine.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s just…” Bull grinned broadly, eyes twinkling, “…I feel so antsy, anxious. He’ll be here any day now, and I only want to make sure everything’s good for him, you know?”

“Yes, I know, darling. I feel the same way. Oh!”

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. The baby’s moving again.” Ayla rolled to her back and took his hand. She pressed it to a place on the rounded bump of her belly. “Here.”

They waited for a few seconds, quiet and anticipatory. Almost half a minute passed before the little life shifted in the womb, a nub pressing to Bull’s palm. The Qunari erupted with laughter.

“Wow! That’s one hell of a kick.”

“Indeed,” Ayla said.

The baby moved again.

The parents-to-be beamed at it, all smiles, thankful.

Iron Bull eased down until his face was even with her stomach and the baby. He embraced his wife closer, kissing the bump. “I love you,” he whispered to Little Bean.

Ayla smiled gently at him, a small hand rubbing lovingly at his head, stroking slowly along one horn.

Iron Bull’s eye met hers. “You’re so amazing, to be able to do this.”

The Oona giggled. “Well, I didn’t exactly do it by myself.”

“No, but that still doesn’t negate how remarkable you are.” He kissed her belly again, then repositioned himself back up next to her.

Ayla snuggled as close as she could, getting comfortable. Should would fall asleep in her husband’s arms not long after.

(*)

Like every other time before a journey, party members rose early in the morning, ate the Heroes Breakfast, and left Skyhold for Jader to the north.

(*)

Fen’Harel pushed back the veil of slumber and made his way once more into the waking world. His eyes slowly opened, focusing on a high ceiling against which early morning shadows played. He completely jumped to awareness when he noticed the warm figure against his side, whose arm draped across his stomach.

He quickly sat up and cringed, shrinking away from Ralden, who was stirring awake. The elf scrambled from bed, pulling the rumpled sheet along to wrapped around his waist.
Ralden stretched and wiggled fingers at him, smiling. “Good morning, pretty elf man. Last night was extremely wonderful, and nothing quite compares to the feeling of you inside me.”

Fen’Harel shivered at the thought of intimate relations with another man, but he supposed there was nothing he could’ve done to keep Ares from soiling his body.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I had to say it, not that I wanted to. Ares’s orders.”

“Not surprised.”

The elf strode for the door, yanked it open, and all but ran through the corridors. Halfway to his room, Ares appeared in his way, grinning.

“How’d you like waking up to that little surprise?”

“You are positively vulgar.”

“And you positively deserved it for trying to trick me. I even neglected to bathe so you’d still feel and smell him on you.”

Fen’Harel’s slim, patrician features formed a smirk. “I noticed, so if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take a long bath.”

Ares chuckled low and deep as he watched the elf hurry off. He examined his body once again, satisfied to be back inside it, then vanished.

(*)

Aside from some slight nausea, the trip up to Jader had been easygoing for Ayla. The party stopped in the sizable city for a day so that Hannibal could speak with the officials, making it clear he intended to thicken their military ranks through his own connections so they could protect themselves. This, of course, earned him even more respect and words of kindness.

Once done in the city, the Inquisitor and his group traveled half a day to the Inquisition camp east. It sat right along the border between Orlais and Ferelden, a few hours ride from a Deep Roads entry leading to Orzammar. Iron Bull and Ayla basked in the glow of a fire pit munching on roasted druffalo stew and biscuits. The woman had sprinkled a generous amount of fire pepper sauce in hers, so much that the smell of its potent spiciness nearly overwhelmed Bull’s nostrils. He ate a large bowl, then waited while she got her fill.

Ayla finally relinquished her dishes to the personnel at the wash station after three bowls. Bull smiled hesitantly down at her. “You gonna attempt dessert?”

“Mm,” she licked her lips and released a big burp. “I probably shouldn’t, even though it’s apple cobbler tonight,” she whined. “I’m just so stuffed from the stew. It was pretty tasty.”

“Think you might throw up?”

She shook her head briskly. “I’ll be okay. I don’t feel sick at all.”

“That’s good. The books I’ve been reading said that nausea is usually worst in the first trimester, and all but disappears later in the pregnancy.” He nodded his horned head.

Ayla chuckled. “When did you become such an academic on the subject?”

Massive shoulders shrugged, and he grinned. “I wouldn’t say I’m an academic. Once I started reading up on it, I realized how interesting it all is.”

“Uh-huh.” The Oona lifted on her toes to kiss him, then tugged his hand for the direction of their tent.

When they got there, the couple settled in. Ayla slipped into a nightgown, and Bull stripped down to his briefs. The Qunari couldn’t wait to play with the baby again, and managed to coax Ayla to her back in a comfortable arrangement of pillows. He lay beside her, level with the baby bump, his single eye examining it. Bull rested his hand on her stomach and gently massaged, then waited excitedly for the baby to respond.

Nothing happened.

He stirred the baby again, and again nothing happened.

Iron Bull grew antsy. “You think he’s okay in there?”

Ayla laughed. “The baby’s fine. She’s probably irritated at being disturbed from her sleep.”

As if wanting to put its own opinion into the light conversation, the child shifted enough so that one side of Ayla’s abdomen poked outward for a few moments.

“Goodness!” she wailed, catching her breath.

“Are you alright?” Iron Bull touched Ayla’s stomach, his eye shooting up to meet hers.

“Yes. That one just caught me way off-guard,” she replied, smiling.
“Maybe it was all that fire pepper sauce you dumped in your stew.”

“Or maybe it’s because a certain someone won’t stop provoking a sleeping baby.”

Bull laughed, rumbling greatly from deep in his chest. “Yeah, that could be it. Okay, okay, I’ll take it easy.” The large man pressed his face to her bump and nuzzled, and the baby answered with a tiny kick.

Ayla smiled warmly to watch him, so anxious to be in the world of their little one, so full of love and caring. She rubbed his shoulder, fingers idly dragging over his tattooed skin. Absently, she drew her hand to one pointed ear and started massaging the lobe.

Bull instantly yanked his eye to her, grinning heatedly. “If you’re trying to distract me from playing with the baby, it’s working.”

“I know.”

“Hm…” a sultry growl ebbed from him, and he repositioned so his solid, warm physique pressed to one side of her. He stole a kiss and nipped her chin. “You want to ride the Bull, then you take the top. I’m going to make you put some work in.”

Ayla giggled, pushed him to his back, and climbed on. “No, dear husband. It’s I who am going to make you put in some work.” She raked nails over his chest.

(*)

Back on Earth, somewhere in the woods stretching through Patraian Amazon territory…

Vreshka, the current queen of that amazon sect, kneeled on one knee before a weatherworn stone carving of a Greek goddess—Artemis. She lifted her arms to the night sky and the waxing moon.

“Artemis, Watcher of the Woods and Earth, if you can hear me, I ask for your blessing and that you watch over my tribe in these dire times.”

She bowed her head, then reached for the basket of root vegetables and small pumpkins, placing it at the base of the altar.

“Even now, with the gods on our last legs, you stay loyal to me.”

Vreshka spun to face Artemis, who had appeared silently in the shadows, blending from them, her beautiful face floating in the darkness of her hood and cloak. The amazon dropped to one knee again. “Goddess, thank the stars. It has been a while since we last spoke. I thought perhaps you’d fallen to the Twilight of the Gods.”

Slowly, a smile pulled over Artemis, and she glided closer to touch the woman’s shoulder. “Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary. As you can see, I am well. I merely had to lay low for a while, take care of some other business. Please, stand.”

The queen did so, letting her eyes roam the goddess’s immaculate features. Never in her life had she ever seen a woman so beautiful, so demanding of attention. Except maybe Xena, that bitch. It was her fault that many Patra lost their lives in the Amazon Wars several years back, including Vreshka’s mother. She had been in her teens when she watched her mother get cut down in battle. It hadn’t been Xena’s sword that physically killed Rilthea, but rather the Warrior Princess’s interference in affairs that had nothing to do with her. The self-righteous slut.

“How is your tribe?”

Vreshka took a breath, quelling the anger that such thoughts evoked. “We are well, Goddess. The hunt is bountiful and our warriors are fierce. We cannot ask for much else.”

Artemis nodded. “I promised you that I would reward your fealty with a great prize, and it pleases me to tell you that the time you shall receive it grows near. Your moonlight mating ritual happens soon, in just two weeks, right?”

“Yes, when the moon is fullest and brightest. We have already chosen and invited the twelve males from various parts of the land, the ones sought out by our best scouts.” Many a man could only hope to be picked for the ritual, because for one night he would get to have lots of sex with one of the twelve amazons chosen for him. And if he were even more lucky, he might find himself partnered with the queen, since she’d be part of the ritual this time.

“Rescind those invitations and tell them not to bother making the trip. I have a very special man in mind for your ritual this time. He is a warrior unlike any you’ll find amongst the men of Earth, and his seed will greatly enhance the genetic pool of your tribe. He is a creation of the Gods that I will give to you. The daughters he produces will lead to the Patraians being the most powerful amazons in the world.”

Vreshka’s pulse quickened as she listened, stirred and excited. Not wanting to appear skeptical, she kept her voice as humble as possible and asked, “How will one man be able to serve the needs of twelve amazons? We only have the hours of night to complete our ritual. Surely, he’ll need time to rest if he is to give seed to us all.”

Artemis chuckled openly, teeth flashing. “Oh, don’t you worry about that. He’ll last, and he will impregnate every one of you. I promise you that.”
“Goddess, this is truly the most honorable gift. I greatly thank you.” Vreshka bowed. “When should we expect his arrival?”

“One or two days before the ritual, I’ll deliver him to you.”

“Very well.” The queen bowed again.

“Go now and return to the village. I’m sure there are still several preparations to be made.”

Holding a big smile, Vreshka nodded, grabbed her sword from the grass, and headed into the tree line. When Artemis was certain of her solitude, she used her power to transform into her true figure—Ares. Vreshka’s concern about the Goddess of the Hunt had actually been warranted, since the real Artemis died in a conflict near Mount Etna, along with Hermes and Nemesis, almost a year ago. The God of War decided to exploit her death now that the opportunity presented itself.

He chuckled deviously and vanished.
Months ago, before Ares entered Thedas and began his quest for domination, Hannibal had only Corypheus to worry about, and he swore that the instant the old magister was dead, he’d take more time for himself, for Dorian. Plans always get compromised, because he was no less busy now. He’d met with a few officials the following morning, then sneaked off for a break with Dorian right around lunch time.

The two men were in their large tent now, shirts removed, the Altus on top greedily kissing his mate. He was so hard and hungry for the Qunari’s cock that he believed he’d combust at any moment. Dorian reached between them and rubbed Hannibal through his pants.

The Inquisitor growled, biting his neck.

They didn’t get much further, though, blatantly interrupted by someone rapping on the wooden plank outside.

Hannibal sank to the bedroll, his body lax, broad chest heaving up and down from the sexual frenzy. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” he said lowly. “Just ten minutes of peace would be nice.”

Dorian sighed, kissed his chest, and climbed off. “Mm.” His lovely mouth pursed, a testament to his lack of amusement. “Such is your life, Amatus.”

“Yeah.” He rolled, snatched his shirt up, and pulled it on. “Just a moment!”

A handful of seconds later, Hannibal unbound the tent’s flap, yanked it back, and stepped outside to glower at a soldier who looked apologetic.

“I’m sorry to bother you, milord, but you have unexpected visitors.”

Hannibal, accompanied by Dorian, went to the war room tent. Iron Bull and Ayla were there. They’d been having lunch when the visitors were led into camp, and Bull instantly knew he had to be present for this meeting. He wanted to be present.

Xena also saw the visitors and made her way to the tent, following Bull and Ayla.

Varric and Cole entered right after Hannibal and Dorian.

The Inquisitor’s eyes took note of all four newcomers, but fixated more on the two with horns. “Qunari,” he voiced. “Don’t see many of you out this way. Are you Tal-Vashoth?”

“We’re not any Vashoth,” spoke one of the Qunari. Like most males, he was tall and broad. He had a long black braid to the middle of his back. “I am Arisol, a Ben-Hassrath leader, and this is my squad—Gorigor, Sorcha, and Yagmaas.” He gestured to the dwarf, human, and other Qunari.

“Okay, Arisol,” Hannibal said. “If you’re still attached to the Qun, why are you here? Last I recall, your leaders didn’t want anything to do with me or the Inquisition.”

“In lieu of what is happening with this One True God, the Triumvirate has reconsidered and wishes to move forward with the alliance. Ares is quickly taking the southern lands, and he will naturally expand outward and into Qunari territories after he’s done here. The four of us came across him several months ago in the Free Marches, not far from Markham. One of those portals opened near us and we had to fight the vile creatures that emerged. Ares showed up, killed the remaining enemies, and closed the portal. He’s very powerful. With our army mobilized to join yours, we’ll be able to fight him. We were on our way to Skyhold when we heard you were in Jader. Yes, your decision to save a few over the many was a fickle one, fueled by emotions, no doubt—”

“Ha! He comes not only with the Qunari logic that they’re Maker’s gift to everyone else, but also with predictable insults,” Dorian chimed in. “Fitting.”

“But you are not a product of our society, even though you look like us. This was taken into consideration,” Arisol finished talking to Hannibal, paying little attention to the smaller Tevinter.

“So, let me get this straight,” Hannibal said, arms crossing his chest. He peered over the war table at Arisol and his people, “the Qunari Empire has sat back and laid low from the beginning, knowing Ares was a growing threat, and now that that threat is virtually on its shores, they want to help.”

Arisol nodded. “Yes, We used the Waking Sea to travel this way, hitting land a few hours ride from here. There’s a camp where our Sten awaits. He will be the Qun’s official with whom you can speak. I am simply here to deliver our initial offer.”

“Ah. Excuse me while I seem a little skeptical about all of this,” said Hannibal. “I mean, how do I
know this isn’t some Qun trick to get vengeance for what happened to the Berethlok?”

“I can assure you that this is no ruse, Inquisitor. The Qunari have no time for such games. We figured you would be doubtful, and so I was sent with official papers.” Arisol reached into his traveling pack, pulled out a scroll, and set it to the table.

Hannibal stepped forward and grabbed it. He unrolled it, reading. It had been thoughtfully written out in common, which worked since he wasn’t the best at reading Qunlat.

“Boss, may I see that?”

Hannibal handed the paper to Iron Bull.

The large, one-eyed man skimmed it. “It’s definitely official. Bears the seals of the Salasari.”

“Salasari?” Hannibal hoisted a red brow.

“They’re the three officials that rule the Qun’s government,” said Bull. “Arishok, Arigena, and Ariqun. The body, mind, and soul.”

“Ah.” Hannibal nodded. He pocketed the paper. “What do you think? This is more your territory than mine.”

Iron Bull’s eye slid to the four members of an organization he’d stepped away from for the love of a woman. He’d never met them personally, but he felt like he knew them, because he used to be them. He looked to Hannibal. “As condescending as the Qun can be, I think they really do want to converge our troops. Logically, it’ll make them and us stronger. At the same time, you should tread lightly, boss. The Qun’ll turn on you if they feel it suits them. They couldn’t give two fucks about your own interests.”

His eye burned at Arisol and his group.

Hannibal nodded, satisfied with that answer. “You always speak without a filter, Bull. I like that you tell it how it is.” He addressed Arisol. “I will meet with your Sten. We leave tomorrow. I’ll still need to convene with my people before that. Feel free to stay in our camp. I’ll have tents prepared for you.”

“Very well, Inquisitor. We thank you.”

(*)

That night, while they sat by a fire and ate, Iron Bull and Ayla found themselves looking across the way at Arisol and his group, with her asking random questions about them.

The Oona decided to save room for dessert this time, happily munching on a bowl of warm apple cobbler, very glad they decided to make it again that night. Her bare foot rested over Bull’s. “What’s wrong, my warrior? You’ve barely even touched your food.”

“Hm?” Bull replied absently, then forked a little fish casserole into his mouth. He’d been staring hard in Arisol’s direction. “Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just thinking about things, Qun things. The proposal of another alliance is the last thing I’d expect from them. The Triumvirate is already harsh on those who deviate from the Qun, not to mention outsiders. They rarely give second chances.”

“So, you don’t trust that group?” Ayla ate more cobbler, toes curling at how delicious it was. She really had to find the chef and shower her or him with praises.

“It’s not so much them as it is those who command them. Arisol is only doing his job, serving as the messenger.” Bull devoured the remainder of his casserole, clearing his throat. His eye levelled on her in that familiar serious way.

“What is it?”

“When you’re done eating, we need to go to Hannibal’s tent. I have to talk with him.”

(*)

Much to Hannibal’s pleasure, the evening hours proved to be less demanding. Once the sun sank in the west, the camp became relatively quiet. This gave him and Dorian time for a romantic interlude. Now, they lay on their bed of furs, languid and satiated, with Dorian curled against him.

“Mm, Amatus…”

Hannibal chuckled. “Looks like I’ll have you to myself for the rest of the night,” Dorian said.

And then someone wrapped at the wooden plank.

The Altus breathed an exaggerated sigh and rolled his pretty eyes. “Or maybe not.”

Hearty, unbridled laughter rolled from Hannibal. “At least we got to finish this time.”

“Small favors,” Dorian mumbled, stretched, and rolled over while his husband slipped from bed.
Hannibal pulled his pants on and answered the knock. He wasn’t expecting to see Iron Bull and Ayla on the other side of the flap. “Hey…”

“Boss, we need to talk.”

“Okay. Just a second.” Hannibal dropped the flap back in place and turned to Dorian. “Sweetchest, you’re gonna want to cover yourself. We have company.”

The Altus, curious as ever, donned his robe. When he was decent, sitting up all disheveled and beautiful in bed, Hannibal lifted the tent flap again and gestured for Bull and Ayla to enter.

Bull’s lone eye took in the candles, low lighting, and overall romantic atmosphere. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but I really have to tell you something.”

Dorian quirked a brow. “Should I leave?”

“No,” Bull said. “You can stay. I haven’t even told Ayla what I’m about to reveal to the boss. The Chargers don’t even know. Only me.” Beside him, Ayla grew anxious. Bull looked to Hannibal. “There’s something you need to know about me. You and I didn’t exactly meet by chance. I was put in your path by the Qun. They wanted me and the Chargers to make acquaintances with the Inquisition, so I sent Krem to Haven. They also knew your people would research everything about me, and so instructed me to hide nothing of my designation and job as Hisrad. Once I’d gathered your trust and you had served their plans, I was to…” he paused, “…assassinate you.”

Dorian and Ayla both gasped in unison.

Iron Bull continued. “They saw you as a threat either way, as an ally or an enemy. You represented unity of the south, strength against the Qunari.”

Hannibal nodded slowly, letting the news permeate. “Did you know about their proposal for the first alliance?”

“No. My orders were simple. Join you, if you allowed it, get friendly, and slit your throat when they gave the word.”

“Oh. I see.” Silent contemplation from Hannibal. “Are you still working for them?”

Bull looked lovingly at Ayla. “I could never go back to the Qun, even if I wanted to. Ayla wouldn’t be able to go with me, and I’ll never leave her.” The couple’s interlocked hands tightened on one another.

“Considering the alliance flopped because of what happened on the Storm Coast, the destruction of the Berethlok, how come you didn’t kill me then?”

Bull smiled a bit. “When you made the decision to save the Chargers, I knew you were a man I could follow, one I could trust and fight for without doubting your intentions. I made up my mind then that even if the Triumvirate gave the kill order, I wouldn’t go through with it.”

“So…” Hannibal lifted a red brow, “my saving the Chargers essentially saved me from you.”

“Yeah. Essentially. With the Qun making contact again, I just thought you should know that.”

No one said anything, wallowing in a slightly uncomfortable silence.

“Well, Bull, I appreciate you telling me. I assume I’m still safe,” Hannibal said, his tone lofty and joking.

“For now.” Bull winked. “’G’night, boss, Dorian.” The large man led Ayla out and for their tent.

Hannibal secured the flap and settled back in bed with Dorian.

“I’m not exactly sure what to think about that,” spoke the mage, snuggling close, a pout over his lips.

Hannibal chuckled and kissed his brow. “Don’t think anything of it. Bull’s no threat to me.”

“It’s a good thing you chose to save the Chargers, or you might be thinking otherwise.”

The Altus focused on a lantern, watching the flame flicker. He shuddered to think of how things could’ve gone. The Iron Bull was a formidable force, and if he’d chosen to assassinate Hannibal, Dorian had no doubt in his mind that his handsome Amatus wouldn’t be alive now.

(*)

There was no need to haul out at the crack of the dawn the next morning, mostly because Hannibal had no intention of pandering to the Qun. If they were so blatant and brazen as to annul the first alliance then come back for a retry, then they could wait on him. Therefore, he declared the group would leave some time in the late morning.

They began to assemble now. Iron Bull and Ayla approached the mounts, seeing Hannibal, Dorian, Varric, Cole, Xena, Arisol, and his people gathered. The couple conversed lightly as they went.

“Ayla, I have to go since I’m the Inquisition’s Qun expert. The boss needs me there to monitor
them and give my insight.”

“I know, Bull, but I don’t see why I can’t go too. We’re not going to Par Vollen, Seheron, or any other Qunari territory. We’re just going to a camp a short distance from here to meet with one of their officials.”

They reached the others.

Iron Bull smiled down gently at her. “It would make me feel better if you stayed here. We may not be going into Qunari territory, but I don’t want you anywhere near them.”

“You’re just going to leave me here by myself?”

Bull chuckled. “Woman, you’re quite capable of being without me for a few hours, though you wouldn’t be alone. There’s a whole camp of soldiers.”

“I could stay with her,” offered Cole. “Your presence is required, while mine isn’t. I’ll remain here and look after Ayla while you’re gone.”

“You’d do that? Thanks, Cole.” Iron Bull nodded, suddenly grinning. “Best to keep her fed. She’s liable to gnaw your arm off otherwise.”

The slim, blond rogue’s eyes flipped to Ayla and he smiled. “I’ll be sure to do so.”

“Oh, hush.” Ayla rolled her eyes and punched Bull’s arm. She examined the sky, gray and cluttered with low-hanging clouds, then inhaled. “Looks like rain. I can smell it in the air. Try to stay dry.”

“I will. Be back soon,” the Qunari said, then kissed her and caressed her stomach. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

A short while later, Ayla stood beside Cole watching blindly as her husband and the others left out to meet with the Sten.

(*)

Thunder rumbled in the distance and lightning strobed across the sky. Hannibal and the others left the Inquisition camp almost an hour ago at a steady, unhurried pace. To the immediate south stretched patches of forest, and to the north were low, rocky hills.

Iron Bull chuckled at Dorian, who rode horseback beside him. The two were engaged in an… interesting conversation. “Hm. I dunno. I think that position could work for either a man or a woman. It depends.”

“I think it works more for a woman…or a man who happens to find himself topped,” the Altus quipped playfully.

More laughter poured from Bull. “Yeah, you might be right. You could always just use the boss to…"

The Qunari abruptly silenced and drew in a breath.

Dorian observed him carefully, finding him to look more than a little pale. “Iron Bull, are you okay?”

The rest of the group went quiet and put their attention on the Qunari, who’d stopped his mount. His eye tugged left to right to left, as if he was seeing something they couldn’t, or feeling it.

“Bull, what is it?” pressed Hannibal, concern etched on his face.

“I…dunno. Something doesn’t feel right. Ayla…she’s scared…so very scared. No…no!”

The Iron Bull turned his horse, kicked its sides, and started racing back for the Inquisition camp. Dorian didn’t wait for any speculation or explanation. He sent his mount after Bull’s. Hannibal, lost and confused, looked to Xena and Varric, then took off after his mate and fellow Qunari. The Warrior Princess and dwarf followed. Arisol and his people did the only thing they could do. They couldn’t return to the Sten without the Inquisitor, so they started back for the Inquisition camp too.

(*)

Thunder boomed again, and rain started to fall shortly after. Iron Bull drove the horse as fast as it could go. He had to get back to her now! He had to! His body felt numb, and for once in a very long time, the chill of winter began to eat through him. Something was so wrong. He felt it.

“HA! HA! HAAAA!” He heeled the horse’s sides. The animal screamed a neigh, and it was by some miracle it didn’t simply stop, rear up, and toss him off.

Bull was able to maintain that speed for fifteen minutes, then he allowed the horse some respite, slowing to a medium gallop so it could catch another wind. When he reached the posts marking the outskirts of the Inquisition camp, he drove the animal at full speed again, racing through the trees with Dorian and the others behind him.
They broke into the clearing, and it was evident that something had happened at the camp. Soldiers hurried about, armed and frenzied. A team of field medics carried a couple of wounded on stretchers for the medical tents. Another body was covered completely, no doubt dead.

Iron Bull jumped from the horse before it completely stopped, instantly going into a run. His heart was about ready to leap from his chest, it slammed against his sternum so forcefully. He skimmed around quickly as he hurried towards his and Ayla’s tent, noting that there were other covered bodies lying about.

Hannibal stopped a soldier running across his path. “What the hell happened?”

“An attack, sir. Tal-Vashoth. A group of them assailed the camp not too long after you left. They killed a dozen, seriously injuring some others.” The soldier looked after Iron Bull and he closed his eyes.

Hannibal yanked his gaze to Bull too and shook his head, face grave. “Oh, no…”

Iron Bull reached the section of tents where he and Ayla stayed, and he stopped short. Paralyzed by fear, anguish, disbelief. A shrouded body rested motionlessly on the ground not far from their tent, lush, bloodstained white hair flowing from beneath the covering. His heart lurched into his throat, blocking his breathing for a long, agonizing run of seconds. He slowly approached, face contorted with pain like none he’d ever experienced, his eye blurred by tears.

The surreal nature of the moment made it all seem staged, like a joke, a horrible joke. Iron Bull couldn’t hear anything. He couldn’t feel anything. The only thing he could see was the covered body, and while his mind wanted to concoct some other reason why the person underneath had such lovely, familiar white tresses, a reason to make it anyone other than her, the Qunari knew it was Ayla.

He didn’t know how many steps he took, didn’t even feel the muscles in his legs or his feet touching the ground. But he was suddenly standing over the figure. His knees hit the ground, splashing muddy water. Very slowly he peeled back the cover, and the tears gathered in his eye plummeted free. He caught his breath at the lifeless way her sheer blue eyes stared up at the stormy heavens. She had been stabbed multiple times in the stomach, chest, and throat.

The Iron Bull pulled Ayla’s body into his great arms and hugged as tight as he could, as if doing so would squeeze sweet, coveted, life-giving breath back into her. He sobbed and rocked back and forth, his eye clenched tight.

“Ayla…nooo…NOOOO!”

The Qunari warrior suddenly pulled back to see her face, stroking her cheek, a dapple of ill-placed hope striking through him. No, she couldn't be dead. Not her. Never her.

“He gently shook her body, and her head rolled limply to the side.

“Come on. It’s okay,” he kept repeating, trembling.

By now the others had reached the absolutely heart-ripping scene. Dorian clamped both hands to his face and started crying, his knees weak. Hannibal held him up, hugging him close to keep him standing. Varric’s shoulders sank and he closed his eyes. Xena had seen her share of death and loss. She stared with sad stoicism at Iron Bull, and she knew she’d do what she could to bring Ayla’s killer to justice.

Bull continued rocking Ayla’s corpse, clutching her to him, her blood saturating his shirt and pants. He looked up at the person who’d walked over.

It was Cole. The man was paler than he’d ever been as a spirit, shoulders rising and falling deeply. “I’m so sorry…”

The anger and anguish in Bull’s eye was so hot it could’ve burned a hole through the man. “Where were you?” he said, voice a strangled whisper. “I left her in your care. WHERE WERE YOU?”

“I…”

“Just go. NOW!”

As Cole walked away, The Iron Bull threw his head back and roared as loud as he could up at the sky. Over and over. Eventually, the roars transformed to all out sobbing. In that awful, devastating instance in time, hunkered in the mud surrounded by death, the Qunari warrior hugged close the body of his one true love—Ayla Imani, Oona of the Jado.
Behind the Scenes: Convening with the Dead

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The lights over the familiar stage transitioned from dim to full, casting the scene into view. The Interviewer sat in his chair that semi-faced a couple of couches. On one couch sat Sera Kah'Vrel and William Knightley, the actor who portrayed Corypheus. His hair contained streaks of silver, and he appeared to be in his mid to late fifties, not an unattractive fellow. Sera, true to her in-Fic self, still sported a short do, wearing skinny jeans, combat boots, and a high-collared jacket.

On the second couch, closer to the Interview sat Aaron Grim, Ayla, and Iron Bull. The man who portrayed the silent Charger wore a retro designed suit, his dirty-blond hair somewhat J-pop inspired, and a thickened beard. Ayla’s attire complimented her enlarged belly, an ankle-length dress, and Bull wore a powder-blue t-shirt with a unicorn on it that hugged his massive torso and arms, showing off the bull tattoo on his right bicep, something that was covered by makeup for the Fic.

The Qunari grinned at the Interviewer. “Well, well, here we are again.”

The Interviewer chuckled, nodding. “Yes, it looks that way. I’m very happy to have you and Ayla back, and I’m especially stoked to have three newbies to the show. Thank you all for coming.”

“I wish I could’ve made it on before my character died. That would’ve been nice,” piped Sera, smiling.

“As do I,” the Interviewer said, “but it seemed fate wouldn’t allow it.” He clasped his hands and leaned forward anxiously. “Is there anything you’re going to miss about playing Sera?”

“Well, yeah—everything. She was fun and quirky, not unlike myself, though I don’t speak in circles like her.” Sera blurted laughter. “I think what I’ll miss most is staring at Vivienne’s ass. She has a nice ass.”

The stage lit up boisterously as they all laughed.

“So…about all the deaths—how do you guys feel?” asked the Interviewer. “I mean, I was definitely expecting someone to die in the battle, to include Corypheus—”

“Well, thank you for making me feel like chopped liver,” William’s accented voice cut in, drawing up more laughter from his co-stars.

The Interviewer smiled widely. “What can I say? I just didn’t see your character coming out of it alive, not with Ares on the loose. I was expecting people to die, I just didn’t really know who.”

“We all felt the same way pretty much,” spoke Aaron. “It doesn’t all strike home until you get that script though,” he chuckled. “I was kind of surprised to see that I was killed off, mostly because of the potential for Grim and Sophitia to get closer.”

“And then all kinds of shit hits the fan, right?” Iron Bull mused.

Exactly.” Aaron nodded.

A few chuckles passed through the group.

“We had Sera dying in the same scene, which made me particularly sad because I LOVE her character,” droned the Interviewer, his features crimping sadly. “I honestly thought someone else not so central to the Inner Circle would’ve taken the hit.”

“Someone like who?” asked William, eyes gleaming curiously.

“I was thinking that someone in the Arrows—Elemir’s group—would probably die, since they were the newest characters to be introduced. Or maybe some of the Xenaverse people.”

“Well,” William said, “that’s what makes it hit harder, the fact that some long-standing characters bit the dust. You don’t visually see much of Corypheus until right around the battle that kills him, but he was definitely central to the plot, until the war god came along.”

“How did you like playing the part?”

“For me, it’s nothing new to play a villain. I’ve done it multiple times, and I’m probably most known for my recurring role in those pirate movies. I’ve also gotten to star in comical horror as well, such as the stepfather in that zombie flick. I enjoy every role I’ve ever gotten and played them as truthfully as I could. The role of Corypheus was no different. My least favorite part of it was the makeup. God, there was just so much of it to transform me into that hideous creature. It would get so flaming, bloody hot.” Chuckles shook through him.

“I can bet,” said the Interviewer.
“With my part done, I’ve been able to take a break from the business for a bit, which my wife is very happy about. She’s been wanting to travel some, and we’ve gotten to. And I’ve also been able to spend more time with my grandchildren, so it all works.”

“I’m glad to hear that, and again, you did wonderfully as Corypheus.”

“Thank you kindly.”

The Interviewer sighed and fixed eyes on Iron Bull and Ayla. “Now, we get to the death that literally left me stunned. It was completely unexpected.”

The couple exchanged looks, smiling some. Ayla spoke up. “Mm. Yes, you can imagine how shocked the two of us were. Um…” The woman gathered her thoughts, looking about for a moment, “…I did cry a little after I read it.”

“A little? Woman, you were bawling pretty hard,” Bull said, smiling over at her, tucked safely under his arm, against his side. “Your eyes were puffy and red for a whole day.”

“Okay, so I cried more than a little. What can I say? I wasn’t expecting my character to die ever.” She trilled out soft laughter. “I’m still shocked about it.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bull said.

“I think what scared me most,” the Interviewer began, “is that in killing Ayla off, the Writer had decided to nix the Fic, leaving it at a complete standstill, but it’s been confirmed as otherwise, right?”

“Yes,” Bull said. “Essentially, we were all given the script, and then assembled once everyone was done reading it. The first thing we were told is that the Fic isn’t ending, so we could get that worry out of our minds. When asked why Ayla had been killed off, they said it’s because the Writer decided she wanted to create a more dynamic effect for characters to interact within.”

“So, just to stir things up, then.”

“Yes, pretty much,” the Qunari said, rubbing his beard. He sighed and kissed his wife’s forehead. “I’m gonna miss having my baby next to me, though. While us actors don’t get any heads up on coming events, I was told that it was going to get kind of dark for my character, which makes sense considering the magnitude of his loss.”

“Man, yeah, that closing sequence with Iron Bull roaring and crying while holding her body gave me chills. I really felt it, you know.”

Bull smiled, nodding. “That was the plan.”

“How did you muster up the inspiration for it? I truly felt the anguish.”

“Well,” he sighed, pondering, “I basically imagined losing Ayla for real. I asked myself: how would I feel about that? It would devastate me if anything happened to her, and I really tried to pull those feelings into the last scene. Of course, we had to film it several times because she kept breaking into sobs in my arms.” He chuckled.

“It was just so heart-breaking!” Ayla entered. “It took a lot to keep pretending to be dead, while the man you loved cried his heart out over your body.”

“It was definitely the hardest scene I’ve had to play so far,” Bull said, giving a resolute nod. “It’s allowed me to push my limits though, and that’s always good.”

“Hmpf,” Ayla chuffed and rolled lovely eyes. “I’d rather still be part of the Fic, though my character’s death has given me some reprieve. In the Fic, at the time of Ayla’s death, she was six months pregnant. In reality, I’m more than eight months along, and the aches and pains of pregnancy are very prominent now. At least I’ll be able to chill and stay off my feet until the baby comes.”

“Any day now,” rang Bull’s resonant voice. Grinning happily, he rubbed her stomach. “Baby three’s almost here.”

“Rabbits,” quipped Sera, grinning.

The group laughed.

“Well, that’s all the time we have for this segment, and I wish you two the best with the new baby. I’m really honored to have you all as guests on the show, and I’ll be tuning in to the Fic to see what happens!”

Sera turned to the right and stuck her tongue out at the camera, then bloomed a cheeky grin and waved at it. Everything faded to black.
I do not own the public images.
Iron Bull remained out in the rain holding Ayla’s body for some time. He didn’t know for how long, though the daylight was still prominent. The initial shock had passed, and now the lingering loneliness, unacceptance, angst, displacement, rage, and unchecked darkness would set in.

He finally stood, lifting her. Unblinking and nearly mechanical, he carried Ayla’s corpse to one of the large medical tents, carefully laying her on a table, straightening her skirts. He reached to lower the lids of her staring, lifeless eyes, and that’s when reality’s huge, hard fist slammed into him again.

Iron Bull collapsed over her body, face buried at her chest, clutching her tightly while he cried, his entire form trembling.

“Ayla…ooooh…whyyyy? Nooo…please, noooo!”

He’d lost her and the baby. They were truly gone. He’d lost everything.

Bull eventually managed to straighten up. He wiped his face on a shirt sleeve and stared down at the remains of his family. Someone moved behind him, then they spoke.

“I…I am sorry to intrude, sir,” the woman said in a soft, grave voice, “but I must clean and examine her body, as per instruction—”

“I know the instruction!” Iron Bull spun so fast to face the woman that she jumped back. He glared down harshly at her.

And she stared back with wide eyes, prepared to flee if necessary.

The Qunari sighed, closed his eye, and nodded. He wanted to turn and look upon Ayla’s body again, to hold it near, but doing that would inevitably send him into a sobbing frenzy again, and he had to keep it together as best he could. His heart ached in a way that seemed painful enough to kill him. He had to erect the same wall he’d conjured during his time in Seheron, and it would serve as a buffer to separate his love for Ayla from everything and everyone else.


The Iron Bull’s face hardened, a façade to cover this fresh pain. He still couldn’t believe she was gone, even after holding her corpse in his arms, feeling the warmth gradually leave her flesh. His features twitched and twisted, and he thought he might cry, but he didn’t. Instead, he forced his legs to work, slowly leaving the tent out into the trickling rain.

Thunder crashed overhead.

Bull stood there staring at nothing, dazed.

“Iron Bull…”

He didn’t turn at the call of his name.

“Iron Bull…”

He still didn’t turn.

Hannibal moved around him, into his line of vision. He sighed. “Bull…”

The Qunari’s eye moved to him.

“I can’t imagine what you’re feeling, I just can’t, but we’re meeting in the war room tent right now, and I need you there while we discuss what happened.”

The Qunari considered his words, then silently turned and started for the meeting place.

Hannibal licked his lips, summoned another huge, heartful sigh, and followed.

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Bull ducked slightly through the opening and entered the tent. His eye raked slowly at every face, twitching when it fell over Cole, who stood directly opposite. And good for him, because while Bull seemed calm outwardly, a potent, fresh rage had gathered just beneath the surface. He could gladly wrap his hands around the smaller man’s throat and strangle the life from him. But he wouldn’t.

The others present were Varric, Xena, Dorian, Arisol’s group, and some higher officers there to deliver their reports and recollections of the attack. Hannibal entered after Bull and sealed the flap.

The Inquisitor went to the table in the center and leaned to it, head hung. “Seven dead and fourteen wounded, some of them seriously.” Aqua eyes lifted to scan everyone present. He shook his head. “This should not have happened, and I need to know how it happened. Lieutenant
Landry, give me your report.”

The lieutenant cleared his throat, nodding anxiously. “You and the party had been gone not more than an hour when the attack happened. It was so sudden. I was on the east side of camp when I heard screams, then war cries, Tal-Vashoth war cries, and that was on the west side of camp. That’s where they came in, from the forest on that side.”

“I noticed that most of the wounded and dead were found on that side of camp.” Hannibal nodded. Behind him, Dorian slipped into a chair, covered his face, and cried some more.

Lieutenant Landry continued. “Their attack was fast and concentrated. We couldn’t even take any of them out before they dispersed back into the trees. We sent men but as of now, they’ve found nothing. It’s almost like they were targeting someone.”

“And where the fuck were you?” Bull growled at Cole, voice trembling angrily. “While Ayla was being stabbed to death, where the fuck were you?” He took a step towards the man.

Hannibal put himself between them. “I know you’re hurting, my friend, and I’m so sorry this happened, but I won’t let you attack Cole.”

Iron Bull’s clenched fists shook at his sides. It took every ounce of control he contained to adhere to his inner promise of not taking his anger out on the rogue. He slowly backed away. Hannibal faced Cole, awaiting his response. Everyone else listened intently as well.

Cole neither flinched nor retracted when Iron Bull had started for him. He merely stood his ground, smothered with guilt, disappointed with himself. Ayla was dead because of him, because he’d left her alone. Looking dazed, he started talking.

“I…wasn’t feeling well. I was tired and hadn’t slept really last night,” Cole answered. “Ayla suggested that I go lie down for a while, insisting she’d be fine, that she’d read a little until I returned. So, I retired to my tent, awakening to the sounds of the attack. By the time I reached your tent…” he finally allowed his pale eyes to focus on Iron Bull, shaking his head, “…it was too late. I saw her lying there, and I knew she was gone. I carried her outside where medics briefly tried to revive her.”

Dorian started another round of sobs.

Bull shut his eye and gathered what little strength he had to keep from unraveling. The tears wanted to overwhelm him, but he wouldn’t let them. Not then.

Hannibal wanted to pull the big guy closer and hug him. The reason he didn’t was because that wasn’t Iron Bull’s way. Even though he was hurting in a way he probably never would again, the Qunari wouldn’t accept such a level of pity or sympathy. Or maybe he would. Hannibal wouldn’t test the theory. For now, he’d let Bull be. That was the best thing anyone could do for him. He instead spoke to Cole.

“If you reached the tent to find her already dead, this insinuates she might have been killed before the attack even started. I’ve already asked around, and no one ever heard her call out.”

“She was targeted,” said Bull softly, his chest empty, void of a heart now. “Whoever killed her focused on…on the baby. Somebody wanted them dead.”

Hannibal turned to him. “Who would want that, Bull?”

The Qunari’s glaring eye tuned in on Arisol. “The Qun.”

Arisol fumed and his features swelled angrily. “We had nothing to do with this attack! How dare you blame us!”

“It’s not so fucking hard to believe. I wasn’t exactly the ideal citizen, and I chose the outside world over them, bound myself to an outsider. That’s more than enough reason for them to want to fucking humiliate and destroy me by taking my family!”

“Iron Bull, please, calm down,” Hannibal spoke softly. “I don’t think it was the Qun. Think about it. What sense would it make for Arisol to come here about a newly proposed alliance just a day before the attack? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“You think someone might have used the cover of the Qun, their presence in the area, to launch the attack?” Xena entered.

“That’s a possibility.” Hannibal nodded.

“I still believe Ayla was the intended target,” said Bull gruffly, lowly. He didn’t know how he would get through this.

“The rest of the attack was just for cover, a decoy. That would explain why it was localized to the west side of camp, where your tent is,” finished Xena.

Silence prevailed while they all considered the developments. There wasn’t much more to go on, so they dispersed. Hannibal would be busy for the rest of the day, taking statements from everyone about their views of the attack, trying to get more information. It would be investigated to the fullest. He would also send word to Skyhold about what had happened, and to the east.
Iron Bull returned to the medical tent, entering very slowly, the flap closing after him. Aside from Ayla’s body, there were two others on tables too. The medical examiner was bent over one, cleaning and sewing wounds. She turned to watch Bull move closer to his wife’s body, taking her hand, stroking her stark hair.

The examiner took a breath, went to another part of the tent, and very gently gathered up a bundle of cloth, which she carried to Bull, holding it out. Her eyes already shimmered with tears, voice trembling. “I…I thought you might want t-t-to…to see your son. So, I extracted him from the womb.”

Bull stared down disbelievingly at the tiny figure wrapped in a clean towel. Fully developed, needing only two more months to finish growing, with tiny hands, facial features, ears, very dark fuzz on his head, eyes closed. Small, soft bumps above his temples marked where his horns would’ve grown (they were the same configuration as his father’s). The lower half of his body was tucked in the covering, but the three stab wounds in his torso showed clearly.

The Qunari just couldn’t take it. He broke down into tears as large hands clasped the little bundle, cradling him in the crook of his arm. He sniffled, wiped his eye, and smiled sadly down at the baby, looking so peaceful in postmortem. Bull lifted him and nuzzled his face, so soft and delicate, as if his skin was spun silk.

The medical examiner was all tears now too. She hated this part of her job. “I’m so sorry!” She turned and hurried from the tent, leaving the man alone with his dead family.

Iron Bull draped over Ayla’s body again, torn by raw emotion. He openly cried, pulling back several minutes later to kiss her cool forehead. His voice cracked when he spoke. “I should’ve been here. I never should’ve left you! I’m so very sorry! I’m sorry!”

More time passed.

The Qunari warrior finally set the baby beside Ayla, tucked against her.

“He’s so perfect. You did so good, my heart, we did…” he whispered, the words shaking past his lips.

Everything began to flash through his mind again. Meeting Ayla, saving her life, their awkward courtship and falling in love with her, their first time together, marrying her, talks about the future, plans. Then, he was crying over their bodies again. He remained there for some time.

He stayed with their bodies until the evening came and it was time to place them on the pyre. The clearing outside of camp to the north served as the funeral place for Ayla, Little Bean, and the rest of the dead. As leader, Hannibal stood before those gathered, an abundant crowd since anyone who wasn’t on duty or standing watch was present. He issued some sorrowful words for the dead, then moved aside.

Iron Bull stepped forward, going to Ayla’s pyre. Mercy, he couldn’t believe this was happening, that she was gone. He’d just seen her smiling, beautiful face that morning, told her that he loved her. And now the world was devoid of her light. The man produced a blade and cut off a length of white tresses, tucking it into his pocket. Her brother would want it.

By the Qun, her brother.

This was Bull’s worst nightmare, losing Ayla, and facing Elemir in the wake of her death. The man had done what Bull probably never would’ve been able to, had he been in Elemir’s position. He let his sister, the woman he loved, go into the protection of a man he didn’t really know, trusting only in her judgment. And in doing so, he’d eventually lost her. Qun, this would destroy him inside too.

Iron Bull leaned down, kissed Ayla’s cold, dead lips, then whispered. “I will always love you, only you…”

He clenched his eye shut, attempting to stave the tears, but they broke through and traced down his cheek anyway. He kissed Little Bean’s forehead, the baby nestled close to his mother, wrapped in a blanket.

Wordlessly, with everyone watching, Bull strode to the nearest fire pit, pulled a torch free, and set the pyre afame by tossing the torch into the kindling. In moments, the inferno engulfed the remains of his family, and he stepped back to watch in silence while the tears streamed. The fire was not only burning them away, it was also searing the softness from The Iron Bull. Any decency or empathy he held would soon dissipate, cleansed by the funeral pyre. All the light would cease, and the darkness would encapsulate him again, much worse than his breakdown caused by the events in Seheron. He’d nearly lost his mind then, but with Ayla and the baby gone, he’d lost his soul, his heart, his purpose. The man who remained was a shell of the Iron Bull that once was. As he stared at the bodies and watched them burn, his features hardened, and the tears dried up. This was the last time he would weep openly; from then on, he’d only do it when alone.

As was customary in her culture when someone died, and she attended the funeral, Xena began singing a heartfelt, soulful lyric, the fires of all the pyres flickering in her steely eyes, each lit one by one.
A large hand came down on Bull’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. It was Hannibal. Bull didn’t acknowledge him, continuing to stare at the flames.

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The Qunari stayed in the clearing until the pyre burned out to nothing more than ash and embers, then he stoically turned and started for his tent. Before he could step inside it, Hannibal walked up.

“Iron Bull, maybe you shouldn’t go in there. It hasn’t been…cleaned up yet.”

Bull turned partially towards him, said nothing, then ducked into the tent, securing the flap after him.

Hannibal drew forth a big breath, tense and apprehensive. He was so sorry for the man’s loss. Iron Bull had become a valued friend and ally, a good person, and this shouldn’t have happened. Still, there was the distinct change Hannibal sensed in him. Ayla’s death was quite fresh, and he could only hope that time would allow Bull to heal.

He turned and left.

Inside the tent, Bull turned the lamp up. He stared down at the large blood stain on the sleep roll, numb all over, inside and out. A daze had fallen over him, and he felt lost. He just wanted to lie down. So, he did, right next to the blood stain. He took up one of the pillows, brought it to his face, and inhaled it. It smelled like her. He clutched the pillow close, staring up at the ceiling.

(*)

Ares witnessed the funeral from afar. He watched how the lone, broken Qunari warrior was the last to leave, and he knew in that moment that these developments put a major dent in his plans for Bull and the Patraians. He would forego them. The man had suffered such a devastating blow that the war god couldn’t bring himself to proceed, not with Bull in such an impure state of mind and heart. For their ritual, the amazons would require that he be ‘unbroken’ to ensure that all of them conceived daughters, and there was no way to be sure it would happen now.

