When the World Fell

by AnaChromystick

Summary

Shall I tell you a story?

When the world fell, chaos spread across Thedas. The veil, torn down in a single moment, the fade and the corporeal world thrust together in a violent collision.

Spirits were thrown into the world, corrupted by the fears of men, twisted into demons. The wars began in an instant. Brutal, bloody, horrifying. For...most.

The elves had a harbinger, a Lady, who whispered words of caution and guidance for years before the fall came. She made the transition easier, taught them the truth of spirits, guided them when all fell to ruin and despair. And when the veil fell, she gathered them to her.

Her people.

City, clan, they abandoned the humans, disappeared into the woods and strange places of this new and confusing world. They left them to the mercy of the invaders, the Elvhen of Fen'harel. The war raged, between more than man and spirit.

When the humans were on the brink of destruction, the Lady reappeared with her people. She walked onto the battlefield, and asked Fen'harel for mercy.

Mercy for the humans.
The road ahead is difficult, with two not-gods standing in opposition to one another.

The world needs righting yet.
When the world fell for the humans, it rose for the Elvhen.

The children had given it a name, as children always did, making up stories and songs that spread more rapidly than the Hahren's version. They called it the Time Before. When the world had been stone and not water, and their friends had lived on another side, separated by a curtain that the sad wolf had drawn over them. Back when there were more humans, and it was the People who were small and frightened, missing part of their selves.

The People liked the children's stories, about Fen'Harel and his veil, and how the world had been torn and then mended back together again like an old blanket. They made more sense than the truth, which was found in the Lady's eyes when no one was looking. Sad eyes, wise eyes, behind the Vallaslin she would not let the Other People remove, no matter their scorn.

Hahren said she liked the way it unsettled them.

The Elvhen did not like to be called the Other People, but it was the name that they whispered between themselves. The Lady didn't mind, she always just smiled and listened to their stories with delight. She liked the children's stories better as well, because they didn't hurt the spirits. It had taken some time for the People to learn how to not hurt the spirits, but the humans still struggled.

That is why the humans could not live freely, like the People. One of the girls from far away, an Alienage in Antiva, said that a human had turned her friend Kindness into a monster with his fear, and killed him. The story was just a scary tale to be told around the fire, because the Lady would not let that happen here.

The world was big and empty now, ruins where the spirits played and told their stories for the children, cities that were no longer dirty and cold, but full of memories and plants that eroded walls and cracked streets. They could have gone back to build cities for the People, but the Lady said that they should not. They should keep being the people they had become.

Instead, the People from the cities built villages where the wanderers would visit, small simple places built on old ruins instead of taking from what the humans had left behind. The spirits liked for the People to be there, where they once had been centuries before. The dead human cities were far too sad.

The Other People built cities, though. Or, they were building a city on the bones of Orlais. Grand and twisted and graceful, beautiful like a song. The Lady would smile sadly at that, and shake her head. It was not a happy smile. She was so strong, and so sad, and she loved all the People and the children. That's why she had saved them, when the Time Before came to an end. That was their favorite story.

The Lady called for the People all across Thedas, she rode from city to city and clan to clan and rescued them, taught them to understand the new world. She made the change gentle for them, showed them the way forward. Taught the way of spirits, fought away the fear and superstition. She had done her best, for everyone...

But she could not save the humans.

Too afraid, too wrapped up in their maker and demons, they killed so many spirits that the Lady had to drive them back, so that they would be safe. Tevinter was now a place of great danger, as the
humans struggled against the new world. The People could defend themselves quite easily, now that the world was one thing instead of two, and magic flowed like water.

Still, the Lady said the humans should not be killed. They could learn, in time. Compassion had taught her how to understand the spirits, and compassion was meant for everyone, not just the People. So the humans lived. The Other People often argued over it, but she stood firm.

The children loved the spirits, and taught the People how to love them, too. Perhaps one day the human children would find the way, too. They all agreed that was for the best, at their council. They called it the Da’len’al, just like the Hahrens had, because they were important now. The Lady would come to their council, and listen to their wisdom.

It made her smile. It was not a sad smile.

The Arlathvhen was bigger every time, and this time it spread across the Dirthaveran like ripples in a pond, with the new village of Enasal in the center. Close enough that some of the Other People had visited, in their aloofness, but some coming to share and seek knowledge, or pretty things. Few enough that each one lured a pack of staring children in their wake.

They all visited the Lady first. And when Fen’Harel and his people came, she went to meet them.
Da'len'al

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Posturing.

He found it necessary even now, and she still found it tiresome. It did, however, keep a firm barrier
between them, reminding her of duty and restraint. Duty and restraint and distance. Her mantra for
these years. She still had a people to save, in the ruins of his world.

It was hard to hate the robe because it was beautiful, and because the children were delighted when
she dressed up, even if it was cumbersome. The ardency of their adoration worried her sometimes,
made her think of the future and the stories of the Evanuris. No, she would not let herself become
that. She had made a promise. She wanted love, friendship, not their devotion and obedience.

Their parents and elders would tend to them carefully, raise them in knowledge and not ignorance.
There would never be mage-gods again.

“Thank you, Orana,” she murmured softly as the woman slid the silvery, delicate under robe over her
head, lacing her into it before reaching for the woven veridium overdress.

Heavy, but such things hardly mattered any more. Once it would have, but now magic was merely a
thought, to keep the weight of it from crushing her. The metal had been spun into tiny threads, and
then woven into a sort of lace, vines and leaves, and delicate flowers inlaid with sylvanwood. Giving
magic to hands already highly skilled in art had ensured the creation of some fascinating things.

She held still as her hair was swept back and twisted into place by the simple circlet that matched.
She'd drawn the line at anything remotely resembling a crown or helm.

“There you are, my dear Lady,” Orana declared, her voice much less timid than it had been a few
years ago. Having something to protect had done her a world of good. Something to protect and
someone to love.

A gentle hand pressed to the former slave's swollen stomach was rewarded with a little kick, and she
smiled wistfully as Orana laughed.

“One more for the pack, soon. He grows quickly,” she declared simply, and then nodded to the
woman, turning to face the clans and the Elvhen waiting for her.

The children were first, of course, waiting to ooh and aah as she stepped out, fluttering spirits
amongst them. She smiled in amusement, and gave a little turn for them.

Afternoon sun was cut into dappled patterns here, swaying with the motion of the trees. Young trees,
that had been growing for the ten years since the world had been thrown into chaos. There had been
a mill here, the children had found it yesterday and had taken her to it. They found such things
delightful to play in.

She found them somewhat sad, but their joy eased that burden.

“Do the da'len approve?” she asked meekly, amusement hovering at the corners of her mouth.
“No! Lady, you need flowers!” the latest little ringleader declared, all curly copper hair and a stubbed nose. Ferelden, she thought, and tried to remember her name as she penitently knelt for them.

Ember. That was right. Little Ember with her loud voice and her surprisingly gentle magic. She would be a healer.

As she waited, a little group of them scampered off to gather flowers. This time of year there were plenty, and they returned swiftly. Swarming over her like busy little insects, they wove flowers into her hair with no rhyme or reason, plaiting little braids, some with more success than others.

The colors clashed and cluttered, a few petals crushed so that she could smell the sweet wild perfume drifting from near her temple. She wouldn't sacrifice this for anything. She had lived the other life, seen the price of religion and devotion. Cold and frightened and distant, on a pedestal and yet hated. She still had nightmares about what the humans and their Maker had done to her in those years when she had tried to save them from this world.

This. This was better, with sticky fingers and little voices laughing.

That it had come with so much loss and suffering, that was her great regret. She was still kneeling amongst the children when Abelas came to fetch her. Some of them drew back meekly at the sight of him, as they did every time. She hadn't been quite able to convince him to stop frowning all the time. Little Ember was the last to leave her side, scowling up at him defiantly as he extended a hand.

Rising to her feet with the hand, shedding loose petals and a few stray blossoms, she offered a slow smile. It was not returned, but she never stopped trying.

“I hope I have not kept them waiting,” she remarked, because it was something to be said and not because she meant it.

The daisy chain that had been pressed into her other hand she was tempted to throw around Abelas' neck. She had done it before, and he'd tolerated it, but needling his dignity in front of Fen'harel was probably not wise. Instead, she slipped it over her head to let it dangle between her breasts, and then turned to blow the children a kiss before heading off.

“No more than they deserve. They know that the Arlathvhen is busy,” his much longer legs kept a slower stride for her sake, “and I doubt he would have come unless it was important.”

“Yes. Well, I will try not to tax his patience overmuch.”

They shared a look, hers amused, his dour. The sentinels resented him even now, but she couldn't blame them. She never would, and she was grateful they had been by her side.

To realize Mythal was alive, only to lose her again...

“You know what this is about. The delivery will be here this evening, there will be no way to hide it from him,” his warning was without much force, and she smiled, tipping her head as they paced through the trees.

“Hmh,” she agreed simply, and then fell into silence as they reached the ruins where council seating had been set up for the Hahren'al. They were already there, and seated, but they politely rose as she paced up the cracked marble stairs, crumbled by tree roots.

Her heart thudded, as it always did when she saw him again, that tightness in the chest and the jolt of pain. This time the agony was not as intense, but it was just as heavy as it had been the first time. Her eyes slid past him, merely taking in his gaze rather than meeting it. His stare was cool and appraising,
though she thought she might have seen a brief flicker of amusement in her nervous assessment.

Probably the flowers, she had a feeling that scarlet, purple, and faded pink was not a combination in fashion with the Elvhen.

Cole and Hope were already there waiting for her, wavering green and gilded forms, and she was delighted to see that Wisdom had come with his contingent. She offered the delicate spirit a brilliant smile of welcome, far more genuine than the formal gesture to Fen'Harel. Wisdom offered a bow of her head in response.

“Good day to you,” she greeted, skipping the formalities as she moved for her seat at the head of the table. His at the foot, of course, settling them prettily in opposition. Keeping her as far from him as possible. “I hope your journey was pleasant and swift.”

“Yes, and thank you for seeing us so quickly. I am sure that you are extremely busy,” he replied, perfectly pleasant as well, though the unvoiced sarcasm and censure was plain.

He'd always cared for this nonsense more than her. She wondered if he knew she only played along for his sake. Matching wits with him was as thrilling as ever, though, and she tried not to indulge too much in that. It brought up too many old, dead memories and feelings. Better to be neutral.

Her composure was not a fragile thing, not any more, but incaution was rarely wise.

“Always more duties to be handled,” she agreed, and then fell silent, expectant.

“I noticed that the last of the blighted lyrium has been cleared from the area. You have our thanks, of course.”

Ah, so it was to be pleasantries.

She offered a hopefully genuine-seeming smile, shaking her head lightly. A flower slipped from behind her ear to flutter to her lap. It gave her fingers something to do, hands in her lap to help keep her posture upright.

“I assure you, we do it to keep our people safe as much as anything, though with our borders so close here, it is more urgent, of course. And how goes your work on that front?” her voice remained pleasant, thought she nearly flinched at his answering smile seen out of the corner of her vision.

A reminder, to her betraying mind, forcing it back to where it belonged:

_It isn't him._

“We hold our borders well, thank you. And, on the topic of borders...”

Ah yes, here it was.

“I received word that some of your people crossed the into Tevinter. I hadn't any word from your commanders, I was curious what precisely they were doing there.”

“So kind of you to be concerned.”
Concerned?

Her expression was still that perpetually bland, barely pleasant facade she always kept with him. It made one feel as if she was utterly bored by them, a fact that had always rankled with all of his people. Distrust or hatred he could understand, her sympathies were obvious and numerous. But she always seemed as if he was some minor inconvenience, as if her mind were somewhere else every time he spoke. He doubted she had met his eyes more than once or twice in all of their meetings.

She had been not at all what Solas had expected from a self-proclaimed Lady of the People.

The spirits gave him little on her, they seemed oddly protective of her secrets and her thoughts. This Lady was a strange creature. He had known that from their first meeting, her refusal to give him a name to call her by.

He would be eternally grateful that she had saved so many of the broken remnants of the people, though he had a feeling that if he said as much, she would laugh scornfully. They might be ignorant and superstitious, but they were still descended from the Elvhen. It made no difference if she believed that he cared or no.

He had no doubt that her people would tire of the simple existence she had imposed on them, and would eventually join the Elvhen. For now they coexisted, uneasily for the most part, as he attempted to ascertain just what the mysterious Lady intended.

“We had agreed that the humans are far too dangerous to be interacted with. We have respected your wish to have them be left alone, I will remind you. My people have stayed far away from Tevinter and Rivain.”

“My people were simply acquiring a delivery from an old friend of mine,” she responded smoothly, with another of those false, strained smiles.

He knew what her true smiles looked like, when she greeted the spirits, when a thought amused her in what she thought was a private moment. She had never offered one of them to him. Their interactions were sterile.

“And I am certain you know why that is not a good enough answer for me.”

“Yes, Fen’harel.” Her voice always said that so strangely, carefully tripping over each syllable, giving it an odd portent. Old superstitions, he would think, but that didn't fit with what little he knew of her. “I am aware. The delivery will be here this evening. You may inspect it at that time, if you wish.”

“We would hardly wish to impose upon you.”

“It is the Arlathvhen. There is no imposition. You may even join the council meetings if you are at all interested. Better to hear such things first hand, don't you agree?” her inflection had not changed, but he found the offer strange.

She had never made one like it before, and she was giving him no clues as to why. Curiosity tugged at the corners of his mind, though he could not let that be the only reason.

It would be better to know the state of the people, as they called themselves in common now, and how they were feeling. All the better to ensure they didn't give in to baser impulses and attack his decimated Elvhen. Their magic may have been stronger than her people's, but their numbers were far too few to risk it.
“Thank you, Lady, I believe I will accept your kind hospitality. Perhaps we can speak again tomorrow?” he suggested, fully expecting her to do as she usually did, and disappear to her aravel the moment they had stopped speaking.

“I have a very important council meeting, actually. You are welcome to join me, though I doubt your men will find it interesting.”

The sentinel in Mythal's Vallaslin gave her a sidelong look that she ignored, and his curiosity only doubled. What was in that offer that drew the disapproval of her silent, scornful guardian? He still could not quite understand why the former servants of Mythal followed her, and did not return to their people. The spirit of Compassion that always traveled at her side leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“Yes, Cole, of course you may come,” she agreed with him, and smiled then, as she never would to him, “and Hope as well. The council will be delighted to see you.”

“I will come as well,” Wisdom decided, surprising him yet again.

As the Lady rose, he did as well out of habit, but with some confusion lingering yet. This had not gone at all like their previous interactions. Up until now, he had thought her rather predictable and frosty, which was admittedly at odds with the vibrantly heroic feats her people attached to her.

The tangle of garish and rumpled flowers in her hair shed a few more blossoms as she moved, quiet Hope catching one in her insubstantial, golden fingers and offering it back to her.

Again, she smiled, and he became aware yet again of how charming and free it was. The Vallaslin she stubbornly wore detracted from it, of course, like a reminder of his own failures writ on her flesh. Mythal’s markings, like those of her Sentinels. His guilt twofold. Perhaps she knew of the sacrifices he had made to create this world, though he did not know how she could.

He had done what he had to do, in the end, and this was the world he made. They might despise him, but they had survived and must be protected. Even from themselves, if necessary.

“Come. The council may have started without us,” she said abruptly, and strode off, long skirt fluttering. He gestured his men back to their camp, and turned to follow her. He was in no danger here.

As he left with the Lady, he could feel the sentinel's glare on the back of his neck like a threat.

She said not a word to him their entire trip through the trees, greeting people they passed, always remembering names. He was curious as to why Wisdom had insisted upon coming, but pleased all the same. It had been quiet all too often as of late. It was good to simply travel with his friend again, to speak of things they passed and discovered, or rediscovered.

Watching the world and the fade conforming to one another again had been a pleasant thing. Freed from his influence, and hers, as they had both agreed. Letting the world become what it would be, without interference.

Now with uneasy peace finally brokered, perhaps he could travel more while his people needed him yet.

He was drawn out of his pensive thoughts by a nearing babble of noise, bright and cheerful and above all...young. The clearing they entered was rather large, and wholly ringed by children. After
the quiet serenity that was the new Arlathan, it was...jarring.

He wasn't even aware the people had so many of them, there had only been two births among the Elvhen in the last ten years since they had awoken, and each one had been treated as a miracle. But here they were, dozens upon dozens of them, all pointed ears and dirty knees, with a few spirits settled with them.

“Welcome to the Da'len'al,” the Lady called over her shoulder to him, the smile on her lips warm, but not meant for him. No, it was meant for the children, who gave little cries of delight and welcome as they caught sight of her.

Hope immediately left her side, drifting off to join a small girl with a pensive expression, though the spirit of Compassion she called Cole remained close. The children were shuffling open a space for her in their circle, when the first one caught sight of him.

“It's the Dread Wolf!” the freckled little boy exclaimed, more shocked than frightened. In fact...none of them seemed frightened by him. He found himself somewhat unsettled by that. “The Dread Wolf's come to the Da'len'al!”

“He comes to seek your wisdom, my council. Will you let him stay?” the Lady asked, persuasively sweet, and for the first time he understood why they followed her. She was alive now, in a way he had never seen her, not the aloof Lady who puzzled him with her cold smiles and averted eyes while she demanded compassion for the humans.

“Yes, he may stay!” a small, puckish little creature with tangled red curls declared, over a few protests. The vote was very noisy, and went on for several minutes while the Lady waited patiently. It was almost enough to make him smile.

“But he isn't to play tricks or et anybody! Or the Lady will set him on fire!”

The verdict was finally rendered, and she turned her sober gaze to him.

“Lord Fen'Harel, do you solemnly swear not to play any tricks or eat anyone?” she asked him with a careful ceremony, not mocking the childrens' seriousness.

“Yes, Lady. I solemnly swear that I shall avoid all tricks and eating people, though cakes stand very little chance against me,” a mild bit of levity, but the situation seemed to call for it.

She seemed...less than amused.

For a moment her smile went tense, and then faded altogether as she turned to settle down in the circle, heedless of her white dress and its delicate decorations. In her sudden returned distance she was silent, watching him discreetly sidelong. Likely to see if he'd unbend enough to sit on the ground. Careful in the ceremonial armor, he followed suit. His willingness didn't seem to return her to good spirits, her lips pursing together before she turned to face the 'council'.

“Who is Speaker today?” she asked, and then nodded as the very loud little redhead lifted her hand. “Ah. Speaker Ember, I had thought as much. Are there any worries I should know about, Speaker?”

“Yes, only the midwife said Senna gets two brothers, and that's not fair because SOME people don't have any. Some people only get sisters, so Senna should trade, shouldn't she?” the little imp declared, and the Lady chuckled softly.

“I think that perhaps some people who wish to have brothers should ask Sennas' mamae if she will
need help with the babies. Three all at one time is a great many, since her sister is very small, and it is better to be helpful than jealous. We are all one people and family, after all.” It wasn't a chide, just a musing, and more than a few of the children nodded, making exaggeratedly thoughtful noises.

“Babies are dumb!” a gangly little girl across the circle declared, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Emby said she'd talk about magic, not babies!”

“Oh! Has someone found their magic?” the Lady asked and extended her hands to the circle, beckoning to the center. “I should like to see. Then I can tell you who will teach you!”

Suddenly, this little bit of playacting was making sense. It was very unlikely that the people had much experience handling the newfound surge in magic, especially in the younger children. It would have to be monitored, carefully, while the adults came to grips with their own abilities.

Who better than her, the woman who all these children seemed to trust so implicitly? Who better than her to ensure that they found the teaching they needed?

It wasn't a facet of all of this that he had given much thought to, for all he knew their abilities had been stunted from living away from the fade. Certainly, they were less powerful than the Elvhen, but it seemed even the least of them had found something.

Or the smallest.

The boy who stepped into the circle was shy and very young, with a thick shock of black hair and a flush in his cheeks.

“It is quite all right. Will you show me?” the Lady urged him gently, offering both hands to him, “Remember...just a little. You only need to show a little. Think a small thought. Do you have a friend to help you?”

The boy nodded his head rapidly, and to his great surprise, a rippling spirit tinged a dark violet parted from the crowd. Now he focused. She had brought him here to show him something, and not simply the rather charming little council. Their interactions had all been political and surface, and sometimes utterly antagonistic...but she did nothing without a reason.

“Hello, Joy,” the Lady greeted the spirit warmly, and a little burst of laughter dancing in the air straightened the boy's thin shoulders, “thank you for helping him. Now, let us see what you can do with your friend here to help you. It's all right, we all had to learn this way.”

That drew his attention, a head tilting aside to watch her for a moment, her own eyes never leaving the boy. He focused, lips pushing together, his slender fingers shaking a little. Nerves, it must have been, because there was nothing wild about the tiny surge of magic. Strangely controlled, and very deliberate. That was not what he expected.

Around the boy's bare feet, the grass abruptly rustled, growing and tangling around him. The little burst of magic stopped, and his cheeks flooded red as the children all cheered for him, as enthusiastically as if he had summoned a lightning storm.

“Excellent,” the Lady enthused, giving a clap of her own hand, “you did so well! You see, da'len, what happens when you are not afraid of your magic? Excellently done! I will speak to your mamaes, and we will find someone to teach you. I'm so very proud of you!”

As the children started chattering and showing off to one another, she finally looked in his direction, unfocused gaze cool and distant again. The one he remembered so well. It was a pity, in a way.
“We had no one to teach us,” she informed him, quiet and calm, “when the world fell, and you changed everything. Not even the Keepers truly understood it all, and it was too dangerous not to control. It could have killed us all. The spirits saved us, Fen'harel. We saved them, and they saved us, while you waged your war.”

A pause then, as she began to rise, shedding more flowers. A wilting, pale pink blossom fell onto his armored thigh, and he picked it up, spun it between his fingers contemplatively.

“You returned to save the Elvhen, and abandoned us. What if your new Elvhen betray you as well? Become corrupt, become weak. Will you abandon them? An eternal cycle?” She stared down at him, and he could not meet her gaze. “Who are your people, and what are you willing to sacrifice for them?”

When he gave her no answer, she turned and left.

Eventually the laughter became too much, and he did as well.

Chapter End Notes

There's no schedule for this re-upload. I'm only uploading this one now b/c the first chapter required so little editing- I'm using this as editing practise, which is why you're seeing again. I'm glad people seem to be excited to see it. I've felt very conflicted about re-uploading it, as it is unfinished, and at this point I have no intentions to complete it, but I hope that you can enjoy it regardless. Thank you.
The evening was cooler, busy, every camp fire holding a different song, a different story. The Lady drifted among them as she always did, pausing to listen to a tune, holding a quiet conversation. Another three clans had arrived, and the gathering was complete, the good cheer in the air magnified by it.

They had lost no clans this year. They had more children born than people lost. It was a worthy celebration. There was growing now, not simply destruction, families being born out of the ashes of war. It filled her heart with contentment. The people were flourishing, at last. It was their first year they had not been in decline.

“Settled with just your daughter?” she teased Abelas, pausing at the sentinel's fire to steal a drink from their cask, “the amount of doe eyes being sent your way is astounding, falon.”

“She grows well,” Abelas replied blandly, golden eyes shifting aside at her, “a sturdy five years. I have done my duty, Lady.”

The implication was clear, and she just laughed, lifting her cup for a small sip. A little sweeter than she liked, but the burn was pleasantly warming. How could she curse a child with the burden she bore on her shoulders? They already had too many strange ideas about her, without her starting a family to attach more...stories to.

“Ah, but these are all my children, Abelas. And soon I shall have two dozen more. They are close, are they?” she asked, and smiled as he gave her a simple nod, and her hand reached out to tug the end of his braid, ignoring the slight narrowing of his eyes. “Good, good. I do wonder what the Dread Wolf will think of my experiment. Are his people still avoiding us?”

“They were taken dinner and were pleasant, for them. They speak with the spirits, but not the people,” a slight pause, and then he hesitantly added, “you think this is wise, even now?”

“The children or bringing them in under Fen'harel's nose? Yes to both, I suppose. I would rather do it before him than behind him, and unless I know him less than I believe...he will eventually see wisdom.”

She swished the cup in a slow circle, gazing contemplatively into the night-darkened liquid.

“Fortunate for you that he brought Wisdom with him, then.”

“Is it? Now I wonder what has brought my name to my ears.” The flickering green edges coalesced into a form as a spirit joined them just outside of the reach of the firelight. “Lady. Sentinel.”

“Wisdom,” she sighed, and then smiled. One more reminder that she had done the right thing, at least in some aspects. She still remembered his grief, when his dear friend had died. “I am afraid I have created some mischief for your companion to frown over.”

“He frowns often enough without his burdens being added to, but much of what he carries he has put upon his own shoulders,” the spirit replied, voice smooth and fluttering, rising and falling, “but that has always been his way, as you know, Lady.”
The spirits never told her if they completely understood what she had done, and she hadn't bothered to poke at it. It seemed less than decorous, since most of them did not pry about her. There were, of course, exceptions. Especially one large, glaring exception. She wondered where he was.

It might be a bit much to hope that he was harassing Fen'harel.

“Well, this is my burden, my recompense for what I could not do. If he disapproves of it, it is his own choice.”

“That is a truth,” Wisdom agreed placidly, and then tilted its head at a sudden burst of chatter, “your delivery is here, Lady.”

“Ah, excellent,” she replied, dipping her head to the sentinel and the spirit, beginning to follow the sudden flow of the crowd. The children always heard first.

