Ferelden’s mages are flocking to Skyhold as the Chantry debates the future of the Circles, but they are more vulnerable than they realise. Someone has stolen their phylacteries. And the key suspect has feathered pauldrons, a penchant for cats, and an incredibly powerful spirit on board.

It’s up to Cullen to find Anders and return the phylacteries before anyone important knows they’re gone. After the harrowing year he’s had, he may not be up to the task. Heartbroken and exhausted, he’s fallen into old habits his wife can know nothing of.

Meanwhile Solana grapples with her past deeds, Hawke struggles to get over the man he gave up everything for, Cassandra is forced to choose between love and duty, and Celeste has to confront the past in order to embrace her future.

Is 'happily ever after' possible for people who have seen as much as they have?
Notes

Aaaand we're back! Thanks so much for your patience, that took longer than I expected but hopefully it will be worth it :). While the other parts are just over 30 chapters, this final one has 42 (and an epilogue). Everything's all beta'd and ready, so I'll be posting Mondays and Thursdays. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes
There were so many people packed inside The Herald's Rest that Hawke couldn't even hear the bard. Not that he minded. She'd been trying out some new material about the Inquisitor and it wasn't quite there yet.

Wasn't quite in tune yet.

He pushed another silver piece across the table. "Keep 'em comin."

The barkeep probably didn't hear him, but he knew the drill by now. He sloshed more ale into Hawke's mug without so much as looking at him.

Hawke took a long drink. Perhaps this one would bring oblivion. Or at the very least the kind of blackout where he woke in a stranger's bed with no clothes on and a shoe missing.

He was on his fourth or fifth gulp, chin pointed at the ceiling, foam running down his face, when someone jostled him and the rest of the drink ended up down his front.

"Oh for the love of--"

He slammed the mug down. He'd need to find somewhere else to drink. Now Corypheus was dead, it was like people had nothing to do at Skyhold besides fill up the tavern. Perhaps the Inquisitor would allow him to open a competing establishment. Perhaps then he could lure Varric back…

"Evening."

The man who'd slid in next to him was awfully polite for one of the Herald's Rest's patrons. Hawke was opening his mouth to give an automatic reply when it registered who it was.
"Cullen?"

The Commander scratched the back of his neck self-consciously and gave a small nervous laugh. He wasn't wearing his armour. It was the first time Hawke could remember seeing him without it. Even when they'd travelled together, he'd never emerged from a tent or inn room without it. He looked much… smaller.

Hawke blinked slowly to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. Cullen was supposed to be in South Reach.

The blond man leaned across the bar and tried to flag down the barkeep. "Uh, excuse me, sorry?"

No, definitely Cullen.

Hawke stood and waved his mug. "Oy! Another one of these." When the barkeep took his mug, he yelled, "And one for my friend here."

*Heh. Friend.* Now if that wasn't a more unexpected development than the Commander's arrival.

Cullen didn't seem to notice the slip. He sank back onto his stool and thanked Hawke, eyes darting around the room. He said something that Hawke didn't catch above the din.

"What?" Hawke yelled.

"I said, if this isn't the Herald's Rest. I mean, I know it is. I have been here before. With the advi-" he fell silent as his drink was placed in front of him. He reached into his pocket and started feeling for coin.

Hawke sighed and flicked another few copper across the counter.

"I've got it."

"Oh, I, thank you."

They drank in blissful silence for a time. But then, of course, Cullen had to say, "I, uh, I heard about Anders. I'm sorry."

Hawke snorted. *Great,* exactly what he wanted to discuss.

"I really am. Sorry, I mean. Look, is there somewhere else we can talk perhaps?"

Somewhere else? He'd assumed the man was here to drink like everyone else. It hadn't occurred to him that he'd sought Hawke out intentionally.

"What about?"

"Sorry?"

"What do you want to talk about? Because if it's about Anders, you can shove it."

Maker, the name still cut into him to the quick, as if he'd left yesterday and not almost a month ago. Hawke took another glug of alcohol. Cullen fell silent.

When Hawke came up for air, Cullen had his hands wrapped around his drink and he was staring off into the distance as if his heart had just been shattered.
Well, it had, hadn't it?

Hawke rose and tilted his head towards the stairs. "Come on."

Cullen looked at him, mouth forming an "o" of surprise, eyebrows drawing together in puzzlement. Hawke jerked his chin again and the Commander seemed to catch his meaning, rising to follow.

Up on the top level of the tavern, the noise of the crowd sounded more like the gentle roar of the ocean. Cole didn't seem to be about, but even if he was and Hawke had forgotten him, they still had more privacy than at the bar. Hawke settled on the top step and patted the spot beside him.

Cullen looked doubtful. But, after merely a moment's hesitation, he sat too.

"So, Commander, here's the rules. Every time you say his name, I say hers. Alright? So it's up to you. We can talk, or we can sit here in silence."

Cullen chuckled and tipped his mug in Hawke's direction. "Agreed."

He took a long drink. Hawke waited.

Eventually, Cullen lowered his mug and stared into it. "I think it's my fault."

"Which are we talking about? Anders or Solana?"

"Probably both," Cullen said, without expression. "But I mean Anders." His eyes darted to Hawke as if wary that he'd follow through with his threat.

"Oh, because you revealed his deep, dark, secret?" The words came out sounding more sarcastic than he'd meant. He could hardly close his eyes without seeing that room, with the vials of blood along the walls, without hearing Samson's agonised screams. It twisted his stomach. Yes, he'd been angry but… "I didn't throw him out if that's what you think. He chose to leave of his own accord."

"Yes, I… Solana mentioned."

"Ah, so you've seen her then?"

"Of course I have. She's my wife, is she not?"

"You tell me."

Cullen's gaze dropped to his drink and Hawke regretted his words. Touchy subject, clearly.

"Look, Cullen, you have enough to concern yourself with without taking the blame for my relationship falling apart. It's been on its last legs for… well, years, if I'm to be honest. Besides, if you had not taken me to that room I may well never have discovered his true reason for joining me here. He… he promised me that I was the… urgh, it doesn't matter."

"No. I… I don't mean the experiments. To be honest, I didn't even know you were unaware. There was something else…" He trailed off.

"Something else?" Hawke prompted.

"When we were trying to get to… I asked him… I insisted… that he…" Cullen drew a deep breath. "We needed to get through the eluvian. If we hadn't, I hate to think what would have happened. We didn't know the key. Cole said that Justice could open it. But he'd need complete
Hawke lowered his mug. His heart was starting to race. "I see."

"We had to get to Alise. I… I was not in my right mind. I begged him to give over that control. He did so against his better judgement."

Anger flared from deep in Hawke's belly. He clenched his jaw.

"It was the only option. But I accept responsibility."

Hawke stood abruptly. He needed to go, be anywhere but there. Get away before he did something he'd regret. Already, he could feel his control slipping. Alcohol and these kinds of admissions? Not a good combination.

But Cullen was at once on his feet too. "Wait, please, there's more."

"No." The word was hard and cold and sharp. "No, I don't want to hear more."

"Hawke…"

"Do you have any idea how hard he fought, how long he struggled, to prevent that very thing from happening? He's been losing control for years. Years, Cullen. I thought I lost him in Kinloch. When Justice took over, I thought he was through. But even then he was still fighting, still holding on, making sure that a part of him remained at all times. And you," he jabbed a finger at Cullen. "You ruined it." His voice cracked. "How could you do this? You saw what he did to that chantry! You know what he's capable of! And then you ran away and now, over a month later, come back with your tail between your legs and tell me? Who knows what he's done since?"

Cullen held out his hands. "Please, remain calm."

"Remain calm? He could be on the other side of Thedas by now! What more do I possibly need to hear? What more do you thi-"

"Phylacteries," Cullen said.

"What?" Hawke's voice was broken even to his own ears.

Cullen's hands curled into tight fists. "Ferelden's phylacteries were stored here, for a time. Very few knew about them. I believe he might have. And I believe he might have taken them."

The mug slipped from Hawke's fingers, clanging onto the ground and bouncing halfway down the stairs.

"Do you have any idea where he might have gone?" Cullen's voice seemed to come from a very far way away.

The phylacteries. Once they had spoken about them, cuddled up below the decks of one of the many ships they had sought passage on in their years of running together. They had fantasised about destroying them, setting all the mages free.

But that was another Anders, one who would never go near blood magic.

What would this Anders do? What would Justice do?

"Hawke?" Cullen pushed for an answer.
He shook his head. "None at all."

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the note, passing it to Cullen. It was ragged around the edges and crumpled from being folded and unfolded so many times. On it, in Anders's elegant hand, two words: I'm sorry.

Cullen pushed his food around his plate. Solana had set a table up in their room so that they could dine together rather than down in the great hall. She'd risen early and picked up some fresh rolls and eggs from the kitchens. She'd even brewed some tea. It was weak and bitter, but Cullen drank it dutifully. She was trying. Trying to make everything better. Trying to make up for what she'd done with token domesticity.

"Love?"

He looked up, suddenly aware that she'd been speaking and whatever she'd said required an answer.

"Sorry, what was that?"

He watched her features for signs of annoyance, but there were none. She'd arranged them into unflappable brightness. "I was just saying that perhaps we should ask for leave to extend our quarters. If we built on further across the ramparts, Alise could have her own room."

Alise was asleep in her bassinet on Solana's side of the bed. She'd woken several times during the past two nights, no longer with tiny grunts of discomfort, but with howling agony as if in pain. Eventually, Cullen had queried whether this was normal. It was, Solana had assured him. This was how babies were supposed to be.

"That sounds like a good idea," he said.

His mind was still on Anders. He was considering whether to tell the Inquisitor. He'd written to Varric and sent the letter personally so as to not alert Leliana. Perhaps Varric knew where Anders was, or could find out, before there was need to cause widespread panic.

"I was hoping you'd speak to the Inquisitor," Solana said.

Cullen jerked. She didn't seem to notice, she was pouring herself a cup of tea. "The Inquisitor?"

Her eyes rose to meet his. "About the room?"

"Oh, yes."

Was it possible that Solana was in on it? No, surely not. Although, how else could Anders have learned the location of the phylacteries? She had wanted to break them.

Solana's power has saved her life more times than I can count, but it's corrupted her as much as the taint did. Leliana's words echoed in his mind.

"Will you?" Solana asked.

He reached for a bread roll. "You should ask him yourself." Weren't they friends?

"I could I suppose, but I thought it would have more weight coming from you. You hold actual rank in the Inquisition, after all, and as one of his advisers..."
"You're the Hero of Ferelden, I'm certain they'd give you the entire guest suite if you asked."

She started at his use of her title, but he hadn't meant it sarcastically. Her eyes dropped down to her plate and with that, her facade dropped too. "Please don't call me that."

"I thought you'd grown accustomed to it?" She'd taken to using it herself.

"I… we both know it's not true." She rubbed her arms as if cold. "I'm no hero."

"Say what you will about what you've done, but I think we can agree that if you are one thing it's a hero."

The words left his mouth without much thought but her gaze immediately locked with his. She was taking too much meaning from it.

"You cured our daughter of Tranquility and the Blight," he reminded her.

The intensity of her look was too much. He stood, picking up his surcoat. "I have duties to attend to. I should be home shortly after dark."

"All right, I'll have a meal ready. On the table."

"That's not necessary, Solana."

"I know it's not. I just… I'd like to."

He drew a deep breath and went around the table, leaning down to give her a kiss on the cheek. She tensed at his touch and when he drew away, her eyes were still closed as if she was trying to preserve the moment.

His stomach clenched. Maker, this was more difficult than he'd ever imagined it to be.

In his office, clarity awaited. He'd feel better soon.

The gaol was still cold in the mornings, even with the onset of spring. Celeste's breath puffed in front of her face as she entered the back cells.

"Good morning, Ser Samson."

He was sitting scrunched up, with his knees tight against his chest. She lowered herself to the floor before his cell.

"Mage," he said, from beneath his arms.

A chill rushed through her and instantly she felt like she was kneeling before a different Templar. She swallowed down her revulsion. "Please don't call me that."

He lifted his head just enough to peer at her. His eyes were less red than they'd been even a week before, but in the shadows beneath his brow it was impossible to tell their colour. Again, Celeste questioned her wisdom in coming here.

"How does Maleficar work for you?" The way he said the word, she could hear every minute he'd spent as a Templar.

She turned her attention to her basket. The rolls were still warm to the touch as she unfolded them from a handkerchief. "Celeste is my name."
"I've been trying to place you, Celeste. You weren't one of the Kirkwall ones, were you? I would have remembered you. Although, what with the lyrium, who knows." He chuckled darkly.

"I wasn't."

"A blood mage in the Inquisition ranks." He whistled through his teeth. "Does Cullen know?"

"He does."

"Ha! Now that, that I find surprising. What did you do to buy his silence, sleep with him?"

Celeste reached through the bars and held the roll out to him.

Samson ignored it. "No, Rutherford's not the type. You have dirt on him, don't you?"

"No."

Samson fell silent, continuing to stare at her. A line formed between his eyebrows as she tried not to squirm under the intensity of his gaze.

"Why are you doing this?" His voice was suddenly soft and serious.

"I told you."

"You're feeding me bread because your friend fed you bread a year ago? Forgive my failure to follow that fine logic."

Celeste’s arm was growing tired, so she pushed the handkerchief through and laid the bread roll on top of it on the floor between them. "I was there when the Inquisitor sentenced you. He said you're to serve the Inquisition."

"Yeah. Providing samples of blood and tissue for your arcanist and information for your interrogators. No one happened to mention bread rolls."

"You said there was nothing worthy left in you."

"Did I?"

This was pointless. However she formed the words in her head they sounded stupid or impossibly naive. She had half a mind to get up and leave, forget this entire endeavour.

He must have sensed her mood, because he reached forward and took the roll. He stared at it as if he had never seen its like. "There isn't, you know? A second chance is not enough to undo what I did. Second, third, fiftieth. I could become a fucking chanter and still never make up a fraction of…"

"Andraste's holy tears, will you stop wallowing?"

His eyes snapped up to hers. Brown.

She fumbled for the next words. "Moaning about it won't change anything. You made a decision to do what you did, yes. But you also decided to take the lyrium I gave you, even though you knew it would extend your suffering, even though you knew what Fiona would do to you, and you feared the Inquisitor's vengeance. You chose to live. You chose to try-"

He snorted. "That was the cravings. They'll make you do anything."
"No it wasn't."

"I say it was."

"I don't believe you."

Samson's mouth twisted upwards in an almost-smile, showing his uneven teeth. "Well believe me, Mage."

Maker. She closed her eyes. "Don't." But she'd given him a weapon against her now. Stupid. She spoke before he could use it again. "I've seen you, Samson, in the late hours of the night, in the earliest hours of the morn. I've seen you twisting and thrashing against your guilt. I know your burden. Maybe not... not all of it. But I have been where you are now, wrapped up in regret, poisoned from the inside by past deeds, paralysed by my own self-hate. I know you, Raleigh Samson. I... I know you see me as some foolish girl who... dabbled in darkness or, or was misled a long time ago. And perhaps I am foolish. Perhaps I shouldn't be here trying to reach you. Perhaps there is no saving you from your past and from your own self-pity. But I... I've seen goodness in you. And I don't have it in me to leave you to rot. Solana didn't leave me. I won't leave you. I... just eat the bread."

When she opened her eyes again, he was still staring at her, but there was something different about the look. His eyes were wide and he said nothing. Quietly, he bit into the roll.

Cullen paused outside Trevelyan's door, running through exactly how he'd break the news about the phylacteries. The lyrium had been just the boost he'd needed to bring his mind to clarity. He had taken the men through their morning drills, inspected the barracks and caught up on many of the reports on what had transpired in the time he'd been away.

Skyhold was an almost entirely different place now. More mages, fewer soldiers, and the Grey Wardens had almost completely trickled away to do whatever they did when not at war. Many of the Inquisitor's companions had also left and, walking through the quiet halls, Cullen found he recognised few faces.

He drew a deep breath. The lyrium had also helped him make up his mind about this. He had to tell Trevelyan. It was the right thing to do, even if it did make him look incompetent. Even if it did cast doubt on Solana.

What was the alternative? Wait weeks to hear back from Varric and hope the dwarf's letter said, "Hi Curly, don't worry, I know exactly where Anders is. I have the phylacteries. I'm sending them back to you. Please find them attached?"

That wouldn't happen, and the longer Cullen kept his own failure silent, the further away Anders would get.

He squared his shoulders, took another long, deep breath, and held his fist above the door ready to knock.

"Don't be like this!" Trevelyan's voice from within, followed by the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Max, I have a duty." Cassandra said.

Cullen paused. He had no desire to eavesdrop.
"To the Void with your duty! You have given them enough." A second set of footsteps echoed down towards the door.

"You only say that because you want me to remain here." It sounded like she was standing right beside the door. Would she hear Cullen if he left?

"That's not true. What about the Seekers?" Now the Inquisitor was also by the door. Cullen didn't know what to do.

"What about them?" Cassandra shot back at Trevelyan.

"You were going to rebuild them."

"And now I will be in a unique position to do so."

"Don't." Trevelyan's voice was soft, but he was standing close enough that Cullen could still hear every word. "Please."

There was a long pause and Cullen dared not even breathe. Should he stay? Should he leave?

He was still trying to decide, when Cassandra spoke again. "You know how I feel about you, but please don't make me choose."

"I would never ask that of you," his voice was still low. "Besides, I know that I would lose. I've known it from the start, Cassandra. You came into my arms with the caveat that what we had was temporary, an escape from your grief. I'm not Regalyan. I could never replace him."

"Why would you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true and I accept it. I'm not asking you to decline to keep you here. I'm asking you because I care about you. Dammit, I love you. And being Divine will not make you happy. You need to be somewhere where you can brandish a sword. Even if it's not at my side. If you wish to leave the Inquisition, then by all means leave. Go and rebuild your Seekers. But don't leave because Orlais wishes for you to be their latest pawn. Please."

"Max…"

Cullen's neck heated. *Cassandra, the next Divine?* She hadn't said anything to him when she'd debriefed him the day before. There had been a stiffness about her, but he'd put it down to a reaction to his presence. When he'd run from the Wilds, she'd accused him of abandoning his men. It was expected that she have even stronger feelings about the way he'd fled Skyhold. But perhaps he hadn't been the reason after all.

Cassandra spoke again, "I need to do this. It's me or that ambitious viper."

Cullen had been under the impression that Leliana was also up for Divine, but he couldn't imagine Cassandra speaking of her in such a way. She must have meant the mage, Madame de Fer, the Lady of Iron. His reports said that she'd been campaigning hard for the return of the Circles. From what he understood, she was the main reason Fiona had returned to Val Royeaux. If de Fer came to power, it would mean… he shut his eyes before he spiraled too far into *what ifs.* Solana may not have been a Grey Warden anymore, but she was still the Hero of Ferelden. They wouldn't throw her back into a Circle, would they?

"It's not fair," Trevelyan said on the other side of the door, sounding for the first time in Cullen's memory like the petulant lord he'd expected when they'd first met.
"Since when has life been fair, to either of us?"

"It led me to you."

Cassandra tsked. There was a pause before she said, "Max, this is what the Maker wills."

"But you don't want it."

"I keep telling you, what I want is not important."

"It is to me. Tell me you want this, and I will-"

"I want this."

"Really?" He sighed. "Very well."

Cullen heard Max's boots on the stairs again and only had an instant to prepare himself before the door opened. Cassandra jumped when she saw him there, still frozen as if about to knock.

He cleared his throat. "Good morning, I eh… I just got here."

"Is that Cullen?" Trevelyan's voice came from inside.

"Yes," Cassandra said. Her eyes narrowed and Cullen's stomach jerked. He didn't want her to guess how much he'd heard.

"I… if this is a bad time?"

"No, it's not a bad time," Cassandra said. "I was leaving."

At the top of the stairs, Cullen found Trevelyan pouring himself a drink. His hair was ruffled as if he'd recently risen, although the bed was made and he was dressed for the day ahead.

"Cullen, welcome back. I'm sorry I haven't come to see you yet. Paperwork, you know how it is." He glanced up and forced a smile. "How is the family?"

"They are… well."

Silence fell as Trevelyan downed the contents of his glass.

"I… uh. I wished to thank you for granting me leave at such short notice."

Trevelyan waved away the statement. "Please. I'm only glad you returned. Things weren't the same without you here."

"Cassandra is a capable…" Cullen trailed off, realising his error in mentioning her.

Trevelyan offered another smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "She is, isn't she? Capable." He forced a laugh. "But I'm sure you didn't come here to speak about Cassandra's merits, varied as they may be. What can I do for you?"

Cullen's mouth moved but no sound came out. He couldn't speak of the phylacteries now, not when he'd just witnessed what he had. "It… it's not important."

"Come now, you're here. I have a few minutes. Out with it."

His stomach formed an anxious knot. *Just say it. The sooner you say it, the sooner the resources*
of the Inquisition can be put to use on this. The sooner blame can be laid, the sooner respect can be lost, the sooner the broken-hearted Trevelyan can be squashed under an additional burden.

"It's, uh, Solana wished to know if we might extend our quarters."

Cullen's heart pounded traitorously, each beat a reminder of his cowardice and pride. Each thud urging him to give an addendum, but he remained silent.

"Extend your quarters?" Trevelyan frowned at the unexpected question. "Oh, you mean along the battlements? Well that's a fine idea. I don't see why not. Your little one will need more space as she grows older. Speak to Berinole, I know he was doodling up some plans for general expansions, but I'm afraid I have not been able to look into them yet."

"Thank you, I shall."

"And feel free to requisition whatever you need. You're one of my most trusted advisers, I would see you comfortable."

"That's very kind."

How much of the offer was kindness, and how much was Trevelyan trying to ensure Cullen didn't leave again? Regardless, the news would certainly please Solana.

"Was that all?"

Guilt pulled at Cullen's gut. *Say it.*

"Yes, Inquisitor. Thank you."

Perhaps Varric would have some good news after all.

Or else Maker help them all.
Dearest Isabela,

You owe me.

And this letter better find you, because I spent fair coin...

Point is, Anders is gone. Took something important.

I know we had our differences, but I also know you can find him. I need to know where he is.

Did I mention that you owe me?

Hawke.

Dearest Hawke,

It’s Admiral Isabela now.

Signed,

Admiral Isabela.

Dearest Admiral Isabela,

Need I remind you that I fought (and killed) a qunari arishok after you ran away with his precious book? I could have died. Very nearly did.

I helped you find that Maker-forsaken book.

Help me find Anders.

Please.

Hawke.
Dearest Hawke,

Fine.

Admirable Isabela.

“Does the Commander even eat breakfast?” Celeste asked, glancing at Solana only briefly as she opened the oven door.

Around them, the kitchen hummed with activity as the staff prepared for the day ahead. Solana tried to stay out of the way, pressing herself into the corner by the ovens. Every so often, someone would push past and click their tongue at her.

“He’s eaten it every day for the past two weeks.”

“And he’s enjoyed it?” Celeste pricked one of the rolls and then closed the oven door again. When she turned back to Solana, her cheeks were rosy from the heat.

Solana wrung her hands, fiddled with her wedding rings. “I don’t know what to do. I just want to make everything better.”

“And you think forcing breakfast upon the poor man will make him instantly forgive you?”

“No.” Solana focused on the oven. Celeste was one of the few people who knew the truth and hadn’t turned from her. Even so, Celeste hadn’t entirely forgiven her either. “It’s not… I don’t expect him to forgive me. I just want to be the kind of wife he deserves. I don’t want him to regret coming back.”

“Solana, Cullen knew what he was agreeing to when he married you. You’re a Circle mage.”

“He’s been staying with his family. You didn’t see what they were like, Celeste.” The warm kitchen, Mia’s hugs, Maralie’s assurances. “That’s what he grew up with. That’s what I should be.”

Celeste opened the oven again and peered inside, but said nothing.

“Besides, I think it will be good for us. We didn’t really talk before, when he was leading the fight against Corypheus. We hardly saw each other. If we’re sitting down to meals twice a day maybe things will be different.”

“Step back.”

Solana moved out of the way as Celeste guided the tray out of the oven with magic - probably the
very spell Solana had taught her for lifting water. Now Celeste did it with ease, setting the tray carefully down on the stone countertop.

“All I’m saying is don’t try too hard,” she said.

“You think it’s wasted effort?”

Celeste let out a breath and shook her head. “No. I mean… when I first returned to Denerim during the Blight, I didn’t tell my family what happened. I couldn’t. I was a mess. My sister realised it must have been something terrible. I think she guessed the gist of it. Anyway, she’d do what you’re doing now. She’d flap around me, making me food I didn’t want to eat, asking me questions, not taking her eyes off me. I know she was worried, and in retrospect it was really sweet of her. But it created this sense of… expectation. It made me less comfortable. Cullen’s back, he’s been back for weeks now. He’s made his decision. Just… let him get over things at his own pace.”

He had seemed distant, but that was to be expected wasn’t it? It was so hard to tell whether he was annoyed or if it was just… a remnant. “Are the rolls ready? I should get back. I left Alise with him.”

Celeste smirked.

“What?”

“Nothing. Let me know how that goes.” She waved a hand and two rolls lifted off the tray and into Solana’s basket. Solana was opening her mouth to respond, when Celeste waved her hand again and an additional two rolls lifted off the tray. They hovered through the air, dipping and disappearing under one of the tables.

“And that?” Solana asked, eyebrows raised.

Celeste shrugged nonchalantly. “For later.”

Were her cheeks still coloured from the oven or was she blushing?

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Solana heard the screaming from the bailey. She broke into a sprint, bursting through the door to find Cullen holding Alise at arm’s length. Her face was red, her head was thrown back and she kept bringing her limbs into her centre and then flinging them out again in anger. Cullen was staring at her, pale and bewildered.

“I didn’t do anything,” he said.

Solana dumped the basket on the table. “Don’t hold her like that.”

“She was wiggling and kicking me.”

“Did you check her? Does she need to be changed?”

“Yes, of course I checked her!”

Solana took the baby into her arms and held her to her chest.
“Maybe she’s hungry?” Cullen suggested.

“No, I fed her just before I left. Shhh, love, shhh.” Solana bounced her gently and her cries grew softer and then she fell silent, blinking as if started by her own behaviour.

“How did you do that?” Cullen wanted to know.

“For starters, I didn’t hold her out in the middle of the air.” Solana’s heart was racing, her stomach still clenched in reaction to her daughter’s screams.

“I didn’t…” Cullen swallowed, wiped a hand across his forehead. “I was holding her properly. We were looking at the pictures.” He gestured to the frames along the wall that now held the portraits of the Amells that Hawke had given Solana. “She was fine. Then she just started screaming.”

“You must have frightened her.”

“I didn’t.” He sank onto the bed. “Not intentionally.”

He frowned at the ground, his shoulders sagged.

Good going, Solana. Fantastic job being the supportive wife.

She settled beside him. “Perhaps you’re just unfamiliar.”

“I’m her father.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t know you yet. Perhaps she grew frightened. I’m not apart from her often. Ever, really.”

“I’m her father, she shouldn’t be frightened of me.”

Solana placed a tentative hand on his arm. “She won’t be for long. She just needs time.”

“Time…” Cullen repeated.

Cullen’s hands were shaking by the time he reached his office. He’d been slowly raising his dosage, but apparently not slowly enough. He fumbled for the kit, mixing the solution as fast as he could.

He’d reduce his daily dose again once things calmed down. Once he found Anders. But right now it was the only way to cope, it was the only way to think straight.

It would be easier if he could hate Solana, but she had done absolutely nothing since his return to warrant even the slightest annoyance. If she was guilty of anything, it was of being too perfect. She was everything he’d always dreamed she’d be back in the Circle, back in that Harrowing Chamber when he’d fantasised about a life with her. He had pictured her gentle and attentive, a precise counterpoint to the horrors that had surrounded him then.

So why wasn’t he happy now that she was those things? Why did her behaviour do nothing to soothe him? On the contrary, he found himself anxious around her. He was no longer a
stammering fool in her presence, he simply could not think of a single thing to say. He had elected to put what she’d done behind him. And yet the things that were unsaid loomed so large that there seemed no space for conversation at all.

He still hadn’t told her about the phylacteries.

He hadn’t told Trevelyan either. When he’d gone back to do so, he’d found the man packing for an excursion to the Frostback Basin, surrounded by servants. And now he was away and Cassandra was in charge.

Cassandra, who was already angry with him, already doubting his ability and worthiness to lead. Cassandra, who would soon be Divine. It was this more than anything that caused Cullen to keep his failure from her. If the Chantry knew about the phylacteries, there was no telling what they would do.

He lifted the philter to his lips, whispered his usual prayer and the door slammed open. The vial slipped from his fingers, splashing precious liquid across his desk as it hit the table and rolled onto the floor.

_Bloody blast it!_ He’d left the door ajar. He shot to his feet, tossing a book over the incriminating lyrium kit.

The recruit who entered was looking down at a report, thank the Maker for small mercies. “Commander, Conder and Shelnen have returned.”

Cullen could hardly be angry with him for entering. He had insisted that he know the instant his men returned from Jader.

He strode around his desk, gripping his sword pommel to hide his quivering hands. “And?”

The recruit glanced up. “No sign of the apostat- sorry, sir.” Old habits died hard, clearly. This must have been one of the ex-Templar recruits. “No sign of the mage, himself. They spent some time questioning the dockworkers and one thinks he might have seen him leave a few weeks ago. Would you like to speak with them?”

He passed Cullen the report. Cullen knew it would be comprehensive. That was partly why he’d sent Shelnen. He was always very thorough.

“That won’t be necessary right now, thank you. I’ll speak to them later once they’ve had time to rest.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

The recruit left and Cullen sank back into his chair.

_Close. Too close._ His men had already lost respect for him when he’d run away. How much more would they lose when they discovered he was too weak to stay off lyrium? And if Solana found out...

No, he needed to be more careful. He’d been in too much of a rush to get to his dose this morning and it had almost cost him everything. He couldn’t let that happen again.

He drew one last steadying breath before wiping up his mess.
Then, the report.

The man who said he’d seen Anders claimed he recognised him from Kirkwall where he’d tended to his sick wife. He’d seen him four weeks prior. The timeline matched up. But one critical piece was missing. There was no mention of any cargo. Anders had apparently taken ship with nought but a sack over his shoulder.

So was this dockworker confused? Lying? Protecting Anders?

And if he truly had seen him, that in itself was an oddity. A mage as adept at escaping capture as Anders would surely have been more careful?

As far as leads went, this one was useless. Useless!

Cullen threw the report across the room. He growled as he scrubbed at his face with his hands.

What did you expect? That he’d be staying at a fancy inn overlooking the ocean just waiting for your men to come knocking? You’re an idiot.

Yes, an idiot. An idiot who didn’t know what more to do. Surely the commander of the greatest army in Thedas could find one man?

Not alone.

Not without help.

With a shuddering breath, he rose and went to lock the doors. One by one, he slid bolts methodically into place. Then he retrieved the philter, uncovered the box, closed his eyes and said a prayer for clarity.

It took no more than a few minutes for the lyrium to take effect. It sang in his head, in his heart, in his veins.

Cumberland.

Anders had been heading to Cumberland, according to the dockworker. That’s where Cullen would have to inquire next. If he managed to pick up the trail again, he’d have confirmation that Anders really had travelled that way.

Cumberland… Possibilities blossomed in his mind. Hundreds of them, stretching out before him. He could almost picture them, like a map. Cumberland was on the Imperial Highway. It was the port that linked Orlais and Nevarra. He had men in Hunter Fell. And, through Nevarra, was Tevinter. Could Anders be taking Ferelden’s phylacteries to Tevinter? Dorian could make inquiries. He would do so on behalf of Hawke, surely? Even if he thought this no more than a lovers’ spat.

All was not lost just yet. Cullen needed to send some birds.

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The tower was dimmer than Cullen recalled, and quieter. There had always been great numbers of birds coming and going whenever he’d visited before, but now merely a handful glided from
perch to perch, a testament to the newfound peace.

He didn’t see Leliana at first, and was about to call for her, when one of the shadows along the wall moved. She was sitting on a bench, watching him from beneath her hood.

He forced a smile. “Good morning.”

“How is it?”

He drew a steadying breath as he moved towards her. It took nearly all of his effort not to fidget, to keep his gaze firm. “I haven’t had the chance to thank you for the other night.” Other night, as if it hadn’t been weeks before.

Her pink lips formed a smirk. “Careful, Commander. You wouldn’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

He felt the flush creeping up his neck and he cleared his throat at the sudden tightness constricting it. “You know what I meant.” There didn’t seem to be anyone else listening in - the nearest of her scouts was across the room reading a message that had just arrived. Still, he was very much aware of how efficient the Skyhold rumour mill was.

Leliana rose. “Yes. How is Solana?”

“She is well. She seems well. Happy, I think. It’s… in truth, it’s hard to tell.”

Leliana drifted past him towards her desk. “I’m sure she’s glad to have you back.”

“You haven’t spoken with her?”

She paused in her movement, then stiffly bent to pick up a scroll. “No.”

That surprised him. “When last did you speak?”

She didn’t look at him. “I don’t believe that’s what you came here for?”

He was always wary of pressing Leliana, but he continued regardless. “You have spoken to her since the... eluvian, though?”

“No. I haven’t.” She turned to him. “Is there something else I can help you with?”

Now he saw her eyes and his breath halted in his chest. He saw in them a reflection of everything he’d been feeling since that day. Leliana scowled, knowing she was caught.

“Leliana, you should speak to her.”

She’d pushed him. This could go both ways.

“I have no desire to.”

“Because you don’t approve of what she did.”

“Because I killed her!” The exclamation was enough to draw the eyes of the other scouts, but Leliana did not seem troubled by that. She sank into her chair.

Cullen stepped closer to her. “She’s hardly going to blame you for that.”

“Maybe not, but it should never have gotten that far. I failed her.”
“If anyone failed Solana, it was me,” Cullen admitted stiffly. “I was with her when she discovered the cure, I… I spent the night with her.” Again, embarrassment crawled across his skin, but he forged on. “She was there, in my arms. If anyone should have had the foresight to stop her, it was me.”

Leliana stared at him like she was looking into his heart. “I don’t mean the ritual itself, Commander. I mean all of it. Blood magic happening right here, people experimenting on our prisoners, Warden Cassey leading the Inquisitor into the Fade… she took over his mind. If she had been any more ambitious…” Leliana shook her head. “How much else is happening here that I don’t know about? I always thought that… “ She let out a hollow laugh. “I told myself that the Maker chose me for this, that I was a uniquely talented player of The Game, that I was the best the Inquisition could hope for. But that simply isn’t true. I’ve lost my touch. Or perhaps I never had it at all.” She looked out the window towards the Frostbacks.

Cullen’s heart thundered. This wasn’t the spymaster he knew. He searched for something to say. “How can you doubt yourself after everything we’ve achieved here?”

Her eyes rolled to meet his again. “I was responsible for the fall of Haven too. Did the Inquisitor ever tell you that?” His expression must have confirmed he hadn’t because she continued, returning her gaze to the window. “My scouts started disappearing. I pulled them back, waiting for more intelligence. And then the Red Templars came.”

“There’s no good in blaming yourself for something so far in the past.” He knew a great deal about guilt. If you let it, it would eat you alive.

“Isn’t there?”

“I could just as easily shoulder the blame for Haven. We weren’t prepared, we were not fortified against any kind of assault, much less a dragon. None of us knew about Corypheus.”

“But we should have. We would have. If I was worthy of this position, we-”

On a whim he reached forward and seized her hand. She started, head snapping to stare at him. “You called me your friend. The other night. As your friend, I am telling you that Haven was not your fault, and neither is what happened with Solana.”

“I still should have-”

He pressed his letters into her hand before he could think better of it. “We have bigger concerns.”

He studied her as she examined the letters. This hadn’t been his intention. He’d meant to borrow a bird or two with minimal explanation, he’d meant to let her think he was doing Hawke a favour. He’d even had a speech prepared. And while she scanned the pages, his pulse raced. He swallowed again.

“Why are you trying to find Anders?” she asked.

He felt nauseous. Where did he start? This would make everything worse, surely. If she discovered the phylacteries had been here without her knowl-

A sharp intake of breath interrupted his thoughts and her eyes stretched wider. “Maker, tell me this isn’t what I think?”

“That would depend on what you think.”
“But Solana warded them.”

Relief flushed through him. She knew about the phylacteries already. That was half the battle won. “She did,” he confirmed. “Which is why I haven’t told her they’re missing.”
“Let’s be certain I understand. You suspect that Solana, your wife, the Hero of Ferelden, who requested as her only boon after halting the last Blight that the Circle mages be set free, who’s been patiently helping the mages adjust to that freedom for the last year… you suspect that *that* Solana assisted Anders with a plot to steal the phylacteries belonging to those very mages?” Leliana paced before the window, her hands behind her back.

She’d instructed her agents to leave them so they could speak alone. Cullen sighed. “You needn’t make it sound so… paranoid. You’re the one who warned me her power would corrupt her.”

Her sharp gaze came to rest on him. “This was not what I meant.”