Brown eyes took in the ashen remains of Ayla, and he actually grew sadder. Ares might’ve been conniving, a dick, a nefarious, egotistical asshole, and so many other things, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t feel. It was just that being a god allowed him the privilege of not feeling as deeply or seriously as a mortal. Regardless of what anyone thought, he had grown very fond of Ayla and it hurt him to see her dead. She was very special.

So, no. He wouldn’t carry out his plans with the amazons. He’d leave Iron Bull be for now. It was a shame the warrior women would miss their mating ritual window this time around, since Ares told Vreshka to cancel the men, but, oh well.

The God of War’s handsome figure shimmered in blue light, and he vanished.

(*)

Sleep, understandably, eluded him. Bull recalled drifting between slumber and awareness. However, he was far from exhausted. He’d undergone more strenuous times as a soldier. That morning, he accompanied Hannibal to see the Sten and set up the terms of the Inquisition-Qunari alliance. Things needed to move forward, and Hannibal didn’t want Bull to go, but his presence was required to make sure the Qun didn’t try to pull one over on them. All through the ride to the camp, Bull said nothing, and once there, he spoke only when addressed. He did not smile or display much emotion.

Xena went as well, since she was the only one now who’d be able to sense when Ares was around, though she wouldn’t be able to see him like Ayla could. Within an hour, all was decreed. The Qun would immediately begin to dispatch troops to the south, to be given Haven as their main area of operations since there was no way they’d all fit in Skyhold.

A day later, the party was en route back to the fortress in the mountains.

(*)

Less than a week passed before Hannibal and party returned. It was mostly quiet, except for the horn blast rocking back through the fortress to announce their arrival. They guided their mounts into the main yard and dismounted, letting the stable-hands do their job.

A small crowd had gathered, and at the front of it stood Magnus, Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine, each with solemn expressions. The battlemage appeared paler than usual, a bit haggard and disheveled for the lack of sleep since news of Ayla’s death arrived. Josephine was the softest of the four, and when she saw how crushed Iron Bull was, the despair sculpted over his face, she couldn’t keep her eyes from watering. The ambassador went forward, hand out.

“Iron Bull…” she said.

The towering man finished adjusting his axe and traveling bags—once was Ayla’s—over his torso, then brushed silently by her, heading for his quarters. He disappeared up the steps leading to the upper courtyard.

Hannibal sighed. “He’s going to need a lot of time.”
“Yes, I know,” Josephine said softly, wiping her eyes. “I can’t believe Ayla’s gone. Ele-Elemir… will be crushed…”

“I can’t believe it either,” voiced Cullen. He’d shed tears privately when the message arrived several days ago. “Did you find anything more on the attackers? Their reason?”

“Not really,” Hannibal answered. “And there’s not much to go on. They got away cleanly, so there was no one to interrogate, not even a body to examine, since none of them were killed or injured. They were in and out.”

“Sounds like an assassination,” the commander said, shaking his head.

“That’s the only conclusion we can draw as well. Iron Bull thinks Ayla was the target. Anyway,” Hannibal drew in a breath, “let’s meet in the war room in thirty. I have more news regarding the Qun and the alliance between us and them.”

Iron Bull moved with a slow, long-legged stride, his eye forward. When he reached the entrance to the east tower, his gaze narrowed at the group of children who had gathered to the side of it. Being young had its admirable traits. It meant you got to remain blind to the problems of the world, most times anyway. It meant that while an interdimensional god of war was busy plotting to take everything over, you got to continue playing kiddie games and celebrating birthdays. Being a child simply meant you were afforded the luxury of not worrying about being an adult. All the little faces hovering around the tower entry said as much. They were probably waiting for candy, since Bull customarily brought some back for them when returning from a journey.

Of course, he had nothing for them this time.

Hefting a sigh, the Qunari moved by without even looking down at the children, slipping inside. He shut the door.

The children blinked and exchanged looks.

“Aw! No candy!” cried a boy.

“Where’s the pretty lady?” asked another.

“My mommy told me she went to heaven,” said a little girl. “That’s why Iron Bull is sad.”

Silence hovered between the children. They eventually dispersed to other things.

Iron Bull unlocked the door and pushed it in, drawing forth a minute creeeeak. He stood in the hall for a moment, then entered and shut the door. So quiet, desolate, and cold. He couldn’t remember the room ever capturing such a sour, dismal tone. Light poured in through the windows, but it did nothing to push back the shadow that had formed over his heart. He set the bags and axe down, built a fire, and turned on the lamps.

He hadn’t eaten for hours, and he didn’t feel particularly hungry then, though he’d have to eat something soon. The pangs would become obnoxious by sundown. Such was an effect of a high metabolism. He stood in the center of the room and slowly looked around. To the bed, nicely made, the dishes neatly on shelves, the separator wall between the bathing area and main room. To the rods nailed to the wall holding several dresses, a few pairs of shoes lined beneath, Ayla’s body-length mirror.

And Little Bean’s crib. Bull rearranged the furniture in their room a couple of months ago to accommodate the baby. Both he and Ayla decided the crib should be close to their bed, and that’s where it sat, adorned with a couple of stuffed toys and the little dragon figure Bull made.

The man turned to the hearth and stared at the portrait decorating it, the one of him and Ayla that she got him for Winter Solstice. She was looking forward, right at the artist Lucien Po, her face captured so perfectly in paint, her smile serene and secretive. In the portrait, Iron Bull looked lovingly upon her.

“Ayla…”

The Qunari sat on the bed and brought his hands to his face.

*I can’t live without you, for a man cannot live without his heart*—Bull’s words to Ayla back in the Grozmare Mines after she’d taken that tumble into the pool. Bitter, angry tears overwhelmed him.

“I can’t live without you, I just can’t. Qun, help me, I can’t. Ayla…”

Three days dragged by. Later in the morning, Iron Bull found himself out in the section of the gardens where Ayla’s and Little Bean’s memorial had been placed near Grim’s and Sera’s. He stood staring down at it, bereft of any other feelings but extreme grief, barely contained rage, and self-disappointment. He wanted to scream, to kill someone, preferably the one who’d taken Ayla and their baby away from him. He was nothing now, where he had been everything before. He’d been a husband, a father-to-be, a friendly acquaintance to many, a protector, but that was all gone. And some protector he turned out to be. Couldn’t even keep his family safe.
The beginnings of summer were upon the land, and the temperature at Skyhold’s altitude was a little warmer, warm enough that Bull was shirtless and comfortable. His ears perked at shuffling behind him.

“Elemir and his party approach the outer gate,” said Josephine. The woman was happy to be seeing her man again so soon, but sorry that it had to be under these conditions.

Iron Bull turned and made his way down to the main courtyard. Josephine followed.

(*)

Hannibal and Dorian were already there, along with Cullen and Magnus. Bull gathered himself and waited, watching the inner gate rise. Elemir, Joswen, Vek, Sophitia, and Ozra entered on horseback and dismounted, each of them solemn and speechless for the moment. They’d known Ayla for years, some of them since she was a little girl. Her loss would be painful for all time.

There was nothing for anyone to say, not the Inquisitor or his visitors, only silent gazes that spoke everything. Elemir glared at Iron Bull. He moved swiftly for the Qunari, pulled his arm back, and swung as hard as he could, a strike that Bull could’ve easily dodged but chose not to. His head yanked around when Elemir’s fist collided. The ranger hit him again, and again. The Qunari staggered once, but didn’t go down.

“Elemir, stop!” Sophitia screamed. “Just stop it!”

“Why!” He spat over his shoulder. “It’s his fault she’s dead! And he knows it.” Moss-green eyes boiled with angry fire at Bull. “You know it. She was fine with her own people, her family, and she’d still be alive now if she hadn’t given her heart to you!”

Iron Bull’s eye slowly fixed on him, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Deep, low, and resonant, he spoke, “You’re probably right.”

“I know I am!” Elemir bore his teeth. Tears filled his eyes. They didn’t fall, however. He trembled furiously. “You were supposed to be her guardian, and you failed.”

Bull inhaled greatly, keeping an iron clamp on his emotions. He reached in a pocket of his trousers and pulled out the braided lock of Ayla’s hair he’d cut from her body. He held it out to Elemir.

The ranger shuddered a sigh, and when he finally extended his hand to take it, the tears in his eyes dropped. His lids lowered as he kissed the lock. When his eyes opened again, they hardened like diamonds on Iron Bull. “You stay away from me. If I ever see you again, either you’re going to kill me or I’m going to kill you. We are done.”

“Elemir…” Josephine breathed.

Bull expected nothing less from a loving brother and the man who’d been in love with Ayla long before the Qunari entered the picture and swept her away. He didn’t nod or anything, only staring ahead. Elemir wouldn’t be the only person he’d push away as time passed. Iron Bull mechanically turned and headed away from the courtyard.

Elemir tightly rolled his eyes after him, then went to Josephine. He hugged her close for a moment. “I love you, but I will not be returning here. This place holds memories I do not wish to dapple in, and it hurts. I can’t be here. This doesn’t mean I want us to break up. When I return east and settle some things, I will send for you, and you could visit me whenever you like. But this place,” he snarled, “this place is dead to me. Aside from you, the only reason I will continue my part in the alliance between the Inquisition and Red Army is honor, and I know that we need each other to fight Ares. Otherwise, I’d have nothing to do with any of this.”

The man wiped his eyes.

Josephine didn’t know what to say. Her heart beat painfully, and she felt like her world was unraveling, the world she’d built around her love for Elemir and what had grown between them.

Elemir kissed her gently. “I can’t stay here another moment. I’m leaving.”

“Now? Can’t you at least stay the night? You’ll have to travel down the mountain in the dark,” she protested.

He shook his head, sending shoulder-length auburn locks shifting. “No. We’re leaving now. I merely wanted to see that useless man in person, to deliver that message to him.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on him, Elemir,” Magnus said softly, his voice grave. “Iron Bull has always looked out for Ayla, but sometimes things happen.”

“He failed in his duty to protector her, and that’s all there is to it!” Elemir recomposed himself. He looked to his group. “Resupply yourselves, then we leave.”

Usually, Joswen was the commander of the Arrows. He’d relinquished control for the duration of this journey because Elemir needed this. He needed to face the loss of Ayla head-on. So, within an hour, they mounted back up and left Skyhold.
A link to Xena's funeral lament, which she sings in the show a few times due to the death of someone close to her:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq7mah-jO8
Never-ending night. Dense foliage. Sinister pockets of fog blotching the jungle floor. Like a night-stalking predator, Iron Bull jogged silently through the darkness. He was discerning, expectant, and nervous, as if something was in pursuit, though there appeared to be only him.

He stopped, letting that single eye skim about, his ears open. He sniffed the air and caught the unmistakable whiff of decaying flesh, an acrid, vile smell. The man whipped around and gasped. The specters had come, just as expected. The dead children of Seheron, his slain soldiers, and the Tal-Vashoth Hisrad slew in his vengeful rage. They all stared vacantly at him, surrounding him. Their figures were clad in strips of clothing, eaten away by the unforgiving environment of the jungle, as was their flesh, patrid and falling away from the bone in some places.

Iron Bull’s face contorted as the undead, decomposing figure of Ayla walked between the rest, crudling their equally decaying son. The Oona’s eyes, coated in a silky film, watched him sadly.

“You let us die. This is your fault, all your fault. Why weren’t you there for us?”

The Qunari fell to his knees, illuminated by a spotlight of moonbeam. He sobbed quietly, shaking his head. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t… I didn’t mean to…”

“All your fault…”

Ayla’s ghostly form turned and slowly started back into the jungle.

“Ayla! Ayla, please!”

Bull jumped to his feet and tried to pursue, but his legs were suddenly caught in a puddle of gooey earth up to his knees, and he couldn’t escape. All the undead children, soldiers, and Tal-Vashoth began to close in on him, rotting arms reaching, moaning, their mouths open, eyes gray and wide. Bull weaved left and right trying to keep his eye on Ayla, but he lost sight of her through the hellish crowd.

He relented and let them come, ceasing to struggle. When they reached him, the dead huddled in, smothering, weighing him down into the murky, stinking goop. Up to his chest, then shoulders, then his head. One arm thrust from the pool, shaking and spasming while he drowned in the darkness…

(*)

Iron Bull jerked awake with sweat beading his brow. It had been four months since Ayla died, and the nightmares had set in a hundred-fold; he experienced them every other day. Before he lost her, she’d used the bond between them to ease the ill dreams of Seheron and massacre he brought upon the Tal-Vashoth, and he hadn’t dreamt of it for months. Now, not only was he dreaming it up again, Ayla and the baby had somehow been woven into it.

His head rolled left so he could stare sadly at the empty place beside him as he’d done every morning since he lost her. He sighed and finally sat up, swinging his legs over the side. The place wasn’t as tidy as it used to be, with empty booze bottles on the table, pieces of clothing strewn about. The baby’s furniture had been packed up and put in Skyhold’s storage, along with most of Ayla’s things, her clothing. Her mirror still sat in the corner, however. He decided to keep it in the room, so he could look upon his sorry self to remind him of far he’d fallen and how pitiful he was. The portrait of the couple still sat on the mantel, but it had been turned around.

Bull grimaced at the pair of panties and single long stocking resting on the floor not far away. They belonged to the woman he’d had in there last night. He was so drunk he honestly couldn’t recall her ever wearing panties. He couldn’t even remember her name, and maybe he hadn’t asked. Bull’s depression was deep, and he’d remained in the fight against Ares because it was one of the only things keeping him anchored. The other thing was sex. Fighting and fucking kept him connected to the world around him, allowing him to feel something other than the near unbearable despair and rage, but they were temporary fixes. After the fight, once the adrenaline evened back out in his system, he found himself destitute and lost all over again. It was the same with the sex. There was no love for the partners he took. They served only as a means of physical, instinctual release. It didn’t go beyond that for Iron Bull. He hoped none of his partners ever believed it would, because they’d be very mistaken and highly disappointed. He would never love again.

Ayla was it. She was the one. There would never be anyone else.

So, he’d become a bit of slut about the premises, brooding, drunken a lot of the time. His beard had grown much fuller, and he was noticeably darker in character, seeming almost villainous. The natural thin line of mascara underlining his hard, blue eye appeared a tad thicker and more defined. The Qunari was still very attractive, though more threatening. He rarely smiled, and when he did, it was dry and tainted by mockery, no longer friendly and good-natured. He was gradually being consumed by the pain of losing the one person he ever loved. And he didn’t care.

Nothing mattered. Not anymore. He would happily suffer the horrors of Seheron over again if he didn’t have to go through the nightmare of losing Ayla and the baby. Iron Bull was just biding his time until death finally rode in on its black horse and breathed ice down the back of his neck before whisking him away. As careless as he’d gotten in battle, maybe some dickhead would get
lucky and land a blow to finish him, though he was going to take as many of them with him as he could before that happened.

The Beast of the Battlefield, as people started to call him for his unrelenting, unforgiving conduct against the enemy, finally slipped from the mattress. He cracked his neck a few times, shoulders rolling. His eye spied what appeared to be a full bottle of booze on the table amidst many other bottles. He snatched it up, brought it to his lips, and tipped his head back. The dark green glass had been misleading. Only a few drops came out.

Bull growled and threw the bottle into the hearth, where it smashed. His head throbbed a little from his overindulgence in the drink the previous night. It was nothing he couldn’t handle. He’d had worse. A little coffee would help ease it, the jolt of caffeine.

The man sighed, stalked across the room to the bathing area, and ran a bath to scrub the tart odor of sex-sweat from his body. Afterwards, he dressed in a pair of trousers, boots, and his eyepatch. He could tell by the light streaming through the windows that it was very late in the morning, perhaps very close to noon by now, which meant he’d have to go to the Herald’s Rest for that coffee. He left his room and went to the establishment, pushing the door in. Not surprisingly, he found four other random patrons there. Two sat conversing in a corner, smoking on long-pipes. One sat alone flipping Wicked Grace cards in a game of Solitaire. The fourth worked on a tankard of ale. He had the right idea, Bull thought.

The Qunari’s long stride carried him to the bar, and he lowered to a stool.

Cabot walked over, peering at him from behind the counter. He grabbed a mug and started to buff it preparatory. “As much as ye put away last eve, I didn’t think I’d be seein’ ye at least until the sun went down.”

“How about a cup of coffee? None of that fancy shit, just regular.” The beverage was free, so Bull didn’t bother tossing down the coin to cover it.

The dwarf, like everyone else, noticed how Iron Bull transformed. His fuse was much shorter these days, and Cabot didn’t want to be the catalyst that ignited him. He nodded, grabbed the coffee pot, and poured, setting the mug to the bar top.

“Thanks,” Bull muttered in courtesy only. He sipped the brew and shut his eye, already feeling the welcomed effects of caffeine-induced pacification.

The door opened and shut. Footsteps fell over old wood, getting closer to the Qunari. He didn’t bother to turn, until the person sat on the stool beside him. She looked very familiar, and then it clicked.

“You’re the woman from last night.”

She smiled wryly, on the verge of a smirk. “Corliss…or don’t you remember? Certainly, I couldn’t have been that forgettable.”

Iron Bull looked ahead at the mirror behind the bar, sipping his coffee. “It slipped my mind is all.”

“Ah, I see. Well, you did have a lot to drink,” she loosened a chuckle. Corliss was a cute human bard with caramel skin. Her band had been in Skyhold for almost two weeks performing at the Rest. She’d seen the Qunari visiting the place often and decided to indulge in him. He nodded, grabbed the coffee pot, and poured, setting the mug to the bar top.

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Her hand settled over his hard, huge arm, trailing down it.

Bull’s head slowly turned, and he studied her. “Yeah, sure, why not.”

“Maybe this time you’ll let me stay the night.” She grinned.

“Not likely.”

The man drank most of the coffee, set the mug down, then left the tavern with Corliss frowning after him. He treated everyone like this now, and the funny yet sad thing was that they always kept going back for more. They enjoyed the Bull-rides, and that worked fine for him. It meant he never lacked a warm, willing hole when he wanted one.

Bull started for the training area, and at the top of the steps leading down into the main courtyard, Hannibal caught up to him, matching his pace.

“How are you doing today, Bull?”

He shrugged. “Fine.” His pace didn’t slow, and he didn’t look over at the Inquisitor.

Hannibal had watched this transformation in Iron Bull over the past few months, his disinterest and aloofness, and he felt there was nothing he could really do for his friend. Bull was still an exceptional warrior, and his fighting skills were very much needed. Hannibal decided the best thing to do was to keep him active on the battlefield whenever possible to help fill the time.

The slightly shorter Qunari nodded. They reached the bottom of the steps, striding for the training yard. “Leliana received word early this morning that the Arishok has returned to Haven. We’re heading down tomorrow to convene with him.”
Bull stopped and faced him. “Okay.”

Hannibal silently regarded him, looking like he might say something, but holding back.

“Anything else, boss?”

“No…well…except you know you can talk to me if you want, right?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be ready to leave at dawn.”

Iron Bull presented the broad wall of his back and left Hannibal standing there staring after him. The Qunari immediately went to one of the racks where people kept their personal weapons and removed his axe. He ignored the looks and stares from others in the area, going to an unoccupied sparring dummy. Bull practiced strokes and stances alone for a while, pivoting and twisting his powerful body, consumed by the need to constantly exert the rage gathered inside him. He pretended that the dummy was the Tal-Vashoth piece of dog shit that took Ayla and Little Bean from him, imagining he could see the feral sneer on their face as they attacked an innocent pregnant woman. This urged Bull to swing and hit harder, and while the sparring dummies were made to endure even the roughest treatment, the one he hacked away on didn’t stand much of a chance.

The man roared, his face wild, and he brought the blunt side of his great axe down on the target, splitting its beam. The dummy toppled heavily to the ground, all busted and maimed, a pitiful pile of splintered leather-enforced wood, burlap, and stuffing. Gathering deep breaths, Iron Bull growled down at it, wishing it was his wife and child’s murderer, longing to see the intoxicating spatter of brains, bone, and viscera. But it was just the dummy.

All eyes in the area were on him, everyone having stopped what they were doing. Bull didn’t care.

“Um…I was going to offer to spar with you, seeing as we haven’t in a while, Chief,” came a low, slightly shaky voice that sounded as if its owner was trying to be joking, “but now doesn’t seem to be a good time.”

Iron Bull took a breath and turned to Krem. He looked levelly down at him, the Qunari’s features holding not the faintest hint of warmth. If anything, he appeared to ice over. “Maybe you should find someone smaller to spar with. I wouldn’t want to hurt you. You are just a woman.”

It was a contemptuous remark that Bull instantly regretted. The hurt on Krem’s features tugged at the tiny, guarded nugget that remained of his heart. Bull shook his head, and the scowl on his face lost its edge.

“I’m sorry, Krem. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“S’alright, Chief. I understand.”

“No, it’s not alright. But I don’t think you should spar with me, not anymore.”

At that, Bull turned from him, went to put his weapon away, and headed for the pub. It was well after noon and he could use a drink, or several, and some food.

(*)

Ares controlled so much of the Tevinter Imperium now that he’d relocated his main base of operation from Villa Maurel in the Emerald Graves to the city of Qarinus. The position placed him much closer to Qunari territory, separated from Seheron by the Venefication Sea and Ventosus Straits.

On this fine if not a little overcast day, the God of War stood before a massive crowd, elevated by a sturdy wooden boardwalk overlooking the waterfront. Five people were tied to posts behind him. Off to the side stood Resentius, Elgar’nan, and Fen’Harel.

Ares raised a hand, ushering in silence amongst the people. His voice easily carried for all to hear.

“Good citizens of Qarinus, loyal followers of my order, I am sorry for the loss you have suffered at the hands of terrorists like these.”

The god swept his arm to gesture at the five prisoners. They were part of a resistance group that attacked the city last night, burning businesses and homes of Ares supporters. The god would make an example of them. He faced the crowd.

“I wish I had been able to stop it, to spare you such strife. You can rest assured that these fiends will pay dearly in pain, as will any who dare to disrupt the harmony we have created.”

The people rustled and rallied, nodding, shaking their fists, yelling for vengeance. Ares smiled and nodded. He wasn’t sure how it worked for other gods, but Earth gods needed people to focus their belief and allegiance into them. That energy fed the entity that was the god. Sure, he could simply start forcing people to do his bidding rather than play the monumental game of chess he constantly indulged in, moving people around like pieces, but that would not give him the energy he required. He could possibly find himself diminished. The game was tedious at times but necessary. He rallied the mortals that believed in him and gave them something in return, be it healthy livestock, bountiful harvests, or otherwise. They would do his bidding then. That was how being a god on Earth worked, and it had been working for him a very long time. Besides, he enjoyed
playing around with peoples' lives.

“You’re no god!” yelled one of the prisoners, a woman. She tugged uselessly at her bindings. “You’re a demon!”

Ares simply held his chin level, eyes on her. He lifted his hand and summoned blue fire, the hottest kind. It danced in his palm. “By all that is light, in the name of my father, the Maker, and my mother, Andraste, I cleanse you.”

With the faintest flick of his wrist, all five prisoners combusted, smothered by searing, lapping azure flames. They writhed and screamed at the pain of burning alive. Some out in the crowd cringed in fear, never having seen anything like this, while others nodded resolutely, thinking the five were getting what they deserved.

Resentius watched unflinchingly. His life was great thanks to Ares. He had a big house, prestige, women, money, and power. He also served as general of the greatest army on Thedas.

Elgar’nan stood with his hands clasped at the small of his back, straight hair flowing over his shoulders. Only his eyes moved, taking in how awed the crowd was by Ares. He just had to bide his time until the right opening came. He would get his orb back somehow.

Fen’Harel was mortified by the display, despite how collected and indifferent he looked outwardly. Everything had taken a turn for the worst since the night he first crossed paths with Ares in the Fade, and he’d fallen so low. The only reason the elf hadn’t left was because he, like Elgar’nan, knew Ares was the key to restoration, to getting his godhood back. Also, the only place he wanted to be right then was back east in the hidden sanctuary, but he didn’t dare go there with Ares watching him so closely. He sighed, wondering how the Inner Circle was faring in the wake of all the war, the loss of Ayla. He already knew Iron Bull was taking it very hard.

Fen’Harel had watched a couple of battles from afar and saw firsthand why the man had gained the nickname Beast of the Battlefield. He was relentless, powerful, and brutish, sometimes using his bare hands to neutralize foes. There had even been a time when Bull tossed his axe aside, pulled loose his knife, and ran into a group of enemies, killing every last one. Fen’Harel felt immense pity for the man. He would probably never know peace again. Periwinkle eyes hardened on the execution.

The five captives had ceased screaming or moving, and when the blue flames finished consuming them, there was nothing left but charred posts, a skull here or there, and blackened piles of smoking ash that had begun to sift away in the sea breeze.

The crowd burst into riotous cheer, chanting Ares’s name.

The war god gazed at his followers coolly, his expression one of absolute triumph. This world was almost his. He supposed he could’ve executed the last phase of his plans months ago, but all of it was too satisfying. He’d do it soon enough.

Ares strode to Resentius. “Have someone clean this mess up and make sure order is maintained.”

“It shall be done, milord.” The general partially bowed.

The God of War looked to his elvhen companions, grinning. “I’ll see you two back at the estate later.”

He disappeared.

(*)

That evening, Corliss and her band performed at a packed Herald’s Rest, and while she sang and danced to the thump of drums, strum of lutes, and flowing flutes, the pretty woman spotted Iron Bull out in the crowd a few times, drinking, watching. Sometime in the middle of the first set, she lost sight of him. When the set ended for a break, she went to the bar for a cup of water.

“Anything else I can get for ye, miss?” Cabot asked.

“Yes, actually. Have you seen Iron Bull?”

The dwarf didn’t answer immediately, giving her a somewhat disapproving look. After the way the Qunari brushed her off earlier, one would think she’d get the idea that he wasn’t all that interested. But, hey, that wasn’t Cabot’s business. He nodded for the door. “Left out a little while ago.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Corliss smiled, finished her water, and left the pub. She was about to start for the east tower and Bull’s quarters when sounds caught her ear. They came from around the side of the building. Curious, the bard started for it, stepping lightly, sticking close to the tall bushes that hugged the Rest’s front wall. As she got closer to the source, the sounds became more discernible—taking, moaning, grunting, growling.

“Harder…fuck me harder…ooo…yeah…”

“Mm. This how you want it?” Familiar and rich was the man’s voice. He groaned thickly.

“Oh, Maker, yeees. Fuck me just like that!”
Corliss dreaded to see what lie around the corner, but she just had to. Slowly, she stepped around the side and gasped a breath. There in the shadows, with his pants down to the middle of his thighs, was Iron Bull. He was positioned behind a run-of-the-mill looking blond woman with big tits, her skirt secured up around her waist and panties looped around one ankle, legs apart, hands planted against the side of the building, large ass hoisted in the air so the Qunari could bang her good from the back.

They both looked to Corliss.

The blond rolled her eyes. “Go away, bitch.”

Bull’s eye yanked to the woman in whom he was buried up to his testicles. “Be nice.” His attention fixed on Corliss, who stood there looking mortified. “You want in on this?”

The bard didn’t answer, blinking.

“Does this mean you’re not coming by later?”

Corliss finally unfroze and stormed off.

Iron Bull shrugged and went back to screwing the blond. Ten minutes later, he exploded inside her, blandly bid her goodnight, then retired to his own quarters for a bath. He went to bed after that since he had to leave early the following day.

(*)

Things ran as usual the next morning, with the party up, partaking in the Heroes Breakfast, and readying their horses. Iron Bull climbed into the saddle and started leading his mount from the stable area. On his way to the gate, he passed by Corliss and her troupe, who headed to load their cart. They were departing the fortress as well. The bard’s eyes narrowed at him and rolled, her chin lifting.

Her reaction didn’t make the slightest impression on Iron Bull. The woman had made the naive assumption that the Qunari would be exclusive to her since they had sex, and even with only one more day before she left. When she caught him banging the woman last night, she realized how mistaken she was.

Bull mentally dismissed her and memories of her. She’d been there and willing when the urge built in him, and that was all. Moving on.

Hannibal rode up beside him. He’d seen the silent treatment from the woman. “Everything okay there?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal nodded. He wouldn’t push Bull into talking. Doing that only made the huge man more upset and snarky.

(*)

Haven lay on the east side of the Frostbacks. It had been mostly destroyed by Corypheus’s attack over a year ago. Now, it was mostly rebuilt and fortified, thanks to efforts overseen by Krem and Cullen. By the terms decreed for the alliance between the Inquisition and the Qun, the town had become a base of Qunari operations. Their tents spread across the basin, lining the shores of the lake, as did their instruments of war—catapults, trebuchets, and the like. Hannibal understood Qunari weren’t the only people that comprised the Qun. Humans, elves, and dwarves also served under the society, referred to as Viddathari, and they were abundant amongst the hundreds of soldiers.

When Hannibal, Bull, Cullen, Cassandra, and Dorian rode through the gates, they received brief looks and not much more. Their faces were familiar to the guards and ranks. Arisol was there to meet them.

“Please, leave your horses and come. The Arishok awaits.”

“Yes, and I know how he doesn’t like to wait,” drawled Hannibal.

The Inquisitor and his group walked through the inner section of Haven, by that place where Varric always used to hang out, the little house Hannibal had been given after he closed the main rift at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, past the area where Leliana’s operations used to be set up. It all seemed so long ago, and so many things, good and bad, had occurred since then.

They reached the doors of the chantry, which no longer served as such. The building was used to house all prominent Qunari figures, Arishok included. They crossed the threshold to see Qunari, elves, humans, and dwarves bustling about to their duties. One tall, slim, gray-skinned female with long hair and short horns carried a large basket of freshly baked bread for a destination, her occupation being a baker. She smiled warmly at Iron Bull when they passed each other, and he allowed his eye to roam, turning over his shoulder so he could get a look at her ass. Maybe he’d try to find her later.

A guard stood outside the door of the war room. He nodded to Arisol and pushed the door in for them. Hannibal briefly observed the very familiar room, before giving his attention to the Qun’s current Arishok. He was glad that this room had been left mostly as it was before, containing the
same war table, shelves of books, and décor. Some of the Arishok’s personal trophies and belongings adorned the walls and shelves, though.

The Arishok himself was a massive man, just as big as Iron Bull. Two sets of horns curled from his head, which was capped with short black hair. His skin was deep gray, his eyes a fierce hazel. An old scar traced his right cheek from ear to chin, and his nose was slightly crooked, as if it had never healed correctly after being broken more than once. Full lips widened into a smile that was both amused and condescending.

“Welcome back, Inquisitor.”

“Arishok,” Hannibal said, “a pleasure.”

The leader and commander of the Qun’s army skirted his eyes to Iron Bull. “You’re looking better than the last time I saw you, One-one-seven-zero-nine. I assume you’ve worked through the loss of your woman by now.”

11709.

That had been Iron Bull’s numerical designation, which was how all Qunari were identified from birth up until they were either given a name or a job. In his case, he’d received a job, Hisrad. He never got a name, choosing his own later in life: The Iron Bull. Arishok, however, decided he wouldn’t call Bull by that name, opting instead to refer to him as his numbers. Bull didn’t care either way, letting the pompous jerk do as he wished, except when it came to talk of Ayla.

Iron Bull’s eye hardened further at Arishok. “I told you before not to speak of her. She’s of no concern to you.”

“Hm.” Arishok loved to push buttons. Doing so elicited the most truthful responses from people. He’d spent some of his military career in the Ben-Hassrath and delved heavily into mentally breaking prisoners and members of the Qun who required re-education. The commander put hands to the war table and leaned closer. “You don’t tell me anything. You’re not even part of the Qun anymore officially. You’re more Tal-Vashoth than—”

“I am not Tal-Vashoth,” Iron Bull’s anger strained for release, the words seeping tightly past his lips. “They’re the ones who killed her.”

“Precisely,” Arishok nodded. “Between Lydes, Verchiel, the Crestwood region, and thousands of free-agent warriors, the war god has plenty of soldiers in close enough proximity,” said Cullen.

“Right,” Hannibal said. “Everyone get a good night’s rest, because we’re up early and riding hard back to Skyhold.”

And speaking of riding hard…
name—D’Aranna, which she chose herself years ago—and sharing a few drinks at the pub, Bull was engaged in sex back in her room.

The woman straddled him on the bed, quivering and moaning, riding. She’d just climaxed and was coming down gradually. Bull followed her into temporary ecstasy soon after, though there were times when he hadn’t been courteous to some of his partners, taking his climax and leaving them high and dry. This session was the same as all the others. Routine, instinctual release that lacked anything other than pure, raw sex. No kissing, snuggling, or true intimacy.

Once he’d gone limp inside her, the Qunari gently rolled her off him, then eased from bed. He grabbed his pants and pulled them on.

D’Aranna stretched and purred, looking amorously satisfied at his broad, muscular back, the incredible sculpting of his ass, legs, and arms. “Mm. For the Beast of the Battlefield, you don’t seem so beastly. Certainly not as scary as I’ve heard.”

“You don’t know me.” Bull tied his pants shut.

“Maybe I would like to know you better. Stay the night.”

“No.” He sat in a chair and pulled his boots on.

“Why not?” D’Aranna sat up, giving him a wanton, seductive smile, enjoying how the hearth light glowed over his skin. “You need a warm bed to make you happy. I can sense that you are sad.”

Iron Bull’s eye lingered on her, his gaze not exactly soft, nor as strict and menacing as it could be. “I had a warm bed once. Now I sleep in the cold. Good night.”

D’Aranna sighed and watched him go. She huffed and flopped back on the bed when the door shut after him.

(*)

Hannibal and the others had been given rather nice quarters within the town’s walls, and Bull had been offered the same. Instead, he’d chosen quarters in the small sea of tents with the Qunari army outside the walls. He was used to such arrangements, and it didn’t bother him. Like a half-dead, half-feeling shadow of a man, he moved through the soldiers, his face perpetually sad while equally brooding.

Before he reached his tent, he spotted a figure through the many warriors and workers, catching glimpses of her while they moved across his line of vision, obscuring her at times. It was a woman with her back to him, tending to something. She wore a long dress and possessed flowing white hair. His heart caught in his throat. Unblinking, he moved for her, scared and excited, almost petrified.

He reached the woman, carefully grabbed her arm, and turned her…but it wasn’t who he thought, which caused his heart to sink into hell again. His eye had played a trick on him. She had pale skin and a white mane that, while lengthy, wasn’t even close to the same kinky, curly grade Ayla had.

The elfhen laundry attendant stared up at him, surprised. Her large eyes batted. “C-can I help you, milord?”

Bull shook his head, answering almost inaudibly. “No. I’m…sorry.”

He turned and continued to his tent, sealing the flap after him. The man sat on the bed roll, dug in his traveling bag, and pulled out the braid-lock of Ayla’s hair. He laid back, caressing the coveted item.

“Why does this hurt so much, Naaremna?” he whispered, tears slipping from his eye.
They returned to Skyhold sometime in the afternoon the next day. Cullen, the strict, assertive military mind that he was, spread word of what was happening to the rest of the Inner Circle and his troops. Working with Leliana, he sent out encrypted messages to certain Inquisition posts using her spy network. Kirkwall and Highever would know what to expect and get things in place several days before the party was in the area.

They’d leave out in the morning. So much movement. There never seemed to be time for much else these days. Ares was making it very difficult. He had to be kept at bay, however, or they’d lose the war and Thedas to his rule.

That evening, Iron Bull made his way to the Herald’s Rest, his favorite place other than his quarters or the training yard. Out of habit, he stalked through the room and sat on the padded bench offside of the fireplace. The Chargers stopped chatting and watched him silently, their Chief who stared with hard woe out into the busy room. They didn’t know what to do for him, and it saddened them to witness his decent into desolation. Never had the Chargers seen Bull in such a state. Yes, he’d been shaken by Grim’s loss, but Ayla’s death had disrupted everything about him. Since the day their Chief introduced the blind beauty to them, they knew he was in love with her. She’d become his best friend, his confidant, his soul mate, and losing her was like losing a significant part of himself.

How did they battle it? How did they even begin to ease the pain? They Chargers had no idea. All they knew was that they’d never give up on him. The Iron Bull was the reason they were all together, a family. He was also the reason Krem was alive.

The lieutenant poured a cup of Charger’s brew and took it to Bull. “You look like you could use one.”

Bull turned to him, then took the drink. “Thanks.” He knocked back half of it, grimacing at the stringent sting in his throat, the welcoming fire in his chest.

“Chief,” Krem spoke above the lute-song filling the room, “we’re here for you, just so you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Bull finished the alcohol. His eye scanned the other Chargers, then rested stiffly over Krem. “This is just something I need to handle on my own. I’m placing you in command of the Chargers until further notice.”

“Wha…? Hold up, Chief,” Krem stammered, raising his hands.

“No need for that. You’re more than qualified for the job. And I…” he stared down into his cup, “…I’m no longer fit to lead the team.”

“But, Chief…”

When Iron Bull’s gaze met Krem’s again, it seemed to have hardened, as had his rugged features. “Don’t argue with me, Krem. I’m not the same man anymore, and this needs to be done. Now,” Bull’s head turned from him and he stared forward, “go and be with your team.”

Krem’s legs wouldn’t move at first. He was gradually processing what had transpired. He finally turned and went back to the Chargers, taking his seat, he stared sadly at Iron Bull.

The Qunari subsided further into his darkness, a predatorial spark flickering in his eye. Bertrand filled mugs and glasses at nearby tables. He reached out with lightning speed as she passed and gently yet firmly gripped her arm, allowing his eye to roam lasciviously over her.

Bull growled heatedly.

Bertrand conjured a thick smirk, shaking her head. “I told ye before, Bull, it’s not gonna happen. We’ve been over for some time.”

“And you need to get yer shit together, instead of feeling sorry for ye’self,” she snapped, then sighed. “Let go of my arm.”

The man’s expression changed from amorous to brooding. Who the hell did she think she was, trying to tell him what he needed? Bull sneered and held his cup out. Bertrand filled it, and he abruptly let her go. Didn’t matter. He’d find someone before the night was through.

Iron Bull sat there for two hours getting sauced, attempting to smooth the hurt away if only for a little while. He got up once to go outside and piss in the bushes around the side of the building. He returned to his bench and nursed his seventh or eighth cup of ale, leaning back lazily. His prowling eye stopped tracing the room when it fell on a pair of men, an elf and a human. They appeared to be a couple, from the way they danced against one another, their bodies rubbing and writhing.

And they both smiled sensuously at him. Two little temptresses. As far as men went, they were his type—small to medium build, effeminate, pretty. From the looks they gave, Bull was sure he’d found not one but two warm, willing holes for the night.
The Qunari finished his drink and headed over. “The two of you see something you like?”

The elf chuckled and licked his lips. “We sure do, big boy.”

The human male stepped in and pressed a hand to Bull’s chest, testing the firmness of his flesh. “You’re so…warm.”

“And you’re cute.” His eye skimmed between them. “Are you sure you’re up for the ride?”

“Mm-hmm. Oh, yes,” drawled the slender elvhen man.

Bull took a moment to consider them, then nodded. “Okay, then. There are two rules. Number one: things get too rough, you tell me; we stop. The safe word is katoh. Number two: never kiss me on the mouth. Got that?”

Bull laid down these terms for all his partners. If they didn’t agree, they didn’t get the ‘D’.

“Yes,” the men said together, excited.

Krem and the Chargers watched Bull approach and proposition the couple, all the way up until they left the Herald’s Rest. The lieutenant shook his head. “This isn’t good. He’s so far gone that he may never return. I think we might have lost our Chief. What other reason would he have for putting me in command, unless he never intended to reassume it?”

“I can’t believe he’s walking away from us,” Skinner said softly, staring into the candle on their table.

“Maybe he just needs some time,” Stitches voiced. “A lot of it. I’ll keep an eye on him during the trip to Kirkwall.”

Of all the Chargers, Stitches had accompanied the party to most battles, using his medical expertise to patch people up. He was very good at it, so Hannibal agreed to let him help.

“Yeah, you better watch him good,” said Krem. “At this rate, he’s bound to slip up out there and find a sword in his chest.”

(*)

They reached his room, and Iron Bull opened the door, waiting for them to enter. Once inside, he closed and locked it, staring down at the men, who stood in the center of the room, observing the less than tidy place. The sheets on the bed were tousled, a small stack of dishes sat in the washing basin. Booze bottles cluttered the table. None of this really bothered the men, though. It wasn’t truly filthy, just cluttered. Besides, they’d gone there with the intention of getting a large piece of the Qunari.

Bull went around the room lighting lamps, starting a fire. The men made themselves more comfortable in the meantime, stripping off their shoes and shirts. Bull slowly approached them, a low, animalistic rumble hovering in the back of his throat.

He eyed one man. “If things become too much, what do we say?”

“Um…katoh?”

Bull’s gaze tugged to the other man. “And what’s the other rule?”

“No mouth-kisses.”

“Good. Let’s do this.” He undid his pants and grabbed the human male’s arm, gently coercing him to his knees. “Suck.”

(*)

For over an hour Bull fooled around with the couple, enjoying them in every possible way. He laid on the center of the bed now staring up at the ceiling, the wisp of euphoria and satisfaction having seeped from him as fast as the seed he’d released a short while ago. Emptiness engulfed him once more, and he felt nothing. Soon, the rage and despair would return, and he’d have to vent them again. The human and elf laid beside him kissing and touching one another.

“It’s time for you to go.”

“What?” the elvhen man rolled over, hugging an arm over Bull’s middle. This caused the Qunari to stiffen and frown. “Can’t we just sleep here?”

“Yeah, so, rule number three: no one stays the night. You can use the tub to get cleaned up, then you have to go.”

The human male huffed and sat up. “Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Iron Bull’s features hardened. “Get out.”

Both men glared at him, shaking their heads. They climbed from bed and started to dress, all the
while shooting resentful looks Bull’s way. They finished and headed for the door.
The human male turned over his shoulder. “You’re a real asshole, you know that?”
Iron Bull kept staring up at the ceiling, issuing no response save for brooding silence.
The men left, slamming the door after them.

(*)

Commander Rutherford’s planning and time management was quite impeccable. He’d estimated that the Inquisition and Qunari forces amassed would reach Kirkwall in just over a week, and he was right. Hannibal and party left Skyhold six days ago, went back down into Haven to gather up the Arishok and his traveling group, then marched northeast to the Storm Coast, city of Highever. From there, they took on two-hundred more soldiers, loaded up in Qunari ships, and set sail across the Waking Sea. The small fleet hooked a path that took them east instead of west. Ideally and strategically, as discussed between Cullen and the Arishok, it made sense to hit the shore several miles down from Kirkwall. If the enemy was there already, they wouldn’t see the reinforcements coming.

The journey over the water would take about a day.

Iron Bull sat on a wooden crate on the flagship’s main deck. He stared out portside to the west, watching the last of the sun sink into the sea. As always—except in those times when he took sex partners to make his mind forget—he thought of Ayla, of Little Bean. His space bubble got breached by someone who sat to his right.

Neither said anything for a long while, only staring off at the darkening horizon.

“I’ve given you some time and distance, because that’s the least of what you need,” said Ryder softly. “I’m not going to say, ‘I’m sorry’, even though I am, my friend. You’ve heard that enough by now. What I will say is that it can get better, if you let it, it can.”

“It will never get better. The only way that can happen is if I get my family back. No chance of that.” Bull kept looking forward.

Ryder’s eyes fell to his hands, and he shook his head. “No. They are gone. But you are still here. You’re still alive.”

The Qunari’s shoulders bounced with low, menacing chuckles. “I might as well be dead.”

“My grief is different from yours and isn’t comparable on any scale. I know this. But take it from someone who has lingered in regret for years that there is no other way to get through it but to face it.”

Bull’s eye flicked to him, and his words came out constricted, frustrated, “What do you think I do every day? I face it.”

“No, you fight it, and it is fighting you back. It’s winning.”

“Why don’t you go be all master prophet somewhere else?” Bull growled. “Leave me alone.”

Exhaling a quiet sigh, Ryder stood, staring down at Bull. “You’re the best warrior I know, and it’s a shame that you’re letting this grief get the better of you. Strike it down soon, friend, or it will devour you.”

“Piss off, hero.”

Ryder did as Bull wanted. He left him alone, sitting there on that crate and watching the sea, boiling in thoughts of vengeance, working to hold back a monstrous rage.

(*)

Night fully blanketed the land. The cloud cover was thin and broken enough to reveal huge patches of star-speckled sky and a silvery moon. Ares stood on the rocky shore in the basin of the Vimmark Mountains, a couple of miles away from Kirkwall. He gazed out at the water, knowing his opponent approached. He couldn’t see the ships out there, but he knew they were coming.

Playing mortal chess was highly satisfying. His own forces were still two days from Kirkwall and would use a western road to bypass the mountains. They’d cut through the Planasene Forest for the city, and battle—oh glorious battle—would commence in his honor, feeding into his eternal power.

The devilishly handsome war god grinned darkly.

(*)

Lassalanta moved silently through Ayla’s room again, as she had several times for the past four months, touching over the young woman’s things. Her pale hand glided over the dark wood of Ayla’s harp, along the foot of the bed. She stopped at a decorative cabinet holding shelves of various dolls, picking up one that Lassalanta had given her blind daughter years ago. The custom-made doll had been fashioned after Ayla, the porcelain head and limbs masterfully painted to reflect her flawless, ebony skin, the eyes crafted perfect and piercingly blue, the hair long, tight,
fluffy white ringlets. The doll wore a beautifully tailored dress and little shoes.

“My beautiful, precious girl…”

The queen closed her eyes and hugged the toy close. She stepped out onto the terrace and began singing an old Elvhen lamentation, and she’d continue to grieve for her unofficial daughter for a while yet. Unlike Elemir, Lassalanta held no anger towards Iron Bull, and she didn’t blame him for Ayla’s death. Contrarily, she knew what was in the Qunari’s heart and the goodness of his character, and she fully believed Bull would give his life in an instant to save Ayla and their child. Lassalanta also knew of the other-than-brotherly love Elemir had for Ayla, but never spoke of it or addressed it to him. She spotted it as clearly as Bull had.

Her song carried through the palace grounds, reaching the ears of servants and others about the house, all of whom listened with saddened, heavy hearts. Their princess was greatly missed.

(*)

The ships anchored offshore in the predawn hours. Longboats were loaded up soon after, transporting the troops to land. They formed up and started trekking westward for Kirkwall. Hannibal walked at the head of the formation, as did Arishok.

“I hope your message to the city made it without delay,” Arishok said.

Hannibal spared him a glance. “It did. Leliana is very skilled at moving information discreetly.”

The Qunari military mind chuckle lowly. “She is rather intriguing.” He’d spoken with Leliana twice in an official capacity, though he wouldn’t have minded something more intimate with the woman. “Perhaps, you could put in good words for me, gain her favor.”

“Yeah, I kind of don’t think you’re her type.”

“Let her decide that.”

“If you’re so confident, you don’t need me to vouch for you.”

“True, but it never hurts to have positive endorsements.” The Arishok formulated a hearty smile, eyes twinkling.

The troops continued, stopping once for half an hour. Sometime in the afternoon, the scouts that had been sent forward popped out of the forest running along the road at the base of the mountains. They reported that troops from Ostwick, Markham, and Hercinia were positioned at Kirkwall, ready to defend.