Swirling around her like a stream around a stone, they burst ahead of her into the darkness, tugged on her, excitement making them heedless of propriety. She adored it, swinging up a little towheaded Rivani girl, who giggled and clung to her hair as she perched on her shoulder.

She could see the wagons past the last of the camps, beyond where the Dread Wolf and his men lingered. She gave them no glance as she walked past them, girl on her shoulder, a smaller one clinging to her split skirt in shyness of the crowd. The edges of spirits wove in and out of the people, faintly lighting the way.

No one broke the darkness with lights, for it was hardly necessary.

“Lady, it's the storyteller,” the little one close to her ear whispered, and she smiled brilliantly.

“Yes, da'len. It's the storyteller. He's brought new brothers and sisters to the family,” she said. The small arm around her neck tightened, and she became aware of Fen'harel's approach, picking up his stride to catch up with hers.

It had been too much to assume he would wait, she supposed. It was extremely tempting to shift her little burden onto his shoulder...but that would be admitting she knew he would enjoy it. How long had it been since he'd had a proper hug from a child?

“Your delivery has arrived, I assume?” he inquired, and then met the sudden scrutiny from her little shoulder-passenger. She had a particularly searching gaze, with owlish brown eyes. “...Hello, da'len.”

“You're bald. How c'n you be a wolf if you're bald?” the curious little creature asked him, and he blinked, twice.

It was all she could do to stifle a laugh. No. Keep some distance. Distance.

“That is an excellent question,” he finally replied, after regaining his composure, “how can you be a da'len, if you are so tall?”

“I climbed up the Lady.”

“Ah, well, a very sensible answer, da'len.”

It seemed to have sufficiently distracted the child, who wriggled to be released.

Swinging her down, she released her and watched as she pelted off to join the very short crowd
bothering the tired, but cheerful-looking dwarf standing in the middle of a pool of light. More lines on his face, more gray in his hair, the thick glasses sliding down his nose. She scanned him over critically, as she always did when he managed to find a way to visit. Poor Varric. The past ten years had not been kind to the dwarves, but he was still smiling.

“The storyteller, I take it?” Fen’harel inquired, and she breathed in shortly.

They had been friends once, and it pained her to hear him ask that now. He would never know how much, however. This was not the first time she'd been through something of this sort, and it would not be the last. Friends forgetting friends, becoming strangers or even enemies.

Her most of all.

Tonight especially it weighed on her, a night heavy with history. It was the night one of her once dearest friends had died, because she could not win her trust again in this world of second chances. She could only hope that what she was doing would bring some recompense for that piece of guilt. It was all she could do, fight again and again to balance her scales.

It seemed a futile fight, but to stop trying would be far worse.

“An old friend. Varric Tethras,” she replied, voice a low and thoughtful murmur, “bringing to me a very special gift.”

“And what gift would that be?” he inquired, their conversation becoming cool and distant without the child between them as a buffer.

“A future,” she replied, as the first of the nervous, shy little children peeked out of the back of a wagon, “a future for the humans, Fen'harel.”

The implications of her words sank in, and his frown was instant as the thin and bedraggled human child nervously slipped out of the wagon, his hand twisted tightly with a smaller girl's. For a time he merely watched, as they trooped out one by one.

Only children, but he could not be so ignorant as to think that made them harmless. Sharp, his eyes, gauging their reactions to the curious spirits. Waiting for signs of corruption, of warping.

The Lady was likewise poised and silent, and he became aware of the lingering people just outside of the light, hints of reflective eyes in the darkness. Scouts, ready to incapacitate. It seemed she was wise enough to take precautions, at the very least. Still, the sheer enormity of what she was doing was both baffling and infuriating.

Any one of these children could be the death of these gentle, harmless spirits, and she had slipped them under the nose of the Elhven. Arrogant, at the very least, and willfully negligent at the worst. After the humans had massacred countless numbers of them, and not just in the last ten years, but over the centuries, she had somehow decided without consulting them to...to import their children.

“You lost so many people driving them out. The war is barely over, you have barely found your peace,” he simply could not comprehend it, anger and confusion in his voice. “and now you bring them back in? To what end? Misplaced...misplaced guilt?”

“You would know much about that, would you not?” her words were gentle, but pointed as a blade.
It did little to quell his unease. “Half of the humans are children, starving to death in the streets, Fen'harel. Children are innocent. Children do not look at a spirit and see a demon. They see a spirit and ask it what it is. They learn, they grow.”

“Even the young can be corrupted. Such mindsets are insidious. You of all people should know that sometimes prejudice is rooted too deeply to be removed,” his voice was harsh now, angry with her presumption. More than just the children, but the tone in her voice that assumed to know how he felt, how he had suffered.

“They are my children now, and you will have to accept that,” her own voice grew sharp, in a way it so rarely was with him. Usually she could not seem to care enough to argue with him. “They are my people now. It is guilt. I promised I would save them all from you, and I failed. Just as you failed your people. My...definition of people is just somewhat broader than yours.”

The look she gave him sidelong in the darkness was witheringly scornful, and he was reminded then of their earlier conversation. Who were his people? Hers seemed to be more vast than he had realized.

“This is not your world, Fen'harel. It belongs to all of us, including them. If you wish to censure me over this, kindly go back to your crystal towers and write me a scathing missive. You will find it a much safer endeavor,” the last two words she rolled on her tongue like a threat, heavy with an unspoken grudge, and for the first time he looked at the Lady of the People with unclouded eyes.

She hated him.

Why had he not realized it before?

Before he could process the thought, she swept off to join the crowd, thick with spirits and curious children. They were...much alike, in their own ways. He could feel one of them at his shoulder now, and Wisdom gave a slow sigh.

“She will save nothing in her efforts to save everything,” he finally declared, hollow, the weight of history and his own choices heavy upon him, “I cannot let her destroy what I have saved in her attempts.”

“But...you can let her try,” Wisdom replied quietly, “and hope. Surely not all hope is doomed to failure, Solas. You know that it is not.”

Yet again, he had no answer.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot how short some of these old chapters are. Crazy. They say a chapter should be anywhere from 2.5k words to 7k words, with an average of 4-5k. It also depends on the genre of book, of course.
When you think about that, it's amazing how some fanfiction authors write chapters upwards of 10k words, don't you think? I think it's wonderful how people manage to buck the conventions of modern publishing and still put out wonderful stories. It's just a shame that this is an art form people so rarely can support themselves on. If only more people saw it as valid entertainment, instead of 'trash'. Let's hope the next generation does better by our fan artists of all types.
The Story of Freedom

When the world fell, some places fell faster than others, they say. Dark places, old places. Places that had always been home to demons and centuries of death and pain. Kirkwall was the first. She was always a broken city, and none of her spirits had survived being twisted into their darker selves, except one.

The Lady went there first, because she knew of the darkness it held. Kirkwall was born out of blood, blood of thousands of slaves, young mages, old evil rituals to whisper in the ear of the old Tevinter gods. Some stains can never be washed away, and they infect everyone who touches it.

Or...almost everyone.

In the city the Lady found a brave storyteller and his friends to help her rescue the people of that city, to take them far away.

There was the Champion, who had saved the city before, and understood that people were more important than buildings.

There was the Blade, who struck down slavers and profiteers with his righteous anger, and kept the people free.

There was the Keeper, who understood old wisdom and old ways, but had a young heart that loved the Lady and all those good of heart.

There was the Protector, who used the Law as a shield to protect the people, even from themselves for the good of all.

Together they fought to free as many people as they could from the darkness of Kirkwall, before it rose and swallowed them whole. They saved many, but even more were lost, and the storyteller wept to see his beloved city beyond saving. The Lady had decided to call down the fire upon the city, to cleanse it so that one day something new could be born from its ashes. But the storyteller stopped her, then.

“It will be a long fight, but it is our fight. Can you say that there is nothing in Kirkwall left saving?”

It was a question she did not know the answer to.

And so, the Lady left them, and walked among the ruins of Kirkwall for a day, and a night. The demons did not trouble her, and the city opened its heart to her so that she could see everything it had been, and everything it could be.

She looked at the great statues of tortured slaves, and her heart was sad, and heavy. It was then that she thought again that Kirkwall was not a place worth saving. Pain built upon pain, what kindness could grow out of such evil memories?

“Look again.”

A voice spoke to her then, and she did as it ordered, looking again at the statue, the polished metal.
And do you know what the Lady saw then, reflected back at her?

Her face. Her face marked by Vallaslin, which had been slave markings, and now she wore as a sign that the people were more than their history. Not marks of slavery any more, but marks of freedom, of loyalty and love freely given.

The spirit of Freedom laughed, and she understood.

One day Kirkwall would be saved. Because someone loved it, it was worth saving. She would create, and not destroy, and then there would be balance. So long as the wolf destroyed, the Lady would create. And so, the Lady and the Freedom of Kirkwall left the city together, and she made a promise to the storyteller.

“On day when the People are strong, we will heal Kirkwall for you. It is loved, and therefore it is worth saving.”

And the storyteller was glad.
The fire crackled loud into the sudden silence as Varric finished his tale, accepting a filled tankard from an appreciative listener. He grinned at her, and she tried not to frown too deeply in front of the crowd. Thankfully once the story was done, some of them moved on, leaving her with some room to breathe. And scold.

She leaned in towards him, hands on her knees.

“Really, Varric,” she sighed, ignoring the remaining wide-eyed stares around the fire, lowering her voice to a hiss, “that was practically mythology. You had to make me sound like a goddess of judgment?”

“Hey, c'mon, they love it,” the dwarf chuckled, leaning back in his seat and tipping back his tankard, “kids eat that stuff up.”

“I liked hearing about me,” Freedom declared, and the Lady sighed again as the silvery spirit wrapped its insubstantial arms around her neck. The press of his magic gave her a small hug, and some of her irritation eased. She could never be angry with him, even if he did his best to drive her mad at times. “Don't be so sour. It's a good story!”

“See, the kid likes it!” Varric pointed out, and her lips tightened as Cole nodded in agreement. “Both of 'em. Relax, would you? It's just a story.”

“It's more than that, you of all people should know that. You remember what your books did to the Fade? We've been over this, Varric,” she said.

Her words just got another grin, and she let her gaze shift up and across the camp, to a fire barely seen through the trees. He was still here, she knew he was, Fen'harel's lurking presence like a boulder in the flow of the fade, rather than the smaller interruptions of people and spirits.

It was why she could barely stand his presence, even when he was out of her sight. She knew he was there, just as he knew where she was.

“How far has this spread already? You know exactly what you're doing, don't you?”

“Maybe...” Varric finally allowed, voice dropping, “listen, it's already too late for him, we both know that. I mean...whatever you say about the guy not wanting to be a god, the fact of the matter is that he destroyed the damn veil. He destroyed the damn world. And right now there's a whole lot of people who basically think he's the worst thing since the Blight, and he didn't count on them still being around.”

“You're saying he's the new enemy of the Maker's people?” The thought left a sour taste in her mouth. It was bad enough being the Herald of their god, what would they do to their enemy?

“It's...a little worse than that. It's going doctrine,” Varric finally admitted, and her heart sank, “Fen'harel, the Adversary. It's getting pretty popular. It was only bad luck that the Black Divine didn't die and Justinia did. They've got no one else to listen to now.”

“And I drove them all into Tevinter,” she groaned, frustrated. The common flowed across her tongue, so much less evocative than Elvhen, but so much more accurate right now. “Shit, Varric. Shit.”
“Yeah, that about covers it. There's nothing a few thousand or so humans can do to him, especially with the problems with the Qunari. He's not in danger. Yet. Rivain is still neutral.”

She knew the concern in his voice was for her, not for Fen'Harel, and she appreciated it. She always felt more connected around him, less likely to drift off and let time slip through her fingers.

“But frankly, it's looking less and less likely that you're going to be able to save everyone.”

He sounded so tired, and it broke her heart a little. Turning her head, she stared into his face, lips pursed together. Light glinted off of his glasses as he gazed back at her soberly, the lines at the corners of his mouth deeper than last time she'd seen him. It hurt, a small sharp sting.

“I can try, Varric, I can try...” She whispered, another of her mantras. Another thing she had to keep saying, or lose her grip entirely. She could feel Hope watching now, settling down next to Cole. They always knew when she needed them.

“You're the only reason people are alive, no matter what the 'vints are saying about the subject. They still believe in you, y'know. It's the only reason I'm not over there right now trying to put a bolt through his dread neck,” he said with a smile, but it was dark at the edges.

The grim certainty of his voice made her laugh sardonically, and she lifted both hands to rub at her forehead. She couldn't even curse properly any more, could she? All the curses had become truths. Far, far too accurate truths. Calming her mind with the ease of practice, she let it all flow from her, back into the past where it belonged. That was then, this was now. She was not that woman any more, she was not the frightened Herald.

“And so you would make me an adversary to your Adversary, knowing full well that I am trying to save him. That I am trying to save you all,” she finally finished the thought that had began it, with a cold certainty in her gut. That's exactly what they were doing to her. And there was nothing she could do about it, because they needed her. “This is...the last thing I ever wanted, Varric. You know that more than anyone. If anyone so much as breathes the word Andraste in my direction...”

“You made yourself the middle of all of this, Lavellan, when you set yourself up against him and decided not to kill him. This is better than the alternative.”

His use of her name made her wince, and he gentled his voice, “sorry. Hey. We've got to make the best of this. If that means I've got to start pushing a new narrative...”

“What kind of world will this be, Varric? I never wanted this,” she whispered, thin and forlorn, “did I save him just to make him suffer? Did I save everyone just to make them suffer? Perhaps...perhaps they...we were all better off dead.”

“It wasn't your fault,” Cole whispered, voice always on the edge of breaking, even now, “he needs you now. They need you now. Every life is worth saving, bright and small, little stars in new constellations. This is better. This is better than what was, would have been.”

“Your plan's good,” Varric agreed, unphased now by it all, by the spirits he treated like people, “I mean, good for someone who's got centuries to spend working on it. My view’s a little more shortsighted, though, and I'm seeing a whole lot of mess up ahead.”

“What then, in your shortsighted opinion,” she declared with resignation, already dreading the answer, “should I do now, Varric?”

“Get drunk, oh Lady of the People. Now is when we get drunk,” Varric replied, giving her a solidly comforting little pat on the shoulder.
She smiled, wanly, and gave a small shake of her head. Well, it was more of a solution than she had, certainly. Before she could give in to the allure of a dizzy head, a flicker of golden light caught her attention, dragging it over Varric's shoulder.

Hope extended a hand to her, beckoning, and the Lady began to rise. The spirit wanted something, and she never said no to Hope, who so rarely spoke. It had to be important.

“Get started without me, Varric, I'll be back soon. If you're going to tell stories about me fighting the Dread Wolf, can you wait until he's not literally across the way from us?”

She adjusted her simple top, sighing a bit at his wry grin.

“No promises,” he replied, as expected, and chuckled as she turned to follow the spirit.

“I will go with him,” Hope told her as they wandered through the trees, gradually towards the Wolf's camp.

She realized halfway there where she was being led, but held back her gut reaction, which was to flee. Hope did nothing without a reason, she would have to be patient with the young spirit. Still, his presence was an onerous thing, demanding her attention if she wanted or no.

“You are the Hope of the People, ma da'vhenan. Why will you go with the Dread Wolf?” curiously she asked, not chiding. A bloom of cautious optimism in her heart now.

“He needs me.”

The answer was simple, quiet but firm. Hope disappeared through the trunk of a tree, and she rested a hand on the rough bark, swinging around it to rejoin the spirit. Grounding, the scrape against her palm, though she had to fight the urge to cling, pull back.

“I know,” her words came with a sigh of relief, though tinged with worry. She would miss Hope, her quiet support. “He always has. Why now?”

“He will be hated, again. It will make him falter. He wants to believe, but he cannot see how your way is better than his. He is grateful to you, but angry.” The spirit turned its head, bright gold and shimmering in the darkness between the camps. “He will not trust you, but he would never harm me. You wish for me to go with him, you always have. And if I go with him, then you will hope as well. And then the People will hope. And then the world. This is the best way.”

“Oh, my heart,” she sighed, the burden of new and painful knowledge lightened just a touch, “I wish that you could reach to every corner of Thedas.”

“One day we will,” Hope replied, serene and sweet, “let us go see Solas.”

The spirit continued on her way and she followed, a melancholy smile on her lips now. It always hurt her a little when the spirits said his name, knowing it would never pass her own lips again. Dramatic, that little vow, but she had needed it so badly, and still did. It helped keep that distance that kept her from crumbling.

Kept her strong for all those who depended upon her.
“Yes, da'vhenan, but he must not know it pleases me to have you go with him. That is important,” she warned the spirit quietly, as they headed into the Dread Wolf's camp.

He was well aware that he had started brooding at some point this evening, thoughtful contemplation giving way to less productive darkness. He always knew because it was generally the point where Wisdom would leave him, the signal for him to start forcing himself back to relative calm and control. It was difficult to do tonight.

All of his expectations for the world had been subverted, and he had made the best of it all he could. Their borders held, their people rebuilt, new life had begun, and yet...old life clung on stubbornly, and thwarted all predictions. Their deaths were not what he intended, just an unfortunate side-effect of making the world right again. Their survival should make him glad, and it did, but...things grew more complicated by the day because of it.

This was not what he had intended. Every year that passed pushed the most important part of his plan further and further away. He could not lose sight of it, could not let himself lose his focus, but nor could he abandon his people with their future unclear.

Merely a test of his resolve, one he had no intention of failing.

If only he knew her intentions, he could feel more secure in the safety of his people. He could not complete his journey only to leave them in the hands of a new Evanuris.

Was this Lady his friend or foe, or something in between? Despite the hatred he now realized she felt, she had always been willing to work with him. Their arguments had reached resolutions, their negotiations compromises. That alone was reason enough to tolerate this new experiment she seemed set upon. His reaction had been...hasty.

His allies were too few.

What he was not expecting was for her to approach their camp, a gilded spirit wandering by her side. It was an easy enough thing to sense what it was, even if it hadn't been her constant, silent companion. Hope. A curious partner for a night's walk, especially to the Elvhen camp. He had given his men and women leave to join whatever festivities they cared to, and to his surprise many of them had gone. It made for a quiet evening, both welcome and yet also a catalyst of his inwardly focused thoughts.

A situation all too common as of late, solitude and black thoughts walking hand in hand.

“Good evening.”

It was the spirit who greeted him in Elvhen, not the woman. That was a surprise.

“Good evening to you, Hope. Lady,” he inclined his head to them both, after politely rising to his feet. Just because they did not stand on ceremony did not mean he should give up his own manners, after all.

“Hope wished to speak with you,” the Lady said, adjusting the cuffs of her embroidered tunic. The movements of her long hands were small, fluttering. Was she nervous?
“I wish to go with you when you depart, Fen’harel. Please,” the spirit offered, voice thin, wispy. Feminine, as well, though its form gave no hint if it identified itself as such. It may have simply been an echo of what had created it.

His gaze shifted from the spirit, to the Lady herself. An odd request, from a spirit. Usually they went where they liked, if they were of a type to wander, and had no need to ask for permission. Not many were, they often stayed anchored to tend to whatever had created them, unless something nearby tugged their attention or disrupted them. Hope being a wanderer was not a surprise, but the fact that it wished to go with his people...

“It is not my place to speculate why my heart wishes to go with you, Fen’harel,” the Lady said, somewhat stiffly.

Ah. The...sentiment behind it obviously made her as uncomfortable as he found himself so suddenly. She had been the one whose sentiments shaped it, or it had attached itself to her. Her Hope, going with him. The layers of it were intricate, and he doubted either of them could truly uncover what it was meant to be.

Only the spirit truly knew.

“It would be a foolish man to turn down Hope when it offers itself as a companion,” he finally replied, inclining his head.

The Lady's lips drew into a line, and she dipped her head to him in acceptance, mimicking his movement. For once she hadn't bothered to hide her distaste, and he wondered what it meant. Nothing pleasant, he would imagine, for her mask was one he had always considered nearly flawless.

It made her irritating to negotiate with.

“You are always in my heart,” the Lady told the spirit, and then abruptly turned on her heel and stalked off, without another word.

The sheer rudeness of it startled him into silence, jaw tight for a few moments as he watched her stiffly upright form disappear into the darkness. Well, if he hadn't thought she disliked him before, he certainly would now.

Letting out a quiet breath, he turned his attention to the spirit, who was watching him placidly.

“I apologize if that was unpleasant for you,” he told Hope, mildly.

“It was not,” the spirit replied, thin voice peaceful. He was not used to Hope so calm and quiet. “It is a good night for the Elvhen. Your people will flourish yet.”

He moved to settle back down at the fireside, puzzling over those words. Hope followed, its edges bleeding out into the darkness. Not quite comfortable, though the armor had been designed as much for show as it was function. There was no real need for heavy protection. Simply to make a point.

They were not allies, not at ease with one another.

Still, getting out of the armor when he returned home would be welcome.

“Why do you say that, my friend?” he asked carefully, settling hands atop his knees. The Lady’s rudeness still pricked at him, but it was hard to stay unpleasant. Hope was sorely needed in Arlathan.
“You will leave with more than you arrived with.” Hope replied, form somewhat more tenuous than Wisdom, but with a glowing center like the heart of a fire.

“Your company is greatly appreciated, and will be valued,” he agreed, finding his earlier black mood much mitigated.

“I was not speaking of myself,” humor there, a little tendril of it, a little sparkle of laughter over the spirit's words, “your people enjoy the Arlathvhen, Solas. Old metal forged into a new blade can make both stronger than they could be alone.”

It took him a few moments to divine her meaning. A somewhat enigmatic spirit, this Hope. When its meaning sunk in, he abruptly chuckled, surprised into the sound he had not made in some time.

“I...well...” he finally said, shaking his head lightly, “at least they are enjoying themselves.”

“They are, and they shall be. Your Arlathan deserves more laughter. More small feet to run, hands to reach, and hearts to learn. It is hard to hope when one does not see growth and change. To build for the future, one must see the future.” Hope told him, and he smiled, faintly.

Something else he had not done much of, as of late.

The thought struck him then, as he turned his gaze skyward. The Lady's hope, traveling with them. Hope of her people, becoming the hope of his. Old metal in a new blade, hmm? Well, the children would be welcome, there had been far too few born these last ten years. It had never been an issue when the Elvhen were numerous, and did not fear the passage of time.

The Lady's small council rose in his mind and he smiled again, barely.

They would be welcome indeed.
The new children had long since gone to bed, collapsed in a pack somewhere among the camps with the elders watching over them. She was proud of how easily the people's young ones accepted their new siblings, absorbing them without a care. War was a difficult thing to live through, and many of them had lost and found new families several times now. They had adapted.

Her careful tending of their future was bearing fruit, though she could only claim the smallest bit of credit for that. Fathers and mothers, city and clan, they all had a part to play in finding a new way for the young ones, stripped from so much of their own upbringing and history now. Many things did not belong in this new age.

The children's refuge was the quietest corner part of the Arlathvhen, which was becoming rather noisy indeed.

She thought in some amused part of herself that some of them were enjoying themselves to spite the Wolf, who still lurked at the edges of the gathering in his camp like the beggar at the feast. They may not have considered him the great enemy overtly, but she could not claim her people loved him, either. Some spite was understandable.

Well, if he was determined not to even make an attempt to enjoy himself, all the better. It was easier for her to have a good time if she didn't have to worry about behaving in front of him.

Dignity and manners be damned. Her people celebrated their survival as they liked, as free and loud as they could.

It was nice that she was still able to get drunk, though it took some work to keep it going. She was quite a few ahead of her companions by the time she began to feel it, but they easily kept her tankard full. The lilt of a Rivani fiddle drew her eventually from Varric's side, clasping his shoulder as she tipsily wandered off again.

She pretended not to notice when he stiffened at her touch.

Navigating the darkness was tricky tonight, though it wasn't the shadows that gave her pause. It was avoiding the trysting that made it a careful venture. Luckily Freedom had returned to her, and she followed after him as they sought the music of their people of Llomeryn. They had been the last to arrive, the furthest flung clan, and she had yet to seek their company with the Wolf's arrival.

They greeted her with rousing shouts as she slipped from between the trees, and she smiled at the welcome, spreading her hands and bowing her head to their Keeper, an elderly seer with skin as wrinkled as it was tattooed. The music didn't stop for the cheer of greeting, and she laughed as she was tugged towards the circle by a young woman with a broad smile and startlingly green eyes against her darkly tanned skin.

Succumbing to the inevitable, she let herself be swept up, Freedom joining the dancing in its own fashion, a silvery shadow weaving between the bodies. She didn't know the dance, but it was easy enough to catch up with, her young partner patient and cheerful. Eventually all the spinning began to dizzy her, and she discreetly slipped out after a smile and a press of her hand to the girl's arm.

Watching cheerful Freedom with the smile lingering on her lips, she moved to settle down next to the Seer, accepting the cup the woman passed her.

“My Lady,” the seer greeted affectionately, giving her a light pat on the arm, stubbornly speaking the
common tongue even now, “I wondered when you might be joining us.”

“I apologize for the delay,” she replied placidly, amused by the words that would have been censure from anyone else, “I assure you I’d much prefer this company to the company I found myself in earlier.”

“Ah, yes. The spirits have told me as much. Chatty little things tonight, aren’t they? I wonder why he comes at all, if he’s just going to lurk about,” the old woman said with a chuckle, short and boisterous. And then again, when the Lady sipped at her drink and nearly choked at the fire of it. “Strong stuff, m’girl! Only the best for the Arlathvhen. Did you come for an old woman's stories? Or perhaps to enjoy the company?”