He eased himself onto the bench against the wall. “Is it so inconceivable, though? I don’t want to believe she was involved, but she did set up the wards. They repelled darkspawn. And you can’t tell me that Anders came upon the room by accident.”

Leliana frowned. “Who else knew about the phylacteries?”

“Aside from Trevelyan? Darrow, Lysette… they are the only two who still live. I would trust them both with my life.”

“Still live?”

Of course she would pursue. He shifted, his guilt sitting heavy in his stomach. “There were two others, they passed in the Arbor Wilds.”

“Oh.” Leliana’s eyes were still focused on him. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. It was war, losses were to be expected. “Who told you? Or did your spies inform you?”

She smirked and, to his surprise, came to sit beside him. “The Inquisitor informed me. He was… concerned I might act irrationally should I find your people sneaking about.”

“Is it possible he told anyone else?”

“You could ask him?”

Cullen said nothing.

“He doesn’t know they’re gone.”

“No. He… I meant to inform him, but I was unable to catch him alone before he left for the Frostback Basin.” A lie, but better than telling her he’d been too much of a coward.

"There was a night, towards the end of the Blight.” Leliana's voice went low and soft, as if she was lost in memory. “There was a night that her wards failed. Darkspawn invaded our camp, tried to kill us in our sleep. We were very nearly overwhelmed. She never mentioned what went wrong. Perhaps they simply overwhelmed her magic. Last month when… Justice was strong. Stronger than I would have expected.”

Was there an unspoken accusation? Nothing about her expression indicated she blamed Cullen for
that strength.

“You believe he simply broke through Solana’s ward?”

“It is possible. He still would have had to know where it was and what it hid, however. That night during the Blight, Alistair said the archdemon sent the darkspawn to us. It could sense our location, because of the taint. I don’t know how Anders would have discovered the location of the phylacteries.”

“I can only think of one way.” Cullen dropped his head forward into his hands. “The day that Cassey approached us with her plan, we tracked Solana. She passed through that corridor with Anders. At the time, I accused her... She denied it, of course. But perhaps…”

“You believe she lied?”

“I don’t know what to believe about her anymore.” He felt Leliana’s gaze on him again and he wished she’d look away. “I don’t believe she has malicious intent. That, at least, I’m certain of. If she is aiding Anders, it will be because he’s doing something she believes is right. And Maker help anything that stands between my wife and what she believes is right.”

Leliana drew a deep breath but didn’t offer comment, and every moment of her silence was measured by Cullen’s heartbeat. When had Leliana’s opinion of him started to matter? He waited for her condemnation, or assurance. Neither came.

“I wonder,” she said, eventually. “What would Anders do with the phylacteries? I would have assumed he would break them, erase the final thing that ties so many mages to the Chantry. To take them…” She wandered over to her desk. “It doesn’t make sense.”

She tapped her bottom lip, eyebrows drawn together. “How many boxes were there? Enough to fill that room, certainly. Too many for one man to carry.”

“The sister who brought them had them delivered in a single cart.”

Leliana rifled through papers. “People come and go from Skyhold all the time, but my people keep records. If we search through them around the time he left, we can draw up a shortlist of the possible accomplices.” She grinned at him. “I hope you like paperwork, Commander. This could take us some time.”

“You seem to be in a good mood,” Samson said, keeping his voice level.

He watched Celeste’s delicate fingers as she tucked the handkerchief into her basket. Her eyes were downcast, but she was smiling. It was a rare expression and it made his heart do things. Things he wasn’t sure he liked. He’d been trying to stare less, but his desire to study her had grown with each visit. Lecherous fool. But moments like this, when she was distracted, he let himself drink her in.

“Special occasion?” he asked.
Her gaze flicked up to his. “No, not really. Not yet.”

Yet? His stomach clenched. The immediate thought that jumped into his mind, was an engagement. Of course, she would have suitors. And it shouldn’t matter to him.

Over the past weeks of shared breakfasts, they had talked a great deal, but he still knew so little about her. She’d confessed she came from Ferelden. Blood mage, Kinloch Hold. It didn’t take a lot of imagination to figure out her past from that. But mostly they had talked about him. He’d told her about Meredith. He’d told her everything about the night that Corypheus had found him. He’d told her many of the things that had happened since. She knew at least as much by now as his interrogators did, maybe more. And what he knew of her amounted to something akin to one of those Chantry windows made up of pieces of coloured glass. Only, he hadn’t filled in all the pieces yet. He had an outline, and each morning he’d look forward to being able to fill in something else. Her hair, he’d learned yesterday, was not naturally blonde. She’d been a redhead once. He had stared at her for a good few minutes trying to picture it after that revelation, until she’d blushed and asked him to stop.

And today’s revelation would be what brought that smile to her lips.

“Don’t make me pry,” he prodded.

She glanced at him from beneath her long lashes. “Alright, I received word today that someone’s coming to visit me here, possibly to stay.”

Traitorous heart, thumping far louder than it had any right to. Traitorous tongue, asking the question even though he had no desire to know the answer. “Someone?”

She was sunshine and he was dirt. Or, that mucky water in the canal near the corner he’d once called home. Was it not enough to crave lyrium? Must he crave this too?

“What was that about not prying?” she teased, and smiled again.

The conversation felt like walking over broken glass. Every step threatened to slice into him. Stupid idiot. “Come on, you can tell me. It’s a fella, isn’t it? Gotta be to make you smile so wide.”

The moment she took to answer seemed to stretch. His breath stopped. What in the Void is wrong with me?

“It is.”

She was still smiling and he tried to keep his own smile firmly in place despite the icy fingers wrapping around his heart.

“It’s my son.”

The air left his lungs in a whoosh of relief and surprise. “Your... son?”

She had a child. Well, fancy that.

Celeste nodded, gaze dropping down to the basket again. “I left him in Denerim when I joined the mages. I wanted him to be safe. And while Skyhold was...”

“While Skyhold was under threat from me, you mean? Wasn’t safe to have the lad here.”

“Well, yes.”
And here he was leering at her. *Sick.* “And the father?”

She squirmed as if something cold and wet had run down her neck. “He’s not in the picture.”

“You can’t mean he left you?” No one would do that.

“No. He’s dead.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I have Ren.” She made a brave effort at another smile, but it wasn’t the same.

Cullen hovered in the upper bailey. The sun was already high, it shouldn’t be too much trouble to pull Solana away from her duties under the guise of a mid day meal.

He ran through what he’d say for the umpteenth time. He hated this. He’d prefer to be direct, but if he simply asked her what she knew of the phylacteries, what was to stop her from lying? Or from giving him the answer she thought he wanted to hear?

He’d tried numerous times over the last weeks to tease the truth from her, without being too obvious. He’d asked about Anders, claiming concern for Hawke, who had been planted in front of the bar ever since Cullen had returned. He’d asked her tentatively about the mages, and he’d been rewarded with enthusiastic explanations of her lessons. He’d made the mistake of mentioning the Circles once. She’d refused to speak to him on the subject, fearing a fight. He knew the techniques for getting answers - nonviolent ones had proved as effective as the alternatives more often than not. But as of yet, none of his strategies had worked on her.

Leliana was unsatisfied with waiting. If Solana was in league with Anders, she was their best hope of finding him. And if he couldn’t determine where her loyalties lay, Leliana had volunteered to.

He didn’t want to think what that might entail. Leliana had killed Solana, how much of a leap was it to believe she’d interrogate her?

He closed his eyes and said a brief prayer. The lyrium would help.

He could not see Solana as he made his way down to the lower courtyard. There were a few people hovering about, it didn’t seem like a lesson was underway and for a glorious moment he thought he’d missed her. He could put off this confrontation for another time.

But then some merchants moved aside and there she was, kneeling on the grass, surrounded by a throng of children. Her light blue robes almost glowed in the bright sunshine. Her fiery hair escaped from a pin where she’d piled it haphazardly, and it gathered in long almost-blond wisps against her neck. She was smiling and happy and perfect. His heart started racing.

Solana held out a small white flower bud to the youngest child, a little redhead girl who could be no older than eight years of age. The child accepted it with her eyebrows drawn together in
“Now concentrate, just as I showed you,” Solana said.

The little girl narrowed her eyes. “It’s not working.”

“Remember, you’re not grabbing it, you’re letting it flow through you. Imagine your power is a beam of light caressing the petals to wakefulness.”

*Your power.* She was training mages. Only… smaller ones than he’d anticipated.

A smile grew on the little girl’s face and before their eyes, the flower started to unfurl.

“You see,” Solana said. “You *can* do it. It’s *your* power. It does only as you will.”

An older boy, standing at the girl’s side, interjected, “My pa said magic is evil.”

Solana lifted her gaze to meet his. “If magic was evil, how is it I used it to stop the Blight? Magic is a tool. It’s no more good or evil than the sunlight that feeds our crops but can also burn our skin. A good man will use magic for good ends.”

The boy appeared to think about this, chewing on his cheek. “But the Chant says-”

Words came forth from Cullen’s mouth automatically. “The Chant says magic is to serve man, never to rule over him.”

Solana snapped her attention to him, obviously startled by his sudden appearance. The children gasped and whispered. Then Solana smiled once again, at *him*. Warmth flushed down his spine.

“Commander Cullen, sir,” the boy said. “What about the magisters? Corypheus and the other mages that started the Blights?”

“I don’t want to start a Blight.” The little girl frowned at the flower in her hand.

Cullen went to stand beside his wife. “Those mages were guilty of more than simply using magic. They broke into the Golden City by sacrificing their slaves and using *blood* magic. The biggest threat you will face as a mage is not your own power, but the demons who seek it in your dreams. So long as you continue to deny them, you walk in the Maker’s light.”

Solana’s expression clouded and she dropped her head. “Yes,” she agreed. “Commander Cullen is correct.”

*Oh Maker,* he hadn’t meant… she thought he was talking about her. He cleared his throat, uncertain how to correct his error.

“Why don’t you all go play?” Solana suggested to her charges.

As the children ran off, the little girl still proudly clutching her flower, Cullen searched for something to say. Solana moved away from him. Alise’s basket was in the shade of a nearby tree and Solana settled herself down again beside her daughter. He followed.

“Solana, I... I was…” He cleared his throat again. “It’s a nice day. Perhaps we should have lunch together.”

Her bright green eyes locked to his and in an instant he saw pain, hope, shame flash across her expression. “You don’t have to do that.”
He eased himself down beside her. “I’d like to.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?”

“You’ll see me at dinner, you saw me at breakfast.”

He bristled. “I apologise, I didn’t realise I had a strict allotment of time with you.”

Breath hissed from between her teeth. “That’s not what I meant.” Her gaze slid from his. “You haven’t had much to say to me these past weeks, even at meal times. I’m… surprised you desire my company. That’s all.”

“You are my wife,” he said, not knowing what else to say.

“Yes…” She watched their sleeping daughter. “I am your wife, and you wish to discuss something specific. You’re not one for picnics, or lunch, or food in general if we’re to be honest. Which means you have a reason for this meeting, just as you have a reason for everything you do. And if we are to talk seriously, I would rather we do so here. Unless it is something sensitive, in which case we can return to our quarters. I would rather not… I’d rather not pretend it’s something it’s not.” A small smile flickered on her lips, but she looked inexorably sad.

She was also right and he tasted the humiliation, as bitter as defeat. He knew it was likely written across his face. So he did the only thing he could think to do. He lunged forward and kissed her.

She went stiff with surprise, and for an instant he thought he’d made an awful mistake. Then her fingers curled around the back of his neck and her lips responded. Heat raced through him at the taste of her, the feel of her. Lips soft and familiar, it felt like returning home after a long time away. And it had been a long time. The last time he’d kissed her like this had been that night.

The night she’d left him and taken their daughter into danger.

The memory instantly cooled his passions and he pulled away, finding her breathless, eyes closed.

He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t… it was too… he stumbled to his feet, shaking his head. “I’m sorry.”

He was across the courtyard and halfway to his office before he even knew he’d decided to leave.

The larder was always cold no matter the time of year, but this day Celeste didn’t mind. She couldn’t stop smiling and had even caught herself humming.

She was going to see Ren again. Soon. The letter from her sister sat in her apron pocket and she kept taking it out and re-reading it. When she’d suggested he come, she hadn’t expected the next letter would say he was already on his way. Her nerves fluttered. Would he even recognise her after so long apart? Two years. How tall he must be now. Did he still enjoy-

The shadows to her left moved. She spun towards them, a barrier spell snapping from her hand.

Cullen raised his hands, palms facing her. “It’s only me.”
She blinked. “Commander? I... “ What was he doing sneaking around the larder?

He moved to the door and pressed it closed. Darkness swallowed them.

“A light if you will?” His voice remained soft.

She cast fire into one of the sconces above them. His face, illuminated by the flames, was drawn. “I know you’ve been taking bread from the kitchens at the end of your shifts.”

Her stomach knotted. Had Solana said something to him? It seemed unlike her, but then so had... other things she’d done recently. Before Celeste could form a response, he moved closer.

“I know you’ve been taking it to Raleigh Samson. You’ve been spending a lot of time with him.”

Her heart thudded. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” His shoulders moved as he drew a deep breath. “I need to ask you a favour.”

“To do with Ser Samson?” Dread crept through her. “If it’s information you want I assure you he’ll speak to you without my-”

Cullen shook his head. The flickering light threw shadows over his eyes, she wasn’t sure what to make of his expression. “It is to do with him, but not how you think. I’d like you to take Solana to apologise to him.”

She wasn’t sure she heard right. “Apologise?”

“She put a demon in him and then killed him, I think she owes him one, don’t you?” The Commander didn’t sound like himself.

“I don’t understand why you need me. If she’s seeking penance, she’s perfectly capable of going herse-”

“She’s not.”

“She’s not capable?”

He raked a hand through his hair. “She’s not seeking penance. Maker, this is harder than I thought. I... I apologise if I’m overstepping, but I am having difficulty forgetting what transpired and, I believe you are too.” His gaze met hers. “Am I wrong?”

Celeste’s throat constricted. “Solana saved my life...”

“And you’ve saved hers. Your friendship is not in question. Forgive me, I mean only that I feel that I can trust you.”

*Well there’s one for the books.* “You’d trust the maleficar?”

“Please don’t make this harder than it already is.”

She folded her arms. “You want me to take Solana to apologise to Samson. And then what? I’m afraid I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking of me.”

Cullen scratched the back of his neck. “I need to observe her.”

“Observe her?” Celeste arched an eyebrow.
“I’d like you to guide her to Samson without her knowledge. You used a corridor to reach him once, cutting through the back of the gaol?” The day he’d followed them using Solana’s tainted blood as a beacon.

“It’s a test.” Celeste was starting to understand. “You want to see how she reacts when confronted with him. Leave the apology up to her?”

The tension seemed to drain from Cullen’s face. “Yes. Yes, that’s precisely it.”

Of all the ridiculous things. “Commander, I’m not sure I can help you with this.”

“It’s nothing untoward.”

“Nothing untoward? I may not be an expert when it comes to relationships, but I’m relatively certain-”

“I need to know! I need to know where she stands!” His anguish seemed excessive on Samson’s behalf. Celeste could only imagine that he somehow saw an equivalence between what Solana did to Samson and what she’d done to Alise. He paced, burying his head in his hands.

“Have you considered asking her?”

He laughed hollowly. “And relying on her honesty?”

“She’s not a monster, Commander. We might not approve of what she did, but she did it out of love. You can’t deny that. She wouldn’t have let any harm come to Alise-”

“You weren’t there. You didn’t see what she became.”

A cold shiver passed down Celeste’s back. Yes, she’d heard Solana had become an abomination, that Cullen had very nearly had to kill her. “I may not have seen it for myself, but I saw her remorse in the weeks that followed. She wouldn’t speak to anyone, Commander. She wouldn’t have eaten at all if it hadn’t been for Alise, and then only when I brought her food. Ever since you returned she’s been fussing about how to please you, how to apologise with actions if not words. I even told her to ease up for fear she’d irritate you. She stands with you. Of that I am certain.”

“And yet I never see you with her anymore.”

Celeste dropped her gaze to her feet. For all her words, he was right.

“Take her with you tomorrow morning when you visit Samson. Please, I beg of you.”

“And if she doesn’t apologise, what then?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

Cullen braced himself before entering their quarters. The moons were higher than they usually were when he returned. He’d procrastinated as long as he could without making matters even worse.

With a deep breath, he opened the door.
The room was filled with the warm glow from the fireplace and the tantalising scent of dinner - his favourite stew it seemed - filled his nostrils. She was standing across the room, with her back to him. She stiffened at his entrance.

“Solana… I… I owe you an apology.”

She turned slowly. Alise was cradled in her arms, asleep by the looks of it. “For which part?” Solana asked. “The disingenuous lunch invitation, the kiss, or for running away?”

His heart thudded. “All of it?”

The distance between them felt like the Abyssal Rift as she nodded and turned away from him again. “Dinner is ready, you’re welcome to start while I put her down.”

He moved to the table. It was neatly laid with two bowls of fragrant stew, two wooden spoons and a basket of rolls. She knew he enjoyed rolls with this dish, she’d made the effort to get them.

He didn’t eat until she sat down opposite him. Her hair was loose now, and bright red in the firelight. Her gaze lingered on her food. “How was the rest of your day?”

It was the same question she asked every night. She was slipping back into the routine, as if nothing unusual had happened. He should have been grateful, but he found himself frustrated. So that was it? Just another thing they didn’t talk about. Another thing she shoved down inside her, behind her pretty smile.

“You don’t want to talk about what happened?”

She reached for a roll. “Not particularly.”

He snatched her hand. Her eyes flew up to his. Fear. What was it Celeste said? Ever since you returned she’s been fussing about how to please you, how to apologise with actions if not words. And here was his favourite meal waiting for him, when he’d been expecting confrontation.

“Solana. We should talk.”

She didn’t pull her hand back. It was soft and limp in his. “Say what you will, then.”

“Aren’t you angry with me?”

“No.”

He waited, searching for something to say that would garner some reaction.

A sad semi-smile lit her lips, wavered and was gone. “How can I be angry with you for what you feel?”

The air was thin, like the moment before bloodshed. He knew so much hung on his response, and yet he couldn’t bring the words forth to reassure her.

Then Alise wailed and the moment was lost. Solana tugged her hand free and went to see to their child.
Broken

Sleep hovered just out of Cullen’s reach for most of the night. He lost himself in thoughts, in regrets, in trying to imagine how the scheme he’d drawn Celeste into would play out. He came to full wakefulness some time before dawn.

A high-pitched sound drew his attention to Solana’s side of the bed. His wife’s chest rose and fell with steady breathing, but his daughter lay against her bared breast. Solana must have dropped off while nursing. Alise made another sound and wiggled, kicking out her legs.

Solana didn’t stir. Staring at her face in the moonlight, Cullen could see discolouration around her eyes. She’d been crying. His throat constricted.

Alise whimpered again. Her small bright eyes found Cullen as he sat up. At least, he thought they did. It was difficult to tell just how much she could see. She made another sound, forehead wrinkling.

“Wind, is it?” Cullen asked his daughter, softly. She squeaked as if to confirm.

Being careful not to wake Solana, Cullen reached over and lifted Alise. He cringed, expecting her to start crying as he slipped his hand behind her head, but she made no sound. He realised he was holding his breath and let it out as he drew her little body to his shoulder. He’d seen Solana and Celeste burp her. It had seemed simple enough.

He patted her back, gingerly. She was so tiny, so light, so soft. He hardly dared move for fear of injuring her in some way.

Then she burped in his ear.

It was not just a burp, it was a belch. The kind he would have expected from a grown man who had been drinking half the evening. Alise stared at him, as startled by the sound as he was.

“Maker’s Breath,” he whispered, shaking with suppressed laughter. “Where did that come from?”

Alise was still staring at him. Was she going to cry? He felt as if he was holding a barrel of gatlock, one false move and it would explode in his face. Instead, she reached out her tiny hand to touch his cheek.

He held his breath again. Her fingers brushed over his stubble. Would it hurt her? Surely it would be too rough against her skin? Her hand closed around his nose. Her mouth opened and he tensed for a wail, but instead her eyes lit up as she gave him a gummy grin.

Many years ago, when he was a fresh Templar, he had seen a smile that had done something similar to him. Across a crowded dining hall, lips just like these. But this… if falling for Solana had made his heart feel like it was diving from his chest, this felt like his heart was diving from the top of Skyhold’s tallest tower and soaring down to the Frostback valleys below. Nothing else mattered. Anders, the Inquisition, the Circles… it all meant nothing so long as she was smiling like that.

Be strong for her, Cole had said a year before. Cullen had thought he’d meant Solana. But he knew now that he hadn’t. Cole had known about Alise from when she was the tiniest seed. He had known that Cullen was weak. What else had he known? Had he known what Solana would do? Had he known how Cullen would run? Had he known that Cullen would turn to lyrium?
Alise’s smile broke into a yawn and Cullen cradled her close.

Maker, what was he doing? Taking lyrium was shortening his life. How could he protect her when he was doomed to lose his mind?

How could he protect her without it?

Morning sun gathered in narrow rectangles across the stone floor and Celeste’s string of steady chatter bounced off the walls, filling the dim recesses of Skyhold with an unusual cheer. Solana would have been glad of it, had it not been so suspicious.

It wasn’t like Celeste to talk this much. She was probably excited about Ren’s imminent arrival, but even so, Solana’s suspicion deepened the further into Skyhold they walked, the more times Celeste refused to answer where they were going.

“I don’t like surprises,” Solana said eventually, interrupting the other woman’s babble mid-sentence.

Her eyes shot to Solana’s. Something’s wrong.

Anxiety tightened Solana’s stomach. “Please, tell me where we’re going?”

She’d been collecting that morning’s rolls in the kitchen when Celeste had begged her to come with her. Solana hadn’t thought to disagree. She’d thought that Celeste wanted help carrying something from the stores or a task equally mundane. She’d been satisfied to leave the sleeping Alise with one of the other servers, thinking she’d be back in a moment.

She was on the verge of turning and heading back, when a new kind of unease prickled across her skin.

“Solana, are you well?”

She’d stopped walking, listened. What had upset her senses?

Celeste placed a warm hand on her arm. “It’s not much further.”

“Wha t isn’t much further?” Her pulse was beginning to hum.

Solana didn’t wait for another non-answer. She drifted forward cautiously, magic sparking in her palms. Something familiar brushed at her senses. The desire to turn away increased, sitting heavy in her chest. But she recognised it at once for what it was.

Her ward.

If she’d been paying closer attention and not trying to listen politely to Celeste’s prattle, she would have realised. But now there was no doubt about it. They were in that corridor, this was her ward, but it felt sour and wrong. Like that night the darkspawn had attacked the camp.

Alistair had almost died.

Her senses were no longer attuned to darkspawn, but they were attuned to magic. Someone had messed with her wards.
She rounded on Celeste. “Tell me what we’re doing here. Now.”

Celeste’s face blanched. “What…”

She didn’t want to hurt Celeste, but she advanced on her as if she did. She’d learned how to intimidate when needed. “Tell me.”

“Solana, I don’t understand.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

Celeste held up her hands plaintively. “Please calm down.”

“Why is it a secret?”

Celeste backed into the wall and swallowed.

“If I’m overreacting then tell me why we’re here,” Solana growled. “Or was it you? Did you do this? Blood magic?”

Celeste’s eyes had been growing wider and wider and on the last word she physically twitched as if Solana had slapped her. “I don’t understand.” And from the wobble in her voice, Solana believed her.

Solana reached behind her to caress the edges of her broken wards with the tips of her fingers, not daring to move her eyes from Celeste. “So someone told you to bring me here. Who?”

Celeste stared at her as if she’d transformed into an abomination. “I… Solana, please.”

“Who!”

“It was me.”

Solana spun towards the familiar voice emanating from the entrance behind her, the one her wards had been protecting. Cullen stood with the door open just a crack, shadows across his face.

Her heart slammed. “Why?”

But Cullen spoke over her shoulder, to Celeste. “Forgive me, the ruse was necessary. You may proceed.”

“Proceed?” There was a note of steel in Celeste’s voice now that hadn’t been there before. “I don’t know who you think I am, Commander, but I am not a pawn to be used in some game. If you think you can-”

“Leave us!” His bellow made Solana jump.

Celeste stiffened. “You owe me for this, Commander.” She turned as he’d asked, but not before adding, “I will not be toyed with.”

Cullen’s expression did not falter as her footsteps retreated.

“What is this?” Solana asked. “Did you have someone alter my wards? Were you hoping I wouldn’t notice?”

“On the contrary.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I was hoping you would notice. If you had not, I would have had to assume you played a part in this.”
“This?”

He stepped aside, revealing the inside of the room.

It was empty.

For a moment, Solana couldn’t breathe. Her every muscle tightened, as if she’d been caught in a paralysis spell. Then, her breath escaped her in a gasp.

He walked into the room and she followed.

“You thought I stole the phylacteries?”

“I feared it, yes.” He seemed to loom against the light from the arrow holes, and he peered out of one, as if checking no one was listening in to their conversation.

“How could you think that? I helped you ward the room. I helped you hide them.”

“And you led Anders to them.”

“This again?” Realisation hit before he could respond. “Anders. You think Anders took the phylacteries? He’s been gone over a month. How long have you known about this?”

Cullen pulled something out of his surcoat pocket and held it out to her. It flashed brightly in rhythm with her heart. Her phylactery. She stared at it pulsing in his palm.

“I still had this. It’s how we found you that day. I thought I should return it to its proper place.”

She’d never had the chance to explain why she’d had it. “Cullen…”

“Don’t. I don’t need to hear about why you took it. That’s the answer to your question. That’s how long I’ve known.”

Solana folded her arms and tried to fight off the roaring anger coursing up through her. “We’ve seen each other every morning and every evening since you returned. You should have told me.”

He thrust the phylactery back into his pocket. “I didn’t tell you because I wished to ascertain whether or not you were assisting him, and now I am convinced you knew nothing of this.”

This wasn’t the first test, this was only the most desperate. This was why he’d been so quiet, so withdrawn. He’d been watching her, measuring her… this was what the lunch invitation had been about, the kiss. Bitter disappointment warred with the anger rushing through her. She hadn’t confessed, even to herself, how much hope that kiss had given her. But it had been a lie.

“You honestly thought I was a part of this?”

His eyes met hers. “Is it so inconceivable? You’ve shown sympathy with his cause, you’ve formed a friendship with him, and you’re singularly capable—”

Each word hurt more than the last. “You’re talking about selling out the mages! How could you think me capable of that?”

“Ask me two months ago and I may well have struggled to.”

She stared at him, searching for words. Her tongue felt numb. “But because of how I saved our
daughter, you believe I’m capable of anything?”

“This isn’t about saving her, Solana!”

“No, it’s about the fact that you don’t trust me.”

“How could I? Maker’s Breath. You came into the Fade, you saw what… what they did to me. You held me in your arms. We made love. And then you left me. You took our innocent baby daughter from the safety of my family and you put a demon in her. You became an abomination. I very nearly had to kill you with my own hands. Do you have any idea what that was like?”

“You weren’t supposed to be there! It was only meant to be Morrigan and-”

“How does that make it better?”

“I’m sorry! I knew what the cure was. She could be normal, healthy. I knew that if I told you, you’d feel obligated to stop me. That or, if something went wrong, you’d never forgive yourself. I didn’t want you to be culpable-”

“No. Don’t act like you did this for me. Don’t act like you even so much as considered me. What you did… it’s the exact same thing you did to Alistair. You made a choice that should have been ours.”

Each of his words were like the meteors in Hawke’s favourite spell, crashing into her. Her chest became too tight to draw in air. All she managed was a breathless, “What?”

His eyes went wide, but he didn’t take back what he’d said. Then his features hardened once more. ”Is it any wonder I believed you might do the same to the mages?”

There was no retort, nothing she could say, and nothing she could do. The desire to flee became overwhelming. The room was airless. She needed to escape.

She rushed past him, out into the corridor. He called after her, but she didn’t slow.

_Alistair, running to stab the archdemon…_

_Morrigan’s words “I offer a way out, a way out for all Grey Wardens, that there need be no sacrifice.”_

Cullen clattered after her. She didn’t even know where she was going until she’d reached the stairs up to their quarters. The urge to get away was more than just a drive to leave a single argument. She flew through the door, not even pausing as she came to the dresser.

Cullen burst through after her. “Solana, what are you doing?”

She pulled her clothing out of her drawer, piled it onto the bed. She’d be able to carry everything in the bedspread. “This isn’t going to work, Cullen. I think we both know that.” Her voice shook.

He grabbed her wrist, pulling her around to face him. “Stop this.”
“We were fooling ourselves.” Her vision blurred and she brushed the tears away, annoyed at her own weakness.

“You’re being irrational.”

She tugged her wrist free. “Do you even want me here?” He stared at her. *Confirmation.* She turned back to her packing, the desperation leaving in a rush of pain and disappointment. “I’m tired. I’m tired of trying to force this to work when it doesn’t. You are right. I’m not a good wife and no amount of meals or polite conversation is going to change that.”

“I didn’t say…” He swallowed. “Where will you go?” It sounded like he had something stuck in his throat.

“We’ll stay in the servants’ quarters.” *We.* It should have been clear that she’d be taking Alise with her, but he jerked at the word regardless. “There’s space now,” she continued as if she hadn’t noticed. “Skyhold has emptied out significantly since the war.”

“This is ridiculous. You should stay here. I’ll go to my office. I fixed this room for you. It’s yours.”

A note drifted out of the dresser to the floor as she removed the last of her items. Cullen bent to pick it up, but she knew it held nothing of significance. It was the letter she’d been unable to send him, about Alise’s Blight.

“Exactly,” she said, in response to his words. “You fixed this room. I can’t stay here.”

It was a small dagger thrust between his ribs. She saw it hit home. He swallowed again, nodded, and she instantly regretted it but it was too late to undo the hurt.

“You’re of course welcome to see Alise whenever you wish,” she said, turning from him to gather up her belongings.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

He sank onto the bed, head bowed.

*What are you doing, Solana? You’re hurting him again.* “This will be better, in the long run,” she said. “I… want you to be happy.”

“Of course you do,” he muttered.

With nothing else left to say, she went to fetch Alise.

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So that was marriage.

Cullen stared at his lap, listening to his own heartbeat in the empty room.

Vows meant to last a lifetime had lasted less than a year. He had failed at this endeavour just as he had failed at so much else.

It should feel like a victory, knowing she wasn’t involved in whatever Anders had done, and yet it felt like death. He tried to think of a single worse way he could have handled it and came up empty.
In his hand, a note she had never sent.

Dearest Cullen,

Please forgive me. My worst nightmare has come to pass. I will do everything in my power to remedy this. I promise.
Heart remiss

Chapter Notes

I promise there is fluff coming soon to counter all this angst!

Pretty major spoilers for DA2 in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“A sex dungeon,” Samson said.

“A what?” Celeste stifled a giggle.

“It’s a room where they… experiment…” His eyes locked with hers. He was calling her bluff, willing her to make him continue the explanation. When she raised her eyebrows, a crafty smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “With erotic pleasure and pain… bondage, discipline, dominance… submission.”

“No, stop.” She held up a hand to halt him. She didn’t want to picture Cullen and Solana in any of the activities he was suggesting.

Samson leaned close the the bars, his face flushed with humour and his eyes sparkling. “What, you can’t see it?”

“I can see it. That’s the problem.” Celeste closed her eyes and scrunched up her face in mock disgust. “Gives a whole new meaning to ‘Commander’.”

Samson chuckled, a deep and surprisingly melodic sound. “Oh, I highly doubt he’d be the one in command.”

It took Celeste a beat to understand what he was implying and then laughter bubbled up from her chest and she was overcome.

“Oh Maker, I hope you’re wrong,” she said when she found her breath again.

“Do you have a better idea?”

She’d been so angry with Cullen when she’d arrived, that she’d told Samson everything he’d done. He’d listened without saying anything, and only when she’d finished speaking had he asked what she thought they might have been hiding in that warded room.

“If I knew, do you believe I’d tell you?” she’d asked, without thinking.

She’d regretted it the moment the she said it. His face had fallen, but he’d quickly forced a smile. “Well, there goes that cunning plan.”

She’d apologised as she’d knelt beside the bars and handed him his bread. Cool now, not warm like usual. But he didn’t even seem to notice as he accepted it, eyes downcast.

“Lyrium,” she’d said, because she’d needed to say something and that had seemed the most likely guess.
He’d smirked. “Rutherford has his own private stash? I can believe it.”

“He doesn’t take it of course,” she’d added as she tore off a piece of bread for herself. “He just likes to glare at it. It’s how he practises that glower.”

That had brought a real smile to his face. And then they’d been off, each guess more ridiculous than the one preceding it.

Now she realised that she, too, had grown close to the bars. Close to him. If it weren’t for the metal between them, they may well have been touching.

“I was going to suggest nugs,” she said. Her face was growing hot. Would he think it was because he’d embarrassed her by talking about sex? She concentrated on her hands.

“Nugs?” he prompted.

“A room of nugs that the commander could go and cuddle whenever his duties became overwhelming.” When he didn’t react, she added, “Seems tame now.”

“Depends what he’s doing with those nugs.”

Again laughter tore through her, even though she was shocked at herself. And he joined her. When he laughed he seemed to have an inner glow. He became a younger man, one unjaded by the trials of the past years. One who had become a templar.

That was an unwelcome thought.

“Is something the matter?” Samson asked.

“No, why?” She pushed the idea of templars from her mind.

“You’re staring at me.” He ran a hand through his hair. The hair he’d lost while on red lyrium was starting to grow back and it occurred to her that he might have misinterpreted her gaze.

“Sorry, I didn’t realise. I… my thoughts drifted.”

“I see.” He shifted. “I’m going to assume it wasn’t in the direction of creative things to do with nugs…”

The quip might have landed, were it not for the anxiety still in his eyes. Brown eyes now, not a trace of red. And her breath was trapped in her chest as she stared at them.

I know you’ve been taking it to Raleigh Samson. You’ve been spending a lot of time with him.

Was it obvious to everyone except her? Her cheeks were heating again and she scrambled to stand. “I… I’d better go see to… duties.”

“Oh,” Samson said, and she could hear the disappointment in his voice. “Yeah, of course.”

“Thank you… I… sorry.”

She snatched up her basket and flew from the gaol. Though as soon as she was out in the corridor, she pressed her back to the cool wall and took several deep breaths. There was a warmth in her stomach, a tingling down her arms right to her hands. Her heart felt large and full and her one desire was to go back into that room and… and what? She pressed her hands to her cheeks, willing them to cool.
Cabot eyed Solana for a long moment, absently drying the mug in his hand.

“A glass of water please,” she repeated. With a shrug, he decided she was serious and went to fetch a pitcher.

Solana slid into her old chair and leaned down on the bar. Her heart was still hammering, her pulse racing. In truth what she needed was a drink, but she didn’t dare while she was still nursing.

“I just left Cullen,” she said softly.

Hawke, who was sitting on the other stool, hadn’t so much as greeted her. At her words, he turned his head to look at her.

He’d grown a thick black beard and his eyes were bleary. She knew he’d taken to coming here after Anders had left, but she hadn’t tried to approach him.

“Wow… that is a surprise,” he said. “I would have expected him to be the one to leave you.”

She sucked in air. His response shouldn’t have cut the way it did. She knew how he’d come to feel about her. Yet, he had once called her family. He was the only family she had now besides Alise.

Cabot set down a mug of water, and Solana reached for it with a trembling hand.

“Sorry,” Hawke mumbled.

“You’re not wrong.” She drank deeply, the cold liquid sending jolts of pain up into her head, a blissful distraction if only for a few minutes.

“So, what did he do?” Hawke stared into his ale.

“What?”

“What did the Commander do? There must be a reason. I’m assuming it’s not blood magic and demons, because last thing I checked those weren’t exactly a deal breaker for you.”

Solana took another swig of her water. “Nothing. He didn’t do anything. He doesn’t love me anymore, and it just took me two weeks of foolish hoping to realise he probably never will.”

Hawke started laughing and shook his head.

“You going to tell me why that’s funny?”

“Nope.” He lifted his mug and took a long drink, then slammed it on the table and waved to Cabot for another. “So, where’s the baby? Don’t tell me you left her too.”

“No! Of course not. She’s in the servant’s quarters. There’s a woman who works in the kitchens, has children of her own… we’re rooming with her now. She offered to babysit. I… Hawke?”
He was still shaking his head, eyes closed. “What are you doing here, Solana?”

“I came here for a drink.”

“Water.”

“Well I can’t exactly have alcohol.”

“You could have gone anywhere else.” His words were slightly slurred. “Yet you come here, and sit down next to me. What do you want from me? Comfort?”

Another cold slap. She squared her shoulders. “I didn’t come here to see you.”

“Then go sit somewhere else.”

She bit into her bottom lip. She waited for him to change his mind, apologise again. But he didn’t. So, she nodded and slipped from her stool. “Alright. Sorry.”

She was aware of eyes following her as she took her mug upstairs, and she heard snippets of gossip. She hadn’t exactly been discreet in her dash up to her quarters. Most of Skyhold probably already knew what had happened between her and Cullen.