(*)

The Inquisition and Qunari forces arrived at Kirkwall so late in the evening that there wasn’t much to do but wash up, grab food, and head to bed. And this is what the bulk of the troops did. Hannibal, Arishok, and the other Inner Circle members headed to the Viscount’s Keep in Hightown, where they were immediately accompanied to the Viscount’s office.

Guards opened the door, allowed them entry, then shut the doors after them.

Provisional Viscount Bran Cavin stood by the war table, hands clasped at the small of his back. He appeared slightly unnerved, which wasn’t too strange considering he’d been tossed in the role as leader of Kirkwall on a “temporary” basis. The position of Viscount should’ve gone to Hawke, but he died in the Fade, giving his life to distract a Nightmare demon so that Hannibal, his party, and Grey Warden Stroud could escape. Bran figured it was only natural the position fall to him until a permanent Viscount could take the seat, considering he had been Seneschal of the house and knew the ins and outs of the position.

“Inquisitor, Arishok, friends—welcome,” Bran spoke. He briefly caught Varric’s eye and read the discomfort there. The dwarf had been good friends with Hawke and was highly unsettled by his loss. Bran’s smile twitched nervously, and he sighed, lifting a brow. “This city has seen Blights, darkspawn, Qunari attacks, Tevinter brutalization, Templar mutiny, and so much more. It was only a matter of time before Ares set his eyes here.”

“Which is why Ostwick and Markham have been splitting their armies between their own cities and Kirkwall,” Hannibal said. “This place is the City of Stone, but even stone crumbles to the strike of a powerful enough hammer. Kirkwall has always been stable ground. It’s changed hands so many times, had so many leaders, that it’s become its own entity in Thedas. Ares isn’t taking it.”

Bran nodded faintly. He lifted a tumbler of brandy-wine to his lips and sipped. “I hope you’re right. I really don’t want this job anymore. It would be nice if you could find someone else to do it.”

Hannibal chuckled dryly. “Sorry, but it’s all yours until further notice.”

“Great.” Bran set the cup aside and turned to the map spread across the war table. He pointed at a place on it. “Scouts reported that Ares’s forces move in from here. They’ll certainly have to come from the Planasene Forest, since using the mountains isn’t feasible or easily done for an army of that size. At the rate they’re moving, they’ll be here very soon. A reinforced security detail has been constantly on watch at the bridges. That’s the easiest route into the city from the west.”
“You must believe that Ares has prepared for that,” entered Cullen, rubbing his chin. “Coming in from the sea would be ludicrous, considering we could blow most of their fleet from the water before they ever hit shore. What is he planning?”

“It’s hard to say with him,” said Hannibal. “If you haven’t already done so, Provisional Viscount, you should also tighten security around the keep.”

Bran’s face sank worriedly. “I’ve done so around the city itself. You think more is really necessary.”

“I hope I’m wrong, but you should do it.”

“Alright, consider it done.” The acting Viscount sighed, looking to everyone. “It’s rather late, and I know you’ve all been traveling constantly. Let us retire for the night and pick this up in the morning.”

Iron Bull turned and strode for the doors, not waiting for any more talk to transpire.

(*)

The army of the God of War was like a plague upon the land, though it was a plague that assimilated its victims rather than destroyed. Mostly. The city of Cumberland found out as much when the god’s troops swept through there, claimed their chantry in the name of Ares, and forced their mayor into submission. Many fell into the god’s fold immediately, while others fought; the resisters had either fled the city or were killed.

Now, with the sharp, glowing thumbnail of a crescent moon dangling in the sky, Ares’ troops marched on the road south of Cumberland, just entering the Planasene Forest. Sticks and foliage crunched beneath their boots. The colossuses—huge, berserker type warriors created by Ares using an extreme power infusion process—marched at the rear. They looked almost zombie-esque with their bloodshot eyes and pale-purplish skin tone.

One of them sensed something, jerked his head right, and zeroed in on a deer creeping through the forest fifty feet away. For the swiftest moment, humanity sparked in his eyes, a faint softening as if he was recalling what it felt like to be an actual person once. Then he scowled, growled, and faced forward again. His only purpose was to kill, and kill he would.
A Thin Line Between the Civilized and the Primal

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was no secret that Ares’s army marched for Kirkwall or that the Inquisition and its allies waited for them at the city. By now, it had become a courtesy of war. Both sides had clashed several times since the war god’s ranks swelled into the thousands. For the pending fight, each side had sent out scouts to mark the movements and locations of the other.

Less than two days after the Inquisition and Qunari arrived, Ares’s front lines began amassing on the far side of three long stone bridges that stretched across the great Estrid River, their banners billowing on the morning breeze. Ares, of course, was nowhere to be seen, but he was there, watching in stealth. Xena couldn’t sense him at that distance, but she knew he lingered in the area. This was his way. He moved the troops around strategically, rallied their confidence, and let the mortals engage.

His front man, General Resentius, sat atop a gray stallion with green eyes gleaming harshly across the water at the many ranks of enemies. Their banners flew various colors. Kirkwall, Markham, Ostwick, Hercinia, Qunari, and Inquisition. Ares had gained the favor of many territories, but there was still a formidable opposition between the God of War and total domination. Resentius was glad the god let him to manipulate the troops so freely, as this allowed him to display his own war tactics. Ares had taken to observing the battles mostly, working behind the scenes to control the bigger picture.

Hannibal did the same thing as Resentius. He sized up the enemy, and there were a lot of them, more than he estimated. However, he was confident that he had a strong army too. Beside him, Dorian sighed at something. Hannibal turned to see what.

The ranks parted to allow the Beast of the Battlefield passage through. As usual, he was hulking and primal, his face painted with red and black patterns, his eye dangerously savage. He wore no shirt, with pieces of partial armor about his torso and left arm. His axe hung on his back, and a couple of knives were sheathed on his belt.

Iron Bull stopped beside Dorian, looked down silently at him, then observed the enemy, particularly the colossuses. He counted seven of them this time. They’d be his primary focus. Regular soldiers offered no challenge, but those bigfuckers required a bit of work. Bull yearned for the encounter.

Xena and Gabrielle eyed Ares’s forces. Autolycus wanted to come help fight this time, but the Warrior Princess convinced him to stay behind to look after Joxer, who Xena had restricted from battle completely, since he was apt to get himself killed. Xena’s attention focused on Resentius. He hadn’t been on the fighting lines since moving up so high in rank. Generals gave orders from a safe vantage, but if the line could be disintegrated enough to reach him, he could be killed. That was Xena’s objective. She’d faced off against Resentius more than once back on Earth, and she was sure that if they fought now, she’d be able to end him.

The Arishok stood on Hannibal’s other side. One of his stens loomed just behind him, awaiting. Arishok spoke to the Inquisitor. “We are at a stand-still for now because our enemy is formulating a way to reach us, but they will make a move soon enough.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. He shook his head. “There has to be more to it. They can’t do anything. Trying to cross the bridges will bottleneck them, making them easy to pick off.”

And so, the two armies stood in wait, neither backing down, only staring at their foe on the far side of the river.

(*)

Inside the city walls, soldiers lingered and watched the pending clash in the near distance. Provisional Viscount Cavin watched with them, flanked on either side by personal guards. He was no soldier, but he felt that as leader of the city, he should be out there.

Bran rubbed his temples. The whole ordeal of carrying the weight of the position gave him frequent headaches. He turned to one of his guards. “I need to retire to my office for a bit.”

“Understood, milord.”

Bran turned from the ramparts and started for the nearest set of stairs. His pair of guards walked behind him. The city was on lockdown and citizens had been instructed to remain in their homes, so not a person was out now, the streets empty. Citizens did peer from their windows, however, waiting frightfully for the dreaded cacophony of war. The screams and sword clashes.

The Provisional Viscount and his guards turned into a side passage, an easy shortcut to the keep. While Bran’s back was turned, one guard swiftly released a knife, grabbed the other guard, and jabbed the blade relentlessly into his neck.

Bran spun to the sounds of wet gurgles and chunky shuffling. His eyes loomed wide at the spurs of crimson coming from the assassinated guard’s throat, his body sprawled on the ground. He backed away. “Lieutenant Leim, wh-what have you done?”
The corrupted guard said nothing. He moved for the Provisional Viscount, and Bran took off running. He was prepared to burst from the other end of the narrow, conveniently concealed alley when a trio of guards rushed in to block him. One grabbed and secured Bran, putting a knife to his throat.

“Careful with him,” barked Leim. “We need him alive, for now.”

“What is the meaning of this, lieutenant!” Bran knew better than to struggle too much. He’d find his throat accidently slashed if he did. Then, he came to his own conclusions. “You… you’re all traitors. You’re working for Ares!”

“Very astute of you,” said Leim calmly.

“How could you? You’ve protected this city for years.”

“And where has it truly gotten me? My family has sacrificed much for this city, for this army. My father gave his life for Kirkwall, and so did both my brothers. My mother died from the grief of it. I have given my all, up until a few months ago, when I got a better offer.”

“From Ares.” Bran frowned, shaking his head.

“Not from him directly, but representatives of his faction. For my fealty, I will be made a commander.”

“Why? Why are you doing this? You know it’s not right.”

Lieutenant Leim snorted. “There is no right and wrong, only survival. We cannot win. As much as we want to try and convince ourselves that we’re making progress, the truth is that we are simply impeding the inevitable. This war god or One True God—I don’t really even care—is too powerful for Thedas. He will have it all one day, and I will not be his enemy when that day comes. Now, shut your mouth.”

Bran did as he was told, trembling faintly. The blade at his throat was most disconcerting.

Leim looked to one of the other corrupted guards. “Are the others in place?”

“There are more defectors than just you four?”

“I said to be quiet,” snapped Leim. He waited for the guard to answer.

The guard nodded. The corners of his mouth carried the hint of a smile.

(*)

In different parts of the city, groups of traitorous soldiers attacked the ones who weren’t, dispatching of them quickly, as ordered by Lieutenant Leim in the name of Ares.

(*)

Leim and his group took Bran down to the city’s north gates and waited while the rest of the traitors converged there as planned. More than thirty defectors in all, armed and ready. Some of them remained behind to make sure any remaining good guards were neutralized and to keep civilians under control. Ares didn’t want civilians harmed unless necessary. Leim mounted a horse, then waited while one of the guards helped Bran into the saddle before him. The lieutenant’s knife was out and ready.

“Make any sudden moves and I will kill you,” he said by Bran’s ear. He urged the horse steadily ahead.

The other guards marched behind him. They headed for the two armies that silently regarded one another.

(*)

Out in the gardens of the Viscount’s Keep, near the old well, hidden by overgrown foliage and wild berry bushes, a sewer grate rattled, then carefully lifted. Jean-Marc Stroud peeked up through the opening, blue gaze sliding back and forth. They were in the right place according to the map. A nearby storage shed blocked him from the view of anyone on the garden paths. The Grey Warden quietly set the grate aside and pulled himself up from the underground passage. He immediately drew his sword and stood watch while his fellow Wardens climbed free. Once they were all out, he spoke low and swiftly.

“You saw the armies from the hills. They haven’t engaged, but it’s only a matter of time. We must reach Viscount Cavin.”

“Provisional Viscount, sir,” corrected one of the Wardens.

Stroud smirked. “Yes, Provisional Viscount. Anyway, we will stick to the shadows. I smell blood in the air.”

The leader of the Grey Wardens crept up to the shed and slowly inched forward. He heard steps and waved a hand to those behind them, signaling them to stay still. Stroud watched from cover while a pair of conversing guards walked by.
“You think he’ll have to kill the Provisional?” said one.

“No, that Inquisitor is a goody-goody. Won’t let Cavin die. They’ll comply,” the other answered.

The first one laughed mockingly. “Even if he does give in, I hope Leim kills that little weasel anyway. I never liked him.”

“Knowing him, he probably will.”

The guards moved away, laughing, their voices becoming muffled as distance increased. When they were far enough away, Stroud turned to his people.

“Seems the Viscount—”

“Provisional.”

“Whatever,” Stroud shot, lips pressing a thin, unamused line. “He’s not in the city. This Leim is taking him out to the armies. So that’s where we’re going. He’s probably going to try to leverage Cavin to get control of the bridges. We need to hurry.”

Stroud and his Wardens began sneaking through the keep and out into the city, handling dirty soldiers as they went.

(*)

That was exactly what Leim planned, or rather what Resentius planned. When Ares expressed interest in taking control of Kirkwall months ago, the general formulated a plan to immediately begin infiltrating, to get insider help for the inevitable conflict. Using highly detailed maps, Resentius learned the lay of the land and knew he’d have to formulate a way to get across the bridges to the city. That’s why he sent in soldiers to convert people in Provisional Viscount Cavin’s guard.

Ares had been impressed by the idea, and it was ultimately what solidified his decision to name Resentius as general to all his forces. The war god remained predominantly in the background, stepping forward and making appearances at times to secure the disbelievers and make examples of the resisters.

The God of War stood in stealth at the tree line behind Resentius and a thousand warriors who pledged service to the god’s order. It appeared things were going as planned. He grinned at the approach of Lieutenant Leim on horseback, Cavin before him, knife at his neck.

On the other side of the river, soldiers parted for the group of traitors. Hannibal, his people, and Arishok silently watched. Leim stopped the horse a good distance from them, speaking loudly.

“I don’t think I need to say much. You’re going to pull your army back from the bridges, Inquisitor, and allow Ares’s army to cross.”

Hannibal glared at him. “Why didn’t I see this coming?” he asked softly and with rhetorical intent. “I should’ve figured Ares would have inside help, defectors.”

“Yes, you should have,” Arishok spoke harshly. “I say we do not comply.”

“What?” Hannibal’s eyes jerked to him. “If we don’t, they’ll kill him.”

“Damn right, we will,” Leim said, pressing the blade closer to Cavin’s neck. “I’ll slit him. This isn’t an argument, it’s an ultimatum. Now, pull your army back from the fucking bridges.”

Cavin gulped and tried to stay very still, which proved tedious with the horse shifting under him.

“Oh… I kind of don’t want to be dead.”

Arishok fully faced Hannibal. “You know what will happen if Ares gets Kirkwall. We will most certainly lose the war.”

“We don’t have a choice. I won’t let him just kill Cavin. Who knows how many others have been killed back in the city?”

“Yes,” piped Leim, looking pleased with himself.

“I will pull the army back,” Hannibal said.

Arishok’s frown intensified, and he growled. “That is the problem with those who did not live under the Qun. You are weakened by the illogical belief that the one is greater than the many. It’s disgusting.” He waved an arm, telling his Qunari troops to fall back.

Hannibal sucked up the insult. It wasn’t that bad coming from someone of Arishok’s stature. He looked to his own army, composed of warriors from Ferelden, Orllais, and the Free Marches. “Fall back!” He turned to Cullen. “Make sure they reform outside the city walls.”

Cullen nodded, sighed, and turned to his duties. Cassandra accompanied him.

Iron Bull’s face was stoic and calculating. He understood why Hannibal would make the decision to pull the army back, but he agreed with the Arishok. They could’ve risked Cavin’s life for the good of the many. Bull supposed that Qunari logic would always be a part of him. Though, this was no different than when Hannibal chose to save the Chargers over the Berethlok, for which
Bull had been very grateful. His mountainous figure pivoted about to stare at the enemy over the river. It made no difference on what side of the water he fought them. He was ready. The Qunari remained with Hannibal, backing away from the immediate vicinity of the bridges. Ryder, Xena, Gabrielle, and Dorian were also nearby. Varric, Cole, and Stitches had fallen back with Cullen. Cole fought many times at Iron Bull’s side, but since Ayla’s death, he’d avoided the man as much as possible, only because he knew it only aggravated Bull when he was around. Cole didn’t blame him, since he too believed he was part of the reason Ayla was gone.

Lieutenant Leim’s eyes shot to one of his fellow traitors. “Signal General Resenius that he may proceed.”

“Yes, sir.”

The soldier ran to the threshold of the middle bridge. He waved his arms, then stepped aside.

Across the water, Resenius spread on a slow smile. “Men, forward!”

Of course, he did not go first, but sat atop his horse and let his commanders march the troops forward. His green gaze watched the enemy recede. He spotted Xena amongst them and sneered. Maybe the bitch would die in this invasion, though with her track record for avoiding death, she probably wouldn’t.

(*)

Stroud and his group reached Kirkwall’s huge entry courtyard. They killed half dozen traitorous solders and hid their bodies along the way. He stopped short and studied the area from the cover of a thin path between two rising buildings.

“Up on the wall,” his words were low. “There’s at least six. We’ll take them out and get better bearings. The goal is full concealment. We don’t know how many defectors there are. Best not to give them cause for alert.”

Thirteen Grey Wardens. Counting himself, that’s how many of them had gone to Kirkwall. Stroud knew that the armies converged to fight Ares were plentiful with soldiers, but it was by request from a friend that he’d decided to go, and hopefully be of some assistance.

Stealthily, Stroud led his Wardens for the wall.

(*)

Cullen oversaw the repositioning of the entire army, each man and woman moving with efficient haste. Many of them had gone against Ares’s army before. Some had lost people they cared about to the fighting.

Hannibal’s gaze kept going between the enemy ranks filing over the bridges two thousand yards away to Lieutenant Leim up on his horse, Provisional Viscount Cavin still captive with a blade to the throat. He was so tired of fighting. He just wanted to sit in a place of nothingness and listen to sweet silence. No Ares or his minions, no Arishok, no Qun, absolutely nothing.

“Are we just going to sit here while our enemy closes in and gains the upper hand, pinning us between the city, the river, and the forest?” Arishok said under his breath.

Hannibal’s eyes settled squarely on him. “Not many options.”

“You take the nazbaak on the horse out.”

“I cannot risk Cavin’s life.”

“You could but you won’t.”

“No, I won’t. Now be quiet and let me think.” Hannibal sighed. Their side of the river was quickly populating with enemy ranks, lining up as they crossed from the bridges.

“Yes, you do that, Inquisitor, stand there and think us into victory,” Arishok grumbled, lips twisting with displeasure.

Dorian spun to glare at the Qunari war mind a moment, then moved closer to Hannibal, keeping his voice low. “As much as I don’t like him, he’s right. We’re losing the advantage. We must do something, Hannibal.”

The Inquisitor quickly examined the scene again. More than half of Ares’s army was across the bridges now, and the strength of the allied troops waited in ranks behind him, ready to engage. When he met Ryder’s eyes, he saw something concealed in them. The man had a plan. They needed to save Cavin. Doing that would allow them to start the fight before the enemy had completely come across the water, giving the Inquisition and its allies back the advantage.

The Arishok, Bull, Dorian, Xena, and Gabrielle saw the exchange. The silent, unspoken language of warriors. Hannibal gave the slightest nod to Ryder, while the others watched and waited for the moment to strike.

Ryder’s blue vision turned to Lieutenant Leim up on his horse threatening the Provisional Viscount’s life. He backed slowly into the ranks, gradually circling around, cutting through the soldiers.
The Grey Wardens easily cleared the walls, as their enemies were no match for them. Stroud let the body of the one’s throat he’d just slit fall to the ground. He lifted his hand and rotated his pointer finger, the signal for his team to converge on him. Cautiously, they all peered between the merlons of the wall.

“Just as I thought,” Stroud said. “Leverage for the bridges. That must be Leim on the horse with Cavin, by the Inquisitor.”

“The enemy’s troops are almost all across,” spoke a female Warden. “We have to stop them.”

“We just have to take their leverage.” Stroud removed his large bow, a fine weapon crafted for long range. A sight ring was connected to it, allowing him to further align with targets. He placed the arrow. “Keep sharp and cover me. I cannot miss this shot.”

The Wardens positioned themselves accordingly up on the wall, looking out for enemies, both near and below on what would soon be a battlefield.

Stroud stood fully up, drawing the arrow back, eyes focused on the sight ring, inside of which was the image of Lieutenant Leim.

Everyone kept calm. Ryder was almost in position somewhere in the ranks. He’d drawn his throwing blade and would need to hit Leim somewhere in the spine for any chance of killing him. The base of the neck was always a good spot.

He drew a long breath, eyes flicking to Leim’s guards, who clustered near and around him. Ryder’s path put him amidst the Qunari ranks; they were closest to the ideal place from which to strike. They quietly allowed him to weave between them, at the ready for when he made his move. The ex-Warden flipped his knife so that he gripped the blade’s cold steel in his fingers. He went still as he gauged the toss.

He began to draw his arm up, yet never got to throw the knife.

An arrow suddenly appeared in the side of Leim’s neck, and spurts of crimson flew from the wound. The man gurgled wetly and dropped from the horse. It had happened so quickly that Leim’s fellow mutineers had little time to process it. The acting Viscount wasn’t taking any chances. He grabbed the reins, ducked low to the saddle in case any other arrows flew from above, and kicked the horse’s flanks. The animal whinnied and reared around, sprinting back for the city gates.

While that was happening, Hannibal and the others aggressed the remaining traitors. “Attack!” yelled the Inquisitor.

And the forces of the Inquisition and its allies rushed forward.

There were still at least two hundred soldiers that needed to get across the river when the fighting started. Resentius squinted across the way, hearing the ruckus, and then the enemy was charging.

He hurried his horse across the bridge, the mount’s hooves clocking against the stone. “Fortify! Fortify!”

The general made it across and remained at the rear of the army.

Ares vanished from his previous position and found a new one, remaining in stealth. It had begun. Finally. The God of War’s eyes shown with the fire of battle, his absolute love of it. The sound made when both armies first clashed was a sweet symphony—the clank of metal, battle cries, and screams of the mortally wounded.

He figured his army still had a good chance at victory. Most of them had made it across the bridges and they were highly skilled. He had to hand it to Resentius. The plan was a sound one, the infiltration. It gave the advantage they needed.

Ares admired the bard’s dedication. She was nothing before she met Xena, a plain girl from the village of Potidaea, not a single fighting bone in her body. And what a fine body it was now, toned with slim muscle, honed by years of training.

Gabrielle spun and eluded a foe, kicking out. She flipped one of her sais and jabbed the pointed end into the man’s chest. Ares admired her warrior skills, nodding. He turned his attention to a certain huge Qunari wearing red and black war paint.

Featureless images painted on cave walls by fire and shadows, the primitive recollections of early man. This was how Iron Bull experienced every battle now, as distant images of old, the crudely drawn figures of warriors wielding their weapons against one another. He’d learned to tone it out
mostly, and the tumultuous sounds of war were dim in his ears. Everyone and everything moved in slow-motion, and he could clearly see every enraged, excited expression.

The Beast of the Battlefield stalked through the fighting with his axe drawn, his eye fixed on one of the colossuses. Several of Ares’s soldiers made the mistake of trying to engage him during his mission, and Bull killed every one of them with quick, deadly strikes. He savagely broke one’s neck.

“You,” the Qunari stopped a short distance from the colossus.

The huge, augmented warrior finished yanking his wide, flat blade that looked like a giant cleaver from the skull of an Inquisition warrior. He turned to Bull and elation flooded his eyes. He was happy to see a big foe, almost as happy as Bull was to be facing a perspective challenge too.

They began circling each other. The colossus attacked first, just like Bull figured he would. The Qunari braced and parried the weapon strike, spinning his body to throw the enemy off. He flipped his great axe and gripped the haft, jerking it up to catch the colossus under his chin. Blood sprayed from the colossus’s mouth since the blow caused him to bite deeply into his bottom lip. He wailed and stumbled backwards, meaty arms flailing limply, blade fumbling to the ground. He didn’t fall, though.

“There we go,” Iron Bull taunted. He dropped his axe. “That’s much better.”

Roaring wildly, he charged the colossus, and they entered a battle of might and strength, pummeling at one another with their fists, headbutts, kicks, throws.

(*)

The Altus had fought so much in the past year that he’d grown to completely despise it. Fighting was necessary, however, in current times. Amidst the battle somewhere near Hannibal, Dorian twirled his stave and caught an enemy in the groin, knocking him over the head when he faltered. He conjured a branching bolt of lightning that disabled three foes at once.

He gained only a few seconds to scan about, and that’s when he saw Iron Bull drop his axe and go at the colossus. Worry painted over Dorian’s face. His friend was becoming increasingly reckless with every fight. He sighed, gathered himself, and engaged another foe.

(*)

The battle for Kirkwall continued, bloody and brutal as any other conflict. The Inner Circlers gave it everything they had. Cullen orchestrated the archers to take out nearly a hundred of Ares’s people, and of course, the Inquisition and their allies faced many casualties. Iron Bull killed three of the colossuses. Stroud and the Wardens secured Provisional Viscount Cavin and maintained the line at the city’s gates, picking off the remainder of the traitors.

Ares realized his people wouldn’t win. Firstly, they were slightly outnumbered. Secondly, they’d suffered a lot of losses. By not getting all soldiers over the bridges, they hadn’t been able to gain the most prominent advantage. Regardless, he was enjoying the fight. It pleased him immensely that even though the Inquisition and their allies opposed him, their very participation in the act of war fed his eternal power. For Ares, it was a win-win situation.

Within an hour of commencing, the battle for Kirkwall had begun to close. The land between the city, the forest, and the river was covered with bodies. Resentius had sounded the retreat.

(*)

The Inquisition, Qunari, and allied armies resounded with cheer as their enemy gradually receded for the bridges. Iron Bull stared wildly at them, the retreating shadows. He was at the most forward point, closest to the enemy. They ran swiftly by him, scrambling for the bridges.

His face contorted angrily. “No, you don’t get to run. YOU DON’T GET TO RUN!”

Bull pulled his long knife and hurled it into the back of one man. The man cried out and flew forward to the ground. He started trying to claw his way for the retreating army. Bull strode calmly for him, staring down, watching him squirm. The Qunari lowered to put a knee on him, keeping him still. He pulled the knife free, grabbed his hair, yanked his head back, and slit his throat. All done without so much as a flinch.

He slowly stood. His eye met those of another enemy soldier who’d watched in horror as Bull slaughtered the man. The soldier knew Bull would finish him too if he got his hands on him. Instead of running for the bridges, which were still a distance off, he turned and sprinted for the forest.

Bull grinned and ran after him.

Dorian had taken it upon himself to keep a close eye on Bull. He witnessed the slaughtering, a hand resting over his heart to see it. His friend was slipping away.

(*)

The soldier entered the tree line and didn’t stop. He stole glances to see if the big, horned man with berserker paint was behind him. He wasn’t there. Still, the soldier ran, almost twisting his ankle on an unearthed root. He finally stopped and leaned to a rough tree trunk, listening. He
heard birds above, the cheers of the Inquisition…and water. The river. He turned towards the
sound, and could spot it through the trees, down a shallow embankment. If he could get to the
shore, he’d cut back to the bridges.

The soldier ran for it, the edge of the forest growing closer. He was going to make it.

A solid gray arm shot out from behind a wide trunk, catching him in the chest, effectively
clotheslining him to his back. He wheezed and hacked, winded. A figure loomed across his blurry
vision.

Iron Bull clenched fingers around the man’s throat, pulled him to his feet, and shoved him against
the tree, lifting him until his feet dangled above the ground. He glared into his enemy’s strangling
face. “You don’t get to run. You will accept your death with honor, and I send it upon shadowed
wings.”

He rammed his knife into the man, splitting him from navel to sternum, his guts and entrails
spilling in a smoking vat to the forest floor, spattering the battle-lusted Qunari’s boots. The soldier
gagged and sputtered, struggling, his face seized in terror at the realization that he wasn’t going to
make it after all. It wasn’t long before he stopped moving. Bull tilted his head to study the vacant
stare of his victim’s eyes, then dropped the body. He turned to see Dorian standing a short
distance away. Without a word, Bull headed back to the troops, leaving the mage highly disturbed
and on edge.

For the longest moment, Dorian thought Iron Bull might kill him too.

Chapter End Notes

This song, I believe, is a good musical representation of the Beast of the Battlefield’s
current state, “Blood and Bone” performed by Anxiety X:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omm1QuSGMvM
Deeper into Despair's Abyss

War, like a fancy dinner party, held a certain kind of etiquette. The fighting outside Kirkwall was done, but both sides still needed to retrieve their dead from the battlefield. That would be done soon enough.

Hannibal stood with his people and watched the enemy filter back over the bridges, where they regrouped to assess their damages and wounds. There were noticeably far less of them now, and this made Hannibal happy. They’d won this time. His eye swiftly caught Iron Bull heading for his position from the direction of the forest, and Dorian a short distance behind him.

“That was not what I expected, but it works,” Arishok’s deep voice poured from the left.

Hannibal faced him, then his aqua eyes widened at the figure who’d also joined them. “Stroud?”

The Warden nodded, then looked to Ryder. “Seems I got your message just in time.”

“Message?” One of Hannibal’s red brows lifted, and he peered between Ryder and Stroud.

Ryder assumed control of the conversation. “Warden Stroud and I have been on good terms. I sent a message out to him requesting whatever aid the Wardens could give. I also suggested they traverse the Vimmark Mountains, use the passages under the city. I wanted them to be an element of surprise in case we needed it.”

“I see,” Hannibal replied. Sternness etched his face. “That was a good call. It would’ve been nice to be informed about it. I’ll have to talk with Leliana about passing the message over me.”

Ryder shook his head, thick, dark hair swaying. “Don’t be upset at her. She doesn’t know. I couldn’t risk corruption in Leliana’s communication route, revealing the Grey Wardens summons to Kirkwall, so I alone secretly sent the message through my own routes.”

Hannibal let the explanation simmer a moment. It was sound. “You could’ve at least told me, though.”

“Noted. I will not leave you out of the fold again.”

The Inquisitor smiled a tiny bit, nodding. He addressed Stroud. “No offense meant to either of you, but I would assume the Grey Wardens not to be so fond of Ryder for posing as Blackwall.”

“You would be right in that assumption,” Stroud said. “Most of the Grey Wardens don’t know what Blackwall really looked like, and the ones that do recognize him, the man we came to know as Blackwall,” his eyes flicked to Ryder, “have sworn a pact that we will not reveal his identity. As far as everyone is concerned, the man who posed as Warden Blackwall was hanged, and we’ll leave it at that. We all have regrets. I almost got the Grey Wardens destroyed, so I am not one to judge. However, I can understand the need for atonement.”

Ryder still had a long way to go until he felt even remotely atoned. He was glad to have friends like those in the Inner Circle. They’d made it easier for him to press forward, particularly Leliana. Unknown to anyone, they’d formed a bit of a relationship. She’d been sneaking from Skyhold to visit him at the small cabin, and when he did cross into the fortress to resupply or attend meetings, Ryder made sure to go to the Watchtower for seemingly innocent conversation. They weren’t worried about what others would think. It was more a concern for prying curiosities. Neither the ex-Warden nor Spymaster wanted to be hounded by friends and acquaintances for the “juicy details.” They mutually agreed that secrecy was best for now.

Ryder wasn’t sure where things were going, if they were going anywhere at all. He wouldn’t press it. They were good for the time being. He stared off somewhere while his mind slipped to thoughts of Leliana, so strong and resilient, easily the most cunning woman he’d ever met. Ryder had found her intriguing from the beginning, but felt she might not be interested, until a she showed up at the cabin a few months ago. Being with her, whatever the status of their relationship, renewed hope that he could one day move beyond the past enough to forgive himself.

The rugged ex-Warden examined the dead spread across the ground. He faced Hannibal. “I’ll work with Cullen and the recovery teams to gather our fallen.”

Ryder left them.

(*)

Cullen Rutherford was synonymous with “hardest working man in the Inquisition” or “the man that never really slept”, Cassandra thought. Pausing for a break, drinking from her water skin, the Seeker watched her lover help carry another allied body to the carts. He was so dedicated and unfazed by getting his hands dirty, constantly giving. She wouldn’t have him any other way.

Cassandra sighed and looked at the others helping, about a hundred in all. Ares’s side had sent people to recover their dead too, and Inquisition soldiers were on standby with weapons in case of any funny business. The Seeker turned to the looming stone city of Kirkwall. She smiled faintly, content that the Inquisition forces secured the victory.

She put the water away and went back to work.
Ares’s forces fully retreated into the Planasene Forest by nightfall and started back west. Resentius’s plan was to position the remaining forces in Cumberland, the town they’d converted on the way to Kirkwall. It was loyal to Ares now and would, therefore, serve as the god’s base of operations closest to Kirkwall, establishing a presence in the area.

Hannibal had two dozen scouts trailing the enemy at a distance to gauge their movements.

Within Kirkwall, the citizens lockdown had been withdrawn, and people moved back into the streets to go about their lives. Every tavern in the city celebrated victory with either free drinks or brews greatly reduced in price. Just because they’d won didn’t mean their guard could be dropped. The remaining allied troops set up a mega camp outside the city walls, their tents forming a sea of burlap that extended almost to the three bridges, and fire pits spotted the immense area.

Iron Bull decided he’d stay amongst the soldiers and had secured a tent. The huge man currently stood by a table of refreshments in the Viscount’s Keep, drinking and eating while his eye swung watchfully through the room. The rest of the Inner Circle, the Arishok and his entourage, and the Grey Wardens were there too, along with a couple dozen others. Provisional Viscount Cavin insisted that a celebration be given. He made his way around the place, chatting with people, some of which were snoopy and rich, and wanted to hear about his brush with death.

Hannibal was glad everyone else clambered for the Provisional’s time, because he certainly didn’t want to be the man of the hour. He was very content to smile and wave occasionally while sitting on a couch sipping ale next to his husband.

Iron Bull scanned the tables before him, found a flagon of something preferable, and poured himself more. He tossed it back and swiped a hand over his mouth, grip-tugging his beard to remove any liquid or crumbs. Without his war paint and wearing a shirt, he didn’t appear any less menacing.

“Congratulations for the fine victory, soldier. I thank you for protecting our city,” piped a female voice over the chamber music.

Iron Bull turned and studied the woman, an elf. He recognized her as one of the servants in the keep. She looked kind of plain but was certainly attractive enough for his needs. “Hm.”

The woman blushed and cleared her throat. “I’m Ravia. I work here.”

“Yeah, seen you around.” If there was one thing Bull knew, it was the sexual appetites of people, and the woman’s demeanor suggested she was very interested in him. He had only to wait for it. Slowly, he crossed muscular arms over his chest and let his eye rake hotly over her.

Ravia giggled. “So…my shift is over here. Would you like some company for the evening?”

Well, he didn’t have to wait long.

Iron Bull nodded. “Sure, but I have two rules you need to know.”

Dorian sipped his drink. His gray eyes absorbed the tamed gathering, a large room full of people happy to be on the winning side of the battle. The mage studied the exchange between Iron Bull and the woman, unable to hear any of it. The Qunari suddenly hoisted her up over his shoulder, then strode off for her quarters. The woman squealed delightedly.

He sighed. “Hannibal…”

The Inquisitor’s attention fixed on Dorian.

“I think you should consider removing Iron Bull from service for a while.”

Hannibal’s brow furrowed. He looked about quickly for said Qunari, but couldn’t find him since he left the party already. “Why would I do that, Dorian?”

“He’s not stable. He’s really starting to lose it.” The Altus’s eyes narrowed skeptically. “Or are you just going to sit there and tell me you haven’t noticed how bad he’s gotten?”

Hannibal leaned to set his cup to a table. “Dearest, we’ve already talked about this. Of course, I know how bad Bull’s gotten, but what exactly do you want me to do? I can’t remove him from battle. Fighting is the only thing keeping him grounded.”

“Ha. Not the only thing.” Dorian rolled his eyes.

“Okay, so he’s indulging a lot. That’s neither of our business.”

“You’re right. You can’t control his heavy drinking or random, abundant sexual encounters, but you can control whether he fights or not.” Dorian shook his head. Icy dread masked his features. “He’s becoming increasingly reckless, and he’s going to get himself killed. Today, after they retreated, I watched him kill a man who was running away.”

Hannibal shrugged. “Well, that’s what we do to our enemies, love. We kill them.”
“Stop making excuses for him.”

“Dorian, please calm down.”

The Altus paused, closed his eyes, and took a big breath. “After he killed that man, he chased another into the woods, and I followed. He caught him and gutted him like a pig in a slaughterhouse…and he liked it. And when he turned to see me watching, I…” he conjured the image again, the cold desolation he’d seen in Bull’s eye, “I was scared. I couldn’t move, not until he walked off as if nothing out of place had happened. Iron Bull is losing it, Hannibal. He’s going to hurt one of our own one day. You must retire him for a while, get him some mental help. Maybe you could convince the Arishok to allow him to return to the Qun for re-education. They’re the most qualified to deal with him.”

Hannibal placed a hand over Dorian’s a moment. He shook his head. “I’m not doing that. I’ve also been watching him. If you think he’s a danger now, consider what he would become if you took away his purpose. He’s a warrior, undisputedly one of the best in our ranks. He was bred to fight. You strip that from him, and he will sink completely away. I care about Bull a lot, and I don’t want that. Losing his family was the worst thing that could’ve happened to him, and I still hold the hope that he’ll get through it. Leave him be, Dorian. I’ll continue monitoring him.”

“I see.” Dorian observed his husband. “Is that your final decision?”

“It is.”

“Fine. But when he finally snaps, because he will, the casualties will be on you.” He gulped the remainder of his wine, plopped the cup harshly to the table, and primped his moustache. The mage stood and glared down. “I’m going to bed. You can sleep on the couch.”

“Dorian…”

Hannibal summoned a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he watched his spouse stalk off.

(*)

Over the course of a few days, Hannibal convened with Provisional Viscount Cavin, Arishok, and the leaders of Markham, Ostwick, and Hercinia. They reached an agreement to keep Qunari troops in the area to further fortify Kirkwall, since Ares now had the town of Cumberland on the opposite side of the Planasene Forest.

Little more than a week after that, Hannibal and his party returned to Skyhold. Imminent summer showers currently had the sky overcast, the gray clouds moving fast overhead. Everyone secured their horses and went their separate ways, with Hannibal announcing the usual meeting in the war room in thirty.

Iron Bull headed for his quarters. He reached the courtyard of the east tower, and a little girl, the same one who’d pointed him out as not being the real Winter’s Saint, popped out from the right. The Qunari stopped, and his eye fixed on her.

She blinked a few times and lifted a shaky smile. “Hi, Iron Bull.”

“I didn’t bring you anything, kid. I don’t do that anymore. Go and play, okay?” Bull said softly but firmly.

“Oh, I didn’t want anything, except…um…” she replied quickly, then dug a little hand in the pocket of her simple dress, fumbling for a moment, before pulling out a folded piece of paper, “…to give you this. I made it for you, so you can be happy again.”

Bull had done well at keeping everyone at bay, the children included. His overgrown beard and constant frown helped with that. He just wanted to be left alone. Yet, something in him, a remnant of his old self, guided his large hand out to accept the paper. He unfolded it very slowly and stared down at the picture, drawn with great care. It was him and Ayla as seen through the eyes of the child, a step or two better than stick figures. Bull, of course, was tall with awkward muscles, his horns sketched accurately, a smile on his face. Ayla was smaller, posed beside him with long, curly hair, a smile, and a round belly.

The Qunari swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Do you like it! I drew it all by myself!” The girl beamed.

“Anna! Anna, you get over here right now!” Bull said softly but firmly.

Bull’s face softened, his eye on the child.

“Anna! Anna, you get over here right now!”

The child whipped about to see a woman with dark hair pinned in a bun waving vigorously at her. She didn’t look happy at all. Frankly, she looked scared.

“Okay, mama! Bye-bye, Iron Bull!” Anna ran to her mother.

The edge returned, hardening Bull’s features. His long stride carried him inside.

Anna’s mother hugged her, then donned a mild scolding expression. “What do you think you’re doing?”
“Iron Bull’s my friend. I made him a picture and wanted him to have it.”

“I’ve already told you, Anna. Stay away from him.”

“But, mama…”

“No, buts! Do as I say! Now let’s go, come on,” the woman said softly. As they walked away from the east housing tower, she turned to frown over her shoulder. There was a time once when she believed the Qunari was the sweetest man to her little Anna and the other children, but he’d become a monster, and she wouldn’t have her baby around him. None of the parents would.

(*)

This didn’t surprise Bull. If he were those parents, he wouldn’t let his children around him either. They were doing the right thing. He locked the door, setting his traveling bag and axe down.

He sat on the bed and stared at the picture again.

He wanted to feel joy by looking at it, but he couldn’t. The image of a smiling somewhat-stick-figure Iron Bull and mirthful, pregnant somewhat-stick-figure Ayla made him angry, serving as a blatant reminder of that which he’d lost. He had felt happy at first, for those few seconds before Anna’s mother showed up to drag her daughter away from the dread Beast of the Battlefield. The iota of happiness had been blotted out by a combination of despair and rage that had become too big now.

Iron Bull stood. He could’ve tossed the picture in the hearth and used it for kindling. Instead, in an attempt to fight the darkness, he went to the dresser and placed it in the same drawer where he kept Little Bean’s dragon, Ayla’s braid-lock, and the bit of rope used to bind their hands for the wedding ceremony in Hald’arun. Whenever he traveled, he took the dragon and the braid-lock with him, and would unpack them shortly. Bull thought of the items as talismans that anchored him to civility. Touching and holding them at times did help to push away the overwhelming sadness.

He shut the drawer, went back to the bed, and reclined. He closed his eye and drew in deep breaths of his own scent. Because of the mizraa-teth, he would never really escape. It was a welcome blessing and a curse, smelling Ayla’s scent forever mingled with his own.

(*)

Iron Bull went to the Herald’s Rest that evening and got drunk, anything to dull the unpleasant sensation of reality, to temporarily loosen the powerful fist clenched around his heart. He was sitting at the bar floating lazily within his inebriation when a man approached and harshly jabbed him on one bare shoulder.

“Hey!”

Dry amusement bloomed on Bull’s face. The shorter fellow with thinning hair seemed upset about something. Bull swigged from his cup again. “What is it?”

“Like you don’t fucking know!”

Bull’s brow lifted. “Enlighten me.”

“You slept with my wife!”

“Huh?”

“My wife, Camila, you fucking asshole!”

The man spoke loud enough to gain the attentions of everyone nearby. Maryden continued playing her lute, looking with concern in their direction.

Iron Bull took a few moments to really think over the allegation. He produced a slow smile and nodded as the memory surfaced. Camila was some woman from a month or so ago. “Ah, yeah. Pretty redhead. I like redheads…but white hair is the best…”

He zoned out and remorse claimed him to think of Ayla. He didn’t see the punch that knocked his face around just a little. The attacker winced, shaking his hand out. Bull glowered at him, then chuckled.

“Maybe your wife came to me because she wanted a python instead of a worm.” Bull presented his back to the disgruntled husband and went back to his drink.

An angry growl erupted from the man, and he made to swing at the Qunari again.

Bull spun in a flash, catching his arm, while grabbing his throat and pinning him against the bar. He leaned close, intaking a long breath. “You stink of fear and weakness.” He snarled. The man did appear quite terrified then. Bull smirked and released him. “Get outta my face.”

The man hurried off.

Maryden had paused when Bull restrained the man, and she waited with everyone else to see what would happen. Once it passed, she cleared her throat, stole a look at Krem, who sat with the Chargers in their corner, then struck her song back up.
Bull peered in the mirror behind the bar, the stares he was receiving. Those who previously occupied stools to either side of him retreated to other seats, giving him space. He frowned, knocked back the rest of his drink, and left the tavern.

A few steps into the yard, Dorian called from behind, “Iron Bull, wait.” He saw the exchange in the pub.

Bull sighed and turned. “What?”

The mage moved cautiously closer, remaining a good arm’s length from him. “Everyone is worried about you. We know you’re reluctant to hear that, but we want to help. Please, tell me what we can do.”

Bull laughed mockingly. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“Look, Bull…I know your heart is broken and—”

“No, my heart isn’t broken. It’s gone. It’s just fucking gone. It was ripped from my chest when they were taken from me. I need to suffer, maybe even die. I wasn’t able to save them.” The warrior’s eye closed. Anger boiled in its depths when it opened again to focus on Dorian. He waved an arm dismissively, brushing the mage off. “Leave me alone.”

Iron Bull walked away for his quarters.

Dorian looked after him with tears glistening in his lovely eyes.

(*)

The instant lucidity eased over him, Fen’Harel felt that this dream was very different from all the others. He didn’t feel…in control. His first thought was that, perhaps, Ares had conjured some dreamscape for his own godly entertainment to toy with the elf. However, it lacked the distinct flavor of deceit Ares contained.

Fen’Harel turned slowly, eyes taking in the endless field of roses surrounding the large patch of lush emerald grass on which he stood. The sky was pleasantly blue, but no sun could be seen. He made two complete circles and halted, catching his breath.

A figure stood across the grass facing away from him. He knew who it was and smiled softly. Crimson hair tumbled down her back, the skirt of her dress long enough to cover her feet. Lassalanta turned, delicate hands resting on a very round abdomen.

Fen’Harel’s lips parted, surprise exploding over his features. He headed to her. “Lassalanta, is…”

“Is the baby yours? Of course.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wouldn’t have made a difference, my love, since you cannot return here at this time.” She smiled and rested a hand on his cheek.

“You could have at least sent word.”

“It was better that I did not.”

Lassalanta used the power of Hald’arun to mentally amplify herself, connecting to Fen’Harel through a dream-link. They hadn’t spoken since he left the sanctuary, and she’d heard about his alliance with Ares through the Inquisitor’s message to the Red Army.

“I should be with you,” uttered the rich tones of his voice.

“Yes, you should, and you will be someday.” Her sparkling eyes studied him. “You have your reasons for staying with the war god, getting your power back. I can understand that, though it does not mean I approve.”

Fen’Harel nodded faintly. “Perhaps, Hon’o Hald’arun would able to help me obtain it again.

“Do you not think I’ve considered this? It cannot be so. The Heart of Hald’arun does not grant power; it is power. Sadly, Ares seems to be your only hope.” The queen took his hand in hers. “You could always abandon this obsession, Fen’Harel, and make your way back to me eventually. One day, the power you still contain that keeps you alive and gives you longevity will fade, and you will perish. If you bound yourself to Hald’arun, you could live indefinitely, with me and our child.”

He sighed. “Believe me when I say that I want nothing more than that, but I must be restored to see things right. I have to get my power back.”

Stubborn as ever, Lassalanta mused silently. Fen’Harel was a very determined man, and this trait was what attracted her to him so much. She knew he would risk their relationship to see his mission through, and there was nothing she could about that.

She finally nodded, smiling gently. “I understand.”
Fen’Harel reached out to touch her stomach. “You didn’t have to let this happen. You can control life. Why? Why give me this honor?”

“I’ve always cared for you and believe we should’ve done this sooner.”

“Well, better late than never.”

The elf’s smile brightened. He hugged Lassalanta close and enjoyed what remained of their dream-link.
Things would be easier if Ares was the only threat, but such a convenience wasn’t awarded. Aside from the God of War’s tedious attempt for total domination, Hannibal found that smaller enemies were taking their shots more often, taking advantage of the Inquisition’s distraction.

The Tal-Vashoth, for example.

They’d attempted to storm in on smaller Inquisition camps, and even managed to overrun some of them temporarily. One Tal-Vashoth sect had become quite large compared to the others, rumored to be composed of three or four smaller groups, which was unusual since sects rarely converged with each other. This sect, known as Hisera Astaarit, Qunlat for “The Rising Hope”, was nearly two-hundred large with stray Qunari and Viddathari warriors. They’d taken it upon themselves to attack and take an Inquisition camp between Redcliffe and Lothering.

Fickle of them to think they’d be able to keep it. A week into controlling the camp, Hannibal and his equally sizable force attacked. Among the soldiers were Dorian, Bull, Xena, and Ryder. The fight was nearly at an end now, leaving most of the Tal-Vashoth dead. As wild and trained as some of them were, they simply weren’t ready for the destructive power of two-hundred Inquisition soldiers and one berserker Qunari.