She endured the suggestive elbow in her side with a laugh and a shake of her head, smiling and turning her gaze away from the dancing. Her eyes met the seer's dark, knowing ones, and the smile turned rueful.

A great deal passed in the brief, wistful silence, until she received a small, conciliatory pat on the hand.

"Don't wade too far into that ocean of solitude," the seer told her, voice thoughtful as she refilled the cup, "you might find the current too strong to make it back."

"Sometimes it is preferable," she replied simply.

In companionable silence, they watched the dancing for a few moments, bodies flickering in firelight. Nothing was ever completely dark, not here, with wisps dancing in the woods, spirits wandering here and there, and the occasional reflection of eyes in the shadows when the light found them.

The fire eclipsed them all, however, bright and brilliant, kept tame by a delicate spell that she admired for its simple efficiency. No waste, no unnecessary flourishes. How different from the fires she used to make when she had first come into her magic.

One of the dancers dragged a hand through the flames as they spun past, turning the flickering edges briefly copper-green. They seemed to find the bit of magic amusing, because within seconds it was changing again, and then again, sending out licks of translucent color in a rainbow of hues.

Pretty, if silly.

It made her smile, dragging her out of the brief melancholy.

“I would love to hear any tales you have to tell, seer. How fare the people of Rivain?” she asked at last, lifting the cup again. This time she expected its ferocity, letting it burn down into her belly. There was only a little spluttering this time, a harsh clear of her throat.

“Oh, well enough. The Chantry is barely holding on, poor things, but there's a young sister there in the capital with a more...flexible mind. The last of the Templars we know of fell in Kont-aar, as far as we can tell. Place is sealed up tighter than tight. Bit much to hope the Qunari and the Templars finished each other off.”

The old woman's voice was undeniably bitter, and she couldn't bring herself to say anything about it. She had suffered far too much, and the fact that she was being pleasant at all to the Chantry was a relief. Sighing, the Lady lifted her cup again, giving a small nod of her head.

“And the Raiders?” she asked easily, glancing sidelong.
“Behaving, behaving. Admiral Isabella's keeping her own sort of peace between the mainland and the islands, though I know some of the Armada's been givin' her trouble. Sends her regards, says you owe her a drink, actually.” Sliding a pipe out of her loose top, the seer began packing it, movements deft despite the slight tremble of her hands.

“I probably do. After the Arlathven I will go see her and Merrill, see if there's anything I can do. Rivain must be protected, especially now,” she kept her voice steady, tightened her mouth, trying to hide the hint of fear, “if Tevinter falls...”

“You worry too much. Humans are tenacious critters. Then again...” the seer's eyes and voice went distant, and she gazed off into the darkness, tucking the pipe between her lips, “didn't expect things to be so...empty. You did well saving what you did, my Lady, but Antiva...well, getting off that ship made me real appreciative of what we went through.”

“Rivain saved itself,” she replied stubbornly, giving a rapid shake of her head, “open minds and open hearts, Seer. You saved the spirits, and in so doing, saved yourselves. I'm just grateful the Chantry didn't manage to stomp out the old ways.”

“Their Chant is changing,” the seer replied deliberately, inhaling deeply as a hunter paused to light her pipe for her from the fire.

“Even there?” she asked, head bowing, a hand rising to her forehead. “Shit. I had hoped...”

“Did you really expect the world to just accept what he'd done? Come now, Lady. Your victory was the Wolf's defeat in the hearts of our people. Maybe if more had died, maybe if the people hadn't rallied around you, he could have changed their hearts. Given them something to fight for, given them back their history...but now? No. You gave them everything they could have possibly wanted from the Elvhen.”

With a long exhale, the scent of elfroot spiraled up into the air and the Seer leaned back to stare skyward.

“I changed everything,” the Lady agreed, giving a small, bitter laugh, “is he the Adversary there, too? Such a clever title. Menacing and grand all at once. Making him less than, and more than a person. It seems I didn't do enough to keep Tevinter and Rivain apart.”

“That's not your place, Lady or no. The humans will only rise up against you if you try to divide them. And yes, that means they will infect one another. Not against you, not yet, despite the war. The humans who survived, fought, know how much you sacrificed to stop the deaths.”

The Seer smiled, eyes nearly disappearing into her wrinkles. Clever eyes, clever mind behind them that put together the pieces she only had herself earlier. She could almost see the question coming, feel her own unease rising to meet it.

“So I suppose that's going to be your question to answer, isn't it? What kind of goddess are you going to be, Lady? Are you going to tame the Wolf, or kill him?”

“I am not a goddess,” she snapped reflexively, and then groaned and leaned forward, fingers clenched around the cup, “there is...no word for what I am, because I am not anything. Not god, not evanuris, not even a leader. I am just...a guide. This is not what I wanted.”

“It's what you have, Lady. Ask your Fen'Harel what happens when other people give you your mantle. Ask your Dreamer what the hearts of the People say. There's a clever human, your Dreamer,” the old woman's voice was just a little smug, and she reluctantly smiled, despite the
sickness in her stomach.

“The spirits tell you quite a bit,” she murmured, and then gave a long sigh, lifting the cup to drain it. A dizzy head was better than a restless one.

“Ah, well, I’m just an old woman. There’s no harm in me, is there?” the seer chuckled, and then grinned a gapped grin at her snort of disbelief. “the people of Rivain are safe, and they thrive despite the tensions. We’ll take some of your human children with us when we go, we have homes for them.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, and then forced herself on, hesitantly, the nausea in her gut churning, “and what...are they...?”

“Oh, there's a few. The Lady of Flame is popular, you know, with the whole Chantry implications. They're pushing that one hard. Some of them are even saying you're not actually an elf,” the seer chuckled at her expression, tolerantly, “let them, it doesn't harm anything. The elven people know. Lady of the Skies is getting up there, too.”

“Now I'm an Avvar goddess?” she asked in faint disbelief, and then sighed, rubbing her forehead, “of course I am. And I'm probably Andraste and Mythal and Queen of the Nugs or something as well. What's the possibility, do you think, that this could just...go away. Fade out.”

“About as likely as you changing their minds about Fen’Harel. The world's no threat to him, and it won't be for a long time. There's only one threat to him, and that's you,” and then she was reminded as she was every single day, pointed and calm, “it's you that won't kill him. All you can hope is that the world will stay too weak to do it for you if you're determined not to off the bastard.”

“Ah, no, that is not my hope,” she sighed, finding grim humor in it, smiling at the seer’s puzzled expression, “I will change his mind about the world, and then I will change the world's mind about him.”

“A woman who wishes to change the mind of a once-god, and the entire world besides it...and says she is nothing,” the seer said, exhaling a chuckle with a cloud of smoke, “the people know the truth of their gods now, and you hoped that it might protect you, didn't you.”

“I...” she started, and then let her head drop, staring at her feet as firelight flickered across them. “I simply didn't want for us to start this new world in ignorance. I hoped that we could move together into a world of truth, without superstition and fear. We should never become what the Elvhen were. I should not become...”

“What the Evanuris were. Slavers, warmongers, tyrants,” the seer supplied, sympathetically. “That fear will keep you honest, Lady. Never lose sight of it. You have been given a gift to save the People, and you are using it to try and save everyone. Only natural to feel stretched thin, hey? Don't let it all worry you so much. It's still raw, the peace is still new, and they're just trying to figure out their place in this world you've made.”

“Yes, I suppose I will find something else to worry about soon enough. I generally do,” she murmured wryly. “Thank you for your company and council, seer. I will see you at the Hahren'al tomorrow.”

The old woman nodded placidly, turning her dark eyes back to the dancing as she drew on her pipe. The Lady rose, head feeling a bit light as she slipped into the trees, leaving behind the chatter and laughter, the music.
Freedom did not follow her, he had long since learned that this was a burden she did not want lightened. He would probably pester her later about it. It did no good, the responsibility was hers and she had to learn to bear it. She’d made the choice, and all these consequences...were hers. For good and for ill.

Even so, she could see the future stretching out before her if she could not change something, and it was terrifying her.

Was this how he had felt, when he created the veil? The thought chased her through the darkness, as she sought the privacy of her aravel. Would she be the enemy some day? Was she already?

Abelas met her halfway to her small camp, and they walked together for a time in silence. He watched her sidelong as her pensive mood lingered longer than it usually did, finally giving an irritable sigh and catching her arm. She resisted for a moment, and then turned towards him, shoulders slumping.

“Ellana,” he declared flatly, frown thoughtful instead of thunderous.

“You only call me by my name when I’ve been a pain.” She sighed, and he released her arm, glancing skyward contemplatively.

“Hm. I suppose that is true,” he allowed, and she smiled faintly, “but this time it is hardly your fault. I will make the very pointed suggestion that..he leaves in the morning.”

“Fen’harel might have other things he needs to talk to me about. I shouldn't be so hasty to brush him away just because it's difficult for me. Just because I...” she turned back to walk again, shaking her head slowly. Anyone could be listening. It was no time to be making confessions. “I'll be all right, Abelas. It's never going to get easier, so I'll have to come to terms with it. Hope is leaving with him.”

The sentinel stopped, but she didn't, pacing onward through the dark trees until he caught up again. The glow of her lanterns through the trees were visible now, her halla sleeping drowsily next to the entrance to the tent, their heads hanging. Someone had been by to flower-crown them, probably the children. Some wilted remnants remained, drooping off of carved horns.

“Interesting,” he finally replied, and she gave a short laugh at his terseness.

“Yes. That is...one way of putting it. I'm...” she stopped for a brief moment as the word caught, shaking her head at the melancholy note in her own voice, “I'm fine.”

She paused as they came to the lit clearing, her gaze shifting aside and then up at him. Teasingly, she reached up and tugged on the end of his braid, trying to banish her own dark mood by pricking at him. He shifted his golden eyes down to her, and frowned disapprovingly.

“Will you stay tonight?” she asked hopefully, trying to keep her voice effortless.

He was silent for a few long moments, and her hand dropped, eyes finding the darkness, listening to the chirruping of insects and the distant sounds of laughter and music. And beyond it, at the far, equally dark and quiet opposite of her camp, a Wolf lurked.
“No. Not tonight. Your mind is fixed elsewhere,” he finally replied, giving her shoulder a faint squeeze, a rare bit of casual affection.

It didn’t quite take the sting out of his words, though he was entirely right. It would make things complicated, and their lives were complex enough. It was wisdom, not to let herself try and exorcise her conflicted feelings and pain in bed, but...

She had no outlet for them.

Regretfully she watched his form as it disappeared into the shadowy forest full of distant dancing lights, and then turned to head for her aravel. Another long night with little sleep, no doubt. Her head felt too muddled and muddied for anything besides unhappy dreams.

Instead she found her small built-in bed, covered her face with her pillow, and screamed until her voice failed her.

In the morning, the Dread Wolf and his people were gone.

They did not see one another again for over three years.
Solans would be hard-pressed to say that he avoided coming to Arlathan. It was not at all like those distant memories that had concerned him when they had begun plans to build. They had made something new, something more suited to the world they had found themselves in. It was simply not his home.

He expected that many of his people felt the same way, for they'd chosen an entirely different area to begin construction of their new city. An area free from the burdens of the past.

Tarasyl'an Te'las was his again now, where he kept himself separate from his people as they tried to find the shape of their new world. Even Skyhold had changed, greatly, a new structure built on the bones of what time had left behind. His, and yet not his. The distance was welcome, both from his people and his own history.

He had enough of interfering in their lives, and the whispers the far corners of the world brought him only made him more certain of that.

What he saw in dreams now unsettled him, some creation born in the heart of the Andrastian faith. Another self, a menacing thing of icy disdain and malevolence. Grand, certainly, but uneasily close to memories of the Evanuris. He had felt it, in moments when he wandered the fade among them, seeking their dreamers. He had become it, even. A thing of terrible majesty, crowned in bone and draped in ebony and gold.

Their Adversary.

What the Dalish had made of him was far, far different than what the humans were making him into. If anything, it was those humans of Tevinter that reminded him most closely of Elvhenan, for good and for ill. It wasn't that their doctrine frightened him, far from it, but the numerous implications were worrying. For both his people, and the Lady's.

It was far too easy justify hate under the guise of religion.

Protective, still, he was of them, even while trying to pull himself apart from them. So many had been lost, and they had gone from a war in the old world to a war in the new, with no time to heal. He had been lucky that so many had survived Uthenera, and luckier still that Mythal had been waiting for him when he had awoken.

It was her hand that had drawn him up from his resting place, her face so different, and yet her eyes unchanged in thousands of years. She had come to him, in his weakness, and given herself to him. Given him the power to unlock the focus and bring down the veil swiftly, before wakefulness could steal his purpose from him.

Mythal.

He had watched her die again, by his hand this time.

Her sacrifice weighed heavy upon him, but he had done his best with the gift she had given him. Knowledge, power, and a future for the Elvhen. He would not waste it.

The world was whole, but covered in wounds that needed healing. It was unfortunate that he and the Lady argued so much over how precisely they should be handled. She had been...unpleasant as of
late, her missives terse, enigmatic. Still, Hope was his constant companion, offering a quiet word when the burden became too heavy. The spirits seemed at home in Skyhold, and they did not bother his solitude.

Her people had become more contentious, more aggressive, if such a thing was possible. Maybe it was because they grew at more than twice the rate of his own, even with the infusion of new blood. Perhaps it was because he had stayed his hand too liberally. Hopefully it would not be a mistake in need of rectifying.

Clan Ralaferin was becoming a problem on his western border, pushing into territory that did not belong to them. It was not the Elvhen's fault that they were having trouble with the dragons, whose numbers grew even faster than the People's, if such a thing was possible.

He was grateful that the Lady had asked to meet, because her terse responses had made it impossible to solve any of this.

War.

It always lingered on the edges, a threat that he was quite sure neither of them actually wanted. Nothing in her actions suggested she did. Every time they wrote, every report he received, it became clearer and clearer that both of them were trying desperately to avoid it.

And yet neither of them wanted to bend.

It was not a situation that suggested a happy ending. Even so, her request had been couched as something close to a demand. She had never asked to travel into the heart of Elvhen lands before. How could he say no?

He had always gone to her, and the reciprocation indicated some sort of change. It was likely a weakness to admit that he was fascinated by the puzzle she presented. The fact that she would never answer any of his questions made it all the more intriguing. He had gathered every iota of information on her that he could, and still none of it added up to a picture of the woman herself.

Perhaps it had something to do with the Andrastians. His mind was drawn again, as it was so often as of late, to that disturbing weight of belief they were pressing upon him. They would make him the villain again, for a new god, a new people.

He had saved his own, and in doing so had become the enemy of all others. And yet, despite their both being elves in the eyes of the humans, they made the Lady to be some sort of savior, the antithesis to him. It was a strange and unexpected doctrine, though more curious than insulting. She had given him no personal signs of aggression, even with her hatred.

Only challenge, not threats.

It had become even more important now that they fortify their position, and incursions from the people made that a difficult proposition. He could not fight the entire world. Not without destroying it. If she truly wanted peace, she'd have to prove it.

He could only hope that the Lady would rein in her people before things grew any more tense.

He was surprised when the news came that they had arrived. Her people must have been close to
two full clans strong, if his intelligence about their numbers had been accurate. The poor council was in uproar about the news, but calmed when they camped outside the city instead of expecting hospitality. Still, he was all too aware that their arrival had offended some sensibilities and manners, and wondered if that had been her intention.

She seemed to delight in ignoring their conventions.

The new Arlathan was walled, and heavily so, his city of former slaves more untrusting and nervous than the old Elvhen had been. The People camped at the edge of the nearby wood, grown up thickly by magic, hiding the now-ruins of what had once been a place called Montfort. He would have preferred somewhere closer to the dark woods of the west, but his people were practical, and the roads of Orlais were still mostly intact.

It was, after all, their home and not his. He had to remind himself of that fact. Too many of the eluvians had been damaged and broken, and he still had not located them all. The roads were necessary, for now.

The Lady’s people seemed in no hurry to contact them, and curiosity eventually drew him from the council hall to the walls. No one bothered him, it was generally expected that he would come and go as he pleased, and he knew most of the guards by name. They had all fought together, once, all but the very youngest of them.

There were a few of them clustered together atop the wall, watching the river below, chattering together in a small knot. They broke apart as he approached, and he waved off their salutes with a nod of his head. He had heard no complaints about being relegated to sentry duty. Solas imagined they were all just grateful the war was over at last.

One more reason to hope for compromise and conversation with the Lady.

“I wonder what is so interesting beyond the wall,” he remarked, taking note of more than a couple pairs of flushed ears. A faint shout in the common tongue came distantly from below, and he raised an eyebrow. There was more flushing.

Even more curious now, he stepped over to lean over the battlements, resting an arm on the smooth, magic-fitted stone. A clustering of youths near the river were watching the wall, dressed lightly in Dalish fashion. From the buckets and other vessels left in the grass, it seemed they were avoiding some chores.

His appearance surprised them it seemed, for their smiles faded, and they quickly spoke among themselves in hushed tones. Again, he saw no signs of fear, just a simple and natural wariness. Much like any other young people caught neglecting their duties.

One of them, a dimpled young man with an impish, fearless grin, cupped his hands around his mouth and called up, once the furor from the group had died down.

“Oh look, it is a Wolf! Mercy, Lord Fen’Harel, mercy for the people!”

One of the sentries hid a nervous giggle, and he breathed out a faint sigh, hiding his own amusement with some strain. Young people would be young people, it seemed, no matter where they came from.

“Are you teasing my soldiers?” he called back, folding his arms together as he leaned a hip against the stone. “They have duties to attend to, just as you no doubt do.”

“We wished to invite them to dance tonight, Lord Fen’Harel, but they are being shy,” the bold young man shouted back, “will you give them leave to come?”
“And what would your Lady think of that, I wonder?”

He kept his voice casual, but it was a question he’d like the answer to. Judging her mood, at the very least. It did not seem she called this meeting in much solemnity. He was uncertain if that was preferable or no.

“She said that we should! It is the first time we have had a chance to meet our cousins, after all!”

Now that was surprising enough to silence him, at least for a few moments. Arms folded still, he watched the group for a time before giving a small, nod of his head, mind already racing.

“Of course they may, if they like. As long as they can attend to their duties with a clear head the next day.”

Pushing off from the wall, he gave his soldiers a significant look before turning to stride off, too thoughtful now to indulge in the lighthearted banter.

A claim to kinship, from the people? The implications of it were interesting. Some of the Elvhen would be offended by it, of course, without even considering the deeper meaning. If she wished to press it now, it could mean danger threatened them, and she needed his support. He would at least give her the courtesy of hearing her out, but they were stretched thin enough as it was.

Then again, if she needed them, perhaps it would be the leverage he needed to force her to push her people back. It was useless to speculate until they had spoken.

He would have to wait.

For just a moment, she felt wholly herself again.

Anchoring, that moment of awareness that flooded her senses, washed away the ever-present pain and melancholy. It returned her to her fragile body, the slide of hands over her trembling skin, the taste of sweat on her tongue.

She breathed in once her head became too light, slow and shuddering, and felt the pound of her pulse begin to ease.

It thundered in her ears yet, reminding her that blood still poured through her veins, a hint of it coppery in the corner of her lower lip. A wound closed with a stroke of his thumb now, drawing her eyes to flutter open at last.

Sunlight filtered in through the loose flaps of the thin tent tied to her aravel, patches of golden fluttering across her vision as she slumped forward. His hand, dimpled into the flesh of her hip, gradually eased off its grip, wandering up to support her at the waist instead.

The sound of their breathing was loud in the sudden quiet, even with her face muffled against his bare, muscular shoulder. The heat of the day made the tent stifling, evening breeze not yet picked up
enough to cool sweat-slicked skin. It made the strands of hair clinging to her neck prickle, and she squirmed, relaxing as his hand lifted to gather up the mass of it, twisting it up. She hadn't cut it in ages, and it was starting to get uncomfortably heavy.

“You should be getting to the river if you're going to wash.”

Blowing out a sigh, she sat back into his lap, lifting her head and meeting golden eyes. Her expression must have been more sour than she intended, because Abelas lifted a brow questioningly.

“Nothing, I am just not looking forward to this meeting. I hate being the bearer of bad news,” she groused, but lazily, “things were finally starting to settle again, and I didn't want to show this part of my hand, so to speak.”

“You know my conflict in this matter, so I hold my council,” he reminded her, voice just a hint sardonic, "though your unrelenting passivity is becoming incredibly vexing."

"What would I do, if I didn't have you to constantly disapprove of everything I do?" she asked him flippantly, well aware her voice was edging towards snide, "perhaps you're right. Shall we storm the city while we're here, my hand?"

"No," Abelas replied flatly, twisting her hair forward over her shoulder, eyes narrowed, "though if you would like to see some plans to infiltrate and kill him, that could be arranged."

"You will not try to harm him," she replied, leaning forward until the end of her nose pressed to his, "I will not allow you to die foolishly for your own anger and pride. You will endure this, because I say you will."

He stared at her unreadably for perhaps ten seconds, eyes hard, mouth drawn into that scornful expression she knew all too well. She would bear his disapproval happily, if it meant he would survive. Beyond any preference for his oft-contrary company, he was simply too valuable a tactician.

How could she blame him for his repeated requests that she kill Fen'harel? His reasons were completely understandable.

"The day you change your mind is a day I will relish," he finally told her, rousing a quiet laugh.

"And a day I will regret," she responded with a sad smile.

Bracing herself on his shoulder, she pulled to her feet, quelling a small shudder as he slid free of her, leaving a slick smear on her inner thigh. Some of her tension had eased, but her heart was still restless and unhappy. The sight of the new Elvhen city had dug up some uncomfortable feelings all over again, especially after their trek past the ruins of Val Royeaux.

Swinging her leg over his hip, she stepped away from the table and went to fetch the thin underdress that would have to do as a robe. She wasn't going to get dressed just to take it off again to wash. Idly as she pulled it over her head, she turned to watch him stand and move to the basin, lips twisting to the side. Unsurprised, but still disappointed.

“Not going to join me?” she asked out of habit, not because she expected a different answer.

“Sentry appointments. We are at the enemy's gates,” he reminded her simply, and she made a small sound of understanding as she loosely tied the dress under her breasts. “I'll send Orana.”

“If he sends anyone from the city, just settle them in with something to eat. Otherwise just do as we planned and send up the invitation,” she instructed as she slipped out, leaving before she let herself
get too distracted.

But not without one last peek over her shoulder, admiring his bare back for a few seconds before letting the tent close. Still important to enjoy the little things in life, after all. Especially a rear end sculpted that perfectly.

The herd of halla that had joined them for this journey were between her and the river, and she greeted them affectionately as she wandered through them. She endured the curious noses and whuffs from the ones she wasn't acquainted with, obediently admiring fawns that came to see if she had anything for them.

Hanal’ghilan joined her at the edge of the water, the golden-pelted halla lowering her head to drink as the Lady stripped out of her dress. Here the offshoot of the river widened into a small, sluggish pond, edges thick with blood lotus. Pacing into the water, she shivered as the chill caressed sweaty, overheated skin, and then slumped gratefully into the water.

She sank under, keeping her eyes open to watch the world shift from late afternoon sunlight to green tinted and wavering. Letting out a sigh with a little cascade of bubbles, she scrubbed fingers against her scalp for a few moments, and then pushed off the stony ground.

Breaking the surface, she wasn't surprised to see Orana already navigating the drowsy herd, arms full and a toddler clinging to her skirts. She watched them for a few moments with a smile, until Hanal’ghilan abruptly blew a mouthful of water in her face. Turning her outraged stare on the halla, she splashed a handful of water at the graceful beast, and was rewarded with an undignified snort and step back.

“You started it,” she told the halla as she stepped back out of the water and shook water from her coat with a shiver, “do not start wars you are not prepared to fight to the end, my gilded lady!”

“Wise words,” Orana remarked with a faint, thin smile, her son toddling over to cling to a leg of the tolerant animal, “Sentinel Abelas said you don't wish to wear the dress that was sent to you? It is very pretty, Lady.”

“And heavy, and hot. Protocol be damned, this summer is abysmal. If the children can run around in tunics and bare legs, than so shall I.”

She pushed wet hair out of her face with both hands, and then reached out to accept the soap she was offered, scrubbing up as her maid settled down on a rock. Having someone else wash her still reminded a step too far. Likewise having someone dress her.

She couldn't imagine why people enjoyed such things.

“Ah, well, as long as you do not think the Elvhen will be offended...” Orana remarked, a little nervously, unfolding the Rivani-style tunic she'd been favoring. Sensible garments, if not precisely modest.

She wore hers long, split only to mid-thigh, but Orana still fussed now and again. Her maid was in the camp of those who thought she should swan about the summer forest in gowns of gossamer and ridiculously ornate jewelry.

All it would take was one patch of brambles to ruin something silly like that. Yes, she could use
magic, both for that and to keep herself cool, but what an awful waste of effort. It would ruin the very heart of summer not to be uncomfortable now and again, so that the evening breeze could not bring sweet relief, and the cold river would not feel so bracing.

Small discomforts made the joys all the more joyful.

“They are coming to our camp. I will be myself in our own camp, Orana. Pants are unnecessary burdens,” she remarked cheekily, more to see the woman fluster than anything else, “we must keep our dear Elvhen cousins from getting too stuffy. If we are all going to work together, they’ll have to get used to us.”

“I think that is only your excuse for being shocking, my Lady,” Orana replied, playful meekness hiding a hint of a bite.