Cole was sitting on the upper floor of the tavern, the only quiet part. The rest of the patrons had given him a wide berth. His legs were crossed and he was rocking back and forth.

“Fancy some company?” she asked.

He glanced up at her, then back at his feet. “No, but you do.”

She hesitated.

“You can sit,” Cole said.

“Thank you.”

She settled on the top step and half dreaded what Cole would say next. But he never got the chance. Hawke came stumbling up the stairs. He skipped one, tripped, caught himself, splashed half his mug of ale across the stairs then stood swaying a few feet from her.

“No, Solana, wait. Look, I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes he did,” Cole provided.

Hawke’s gaze shot to Cole, then back to Solana. “Did I ever tell you about the war I started by accident?” His slur was even more pronounced on the last word.

Solana stood again. “I think everyone knows about what happened with the Chantry.”

He cut the air with the flat of his hand. “No, not that war. The one with the Qunari.”

“Oh, that war,” Solana said. “You mentioned the Arishok.”

Hawke climbed up the last few stairs, gripping the banister for support. “Right. So. I didn’t mean to start a war. I wanted to do the right thing. I was just doing what I thought was best. But it wasn’t best. A lot of people got hurt. Some died. They called me the Champion for it, but that’s
because they didn’t know.” He gestured with his ale again, splashing more along the top landing. “Thing is. My point. My point... “ His face clouded.

“You wanted to tell her about consequences,” Cole reminded him in a voice that sent a chill rushing up Solana’s spine.

“Right, yes. My point. Consequences.” He jabbed a finger at her. “What you did. It could have consequences. Doesn't matter your intentions. We all know your intentions. Save your kid. Good. Yeah, we love your baby too. But how… messing with that stuff. Just playing around with it as if you’re…” He sat heavily on the top step beside where Solana stood. “I’ve known people who’ve thought that their intentions warranted the use of such.... It doesn’t end well. It never ends well.”

“He means his mother,” Cole said.

Hawke’s head snapped up, brow furrowed. “Don’t.”

“It hurts too much to talk about, even now.” Cole’s interest must have been piqued by whatever Hawke was thinking, because he drifted towards them, staring at Hawke in that disconcerting way he had. “You found the Amell shield in a chest.”

“Maker, Cole.” Hawke buried his head in his hands.

“It shouldn’t have been there. It wasn’t her place.”

“What’s he talking about?” Solana asked.

“Nothing.” Hawke ran his hands through his hair. “He’s not talking about anything.”

“Face just like hers,” Cole said. “You knew it when you saw the picture.” Then, to Solana, “The picture that he gave to you.”

“Yes.” His teeth were gritted. “And I didn’t tell her for a reason. Can you leave it alone? That’s not what I came up here to say.”

“Yes it is,” Cole argued. He turned to Solana. “He came up here because he doesn’t want you to go dark like your father.”

“My father?” Solana’s heart kicked against her chest. “What does my father have to do with anything?”

“A maleficar killed my mother,” Hawke said on a sigh. “He killed her for her face. He had reconstructed the woman he loved from pieces of bodies belonging to other women.”

“Maker!”

“I… I tried to track him down and failed. I gave up. And then he got her. By the time I found his lair, he’d completed his work. She was reanimated, a shambling monster. I killed him and she died in my arms. Isabella found a shield tucked away in a chest at the foot of his bed. It bore my family crest.”

Solana’s stomach lurched. Her knees were too weak to hold her. She sank to the ground beside him. “You think this man… this man was my father?”

“Revka and my mother were virtually identical. You can see it in that etching. As I told you, she and her family disappeared. I know nothing for certain.”
Ice flushed through Solana, she wanted to be sick. The trembles that had followed her from her quarters overwhelmed her again. She started shaking so hard she had to wrap her arms around herself.

“So you can see why I was somewhat adverse to the idea of you playing around with blood magic and demons. But even if I didn’t suspect what I did… Solana, how could you? You’re the Hero of blighted Ferelden. You are possibly one of the most powerful mages in Thedas. We believed in you. They all did. You didn’t just betray Cullen that day. You betrayed all of us.”

“I want to make it right,” she managed, although her voice was so small she wasn’t sure he heard it until he answered.

“I’m not sure you can.”

Cullen rapped softly on the door, even though Josephine’s office was always open when she wasn’t meeting with visiting nobles.

She looked up from her desk and smiled at him. “Commander, did we have a meeting scheduled?”

He moved into the room, relying on the lyrium to keep him steady. “No. I wanted to ask a favour.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrows shot up. He seldom spoke to her at all, and had never asked anything of her.

“It’s…” He tried to maintain eye contact but failed, his gaze darting to the fireplace, then to her desk. “I wished to know if any of the guest suites are currently available?”

Josephine stood. “Oh, is your family coming to visit us again?”

Cullen cleared it. “No. It’s for Solana.”

He dared not look at Josephine’s face. He didn’t want to talk about it, didn’t think he could. He pressed on. “I offered to move to my office, of course, but she refused. She’s in the servant’s quarters at the moment. I thought one of the guest suites would be preferable. She can’t very well keep the servants up with a crying baby and-”

“And you want her to be comfortable.” She’d closed the distance between them.

“Yes,” he said. His voice sounded strangled.

“It will not be a problem, Commander. We’ve had few visitors since the war ended.”

His breath came out in a rush. “Thank you.”

When he risked a glance at her face, he wished he hadn’t. Her dark eyes were shining with pity. How much did the ambassador know of what had happened through the eluvian? Probably everything, thanks to Leliana. At the very least she knew that something had caused him to flee Skyhold, leaving his wife and child behind.
“Additionally…” Now the difficult part. He hesitated, trying to think of an alternative. Then cursed himself for being silly. “I wondered if you could perhaps offer the room to her. I… if she knows I asked you about it…”

“Consider it done, Commander.”

“Thank you. I… I’ll leave you to your work.”

Josephine inclined her head and drifted to her desk as he made for the door. As he reached it, she called, “One more thing, Commander.”

He turned back to her. She’d picked up a report and was paging through it. “We haven’t recruited any more templars, have we?”

“No, not that I’m aware.”

“I only ask because our lyrium supplies seem to be running lower than I’d anticipated.”

His stomach dropped. She didn’t look up from her report and for that he was grateful. She wouldn’t have seen the colour drain from his face.

“Perhaps you miscalculated?” Surely his extra dose per day didn’t make that much of a difference?

She gave a hollow laugh. “Please do not let the Chantry hear you say such things. Our use of lyrium is supposed to be strictly monitored.” She frowned at her page. “But perhaps you are correct. I will have to be more vigilant.”

“Yes,” he croaked. “I mean…” The hairs on the back of his neck rose, as they loved doing when he felt nervous. He fought the urge to rub them. “I will keep a closer watch too.”

Now her eyes did rest on him and he was almost certain she knew. His heart pounded rapidly as she looked at him.

“You should get some rest, Commander.” Pity again. “Do not concern yourself with this matter for now. I will speak to Solana.”

It seemed she’d interpreted his nervousness as relating to his wife. He nodded and turned from her before she decided otherwise.

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The light streaming into Cullen’s office was crimson by the time he entered, shoulders aching from a long afternoon of training. He'd thought to exhaust himself so that perhaps he could sleep despite Solana’s absence.

With the Inquisitor in the Frostback Basin, there wasn’t all that much for him to do, so he’d decided to dedicate the evening to going through Leliana’s scout reports.

He was not expecting to find someone in his office.

His heart leapt when the evening sun gave the impression of a short redhead. Solana, come to
make up? But no, it was just a trick of the light. It was Celeste. She turned when she heard him enter.

“I do not wish to discuss it,” he said, setting his sword on his desk. “Please, can this wait until tomorrow?”

“You used me.”

Evidently not. “And I apologised. It was necessary.”

“Why? Why was it necessary?”

“How long have you been waiting here?”

“What’s in that room?”

“Nothing. It’s empty.” He strode around his desk, rolling his neck, which gave a satisfying click. His armour was too heavy on his shoulders, fatigue was settling into his muscles. He’d possibly pushed himself too hard out there.

“Alright.” Celeste folded her arms. “What was in there?”

He eyed her wearily, weighing up the possible consequences of telling her the truth. Maleficar. It had better be a half truth. “Something valuable. It has been stolen.”

“And you thought Solana stole it?”

“I thought she might have. Few people knew about it.”

“She placed the wards,” Celeste said, as understanding dawned. “You wanted to test whether she was surprised about them being broken. You needed me to lead her past the room.”

Cullen sank into his chair. “Yes. Is there a point to this?”

Celeste glared down at him. The red light sliced across her profile, making her look far more intimidating than someone with her delicate features should have. But Cullen felt no fear. He felt numb.

“You owe me,” she said. “You lied to me and you used me.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “What do you want, Celeste? What can I possibly give you?”

“Samson.”

Her expression faltered, the intimidating facade dropped and she shifted so that she was no longer folding her arms and glaring down at him, but rather hugging herself and looking at him plaintively from beneath her lashes. In this light it was impossible to tell if she was blushing, but he wouldn’t have been surprised.

“Of course. I’ll have him bound and delivered to your quarters at once. Is that all?”

“No- that’s not-” She was most certainly blushing now, he could hear it in her voice. She drew a breath, then said in a steadier tone, “That’s not what I meant. I want you to give him a chance. He’s wasted down in those cells. He could be useful.”

“Celeste, you seem to forget that a little over two months ago he was trying to destroy the world.”
“I haven’t forgotten.”

“He was using people to grow lyrium, were you aware of that? Sewing it in them like seeds in pasture.”

She swallowed. “He was corrupted.”

“I’d say.”

“He’s different now. He wants to be good. Our experiments, the ones you disapproved of? He engaged in them willingly. He wanted to help us find a cure for the Blight, even if it cost his life.”

Cullen couldn’t help but laugh. She looked stricken. “He’s manipulating you. He’s found a way to gain your sympathy and now he has you doing his bidding.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“What do you think he intends to do if I grant him his freedom, hmm? Play good little soldier?” Cullen shook his head. “He’ll be on the first ship back to Tevinter where he’ll no doubt rally what’s left of Corypheus’s sympathisers and start our war anew.”

“He wouldn’t do that. He doesn’t believe in Corypheus. He never did. He wanted to help the… the Templars.”

“You’re in love with him.”

She gaped at him.

“It’s written plainly on your face.”

Her hands flew up to her cheeks and he found it amusing, despite everything, how surprised she seemed.

But she recovered quickly. “He’s a wasted resource. His sentence was to serve the Inquisition. You’re his handler, but you haven’t seen him in weeks, have you? The interrogators are done with him, Dagna’s collected what she can. He’s rotting away in that cell for no reason—”

“He’s rotting in that cell because he was Corypheus’s first lieutenant!”

“But he isn’t anymore. He’s intelligent, T-Templar-trained. You could put him to better use than this. I’m not suggesting you set him free and give him the run of Skyhold. Set a watch on him, if you must, but he’s wasted in there. My feelings - if I did have feelings which I most certainly don’t - would be irrelevant. Solana gave me a second chance—”

“You killed a single man in what amounts to self defence.”

“…just speak to him, Commander. Please.”

He remembered Celeste as he’d first met her, a wreck terrified of her own power, ready to die. Solana had changed that. Here she stood, as fiery as his wife, strong and confident as any enchanter.

Wife… could he even still use that term? He looked down at the desk. “I will speak to him. I cannot promise I will release him. But I will speak to him. Although, I have a favour to ask you in return.”

“You mean besides forgetting how you used me?”
He met her gaze. Her smirk melted away.

“Keep an eye on Solana for me?”

“I won’t spy on her.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Was it possible she didn’t know yet? He looked at his hands, realising he was still wearing her ring. The sight of it hurt. He gritted his teeth. “Solana and I are no longer… together. But I would see her happy, despite everything. I know most people at Skyhold are… well, you’re the only one she has now. I don’t want her to be alone.”

Why was every word so painful? He was aware of Celeste staring at him.

“You left her?”

“She left me.”

Chapter End Notes

So the whole Revka Amell thing is a personal theory of mine. It’s based on finding the Amell shield in the chest in the secret lair and on all the comments about Hawke’s mum having the same face. The info on Warden Amell’s father is very sketchy, even in the World of Thedas books. IMO what is there could easily be made up to try hide the fact that the father was a mage, and the father being a mage would explain all Revka’s mage children. At this stage they’ve all been caught and thrown into different circles. The father ended up in Starkhaven. He knew Orsino though from back in Kirkwall. Who knows, maybe Leandra met Hawke through him? But as I said, just a theory :)}
**ELEVEN YEARS AGO**

The water was so cold it numbed Solana’s fingers, but the break in rain meant a rare chance to do washing. So, she ignored her discomfort, scrubbing and wringing and trying not to think about what manner of dirt was spreading out from her old Circle robes, tainting the calm water in shades of brown and red.

“Solana?” Alistair had been silent since they’d settled on the bank, and she’d assumed him as absorbed in his work as she, but when she looked up she found him staring at the block of soap in his hands.

“What’s the matter?”

He’d been quiet since Kinloch, but she’d thought nothing of it. The experience in the Fade had left them all unsettled.

He swallowed. “That templar...”

Cullen. He must have meant Cullen. Her heart clenched.

“That templar and you… did you have a... sorry, I shouldn't ask.”

"Did we have a what?"

His amber eyes met hers again, his cheeks coloured. "Well, you know..."

"And you know that sort of thing isn't permitted. You trained as a Templar."

"Yes, sorry."

She hadn’t meant to snap. Her chest still ached with the memory. Cullen in the cage, curled up and praying. Cullen in the entrance hall, hating her.

Alistair studied her. “I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just... the way you ran to him. I thought perhaps he was a friend.”

They’d rounded the corner and she’d seen Cullen there, gaunt and muttering like a madman. A lone survivor. All thoughts of caution had left her with her breath. She’d flown to his side, fallen on her knees before his magical prison.
And he had admitted, from the very edge of sanity, his feelings for her. Finally. But to hear it like that... Even now bitter bile rose in her throat at the thought of it.

*A mage of all things.*

Solana scrubbed the shirt, channeling the ache into something productive. “Templars don’t have mage friends,” she reminded Alistair.

“No, I suppose not.”

She jerked when he touched her arm. His hands were as warm as hers were cold. He was always warm, as if blazing with inner flame.

“You can tell me, you know? It’s not like I’m going to report you.” A hesitant smile. “We’ll talk really quietly so Wynne doesn’t hear.”

Solana found herself return the smile. “Was it really that obvious?”

“It was obvious that you cared about him, yes. I… eh… I’m being nosy. I know I am. You’re allowed to say.”

“You’re being nosy,” she obliged, but she kept the smile in place. “And I appreciate that you care.”

“You do?”

“You’re a good friend.”

He scratched behind his ear. “Ah, friend, yes.”

And as a good friend, she supposed she owed him the truth. He’d told her his secrets, hadn’t he?

She massaged her temples, trying to find the words. “There was never anything between Cullen and me. But… if circumstances had been different, I would have liked there to have been.”

There, the words were out. She’d said them aloud for the first time ever. Heat crept up from her belly. She couldn’t meet Alistair’s eyes.

“It was foolish. We hardly knew each other, after all. We weren’t allowed to socialise. He watched me and I… watched him. He wasn’t like what you saw. He was kind and gentle and… we’d share looks, looks that said what we’d never be able to say… that sounds pathetic, doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t.” Alistair’s voice was soft.

His hand was still on her arm. It gave her the courage to continue. “When Gregor first said that his Templars were locked in with the abominations, Cullen was all I could think of. Every time we passed a….” she pressed her eyes closed as she forced the word out, “*body*, I had to check that it wasn’t him.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“What was there to say? We were surrounded by so much horror. There were so many faces I should have been checking for, so many faces that I should have dreaded seeing as much as his. But when we uncovered their bodies, I was relieved. And I hated... hated myself. How could I be relieved to see my fellow mages like that? People I’d grown up with, people I’d shared *everything*
“You loved him.” It wasn’t a question. Alistair squeezed her arm and now his gaze was steady. He’d found the answer to what he’d really been asking.

“I…” She couldn’t quite admit it. “It doesn’t matter. He hates me. And I’m a Grey Warden. And we have a duty.”

“Yes, that saving the world thing,” Alistair said.

“Someone’s got to.”

That night she didn’t dream of darkspawn, she dreamt of Cullen in the centre of a circle of fire, screaming her name.

PRESENT DAY

A loose shingle came free beneath Celeste’s right boot and skittered down, thwacking against the Herald’s Rest’s sign on its journey down to the courtyard.

“When Cole said I’d find you up here, I thought he was joking,” she said. She dug her nails into the roof, her stomach twisting. She hadn’t thought herself afraid of heights before, but she’d never had the opportunity to test the theory.

Solana was nothing but a hunched shadow against the darkening sky. Celeste made out the shape of a bottle in her hand. Solana raised it to her lips, but said nothing.

Celeste swallowed her fear and shimmied further up. “Of course, Cole doesn’t joke.”

Solana didn’t respond. Lightning cut across the night, far off enough that it took a moment to hear the accompanying thunder, but close enough that it lit Solana’s features. She was staring straight ahead.

“I thought I’d find you in the Grove,” Celeste said, finally reaching Solana.

“There’s a storm coming,” Solana’s voice was flat, heavy.

“Well this is certainly the place to be if getting hit by lightning is your aim.”

“It’s not.” Her focus stayed on the bottle in her hand.

“Well I suppose the top of the mage tower would be slightly more effective,” Celeste agreed.

“No. I’m not…” Solana drew a deep breath, her entire form shifting. “Getting hit by lightning is not my aim. And I’m not planning to throw myself dramatically from the top of the tavern either, before you ask.”

“I wasn’t going to ask. I was going to ask why you’re drinking. Where’s Alise?”
Now Solana looked at her, another flash of lightning highlighting an amused quirk of her mouth. She passed the bottle to Celeste. Celeste sniffed it. It smelled like lavender. Intrigued, she checked the label.

“Lavender and rosehip cordial.”

“Apparently it’s popular in Orlais.”

Celeste took a swig and immediately regretted it. The overpowering sweetness of honey surged down her throat, leaving her mouth feeling like she’d taken a bite out of a bouquet. She thrust it back into Solana’s hand. “What in the Void is wrong with Orlesians?”

Solana chuckled. “You sound like Cullen.”

His name hung in the air. Rain began to patter down around them, in the large globules so common at this time of year. Solana sighed, her breath shaking on the exhale.

“Solana… you know that I had no idea what he was planning today?” Celeste asked softly.

“I know.”

“He told me to take you to Samson. I thought the request was odd, but I thought maybe he honestly wanted to see if you regretted… things.”

“Celeste, I know. I know you wouldn’t. I’m sorry for how I acted. Everything’s been so…” Her head fell forward and her shoulders trembled. She was crying.

Celeste reached for her shoulder, not sure what else to do. For a while they stayed that way. Solana crying, Celeste’s hand on her shoulder. The rain fell more heavily, soaking through Celeste’s clothing, but she dared not move.

“My father killed Hawke’s mother,” Solana said at length, in voice so small that Celeste could hardly hear it over the sound of the pattering rain.

She thought she must have misheard, it made no sense in the context of everything else. Solana sniffed and brushed aside some of the hair that fell in a wet curtain around her face. “My father was a murderer, a serial killer. He hunted women for their body parts.”

Celeste shifted closer. “Where’s this coming from?”

“Hawke.” She sniffed again. “He thinks I’m the same.”

Horror, anger and revulsion warred for dominance in Celeste’s stomach. *Why would he say such a thing? No matter how angry he was. “You’re not.”*

“What if I am? What if I’m just one bad spell, one bad decision away from that darkness? The ritual I did with Morrigan…” She hiccupped.

“You’re not ,” Celeste insisted.

“I just keep hurting people.”

“Not intentionally!” Celeste wrapped both arms around Solana and pulled her close, holding her as she sobbed. “Solana, you’ve saved more people than you’ve hurt. You saved Alise. You saved *me* . You saved-”
“-Ferelden, I know.”

“And all those people in your stories.”

Solana sobbed harder, her whole body shaking. “There’s so much blood on my hands. They never talk about the blood.”

“The likes of Loghain Mac Tir you mean?”

“And Jowan.”

Jowan? Celeste had known him at the Circle, although not very well. He’d been quite a few years older than her, so she’d only really seen him at a few clandestine meetings. But she knew the story of how he’d tried to escape with the Chantry sister, and used blood magic to do so. Solana had betrayed him to the Templars, the stories said. Perhaps that’s what she meant.

She brushed the wet hair from Solana’s eyes. “You’re not a murderer. You’re a soldier. I know you, Solana. You’d never let a good person die if you could save them. And forget about what Hawke said. It doesn’t matter who your father is. Ren’s father… well you know what he was. But my Ren? He’s the sweetest, kindest boy you could imagine. You’ll see when you meet him. Now, let’s get you home and dry, alright?”

Solana swallowed. “I don’t live-”

“-I know.”

Solana stiffened in Celeste’s arms. “You’ve spoken to him?”

Celeste weighed up lying, but decided against it. “Yes.”

“How… how was he?”

“He seemed… tired. He was concerned about you.”

Solana laughed darkly. “Of course he was. He’s Cullen. If you… if you see him again, can you tell him that it’s not because of what he said?”

“You should tell him yourself.”

“If I talk to him, we’ll just end up fighting. Or dancing around each other.”

They managed, somehow, to get down from the tavern roof without slipping on the wet tiles. By the time they reached the servants’ quarters, Solana was trembling violently and Celeste’s own clothing was heavy enough to weigh her down.

“I’ll be across the hall,” Celeste said, depositing Solana at the door to her new quarters.

But Solana stared at her with big green eyes, looking lost and broken. Celeste leaned past her and opened the door.

The room beyond was blissfully warm. Natalia had lit a fire and closed the windows. She was sitting on one of the beds, holding Alise at her shoulder.

Celeste knew Natalia. She was the oldest of the scullery maids, finding work with the Inquisition after her husband passed and her children had been married off. She’d often told Celeste that she
liked the excitement of being in the “thick of things”, despite how her knees protested at the more menial tasks assigned to her.

Her eyes crinkled when she smiled in greeting. “Ah! You’re back. She’s beginning to get fidgety.”

Solana crossed the room and scooped Alise into her arms. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be gone so long.”

“You’re wet through,” Natalia rose and began fussing over Solana, who protested weakly.

Celeste backed towards the door, aiming to make a subtle exit. She narrowly avoided backing straight into Josephine Montilyet, a sharp intake of breath her only warning as the woman entered the room.

“Forgive the intrusion, my lady. May I have a word?”

Celeste blinked at her. Solana and Natalia both froze. Alise gave a little whimper, pawing at Solana’s chest for nourishment.

“Who are you speaking to?” Solana asked. She seemed genuinely confused.

Josephine laughed softly. “I apologise, I’m not certain how to address you considering…”

Solana quirked an eyebrow, “Don’t tell me you would have gone with Mrs Rutherford?”

The ambassador blushed. “Solana, then. May I have a private word?”

“Can it wait until morning? I need to feed her.”

“Please, it will only take a moment.”

To Celeste’s surprise, Solana looked to her. She shrugged.

Alise gave another impatient wail.

“Fine,” Solana said, “but I’m feeding her in your office.”

Celeste waited with Natalia, too anxious to leave. She knew Solana too well. Her easy humour was a front. She was worried that Josephine would lecture her, tell her how making such a display of leaving Cullen would somehow affect the Inquisition’s reputation. How would Solana react to that, after everything else that had happened that day?

But it turned out she needn’t have worried. Solana returned a few minutes later with a small amused smile on her face.

“Apparently it will not do to have the Hero of Ferelden living like a servant,” she told Celeste, quietly enough so that Natalia wouldn’t hear. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. Her hair had dried into frizzy waves that bounced with the motion.

“Where does she want you to go?”

“She’s prepared a guest suite for me. Along with a cradle for Alise.” Solana sighed, gaze dropping to her daughter, bundled in her arms and chewing on her fist. “I would refuse, but she’s not a particularly good sleeper. I don’t want to keep everyone up.”

The current room slept four, the other two women must have been on dinner duty. Plus, the room
didn’t have much in the way of facilities for a baby. Each bed had a trunk at the foot for personal items, and there was a single vanity against the one wall with a mirror. It was reminiscent of the apprentice quarters at the Circle, sans bunk beds. Celeste knew Solana was used to much less, but now she had Alise, sleeping in a tent or up in a hay loft wasn’t really an option.

“Where are your things?” Celeste asked. “I’ll help you carry them up.”

Smoke drifted across the floor of the tavern, curling around Celeste’s feet.

“Enchanters, the time has come to be alive…” Maryden’s sweet voice carried over the noise.

The tavern was busy and hot. People crowded together, trading jokes and stories, so close that Celeste could hardly move through them. Celeste knew she was looking for someone, but not who. Above her, the green sky of the Fade glimmered. It didn’t seem out of place.

“Celeste!” A familiar voice called. In her heart, she knew it to be Solana’s. “Celeste! Come join me!”

Celeste stood on her toes, trying to see the tables along the edge of the room, but thick fog obscured them. She shouldered her way between two large men.

“What we plea will be faithful end decree…” Maryden sang.

“Celeste, over here!”

A shadow moved in the smoke, darkness against the bright of the tavern. There were no features, only a blurred silhouette.

“Come join me,” the shadow said.

“Enchanters! A time has come for battle lines…” Maryden sang.

Both voices were twisted together and no longer sweet. Celeste paused.

“You’re powerful, Celeste, you know it to be true,” the shadow said. It no longer had Solana’s voice. It no longer really had a voice at all. It was distorted, like a whisper.

“Go away, demon,” Celeste said the practised words.

“I am no demon,” the shadow said. “I do not wish to take your power from you, I want you to use it, for good.”

Celeste shook her head. All other sound in the room had faded away. It was still filled with people, but they moved in silence.

“The mages need you, Celeste,” the shadow whispered. “Your fellow mages need you. I have seen your power. More power than the Hero of Ferelden. You know it to be true.”

“We will cut these knotted ties, and some may live and some may die…” Maryden sang.
“Why do you waste your powers as a kitchen girl?” the shadow asked.

Celeste gritted her teeth and tried to force herself to wake up. “I will not listen to you, demon.”

“Enchanter, come to me. Enchanter, come to me…” Maryden’s voice seemed to come from the shadow.

“I’m not an enchanter!” Celeste shouted.

The shadow started drifting towards her. It didn’t become clearer as it neared. Its edges remained fuzzy, as if it was made from smoke. “According to whom? The Circle?”

She backed away, stumbling over Maryden’s empty stool. “Leave me alone!”

“Do not be afraid, Celeste. I mean you no harm.”

Celeste reached inside her, reached for her power. “I said, leave me alone!” She struck outwards. Energy speared from her fingertips, tearing through the tavern and shredding the tables, the walls, the ghostly people.

Her final impression before she jerked awake was of the shadow slowly retreating.

Samson wasn’t sure what woke him. There was no particular sound, but something was out of place. Something in the air around his cell. Something…

He opened his eyes to find Commander Cullen Rutherford standing over him. His features were shrouded in darkness.

A lump formed in Samson’s throat, but he managed to swallow it down, to lift his head with dignity he did not feel. “Rutherford, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

He was glad his voice sounded steadier than he felt. Cullen hadn’t visited him once during his internment, aside from the interrogations he’d overseen. Samson had known this day was coming, had been dreading it. A confrontation, at last.

His heart clenched as Cullen moved towards the opening where the first rays of light were seeping in. Unease crawled up his spine.

If today was to be the day of his reckoning, did Cullen have to draw it out?

“Why did you join Corypheus?” he asked, hands behind his back like one of those Chantry tutors they’d had at the monastery.

“I told your interrogators everything I know already, I swear it.” Andraste’s tits, did he have to sound so pathetic?

Cullen turned. Even with the weak sunlight on his face, the area around his eyes remained dark. He clearly hadn’t slept in days. Samson didn’t much like the look. It gave him the appearance of someone willing to do things. Things to turn a stomach.
“You’ve got nothing left to lose, Samson,” he said. “We may as well speak honestly. What were you looking for? Power? Glory? Why did you join him?”

Samson wanted to give a snide remark, but none came to him. Much as he hated to admit it, Cullen had him rattled. Besides, what was the point in bravado now? The man was right. He didn’t have anything left, much less pride.

The truth, then.

“Glory in some respect, I suppose. Mostly hunger.”

“Hunger?” He sounded incredulous.

“Yeah, hunger. Hunger for purpose, hunger for lyrium, hunger for food. Hunger. Kirkwall after you left.... shit, Rutherford. I hadn’t eaten in five days. I was lurking in the Hanged Man hoping someone would take pity on me. Someone did.”

“Corypheus?”

He nodded and dropped his gaze. “I’m... I’m not proud of it. He gave me lyrium, a warm meal and he promised me a future where no one would suffer at the hands of the Chantry as I had.”

“Other than being turned into red lyrium monstrosities you mean?”

“They were always doomed to die,” he answered, but his words came out small and compressed, delivered to his lap.

“I didn’t hear that,” Cullen said.

Samson forced his eyes to meet the commander's once more. "They were doomed to die anyways. You and I both know that. Lyrium madness either way. At least... at least they'd go down fighting. They'd go down making a difference to this blighted world."

"Some difference."

"Yeah, I know."

"You admit he was wrong?"

Samson chuckled. "What? You're surprised? You think I actually believed any of his great Tevinter bullshit?"

Had he? He didn’t truly know himself. It had certainly been appealing thinking of a new power that wasn’t the Chantry, but Samson hadn’t allowed himself to think on it too much. It was like that time he’d discovered a nest of beatles under one of the paving stones in the Gallows courtyard. Ugly little things, especially in that number, all crawling over each other. And as long as he didn’t think about them, he could stop feeling like they were crawling under his skin.

"You were his right hand, a few moments from becoming his Vessel when we stopped you,” Cullen insisted. “You were willing to give your life for him.”

"Wrong. I was willing to give my life for a new world. He was the means. And... he recognised me as someone worthy to help. Which is more than the Chantry ever did. I know you will never believe me, Rutherford, and I don’t blame you. But that's the truth. " The truth. It felt true, as it reverberated through his chest. Regardless of consequence, it was honest. He found himself staring at his hands, where red lyrium had once grown beneath his nails. "At the time, I thought
the ends justified the means."

"And now?"

"What does it matter? What's done is done."

Rutherford was at the bars again, his dark eyes glaring down. "It matters because Celeste wants me to release you."

Celeste. His heart kicked, stomach tightening with surprise and… maybe something else. "Release me?"

"She says you've changed and you're a wasted resource. She believes you could help the Inquisition."

"She does, does she?" There was no hiding the smile that tugged at his lips. "And what do you believe, Rutherford?"

"I believe you're dangerous. I've seen what you're capable of."

"But then you seem to like dangerous things."

"Her green eyes glowing in the light from her spell, the smell of lyrium, hunger like he'd never known, his skin being stretched, ripped… the cold solace of death. "How's the missus?"

Cullen scowled, showing his teeth, an expression completely at odds with his usual cultured demeanor.

"That good? Forget I said anything. Look, Rutherford, if you're wanting me to plead my case, I'm afraid you're gonna be disappointed. I know what I did. I know what I deserve. Besides, that ambassador of yours? She'll have your head." He laughed. "Imagine her trying to explain that one away."

Cullen reached up towards the bars and Samson flinched despite himself. But he didn’t shake them, or slam them. Instead, the soft clink of a lock. "What are you doing?"

It was all Samson could do to stare as the door of the cell swung open. Fear pooled in his belly, with the barrier between them removed, Cullen could do anything. Sunlight glinted off his sword pommel and Samson regretted the quip about his wife. An apology was on his lips, but Cullen stepped aside.

Samson tried to read his expression, and failed.

"Don't be mistaken,” Cullen said. “You're not free. I will be watching you and my men have orders to throw you right back in here should you set foot outside of Skyhold. But Celeste is right in one respect. You are a valuable resource and since we're keeping you alive, we might as well make use of your skills. The quartermaster is expecting you. Get kitted up and meet me in my office. Anyone can tell you where it is."

Relief left Samson in a whoosh of air like a laugh as he got to his feet. “You had your mind made up before you even got here."

"Don't make me change it."

"Yessir."
If you like the Samson redemption stuff, I've also written a shorter fic in which he falls in love with the Inquisitor (16 chapters, stand alone). It's in a very different style and very NSFW. https://archiveofourown.org/works/10871610

A lot of this Samson info is taken from the Bioware short story about him, Paper and Steel, which you can read free on the wiki and I highly recommend.
“Celeste, dear, you have a visitor.”

Celeste straightened, tightening the rag around her head that kept her hair out of the food. In addition to the usual breakfast rolls, Ambassador Montilyet had requested a selection of pastries for some visiting Chantry mothers. Hopefully they’d be appreciative. She’d been bent over folding pastry for the last hour, and her back made its displeasure known as she turned towards the doorway.

She fully expected to see Solana. Even in the fancy guest room, the woman had seemed ill at ease when they’d parted the night before.

Instead, Raleigh Samson hovered in the shadows just beyond the door.

He was tall. She must have known that at some stage, but in the mornings she’d been sitting with him, she’d forgotten. He loomed, although the expression on his face was far from threatening.

Her throat constricted, heart skittered. She wiped her hands on a cloth. “I’ll be a minute Marsha.”

The other cook took her place over the pastry without comment.

Out in the corridor, Samson ducked his chin and offered her a shaky smile. “I believe I owe you my thanks.” His voice was soft. She would have said he was nervous, were that not so at odds with who he was.

“I didn’t think it would work.”

“Yeah, well, Rutherford’s always hated a wasted resource.”

“He told you what I said?” She searched his expression for resentment.

“Yeah, but don’t worry. If anything, I’m glad you think I could be useful.” His eyes lingered on her face and it was difficult to breathe. Was that all Cullen had told him? She could feel her neck heating. When she said nothing, he continued. “I’m to see the quartermaster, get equipped. You know where I can find him?”

“Yes, he’s… I’ll take you.”

“You don’t need to.”

“It’s no trouble. It’s just down here.” She turned quickly, heading back into the kitchen and out the back door into the courtyard.

The air was fresh and fragrant after the previous night’s rains, a welcome respite from the stuffy kitchen. Celeste anticipated some sort of reaction when they moved through the marketplace, but it seemed no one recognised the man she was with as Corypheus’s right hand. How many at Skyhold had seen his face? They’d known him by his red armour, and now he wore nothing but cotton.
A cool breeze teased at the branches, rustling new leaves and pulling wisps of Celeste's hair free.

_I probably look a sight. And why do I care? What does it matter. It doesn't matter._

She tucked her hair behind her ears as they came to a halt before the barracks. “Here you are.”

“Much obliged.” Samson’s shoulders were hunched and he stared down at his feet.

“Morris won’t bite,” Celeste teased. The very idea of nervous young quartermaster being threatening was amusing. It was more likely he’d scarper from Samson on sight.

The corners of Samson’s mouth twitched upwards. “Guess this is it.” He shrugged. “I… I’m not really one for speeches and the like. But you’ve been kind to me these last weeks, when no one should’ve been. I s’pose I wanted to say thanks.”

But the way he said it, it sounded like “goodbye”.

_Oh._

It hadn’t occurred to her. She’d have no reason to see him after this. And why should it matter? It was probably for the best. He was Raleigh Samson. And Ren would arrive soon, and how would she explain this friendship - or whatever it was - to her son?

“I suppose you’ll be eating in the hall now?” she asked.

“Yes, I suppose.” He fidgeted, cleared his throat. “W-will you be eating in the hall?”

Her heart leapt. “I…” say something. “Yes, I suppose I will.”

His answering smile made her head feel light. It wasn’t even a particularly handsome smile, but she found herself staring.

“I… I’d better get back,” she gestured over her shoulder.

His smile faltered. “Yeah, of course. Thanks again.”

That unidentifiable heat was back in her belly as she moved away from him. She made it halfway past the tavern before something made her pause.

“What?” She didn’t even know if he was still there.

“Yea?”

“I… I finish at ten. That’s when I’ll go eat.”

She could hear the grin in his voice when he answered, “Right.”

It took a good few minutes for the heat in her cheeks to fade, and by the time it did, she was back in the kitchen, bent over pastry once more.
It didn’t take long for Samson to realise he was not going to make it to breakfast by ten. The quartermaster spent the better part of an hour tittering and measuring and figuring out what manner of armour was best for him. Cullen hadn’t specified. Samson eyed the plate, recalling better days, but it turned out he was still too weak to bear the weight. In the end, they landed on leathers.

Leather was better anyways. New like a new start. Stiff as he was.

He found Cullen’s office easily enough. The Commander was behind his desk glaring at a lyrium box. He jerked when Samson rapped on the door and pretended to be focused on something else - some book on the Blight he had lying on his desk.

He spoke to Samson while looking at the book, taking him through the day’s plans until Samson interrupted. “Still tempting is it?”

Cullen’s eyes widened and he cleared his throat. Did his face pale? It was hard to tell with his pallor. It took him a moment to speak. “It always is.”