Iron Bull very much looked forward to encounters with the Tal-Vashoth. He thirsted for their blood. One of them had taken his family from him, and he may or may not find the one who did, but he’d surely make every Tal-Vashoth that crossed his path suffer as much as possible.

The Tal-Vashoth were in retreat, scattering south for the hills of the Hinterlands, their ranks cut to sparse numbers, while the Inquisition still had most of its fighters. Retreating or not, Iron Bull wanted them dead. Every last one. He bolted through the camp, past a burned-out tent and a ruined cart, leaping into the path of three Tal-Vashoth. One was Qunari, the other two were human, all males. It wouldn’t have mattered if they were females, though. Bull would still exterminate them like the vermin they were.

The three men regarded Bull very cautiously, his frenzied eye looming wide, glaring from a face painted black and crimson. The sinewy muscles of his chest, stomach, and arms glistened with sweat, soot and blood smudging his gray skin. They exchanged looks quickly, taking battle stances, but reluctant to attack.

Iron Bull smiled darkly. “Okay, I get it. You’re scared. Alright, how’s this?” He dropped his axe and unsheathed his knife. “Come at me, you pieces of shit.”

Iron Bull waited patiently. These three might be the last Tal-Vashoth he’d get to kill for the day, and he would savor the sensation. He switched the knife back and forth, right hand to left, left to right, back and forth, grinning.

One of the humans growled and engaged Bull first. He was larger than average, his muscles lean. He would’ve have mattered if they were females, though. Bull would still exterminate them like the vermin they were.

Iron Bull side-stepped, ducking for a low kick to the man’s shins, sending him toppling to the ground, his sword sliding off. Bull was on him instantly, pinning him down, hands clamped to his throat. He squeezed and squeezed, until his enemy stopped moving, his tongue jutting past his lips, eyes bulging and watery, a vision of death.

The Qunari Tal-Vashoth wasn’t as big or tall as the berserker, but he was sizable, the nubs of his sawed-off horns poking through his crown of dark hair. He rang a battle cry and charged the Bull, swiftly finding himself locked in a position with rock-hard arms linked around his head and throat. Performing a masterful, precise toss and shift of weight, Bull snapped his neck, shoving his body to the ground. His single wild eye zeroed in on the last opponent.

So, he ran at him, sword up and ready to fall.

Iron Bull side-stepped, ducking for a low kick to the man’s shins, sending him toppling to the ground, his sword sliding off. Bull was on him instantly, pinning him down, hands clamped to his throat. He squeezed and squeezed, until his enemy stopped moving, his tongue jutting past his lips, eyes bulging and watery, a vision of death.

The Qunari zoned out, the image of Ayla’s corpse laid out on the medical table filling his mind, Little Bean in his towel tucked against her. Maybe one of the Tal-Vashoth scum killed that day had been the one to snuff their lives. Just maybe…
Dorian’s attention moved from Hannibal and Ryder, who helped keep back a thin line of Tal-Vashoth dashing for the hills. The only people immediately around him then were corpses, fallen enemies and allies. He carefully scanned about, and his heart flipped.

“Look out!” The Altus’s voice blared.

Iron Bull instantly sharpened. He looked over his shoulder as the sword came down, instinctively raising his left hand to block it, but no matter how strong and resilient flesh was, it would always lose when pitted against steel. Numbing cold and pressure, followed by fire.

Half of his baby and ring fingers flew off somewhere, and blood gushed from the stumps.

The Qunari howled barbarically and kicked into ultimate survival mode. He thought the first man had been downed by the knife in his side and blow to the larynx, but that only temporarily incapacitated him. While Bull strangled the third man, the first managed to grab up his sword and close in to maim him, taking two of his damned fingers.

Bull’s right fist crunched into his attacker’s crotch. Instant stun. The man cried out and hunkered. Bull tackled him to the ground and dug his thumbs into the guy’s sockets, gouging his eyeballs. The Qunari didn’t stop there. He clamped massive hands to his enemy’s skull, arms straight out, putting his entire weight and monstrous strength into play, pressing, unrelenting. The Tal-Vashoth man flailed stiffly, attempting to free his arms and legs, but there was no possible way to dismount three-hundred pounds of blood-lusted, battle-crazed Qunari warrior. The Beast of the Battle field was grunting and growling ferociously, bearing his teeth, spittle dripping down, every muscle taunt. He savagely continued putting pressure on the man’s skull.

Dorian had raced over, his eyes taking in the two dead Tal-Vashoth. He felt helpless and completely sorry for the one still struggling under the weight of the Qunari.

“Iron Bull! You need to stop! Maker, please stop this!”

Ignored.

“How are you holding up?”

Bull roared angrily, pushing past the hot pain of his chopped digits. He gave it everything he had, every bit of brute, raw strength. And then it happened. The man’s skull finally gave, collapsing, and his flesh split apart to let the brains and blood splatter out. Iron Bull stared down at the gore fanned all over the ground, the man’s face flat and distorted because it no longer had the support of a cranium. He couldn’t hear anything but the powerful drumming of his own heart, his deep breaths. Sweet, sweet peace.

It wouldn’t last though. It never did.

Iron Bull finally removed his bloody hands from the destroyed skull and got to his feet. He faced Dorian, Hannibal, Ryder, Xena, and some random Inquisition soldiers, all of them gawking at him with their mouths agape, the universal way to express disbelief. The Qunari lifted his left hand and examined it, blood seeping from the wounds.

“I need to fix this,” he said gruffly, then grabbed up his axe and left them there staring after him.

Hannibal swallowed and swung eyes to Dorian, who wore an “I warned you” expression. The Altus looked at the Tal-Vashoth bodies again, shook his head, and walked off.

(*)

Iron Bull went to the medic tents and sat on an unoccupied stool. He groaned, holding up his injured hand. The doctor on duty regarded him seriously, unsettled by Bull’s calmness. He nodded, quickly gathered the materials he required, and set to patching the Qunari up. Within half an hour, the doctor cauterized the ends of the fingers using the flat side of heated metal bar and bandaged the digits.

Bull sighed as he examined his hand.

“You need to change the dressings at least three times a day,” said the doctor.

“Got it.”

“Shall I give you some herbals for the pain?”

“I’ll be fine.”

The doctor issued a nod. “Okay then. You’re good to go.”

Bull stood and left the tent. He started aimlessly through the camp, taking in all the carnage. His eye fell on Hannibal, who headed his way. Bull halted and waited.

Hannibal said nothing at first, trying to figure out a way to approach the subject. His eyes fell to Bull’s hand. “How are you holding up?”

“I got eight left; I’ll live.”

“Yeah, I know you will.” Hannibal wet his lips, shaking his head. “What happened back there, Bull?”
“I did my job. Killed the bad guys.”

“That wasn’t just killing, it was a slaughter. You didn’t need to go that far.”

Iron Bull rolled his eye mutely, features level and strict. “You want me to eliminate our enemies, right? That’s what I did. If you don’t want that, then say so. Kill them or not. There’s no middle ground.”

“To hell with that! You know what I’m talking about! You were out of control, and because of that, you’ve lost part of your hand!”

“I can still hold an axe,” Bull replied calmly, seemingly undisturbed by Hannibal’s emotional outburst.

“That’s beside the point. You could’ve lost your life, Bull! If Dorian hadn’t called out…”

“Yeah, guess I’ll have to thank him for that.”

“Oh, Bull…”

Not another pity party. The Qunari didn’t want to hear once again how sorry anyone was for his loss or how they wished they could help, because none of it did a goddamn thing but make him angry. Sharp pain zapped through his finger stumps, smarted nerves. He grimaced and sighed. “I’m tired. Anything else?”

Hannibal had never felt so useless to Bull as he did then. The man truly was far gone. He shook his head, replying softly, “No.”

Iron Bull immediately moved around him for his tent.

(*)

Hannibal ordered most of the soldiers to remain behind and reassert the Inquisition camp. He’d have more people there within a week. Bull, Xena, Ryder, and Dorian returned with the Inquisitor to Skyhold. Through most of the trip, Dorian spoke very little to his lover. He told Hannibal more than once that Iron Bull was unraveling, and now the fact was fully in their faces. They’d all seen the Qunari crush that Tal-Vashoth’s skull with his bare hands, and none of them dared to step in and try to stop him. In that moment, Iron Bull had been more animal than man.

They were greeted by Cullen, Leliana, Josephine, and some others upon arrival. Ryder spared a brief glance to the spymaster, before carrying his traveling gear to the stable. He would stay in Skyhold for a day or two, then retreat to the lone cabin a short distance away and remain there until needed.

Josephine returned a couple of weeks ago from the east. She’d met up with Elemir on the road near Redcliffe and went to the Valdian Trading Post camp, where they stayed for five days. The woman had no idea that she’d actually been inside Hald’arun, and those memories would be elusive to her until she went to see her love again.

Commander Rutherford saw Bull’s partially bandaged hand. “What happened?”

The Qunari shrugged, pulling the strap of his traveling bag over his torso. “Battle damage.”

“How bad?”

“Lost two fingers.”

“Maker,” breathed Josephine, hand lifting to her mouth. Her brown vision sadly searched Bull’s eye. She truly loathed how much he’d changed over the past few months, but she could understand why. Ayla’s death was still having a heavy impact on Elemir too, though he hadn’t slipped into a dark hole like Bull.

“I’ll be fine.”

Iron Bull left the courtyard and dropped his weapon and bag in the room. He then went to find Stitches so the medic could look over his cauterized fingers. Aside from an irritating throb, Bull was experiencing phantom sensations, as if the fingers were still there. He’d lost most of the baby finger and half of the ring finger. Luckily, the left wasn’t his dominant hand, and his axe-wielding wouldn’t be severely affected. He’d just have to get used to having the right hand do most of the support. Easy enough.

He occupied a chair at the table in Stitches’s room, arm extended so the medic could tend to the wounds, cleaning the stumps and applying a salve. Stitches finally applied new bandaging. He sat there quietly while Iron Bull examined his work, which was solid and expertly done.

“Feels better. Thank you.”

“You’re always welcome, Chief,” Stitches replied softly.

“Krem is your Chief now, not me.”

“Yes…right…”
Stitches looked away from the man he once served under. It was more than sad to see what he’d become, how he’d simply given up on everything. Iron Bull was still very intuitive. He could almost hear Stitches verbally judging him. His massive figure rose and headed for the door. He peered over his shoulder.

“Thanks again.”

Stitches nodded faintly. The door clicked shut at the Qunari’s departure.

(*)

Drinking did a lot to dampen the throb in his hand, though it didn’t even really taste good anymore. Getting drunk was only an avenue Iron Bull traveled to drown his sorrow and anesthetize his emotions. He sat at the bar that night knocking back cups of ale, staring at his damaged fingers. Idrial’s laughter drifted from a table in the corner not too far away. She and Cole occupied the space, and he’d obviously done or said something to amuse her, and knowing him, he probably hadn’t really tried to.

Iron Bull studied them enviously. They still had each other, even if the world was such a garbage place at times. He had that once. The ultimate, complete trust, comfort, and companionship of another person who loved him unconditionally. Anger snapped staunchly through him.

He drank some more ale.

Someone settled on the stool beside him, and he got a little sick to his stomach. Bull would usually welcome the approach and sexual invitation, but he didn’t feel like it now. He inhaled deeply, released the breath, and faced the person, prepared to turn them down. A woman. His eye squinted while he tried to recall her name.

“I remember you. V-something. Ver…onica?”

“Vanessa.”

“Yeah, right.” He had a hot threesome with her and her friend over two months back. A few days after that, she packed up her goods and left. She was a traveling merchant.

Vanessa looked anxious, like she had something to say. Her eyes swung to his bandaged fingers, and she sighed, hesitating.

Iron Bull watched and waited.

“I’m…pregnant.” Just like that, the words spilled out.


“It’s your baby.”

Bull sniffed, instantly irritated. He swigged from his tankard and wiped foam from the thickness of his beard. He stared at the mirror behind the bar. “I don’t have time for this. Go away.”

Vanessa’s eyes watered. She didn’t move.

Bull’s face whipped around, and he glared at her. “Go!”

The woman flinched away from him, rising from the stool. Shaking her head, wondering what else she could’ve expected from a man like him, she turned and ran through the tavern, out of sight.

Iron Bull faced forward again. He caught Cabot staring disapprovingly at him from down the bar. The dwarf smirked and went back to buffing glasses, serving customers. Bull’s countenance slowly morphed from anger to regret. Whether he was the father of Vanessa’s baby or not, there was no reason to treat her that way. He supposed it was quite possible, since he hadn’t taken a single drop of dhaya juice since the day before the first time with Ayla. For all he knew, he might have several offspring floating around.

The Qunari pushed away from the bar, standing. He left the tavern.

(*)

Cullen tried pulling his jacket on with Cassandra clinging to him. It proved to be a futile task. She was physically very strong and had him pinned against the door of his quarters, his lips engaged in a smoldering kiss.

“Stay with me. I’m sure your soldiers can handle the rounds, Cullen.”

The commander groaned. She wasn’t making it easy, not with the way she ground her naked body to his. He smiled boyishly at her, his wavy, golden hair tousled. “Cassie, I’ve never been one to shirk my duties. I must walk the wall for security inspection. I’ll return in half an hour at most.”
Cassandra smirked softly, kissing him again. “Oh, fine. Hurry back. The bed will be cold without you there to warm me.”

Cullen chuckled. “I promise to make haste, milady.”

They exchanged another kiss, then he ducked out of the chamber, hearing the click of the lock. With a languid smile dangling from his features, the commander went to walk Skyhold’s walls.

(*)

The view at night from atop the western wall was one of pristine beauty. Iron Bull had positioned himself between two merlons, one hand resting on the cold stone. The crenels were wide in this part of the wall. He stood there listening to the wind howl, staring down into the blackness of the ravine with the braid-lock of Ayla’s hair clutched in the other hand. A huge moon floated above the cloud-wreathed peaks of the Frostbacks.

Iron Bull deeply considered what he was about to do. Things would be better without him around being a constant angry damper to everyone. Maybe some of them would be sad, but they’d get over it. He looked down at the precious white braid, and the tears gathered in his eye slipped free.

“I think of you every day, I smell you on me, and I tried to be strong for you, but I can’t do this anymore. I can’t. I love you, Ayla…”

He brought the hair to his lips and kissed it, then took a long breath. His only hope was that in death he would find himself drawn to whatever afterlife his wife and child had found, that they could once again be together, if there even was an afterlife.

(*)

Cullen moved swiftly along the west wall ramparts. He was anxious to get back to Cassandra. After he was done there, he’d cut across the training yards and upper courtyard to the east wall.

The commander checked the lock on a supply room, found it secured. He kept moving and checked another space. He reached the place where the wall veered to angle left, and movement down the way caught his attention. A large shadow. A familiar shape. The horns gave him away.

“Maker…” Cullen gasped.

The Qunari stood up on a crenel steadying himself by grasping to the merlons on either side. Cullen ran forward, bootsteps thumping the stone. He stopped a short distance from the horned man.

“Step down, Iron Bull…please…”

Bull didn’t turn to face him. “Go away, Cullen.”

The commander quickly scanned the area. No one else was around. He held his hands up, as if doing so would calm the situation. “What do you plan to do up there?”

“What does it look like?” Bull said sharply. “Just turn around and walk away.”

“You know I can’t do that. Please, come down so we can talk, alright?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Perhaps, there’s something I can do then.”

Iron Bull finally looked at him, partially turned but still in place to take the plunge. “Can you give Ayla back to me? Can you?” He sneered at Cullen’s silence. “Then, there’s nothing you can do.”

He faced out over the ravine once more.

“I loved her too!” Cullen roared. “Even after she chose you, I still loved her! I’m sure I’ll never stop loving her, and I can assure you that if Ayla had decided to give her love to me, I wouldn’t be moping around in self-pity. I would try to honor her memory by moving forward and living life, because that’s what she would’ve wanted!”

“You don’t know what she would’ve wanted!” Iron Bull turned fully to set his stern eye on Cullen. “You say you loved her, but you didn’t have what she and I did! She was my life! She was everything! The bond we shared is nothing like anything you’ll ever have with anyone! So, fuck off and stop trying to tell me about Ayla. We were so close that she literally became a part of me.” Iron Bull broke down then, hand going to his face as he sobbed silently. “I cannot live without her.”

Cullen sighed. “Come down, Iron Bull,” he said softly and offered his hand. “You don’t need to do this. There are people that are counting on you, right here, right now. Do you think Ayla would want you to selfishly abandon your life and friends, people who care about you, who love you? It’s not just Hannibal, others in the Inner Circle, and the Chargers. I’m speaking for myself as well. You and I haven’t always seen eye to eye, and we are like day and night, but I came to respect you, as a man, a fellow warrior, and the one who won Ayla’s heart. She was special beyond all meaning of the word and could’ve had anyone she wanted, yet a brash, overbearing buff like yourself managed to gain her love. She wouldn’t have made that choice if you weren’t a good man who deserved her, and she wouldn’t want this.”
Every sentence Cullen produced acted as a rope tugging Bull further and further away from his objective to toss himself over the wall. The words were genuine and true. Ayla wouldn’t want her husband to throw his life away, which was what he’d been doing since she died. One thing was for certain: living without her was unbearable. It might not be that night, tomorrow, or anytime soon, but Bull would eventually give in and call on death to take the pain away.

He grumbled and stepped down from the crenel, approaching until his hulking form loomed over Cullen. He tucked Ayla’s braid-lock away. “You couldn’t just let me die in fucking peace.”

Iron Bull shoved passed him, striding off.

Cullen released a rattled sigh. He immediately hurried to find Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Iron Bull did that Tal-Vashoth guy the same way the Mountain did the Viper.
Wait for it.
Wait for it...

Solid knocks boomed at Iron Bull’s door. The huge man sat at the table watching flames flicker in the hearth. He knew who it was.

“It’s open.”

The door swung inward and Hannibal’s broad frame filled the threshold. He fully entered and shut the door behind him, going to stand before Bull. “May I sit?”

Iron Bull silently gestured at a chair.

The Inquisitor lowered to sit across the table from him. Neither of them spoke for what seemed like several minutes, watching the fireplace, listening to embers snap. Hannibal finally broke the silence, his voice hollow.

“I feel like I let you down, Bull. If I had done more to pull you back from the abyss, you wouldn’t be in the shape you are now.”

Bull shook his head slowly. “There’s nothing you could do.”

“There has to be something. I’m sorry you felt like you had to kill yourself. It never should’ve gotten to this point.” Hannibal’s thoughts ran rampant with other considerations. “Do you still feel like you…want to…”

“Jump off a high wall? Yeah.”

“Iron Bull…” Hannibal breathed a sigh. “You need help. Stop fighting me and the others. We’re your friends.”

“I appreciate all that, but I can’t help the way I feel.” The Qunari paused, brow pinching while he sorted through his thoughts, “I can’t breathe sometimes, thinking of her, of everything we had, how she…” a smile twitched upon his face for only a second, “…how she looked at me, like no one else in the world could make her happier than me, just some guy who got lucky enough to find her and fall completely in love with her. Qun, I miss her so much.”

“I know you do, Bull, I know you do. And if there was any way I could help, even go back in time and change things, I would.”

Go back in time and change things.

Go back…

And change things.

Iron Bull’s mind lingered on those words, the rest of Hannibal’s conversation falling transparently upon his ears, heard in the background. He had constantly thought of how he could’ve saved Ayla if he’d just taken her with him or stayed with her in the camp, but it wasn’t until Hannibal spoke it aloud that he’d seriously considered it. Why couldn’t it be so? They’d traveled in the Fade, and entities like Ares had traveled between worlds. Most importantly, an older version of Dorian had traveled back in time to give them a heads-up on possible events.

Dorian was the key. Why hadn’t Bull seen it sooner?

His mind and his heart raced at breakneck speed, revitalizing him with life and excitement. He hadn’t felt this hopeful in what seemed like ages, and he nearly smiled.

“…which is why I’ve decided to remove you from combat for the time being.”


“You’re…fine with it?”

“Yes. I guess I could use some time to regroup.” He nodded.

“Dorian suggested a little while back that maybe you could go to the Ben-Hassrath for re-education, if the Qun will allow it. Help get you back into a sound state of mind.”

“Yeah, maybe they will. I might look into it. Thanks, boss, for everything. I think I’m good. I should head to bed.”

“Okay, then,” Hannibal said waveringly. “This will remain between you, me, and Cullen. Are you going to be okay here by yourself?”

Bull tilted his head, eye narrowing faintly. “I won’t kill myself, if that’s what you’re implying. I’ll still be here in the morning. I’m good.”

The Inquisitor nodded and stood. “Alright. Just know that you always have us, okay?”
“Thanks again.”

Bull rose from his seat and walked with Hannibal to the door. He shut it after the other man and locked it. A short while later, he lay in bed staring at the ceiling and caressing Ayla’s braid-lock. Hope. He had hope again. His sleep was dreamless that night, unplagued by horrid images of rotting undead from the past, to include the figures of his wife and unborn son.

(*)

Dorian slept in like he did most days, heading to the library with his usual piece of toast and cup of tea. He lingered in what he deemed as his section of the large literary collection, sitting in a high-backed chair with his legs crossed, teacup gripped daintily in slim, manicured fingers.

He sipped, set the cup down, and turned another page of the book on his lap, a collective work of poetry by Astrid Adalis. Her imagery was superb and engrossing. A shadow fell across the floor before Dorian, and he lifted eyes to behold Iron Bull. The mage immediately stiffened, the two of them staring silently at one another.

“You don’t have to look so scared, Dorian. I’m not going to hurt you.”

A trim brow lifted meticulously. “Are you sure about that?”

Iron Bull smirked lightly. “I would never hurt you.”

“Hm.” Dorian bookmarked his place and set the literature aside. “To what do I owe the visit?”

The Qunari drifted closer, stealing a look about. There were many in the library, but he kept his voice hindered. “I need your help.”

“Oh, really…” Dorian’s interest peaked. He sat up a little straighter. Maybe his friend would finally open up after all the coaxing, and the Altus always loved a good talk. “What can I do for you?”

Bull lowered to a chair near him, rubbing his large hands slowly together, staring down at them for a few seconds. His eye lifted to meet Dorian’s. “Time travel. You have knowledge of spells and stuff. You could help me go back to save Ayla.”

This wasn’t what Dorian expected. He’d been expecting the Qunari to spill his feelings or something, but not this. He was stunned into silence, picking his mind for a response that would be both mild and resolute. “Iron Bull, I can’t—”

“But you can. You were a student of that magister, Gereon Alexius. You two worked on magic involving traveling through time, controlling it, and you were close to breaking through.”

Like Cullen, Bull kept up on all happenings involving the Inquisition and had read the archives collected on all members of the Inner Circle. He found out long before Ayla even entered the picture that Dorian mentored under Alexius, proving to be a very gifted student. They had almost figured out the secrets of space and time when Alexius’s wife was killed, and his son got afflicted by the Blight. The magister blamed himself and retreated into the Venatori, attempting to recruit Dorian into the Tevinter supremacist group as well. Dorian, of course, didn’t accept the invitation. The two of them drifted apart, and Alexius was eventually betrayed and killed by the Venatori. His work, however, and everything he knew about traversing the boundaries of time, resided in the mind of one beautiful, little Tevinter Altus.

Dorian shook his head. The picture-perfect plains of his face shifted gravely. “I can’t help you.”

“You can’t, or you won’t?”

One of the Orlais scholars assigned to conduct studies and gather information at Skyhold idled by and out of sight. Dorian leaned closer to Bull, keeping his voice low. “Time travel can be a very dangerous thing. Iron Bull. Messing with it can skew the past and unravel the present. I mean, there’s the chance that things may turn out okay, but an equal chance that they won’t. It’s not wise to go dawdling in the past.”

“Look.” Bull started, his voice taught and smothered in emotion, his eye glistening, face pleading. “I must have Ayla back. I miss her so much. I… I wake up with a smile on my face some days, because I just know she’ll be there, right there, lying next to me. But she’s not…” The man’s voice cracked, and he sobbed, sucking in a breath. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live without her, and that makes me as good as dead. Please, Dorian… please…”

The mage was heartbroken all over again, tears filling his eyes, but he’d made up his mind. Time was nothing to mess with, no matter how much people might want to alter it. “I’m so sorry. I can’t.”

Iron Bull’s face hardened, seized harshly by a frown. “So, you’ll go back and change time for yourself to keep the one you love from being taken away, but you won’t help me save Ayla.”

“That’s not fair. I’m not the old man that came to us in Val Royeaux. I… I…”

“You’re a fucking hypocrite.”

Iron Bull rose, glowering down at him. He stormed off.
Dorian brought a hand to his face, wiping his eyes, shoulders shivering as he cried.

(*)

Ten minutes later, Dorian left the library in search of Iron Bull. He didn’t have to go far. The Qunari occupied a table by the great fireplace in the main hall, watching the flames. Gathering himself, he sat across the way from Bull.

“Alright, I’ll try. I can’t make any promises, since there’s a chance I may not be able to succeed with the spell.”

Bull’s broad shoulders sank, unburdened and untense. He sighed and nodded, appearing content for the first time since Ayla’s death. He realized it might not work, that bringing his wife back was a long shot, but it was at least a shot. Bull nodded, speaking softly, “Thank you.”

“The main reason I’m agreeing to do this is because of you. You’ve fallen apart, my friend, and I know it will consume you soon enough. Secondly, I miss Ayla too. She was my best friend, aside from Hannibal, and I loved her very much. I want her back.”

Renewal and redemption, the possibility of changing things, evoked warm calmness in Iron Bull. He could almost feel the beautiful softness of Ayla’s hair between his fingers again, her delicate cheek against the graze of his lips.

Dorian continued. “It will take a few days. I need to gather elements of the spell. We need to keep this completely secret. Oh, how I dislike hiding things from Hannibal,” he muttered. “Do you have anything personal of Ayla’s, something that belonged to her? Clothing or whatever?”

“Yes,” Bull said. He had something very personal. Her braid-lock.

“Good. It will help strengthen the spell I plan to use, which will center around her.”

“Where should we meet?”

“Your room. It’s private.”

Iron Bull gave a nod, his eye narrowing. “How close were you and Alexius to succeeding?”

“Extremely. The truth is…,” and Dorian paused, lavender-flecked eyes skirting off randomly while he gathered his words, “…I figured out the missing element months before Alexius did. I was a very apt pupil, which is why I suppose he chose me as his protégé. His work was fascinating, and I studied it even after we stopped for the day, venturing back into the lab.” The mage’s gaze jotted about, and he continued in a softer voice. “Blood magic, literally. The key to time travel lies in both science and magic. I discovered that for someone to travel back in time, they needed to supply a few drops of their blood to the vessel containing the spell. In our case, the vessel will be a spell-stone, which I can create using equipment in storage. As for the ingredients, there are two alchemical merchants here in Skyhold.”

“Dagna.”

“Yes. She has the best tools and materials for our needs, and I’ll have to steal them. Between the two of us, we don’t possibly have enough gold on hand to buy everything. The most important item is the unwritten crystal. She has several of them, and getting one will save me the week or so of creating one. We’ll get all the stuff back to your room, where I’ll work to finalize the spell-stone.”

“Solid plan.”

Dorian sighed. “Tomorrow, right before lunch, meet me here in the main hall. I’m going to need your assistance.”

“With what?”

“You’re going to distract Dagna.”

(*)

Iron Bull’s step felt light. He was able to enjoy the sun’s beaming rays as they coated him pleasantly. Hope had him more euphoric than alcohol could ever achieve. It didn’t matter how small the chance that the plan would work. It only mattered that there was a chance. One step at a time, though. First, Dorian had to get the materials and equipment and create the spell-stone, then on to the second phase—going back into the past.

The Qunari’s long gait carried him across the yard to the Herald’s Rest. It was still rather early, and no patrons lingered about, all the chairs still up on the tables. Cabot was there, wiping down the nicked wooden bar top. He halted and regarded Bull silently.

Bull approached. “I left my money sack here last night. You happen to see it?”

The dwarf chuffed and nodded. “Yep.” He put the towel down and lowered behind the bar to unlock his safe, hidden behind a cabinet panel. The thing was crafted of dwarven design, automatically making it superior in quality. Cabot might have known the reason behind Bull leaving all his money there, but he’d never tell. He stood and tossed the pouch to the Qunari, who caught it. “I only took what you owed me.”
Both men held each other’s gaze, quietly assessing. Iron Bull read an astuteness in Cabot’s. The man knew of his intended suicide. He found himself wondering if he was the only person to leave a full wallet on the dwarf’s bar.

Cabot softened the stern mask of his face, nodding.

Bull returned the gesture and left.

(*)

The next day, sometime in the late morning, he sat in the main hall at a secluded table waiting anxiously for Dorian. He didn’t sleep much last night, and not because of the nightmares. Iron Bull was antsy and excited. That was the first time in a while that he hadn’t gone to bed hammered. All his hopes were riding on Dorian’s plan. He didn’t know what he’d do if it didn’t work.

Bull fiddled his hands on the tabletop. His position in the room offered views of both the door leading up to the Inquisitor’s apartment and the stairwell leading into the library. Dorian finally came from the library passage. He spotted Bull and went over.

“Have you decided how you’ll distract Dagna?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Okay, head into the Undercroft. She’s like me when it comes to schedules, very meticulous.” The Altus spared a look to the giant sundial near the dragon claw throne. Light shone through the windows behind the immaculate seat, hitting the time piece and casting a shadow on its discus. “She’d usually come out of there in twenty minutes, grab a plate of food, then head back inside to eat alone. You need to go in and engage her, get her to eat with you out here while I get what we need.”

They wouldn’t have to worry about Harrit, since he returned to Haven to reopen his blacksmith shop, leaving Dagna as the master forger for Skyhold. She really only handled special orders for the Inquisitor and his Inner Circle. Four other blacksmiths serviced the rest of the fortress. The skilled man couldn’t really complain, since he was making quite a bit of money off the Qunari stationed in Haven.

“Okay,” Bull said.

“Get a table as far as you can from the door to the Undercroft.”

Iron Bull nodded and stood, heading towards the entrance to Skyhold’s central forge. The heavy wooden door swung easily inward on well-oiled hinges, quiet. He shut it after he entered and scanned for Dagna. She wasn’t hard to find in the large, open space. Renovations had been done to the entire fortress since Hannibal assumed the position of Inquisitor. The Undercroft was once completely open on the far side, a gaping hole that overlooked the ravine. Now a stone wall was in place with huge windows, leaving the gorgeous view but keeping the brutal mountain elements out.

The dwarven arcanist sat on a stool at the weapons modification worktable with her back to the door. She tapped away at something with a medium hammer and didn’t hear anyone enter the forge.

Iron Bull moved in on her, stopping a short distance away. He loudly cleared his throat.

Dagna startled and spun around. The cute little woman had an apparatus on her head that contained a series of lenses used for magnification. Her right eye loomed comically large behind one of the lenses, blinking swiftly a few times. She pushed the concave glass circle aside and removed the equipment from her head.

“Oh...good day, Iron Bull. Come to have your axe refitted?” Even as Dagna asked the question, she noticed he had no weapon with him. “Hm...or not.”

Iron Bull wasn’t surprised to find her uneasy at his presence. She, like everyone else in the fortress, saw how much he’d changed, and not for the better. He didn’t want to make her feel any more uncomfortable than she did. “No, not here for my axe. Actually, I’m here to see you.”

Dagna instantly flustered. She slid from the stool and fiddled with tools on the workbench. “Um... well...I’m flattered, but you see, I’m not—um—what I mean to say is that you’re not my type and I’m really not interested in...well...you know.”

The woman thought Iron Bull had come to seduce her, which he couldn’t really blame, given how easily he’d been throwing his dick around. He held his hands up and quickly shook his head.

“No, it’s not like that, Dagna. I only want to talk.”

“Talk? To me? Why? There are plenty of others to talk to. I’m quite boring really.” The dwarf laughed nervously, backing away.

Bull pulled in a deep breath, letting it ease out smoothly. It was a knife in the stomach, taking full notice of just how scared he’d gotten the people around him. “That’s just it. I have some things I need to get out, but I don’t want to talk to anyone in the Inner Circle because it would inevitably get spread around. You seem to keep to yourself. I know you have integrity and wouldn’t go
Dorian sat with a cup of tea at a table giving him a straightforward view of the door leading to the Undercroft. It only took a couple of minutes for Dagna and Iron Bull to exit. The Altus and the Qunari briefly exchanged knowing glances.

Bull headed to the food table with Dagna, waited for her to load up her plate, then led them to a table down by the great fireplace, as far from the Undercroft as possible like Dorian said. Once they were seated, Dorian casually sipped his tea, blotted his lips with a napkin, grabbed up the folded sack on the bench beside him, and stood. Making sure no one paid attention to him, he slipped into the Undercroft.

Iron Bull focused on Dagna across the table. She picked at a piece of bread, munching, waiting. He started to talk.

“So…it’s no secret that the past five months have been rough for me, and it’s time I spoke to someone. I should’ve spoken to someone a while ago.” He paused to wet his lips, his eye wandering a moment, hands clasped on the table before him. He swallowed. “I never imagined— ever—that I could be hurt like this.”

Dagna’s attention intensified. She set her fork down, watching Bull closely, her expression telling of how sorry she was for him.

The Qunari continued. “You see, those in the Qun aren’t supposed to have what I had with Ayla. It’s not something allowed to us.” He smiled briefly, drifting through thoughts. “She made me feel complete. I could face anything with her beside me, and in those moments where I doubted myself, her smile set me straight.” It felt good to talk about these things, so he kept on talking while staring at his hands. “Nothing in this world mattered more to me than Ayla. I knew within a day that I loved her, that I wanted to spend forever with her. When I lost her, the world and everything in it lost meaning. I feel out of place now.”

Sniffles came from across the table.

Bull’s eye shot up to Dagna. The woman was crying over her lunch. “Damn. I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, no, it’s okay.” The dwarf smiled warmly, wiped her eyes, and pat a little hand over his. “It’s just…well…I always thought you and Ayla were the cutest pair. I was so heartbroken to hear of her passing. I knew it was hard on you, but I guess I just never imagined it to be this excruciating. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. I’m working through it.”

Bull sensed someone approaching from the left, his blind side, and his head ticked that way in time to see Dorian stroll by carrying a bag. The mage didn’t even look at him as he headed through the great foyer, exiting the hall. He was going to Iron Bull’s room.

The Qunari took a breath and offered a partial smile at Dagna, the expression riddled with sadness. “Well, I think I’ve rattled your ear off enough. I should go.”

“Oh, you don’t have to. You can talk some more if you want.”

“No, I’m good. Got some things to tend to. Thanks for listening, Dagna.” Bull stood from the bench.

“It was no problem. If you ever want someone to talk to again, I’m always here.”

The Qunari nodded, then exited the hall.
secured the blank crystal in a mortar. The mage also produced a few arcane dusts and powders.

He stood back to examine the table, satisfied with the station.

Bull stood at the basin washing dishes. He looked over his shoulder. “Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, save for those drops of your blood, which won’t be until I infuse the crystal. It’s going to take at least three days to finish the process, then we can attempt to execute the spell. First, I need to measure and grind down the correct materials, concentrating my magic into them afterwards.”

Dorian went about placing things in mortars, grinding them with pestles, heating them on the burner. He went at it for well over an hour, and by then Bull had finished cleaning the place, sweeping up the small pile of dust and debris he’d amassed, dumping it in the sack with the old bottles.

The mage combined two items in a small glass bowl.

\textit{Pff-POP!}

Followed by a fizzle of blue smoke.

Dorian waved his hand to clear the air.

“Is…that supposed to happen?” Bull questioned.

“Yes. Now, hush so I can concentrate.” The mage hovered one hand over the contents of the bowl and gathered his magic. “\textit{Infusionem virtus miscentur, infusionem virtus miscentur…}” He repeated the words several times, the deep purple glow around his hand expanding a bit.

\textit{Pff-POOF!}

A thin tendril of white smoke filtered from the bowl.

Dorian smiled. “Going well so far.” He looked to Bull. “This is as much as I can do for now. The combination must sit overnight. I’ll return tomorrow around noon to do the next phase. In the meantime, do not touch anything.”

“I won’t.” The very last thing Bull wanted was to botch the spell. It was the only thing offering any hope of getting his precious Ayla and Little Bean back.

Dorian scanned the table, then nodded, satisfied. He headed for the door, unlocking and opening it, turning to face Iron Bull. “I really hope this works, my friend.”

“Me too.”

(*)

Dorian returned to Iron Bull’s as planned the next day. He worked over the table of instruments and components, while the Qunari idled about the room, standing by the windows staring out, sitting in thought, pacing. All Bull could think about was how close he might be to having his family back. He left the room once to retrieve food for himself and Dorian from the hall, and to go to the latrine. He would’ve cooked something up, but the mage had multiple bowls and vessels situated upon the hearth, heating them. Bull thought his room looked like something out of a mad scientist story, with all the alchemy equipment and materials placed about.

Dorian finally stopped and stretched his arms, rotating his head on his neck. Gray eyes took in the darkening sky beyond the bay window across the room. He looked to Bull. “Alright, the second phase is just about done. All we need to do is add a few drops of our blood to this concoction.”

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He gestured to the glass bowl before him.

Bull went to him and held his hand out.

Dorian produced a blade and quickly sliced the meaty part of his palm, ushering a thin wound from which a little blood welled. The mage talked as he held the bowl under Bull’s hand. “Now to elaborate on why our blood is required. The spell I’m using is based on vindicus sanguinem—blood vengeance. We plan to go back in time and find Ayla’s killer before they get to her. Adding our blood to the spell will allow our consciousnesses to travel back in time and inhabit our past bodies.”

Dorian got the drops of crimson he needed from Bull, then set the bowl down. Bull wrapped his hand tightly to choke the wound. It would stop bleeding in a few minutes. Dorian grimaced, held his hand out, and looked away. Bull quickly cut him, drawing a little yelp.

“So dramatic,” the Qunari droned.

“Some of us have lower tolerances for pain, thank you very much.”

Dorian let a few drops fall into the bowl, then stood by while Bull wiped and wrapped the wound, speaking to the mage as he did. “So…our minds are going to zip to the past. What happens to our past selves’ minds?”

“\textit{In theory, they will transport here to the future and inhabit our present bodies.}” At Bull’s completely confused expression, Dorian elaborated. “\textit{Okay, so I will cast an inactivity spell for our}
bodies that will be initiated with the time travel spell. Our bodies will be asleep here in the present, kept in a state of temporal stasis, so when our past minds transfer temporarily to our bodies, they’ll be unconscious.”

“Ah.”

“If we succeed in intercepting Ayla’s killer, stopping her death, we will remain in the past and live forward from there. Our bodies here will vanish from the time continuum, since they’d no longer be required.”

“Our past minds will be wiped out too?”

Dorian nodded. He pushed the hard lump from his throat. “I told you there would be consequences to this. By going back and changing things, we’d be erasing the minds of our past selves, yes. The only consoling factor is that the past us would never know it, and we are them, so they really wouldn’t be destroyed. You and I would simply take up where they left off. This means we will remember everything that has taken place for the last five months. Everything. Doing this means all the memories I made with Hannibal and in general will be gone, and that he’l lose me here in the present. You and I both will seem to have completely disappeared.” The Altus closed his eyes a moment, thinking deeply. “But Hannibal is strong, and memories can be remade. There is only one Ayla, and I too want her back, so I’m willing to make the sacrifice.”

“Dorian…” Iron Bull’s large hand gripped and rubbed his shoulder. “I appreciate what you’re doing, I really do. Whether this works or not, I owe you big.”

“You sure do.”

Bull’s single eye veered off, gaining a distant haze. “We’ll remember everything, hm?”

“Everything. You will have to live with all the decisions you’ve made since Ayla died, the flippant sexual encounters, the way you’ve been conducting yourself in battle. You’ll have to look Ayla in the eyes and live with yourself and those actions. Do you think you can do that?”

The Qunari’s features firmly, resolute. He would live with whatever he had to if it meant he could have Ayla. “It won’t matter. We make this work, and this life won’t have existed. I won’t really have done those things.”

“Except that you have.”

Bull sighed, nodding stiffly. “I can live with it.”

“All right. Be aware that if we don’t figure out who the murderer is before our time runs out, we’ll jump back to our present bodies, our past selves will go back to their bodies, and nothing will change. Your family will still be gone.”

“Then we’d better succeed, because I’m not coming back to this life.” The Altus and the Qunari locked gazes. Dorian knew the exact interpretation of Bull’s words. He would rather be dead than without Ayla, and if they couldn’t change the past, then he’d give up on life there in the dim, sad shadows of the present, a world without the Oona. “How much time do we have to save her?”

“I managed to tweak the spell enough to give us twenty-six hours, little more than a day.”

“That’s not a lot.”

“I know, but it’s all I could get.”

“We’ll find the murdering sonovabitch then.”

Dorian went to the counter by the wash basin, grabbed a cup, and poured some water, sipping. “By my calculations, we will end up somewhere earlier in the day before…”

“Yeah, the day before the attack that killed Ayla and our son.”

“Iron Bull, I know you’re excited about this. So am I. But we need to remain calm back in the past and stay in character. No one—not Ayla, Hannibal, Cole, Varric, Xena, or anyone else—can be thrown off by the presence of our future selves, by us. Causing any kind of disturbance or acting out of the ordinary might spook our killer. It was speculated that they could’ve been on the inside. The truth is that we don’t know for sure, so it’s wise to assume anyone is the culprit.”

“I get it. We go about business as usual, don’t draw attention. At the same time, we have to investigate.”

“Yes,” Dorian sighed over his smirk, “it’s going to be a challenge. We just need to keep our eyes open for any and everything that seems out of place, down to the smallest details. All clues are imperative to finding the killer.”

“I understand.”

Dorian’s shoulders lifted and fell. A long sigh. He went back to Bull. “Where is the personal item of Ayla’s that I requested?”

The Qunari turned to the dresser, opened one of the drawers, and removed the long, soft white twist of hair, coiled a few times. He showed it to Dorian.
“The hair you cut from her body. I thought you gave that to Elemir.”

“I actually cut this piece while she slept, right here in this room, the night prior to leaving for the Storm Coast to eliminate the Venatori red lyrium transport route.” Bull stared down at it, caressing a thumb along the item. A tender smile touched his lips. “We weren’t officially together yet.”

Dorian’s heart sank to see such care and devotion displayed by the broken man. He cursed the tears in his eyes and willed them to back off. Why did he have to be such a damn softy? “It will do just fine. We’ll place it in the rune circle with our bodies before I start the spell.”

“Rune circle?”

“Yes. I’ll chalk it out the day after the tomorrow. That’s when we do this. The crystal has been infused and needs to sit until then.”

It was almost time. Iron Bull’s mind and body coursed with overcharged anticipation, a welcome combination of positive anxiety and jovial excitement, akin to how little children felt on the eve of Winter Solstice day, only times one-hundred. If he and Dorian pulled it off, he’d receive the greatest gift anyone could ever hope for—the return of his family and another chance at the life that had been tragically shattered.

Iron Bull lay in bed that night constantly milling through thoughts. When his mind finally acquiesced and entered slumber, he again found no haunting nightmares, only the blissful vision of his wife’s sweet smile.
"If I Could Turn Back Time, If I Could Find a Way..."

Today was the day. Dorian awakened to the tender brush of Hannibal’s lips along his shoulder and neck, the Qunari’s fingers gliding through his tousled, dark hair. They made tender love, and Hannibal left the bed to get cleaned up at the wash basin on the far side of the large room, near the shallow sunken pool.

Dorian lay on his side, watching the man he loved get dried and dressed. His feelings had been conflicted the past few days concerning what he and Bull were about to do, or at least try to do. What made the decision hard for Dorian was the fact that he’d be leaving Hannibal there in the present, while he’d be rejoined with the Hannibal of five or so months ago. Dorian wouldn’t be losing the Inquisitor either way, but it made him sad that Hannibal would lose him in the present. He knew he couldn’t just disappear without giving an explanation to his husband, and he’d prepared for it.

The Altus drew on a soft smile as Hannibal headed back to the bed, fully dressed. He leaned to kiss Dorian passionately, nuzzling.

“Another busy day, my love. Dagna came to me yesterday about some missing items from the Undercroft, so I’ll have to get someone investigating that. I’ll try to cut things early enough this evening to get back here and make us dinner.”

Dorian sighed, nodding.

Lines formed across Hannibal’s brow, and he watched his mate closely. “Is something wrong? You didn’t forget that tonight is date-night, did you?” He smiled handsomely.

“No, Amatus, of course not.” Dorian intensified his smile, trying hard to hide how much he wanted to cry. “I’m looking forward to seeing what amazing meal you come up with. I swear, if you weren’t so busy being the Inquisitor, you could easily make it as a world-class chef with the techniques and palate you possess.”

“You think so?”

“I know it.”

“Hm,” Hannibal nodded, grinning. “Might consider it then. I’ve always loved cooking.”

“You’ll be great.” Dorian reached to trace a finger along one pointy Qunari ear. “You’re extraordinary.”

The Inquisitor chuckled richly and kissed his husband again. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Have a good day. I’ll see you later.”

Hannibal headed for the long staircase leading down. Dorian waited until he heard the heavy door close after him before loosening his tears. He cried for a few minutes, then dried up, willing himself to push forward. He was to meet up with Iron Bull around noon in his quarters, and then they’d be off.

(*)

The day was slightly overcast, but that didn’t stop Iron Bull from reveling in it, letting the cool, pleasant mountain breeze ride over him while he sat on a covered hay bale at the training yard. Krem was out there with Skinner and Dalish, the three of them sparring. Bull watched them with a saddened kind of love. He’d let them down in the here and now, turned his back on the group of people he’d called his family for years. At least they had Krem, and he was very strong and resilient. He would see them forward once Bull was completely out of the picture.

The here and now would soon be the past for the Qunari, and the past would become the present, giving him a new lease on life. That was the plan, anyway. Iron Bull fully believed Dorian’s spell would succeed, and if it did, they would be physically gone from this timeline, and the world would move on.

Satisfied with his silent goodbye, Bull stood, and Krem stopped across the sparring yard, as did Skinner and Dalish, all of them observing him in respectful silence. Regardless of his shortcomings, The Iron Bull would always be their Chief. The mountainous man turned and went about walking the fortress a bit longer. It was nearly time to meet up with Dorian.

(*)

Bull’s quarters right about noon.

The Qunari stood back and watched Dorian finish chalking the circle and runes over the floor’s wood planks. No fire burned in the hearth or upon the lamps’ wicks. Their bodies would be ‘asleep’ in the room, and Dorian didn’t want to leave anything prone to accidents. He produced a small grunt and rose, setting the chalk aside. He then went to the table where all the necessary items sat, picking up Ayla’s braid lock and the spell-stone, which he placed inside the large circle. The mage positioned the 26-hourglass outside the circle.

“That’s everything. Are you ready for this?”
“Do you even have to ask?” Bull answered softly, the light of hope shining through his sky-blue eye.

“Remember, you have to act as if everything is alright, like your past self would, and be ready for anything when we go back. There’s no telling where exactly in the camp we’ll find ourselves.”

“I understand.”

Dorian nodded, his face taking on the hint of a blush. “Okay. Take off your clothes and get into the circle.”

One dark brow lifted, and Bull stared at him.

“We must be naked to enter temporal stasis, nothing but our bodies, no outside materials or items.”

“You failed to mention this part, hm.”