The Lady laughed, her briefly heartfelt mirth filling the air. A pleasant sound, too rarely heard as of late.
The invitation had come a couple hours before sunset, delivered to the gates by one of the Lady's Sentinels. She had been kind enough to invite all of his council, though that had only affronted the oldest of them more. She came to visit Arlathan, the heart of the new Elvhen people, and invited them out to her makeshift, ragtag camp on their lands. He had reminded them that their manners were not of the Elvhen, but it had done little good.

Solas was only grateful that they'd chosen to refuse the invitation, instead of coming with a grudge. It was a sign of how much they trusted him, at the very least. A good thing to keep an eye on, as his people grew away from their dependence on him. His retinue was small as he left the city, though he was well aware many of the Elvhen had already gone to join the people.

He had been hard pressed to find guards to accompany him without drawing from those on wall duty.

The camp was noisy and boisterous as he remembered it being, music and dancing already in full swing, the scents of food in the air. They were directed away from the heart of it, however, to a place already set up and awaiting them. As was the Lady.

Bare-legged and once again with her hair twisted into braids and complications wound with wilting flowers, she lounged casually in a chair at the head of the table. Suddenly he was intensely grateful the council had for the most part refused the invitation. He couldn't imagine how offended they'd be by her right now. Despite the state of undress and the casual air, he could find no fault with her manners. The greeting she rose with was pleasant and polite, and he returned it with equal ceremony before they settled.

He was intensely grateful that they had, because the sight of those long, bare legs was incredibly distracting. It was certainly the last thing he needed to be thinking about right now. He couldn't recall ever being witness to her so casual in both manner and dress. Certainly he had seen her in armor, and occasionally the formal garments she wore with all of the martial gravity of her battle garb. If this was how she dressed herself normally he supposed he could understand why he had not seen it before.

And...he realized he had been thinking about her clothing, or lack thereof, for entirely too long.

If it had been a tactic, it was an effective one, because he didn't notice the man settling next to her until he had fully seated himself. Not the Sentinel, who was only just arriving, but a sturdy man with barely greying temples and a pair of eyes far too old and tired for his face.

A blue and grey set of armor, the gryphon insignia on its etched silverite breastplate.

Warden.

His dislike was instantaneous, but he throttled it back. Surely she knew what harm they did, did she not? He couldn't imagine she was ignorant. He had known some had survived, but...

Once the sentinel had arrived, she gestured to the Warden, voice pleasant and lilting.

“You have met Sentinel Abelas and the Hahrens, of course, Lord Fen'Harel, but I would make known to you Warden Commander Carver Hawke,” she introduced, dipping her head. “Warden Commander Hawke and his men have been working with the remaining dwarven Legion of the Dead, monitoring the Deep Roads for me.”
A fact he had not been aware of, which meant she had been hiding it from him. His eyes hardened, but he kept his face neutral otherwise. The Wardens...had she been hiding them from him? If so, why? The Deep Roads...they could only be hunting for...

“I see,” he finally replied, neutrally, asking the question he knew she would not tell him the truth to, “and what, precisely, have they been monitoring for, Lady?”

“The darkspawn, of course. Whatever else could they be?” her smile remained pleasant, but the slight tilt of her head spoke volumes. Oh, they would certainly have to discuss this. In private, it seemed. “Orzammar has taken in any surface dwarves that would go and barred itself from the rest of Thedas. Kal-Sharok stands empty. It must be monitored closely. The world cannot survive a blight now.”

“The darkspawn are behaving oddly,” the Warden Commander declared, Ferelden-accented voice roughened, flat, “we won't see any for weeks, and then we're pinned down by hundreds of them. They're picking us off, and we don't have the numbers to hunt down what they're doing.”

“You think they are...searching for an archdemon?” He seemed to recall that's what they called them. The past thirteen years had been educational, but sometimes the mind would fail to recall the occasional term. Centuries of history to absorb without the distortion of the fade.

“Think it's a real possibility,” the Warden Commander retorted, voice undeniably cold and bitter, “someone's got to figure it out before it's too late. I know you people don't think much of the rest of the world, but you're in just as much danger from the Blight as the rest of us. And the Lady thinks you can help.”

The hostility in the man's voice was understandable. He tried not to let it affect him overmuch. The Lady herself was still watching him, expectantly, likely to see how he'd react. She did seem to keep setting him up to test him.

It irritated.

“It is certainly a matter to be discussed. Not tonight, however. I can take it to the council in the morning.”

The Lady inclined her head with a gracious smile, and swayed to her feet. It was the signal to rise, and everyone took it. A short conversation, but obviously only the opening to further talks. It wouldn't be the first time they'd conducted things in this fashion.

“I hope your people can stay and enjoy the evening, Lord Fen’Harel. It is a pleasant one,” she remarked, smooth and blandly inoffensive, “perhaps you would care to go for a walk with me?”

Amusement and surprise twisted together in the barest hint of a smile, and he inclined his head to her. The inquiry provoked some quiet murmuring from around the table, and his response a little more. Of course, if they had read her reactions the way he had, they would not have been so shocked.

Still, she had to know what sort of gossip such an excursion would invoke, which meant the conversation they were about to have was important. Good.

“Of course, Lady, it would be my honor,” he replied with careful formality, and was rewarded with an amused, sardonic twitch of her lips before she stifled it.

Inclining his head to the table, he turned to pace off into the woods as she made her way around to him. He kept his eyes on the way ahead, hands clasped behind his back.
There was no path, but she navigated unerringly, fading into the darkness between the trees. There had been lanterns hung elsewhere, painted paper strung between the trees, flickering with magic fire, but she departed from those well-lit venues.

He followed.

The night was silent and dark, heavy with summer heat, and suddenly he became aware that not a single spirit had greeted them since they had arrived. A curious thing, but all of his thoughts on the subject were pushed aside abruptly as she spoke, low and quiet.

He had been dreading the question, but expecting it all the same. In fact, he had been expecting it for some time, but he still found his stomach sinking as she murmured it into the humid air.

“Fen'Harel, where are the Evanuris?”

They walked a time in silence, The Lady patient, her eyes fixed somewhere ahead of them. It was a question she deserved an answer to, but their acquaintance was full of those, and so far none of them had been asked or answered. He couldn't remember if they had ever actually been alone together, she seemed to studiously avoid it.

A crack in the wall between them. He wondered what would spill from it.

They paused once, as she listened to a melancholy song wandering through the trees, but her expression was hidden from him. He waited until it died away. Time slid away here, in solitude, neither of them impressing their will upon the world.

Eventually he lost track of it altogether, lost to the meandering of his thoughts- a maze of contemplation, with no beginning or end. He could not begin to find his way through it without uncovering the limits of her information.

“What do you know?” he finally asked her in return, and she gave a small noise of amusement under her breath.

Another pause then, and she turned to follow the sound of the river to their left, bare feet silent. A strange peace between them, despite the topic of conversation. The heavy night was somehow soothing, the weight of the heat bearing down and making everything languid. She seemed sorrowfully serene, and it echoed in her voice.

“The shape of the gods...” she recited quietly, and he let out a slow breath, “you know what the darkspawn can do, and have done to these dragon gods of Tevinter.”

She did not know, then. A small breath of relief, that knowledge. Unless, of course, she was hiding it from him, which was a baseless speculation at this point. Focusing on that idea would only make him all the more suspicious.

“Yes, I do,” he allowed, hiding nothing, but offering nothing, “I am aware of that much. The fade distorts, but not so much as to lose the events that shake the whole of Thedas. History does not forget.”

"The blights. You were not awake for their beginning, but..."
"No, I was not," he agreed, as mildly as he could manage.

"Will you tell me?" she unbent enough to ask, glancing sidelong at him without truly looking at him, "I know so many pieces, fragments, knowledge of spirits, but they all lack one vital thing. The spark that began the fire."

"You find theology insufficient? The Tevene's stories do not have the ring of truth for you?"

She paused as he continued on his way, lifting a heavy evergreen branch and ducking under it. He would have held it for her, simple politeness and not chivalry, but he doubted she would have appreciated it.

When she spoke, soft and measured, he glanced over his shoulder to her in the darkness.

"Then is it Arlathan after all? The Black City?"

"Are you asking if the blight came from the Elvhen?" he responded, voice careful.

"They found power there," she replied, expression and voice unreadable as she stared past his shoulder, "I already know that it did. Is that why? Is that why you did what you did? To keep it contained?"

What could he say to that?

It would be a truth to agree, of course, but not the whole truth. Not the truth in his heart. Which, of course, he did not owe her. They were scarcely done being enemies, and their wartime alliance was long abandoned.

"Yes," he finally said.

"It worked. For a time. I would imagine you felt at peace with what you had done."

"No."

She laughed, brief and bitter, and then nodded and dropped her head.

Time again seemed to slide past them unnoticed, slowing the hint of a welcome breeze that gently pushed aside the muffling heat. He watched her hands, long and scarred, twisting together. A deep gouge across the back of the left, skin puckered and darkened.

She left it there, but she had never seemed the type of woman to dismiss her own scars.

"It must have felt a great betrayal."

"There is a reason they call me such," he agreed, trying not to sound irritated by the statement.

"I meant for you," she replied, and then abruptly began walking again, restless strides, "you freed them, perhaps violently, but you freed them from slavery and they still called them gods."

"They were suffering, I would imagine they found it a comfort, in a world without the fade," he said, as neutrally as he could manage with his anger taken from him as swiftly as it came.

"People will turn to worship too easily in times of great disaster." She agreed, voice low and somewhat strained. His eyes shifted aside at her in the darkness, and saw the sorrow still there, deep and untold.
Yet again, she had surprised him. A strange kinship between them in that moment, as they both acknowledged the truth of it as their eyes met. Neither of them wanted this. And yet...it was unavoidable, for now. Belief shaped the Fade, and he had torn down the veil. It would echo the hearts and minds of all people, for better or worse. Not for the first time, he wondered what it was that had made her into what she was, what power she wielded over the people. Was it merely words, or something more?

“That does not excuse what people choose to do with that worship,” he said, hands clasped behind his back, “the Evanuris are...secured.”

“They sing,” she murmured in contradiction, shaking her head. “they will find them, the power sings.”

“The darkspawn are mindless carrion-feeders who scurry through the depths of the world hunting echoes, fragments,” he replied, keeping the scorn from his voice, “the Evanuris are uncorrupted...apart from the corruption of mind and morals.”

“Hmmm,” she replied wordlessly, musingly quiet, “are you certain of that?”

He glanced to her profile again, watching the shift of her thoughtful eyes as she narrowed them. The lines of her delicate Vallaslin were nearly invisible in the dark, and he found it reassuring. Her steps had paused, and she turned to face the nearby river, a few small flowers slipping free of her hair, fluttering to the ground. He resisted the urge to lift his hand and catch one.

“Regardless, that is not precisely true,” the Lady finally spoke again, slow and careful. “The high priests of the Old Gods have retained their sanity and their faculty for thought, despite being corrupted into darkspawn. They can control the horde, direct them.”

He said nothing, merely waited. It was another crack, something new she wished to share with him. He would hear it, at the very least.

“There is one who was released from imprisonment, a fact I regret and could not prevent. Your new world is his perfect opportunity,” she said, her turn of phrase bothering him, as they so often seemed to. “He is the most powerful of all of these ancient Magisters, and I have little doubt that he will find your Evanuris if given the chance, and will corrupt them.”

“You believe this darkspawn Magister could corrupt the Evanuris into...archdemons, as you call them? And somehow control them?” The idea was utterly ludicrous, of course, but he had to find the limits of her knowledge. “I cannot simply release them from their imprisonment. Even though I have saved them, that does not mean I believe they should be released. They may be weakened, but they are still far too powerful, and I do not know what their long slumber has done to them.”

“You will not release them, nor will you kill them. Tell me, Fen'Harel, did you actually know what you would do with the Evanuris when you took down your veil again?”

She let the question linger in the air, her eyes turning away from him to watch a flurry of pale green wisps dancing with the fireflies that darted through the trees. The heavy air hadn't lightened even now, though the river made it slightly cooler here than it was elsewhere.

“No.” He finally admitted, offering knowledge for the knowledge she had shared with him. “Their crimes are many, none of them are innocent, but...neither am I. I still do not know if I have the right to judge them, after what I have done, but I fear to hand that duty to the Elvhen.”

It was perhaps a foolish thing to admit to someone who hated him, but he had been alone for so
long...even this hint of kinship between them was something he craved. They spoke of things that would shatter the world, but her company was still oddly pleasant.

She had surprised him before, but what she said then surpassed it all, accompanied by a sad, breathy sigh.

“Oh, Fen’Harel,” the sympathy throbbed deep in her voice, shocking in its intensity. This from a woman who hated him? It defied all his expectations, something she seemed to make a habit of. “Your heart is so heavy even now that you have what you wanted. Perhaps it was right that my Hope go with you.”

His mind blank, he stood in silence as she turned away and paced off through the darkness without him. The darkness swallowed her form once more, but he could see the wisps drifting after her, a curious procession that left a glowing trail in her wake. He became aware once it faded from view that he was not alone, a greenish spirit lingering at his side now. Its approach had not been noticed, but it was a subtle, gentle spirit, and it seemed to move itself unseen more often than not.

A turn of his head met the sight of a small, papery violet flower being offered to him, left behind by the Lady. Against his better judgment, he accepted it from Compassion, lowering his chin in a nod.

“It hurts to hope, but hoping helps, a burden too heavy for heart or shoulders,” the spirit whispered to him, momentarily gaining more substance before flickering at the edges, losing his coherence.

“That is often the way of things,” he agreed, examining the small flower in the darkness, its petals verdantly tinged from the light of the spirit, “many of the things that hurt us are what we need the most.”

“Burdens shared are halved, freeing, feeling together. Secrets are heavy, deep under the ground,” the little hitch in the spirit's voice was oddly emotional, a pained catch somewhere deep in it. “Why let them stay?”

“Sharing burdens requires trust, Compassion. It is the nature of the world that sometimes it is impossible,” he said and kept his voice and mind calm, in deference to the delicate nature of the spirit. Compassion was far too rare to risk upsetting.

“Seeds must be planted to grow...but my name is Cole,” Compassion told him, much to his surprise. The Lady had referred to Compassion as such before, but he thought it was an affectation.

“My apologies, Cole,” he said, and turned his attention across the river again, breathing in the brief brush of a late night breeze.

Rare enough to not enjoy, in this world that was left to follow its own will.

Her people were strange, regaining their power and the strength of what had once made them the same as the Elvhen...but they pressed no influence on the mutable world. Fade and reality flowed together, and the Elvhen manipulated it as naturally as breathing, bringing the world to them, letting it conform to their desires. In contrast, her People seemed to move through the world, accepting it as it was and fighting through what they could simply change.

He wondered if they even knew what they were doing. Then, he wondered which way was better. Another question with no answer.

“Travel with or swim against,” Cole said, the spirit's gaze locked on the river, much as his was.
“Often the only choices to be made,” he agreed, gaze shifting back down to the small flower, turning it in his fingertips.

“Not always. Sometimes we can build bridges together,” the spirit replied, and then slipped away, wavering between the trees, and quickly disappearing out of view.

Left alone, he settled down at the edge of the river to think. The night shifted around him, with the occasional quiet echo of a memory wandering by on the breeze. A snatch of laughter, a scream of pain, all muted to distant figments drifting by on the currents with no spirits to echo them.

He let himself exist, and tried in vain to free himself from the burdens of purpose and duty, if even for a moment. Hunting, alone, he searched for that breath of reprieve.

Unlike the breeze that lifted the sultry heat of summer, it did not come.

In time, Hope came to find him, and they sat in silence.
The Song of the Last Rose of Nevarra

There is a city in Nevarra where the flowers would not bloom.
There is a city in Nevarra where dead rise from their tombs.
Without flame and without earth,
They laid them down with things of worth.
There is a city in Nevarra that the dead consumed.

There was a Seeker of Nevarra who did forward bravely ride.
There was a Seeker of Nevarra who stood against the tide.
With her love and with her blade,
The unquiet dead she'd hunt and slay,
There was a Seeker of Nevarra who watched her people die.

The Lady of the People into the city came,
The Lady of the People with her mournful heart aflame.
She asked them would they stay,
And stop their angry blades.
And the Lady of the People would show another way.

The Seeker of Nevarra would not let her heart be swayed.
That brave Seeker of Nevarra would not bend nor would obey.
Her love he fought and died,
And hopeless vengeance did she cry,
And the Seeker of Nevarra did throw herself into the fray.
The Lady looked upon the death and saw no way besides,
The Lady of the People gathered those who were alive.
The cleansing flame she summoned down,
And burned the city to the ground.
The Lady razed the broken land, where no one did survive.

There is a city in Nevarra that was built of tombs.
There is a city in Nevarra that was lost to death and gloom.
In the ash a single grave.
A monument to hold the brave.
There is a city in Nevarra where a lonely flower blooms.
The message had come early, borne by a single runner without a guard. That was unusual enough, but the contents of the note were even more, when The Lady rose from her lonely cot to accept it from Orana. Her maid was slightly displeased that the Lady awoke alone, she seemed happier when Abelas was there.

It certainly wasn't her place to say anything.

Still, the rumors after last night were highly troubling. Certainly inappropriate. There was absolutely no way the Lady would let Fen'harel court her, she would imagine if they had gone for a walk together, it was only for important business.

That must be it.

There were enough troubles in the world without gossip, but Orana still couldn't bring herself to speak up and chide people for it. It wasn't her way.

“We have been invited inside. Will wonders never cease,” the Lady remarked with some surprise, under her breath, and then lifted her voice. “Could you send word to Abelas and the Commander, please? As well as the Hahrens. Let them know they are going in to the city mid morning. We do not need guards. May as well return the courtesy.”

“It...of course, Lady,” Orana replied, and shook her head as she gestured expectantly. “No, I did not have anything to say. Just that...everyone knows that you spoke alone with him last night. Did you say something to make them willing to hear you? Did you change his mind?”

“Perhaps I did, or perhaps he changed his own mind. Or perhaps the fact that half of the younglings have been sneaking into the city already with their new friends...” she smiled discreetly as Orana flushed, shaking her head, “curiosity is natural. This is exactly what I wanted.”

“My Lady?” Orana asked gently, head tilting to the side. “What do you mean?”

“People will be people, Orana. All you have to do is give them a chance,” the Lady said as she turned away, examining her breakfast. “I don't need help dressing...but no, I will try not to scandalize anyone.”

“Do you promise?” she asked dubiously, only making the Lady laugh, bright and breezy.

“Shoo. Tsk. What would our stuffy cousins think, to hear you talk to me like that?” she teased, and then chuckled mirthfully at the look it got her. “Yes, I promise. Go tend to your son and send those messages. I'm sure little Garrett is fussing for his breakfast and his mamee.”

“He eats more than I do.” Orana agreed with a sigh, turning to slip out of the tent with the Lady's laughter following after her.
Orana was quite used to the roving ways by now, though it had taken her some time. Still, Hawke had said she'd be safest with the Lady, and not in Tevinter. Her agreement had been reluctant all those years ago.

Now she was quite grateful, knowing what had happened to most of the rest of the world. Here she had family and freedom, both things she had once assumed she would never have. She couldn't even grasp the concept of it when Hawke had freed her and taken her in. How times had changed.

Sometimes she wondered if it was the sentinel's long sleep that made many of them so quiet and self-contained, or if it was just the way of the other people. Elvhen. She meant Elvhen. It wouldn't do to be disrespectful, not with the Lady working so hard to make everyone get along. Not that the sentinels weren't the Lady's people, but they were different, and not only physically.

There wasn't specifically a sentinel's camp any more, not with so many having families now, but they tended to gather together to break their fast, to plan work at the very least. Garrett was perched on his papa's armored knee, babbling no doubt about whatever insects he had found that morning. Her son was such a pretty boy, she admired unabashedly, with his golden hair and golden eyes. He was going to be so much taller than her.

“Message?” Vareth asked her simply, and she nodded, slightly concerned with his frown. “You haven't been given time to eat?”

The fact that he'd cared enough to ask flustered her for a moment, and his brows drew in towards his proud nose as she stared at him. It was Garrett that broke through her surprise, shouting happily about a passing butterfly. She blinked, and then managed a small smile.

“I've had some tea. There was a very early messenger, I haven't had time,” she said and he frowned again. “I will once I've given word to everyone I need to. Where is Abelas?”

“Down at the river.”

Vareth swung to his feet, catching Garrett under his arm before the little boy could tumble. She smiled as he squalled, kicking his legs delightedly as he was heaved about like a parcel. Heading over to the fire, he picked a sweet roll out of a basket and offered it to her.

“Thank you,” she said.

Oddly touched by the simple gesture, she took it in both hands and smiled, nodding her head.

He was staring at her rather intently, and so she waited. Patience was one of her best skills, after all, and she knew it sometimes took him a while to speak. It had taken him almost two months of sharing a fire in the evenings before he'd said a single word to her.

She'd wondered for the longest time if he hated her or found something strange about her, staring in silence when she was encouraged to play her lute, not responding to her tiny overtures of friendship. He was a bit withdrawn even now that they shared a child, but she knew it was just reserve. And not a little shyness, which she would never cease to find endearing. While she waited, their son was busy climbing his father's arm like a tree, as fast as his clumsy little arms could manage.

“Mairi said I have not been...very kind to you. I hadn't realized I wasn't.”

She blinked twice, letting the words sink in. Unkind? Maybe if she had been more demanding of his time, but she hadn't. Maybe that was her fault, but it certainly wasn't his.

“You are very busy, and I haven't wanted to bother you. It's enough of a burden that you have to
look after Garrett on your own so much, and I know you value your quiet time in the evenings,” he said, speaking so stiffly that it was almost funny, but she knew it was the wrong time to smile.

He was worried she'd be upset with him.

“Taking care of our son is not a burden to me, and you aren't either,” she finally replied, once it seemed clear that he was done talking, “or a bother. If you're uncertain of it, you can always...ask me.”

“I am,” he pointed out, and that's when she couldn't hide the smile.

“Our son is three years old. When had you planned on bringing it up if Mairi hadn't said anything? When you became a grandfather for the first time?”

She kept her voice lighthearted, trying not to drive the teasing home too deeply. It was true, though, he seemed to do everything at a pace just short of glacial.

The faint flush she remembered with fondness crept up in his cheeks, under the Vallaslin he still wore. Obediently holding out her arms as Garrett leaped from his father's shoulders to her, she caught the toddler with a faint huff of effort, setting him down and avoiding his grab at her roll. Splitting it, she offered him half instead, all while watching Vareth expectantly.

“I suppose,” he finally allowed, and she let her smile creep back to her lips, “and I should not keep you from your work.”

She nodded, turning away to head to the river. She'd gotten a dozen steps away when an impulse made her turn back to him, watching as he pulled Garrett away from the fire and the rolls. The fact that there were others at the camp would have stopped her once, and likely would have stopped her even now if not for his words to her.

It had been an effort on his part, she could do no less.

“I...” she started, meeting his eyes as he glanced up to her again, “I'd like to have another child, before Garrett gets too much older. A daughter would be nice. Or another son.”

Once the surprise faded from his eyes, he nodded silently to her, with the smallest edge of a smile touching his lips. She returned it, and then turned to continue on her way, eating her half of the roll. Yes. He did look very handsome when he blushed. She thought she might tell him so, next time she wanted to see it again.

It had been foolish to come down to the river when she could have delivered the other messages first and then come back. Red cheeked, hands over her eyes, she tried not to laugh at Abelas' flustered sigh. This wasn't exactly the first time they'd been in this situation, and last time it'd been worse. Last time she'd walked in on him AND the Lady. She didn't know what annoyed him more, the fact that she was so embarrassed by it, or the fact that it kept happening.

“Please be kind to Orana, the Lady tells me. She is very meek,” he said. The tone of his voice was what finally pushed her over the edge, and she started giggling.

“Ma serranas, Abelas,” she replied, between her little tremors of mirth.
“I believe you mean 'ir abelas'. You would think in the past decade your elven would have improved,” he responded mildly, as she listened to the sounds of him getting dressed.

“No, I didn’t mean that,” she responded, and then started laughing all over again at his faint grumble, “it is a pleasant sight to start a morning with, I can see why the Lady favors it.”

Why she felt comfortable with him, she couldn't say. Perhaps it was because she saw him in situations no one else besides the Lady did. His frowns did not bother her, and she actually preferred his quietness to more boisterous people. It was amusing to needle at him, just a little. He was good for practicing being cheeky at.

“Orana...” his warning over her laughter was a little strained, and she peeked between her fingers to greet his frown. “Message?”

“You are invited into the city today, with the Lady, the Commander, and the elders. The Lady does not wish to take a guard.”

She knew he wouldn't like it, his frown deepened almost instantly, and she prepared herself for the return message. He'd have something to say about that without a doubt, but as he closed his mouth again, jaw tight, it didn't seem he'd be sharing it with her.

“Thank you, I will go see the Lady. Could you have my breakfast sent there?”

“Of course,” she murmured as she turned and fled, torn between giggles and concern as she paced back up the bank, grass soft underfoot.

Hopefully their arguing over it wouldn't upset the Lady too much. Still, when she paused at one of the camps to direct Abelas’ breakfast, she made sure that they sent the Lady's favourite tea and some sweets as well. Anything she could do to help things go smoothly.

He wouldn't win the argument, of course, but he would try. She wished he would have been able to, though, she agreed that going in to the Wolf's city with no guards had given her some concern. Not her place to say anything, but she was glad he felt the same. Perhaps he would make her be cautious.

She never could quite understand why the Lady was so unafraid of Fen'harle, and taught everyone else not to be. He had destroyed the world, after all, it wasn't as if there was no reason. It bothered her, and perhaps always would, though she had never been very devout.