Samson had expected making Cullen feel unsettled to be more satisfying than it was. The man looked positively haunted.

“Well props to you for managing to stop. Willingly. That’s something, innit? There’s nothing quite like the call of the dust.”

As sympathetic as he’d meant the words, they didn’t seem to be received that way. Cullen glared at him and gestured sharply at the door.

Meeting Cullen’s men was the closest to public shaming Samson had come since being captured. He wasn’t stripped naked and flogged, but he might well have been by the way the recruits glared at him. Cullen introduced him as Corypheus’s right hand, as someone who had been their enemy and had seen their weaknesses. He was to work on those weaknesses with them.

Fortunately, Cullen was right. He did know their weaknesses.

“You’re a fine bunch individually, but you’re not individuals at war. That’s where we - er - the Red Templars always had one up. You all have things to die for back here, right? Pretty ladies, wives, children, a game of diamondback. We never had that. We had singular purpose and that meant that each one of my men was willing to die to protect his neighbour out on the field. If we wanted to down you lot, all we had to do was find the gap in your shields, or find the one man distracted enough to let us through.”

Training itself took nearly three hours and Samson was fall-down exhausted by the end of it. It must have been after eleven by the time he made it to the great hall, and as expected there was no one there.

Celeste wasn’t there the next day either, when he did manage to make it by ten. He sat at the end of one of the long tables, keeping to himself. Now people glared and whispered and pointed at him. Well, the anonymity had been nice while it’d lasted. It was little wonder no one came at him with a knife or tried to slip poison into his food. The very last thing he should be worrying about was whether Celeste would join him, but he looked up every time someone entered the hall, regardless.
The following day, when there was still no sign of her, he thought perhaps her shifts had changed. That or she was spiteful about being stood up. Or, more likely, she’d changed her mind about wanting to eat with him. And good for her, because the last thing he’d want would be to make her a pariah for spending time with him.

Still, he found himself wandering down to the kitchens. He reasoned he’d like to hear it straight from her if that was the case, if only so that he could eat in peace without looking up every few moments in hopes of seeing her.

The shift seemed the same as when he’d visited before. The girl who’d been helping her spotted Samson in the doorway again. From her open expression, it appeared she still didn’t know who he was. Good.

“I, um, Celeste?” Mumbling idiot.

“Oh, she’s off ill, dear.”

“Ill?” his voice pitched upwards as his chest tightened.

Marsha chuckled. “A cold, dear. She should be back at work come Sunday. Do not fret.”

Celeste accepted the cup from Solana. It was warm to the touch, but not hot. The concoction must have cooled on the trip down from her new quarters. A whole pot of the stuff was sitting on a stool near Celeste’s head, and the fragrant steam rising from it smelled like honey.

“It’s gnot from Orlais, is it? Still havin flashbacks,” Celeste said, hoping Solana could make out the words despite her blocked nose.

Solana’s smile assured her she could. “It’s as Ferelden as you get. Ginger, honey and elfroot.”

“Oh good.” Celeste took a tentative sip. It wasn’t half bad. The honey balanced out the bitterness of the roots. “You shouldn be here. I don want Alise to get sick.”

“It’s my fault you’re ill. You were out in the rain because of me.”

Celeste couldn’t argue. She hoped a sympathetic expression would do the trick.

Solana reached over her to puff her pillows. “And as for Alise, don’t worry, Natalia seems more than happy to entertain her.”

Celeste managed to contain her sneeze until Solana had leaned back again, and was grateful for the handkerchief her friend passed her.

She was in the middle of blowing her nose when Solana’s chair screeched back. There, in the doorway of the room, was Samson. He seemed as startled to see Solana as she was to see him. He clutched a small basket in front of him, like a shield.
He recovered quickly though and offered Solana a small nod. “Mrs Rutherford.”

Blue light burst from Solana’s palm and hovered there.

His eyes flicked to it. “Let me guess, your husband failed to inform you of my release?” He held out the basket. “Delivery, from the kitchens.”

“So what? You’re an errand boy now?”

“Something like that.”

Solana stepped forward tentatively to take the basket in her free hand. She didn't extinguish the spell.

“I'll be on my way then,” Samson said. His eyes moved briefly to Celeste, and he gave her a curt nod before melting back into the shadows beyond the door.

Solana sighed and sank onto her chair, handing Celeste the basket. “Cullen might have said something.”

“Have you spoken to him at all?” Celeste asked, sinuses blissfully clear for the moment.

“No. But if Samson’s roaming about the place I was certain to run into him. Who’s to say he’s not going to come seeking revenge?”

“Oh yes, that business where you killed him.”

Solana chewed on her lip. Her hands were curled into fists, and her knuckles were white.

“Relax. I’m sure Cullen’s got people watching ‘im. He wouldn’t put you in danger. You know that.”

Solana sighed and nodded. “Well, nice of the kitchen to send you a care package. Go on then.”

Celeste moved the handkerchief covering the top of the basket aside. Two rolls and a sprig of embrium. Warmth flushed up from her stomach, to her chest. She grinned.

Solana frowned at the contents. “Embrium’s good for the chest, but bread isn’t the most substantial meal. I would have expected soup or something.”

“I like bread,” Celeste said.

Cullen had been dreading the spymaster’s visit. He’d known it was coming.

The day Solana left, he’d stayed up at his desk waiting, drinking wine until he stopped tasting it. He’d pictured Leliana entering, planning to drag him from his bed and lecture him, only to find him sitting up waiting for her. He’d push a glass towards her and she’d take a seat and they’d share silence until she started with accusations and he’d be too numb to feel anything.
That’s not what had transpired.

He’d woken up at his desk as the first rays of light poured in through the broken roof. Cotton-mouthed, reeking of wine, with a pounding headache, he’d readied himself for morning drills.

Leliana had not come to him the next night either. But he’d known she would, eventually.

He was going over the latest report from Griffon Wing Keep, when one of Leliana’s messengers finally arrived at his desk. He passed Cullen a parchment that said simply, “Come see me at sunset.”

Ominous. But then, that was very like her.

Unease chased Cullen up to the tower. The pit of his stomach was cold and sour. At this time of the day, the rookery was empty and heavy with shadows, black against the orange of the failing light. He was half expecting Leliana to melt from one of them with a dagger in hand, but he found her on the balcony looking down at the herb garden.

She turned at his approach. “I have news.”

“News?” That… was not what he’d expected.

Nodding, she brushed past him to her desk where she rifled through papers and drew out a piece of parchment. “Grey Wardens. It seems obvious now.”

“Grey Wardens?” he repeated, mind recalibrating.

She waved the page at him. “Grey Wardens. He’s a Warden. They’ve been leaving for months. It should have been my first thought.”

Cullen plucked the parchment from her hand and examined it. A list of times in various scripts, and beside them a few jotted notes that made very little sense.

“What does ‘raven bottle elfroot’ mean?”

Leliana rolled her eyes. “It means two women with no weapons left Skyhold. I should think that would be obvious.”

He wasn’t sure if she was joking.

“And then ‘garden of flowers’?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Jim feeling creative.” Leliana took the page back. “It’s eight children. He’s supposed to list the types of flowers but I suppose he didn’t see them as much of a threat.” She pointed a little way down the page. “See this here?”

Cullen had to squint; the writing was nearly ineligible. “Wagtail quid embrium.”

“That’s right. Single blonde mage. That’s Anders. And he’s alone.” How she came to that conclusion, Cullen couldn’t begin to guess. She snatched another page off her desk and thrust it into his hand. “I was trying to find a record that showed he either took the phylactery with him or someone brought them after him. Then I realised it made far more sense for him to send them ahead. Less suspicious that way, no?” She smoothed the page she’d given him and pointed at a time code a few hours before the ‘wagtail’.
This one he could understand a part of at least. “Griffons.”

“Griffons stand plaidweave quid,” she read out the full entry. “Four Grey Wardens with a cart and a single horse.”

“Plaidweave?” He couldn’t help but ask.

“It’s a description of the transport. Not armoured, plain, old-fashioned… ugly.”

“That’s not much to go on.”

She sighed, taking the page from him again and placing both on her desk, where she leaned, face covered in shadow. “Which is why I didn’t come to you sooner. Wardens have been leaving Skyhold ever since we defeated Corypheus. That is no secret. But I’ve started digging.”

“Digging?” He moved closer to her.

“Digging, Commander. I received word this morning from my agents near Halamshiral. Wardens aren’t just leaving Skyhold. They’re disappearing.”

He sank into an open chair. “Maker, not this again.”

“There’s more. Solana’s been writing to Weishaupt since Adamant. She’s received no reply. At least none that I’ve seen. And I have been keeping a careful watch on her, as you might well imagine.”

“Solana’s not involved,” Cullen confirmed. He even managed to keep his voice steady on her name.

“Oh, I know that.” She became suddenly very busy with her papers and Cullen hoped that might be the extent of their talk of Solana. But Leliana shook her head, “Alistair, really?”

Cullen pulled his back straight. “You heard the entire exchange?”

“No. But it was loud enough that my agents down the corridor did. Still, I suppose she needed to hear it.”

He didn’t know whether to be more embarrassed or surprised. Was Leliana taking his side?

Before he could find words to respond, she was smiling at him. “She’ll come round. Give her time. She’s always had a hot head.”

But even if she did come around, what then? Nothing had been the same since Kinloch, and it might never be. Perhaps he needed to accept that.

Celeste tossed over onto her side. Her body was hot with fever and all she wanted to do was sleep, but people were talking. It must have been the shift change. Two of the women she roomed with did the evening dinner run.

“It’s the strangest thing.”
“That’s definitely what it said?”

Celeste cracked her eyes open to glare at them. They were standing near the door, oblivious. She recognised the first speaker as a member of the resistance who had also found work and acceptance at Skyhold.

“Yes, ‘your fellow mages need you’. I swear to the Maker, it was just as you said. Strange shadow with a rasping voice. Knew my name and everything.”

“Demon?”

“Must be. Gives me the shivers, let me tell you…”

They moved out into the corridor, and with the silence Celeste fell back into her own dreams.
“He’ll be fine,” Solana assured Celeste for the umpteenth time. “No one’s going to attack a merchant caravan bound for the Inquisition. And our soldiers patrol the route.”

Alise gave another impatient squeal, reaching over Solana’s shoulder towards the horses. Solana bounced her, but kept focussed on Celeste.

The woman paced with her arms folded. Her breath puffed in the cool morning air. Every so often, she’d pause and stare out at the gates, before resuming her march backwards and forwards.

“I know, I know. I have nothing to worry about.” Still, she stared at the portcullis as if she could make it rise by will alone.

Then, with a great creak and the clatter of chains, it did start to rise. Solana examined Celeste’s face, half-convinced she was lifting it with her magic. But, though Celeste’s every muscle was tensed, her attention was not on the rising metal that protected Skyhold’s main gates, but on a caravan that slowly made its way up the steep mountain road.

When Solana had walked into the kitchen that morning, she’d found the head cook red in the face, yelling at Celeste to pull herself together. Apparently she’d spilled an entire jug of garum all over the floor, shattered several plates and burned half of the day’s bread. When the cook chased them out, they’d come out here to wait. It had still been dark and Solana had fed Alise in the shadows of the barn. Now, an hour later, she was starting to fidget.

The courtyard had also filled up significantly.

The crowd that had gathered to greet the merchant caravan whooped and cheered as the first grey mare clopped through the gates. It was several tense minutes before the three passenger carriages at the centre of the caravan ejected their occupants. A small boy stepped down from the furthest. He was lean, with tousled brown hair, a smattering of freckles and Celeste’s keen green eyes. He looked around, brow puckered. Celeste did not seem to notice him amongst the sudden chaos of off-loading - boxes of fruit, reams of fabric, barrels of exotic drink and an assortment of other cargo dominated the courtyard. Solana was about to point Ren out, when someone else stepped down from the carriage beside him.

Varric.

The dwarf placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder and pointed in Solana’s direction. The boy’s face stretched into a broad grin. He waved wildly. Celeste saw him and broke into a sprint. She fell to her knees as she reached him and pulled him into a fierce embrace.

Varric’s gaze travelled over Solana, resting just behind her. She turned, expecting to see Hawke. But it was Cullen she found standing calmly a few meters back.

Her insides jerked. The cold air she drew into her lungs wasn’t enough. Cullen. She hadn’t seen him at all since she’d left him in their room. He was thinner, paler and his mouth was set in a deep frown.

Varric passed Solana as if she wasn’t there. “Commander, I didn’t expect to find you waiting for me. Tell me this is a coincidence, or I’m going to have to fire some people.” He offered Cullen his
"A coincidence?" Solana was unable to stop herself from approaching the duo.

Varric’s gaze slid to her and his eyes narrowed. “Hero.” The nickname was thick with irony. “How’s the kid?”

Alise was chewing on her fist, eyes large as silver pieces while she watched the antics of the merchants.

“She’s well,” Solana said. “Thank you.”

As if on cue, Alise gave a whimper. She wriggled, kicking out her stockinged feet in displeasure, before opening her mouth and wailing.

“She’s easily overwhelmed,” Cullen provided.

Solana bounced her again, but she only yelled louder. Solana didn’t want to leave, she wanted to find out why Varric was here. She wanted to meet Celeste’s son. But she had little choice when Alise was making that much noise. “I should… I should take her inside. Sorry.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Varric said.

Cullen felt involuntary sympathy for Solana as he watched her head back into the main building, shushing their screaming child.

Not because she had to deal with Alise. All the noise and activity of the caravan’s arrival was just the sort of thing he would have expected to set her off. Solana was good with her, and he had no doubt that Alise would quieten the instant they entered Skyhold’s dim recesses.

But he’d never seen Varric being cold.

Even in Kirkwall, when he’d been a Templar and Varric had spent his free hours drinking with the leader of the mage rebellion. And afterwards, after the bloodshed and Meredith, after Cassandra had recruited Cullen to the Inquisition, when Cullen had been suffering the ravages of withdrawal, it had been Varric who’d coaxed him out of himself, who’d forced him to smile. They’d been on opposite sides of a war, and Cullen had never seen this side of Varric.

As soon as Solana was out of earshot, Cullen said softly, “You received my letter, I take it?”

Varric snorted. “Yes Curly, I received your letter. And fortunately for you I pay people to ensure no one else did. You have any idea how dangerous that information is? Least you could do is use a cypher. Who else knows about this?”

“Look, Varric, I hardly expected you to come all this way-”

“Nightingale no doubt, whether you intended her to or not.”

“Yes, she knows. Varric, I merely wanted to ascertain whether you had perhaps heard anything about where-”
“And the Inquisitor, you’ve told him?” Varric slung his pack over his shoulder and began walking towards the stairs to the upper bailey.

“No.”

Varric gave him a meaningful look.

“I… meant to tell him. He’s left for the Frostback Basin on an archaeological mission. Cassandra’s in charge.”

“I see.”

“I thought it best not to inform her.”

Varric chuckled. “Yeah, I can imagine how that would go down. And Hawke?”

“Yes.”

“You told Hawke?”

“Of course I told Hawke. If Anders left a clue with anyone I assumed it would be with him.”

“And did he?”

“No.”

Varric said nothing until they reached the Herald’s Rest. He turned suddenly at the entrance and in a low voice asked, “How’s he been?”

“Who, Hawke?”

“No, the guy who mucks the stables.” He rolled his eyes. “Yes, Hawke.”

“Ah…” Cullen wasn’t certain how to answer. He scratched the back of his neck. “I suppose he’s been as one would expect considering the circumstances.”

Varric pushed the door all the way open and strode in.

The tavern was almost empty at this time of morning. Maryden sat on a stool tuning her lute. A single patron slumped at the bar. Cabot was busy drying a glass. Varric strode up to him, and reached for his purse. He paused.

“Hawke?”

The drunk at the bar turned on his stool. Maker’s breath, it really was Hawke. He hadn’t shaved recently and his hair had grown longer. He had a wild look about him as he stared at them through bleary eyes. “Varric?”

Samson thwacked at the dummy so hard the thing shuddered and straw flew. His arms were feeling like a pair of jellied eels and it was frustrating. A year ago he’d have been able to march half a day and fight for the rest of it. Now Cullen’s morning training sessions were enough to wear him out.
“So, they entrusted you with a real sword, then?”

Celeste. He was grinning before he even turned around and saw her leaning against a tree in the shadows near the armory.

“You’re looking better,” he said, before thinking to wipe away the sweat from his brow.

A movement near her skirts drew his gaze. A small boy with shaggy brown hair was half hidden behind her and staring with big green eyes. She gently pushed him forward.

“This is Ser Samson.”

So, he’d arrived. The boy - her boy - continued to stare at him.

“And you would be Ren, I presume?” Samson strode closer, offering the young man his hand. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Are you a Templar?” Ren asked.

The question caught Samson off guard. “I… used to be. How’d you figure that?”

Ren frowned. “Templars are big. And they carry swords.” His eyes darted to the training dummy, where Samson’s shield leaned. “And they fight with shields.”

“Observant young lad.”

Celeste ruffled his hair. “We taught him to be able to identify Templars from an early age. You can imagine the necessity.”

He was confused only a moment before he remembered. She was an apostate. A maleficar no less. Of course, most of the boy’s life they would have been hiding from people such as he.

To Ren, Celeste said, “Ser Samson isn’t a Templar anymore. He’s with the Inquisition now.”

Was he? He supposed he was.

“Did you fight against Corypheus?” Ren asked.

Samson’s stomach dropped. But Celeste laughed.

“Uh,” Samson said, “not exactly.”

He dreaded a follow-up question, but Ren’s attention was on his sword. “Can you teach me how to fight?”

“Ren!” Celeste laughed again.

“Symon and Antony fight with swords,” he protested.

Samson raised his eyebrows in silent query. She didn’t have other children she’d failed to mention?

“Your cousins are older than you,” Celeste said, her gaze meeting Samson’s.

“I’m ten,” he proclaimed. “Last Fall the Templars came for recruits and they took Steiven and he’s only eight. But his dad let him use a sword when he was five and-”
“-and you’re not going to tell me you want to be a Templar?” Celeste’s voice pitched in genuine concern.

Ren blushed. He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “No.”

“I’m sure I can teach him a few things,” Samson said, although the moment he started speaking he doubted himself. He could see Ren was anxious to learn, but was it overstepping? He didn’t want to upset Celeste. That was the very last thing he wanted.

Ren’s small face lit up and he looked to his mother with such desperate hope that she shook her head and sighed, “We’ll see.”

Not satisfied to let the subject drop, Ren turned back to Samson. “How old were you when you started training, Ser Samson?”

Crafty little thing, this one. “Me? I was given to the Chantry, so I’m a poor example.”

“Given to the Chantry?” His jaw hung open.

“Ren,” Celeste cautioned. “It’s not polite to ask someone you’ve just met so many questions.”

Samson waved off her concern. “Naw, I don’t mind. My parents gave me to the Chantry at the age of five. The Chantry decided I was to become a Templar and my training began.”

“Why’d they give you to the Chantry? Didn’t they like you?”

Celeste dropped her head forward into her hands. “Ren, please.”

*Out of the mouths of babes...* “No, I suppose they didn’t much like me. I was another mouth to feed, you see. They never meant to have another child, but they made a brave show of it for a few years. Then they hit on financial troubles and, well, I became a Templar.”

“That’s horrible!” Ren was more affected by the story than Samson had expected. He’d always known children to be rather selfish, lacking empathy. But Ren’s large green eyes mimicked his mother’s. They looked at him like he was a person, worthy of sympathy.

Samson shifted in discomfort, regretting saying as much as he had. “It wasn’t all that bad.” That was a lie. “I don’t even remember them, truth be told.” That was a lie too. He remembered his father’s fists all too well, and the cold first nights in the monastery when he’d known himself to be unwanted, unloved; when the older kids had seen that weakness and tortured it out of him. Still, he managed to force a smile. “Given the choice, though, I would have chosen to run playing over sword drills and the likes. It’s not very exciting. Perhaps you should take some time to enjoy all Skyhold has to offer a boy, hey?”

Ren pouted and nodded, but his eyes stayed locked on Samson’s sword.

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Hawke leaned back against the wall and tried to ignore the ache in his chest. His chest and his head. His chest and his head and his stomach. *Maker.* Solana had made alcohol seem like a decent coping mechanism back when they’d first met. He’d have words with her… if she ever spoke to him again.
Varric handed him a mug of water across the table. The entire upstairs was theirs, and he’d seen Varric slip Cabot some silver to ensure it stayed that way for the next few hours.

As usual, Varric’s expression didn’t say much as he settled on the bench opposite. Cullen hovered, arms folded, eyes darting around the room. He couldn’t look more suspect if he tried.

“Take a seat Curly, you’re making me nervous.”

Cullen frowned, but did as Varric asked, sliding in next to the dwarf and placing his clasped hands on the table.

“So this is about Anders, I take it?” Hawke broke the increasingly awkward silence.

“I missed you too.” Varric smiled. “I see you’re keeping well?”

Hawke rolled his eyes and took a sip of the water. It was marvelously cool, sliding down his throat like silk. He wanted to keep drinking, maybe drink another three mugs of the stuff before crawling into bed and awaiting his hangover. Although, by the feel of his temples, it had already arrived.

“I doubt you would have brought Cullen along for a social call. No offence, Commander.”

Cullen inclined his head. “None taken.”

“Now the niceties are out of the way…” Varric leaned forward. “You two going to tell me what happened?”

“How much do you know?”

“Curly here thought it was a good idea to send a letter informing me that Blondie had taken off, possibly with Ferelden’s phylacteries.”

Cullen growled. “Well forgive me, subterfuge is hardly my area of expertise.”

“I don’t know whether that’s meant as an insult or-”

“Stop.” Hawke held up a hand. The last thing he needed on top of his blinding headache was the two of them getting into it.

Varric drew a breath. “Alright. I apologise. I know this can’t be easy-”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“Yeah, look, I know what Blondie meant to you. But I’ll sleep a lot better when we know what he’s doing with those phylacteries. Maybe you can take us through what he was like before he left. Did he say anything?”

“If he’d said anything, I would have told Cullen when he first informed me that it’s Justice we’re dealing with, not Anders.” Hawke kept his tone light, but he couldn’t resist looking at the commander when the words landed. Cullen did not disappoint. He flinched and closed his eyes.

“You failed to mention that in your letter.” Varric said. “How can you be sure?”

“Cullen made Anders give over control.”

“It was the only way to get to Solana.” His eyes were still pressed shut.
“Alright, so we’re dealing with a spirit on a rampage again? Oh, that’s perfect, that’s just great.” Varric leaned forward, forearms on the table, bringing his head closer. “Hawke, I need you to think. Did he say anything, anything at all that could indicate what kind of a rampage this is?”

“Varric…” Even thinking hurt. Hawke didn’t want to have this conversation.

But Varric didn’t stop speaking. “You know, grumbling about the price of silverite? In a mood over the slaves in Tevinter? Anything at all at this point would be helpful.”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Not suddenly upset about how the Carter runs Dark Town?”

“Yes.”

“Well what did he say? Maybe you missed something-”

“Nothing!” Hawke shot to his feet, all the hurt and bitterness bursting forth like a dam breaking. “He said nothing. Nothing at all. Because I refused to talk to him. Alright? After that room… with the blood… I turned him away. I said I needed space and I needed time. And he gave it to me.” Part of him wanted to leave them there, leave it like that. But where would he storm off to? The room that still smelled like Anders? With the uncaged rage came grief, like a whiplash. He deflated, crumpling into himself and sinking back onto the bench. “I always knew I was the one standing between him and self-destruction. I should have spoken to him. Perhaps I could have-”

He jerked as Varric’s hand landed on his arm. “Hawke-”

Varric’s eyes were big and sad and not at all helping Hawke get control of himself.

“It’s not your fault,” Cullen said, matter-of-factly. “It is mine. We have established as much. And until we know more, there is no saying whether or not you could have stopped him.”

“Chin up, Hawke. It’s Anders,” Varric said. “It’s not like he’s going to be using the phylacteries for blood magic. Whatever it is, it’s probably something noble. Or at least something he thinks is noble.”

“That’s what worries me,” Hawke said softly.

Chapter End Notes

For those who are still worried, I am going to keep my promise, I am going to fix everything! :D

Also I just want to say that I love all of these characters and that you can trust me with them. I can't say more without spoilers.
Celeste was in that alcove again - the cold stone floors, the smell of damp, the darkness. Footsteps echoed towards her. “Little Mage… where are you hiding?”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and hid her head. Beads of sweat gathered at the nape of her neck.

His shadow passed the entrance, tall and monstrous, blocking out the light. His armour rattled. Her heart slammed.

“You can’t hide, Little Mage. Hiding is against the rules. You don’t want me to tell them you broke the rules, do you?”

He paused and she was certain he sensed her. She’d found this alcove behind the books after she’d heard some of the mages talking about it.

“You know what happens to apprentices who break the rules, don’t you? They simply cannot be Harrowed. It’s too dangerous.”

He knew she was there. He must have known or he would have moved on.

“Celeste.”

She jumped at the sound of another voice, another person in the alcove with her. She always hid here alone. There shouldn’t have been anyone else here.

Celeste wanted to tell them to shush. If they didn’t, he would hear. But she was too frightened to speak. Her tongue felt numb and heavy.

“Celeste,” the whisper in the darkness said. “Come to me, I can help you.”

The Templar turned, his shadow changing direction, showing he was moving back towards the alcove.

No! He’d heard them!

But the voice spoke again. “Join me and we can make sure the Circles never return. Protect your fellow mages. Come to me.”

Even if she’d wanted to, she couldn’t. She was paralysed by fear.

“Little Mage…”

“Come to me…”

“Little Mage, I see you…”

“Come to me…”

The Templar stood opposite her, a dark silhouette staring straight at her. As he moved forward, light fell across his face.

Instead of the face she expected, he bore the face of Raleigh Samson.
Celeste jerked awake. She heaved in air. Her back was coated in ice cold sweat.

“Mom?” Ren’s voice came from the bed next to hers.

She rolled over and found him propped up on his elbow. The light of the dying fire showed her his sleepy, concerned expression.

For many years she’d been frightened that he would grow to have his face. But Ren’s eyes were hers, and his other features were uniquely his own.

She smiled at him. “Everything’s fine. Go back to sleep.”

______________________________

It was after midnight and even though the tavern was still bright and loud, the rest of Skyhold was draped in shadow.

Varric knew she’d still be up, but he thought it was polite to knock anyways. As his knuckles hit the wooden pillar, disturbed ravens took flight, cawing loudly. If Leliana had been asleep she was no longer.

A shadow near the Chantry altar moved.

“Varric.” He could hear a smile in her voice, even though he couldn’t see her features against the light of the candles. “I heard you arrived with the merchants this morning. Checking up on Hawke?”

“That,” he acknowledged, moving towards her. “And other things. I’m not disturbing you, am I?”

She laughed, a dull sound like brass left unpolished. “Why would you possibly be disturbing me at this hour?”

“Fair point.”

She swept past him to her desk where she had a bottle of wine open. She poured some into a mug and handed it to him, keeping the bottle for herself.

“I’m gone a few weeks and everyone’s become an alcoholic,” he commented, accepting the drink regardless.

“This?” she tilted the bottle as if to read the label. “Oh, this is for you, Varric. I thought you’d stop by.”

“Did you now?”

“Rowan’s Rose. I seem to recall you were fond of the vintage.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle as he settled onto one of the barrels beside her desk. “And what made you think I’d stop by, Nightingale?”

The wine brought to mind a night in the Hanged Man trading stories with her, Dorian, Hawke and
The Iron Bull. There was probably some meaning in her referencing that night, but it was lost on him. Maybe she really did just think he’d like the wine.

Her mouth did that thing - twisting up in the corner as if she were amused - while her eyes remained hard. “Anders.”

She didn’t miss a trick. But then neither did he. “I’m assuming you’re the person to speak to on the subject.”

Leliana inclined her head and poured a second mug of wine. “Who told you? Hawke?”

“Curly, actually. He thought I might be able to help.”

She raised her eyebrows. Odd, Varric would have expected her to see the letter before anyone else. “And are you?” she asked.

“Not as much as he hoped. I tried to tell him what I’ve found earlier but, well… he’s not in a great place right now, is he?”

Leliana shook her head and took a deep drink from her own mug.

“I heard he and the Hero... no longer a thing?”

The spymistress sighed. “Partly my fault. I offered to discover where her loyalties lay, to set his mind at ease.”

“He suspected her?”

“Can you blame him? At any rate, he obviously mistook my meaning. Thought I’d torture her or some such.”

“Don’t know where he’d get such a wild notion.”

“Me neither. He tricked her into discovering the broken wards, and then they had it out. I believe he told her she was responsible for Alistair’s death.”

Varric almost choked on his wine. “He what?”

Leliana shrugged. “Not in as many words. But the sentiment was there. She and the baby are in the guest quarters now.”

“Well, shit.”

She sighed again and pinched the bridge of her nose. “This is bad, Varric.”

An unguarded moment, could it be? He reached for the wine and filled up his mug. “Yeah… about that. I take it you know about Justice.”

“That Cullen suspects he’s in control? Yes. Although that was not what I meant.” Her mouth quirked again. “I meant the two of them.”

“Marriages break up all the time. Maybe it’s not meant to be.”

Leliana shook her head. “No. They need each other.”

“Now, I know they’re your friends but they’re grownups and-”
“Leliana?”

Varric jumped and spun around, almost spilling his drink. There was a ghostly figure at the top of the stairs. A woman with pale skin, pale hair and a white nightdress. Her eyes were covered in shadow and even as Varric’s heart raced, he made mental notes on the scene for a horror he’d been plotting. All that was missing was a bloodied knife in her hand.

Leliana, for her part, had shot to her feet and now she squinted at the figure, as if she was also trying to determine if they’d been visited by a particularly opaque spirit.

The woman drifted forward, the moonlight illuminating bare feet - at this time of night, at this time of year. “I was hoping you were up. I’m sorry to disturb you.” She fidgeted, and then she seemed to notice Varric for the first time. “I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“I know you,” he said, squinting at her features in the dim light. She was Solana’s friend, the one who’d been helping her with that research, who’d lead them to Samson. “You’re Celeste. Ren’s mum. Something the matter with the boy?”

The kid had been equal parts nervous and excited on the trip up. He’d only stopped babbling when Varric had agreed to tell him stories. And then he had sat with back straight as a rod and eyes wide, hanging on every word. Good kid.

Celeste shook her head. “I… I wouldn’t usually come disturb you at this hour, but I wasn’t sure who else to speak to.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, as if just noticing she was cold. Leliana produced a blanket from somewhere and draped it around her shoulders. “Solana?” she queried.

Celeste shook her head again. “No… I… dreams.”

“Dreams?”

“I think there’s someone visiting me in my dreams.”

Varric took another sip of his wine. “You’re a mage, aren’t demon dream visits part of the package?”

“This feels different. I… I don’t know how to describe it.” She stared down at her feet. “There’s this presence. It keeps saying the same thing. ‘Come to me, join me.’ Demons don’t do that. Demons try to trick you. They don’t summon you.”

Varric leaned forward. His heart pounded in his ears again. “It’s summoning you?”

She nodded, chewing on her lower lip. “I would think nothing of it, except… I don’t think I’m the only one. After the first dream, I overheard some of the other mages talking. That was strange enough, but tonight… it returned to me. It kept saying how I had a duty to protect the mages. I think it’s planning something, I think-”

“Shit!” Varric slammed down his mug and Celeste jumped. To Leliana, he said. “So you know that thing that I found out that I was going to tell Cullen but didn’t?”

Leliana folded her arms. “Let me guess, mages having dreams.”

“Mages disappearing, actually. But this is as good an explanation as any. Think about it, what can you use a phylactery for?”
“A phylactery?” Celeste asked.

Leliana ignored her. “Finding a mage, controlling a mage…”

“Controlling, yeah, but only because you have a link with the mage. I think we’ve discovered why Blondie didn’t break the damned things. He’s using them to chat to possible allies.”

“Blondie?” Celeste repeated.

“What precisely did this… presence… say to you, Celeste?” Leliana asked.

“Come to me, protect the mages, stop the Circles, use your powers for good… a combination of those sentiments.”

Varric hit the table again. That was Blondie alright.

“Did you see what this figure looked like?”

Celeste shook her head again. “No, always in shadows or in the form of a shadow. At… at one stage I thought it was Solana. But that’s not possible, is it? She wouldn’t be involved in something like this? No. She wouldn’t. I know she wouldn’t.”

“And I believe it’s thanks to you that we know that too.” Leliana said. She smirked, despite everything.

Celeste’s already wide eyes stretched and she seemed to come to some kind of realization. “Phylactery. That’s what was in the room. That’s what Solana was supposed to protect. How many? Whose? Who took them?”

“Calm down, Spooky.” The nickname rolled off Varric’s tongue automatically. “Take a seat.”

Celeste blanched, which made the name even more appropriate, but she settled down on the barrel beside his.

Leliana sat too, her fingers steepled, eyes downcast. He was a little frightened of what that might mean.

It was a bad idea to be walking around so late at night. Samson knew that. He’d learned as much in Kirkwall where he’d become prey more than once. But there was something about Skyhold that made one feel safe. Even one such as he.

The breeze that cut across the courtyard and stung his cheeks was cold, but welcome. It meant freedom.

He’d been assigned quarters, but they were small and cramped and not much different from his cell. Plus, he was sharing with two unimpressed gentlemen who he suspected were one step away from being discharged.

It was the lodgings one got when one was no longer welcome in the barracks, but they wanted you close enough to keep an eye on you. He would have preferred a tent - peaceful nights alone
beneath the stars - but he understood Rutherford’s reasoning. He wouldn’t trust him either.

So he’d stepped out for some fresh air, and now he realised his mistake. He’d wandered down to the stables, taking pleasure in solitude he should have been wary of. It was only when he heard a rustle from near the deserted marketplace that the familiar tension settled between his shoulders.

He told himself he was being stupid. Of course he was being followed. Rutherford had said as much, hadn’t he? He’d warned him he’d be watched. Only, he’d never spotted anyone before. He scanned the dark stalls. Was that armour glinting beneath one of the awnings? He laughed at himself when he remembered that shop sold weapons and shields.

Still, best head back.

He made for the stairs he knew led up to the kitchens. That in itself was risky; it wouldn’t do to be caught poking around the kitchens late at night either. But compared with the thought of walking back past those stalls-

Something slammed into the base of his skull. Old instincts took over. He jabbed backwards with his elbow, even as his head spun. But whoever his assailant was, they sidestepped, yanking him around to drive a gauntleted fist into his chin. He stumbled backwards, hitting into another armoured body.

Metal-clad hands clamped his arms behind him and he could see his first assailant. Square jaw, tousled black hair, a sneer to rival the worst of the Carter. Samson’s practised eyes took in possible weaknesses. The man wasn’t wearing a helmet, although the rest of him was in full Inquisition armour. He had a sword at his side. Bad sign. He wouldn’t have brought something sharp along if he didn’t plan to use it.

But he didn’t go for his sword. He took three steps forward, then, eyes meeting Samson’s, he lifted his leg and kneed him in the groin.

The world exploded into stars, white-hot pain wiped every thought from Samson’s mind. He reached for the part of him that clung to survival, that scrabbled for it like a sewer rat, but it had dissolved. His knees gave in as another fist pounded into his face.

“This is for Zaben.” Smack. “This is for Reisad.” Smack. “This is for Dorvol.” Smack. “And this is for Methra”. Crack.

The impact sent Samson’s head back into the man behind him. Fresh pain blossomed from his nose. His entire face was on fire. And there was blood - he tasted iron as it leaked into his mouth - wet against his face.

The assailant looked down at him. “Commander Cullen thinks you can be redeemed. He’s wrong. No one comes back from what you did. No one deserves to.”

Another knee, this time to his stomach. Samson crumpled forward, choking, as the man behind him let go. And then his face was being pushed forward into the dirt. He heard the unmistakable sound of steel being drawn.

This was how he would die. Finally, after everything. He closed his eyes and whimpered.

“So this is what the great General Samson comes to, eh?” The man who’d been holding his arms kicked him in the side. “Pathetic.”

“There’s nothing great about him. Look at him. He’s not a fighter. Nothing more than Corypheus’s dog, ordering others to die.”
Samson opened his mouth to protest, but how could he?

*Maddox, Maddox standing in the Temple of Dumat. Go. We will slow them. The air already thick with smoke, the Inquisition less than ten minutes away. A decision, and no time in which to make it. Go, Maddox said. And it was go or face Corypheus’s wrath. Go, let them die, or stay and risk the Inquisition finding the armour, capturing him, torturing him for secrets. So he went.*

Another kick to his side brought him back to himself. “You got nothing to say for yourself, dog?”

A pool of blood was spreading out from where his cheek was mashed into the ground. It was thick and black in the dim light, like corruption. “If ya gonna kill me, get it over with,” he said.

He was tired, tired of this world, tired of pain.

But the man grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and yanked him to his feet. “Oh, I’m going to kill you.” His face was inches from Samson’s. “And then I’m going to have my way with that pretty girl of yours.”