The Altus was full-on blushing now. He smirked. “It slipped my mind. I know you’re not the modest type, so just get your damned clothes off.” He hurried behind the changing screen to remove his garb.

Iron Bull almost laughed. “No, not modest. You sure are though.” He pulled off his boots, socks, and pants, then cautiously stepped into the sketched-out circle, lined with symbols.

A couple of minutes later, Dorian peeked from the behind the screen, then slowly stepped out. He got into the circle, both men facing each other. Iron Bull kept his eye on Dorian’s, though he’d gotten a sufficient look at the smaller man’s physique. Light brown and appealing, dark hair dusting his chest, stomach, and legs.

“To be frank,” Bull said, “I’ve imagined seeing you like this many times, and if things were different, I would make a move.”

Dorian conjured a humored smirk. “Hm, I’m sure. It’s good that you’ve lightened up enough to crack jokes.”

“I’m just feeling happy for the first time in a while. This is going to work. I know it.”

“I truly hope so.” The mage looked down at the slender roll of paper in his hands.

“What’s that?”

“A message, for Hannibal. I really want us to succeed in this mission, Bull, and if we do, he will lose me in this timeline. I decided I couldn’t just leave him wondering what happened. He deserves closure, and to understand why I left him…” the last words trickled softly from Dorian’s lips, and he thought he would cry.

Iron Bull merely watched him a moment. He realized the magnitude of Dorian’s sacrifice, and there was no way he was going to try and talk him out of it. Sure, Hannibal of the here and now would lose Dorian, but past-Hannibal would still have him. Present-Hannibal would be fine. All that mattered to Bull was Ayla, and while his thought process might be considered selfish, he didn’t care. If he had to, he would spend the rest of his life kissing Dorian’s ass for giving up the life he had now so that Ayla might live.

“It’s going to be alright,” said the Qunari.

“Yes, it will.” Dorian set the letter down beside the hourglass, which he flipped over. He stood up again. “Turn around.”

Bull spun, and Dorian did the same, so they were back to back, but not touching. The mage channeled his power, shut his eyes, and began to chant the activating spell.

“Curvabit tempus praeteritum, Ayla vindicus sanguinem. Tunc aperta est fabricae! Tunc aperta est fabricae! Curvabit tempus praeteritum! Curvabit tempus praeteritum!”

Time bends to the past, blood vengeance for Ayla. Open fabric of time! Open fabric of time! Time bends to the past! Time bends to the past!

On and on he chanted, and the runes on the floor, twined through the circle, lit up. A protective field formed around their bodies, wavering, transparent, and blue. Dorian had fixed it so that casting the time travel spell automatically activated the stasis spell. Bull’s eyes fell shut too, their bodies perfectly still, asleep.

(*)

It was common belief, especially amongst those who followed the Chantry’s religion, that having a near-death experience caused one’s life to flash before their eyes. That every memory and experience assailed them all at once, preceding their transition into the ‘next realm’.

Iron Bull was no Chantry follower, had all but renounced everything of the one religion he was familiar with, the Qun. These facts meant nothing in the whole of things, and maybe all people were connected and synched from birth into death, because the Qunari certainly felt as if his entire existence was flashing before him now.
First, he was in his room in Skyhold, standing in a magical circle with Dorian, and the mage was chanting something in an unfamiliar tongue. Then, Bull’s eyelids turned to lead and gradually fell shut, the darkness swooping in. He stood in the center of the endless dark and he could miraculously see. Stars—so very many of them—began to blink into being, filling the void, and he felt like he was floating in the vastness. His life began to speed by as a series of images, sensations, and feelings.

“Zero-nine, eat your vegetables.”

“I don’t want to, Tama. They taste yucky,” replied 11709, a seven-year-old boy at the time. His signature set of horns were fully shaped, miniature and still growing, as they would until he reached manhood. The child grimaced and held his ground, staring down the Tamassran.

The woman smiled gently at him. “Vegetables make you big and tall, so you’ll have to eat them as well.”

Large, innocent sky-blue eyes watched her thoughtfully. Zero-nine, as he was called for short, was a cunning boy. The Tama knew that and she’d been keeping track of his development through school. He was sizable and strong for his age and helped take care of the younger children, keeping an eye on them and letting Tama know if there were problems. The woman realized he was a special one.

Zero-nine shook his head. He wouldn’t be budged about the vegetables.

She chuckled and shrugged. “Okay, then. How about this—you eat two things from your plate and you can go and play?”

The boy’s eyes lit. “Hm. Any two things?” He spied the slices of carrots, beans, and cabbage sprouts, nose wrinkling.

“Yes.”

He grinned and nodded. “Okay.”

Zero-nine, a little boy who would one day become the powerful, mighty Iron Bull, dug into his shirt pocket, pulled out the three chunks of roasted meat he’d stashed inside, and put them on the plate. Locking eyes with the Tamassran, he plucked up one, chewed, and swallowed, then another.

“Two things gone! Play-time! See you later, Tama!” he smiled mischievously, hopped from the chair, and ran off with the caregiver chuckling tenderly after him.

If life could be broken down into seasons, that instance had happened in the Spring.

Summer was full of warm joy. The carefree days right before full adulthood when the world’s problems weren’t yet your own.

Zero-nine was fourteen years into existence now. A teenage boy with teenaged boy hormones. He hid behind some thick, tall bushes with two other boys in his age group, the three of them raised under the same Tama. All six eyes fixed on the females who swam nude in the lake, both four or five years older, one Qunari and one Viddathari, a human with red hair. Zero-nine observed her creamy skin and flaming crown with the highest curiosity, finding that the part between his legs had hardened to behold her. The boys exchanged grins and continued to watch, and Zero-nine had no idea that the redhead would be his first sexual encounter a year later.

With Summer gone came the Fall, the most nostalgic time of all. Robust colors, the cool breeze, and comfort of a hearth while the trees lost their leaves.

This season was filled with memories of Seheron, the mental recovery afterwards. Then, sweet life. The Chargers and adventure. Freedom from the Qun mostly. And Ayla. Every memory of her bombarded Iron Bull, and he stood in the starry expanse trembling, arms out, eye closed, naked and open.

Winter encroached, bringing icy death, the loss of Ayla, the anguish, Bull’s fall into darkness. Then, it was over. There were only the stars. Everything suddenly yanked forward with tremendous, impossible momentum, making the specks of cosmic light stretch and skew to either side and below and above him.

It ceased. The stars faded, and there was blackness again.

A figure appeared before Bull, and at first, he thought he was gazing into a mirror, but it wasn’t so. The Iron Bull that stared back at him disbelievingly didn’t carry the burden of the last five month’s memories. That Bull hadn’t lost Ayla. He was the consciousness future-Bull would replace.

The two only studied each other, and the past-Bull looked a little scared. “Am I… dead?” His voice reverberated out into the nothingness. “Ayla…”

Future-Bull didn’t know how to respond. To say no would be a lie, should he and Dorian succeed. To say yes would also be a lie, since they hadn’t succeeded yet. He shook his head, mouth working to speak, yet no words came.

Then, past-Bull was yanked back through the time corridor from which future-Bull came. And all
went completely dark.

(*)

From the darkness first came sounds. Familiar sounds. Soft moans derived from pleasure, and not just any moans. They were hers. Sensations quickly overtook Iron Bull. Hot disorientation and the pleasurable tingle of coitus concentrated in his loins, spreading outward to the rest of him. He’d had many partners in his life, and he would never mistake the feel of Ayla, being buried in her.

The darkness faded to the corners of his vision, then vanished completely, and he was looking up at his ebony beauty. She rode him passionately, hands planted to his chest, breasts bouncing invitingly, searing crystal-blue eyes on him through her wild fall of white hair.

“Ayla…” Bull’s hands were clamped firmly to her hips. His past self had been right on the edge of climax, and now he would finish it. He closed his eye tight, thrusting up hard to meet her movements, and then a ravenous groan shuddered from him and he released.

The Oona melted around him shortly after, muffling her cries of ecstasy for the sake of anyone nearby. Smiling, she made to climb off, but Iron Bull quickly sat up and wrapped solid arms around her, face buried against her neck, breathing hard. Nearly half a minute crawled by, and he sniffed.

Ayla’s face shifted to worry. She hugged his shoulders, rubbing them. “Bull, what’s the matter? You’re shaking.”

He sniffed again, and a small moan drizzled from him.

“Bull?” She pulled back to see his face, and her gaze widened. “Are you…crying?”

He had to keep it together. Dorian said it was imperative that they not give those in the past reason to suspect them. The Qunari took a deep breath, wiped his eye, and gave his best steady, satiated smile, the expression lingering boyishly on his face. “I…I guess being with you this time really got to me, that’s all.”

“Mm, you know I love when you get all sensitive, though you’ve never cried during sex before.” Ayla nuzzled his lips.

“I’m just so happy to see you.” Bull’s eye jotted about, carefully taking in every detail of a face that, up until a few days ago, he never thought he’d get to see again.

The woman giggled and smiled sensuously. “You say that like you haven’t seen me in ages, when we’ve been making love for most of the morning.”

He thought, then nodded, his smile faint and distant. “I remember…” Yes, he clearly recalled this morning as it happened over five months ago for him.

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“You’re acting weird this morning, my love.”

Bull had to keep cool, to act and be as he was then. He grinned and snagged her against him.

“You make me weird, woman.”

“Mm.” She rotated her hips, riding his semi-firm cock, holding his face in her hands to kiss him with soaring passion. “I must say that seeing you so sensitive has gotten me all hot again.”

His hand slipped between them and caressed her round stomach.

Ayla chuckled. “Don’t worry. She’s fine.”

“I’m sure she is.”

“Oh, so now you agree with me about the baby’s gender?” she said, grinning widely.

“Well, you’ve proven right most times, so I figure why keep on fighting it.” The Qunari knew full well the baby was a boy, and it tugged his heart to remember Little Bean’s body wrapped in the towel, stab wounds in his tiny chest. Thoughts of his family’s death rushed in to swiftly sober the man. He and Dorian were there to stop their murders, and if they didn’t, Bull would lose them forever. He wasn’t about to let that happen. Not again.

He had to find Dorian.

Ayla slid off him, cuddling into his side. She stretched and yawned. “Could you go get me something to eat, my darling?”

“Oh, of course. What would you like?”

“Anything will be fine, as long as you bring back some plums too.” Ayla smiled up at him, rubbing his tattooed arm.

“Okay,” Bull replied softly, the tones of his voice a pleasant resonance. He stared at her for a moment, unbelieving that she was with him again. Dreams of this seemingly impossible moment
taunted him many times since her death in the other timeline. The man lowered to kiss her brow, her lips, her shoulder. He could've easily stayed there forever, but he knew there was only so much time.

Iron Bull pulled the covers over her and reluctantly shifted away to dress himself, hands trembling a little. He so didn’t want to leave her alone, knowing that somewhere close, probably hidden in plain sight, was a person who wanted to kill her. He finished dressing, swallowing the dryness from his throat brought on by well-placed anxiety.

“I’ll be back shortly, my heart.”

Bull kissed her again, then moved to the tent flap, pulled it back, and stepped out into the Inquisition camp near Jader, ground zero for what would be the most horrible day of his life if he didn’t stop it. It was like being in a very vivid, detailed dream. The sky was blue with patches of clouds. Soldiers milled to their duties. All of it just as he recalled. The Qunari looked down at his left hand, wiggling the pinky and ring fingers. It felt great to have them back. He spared a look at the tent, then went sterner, turning to skim the area.

His eye fell on Dorian, who watched him from near a supply tent. Bull casually headed over, both men’s eyes flipping about observantly.

The Altus lifted a soft smile. Bull looked different. More content, at peace, whole. “How does it feel to see her again?”

Bull willed himself to stay composed, though he couldn’t control the excitement coursing through him, causing his hands to tremble right then. “Unreal. In a good way. Say…when you were transported back, did you see yourself?”

“Yes,” Dorian nodded slowly. “It was so strange. We just…” he shrugged, “…stared at each other, then he was gone.”

“I’d almost feel bad, if they weren’t us.”

“They’re not dead. They’re right here.”

“Exactly, so I won’t linger on it.”

Dorian nodded, getting right down to business. He spoke lowly, maintaining his facial expressions and posture as he normally would. To anyone watching, it would appear that the two were having a casual conversation. “We have one day, Iron Bull. Just one. I personally think it’s an inside job, and we have to figure out who it is before the spell times out, or we’ll be drawn back to the future.”

“I was thinking—why can’t we just alert Hannibal to the impending attack on the camp? That would keep it from happening.”

“Because that would alert the infiltrator. To truly fix this, we’ll have to find the killer ourselves, reveal them, and neutralize them. These are the terms of the spell. Vindicus sanguinem. We must have blood vengeance. If Ayla’s killer doesn’t die before time runs out, we fail. It doesn’t matter if we warn Hannibal or not. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I do.” Bull nodded and skimmed the camp, the soldiers, medics, cooks, armorers. “Shit. It could be anyone.”

“Correct, which is why we’ll have to tread carefully in our investigation. Trust no one. I suggest we get started now.”

“Alright, but first I need to grab some food for Ayla really fast. Can you stand here and watch our tent? Please, I don’t want to leave them alone.”

“Yes, of course. I understand.” Dorian touched his arm. “I’ll stay right here until you get back. I promise.”

Iron Bull nodded to him, glanced lovingly at the tent where his family awaited, and hurried off.

(*)

Back in the future, Hannibal slipped through the door of his and Dorian’s tower apartment with a bag of groceries under his arm and a smile on his face. It was date-night, and anxiousness had taken hold of the Inquisitor. He couldn’t wait to make dinner for his lovely spouse, then give him a massage, and afterwards, they could make love through the night and hold each other while listening to the fire, basking in its warm. Hannibal was surprised he’d gotten off as early as he did, shortly after five, the sun still sinking in the west.

“Dori! Dori, sweetheart, are you home?” he called up the steps, ascending.

He thought he might crest the landing to find Dorian lounging in the sunken tub, awaiting his arrival. However, the room was empty, the hearth cold. Beautiful plays of colorful light decorated the stone floor, pressing in through eloquent stained-glass windows.

“Hmm.”

Hannibal went to set the food items down in the kitchen area to the side of the fireplace. He
wanted to start cooking, but also wanted his husband there to keep him company while he did. The mage always insisted on helping, then the two ended up embracing and kissing while Hannibal tried to cook, and then dinner ended up slightly postponed because they’d gotten themselves all hot and riled. Dorian insisted that culinary men were an aphrodisiac for him.

He left the apartment and headed into the main hall. No Dorian, though he would’ve seen him on the way up. Hannibal tried the library next, and he wasn’t in his usual corner. The only other place Dorian might be was the Herald’s Rest, so Hannibal tried there. The place bustled, though it was nowhere near as busy as it would be in a few hours. He spotted Varric, Cullen, Cassandra, and Cole playing Wicked Grace.

The four of them looked up as Hannibal approached.

“Ah, Inquisitor,” Cullen called. “Nice to see you out this evening. Join us?”

Hannibal smiled, shaking his head. “No, no. I just want to get home and relax. I’m actually looking for Dorian. Has anyone seen him?”

Varric, Cullen, and Cassandra indicated a negative, heads shaking.

Cole, however, nodded. “It wasn’t very recently, though. Before noon, while sitting in my usual place to meditate, I saw him crossing the yard for the east tower.” The man’s brow furrowed thoughtfully. “He went there about the same time yesterday too, with Iron Bull.”

“My…that’s interesting. Thanks, Cole.”

Hannibal bid them goodnight, and made his way for the east housing tower. He couldn’t imagine what could be going on with Bull and Dorian, and even though his mind instantly fixed on unfaithfulness, Hannibal pushed the idea away. Dorian would never cheat on him, but with the way Bull had been acting, Hannibal wouldn’t put it beyond him to try and seduce the Altus.

He reached the tower, pushed the door in, and hurried up to the fourth floor. He didn’t know why, but he felt uneasy. His fist banged Bull’s door; he got no answer. Hannibal slammed the door again.


Hannibal tried the door and found it locked. He could go to Josephine for the extra key. All tower quarters had extra keys locked up and managed by the ambassador, but he decided the situation was urgent. He was worried Bull might have hurt his lover, and he’d kill him if he had, or die trying. Growing more and more frantic with every passing second, Hannibal started charging his body against the door, leveraging his strength in his shoulder. Ten seconds passed before he was viciously kicking at it. He managed to bust the jamb, destroying the lock. The door flew inward.

And a scared breath rushed into Hannibal. He was completely in awe at the scene. Dorian and Iron Bull were naked and standing in a circle facing away from each other. Their eyes were closed, features serene, as if they were asleep. A visible but transparent forcefield surrounded them.

Hannibal hurried forward and put out a hand to touch his husband, but he couldn’t. The field stopped him from disturbing the bodies.

“Maker, Dorian…please…what is this?”

He clasped large heads to his head and looked around quickly for anything that might explain what was going on. His aqua eyes noticed the hourglass, most of its sand in the top chamber, then the note near it. Staring at the two bodies again, Hannibal lowered and took up the note. He unrolled it, instantly recognizing Dorian’s fine penmanship:

Dear Hannibal,

I’m sure it didn’t take you long to track me down, wondering where I’ve been all day, knowing I could never stay away from you for any extended amount of time. I know you’re confused about what you’re seeing, but it’s for a good reason. Iron Bull asked me to help him go back in time to save Ayla, so I’ve conjured the spell to send us to the past. Our bodies are asleep here, while our minds have traveled back. Should we succeed in finding and stopping Ayla’s killer, we’ll stay in the past and move forward in time from that moment, and the two vessels you see in this room will disintegrate after the hourglass runs out, no longer on hold within temporal stasis. If we fail in our mission, we will return to our bodies.

I want you to know that I love you more than I ever thought I could love any man. I’m very lucky to have found you. If I don’t return, please don’t be sad. I’m fine, in the past with you. We’re still together no matter what, and as much as I want to return to the future, I’m hoping Iron Bull and I succeed and save Ayla. It would be wonderful to have her back. The decision to do this was made under tremendous consideration. Not only am I working to save Ayla, I’m also working to save Iron Bull. He will not make it without her, losing her this way.

Again, my heart, my Amatus, I love you, and I know you love me too.

Forever yours,
Dorian

A hollow, helpless cold seeped its way into Hannibal, stealing his breath. His lips trembled, and he worked hard to keep from panicking. He had no doubts that it was all true, what Dorian wrote, and there was nothing he could do about it except wait for the hourglass to spend.

“Oh, Dorian…”

The Inquisitor dropped to his knees at his husband’s feet. He needed some time to recompose himself, to digest what all of this fully meant, then he would pull the Inner Circle together for an emergency meeting.
It was difficult for Iron Bull not to linger on every second as they ticked by, counting down to the deadline. He felt inclined to spend as much time as possible holding Ayla, wallowing in her presence, her smell, her love. That wasn’t an option, however. He needed to be keen and find her murderer.

And where the fuck did he even start?

The warrior and his lady freshened up and left their tent for some air. Ayla wanted to eat a little more, so they found a place in camp and he got them something. Bull picked lightly at his food, eye roaming around. Right on cue, a set of armed guards moved in from the north camp entrance leading Arisol and his group. They’d shown up shortly after noon on this day in the other timeline.

Ayla stopped munching her plum and tightened slender fingers on Bull’s forearm. She looked over curiously at him. “Qunari? Here?”

“Mm,” he replied, trying not to sound as grim as he felt. “We’d better follow. I’m sure the guards are taking them to the war room tent.”

Iron Bull stood and helped her up. Ayla linked her arm through his, and they were off.

(*)

Bull, Ayla, Xena, Cole, and Varric filed into the spacious, open tent, standing spread out around the war table with the Qun members. No one said anything while awaiting Hannibal, merely sizing one another up.

When the Inquisitor finally did arrive with Dorian, he appeared edgy, unsettled. Dorian and Iron Bull kept sharing glances through the whole meeting, knowing exactly why Arisol was there, and when it came time, Bull read over the scroll sent by the Qun and gave his insight, as he had the first time around. Though, there was something Bull wanted to do differently this time. He wanted to suggest Ayla go with them, but that was impossible. Not only would that alert the secretly lurking culprit, but the hourglass was set to expire an hour after the party headed off to see the Sten. Even if Ayla accompanied them, Dorian and Bull would be snatched back to the future during the trip if they didn’t find her killer. No matter how many things changed, Ayla’s murderer had to be neutralized.

Like before, a few more words were exchanged, then the Inquisitor agreed to meet with the Sten and offered tents to Arisol and his people. Everyone broke from the meeting.

(*)

The day continued mostly as it had the first time around. Dorian and Bull weren’t there to change anything other than stopping Ayla’s murder. So, that night the Qunari and his lady sat eating by the fire, and Bull kept his arm around her while she dined. Mindful not to look suspicious, he idly scanned the people around them, paying extra attention to Arisol’s group this time.

“What’s wrong, my warrior? You’ve barely even touched your food.” Ayla had asked this exact thing before.

Bull tugged on a gentle smile, rubbing the sternness from his face. “Strangely enough, I’m still good from eating earlier.”

“Alright.” The woman nuzzled his bearded chin, then continued spooning in apple cobbler.

Bull relished her closeness, her warmth, the liveliness of her being. The thought of having her snatched away again made him flinch. Things were playing out differently this time. In the other existence, Bull said he wanted to go talk to Hannibal in lieu of accepting the terms of the alliance with the Qunari. During that talk in the Inquisitor’s tent, Bull explained how he’d originally been tasked with getting in good with him, then was to assassinate him when the Qun gave the order. He felt Hannibal had the right to know that, and to also be aware that Bull had no intention of killing him. In this new timeline, Bull might tell Hannibal about the Qun’s original plans, but for now, he needed to concentrate on finding Ayla’s killer. Time was slipping by faster than water from a vessel full of tiny holes, and Bull was growing more and more frantic. He did well to hide his anxiety.

He spied Dorian approaching and quickly looked to Ayla, speaking softly. “I need to talk with Dorian for a moment, but I’m not going far. I’ll be just over there.” He nodded across the firepit.

“Will you be okay for a few minutes, Naaremma?”

“Just fine,” she said, lifting a bright smile. “I have my cobbler to keep me company.”

Iron Bull couldn’t help but chuckle lightly. He kissed her temple, inhaling her scent. “I love you,” he spoke against her skin.

“Mm,” she smacked her lips, licking the sweetness of baked apples from them, “I know you do. I love you too.”
The Qunari swallowed and reluctantly broke contact with her. He turned and went to Dorian, the two of them standing partially in the shadows between two supply tents.

“Have you found anything?” Bull asked lowly.

“No, sorry to say.” The mage looked distraught. He noted his expression and smoothed it out.

“Almost half the time is gone, Dorian.” Bull’s eye yanked to Ayla, whom he had an unobstructed view of, pregnant and happily eating her dessert. “We have to do something. We have to.”

“Calm down, Iron Bull. Panicking is only going to exacerbate you, and it won’t help the situation.” Dorian thought a moment, fingers gripping his chin. “We’ll have to use time in the middle of the night to continue investigating, looking for any kind of clues.”

Bull shook his head, face dire. “No. I can’t leave her alone.”

“She’ll be alright. The…incident isn’t set to happen today.”

“How do you know she’ll be alright? Our presence here in the past changes things. In the other timeline, I never left Ayla during this day; we were together mostly. And I certainly didn’t leave her in the middle of the night.” His resonant tones were growing more and more distressed, though he kept his voice low. A haunted shadow hovered in his eye as it focused sharply on Dorian. “What if I leave her and the killer’s watching, and they take that moment to…to…to kill her. No. No. I can’t leave her. I won’t do it.”

Iron Bull closed his eye, fighting off the massive wave of panic rolling in. He shook his head vigorously.

Dorian saw this ship catching fire and sinking fast if he didn’t calm the large man. He set a hand to Bull’s arm, rubbing it, squeezing the firm, warm flesh reassuringly. “Okay, okay, it’s alright. Breathe, Bull. Breathe. You stay with Ayla,” he said, skimming to make sure no one paid any special attention to them. “I’ll spend as much time as I can investigating the camp during the after-hours, try to find something. How’s that sound?”

Bull opened his eye, silently watching the Altus. He nodded, taking a breath. “Thanks, Dorian. I —”

“Yes, yes. You owe me one.”

(*)

The Qunari and his wife retired to their tent within the hour and got washed up. Having fallen victim to a slight food coma, Ayla snuggled against him and went right to sleep. Bull, however, didn’t immediately find slumber, worried and sickened by thoughts of failure, of time running out. A few hours later, fatigued, he finally drifted into a mild slumber, his mind shutting down just enough to drop him in and out of unconsciousness. His eye flew open sometime in the middle of the night, and he jerked when he noticed her warmth wasn’t against him. Dread seized Bull, and he thought he might’ve dreamt up the past half a day, that the foggy dreamscape façade would clear up and he’d be left lying alone in bed in his Skyhold quarters.

Iron Bull sat up quickly, voice panicked when it called out softly. “Ayla!”

He caught his breath and sighed when he saw her right there. She’d rolled away from him, getting comfortable on her other side. The larger the baby got, the more Ayla started shifting to find a good position for sleeping. Bull closed the small gap of space between them, scooting against her, stroking her hair. He kissed her cheek and lay back staring at the tent’s ceiling until the sun came up.

Bull didn’t want to rouse Ayla so early, but it was necessary. There was only five or six hours left before the spell expired. He hoped Dorian had found something, anything. The couple got dressed and refreshed, then headed to a spot by one of the fire pits near the galley tents. They made plates and had breakfast. Bull’s stomach was in knots, and he didn’t feel like eating. He made himself devour most of his food so that Ayla wouldn’t question him. She ate in her usual birdish manner, slender fingers picking delicately at her meal.

Iron Bull saw Dorian enter the area and go fetch his morning tea. The Qunari set his plate aside, speaking to Ayla. “I’ll be right back.”

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The woman nodded and smiled through the blurriness at his familiar shadow-shape. With his back to her, Bull didn’t see how swiftly the smile melted or the concerned expression that replaced it.

Ayla sensed that something was up with her husband, and it had been since yesterday morning. She’d already established early on in their relationship that she would never attempt to pry his mind for thoughts using the mental link between them, but she was quite tempted to try now.

Bull went to casually lean against a sturdy stack of supply pallets by Dorian. “Find anything?”

“No.” Dorian shook his head. His eyes fell on Ayla, a good enough distance away that she certainly couldn’t see their shapes or hear them over the low chatter of others in camp. He gripped tightly to the wooden mug in his hands.

“We only have a few more hours,” Bull spoke tightly, worry and panic starting to set in again.
“Keep your voice down. I know we’re cutting it slim. We can’t unravel now,” Dorian replied calmly. “I didn’t go to bed until four this morning. I went from one end of the camp to the other, watching, looking, listening, and nothing. I don’t know what else to do, Bull.”

“There has to be something we’ve missed.” The Qunari’s gaze trailed back to the love of his life, the light of his world. “I can’t lose her again.”

Dorian took a breath, sipped his tea, and looked up at the sky a moment to clear his mind. Overcast like before. It would be raining soon enough. Maker, please, you have to show me what I’m missing. Please, I’m begging for anything. Show me…

The Altus’s eyes set about scanning again, slow and meticulous. There was Xena sitting on a crate sharpening her sword. Varric over at the food tables making a plate. Two soldiers carrying a chest, straining with the effort. Another soldier gave Dorian pause. He sat not far from Ayla, looking in her direction while slowly eating his food. He suddenly smiled and waved a hand, beckoning. Apparently, he wasn’t watching Ayla, but a fellow soldier, who walked from across the area to sit by him. Dorian sighed and kept looking. There was also Cole. He stood in an open spot with his dual blades out, practicing footwork and stances. Dorian’s gaze panned by him…then snatched back.

Cole.

The Altus observed him for several seconds, and he almost smiled. Almost. He didn’t want to draw attention. Calmly, Dorian turned to Iron Bull. “Don’t look immediately, but what do you notice that’s strange about Cole?”

Iron Bull had a vast amount of experience being inconspicuous, which was expected since he was a retired Ben-Hassrath. His eye smoothly rolled to Ayla, genuinely observing her, and after enough time rolled by, his gaze swayed to Cole. It took less than three seconds to note the oddity.

Bull’s eye drifted elsewhere while he spoke lowly to Dorian. “His stance. It’s poised for right-handed dual-blade wielders.”

“Exactly.”

Both Dorian and Bull were familiar with Cole’s posturing and had fought alongside him long enough to know he was left-handed. This meant that when Cole was engaging an enemy, his right foot went forward, and he put his strength into his left side. Now, across the way, the rogue’s left foot was forward, favoring his right side.

They watched Cole casually, making sure they didn’t look for long stints.

“That’s definitely out of the ordinary,” Bull said lowly.

“We should check his tent.”

“I agree, but we can’t both just leave the area. That might alert him.”

“You’re right,” Dorian answered. “You go investigate, and I’ll remain here to make sure he doesn’t walk in on you, as well as keep an eye on Ayla.”

Iron Bull’s attention slid to his wife, still eating her breakfast. He loved her so much, he thought his chest would burst from the swelling of his heart. He nodded. “Okay. I’ll try not to take long.”

With that, he slipped away from the area, heading for Cole’s tent. When he reached it, Bull did a quick glance about, saw no one paying attention to him, and entered. The inside was dim, and it took a few seconds for his vision to adjust. At first sight, it didn’t appear suspicious. It was tidy and minimal, just what would be expected of Cole. Then, Bull further studied the sleep roll. It looked strange. He went closer, kneeled beside the bed of furs, and put a hand out. Bull sucked in a small breath when his fingers collided with something he couldn’t see—the warmth of a clothed body. Moments after he contacted the body, it shimmered into sight.

“Cole!”

The man was unconscious. He’d been cloaked by magic, hidden in plain sight. Bull gently shook him, but he wouldn’t awaken. Whatever spell had hold of him, Dorian should be able to counter it. He was still alive, thank goodness. The Qunari’s face hardened. Whoever that was looking like Cole, training in the yard, they were an impostor, and most certainly the one who killed Ayla.

After all, Bull had agreed to let that person watch over her while he went to see the Sten with Hannibal. All the while, the real Cole was in his tent, knocked out by a spell and hidden under invisibility.

Qun, they were going to save her!

Bull made sure the real Cole was alright, then slipped from the tent. He returned to the galley area to find Dorian sitting beside Ayla, talking with her. ‘Cole’ now sat by himself eating a light meal of apple slices and bread. He spared a long look at Bull, the Qunari purposefully ignoring him since there was no need to spook him just yet.

Bull sat on Ayla’s other side, touching her hand, lending sight.

“There you are, my love,” she chimed.
“Yeah, sorry I keep bouncing away. Just need to ready a few more things for the trip to see the Sten. Dorian, I need you for a moment. Be right back, Naaremna.” He kissed her forehead.

“Okay,” she said softly.

Iron Bull and Dorian went to a place a short distance away for some privacy. Ayla was still visible, as was Cole.

“Find anything?” Dorian implored, hopeful.

“Damn right, I did.”

“What?”

“Cole.”

Dorian arched a brow questioningly.

Bull elaborated. “I found Cole. He’s unconscious in his tent.”

“Maker!” the mage exclaimed lowly. His eye jerked to who appeared to be Cole, sitting by a fire pit eating.

“He was hidden by a cloaking spell or something, came into view when I touched him.”

“So, that person over there, whoever they are, removed Cole from the picture and took his place… all to get close enough to kill Ayla?”

“Looks that way, though how can we be sure the imposter is the one who killed her in the other timeline? They could just be an accessory.”

“It’s possible,” Dorian said, both men speaking quickly back and forth, excited to finally have a solid lead with only four hours left. “How long do you figure they’ve been posing as Cole?”

“Could’ve been since we got to the camp or for a few hours. No way to tell yet.”

“Time’s running out. We have to do something.”

“There’s only one thing we can do,” Bull said. “We confront him, make him tell us what he knows. If the imposter isn’t the one who killed my family, he will be begging to tell me who did by the time I’m finished.” The Qunari’s demeanor darkened, and to Dorian, he took on the somewhat sinister air he had in the other life.

Dorian nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Iron Bull went to the nearest soldier. “I need you to fetch the Inquisitor and bring him to that fire pit.” He pointed. “Tell him it’s an emergency. Got it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bull and Dorian watched the soldier leave, then headed back to the area.

(*)

“Yeah, it’s known that Ares has spread his influence all along here”—Hannibal traced a finger around the crescent of the Nocen Sea shoreline—“obviously attempting to gain the favor of Tevinter, and that doesn’t bode well for the Qunari cities and colonies on Seheron.”

The huge island territory and all its surrounding smaller islands was to the north of the Nocen Sea, forming a plug between that body of water and the Boeric Ocean.

“That is primarily why the Qun now seeks this alliance. For centuries, we have held back the Tevinter Imperium’s domination, unlike the old Elvhen kingdoms,” said Arisol. “They didn’t treat those magic-wielding swine accordingly, and the ‘Vints overpowered them, turned them into slaves and puppets. Qunari are strong, yes, but we know that with this war god backing them, the Tevinter will be a force even we won’t be able to endure over time.”

Hannibal had spoken with Arisol in-depth the previous evening, filling him in on just what Ares was, a god from another world. He was not some savior sent by the Maker and Andraste as he claimed to be, but most of those following him didn’t know that, and even if they did, they’d probably still follow him blindly.

The Inquisitor’s aqua gaze swept to a soldier who suddenly entered the war room tent. “Yes?”

“Excuse the intrusion, sir. I deliver a message from Iron Bull stating that you should report to the galley area immediately. He says it’s an emergency.”

“Emergency?” Instinctively, Hannibal grabbed up his sword belt and fastened it on.

He hurried for the area with Arisol and four guards in tow. His red eyebrows drew closer together in confusion when he got there and saw nothing notable. Just Ayla sitting between Bull and Dorian, some others lounging around for a morning meal, including Xena, Varric, and Cole.

At the same time, Dorian and Bull stood and went to flank Cole, who stopped chewing and went
“Bull? What’s going on?” Hannibal’s arms crossed his great chest.

In one fluid movement, Iron Bull drew his long-blade and pressed its sharp, cold steel to Cole’s neck, forcing the man to stand. Cole dropped his plate to the ground, eyes wide. “This isn’t Cole.”


Bull sneered, bearing his teeth, fingers tight on the knife’s hilt. “Neither do I. You look like Cole, sound like him, and you even smell like him, but you’re not him. Who are you?”

‘Cole’ said nothing. In fact, his entire countenance shifted, and he appeared smug. His vibrant blue eyes hardened, and a taunting smile hooked the corners of his full mouth.

“Answer me!” Iron Bull roared, applying enough pressure to pierce the imposter’s flesh and draw a thin run of blood. The Qunari was a man on the bitter edge. His wife’s and child’s lives were on the line, and he was not fucking around.

‘Cole’ winced and swallowed, his Adam’s apple dipping and rising.

Dorian stood at the ready, hands glowing with conjured power.

Xena and Varric had risen, watching as keenly and curiously as everyone else in the area. Ayla remained seated, but had stiffened, scared. Her lovely eyes stared in the direction of her husband’s voice.

Hannibal sensed something wasn’t quite right and decided to trust in Bull’s judgment. Apparently, Dorian believed Cole wasn’t himself either. The Inquisitor waved a hand, signaling guards to take over for Bull and Dorian, and once they were in place with their swords trained on who appeared to be Cole, the Qunari and Altus backed away. Bull returned to Ayla, taking her hand, helping her stand beside him. She looked up quizzically at him.

“Will one of you please tell me what’s going on?” said Hannibal.

“Iron Bull and I noticed something off about Cole, so Bull checked his tent a short moment ago and found another Cole inside it, under a sleeping spell and hidden by a cloaking spell,” answered Dorian. “We’re sure the one in the tent is the real Cole.”

“What the…” Hannibal’s eyes jerked to ‘Cole’, scanning for something that might reveal him as an imposter. He spoke to another guard. “Go get the medics and take them to Cole’s tent.”

The soldier hurried off.

Hannibal frowned harshly at ‘Cole’. “Who the hell are you?”

“I suppose, as they say, the jig is up.” ‘Cole’ sighed. He knew he wasn’t going anywhere and that his plan had caved. Very slowly, aware that any quick movements would get him impaled, he put a hand into his pocket and pulled out a flattened crystal with a reddish tint.

“A spell stone,” Dorian said.

“Careful with that,” warned Hannibal, drawing his own sword.

‘Cole’ smirked and froze. “You wish to know who I am, yes?” Without waiting for a response, he clutched the stone tightly in his fist. His figure immediately glowed dimly and shifted to its original form.

Several very unsuspecting gasps resounded.

Bull’s mouth dropped open, and the pain of betrayal claimed his face. “Gatt! You!”

“Bull, stay calm,” came Dorian’s voice. Speaking about the incident that hadn’t occurred yet in past tense would further raise suspicions.

“Why?” Bull demanded, arm tightening around Ayla.

“Because of what happened at the Storm Coast. Because of you,” the elf spat at Ayla. “Two-hundred Qunari lives needlessly lost. The moment I saw her on your arm that day in Skyhold, when I’d gone to inform the Inquisitor that the alliance was off the table, I knew she was the reason you’d changed so much, the reason you turned your back on your own people, that you turned completely away from everything you were.” Gatt’s eyes narrowed at Ayla, who stared at him from the safety of her husband’s embrace, small hand on his arm. “It was her fault, and I knew then that she had to die. I had planned to run her through myself. She’s the reason you turned against the Qun. She’s tainted you, making you question everything you stood for. Her death would’ve freed you, made you see the error of your decisions, Hissrad, or rather…Iron Bull.”

“You’re delusional,” Bull replied, his voice steady, though he was quite ready to break the elf’s neck with his huge bare hands for all the pain and suffering he’d caused.

“I care about our people! You obviously don’t!”

“So, you’ve broken from the Qun and turned Tal-Vashoth to avenge the Qun?” Hannibal cut in.
“That makes no sense.”

Gatt rattled out a dry, humorless laugh. “The Qun has nothing to do with this. They don’t know I’m here. I infiltrated a large Tal-Vashoth group as a spy and got them to work with me. There’s a few dozen of them hidden in the area, once I gave the signal, they were to attack and form a distraction, so I could get to that white-haired witch. I was waiting for you and your party to leave to see Ayla. That traitor said he wasn’t taking her with him. I had already decided I’d find a way to stay behind, initiate the attack, and kill the bitch while the Tal-Vashoth kept the soldiers distracted. It’s a shame I couldn’t complete my mission. As I said, the Qun is not involved, so don’t take your animosity to them. This was entirely my doing.”

Gatt scowled at Ayla, his eyes darkened and merciless.

Iron Bull knew the crazy little asshole would’ve proceeded without hesitation. The only reason Gatt was still alive was because four hours still remained until the spell expired, and there were questions that needed answering.

Bull’s eye leveled on the man-who-would’ve-but-actually-did kill his family. “How did you pull the swap with Cole?”

“It was easy,” Gatt quipped. “I’ve been watching the Inquisition for several months, planning on how to reach its blind witch. I received intel that you’d be traveling to the region of Jader to help the city’s defenses, and when I saw that she’d been brought along, I used this moment to execute. I watched the camp with my Tal-Vashoth force. Before this, however, I obtained the most important piece in the form of spell stone—the ultimate illusion magic. With the item, I could literally become another person. All I had to do was touch them while gripping the stone. I sneaked into Cole’s tent very late last night, and before he realized what was happening, I touched him, sent him into a deep sleep, and assumed his identity, down to his scent. I knew I had to be very convincing to fool you.” The elf’s gaze locked to Iron Bull’s.

“And you would’ve succeeded if Dorian hadn’t noticed you using a right-handed stance while sparring. Cole is left-handed.” Bull’s hands clenched into fists.

“Ah, an amateur move on my part.”

“Where did you get the magic?” Dorian implied. He was usually very good at sensing spells, but this one was well masked.

At that question, Gatt laughed darkly, his tone skeptical as he talked. “For this plan to work, I needed the best spell, so I sought out people who were said to offer superior services for a steep price. Three old crones living in a hut in the filthiest swamp I’ve ever visited. They gave me the spell stone virtually for free. I almost laughed when they said all it would cost me was my soul. Such rubbish.” Then, he did grind out heavy laughter.

Everyone waited for Gatt to quiet down.

The elf spoke more. “The stone not only let me be another person, it also works to sync their memories to mine. Once I had killed the witch, I was going to return to Cole’s tent and use the stone to wake him, quickly taking my leave from this camp. He would’ve believed he had simply been taking a nap when the Tal-Vashoth attacked, or whatever else I wanted him to believe. Handy little thing.” He examined the flattened crystal in his hand.

“Holy shit.” Varric shook his head. The whole story was almost unbelievable, the extent to which Gatt would’ve gone to exact revenge on Iron Bull.

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. He looked extremely deadly. “Bull, what do you want to do with him?”

Bull already knew what he’d do. He and Dorian found the culprit. Gatt revealed how he planned to kill Ayla. If he truly had been acting on his own and against the wishes of the Qun, he was pretty much Tal-Vashoth to them anyway, even if he thought he was avenging the Berethlok. Bull and Gatt had been friends once, but he wouldn’t let the elf or anyone else take his family from him. Never again.

The huge Qunari moved forward, snatched Gatt, and whirled him around so his back was mashed to Bull’s front. He loosened his knife, knotted his fingers in the man’s brunette mane, yanked his head back, and slit his throat.

Chapter End Notes

For any The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt fans out there, those three old crones were for you. :)
Blood gushed from the ear-to-ear slash in Gatt’s throat. His bright green eyes loomed while slender fingers gripped uselessly at the gaping wound. He gurgled unintelligibly and crumpled, draining on the ground.

Everyone watched on silently while the elf flailed for a few moments, then went still, his eyes staring up lifelessly at Iron Bull. The Qunari looked satisfied and unfazed. Ayla’s nose twitched at the coppery smell of blood. She knew her husband had killed the man, and she didn’t feel remorse for Gatt. He had meant to kill her and the baby.

Death.

Blood.

Vengeance.

The world went still around Dorian and Iron Bull. Every person frozen mid-action or expression or sentence, and deafening silence imbued. Then, they found themselves suddenly in Bull’s room in Skyhold, accompanied by their sleeping bodies in the circle. Time began to race backwards swiftly, blurred and skewed around them. Bull’s room. Skyhold. Battle at Kirkwall. Everything that happened for the past five months.

Then, they were back at the Inquisition camp with everyone frozen around them, Gatt’s body on the ground at Bull’s feet. The world shifted back to liveliness, moving forward again. The spell had been carried out within the allotted time, and the past was now the present for Iron Bull and Dorian. The future they originally had was history.

Bull moved to Ayla, capturing her in his arms, hugging her to his great chest. She attempted to see what deathly fate befell Gatt, but her husband’s large mass blocked her vision. “You don’t need to see it, Naaremma-Kadan,” he said softly. The Qunari loved her so much that he would slit as many throats as necessary to protect her.

“I’m sure I’ve seen worse.”

Bull nodded and stepped aside.

Ayla saw Gatt’s body and inhaled sharply. His eyes were open, gazing into nothing. “He had to die, right?” she said softly.

“Yes. You heard him. He would’ve stopped at nothing to destroy me, and he would’ve killed you to do it. He had to die.”

Hannibal turned to a soldier. “Dispose of his body, and have a message sent to Par Vollen informing the Qun of his intended treachery. Tell them he will not be returning.”

“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Hannibal looked to Dorian. “I’m going to check on Cole.”

“Allright. I’ll be along in a moment.” Dorian watched his husband hurry off. He turned and went to Iron Bull. “May I speak with you a moment?”

“Yes.” Bull wanted to talk with the mage too regarding what had just occurred. His eye dropped to Ayla’s lovely face. She was watching him closely. Even with Gatt dead, he still didn’t want to leave her unattended. His gaze landed on Xena. “Could you please stay with Ayla for a bit?”

“Of course,” answered the Warrior Princess. She gently linked her arm through Ayla’s, leading her back to her place by the fire pit. Meanwhile, Ayla frowned, highly disliking being passed about like a toy between children. Her husband had much explaining to do once she got him alone.

(*)

It rained a lot in the swamp the three crones called home, and it was raining this day. The old women—if they could be called that, since they were not truly of the world the way most other people were—danced around their cauldron in the main house. One was quite bulbous, and her blubbery arms flapped unappealingly when she waved them, grinning. The other two witches were scrawny, their limbs spindly, the ancient material of their attire hanging loosely on them the way clothing clung to a hanger. Each of them was ugly as sin, though, missing teeth and sporting warts and crooked noses.

The fat one suddenly halted and her huge form juggled. She lifted her arms in the air. “It is done, sisters. Blood vengeance has been served, and another soul feeds our endless energy.”

“Done.”

“Done.”

The other two agreed, nodding quickly, their grins foul and wretched.
The fat crone used a long-handled spoon with an oversized scoop to dip into the bubbling cauldron and fish out a perfectly round sphere the size of a marble. It glowed for a moment. The other two witches eased in to behold the item, bursting into laughter when Gatt’s face flickered small and terrified inside the orb. He was theirs now, his soul forfeited the moment he accepted the spell stone from them.

The crones knew what fate awaited the desperate elvhen man, just like they knew two would travel back in time to change things. They, however, remained in the future, their present, the same timeline where Dorian and Bull were missing. And somewhere in that same time, the Gatt that killed a woman named Ayla and her unborn child several months back suddenly dropped dead. His soul belonged to the crones, and that meant any version of him across all timelines was doomed, dead, and no more.

The three sisters danced, laughed, and sang in their old house in the swamp, their cackles giving scare to forest critters, making them cower in their dens.

(*)

The Tevinter city of Qarinus, Ares’s estate mansion.

Elgar’nan’s long legs carried him at a brisk but steady pace through the corridors of the great house for the huge parlor that had been transformed into the war god’s meeting room. A throne stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows, beyond which was the gardens. Elgar’nan had been in Ares’s company for months. He knew the god’s schedule, designating time throughout the week to listen to and address his followers’ concerns. Ares would still be available in the meeting room for another hour.

Elgar’nan rounded the corner and headed down the hall, paying no attention to the guards flanking the entrance. Ares reclined in his throne, fingers on his chin while he listened to a woman, the mayor of a large town who’d fallen into the god’s fold, talk about how their crops were failing due to a blockage in the river caused by mountain mudslides.

The tall, regal elf could care less about her ratty village, the people in it, or anything else. All he cared about then was giving Ares a piece of his mind. His silvery gaze shot to the orderly line of others awaiting their turns to approach the throne. “Get out.”

Ares straightened up and observed with interest.

“I said leave!” Elgar’nan lifted a hand and conjured a fireball.

The room cleared out quickly, including the mayor.

Ares stood and approached him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What I should’ve done months ago—confronting you.” Elgar’nan extinguished the flaming orb. He looked accusingly at Ares. “You have no intention of giving me my orb, do you? You’ve just been stringing me and Fen’Harel along.”

“Believe me when I say I want to help. Just a little more time, and—”

“Answer the question! Will you give me my orb or not?”

Ares studied him, smoldering brown eyes flickering secretively. He finally said, “No.”

“I knew it,” the elf said with disgust.

“No…I won’t give you the orb just yet. I told you that before I return it, you must help me, just like I told Fen’Harel I would attempt to restore him too if he helped me.”

Elgar’nan flung a manicured hand at him, frowning. “It’s been the better part of a year, and I’ve been loyally following you. What else do you want?”