It was true, however, that the peace had been unbroken so far.

Word was gotten to the elders quickly enough, they were not difficult to find, but the news made them visibly uneasy. She left them gossiping quietly, and crossed through the trees to where the Wardens were. People said they'd been friendly enough, if exhausted and gruff.

She hoped they'd gotten some rest. They certainly deserved it, after so long in the deep roads, fighting. She'd wanted to speak to Commander Hawke, but had felt a little awkward doing so. What if he didn't remember her?

Their camp was rather haphazard, and oddly free of spirits, though she had no doubt a few of them had been nosy at one point or another. They tended to be.

There was a woman seated at the edge of the ring of battered, stained tents, watching her approach and cutting up an apple. Orana received a nod and a friendly smile from her, and she returned it.

“Message for the Commander,” she told the Warden, a dwarf with faded, intricate tattoos across her
scarred face. She wondered if they were anything like Vallaslin. “A message from the Lady.”

“Oh, sure,” the dwarf agreed with a little grin, and then called over her shoulder, “HEY! CARVER!”

Wincing a little, Orana tried not to let her smile falter. When the grin was turned back on her, she managed to return it, though her ears were still ringing a little.

“He'll be a minute. It has been a while since we got a good night's sleep and a full meal. Nice to be on the surface again, too. Smells a lot better up here, that's for sure.”

Her chatter was cheerful and effortless, a bit odd for one of their grim company. Odd, but welcome.

“Oh, have you been before?” she asked quietly, finding the smile an easy one to respond to.

“Yep. Long while ago, though, under a different commander. I'm Sigrun.”

“Orana,” she returned simply, nodding her head, “have you had your breakfast sent to you, then? You have everything you need?”

“We're set. It's all been excellent, don't worry about us,” Sigrun assured her with a chipper smile, stepping back and aside as the Commander stalked over. “Hey, Carver, this is Orana.”

“Yes, we know one another,” he replied, nodding his head as Sigrun turned to the fire, and then shifted his attention back. “Good to see that you're well. I didn't realize you weren't working for my brother any more.”

“Not since Kirkwall fell, Commander. He thought it would be safer for me to go with the Lady,” she said, puzzled by the fact that he didn't know.

Oh, of course! The Hawke brothers didn't precisely get along.

Memories from another life, it felt like.

“Than Tevinter or wherever he's inflicting himself on now? Likely true. They haven't been terribly friendly to the elves there for a while, have they?”

He seemed to be musing to himself, as he quickly waved it off and continued on, “I've been underground too long, tend to lose track of things. Pretty bad when you start hoping for a Blight just so you can get some fresh air.”

Orana didn't quite know what to say to that, so she just waited. She was good at waiting.

“You had a message for me?” he finally asked, pulling himself out of his own head at last, blinking down at her. “I'm sorry, here I am rambling on at you.”

“That's fine, Commander. There's been an invitation from the Elvhen, to go to the city. The Lady asked if you could join them. Just you, Sentinel Abelas, the Lady, and the elders, no guards.”

Again, that news got a frown, but in Carver's case it was more like a scowl.

“And she's just fine with that? Maker,” he muttered, tapping a hand against his thigh restlessly, and then finally sighing, “alright, alright. I guess I'll go be the only human walking into an evil world-destroying god's heavily fortified city. I haven't made a sensible choice in years, why would I start now?”
He glowered again, staring off past her shoulder, eyes unfocused.

“I will tell the Lady yes, then, Commander?” Orana finally suggested, once it became clear he wasn’t going to give her a more concrete answer without being prodded.

“Yes. Please. Thank you,” he responded, snapping back into focus, “and...it's just Carver, Orana, please. Titles don't mean much any more.”

Unsure what to say, she nodded and stepped back as he turned for the fire. She wondered if Carver would be offended if she mentioned how much he reminded her of his brother. Actually, no. She knew he would be.

Still, it made her miss Messere Hawke a bit, made her nostalgic for Kirkwall. She wondered if he would visit the Lady any time soon. They used to get a lot more visitors, but everyone was so busy as of late. Even Varric hadn't been to visit since the Arlathvhen three years ago.

It made her worry that the Lady was lonely.

She had made it nearly to the aravel when she noticed a figure lurking under a tree, heavily cloaked and holding a book. A few curious spirits lingered near by him, and she realized after a moment that he was reading out loud to them. For a moment she was puzzled by the heavy hood in the drowsy summer heat, until she recognized the edge of his face under the shadow of it as she approached.

Ah, of course!

“Your timing is excellent, dreamer!” She remarked, and he glanced up at her, startled out of his reading, and then smiled. “Have you gone to see the Lady yet?”

“I heard arguing and decided to wait a while. Hello, Orana,” he greeted, hazel eyes crinkling at the corners with his friendly smile, “I could have warned her last night, but surprises are more entertaining.”

“Ah, so she doesn't know you were coming?”

Frowning, she glanced over at the tent in front of the aravel, head tilting to the side. Joy briefly parted from the other spirits to circle around her, and she cast aside her frown to offer the pale violet spirit a smile instead, reassuringly.

“They're done bickering. And no, but there's someone in the city I need to see, so I thought I would tag along. Do you want me to pass messages to her? I'll probably be occupying her time until we leave. If she needs anything, I'll make sure you know.”

She didn't bother to ask how. Feynriel was quite friendly, but something about his abilities made her uneasy.

Silly, perhaps, considering she served the Lady, but she couldn't help it. She preferred to be the only person who knew what went on in her dreams. She knew the Lady, but she did not know Feynriel too well. He seemed to spend all of his time wandering.

“Just that everyone has agreed to go, even if the hahrens are being a bit antsy about it,” she replied after a moment.

“Understood. I doubt we'll be back before quite late, I'd spend the day with my family if I were you. I'm sure you've earned a bit of relaxation,” he suggested with a light smile, pushing off from the tree with a nod and pacing away. Only nosy Freedom followed him, the other spirits apart from Joy
wandering off back among the other camps.

“Come, Joy,” she suggested affectionately to the lighthearted spirit, turning about, “should we go find Garrett? I'm sure he'll be happy to see you.”

“May we play by the river, if we're careful? There's so many dragonflies this summer!” Joy asked in its rippling, bright voice, rousing a small laugh from her.

“Maybe. Let me talk to his father. It's probably time Garrett started learning to swim,” she finally agreed, as they headed back towards the sentinel camp. Joy darted ahead, disappearing quickly as she went to seek out her friend, and Orana followed more sedately.

It was a lovely day, after all. Maybe she could even get Vareth to spend some time with them. Or even the whole day. It had been over a year since they'd really spent any length of time together. How odd, the way time was starting to drift by without being noticed. She wondered if this was how he always felt. It certainly would explain a lot.

Well, there was no time like the present to start rectifying things. No reason to let years slip by when they could be put to good use. He might not notice, but their son was a constant reminder that the world was still changing.

As she headed through the trees to join her family, her mind wandered back to the Lady's odd meeting that day, and what it could mean. Something far beyond her, she was certain of. Hopefully nothing bad.

The Lady had suffered enough.

Chapter End Notes

I have been waiting until this chapter to post this lovely art that Destinyapostasy on tumblr made of my favourite shy nerds Orana and Vareth. Thank you, Destiny! <3 It's lovely.
Light glinted through the slits in her thin summer tent, fluttering across the floor, over the papers on her table as she sorted through them. Abelas was silent now, but still displeased, eating his breakfast. The quietness was companionable, at least, he'd made his concerns known and she'd refuted them, and all was resolved between them personally. He was unhappy with the situation, not with her reasoning or choices.

They always found a way to get along, even when they disagreed. It was why she valued his council so highly.

The flap of the tent fluttered in a sudden breeze, and she pressed a hand to her papers as Freedom swirled in, amorphous in his excitement, bright and brilliant.

“Mother! Mother, the dreamer is here!”

Laughter in the faint voice, and it roused a smile to her lips even as she denied it.

“Freedom, I asked you not to call me that. You will give people the very oddest ideas,” she sighed, before latching onto the rest of the spirit's words as it tugged on her tousled hair. “Feynriel? Really? I hadn't heard word that he was coming.”

“Ah well, a surprise every now and again is good for you, hahren,” Feynriel said as he ducked through the tent flap, long face set in amused lines, hazel eyes crinkled at the corners. “Hello, Commander.”

“Feynriel.”

Expectation in Abelas' single word, both greeting and a question.

“I just thought I'd join you, I heard about your invitation from a friend,” he said, voice casual as he claimed the stool from her dressing table and dragged it to the intricately carved one they were seated at.

“You're friends now? Well, that's something.”

She wasn't sure precisely what, but it was something. It pleased her, though, that she knew.

After all, Felassan had been dead in the time before. The fact that he was alive at all was relieving, though it had taken some hard work to ensure it. One less death on his hands. Every single life she could save as one less burden on Fen'harel's heart, one person who might offer him companionship.

“You share much with each other?”

Oh, Abelas. Suspicious, protective Abelas. She tried not to smile at it, but Freedom's laughter was as much a giveaway of her amusement as one would have been.

Often she felt badly, she knew they had an entirely different view of Fen'harel than she did. Even her people, who she had taught not to fear him with her stories and her encouragement, they saw him differently. They also saw her quite differently than she saw herself, so she thought it was only fair, if saddening.

After all, she had walked into their lives, and told them that everything they knew was a lie. She
knew that feeling all too well. It was, she thought, the only reason she had been able to succeed where he once failed. Knowing the pain, she could find a way to bring the truth despite it.

“Not too much, no. There just aren’t many people like ourselves left. Him and I, the Lord and Lady of course, though they are different. We converse more of ordinary things.”

The deliberate placing of her name next to the Wolf’s title didn’t go unnoticed, and she clicked her tongue gently at Feynriel, rousing a smile from him. “I’m sorry, I mean Fen’Harel and the Lady, of course.”

“Tsk. You've had no luck finding any echoes of the Evanuris, then?” she asked, knowing she could speak of it freely here. Sending Feynriel hunting had been a thin hope. “Well, I wasn't expecting much.”

“He has them hidden, of that I am certain of. You might be able to find them, Lady, but we certainly won’t.”

There was a pause then, a significant one, and her eyes met Feynriel's across the table, reading the silent message there.

“Abelas, do you think you could go make sure that everyone is prepared to depart?” she asked the sentinel, attention turning to his golden eyes. His narrowed minutely, but she only smiled. “Please.”

“Of course.”

With a dip of his head, he rose and departed, and she let out a quiet breath as the tent fluttered in the breeze of his passing. She would not answer, so he would not ask. It was such a relief to have someone she could depend on like Abelas. What would she have done without him?

“Freedom,” she said, her voice a warning, and the fickle spirit wound silvery arms around her, “promises made, promises kept?”

“Promises made, promises kept, mother. They're your secrets, not ours to tell. Are we to talk about Solas now?”

His voice was eager, and she felt badly for it.

The spirits loved him so very much. Sweet Hope, his dear friend Wisdom who walked with him through his slumber, and of course Cole. Cole who she was not able to keep from suffering, though she had taught him how to leave it behind. Like he had, in another world. They wanted him to be happy, and she of all people knew that was incredibly unlikely. As unlikely as her finding peace and happiness herself.

They were both cursed.

“We are to talk about Fen’Harel, yes,” she agreed, finally turning her gaze back to Feynriel, head tilting to the side, “because the Dreamer has something to say.”

“It's simply that...Felassan and I think that perhaps it would be a good thing for everyone if the... if Fen’Harel and you...”

He wasn't faltering under the look she was giving him, but he was apparently rethinking what he was going to say.

“No, please, do go on about what my agent and his agent think so very important to meddle in that
they collude,” she replied, only half joking. She was intrigued.

“Would it really be such a terrible thing to tell him the truth, Lady? Or at least be...friendly? Things are getting worse in Tevinter by the day, if you want him to stay protected, your people are going to have to be undivided behind him as well, not just you.”

“You see more than you ought to, Feynriel,” she sighed, reaching up to rub her forehead, “what do you want me to do? There is nothing more I can do than I have already done.”

“You were happy, once. Why couldn't you be again?”

It would not be right to be angry at Feynriel, he simply didn't understand. It was only a story to him, and to her, decades and decades of history. History now contained only in the confines of her poor and overwhelmed mind.

“I was happy in ignorance. In another life. And that was not him, that was...that was someone else.”

“He deserves to know what you sacrificed for him,” Feynriel's voice was firm enough that she shot him a darkly reproving look, and then regretted it.

When had she become so comfortable dictating how others should speak to her? Shaking her head at his lifted brows, she waved for him to continue.

“I'm sorry. Speak your mind.”

“A burden shared. No offense, Lady, but the fact that I'm the only person who knows the entire story...that worries me sometimes. Worries me about what you might become, what they might change you into. You don't let anyone in. I realize what you did is...near incomprehensible to most, but surely to him...”

“Worries you?” she laughed, mirthlessly, and then shook her head as Freedom tousled her hair. “It worries me, endlessly. Constantly. But storming up to the Dread Wolf and pouring my heart out to him would hardly solve any problems. If anything, it would make things worse.”

“He meant to walk the journey of death, and yet he's still alive. Because of your interference, because of your existence. That's not...that's not a good way to live, Lady. What will he do when his people don't need him any more, and the world has made him the great enemy?”

“This is about my plans, isn't it?” she sighed, folding her hands atop the table and gazing down at them. “Things are only just starting to work, Feynriel. There is plenty of time to sort this out.”

“Yes, because the Dread Wolf won't notice when in ten years half of his people have children with yours. He won't notice when the people and the Elvhen start blending together,” Feynriel replied drily, reaching over to steal a roll from Abelas' abandoned breakfast, “you know better than that.”

“It will be better for all of us in the long run. He'll see that. You and Felassan should stick to something besides matchmaking. You're not very good at it,” she said, and wasn't surprised to get a bit of the roll flung at her head, letting it hit her on the forehead and then tumble into her lap. “Very dignified.”

“Someone has to keep you from taking yourself too seriously. Abelas certainly isn't going to do it. You should consider Freedom's request for a body a little more seriously. You need more companionship, Lady. It will keep you grounded.”

She could feel the spirit perk up, brightening out of the corner of her vision, and her lips pursed
together tightly, eyes narrowing at Feynriel.

“Absolutely not. We are not having this discussion,” she denied firmly, but it was already too late.

“It would be so easy! Cole and Wisdom showed me how it can be done!”

“And then how would you return to Kirkwall when we retake it? It is your home, after all. You have a purpose, Freedom, I would not see you robbed of it. To lose you...”

Her words brought a wistful memory, in the back of her mind, remembering a long ago conversation between a man and another spirit.

“The world cannot afford it. You would change, da'vhenan. You would not mean to, but you would change. To become embodied...you lose clarity.”

“Sometimes things change,” Feynriel remarked idly, weathering her glare, “and you can't scare me, so stop that. As I said, you've been on your own for too long with people who put you above them. If you want to talk about people changing...I just think that you. You both. Need something to keep you grounded.”

“Very well, why don't you and Felassan just arrange a marriage, then? It'll be fun, like an Orlesian noble family. I'll even sob hysterically while being dragged in front of a sister. You can display the sheets from the marital bed.”

He was starting to grin, and she continued as she headed behind her screen, finally giving in to the dress waiting for her. It was either that or armor, and it was too hot for armor, no matter what Abelas said. “You'll have to find a sister, though, that might be difficult.”

“I'm sure I could find one somewhere. Rivain, maybe,” Feynriel said. She could hear the exasperation in his voice with her humorous deflection, but he stopped pressing the point. “Felassan says the...Fen'Harel has been living in Skyhold, actually.”

“What, alone?”

She kept her voice deceptively light, as she stripped the tunic over her head, tossing it over the screen. That news worried her more than it should have. She had hoped he'd be staying among his people.

“Yes, well, apart from the spirits and the occasional agent passing through.”

“Stupid, stubborn, prideful fool.” She kept carefully to the common tongue, even though Feynriel spoke elven by now. So hard to avoid accidentally saying his name. The syllables tripped off her tongue, sliding over her lips when she indulged in the weakness. Seductively easy to say, and it brought back too many dead memories.

She found the dress amusing, that's why she'd kept it. If she kept every garment the clans and villages sent her, she'd need a second aravel. They had opinions about how she should present herself, especially the elders. Although she knew they held her...differently, it was nice. Being fussed over, a little. It almost felt like family.

Not that she didn't see them as family, but they hardly saw her the same.

She realized Feynriel had been talking, and she forced herself to pay attention as the slick white garment slid over her head. It was probably meant to go on over an underdress, but she had no patience for it with the heat. It laced loosely up the sides with heavy silver cord, leaving a strip of
exposed skin to either side. Orana was going to be so cross with her.

It barely even had any embroidery, just over the high collar and along the hems. Yes, Orana was going to be very cross with her. Simplicity was more interesting to her than all the ornate nonsense they kept throwing at her, though.

“...Was saying, Lady. He doesn't quite know what to do with himself, he is...purposeless, in a way. He doesn't trust you enough to continue on with his plans, but I'm fairly certain he doesn't want to kill you.”

“Perhaps I should send him a thank you note for choosing not to murder me, then,” she declared tartly, ”and he seems to be managing political affairs and holding the borders admirably enough. He hasn't declared war on me, at least.” Well, if she was going to be making statements...

Wandering over to the makeshift armor stand, she shucked the Dalish-style woven white leather armguards off of it. More ornate than any of her people would be caught dead in, of course, with the silverite shoulder guards and elbow detail. She wasn't terribly fond of them herself, but it was enough to make a point.

“I'm sure some of the council would be pleased if he did. Short sighted, though, they'll come around,” Feynriel dismissed.

She strapped the armguards on just below her armpits, settling the guards over the sleeves of her dress. The whole conceit amused her so much that she grabbed the matching leggings as well, and tugged them on under her dress, with a slight chime of metal buckles.

“What are you doing?”

“Seeing how many people I can irritate at the same time,” she responded impishly, buckling the leggings behind her thighs and calves, “as per usual. Bare feet are a must, I think, I will walk their roads with bare feet. But we will go with the gauntlets.”

Heavy, fully metal, they tugged on awkwardly over her hands. She much preferred her archery gloves, but this was for show, not purpose. Besides, this way she could get away with not wearing any jewelry. Earrings made her feel as if they were going to catch in something and rip off, much like rings.

Stepping out from behind the screen she did a little turn, the halves of her split skirt twisting around her thighs despite the weight of metal embroidery at their hems.

“See? Half armor, half fancy dress. No one will be pleased with me,” she remarked smugly, smile deepening as Feynriel began to laugh.

“Memorable, Lady, memorable. Which I'm sure is what you were really going for.”

His expression was slyly amused, eyes slit, lips quirked up. She flashed a little wink, and he chuckled again. “Well, I have seen you wear worse. They should be grateful to get you out of tunics and bare legs.”

“A man who wears a cloak that heavy in the deepest heat of summer has absolutely no room to judge my choices. Especially not when they're made to stand out,” she said with a faint 'tsk', turning to plait her long hair into one simple braid. “Freedom, can you have the children weave me something out of white flowers? I'd much rather wear blossoms today than one of those awful circlets that keep showing up in my things.”
“No.”

The sullen response made her sigh, and she turned on the uncommonly quiet spirit.

“Freedom. Now is not the time to have this discussion, da'vhenan. Please, will you give me some time before we talk about this?” she asked, trying not to plead.

He didn't understand, Freedom never had. Fickle, perhaps, but he was so important, and he didn't even realize it. Wild, bright, fierce and cheerful Freedom. They had been drawn to each other from the moment they’d met in the Gallows of Kirkwall, when she had needed him more than anything in the world.

Freedom. Revas.

He kept the weight from crushing her. He kept the knowledge of what she could become from stifling her, held it back like a shield. All of the things that reminded her of what he was helped a little. The herds of halla, the soft bumping of the aravel in the night as they traveled, rocking her to sleep. Running through the woods in bare feet and unclad legs, dancing around a fire in the darkness.

That was what he meant to her, and he meant so, so much more to that poor broken city.

And he had no idea.

“You cannot protect him forever,” Feynriel reminded her mildly from around a mouthful of bread, as Freedom drifted out of the tent. “he will do as he likes in the end, it's in his nature.”

She had no answer for him, only a sigh that welled up from a deep, exhausted part of herself.

The Lady came to the city of the Elvhen with a very strange party, a host of curious spirits following after. The spirits were welcomed, of course, without even the bat of an eyelash, but two she brought with her were another matter. One of them, human, suspicious and battle-worn, bright blue gaze hard and sarcastic, the other seeming amused with everything he saw, with an odd kinship to him that barely showed behind hazel eyes.

The Sentinel was familiar in form and nature, but his hostility to his true people was not, nor his protectiveness towards these...other people. That protectiveness made him foreboding, and he extended it especially to the Lady who strode ahead of the group with a light, bare-footed stride, shedding petals and offering smiles with ease.

She stopped to remark and admire, comment and charm, seeming utterly comfortable, unlike the elders that followed her. The few children delighted her, and they were drawn to her like bees to flowers, as she made the council wait to kneel in their midst.

Their caregivers seemed flustered enough by the Lady that they didn't draw the children away, while she listened to their confidences and their babbling interruptions. Word had reached the council of her impending arrival perhaps twenty minutes ago, and she still made them wait, pausing again to wander into a garden, to admire the strange flowers and intricate structures that the gardeners had created.
Now it wasn't only her people following her, and the spirits, but a rather large group of curious Elvhen. Such a strange creature, this Lady.

She seemed both delighted and curious by everything she saw, and her followers tolerant of her whims. It was not what any of the Elvhen had expected from her, having only seen her on the battlefield, quiet and cold in white and silver. Colors she wore again today, but softened by flowers and flowing skirts.

No one trusted her, but she certainly was a curiosity.

Fen'harel himself seemed amused by the procession, watching her slow and distracted progress up the broad main thoroughfare from his high window, hands clasped behind his back.

“They are starting to get a little restless,” Felassan reminded him from the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. It was all he could do to hide his own smile. Feynriel was right about his odd hahren.

“Let them wait, Felassan. I believe she's enjoying her visit, far be it for us to interfere.”

Was that a smile? It might almost be a smile, something seen far, far too rarely. Solas could be so dour, though it wasn't without cause. Still, getting him to loosen up a bit would do a world of good.

Felassan smirked to himself, giving a faint shake of his head.

Their might be some hope for their little scheme yet.

“I'll go calm them down, then.”

As he left to go soothe some ruffled feathers, he could have sworn he heard the Dread Wolf chuckle under his breath.

"...never introduce them beyond a garden, Lady. There is a delicate balance to the chain of nature, and to introduce new links can shatter things."

"You are very wise," she agreed with the Elvhen man who had let her bully and charm her way into seeing his work, "and you have done so much, in less than a decade!"

It was true, and she marveled at it anew, sprawled on her knees in the short, perfect grass as she admired the garden spread before her. A three-tiered fountain of artfully arranged stones glittered with striations of crystal, spikes of violet and soft pink that seemed to have been coaxed into growing in arrangements to catch the light.

The cascading water brought a welcome cool moisture to the air, and left the fascinating plants and flowers constantly swaying with gentle motion. She would have liked to sit here for a time, but she had a feeling the others were growing impatient.

“I believe we were supposed to be at some sort of meeting? Not that I mind being stared at as if they expect me to go feral at any moment, of course.”

Carver's edged tone of voice made her laugh, as she straightened up from examining one of the delicate, translucent bell-shaped flowers at the edge of the bed. She glanced up and over as he
He approached, and then smiled faintly as he leaned down and extended an arm.

“It’s like they already know you!” The Lady teased, accepting his hand to pull herself to her feet, the courtly gesture impeded by the fact that they were both wearing gauntlets.

“Why do people think you're charming? I can't really see it myself,” the Warden Commander asked sarcastically.

He let go of her hand, waiting patiently as she said her farewells to the gardener, and then followed her back to join the group again.

“Damned if I know,” she finally answered, and it garnered her a small, lopsided smile. Grudging, but genuine, much like the Commander himself. “I think they're just too afraid to tell me I'm a pain.”

“Well then, your people have more restraint than mine. They tell me I am all the time...” Carver started, good-natured expression falling as they continued up the main thoroughfare of the new Arlathan, “this place is just a bit creepy, if you ask me.”

“Creepy?”

She had to admit she understood what he meant, but was curious to see what he said.

The whole city had the feeling of something that was grown, not built. Seamless stonework, oddly-proportioned pristine buildings, everything laid out purposefully. And yet, she was surprised by the slight austerity of the place, nothing about it excessive or overt. Even the center of the city, the tall spire of a building they were heading towards was somewhat plain, if still imposing.

Oh, certainly there was an excess of magic. They had not built this place by hand, after all, and many of the buildings seemed to be quite taller than she was used to. Ramps circled them from the outside, as if they were divided into more than one dwelling. A beautiful city, a graceful thing, but almost workman like.

All of the decorations she had seen were in parks, gardens, crossroads. Places of public meeting. Gardens, for the most part, water features, ornately carved benches and mosaic-inlaid floors and low walls, never in those ancient designs she recalled from some of their temples.

There was a distinct lack of statues, which was the most foreign thing of all.

It did not match at all what he had told her, so long ago, of the places of the Elvhen.

These were his people, she reminded herself, and the city was still young. Elvhen freed from the Evanuris, kept as safe as he could keep them in Uthenera. Slaves, warriors. Not self-indulgent or spoiled.

At least not yet.

She wondered, as she had before, if any of those other Elvhen yet survived, either in Uthenera or in some other form. And if they did, would he seek them out? He did not seem to be in any hurry to do so.