“I have no girl,” he said, the words thick with blood.

“You sure about that? Kitchen wench, blonde hair, likes conjugal visits…”

*Celeste.* His stomach turned to ice. *Maker, no…*

“Jang…” the other cautioned.

Samson had to force the words out. “She’s not my girl. Never will be. You are mistaken.”

“But you care for her,” the man laughed hollowly. “You care for her like I cared for Methra, and that’s enough.”

He pushed Samson backwards, and Samson struggled to breathe. His knees knocked into something, and then he was pushed back further and further. The smell of mildew and algae. He was hanging over the old well.

“How long do you think it will take you to die down there?” the man whispered. “I hear drowning’s a terrible way to go. But maybe the water isn’t deep enough, maybe you’ll starve.”

He didn’t care, the threats were meaningless. There was only one thing on his mind. Celeste. He couldn’t let them touch her, not because of him. The one bright thing in his putrid existence, the one shining moment of happiness in a dull and miserable life. No. They would not hurt her.

He went limp and whimpered again. A dog playing dead. The man laughed and readjusted his grip, probably with the intention of pushing Samson down the well. But this dog could bite. With every bit of strength left in him, he launched himself to the side. The man’s grip slipped and Samson barreled in the direction of the market.

He only needed to get to one of the stalls, grab a weapon. The other man cried out, making a grab for him, but he managed to evade.

He fell upon the weapon rack. Empty! And the table too. His breath came in rapid gasps. He ducked just in time to avoid another blow to the head from ‘Jang’. He grabbed the man by the calves and tugged. He fell backwards in a clatter of armour. Samson scuttled back under the table. *Something*, there had to be *something* he could use to defend himself. He tried to ignore the pain in his ribs and face.
An old practice dummy lay on its side, pressed between the weapon rack and the stone wall of the fortress. It wasn’t much but-

“Get out here, you mongrel!” Jang’s sword pierced down through one of the slats in the table, narrowly missing Samson’s head. He shimmied backwards, just as it came through again where he had been a moment ago. He dived for the dummy, yanking out a handful of rusty arrows. They’d have to do. Jang came towards him, yelling as he slashed the air with his sword. His movements were erratic. Rutherford would be ashamed. Samson thrust the dummy in front of him. Hay and lambswool flew as Jang slashed open its stomach. As he brought his sword down, Samson shoved off the wall, lurched forward and thrust up. He closed his eyes as the rusty arrows plunged up, right through Jung’s chin.

Jung screamed, careening backwards, buying Samson time to get free of the stall, to run back towards the main gates.

But the other man snagged him, slammed him against the frame of another stall. He drove his fist into Samson’s side again, and Samson heard his ribs crack as he yelped. The strength this man had, he could only be a Templar. He too had foregone a helmet. His bright blue eyes shone in the night.

“What you did to the Order is unforgivable,” he said. “And you will die for it.”

His fingers closed around Samson’s throat and he lifted him off the ground so his feet were dangling. Jang was still screaming behind them, clattering from side to side, trying to get the arrows free. Samson couldn’t breathe, and though he struggled, though he wriggled and kicked, this man was far too strong. Darkness closed in from the sides of his vision.

Would he hurt Celeste when Samson was gone?

“Please,” Samson rasped. He didn’t want mercy for himself, but for her. If only he could get the words out, if only he could find enough air to tell this man he had nothing to do with her.

The man smiled wickedly.

And then his face exploded.

Samson fell to the ground, the impact sending a shock up from his knees. He clapsed at his throat, choking, heaving. He knew better than to relax until he found the source of this unexpected development. He scanned the shadows.

Up on the battlements, a figure with a bow. Lithe, probably elven. Who?

“Ser Samson!” This voice not from the elf, but from the stairs. Another shadowy figure was rushing down, towards him. “Samson, are you alright?”

Who was this man? Samson didn’t recognise him. He was young and thin, from Highever by the sounds of it. He fell to his haunches beside Samson. Air whistled through his teeth. “Ay, they really got you good, didn’t they?”

“Who are you?”

“Your saviours clearly. We’re supposed to be watching you, making sure you don’t get up to mischief. Shouldn’t have given us the slip, should ya?”

“Given you the….” He was still struggling to breathe, let alone think. Cullen’s men. The ones he’d said would be watching. “It wasn’t my intention.”
“Yeah, yeah. Well, lesson learned? Let’s get you to the healer.”
Leliana made a humming sound. It was the first she’d made in what felt like ages. Celeste had almost nodded off to sleep waiting for her to say something. Varric had pulled out a quill and started jotting notes on a scrap of parchment.

Leliana rose and tapped her lower lip. “When I determined that our friend had help from the Grey Wardens, I sent people out to do some checking.”


Celeste wanted to ask who their friend was, but chose to keep quiet.

Leliana pulled a sheet of parchment out from a pile on her desk and handed it to Varric. There was an entry circled, but the words themselves made no sense to Celeste. *Griffons stand plaidweave quid.*

Varric squinted at it. His eyes moved up and down the page, taking in the other entries. Then he nodded and handed it back to Leliana. “I take it you have more to go on?”

She nodded. “Mages aren’t the only ones disappearing.”

“Oh shit,” Varric said.

“My thoughts precisely.”

They both fell silent again. Varric shook his head and muttered. Leliana paced.

“What would make both Wardens and mages disappear?” Celeste ventured.

“Well, Spooky, last time disappearing Wardens got involved with magic it was an army of demons,” Varric said.

Celeste pulled the blanket tighter around herself. It smelled vaguely of perfume, probably Leliana’s. “Whatever it is, it’s anti-Circle,” she said. “Maybe it’s not so bad.”

“Speaks the maleficar,” Leliana said.

Celeste’s insides jolted, but while Leliana was intimidating, her dream was still fresh in her mind. “The Circles are what made me what I… am.” She’d been about to say was, but that would be untrue. She’d forever be a maleficar. It’s not something you recovered from… just something you stopped tapping into. She swallowed. “They say… they say that the next Divine will likely restore the Circles.”

Leliana’s eyes narrowed. “What does that have to do with Grey Wardens?”

“I don’t know, but maybe whoever we’re dealing with… maybe this is about the next Divine.”

“It’s not,” Leliana said.

“How can you be so certain?”
“Because if they were targeting the next Divine they’d be here, not luring people away from here.”

“Why here?” Celeste pressed.

Leliana’s lips formed a thin line. Her gaze dropped to her hands.

Varric chuckled.

When Celeste looked at him, he was smiling. “It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the next Divine.”

Leliana shook her head. “Not anymore.”

“Not anymore? What does that mean?” Varric asked.

Her eyes met his. “It means I declined.”


Leliana did not seem impressed with his comments, and it was clear she wasn’t going to answer.

“But you said that they’d target the next Divine here,” Celeste prompted.

Leliana nodded. “Cassandra is set to take my place. She will do a fine-”

Varric surged to his feet. “The Seeker? As Divine? I… must have had more wine than I thought.”

Celeste’s stomach felt sour. Cassandra was known to be traditional. While she no doubt had a good heart, she’d definitely reestablish Circles.

“Who else knows this?” Varric asked. “Is it possible Blondie found out? Because I think our girl here might have a point. Solana’s out there training an army.” He pointed in the general direction of the courtyard. “And if that army is being led away, being joined with Wardens… we need to tell the Inquisitor.”

Leliana sighed. “That’s the other thing.”

Varric raised his eyebrows.

“The Inquisitor is, well, there’s no easy way to say this. I don’t know where he is.”

Varric sank back into his chair. “You don’t know where he is? Well, that’s not good.”

She held up a hand. “I know what you’re going to suggest: that he’s been kidnapped or drawn into this plot. I assure you, that is not the case. He… chose to disappear.”

“Come again?”

“The official story is that he’s in the Frostback Basin. He arrived, made contact with the local Avaar and had some success digging up information on Inquisitor Ameridan. All the official reports say he’s still there. Even Scout Harding, who I can usually rely on to be honest, has made mention of him in her updates.”

“So if everyone says he’s there…”

Her mouth quirked. “My sources tell me they haven’t seen him in weeks. His latest missions, the
ones Harding is so thrilled to inform us about? My people report that they’re the work of the Bull’s Chargers. I can only assume that the Inquisitor chose to take a… vacation, for want of a better term. And he’s got some of his people in on it. Usually I’d be thrilled but…”

“Yeah, he has some timing.” Varric dropped his head into his hands. “Alright, so we likely have Wardens building an army of mages. Or is it mages building an army of Wardens?”

“Likely it’s our friend building an army consisting of both,” Leliana said.

“Right.” Varric’s voice raised in pitch. “And no Inquisitor. We can’t tell the Seeker because she’ll get the Chantry involved the instant she hears the word phylactery. That’s probably a full minute before she has our mages locked up for being susceptible to dream whispers. Although that’s maybe not a bad idea.”

“Hey!” Celeste said.

Varric turned his attention to her. “Now that I think of it, we probably shouldn’t even be discussing this with you here. How do we know he can’t listen in?”

“Varric.” Leliana’s voice was level. “If I could listen in to conversations simply by having a mage’s phylactery, I wouldn’t need spies.”

He grunted, but he seemed satisfied with that. “So, what do we do?”

Leliana steepled her fingers again. Celeste was worried this might mean another half-hour of silence. Surprisingly, the spymaster smiled. “We need to solve this quietly. That means we send a small team. A very small team. A team with… expertise.” Her focus rested on Celeste and her heart lurched. She didn’t want to be sent away from Skyhold, not now Ren was here. But Leliana said only, “I’d like you to play along with this shadow. You will need to be careful not to let on what you know. Can you do that?”

Celeste squared her shoulders. “I can control myself in the Fade.”

She was grateful her self-doubt didn’t leak into her voice.

“Good,” Leliana said. “We need to find out where it wants you to go. And preferably when. The timeline is important. Maybe try to delay… see how desperate it is.”

“Alright.” Celeste’s mouth went dry at the thought of it. “I’ll do that. I’ll also try to… I’ll let you know if I hear things from the other mages.”

“That would be helpful, but be subtle.”

“Heavy.”

Footsteps pounded up the stairs. Varric’s eyes slid to Leliana. “You always this popular?”

Before she had a chance to answer, the scout arrived panting. Leliana stood. “Report!”

It couldn’t be an attack already, could it? Celeste cursed bringing Ren here. She’d thought it would be safe. Now, once again, the fortress was likely the target of some conspiracy.

The scout gulped in air. “It’s Samson. Some of Cullen’s men attacked him. He’s been taken to the infirmary. Thought you’d want to know.”
Samson stared at his hand in front of his face. He knew it to be his own hand, but it didn’t feel like his. It felt disconnected. The lines and wrinkles he’d known his whole life suddenly seemed strange. He blinked to bring it back into focus.

The door burst open and he moved his attention to it. A familiar voice. A blur of silver, Rutherford’s clipped voice asking questions. “I instructed you to keep an eye on him.”

“Sorry, ser.”

“Who was it? Where are they now?”

“Jung and Markem, Ser.”

“I hope you had them escorted to the gaol? I will not have this sort of behaviour from men under my command.”

“Err. About that…”

A white shape moved passed Rutherford, dashing towards Samson at such a speed that he covered his face with his arms.

“Oh Maker, what did they do to you? Are you all right? Samson?”

This voice he knew too, and his body flushed with warmth. He saw flowers, sunshine… he blinked and lowered his arms.

Celeste gasped, recoiling from him. She reached out a tentative hand towards his face, but paused in mid air as if uncertain where to touch him that it would not hurt.

He tried for a smile. “They got me good, didn’t they?”

Rutherford was yelling now, yelling at his men though and not at Samson. But it was annoying because it drowned out Celeste’s reply. Samson tried to focus on her, but he was having as much difficulty as he’d had with his hand. Only, instead of looking unfamiliar, she looked ethereal. Her white clothes seemed to glow in the lantern light, fuzzing out around her. Her white clothes… her white… nightdress. She was wearing nothing but a nightdress. It was conservative - buttoned up to her collarbone, with long sleeves - but it was still just a nightdress.

He gawked. It took a good few moments before he was aware that she was speaking to him.

“Have they given you anything? Did they send for a healer?”

Someone snorted. It was Rutherford’s man, the one who’d brought him here. He stood beside Celeste, peering down at Samson. “They gave him elfroot. Can’t you tell? He’s off his rocker.”

“‘s not that bad,” he said defensively, although the words slurred. “I’m here.”

“Sure you are,” the man said.

Samson shook his head. He didn’t want to speak to him anyway. The movement sent the infirmary spinning. He had to press his eyes closed until it stopped, but then he was free to look at Celeste again.

“I’m happy you’re here,” he said.
She took his hand, the one he’d been staring at, and squeezed it.

But why was she here? In her nightdress? Surely Rutherford hadn’t roused her?

“Tell me what happened?” she asked.

What happened? It took a surprisingly long while to remember, considering how much his face hurt. “Went out for a walk, didn’t I? Then… Inquisition soldiers. Revenge or some such. One for the Red Templar business, one for a… lady soldier.” A lady. He’d threatened to hurt Celeste in return, hurt Celeste because of her association with Samson. “You should go.”

“Not until I’m sure you’re alright.”

Samson tugged his hand free. “I said, go. I don’t want you here.”

Rutherford’s man whistled through his teeth again, and Celeste looked to him as if he could offer explanation.

“Go!” Samson shouted, and Celeste jumped. “Get away from me. I don’t want… want nothing to do with you. Yeah, you all heard me.” He waved his arm for emphasis. Even Rutherford had fallen silent and had turned to look at him. This was how rumours spread wasn’t it? He pointed at Celeste. “Get her away from me. I don’t want her here. Want nothing to do with her. Nothing.”

Celeste shrank into herself, and she flinched with each word. It was like a kick to the stomach seeing that. But it was that or putting her in danger. No ways was he gonna do that. Not again.

No one moved. Then Rutherford stepped forward. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying, Celeste. It’s the-”

“It’s not the elfroot.” Samson waved his hands again. The violent movement pulled at his side, sending a shock of pain up from what must have been a broken rib. He held onto the pain. It brought with it clarity. He knew the one thing he could say to convince them all he was serious. He pointed at Celeste once more. “She’s a maleficar. Get her away from me.”

Samson wasn’t exactly experienced with women. The women he’d known had either been self-righteous Meredith types or, well, whores and the like who were prone to drama. His heart was slamming and he expected one of two things to happen. Either Celeste, who was staring at him with wide, hurt, eyes would leap to her feet and flee from the room. Or she’d hex his balls off.

She did neither of those things. She rose slowly, and Samson knew every eye in the infirmary followed her. Probably waiting for the hexing, probably hoping for it.

She took two careful steps forward. There was a blanket draped around her shoulders, he saw. She removed it. Her hands shook and his guts twisted. He dared not breathe and it seemed no one else did either.

She reached forward, holding opposite corners of the blanket. He was prepared for her to try and smother him, or set the thing on fire. He wasn’t prepared for her to drape it around him. It was warm from being beside her body and it smelled good. He wanted to push it away, repeat his declarations. But he lacked the strength.

“I told you to leave,” he offered weakly.

“I’m going,” she said, voice like ice. “Be well, Ser Samson.”
Everything hung in suspension as she turned and left, as if caught in a Gravitic Ring. The moment she was out in the courtyard, the infirmary came alive again. People started talking to each other. Rutherford muttered, “Maker’s breath,” and hurried out again, removing his surcoat. Samson crumpled in on himself.

He let out a breath. It came out a sob. Maker, let them all not have noticed it, or let them think it was due to his physical pain. His chest hurt so bad that it drowned out the pain in the rest of him.

Mist swirled around Cullen’s feet as he headed back to his office after his dawn drills. Gooseflesh rose on his arms as his muscles stiffened in response to the chill. An unfamiliar sensation, and one he was not fond of, but he’d given his surcoat to Celeste the night before and he wasn’t about to go pounding on her door for it back before the sunrise.

He’d roused his men early to break the news about Jung and Markem. It had been a difficult thing, to be suitably mournful about their deaths and to balance this with a lecture about what a waste it was, and how Samson was on their side now and any grievances for the past should be set aside, no matter how difficult it might be.

Jung had always been a bit of a fire mine waiting to explode. Cullen regretted not keeping a better watch on him after he lost his partner in the Arbor Wilds campaign. Markem, on the other hand, had been a good soldier, an ex-Templar, disciplined. For him to do something like this...

As he mounted the stairs to his office, he noticed the door ajar. His stomach churned as possibilities raced through his mind. Cassandra there to lecture him about the events of the night before, Solana there to tell him she was leaving Skyhold and taking Alise with her, Cassandra having discovered the phylacteries missing, Josephine having discovered his lyrium theft… no, stop. Paranoia, a side effect of the lyrium. Still, it was with caution that he entered his office.

A man stood staring out of one of the windows. He turned when he heard Cullen enter, and grinned.

Cullen’s trepidation melted away and he found himself returning the man’s smile. His skin was darker than when Cullen had last seen him - the tattoos on his chin now almost blending into his stubbled beard - and he was broader of shoulder. But despite his difficult assignment, he still radiated warmth.

“Rylen!” Cullen shook his hand and patted him on the back. “I didn’t know you were due back from the Western Approach.”

“Heh, well, they asked me to replace you when you took your little sojourn, didn’t they? Unfortunate for them it takes near on a month to get here from the Approach. So I suppose it’s my turn for a holiday.”

So the Inquisitor hadn’t had all that much faith Cullen would return, despite how he’d made it seem. Cullen couldn’t find it in him to be annoyed. It was good to see his second in command again. A friend.

“When did you get in?” Cullen asked. He hadn’t seen any horses in the courtyard.
“Late last night, but I was informed you had your hands full.” Rylen leaned back against the wall. “Something about Samson attacking someone?”

Cullen snorted. Amazing how the gossip mill always twisted things. “Someone attacking Samson, in fact.”

“In his cell?”

“Eh, no.”

Rylen narrowed his eyes. “Samson’s not in a cell?”

Rylen had worked with the Templars in Kirkwall, but long after Samson had been thrown out of the Order. Cullen wasn’t sure if the two of them had ever met. If they had, it would have been when Samson was nothing but a vagabond.

“I’ve asked Samson to assist with training the recruits. If anyone knows our weaknesses it would be him.”

Cullen waited for the contradiction, watching Rylen’s face. Cassandra had made a noise like a kettle about to boil over, and then proceeded to launch a barrage of questions. But Rylen simply tilted his head to the side, seemed to consider this for a moment, then nodded. “I take it your men are not too happy with this arrangement?”

“Only two of them.” Cullen sighed. “That I know of. Hopefully their fates will serve as a warning to any others.” When Rylen didn’t say anything, he added, “You think me mad.”

“Oh no, not at all. I’m just surprised Samson would help us so willingly. You are certain he doesn’t have some ulterior motive?”

Cullen couldn’t help but smile. “Oh, he has a motive.” Rylen raised his eyebrows. “A girl.”

Rylen laughed and shook his head. “Is that all it took? Well we should have sent one of those into the Wilds instead of soldiers. Would have been cheaper, let me tell you.”

Cullen laughed too. It felt good to laugh. “Jokes aside, I knew Samson before all of this. When he was a Templar in Kirkwall. We roomed together. He was a good man then. Kind. I… didn’t do as much for him as perhaps I could have. I’m not certain if he can be redeemed, but… everything that’s happened these last years… it would be nice to believe that something can come back from the brink?”

“Yeah,” Rylen agreed. And looking into his face, Cullen could see that he understood as few would. He’d been there to clean up the mess in Kirkwall.

His gaze didn’t leave Cullen as he said, “Talking of… we hear strange rumours out in the Wastes. I was hoping you could clear this one up for me? I heard you married, the Hero of Ferelden no less, had a child, which was Blighted and Tranquil… and was cured with blood magic. Which of those things are real and which ones are false?”

“Solana didn’t use blood magic,” he said. Rylen eyes widened. Cullen dropped his voice. “She used a demon. But I’d rather that wasn’t common knowledge. And no, I did not approve.”

“A demon?” Rylen repeated, voice equally soft. “You can’t be serious?”

“I wish that I wasn’t.”
Rylen clapped him on the back. “Well, in that case, drinks on me.”

“I can’t,” Cullen protested. “It’s first thing in the morning. I have work. I’m on duty.”

“You’re also the boss around here. Unless I am, in which case consider it an order. We should probably get that cleared up.”

It would have worried Cullen, except he knew that Rylen wasn’t the sort to jockey for authority. No doubt he’d report to Cassandra and be given a few weeks of leave before heading back to the Western Approach.

Cullen pinched between his eyes and sighed. He could do with a drink.

“Well, would you look at that,” Leliana said suddenly.

Varric glanced up from the chess board. “Nightingale?”

The spymistress stared over the balcony. Varric rose and followed her gaze. His eyes itched and he struggled to focus. Leliana had insisted that instead of going and getting a few good hours sleep, they should play chess. It would help them develop a strategy, apparently. So far all Varric was developing was a headache.

Varric didn’t see anything of note, except that Cullen and another man were heading towards the tavern.

“Bit early for a drink, isn’t it?” he asked, not understanding her interest.

“That’s Cullen’s replacement.”

“Replacement? Why’s the Seeker replacing him?”

She shook her head. “Cassandra isn’t. But… this solves a little problem I was having.”

She knocked over Varric’s king. “Check mate.”

“Maker’s balls.” Varric sighed. “I don’t know whether you’re being dramatic, cryptic, or just made me look up to distract me.”

“Why not all three?” she asked.
If you're unsure who Rylen is, he's the dude who gives you some quests at Griffon Wing Keep. If you chat to him, you find out he was one of the Templars from Starkhaven who came in to help with Kirkwall after the Anders Incident and that he became friends with Cullen and is now his second in command. I've taken liberty with pretty much everything else about him here.

Things are about to get interesting ;)}
Look to the sky

There was one blissful moment upon waking that Samson was aware of being wrapped in a warm blanket that smelled vaguely of Celeste.

Then the pain crashed down on him. He swore, rolling onto his back, as memories flooded back of the night before. Rutherford’s men and then… and then Celeste.

“Andraste’s holy arse.” Her face when he’d said those things.

It had been necessary. He needed to show them all he didn’t care for her. But if he’d been more himself perhaps he could have thought of another way.

He needed to apologise.

But if he apologised, wouldn’t that undo any good he’d done?

No, he needed to apologise. Screw the consequences.

“Awake are you?”

He opened his eyes. Light too bright. An old woman bending over him. She prodded his ribs and he yelped.

“We mended your face best we could, but your bones are going to take a while.”

“What bones?”

“Two ribs and, of course, the nose.”

Yeah, the nose. Wasn’t like it had been a prize one in the first place. Wasn’t like he had any need for vanity. And who had he been fooling anyways? Even before last night, there was no chance of…

Maker’s balls, if there’d been no chance of anything why did he feel so shit about it? Eh?

He hadn’t felt this bad since just after they took him off the red stuff. And he’d been dying then. She’d saved him. She’d risked herself to save his pathetic arse. No wonder he loved her. She was so…

Shit.

He pressed himself to a sitting position, despite protests from his bruised muscles. “Thank you for your efforts,” he said to the old healer.

“Now hold on, you shouldn’t be moving about just yet.”

“Have to.” He was shirtless, he realised. He looked around for his clothes. Didn’t see them. Didn’t matter. He gathered the blanket to his chest and stood.

“Ser, I must insist that you-” The healer, a diminutive old woman, tried to stand between him and the door, but he pushed past her.

It was like walking on the deck of a ship. The ground kept moving beneath his feet, threatening to tip him over. He marched out into the courtyard regardless, squinting against the sun as he tried to
estimate the time of day.

There weren’t many folks about. The Hero wasn’t doing her drills yet. Early, but not very early. Probably just about the right time.

It was always cold in Skyhold’s recesses, but today it felt far worse. Today the cold didn’t just come from the outside, but from Celeste’s insides.

A plot afoot, a new Divine who distrusted mages, a responsibility beyond anything she’d ever been entrusted with before. And Samson.

She shouldered open the pantry door, arms laden with supplies, and willed herself to think of something else. Think of Ren.

What if the shadow and its army attacked Skyhold? Should she send him back?

The door clicked shut behind her. Ren wanted to learn swordplay. Samson had seemed willing to teach him. What had changed? He knew from the start what she was.

It didn’t matter. It was for the best. It…

“Celeste?”

She jumped. A sack of flour on top of the pile she was carrying teetered, fell to the floor and exploded, sending a spray of white up towards the figure lurking in the dark back corner of the pantry.

Samson.

He was pressed against the wall, clutching a blanket to his otherwise bare torso. His face was still a mess. His cheek was blue, his brow sported a deep gash. The entire area around his nose was swollen and red and his lip was split.

“Sorry,” he said, gaze dropping to the flour.

“What are you doing here?”

“I…”

“Where are your clothes?”

“The infirmary, I think.” He swallowed.

“And you’re not in the infirmary because…?”

His eyes darted around the room, looking everywhere but at her. “I needed to see you. To apologise. Explain.”

She knelt down to begin gathering the flour. Magic couldn’t make it usable again, but at least it could clean it up. With a sweep of her hand, she cleared a section of the floor. “You don’t have to
explain, you were dosed up with elfroot.”

“Yeah. But, that’s not it.” He dropped to his knees too. “I… listen, you didn’t deserve any of that, alright? I want you to know that.” He tried to scoop up flour with his hands, but he only managed to spread it out further. “I want you to know I don’t think of you like that, like that word.”

“A part of you clearly does.” She didn’t want excuses, so why was she asking for them? It would have been easier just to let him say his apology and be on his way.

“No, that’s not true.”

She cleared another area of floor. “They say that of drunks, you know? They say how they truly feel once they’ve had too much liquor.”

“I don’t truly feel that. Please believe me.” He reached forward and grabbed her hand. Flour drifted down to the ground again like fine snow, freed from her spell.

His hand was warm, his fingers rough and calloused. His touch wiped all other thought from her mind. Her heart started hammering.

“Those men last night, they said… they said they’d have their way with you, after I was gone. They wanted to hurt you, because they knew I… I cared for you.”

Now her pulse thrilled through her, humming in her ears. His eyes were serious. She felt light-headed.

“I’d never want any harm to come to you due to an association with me.” He concentrated on the floor again. “That’s the truth of it. But I feel awful. Like… like I can’t breathe. Like there’s a fist being driven into my chest. And my stomach’s a mess. I thought that I’d feel good about protecting you. But I don’t. I made a hash of it, like everything else.” He dropped her hand and she immediately felt the loss. “I don’t need you to forgive me, I’m not here to ask for that. It’s just… well… point is, you deserve better than to be called maleficar in front of everyone like that, and embarrassed and rejected. After everything you’ve done for me.”

He fell silent, finally. He still didn’t look at her, but he handed her the blanket.

As his hands came away from his chest, she sucked in air. The blanket hadn’t just been hiding the bruised ribs from last night’s fight. His chest was covered in scars of varying shapes, varying sizes. Noticing her gaze, he wrapped his arms around himself. “Shoulda found a shirt, sorry.”

“Where did…” her mouth was dry. “How did those…”

“Not here, if that’s what you’re thinking. Turns out Inquisition treats you well provided you cooperate. I mean, they roughed me up a little but nothing that won’t heal. I… eh… well I should go.”

He climbed to his feet, gaze still downcast.

“Was it Corypheus?” she asked, also rising.

“Little bit,” he said. “Little bit him, little bit Kirkwall, little bit… before.” He glanced up at her nervously.

She didn’t know what to say. “I suppose last night gave you a few more?” Stupid.

He smiled, best he could with that split lip. “Yeah, possibly.”
“I’m sorry.”

“Now why are you sorry? Last I checked, you didn’t come at me with a gauntlet.”

“No, but if I hadn’t asked Cullen to set you free…”

He shook his head. “This isn’t on you. None of it. You hear?” He advanced towards her, shambling more than walking. “You are…”

She waited for him to say what she was.

Eventually he simply shook his head. He continued past her, towards the door. “Thank you for everything, Celeste. I mean it. It’s been truly-”

“Wait.”

He’d almost reached the door and she knew that once he opened it, that was goodbye. She wasn’t ready for that. She searched for something to say to change his mind, to convince him that there was a way they could continue to see each other.

“Ren,” she blurted. “You said you’d train him.”

He paused, but didn’t look at her.

“He hasn’t stopped asking about lessons since we saw you training. His mind’s set on it.”

“I’ll have to ask the Commander,” he said.

“Of course.”

“You sure it’s something you want? I’m not exactly a role model.”

“Long as you promise not to get him hooked on red lyrium.” The joke was a gamble. She didn’t know what else to do to lighten the mood. As she said it, she realised it might be the exact wrong thing to say.

But Samson smiled. “Just the blue stuff, eh?”

She picked up his implication. Ren had seemed very interested in his shield.

“He won’t be a Templar,” she said.

“No, course he won’t. Templars won’t even be around when he’s old enough, Maker willing.”

“Maker willing,” she repeated.

She watched him leave, debating whether she should risk helping him out. Each movement seemed painful, but he’d made his wishes clear. Half carrying him back to the infirmary wouldn’t exactly send the message that he wanted nothing to do with her.

After he was gone and she was left alone in the dim room, standing in the middle of a pile of flour, thoughts of the shadow came back to her.

_No Templars, Maker willing._
For Solana, the best part about staying in the guest quarters was that they overlooked the garden. Bird song and the smell of herbs would drift through the window, over Alise’s cot and she’d stare up at the curtains moving in the breeze and giggle. The cot was Orlesian - something Josephine produced from somewhere in the stores. It was intricately carved and rocked gently from side to side at the slightest push.

The Circle had taught Solana never to waste magic, never to use precious mana on menial tasks. But now she knew they were only afraid. Magic was like a muscle, the more you used it, the more there was to use. Now she gave no thought to sending tendrils of energy across the room to rock her child back to sleep.

No such luck. Alise's giggles turned into worried whimpers.

So, Solana lifted her heavy limbs and rubbed her eyes. The guest bed was everything she could have asked for - a soft duvet, expensive sheets. But it was not her bed, it was not Cullen’s bed. She did not sleep well in it.

"Alright, love, I’m here. I’m here." She leaned over the cot and scooped Alise out.

She wouldn't settle. Solana tried to feed her, but she shook her head from side to side. Whatever had upset her, it didn't seem to be anything physical.

Holding the infant to her chest, Solana tugged on fresh robes over her night dress. A walk in the garden then, that usually calmed her when little else would.

When Solana closed the door to their quarters behind her, she was so absorbed in trying to straighten her robes without dropping her squirming daughter that she didn't notice the person leaning against the wall until they moved.

"Have a moment?"

Solana jumped. Leliana stood with her arms folded, her hood up. Solana’s heart kicked and started thumping hard. She hadn’t spoken to Leliana since… since…

Alise kicked out and screamed, loud enough to hurt Solana’s ears. “Ah, can it wait?”

“I’ll walk with you,” Leliana said.

Solana swallowed but inclined her head.

She bounced Alise gently as they moved down the stairs, the baby’s screeching echoing off the stone. She was about to reiterate that this probably wasn’t the best time, when they reached the bottom of the stairs. The garden was empty. One of Leliana’s people stood at each entrance.

Solana’s breath caught. She twisted to look over her shoulder, half expecting to see another agent following them, blocking the exit.

Leliana held her hands up plaintively. “I only wish to talk. It’s about something… sensitive. I’d rather we didn’t have any eavesdroppers.”

Alise’s crying died down as she spotted a bird overhead.

“Let me guess,” Solana said, “you want to know what happened to the phylacteries?”
“No, I know what happened to them.”

“You do?” Solana had not been expecting that.

“But this is about the phylacteries.” Leliana linked her hands behind her back and strode further into the garden. Alise pointed at the bird, breathing rapidly in excitement. Solana followed the spymaster.

She stopped in the centre, beside the old well, as far away from her agents as they could get. Then she turned back to Solana. “I need you to go on a mission.”

The idea was so ridiculous that it brought a bubble of laughter up from Solana’s chest. “Um, Leliana. I’m not sure you noticed, I’m a mother now. I don’t do missions.”

The spymaster waved that fact off as if it was of little concern. “We’re the Inquisition. We’ll get your daughter the best nurse money can buy. She’ll be seen to by women who raised kings. Her welfare is not an issue.”

“She’s my child.”

“And she’ll still be your child when you return. I need you for this.”

Solana shook her head. “No. You can find someone else.”

“He’s summoning the mages.”

The mages? “Which mages?”

She cursed Leliana’s smug expression. “I knew that would get your attention.”

“What do you mean summoning?”

Leliana advanced until she was so close that Alise could grab a lock of her hair, had she been so inclined and not mesmerised by the sky. “He’s using their phylacteries to approach them in their dreams and bid them join his army.”

“Army?”

“Army. To attack the next Divine should they choose to bring back the Circles.”

*How did she know all this?* “Sounds like he might have the right idea,” she said facetiously.

“I’m the next Divine.”

For a long moment nothing moved. Even Alise was still. Solana realised she was holding her breath. Leliana’s gaze dropped down to her feet.

“Would you bring back the Circles?” Solana asked stiffly.

“Never as they were. You trust me, don’t you? You *know* me.”

She did. Beneath that hood was a woman who wanted nothing but to make the world a happier place, who had braided flowers into Solana’s hair while humming fireside songs, who had believed herself chosen by the Maker.

“I do,” she agreed.
“But Anders doesn’t.” Leliana took a step back. “He only knows me as the calculating spy who would do anything necessary to achieve her goals. He’s raising an army and you’re training it for him.”

“Training it for- oh.” Her daily drills. She was teaching the mages to protect themselves, to control their energy, not to wage war. The war was supposed to be over.

Solana started walking, pacing, trying to think. “I could stop training them?”

“I’ve seen what you’ve accomplished so far. It may be too late.”

“Well what if we tell them not to listen to him, tell them the truth?”

“You seem to forget, these are by and large mages from the mage rebellion.” Leliana folded her arms again. “Besides, if we change anything now, he would get suspicious. If we stand any hope of stopping him, we need to act soon, and quietly.”

Alise wriggled again, grasping at a butterfly as if she wanted to be set free to chase it.

“And you want me to stop him?” Solana asked.

“You leaving Skyhold would raise no suspicion. You weren’t exactly discreet when you left Cullen.”

Solana’s stomach twisted at the phrasing. You left Cullen. It wasn’t that it wasn’t true. It just… it just sounded so final. “People will think I abandoned my daughter.”

“Only until you return victorious and once more the hero.”

Solana shook her head and cuddled her writhing child closer.

Leliana pinched the bridge of her nose. “There’s more. The Grey Wardens are involved.”

Solana searched her face for any trace she was being less than honest in a bid to gain her agreement. “I don’t understand, what would they want with phylacteries?”

“That I’m not sure of yet. But I know that Anders is a Warden, so old ties… perhaps there’s something there. Point is, you see now why you’re the only person we can send. You’re a mage, a Warden and-”

“I’m not. I’m not a Warden anymore. I’ve been… cured of that.”

Leliana shook her head. “But not everyone will know that. You haven’t received word from Weishaupt at all, have you?”

“No,” Solana was forced to admit.

“So for all we know, you’re still a Warden Commander. You might be able to order them back, or get them to stop what they’re doing. Plus, most importantly of all, you’re Anders’s friend. You can reason with him, assure him that the Inquisition won’t allow the Chantry to hurt the mages again - something. If anyone can get through to him, you can.”

Solana frowned, “What about Hawke?”

“Hawke is too close to this. He might be like holding a flame to gaatlock. You’re the only one who can do this.”
“You’d have me go to him alone?”

Leliana shook her head again. “Not alone, no. I’ll send an agent or two to meet with you on the road.”

An agent or two, that was hardly a comfort. “Do you even know where he is?”

“I will soon.” Leliana reached out and touched her shoulder, fondly. “Think about it. I’ve already put in the call for the nurse. She will arrive in two days. I would not leave this longer. The next Divine will be consecrated before the end of next month. I do not imagine he plans to wait long after that to strike.”

With that she turned and left. Her agents disappeared from the entrances. Solana stood with Alise as people began filtering into the garden again. She overheard that someone had let off a confusion grenade and they’d all been waiting for it to dissipate. Solana certainly felt like they could have been telling the truth.

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The smell of ash filled Celeste’s nostrils and panic chased across her skin. The city was burning. Around her, screams. Somewhere in all of this, Ren. She had to find him… she had to get to him… she had to get him to safety.

Darkspawn came rushing down the street in a wave of death. She tried to run away, but her legs wouldn’t move. They came closer and closer and-

“Celeste!” An alleyway presented itself to her left and she ducked into it.

Darkness swallowed her. “Jenine?” she called for her sister.

“Celeste, come to me.”

Celeste felt her way forward in the dark. And then she realised. She was in the Fade.

It was still morning at Skyhold, but as soon as Celeste had finished her duties, she’d sent Ren out to play and made some of the tea she’d once served Solana. She may not even have needed it - she’d been exhausted from the events of the previous night. But better safe, better get this done as soon as possible.