Ares smiled slowly. “Oh, there is something specific I need from you and Fen’Harel, but I won’t tell you just yet. You’ll know when the time is…”

The God of War stopped talking, words trailing off, and stared at Elgar’nan. He’d gone completely still, the beautiful scowl on his face perfectly unmoving. Ares swayed to the side to see if his gaze would follow; it did not. His stark eyes remained ahead. The god spun about to the windows. He saw a bird hovering mid-flight over a bank of hedges, every plant and tree branch halted in mid-sway. The air felt different too.

The same thing that happened to Bull and Dorian played out for Ares, and he stood still as the world rewound around him, whipping hastily backwards, day and night skipping by beyond the windows. Ares cried out when a beam of light exploded from his chest, focusing on the area before him. The power surge formed a vortex, and the beam shot into it, then suddenly the images of Thedas blended into other familiar things. Instances on Earth, moving backwards. Battles; fields of golden wheat shrinking back into the ground, rain falling up into the sky, Amazons dancing in reverse around a strangely whipping bonfire.

It all ended as swiftly as it began, leaving Ares blinking wide-eyed in the middle of a room he hadn’t seen in months: his meeting room back in Villa Maurel. It was daylight once more, somewhere in mid-morning by the play of thin shadows on the floor. People suddenly fazed in around him. Two guards across the room flanking the doorway. A couple of citizens awaiting
their time to talk with him.

And Resentius. His attire was dark, as usual. The only thing that really stood out about him was the insignia on his jacket. It should’ve been that of a general, but it indicated he was a commander. Either he’d been demoted, unknown to Ares, or…

The God of War took a breath and listened, as the man had been in mid-sentence when he’d appeared.

“—and I’ve also made sure to inform the Tevinter contacts of Vyrantium and Neromenian that they will have your backing when it’s time to make a move on those territories.” Resentius spread a nefarious grin. “They love the idea of being powerful and rich, even if it means selling out their own.”

“Yeah…right.”

“Is everything okay, milord? You seem distracted.”

“Everything’s fine, Resentius,” Ares said, rubbing his chin, face thoughtful, becoming more and more aware of what had occurred. “You’ve done great. I’ll be promoting you to general soon enough.”

This made the warlord extremely happy. He grinned broadly, eyes brightening. “What an honor, Lord Ares!”

“You deserve it. Tell you what—I have somewhere I need to be right now. Close down the meeting hall and inform those still waiting that I’ll tend to them as soon as possible.”

“It will be done.”

Ares remembered everything that had ever occurred in his existence, including this day as it happened five months ago. If he was correct, Ayla had a few hours left before someone killed her. Ares had to get there first. Blue luminance shimmered across his fine form, vanishing him from sight.

(*)

Bull and Dorian went to find a secluded place at the back of some supply tents. The forest loomed close by, the tree line not even ten feet away. They were alone.

“We did it,” said Bull quietly, releasing another long sigh, shoulders sinking.

“We sure did, big guy.” Dorian stepped forward and touched his arm. “You got your second chance.”

“Thanks to you. Shit, Dorian, I… I…don’t know how to begin to repay you. You gave up a lot to help me.” Before the mage knew it, he found himself wrapped tight in solid, thick arms, crushed against the Qunari, hugged. “Thank you.”

“Yes, yes, well…” Dorian cleared his throat and chuffed a short, dry chuckle. “A little too tight there.”

“Sorry.” Bull released him, and they wallowed in silence a moment.

Dorian’s eyes closed, subtle sadness claiming his features. “I just hope Hannibal will be alright without me, that he’ll understand why I did it.”

“He will. He’s the boss, right?”

“Either way, this is our life now.”

Clapping came from the trees, and both men’s gazes snatched there just as Ares materialized, separating from the shadows. “I don’t know exactly how you pulled it off, but job well-done. It’s strange how things work here in Thedas, but it fits for me. I’m glad to have Ayla back; she’s a real beaut. But that’s the last time you’ll be able to manipulate time in my world without going through me first, thanks to this.”

The war god lifted his left hand and wiggled the fingers, prompting the Anchor, making it glow green. He continued talking while Bull and Dorian listened in semi-surprised silence.

“The world reverted to this point in time around me a short while ago, and I was quickly able to track the source of the power to a place in the Fade.”

Dorian grumbled lowly. “Venhedis. The spell I used drew its energy from the Fade.”

“Exactly. And since I’m connected to that realm, all I had to do was scan for the life force who initiated the spell, leading me to you. I’ve used the Anchor to seal the Veil, which attaches your world to the Fade. Any other time spells cast by anyone will be blocked.” Ares’s eyes narrowed. “You two are the only ones who remember what happened the past five months.”

Bull’s expression thickened, and he went defensive. “You gonna kill us?”

“Hrm, well, I could do that, since getting rid of you gives me a tactical advantage on events to come, but that’s no fun.” The war god grinned. “There’s no true glory in cheating. Besides, he’s
too pretty to kill, and you, a warrior of your caliber, I’d rather convert to my side than kill. No, we’ll just move forward with a clean slate. I’d like to say thank you, Dorian, because you’ve done what I could not. You’ve saved Ayla and given me back a moment in time that I lost previously. Thank you.”

Ares vanished.

“Fuck.” Bull glowered.

“I guess we forgot to factor him into our little plan, hm?”

“Fuck. I know you said we needed to keep this whole thing quiet, Dorian, but there’s no way we can do that now.” The Qunari’s single eye jotted for a swift observation, making sure they were still alone, his voice lowering. “Ares knows what we did, and he also knows how things played out in the future, as do we. We have to tell the others, so they can be ready for whatever he has planned this time around.”

“Yes,” Dorian sighed. “I know. I really just wanted to keep this between us because I thought it would be easier, but you’re right. They need to know.”

“When should we tell them?”

The mage shrugged. “Soon. How about after we go see the Sten? We can seal the terms of the alliance, then reveal everything. How do you think they’ll take it?”

“It’s hard to say.” Iron Bull shook his horned head. “If they need more than just our word, I have something that should make them believe.”

(*)

Lassalanta sat on a padded chair in the palace gardens watching the afternoon sunlight play through the great tree’s branches, casting wayward shadows across the grass. Being pregnant sure did strain a woman’s resources. She still had another month or less before her child’s birth, and the past few weeks left her tired and anxious.

Her hands rubbed slowly over the bulge beneath her dress.

It was such a lovely day, perfectly tempered. She was happy to have her baby, and at the same time sad. The queen was thinking on the times she’d sat out there with Ayla, so many moments over the years, watching the girl grow into a young woman.

“May I get anything for you, milady?” asked Isilwyn from behind her.

Lassalanta turned partially over her shoulder, smiling at the elf. “No, thank you. I think it’s about time to head inside. Could you please help me up?”

“Of course.”

Isilwyn hurried around the trimmed hedges and held her hands out. Lassalanta grabbed them, pulling herself to stand. That’s when an invisible shockwave rocked through her, making her flinch and yelp.

“Milady! What’s wrong? Is it the baby!”

“No…it’s…I don’t know.”

At that moment, the sky darkened, instantly transforming to evening. Then, it flashed back and forth randomly between day and night, over and over swiftly. Clouds zoomed by overhead as the sky made its transitions. Things finally stopped moving, settling back into daytime, but it was earlier than before, indicated by the new position of the shadows on the ground.

“What in the name of the gods was that?” Isilwyn voiced lowly.

“I’m not sure. Please, help me inside, quickly.”

(*)

The two men broke from their secret meeting. Dorian caught up with Hannibal at Cole’s tent, using magic to awaken the man and dissipate any spells. Hannibal gathered everyone immediately afterwards to inform his forces of Tal-Vashoth lurking in the area. Of course, they would never attack, and he would never find them. The Inquisitor also informed Arisol that they’d leave tomorrow instead to go meet with the Sten.

Afterwards, on the way to their tent, Ayla stole glances up at her husband, and he could sense that she wanted to say something. Bull decided to leave it be and continue as usual, since he knew the questions were coming.

He sealed the tent flap after them and turned up the lantern. Ayla removed her boots and shimmied over on the bed of furs, blurry vision aimed at Bull, who also took off his boots. The warrior moved in close to her and lay back with a hand behind his head. His other hand found hers, instantly sharpening her sight. He smiled gently up at her, his eye searching every lovely detail.

Ayla nibbled her lip. “Bull, what’s going with you?”
“Nothing, Kadan.”

“Oh, it’s definitely something.” She scooted against him, eyes adhered to his. “You’ve been different since yesterday morning, and I know you well enough to realize when something isn’t right. I can sense it. You’re hiding something. What is it?”

His expression faltered, and he closed his eye a moment. “I can’t tell you just yet.”

“So, there is something?”

He nodded.

“Tell me then,” she pressed, small hand on his chest.

“I will, Ayla, I promise. Dorian and I will tell all of you at once, soon.”

The Oona’s eyes narrowed and worry claimed her. “Dorian. You two have been sneaking off together a lot.” She swallowed the lump in her throat, breath quickening. “Are you…?”

Bull’s eye widened, and he snorted. “What? No! It’s nothing like that. Neither of us would ever do that to you or the boss. It’s…something else.” He drew a large hand over his face.

“I want to know what’s going on right now.”

“Ayla…”

“Now, Bull, please…”

The Qunari stared into her eyes, two bright points, intense like stars set against her dark, smooth features. A sigh swelled his chest, and he nodded. “Okay. But we must gather everyone first.”

(*)

The couple went to the war room tent, finding that most of the Inner Circle crew were already there, along with a few higher up Inquisition soldiers. Hannibal was receiving the hourly reports from all camp posts. Dorian stood near him. The mage’s curiosity heightened when Bull and Ayla entered.

Bull’s attention fell on Dorian. “We can’t wait. We need to tell them now.” His eye dropped to his wife.

The mage knew exactly what he implied. Ayla wanted answers for all the weirdness surrounding her husband, and there was no way for Bull to back her down. The woman was relentless and stubborn most times, this Dorian knew. He nodded slowly. “Alright then.”

“Boss, please clear the tent except for Inner Circle, and have somebody get Xena and Varric in here,” said Bull.

Cole occupied a chair across the table, appearing unsettled and a little dazed. Gatt’s spell stone had him knocked out for six or seven hours, and he was still trying to reassert the memories of what happened before he was overcome.

Hannibal issued a nod to Bull, doing as he said. Within minutes, Xena and Varric showed up, and Hannibal had the tent flap sealed. His aqua vision lingered between Dorian and Iron Bull. “What do you need to tell us?”

The Qunari and mage exchanged looks. It was Dorian who spoke first. “Amatus, I know this is going to sound unbelievable, perhaps even more so than what happened with Gatt, but…well…Iron Bull and I aren’t from here, from this time. We’re from the future.”

Judging by the silence and bafflement, no one was buying it.

“I can prove it,” said Bull. He turned to Xena and cleared his throat, which suddenly seemed constricted as the memories flooded him full-on. Holding tight to Ayla’s hand, he started humming the tune Xena sang for the sad occasion in the other timeline as best he could, lowering it by an octave to fit his voice. The song was burned into his memory, haunting and beautiful. Xena’s face lit with surprise. Bull stopped humming, closing his eye a moment before speaking. “You sang this as…as the pyres burned.”

“I believe him,” Xena said instantly. “I’ve never sang that song in your world, but I’ve sung it many times in mine. It’s an Amazon funeral lamentation, and there’s no way he could know it unless they’re telling the truth.” Understanding dawned over the warrior woman as she began to piece things together. “Gatt succeeded in your timeline, didn’t he? He killed Ayla.”

“Yes,” Hannibal answered, the single word choking out.

“Oh, Bull!” Ayla hugged tighter against his side, bright eyes glistening up at him.

“Okay…” Hannibal shook his head. “This is definitely a lot to swallow. So, you’re saying that neither of you is the original Iron Bull and Dorian of right now?”

“That’s correct,” said Dorian.

“How the hell is that possible? When did you manage to switch places with them? How?”
Hannibal couldn’t help the distrusting glare he gave his lover. “Where is my Dorian?”

“Atmu, please calm down. I am your Dorian, I can assure you. We’re the exact same, except that I have five months of memories and experiences that he didn’t.”

“Didn’t?”

Dorian sighed. “Iron Bull and I can’t go back to your future, well… it would’ve been your future. Things will certainly change now, even if in minute differences.”

“Didn’t?” repeated Hannibal. “As in Dorian’s gone?”

“Not exactly,” said Bull. “In the future, losing Ayla changed me. I didn’t care if I lived or died, and at one point, I found myself up on Skyhold’s wall ready to throw myself off.”

“Ohmygods!” Ayla clamped a hand to her mouth, face horrified, tears forming.

“I couldn’t live without you. I tried, Ayla, but I just couldn’t.” Bull’s eye strayed from her. He felt dirty and tarnished, though he was now in the body of his five-months-ago self. Still, he couldn’t help but think he was sullying his beauty somehow every time he looked at her or touched her. “I did… things. Things I will never forget, things I’m not proud of.”

“You can tell me,” the Oona prompted, her voice small, tears falling.

“I will. I’ll tell you everything once we’re alone.” He planned to go as in depth as she wanted, and the details weren’t things everyone else needed to know, though Dorian knew most of it. Bull took a breath and looked to Hannibal and the others. “The jist is this: on this day as it happened for Dorian and me the first time, I left Ayla in Cole’s care while we met with the Sten, not knowing that he wasn’t Cole, but Gatt. Everything happened as Gatt said. He did get his chance to kill her, and the Tal-Vashoth attacked, giving him his distraction. Ayla, the baby, and some others died. We held a funeral for them outside of camp, and Xena sang. Time went by and I got worse, more and more withdrawn from everyone and everything.

“Seeing me on my last leg, Dorian agreed to help me when I asked. He used his knowledge derived from Gereon Alexius’s research to create a time travel spell that sent our consciousnesses back here. The spell worked on vengeance, meaning we had to find and neutralize Ayla’s killer to change events, and we only had little more than a day to do it. If we hadn’t succeeded, we would’ve returned to our bodies in the future, where Ayla would still be gone, and Gatt probably would’ve gotten to her eventually here and now. But we did it. We saved her,” Bull finished, smiling tenderly down at his wife.

“I’m glad beyond words that you succeeded, but let’s back up,” said Hannibal shaking a hand. “You sent your minds back here into your past bodies, so does that mean your past minds are in your bodies, in the future?”

“Yes,” Dorian answered. “They were dormant in our sleeping bodies.”

“Were?”

The mage nodded sadly at his husband. “Since we were successful in our mission, our bodies in the future will disintegrate from the continuum once the spell’s time runs out, which should be shortly. Our past consciousnesses will disappear with our bodies there.”

“Maker…” Hannibal breathed.

“There’s no need to worry. I’m right here, I’m the same Dorian you’ve always known.”

“But what about the future me? He’s lost you, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, sadly, but you’re strong of heart, Hannibal, and he will understand why I did what I did.” Dorian closed the distance between them and hugged arms around the Inquisitor’s waist, face to his chest. “It wasn’t easy leaving you for many reasons, but I had to save Ayla and Iron Bull. He’d be dead right now otherwise.”

Hannibal embraced his man, kissing the top of his head. “Dori… always thinking of others.”

“I am sorry I let you down, Iron Bull, in the other timeline, I mean,” Cole spoke up from his seat. “No need for that. You weren’t you,” said Bull.

“All of this time travel mess makes my head ache.” Hannibal smirked.

“Mine too.” Dorian nodded. “Bull and I weren’t going to tell you all about it, but we got a visit from Ares earlier after Gatt’s untimely demise. He knows what we did, the time traveling. He was unaffected by it, which means he knows every move you’re going to make from now until five months out. The upside is that Bull and I also know what he would’ve done. With that being said, I can confidently suggest that you reinforce Kirkwall with everything we have—Inquisition, Grey Wardens, Qunari. In the other timeline, Ares went to take the city since it serves as a central force of defense in the north. Kirkwall and the surrounding territories are the reason our Qunari allies will be able to make transit from their lands to aid us.”

“I see.” Hannibal rubbed his beard. “So, you’re saying I’ve already accepted the alliance.”
“Yes. It’s a sound move—”

“Though you definitely need to keep a close watch on the Qun,” Bull cut in.

Dorian nodded. “What he said.”

“Alright,” Hannibal’s gaze swept to everyone in the tent, “we move forward. This day has been the weirdest I’ve had in a while. Let’s call it quits for the night. We’ll talk about all this more tomorrow.”

Before they could break from the meeting, Varriq said, “So…does anyone mind if I use any of this material for a new book series I’m working on? This shit’s just too good to pass up.”

“Go for it,” Dorian and Bull both spoke at once.
Hannibal paced back and forth through Iron Bull’s quarters. He’d found the Qunari’s and Dorian’s unconscious bodies last evening, and shortly after he rounded the Inner Circle up to the room, explained what happened, and instantly set up a watch. Hannibal spent most of his time in there, nervously watching Dorian’s nude figure standing with Bull’s inside the forcefield. Time was nearly expended, all but a pinch of sand in the hourglass’s upper chamber.

Everyone was there. Cullen, Cassandra, Josephine, Cole, the Chargers, Ryder, Leliana, Vivienne, Magnus, Morrigan, Varric, Xena, Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus. They filled the room and the doorway, leaving a good bit of space around their friends’ sleeping bodies.

The moment of truth was mere seconds away, and it would be a sad moment either way. If Dorian and Bull awoke and the forcefield fell, Dorian would be back in the arms of his lover, but that meant they failed to save Ayla. If they didn’t wake up, well, the Oona was alive and safe, but both Dorian and Bull would be gone forever.

The waiting and suspense was killing Hannibal, and he was sure he’d aged at least a year in the past twenty-four hours worrying about it. Flames glowed in the hearth, keeping the room warm for Bull’s and Dorian’s bodies, and there was only the sound of embers snapping while everyone held their breath.

The last grain of sand fell, and Hannibal stopped breathing, holding onto the inhalation.

A second later the runes on the floor glowed, sparked, and vanished, as did the two bodies in the forcefield, and the barrier itself flickered and disappeared, the spell expended.

“Dorian…” mewled Hannibal, exhaling sharply, eyes clenching shut.

Saddened quietude overtook the room. The Inner Circle had just lost two more of its members. The tears in Hannibal’s eyes squeezed loose. Josephine hurried close and hugged him. As distraught as he was, Hannibal knew Dorian did the right thing. He’d made this sacrifice to save his friends.

There was no need for words. Everyone in the room remained silent and contemplative, then Hannibal’s features tightened. He stared at the flames dancing in the fireplace, speaking gravely.

“Dorian, my husband, and Iron Bull, my friend, will never be forgotten. We should be happy that Ayla is alive in the past. We, however, are still here, in the present, and we have a war god to drive from our world. We move forward.”

“Oh, Chief,” droned Krem. The rest of the Chargers were hugged around him, Skinner silently crying while trying to maintain her hardened exterior. “It’s better this way. He needs Ayla, and now he has her again.”

Krem was officially their chief now. He would take care of them.

At that moment, none of them knew that Ares was no longer in their timeline, no longer a threat to the Thedas in which they resided. He was in a variation of the past. The Hannibal of this world would go on to lead the Inquisition and its allies to victory with the sudden disappearance of the God of War. The road wouldn’t be easy, but it would happen. Goodness would prevail.

However, the same could not be said for Thedas of the past. A different fate was in store for that world.

(*)

The blanket of night settled across the land, and the rainfall that had commenced for most of the day dried up, leaving the sky streaked with clouds, the moon peaking between the thin veils. Iron Bull and Ayla had dinner around a fire pit and retired to their tent. They sat on the bed roll watching one another. He reached to caress her cheek.

“The moment you switched into this body was when we were making love yesterday morning, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Bull answered, nodding.

“The tears…oh, Bull.” Ayla moved closer to him. “You said you were happy to see me. I thought you were being weird, but it makes sense now.”

His eye dropped away. “I know it might seem strange, that you probably don’t see me the same, but it is me, Ayla. I’m just a little…broken. I lost you, and it broke me.”

The Oona pulled into his lap, hugging tight. “You are my Bull, regardless of what’s happened. You did what you felt was right to save me and our baby.”

“And I would do it again.”

“I know.” She licked her lips. “So, what things have you done that you’re not proud of?”

Iron Bull figured she’d get around to asking. He took a big breath, great chest heaving. “I was a
dick to everybody. I said hurtful things at times to people who saw me as a friend. I also sought ways to make the hurt go away. Fighting, battle, war, drinking—I looked forward to violence. It helped expend some of the anger that constantly seemed to fill me, though it didn’t last long. I also…uh…” Bull looked away from her, “…I indulged.”

Ayla examined him closely. “Sex partners?”

He nodded.

“Were there a lot of them?”

He nodded.

The Oona’s eyes traced his rugged profile. “How many?”

He shook his head.

A white brow lifted. “More than ten?”

The only answer was the quick flick of his eye to her, then away again.

“More than twenty?”

Iron Bull sighed. “Probably. I didn’t count them. In my mind, I didn’t care. I only wanted a reason to forget, and being with them helped. Temporarily.”

“But more than twenty, in five months?”

He finally met her dazzling eyes, his voice wrapped in tender nuances, “I’m not happy about it, Ayla, and there’s no excuse. I never thought I would be able to have you again until a few days ago, and by then it was all said and done. There was one woman who came back to me, approached me while I was sitting at the bar in Skyhold. Said she was pregnant with my baby, and I yelled at her, told her to go away. And as I watched her running away from me, out the door, I realized how far I had fallen, and I didn’t want to live anymore, and I went up on the wall that night. I’m sure I would’ve jumped if Cullen hadn’t come along.”

Ayla sniffled, clutching arms around his neck, rubbing his shoulders. She kissed his bearded cheek, nuzzling. “I’m so sorry you experienced all of that, my love.”

Bull’s face turned so he could fix his eye upon her. “I’m so amazed to actually be back here with you, to be able to hold you again. It’s all I ever wanted since the day I lost you. But…with the things I’ve done, I feel, I dunno…undeserving, like I’m not good enough for you anymore.”

She gripped his face in her small hands, forcing him to maintain eye contact. “You are good enough for me. We make mistakes, Bull. Everyone does. That doesn’t negate the fact that you and I are one. You will always be good enough for me.”

He groaned miserably. “I crushed a man’s head with my bare hands. He was bad, yeah, but I…I didn’t have to go that far. I let the rage take me. Qun, I’m so weak.”

“Shhh, it’s okay. Everything’s going to be fine, my warrior.” Tears rolled down Ayla’s cheeks. She hugged him tight, stroking the back of his neck. “We’re together, and everything is alright now.”

They pulled apart to look in each other’s eyes, and they kissed.

“I love you, Ayla.”

“And I love you,” she whispered. “I know it will take some time, but we’ll get through this. We will.”

Iron Bull believed her. Without her, he’d been trapped in the eternal darkness of night without the sun, his Oona, there to balance him and bring her golden light. Having her back completed him. He slept soundly that night, awakening only once out of fear that Ayla would be gone, but she was still there, round with their child and tucked warmly against his side.

(*)

The switching between day and night had been witnessed by most of the sanctuary, causing quite a stir amongst its citizens. Lassalanta called a meeting in the Council assembly hall, and it was quickly decided that Joswen and his team, being the most elite and specialized of Hald’arun’s soldiers, would go outside and investigate.

Lassalanta now stood with a party of guards and the other Council members at a place along the dense wall of foliage and vines, waiting for the warriors to return. Isilwyn was nearby, fiddling her little hands. The tightly woven plant-life shifted and stirred, and the portal to the outside wavered into view. A moment later, Joswen stepped through, followed by the rest of his group. The strong-featured elven man was usually very composed, as stoic as Fen’Harel at times, but he looked obviously bothered just then.

“You will not believe this, milady,” Joswen voiced, hazel eyes slightly wider.

“What’s happened? What have you found?” probed Lassalanta.
“The world seems to be drawn back in time.”

The queen blinked wordlessly at him. The Council members stirred nervously.

Elemir, whose expression was disturbed as well but holding what Lassalanta believed was a hint of contentment, cut in. “He speaks true. We didn’t notice it at first, but when we entered the main camp, I was stopped by a couple of soldiers who asked me how I had disappeared a few minutes before right in front of them. They were giving me reports, apparently, and I just vanished. Obviously, I had been inside the sanctuary at the time he specified. I didn’t know what to say, so we explored a little more. We noticed one of the calendars in the command station. It indicated that the date is five months ago. I had Sophitia and Ozra check any other calendars in the trading post they could find, and every one of them is dated for just over five months ago, on the day…the day…”

“Ayla,” the Oona’s name trembled past Lassalanta’s lips.

“Yes,” said Elemir lowly. “I thought more about the soldiers who said I vanished, and I remember the day. If I’m correct, we’ll get a shipment of grain in tonight from Lothering, and a third of it will be ruined because it picked up some bugs in transit to the trading post.”

Vek’s face cringed. “Aye, I remember that. Damned weevil infestation. It almost flowed over into the base’s main supply. I could have the entry guards look out for it and keep it out.”

“Good idea,” said Joswen. “More importantly, we need to figure out why and how time has reverted. This could be Ares’s doing.”

“Most importantly is getting to Skyhold.” Elemir’s heart beat furiously. “This is the day my sister died, but what if somehow…It’s change. I need to know.”

“Yes, I agree with you, Elemir,” Lassalanta’s pleasant, rolling voice ebbed forth. She’d been thinking the same thing.

The ranger nodded, mind racing with possibilities. “We can be on the road within the hour.”

“So be it,” the queen said.

“If everything and everyone on the outside has been reverted in time, this means Magnus has been as well,” Sophitia spoke. The warrior woman shivered a little. “If we hadn’t been on stand-down inside Hald’arun when the time shift took place…”

“We’d probably be in the past, our memories of the last five months lost.” Ozra finished.

“It could happen again,” Lassalanta said, then drew her serene vision over her beloved soldiers. “We must know if Ayla is okay, but I will use Hald’arun’s barrier to record your memories of here and now, in case time shifts or something else uncanny happens. That way when you return, you will remember.”

“Sounds good,” Elemir answered almost immediately. He was anxious to head off.

“You will most likely have your child before our return, Your Majesty,” Joswen started. “I pray he or she is healthy and that you pull through with little discomfort.”

“As do I, old friend,” she said, noting Elemir’s impatience. “Now, go, and be safe. Send word as soon as you know what’s happening with Ayla.”

“We will,” Elemir said.

The Arrows left Hald’arun less than an hour later, westbound for Skyhold.

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With Ayla riding safely in the saddle before him on their hart, captured in the link of his arms, Iron Bull accompanied Hannibal to meet with the Sten, along with Dorian, Xena, Cole, Varric, and, of course, Arisol’s group. The meeting went just as Bull and Dorian said, and the alliance was established.

A day later, they were on their way back to Skyhold, traveling a trail southbound with plans to connect to the Imperial Highway by nightfall. It was nice out and not quite noon.

“Wow. Sounds like Ares is actually doing good in the future,” said Varric, the words tumbling grimly past his lips. He’d synched his mount with Bull’s and Ayla’s, and Dorian rode to the other side of him.

Hannibal and Xena rode side by side talking some distance behind them, and Cole rode solo behind them, taking up the rear. The previous spirit was still sorting out events and consequences. His conscience wanted to press shame and remorse upon him for what happened to Ayla, though he knew it wasn’t his fault. That didn’t make him feel better, though. Cole supposed this was just another hard lesson in humanity.

“Well, he wasn’t exactly doing bad,” Bull said. The Qunari gripped securely to the reins, relishing the familiar feeling of Ayla leaning back into him. He inhaled her fragrance. “He managed to get many territories to follow him.”
“To include many of my countryman,” entered Dorian, looking sternly ahead. “Most of the leadership all but jumped right into his hands, lustng for power, as always, and ripe with corruption. Being back here with the chance to look at the future from the outside, I can honestly say that I don’t know if we could’ve beaten Ares in the end. We saved Kirkwall, but the war was far from over.”

“Hm…” Varric rumbled deeply, thoughtfully. “What if…she war is already won? If Ares is unaffected by the time-shift, that means, as a god, he’s not really subjected to the laws of time travel. What I mean to say is there’s only one Ares, theoretically, and he’s here in our time, right now, which means he can’t be in the future you two left.”

“But that means he would’ve had to have been in the past, here in this timeline too, since we interacted with him,” Ayla jumped in to join the conversation. “While Dorian and Bull were dealing with Ares in our future, we were also dealing with him in their past. Gah, this is so confusing.”

“Maybe, he did exist in all manners of the timeline since he entered our world, but the spell I used to get Bull and I back here pulled him from the future and to this point in time as well,” Dorian said. “Remember, he told Bull and I that the world rewound around him, and he tracked the disruption to a point in the Fade, the point where my magic intersected when the spell was cast. At that moment, perhaps all versions of Ares in the timelines converged to one place—right now. And if that has happened, then you could be right, Varric. Ares might have disappeared from the future timeline, giving the Inquisition an upper hand. But it makes me wonder who or what else wasn’t affected by the time-shift…”

“I hate this time travel shit,” Bull muttered.

Ayla nodded her agreement, smirking. She stretched and yawned, gently rubbing her belly. “Me too.”

“How are you holding up? Need to stop for a little?”

Ayla pat her husband’s hand. “I’m fine.”

Varric chuckled briefly. “It’s all more than extraordinary, which is why I know the books will sell like crazy when they hit vendors.”

“It’s all about the profit for you, isn’t it?” Dorian mused.

“Heh, not all,” Varric replied, his smile secretive, “but you can’t deny the appeal of such—what the hell is that!”

All eyes yanked forward, and Ayla sat up straighter in the saddle, gaze widening.

There, in the middle of the trail, a small point of light swelled rapidly into a sizable portal. Before Bull, Dorian, and Varric could react quickly enough to steer their mounts away, the portal mobilized and swooped for them, engulfing them, the Oona, and the animals, and they disappeared.

Xena, Hannibal, and Cole raced forward, but were too late to do anything. They dismounted and drew their weapons, going back to back and eyeing the surrounding trees.

“Dorian!” yelled Hannibal.

“Where do you suppose they went?” Cole asked, listening closely to the environment.

Xena scowled. “I don’t know exactly, but something tells me Ares has something to do with it.” Her eyes and face went wild and she roared into the day, “Show yourself! I know you’re here, Ares! Come out now!”

(*)

Things were instantaneous for Iron Bull, Ayla, Dorian, and Varric. The pale violet maw enclosed them for a mere spattering of seconds, then retracted and dispersed, and they found themselves still on a path amidst the forest. Though, it was neither the same path nor the same forest. It was still daylight out, nice weather, perhaps a little warmer than previously.

“What the hell just happened?” Varric’s gaze went to everyone else.

“That was some kind of power field,” Dorian said. “I picked up traces of the Fade when it first contacted us.”

“Ares,” Bull growled.

The mage nodded. “Yes, perhaps.”

“Um...where are the Inquisitor, Cole, and Xena?” Varric had turned over his shoulder and found nothing but a vacant trail.

“Hannibal?” called Dorian. “Hanni! Maker, what in Andraste’s tits is going on, now?”

“Okay, let’s not panic,” Bull said. “We are clearly not on the same path we were before that energy field hit us. We need to find out where we are.”
“Agreed,” said Varric. “Look, there’s a road sign up ahead.”

They guided their mounts for the sign, tucked in a picturesque copse of bushes and flowers, and they all stared at it with confusion riddling their faces.

“Does anyone know what language that is?” Dorian nervously rubbed his chin.

Varric shrugged. “Could be Elvhen.”

“I don’t think so,” Bull answered lowly. He maneuvered in the saddle, climbing down, helping his wife dismount. The man broke contact with Ayla and went closer to the sign. “I’ve seen characters like this before. Xena’s weapon, the Chakram. It has similar symbols on it.”

Ayla mewed softly, and the three men turned their attention to her. She stared down at her hands, crystal-blue eyes looming, blinking. “Oh, we’re definitely not in Thedas anymore.”

“Why do you say that?” Bull asked.

The Oona’s gaze lifted to his, and he gasped to see it focused crisply on him. A smile bloomed slowly over Ayla’s face. “Because we’re not touching, and I can see. I can see everything, Bull!” She spun around to behold the trees, foliage, and sky. Wow! It’s so weird being able to see on my own!

“Well, I’ll be damned…” breathed Varric.

“This is probably Xena’s world. This is Earth,” Dorian concluded.

Iron Bull went defensive, closing the slip of distance between him and Ayla. His eye traced their surroundings. “Ares. This is his doing, and I don’t like it at all. Dorian, maybe you could use your power to make another portal outta here.”

“Not likely,” the mage said, his voice dire. “I can’t even sense my power right now, let alone summon it. It’s…gone.”

“So is mine,” Ayla said quickly. Her features adopted a cloak of worry. “I…I can’t sense our link, Bull.”

“It’s alright, Naarenma. Keep calm. It might be this place, this…Earth, if that’s where we are. Powers and magic most likely don’t work the same as they do back home.”

“Ah, shit.” Varric sighed. “What do we do then?”

Iron Bull knew exactly what to do. They had to get Ares to show himself and explain what was going on. He faced the trees, gathered a robust breath, and bellowed, “Ares!”
Xena called out to the God of War for five minutes, and he still didn’t show.

“Maybe it wasn’t him then,” Cole said, his pale eyes whipping from the surrounding trees to the Warrior Princess.

“No, it’s him alright.” Xena scowled. “He’s just not showing himself. He rarely stays hidden when he’s called out like this, which tells me that he has plans he expressly doesn’t want tampered with. We can call out all we want to, but he’s not going to show.”

Hannibal tossed his hands in the air. “That’s not good enough! He has our people, doing Maker knows what to them!”

“And there’s nothing we can do for the moment. I’m sorry.” Xena sighed and turned to squint into the trees. “I suggest we camp in the area, give it some time, see if Ares comes or the others return.”

The Inquisitor knew she was right. No matter how much they wanted to do something, they had no leads to go on. Their friends and his lover were gone without a trace. Worry began nibbling relentlessly at Hannibal. With all the time traveling stuff that had occurred, he couldn’t help but think Dorian had been snatched away to some other reality.

Left with not many options, he, Xena, and Cole left the trail to make camp.

(*)

Hannibal was actually right. The rest of his party had entered another reality. The world of Earth. And because they all thought similarly, having been part of the same Inner Circle for more than a year, Bull also suggested they find a place to camp down. He needed to get his wife off the road. They found a clearing nestled against a huge boulder and unloaded their mounts. They gathered stones and wood and made a fire.

Ares hadn’t shown up for them either, though they all agreed that the war god was involved and sensed them summoning him.

Iron Bull’s eye slipped to Ayla beside him, who was clearly enjoying her new unrestricted eyesight; they sat close together but weren’t touching skin to skin. She munched on traveling goods—flat bread, druffalo jerky, and an apple. Bull sighed and stood, stretching his legs, working his head in slow circles to pacify the muscles in his neck. He took in the sight of the moon dangling perfectly full above. It looked so different from Thedas’s two moons, smaller, smoother, yet still very intriguing. The star formations were a complete mystery to the Qunari, nothing at all like the constellations back home. There was no way to tell which way was north, south, east, or west.

His eye dropped to Ayla, his number one concern. “Our traveling rations will last another two or three days at best, since there are no Inquisition camps where we can replenish. We’ll have to hunt for something tomorrow, pick some fruits and vegetables.”

“I saw what looked like rabbits hopping through the foliage earlier,” Varric offered.

“We’re not familiar with this world,” Dorian barged in, sounding highly concerned. “We don’t know what’s edible or not.”

Iron Bull’s face softened, and he looked like he would chuckle. “So, you’re going to starve? No telling how long we’ll be here.”

The Altus smirked. “Guess, we’ll have no choice but to dally in the local flora and fauna. At least the water’s safe to drink.” As they found out having sampled it and refilled their flasks at a nearby stream.

“At this Bull did chuckle, but he fell silent when a light suddenly flickered across the sky. A flaming arrow high above. It reached maximum trajectory and arced down in the forest somewhere. The group immediately pulled their weapons, though Dorian was feeling uneasy that he’d probably have to twirl his stave without magic to back him up. Bull pulled Ayla close to him, the woman standing in the center of her three traveling companions, protected.

The forest came to life, hoots and trilling calls surrounding the Thedosians. Definitely not the sounds of animals, but of people. And then the women blended into view from the trees and shadows, more than a dozen, each one with bows drawn and arrows pointing at them. The females varied in skin-tone, every one of them strong-looking in her own way. Some of them wore war paint on their faces. They yipped and chortled their tribal call-outs.

“Well, if I gotta go, this is as good a way as any,” Varric mumbled sarcastically.

Iron Bull thought of Ayla’s safety first. He slowly set his axe on the ground. “Lower your weapons.”
Dorian and Varric hesitated, but followed suit.

“Very wise move,” ebbed a husky voice from the shadows, understood by the Thedosians only because she was speaking the Common Language, as her goddess instructed. A very lovely woman stepped into view. She, like most of the others, was dressed in small furs and scanty bits that showed her toned midriff. Her eyes roamed over the prize she’d been promised for her and sisters. “You are, indeed, much to behold, though not exactly what we were expecting.”

She spoke of the Qunari’s horns. Artemis said he had them, though had failed to say they were so prominent. But a creation of the gods was meant to exceed the meager creatures in the realm of humans, right? Artemis told her the night before that the time had come to supply the ‘donor’ for their ritual, and that he would be delivered on the trail south of their village the following day. Ares hadn’t counted on drawing others through the rift with Iron Bull, but he had to seize the moment when it came. Once he saw that Ayla, Dorian, and Varric accompanied the Qunari, he appeared before Vreshka, as Artemis, and gave her the scoop on the group, instructing her to harm no one, especially the woman, though it was okay to use her as leverage to make the chosen one cooperate if necessary.

Iron Bull’s eyes narrowed. “You knew we were coming. Are you working with Ares?”

“Ares?” the woman snorted. “I would never associate myself with his foul presence. We worship only one god, the Goddess of the Hunt, Artemis, and it is she who has promised you to us. Gather their weapons.”

On cue, a couple of the warrior women moved in to take Bull’s axe and knives, Dorian’s stave, and Bianca.

“Who are you?” Bull demanded, voice hard.

“I am Vreshka, Queen of the Patra Amazons.” She brushed a hand outward. “Thimdhana, the cuffs.”

At that moment, the large woman near Vreshka strode forward. The queen’s right hand. She was very tanned with short, curly, dark-blonde hair. The woman was so muscular that her figure had lost most of its female curvaceousness, her breasts almost nonexistent. She stood nearly eye to eye with Bull. One might almost mistake her for a man if it weren’t for her facial features, which were quite feminine, and her voice, which was rich yet silky.

“Hold your arms out,” Thimdhana said flatly to Bull.

He didn’t comply, instead locking his eye on the queen.

“Do as she says, and the woman who carries your child will not be harmed.” Vreshka eyed him unflinchingly, chin held level.

Something in Iron Bull released. It was that same beastly, vicious animal he’d hoped to leave behind in the future that was now his past. His features went solid, and his eye locked on Thimdhana as he held his hands out. “Nothing better happen to her. If it does, I’ll kill you first, then I will destroy the rest of these bitches.”

Thimdhana chuckled, lips curling. “You’re definitely in no position to make threats.”

“That wasn’t a threat; it was a promise.”

“Bull, please, calm down. Everything will be fine if we don’t defy them,” Ayla spoke softly just behind him, a small hand rubbing his arm.

“Smart woman. You should listen to her.” Thimdhana’s eyes shifted to the Oona. “And pretty. Maybe you can stay with us after this is all done.”

“After what’s done?” Dorian asked quickly.

“Pipe down, pretty boy.” Thimdhana finished securing the metal bands around Bull’s wrists, but there was no chain attached to them, nothing binding him.

The Qunari examined the shackles curiously.

“Those are to keep you in line,” spoke Vreshka. “They’re imbued with power from our goddess. You will not be able to do anything we don’t want you to do while you’re wearing them. Thimdhana.”

On her queen’s word, the tall, muscley woman drew her hand back and punched Bull in the face, making Ayla yelp and Dorian and Varric go more alert. The Qunari growled, intending to repay her for the blow, but when he made a fist, he couldn’t wind back a punch to do it. His mind knew what he wanted to do, yet his body would not execute. He glared at Thimdhana.

“See?” Vreshka said. “You’re under our control. Now, let us get back to the village. Tomorrow will be a big day and there is much preparation to be done for you, horned man. Move out.”

The Amazon queen turned and headed back into the trees. Once their small camp had been broken down, the fire extinguished, and their mounts gathered, Iron Bull, Ayla, Dorian, and Varric were led further into the strange world.
Amazons valued the lives of their sisters more than anything else. Ayla wasn’t one of them, but she was a woman, and a pregnant one at that, meaning she would receive proper care. The queen ordered Thimdhana to help the Oona onto a horse and to ride with her. Vreshka and a few others also mounted up, while the rest of the women went ahead on foot. Varric, Dorian, and Bull were made to walk at the rear under high guard. The procession moved beneath the cover of night, traveling a path in single file.

Iron Bull scanned their surroundings. There wasn’t much to see in the dark, the moon’s silvery light lending some clarity to the shadows. His ear picked up running water, a stream probably. It didn’t sound powerful enough to be a river. The path was on a low-angle incline, gaining a little in elevation. The Qunari’s eye fixed ahead on the mostly dark shape of a horse and Thimdhana’s broad back. He couldn’t see Ayla around the woman.

“How far do you think it is between their village and our camp spot?” Dorian spoke just above a whisper.

Bull shrugged. “Hard to say until we get there.”

“Silence!” ordered one of the guards.

They traveled for just over an hour, before the procession halted. Ahead rose a hundred-foot tall rock face. It was overgrown with plants and vines, and a wide opening allowed entry into a passage. Four warrior women stood guard, two posted to either side of the torch-lined crevasse.

What Bull and his companions didn’t know was that they’d passed two other posts on the way up, hidden in the dense trees, manned by highly trained and armed Amazons.

Vreshka had prepared her people for Iron Bull’s arrival, and the women understood that a creature of the likes they’d never seen before, a gift from their goddess Artemis, was to enter their realm. This didn’t lessen the stares the Qunari received as he was led into the opening between the slabs of rock. He paid little attention, craning his neck left and right in an attempt to spot Ayla up ahead.

The Oona was grateful to whatever force allowed her to see without her husband’s touch. Every sight came to her in clarity, and she skimmed the stone walls to either side, both painted elegantly and adorned with beadwork and shells, patterns and sceneries. Her eyes went forward as the passage came to an end, opening to a view of the large village of the Patra Amazons. It was built into a gentle hillside with many structures and huts, and a river ran by below, the moon reflecting off its dark, shiny surface. Ayla shifted in the saddle.

“We’re almost there,” Thimdhana said, guiding the horse further in.

By the time Bull, Dorian, and Varric entered the village, the occupants had gathered to gawk. Bull saw that there were mostly females ranging in all ages. The males he did see were very few and none of them could’ve been much older than five or six.

“A city full of women. In any other circumstance, I might find this appealing,” Varric muttered in a low voice.

“Their fixation seems to be on you,” Dorian said to Bull. He too noted the absence of testosterone. “I wonder why that is, aside from the fact that they’ve never seen a Qunari before.”

“Guess we’re about to find out,” Bull answered. His eye found Ayla being helped down from the horse by Thimdhana. He intended to go to her, but a group of Amazons moved in with spears.

“Sisters, stand down,” came the smooth chords of Vreshka’s voice.

The Amazons parted and allowed Iron Bull close to his wife, whom he hugged against him.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. Tired.”

“And you shall be given proper quarters,” Vreshka interjected. “Take her and the other two to the hut we’ve prepared.”

A couple of Amazons moved in, spears up and aimed at Dorian and Varric, indicating that they follow a third woman. Thimdhana gently took Ayla’s arm and began to lead her with them.

“Bull!” Ayla called.

The Qunari growled. He tried to follow but his legs wouldn’t budge. It was the damned bands on his wrists, controlling him. “It’s going to be okay, Naarehouse. Just go with them. I’ll be with you soon.”

Bull turned slowly to face Vreshka. He looked dangerous with the light of a bonfire burning through his eye, painting his stern features.

The queen smiled, drawing her eyes over him. “Don’t worry. She’ll be fine. Nothing will happen to her. Now, let’s get you to the bathing pools. We’re cutting it thin for time, but nightfall will be upon the land for several hours more.”

“Bathing pools?” Bull smirked.
“Bring him,” Vreshka ordered.

Iron Bull looked in the direction his wife and friends were taken, gone from sight now. All he knew was the Amazons had better take care of Ayla, or they would find themselves facing a Qunari-gone-wild. He turned and followed Vreshka, an entourage of spear-wielding ladies behind him.

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The quarters in which Ayla, Varric, and Dorian found themselves was very spacious, and even sectioned off so that Ayla had her own area. The bed was large and padded with several furs. She sat on it now with her face in her hands. She wanted to cry, but was too scared.

Dorian sat beside her, an arm around her shoulders.

Varric stood by a window peering out. Two armed guards were posted in the yard. From that vantage point in the village, he had a clear view of a central structure with no roof, circular, and several sets of wide entryways that were currently closed off. Amazonian citizens stood around their hut, kept at bay by the guards. They were no doubt curious about the visitors.

“What do you think they’re going to do to him?” Ayla finally moved her hands from her face, eyes on Dorian.

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” he said.

“Sounds like some kind of ritual or something.” Varric left his place by the window and found a chair. “She said something about bathing pools as we were led away, made a remark about having enough hours of night left.”

“A ritual? Ohmygods…” Ayla’s eyes widened. “I’ve read stories like this when I was younger, about people coming across savages in the jungle and getting sacrificed to a god of some kind. They…they may want to sacrifice Iron Bull!” The woman shot to her feet and shuffle-waddled for the door.

Varric hurried from his chair to block her, and Dorian caught her arm.

“Ayla, you’re working yourself up,” the mage said calmly. “I doubt they mean to kill him.”

“But you don’t know that!” she cried, attempting to free her arm, unsuccessfully. The Oona failed to remember that her best friend, though unmistakably effeminate, was still a man and rather strong compared to her.

“Come now, love. You need to settle down and get some rest, for yourself and the baby.”

Ayla gathered some shaky breaths and nodded, allowing Dorian to lead her back to the bed.

(*)

Bull was taken down a path closer to the river. He decided to get as good a look as he could of the village, making mental notes of where structures were in reference to the river, in case they needed an escape route. The path ran flush along the rocky hillside, terminating at a large cave entrance. Golden luminance spilled from it.

“Torvra, Jehat.”

At the queen’s summons, two warriors broke from the group that had been guarding the Qunari, and the others formed up to either side of the cave.

Vreshka’s gaze turned to Bull. “Follow.”

Since he wasn’t left with many options, the man did as she ordered, glad he didn’t have to duck to enter the cave. Torva and Jehat went in after Bull, their spears ready but not pointed at his back. It opened right into a large chamber lined with cushions, pillows and a fire pit in the center. Two passages broke from the room, and the queen went through one, speaking as she walked, her words carrying thickly on the warm, fragrant, damp air.

“I know you are upset by what has happened, that you don’t even know why you’re here.”

“Come to that conclusion all by yourself? That’s real keen of you.”

Vreshka chuckled, dismissing the bite of sarcasm. “To say you are not like other men would be like saying women hold more value than men ever could. Both are obvious truths.”

Bull kept playing the stoic, pissed card. “You guys some kind of feminist colony? We have them back home too. Not many, but some.”

“Feminist colony,” Vreshka mused over the term, nodding. “You could say that.”