“Creepy,” Carver finally agreed, and she gave a small laugh, pulling herself out of her musing. He eyed one of the white and blue pillars that braced each corner of an intersection they passed through.

“and what's with all the runes? Wards? We walking into a trap?”

“No. I would know,” Abelas interjected, flatly speaking up at last. His words roused a small chuckle
from Feynriel.

“Just guides, Commander, relax. They light up at night, and direct travelers,” he said, barely keeping his amusement from his voice, “I'm sure you've seen more oddities in the Deep Roads than you have here. The Elvhen use magic for many things, not just destruction.”

“Not just...”

don't worry, Carver, I'll protect you,” she assured him, and received a 'hmph' for her trouble.

The gate leading up to the spire in the middle of the city was the most ornate thing seen yet, and she resisted the urge to stop and examine the intricate metalwork. Only intricate decorative designs, yet again, no scenes or iconography. It was amazing the detail they could create with magic. Her own people had discovered the same, of course, but they had neither the practice nor the aesthetic of the Elvhen.

It was beautiful to see it as it must have once been, rather than in ruins and remnants. Echoes of those ancient places here, in the graceful arches, detail in the stonework, and the tiled walkway they now found themselves on. And yet, so much deliberate distance from the art and motifs of the Elvhen. No stags, no halla, no wolves, no paintings on the walls or the familiar statues.

She wondered how much of it was due to his influence.

As she left off examining the great doors and began to pass through it, the guards silently standing sentinel turned to follow them in, leading without words. She hadn't expected them to be particularly chatty, but she heard Carver give a faint sound of annoyance at their taciturn guidance.

She was considering saying something when the first burst of noise came, echoing down the hall in shouting and panic. Their guides shared a look, and then took off running without saying a word. Intensely grateful she had declined the heavier, more ornate gowns and silly fripperies, the Lady followed, hearing her people pick up their pace behind her.

“What the hell is going on?” Carver growled, and she shook her head, lips thinning as she ran.

“We’ll find out soon enough, I have a feeling...” she replied breathlessly, more guards pouring in from a side hallway, the tension and worry on their faces evidence enough of how unexpected this was.

Whatever was happening could not be good.

The hallway opened to a large open area surrounding a circular room, the scent of water and greenery in the air again. There was no time to admire the indoor gardens, the odd plants she was so charmed by and the cascading spiraled fountains. There was no time for anything but pelting through the massive, open golden doors, taking in the fading glow of the massive eluvian at the very back of the council chamber.

Blood. Blood on the floor, and so much shouting and chaos focused on a very frightened looking man behind an unstable shield, facing down the Dread Wolf who knelt before him. One of Fen'harel's scouts, she recognized the armor. She may have even recognized the young Elvhen's face, but it was hard to place at the moment, especially as she saw who he was protecting, the man bleeding out on the floor as they cowered in front of the eluvian.

Shit.

She ignored the aghast stares, the shouts from the guards as her smaller frame slipped through them,
a quick shield ensuring that fingers slid off of her as they tried to hold her back. Terror in the injured scout's eyes, in his shield, keeping it strong as Fen'harel tried to talk him down. There was no conscious mind there now, he was too far gone in his fear and anxiety.

It would be no use, she knew it.

She had left her people behind, but that didn't matter as she flew up the high stairs, feeling something impact against her shield as someone tried to stop her again. Abelas' angry shout, a brief flare of heat from whatever it was had been sent against her. She didn't care, it couldn't touch her. All it did was momentarily dazzle her eyes.

The scout couldn't seem to snap into focus until he saw her, and then relief flooded over his features, so intense that Fen'harel turned to look at what had caused it. She skidded to a stop on her knees, bringing her hands out towards his panic-driven shield, crackling with untamed, wild energy. The man he was protecting was nearly gray now, and there was so much blood on the floor...but she knew she could save him, all she had to do was get the scout to stand down.

She'd known it was him since the first moment she'd caught sight of him, a heap of gangling limbs and tangled straw-colored hair.

"I will protect him," she promised the Elvhen scout, letting a sigh of relief as his eyes rolled up in his head at last, the unstable energy snapping out of view.

She felt gratitude for Fen'harel's shield that took over then, but the remembered sensation of it was an agony all its own. So familiar, his carefully controlled magic, with its artful precision. Gently as she could, she slid the scout away from the mortally wounded man and quickly moved to tend to him.

He was gone, she noticed as she gently cracked open an eyelid, passed out completely but still alive. He shouldn't be alive, not having lost as much blood as he had, but...he wasn't alone. He never was. She had to get him breathing quickly, or the damage could be permanent.

"Anders...oh, Anders, you stubborn, foolish idiot," she cursed him under her breath as she poured power into his wounds, feeling the crackle of Justice under his skin, a second spirit in a broken body, barely keeping him alive.

He was exhausted, she could feel it underneath the bloodloss and injuries, running himself ragged as always. How long had he been fighting before the scout dragged him here? How long had he tried to hold out before notifying anyone?

"Your wards have failed."

She could hear the calmness in the voice behind her, as her bloody gauntleted hands ripped open the remains of Anders' robes, checking the underfed chest. Breathing again, evenly, but shallow.

"My wards have failed," she agreed simply, acknowledging the truth in the words as she closed an older set of claw marks across his rib cage, half-healed, "Kirkwall is no longer contained. How long have your people been watching?"

"Long enough," Fen'harel replied, as much of an answer as she had expected, "though I did not expect whatever you had contained in that city to be...that powerful. I thought your wards somewhat overzealous."

"It does not do...to underestimate the spirit of Kirkwall," she murmured under her breath, mournfully. Anders alone...hopefully that meant the other guardians were safe somewhere, and not dead. "It was born of one of the greatest evils ever known. I only hope that I will be able to defeat it now, I was
not ready before, there was too much to be done. I am not ready now, but...there is no more time.”

“We need to know...” he began, but stalled as the ostensibly injured man opened his eyes and sat up, stiffly.

Though, they were not his eyes, precisely, lost in a pale blue glow, cracks sparking across his skin with the same luminescence.

“Thank you, Justice,” she greeted the spirit with a dip of her head, worry still trembling across her nerves, “it was good of you to get him this far. He should be fine now.”

“I will stay with him for now,” the spirit replied simply, voice echoing oddly. She was not terribly surprised. “You require a report?”

“Yes, thank you.”

It was Fen'Harel who answered, and she simply nodded.

This was, after all, his city, not hers.

“The twisted creature has broken free of its chains, and the city is overrun with demons. We have held them from leaving the city as best we can, but we were overrun at long last. The others have fallen back to the second wards, but those are rapidly failing,” Justice intoned, brightening slightly as she let some of her energy bleed into them, strengthening the healing left behind. “Fen'Harel's people found us and they remain, and we left to bring word. There is perhaps two days left, they think, before the final wards fall and the demons are free. Word has been sent to the Champion.”

“I will do my best to see that your people come to no harm,” she sighed to Fen'Harel, beginning to rise to her feet. The council hall behind them was quiet now, for which she was grateful. There would be fighting soon enough. “I must gather whatever forces that can arrive in time. This is my responsibility.”

“You would reject aid?”

The question was mild, his voice still so tightly controlled that she couldn't imagine what he thought of the situation. It likely didn't help that she hadn't looked at him once. It was hard to, with the feel of his magic so close to her skin.

“No, but nor would I ask it. As I said, this is my responsibility. If it is offered, however...” she trailed off, reaching a hand down to help Justice to its feet, clasping a thin forearm, “I am not in any position to refuse. No army can storm the city, it will destroy them from within, it is too insidious. I will have to go in alone to face it while the demons are kept from my back.”

“Not alone,” Freedom's voice was firm, the spirit having slipped easily into the shield. He had a way of doing that. “I will go, and Justice. The Champion knows it, and should be able to fight it off again. And Solas will go. Won't you, Solas?”

She should have expected that he would speak up now of all times. It was true, she had promised him they would return, it had always been their plan. He had been born there, created by its people, and it was there he belonged.

Her depending upon him to ease her burden was selfish, and her keeping him from this fight out of fear for his safety would be as well.

Her discomfort at hearing that unwelcome name went unnoticed due to Fen'harel's own surprise at
being addressed so, a sidelong glance showing him gazing at the spirit with a furrowed brow. It almost made her smile. Freedom had that effect on people.

“I...do not see any reason why the Lady should go alone, if I am capable of aiding,” he finally replied, though somewhat uncertainly. “I would, however, like to know what precisely we are going to fight, and why it must be approached in such a manner.”

“I will tell you while we journey. Will that suffice?”

“It will have to, it seems we have little time. Gather your people, then, and I will do the same. Will those that you leave behind require hospitality?”

More solicitous than she expected, especially with the situation they found themselves in.

A situation that was entirely her fault, she knew. She just couldn't bring herself to destroy Kirkwall. There had been too much destruction already, and she had made a promise.

“No, thank you. They will be quite safe.”

So odd, to have such a bland conversation now, standing in the middle of a pool of blood.

She glanced down once, and realized she'd lost her circlet in the chaos, the white flowers now stained and spattered red.

The poor scout was rousing, and Fen'Harel dropped his shield. The whole situation felt almost nostalgic, dangerously so. No, this wasn't good. Best to withdraw now, things would be uncomfortable soon enough it seemed.

“We will...withdraw, then. I will be happy to meet with your council when this is all over,” she said, nodding to Justice, who turned to follow her, “but now is not the time.”

“No, it is not,” Fen'Harel replied, quietly.

Pulling on her serene mask, letting her face settle into aloof, peaceful lines, she turned to pace down the stairs, leaving the dais. Blood down the front of her white dress, hands soaked in it, and followed by a spirit wearing a tattered body, she glided silently between the Elvhen. They watched, and so did Fen'harel.

Her footfalls were nearly soundless, but she could hear them in the quiet of that room, the shuffle of Justice's boots. It echoed around the vaulted, pillared hall. She imagined the discussions and arguments would reverberate quite impressively here. It was a secret relief that she wouldn't have to endure the council quite yet.

They rejoined her people, Carver giving Justice the most unpleasant look she'd seen from him in quite some time. She recognized it, of course. It was the way he'd looked at his brother when last they'd met. He said nothing, at least, as they all turned to depart, Feynriel stepping aside from a tall man she recognized at sight.

Inclining her head gently to Felassan, she offered a tense smile as he returned the gesture, and then began to lead them back out again. No words passed between them, but just to see him was a comfort. A thousand questions she wished she could ask him.

_Is he lonely?_

_Is he well?_
A thousand questions she could not ask, and so instead she said nothing at all.

This time she did not pause to admire the city as they departed from it.
Solas was grateful that his people still trusted him enough to turn to him in a crisis.

Little time left ensured that things moved smoothly enough, once his people had understood the necessity of the situation. They had listened to him, followed his strongly worded suggestions. He could not count on it always being so, as time moved on and their goals moved away from the necessities of war and struggle.

Kirkwall was simply too close. He had located other such dangerous places, but this one...this one was far too close, and apparently much worse than he had realized. It had been foolish to think the Lady had the situation under control, and he cursed himself for the lack of foresight.

Perhaps he had overestimated her.

It was impossible to know now, not until he had all the information in hand could he make sense of it. It had been somewhat chaotic, getting their forces into the crossroads, as the Lady insisted upon bringing their halla. Through the eluvian, and into the crossroads.

When they had come trooping through the council hall, he could have sworn some of the older council members had looked a bit faint.

She was beginning to give Solas the oddest flashes of amusement combined with utter exasperation, and it made him wonder if she did it on purpose. It felt like a test, when she did these things, pushing at borders, boundaries, to see if they held or snapped back. Normally the feeling of being tested would have irritated, grated on his nerves, but with her...he was quite certain she was doing it to everyone. Constantly.

Rather than being abrasive, it had a certain impish curiosity to it. There was no malice in her testing, just an incessant need to be utterly contrary.

What an odd woman.

Having the halla along slowed them down somewhat, but the trip was a short one, a second eluvian leaving them perhaps a half-day's ride from Kirkwall. Wending out of the ruined, but well-warded fortress hidden in the Planasene forest, their odd little army was met by another of the Lady's clans, already armed and waiting.

Even with their numbers, it seemed a small force to retake a corrupted city.

He found it mildly diverting that some of the halla had become enamored of his people, but the Lady seemed to expect it, as he moved to join her. She was watching a young doe harassing one of his scouts with a fond smile, glancing aside at him. The expression lasted a few moments, but then quickly dropped as their eyes met, her attention shifting away again. He regretted the loss of her smile, surprisingly more than he would expect.

"The herds have been growing well. I hope you won't mind if some of them choose to stay behind in your city. The halla go where they like."

"You seem to make a habit of leaving things behind with my people, my Lady," he remarked, a faint
'hah' escaping her lips, short and quickly dying. “It is hardly my place to say no. I do...try not to interfere.”

“Difficult when they ask you to interfere more often than you'd like,” she agreed quietly, as they paced through the trees, the bow at her back jolting with the movement.

“Yes. As for what we face now...” he began, expectantly. He might have traveled here with her, but he could not commit to this fully until he knew what they were up against.

“Oh, yes. Yes, of course. Well, Lord Fen'Harel, I suppose I may as well tell you a story. It is the easiest way to give you the full scope of it, for it stretches a long way.”

He lifted a brow at her words, but she only smiled a faint, sardonic smile at the sky peeking between tattered leaves, tucking her hands behind her head.

“This is an old tale, then?”

His own hands clasped behind his back as they walked together through the wood, ignoring the curious stares and the beginnings of gossip.

It came not just from her ragtag people, but from his own, as well. It wasn't that he hadn't been aware of the gossip before, certainly it was in some aspects...inevitable, considering their positions. See what a simple walk together had done for fueling those fires.

He could only imagine what this temporary alliance would do to the stories.

“Oh, yes. It began long, long before the world fell,” she said, using the phrase deliberately then, as he thought she had before just to make him frown, but her voice was arch, inviting him in on the joke.

He found he couldn't be offended. The unfamiliarity of such camaraderie was striking, luring him in to be agreeable whether it was wise or no. She had a remarkably vibrant voice, and a properly theatrical lilt as she began to intone her tale.

“When Tevinter stretched across Thedas, like the grasping claws of a great beast...”

Long, long before the world fell, when Tevinter stretched across Thedas like the claws of a great beast, the priests of the old gods spoke as though their word was law. When they commanded that a city be built to their strange specifications, there was no question that it would be done, legions of mages arriving to the land that had once belonged to the Almarri.

They laid out this city with great care, every street precisely placed, every stone with a purpose. If you had been a bird, flying over the city in the days of its creation, you would have seen lines of roads that gradually formed deliberate patterns, spreading out across the earth. Vague shapes became glyphs, parts of one great and singular magic, writ large across the whole of the city.

For you see, Kirkwall was not merely a city, but a great magical undertaking.
The true heart of Kirkwall lived underneath her streets, built to hide their workings from the eyes of the world. The mages who came to build the city never left, and instead turned themselves to furthering this great undertaking as the slaves began to arrive in Kirkwall. It was to be the new center of the Imperium's slave trade, an artifice that gave them what they needed.

Any undertaking of this magnitude required vast amounts of power.

More than one tenth of the slaves that entered Kirkwall died by the hands of the mages, and the glyphs etched into the roadways of the city ran red with blood. Death seeped in to the very stones, as the blood was funneled deeper, and deeper under the city, into the bowels of the earth.

Rivers of blood, lakes of it, all feeding in to an ocean at the very bottom, where the heart of the spell lay.

Perhaps power enough to one day repeat the glorious feat of the ancient Magisters. The great spell woven into the bones of Kirkwall was set to thin the veil, and they fed it hundreds, thousands of lives, especially those of the elves.

The great working was interrupted before it could be completed, when the Almarri marched upon the Imperium under the banner of the lady Andraste. The magisters attempted to flee to Kirkwall when the war had began, but never arrived. The city fell in that war, and the knowledge of its purpose was lost, sealed up deep beneath the earth in a warren of hidden chambers and tunnels.

And beneath it all, the power and corruption of that evil spell, luring in demons to the thin, weakened veil.

When Kirkwall was rebuilt, and reclaimed by others, it never really stood a chance. They had no idea what their home was built upon, though they did fight back against it.

Demons would be slain, spirits corrupted and shattered, killed but never truly destroyed, as spirits are not. Fragments in the Fade, shapeless and meaningless, eventually drawn together to be reformed by the heart and spirit of the city. But in a city where demons whisper in the minds of ordinary men, poison dreams, corrupt mages and inspire suffering, what sort of spirit could be born?

Something insidious, inspiring even the bravest of men to lose trust, hope, to betray friends and see enemies around every corner. A spirit that whispered to the darkest corners of the mind, preying on fears and anxieties, a spirit more deadly than wrath and more devastating than despair.

*Everything you fear is true.*

It whispered, creating shadows where none existed, planting tiny seeds of doubt and dread.

*That man is eyeing your purse. He has a knife, you must defend yourself.*

Small things, large things. They all fell within its purvey, and it fed on every single one.

*Those mages are engaging in forbidden magic, they must be monitored more closely. They must be taught to fear.*

A subtle spirit, but pernicious, woven so deeply into the fabric of the city that it became the city.

*They are watching you. They're all watching you.*
The Templars are coming for you, it is the only way. Just a small cut...

No one can be trusted.

Kirkwall is a dangerous place, they say. A place where mages turn to blood magic out of fear, and Templars treat them as less than people. Where streets still run red with blood, slaves are still stolen out of the back alleys, and more men are enslaved by poverty. A city without trust, where no one can be trusted.

One would think that a city like that would be beyond saving, but not even a spirit of fear so malevolent as what they came to call Paranoia could corrupt everyone. Not even hosts of demons could drive out every virtue. Those that survived were strong.

There were still people who loved the city, the city that had never been given a chance to thrive from the very first stone that was laid. There is nothing in the world so lost that someone cannot find some good in it. There is nothing in the world so corrupted that it does not deserve a chance for redemption. If Freedom can be born in a city such as Kirkwall, and Champions rise to defend it, then surely, it must be a place worth fighting for.

Wouldn't you agree?

For a time he was silenced by her tale, but she seemed in no hurry to pick up the conversation again. The murmur of sound all around them was muted, little heard but birdsong and a distant stream. It was difficult not to condemn her as sentimental, foolish. Overestimated her, yes, he must have. Taking unnecessary risks in a world still plagued by many such evils created over the centuries, for the sake of sentiment. And yet...

Her point was flawed, but once more, he felt as if she was testing him. Something about her words, the deliberate phrasing of them, the way she nearly looked at him with expectation in her eyes.

“So you are claiming simply because...this city is held in some affection, even though it was created through tragedy and breeds more of the same, it deserves to be saved? Even if the attempt creates more death.”

“Well, I do hope there will be no death,” she laughed, the undue mirth unable to hide the sorrow underneath her words, “but yes.”

“I had thought you were possessed of more wisdom than that,” he finally concluded, perhaps more openly than he should have, shaking his head.

Her people, his people were too few. He would have to step back, he would not risk it.

“I am not. I am not a wise woman, Fen’Harel. I am irrational, I am opinionated. I hold silly ideals and I believe in one thing above all. Giving people a chance.”
She sounded serene now, and he turned his head to observe the placid look slip across her features again, hiding her intentions.

“Do you not want your second chance, Fen’Harel?”

“I...excuse me?”

The words came out more offended than he meant them to, but it was the last thing he had anticipated. He paused a moment, but then caught up again as she continued walking. If he had been expecting defensiveness from her, he would have been mistaken.

“You don’t have to be their enemy. They simply don’t know that yet. Why not show them? This would be a start.”

Her far hand extended as Hope slipped up, the spirit wending gilded fingers in hers. The smile she turned on the spirit was genuine, wistful, and she murmured, “There you are. I have missed you.”

“They are not my concern. Let them make me their enemy,” he finally replied, dismissively. The fact that her lips quirked up in a hint of a smile at his words only irritated him further. “In the end, they will always find an enemy. If it falls upon me to be that, then so be it. They are no threat to me.”

“Very well. I will face it alone, then,” she replied calmly, not seeming in the least upset, “though I would ask that you stay and help fight the demons. I understand if you choose instead to gather your scouts and leave. I am grateful for the use of your eluvians.”

Anything he might have responded died on his lips as she strode off, tilting her head towards Hope as the spirit whispered to her. Irrationally, he felt a slight stab of jealousy that it departed with her instead of staying with him. He could have used some company now. Wisdom had remained at Skyhold, and the Lady’s constant companion was a bit...

“You should have said you would go, Solas.”

Meddlesome.

“My reasons are many, Freedom, and difficult choices must be made for the greater good at times. Sometimes we must sacrifice what we desire for the safety and freedom of others,” he responded patiently. Absolutely no point in getting upset with a spirit. “She will save nothing if she continues to try and save everything.”

It was a sentiment he had about her before, when she had brought human children into her clans. A lesson he had learned, it seemed, that she had not, as she continued with her foolish risks. He doubted she would listen if he told her so, it would have to be loss and failure that showed her the way.

Much as it had taught him.

Why he regretted that it should be so, he could only assume was due to others who would have to suffer for her sentimental foolishness. She would have to be watched. Killing her was the absolute last thing he desired, but his desires had no place in the world he now negotiated.

He existed only to pave the way forward for others. It would not do to forget that.

“And she’ll save nothing if she doesn’t try to save anything,” Freedom quipped back, drawing him from his cold thoughts, “you know that! You never know, it might be interesting.”
“Interesting...” he didn't know if the faint laugh was exasperation, or amusement as the silvery spirit darted off among the trees, “I have heard worse reasons.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is a doozy, but I will try to get it edited and up before my birthday on Monday. ^_^ Thanks to everyone enjoying it! I love your comments and your delight in sharing this with me.
The Battle for the City of Chains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Solas had traveled for a time in solitude, though surrounded by throngs of people.

Unsurprising, to be given space, for her people likely had no interest in speaking to him, and his own would generally leave him in peace unless approached. Felassan had gone ahead as he always did, and he was generally the conduit through which requests and questions came to Solas. Eventually, however, he found himself with a companion in the march.

Patience had appeared in silence, as they so often did. Their acquaintanceship was a long one, and often fraught with disagreement, but very few could negotiate a discussion with as much tact and care. Their differences of opinion remained frequent, and became nothing more. He could not lie to himself and say it was because of his own even temper.

He still remembered the far distant day that the tall, aloof Elvhen had approached him in his self-imposed exile, warned him of things to come.

A monumental risk he had never forgotten had been taken for his benefit, for Patience was no warrior.

If anything, they were the most vulnerable of all, a spirit cajoled into a body, a gentle mind expected to play the part of peacekeeper and voice of reason in the midst of Sylaise's dangerous and viciously underhanded court. When machinations had turned upon Mythal, Patience had done the unthinkable and risked their life to find Solas.

Sadly, he arrived too late in Arlathan.

Memories of a time that had no place in the here and now, things that must be left behind to move forward. Some contemplation was inevitable, however, for Patience was much the same as they had been in those days. Solas had changed, and so had their circumstances, but the austere Elvhen seemed unmarked by the passage of time and changing of the world.

"I am surprised to find that you have chosen to undertake this journey," he remarked quietly aside after some few minutes of silence companionship.

"Tensions may be high, and the council requested that I accompany you, to speak for them," Patience replied serenely, "and to voice some requests that they did not have time to express."

Well, that was interesting. He would not call it mistrust, perhaps, but certainly an implication of some division there. An attempt to separate the Elvhen's voice from his own. He could not blame them for it, if anything he considered himself grateful.

"I will listen to any requests they have," he agreed, giving a small nod of his head aside.

Patience's sculpted, androgynous face was always impossible to read- a skill, not a state of being. He knew them well enough by now to have seen them in repose, a rarity. When they let the mask fall to rest, vibrantly violet eyes would speak as eloquently as their lips.

"I speak for the council, not myself."
He stifled a smile at the reminder, and steeled himself for something unpleasant. A gentle warning
not to shoot the messenger.

"Of course, Patience," he said, giving a small incline of his head to them, "what do they require?"

"The council would like you to speak with the Lady, and find a way to convince her to allow you to
remove her Vallaslin," Patience told him, quietly calm, "as they find it to be somewhat insulting and
worrying. I realize it has been some time since the war, but the memories are fresh after Uthenera,
Solas. They are willing to consider it an ignorance, rather than a deliberate ploy to make them
uneasy. Perhaps if you took the time to explain to her where they come from...she would understand
and allow you to remove them."

"That seems a remarkably personal conversation, Patience," he replied, instantly uncomfortable, "and
I will point out to you that many of her people have removed theirs, I cannot imagine she is ignorant
of the history."

"You would be the better judge than I if asking would offend or no..."

He could admit to himself his own discomfort with her Vallaslin, as he had before. Yes, he found it
distasteful, marring, the mark of his failures. He could not believe that she did not know their
significance.

Of course she did.

"If an opportunity presents itself, I will...say something," he finally allowed, but could not bring
himself to claim more than that.

The idea of doing so made him incredibly uncomfortable, but one never knew. It could be that she
would be opening to listen at some point. After all, he was aiding her in this.

Uncomfortable...

He had a feeling that was a fair descriptor of everything that lay ahead, especially when they left the
wood and began their trip across the uneven plain towards Kirkwall. Enemies, coming to ally
together. Not her people his enemies, but the Champion's, the humans that once resided in this city. If
she did not seem capable of keeping them from his people's throats, he would simply gather the
Elvhen and leave.

Regrettable, but he would not risk a single life at the hands of the humans.

It was easy to feel her wards before the camp even came into view, the thrum of them strong and
vibrant. A great deal of power had been expended here to protect this corrupted city. Power that
could have been used to destroy it, instead.