Now she paused in the darkness, shivering. The scene beyond the alley was unfolding in all its gory detail. It was difficult to separate herself from it.

“Celeste, come to me. Save the mages from destruction. You have the power.”

She’d prepared for this. It shouldn’t take long. “No more Circles?”

“No more Circles,” the whisper confirmed. “No one will have to suffer as we have.”

“And no more Templars?”
“None.”

“Where do I find you?”

A surge ran through her, like magic. The streets of the burning city melted away and instead she was standing beside a ruin in the middle of a forest. Tall trees encircled it and overhead the stars twinkled.

“Look to the sky,” the voice said. “Keep to the stars. The dawn will come.”
Cullen was only a little tipsy by the time they’d climbed up the stairs to the Inquisitor’s office. He’d hadn’t intended to have more than one drink, but Hawke had been there and he’d looked in need of company. And then Varric had come in and suggested a game of Wicked Grace to cheer him up. Rylen had been keen. Next thing Cullen was ordering another round.

What was one more drink, after all? He had not counted on his empty stomach.

The alcohol had only really hit him when he’d tried to stand. He’d almost fallen over again. Limbs light, head floating. Rylen had rushed to catch him, wrapping an arm around Cullen’s waist just before he tipped over.

“We shouldn’t see her like this,” Cullen said now that they were up in the tower. He was careful to enunciate each word, not to slur.

“I have to report I’m here, just let me do the talking. Smile and look pretty.”

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen grumbled.

The door to Max’s quarters was open and afternoon sunlight splashed across the stairs. How long had Cullen been in the tavern? They found Cassandra at the Inquisitor’s desk, leaning over the table and scowling at it as if it had personally insulted her.

“Oh, Knight-Captain Rylen reporting for duty, ser,” Rylen said as he approached her. Cullen hovered near the top of the stairs, convinced she’d be able to tell with one look how much he’d had to drink.

Cassandra glanced up. “Good.”

“Good?” Rylen sounded like he was smiling. “I’m afraid I’m not sure I understand. I was ordered back here when Cullen was away, but he’s here now so I assumed there’d be no need for me.”

Cassandra straightened, locking her hands behind her back. “Yes, well…” Her eyes moved to Cullen. “Perhaps you should take a seat, Commander.”

Had she seen how unsteady he was on his feet?

*No, no, this was something worse.* “You’re dismissing me?” he guessed.

He knew it was paranoia, he knew it had to be. Yet there was a buzzing in his ears, a tingling at the back of his neck. And the memory of how disapproving she’d been when he’d returned. She didn’t know the whole story. Maybe if he explained… he bit his tongue.

She sighed. “We think you need… a break.”

“A break? What is that supposed to mean?” Control yourself, *don’t let the alcohol loosen your tongue.*

“Cullen, I’d rather not discuss this in front of Knight-Captain Rylen.”

“I am not concerned about what Rylen hears. Tell me what’s going on.” He advanced towards her. “I’ve only recently returned from a break, Cassandra. I do not need a break.”
Her gaze cut past him, to Rylen. “Perhaps you could leave us for a few minutes?”

“Of course,” he said. He nodded to Cullen, brow creased with concern, before he turned and went back down the stairs. Cullen heard the door close behind him.

Now they were alone, Cullen’s annoyance drained away, leaving only a deep pool of emotion that he had been trying not to fall into for weeks. “Cassandra, you can’t take my command from me… please.” *It’s all that I have left.*

She wiped a hand across her eyes, resting the other hand on her hip. “You asked me long ago to watch you and to recommend a replacement if I thought you were… not handling things effectively.”

“Is this about Samson?” His voice pitched on the name.

“No, Cullen.”

“I don’t… I don’t understand. When I returned, the Inquisitor welcomed me. Have I not been performing well enough? Is there some aspect of this position that I should be… I’ll do better. I assure you, I’ll-”

Cassandra held up a hand to silence him. “This is not about your performance, Cullen. And I am not stripping you of your command. I meant what I said, it’s a break. That is all. You know I do not pad my meaning with niceties and useless assurances. You need time to recover from the events of the past few months.” Louder, she added, “Leliana, you can come out now.”

The spymaster slunk out of the Inquisitor’s dressing room where she’d clearly been listening in.

“Do you ever walk into rooms like a normal person?” Cullen asked.

Leliana just smiled.

“Commander, Leliana requested permission to ‘borrow you’.” She sneered at the term. “I have granted it on the Inquisitor’s behalf. However, it is your choice whether you accept her mission, or whether you opt to take leave instead. I will not pressure you into this, and you should not let her do so either.”

“Thank you, Cassandra,” Leliana said sweetly. “I will take it from here.”

Cassandra tsked. “Fine, I will be briefing Knight-Captain Rylen. Outside.”

Leliana stared after her as she marched off.

Cullen rubbed his temples. “Was all of this really necessary? Could you not have approached me in my office?”

“We both know I wouldn’t have found you there. You smell like ale.”

He took a step back from her but she laughed. She drifted around the desk, taking in all the paperwork that Cassandra had left there. “I know where he is.”

“Anders?”

She nodded. “One of my... *agents* came back with a lead. I even have a map.” She looked up at him again. “So, Commander, what do you think?”

“What? You believe *I* should go after him?”
“Don’t tell me you haven’t been itching to since Kirkwall?”

“Me and my wits against Justice?”

“You, your wits, and a map, yes.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “I am not sober enough for this discussion.”

Leliana smirked at that. “Perhaps this will sober you up. I have a relatively good grasp of what he’s intending to do. It involves an army of mages and overthrowing the Chantry.”

Ice rushed through him. “What?”

“We have to move fast and quietly. He’s using the phylacteries to summon the mages to his side. No doubt he will be watching for an army or some kind of large force. But a single person might be able to move past his defenses.”

“The phyla- that’s what he’s using them for? To build an army?”

She nodded. “For all we know, that’s only the beginning of his plans. Someone has to get to him and stop him. There aren’t many I’d consider sending on such a dangerous solo mission but-”

“Stop.” He held up a hand. His head was spinning. “You’re not going to convince me with flattery.”

“I’m not trying to flatter you. It’s the truth. We have worked together a long time and I know you to be a master strategist and a man of principle. You are skilled with the sword, trained in survival. Plus you’re already aware of the situation and of what’s at stake. There is also the fact that you will not arouse suspicion. No one would think anything of it if you left Skyhold after everything that’s happened.”

If he hadn’t been feeling so sick to his stomach, he might have appreciated the compliments. As it was, he sank down onto the Inquisitor’s chaise. “Andraste preserve us. Solana’s been training the mages. I’d wager most of them are from Ferelden.” He dropped his head into his palms. “Why didn’t I realise? What else would phylacteries be used for?”

He wanted to scream. The lyrium was supposed to make him better. “We should warn the Chantry.”

“But,” Leliana said as sat beside him. “You could stop him.”

It was already late in the afternoon when Samson gathered the courage to go speak to Cullen about the events of the previous night. The infirmary had sent him back to his room with a few tonics to speed up recovery and one potion he was meant to take a sip of every time the pain grew unbearable. The lumpy mattress and his numerous bruises made it difficult to sleep. Mostly he’d lain on his back and stared at the roof, watching the shadows change.
When the light changed colour, he knew he’d better go report in.

Walking across the courtyard was an odd experience. He drew everyone’s attention and many leaned together to comment. No hope of hiding who he was now. He hesitated at the foot of the stairs up to the battlements where Cullen had his office. He could retreat to his room and wait until the commander summoned him.

Or he could man up and face the music.

The door was ajar and Samson rapped on it gently before Cullen’s voice bid him enter.

But Cullen was not at his desk. There was another man sitting going through the paperwork, someone Samson didn’t recognise.

“Rylen, meet Samson.” Cullen’s voice came from the dim part of the room, by the bookshelf. He was facing away from Samson, scanning through the titles. “Samson, meet Rylen. My replacement.”

Samson went cold. “Replacement?” The word fell from his mouth before he had a chance to tone it down. “Why are they replacing you?”

His heart started to hammer. What happened to him if Rutherford wasn’t around? Would he be imprisoned? Tortured? Traded away? All the horrors he’d imagined locked in his cage came back to him.

It was the new man - Rylen - who answered. “Commander Cullen has some business elsewhere. I believe you’ll be helping me train the recruits?”

Samson wasn’t sure whether he was serious or baiting him. Before he could decide which, Cullen turned. “Knight-Captain Rylen has been heading our operations out in the Western Approach.”

“Ah, you’re Griffon Wing Keep?”

Rylen smiled. “That would be me.”

“What did you do to deserve that?” Samson regretted the jibe the instant he made it, and he tensed for the response.

But Rylen laughed, turning to Cullen. “He has a point. What did I do to deserve that?”

Cullen bristled. “If you’re implying it was some sort of punishment, I assure you that was not the case. You were determined to be the best man for the job. Your command experience plus-”

Rylen held up a hand. “Cullen, stop, we were joking.”

“Oh.” Cullen frowned. “Forgive me.”

Samson stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked at his feet. “Anyways, I, uh, I imagine you’d want to see me after last night. Sorry for missing the drills this morning. They doped me up with some tonic or some such.”

“I saw the state you were in. It’s any wonder you’re standing here now,” Cullen said.

Everything still hurt, but Samson would be damned if he let them see. “Well, I wanted to… express my regret, I suppose. Those men were bad apples. But I did not intend to kill them. I’m hoping you can believe that.”
“I do.” Cullen’s expression was surprisingly open. “I received a report from my people. They said
you were not to blame and were acting in self defence.”

“Oh, good.” Samson shifted from foot to foot, then stopped himself. Way to avoid looking
suspicious. “I, there was something else. A minor matter.”

“Well speak, man, what is it?”

“Celeste’s little one, you’ve met him?”

“No, but I know of the boy. What about him?” Cullen brought his hands to rest on his sword hilt.
It was a tell that he was nervous, a familiar motion that Samson remembered back from Kirkwall
days. It was somewhat encouraging.

“Scrawny isn’t he? Thing is, he wants to learn the sword. I think it could be good for the boy, the
physical training and, perhaps, a good skill to have. Celeste asked me to teach him. I wanted to
know if that might be alright. Obviously, wouldn’t be anything that would interfere with my other
duties, and if it’s too tangential to what you intended for-”

“I think it’s an excellent idea,” Cullen said.

“You do?” The enthusiasm surprised Samson, but once again he could find nothing insincere in
Cullen’s expression.

Cullen nodded. “I remember when I was his age, you couldn’t keep me away from the training
dummy. Although, believe me, my siblings tried.” He gave a lopsided smile, gaze going distant.
“I’d of course turn it into a game of templars and apostates. My little sister hated playing the mage,
but it was that or leave me alone and she couldn’t do that.” He chuckled wistfully. “Although, it’s
Knight-Captain Rylen’s permission you’ll need.”

Samson swallowed down his pride and turned to the man, drawing a breath to ask again. Rylen
smiled. “Yeah, why not. Long as it’s somewhere public.”

“Of course,” Samson said, although he riled at the implication he might do anything untoward if
left alone with a child.

“Yes, fair point,” Cullen said. “We don’t want the boy getting in the way of the next assassin
someone sends for you.”

As soon as Samson left the room, Rylan asked, “So, Celeste’s the girl I take it?”

“The very same. She’s a good woman, a friend. And from what I can tell, she welcomes his
advances.”

“Widowed?” A fair question considering she had a child.

“Mage.” Cullen sat down carefully on the edge of his reading chair, mindful of the teetering books
he would knock over if he leaned back too far.

“Does the southern Chantry not take children from mage mothers?” Rylen asked.

Cullen sighed. Some part of him knew he shouldn’t say much more, but the alcohol still in his
system was overpowering that voice.
“Oh, they do. Celeste escaped the Circle, with the help of my- of Solana, during the Blight.”

“Ah. The apostate and the ex-Templar. That’s something out of an Orlesian Opera,” Rylen said.

“Maleficar,” Cullen added, because it was all the more ironic when you knew that.

Rylen’s eyes widened and his mouth dropped open and Cullen knew he’d said too much. “You have maleficarum at Skyhold? What else are you harbouring? Darkspawn?”

“Do Grey Wardens count?”

Rylen blinked at him. Maker’s breath, he really was saying too much. He didn’t much care to keep the Warden secret, he bore no love for the Order now that he knew what they made their new recruits do, what happened to any children they bore. Still, he held his tongue. Revealing sacred secrets was a decision best made sober.

He brought the conversation back to Celeste. “I made it sound worse than it is. It’s true, she knows blood magic. But she was brought into a scheme beyond her understanding when she was young and naive. She claims to have used the power once, and only once, against her tormentor. The… the father of her child. The next time she used that magic, it was to save Solana’s life.”

“The father of her child?” Rylen prompted, leaning forward with interest.

Cullen swallowed. Now he was really uncomfortable. He scratched the back of his neck. “Yes, uh, a Templar. I regret to say I knew him. Although I certainly didn’t know what he was doing with the mages in his care. The very thought sickens me.”

“You knew hi- She’s one of Kinloch’s? One of those blood mages?”

Something clicked in the back of his mind. Those mages. The mages with the missing phylacteries. He felt suddenly nauseous.

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “We should get back to work. I have a few more reports I’d like to discuss with you.”

Rylen’s brow furrowed, but he nodded. “Of course.”

It took three days to properly brief Rylen and hand over all of his duties, but when Cullen rode out of Skyhold’s gates, he knew he’d done the right thing.

The phylacteries were his responsibility. With them, Anders, Justice or their allies could use blood magic to force the mages to commit any number of unspeakable acts. The image of Celeste being used that way terrified him, and not just because he’d grown fond of the maleficar. How many other powerful mages were there at Skyhold now, waiting for their power to be tapped?

Cullen hadn’t gone to see Solana. He reasoned that doing so would raise too many questions. And if he saw Alise… He worried he might change his mind. So he hadn’t said goodbye. But when Leliana had seen him off, he’d given her a letter. She’d been repeating the directions for the inn
where he was to meet her agent with the map, when he’d slipped the scroll into her grasp. “If something happens to me… Solana. Please.”

She’d nodded. It was easier to say sorry than it was to say goodbye.
The inn was a lot busier than Cullen would have imagined. It was a good sign, he supposed, having people out on the roads again. Still, he’d hoped for somewhere quiet after two days of travelling. He took off his coat and scanned the crowds.

He had a good idea of what to look for. Leliana had told him that her agent would meet him at an inn a day’s ride north of Val Chevin, that she was a redhead and Cullen would know her when he saw her. He did indeed know her redheaded agent, an elven woman who would spend weeks at a time outside of Skyhold. What was her name? Charger? No, Charter. He was relatively certain that was it. Although she probably went by some other code name while out in the field.

He didn’t see her as he headed towards the bar. He’d made good time, so it was possible he was here early. He could have a drink and wai-

A man moved aside and he spotted a flash of red hair. It wasn’t Charter, that he knew immediately. This hair was long and wild like… no.

He walked towards her in a daze, still hoping he was wrong, distracted, addled by lyrium. She hadn't noticed him. She leaned over the bar, talking animatedly to the barman. There was no doubt. It was Solana.

He stood frozen, people brushing past him, the entire world moving around him.

And then she saw him. She blanched, her lips fell open, all good humour disappeared from her face. “Cullen?”

His name broke the spell, he closed the distance between them, shaking his head. “What are you doing here?” he asked under his breath, his tone was harsh but he didn’t care. “Where’s Alise?”

“Alise is at home.” Solana searched his face. “She meant you, didn’t she? Maker, Leliana.” She turned away, slumped over with her head in her hands.

He sighed. “Let me guess, you were sent here to meet with one of her agents?”

Solana scrubbed her face. “You may as well return to Skyhold, I’m sure your troops will miss you.”

His annoyance battered against his chest. “What, and let you continue alone?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but he interrupted her. “Don’t give me that Hero of Ferelden speech. If either of us should return it’s you. Who did you leave Alise with? Celeste?”

“No. Leliana ordered a nurse from Orlais.”

“Of course she did.” Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose. How long had it taken for the nurse to arrive? Leliana must have been planning this for some time.

They fell into a moody silence. The barkeep brought Solana a drink she must have ordered before Cullen had joined her, but she didn’t touch it.

“I can’t return,” she said eventually, voice soft but firm. “I have a responsibility to protect the mages.”
“And I have a responsibility to stop them.”

Solana snorted. “How perfect, a mage and a templar. I’m certain Varric’s in on this. It sounds just like something from one of his books.”

Cullen leaned against the bar, recalling how the dwarf encouraged him to drink just before Leliana sprung her trap. “Most certainly,” he agreed.

Solana swivelled her body on her stool so she was facing him. “Look, aside from the mage thing, and the Hero of Ferelden thing… there are Grey Wardens involved in this. I don’t know whether I still hold rank with them, but it’s possible I do. It’s possible I can at least stop them.”

“The phylacteries are my responsibility,” Cullen insisted.

“Why do you always have to be so stubborn?”

“Me?” Their argument was starting to draw curious stares. He ducked his head and hissed to her. “I’m hardly the stubborn one.”

She laughed hollowly and fixed her hands around her drink.

“I am not stubborn,” he repeated.

“Look, Cullen, this journey is going to mean a lot of one-on-one time. The route takes us through forests and-”

“So you do have a map?”

She glared at him but did not dignify that with an answer. “And there will be a lot of walking and camping and-”

“I’ve been through the wilderness before. Have you forgotten about the Battle of the Arbor Wilds already?”

“I’m not implying you’re unqualified, Cullen. I’m just saying that if we do this, we’re going to have to do it without killing each other. We don’t have time to get sidetracked by our personal issues.”

“Maker’s breath, Solana, I’m not a child.”

She stared obstinately into her ale. As much as he hated to admit it, she was uniquely qualified for this.

“I may not be the Hero of Ferelden, but I’m not without skill. However, if you truly wish for me to return to Skyhold, I will. I ask only that you then hire someone to accompany you. I do not fancy the idea of you travelling into this entirely alone.”

“Nor do I,” she said softly.

He watched her profile, the tendrils of wild hair that curled down her cheek, the beautiful bright eyes. His heart clenched.

“Hiring someone would waste time,” she said. “I have a room here for the night, but we can set off as soon as you’re ready.”
Solana pulled out the scroll and spread it on the table just beneath the window. Cullen had chosen to make use of her room to wash and get a change of clothes, and now he sat at the small table looking pensive.

“That doesn’t look like any map I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“It’s not a map, it’s a celestial chart. The type used by sailors. I got it from the ship’s captain on the way over from Jader.”

His brow furrowed. “I thought you said we were to be travelling through forests, not across the ocean?”

“Same difference though, isn’t it?” The note that Leliana had given her was considerably smaller, but she placed it on the table too. It was a map of part of Orlais with star positions jotted beneath it. Solana tapped an area circled in ink. “Leliana’s agent identified the star position of Anders’s location as somewhere around here.”

Cullen leaned forward and squinted at the page. “Around here?”

“It seems like if we follow the Arlesans River north that will take us most of the way. Then… we use this.” She was wearing the small brass sextant around her neck so as not to lose it, and she pulled it from beneath her robes to show Cullen. “I also have an almanac of star positions for when we get closer. Leliana mentioned in her note that she suspected the map her agent got hold of was purposefully vague and that it wouldn’t take us all the way there. I see what she meant. This translates to a very broad area. We’ll have to look for other clues as we draw nearer.”

“You love this, don’t you?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure how to interpret the question. Was it an accusation? Perhaps he thought she should be at home with their child, rather than adventuring. Or that she took some sick joy in hunting down someone who had once been a friend. His gaze rested on the map, offering no clue.

“It’s better than being locked in a Circle,” she said, tucking the sextant away.

He made no comment as she packed up the maps. The truth was, she did enjoy it. She felt alive, like she had purpose again. And she felt more at home on the road than she’d ever felt at Skyhold.

“We should go through our packs, compare supplies, discard anything we don’t need,” she suggested.

Cullen jerked. His mind must have been wandering. “That won’t be necessary. We should take what we can carry.”

“Unnecessary items will weigh us down,” she pressed.

He rose. “I’m assuming we won’t be sharing a tent, so I’d argue everything is necessary.”

Taking two tents was definitely a waste. But if that was the only way he’d be comfortable, she had no choice but to agree. “Fine. Then we should get going. We still have a few hours of light left.”

“Agreed.”
A small crowd had gathered around the training dummies, and small in this case meant… well…

“Mister, mister, will you teach me to fight with a sword?”

“And me!”

“I want to learn too!”

It seemed like every single one of Skyhold’s brats had been summoned to the training area the instant Ren had touched his sword. In all truth, Samson wouldn’t have minded, but they seemed to distract the boy. And this was only his first lesson, he needed to concentrate.

Ren squared his shoulders and pushed his hair out of his eyes. He glanced to the side where a particularly eager little girl was jumping up and down trying to get a better look at him.

Samson placed a hand on his shoulder. “Remember what I told ya, hips face forward towards your opponent.”

Even the small movement sent sharp pain down Samson’s side. His rib wasn’t quite healed yet. He was loath to ask a mage for help, even if he’d believed there was a chance he’d be able to find one willing. Time heals all wounds, as the ol’ saying went.

The boy nodded and shifted position.

Samson nudged his right foot with his boot. Ren nearly lost his balance. “You gotta keep your weight even. Else your opponent can knock you over.”

“Yes, ser.”

He wasn’t sure how he liked being called ser, but he didn’t think encouraging him to call him Samson was the best idea considering his name’s infamy.

“Alright, now let’s see you strike. Remember to move to the right.”

Ren lifted Samson’s sword, his arms trembling. He struggled to get it high enough. Sweat prickled across his forehead. But he gritted his teeth and eventually managed. When he moved forward he did exactly as Samson had advised, striking the dummy’s right shoulder.

“Good. Again.”

Ren panted with the effort, but he swung once more. The sword barely touched the dummy’s shoulder before it bounced lightly off it.

There’d been other children watching the first time Samson had lifted a sword too. They’d stood and jeered at him, while his instructor had scolded him. Most of them had been noble, unlike this lot, and they’d practiced with wooden swords since they could stand. He still remembered the heat on his cheeks, the way sweat had trickled down the back of his neck. Now that same pink flush stained Ren’s face.
“You’ll find this easier with time,” Samson assured him.

He had Ren repeat the drill a few more times. When it became clear that he wouldn’t manage many more swings without seriously straining himself, Samson had him practice parrying. Even though it was clear Ren was tired, he was reluctant to call an end to the lesson so soon with all those little eyes watching. Then he noticed someone else watching, from the shade of a nearby tree. Celeste stood against the trunk, half hidden in shadow. When his eyes met hers, she inclined her head towards the stairs to the battlements.

“Uh, Ren, I think that’s enough for today,” he said as he watched her mount the stairs. Had that meant what he thought? One way to find out.

He found Celeste leaning over an embrasure, looking down at the training area. Samson noted that she’d chosen a place where hardly anyone ever walked and where it would be difficult for anyone to see them from below. He was glad of this. She’d taken his warnings to heart, then.

“Raleigh Samson, Skyhold’s babysitter. Who would have thought?” She commented as he approached.

He grinned, wiping sweat from his brow. “How long have you been watching?”

“Long enough to know you’d need this.” She passed him a skin of water.

It was delightfully cool, he hadn’t realised just how thirsty he’d grown while they’d been training.

“Some days I feel like you’re sent by Andraste herself,” he said, passing back the empty vessel. The truth was, it was most days. Celeste was never far from his mind, nor all the ways in which she’d changed things for him. His eyes lingered on her face, her smiling lips. Realising he was staring, he cleared his throat. “He’s a good boy. Fast learner. We need to build some muscle though, or find him a smaller sword.”

“I’ll ask around at the market. I’m sure someone has something.”

Samson shook his head. “Naw, weapons are expensive. I was thinking I could maybe put in a requisition. What’s the word on this Rylen guy? You know anything about him?”

“Who’s Rylen?”

So that was a no, then. Cold wind whipped over the fortifications, a pleasant respite from the heat of the day. Plus, it made Celeste’s cheeks pink. He quite enjoyed the effect. Samson knew he should just thank her for the water and go. He was the one who insisted they never see each other. Yet, there wasn’t anyone here, right? There was no harm in lingering in her presence a little longer.

“I went to talk to Rutherford what, about three days ago? And he tells me he’s being replaced for the time being. Needed elsewhere. Instead there’s this Rylen. Apparently he was serving out in the Western Approach.”

“Cullen’s gone?” Celeste’s hair lashed around her face, and she brushed it away.

“Yeah, I guess he slipped away quietly. Don’t know what his business is, not sure he’d tell me if I asked. Anyways, Rylen seems alright so far. He hasn’t thrown me back in the dungeon or had me tortured. So I consider that a good sign. Still, was hoping you’d picked up some gossip. You know, maybe something else that can inform how I act around him? I don’t want to make some
misstep and throw away everything. I’m gifted enough at that as is.”

Celeste chewed on her lower lip and didn’t respond.

“Or not, it’s alright. I mean I don’t want to get you in trouble or—”

“Solana’s also gone. Leliana sent her on a mission.” She shook her head and laughed. “Our spymaster is playing matchmaker while an army of mages threatens the next Divine. Well, she certainly knows how to gamble.”

“A what?” He stared at her, trying to work out if he’d heard what she’d said correctly.

Her cheeks went even pinker and her hand flew to her mouth.

“I get it, don’t worry. I’m the bad guy. Far be it for me to know what’s going on around here.”

“No, it’s not that.” She shook her head for emphasis. “No one’s supposed to know. They don’t want to cause panic.”

“You’re not very good at keeping secrets.”

“Not from you at least.”

His heart did a strange double beat. Even with the wind, the air felt thick and sticky. His fingers tingled.

Here they were, alone, no one to see them. No reason to stay away from her. And she was so damned beautiful, like some painting, with the long wild hair and the pink cheeks and... lips. She was up against one of the merlons, a picture against the sweeping vista of the Frostbacks. He moved towards her. Her green eyes locked on his.

“You trying to say you trust me?” he asked softly, with a smile so she knew he was teasing. Kind of.

“You trying to say you trust me?” he asked softly, with a smile so she knew he was teasing. Kind of.

“Should I?” Her voice came out breathless and he knew she was caught in this same thing, this moment where everything seemed to hang waiting.

“Depends with what.” His pulse drummed louder than the wind as he leaned towards her. It was something primal that he could no more control than his rapid heartbeat, this need to feel her lips on his. But he moved slowly, giving her more than enough time to pull away should she will it.

His face was inches from hers, he could hear her rapid breathing. He closed his eyes and...

Her hand on his chest. “Sorry.” The word, a whisper. Her breath still coming fast. “Sorry, I can’t.”

She ducked her head and pulled away. And then she was running back along the battlements. He took off after her. He’d misread the signs. He needed to apologise.

“Celeste!”

He caught up with her as she reached the stairs. He snatched her hand, pulling her around. A pulse of electricity shot up his arm and she slipped free as it fell limp, useless and painful to his side.

She backed away from him, chest rising and falling rapidly, eyes wide. “You’re too much like him,” she breathed.
“Too much like who!” he called to her retreating back, cradling his arm.
One thing Cullen couldn’t deny about Orlais: it was beautiful. The inn sat on the edge of a forest, the afternoon sun streamed through the trees in golden beams, and in the other direction the ocean glinted, beckoning them home. But it was into the dark forest that their mission summoned them.

The trees were packed close at first, so close that Cullen doubted they’d be able to travel very far before their way was completely blocked. He had to cut aside a few smaller branches. Solana ducked and dived just ahead of him. She wore a cloak with a furred collar, despite the temperate weather, and carried a pack on her back and one at her side. Still, she was nimble. Oftimes he would have lost sight of her if not for the brightness of her hair against the green.

The forest opened out as they drew closer to the river. He heard it well before he saw it; water gushed down from the Arlesans hills, roaring and smelling like rain and earth. At first the sound was so loud as to be overwhelming, but as they moved up river he found he grew accustomed to it. Still, there was little need for talk as they navigated their way over tree roots and under thick aged branches. Cullen wouldn’t have been surprised if they stumbled upon an ancient elven temple. This was that kind of place.

When the shadows grew too thick, and the light too dim to safely navigate between the trees, Solana suggested they look for a place to camp.

A little away from the river, there was a small glade with dry, even ground that he submitted would possibly be a good spot. He expected her to argue, but she nodded and removed her pack.

He left her to set up the fire, knowing she could likely have done so in her sleep, while he pitched his tent. He stashed his pack safely within, and then offered to pitch hers. Again, she gave no protest. Perhaps travelling with her wouldn’t be quite as difficult as he’d imagined.

The night was full of song: birds, crickets, wild nugs. It was altogether quite pleasant. Solana produced a bottle of wine she’d brought from the inn and even offered to share it with him.

“What do you know about Arlesans?” she asked as the fire crackled, cooking their roast nug dinner.

“Not much, to be honest. My Orlesian geographical knowledge is somewhat lacking.”

Solana took a sip of the wine and passed him the bottle. “I came through this forest before. There are a few small villages we can stop at for supplies. Arlesans itself was overrun by darkspawn during the Third Blight. The Wardens had a heavy presence in the area. You remember when we were in the Western Approach? You couldn’t walk five miles without running into some Warden landmark? It’s a little like that.”

“And if Wardens are involved in this…”

“That’s what I’m thinking. They’ll have taken up residence in some old Warden ruin. I’d put good coin on it.”

Cullen tasted the wine. It wasn’t too bad for something you’d find in a roadside inn. He leaned back. The stars were bright overhead, and he could easily pick out the common constellations between the trees. “And when we find Anders, what then?”

“Then we reason with him.”
He handed her the wine and watched as she took another drink. She’d twisted her hair into a bun at the nape of her neck, but as usual much of it was escaping. “And if he can’t be reasoned with?”

“He will be. He’s not a monster.”

“That’s naive.”

She rolled her eyes and made a deep growling sound.

“Need I remind you what he did in Kirkwall?”

“Need I remind you he saved my life, and your daughter’s?”

*Only because she put their lives in danger.* He pressed his eyes closed, pushing the memory from his mind. “That’s hardly the same thing.”

“If we can convince him that the new Divine won’t bring back the Circles, he’ll have no reason to strike.”

“You mean lie to him?”

Solana stared at him and he righted himself. It took a moment for her to speak. “How can you be so certain the Circles will return?”

Of course, she didn’t know about Cassandra. Was he supposed to keep that secret? “How can you be so certain they won’t?”

“Because Leliana told me. Her personal assurance.”

“Oh, and what’s she going to do about it? Send spies in to change official documents? Assassinate anyone who votes pro-Circle?”

Solana squared her shoulders. “Leliana can assure me because she will be the one making the decision. She’s the next Divine.”

A range of more suitable responses rushed through Cullen’s head, but what came out was a bark of laughter. “She told you that?”

Solana nodded, eyebrows drawing together in suspicion.

“Cassandra’s the next Divine. I overheard her speaking with the Inquisitor.” He couldn’t resist adding, “I’m surprised he didn’t mention it to you. I assume that’s why he went off to the Frostback Basin.”

Solana’s expression was frozen. Still puzzled, searching the embers. “Leliana lied to me?”

*Blast it.* She looked positively heartbroken - not what he’d intended. “Leliana no doubt said what was necessary to get you here. I’m certain she lied to me too.”

... I know you to be a master strategist and a man of principle. You are skilled with the sword, trained in survival...

And he’d swallowed it. He wanted to reach out to Solana, offer her some measure of comfort, but he wasn’t sure the gesture would be welcomed.

“Cassandra will certainly bring back the Circles,” Solana said.
That had been his first thought too, when he’d initially heard the news. And now he could see Solana having the same doubts about her future, her position, as he had had. She was no longer a Grey Warden. Fiona had been thrown back into a Circle when she’d been cured. What was stopping them from doing the same to Solana? She was the Hero yes, but a powerful mage. And if word got out about what she’d done to save Alise...

“I won’t let them put you in a Circle again,” he said softly.

She startled, as if he’d shouted. Her eyes explored his face. “My mother didn’t want to let them either. She had power, influence, but they took me anyway…” She fidgeted with the sextant around her neck. “What if Alise is a mage?”

His gut churned at the thought. It had occurred to him before, of course. To his knowledge, Tranquility only ever happened to mages.

He’d removed magelings from their families as part of his duties as a Templar. Some families would hand over their children without protest. Their eyes would be glassy and sometimes members would glare at him from half-shuttered windows where they thought he couldn’t see. But some… screaming, crying, mothers clinging to their babes, begging him, Please, she’s all I have.

He’d had sympathy for them, but he’d felt safe in the knowledge that he was doing the right thing. He was protecting the family, and the mage. Yet now he was a father himself… the thought of someone coming and taking Alise from them, never to see her again or discover what became of her, was unbearable.

“Would you mind taking the first watch?” Solana asked. “I find I don’t have much of an appetite.”

He nodded and she passed him the wine as she headed out of the circle of firelight, into her tent.

Samson paced from one side of the corridor to the other and back again. He ran his hands through his hair, cursed himself, and muttered what he intended to say again.

“Celeste, I’m sorry. No. Celeste, please forgive me. Shit. Too desperate. Celeste, I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable yesterday. Idiot. ‘Course you made her uncomfortable, she jolted you with her magic, didn’t she?” His arm still ached a little near the shoulder. “Celeste, I wanted to apologise for making you uncomfortable yesterday. I misread… things. I was out of line.” Yeah. I was out of line. "Celeste, I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable yesterday. I was out of line. I promise nothing like that will ever happen again.” He closed his eyes and drew a breath. “Do you think you can forgive me?” Urgh, he hated the pitiful note in his voice, he’d have to try make it sound less pathetic. Even though he was pathetic. The thought of never talking to her again-—

“Of course I can.”

He whipped around, so fast he almost fell over. Celeste was standing by the kitchen door, hands behind her back. He’d chosen the right place to wait for her, and the right time. He’d been uncertain when the dinner shift ended.

“I didn’t mean for you to hear all of that,” he said.
“Didn’t you?” She smiled. He supposed she was right. It was kind of amusing, in a way.

She bent to pick up a box of supplies. “If anyone should apologise it’s me.”

He rushed to help her. As he took the box from her hands, his fingers brushed hers. He nearly dropped the box, embarrassed, frightened she’d think it intentional. “No, you don’t. I was out of line.”

She pushed the pantry door open and he followed her inside. “I’m sorry, Samson. I didn’t mean to… lead you on. I know I did and it’s really not right.”

He set down the box, letting the door shut behind him. She lit an overhead lamp with her magic.

“It’s not your fault I’m a desperate fool.”

“You’re not.” She started packing glass jars out of the box. He wanted to help her, but wasn’t sure how, so he stood there like a dazed snoufleur.

“You said… you said I was too much like someone. May I ask who?”

She paused, fidgeting with the lid of one of the jars. The lamplight played over her features, making them difficult to read. “Ren’s father,” she said eventually. “He was… a Templar.”

“Ah.” What else could he say? The story was apparent. Forbidden love in the Circle, wasn’t the first time he’d seen it and it certainly explained the boy’s interest in swordplay. “May I ask what became of him?” He knew he was pressing her. She might throw him out. But at this stage, what did he have to lose?

“He died when Kinloch Hold fell during the Fifth Blight.”

“I see.” Now that was rough. He knew that as a blood mage from the Ferelden Tower she would have been partly responsible for that fall. He couldn’t imagine that, being responsible for the death of someone you loved. But he could kind of understand. Maddox.

“I thought perhaps I was over it,” she said, speaking down to the jar. “I thought enough time had passed. I’m so sorry, Raleigh.”

Raleigh, his first name. He liked the way she said it. “Hey, I’m the one who told you it was safer if we weren’t seen together. Maybe this is for the best.”

She nodded but she didn’t look at him. Her shoulders were slumped, her eyes downcast. No doubt she was remembering old heartbreak, and he’d brought that upon her. He felt the urge to hold her, but knew that was likely the very worst thing to do.

“Celeste?” His voice caught a little. “You know, I’m still here, regardless? If you want to, I don’t know, laugh about Rutherford or something? I’m always up for that.”

He was glad to see a small flicker of a smile. “Thank you.”

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Hawke,
I did as you asked, but your boy’s lying low.

Here’s the thing though. Ran into some Grey Wardens, couple with Ferelden accents. So I thought, hey, maybe they know something.

Turns out, they think Anders is dead. Sorry, wasn’t sure how to break it to you.

They refused to give me more details. And I was very convincing. I’ll keep digging.

Admiral Isabella

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Hawke slammed the letter down on the bar with such force that it shook, spilling his drink.

“Bad news?” the man on the stool beside him asked.

Hawke growled. It was all he could manage. When he’d been handed the letter, and had seen it was from Isabella, he’d dared to feel hope. He’d thought this would bring him relief. Instead it only brought more worry.

What if he was dead?

The man sighed and shook his head. “Got a fair few of those myself. It’s always tough, especially when you’re surrounded by strangers.” He had a lilting Starkhaven accent.

“Oh, really?” Hawke let his frustration leak into his voice. “You’ve also had letters telling you your lover might be dead, then?”

The words did not have the effect he’d thought. The man just shrugged. “Lovers, friends. Life of a soldier.”