The passage opened into a chamber with a large shallow pool in the middle. Tendrils of vapor rose from the pleasantly warm water. Other women sat along the curved wall, each one wearing next to nothing with cloth over the breasts and nether parts. Bull counted eleven of them, and they watched him with fascination and wonder. He immediately went on guard and decided he hated the situation even more than previously.
Torvre and Jehat assumed sentinel positions behind Bull, one woman to either side of the entrance.

Vreshka went to her place along the wall and set to slowly undressing. Iron Bull frowned as he watched, his gaze never leaving hers, not even once she’d gotten down to the chest and groin covers like the others.

His lip ticked. “What the hell is this? Some sad attempt at seduction? I can assure you that I’m flimsy as a wet noodle, and I’ll remain this way because I’m not interested.”

The gathered Amazons smiled and laughed lightly amongst themselves, looking to their queen.

Caught on the verge of an intrigued smile, Vreshka nodded. “And for tonight, that is your choice. The first night of the ritual only calls for you to be bathed by the hands that will claim you. Me and my sisters.” She lifted her arms, pointing them left and right. “Now, remove your clothes, Gift, and get into the water.”

Iron Bull didn’t like being at the whim of anyone, however he had to obey, for the safety of his beloved Ayla and for his friends. The Amazons had been civil since taking them prisoner, but he was sure that could change if they encountered resistance. Wearing a sour grimace, he said, “Been a long day anyway. Guess I could use a bath.”

The Amazons observed him as he kicked off his boots and socks, then undid his pants and removed them.

“The undergarment as well,” Vreshka ordered.

He grumbled and dropped the black briefs, stepping out of them.

The queen lifted a brow, a surreptitious smile bending her lips. “Mm. You certainly won’t disappoint tomorrow.”

Her fellow Amazons smiled and lowly chuckled their approval.

“Fuckin’ hell.” Bull marched forward stiffly, stepping into the pool. The water barely reached above his man-parts. “Let’s get this over with.”

Vreshka was first to grab up the cloth beside her, stand, and move into the pool, going over to Bull. She dunked the cloth to soak it, then brought it to his broad, solid chest, wiping slowly. The Qunari stared ahead, ignoring her.

She traced fingers along his cheek, playing in his beard, then hesitantly reached to brush one mighty horn, and she had to stretch up a little to do that, he was so tall. Her hand lowered and rested on his eye patch a moment. “You are quite a specimen. Our goddess told us you are a Minotaur, half man and half bull. How did you lose your eye?”

Iron Bull didn’t answer, though he almost told her the same thing he told Joxer when he made that assumption, that he was all Bull. He didn’t think anything he said would sway their minds anyway, especially with his own wife and his two friends referring to him as ‘Iron Bull’ or ‘Bull’ for short. That only helped feed whatever twisted story Ares had woven, because he was sure that bastard had something to do with all of it.

Vreshka continued scrubbing. “Silence is your right.”

“I have another question.”

“What is it?”
“You said ‘the hands that will claim you’. Do you really think I’m going to sleep with you and these other women? I can promise that if you try, you’d be wasting your time.” His eye fixed harshly on her. “Not much you can do with a soft, unwilling noodle.”

“We shall see, Gift.” She smiled warmly at him. “You will answer my question now.”

Iron Bull stared at her, trying to read through the smugness in her gaze, but he couldn’t. He decided to look ahead once more. “My eye.” His mind went to Krem, dear, loyal Krem. “I traded it for the life of a friend.”

“How noble. A fine quality for any daughter to have.”

That made Bull’s eye shoot to her. She certainly seemed sure about something.

The queen waved to her sisters, and they gathered up their towels, entered the pool, and took turns bathing the Gift from Artemis.

(*)

“This meat isn’t bad. It’s roasted to perfection.” Varric chewed another piece of flesh from the animal rib in his fingers.

Thimdhana came a few minutes before, escorting a couple of younger Amazons who delivered an assortment of dishes and some water. Once the women left, Varric investigated the food, finding it all to smell heavenly. Aside from the meat, there was some kind of bread puffs, a bowl of sliced green fruit, some boiled and seasoned potatoes, and miniature carrots.

Dorian laid on the bed with Ayla, an arm over her, and she curled on her side, rubbing her stomach. The Altus sighed, stroking her hair. “Dinner around our campfire was rather fleeting. You should try to eat a little more. It does smell delicious, hm?”

“I’m not hungry.”

He sighed. “Oh, Ayla. Don’t worry. Iron Bull will be alright.”

She stared across the room, wishing that she could enjoy her ‘touchless’ sight more, but that was impossible with how frazzled her nerves were from mulling over what the warrior women might be doing to her husband.

The door clicked open, and Vreshka entered, halting to the side.

Dorian and Ayla sat up in bed.

Iron Bull ducked into the roomy hut after the queen, and Ayla’s heart fluttered to see him. She scooted from the bed and hurried over, meeting him halfway. They embraced one another tight.

“Ayla,” he bellowed her name, rich and resonant.

“Bull.” Ayla nuzzled into his chest, then pulled back to behold his outfit, which consisted of only a loincloth made from the pelt of some spotted animal. It reached to the middle of his thighs both in the front and back. “Why are you dressed like this? Where are your clothes?”

“They bathed me, rubbed me in oil, and told me to put this on.”

“They did that?” Dorian choked. “Did they rub you?”

“Ah, that would explain the lovely fragrance I’m picking up, body oil,” quipped Dorian.

Varric continued slowly eating, listening.

“Why have they done this?” Ayla pressed.

Iron Bull’s demeanor tightened, and he spared a look behind him to where Vreshka waited for him to have a few moments with his people as requested. Bull looked down at Ayla. “I think they mean to use me for a ritual.”

“Ritual. Told you,” Varric said around a bite of bread. He sipped some water and leaned forward to listen closer.

“Do you really think I’m going to sleep with you and these other women? I can promise that if you try, you’d be wasting your time.” His eye fixed harshly on her. “Not much you can do with a soft, unwilling noodle.”

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“Who is ‘they’?” Ayla asked. “And what kind of ritual?”

“The queen and eleven others. I’m sure they plan to try and sleep with me tomorrow.”

“What?” Ayla screeched. Her eyes blazed daggers at Vreshka. “Let them try, and I’ll claw all their eyes out!”

“Ayla, my heart, please calm down. Don’t stress yourself.”

“Don’t stress myself? These women have no right to do this!” Tears filled her eyes and she hugged into him, “Buuuullll!”

He closed his eye and sighed. “They won’t get what they want from me.”

“Are you sure about that?” Varric entered, brow lifting. “There’s a lot of attractive flesh in this village.”
“And I only have eye for one woman. Certain things need to happen before they can get what they want, and I’m a master at controlling my body.” Bull’s gaze settled on Ayla’s wet eyes. “I don’t want anyone else but you. They’ll never get me.”

“Gift, it is time for you to retire to your assigned quarters,” said Vreshka.

Bull peered over his shoulder to her, still holding his wife close. “Couldn’t I just stay here with them? It’s not like we could escape. There are guards everywhere, we have no weapons, and I can’t attack with these cuffs on.”

“No.” The queen said sternly. “Let’s go.”


The Qunari took some breaths to remain in control. Seeing Ayla in distress was enough to push him over the edge. He softened his features. “Hey, Kadan, hey.” Ayla blinked up at him, tears pouring down her cheeks. “It’s going to be okay. Be strong for me and Little Bean. Can you do that?”

She eventually nodded.

“I know you can,” Bull said tenderly, kissing the top of her head. “I love you.”

She mewedled and sniffled.

Bull looked to Dorian and Varric. “Take good care of my family.”

“You know we will,” came Dorian’s response, and he moved in to put his arm around Ayla as Iron Bull pulled away and left the hut with Vreshka.

(*)

The hour was later, but still early enough so that many of the village’s occupants lingered about to watch the Gift being led by the queen and four guards through their clean paths for his own hut. It was down further on the hillside.

Vreshka stood aside and gestured for him to enter. “If you require anything, merely ask the guards. They will be posted right outside.”

Two of the warrior women positioned themselves by the door. They’d be relieved in a couple of hours by other guards in the watch rotation. Iron Bull smirked at Vreshka, then ducked into the hut, and a guard shut the door after him. The place was tidy and clean, furnished with a large, thick bed of furs and pillows. A bowl of fruit—bananas, kiwis, and mini oranges—sat on the table. A fire burned low in the hearth. There was one window at the front of the hut, its curtain drawn shut, and a window on the side wall.

The Qunari settled back on the furs and closed his eye. He wanted to link with Ayla, though he knew it wasn’t possible to experience that part of their bond in this world. But he concentrated anyway. A rustling of foliage stole Bull’s sharp ears, and his eye shot open, already fixed in the direction it came from. The side window.

The face of a female most certainly in her teens hovered above the sill. Her eyes widened, and she ducked from sight. Bull sat up, highly curious. The girl didn’t show again after he waited for a whole minute, so he reclined once more, shut his eye, and thought of his wife.
The Duty of Repopulation

The door to Iron Bull’s hut eased in, creating the smallest sound, but it was enough to rile him instantly from sleep. The man’s eye opened and settled on Thimdhana standing just outside the door.

Bull lifted on his elbows, the muscles rippling through his chest and rock-hard abdomen. He didn’t like the greedy way the Amazon eyed him. “What is it?”

“You will join the queen for her morning meal. Come with me.”

“Take me to my people first.”

Thimdhana chuckled, shaking her head. “Vreshka says you can see them afterwards.”

The Qunari huffed, stood, and stretched. “Fine. Lead.”

They left his quarters, heading through the village. In the day time, the place was even more picturesque, peaceful despite the race of warrior women that inhabited it. His eye met those of an older woman, her silver hair braided and reaching down her back. Bull found it difficult to gauge how old she might be because of how good a shape she was in—a small waist and round hips, tall, athletically muscled. She wore furs like the others, though her midriff was covered, and she had on soft leather pants, boots. Her blazing blue eyes were what intrigued Bull most. They reminded him of Xena’s, so predatorial and calculating.

The woman continued sharpening her sword as he passed.

Iron Bull kept following Thimdhana. They reached a wide path hugging the hillside that led upward. He could see a large hut at the top. He stopped. “I need to piss.”

“Hold it in. The queen has summoned you, so you’ll go now.”

“Right.”

He spotted a copse of tall grass sprouting from the hillside nearby and went to it, where he pulled up the front of his loincloth, eased aside the flap holding his junk, and proceeded to pee against the wall. His eye fell shut, and he grunted in relief. Thimdhana crossed her meaty arms, frowning a bit. Afterwards, Bull fixed his loincloth and turned to her. He saw that a group of teenagers had been watching the whole display, though they were at this back and hadn’t gotten an uncensored show.

Bull sighed and started following Thimdhana up the path again.

Behind them, the girls burst into laughter.

When they crested the path, Bull and Thimdhana crossed a quaint yard boasting a few flower beds and soft grass for the opening of Vreshka’s hut.

“After you,” said Thimdhana.

Iron Bull went forward, ducked a little, and entered. It was very spacious inside, the windows plentiful enough to flood the room with morning light. Vreshka lounged on a bed draped with various furs. She popped another grape in her mouth and smiled.

“Thank you, Thimdhana. You may go.”

The right hand looked suspiciously at Bull. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. He can’t hurt me.”

Thimdhana nodded. “Alright.” She backed from the hut, all the while sending a narrowed and untrusting gaze at Bull.

The Qunari eyed her back, until she closed the door after her. He turned to Vreshka.

The queen gestured at the place beside her. “Please, sit and join me. There’s more than enough for two.” She indicated the spread of dishes on a tray. “You must be hungry.”

“I want to see Ayla.”

Vreshka smirked. “The only ‘love’ men know revolves around the thing between their legs, and in that sense, it’s a man’s function to please women. It is in his nature to want to be with as many women as possible.”

“Ah.” Bull stayed where he was. “So, you’re mad because I don’t act like those who have fallen to their knees before you just because you’re somewhat cute?” He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “You have the mentality of a child, and you need to realize that I will never bend to your whims. I am, as you put it, ‘infatuated’ with Ayla because I love her and only her.”

“Why are you so infatuated with one woman, when you have so many others within your grasp? Are you not a man?”

“Ah.” Bull stayed where he was. “So, you’re mad because I don’t act like those who have fallen to their knees before you just because you’re somewhat cute?” He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “You have the mentality of a child, and you need to realize that I will never bend to your whims. I am, as you put it, ‘infatuated’ with Ayla because I love her and only her.”

Vreshka smirked. “The only ‘love’ men know revolves around the thing between their legs, and in that sense, it’s a man’s function to please women. It is in his nature to want to be with as many women as possible.”
He pulled in a hefty sigh and shrugged. “Fine, yeah, whatever. You can believe what you want. I’m telling you that Ayla is the only woman for me. Now, take me to her.”

Realizing that she was failing at her pre-seduction game, Vreshka chuffed and popped another grape in her mouth. “Okay. Sit and eat, and you can see your friends after.”

Iron Bull stared thoughtfully at the woman, then stepped forward and bent to pick what looked like a biscuit from a bowl on the tray. “I’ll stand, thank you.” Watching her, he ate half the thing in one bite.

Vreshka was used to getting what she wanted from men, and they were usually so easy to manipulate. But the Gift was resilient and determined, not budging. That didn’t matter. Tonight, he would yield to her and the other eleven whether he wanted to or not.

(*)

Breakfast with Vreshka lasted half an hour at most, during which the two of them didn’t speak much. Bull just stood there, eating slowly on bacon and biscuits, while she watched him with that knowing look in her eyes that he’d come to highly despise.

Now, Bull was being led by a couple of guards back down the path and through the village for the hut where Ayla, Varric, and Dorian resided. One of the guards on duty opened the door and let the Qunari enter.

The three of them sat around the table picking at breakfast. Vreshka had ordered the guards to take them to the bathing pools to clean up a little earlier, which explained why Ayla’s pale mane was still damp, though it was freshly combed and starting to fluff out.

The Oona went to her husband, hugging arms around his middle.

“Sleep well?” he asked, setting a kiss to her lips.

“Not really. I kept worrying about you.”

“Other than the he-bitch punching me in the face last night, I haven’t been harmed,” said Bull, then offered a reassuring smile. “What about you two? You good?”

“Slept decent.” Varric nodded. “And the food’s been nice. I still don’t like all this talk of rituals though.”

Dorian shrugged tersely, his brows lifting. “I suppose the accommodations have been satisfactory, though I did find my bed too hard, the biscuits they served could’ve used more moisture, and the water in the bathing pools was cooler than I’d like.”

Iron Bull slipped a low chuckle, knowing this was Dorian’s way of handling situations that made him uncomfortable. The employ of snooty sarcasm. “Always a drama queen.”

“Hm.” The Altus shrugged.

The beat of drums made them all stop and listen, a simple rhythm of bongos, both deep and high. The door opened to the hut and Thimdhana appeared.

“It is time for the Trial by Combat,” she said, appearing proud and content. “All of you follow me. The queen and her chosen await.”

“A glorious morning, sisters! As you know, we will now hold our Trial by Combat, where those who have been chosen for tonight’s special ritual will face me in a fight, further proving why they deserve such an honor. Thanks to our Goddess Artemis, we have been given the gift of a very special seed, one that will elevate us above all other tribes and make us stronger than we ever thought possible.”

Vreshka pointed down from her seat to Iron Bull, and the Amazons erupted with tribal calls and yipping, until her hand raised to silence them.
The queen spoke on. “Bring the Gift to me.”

Ayla pulled closer to Bull, eyes wide.

Bull nodded reassuringly. “It’s going to be alright. Remember what I said. Be strong.” He sighed, rubbed her cheek, and followed an Amazon soldier up the steps and between benches for the queen’s spectating box.

Thimdhana gently took Ayla’s arm, and the Oona tried to tug away. She relented and went with the tall, broad woman, as did Varric and Dorian. The three of them were seat on benches somewhere in the first row, opposite the queen and Bull.

When the Qunari reached Vreshka, she smiled very warmly at him, then stepped aside, indicating for him to occupy the large, fur-strewn seat that offered the best overview of the entire arena. Bull slowly lowered to the chair. His eye immediately went to his companions.

Vreshka moved down the steps and into the center of the open area, while two guards positioned themselves to either side of Bull. The queen lifted her hands, eliciting cheer from her people. She spoke only when they quieted down.

“Warrior number one, come forth.”

Down the way from Ayla, Varric, and Dorian, also sitting in the first row and segregated from the rest of the benches, were the eleven women who partook in bathing Iron Bull the previous night. The first one stood and moved out into the arena, both she and the queen facing one another. Each woman was dressed normally in their tribal garb. Vreshka had a white strip of material tucked into the waist of her short skirt. It flapped gently in the morning breeze.

The drums started up again, produced by Amazons high in the stands. Bull’s eye went to them, and then another woman blew a horn, the blast humming through the arena. That’s when Vreshka and the other Amazon began circling one another, their faces displaying concentration and confidence. Vreshka grinned and made the signal for her fellow Amazon to come at her, a taunting gesture.

The Amazon gave a battle cry and shuffled in, hand reaching for the white flag. She missed, evaded by Vreshka. The queen growled and round-housed her in the gut, following with a right hook. The Amazon staggered, recovered, and regained her posture. She quickened forward, feinted left, and swung at Vreshka, landing a blow to her jaw. Vreshka spun and recovered instantly. She swiped away the Amazon’s hand when it went for the flag again. They continued their weaponless combat for only three minutes, then the horn resounded once more, immediately ending the fight.

Both women had a few bruises, and the flag still hung on Vreshka’s side. Her opponent had failed to take it.

“You fought well, Zenith, and truly deserve the honor bestowed upon us by our goddess. I chose well,” Vreshka said, then nodded.

Zenith bowed, looking displeased with herself. She returned to the bench.

Vreshka eyed the remaining ten. “Warrior number two, come forth.”

Just as before, the horn blasted, and the fight began. Three minutes elapsed. Vreshka still had the flag. Warrior number three managed to land a blow that staggered Vreshka, allowing her to snatch the flag free, and this made the spectators howl in cheer. All the other Amazons got their turns to fight, and numbers six and ten also obtained the flag.

Once the Trial was done, the drummers banged rhythmically while the warriors filed out to the center of the arena again, standing in a line before Vreshka. Silence filled the place.

Vreshka said one name to start: “Otari.”

The Amazon called out produced a huge grin, stepped forward, and bowed to one knee. After Vreshka smiled and nodded to her, Otari went to stand behind her, chin held high. The queen continued calling names.

“Karyn.” The same motions were performed, with Karyn lining up beside Otari. “Embra.” And then, “Lolani…”

Bull’s attention was mostly on his wife and friends, and he caught Ayla’s concerned gaze several times. He was a very keen man, a requirement to reach the level of rank he had with the Qun, so it didn’t take him long to realize the purpose of the Trial by Combat once the names started being called. Vreshka was the queen of these women, and she’d become so because she was their best warrior. The Trial was to determine in what order the Amazons would share him, with Vreshka being first.

Tamber.

Zenith.

Shania.
Romi.
Ingrid.
Talis.
Jemma.

There it was. The Iron Bull’s line-up. It made him want to laugh to think they actually believed they’d be able to succeed. The nerve of these bitches. At the same time, Bull couldn’t help but harbor a little bit of worry. They seemed so sure they’d be able to get him, and that made him wonder if they did have a way to excite him into the act.

His mind boiled over the thought.

Down in the arena, Vreshka was addressing her people again. “This concludes the Trial by Combat, sisters. Go and enjoy your day, rest up for tonight’s feast, and you,” she turned to the eleven behind her, “you all should get the most rest, for it may prove a tiring task, claiming our Gift.”

The eleven and Vreshka turned eyes up to Iron Bull, whose gaze narrowed at them. The women chuckled knowingly.

Ayla shot to her feet, frowning thickly. “You will not touch him!”

All attention went to the Oona.

Vreshka tilted her head at the white-haired beauty, studying her. She moved forward.

“Ayla!” Bull went to stand but strong hands pushed down on his shoulders to keep him seated. The guards wouldn’t have been able to restrain him if he hadn’t been wearing the cuffs. Worry coursed through him.

Dorian took Ayla’s hand. “Please, sit down, Ayla,” he coaxed.

“No!” she screamed. “These women are vile and disgusting, thinking they can take whatever they want!” The Oona met Vreshka’s gaze head-on when the queen stopped before her.

“Men are not like us,” Vreshka started, her voice smooth. “They have one purpose, one use. They supply the seed that gives us daughters, because we—women—are the nurturers of the world. We are the bringers of life. The minotaur is a strong creature, and his seed will greatly benefit my people. The daughters we bear will be the beginning of an unstoppable Amazon nation. It is your obligation to share him. He doesn’t love you anyway. Men don’t know how to love, they know how to fuck.”

Ayla spat in the queen’s face, and the Amazons shifted and stirred to see an outsider, or anyone, do such a thing. Vreshka lifted a hand to silence them, smiling as she pulled the flag from her waistband and wiped spittle from her cheek, the bridge of her nose.

“You have a lot of spirit,” Vreshka spoke. “Thimdhana’s right. You should really consider staying with us.”

The beautiful Amazon queen turned and walked away.

Ayla collapsed into Dorian, sobbing.

Vreshka waved up the stands, and the guards brought Bull down. “Go to her,” she said. “I will allow you to be with your companions until tonight. Stay with them,” Vreshka ordered the guards, then stalked off, exiting the arena.

Iron Bull’s long strides took him to his people, where Dorian relinquished Ayla into his thick, solid embrace. “Shh, don’t cry, Ayla. It’s alright.”

But he didn’t know if that was completely true, that things were alright.

(*)

They weren’t required to remain in the hut throughout the day, so the Thedosians walked around the village, chaperoned by the guards, of course. They also received many gawks and looks, which was to be expected. Noon came, and they were taken back to the hut Dorian, Varric, and Ayla shared. Amazons brought them lunch, and they ate mostly in silence.

Iron Bull was just happy Ayla ate anything at all, given her level of anxiety. The woman put away a solid amount. She might’ve been an emotional wreck, but she was still pregnant and had the craving to eat. Bull curled up on the bed with her, spooning her while she napped. She had vague circles under her eyes from lack of sleep the previous night, and her heavy snores right then told him she was getting the rest she needed.

Evening began to darken the sky before Thimdhana showed up, pushing the hut door in.

“It is time for the feast. Wake her,” she said.

Iron Bull wasn’t found of Thimdhana, and it showed in the abrasive way he watched her. The man sat up fully and gently roused Ayla, who’d been sleeping for almost four hours. Ayla sighed
and shifted, blinking up at her husband. Her smile faded when she realized Thimdhana stood in
the room, and she too sat up, hugging into Bull.

“Let’s get you ready,” the Qunari said. “They want us to attend some feast.”

“I’m not hungry.” Ayla frowned at Thimdhana.

“Nevertheless, our queen wishes for you to be there, so you will. Now, get up and get ready. You
have five minutes.” Thimdhana turned and stepped outside.

“Come on,” Bull said softly, helping Ayla from the bed.

A couple of minute later, the four of them exited and followed Thimdhana to the square they’d
crossed last night when first entering the village. Another bonfire blazed, and tables had been set
up all around, with a slightly elevated table for the queen and her party. Vreshka smiled broadly
and waved to Thimdhana.

The right hand faced the Thedosians. “You, come with me,” she said to Iron Bull. “The rest of
you follow Torvra. Your table’s over there.”

Bull’s eye snatched to Ayla. They were being split apart again. These Amazons were doing well
to keep them separated, probably trying to get in his head and keep Ayla emotionally distressed,
the bitches. He lifted a hand to caress the smooth, dark curve of her cheek, before Thimdhana
pushed him towards the queen.

Ayla whimpered, eyes watering, lips trembling.

Dorian stepped forward to take her arm, and they were led with Varric for a different table.

Vreshka pat the chair next to her, a smile clinging to her lips. “Sit, Gift.”

Iron Bull snorted at her. “No need to talk to me like I’m a dog.”

He really didn’t like the woman, but he complied with her demand, stiffly dropped into the chair,
the rather sturdy piece of furniture creaking under his weight. Bull crossed arms over his naked
chest and drew his eye to Ayla, who watched him from across the area, seated between Dorian
and Varric.

Vreshka addressed her people. “Sisters, now that our honored and treasured guest has arrived, let
the feast begin!”

The drummers instantly commenced, accompanied by flutists. Servers filed out, setting trays and
trays of food on the tables, starting with the queen’s. They brought in pitchers of wine, juice, and
water. Dancers wearing elaborate costumes and headdresses spun before the bonfire, their
movements fine-tuned and in sync.

Vreshka popped a berry between her lips, leaning back casually in her chair. She looked over at
Bull, who was watching Ayla. “Why do you worry so for her? She’s in fine hands.” She leaned
close to him, drawing fingers along his arm, all but purring into his ear, “You should pay more
attention to me.”

Bull’s eye twitched. “Why would I do that? I don’t find you attractive. So, you know what you
should do? You should stop whatever game you’re playing and let us go, because I will not
comply with whatever you think you have planned.”

“Hm.” Vreshka considered him a moment, chuckling. “No, of course you won’t. You should eat
something.”

His head jerked around so he could glare at her. “Stop telling me what I should do.”

“If you won’t eat, at least drink some water and get nice and hydrated.”

Bull rolled his eye and went back to watching Ayla.

“Alright. Suit yourself.” The queen sipped her own water, then settled her hand on the firm
warmth of his thigh and squeezed, feeling the strength in his flesh.

Bull ignored her.

A husky chuckle eased from Vreshka.

Across the way, Ayla watched Iron Bull, both husband and wife holding clear expressions of
worry.

Dinner, dancing, and festivities went on for about two hours, and by then the sky was completely
dark, sprinkled with stars and lit by the face of the full moon. Vreshka stood and stretched,
gesturing for the other eleven to rise as well. The music continued as the women left the area. A
few minutes later, Thimdhana and a handful of guards escorted Bull, Ayla, Dorian, and Varric
away as well. The Amazons hooted and cheered and kept on partying.

The Thedosians were taken back to the arena, the doors sealed once they were inside. It became
apparent that the Amazons used the place for more than just Trials by Combat. A huge tent with
open sides and made of luxurious, transparent material now stood in the center, and under it was a bed lined by a few torches. The bed was fitted comfortably with furs and a padded headrest, as well as a series of binding bands.

“Maker, they’re going to make us watch,” Dorian breathed.

“What! No! No!” Ayla moaned and ran to Iron Bull, holding as tight as she could.

The Qunari was beginning to feel his confidence sink. The Amazons had been so sure all along that they’d be able to make him go along with their plan, and the fact that they weren’t losing momentum, that they’d prepared the ritual bed, really had Bull worried. He did the only thing he could, hugging Ayla close. Maybe the Amazons didn’t have anything. Maybe they were calling his bluff, so sure he’d fall into their seduction, and even if they tried to fondle him into sexual excitement, he would resist. That would be easy. Hope again rushed into him.

Bull heaved a sigh, “Don’t cry, Ayla. It’s going to be alright. They’ll never have me.”

Thimdhana gently took Ayla’s arm and led the trembling woman, Dorian, and Varric to the same front row bench they occupied earlier. The women guarding Bull urged him towards the bed. He stopped before it, shaking his head, eye going to Thimdhana.

“I’m not getting on that.”

“Yes, you are,” she answered sharply.

“No.”

The musclebound woman engaged in a staring contest with him, both unblinking. She finally moved, halting behind Dorian. She unsheathed her knife, grabbed his hair, pulled his head back, and positioned the blade under his chin. Dorian moaned, eyes widening. “You’re keen, which means you know we won’t hurt Ayla. But this pretty man is of no use to anyone and is quite expendable. Get on the bed, or I will kill him. Then, I’ll move on to Stubby here.” Thimdhana jerked a nod at Varric.

Iron Bull felt trapped. Looking at Thimdhana threaten Dorian’s life, he imagined how he must’ve looked the day he slit Gatt’s throat. He didn’t know if she bluffed or not, but he was unwilling to risk Dorian’s life. He loved the man. They’d been through time together, and that meant Dorian was the only one who could understand the magnitude and heaviness of the entire situation. He had, after all, gone through all of it with Iron Bull, had seen the Qunari at his absolute worst and lowest.


Thimdhana complied.

Bull slowly got on the bed and lay back. Two of the guards immediately moved in, securing his wrists to either side of his head with the restraints. A padded leather strap went across his chest, waist, and thighs, and his ankles were secured to the bed like his wrists. All the bindings severely limited Bull’s movement, which would make it difficult for him to dismount any of his riders.

And speaking of which, Vreshka and the eleven entered the ceremonial area, the wide doors closed and secured. They all wore sleeveless, sheer red gowns that flowed to their ankles. A woman dressed in animal skins and a flowing cloak adorned with hawk feathers accompanied them. The right half of her face was covered by a mask. Her name was Gedren and she served as the tribe’s shamaness. She lived in a hut down on the river bank, somewhat segregated from the rest of the Amazons, as was customary for the shamaness, since the privacy helped them better meditate and tune into the spiritual world.

Vreshka, the eleven, and Gedren surrounded the bed, all the while the rest of the village partying away in the square. The drums, singing, and merriment could be heard clearly. Bull tugged at his confines, finding them annoyingly secure. He relaxed and settled his eye on Vreshka.

“Still soft,” he said flatly, lips mashed into a thin, irritated line.

The queen smiled sensuously at him. “Not for long. Gedren.”

The shamaness stepped forward and reached into a deep inner pocket of her robes, pulling out a strangely familiar, spherical item that filled her palm.

Both Dorian and Varric perked, exchanging looks.

“Is that…?” the dwarf started.

“Yes, an orb like the one Solas—Fen’Harel—was chasing. The one he wanted to get from Corypheus before Ares destroyed it in taking the magister down,” Dorian finished the thought.

Varric licked his lips, brow furrowing, “But if it was destroyed, what’s she doing with it?”

“I don’t know,” Dorian said swiftly, the two of them speaking quickly back and forth. “Maybe it’s a completely different one.”

The Altus was right, though he didn’t know it. Fen’Harel’s Orb of Destruction had been destroyed. The item in Gedren’s hand belonged to Elgar’nan, and it was on loan from their
‘goddess’, who said the artifact would make it easy to get what they wanted from their Gift. Ares merely had to tweak the power of the Orb to serve his plan.

Ayla trembled beside Dorian, clinging to his arm.

“Begin,” Vreshka said.

Gedren nodded and closed her eyes, using her power to awaken the Orb. It glowed to life in her palm, pulsating and golden. She held it over Iron Bull’s body. Nothing happened at first, and then the Qunari groaned and yanked violently at his restraints.

“No. No. No. No!” he bellowed, shaking his horned head. He clenched his eye shut, willing his body to do his own bidding and not that of those vile women.

“Ohmygods, what’s happening to him! Stop it!” Ayla cried.

Iron Bull roared ferociously, his eye flying open to glare upon Vreshka. The queen’s gaze widened to see that single eye had taken on a golden-amber shade, and his canines had elongated. It was also blatantly clear he was no longer soft under the loincloth. The other eleven turned concerned looks to Vreshka. Their goddess told them the artifact would prepare his body for them.

She didn’t, however, give them the fine details of the transformation.

Vreshka saw the doubt in their eyes, and she wasn’t having it. This was their time, and the beastman laid out before them was their destiny. She gathered herself, lifting her chin, wiping away any signs of fear. Slowly, she approached the bed and raised the loincloth aside, undoing the simple tuck of soft fabric around his straining erection, exposing him.

Ayla burst into unbridled sobs, her hold so tight on Dorian’s hand that the mage was beginning to go numb.

Iron Bull’s eye snatched to his wife, and for the first time since they got captured, he completely relented, shaking his head quickly at Vreshka. “Please, please don’t. Don’t do this.”

“It is already done.” The queen braced herself and climbed onto the bed, straddling him.

Iron Bull struggled as hard as he could, his eye pleading up at her. “Please, just…” This was really going to happen. He realized it the moment they initiated his kuma’ta kalifaar, and he couldn’t fight it. The only way to appease the strictly Qunari biological function was to release into another body. He could smell all of them, the fucking bitches, and he hated himself for enjoying their female scents. The primal part of him just wanted to be buried deep and brought to satisfaction. “She doesn’t need to be here for this. Please take her away. Please, I’m begging you!”

“No, she will stay.” Vreshka raked nails down his chest, making him shiver with pleasure. “That way she can see that you, like all men, are good for one thing and one thing alone. Seed like yours should not be wasted on one woman.”

And then she positioned her wet cunt over him, lowering slowly, so anxious to have his girth inside her. Vreshka moaned thickly, head tossing back, eyes closing. Iron Bull half-groan, half-growled when she wrapped around him, it felt so good.

“By the Qun, stop…fuck…please…” He continued to fight. With his mind. And a lot of good that was doing. No fucking good at all.

Ayla cried hard as she watched, unable to look away, mouth open.

Dorian tried to turn her so she could bawl into his shoulder. He averted his eyes, as did Varric. “Ayla, don’t watch,” the mage spoke softly.

Iron Bull’s head rolled away from Ayla. He couldn’t bear to see her. A tear leaked from his eye.

The kuma’ta kalifaar didn’t last long, and ‘Artemis’ instructed the Amazons not to exceed the Gift’s limits. Once he released, they were to stop, recharge him with the artifact, and let the next one hop on. Essentially, none of them were to attempt to reach her own climax during the ritual. If they got it before he got his, that was fine though.

Little more than five minutes into the act, Bull felt the release building in his loins. He trembled a throaty groan, bore his teeth at Vreshka, and exploded into her. His head dropped back against the headrest, his eye rolled shut, and his toes curled.

That was all Ayla could handle. She squeezed her eyes closed tight and burrowed into Dorian’s chest crying harder. The Altus kept rubbing her shoulders, trying to calm her with hushed words.

Iron Bull softened, and Vreshka climbed off. The queen had someone give him a ladle of water, which he coughed around, before Gedren used the Orb to harden him again. As the second Amazon, Otari, climbed onto the bed and positioned herself for penetration, Bull closed his eye, tears flowing from it. It wasn’t the humiliation and embarrassment of having Dorian and Varric present. That he could handle. The breaking, degrading factor was Ayla being forced to witness every moment, knowing how much it hurt her to watch and hear it.

“I’m so sorry, so sorry…” he whispered.

For the next hour and a half, the women continued to rape him until each of them carried a load of his seed inside her.
It felt like an eternity of pleasure and pain. A Qunari man wasn’t meant to experience kuma’ta kalifaar multiple times consecutively, and by the time the seventh Amazon mounted him, Iron Bull’s erections had begun to cause him extreme discomfort. The need was still the same, though, the need to release. He stopped fighting, lying there and writhing, eye closed, muttering for them to stop, though they didn’t.

Once the last Amazon received her load, Gedren tucked the Orb away, bowed to the queen, and left the arena. Vreshka waved at the guards by Ayla, Dorian, and Varric, indicating they be taken back to their hut. The Oona had little fight left, sniffling and trembling as she clung to Dorian’s arm, her eyes averted, unable to look in Bull’s direction.

Bull groaned lowly at the chafed sensation between his legs. His eye saw how Ayla wouldn’t look at him, and he watched sadly after her.

“Unstrap him and bring him to the bathing pools,” Vreshka said, then she and the eleven drifted off.

The guards did as she ordered, releasing Bull’s bindings. He sat up carefully, grimacing as he slid from the bed and fixed the loincloth. The smell of Amazon vag covered him, as did their fluids, stirring up disgust. He was happy to hear he’d be allowed to bathe.

This time there was a bit of crowd while he was led for the pools, limping a little, raw from having to endure more than an hour’s worth of kuma’ta kalifaar. The yipping females were only wild shadows to him, for his mind had lost itself in thoughts of Ayla, imagining how she must feel about all of it.

Iron Bull entered the cave and was taken to the same chamber as last night. It didn’t surprise him to see that Vreshka was already in the pool, fully naked and delicately sponging her body, wiping along one arm. She smiled and waved him forward.

Bull didn’t bother to dim the hatred he harbored for her. It simmered in his eye, etched harshly over his face. Sneering, he carefully removed the loincloth and dropped the soiled thing to the cave floor. He looked down at his cock saw that it was reddened and irritated.

“It was necessary.” Water trickled and cascaded down Vreshka’s front, squeezed from the sponge in her hands.

“Whatever.” The Qunari stepped in the water and sighed when his man-parts slipped beneath the surface. He reached down to gently massage himself, cleaning away the taint of his sexual attackers. “She didn’t have to be there for that.”

“Yes, she did.”

“Bullshit! You did it to hurt her. Why?”

Water sloshed when Vreshka closed the distance between them. “I did it to help her. She got to see just how easily you would give in and take pleasure from other women.”

“You are fucking delusional. All of you milked me like a fucking cow.” He glared down at her. “You raped me.”

Vreshka smirked, chuckling shortly. “Men cannot be raped.”

“That’s exactly what you did to me. You used that ball to make my body respond.”

“And if you really didn’t want to do it, you would’ve fought harder to resist.” Her eyes sizzled up at him. “But you are just a man, and it is in your nature.”

Bull growled low in this throat. “Remove these cuffs, and I’ll show you what’s in my nature.” He was so angry, he could’ve strangled her then and there.

Vreshka continued to smile warmly. “I’m sorry, but only our goddess can remove them.”

She went back to wiping her body.

Iron Bull stepped away a few feet, then dunked completely under. His skin crawled with the stink of those raping whores, and he just wanted to feel clean again.

(*)

After he bathed and donned a clean loincloth, Bull exited the caves to find Thimdhana waiting with two other guards.

“Let’s go, big boy. Back to your hut,” the right hand said, smiling.

Bull thought of asking to be taken to Ayla, but two things stilled his tongue. One, he knew they’d probably refuse. Two, he didn’t know if he could face his wife right then, though he wanted nothing more than to hold her. He silently limped back to his hut, ducking through the doorway, lowering carefully to the bed.
Thimdhana grinned down at him. “You’re lucky it wasn’t my time to mate, man-beast, because I would’ve broken you.”

“I don’t doubt it, he-bitch,” Bull snarled. “Now, go away and leave me alone.”

The right hand merely smiled at his response, stepping out, shutting the door after her.

Bull sighed and laid back, grateful to be able to rest after the Amazon gang-bang. He lay there staring up at the ceiling for a few minutes, before he heard a small rustle of bushes beyond the side window. He sat up and trained his eye in that direction.

Very slowly, the young woman stood up until her head and shoulders came into view. She watched the Qunari meekly, perhaps with sadness, he thought. Bull stole a glance to the door, listening. The guards were still posted and unalarmed. He got to his feet and went closer to the window. The young woman noted his limp, and guilt asserted itself on her face along with the sadness. Bull stopped a few feet from her.

“You were at the window last night. What’s your name?” His voice was muted and contained.

“Njora,” the teen answered softly.

“Why did you come?”

Her eyes skittered about nervously. “I…wanted to see the Gift from Artemis up-close. You looked scarier last night, so I ran.”

“I don’t look so scary now that your fellow Amazons have degraded me, is that it?”

She shook her head, sighing. “I’m sorry they did that, but the queen says its for the good of our tribe, to strengthen our bloodline and help further protect us from our enemies.” Worry joined the sadness and guilt that blanketed her features.

“What’s wrong?”

Njora took a moment to gather her thoughts. “It will be my time to begin helping to replenish our tribe in a few seasons, and I…I don’t know if I can do it. Sometimes I just feel like I don’t belong here.”

Bull nodded, understanding all too well her feelings of unsureness. “I’ve been in your situation before. I was part of a society that I loved but thought was lacking in some areas, so I left.”

Again, he nodded, thinking of all he’d done since leaving the Qun behind, of his life with Ayla. He smiled a bit. “Very happy. They can’t keep you here, Njora, not if you want to leave. Just be sure it’s what you really want. Regardless of how disagreeable things can get, you have a home here, a group that will nurture and protect you, and once you leave it, they might not ever let you back in.”

She considered his words, nodding. “Thank you.” The young woman’s head jerked around, and she listened for a moment. She didn’t want to get caught by patrollers at the Gift’s hut. “I must go.”

Iron Bull watched her duck from sight, slipping away with a rustle of foliage and low crunch of grass.

(*)

The next morning, Thimdhana showed to tend to Bull, first taking him to a spot where he could relieve himself and freshen up. Then, she led him to his companions’ hut, all the while speaking on Vreshka’s plans for the Thedosians.

Iron Bull moved by the giant woman into the hut, and Thimdhana left.

Varric, Dorian, and Ayla sat at the table picking through a plentiful breakfast. The Oona’s eyes were red from crying, and tears conjured again at the sight of her husband. Angry, painful, betrayed, sympathetic tears. She jerked her seat back, left the table, and moved around the divider to her bed, sitting.

The dwarf and the mage exchanged looks and stood, heading out into the yard to give the couple some privacy. No words needed. The door tapped shut after them.

Iron Bull inhaled deeply and moved around the divider, seeing that Ayla sat with her back to him, arms folded, staring ahead. He lowered to sit beside her, grimacing, still sensitive from the attack. Neither husband nor wife spoke for a while, then she broke the silence.

“‘They’ll never have me.’ That’s what you said,” she spoke softly.

“I know, and I’m so sorry. They initiated the kuma’ta kalifar, amplified it.” Iron Bull shook his head, his voice steady. His eye filled with anguish, knowing the whole situation hurt her deeply. “I couldn’t stop it, couldn’t control it, and for that, I am sorry.”

Ayla kept her eyes averted, unwilling to look at him.
“Ayla, please…you have to know that I didn’t want this to happen. I fought it with every inch of me.” He immediately regretted using those words.

The Oona huffed and turned to him, eyes narrowed. “Really? Because I can think of about ten or eleven inches that didn’t fight hard enough.”

“They raped me…”

Bull’s eye closed, and when it opened, it fell on the rounded swell of her belly, upon which he wanted to press his hand and feel the life of their baby moving inside. Instead, he stood from the bed, nodding. “I understand your anger. Maybe I could’ve fought harder. If you need anything, I’ll be right outside.”

The woman sniffled and wiped away tears. Her heart sank when he started limping away, moving with care only because those animals sexually ravaged him. Ayla hurried to her feet.

“Bull!” He turned, and she broke, falling into his arms, holding tight, crying. She felt bad for only thinking of herself and not considering how he’d been affected. “I’m sorry, my love! Please forgive me!”

Relief flooded Bull. He held her to him, wrapped securely in his embrace. “Shh. You don’t need to apologize. It’s okay. Everything’s alright now. It’s over.”

Ayla pulled back to gaze up at him. “I’ll be fine,” he reassured her. “I just want to take a nap. Didn’t sleep all that well last night. Can I lie here?”

“I’m sure she’d be fine,” he said, but took her hand, and they returned to bed, the sheets a rawer color above them than below.

Bull lifted a tender smile, then maneuvered to the mattress, grunting when the loincloth rubbed him wrong. He’d been given some salve to help ease the chafing discomfort, and it was working somewhat. He got comfortable on his back, head propped by a pillow. Ayla laid down next to him, nestling close. She thought over the situation. Vreshka had done everything she could to discredit Bull in Ayla’s eyes, blaming his gender for his instincts. The queen underestimated the love between them. It was held firmly intact by bonds Vreshka would never understand.

Iron Bull fell asleep holding his wife close.

Vreshka was still there, trying to convince those around her that nothing was wrong. It was a waste of time. Bull was going to make the queen realize that nothing was going to stop her from telling the truth to the Thedosians and Thedosian lawmakers. Nothing could stop him from making the queen understand.

Ayla remained awake, basking in his welcome, familiar warmth and scent, wishing for a sword and one minute with Vreshka. If given the chance, she believed she could plunge the blade right through that bitch’s vile heart.

(*)

Bull got a couple of hours in, and that was all he needed. A refresher. He sat at the table in his companions’ hut now, an hour after noon, eating on roasted meat and other goods. The queen, as Thimdana passed on to Bull earlier, had given him permission to remain with his people from then on. They would spend that last day in the village, and tomorrow they’d be taken back to the clearing where the Amazons captured them, as instructed by ‘Artemis’.

“You saw the artifact, didn’t you?” Dorian said across the table.

Bull swallowed the bite in his mouth and nodded. “Yeah. I laid up thinking about it last night, and I concluded that it belongs to another of the Evanuris, possibly the elf we think is Elgar’nan. That further proves Ares is behind all of this, even if he hasn’t shown himself. How else would these Earth women know how to get what they wanted from me? He’s familiar with our world and most certainly male Qunari bodily functions. He did this to me.”

“Vreshka won’t listen, and neither will the others,” Bull spoke deeply. “They’re so caught up in making their nation great that they don’t want to hear the truth. It’s all done now, anyway.”

“I just want to go home,” Ayla replied in a small voice.

“Ayla,” Bull turned his eye to the man, his dark brow lifting faintly. “I’d be happy just to end this war and get back to the Thedosian south. But, I’d love to see you again.”

“Aren’t you going to help me get my family back?” Ayla asked, looking at him through her tears.

“I don’t think so,” Bull said, glancing over at Dorian. “But, I’ll do what I can to help. And, I’ll keep an eye on that woman.”

Dorian chuckled. “You’re the best, Bull. We’ve always known that.”

Ayla nodded. “I know. I’ve been so worried about you.”

Bull reached to take her hand, squeezing it, bringing it to his lips to kiss it. “And we will, tomorrow.”

“At least that’s what we’d like to think. The Amazons may not believe Ares is behind this, but we know he is,” Dorian said. “Who’s to say what will happen when they deliver us back to that clearing?”

The Thedosians lingered under a blanket of thoughtful silence.

Varric stood and stretched. “For the record, Tiny, I was prepared to take that hit, but I doubt the Amazons want a bunch of ‘Stubbies’ walking around here.”

Iron Bull turned his eye to the man, his dark brow lifting faintly. “If that was your attempt to cheer
me up, it helped, a little.”

“Glad to hear it.” The dwarf pressed a hindered smile and pat his friend on the arm.

(*)
The Thedosians weren’t bothered for the entirety of the day, allowed to walk around and linger about, under constant guard, of course. The four of them settled down in the same hut for the night, with Bull resting beside his wife.

The next day, as promised and planned, they were given breakfast, and their mounts were brought forth carrying all their gear. Iron Bull got his briefs, pants, socks, and boots back. When he and his people were brought to the square, the Qunari smirked thickly at Vreshka and tossed the loincloth at her feet.

Vreshka curled a warm smile at him. “Glad to see you’re walking better.”

Bull was still sensitive, but the salve he’d been applying for the past day had significantly reduced his discomfort. He wasn’t limping anymore.

“To your mounts,” came Thimdhana’s authoritative voice. “I will take the lead and you all will follow.”

“Ayla rides with me.” Bull’s eye was unwavering from the right hand.

Thimdhana nodded.

Relieved to be leaving, Dorian moved to his horse and climbed on. Varric did the same. Iron Bull helped Ayla into the saddle of their hart—the creature received a lot of grooming and curious attention since their capture—then mounted behind her. He almost moved to adjust his axe, as it would usually be secured behind him. Now, it was attached to Thimdhana’s saddle, along with Bianca and Dorian’s stave.

The eleven gathered in around Vreshka.

“We thank you for your contribution to our tribe,” said the queen.

Iron Bull peered long and hard at her. “Like I had a fucking choice. You better hope you never see me again.”

At that, he clicked his tongue to his teeth and tugged the reins, starting the hart after Thimdhana. Dorian and Varric fell in behind him, and four other Amazons on horseback covered the rear. They exited the main gate and started back down into the forest.

Njora had been watching somewhere in the crowd. She ducked off quickly.