He saw his own scouts first, less bedraggled and worn than the people they protected, ringing the
camp as sentries. He lifted a hand to them, but it was not a scout that moved to greet them, but what
he had thought at first to merely be an outcropping of rock, like the ridge ahead. Unfolding itself, the
stone rose, turning to cross the distance between the camp and the approaching army.

A golem. Well, that was the last thing he had expected to see.

“So, the foolish healer survived the trek after all,” it rasped once within earshot, pausing then. “It is
still alive?”

“Yes, I'm still alive, you bloody pebble!”
He heard the shout come from behind, and he could see the Lady stifle a smile at the golem's answering 'hmph'. He moved to her side, and the edge of the smile faded, though she inclined her head politely to him in greeting.

“Yes, Shale, Anders and Justice are fine,” the Lady assured, gesturing from him to the golem. “Shale, this is Lord Fen'harel. He has come to see to his people. Fen'harel, Shale keeps watch over the wards, for little troubles them.”

“Dull, but everything is dull,” the golem sighed, voice dripping with ennui. He could feel its glowing gaze examining him, slow and scornful. “It is a god? Unexpected for a god to look so...puny. Soft. I expect it would be quite easy to crush its skull.”

“I have made no such claims,” he found himself replying smoothly, all while wondering why a dwarven construct was practically threatening his life. He was under the impression that they were supposed to be mindless and controlled.

Not...snide.

“The so called Champion's people were called upon several weeks ago. They will arrive shortly,” the golem continued, turning its back on them and slowly plodding back to the camp. “The increase in demons was unexpected. They have been lured, no doubt, now that the wards weaken.”

“Why did you not summon me sooner, Shale, if the Champion has been on his way for weeks?” the Lady asked, seeming comfortable with the construct's sullen demeanor. She didn't even comment on the threats, not even to defend him.

It shouldn't bother him, but it did.

“The humans wanted to fight it on their own, because they are foolish. I did not care.” The golem dismissed, and then sighed again. “It does not matter now. Are you quite certain I cannot crush the thing that would be a god?”

“I would appreciate it if you would not. Thank you, Shale. My people will see to healing you all after we have set up camp. Thank you for your service.”

Despite her formal words, the ghost of humor had returned to the Lady's lips, and voice.

“Hmph,” the golem grunted, and then drew ahead as the army spread out to set up their tents.

The closest edge of the near-invisible ward was out of view, a ridge in the way, but the city could be seen in the distance. The teeming mass of demons was just a blot of darkness and glowing flickers of light from this vantage, but it shifted and roiled like a living sea of light and shadow. It was...quite a lot of them.

The Lady paused, and so did he, turning his head to nearly meet her sidelong gaze. He lifted a brow, and she chuckled breathily, without humor.

“That's practically how she says hello,” she informed him, voice light and breezy, “she's threatened to kill Carver on several occasions, too, but he did antagonize her. You get used to it.”

“No, you don't,” the Warden Commander sniped as he passed by them, his few people behind. The man seemed rather on edge. He couldn't blame him, eyes fixed on the disturbing view.

“No, you don't,” the Warden Commander sniped as he passed by them, his few people behind. The man seemed rather on edge. He couldn't blame him, eyes fixed on the disturbing view.

“Or not,” the Lady agreed, and this time her humor was genuine, the smile on her lips briefly warm before she seemed to remember that she was speaking to him. Then it was gone. “Have you decided
what you will do, Fen'harel?”

“I will survey the situation, and then have someone inform you.” He replied, speaking up again at long last, tearing his gaze away from what of the demonic horde could be seen. “It seems that my people may be needed, however, provided the humans can fight beside them.”

“You would have my gratitude if you stayed, and I can promise you...none of us can afford infighting right now.”

Her voice was soft and almost sad, before she paced away to where her tent was being erected with a curt farewell. “Please excuse me.”

He inclined his head as she swept away, and then turned to meet his scouts. Before he could decide anything, he had to ensure the risk was worth it. He had no doubt she could defeat the demons, even if she lost people in the process...but the heart of the city was another matter.

His grasp on the situation had firmed up by the time Hope found its way back to him, his people assessed and settled. The scouts seemed to have formed some sort of neutral alliance with the Lady's group of guardians, at the very least. No hostility for them to defend against. Not yet. The arrival of the Champion's forces would no doubt be less amiable.

Hopefully they would stay apart.

Still, their camp was set a ways from the others, with the Lady's clans and sentinels a buffer between his people and the mixed bag that had been guarding the wards. It was a sensible layout, though an uncomfortable reminder that it would be far too easy for everyone to turn on them.

The spirit beckoned him, voice thin and whispery, confiding as he broke away from his commander to speak with it.

“There is something you should hear,” it told him, and he frowned.

“It is important?”

His question only garnered a nod, and he sighed. It had its reasons, and he would not discover them by refusing. “Very well. Where are we going?”

“To listen to the Lady.”

He followed Hope to the edge of the camp despite his abrupt misgivings, until it held up a delicate hand to hold him in place and slipped into the tent. It felt strange to eavesdrop, but Hope had brought him here for a reason. He should at least linger long enough to find out why. Some sort of battle plans? Something that would make all of this seem less foolish, perhaps?

There were no guards on her tent, not that anyone would see him if he chose not to be seen. Which he did.

“You must rally them however you can,” Justice said, hollow and booming, “they must summon every ounce of strength for the battle ahead.”

“No! It's not fair. Why should you give up more of yourself, mother? It's not fair, they need to stop
depending on you!”

That was Freedom, he decided, feeling an odd hint of amusement at the spirit's titling of the Lady. Mother?

“They need someone to believe in,” Hope interjected softly, and he heard the Lady sigh, her voice much less tenuous than the spirits'.

“I am afraid you are right, Hope,” she agreed, voice full of weariness and worry. “I have come this far. Sacrificing a little more of myself on their altar...well, I knew it would happen.”

He frowned at her words, crossing an arm over his chest as he listened, other elbow on the hand so he could rest his chin. A familiar sentiment, he supposed, though he wasn't certain of the context. Still, the idea of sacrificing oneself for the greater good...well, it was one he was uncomfortably familiar with.

“It hurts, everything hurts, though, and at least this hurting helps. It is better that they be alive than be your friends. It is better that they fear you than die, though their fear hurts too. That is something to hold onto, that they will live, and that makes the pain better,” Compassion whispered, in its gentle melancholy, “they will live and grow and be...happy.”

“They will live,” she agreed, over the sounds of Freedom's exasperated protest. “No, no, Freedom. This is too important, da'vhenan. I began this journey, and to step off of the path now would be irresponsible at best.”

“One day they may not need you any more,” Hope told her, encouraging softly, “and you do not really die, after all. Nothing lost that cannot be regained. You are still you.”

“Ah, I wish I believed that.”

A pause then, a quiet metallic shift of armor in the confines of the tent. When she spoke again, her voice was slower, sadder. “But I fear that in this case...it is not true. They need to be led, they need to believe in me, that belief will make them strong...but it kills me. It kills me by inches, and I fear one day there will be nothing left of me. One day nothing but the stories, nothing but what they have made me into.”

Another sentiment that perhaps hit far too close to his own wounds, discomfort rising enough that he was quite seriously considering departing now. This was far too private, especially for someone such as her who seemed fiercely protective of her privacy. Curiosity had its limits. He could not imagine why Hope thought he needed to hear this. She spoke so freely to the spirits, though he understood why.

He, of all people, understood why.

“Enough.”

The single word fell on the gathering, the voice he recognized as belonging to the Sentinel. He hadn't realized the surly man was listening. She trusted him so much?

“Come here. You are letting these dismal worries defeat you, and the battle has not even begun.”

“You told me...” he heard her say, words stalled by a swift intake of breath.

The abrupt departure of the spirits was a slight eddy in the flow of magic around the area, a faint hint of Freedom's laughter escaping in the air. Why would they...?
He felt the color rising in his cheeks at the sounds that escaped the confines of the thin tent, bleeding out into the hot summer air. Unmistakable, a soft feminine sigh of pleasure. For a moment he was pinned by sheer shock, before abruptly turning on his heel and striding off, clearing his throat roughly.

No, that was certainly not something he needed to be eavesdropping on. He shifted his gaze sidelong to Hope as it caught up with him, shaking his head lightly, a sigh breathed out through his nose.

“I did not mean for you to hear that part,” the spirit remarked, but it was not an apology, just a statement. If anything, it seemed pleased. He was not. “You are more alike than you know. Would it be a terrible thing, to share some of your burdens together?”

“I wonder that you seem so certain I can put my faith in her,” he finally managed to gather his thoughts enough to retort.

“I wonder that you seem so certain that you cannot afford to."

The delicate echo reverberated through the golden spirit's core, and not for the first time he felt a familiarity in it. Younger, softer, and from a vast distance, but it did sound somewhat like the Lady at times. It should not bother him, but it did.

“So you think I should go with her as well? Have you all colluded, I wonder?”

He couldn't hold it against them, they merely acted as was in their nature, after all, but it was irritating. Self-reflection and some peace would bring clarity and no doubt wash away the irritation, but there was no time for somber contemplation now.

“If you do not go with her, she may die. If she dies, a great many more people will die. If you go with her, you both may die, but it is much less likely,” the spirit said as it drifted ahead of him, "I do not wish for the Lady to die, as it would make many lose their way. She is needed, as are you.”

“You're quite certain of that, are you?”

“Yes,” Hope affirmed.

“...Very well. When she is...less occupied, please inform her that we will stay to help fight the demons,” he finally concluded, the weight of the decision settling heavily, “at least my people may help keep down casualties.”

Hope nodded simply, and then drifted off among the camps as he continued on to find the Elvhen's commander. He would have to ensure that they were prepared for what was to come. If he would go with her into the city? Well...he couldn't quite answer that yet.

When the Champion's army arrived, tensions were high, and he still had no answers.

From their vantage point, the mass of demons seethed, gouts of flame, twisting shadows, tendrils of sickly light. Restless, they pushed against the faltering remains of the wards, testing them for weakness. The shrieks and bestial chaos were heard even from this distance, enough so that some of the younger warriors were looking frightened. Even his.
It was an intimidating sight.

The Lady stood at the very edge of it on a crumbled rise, head tilting to the side in that particular way she had of acknowledging him. A hint of a sidelong look, but never meeting his eyes. She looked at no one else that way, from what he could tell. Did she hate him or not? His opinion on it changed by the conversation.

“It's lovely how their tactics never change. That's one nice thing about fighting demons,” the Lady quipped placidly, but he could see the worry in her eyes at the obvious nervousness coursing through the ragtag army, “darkspawn are slightly more unpredictable.”

“They are set in their ways,” he agreed, scanning the forces arrayed against them.

Across the wards, he could see the Champion's people forming up. Five hundred, perhaps, even more of a mixed bag than theirs were, if less potent. He could even swear he saw a Qunari, head and shoulders above the rest. “Can you trust them not to turn on my people?”

“Can you trust me if I say yes?” she responded mildly, and then offered him a faint smile that held no humor, still without looking at him. It was difficult not to wish she would. It made him uneasy. “My people have been ordered to protect yours if things grow contentious. After all, some of them are family now, aren't they?”

“We will still need to discuss that,” he sighed, not terribly pleased to be reminded of it now. The children were welcome complication, he reminded himself, but the problems it created were not. “Later. Of course.”

“If I survive,” she agreed, and then paused, gaze fixing on a distant point, and then unfocusing, going vague, “and if I do not...”

“If I can protect them, I will.”

He didn't know why he promised it, but the words spilled from his lips before he could prevent them. And, even more surprisingly perhaps...he meant them.

Her people had been like shadows before, pale, sad remnants of his own. Something to be pitied. Something that roused a feeling he could uncharitably say was close to disgust. Disgust with himself, projected onto them. He could acknowledge that, humble himself to accept the truth. They were the result of his choices, his mistakes. A mistake he had tried to rectify.

Faced with the other inhabitants clinging to this world, however, her people seemed far more like kin than they had before.

“Well,” she remarked as a runner stopped to hand her a message, unfolding it in her gloved hands. Archery gloves, strapped over her forearms. Did she really intend to fight with a bow instead of her magic? There was something so utterly and ridiculously contrary about it that he knew it had to be the truth. “It seems as if we're ready. I suppose I should signal the troops.”

Her sigh was so wistful that he raised a brow at the melancholy of her expression, the downward twist of her lips. And then the words from the tent came back to him.

“You intend something?” he asked carefully, hands clasped behind his back.

“I'm afraid so.” she said, laughter in her voice, no happier than her sighs, “I...am afraid so. Hope to the people, Fen'harel. Thank you for staying.”
“Which people?” he asked, perhaps deliberately provoking, remembering her long-ago scolding in the midst of her children's council. Her sad resignation bothered him far more than it should. He was beginning to feel a kinship with her, and he didn't care for it or what it implied.

He expected her to frown, and was surprised by her sudden laugh, this time bright and cheerful despite the army of demons clawing their way through her wards. Laughing in the face of death and destruction to come.

“Oh, Fen’harel,” she sighed as the inappropriate mirth faded, in that way he was becoming all too familiar with. She had a particular way of saying that unwanted name that twisted the syllables gracefully. “All of them. And before you ask, yes. I know what I would sacrifice for them.”

“I already know that you do. I cannot say I...agree with what you are doing. There are battles to be won, but surely they can fight this on their own, without grandiose interference.”

Was he any better? Had he even tried to convince anyone he was not a god, that their stories were twisted truth and ridiculous myth? His people, certainly, knew the truth, but they still treated him as a thing apart. That would have been good enough, if they were the only ones left in this new world, but...

Well, they were not. That fact was exceedingly clear as they prepared to go into battle.

Suddenly his assertions that he didn't care if people made him their Adversary, the enemy of their god seemed to ring hollow. Facing the reality of it made it harder to ignore. They were going to fight together, and he was the greatest evil they had ever known.

What a bizarre position to be in.

He had no doubt it was only the Lady's presence that kept the blades from his throat. Protecting them from him, protecting him from having to kill them. Which was the truth?

“You are not alone in your distaste for this tactic,” she said, and her voice held a note of sardonic humor as she slung the bow from her back, “far...far from alone. And yet...I cannot think of a better way. Perhaps we could...together.”

His eyes tracked her as she strode forward, finding nothing to say in response. It was unfortunate, the whole situation. The rest of the world who struggled, with the echoes of the previous world still infecting every aspect of the new. It was not cleansed. It was not a new beginning. It was a continuation, and it seemed his place in it had been prepared for him long before he had awoken.

And his place was as the enemy of this world.

He knew Hope was at his side then, and he sighed quietly.

“They see a lost battle, many of them. Especially the humans. They underestimate their strength,” it told him, voice faint, wavering as its edges flickered in and out of view, “is it truly wrong of her to give them something to lift up their hearts?”

“No,” he told it, defeated at last, shaking his head, “no, but I am afraid that the battle that follows will be remembered as mythology, not history.”

“All you can do is what you think is right. She has accepted that burden. All you can do is hold on to the things that make you strong, and keep trying when you falter. One day they will not need you.” The spirit told him, its gaze following the Lady as well as she made her way alone to the edge of the wards. He could feel them on his skin, the instability and restless energy of them.
“Perhaps one day they will not need her. That is what she holds on to. That is her hope, Solas, the hope that keeps her feet from the din’anshiral.”

He was still listening, but his focus was on the wards now, as he felt the Lady testing them subtly. When they snapped, they would...ah. Well, this would be interesting.

“Please fall back to the camp, Hope. Make sure that Compassion stays with you. She may trust the humans, but it would be unwise to risk either of you,” he finally replied, and let out a sigh as the spirit slipped away, turning back to his men. Its words had sunk in, but he spared them no thought for now. Something to muse over later.

He still could not agree with her, not about everything. But...she may have been right about the battle to come. Perhaps one or two other things as well.

The battle was what needed focusing on now, the rest could wait.

The two separate, and equally disparate armies stood ready that day to face down the horde of demons that seethed outside corrupted Kirkwall. Vastly outnumbered, they waited for the Lady's signal, as their commanders fought to keep their flagging spirits high. The humans and others that had traveled out of Rivain and Tevinter rallied around the Champion, ready to retake their home from evil that had plagued it for far too long. Their shouts echoed across the broken plain, rivaling the piercing and thunderous calls of the demonic enemy.

The fear and anticipation had reached a fever pitch when an explosion rocked the area, fire roaring in an inferno that rivaled the sun for brightness. The very center of the opposing army was obliterated in a spiral of flame, the screams of demons being burned alive momentarily eclipsing all other sounds. They surged away, scattering momentarily in confusion. In the center of the fire that scorched the earth and enemy alike, the Lady knelt, light flickering across her armor, reflecting in her eyes.

Glory and terror, fire and triumph, the Lady of the People rose to her feet and stood in the midst of the enemy. In defiance of them.

She raised a hand, gleaming in silvery armor gilded by the flames that caressed and enveloped, but did not burn her, even as it melted the ground beneath her feet. Her fingers curled in slowly to her palm, and she gave an abrupt twist of her wrist.

The second explosion was one without fire, without impact, but the sensation of the wards collapsing, power dragged inwards towards her, flattening enemies in its wake. The remnants of it rushed into her, and the inferno grew, tossing her hair and rippling the loose edges of her armor.

She lifted her chin, slid the simple bow from her back, and drew it back in one smooth, graceful movement. An arrow of fire formed under her fingertips, red and gold at first, and then blue, and finally, a pure white that seared the air as it flew, hotter than the heart of a forge.

Towerling, a twisted demon of pride reared back up, the arrow piercing, and then devouring flesh and bone alike until nothing was left but ash. It drifted down onto the struggling, malevolent horde.
With a roar that shook the earth, the armies charged upon the disoriented demons, blades and magic at the ready. The clash of opposition came in a rush of sound, shrieks and snarling of the demons, cries of pain and bellowing orders of the commanders. Even the halla charged, following their golden-pelted leader, skewering on horns and striking demons to death with sharp hooves, as lithe and vicious as their elven companions.

The fire had her, held her, as the soldiers tried to surge towards her position in the center. It was Freedom who reached her long before anyone else, the spirit joining her fight the only way he could. The silvery shield that enveloped her came just in time to fend off the attack of a demon of rage, immune to the inferno.

Two, three of them, she took them down without faltering, razor-edged power ripping through them even as more of her arrows flew beyond the thr. It was not rage that she had to fear, however, even a dozen of them no match for her. The end of her bow sliced through another that surged too close, and then she spun at the deafening roar that shook the ground behind her, her chest heaving.

The creature that dragged itself out of the earth scorched much as her inferno had, hulking and mangled, with eyes that glowed like the heart of a star. It screamed at her again, baring rows of teeth, and she lifted her chin to meet Hatred as it loomed over the battlefield.

More demons fell under the combined heat of their meeting, a wave of it coursing across the battlefield, sweltering. The first rend of its claws charred her bow and sent her staggering back, but she darted her way up its back after a feint, its attempt to snatch the much smaller creature gliding off the shield that enveloped her. The impact made Freedom falter, but he quickly rallied, brightening again.

Power thrummed across the bowstring as she wrapped it around the beast's neck, twisted the makeshift garrote around her hands and clung to it for dear life. It screamed, it thrashed as she focused every bit of power into the feeble cord, the inferno dying at last as she absorbed it back into her. She braced a foot against its shoulder and pulled, back arching, teeth gritted. The bowstring sank into the demon's neck, charring flesh behind it with a sickening hiss.

Mindless, Hatred lashed at her with everything it was, every ounce of blistering might it possessed.

The blow that broke her shield impacted against her hard enough that it threw her to the ground, sprawling across the blackened earth as she landed shoulder-first, palms bleeding, gloves lacerated.

It was Freedom that took the worst of it, sapping the spirit as its shield was destroyed. Faded, it flickered out of view, leaving the Lady unprotected. She gave a sharp cry, bloody fingers pushing against the ground as she struggled to her knees. The gloating, growling chortle of Hatred's triumph boomed across the sky, talons reaching for her. The air rippled as they passed.

It was not expecting the blow from behind.

Harsh, keening, it gave a shriek as a spike of ice violently slammed into its back, impaling it and sending it to its jagged knees. The ground shuddered as it fell.

Not wasting energy to rise, the Lady struck as it was attacked from the rear, the bowstring bitten into its neck tightening with a crack of unleashed power. The screech was abruptly cut off as the beast's head was severed from its body, flaring up in a gout of flame that consumed it before it hit the ground. The body followed, flaking into ash as Fen'harel strode through the wreckage of the demon, dying flames reflecting off his armor.

Armies watched, as the dark Adversary strode through the veil of blackened ash and smoke towards
their bright and suddenly vulnerable Lady. Was there more than one enemy on this field? Hands on blades, reaching for arrows, hundreds of breaths held in fearful anticipation.

Silently, he extended a hand down to the her, and she clasped his forearm to pull herself up, leaving a smear of blood on the bright metal.

Their eyes met for a few small seconds that felt like a lifetime, and then the Dread Wolf bowed his head to the Lady.

They turned to face the enemy together.

_It was not him._

_It was not him._

A chant, a litany in her mind that she repeated to herself, the background noise of their battle. She could thank adrenaline and pain for the fact that she had not broken down when he had walked towards her, taken her arm. The tingle of her palms as he healed her without even a gesture was a new pain all its own, surging over her skin. Power rushing over the hand that he had once taken from her, making the fingers curl in towards her palm defensively with the memory of it. It made her nerves twitch.

_Distance. Restraint. Duty. She had a duty._

_It was not him._

The demons were welcome, the very first time she'd ever thought so. Her bow might have been gone, but the memory crackled between her fingertips as she drew it back and released another arrow of flame into the heart of Despair.

She slew despair over and over as the battle raged, there had never been any shortage of it in Kirkwall, but it remained in her heart as she fought by his side. She had known this would be difficult, if he chose to fight with them, but she had not anticipated how much. This, this was where he was most familiar to her, not the polite political machinations, not her chiding and testing of him in the vain hope that he would see that her way was better.

No, the way he manipulated and controlled the power that surrounded them, the slight wrinkle of his forehead as he summoned a shield, the way his lips would tense. This was a part of him she knew intimately, even if the power they played with now was more vast and free than in the other world. It brought a whole new dimension of subtlety and skill to his movements that she appreciated through the pain. If he was surprised that she knew exactly how to fight beside him, to keep him covered and anticipate, he gave no sign of it.

It flowed over her comfortably, an old memory etched into her muscles. It was so easy to fight with him at her back.

The attackers were beginning to thin as a violent bolt of lightning crackled out of the air and burst a spindly terror demon, the grinning, bearded face of Garrett Hawke coming into view through the dripping green ichor.
“Nice day for a fight!” he bellowed, over the sound of disgust from the tall woman behind him as she slammed a shield into the face of a shade. “Shouldn't take too long to mop up the rest of this!”

His smile remained feral and friendly, though his bright blue eyes were hard as they turned on Fen'harel, the two silently eyeing one another up for a moment. The tension in the air was palpable, and she stifled a sigh as she put another arrow into what could charitably be called an eye socket, the demon bursting into flame.

Fen'harel and Hawke were still staring one another down. Of course they were.

“Put it away, would you? We've got to finish this up.” Aveline sniped brusquely, bashing another of the swarming shades, and then thrusting her blade through it, into the ground. She stepped back, shaking her head.

“Maker's breath...Hello, Lady.”

“Hello, Captain, I hope your family is well,” she greeted simply, taking a moment then to breathe, grateful for the thinning demons and the distraction from fighting next to the Dread Wolf. “How many losses?”

“A few dozen. Maybe fifty,” Hawke supplied, glancing over his shoulder, finally breaking the staring contest. “Mostly mine. Healers working hard, and Wolfie's people did a pretty decent job keeping things cleared.”

“Wolfie?” Fen'harel managed to combine utter disdain and shock seamlessly, voice kept cool as a gesture of his hand froze an approaching demon. It exploded into shards of ice as he clenched his hand, face kept serene now.

He was irritated. Why did she find it so amusing? Likely the battle high from the struggle against Hatred. Nasty thing, that one.

“Yeah. You got a problem? Maybe you like some of your new names better, huh?”

Hawke spun on a heel at an impact from behind, a wraith surging out of the ground. It burst into ash as his staff made violent contact, and he cursed under his breath before speaking. “They're reforming into the little guys. Too much shit going on here, we're not gonna get a break any time soon.”

“Not unexpected,” Fen'harel mused coldly, and she shared a look with Aveline, finding the woman already looking back at her, rolling her eyes as she raked fingers through her shorn hair.

She hid a tired, bitter smile. Now was hardly the time for humor.

“Yeah, well, no one told us. Seems like the kind of thing we should have known before. 'Oh yeah, by the way, the bad guys will just keep coming back.',” Hawke growled, reaching up a hand and rubbing it through his grey-streaked hair, an unconscious echo of the Captain. “Shit. Aveline, where's Varric?”

“Injured, but we got him to Anders, he'll be fine,” Aveline reassured briskly, and then turned to her again. “Do you have any reinforcements coming at all? What's the plan here, Lady?”

“There are two more clans that should be here by dark, but that's all of my people that are close enough. I need to get into the city, to take out that monster once and for all,” she decided, letting out a faint sigh of relief as Freedom returned to her at last, slipping through the ash and rubble to her side, looking a bit less faded. “I will be taking Justice and Freedom, if they will come.”
“You've got to be joking. There's no way you're going after that thing without me,” Hawke protested gruffly, and she fixed him with a look.

“I don't want to fight it and you, Garrett. We have no idea how strong it's gotten in the past decade.”