The man was dressed like one of the Inquisition soldiers. He had tattoos down his chin and along the side of his nose. Hawke couldn’t remember seeing him before.

“I’m not a soldier,” Hawke said.

“You got a name, Not a Soldier? What are you drinking? Next round’s on me.”

Alright, definitely someone new. Hawke smirked and offered his hand. “Garrett Hawke.”

That did have the effect he expected. The man’s eyes went large as he accepted his hand. “Rylen. You’re pretty infamous where I come from, Hawke.”
“I’m pretty infamous everywhere.”

Rylen gave a bark of laughter. “Modest too.”
Hawke stared up at the roof, and a starling stared back at him out of a gaping hole. The sky beyond was a pleasant pale blue and a gentle breeze shifted the leaves on a tree branch that looked like it had grown right through the roof and no one had thought to stop it. Hawke might have enjoyed the sight if he had any clue how he’d got there. Where in the Void am I?

It was difficult to think. His head felt twice its size and when he rolled onto his side a sharp pain stabbed at his eyeballs. He groaned, finding himself twisted in some standard-issue Inquisition sheets. Naked. Oh. Clothes. Where were his clothes?

He found his underthings at the foot of the bed, a single boot near the only exit - a ladder down. Shit.

Gathering what he could of his dignity, he laced up his underclothes, took the boot in hand and descended the ladder. There wasn’t really much other option.

He was still a bit groggy, so he made it halfway down before he noticed the room. His stomach clenched as he almost lost his grip.

Cullen’s room. Cullen’s office. Which made that Cullen’s bed. He’d woken up in Cullen’s bed. Oh shit.

“Good morning,” a deep voice said from the desk and Hawke squeaked in fright, hopefully soft enough that the other man didn’t hear him. Hawke hadn’t even seen him.

It wasn’t Cullen. That was a relief.

“What am I doing in Cullen’s office?” he asked.

The man smiled, flashing perfect pearly white teeth. “You mean you don’t remember?”

Beautiful voice. Starkhaven accent. Hawke remembered the large hand gripping his. Rylen. You’re pretty infamous where I come from, Hawke.

“No, pants?”

Rylen nodded to a chair where the rest of Hawke’s clothing was neatly piled, including the missing boot. Hawke climbed the rest of the way down the ladder, averting his eyes. His face was hot, he imagined he was bright red. Not the look he usually went for the morning after. Then again, it had been a long time, a very long time, since he’d had this kind of morning after.

He retrieved his clothes. “Where’s Cullen?” His voice was higher pitched than he would have liked.
“I told you last night, Cullen’s been called away. I’m standing in for him for the time being. You really don’t remember?”

No Cullen. Thank Andraste for small mercies. But now that he said that, he did remember a little...

Pressed against the door, warm arms pinning him, lips on his, then stubble brushing his neck as a hot tongue slid along his collarbone. Rylen had reached past him to open the door. “This is Cullen’s office,” Hawke had said.

Rylen had walked backwards, leading Hawke. “Mine for now.” Further questions were cut off by fevered kissing. That’s when Hawke had lost his shirt. “You sure about this?” Rylen had asked against his ear. “We’re pretty blasted.” He’d laughed, a low rumble, and Hawke had said, “I’m sure.”

“It’s coming back to me,” he said.

Rylen had been watching him with some concern, but now he returned his attention to what he’d been doing before. Hawke’s heart stuttered. Lyrium. He’d been sitting at the desk preparing his morning dose of lyrium.

A fucking Templar.

 Quite literally.

Hawke sat down on the chair to pull on his boots, watching Rylen as he muttered something over the philter, then tossed his head back and gulped the contents. Hawke had heard about Templars taking lyrium each morning, but had never actually seen the ritual. It was less involved than he’d imagined. Then again, he had just caught the tail end of it.

“So, last night... I might need your help filling in some blanks,” he said once Rylen started packing up the apparatus.

Rylen chuckled, the sound sending a spear of heat down into Hawke’s belly. “What do you remember?”

“You’re Rylen, you bought a round of drinks. And I remember the middle bit I think. When we, uh, got here.”

“Only the middle bit?” Rylen asked. He moved his chair around so he was facing Hawke. There was no accusation or hurt in the question, if anything it was vaguely flirtatious.

“You go up first,” He’d said. “That way I can catch you if you fall.”

“How romantic.”

At the top of the ladder, waiting on the edge of the bed. Nervous shivers, the flush of alcohol and adrenaline. A moment to think, but wanting so badly not to. Then Rylen appearing, pulling off his own shirt and revealing chiseled tanned muscles, broad shoulders. So very different from Anders. A demonic grin, followed by strong arms around him. Lips joined. Getting lost in taste and touch. Being touched again. Gentle affection despite the fact that they had just met. Rylen had pulled
away again to ask, “You’re certain you want to do this?”

“Yes.” Hawke had tugged him closer giving him a grin of his own.

Hawke cleared his throat. “Alright, the middle and the, eh, end. Not the beginning.”

Rylen leaned forward slightly. “Well I’m relieved to hear it. That you remember the most interesting part, I mean. I’m no storyteller, so I doubt I’d quite capture it.” The smile again, completely open. He didn’t seem the least bit ashamed of or embarrassed by what had happened between them. “Well, we had a few rounds at the bar, then went upstairs at your suggestion.”

Hawke nodded. “A little more private.” He remembered that.

“Right, then you wanted to talk about Anders.”

Really? “Maker, sorry.”

Rylen waved it off. “No, it’s alright. You had a lot to get off your chest.”

What had he said? Had he mentioned the phylacteries? “How did we go from that to this?” Hawke glanced at the top of the ladder for emphasis.

“Well, we moved onto other topics eventually. And don’t worry, you didn’t make me buy all of the drinks.” Rylen winked and Hawke’s stomach flipped.

“I’ll get this round!” The bar had bobbed in front of Hawke’s face and he tried to reach for it to hold it still, but Rylen held him back. “No more rounds, I think some fresh air is in order.”

Hawke had tried to shake him off. “Please. You bought the last three. I’m not. I’m not like that. Want to carry my own - not hanging around at the bar waiting for handsome strangers to buy me drinks, that’s not me.”

“Handsome am I? Now I know for certain you’ve had too much.”

“Then the battlements,” Hawke said.

Cool wind against his cheeks, his head starting to clear. Heart pounding as they walked. Dread that Rylen was taking him home. He didn’t want the night to be over. But they’d found an alcove on the walls where the wind wasn’t so bad. Stars overhead and glowing campfires down in the valley. They talked until the campfires were out, about nothing and everything, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder.

Rylen nodded again. “And then the kiss.” His voice went extra low when he said that. His eyes twinkled.
Rylen had been the first to rise. “Well, I should get to bed. The troops will need me up early tomorrow.” Hawke had tugged him back down and kissed him.

They hadn’t exchanged more words until they’d reached Cullen’s office, and that must have been an hour later.

Hawke touched his lips self-consciously. “I feel the need to clarify that I’m not usually like this.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t make a habit of jumping into bed with men I’ve just met either. It was an enjoyable night, though. As enjoyable as it was unexpected.”

Enjoyable, yes, but Hawke’s chest felt tight. Aside from the pounding headache, there was the growing disquiet. He’d been with someone. Someone not Anders. While Anders was Maker knows where, in Maker knows what state, possibly dead or dying. And if Anders came back, or contacted Hawke… how would he deal if he found out Hawke had been with someone else? A Templar no less? How would Justice react?

It made Hawke feel dizzy. He scrubbed his face with his hands. “Thank you. I should… I should go.”

“Anders?” Rylen asked, as if reading his mind. His eyebrows were drawn together, his kind eyes - such kind eyes - were searching Hawke’s face.

Hawke’s insides jolted, conflicting emotions tearing at him.

“You haven’t betrayed anyone,” Rylen said in that beautiful voice of his. “Anders left you, Hawke.”

Hawke rose to his feet. “How can you stand to look at me?” The words fell out of his mouth, the swelling tide of his emotions starting to sweep him away. “You saw what happened to Kirkwall, what we did. You’re a Templar for Andraste’s sake.”

“And by we you mean what Anders did.”

“I stood with him, or did Cullen leave out that part?”

“You stood with the man you loved, there is no shame in that.”

“I did… more than that.” Hawke pulled at the roots of his hair, willing the pain in his head and his chest to stop. “I was complicit. I helped him build the… I helped him distract the…”

Rylen’s large hands gripped Hawke’s shoulders. An anchor, bringing him back to himself. “You were tricked. You told me all of this last night.”

“Well, perhaps I was trying to seduce you,” Hawke said.

Rylen’s mouth quirked upwards. “Even if that were the case, you’d still be the Champion of Kirkwall. You are more than him.”

Hawke realised he was breathing heavily. He swallowed, trying to gain control of himself again. “Varric will be flattered that you’ve read his book.”

Rylen raised his eyebrows. “Which book is that?”

“Tales of the Champion?”
Rylen shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m not much of a reader. Shameful, I know. Listen, Hawke, I can see you’re working through some things.” He let go of Hawke’s shoulders and moved back to the desk. “I like you. That much should be obvious. I like you a lot, in fact. But I understand that might not be what you need right now.” He leaned against Cullen’s desk. “So, let me put it like this. I am here if you need an ear to talk things over with. I am here if you want more. And if you want neither.” He shrugged. “No hard feelings. You set the pace on this.”

Solana rested her hands on her hips. “You ready?”

Cullen rose from his crouch by the river, holding a canteen. “Almost.”

She shook her head. “You realise we’ll be travelling along the river? If there’s one thing we won’t run low on it’s water.”

“You never know what might happen. I intend to be prepared.”

He leaned down again to fill another canteen. A breeze ruffled his hair and whispered through the canopy above them. It was the perfect weather for travelling. Clear and cool. Solana couldn’t find it in herself to be annoyed. If anything, he was endearing.

He straightened, offered her a self-conscious smile. Her heart constricted. This was her husband. Out here, the last few months seemed like a horrible dream. She wished they could step through some portal and go back to before Alise was born. They’d still have to face so much, but perhaps she’d do better the second time around.

Alise… Alise would love it out here. Solana could hardly bear to think of her baby, her precious girl. How was she coping with the distance? Was the nurse handling her okay?

She tried not to let on how her breasts ached, or how her robes chafed, as they journeyed onwards. She knew Cullen was right, she should be at home with their child. But then who would stop Anders? Who would save the mages of Ferelden if not their Hero?

Cullen walked slightly ahead today, undistracted by uncooperative anatomy. He cut a clear path with his sword, in seemingly lazy movements that she knew held much strength. Could he save Ferelden’s mages? Possibly. She had every faith in his abilities. But the truth was that she could not bear the thought of him going into danger alone.

He came to a sudden halt and held up a hand to stop her. If he’d been a dog, his ears would have been pricked. As it was, he tilted his head slightly to the side.

She heard it too. Something up ahead, moving through the forest along the river as they were, but heading in their direction. More like multiple somethings, moving as a group. Friend or foe? Her heart pounded. It was impossible to tell. Did they hide, flee or wait?

Then it hit her. The carrion stench.

She dived for Cullen, pulling him sideways into the brush. He struggled at first, making a small startled sound, but to his credit he quietened down and followed her lead, backing further into the
vegetation as the other party approached.

Solana crouched low, not even daring to breathe. Through the leaves and branches, she saw their legs first. Darkspawn. If she’d still been a Warden, she would have sensed them. Now her nose had alerted her too late for them to get safely away.

From the armour, she counted a hurlock, two genlocks and one hurlock alpha.

One benefit of being unable to sense them was that they couldn’t sense her either. Perhaps they’d move past? They walked a little further. Sweat dripped down her neck. Further. What were darkspawn doing out here anyway? Further… they stopped. There was some excitement, and then they started moving back towards her hiding place. No!

Solana moved her head ever so slightly to position her mouth over Cullen’s ear. “They found our tracks,” she breathed. “I’ll strike first. Be ready.”

She tried to slip away from him, but his gloved hand clamped around her wrist. He shook his head violently, mouthing, “No.”

Didn’t he see they had no choice? Even as they deliberated, the darkspawn moved closer. She tried to tug her arm free, but his grip was hard as dragon bone. He was glaring at her as if she was the one being irrational. Fine, if that’s how he wanted to do things. With her other hand, she picked up a stick. She threw it behind them, further into the forest.

The darkspawn whooped and hissed and crashed through the bracken. They were still coming closer. Cullen’s eyes went wide.

“Let. Me. Go.” Solana said, hardly worried now whether the darkspawn would find them. They’d be upon them in seconds.

“You’re insane,” he hissed back.

She tugged her arm again and thankfully he either let go or his grip slipped. Free to run, she barreled through the trees, towards where she’d thrown the stick. Leaves and twigs slapped against her face, the undergrowth threatened to trip her, but she surged onwards. She heard the sounds of pursuit behind her. Good.

She ran until her lungs ached, until they were gaining on her, then she ducked behind a tree and cast Celeste’s invisibility spell.

Three seconds to catch her breath.

Their boots pounded across the forest floor, and stopped. Silence. Confused grunting. She moved out from behind the tree slowly, heart in her throat. They didn’t seem to notice her, although they were looking around with interest. If she could just get back to Cullen without them seeing her-

“Solana!”

Cullen came crashing through the bush. He was red-faced, panting, and entirely obvious. Every one of the darkspawn turned to him.

Colour drained from Cullen’s face, his grip tightened on his sword.

With no time to think, Solana leapt at the closest genlock, an archer, and used her staff to choke it. “Get the big guy!” she commanded Cullen.
He lifted his sword just in time to block an attack by the alpha. She cast a barrier over him, while clinging on to the archer for all she was worth.

The other genlock came roaring at her, swinging a large, crooked axe. She cast Chain Lightning through her staff and it speared off in a dozen separate directions, including Cullen’s. She couldn’t see him, so she hoped her barrier had held. The lightning had the desired effect. It slowed the approaching genlock, and made the one she clung to more pliant. Now they smelled like death and burnt meat. She flung her weight to the side, maneuvering the horrid thing so her staff faced its cousin. Magic pulsed from her hand, up through the rune - which glowed briefly red - before it slammed into the genlock, and sent him flying backwards, with a hole in his chest.

Good thing she’d never bothered to swap out that cleansing rune.

*Her* genlock yowled and then she was catapulted backwards onto the forest floor. The breath whooshed out of her as she slammed into the ground. The genlock turned, bearing down on her, training an arrow on her face. She thrust out her hand, cast Winter’s Grasp and froze it in place. She scrambled to her feet, heaving in air. Where was the hurlock?

Cullen was backed against a tree, trying to fight both of the remaining darkspawn. Solana was still struggling to get enough air into her lungs, but she cast at the hurlock. Arcane energy bounced off its armour, but it was enough to get its attention. It rounded on her, opening its toothy mouth to laugh.

“Funny is it? Come here and we’ll see how funny you find my magic.”

The skeletal form advanced towards her, black blighted skin dripping from its bones. Solana shifted her staff from hand to hand. She could feel her energy, her link to the Fade growing stronger. The hurlock raised one mighty arm. Its weapon glinted in the dappled light, primed to cleave her.

She cast through her staff again, aiming for the arm.

A scream of agony. The smell of smoke. The creature fell to its knees to claw at the place where its arm had been. She gathered energy for another strike, the one that would end it.

“Solana!”

She ducked automatically at Cullen’s warning shout. An arrow whistled past her face. The genlock had come unfrozen prematurely. She whipped around, her primed spell flying into the archer instead of its original target.

Something seized her arm. She crashed backwards, losing her grip on her staff. The hurlock leaned over her, dripping its blighted blood from what was left of its shoulder. She pressed her mouth closed, tried to twist away from the deadly liquid, heart kicking with the realisation that she was no longer immune. She felt blindly for her staff. A giant blade hovered just above her face. The hurlock grinned.

She cast ice, in a last-ditch effort to halt that blade. Cold chased across the hurlock’s frame as the blade came down. Not enough ice, not solid enough, not- The arm tumbled to the side as a silverite sword sliced it off at the shoulder. The hurlock just had time to look startled before its head followed its arm. The body collapsed on top of Solana.

“Solana!” Cullen rolled the corpse off her and fell to his knees beside her.

“No, don’t!” she jerked out of his way as he reached for her. “Don’t touch the blood.” She scrambled upright, wiping her mouth and face with her sleeve until there was no chance of any
blist finding its way into her. She spat for safety. “Yech, didn’t think I’d be doing that again.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Cullen was still kneeling beside her. Was he hurt? She scanned his face, all the small exposed parts of him, didn’t see any blood. “Solana!” He seized her arm and shook her. “What were you thinking? You’re not immune anymore!”

“I know that, Cullen.”

“You’re not acting like it!” He gestured to her bloodied clothes for emphasis.

Yes, dismemberment had worked better when she’d carried the Taint. The fact that she no longer did may have slipped her mind in the heat of the battle. Still. “What was I supposed to do? Sit waiting for them to find us?”

“They may not have! They may have passed!”

“I told you they picked up our tracks.”

“You’re guessing.”

“I know darkspawn!”

“Here we go again.” He threw out his arms. “I’m the Hero of Ferelden. Don’t bother worrying about me. I’m bloody immortal!”

She clambered to her feet. “Why is it so difficult for you to acknowledge my skill?”

“This has nothing to do with your skill!” He also rose.

“I’m a mage and I’m a good fighter. You can’t bear that.”

“This has nothing to do with you being a mage!”

“Oh really? So if I was, say, Bull or Rylen, you’d still be yelling at me?”

“I’m not yelling!”

It was almost humorous, his expression as he realised he was, in fact, yelling. If there were other darkspawn nearby, they’d almost certainly drawn their attention.

Cullen dropped his voice. “If it was Bull or Rylen, they wouldn’t have run off into the forest like that.”

“I was leading the darkspawn away from you.”

“Why? No, don’t tell me, I know. Because I’m not the Hero of Ferelden. Maker forbid I stand and fight with you shoulder-to-shoulder.”

She almost growled her answer. “Because I was going to use magic to sneak back past them. You remember the spell. Mysterious blackberries?”

He had the decency to look slightly abashed at that. He pressed his lips together, glancing down at the hurlock blood slowly pooling at their feet. “How was I meant to know that was your plan?”

“You were meant to trust me.”

“How can I trust you not to get yourself killed when you keep trying to at every opportunity?”
She raked a hand through her hair, no doubt smearing bits of hurlock through it. “If I truly keep trying to kill myself, how come I’m still here?”

“Because I keep getting in your way.” He shoved his sword into the ground with finality and turned from her. “We should gather wood, burn the bodies. We don’t want the blight spreading.”

She bit her tongue before she said something sarcastic and uncalled for. He was right about this, even if he was wrong about everything else. “These things came from somewhere. I’d like to try find where.”

“I’d rather not lose the daylight.” Cullen prodded at the hurlock alpha with his boot. It was sprawled with a deep gash in its stomach, just below the armoured plating of its torso.

“And I’d rather not be slaughtered by darkspawn in my sleep,” she shot back.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. She could see anger still simmering beneath the surface of his gaze. “I’d suggest you set a ward, but I suppose that won’t work.”

A dig at Anders getting to the phylacteries. It shouldn’t have hurt, but it did. Anders was powerful, but certainly he wasn’t that powerful. Perhaps her wards had been weak.

She shook her head. “I’m going to go wash.” Wouldn’t do to get infected with the blight so soon after being rid of it. “If you need me, just... follow my phylactery.” He’d kept it, after all.

He called her name as she trudged away, but she didn’t look around.
Solana submerged herself in the clear water and breathed out all the air in her lungs, sending forth a spray of small bubbles. Her hair danced around her like some tentacled sea creature. The corruption bled from it, twisting like smoke. When her lungs were empty she rose, feeling slightly lightheaded and much calmer. This part of the river was still; the water gathered in shallow pools along the edges, sunlight sparkled off the ripples and birdsong... no birdsong.

She shook her head and leaned from side to side to make sure her ears weren’t blocked. A cool wind teased across the treetops. She could hear that. But no birds.

She sank down again, keeping only her nostrils and eyes above the water and scanning the banks for threats. Her staff was leaning against a tree beside her clothes, not far away. But on the other side of the river, something moved.

The ring of steel being hammered echoed at the other end of the armory as Samson fastened on a padded chestplate.

“Ser Samson, may I ask you something?”

Samson strapped the final piece of padding over his forearm. Ren mimicked him, biting on his lower lip in concentration as he struggled to fasten a buckle with his left hand.

They were alone in a corner of the armory. The other children hadn’t yet discovered that this was where they prepared for their lessons.

“‘Course,” Samson said, reaching to help Ren with the buckle.

Ren allowed his assistance, but didn’t look up and continued chewing on his lip. “I was talking to some of the…” His mouth formed a line and he nodded decisively. “Me and some of the others were talking. And they said some things.”

Was the adjusted phrasing Ren’s attempt to talk tough? Samson tried not to show his amusement. “The others, eh? And who are the others? Other boys your age?”

Ren’s attention shifted to the forge fires. “Yeah. Well.... Older than me. But not by much! Ant is only half a year older.”

“I see.”

Ren squirmed. “Thing is, they were saying some things about you.”

Ah. Samson’s stomach writhed. It had been bound to happen at some stage. He’d imagined that Celeste would be the one to broach the subject with her son, but it seemed he’d heard it from elsewhere first.

Ren’s gaze darted up to meet his briefly, before landing on his feet. “Ser Samson… they said you
helped Corypheus. That you’re a bad man. I told them it was lies. They made me ask Ser Dennett.”

The curmudgeon of a stablemaster. “I think it’s Master Dennet, Ren.”

Ren scratched at his neck. “He said it was true.” His voice was tiny.

Samson went cold. “It is true, Ren.”

Ren’s large eyes looked up into his. “I don’t understand.” It seemed like he was about to cry.

Samson felt like the breath had been knocked out of him. He hadn’t realised how much the boy’s trust had mattered to him. Now he’d lost it. And he only had himself to blame.

He swallowed. “I made some mistakes. I did some bad - terrible - things. I thought that’s all I was good for. But then I met your mum. She told me that there was worthiness in me, that I could change.”

Ren was still staring at him. “But Corypheus nearly killed mom. She wrote… when Haven was attacked, and there was a dragon. There were Red Templars and they filled the town and she was fighting with the Hero of Ferelden and the Red Templars nearly killed them but then Commander Cullen came and saved them.”

Red Templars nearly killed them. Maker. It wasn’t like he hadn’t known that they’d been on opposite sides. It wasn’t like he didn’t remember that night, when he’d commanded his vast army and had been absolutely certain in his victory. He remembered staring down the rise, Corypheus at his side, looking straight at Cullen in his ridiculous feathery surcoat and thinking, Finally. Finally I am the superior one.

He drew his arms to his chest, noticing they were shaking. “That is all true,” he said.

Ren blinked. His brow furrowed. “Mikel said you commanded the Red Templars.”

Mikel must have been one of the boys. “I did.”

“So, you tried to kill mom.”

Samson swallowed again. The urge to flee from this conversation was almost overwhelming, but that would be cowardly and would accomplish nothing. “Yeah.”

“Why aren’t you in the dungeon?”

Fair enough question. “I was. Your mum used to visit me and she convinced Commander Cullen that I’d be more useful out here, helping to train his men to survive fighting people like me.”

“How did she do that if you tried to kill her?” The hurt and confusion were now permeating the boy’s voice so that it cracked and splintered.

“I don’t know, lad.”

Ren fell silent, staring at his knees.

Samson exhaled and shook his head. “Sometimes the world doesn’t make as much sense as we’d like. I could give you excuses for what I did, tell you I was hungry or scared or angry. But the truth is, I was wrong and what I did was wrong. I am… deeply sorry for what nearly happened you your mum.”
Ren brushed at his cheek. *Shit*, he’d made the boy cry.

He shifted forward to put a comforting hand on Ren’s shoulder, but then thought better of it. “Look, I’d understand if you don’t want to do our lessons anymore.”

Ren sniffled. “Mikel will laugh at me. Say ‘told you so’.”

That was the second mention of that name. “Who is this Mikel?”

“One of the boys. He’s the leader.”

The alpha brat in Skyhold’s pack, no doubt. And Ren was the new kid. Tough, that. “And you care about what he thinks?”

“He said I shouldn’t learn the sword. That I’m too weak and funny to watch. Also he said I wouldn’t want to learn the sword when I found out the truth. Because no one wants to train with a… doesn’t matter.”

The lad was still trying to spare Samson’s feelings at this juncture. Yeah, his mother’s son, through and through.

“Ren, you’ve never picked up a sword in your life before now. ’Course you’re gonna struggle. I struggled at first too.”

“But you were a Templar.”

“Yeah, I was. And a fine one at that.” Celeste would probably be unhappy about this, but it seemed like the best time to ask. He found himself lowering his voice, as if concerned Celeste might overhear. “Do you wish to be a Templar?”

Ren’s eyes rose to Samson’s face as if he’d said the most shocking thing. But after only a second’s hesitation, he nodded.

“Unusual choice for the son of an apostate.” Samson attempted a smile.

Ren returned it. It wasn’t much as far as smiles went, but it was definitely better than crying. “My father was a Templar. I know with the war and everything… some Templars went bad and they wanted to hurt the mages. I don’t want to be one of them. I… I want to help people. I want to be a hero. Like in the stories. I want to go on adventures, hunt down evil, fight dragons, find relics.”

Sweet, naive, kid. “You don’t have to be a Templar to do those things.”

“Yeah, but Templars have powers.”

“Heh. Power at a price. There’s always a price for that kind of thing. Anyways, how d’you know you’re not going to be a mage like your mum? Mages have powers.”

“I hope I’m not.”

Samson couldn’t blame him. The last decade - the entirety of Ren’s life so far - had been a terrible time for mages. “Well, if you want to be a Templar - or any kind of hero, mind - you’re going to need to learn a weapon. It’s going to take time, and dedication. Now, I understand if you don’t want to learn with me after our chat here, but you can’t stop just because you’re not good at it yet. That, I won’t accept.”

He unsheathed his sword and held it out to Ren. Ren looked at it skeptically. “You won’t tell
mum will you? About what I want to be?"

“It’s just between you and me.”

Ren’s small hand fastened around the sword hilt. “I want to train with you. I like you. Even if you did bad things before.”

Samson tried not to grin like an idiot when he responded, “I'm fond of you too, lad.”

Cullen tossed the final darkspawn arm onto the heap. He swore at it, like he’d sworn at the others. A litany of things he’d never say in public that were directed at his absent wife as much as they were at the darkspawn. Although, he’d never actually say them to her either.

A crash from the trees behind him had him reaching for his sword again, and spinning. Throat contracting, heart slamming. If it was more darkspawn and he had to face them alone-

But no. It was Solana. A dripping Solana with hair hanging in wet ropes and robes clinging to her… clinging to… He swallowed. She said something that he didn’t quite hear. She hadn’t bothered to do up the buttons down the front of her robe. Her collarbone, the curve of her breasts, everything down to her navel was displayed in a neat triangle of soft flesh.

“If we leave now we might be able to close it before night fall,” she said.

He snapped his attention back to what she was saying. “Sorry, what?”

“The Deep Roads seal.” She looked at him like he was dim.

Deep Roads what? “Perhaps you should start again.”

She sighed, and crossed her arms, blocking his view (probably for the best). “I saw darkspawn moving along the other side of the river - don’t worry, I was careful. They’re coming and going from an entrance to the Deep Roads. There’s a Warden seal there, but it’s broken.”

“You intend for us to fix it? Solana, we have a mission already.” He gestured to the mound of darkspawn bodies with firewood propped around it. “We’ve been delayed enough as is.”

Solana waved a hand casually and the mound burst into flames. “It won’t take us far off course,” she said, as if she’d done nothing at all.

“And how many darkspawn are we talking? How do we even know how many are out in the forest, ready to come up behind us? As impressive as your abilities are, we are still just two people.”

“I was thinking about that,” she said, turning around. Her robes hid very little as they clung to her wet skin and he cleared his throat and pulled his eyes away from her.

She drew in the ground with her staff. “Two phase attack. Phase one is to draw their attention. We bring those that are out in the forest back with a threat of some kind. I’m thinking fire. I have some Antivan grenades in my pack.” They still had to retrieve their packs from where they’d initially
encountered the darkspawn. “Then, we launch a second attack on whoever’s still outside. I repair the seal so they can’t get back in. We finish them off.”

He peered at her diagram. It was nothing more than a number of arrows. “We’re still merely two people. I suggest we mark the location on a map and tell the Wardens about it when we find them. They can come fix it. It’s their duty, not ours.”

“Not yours, maybe.” Solana’s eyes flicked to his. “I’m a Warden in every sense except the Taint. I took vows.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Solana…”

“Besides, these darkspawn are a threat to anyone travelling through these woods. What about the neighbouring towns? We can’t in good conscience just leave it.”

“We may have little choice. We’re outnumbered. Four of those things nearly-”

“But this time we’re prepared.”

Cullen closed his eyes and prayed to Andraste for mercy.

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It took three hours to get set up. Three valuable hours that they could have - should have - been travelling. Cullen’s breath stopped whenever Solana wove between the trees to place the traps. She was using Celeste’s stealth spell, which meant that he could only see her as long as his gaze followed her.

There were many more darkspawn moving along the bank than he’d anticipated. He’d counted nine. If it came to a fight, he wasn’t certain that was survivable. But Solana was right in one respect, they at least stood a chance. The average traveller would not.

He jumped as she slipped into visibility beside him. “I’ve put down ice mines around the edges, hidden in the grass. We should have warning if anyone comes up from behind. There’s a trap rigged to spill pitch across the entrance. It should slow down anyone rushing out.”

“Good,” he said. Just the nine to worry about then.

“We should move before someone triggers the mines.”

He nodded.

They snuck quietly out from their hiding place. They’d crossed in the shallows downriver and had stashed their packs safely away from the fighting. This attack had to be stealthy. It was all well and good for Solana with her spell, but Cullen was wearing full armour. Even his movements were loud. So, when they crouched down behind bush much closer to the darkspawn, Solana pressed a jar into his hand. In it swirled a purple mist that glowed faintly with strange alchemy. A confusion grenade - one of Morrigan’s contributions to the Inquisition. He nodded his thanks.

Together, they peered through the bushes at their enemy.

The Deep Roads entrance itself seemed to be cleaved from the side of a knoll. It was not unlike
the unassuming exit from Kinloch’s tunnels that Anders had shown them, but with an ancient tree growing in a tangle of gnarled branches over it. The darkspawn had set up a small camp in front of the entrance with one of their leather tents and a small campfire - cold at the moment. What did they even use campfires for? They didn’t eat as far as he knew. And what in the world were they even doing up here? Cullen recalled a year or so back, he’d discovered similar incursions on the Storm Coast and the Inquisitor had taken Dorian to sort them out. It was concerning and he hoped - prayed - it wasn’t the first sign of another Blight. Maker knows, Thedas had enough troubles.

There was a hurlock apha at the entrance, a couple of hurlocks on patrol and some smaller genlocks busy around camp. They were repulsive even to watch. This close the stench of their rot was almost overwhelming.

“I’ll go for the hurlocks,” Solana whispered. “You get the genlocks with the grenade and attack the-“

“Alpha directly, I know.”

They’d discussed strategy at length already. Solana started to rise, but he seized her arm as another darkspawn creature appeared, sniffing the air. Solana swore.

“That’s a shriek. Change of plan. We move fast, you get him first.”

He didn’t think to argue. That she knew darkspawn was not in doubt. “Alright. And the Alpha?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Solana...”

She glanced at him, chewing on the inside of her cheek. “Do you think you can get some of the genlocks with the grenade too?”

“I can certainly try. You’re not thinking of taking the Alpha on alone are you?”

The shriek sniffed the air again and looked towards them. Cullen knew there was little time to argue.

“Not entirely.” She grinned and shifted a fire grenade from hand to hand. “I’ll disable him. You confuse the minions and go for the shriek. Then I’ll lead the minions to the mines and you finish the Alpha off.”

“What about the entrance?”

“Shit. Okay. Let me think.”

Cullen shook his head. “You disable the Alpha, then seal the entrance. I’ll keep the minions and the shriek occupied...”

“I’ll try freeze a few.”

“Right. Then I’ll finish the Alpha.”

She nodded and smiled again. Her joy was palpable. She inclined her head a little as she said, “Good luck, Commander.”

“Good luck, Hero.”

She faded as she cast her spell, and ran out from behind the bush, darting through the middle of
She faded as she cast her spell, and ran out from behind the bush, darting through the middle of the camp. Only the shriek seemed vaguely aware of her. It screamed at the air, tracking her, and Cullen’s whole being tensed. But the thing made no move to follow Solana and the other darkspawn paid it no mind.

He waited, trying to find the pool of calm within that he always lectured his men to focus on before going into battle. The exercise proved utterly futile. His pulse would not still so long as Solana was out there making herself vulnerable. Her grenade launched into the air, twinkling as it cut a broad arch before it met the ground in an explosion of flame. The pitch trap triggered. Black goo rained down upon the flames, and they ate it hungrily, growing higher and higher.

The effect was akin to kicking an ant hill. The darkspawn ran, in no discernible direction, and Cullen recognised his cue. He took off towards the highest concentration of darkspawn, but he hadn’t accounted for the smoke. It stung his eyes and burned his throat. He knew his grenade had landed only when twisted purple smoke joined with the black smoke of Solana’s fire. It was quite the challenge to stay clear of it as each darkspawn it touched started shooting or striking out randomly at his fellows.

Cullen tried to make out Solana in the mess, but he couldn’t see her and there was no time. He held his hand over his nose and mouth and ran through the chaos, aiming for where the shriek had been. It was no longer there. He spun around, squinted through the smoke.

He spotted Solana.

She was in the tree.

She hung over the alpha, aiming her staff at its head.

Something barrelled into Cullen and he lost his footing. A swift roll to the side was all that saved him from being pierced by a giant claw. The shriek had found him. The air pulled taut around him as a barrier glimmered into place. Thank you, Solana. Hopefully the spell hadn’t cost her valuable time. The shriek screamed again, and the reason for its name was evident. Cullen scrambled backwards, blocked another strike with his shield, and turned as it struck a third time, throwing it off balance. He drove upwards with his sword and felt the satisfying crunch of armour giving way to flesh.

“Cullen, watch out!”

He dived into a roll automatically. A genlock ran at him from the Deep Roads entrance, waving a crooked axe. Its momentum carried it past him, and he was able to stab it behind the shoulder. It fell to its knees as the injured shriek made a dive for Cullen. There was no way to avoid it. It ploughed into him, sending him sprawling. His ears rang, and he managed to twist his face away as the shriek’s sharp teeth came for his throat. Get up. He dug his elbow into the ground and wrapped his other arm and leg around the putrid thing, forcing it over onto its back. Sitting astride it, he stabbed down into its chest again and again, gasping for breath. It gave one final shriek and was still.

With an instant to look around, he saw Solana was riding on the Alpha’s shoulders dodging the swings of its gigantic sword with ease. From her vantage point, she was able to shoot ice spells at the remaining darkspawn.

Boom crack, boom crack. Her ice mines triggered one after the other. Whatever reinforcements had been about in the woods had just arrived. Cullen climbed to his feet and readied himself. Solana cast a barrier over them both, and sent a final ice spell down through her steed. With the Alpha frozen solid, she climbed down.
She wiped the hair out of her eyes with one hand and tossed him something with the other. Thank the Maker he caught it, because it turned out to be another fire grenade. Before he could say anything, she’d turned and started casting in front of the entrance.

The reinforcements were not as impressive as he’d feared. A rabble of genlock approached, limping already thanks to Solana’s mines. He aimed the grenade at the centre of the group. Only two of the lot managed to stumble out of the flames and he cut them down easily enough.

Another crack sounded behind him and he turned, already swinging at the Alpha. At the same instant that his sword hit home, the Alpha exploded. Shards of iced darkspawn flew across their measly camp. Solana stood in front of the repaired Warden seal with her staff in her hand and a grin on her face.

There was complete silence. They were surrounded by scattered bodies and body parts. The darkspawn hadn’t stood a chance.

“Good work,” Cullen said, offering Solana his own smile.

“We make a pretty good team,” she said. Her eyes darted to her feet, self consciously. She was streaked with darkspawn blood again. Her hair had frizzed as it had dried. She’d done up her robes, of course, and put on some protective leather over them. She looked like a Alamarri warrior queen. The tug of desire for her in the pit of his stomach was raw and primal. He controlled himself.

“We should probably wash,” he said. Separately.
Hawke told himself he would not visit Rylen again.

One night, he could handle. He’d been good at those back in the day, back when it was spend a night in a stranger’s embrace or on the floor of Gamlen’s hovel listening to Carver snore and being drooled on by the dog. Working for a year as a mercenary in a city that couldn’t stomach mages had been good for building muscle. Couple that with living on scraps, and he’d had the physique of a god. Or so the passing dalliances had loved to tell him. It had never been difficult to find a warm place to sleep.

Then he’d met Anders. Anders with his sorrowful eyes and gigantic heart, who had forgone sleep entirely in order to keep sick refugees alive. Anders with his tragic past and his desperate need to be loved.