(*)

It was late morning when they reached the clearing where the Thedosians first made camp. The ring of stones was still intact, inside of which was charred sticks and ashes. Everyone dismounted. Thimdhana set their weapons on the ground, and the other Amazons obediently pulled their bows, readying arrows. The right hand grinned at Bull, then hopped back on her horse and nudged the animal back the way they came. One by one, the Amazons warriors lowered their bows, got on their horses, and did the same.

And then they were gone.

Varric went for Bianca. It felt great to have her back in his hands. Dorian took up his stave. Bull sheathed his knives, then grabbed his axe, examining it.

“What do we do now?” Dorian voiced.

“We wait,” said Varric. “That’s all we can do, Sparkler.”

“What about those?” Ayla shuffled closer to Iron Bull touching the metal bands on his wrists. Her brow furrowed, and she lifted his hand to study one, turning his wrist over. There wasn’t a keyhole or even a seam, only the loops that could be attached to a chain. The things had sealed once Thimdhana put them on. “How do we get these off?”

“Vreshka said only their ‘goddess’ could remove them, and I’m sure that’s Ares.” Bull said, frowning. “So, like Varric said, we wait. Come and sit down, Naaremma. Drink some water.”

He helped her settle on a fallen log.

(*)

There was more than one way out of the village and more than one way down into the forest. This wasn’t Njora’s first time sneaking out. She got a horse and used a parallel trail on the other side of the sentinel posts. The trail merged with the main path at the bottom of the hill. She left her mount and hurried forward on foot, sticking to the trees to keep from being detected.

After watching the right hand and her group ride by, Njora continued in the direction they’d come from. It didn’t take long to spot the Gift and his companions. They sat talking in the clearing. She observed them, hidden in the foliage, listening.
They sat there for half an hour. Dorian, while usually level-headed, had grown impatient, even angry. He wanted to be back with Hannibal. The mage huffed and shot to his feet, turning in a circle.

“Ares, damn you! Show yourself already!” he yelled, and the outburst cause birds to stir and flap off through the canopy.

“No need to raise your voice. I can hear you.” The God of War fizzled into view in their camp, and the others got to their feet as well. Ares grinned at Bull. “You did real good, just like I knew you would.”

Anger overtook Bull, transforming his face into a rigid stone mask. “All those times you kept saying you had plans for me—this was it? Having a bunch of crazed females rape me? Why, Ares?”

The war god’s smile deepened. “Oh, I have my reasons. And when I saw the opportunity to get what I wanted through these Amazons, I appeared to them as the god they worship. Artemis. It was so easy to get them to believe the blood of the Minotaur would make them stronger.”

Bull snorted a humorless laugh. “You don’t honestly believe that all those women will become pregnant, do you? Two or three, maybe. And that’s with a lot of luck.”

“Well, you’re not exactly shooting blanks, are you, big guy?” Ares chuckled and gestured at the very round swell of Ayla’s belly.

“Regardless, there’s no chance all of them will bear children. No chance.”

Ares lifted a brow, taking a step towards them, and Bull instinctively placed himself between the god and Ayla. “Oh, I can promise you without a doubt that all of those women will have your babies. Daughters, every last one.”

Bull shook his head. “No. You can’t know that.”

“But I do.”

The God of War seemed different somehow. No less devious, yet…elevated, like he was operating on a completely different level than previously. He didn’t seem very concerned about having all the progress he’d made over the past five months wiped away.

“He wanted this all along,” Bull said. He looked to Dorian. “He thanked you for giving him back a moment in time that he lost, remember? When he appeared to us after we stopped Gatt?”

The Altus nodded. “Yes, I recall.”

“This—transporting me here for these Amazons, to impregnate them—this was that moment, wasn’t it?” The Qunari focused on Ares.

“It was,” the god answered simply. “I had planned to bring you here in the other timeline, but the instant Ayla died, you lost your purity of heart, the one element required in men for Amazons to conceive daughters. Her death destroyed that in you, making you useless for my plan. I could’ve gone ahead with it, but there was no guarantee all the babies would be female. With time shifted back and Ayla saved, I realized I could go forward with my original plans.” He winked at Dorian.

“And what are these big plans you have?” Bull pressed.

“Hm.” Ares skimmed eyes over each of them. He examined them in a manner that suggested he knew something they did not, something that, perhaps, they should also know. “Since bonding with the Anchor, things have begun to take shape more clearly, my role in all of this, your roles. I have seen so much, and very soon, you’ll all see it too. And you will accept it, because it will be your reality.”

Bull’s eye narrowed. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“You’ll see.” A smile stole Ares’s lips, and he snapped his fingers, making the metal bands on Bull’s wrists click loose and fall to the ground, where they disappeared. He pointed through the trees. “Go back to the road. I’ll open a portal and get you home.”

The war god vanished. He didn’t linger in his home world for long stints. If he did, Aphrodite would eventually sense him and zero in on his location, and that was not an encounter he wanted to have again. It had happened once already, back when he first got the Anchor and began traveling between Earth and Thedas. He’d gone to one of his temples, and she appeared, dressed in black instead of her usual pink attire, her hair pulled into a high ponytail. During their brief chat, where she begged him to return to their world, Aphrodite suddenly switched appearances. Her hair going to its usual long ringlets, her fluffy pink gown returning. She was in a state of flux, having to uphold the duties of her counterpart as well as her own. Love and War. Ares assured her she would get the hang of it and quickly vanished from Earth.

The Thedosians didn’t know what to make of Ares’s spiel, though each of them found it equally disconcerting. Iron Bull sighed and helped Ayla onto their mount, then settled behind her.

“Let’s get to the road,” he said.
"Let's get to the road," he said.

From the cover of forest foliage, Njora watched the encounter and listened, her eyes widening with horrified realization. Once the Gift and his people left the clearing, she made her move, running back to her horse.

The road was a couple hundred meters through the trees. They guided their mounts back onto it, met by silence. Like before, a portal swirled into existence a short distance away, and they all beheld it watchfully, cautiously. The vortex rushed at them and engulfed, surrounding them in its purplish glow. When it dissipated, they found themselves still on a trail. The time of day seemed to be around noon.

Birds called through the trees on either side of them.

“How do we know we’re home?” Dorian’s exotic eyes went to each of them.

“The trail looks familiar,” came Varric’s deep voice.

“I’m back to seeing shadows again,” said Ayla softly, the words infused with disappointment. “There’s at least one other indicator.”

Iron Bull kissed the top her head, and she placed her hand atop his as he guided the hart, turning it so he could examine the trail.

“Hannibal!” Dorian called.

They waited.

The Altus gathered a big breath and prepared to yell his love’s name again, when the Inquisitor burst through the tree line down the way, followed by Cole and Xena.

“Dorian! Dorian!” Hannibal bolted forward.

Dorian shuddered with relief and tears filled his eyes. He climbed from the saddle and ran to meet Hannibal partway. They embraced, Dorian throwing his arms around the taller, bigger man’s neck.

“What happened? Where did you go?”

The mage sighed up at him, shaking his head. “I assume you have a camp nearby. Let’s go and sit, and we’ll tell you all about it.”

Njora didn’t bother to take the hunting trail back. She raced the horse right up to the front gates of the village, getting looks of disapproval. She obviously wasn’t supposed to be outside. She hurried from the saddle in the square and ran through the village for the path up to Vreshka’s hut.

The guard outside stepped in the way and held out a hand to stop Njora. She scowled at the young woman. “What business have you with the queen?”

Njora bent over, hands on her knees, panting. “I must speak with her! It’s urgent! I have information regarding the security of our people!”

The guard’s frown smoothed out a bit, and she finally nodded, stepping aside.

“Thank you.” Njora hurried past and through the beaded ropes into Vreshka’s hut.

The queen sat on her bed folding baby clothes and smiling peacefully. She and the others wouldn’t give birth for some time, but she was still very excited to have her special daughter.

Vreshka stood and faced Njora.

“What did you need, Njora,” she asked simply, smiling at the girl.

The teen immediately went to one knee for a moment as was customary. “When the party left to return the Gift and his people to where they were found, I…I sneaked from the village and followed.”

Vreshka lifted a brow. “Really? Well, I would say that your tracking and hunting skills have greatly improved since you went undetected by the tribe. For that, I am happy. But you mustn’t leave the safety of our territory again until you’re properly trained, Njora. Many dangers infest the world.”

“Yes, yes. I will never do it again, my queen, I promise. But that isn’t all I wanted to say. I stayed behind after our sisters left the area, and I saw a man in black appear before the Gift. The Gift called him Ares—”

Vreshka went on edge at the mention of the God of War.

“—and I heard him say that he was posing as our Goddess Artemis. If this is true, then it is his bidding we have followed, not hers.”
An amalgam of disbelief, surprise, and anger boiled within Vreshka. The Gift had accused her of working with Ares in his capture, but it made no sense why Ares would help the Patra Amazons become a stronger nation by mating some of them to the minotaur, if he even was a minotaur.

“Well, now that the cat’s out of the bag,” remarked a very unfeminine, smooth voice.

Both Amazons snatched eyes to the handsome man in black leather who had suddenly appeared in the room.

“Ares,” Vreshka hissed, wanting to go for her sword, yet knowing it would do no good. She, like many others in the world, had never seen Ares in person, which wasn’t a surprise. The gods appeared before mortals when they pleased, and Ares never had a reason to deal with the Patra Amazons or visit their region until now. “It was you the whole time, not our goddess. Why have you done this, God of War?”

Ares offered a smug expression. “You may or may not find out the answers one day. For now, let’s get my artifact, gather the other eleven, and get all of you to your new home.”

The smugness blended into a rather devious smile.
The distance between Jader and Skyhold was a four-day ride at most, taking into consideration that it wasn’t the snowy winter months for the Frostbacks. It was the middle of spring, so the journey back to the fortress wasn’t hindered by inclement weather. Hannibal and his party rode through the main gate nearly four days after the episode with the Amazons.

They were met by Cullen, who greeted them with one of his good-guy smiles, the vaguest flash of teeth. “How did things go?”

“Mostly as expected,” Hannibal said. “We have much to talk about.” He looked to Iron Bull and Ayla, the man having helped his wife down from the saddle. It was Hannibal’s opinion that she required a little more than half an hour to get refreshed, being so far into the pregnancy now.

“Let’s meet in an hour in the war room, all of you.”

The Inquisitor’s gaze went to everyone in the traveling party.

“Okay…” Cullen regarded him curiously. “That’s different. An hour it is. Would you like Josephine and Leliana there as well?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see to it then.”

“Thanks, Cullen.” Hannibal put the man on the shoulder, nodded, and moved off with Dorian for their quarters.

The others split from the yard too.

Ayla gripped securely to Bull’s hand as they walked for the east tower. She hadn’t been as talkative since the encounter with the Amazons, and Bull sensed her unease via the link between them, though he didn’t need it to know she was still quite upset.

They rounded the corner and took the path leading to the yard of their residential tower, and the children came running, completely catching the Qunari off-guard. In the other timeline, returning to Skyhold after losing Ayla had been less cheerful, and for the past five months, he’d had no contact with the young ones, had lost interest in greeting them. Now, things were back to normal, the children swarming in around them, one boy leaping on Bull’s leg, grinning up.

Ayla regarded the children with a tender smile. It always warmed her heart to see how much they loved her husband, and how much he cared for them.

Bull chuckled a little. “Okay, okay. I think I might have something in here for you guys. Let’s take a look, hm?”

They stood by smiling as he dug in his bag and pulled out the sack of lemon drops his past self had stashed inside, bought from a shop in Jader. The man lowered to his haunches and held the bag out.

“Don’t be greedy,” he said, his voice deep yet gentle. “Take only one so everybody gets a piece.”

“Thanks, Iron Bull!” they screamed joyfully.

The children swarmed in and took their treats. Once they’d been served, Bull saw that a few candies remained. His eye fell on the little girl to his left, who munched happily on the tangy lemon drop in her mouth.

“Anna.” The little girl who drew him the picture in the other timeline, who still wanted to be his friend despite what an ogre he’d become. Bull smiled at her and held the bag out. “You take the rest.”

“Really! Gee, thanks!” The girl ran in to hug him, then took the candy.

He rose to his mountainous height once more and smiled after her while she and the others skittered off to play.

Ayla’s hand wiggled back into his. “Why did you choose her to give the extra candy to?” she asked softly, smiling up at him.

Iron Bull took a breath. “In the other timeline, I became…very mean after losing you and the baby. One day, after we returned from a battle, Anna came to me and gave me a picture she drew of me and you with your belly. She said she thought it would cheer me up.”

He stared ahead at nothing really, recalling the events of the other life vividly, becoming lost in them.

Ayla examined his strong, handsome profile, the sorrow lingering over him. She rubbed his arm. “Let’s go upstairs, my love.”
Bull blinked a couple of times, then nodded. They entered and took the curl of stairs to the fourth floor, going to their door. Bull unlocked it and eased the door in, leading Ayla inside. He froze, looking somewhat pained, catching his breath at the sight of the crib beside their bed, the stuffed toys and carved dragon sitting neatly in it. He knew that a couple of the drawers in the dresser were stocked with neatly folded baby clothes, cloth diapers, and other items new parents would need for an infant.

“Bull, what’s the matter?”

“I…” he shook his head, blinking back the tears gathered in his eye. “I haven’t seen the place like this in a while, never thought I would again.”

Ayla knew exactly what he meant. He undoubtedly got rid of all her things and the baby’s things after they were killed. She sniffed and wiped away tears, hugging him. “Well, we’re all together again now, and that’s all that matters.”

“Yes,” Bull said quietly. His hand eased down to caress her stomach. “Here, let’s get you comfortable.”

He led her to the bed, pulled off the dust cover, and helped her sit.

“Ah, it feels good to be back.” The Oona relaxed, taking her boots off. They had little less than an hour before the war room meeting, and she planned to spend it as idle as possible. “Could you please fetch me a cup of water?”

“You bet.”

Bull saw to it, pumping cold water from the faucet over the bathing tub into a clean pitcher. He poured her some and handed it over, waiting while she downed it thirstily.

He smiled warmly. “More?”

“No, I’m good. That hit the spot. Thanks, love.” She scooted back on the mattress and settled in, staring up at the blurry, shadowed mesh of the ceiling with heavy-hooded eyes.

“Better not fall asleep. Gotta go to the meeting.”

Ayla produced a big yawn, stretching. “Yes, yes, I know. Actually, I have to pee, and I just took off my shoes.” She rolled her eyes and groaned.

Iron Bull laughed. He went to help her up and get her boots back on.

“I can’t wait to have this baby out of me.”

“You seem to enjoy being pregnant.”

Ayla smiled down at him as he tied her boots. “Mostly, yes. Aside from the tiredness, swollen feet, and being fat, it’s made me very happy. But I just want it to be over now. I can’t wait to see her.” A broad smile captured her features, while she gently and slowly stroked her abdomen.

Bull tipped a nod.

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Within the hour, Commander Rutherford, Leliana, and Josephine made their way to the war room, along with Hannibal, Dorian, Varric, Cole, Xena, Bull, and Ayla. The Oona waddled a little, holding to her husband’s arm. He pulled out a chair for her, into which she lowered with a sigh, glad to be off her slightly swollen feet.

Hannibal’s eyes roamed every face in the room, then settled on his three advisors. “We had some very interesting if not disturbing developments during our travels. For starters, Dorian and Iron Bull are from the future.”

And those words sparked up a heap of questions, which eventually got answered, one thing leading to the next. The death of Ayla in the other timeline; Bull and Dorian going back to save her; Gatt’s betrayal; the alliance with the Qun. All of it was explained. And, of course, it was followed by silence, as the commander, spymaster, and ambassador didn’t know what to say.

Cullen finally ran a hand back over his wavy mane and scratched his scruffy cheek. “When I agreed to take this job, I knew that I’d be facing some very rare scenarios, but this—the traveling back in time—is more than a little farfetched.”

“Believe me, we know,” Dorian said.

“So, you and Iron Bull really are from five months into the future?”

“Yes.” The Altus nodded.

The room went silent again. Cullen nodded, eyeing Bull and Dorian. His gaze shifted to Ayla and softened. “I’m glad you’ve come then, that you saved her and the baby.”

“The consequence of their actions,” Hannibal started, “is that Ares was pulled back in time too.
He knows what moves we would’ve made for the next five months, and thanks to them, we know his, but that makes no difference now. He’s already got other plans in motion apparently.”

“What other plans?” Leliana entered.

Bull took up the conversation. “While we were on our way back from the Jader camp, he pulled Ayla, Varric, Dorian, and me through a portal to Earth, where I was used to fertilize twelve women as part of some plan the war god has.”

“Fertilize?” Josephine hiked a brow. “As in…”

“Yeah. He forced me to sleep with them. I won’t go into the details of how he managed it, but I’ll only say that he’s pretty sure all of them will bear a child.”

The ambassador, Leliana, and Cullen looked upon Ayla. The Oona knew they were silently apologizing for something no one had been able to control, not even her husband, a master of control. She released his hand and dropped herself into the comforting world of shadows and blurs, anything to escape the pity-stares being aimed at her. Yes, she’d had to sit through the demoralizing, perverted act of twelve women screwing her husband against his will, but she was stronger than people thought, and she’d get past it eventually. She certainly didn’t need anyone’s commiseration. If anyone deserved their sympathy, it was Iron Bull.

The Qunari warrior looked down upon his wife a moment, caressed her shoulder, then settled his eye on Cullen. “While we don’t know what Ares’s current plans are, I can tell you that Kirkwall became his central focus in the other timeline. The Qun is already sending troops down from the north, and they’ll centralize their operations in Haven. I suggest you get some of our troops to Kirkwall as soon as possible for reinforcement. We need the city because—”

“It’s the largest and most powerful stronghold to the north allied with the Inquisition, and if we lose it, we could lose our traveling route between us and the Qun, among other advantages,” Cullen finished.

Bull nodded. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Alright then. I’ll get on it immediately.” The commander’s gaze went from Bull to Hannibal.

The Inquisitor stepped forward, planted large hands to the war table, and studied the map spread across its surface. His aqua eyes jotted up to look upon each person as he spoke. “This is a very uncertain, critical time for us all. What Dorian and Iron Bull have told us of the future reveals as much. Any plans we thought we had for the next few months, we can’t use them straight-out. Ares will know. We must regroup and rethink everything. Any discussions pertaining to our strategies will be done in this room with Ayla and Iron Bull present. I know you’re getting close to having the baby, but you can see when Ares is around, and we need you for that.”

“It’s alright. I’ll do whatever is necessary,” the Oona replied and nodded. Wanting to perform her job admirably, she reached for Bull’s hand again, taking hold, bringing clarity back to her vision. She skimmed each corner of the room and saw no Ares.

“Thank you, Ayla,” Hannibal said. “We’ll do what we can to accommodate you. Lastly, say nothing of Bull and Dorian being from the future outside of this room. Not to the rest of the Inner Circle, not to anyone. The only reason I wanted it revealed to you three”—the Inquisitor’s eyes flicked over Cullen, Leliana, and Josephine—“is because you are my closest council, and it’s imperative that you know since it’s a matter of Inquisition security. It’s unnecessary for the others to know, so keep it under wraps, understood?”

Everyone acknowledged with nods, and then Hannibal dismissed them.

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That evening, after having dinner in their quarters, Iron Bull and Ayla went down to the Herald’s Rest. He didn’t intend to stay long, for Ayla’s sake, only wanting to experience the place and its welcoming atmosphere as he had before Ayla’s death, before he sank into his chasm of despair, anguish, and ruthlessness.

They entered arm-in-arm, greeted by Maryden’s sweet voice and whimsical lute-playing. Over to their usual spot they went, the corner offside of the hearth where all of the Chargers sat around laughing and chatting.

“Oyyye! There’s the Mister and Missus!” wailed Krem merrily, grinning at the couple. “Have a good trip?”

Ayla smiled at the man, eyes roaming in greeting to the others too. “As well as can be.”

“Hey, Krem,” said Bull, watching his friend so intensely that Krem smirked thinly, grinning. “You okay, Chief?”

“Yeah…I…uh…” Bull unlinked with Ayla to quickly step forward and squeeze the man in a hug.

“Ah! Blimey! Ye big sod!” Krem wiggled free and punched playfully at Bull’s gut. He laughed richly. “What’s gotten into you, eh?”

“Oh, nothing. Just happy to see you. All of you.” The last time Bull saw them he was a mess, and
they were walking on egg shells around him, worried, scared he’d do something drastic to himself or someone else. Now, they were just as they were before the event that shattered his world, the loss of his greatest, most precious love. The Chargers were happy, though still feeling the hit of Grim’s loss.

One of Krem’s eyebrows crept up, and he laughed blatantly. “Someone pour ‘im a drink!”

Rocky did so, pouring some of the Chargers’ brew from a flask into a mug, which he slid across the table, smiling at his Chief.

Bull took the cup, relinked with Ayla, and lowered to their padded bench. “Thanks. Guess I could use one or two, but we gotta head off after that. My lady-love needs rest.”

“Oh, Bull,” Ayla smiled softly, “You could always come back down if you want.”

“No,” he said almost too quickly, starkly recalling what happened when he’d left her back in the Jader camp that tragic day. It would take a long while before Bull considered leaving her anywhere alone unnecessarily for any extended amount of time. The man formed a smooth smile, hoping it wiped away the panic that momentarily stirred through him. “I could use some sleep too, Naaremma.”

Krem considered the couple, then narrowed his eyes and grinned. “Sleep. Yeah, right. We all know why you really want to retire early for the night.”

The corner buzzed with laughter, Bull’s included. Ayla pulled closer to him and blushed, shaking her head.

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An hour and a half later, Ayla sat on the bed carefully combing through the flowing, kinky ringlets of her hair. Her sleeveless nightgown covered down to her ankles. Freshly bathed, Bull moved around the separator wall, finished drying, and pulled on a pair of black briefs. The encounter with the Amazons occurred several days ago, and his body was back to normal. He couldn’t keep from hardening at the sight of Ayla sitting there covered partly by the wild, snowy cascade of her tresses.

The Qunari settled on the mattress as she set her comb and brush to the bedside table. One hand slipped under hers, while he crept in until their bodies touched, and his other hand tenderly pushed her hair aside, so he could plant a sultry kiss to her smooth shoulder.

Ayla stiffened and turned her face from him. She scooted over.

Her cold aloofness was like a kick in the balls. She was still angry about the Amazons. He didn’t know why exactly, but her anger made him kind of angry. He released a sharp sigh and closed the distance between them, gently linking an arm around her.

“No, you don’t get to run from this, Ayla.”

“I’m not running.”

“Yes, you are. I mean, I get why the whole Amazon thing upset you. I do. But, I will not let this fester between us so you can continue to push me away.” Iron Bull’s words drifted out softly, with very little bite and a ton of feeling. He was angry but not at her, just at the whole damn situation really. “That fucking war god—this is all his fault. I lost you in that other reality, traveled through time to get you back, only to lose you to this. Goddammit.”

Ayla gasped and faced him, tears hanging like glistening little diamonds in her eyes. She shook her head, took his face in her hands, and pressed her lips to his. “You haven’t lost me, Iron Bull, and I’m sorry for acting this way. It’s just…I can still see that bitch on top of you, see and hear her and the others, and it makes me angry.”

He sighed and nodded. At least she was talking to him. “I know, and all I can say is I’m sorry and I tried to resist. You have to believe that, Ayla.”

“I do believe it.”

“So, is this our sex life now, you cringing away from me every time I touch you?”

The couple locked gazes.

Ayla’s slender shoulders slumped with a sigh. Her features softened further, and she leaned to wrap arms around his shoulders, nuzzling his beard. “No. I just need to work through it on my own, and I will soon enough. As for our sex life,” she looked down at her belly and chuckled some, “I’d say it’s probably on hold until after the baby. I’m always so tired, not to mention I’m too big. I don’t see how you even find me attractive in this state.”

“Oh, don’t start that again.” Bull smiled lovingly at his wife. He maneuvered so he could hug around her, his head down by her stomach. He pressed a kiss to the firm bulge. The man sat up and drifted fingers along her cheek. “I still find you just as beautiful as the day we met.”

Ayla found herself lost in the enigmatic pool of his single, sky-blue eye. “I know.”

The couple got comfortable in bed, Ayla tucked to his side, an arm over his chest. Bull turned the
lamp down by their bed and took hold of her small hand. “I know this is hard for you, Ayla. It’s hard for me too. We’ll get through it, though.”

He stayed up for an hour after she fell asleep, listening to her snores, feeling the life emanating from her, finding extreme comfort in her presence. After a while, he too fell into slumber.

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Everything was put into motion rather swiftly. Commander Rutherford wasn’t one to dally and waste time when it came to matters of military and security. It was now three days since Hannibal and the others had returned, and the commander already had the messages in route to move the proper reinforcements to Kirkwall. He also sent word to Par Vollen, requesting that they send a few hundred troops to the central city, explaining that it was necessary to keep their position superior to that of the enemy.

The main hall was now serving lunch. Iron Bull and Ayla occupied a table with Hannibal, Dorian, Varric, and Magnus, talking idly over the meal.

The Inquisitor cut loose another piece of steak and chewed it up. He gestured to Ayla across the table, smiling. “Not much longer before we have another member in our little family, hm?”

The Oona returned his smile, nodding, her barefoot rubbing slow across Bull’s under the table. “Just another month or so.”

Hannibal’s head tilted, and he studied her. “You seem nervous.”

“I am. I may not have had a child before, but I’m no stranger to the process. When I was thirteen, I was present during a birth. The woman, a long-time friend to…’ she couldn’t say anything indicating Lassalanta, Hald’arun, or anything therein, so she sought for the right words, “…my family back east needed someone to hold her hand. I volunteered to do it. I’ve never heard a woman scream so loudly.”

The woman of whom Ayla spoke was a servant in Lassalanta’s home.

“And this is ultimately why I’m glad to be a man,” chimed Dorian.

Iron Bull hugged an arm around her. “Everything will be fine. Skyhold has a skilled set of physicians, to include Stitches. They’ll take care of you. I’ll also be there, of course.”

Ayla sighed and tried to shake the sudden nervousness. She conjured a thin smile.

They went back to chatting and eating.

A few minutes slipped by, then a soldier entered the hall and went to their table. “Inquisitor, I’ve been sent by Commander Rutherford to inform you that visitors approach the gates. It is the ranger Elemir and his party.”

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The Arrows, a codename given to them by Lassalanta for being the best of the best in her army, flew around the last bend of the mountain road, through the outer gate, and across the bridge. They’d traveled hard and swift from the east, cutting the trip nearly in half by riding through the night at times. Their training and endurance allowed them to do that. What also drove them was the need to see if their assumption was true, if the time-shift had altered the past somehow.

And when their horses galloped through the inner gate and into the yard, everything they’d hoped for was immediately confirmed. Hannibal and everyone who sat having lunch with him awaited.

Elemir seized up at the sight of Ayla, alive and well. She stood beside Iron Bull, hand linked to his bare arm, a shawl over her shoulders to hold back the gentle, late-spring mountain breeze. Her teeth flashed a bright smile, happy to see her brother and the others.

The others, Joswen, Vek, Sophitia, and Ozra. They too regarded the Oona with sheer, unadulterated surprise and hindered delight, and Iron Bull had an idea as to why. He waited and watched as Elemir and the rest of the Arrows dismounted, their horses immediately led away by stable-hands.

“Ayla…” Elemir breathed her name. His eyes flicked from her to Iron Bull, meeting the Qunari’s gaze. Bull distinctly saw the questions floating through the man’s stare. “Ayla!”

The ranger ran to her and grabbed her to him, hugging as tight as he dared without crushing her.

Ayla realized fully what was happening. She pulled back, sending her broken gaze up at him. She kept her voice the slip of a whisper, brow furrowed, “You remember my death too.”

Hannibal quickly cut in. “We need to speak privately, Elemir. Will you and your people please report to the war room?”

“Yes, certainly.” The ranger’s eyes went back to his sister and he hugged her again. Reluctantly, he stepped away and waved to Joswen and the others, leading them to the war room.

“Bull, Ayla, Dorian, you three as well,” Hannibal said.

“What of me?” Magnus inquired. “Those are my people.”
“I understand that, Magnus, but this is a closed meeting,” Hannibal replied. Magnus had reset with the rest of the world for sure, but his friends hadn’t. Their reactions to seeing Ayla spoke as much, and this might have something to do with the place in the east. The Inquisitor sternly pat the man’s shoulder. “You will have plenty of time to meet up with them later.”

At that, the Inquisitor, Altus, Oona, and Qunari headed for the war room.

Magnus stared after them, a transparent frown upon his face. He wasn’t blind to the way his friends acted towards Ayla either.

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Ayla was immediately assailed by hugs and kisses when she entered, the Arrows flocking around her. Bull barely had time to close the door after them.

“How is this possible!” cried Sophitia. She spilled a few tears.

“Look at you! So big with child!” Joswen beamed and hugged her firmly.

“Your questions will get answered,” Hannibal said, “but first, tell us what happened on your end. Why were pulled back in time?”

“We were inside the place in the east when it happened,” Elemir said. “The sky suddenly switched over and over between day and night. Something obviously wasn’t right, so our leader sent us to investigate. Outside, we found that the world had shifted five months back in time, to the exact day that…well…”

“That I died,” Ayla finished, the words hollow, haunted.

Elemir nodded faintly. “Yes. As soon as we realized this, we left for Skyhold the same day. We had to know if things changed. How did you do it? How did you bring her back?”

“Simply put, I used a vengeance-based time travel spell in the future,” Dorian spoke. “Iron Bull and I sent our consciousnesses down the line to our past bodies to stop the one who killed Ayla. We managed to end him and save her. The moment the spell was fulfilled is the moment you too experienced the time-shift. Apparently, there is some force in the place in the east that made you immune to the spell.”

“Remarkable,” Ozra uttered. The half-Qunari, half-human set teal eyes firmly on Dorian. “So, Magnus is also the five-months-ago Magnus, then?”

Dorian nodded. “He wasn’t in the east with all of you, so he’s the Magnus of the past, like the rest of the world.”

“You should also know that Ares has been pulled back to this timeline too,” Bull said. “We’ve speculated that he may not even exist in the future anymore.”

“I’m happy to have my sister back, and no words can express the extent of my relief and joy, but this really concerns me.” Elemir slipped into his thoughts a moment, pacing. “Right when the shift happened, and we exited the place in the east to investigate, a soldier I came across said that he’d been speaking to me a few moments prior and that I disappeared suddenly before him. What if we’re like Ares? You think there may not be a version of him in the future, and if that’s the case, there may not be any version of all of us,” Elemir gestured to the Arrows, and his features went more serious. “There may not be a place in the east anymore, in the future.”

“Well, there certainly are no versions of me and Iron Bull in the future,” Dorian said. “Our bodies disintegrated from that timeline when we succeeded in saving Ayla in this one.”

This gave everyone quite a bit to ponder over.

“There’s nothing we can do about any of that,” Bull said, tenderly rubbing his thumb over Ayla’s small hand clasped in his. “What’s done is done. Ayla is alive, and that’s all I care about.”

The Oona drew closer, hugging his arm, eyes closing a moment. Regardless of what happened with the Amazons and no matter how much it hurt to experience, she would always love her husband. It wasn’t his fault, and she knew that. Like she told him a few nights ago, she’d just have to work through it on her own, accept that it happened, and move on.

A wild wisp of auburn hair shifted across Elemir’s brow when he nodded. “You’re right. That is all that matters.” He cleared his throat and locked his moss-hued eyes to Iron Bull’s. “I want to apologize for what I said, what I did. I shouldn’t have…punched you in the face.”

“You punched him!” Ayla’s wide eyes hovered on her brother.

“He blamed me for your death,” Bull said. “I blamed myself too.”

“Yes, I did, and think I still kind of do.” The ruggedly attractive man shook his head, trying to sort things out in his mind. “It’s strange. In any case, I apologize for what happened. I appreciate you giving me this.”

Elemir reached into a pocket of his attire and pulled out a braided coil of white hair.

Ayla instinctively reached to touch her flowing mane. “When did you get that?”
Iron Bull inhaled deeply. “I cut it… from your body, right before we burned it.”

She swallowed. “I see.”

“I have another lock that I cut from your head while you slept, the night before I left for the storm coast to handle the Venatori. I keep it with me in my travels.”

Ayla pursed her pretty lips and gripped a length of snowy hair, stroking it. “At this rate, I’ll be bald soon.”

Elemir chuckled lightly. He caressed her cheek, allowing his hand to brush back through her hair. “I wouldn’t worry about that. You have more than enough. Those in the east will be very pleased to hear that you’re safe.”

She knew he spoke not just of Lassalanta, but of Shaori, Isilwyn, house servants, and Ayla’s friends. The whole of the sanctuary would be happy to hear the queen’s blind daughter was alive. “I know, and I can’t wait to return, though it won’t be until after I’ve had the baby.”

The ranger smiled, nodding. “Of course. I will remain here in Skyhold until then.” He touched gently to her stomach. “I’m looking forward to meeting my new niece or nephew.”

Ayla grinned. “Niece. Definitely a niece.”

“How can you be sure? Is that what you think as well?” he asked Bull.

Bull shrugged, smiling casually. “It’s whatever she says.” Ayla would find out she’d been banking on the wrong gender once she pushed their son into the world.

It pleased Hannibal to see the reunion between Ayla and her family. He waited for an opening before speaking. “Joswen, Elemir, the Inquisition has formed an alliance with the Qun, so they’ll be joining our fighting force from here on. Only those involved know about the time shift, and I think we should keep it that way. That’s everyone in this room, Leliana, Cullen, Josephine, Varric, Xena, and Cole.”

“I agree,” Joswen said. “No need to stir confusion. We will simply relive the last five months and move forward.”

“So, it’s settled.” Hannibal sighed. “I’ll ask Josephine to get you all set up with quarters for your extended stay.”

(*)

Josephine.

She’d been in her office—the antechamber between the war room and main hall—when Elemir and his group hurried by. The two of them kept it professional, of course, sharing warm smiles in that moment.

The ambassador sat at her desk twiddling her thumbs when she heard the solid clank of the large door shutting down the corridor. She instantly straightened up, cleared her throat, and tried to look busy, quickly picking up a quill and reading some random scroll about a supply shipment bound for Val Royeaux.

The Inquisitor and Dorian appeared first, followed by everyone else. “Josephine, could I bother you to set up rooms for our guests. They’ll be staying here for a couple of months at least,” Hannibal asked, always respectful to the noblewoman. She was the heartbeat of Skyhold, making sure resources, money, and much more got where they needed to go.

“Absolutely, Inquisitor. I believe the rooms they all had before are still open. If you’ll all wait in the main hall while I check…”

“Thanks, Josephine.” Hannibal exited with Dorian.

The others followed.

Everyone but Elemir. He lingered behind, waiting until the door shut before approaching her desk. He ran fingers slowly over the surface. “Great memories made here, yes?”

The lady chuckled pleasantly and stood, moving around to throw arms about his neck, melding her body to his as they kissed passionately. “The best memories. You’re back sooner than expected.”

“We know about the time-shift, the place in the east shielded us from it, and we had to see if things had changed, if Ayla survived.”

“It’s remarkable, Iron Bull and Dorian coming from the future to save her. I’m so happy they did.”

“Thank the gods.” Elemir said softly. He lifted a smile. “Ayla will have the baby soon, and she wants to return home in the east afterwards. I figured it would be best if we simply stuck around so we could travel together. It is a genuine bonus that I’ll get to wake up next to you every morning until then.”
They engaged in another kiss, hands roaming and grabbing, and things soon became very heated.

Josephine pulled away and hopped on the desk, smiling seductively at him, legs apart. “Go and lock the door.”

(*)

Two weeks passed, and the Arrows settled in at the fortress. Hannibal, Dorian, Krem, and Cullen returned three days prior from a trip into the valley, to Haven. Krem volunteered to oversee some of the infrastructure remodeling there to make the place a better base of operations for their Qunari allies, and he’d be leaving for the town again tomorrow morning to see to it.

Now, it was late afternoon on a pleasantly warm day. Per Hannibal’s suggestion, Josephine had arranged a festival day for Skyhold’s residents. Any soldiers who weren’t on-duty were encouraged to enjoy themselves and take part. This included Cullen. With a little coaxing, Cassandra managed to pull him away.

The Seeker smiled demurely at him as she wound her arm back and tossed the ball at the target, very slimly missing it. The volunteer positioned over the tub of water huffed in relief. Cassandra picked up another ball.

Cullen stood aside and watched. He wore an amused, handsome smile. “Only one ball left. Think you’ll be able to sink him? Maybe you should let me try.”

“Hmph.” She snorted and laughed. “You can play with your own balls.”

The Seeker sent the orb flying, and it struck the target, dropping the volunteer into the water. She burst into laughter. “There, see! No problem.”

Cullen took her hand and kissed it, staring into her eyes. “This is fun. I’m glad you talked me into coming.”

“Well, one of us has to make sure we have some fun.”

She pecked a kiss to his chiseled lips, then pulled him off for another of the minigames set up through the large yard.

(*)

Ayla sat on a covered hay bale beside Bull, her hands linked to his arm. They were preparing to watch a pie-eating contest featuring all the Chargers. Skinner was the last to take her seat at the long table, eyes narrowed at her fellow competitors.

A sizable crowd had gathered to watch.

Iron Bull looked to Ayla, kissing her brow. “How are you feeling.”

“Fat. But happy.” The Oona produced a captivating smile that accentuated the dimples in her cheeks.

He chuckled deeply. “That’s good. Let me know if you get tired. We can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay, love, I will.” She nuzzled his arm.

At the table, Dalish looked to the rest of the Chargers, smirking. “I’ve never been one for sweets. Maybe I will withdraw from this.”

“Nay, ye won’t!” Rocky called down the table. “Ye’ll eat that pie and enjoy it. Skinny as you are, you could use it.” Both he and Stitches blared into laughter.

Dalish frowned at them, then eyed the pie before her, amping herself up. She wanted to win to throw it in their faces.

“You can all prepare to taste the bitter tears of loss. I’m winning this,” Krem said, grinning. “Pie is my favorite food group.”

“Allright, contestants!” came the voice of Lucien Po. The artist had volunteered to oversee the pie-eating challenges. “Get ready! Set! Eat!”

And they started, using no utensils but digging their faces right into their pies, sloshing apple and blackberry filling and golden-brown crust everywhere. The crowd swelled into cheers and hollers, rooting the Chargers on.

(*)

Villa Maurel.

Ares stood in the rear yard staring into the swimming pool. Being back in the past and once more stationed at the huge estate felt strange, out of place, and it should, considering he’d been in this point of time before. As strange as everything seemed, it all also felt right, like the many pieces of a puzzle had fallen into place, or all the tumblers in a lock had finally aligned.

He heard footfalls and sensed a presence behind him.
When he turned, there was Fen’Harel.

“You sent for me?” the elf inquired.

Ares nodded. He’d sent a guard for him and Elgar’nan, who appeared in the yard a few moments later, tall and regal, his hair a straight platinum curtain down his back. Both he and Fen’Harel regarded Ares silently.

“It’s time,” the God of War said.

Both former Evanuris exchanged long, contemplative looks. Neither fully trusted the other. Their age-old rivalry would probably keep it so for as long as they existed. However, they had reached a soft truce, in which they would work together to obtain that which they both desired. The elves turned their eyes to Ares.

“How do we truly know that you will fulfill your end of our agreement,” Elgar’nan voiced, his gaze narrowing a hint.

“Elgar’nan,” Ares said, watching him rather serenely, “when have I ever blatantly lied to you? Tried to deceive you? If anything, it’s you two who have been plotting against me since we crossed paths. Hell, Fen’Harel even attempted to switch bodies with me to gain my power, and we saw how that went.”

The smirk that formed on Fen’Harel’s features was barely visible, as he did well to remain almost stoic. Both elves considered the god’s words, and neither could really think of a time where he didn’t come through.

“Here.” Ares held up his hand and used his seemingly omnipotent power to summon Elgar’nan’s orb. He waited for the elf to take it. “Its energy remains locked for now, but as soon as you do your part, I promise you will be restored.” Fiery brown eyes shifted to Fen’Harel. “I may not be able to give you back your god-status, but once this is done, you will witness a world where the Elvhen race never fell, a world where they thrived and went on to become the most powerful, prominent people in the history of Thedas, as they were meant to be before your…mistake. Don’t you want your people to be restored to greatness? This was always what you wanted.”

Fen’Harel nodded slowly. “Yes. I just want to fix it.”

“And you will.” His eyes swung between them. “Are you ready to gain back what you lost?”

Both elves nodded.

“Okay then. Let us go. You know what you must do.”

Leather creaked lowly when the God of War closed the distance, placed himself between them, and touched hands to their shoulders, transporting them from Villa Maurel for the last time.

(*)

Rocky frowned deeply, using a damp towel to clean blackberry pie from his beard and moustache. “Damn. Thought I’d have that. How’d she manage to win, eh!”

“Better question is where did she put it all!” Krem wailed, smiling. “Eleven pies!”

The Chargers, Bull, Ayla, the Arrows, the rest of the Inner Circle, Xena and her people, and a large crowd of Skyhold occupants clapped and cheered for Skinner, who posed on the stage thrusting her trophy in the air.

“Eat that!” the elf grinned at the other Chargers.

They laughed heartily with her.

“Well, that was interesting, hm?” Bull said to Ayla, helping her stand.

“I enjoyed it very much. I’m with Krem, however. Skinner is so thin. How in the heavens did she manage to eat all of that pie?” The Oona shook her head, giggling.

Bull relished the trill of her sweet laughter. “Must be that elvhen metabolism.”

“Must be.”

The couple embraced warmly and kissed.

“Are you good to walk around a little more? I believe the children are about to put on a parade they’ve been practicing,” he asked.

“Yes, I’d like to see it, then maybe I will head upstairs for a nap.”

“Sounds good. I’ll cuddle up with you.”

“Bull, you can come back down, if you want.” Ayla rubbed his hard-muscled arm. “You don’t have to spend every moment with me.”

“I want to.”
“You’re still worried after what happened with Gatt?”

“Yes. I’m not ready to leave you unattended, Naaremma. I put my trust and judgment in such a decision once, and it cost you your life.” He sighed, shaking his head, gazing down with so much love in his eye. “It tore me apart, and I need to work through it.”

“But—”

“Hey, you have the Amazons, I have this,” Bull said deeply. Both husband and wife had their own issues to face and conquer.

Ayla smirked up at him. “Since you put it like that…”

He released a soft chuckle, squeezed her hand gently, and started them to the area where the crowd had gathered, waiting for the children to start. The little ones shuffled about, wearing their simple yet decorative papier-mâché masks, laughing, and talking. Josephine decided to oversee the children’s parade and had mapped out a route that started in the upper courtyard near the entrance to the Herald’s Rest, going down to end outside the stables.

The ambassador clapped her hands quickly a few times. “Come now, children! Let’s line up like we practiced, alright?” Her coercion didn’t work all that well, and a little boy decided to run off and jump in one of the shallow wading pools set up for the kids. This evoked laughter from the bystanders. Josephine chuffed and ran after him. “Elan! Elan, get out of that water! You’re ruining your mask!”

Ayla giggled brightly at the scene. “That will be us soon enough, chasing after our own little one.”

“Yep, it sure will.” Bull chuckled with her. “You think we might have more than one?”

“Oh…well…” Her eyes veered off in thought. She turned a broader smile up at him, hugging close, “I would hope so. We wouldn’t want our daughter to be all alone.”

“Hm, no. Wouldn’t want that.”

Bull lowered for a kiss, their lips connecting.

A second later, panic shuddered through the crowd. The Qunari and his wife settled their attention on what caused the disturbance. It was more like who.


The God of War had appeared in the open area not more than twenty feet from the couple. Fen’Harel and Elgar’nan flanked to either side. Both elves instantly braced and used their power to create a force-field dome enclosing themselves, Ares, Ayla, Bull, and a few other patrons. The extras scattered away, able to pass right through the field. When Bull tried to back him and Ayla from Ares, they couldn’t pass through.

“Dorian! See what you can do about this energy field!” Hannibal barked. By now, anyone who wasn’t a warrior or part of the Inner Circle had shrunk back to the very edges of the courtyard, watching fearfully. “Vivienne!”

“I’m on it, Inquisitor!” the High Enchanter said and joined Dorian, hands up, sending her mage energy to counter the elves’ barrier.

Hannibal would’ve called for Morrigan too, but she wasn’t present, probably working on something in her atrium. The Inquisitor observed the scene, in a battle stance though he didn’t have his sword. Xena, Gabrielle, Joxer, and Autolycus were also on standby.

Cullen was already rallying soldiers, wanting to be prepared as much as they could be against a god.

Inside the dome, Iron Bull glared at Ares. “What do you want! Haven’t you already done enough?”

Ayla clung to him, enlarged eyes fixed on the war god.

“There’s always more that could be done,” Ares replied calmly. “As for what I want—Ayla’s power. I must utilize it one last time.”

“What—no! Fuck you! Are you crazy!” Iron Bull wanted to charge him, tackle him to the ground, and choke the life from him. His arms remained like metal bands around his wife. “The last time you used her like that, you weakened her. For fuck’s sake, she’s pregnant! Just stay away from us!”

“I don’t know how much longer we can hold this barrier,” Elgar’nan remarked behind Ares.

Ares held his arm out towards her, summoning his power in a greater concentration than ever before. He began to glow, the ancient force that composed him covering his body with pale-
golden light. And then Ayla felt her power activate. As Ares promised, it wasn’t invasive or brash. She felt slightly warm, but that was all. She gasped when the white umbilical of energy stretched from her to the god, absorbed by him.

The God of War’s eyes shut, and the glow around him suddenly shifted from golden to green. The color of the light within the Fade.

“Ayla!” Bull’s eye searched her face, sheer panic covering his own features.

“I… I don’t feel anything,” she said softly.

Elemir banged uselessly on the barrier, yelling his sister’s name, eyes wild. The rest of the Arrows surrounded him, watching in horror.

“We have to get that barrier down!” Hannibal boomed in Dorian’s direction.

The Altus shook his head, trembling with the effort of using his power on the force-field. “They’re too powerful!”

Standing nearby, Idrial grabbed Cole’s hand. “Maker, what’s happening?”

Green mist began seeping from Ares, produced by the eerie glow encapsulating his body, pouring out and down to cover the ground, spreading. Everyone in the yard panicked further at the sight of the green cloud, which started to surround them all.

Iron Bull and Ayla hugged as close as they could together.

“I’m so scared!” she cried.

“It’s alright. Everything will be okay.” The Qunari kissed her forehead, the strength of his embrace unyielding. This was different than other encounters with Ares. There was a finiteness to it, the sense that things were ending. Maybe they were. Maybe this was their last day in Thedas, and Ares was killing them all, damn him. But at least Bull would be with his family. “We’re together forever now, no matter what.”

Breathing hard, charged by fear and excitement, Ayla turned wet eyes up at him…and blinked, brow furrowing. “Finn…?”

Bull stared down at her, just as perplexed, his eye widening. “A-Ariel?”

“My warrior…I love you.”

“I will always love you.”

(*)

The ominous green mist surged outward, seen by Thedosians from afar for miles and miles as it tumbled down from the Frostback Mountains, into the valleys, spreading until it covered every corner of the world.

Chapter End Notes

And that concludes Part One of what I hope will be a very interesting series. I know I’ve said it before in previous notes, but I’ll say it again. I appreciate the readers who have decided to follow my Fic and have enjoyed the feedback I’ve received. Please stay tuned for the continuation to see what the resident God of War has cooked up for the Inner Circle gang.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!