When they’d eventually slept together, Anders had clung to him like his life had depended on never being apart again. He had whispered truths he’d been too afraid to share before, how he’d dreamed of Hawke, how he’d never imagined Hawke returning his affections, how he’d loved Hawke secretly from afar for oh so long.

There was never any chance of that being a one night thing. Anders would come to him night after night, at whatever odd hours his clinic closed. Sometimes he’d be streaked with blood and Hawke would be terrified that some of it was his. Eventually he learned that the blood wasn’t merely that of his patients. Sometimes it belonged to templars who had tried to stop him rescuing mages, sometimes it belonged to mages who hadn’t made it out of the Gallows unharmed. Anders was Darktown’s healer, but Hawke was Anders’s. He’d clean him and feed him and hold him. He’d try and kiss away the horrors. He knew now that he never quite succeeded.

There hadn’t been a stranger since their first night together.

Now there had been. Rylen, with his easy smile, his lyrical voice, and kisses that demanded nothing in return.

Hawke told himself that Rylen was no more to him than the strangers he’d taken comfort in during that first year in Kirkwall. It had been a good night together, a very good night together, but that was all. It wasn’t a betrayal just to seek comfort, was it?

Problem was, Rylen hadn’t left his mind since.
Hawke cleared his throat and Varric looked up from the parchment where he was frantically scribbling. The hall around them was loud and far too hot. He didn’t know how Varric could write here.

“You have a minute? I need to talk.”

Varric gave him a lopsided smile. “Anyone else who interrupted me in the middle of a good scene would have the Void to pay. But you know I’m available any time for you, Hawke.”

His way of saying he’d rather be left alone. Well, tough.

Hawke inclined his head towards the outside. Best keep this away from prying ears. Varric’s eyebrows furrowed in concern, but he set down his quill.

They walked in silence until they were a little way outside Skyhold’s gates. There was quite the wind whipping around the walls. It flicked at the trees like a cat’s tail. Storm was coming, no doubt.

Hawke found a sheltered patch behind a rock. Varric put his hands on his hips. “This about Anders?”

Varric probably thought he had news and that was why Hawke had led him so far away from everyone. “In a sense,” he said.

Varric raised his eyebrows.

*Nothing for it.* “I slept with Rylen.”

Varric’s eyes went wide. Then he tossed back his head and laughed.

Hawke folded his arms. “That wasn’t supposed to be funny.”

“Sorry. Just, you were so dramatic. I thought this was about something important.”

“It is important.”

“Why, is he married?”

“No!” Hawke cleared his throat. “I mean, not that I know of.”

Varric patted his arm. “Well then, that’s good. It’s good that you’re finally seeing other people.”

“I’m not seeing him. I slept with him, once. I thought you’d understand.”

Varric hitched up his trousers and settled down on one of the rocks. “Then maybe you should spell this out for me.”

Hawke buried his head in his hands. “I’ve been with Anders for seven years, Varric.”

“So you’re worried you’ve forgotten how courting works?”

“No! That’s not what I’m worried about. I’m worried about *Anders*.”

“Hawke, you’ve spent the last seven years being worried about Anders.”

“So, what, I just throw that all away?”
“You’re not the one who threw it away. You know I’ve stayed out of it, I’ve kept my mouth shut. It’s between the two of you. But Hawke, what he did with the chantry, what he did to Kirkwall…”

“I know you’ll never forgive him for that. But he had his reasons.” Hawke said through grit teeth. "The Chantry was-

Varic held up his hands. “I was going to say, it would be one thing if that was the end of it. But experimenting on prisoners, dabbling in blood magic and now... Hawke, you gave him a second chance no one else would have. He’s made his bed now. He’s not your responsibility.”

“I know. But how much is really him? Maybe Justice…”

“Maybe Justice has taken over and what, you’re going to save him from the demon? How, Hawke? By saving a place in your bed for him?”

Hawke rubbed his eyes. The turbulent emotions crashing around within him were threatening to overwhelm him. “When we find out where he is, I can go after him. I can talk sense into him. I can bring him back to himself.”

“Because that worked so well in Kirkwall.”

The words hit Hawke right in the stomach. “That was unnecessary.”

Varic stood. “Was it, Hawke? Was it really? You are my friend. My best friend. I don’t care what Blondie does to himself anymore. But I do care what happens to you. I’m tired of seeing you like this. The only time you’ve shown a glimmer of your old self in years was when you first got here, when he was locked away with Aveline.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Maybe, but it’s the truth. If you wanted fair, you should have gone to someone else.” Varric folded his arms and jutted out his chin.

Hawke didn’t say anything and Varric didn’t speak either. The wind roared around them, gathering force.

Eventually, Varric said, “So, tell me about this Rylen then?”

Even the mention of the name made Hawke’s heart beat faster. “He’s Cullen’s second in command. Apparently Cullen’s been called away and he’s filling in.”

“Yeah, I know who he is. Tattoos, right?” Varric pointed to his chin. “Met him in the Western Approach when I was there with the Inquisitor a few months back. You hit it off?”

“I’d say.” Hawke attempted a smile, even though guilt still twisted in his gut. “We had drinks, drinks became… more. He said he’d be interested in seeing me again.”

“So, what are you waiting for?” Varric grinned.

Hawke sighed. “You make it sound so simple.”

Varic placed a hand on his arm again and looked up at him, eyes serious. “Hawke, I know this might come as something of a revelation to you, but sometimes things can be simple.”
The wind whipped at Celeste’s hair, even stronger than the day before on the battlements. She kept gathering it into a twist at the nape of her neck, but eventually it blew loose. A wise person would go inside, but she folded her arms and stood firm.

Samson didn’t seem to notice her. His entire attention was focused on Ren. There were fewer other children about - no doubt thanks to the weather - but the ones who were there may as well not have existed. The wind snatched Samson’s words before they reached her, but it was clear he was giving Ren very specific instructions, which the boy was then attempting to follow. Ren was intent, eyebrows drawn close, tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth. The expression was familiar - it was how he’d looked when she’d taught him his first letters.

As much as she enjoyed watching his progress, her attention kept drifting to Samson. He was built like all templars - strong frame fit for heavy armour with defined forearms and a narrow waist. She’d never found the look attractive before, but as he lunged and struck at the dummy, her stomach tightened. It wasn’t just the body. It was the way he kept glancing down at Ren and smiling gently, the way he patiently corrected Ren’s posture even when he got it wrong five or six times.

In her mind, she kept playing back the events of the previous day. Samson coming closer, smiling, teasing. Her heart pounding, lips tingling. Is he going to kiss me? Then the certainty, he was.

His body pressing hers against the low wall, the plunge to certain death below. No way to escape. Her rapid heartbeat roaring. His face nearer. His touch burning.

‘Be a good little mage. Do as I say.’

*Up against the wall in the quiet corridor he patrolled. His body blocking off all escape. His head coming closer. Rough, demanding, unwelcome kisses. No escape.*

She hadn’t been touched since she’d escaped him, nor had she wanted to be. She’d accepted that the love of her life would be her son. He was what she lived for. He was her purpose. And now Raleigh Samson of all people had disrupted that. For a few dizzying moments in her life, she had thought that maybe, maybe she wanted more.

Celeste gathered her hair again, twisted it again and tucked it under the collar of her jacket. Now she knew for certain, more was impossible. He’d broken her. She’d never be able to be touched without thinking about him. If it was still this bad after a decade, it wasn’t going anywhere. It was a part of her.

She wished Solana was around so she could talk it through with her.

Across the practice area, Ren spotted her and waved. Samson looked up and followed his gaze. He gave a hesitant smile.

She lifted the canteen she’d brought. Samson said a few words to Ren and he nodded and ran off in the other direction. And Samson started towards her.

There was no one else around in this weather to witness her making her peace offering.

“You should be inside, it’s gonna storm,” Samson said as he accepted the canteen.
She searched for something to say as he sipped the water, eventually settling on, “I have some of that gossip you wanted.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Oh, really?”

Celeste wasn’t usually one for gossip, but it filled the silence. “Word is that Rylen and Hawke spent the night together.”

Samson chuckled. “And where did you hear that?”

“In the kitchens, where else? It was all Marsha could talk about.”

Samson took another long drink from the canteen.

“You know Hawke from Kirkwall, don’t you?” she asked.

He nodded. “We weren’t exactly friends, but yeah. I helped him out once or twice. He said he’d put in a good word for me with the Templars in return. Don’t know if he ever did. I thought he was with the terrorist?”

“Anders?”

“Yeah. The one who blew up half of Kirkwall.”

She knew that was true. She also knew that the mage rebellion probably wouldn’t have found legs if not for what he’d done. “Anders isn’t so bad.” Did she confess that he’d only come to the Inquisition because she’d begged him to?

Samson’s eyes searched her face. Then, to her surprise, he said, “No, he isn’t.” He passed the canteen back. “I imagine he’ll have some opinions on this development though. Perhaps we should make a run for it before he decides to plant explosives under Cullen’s desk.”

“That’s if he ever finds out.” At Samson’s blank look, she added. “He’s not here. He left a month ago.”

Samson shook his head. “Who else has gone?”

“Well, the Inquisitor.”

“I knew that one.”

“He’s supposedly in the Frostback Basin but I heard a rumour that no one truly knows where he is.” It occurred to her that he was probably the last person she should be telling this, but his response was another chuckle.

Then the dreaded silence. He kept looking at her then looking away.

“I should probably get inside,” she said eventually. “The, uh, weather.”

“Yeah. I’ll get back to Ren.”

“Okay.”

"Thanks for this." He pressed the canteen back into her hand, and the way he looked at her, she wasn't sure if he meant the water or the awkward conversation.

Even as he walked away, she felt a pull within, something beckoning her to follow him. But she'd
felt that same pull on the battlements, unable to focus on anything but the movement of his lips as he spoke. Perhaps in another life she might have been able to trust it. In this one, she turned away and left him to the lesson.

Solana wanted to make camp early and Cullen couldn’t blame her. They’d had quite the eventful day. Plus, neither of them was usually out in the sun this long. Even with the shade of the trees, Solana’s skin was pink and Cullen’s eyelids were heavy.

They pooled some resources they’d brought from Skyhold and enjoyed a fine dinner of cured meats, dried fruits, nuts and biscuits. Solana was painted in the colours of the sunset as she talked, spinning stories from her days fighting the Blight.

At first they were enjoyable, her enthusiasm especially. The ridiculous things that Oghren would say, a young blushing Leliana who seemed nothing like the spymaster he knew. But at the centre of every story, was Alistair. Alistair the hero, Alistair the punch line. Alistair who could do no wrong in her eyes.

“And then Alistair ran forward and-

“Enough.”

She stared at him, clearly startled by the interruption at the peak of her story.

He let the sound of crickets fill the silence while he tried to find some way of explaining that didn’t make him sound like the jealous jilted spouse he was. “Do you have any stories that aren’t about how wonderful Alistair was?” Well, so much for that.

Solana wrapped her arms around herself and he could see her withdrawing, disappearing back into her shell, into the woman he’d left at Skyhold with the fixed smile and the sad eyes. And he hated himself for it.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“It’s alright. It’s… I know I will never measure up to what he was in your eyes. I’ve known that from the start of this.” He waved vaguely, encapsulating their relationship. “It's only that I don’t particularly enjoy being reminded of it.” There was no rescuing the evening now. He climbed to his feet. “Good night, Solana. You can come wake me at midnight for my watch.”

“Cullen, wait.”

He didn’t. He didn’t want to hear obligatory reassurances and he didn’t trust himself not to make things worse.

Samson stared down at his hand of cards. It was shit. And Maker if he didn’t have good coin riding on it.

Well, good in context. It was a few copper pieces of the stipend he was getting for helping with the army. Perhaps the equivalent of a drink at the tavern and, since he didn’t dare go into the
tavern, it wasn’t even worth that. Still, in the context of the card games he played with his roommates, it was a chunk of change. He wasn’t keen to see it go. Could he bluff his way to victory?

He opened his mouth to call the bet when a knock sounded at their door. Odd at this hour.

“T’ll get it.” he said instead, laying his cards face down. Maybe they’d look better after a break. Lightning flashed across the room and the candle in the middle of the small table guttered.

He pulled the door open to reveal Celeste. Her hair was damp. She was hugging herself and shivering. “You haven’t seen Ren, have you?”

He shook his head. “Not since our lesson. Why, is he missing?”

Celeste bit her lip. “No. He’s just late for dinner, that’s all. I’m sure he’s around. I checked the usual places, but I suppose the children will be playing indoors in this.”

“Yeah, there’s lots of interesting nooks and crannies in this old place for a boy to explore.”

“That’s true.” She looked past him to the card game. He was certain his roommates were ogling her. Who wouldn’t, right? Still, he fought the urge to step in front of her and block their view. “I’ll go look. Thank you,” she said.

“No problem.”

He closed the door as she retreated and settled down with his cards again. He lost that hand - as he’d expected to - and then the next. He couldn’t focus. His thoughts kept going to Ren.

It was likely he was exploring the depths of Skyhold with those new friends of his. He could imagine them making up all sorts of games involving dares and make believe demons. But the nagging feeling in his gut wouldn’t go away. Ren was a small boy and he was new to the keep. What if he’d gotten lost in one of the dark corridors? What if he’d crawled into some nook and gotten stuck?

And then a new, even more terrifying thought. Samson had been seen associating with him. What if someone had kidnapped him or hurt him to get at Samson?

With this thought, he slammed his hand on the table, face up. “I’m out.”

“Already?” the man who had his bed next to Samson’s asked.

“Yeah. There’s something… I’ve got to… sorry.” He almost tripped over his chair as he made for the door, stopping only to grab his sword and his jacket.

The wind howled through the courtyard, battering the stable doors. The rain came down in sheets. Samson found old Dennet securing the last of the horses.

“Haven’t had a storm like this in a while,” he said, without looking up. “I’m afraid we don’t have any horses availa-” He turned and saw who it was he was speaking to. His eyes narrowed. “It’s you.”

“Yeah, it’s me. Listen, I’m looking for a young boy. I think him and his friends play around here. Ren. Short, brown hair.”
“I know the one,” Dennet said.

“Do you know where he is?”

“No.”

“Do you know where any of the boys are?”

“Inside, I’d imagine.” Dennet turned back to what he was busy with. Wind whined though the rafters.

“The kid’s missing. I need to find him. His mum’s worried sick.”

Dennet said nothing. Samson sighed and turned to leave. As he reached the stable door, Dennet called after him.

“His mum, wouldn’t be a slight blonde thing? Hair done up like...” He indicated braids on the side of his head.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

Dennet frowned. “Well, there was a woman little while ago, went tearing out of the front gates like Corypheus himself was chasing her. Matched that description. The guards tried to stop her but—”

Samson didn’t hear the rest of what Dennet said. His insides had turned to liquid and his feet carried him out into the rain again.

Anyone with a little sense would have taken the time to gather some sort of supplies, but he had no sense, only fear. Fear pounding in his chest, choking him. The mountain was treacherous at the best of times. In the dark, in the rain…. Maker, no. He couldn’t even complete the thought.

He dashed out of the gates, but something snagged him. He was jerked around, found himself face-to-face with one of his guardians, the one with the accent who Cullen had yelled at.

“And where do you think you’re going?” The man was drenched, rainwater was pouring from his helmet and he looked completely unimpressed with the current state of affairs.

How he’d found Samson, how he’d caught up with him, were questions for another time. “Celeste,” Samson panted. “She’s out there, and the kid too. I need to go.”

“You’re not to leave Skyhold, you know that.”

“Did you hear me, man? They’re out there. Alone. In this!”

“Yeah and that’s what you’d say if you were rendezvousing with some other malcontent too.”

“Malcon- I don’t have time for this.”

“Now, if you’re really worried about someone we can take the matter to Knight-Captain Rylen and he can decide whether it’s worth sending out a search party.”

Samson shook his head. “There’s no time!”

“Now listen here-”

Samson was done listening. He pulled back his fist and delivered a right hook to the man’s jaw.
The man reeled back, stunned. And Samson slipped from his grasp, pounding out of Skyhold’s gates and into the storming dark beyond.
The night was nothing but smudges of grey between the white of the snow and the dark of the starless sky above. Samson peered through the sleet, holding his hand over his eyes.

“Celeste!”

Already his voice was hoarse. He had no concept of where he was or where he was going. He wanted to run, but every step had to be deliberate, or else he’d risk losing his footing and plummeting down to the valley below.

Oh Maker, what if Celeste had already met that fate? Dennet had said she’d been running when she’d left.

“Celeste!”

He was so cold his limbs were numb, he could no longer feel the rain on his face. She’d been out longer than him. If she got lost she could die out here, die of the elements.

His feet crunched on the snowy ground - a feeling more than a sound. The wind wailed past his ears. It played tricks with his mind. He imagined this was something like how mages experienced the Fade. A confusing world with no clear up, no clear down, the sensation of being separated from his numbed body. It was only his thrumming pulse that kept him anchored. In the wind’s wailing he thought he heard his name. Samsooon. Samsoon.

“Celeste!”

Samsooon…

His heart seized. Was that the wind or was that her voice? He spun around to face the direction it seemed to be coming from.

“Celeste!”

“Samson?!”

“Celeste!” He trudged towards the sound. “Celeste I’m here. Where are you?”

He couldn’t see anything except the white and the grey and the black. And the white dropped off not far from where he stood.

“Celeste!” he called again. “Celeste, I can’t see you!”

At the edge of his vision, a flash. Magic or distant lightning?

“Celeste? Was that you? Do it again!”

Another flash. He turned towards it.

“Again!”

Another flash, at the centre of his vision, but seemingly coming from the sky itself. His stomach sank. Maybe it was just lightning after all. His mind, playing tricks on him. A lost mageling in the Harrowing chamber.
“Samson?”

No, no that definitely wasn’t the wind. Another flash. It was off the… he started running, to the Void with caution. He slid to a halt right at the very edge of the mountain, a steep drop below.

“Celeste!”

This time he hoped he didn’t hear a response.

“Samson.” Her voice, much closer. “Samson I’m here!”

Another flash of light, from below him, illuminated her. She was sprawled only about two meters down, thank the Maker.

“Are you hurt?” he called.

She held a ball of light in her hand and nodded, hovering it over her leg. It was bent at an unnatural angle.

“Hold on, I’m coming down!”

“No! Ren. You must find him.”

Samson searched for a way to reach her. A safe way to reach her. Wouldn’t do to break his own leg. A little way away there was a more gradual slope to her level. When she saw him approaching, she started shaking her head wildly. “Raleigh please, please you must find Ren.”

He ignored her pleas, his heart pounded so fast and so hard that it was shivering more than beating. The back of his throat tasted bitter with fear. He didn’t trust himself to speak. He shouldered out of his jacket. It was damp through, but warmer than what she wore, which seemed to just be what she usually worked in. Her hair was plastered to her face and she trembled, no doubt with both pain and cold. He wrapped the jacket around her and pulled her close.

“Ren, you have to, you have to find him. Please, Raleigh. Please.”

“I will.” He gathered her into his arms and she screamed when he moved her leg. “Shh…” He held her head to his chest. “Shhh. It’s alright. Everything’s gonna be fine. You’ll see. We just need to get you out of the rain, alright? It’s too cold up here.”

“Ren…”

“Yeah, I know.” He rose and started towards the treacherous slope, moving carefully despite his every desire to hurry.

Celeste was light, but she wriggled in his grasp. “Leave me, leave me. You have to find him.”

“I will! I will find him.” Samson tried to keep her still. “Shhh. I’ll find him, I promise. But unless I get you somewhere warmer, you’re gonna freeze. And how would he like that, hey? His mum frozen? Not at all, I’ll tell you. Not at all. So let me help you first and then I’ll find the boy, alright?”

She buried her head against his neck, but didn’t respond.

It was easier to carry her after that and he managed his way up the slope. Skyhold was directly above them, an imposing sentinel, a black shape against the even blacker sky. But they were around the other side of her now, getting to her gates would take too long. There had to be some
kind of hollow or overhang that he could set Celeste down beneath.

“Can you light the way with your magic?” he asked.

She didn’t speak, but held out her hand and shone light ahead of them. The Maker must have been with them, because he found a cave, dug into the side of the mountain. It was shallow and had he had choices he would have chosen something deeper. It didn’t offer much protection from the cold, but it provided a dry spot out of the wind. He set Celeste down carefully. She was the colour of the snow in the light from her hand. Frightened, in pain. His chest ached to see her like this.

“Now, do you have any idea where I might find Ren?”

Her fingers curled into the front of his shirt. “There was a dare. They told him to get blood lotus during the - during the storm. Maker, Raleigh. If something’s happened to him…”

He squeezed her hand. It was icy. “I’ll find him. But I need you to do something, if you can manage it. We’re gonna need a fire so I can find you again. You think you can do that?”

The wind whipped through the plants and small trees nearby. Her eyes flew to them, then down to her leg, then back to his face. She bit her lip and she nodded.

“If not, I can gather some wood before I-”

“No.” She shook her head. “No, go find Ren. I’ll manage.”

***

Samson realised after a few minutes that leaving his coat with Celeste was probably not the brightest of his ideas. He was wet and freezing, shivering so hard that he could hardly move forward. And he had to find one very small boy on a very big mountain.

Blood lotus…

He closed his eyes and pictured the herb. It was a reed, wasn’t it? Reeds grew near water. Would Ren know that? It was as good a lead as any. Water… there was a river running through the valley where Skyhold’s army camped. Would Ren go that far on a dare? No, storms were scary. He wouldn’t travel further than he had to. So he’d go to the source. Samson squinted up at Skyhold, trying to orientate himself. Then he trudged onward.

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The wind had died down some by the time Samson reached the river. He listened for the rush of water, but what he heard first was barking.

Andraste’s blighted ashes!

He propelled himself towards the sound, hardly caring about safety now. His legs wouldn’t move fast enough. The barking was accompanied by the yelping, snarling noise that could only be one thing: wolves.
Ren was the perfect prey. Small, alone. But if they’d caught him already, they’d be silent. Samson unsheathed his sword, thankful he’d thought to grab it as he’d left. Out of the gloom, beyond the sleet, blurs of shadows danced in circles: Growling, woofing, whining.

They seemed almost otherworldly. His feet hit water, the shock of cold made him cry out, but the wolves didn’t pay him any mind. They already had their prey in their sights.

But someone else heard him.

“Hello! Is someone there! Help me! I’m up here!”

He followed the sound, splashed forward as fast as he could. The wolves were circling a tree, and up in the branches was a little grey figure, waving frantically. It jerked backwards as one of the wolves jumped. Smart kid, but the tree wasn’t high enough to truly keep him safe. Another wolf jumped and Ren whacked it on the snout with what looked like a branch.

“Hey!” Samson shouted. “You want dinner? Come get me!”

The wolves ignored him. Another leapt for Ren.

Samson picked up a river rock and lobbed it at the creature. It yelped and spun. Its amber eyes glinted in the weak moonlight as it pulled back its lips, showing its sharp teeth. The other wolves turned too, focusing their attention on Samson. Good.

They started to fan out. No doubt they aimed to surround him. Less good.

The wolf he’d riled before rose on its hind legs. Samson braced his legs and readied his sword. It leaped at him. Its heavy body hit his chest with almost enough force to knock him over. But he’d been ready for it. He sliced up its underbelly. The wolf gnashed its jaws a little too close to Samson’s ear for comfort, but when he pushed its paws from his shoulders, it fell down dead in the snow.

“Anyone else want to try?” he called to the pack.

One of the wolves darted forward, then back again. Another came at him from the side, but as soon as he swung his sword at it, it backed away.

“Off with you!” he shouted, waving the weapon.

The first wolf made another attempt, then thought better of it and retreated to his fellows, ears lying flat. With one final look at Ren, they turned tail and scampered back into the night.

“Ser Samson?” Ren’s small voice asked from the tree above.

“You can come down now, lad.”

Ren swung down from the branch and landed on the ground in a spray of snow. He ran towards Samson, bowling into him at the same speed as the wolf - although he was about half as heavy. He buried his head against Samson’s stomach. The poor lad was shivering and it took Samson a moment to realise he was crying. Samson sank to his knees and wrapped his arms around the boy.

“There there, lad, it’s alright. They’re gone now.”

Ren’s little body shook.
“What are you doing out here anyways?”

Ren mumbled against his shoulder, something about blood lotus.

“Hey now, I can’t hear you like that.”

Ren pulled away slightly. His small worried face stared into Samson’s, illuminated only by the moon. Rain poured down his cheeks, dripped off his hair. It was impossible to tell whether he was still crying. “Mikel said I could join the group if I completed the dare.”

Mikel again. Samson was going to have a word with this Mikel.

“And the dare was to come get blood lotus in the middle of a storm, was it?” His anger was barely contained.

“I’m sorry.” Ren’s lower lip trembled and Samson realised too late that he thought the anger had been directed at him. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t realise how bad it would be. I thought... I thought it would be like the storms back home.”

Back in the city all there was to worry about during a storm was puddles and whether the Chantry roof would get struck.

“You did good with those wolves. Good sense climbing into the tree like that. Now come on, we best be getting back to your mum, wind’s picking up again.”

He wasn’t quite sure how to break it to Ren that his mother had been injured while looking for him. Ren clung to Samson’s arm as they walked back. Eventually he asked. “Aren’t we going to Skyhold?”

“Skyhold entrance is too far in this.” Samson already had to raise his voice over the wind. “Your mum’s just down here, don’t worry.”

“Why’s she out here?”

“Well, she came looking for you, didn’t she?” He scanned the mountainside for light. The rain was picking up again too and... was that more snow?

There, a small orange glow. She’d managed to light a fire.

When they got a bit closer, Samson knelt to bring himself eye level with Ren again. “Before we see your mum, I need to tell you something.”

Ren’s eyes were wide with fear, as if he already sensed what was coming.

“Your mum had a fall earlier. Now, she’s going to be alright. We’re going to help her and when this clears up we’ll take her to a healer, alright? You’re going to need to be a little brave.”

“She fell? Because she came to find me?” His lower lip was trembling again. Poor kid.

Samson wasn’t sure how to comfort him. He patted his shoulder. “It’s going to be fine, Ren. Come on, sooner we get back to her, sooner we can help her.”
Celeste scanned the murky darkness beyond the cave. The pain in her leg was almost overwhelming, but the tightness in her chest was worse. Every minute was agony. Samson didn’t have a jacket. What if he froze before he found Ren? What if he found Ren and something awful had already happened to him? What if he never found Ren?

The minutes crawled by. She was starting to think about trying to make for the castle, using one of the branches she’d gathered with her magic as a walking stick. It would be difficult, and it would take ages, but once she was there she could arrange a search party. It was certainly better than doing nothing.

Something moved beyond the cave. She squinted at it. Another tree in the wind?

But she found it again. A shape walking towards her. A single shape.

Samson? Samson returning alone. Her heart clenched painfully and the grief that flooded her was colder than the heart of this storm.

Then another shape, a smaller shape, darted out from behind Samson and came towards her. Came running towards her.

“Ren!”

He flew into her arms, frozen and wet and crying. “Mom, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” He sobbed against her shoulder and then she was crying too but with relief. Her baby, here, alive, safe. She squeezed him to her. “I didn’t know it would be like this, I didn’t know.” He shook with the tears.

“Shh, baby, shh. It’s alright, you’re safe, you’re safe, I’m here.” She stroked his hair as she’d done when he’d been much younger.

Samson entered, dripping and shivering. He took off his shirt and rang it out, sitting in front of the fire. He glanced at her and smiled.

“Thank you,” she mouthed to him.

She’d managed to use the will power spell Solana had taught her for lifting water to lift nearby wood and bring it inside. It had been wet through, so it had taken a couple of fire spells before it had caught. But she’d kept building it, kept adding to it, making it bigger and brighter as a beacon for Samson. Now Samson peeled Ren from her grasp and instructed him to take off his jacket and sit by the fire. He did so reluctantly, eyes scanning her constantly.

“I suggest we spend the night here,” Samson said eventually. “It’s only getting worse out there now, and I don’t fancy navigating back to Skyhold with such poor visibility. It’s a wonder none of us fell off the mountain as is. Not for want of trying on your part, that is.”

Celeste managed a weak smile at that.

“So that means we’re going to have to set that leg. Ren, you’re going to help me.”

“Yes ser.”

“You’re going to find me two thick, straight sticks or pieces of bark. They don’t need to be perfect. You’re not going to wander far, alright?”

Ren nodded. He gave a single trepidatious look outside before squaring his shoulders and heading
Samson shifted closer to her. He dropped his voice. “How are you doing?”

“I’m well. I’m so very well. You found him. You rescued him.” She was babbling. He simply smiled in response.

He touched her calf, barely brushing the skin. “I’m going to have to remove your boot. It’s going to hurt, I’m afraid.”

She nodded, mentally preparing herself.

“You want something to bite down on? My belt perhaps?”

She glanced outside. She could make out Ren’s shape stooping down to gather wood. “No,” she said. “No, I’ll be fine.”

Samson’s pale skin almost glowed in the firelight, the rough landscape of scars even more visible now than it had been that day in the pantry. He held onto her boot with both hands. “You sure?”

She nodded again. He tugged. The pain was blinding and white hot. She tried to keep silent, but it jerked the sound up from her belly, a scream that brought Ren running.

“Mom! Mom, are you alright?” He dropped the wood haphazardly at the cave entrance and flew to her side.

Perhaps the belt hadn’t been such a bad idea.

“It’s almost off,” Samson said. “Ren, can you bring me those sticks I asked for please?” Ren scrambled away from her, muttering quick apologies.

Celeste squeezed her eyes shut and tried to swallow the fresh agony that shot up her leg. Then it was over, the boot was off and Samson was reaching up under her skirt. Her heart started racing as his warm hands found the top of her stockings, just above the knee. He rolled them down slowly. When she opened her eyes, she found him looking into her face.

He was just helping her. There was nothing inappropriate in what he was doing. Yet at the instant their eyes met, it felt different, it felt intimate. Was it her imagination or did his touch linger?

“Here, Ser Samson.” Ren handed him the sticks and Samson broke her gaze. The strange pleasure was immediately replaced by pain as he pulled the stocking over her lower calf. It was already swollen and bruised. Ren’s hand flew to his mouth.

“It looks worse than it is,” Samson assured him. He selected two of the longer sticks, then his eyes met Celeste’s again. She expected him to offer his belt but he gave her a smile. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to tear your dress for bandages.”

She nodded. To her surprise, he started laughing. He shook his head as he found the seam.

“What’s funny?” Ren wanted to know.

Samson’s eyes rose to meet hers again. There was meaning in the look, but then he glanced at Ren. “Nothing, lad. I’m just relieved you’re both fine is all.”

In a swift motion, he tore her skirt open to the knee. The ripping sound was not a pleasant one and she looked away.
“Ser Samson, may I ask you something?” Ren asked.

“You may.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I take it you don’t mean how do I know how to tear a woman’s dress apart?”

Celeste shot a look at Samson, but Ren seemed to think that was funny.

He giggled. “No, I mean like with the wolves.”

“Wolves?” Celeste tried to sit straighter, even as pain pierced through her at the movement. “What wolves?”

“Easy now.” Samson rested a hand on her knee. “Everything turned out okay, didn’t it? And in answer to your question, Ren, as part of your Templar training you go through basic survival. Wouldn’t do to succumb to the elements while hunting for apostates, would it?”

Celeste wanted to know more about the wolves and it wasn’t lost on her how Samson was avoiding the subject.

“Did you ever hunt apostates, Ser Samson?” Ren’s eyes were wide.

“Only your mum just now.” He grinned. “I was stationed at the Circle right up until I was thrown out.”

“Thrown out?” Ren shifted even closer to Samson.

“Yeah.” He ripped another strip of fabric. “I broke the rules and they asked me to leave.”

“What rules?”

“Ren.” Celeste had heard the story, she’d seen the pain when Samson had spoke of it.

But Samson shook his head. “Naw, it’s alright. I don’t mind telling the boy.” To Ren he said, “The Circle where I worked was very unfair to mages. Eventually they weren’t permitted to talk to their families or friends at all, not even letters. I had a friend, a mage who worked in the smithy and had fixed some things for me as a favour. He asked me to take letters to the girl he loved in the village. I was caught doing so.”

“They threw you out because of passing letters?”

“Yeah, bet you were thinking it was something worse, hey?”

Ren nodded. “I thought it was because of Corypheus.”

Celeste’s insides jerked. She hadn’t found a way to tell Ren about Samson and Corypheus yet, but Samson chuckled. “Naw, wrong way around, kid. I joined Corypheus because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. A bad decision, and one I ain’t proud of.”

Ren didn’t seem surprised. Did that mean they’d discussed it already? She examined Samson’s face as he worked, now comparing the sticks that Ren had brought him. She’d felt so many tangled things for him in the past few months, but never admiration. Ren had been through a terrifying night, filled with horrors she didn’t even know of yet. His mother was injured, he was no doubt scared and cold, but Samson was keeping him calm, keeping him busy and entertaining
him.

One look at her son showed her she wasn’t the only one feeling that way about Samson now. Ren’s entire focus was on the man, paying rapt attention to everything he did. And as far as role models went, she found she didn’t mind this one.

Who would have thought?

“Alright, now, this is what you do for broken bones if you can’t get to a healer right away,” Samson told Ren. “It’s called a splint.”

“A splint,” Ren repeated.

“So what we want to do is stop the leg from moving. Moving it might make the injury worse. So you find something like these sticks here and you strap them, like so. And you want to strap the foot too, right? Because the foot moves the leg a bit.”

The wood was rough against her skin, and the pressure against her swollen leg was painful. But Samson was gentle and practiced in his movements. He talked Ren through every step of the process and before long, her leg was completely bound and stretched out in front of the fire.

“Now I’ve got another job for you, Ren. If you’re willing?”

Ren nodded enthusiastically, rising up on his knees.

“Do you know what elfroot looks like?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think you could go out and try find some? Don’t go too far, mind. This isn’t a dare.”

Ren moved towards the cave entrance.

“Wait!” Celeste reached for him. “No, you don’t have to get elfroot. I’m fine.” The wind was howling again, she could hear the lash of the rain. “Don’t go out there, Ren.”

“I won’t go far, mom.” He gave her a small smile then ducked his head and ran outside.

Samson stood and tossed the spare sticks on the fire. They sputtered and popped, filling the cave with fragrant smoke.

“You shouldn’t have made him do that,” Celeste said.

“He wants to help you. He blames himself for what happened. It will make him feel better.” He settled down beside her, at a respectable distance. “It’s been quite the eventful night for the lad.”

“He said something about wolves?”

“Yeah, there were a few wolves.” Samson smiled at her again. She was propped up against the cave wall so even though he was only a head taller than her, he had significant height advantage. “Your son was doing a good job of fighting them off before I arrived. I suppose those lessons are paying off.”

“Don’t make light, Samson.”
“See, I’ve got to make light. There’s no point you worrying about it now, and you have to stay strong for the boy, don’t you? If you must know, he was up a tree. He’s got a good brain, that one. He’s a good boy.”

“If he had a good brain he wouldn’t come out in this on a stupid dare.”

Samson inclined his head. “True, but he’s a city boy. I figure he failed to take into account the mountain, snow and, well, wildlife, that might get in his way. He’ll know better in future.”

Celeste buried her face in her hands and took a deep breath. “I don’t know how to thank you. If you hadn’t been here…”

“Well I was, so none of that. Plus, it’s nice to be the hero for a change. Not a role I’m accustomed to.”

“Is that what you were laughing about earlier?” She looked up at him, his brow furrowed. Then he seemed to remember.

“No.” He dropped his voice. “I was laughing because, well... It’s best I not say.”

“No, go on. I want to hear it now.”

The corner of his mouth twisted upwards, his gaze lingered on her face. “I was just thinking that wasn’t how I imagined ripping your clothes off.”

Her heart nearly stopped. She stared at him. Had he really said that?

He looked away, and she could swear she saw colour rising in his cheeks.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“So you have imagined ripping my clothes off?” she responded, finding her voice.

He stared resolutely at the fire. “Is this a trick question?”

Heat coursed through her, desire blindsiding her. She wanted to say something, make some move to reassure him. In her mind she pictured rising up and kissing him. Wouldn’t that be just like the stories? A dashing rescue, a kiss in the firelight. But she was paralysed, because she knew it wouldn’t just be a kiss. Kissing lead to other things. Other things like his voice had promised when he’d pressed against her up on the battlements.

“Raleigh, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t talk nonsense.” He wrapped his arms around his knees. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I owe you my life.”

He looked at her again, scanning her face. His expression was difficult to read. His eyes were sad. He looked... frightened? “I don’t know what I would have done if I had lost you tonight.” No hint of humour now, his voice raw with meaning.

She swallowed. Not sure what to say.

She was spared finding the words by Ren returning, happily brandishing the elfroot.
Thanks so much to Sulahn (https://archiveofourown.org/users/Sulahn) and TriangularRoom (http://triangularroom.com/) my amazing betas who went through this entire, gigantic, story for me to make sure that it was readable.

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