She lifted her hands at the sudden screech to the left, but Fen'harel had already spotted the encroaching fear demon, taking it out quickly with a surge of green light. There weren't many of the big ones left, it seemed, just violence-roused wraiths and shades struggling out of the fragments of shattered demons. Whatever chose to grow here would be powerful. It would have to be watched closely.

“I can handle myself. No offense, Lady, but it's my city, and I'm going. The thing couldn't break me before, and it won't break me now. Just another fear demon.”

It was as much as she'd expected, and she exhaled her exasperation.

Hopefully she wouldn't have to kill Hawke. Incapacitate him, maybe, but then she'd have to leave him behind, which would be a death sentence, too. There was always the Chantry, it might still be safe.

If she was lucky, it wouldn't be an issue. If she was unlucky...Her mind was already racing with possible scenarios and repercussions when Fen'harel spoke.

“I will be accompanying you as well. I suggest you make preparations if necessary, Champion. Please ensure that your men are capable of behaving themselves while you are not here.”

There was that hostility again, Garrett's grinning enmity versus Fen'harel's icy disdain, tensing in the air. It was a wonder that it didn't summon a bloody demon, in the current climate. This was going to be a very fun trip, it seemed. She focused on that, more immediate, than the fact that the Dread Wolf had apparently changed his mind.

“If anyone,” she snapped abruptly, before Hawke could bristle too much, “feels that they are not capable of containing their dislike, please do let me know now. I would not want to walk into the lair of Paranoia with a knife waiting for my back.”

"I need to see to the men,” Aveline added, her intrusion helping to break the tension.

The Lady let out a breath as they stopped staring at each other, Aveline giving her a nod before slapping Hawke against the shoulder and turning to stride off. She could count on the woman to be sensible, but sadly she didn't think she could bring her along. Every single extra person that she brought made it more dangerous. If she thought she could leave the Champion behind, she would.

But the people needed to see him leave with her and Fen'harel for the city. And return.

Especially return.

If she had to tie him up in the Chantry and leave him there until they defeated the demon, just so he could stride victorious with them back out through the gates...she'd bloody well do it. Reality be damned, these people needed a hero, not another tragic story.

As Hawke strode off, Aveline following, she became intensely aware of the amount of eyes on them. Wary, distant, and of course that ever-present awe she had become so uncomfortable with. Gaze shifting down to the ground, she closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in slowly as the weight settled over her.
Just accept it. You can't do anything about it.

“It is not you they fear.”

Fen'harel's voice was distant and calm, and she didn't have to look up to know he was surveying the battlefield with his arms behind his back. She knew it all too well.

“Yes. Yes it is. Just because they don't hate me doesn't mean they don't fear me,” she finally replied, lifting her chin to face it.

It was much as she had expected, they stood alone in the center of the circle of dead, blackened earth. The armies were retreating back to camps for the most part, those who seemed mostly uninjured lingering to take out the stragglers as they reformed.

“Then I suppose it is a burden we share,” he allowed, and she nodded her head very slightly, “but I sincerely doubt that you are going to fall from Lady of grace to my unhallowed level with one small display. If anything, it will enhance your reputation. That was quite dramatic, incidentally.”

“Joke as you will, but posturing is necessary.”

The words slipped from her lips with a sudden spark of melancholic humor, ignoring his odd stare at her phrasing. She supposed it sounded like a mockery of the way he spoke. And it was, but...not him.

Not him.

“I...never said it was not.”

His delayed response made her smile a little more genuinely as she watched the movements of the soldiers, before it fell again.

He was too close, there were too many eyes on them. Suddenly she felt tired, bone-deep, and stretched too thin.

“I must go see to my people before we depart, speak to my commander, and tend to the dead. It will not take long. There is a safe place to rest inside the city, but we must move soon while the demons are thinned out,” She murmured quietly, squaring her shoulders and then turning for the camp, fleeing from him as sedately as she could manage.

Now it was his eyes she could feel on her as she moved to join Abelas, and the weight of his gaze was not nearly the burden anyone else's was. He did not fear her, unlike the rest of the world.

She didn't ask why he had changed his mind about entering the city with her.

Perhaps she didn't want to know.

Chapter End Notes
Yay! Happy Birthday to me! I hope your International Ana Day (yes, it's real, don't bother looking it up, it is) is a lovely one.
“Am I to have this conversation with every single person I come across, I wonder?” the Lady asked Abelas, weathering his stern look with gentle, weary frustration as she examined a wound. “A conversation you and I had long ago, Abelas. No. You are not going.”

Poor Vareth was sitting on the ground looking as if he'd like to leap back into the jaws of a demon, pinned by a mangled, injured leg that was awaiting a healer ready for the delicate task. He was in no pain except mental at this moment despite how nasty it looked, a trick that she'd learned a long time ago.

Listening to his commander and his Lady bicker was apparently more than he was comfortable with, and the source of his unease. Not that he'd ever say so.

She was quite sure she'd heard the shy sentinel say five words in the last thirteen years, and three of them were to Orana. She'd get him home in one piece to her. A promise had been made.

“I believed Fen'Harel would refuse to accompany you, which was the only reason I agreed at the time,” Abelas admitted, and she gave an exasperated sigh, giving Vareth's shoulder a gentle squeeze and rising, ignoring the coloring of the injured man's cheeks at the contact.

“It changes nothing. You know that every single person who joins me makes it that much more dangerous. Hawke has to go. I have to go. Fen'Harel has to go.”

She picked up her leather satchel off the ground, incongruously normal against the intricate silverite and white leather armor. The lack of a bow bothered her, but she knew it wasn't technically necessary.

“Other than that, everyone else is just an impediment and a potential liability. I do not want to be forced to kill you. I would regret your death, and our people would suffer for it.”

It was harsh, but he needed to hear it, and she knew her friend and commander well enough to know that he would take it better than trying to be soft with him. He had stepped out of his comfort zone earlier to make things easier on her, she could do him the favor of being honest with him now.

Their friendship was a long one now, and built into it was a great deal of nuance and tacit understanding. He had known her when she was a broken woman, still lost in mourning. He knew more than almost anyone, apart from Feynriel, and he had seen things she would never say out loud. She liked to think she was past it all, moved on, but he felt otherwise.

No matter how many times she assured him, his rules had not changed. She would always respect it, but she wished he would believe her.

It was not...her Solas. Fen'Harel was not.

He was another man, a stranger, and nothing more.

Sometimes it seemed that she was the only person who knew parts of her story that believed it. Then again, she may have been the only one who needed so fervently to believe. She had already failed to be his enemy once, and she would not fail the world again. Nor would she be his enemy before exhausting all other options, however.

“Yes,” Abelas finally admitted, lips tight, eyes narrowed, “I am aware of that. You will not even take
“Ah. No. She's already threatened to kill Fen'Harel twice,” she laughed, enduring the cold look her mirth garnered her. It never bothered her. “Better not, my hand. I'm afraid there's simply no better solution.”

“Then I accept your plan, but I remain displeased.”

“Duly noted, Abelas. Duly noted. While I am gone, we must do what we can to keep the forces amiable and working together. Break out casks if you must,” she declared, and turned to gaze over them, “the last arrivals should help. The Seer and the Augur will be here before nightfall.”

“Which comes too soon. You should depart.” Abelas reminded her, turning to walk with her as she nodded to the sentinels and turned for the ridge.

Justice and Anders were already there, the latter fussing audibly as she approached. He looked slightly better, she noticed, but still a bit wan, stretched thin. So like Anders not to worry about himself when there was people injured. She managed to hide her faint smile as she closed the distance, but barely.

“I simply do not understand why...a healer may be required!”

Lovely, another one. Giving a sigh, she weighted her steps to make her approach audible, both turning to face her. Justice nodded his helmeted head to her, a gesture she returned to her old companion. Justice was his own person, but it was rare for him to be apart from Anders even now. Splitting them up did not sit well with her.

It was, unfortunately, necessary.

“You barely survived the first time, my friend. Would you willingly throw yourself to that demon again?” she asked pointedly, keeping her face placid. “I am sorry I must take Justice, but he knows the corruption of the city like no other.”

“I will strike down the demonic and cleanse the city,” Justice informed the lanky mage hollowly, getting a glare for his statement.

“Anders,” she spoke up again, before he could fuss any further, “I need you here to tend to the wounded. There is no army walking in to that city, your skills could be better utilized here. There are people who need you.”

The noise he made was half a groan and half a shout of frustration, hands thrown skyward. She waited patiently as he got it out of his system, but Abelas was starting to look irritated. And he positively bristled when Anders turned on her, a finger jabbed towards her face.

It was a wonder Anders did not find himself with a weapon to his head. She gently lifted a hand aside.

“Bring him back!” he demanded, and then seemed to think better of speaking to her like that, finger dropping as he shifted a glance sidelong to the glaring sentinel. “Please. Lady.”

“I will,” she assured him gently, offering a reassuring smile, “I will, Anders. I'm sorry, but there's no time to waste.”

Letting out a quiet sigh, she glanced to Abelas and nodded to him, once. He returned it, and she turned to face the city across the bloody and burned plain. Rolling her shoulders, she began to walk,
Justice following. Shale awaited in the center of the battlefield, scanning it for the occasional shade or minor demon, and she paced her way towards her after skidding ungracefully down the ridge.

She could see Hawke departing from her left, clapping the distant figure of Aveline on the shoulder. She lifted a hand to the Captain, and got a wave in return before she turned back to her forces. Freedom was with Fen'Harel, who had apparently taken her departure as signal before.

The symbolism of that moment was far from lost on her, the three commanders of their respective armies, meeting in the center of the field to travel together. Once she would have laughed at it, found it oh so silly and pretentious.

*Look at us, acting as if we're making some great statement. Acting as if all eyes are on us.*

Yet...they were. That's exactly what it was.

This was a statement, it was a moment in history. The weight on her shoulders was no heavier for that knowledge, as it would have been once. She had laughed at the pretense once, when she hadn't understood how important it was for people. As he'd told her, as she'd told him. Posturing. A sadly necessary thing. The people needed to see them walk into the city together, and then out again.

“I feel like I'm supposed to be waving a flag,” Hawke groused with half a grin as they met, the golem turning her glowing gaze down on them, “I'm more of a skirmish in the streets sort of guy. Do you think we could just get on with it?”

“Shale, if no one returns...you know what to do,” she said, her gaze shifting up to the golem.

“Do try not to take too long. Things are growing tedious again. I might be inclined to take measures sooner rather than later.”

She laughed, Hawke glared suspiciously, turning it on her. It wasn't him that spoke, but Fen'Harel, curiously.

“What preparations have been made?”

“Preparations that were made long ago. Luckily they survived the intervening years,” she responded, nodding her head to the golem and then setting off towards the city. The rest followed, and the people watched them depart. “If we do not return, Kirkwall will burn, as deeply as possible. It should be enough to either severely damage the demon, or kill it altogether. At the very least, it will be vulnerable without its lair.”

“I suppose I should protest that,” Garrett chuckled, but with some strain behind the humor. She didn't think she'd heard a genuine laugh out of him yet, and that worried her. He'd changed. “But well, this is what they call last-ditch, isn't it?”

“An odd state of affairs when the first line of defense is also the last,” Fen'Harel mentioned, though she didn't feel as if it was a slight. Just a simple fact.

Garrett, however, was another matter.

“You didn't leave us much choice, Wolfie,” he sneered.

“I suggest you cease your attempts to antagonize me before we have even reached the city. I assure you, it will not end well for you,” Fen'Harel responded smoothly, but with an underlying tension to his voice.
It probably wouldn't do to slap the Champion of Kirkwall and the Dread Wolf on the back of their heads in front of everyone, would it? No, no. Probably not. But she thought about it, quite a lot, as they approached the city perched on, and built out of the massive slabs of stone overlooking the sea.

There was silence for a time, and she appreciated it, observing the menacing city as they approached it. Freedom kept flitting ahead, and then falling back, the restless spirit practically vibrating with its excitement. She wished she didn't have to take him, but she knew that was her protectiveness speaking. For all his annoyances, the spirit had become dear to her.

“So...” Hawke finally spoke again, less hostile this time, “how exactly are we going in?”

“This is Kirkwall, Garrett, you should know that better than anyone,” she replied placidly, not bothering to hide a spark of amusement. “How else? Smuggler's tunnels. I know of one that skirts close to another that comes out in the basement of an estate. Should be able to blast through an adjoining wall easily enough.”

“What estate, exactly?” his voice was tense, and for a moment she was amused before she remembered. Ah, of course. She'd forgotten that his home was there.

No doubt not quite ready to face it.

“Harimann's,” she reassured, and he relaxed, giving a small nod aside to her, “it will be unpleasant, and likely spidery, but it's the quickest route. The Chantry will be safe, and we can rest there.”

She was grateful that neither of them seemed to have anything further to say as the way grew more difficult, terrain uneven and convoluted. She'd rather concentrate on walking than keeping the peace.

Shattered stone and gravel made the going slow, as she would rather not call attention by smoothing it. Fen'harel seemed to think much the same as her. No magic disturbed the landscape, to draw demons to their position.

The whispers began just outside of the city limits, little more than a distracting tug at the edges of the mind. She saw Garrett flinch when he recognized it, and found that somewhat relieving. At least he noticed it was happening, rather than letting it insinuate itself. None of them said anything, at least not at first, as she found the tunnel she'd marked with a hint of magic, still there, but faded.

As they struggled their way through the narrow passage, into the city, the whispers only grew.

In the dusty, abandoned basement of the estate, she finally heard it clearly for the first time.

You can trust no one, and no one can trust you.

“No shit,” she murmured idly under her breath in the common tongue, getting an odd look sidelong from Fen'Harel as he straightened up and started brushing dust from his armor, “just chatting with the resident fear demon. He's not very subtle.”

“No, but it is persistent,” the Dread Wolf agreed mildly, his gaze turning down and aside as Garrett forced his way up the half-rotted ladder and clambered out of the passage. The look was significant.

“I know,” she replied with a faint sigh, turning to help Hawke up with a clasp of his forearm, “I know. Let's get to the Chantry, please.”

“Why are you so sure it's safe?” Hawke asked her as he straightened, not bothering to clean himself off as they pushed their way out of the basement. And then he stalled, at the sight that greeted them. “Oh. Shit.”
She forced the door open as wide as it would go and slid out into the abandoned kitchens, avoiding a crystalline intrusion that glittered under the light cast by the spirits. Red. Dark, bloody red. She could hear the song, just one more bit of noise for her crowded head, and she grimaced as she slid past it.

It was always a saddening thing, to witness the evidence of the sickness the entire world was steeped in. She regretted their infection, greatly, but for all of her knowledge gained, from both this world and the one discarded, she did not know how to cure a blighted Titan.

If only the dwarves would communicate.

Just one more thing wrong with this world, one more battle she did not know how to fight.

“Not surprised, are you?” She asked Hawke, and he grunted heavily. “We’ll get it cleaned up. Not as easy as a giant spider infestation, but blighted lyrium can be fought back, if you know how.”

“Why are you not surprised by this? Why is this something you’re expecting?” Hawke asked accusingly, as they navigated their way out of the manor.

“Try to focus,” Fen’Harel suggested, with surprising sharpness, “you are leaving footholds for the demon in your mind, Champion.”

Hawke glowered, but subsided quickly enough, clamping his mouth closed as they pushed their way out into the street. Out of close quarters, the lyrium song was more muted, but there was still plenty of the stuff around. Her lips pursed in distaste, and she shared a brief sidelong look with Fen’Harel. He nodded, just a little, and she returned it.

This would have to be dealt with, immediately after the demon. They couldn’t risk it spreading out of the city, the stuff was insidious. When the lyrium song faded, the demon returned, twisting itself into her thoughts. She could separate it, of course, she had quite a bit of practice separating whispers from her own mind, but it lingered.

“It will only grow stronger, as it becomes accustomed to our thoughts and minds, as it sifts through our memories,” Fen’Harel reminded as they began walking through the suspiciously empty streets.

No demons. She had expected demons. Had they really all vacated the city? It was a bit much to hope. The distraction and battle would have helped fend off the paranoia, and the lack of it left her worried. Her gaze shifted to Hawke, and he offered a tense smile as he caught her looking. She returned it, but her attention was focused on his eyes.

It was not lost on her that her distrust of his control was just another weakness for the demon to claw its way into. That alone might be reason enough not to take him. She was mulling over that thought as they passed through an archway, and the main thoroughfare of Hightown was laid out before them, grand stairways leading to the chantry at the very top.

“What...what is it that is here?” Fen’Harel asked her, as they took in the sight. She had no answer for him, but a brilliant smile of relief.

She could feel her heart soaring, pushing back the song of the blighted lyrium, the pernicious whispers of paranoia. Spread out in a circle, the chantry was surrounded by a field of unblighted, pure lyrium, shimmering in the late afternoon light.

The view was staggeringly beautiful in a cruel, stark way, spikes of scarlet crystal giving abruptly away to azure. The transition started halfway up the nearest etched stone stairwell, breaking through cracks in the stone. It was like an invisible line had been drawn, so much so that some of the lyrium crystals were split down the center, half blighted, half pure. Crossing past the boundary was like
feeling clean air again in the lungs on the side of a mountain, making the head light, dispelling the
demon's song. She breathed in sharply, a smile crossing her lips.

“Still here,” she breathed, and then laughed, feeling free for the first time in ages. One less worry on
her shoulders, in a world full of them.

He was still here. Still safe.

They both watched her with some consternation as she flew up the steps and crossed the landing,
Freedom and Justice following her without hesitation, the latter taking a position to the left of the
doors, guarding. The Chantry was atop it all, a sight that absolutely no one but her would understand.

No one else had seen what had become of it before. One more thing she had saved. A tally mark
against her guilt for those she had not.

Hawke followed after a moment to take in the sight, Fen'Harel less assuredly. The Kirkwall chantry
had always been intimidating, the massive statue of Andraste looming in a way just short of
menacing. Somehow it didn't destroy the serenity of the space, lit by blue flames that barely cast
light, not melting the dust-covered candles. She slowed as she passed over the threshold, feeling the
peace wash over her.

He had known they were coming, of course he had. This was his sanctuary, after all. It had been a
small hope that he would survive, grow and thrive. The seeds had been planted when she had left
with Freedom, and to see it come to fruition brought joy to her heart. One more thing worth saving in
Kirkwall.

Each victory made her feel more assured of the choices made, eased the burden of regret.

He knelt before the statue as he had so many times in life, pale blue and firm in figure, no wavering
at the edges. It had been the echoes he had left behind that had made this spirit possible. It pleased
her to see that the spirit respected that enough to honor his memory in its form. It was not him, of
course, but yet it was, like a child was its father.

A spirit born from a man's greatest virtue.

“Sebastian?” Hawke's voice echoed in shock, blue-tinged memories of flame flickering as he came to
a stop just past the door. “I...I saw him die...”

“No, it's not him. Not...really,” she remarked, glancing over her shoulder with a faint smile. “Faith.”

“A spirit of Faith? Here?” Fen'Harel's voice was just as surprised, but for reasons much less personal.
“How could such a thing survive?”

The spirit rose slowly from its benediction, turning to face them. His eyes were much the same shade
as they had been, but lit with luminescence. Faith turned a smile upon her, and she returned it, relief
making it all the more warm.

“Faith is a stubborn thing, my friend,” the spirit said, brogue thick and surprisingly human, for all of
its insubstantial form. It did not echo, as their voices did around the empty, abandoned Chantry.
“Especially Faith that comes at great cost. Blessings be upon you all, you are welcome here in this
place of sanctuary.”

“Thank you,” she told the spirit with an incline of her head, and then turned her attention sidelong to
Fen'Harel, “there was a great deal of...unbound and broken energy, once the people of Kirkwall had
fought their way free of the city. I was concerned, of course. Nothing good would have grown from
“Ah. Of course,” his comprehension was clear, but she kept talking, for Hawke's sake.

The Champion was still looking rather spooked. She supposed she should have warned him, but she didn't know the spirit would have chosen to take on his form. A fitting, if somewhat unnerving thing.

“The spirit was already here, just barely. Like a sapling just pushing through the soil. It likely would have been destroyed, corrupted when the city was abandoned.”

Her gaze turned back, as Freedom wandered past to explore, sending dust swirling up. “But I ah...took the energy left behind, and I suppose you could say I forced it to grow. Fed every bit of it I could into the spirit, in the hope that it would survive.”

“And I did. And I will,” Faith remarked, before wandering up the stairs, slow and methodical, rather than Freedom's flitting meandering, “for the forces that beset this poor and blighted city only make me stronger. Faith that cannot stand being tested is not true faith at all. True faith perseveres, and grows from adversity.”

“...Well, he's still preachy,” Hawke murmured under his breath, and then raked fingers through his silver-streaked hair, “Varric's going to love this one. I...ah...gonna need a minute here.”

“Of course,” she assured, stepping in and leaving him behind at the doorway, Fen'Harel following. “It relieves me, a great deal, that I was able to save something.”

“A remarkably tenacious spirit,” he mused, but her gaze was fixed on the statue now.

Gazing into its face, she approached, the ghostly blue flames casting strange shadows that softened the edges of it. Andraste. As always, that kinship between them was there. If she had her way, every single one of these images would have been destroyed. *Free her.* But the humans needed her yet, just as she was needed by her people.

Such an unfair thing.

Such cruel burdens the world placed upon their shoulders, that not even death could free Andraste from them. Not even Uthenere had saved Fen'harel, they had forgotten his face, but not the lies that had made him into the enemy of her people. Would she, too, one day be trapped much like this? Carved in stone, made an icon of for worship...or, like him, to be reviled?

“Love, betrayal, sacrifice. The oldest stories always seem to repeat, don't they?” she sighed, suddenly weary.

Would it repeat again? It had in the other world, after all. Betrayal upon betrayal, until there was not a single clean pair of hands to be found. Guilt, regrets, pain and suffering inflicted upon each other in the name of necessity.

Had she changed enough this time to prevent it?

“Sometimes I wonder how much you know,” Fen'Harel said from behind her, having paused as she wandered on. She was grateful, standing shoulder to shoulder with him was not what she wanted.

The wolf at her back was preferable.

“More than you think I do,” she admitted, smiling to herself, “more than you've considered I might.”
“How?”

The simple word hung in the air, layers of nuance behind it. She knew that none of the spirits had given him what he wanted about her. It's what he wanted to know, wasn't it? How had she found the knowledge and power to set her up as his equal? It should be impossible for her, after all. She was only a Dalish elf, not an ancient Elvhen. Not born from a spirit, but from a mortal mother.

“Where are the Evanuris, Fen'Harel?” she replied, simply. Knowledge for knowledge, and a bargain she knew he would not accept.

“I cannot tell you that,” he said, resignation in his sonorous voice, “you know that I will not.”

“Mhm,” she agreed simply, and then turned to wander up the stairs, leaving him there as she followed after Faith, “rest while you can. This will not be a pleasant trip.”

Here the whispers did not follow, and the mind could rest easily. The vibrant spirit waited for her at the top of the stairs, and she slowly went to meet him, leaving behind the Champion and the Wolf to their contemplation.

“There is more than you realize beneath, Lady. Something cleverer, and older than that which you seek to kill,” Faith told her, as they paced along. “and it stalks the streets now, it drove the demons out. But I think that you already suspected as much, did you not?”

“I did. Will you tell me what? Is it the Magister? The fear demon?” she inquired hopefully, as they turned into an antechamber. Walls blackened by smoke, they both gazed down upon the funeral pyre, her arms clasping behind her back.

Respect held them in silence for a time, her head lowered, Faith's chin lifted unwaveringly. They had little time once to lay out the sisters and the Grand Cleric properly. When the city was retaken, perhaps their ashes could be handled more appropriately.

Finally Faith stepped forward, and she raised her head again.

“I will not, no. It is not your trial to face. Keep your faith in him, Lady. Someone must, for I cannot promise his own will hold through what is to come.”

The spirit knelt, lifting a dusty bow from the floor, its translucent fingers curling around the white leather grip.

She turned as the spirit offered it to her, hesitant to accept it. Her eyes roved over the winged curve of it as it settled into her palms, uncertainty lingering as she turned her gaze up to meet the spirit's.

“The bow of Starkhaven does not belong forgotten on a Chantry floor, my Lady,” Faith told her, lifting its own hands away, leaving it to her, “I do not think the Champion will begrudge you the use of it, will he?”

“No, I don't suppose so. What's the point in a weapon if it's not used?” the sigh came from behind her, and she turned to Garrett, offering a faintly sympathetic smile. “Got a feeling this is going to be even rougher than I anticipated.”

Searching, her gaze shifted over his face, lips tightening. Could he handle it? He'd seemed to do all right on the way in, but it was only going to get worse, wasn't it? Some of her thoughts must have shown on her face, as his eyes hardened, a shift of his jaw and a lift of his chin firming his countenance.
"No. You're not leaving me here and going alone with that bastard. He'll turn on you. Don't even pretend you weren't thinking it."

She smiled wryly as he spoke, wiping dust from the length of the bow, gaze falling down to it. For a moment she only gathered her thoughts, considering every aspect of it. His survival was far too important, politically. Politically and for the city's survival. They needed him to rebuild. Such a cold way to do things, but it had to be done. She didn't want him angry with her, of course, but she knew the extent of his anger. If it had been before his husband had died...she would trust him.

Now, though, he was far too angry to be trusted. No, not now.

_He'll turn on you._

Except it wouldn't be Fen'harel that turned on them, would it?

Her chin lifted again, meeting his gaze as she smiled slowly, apologetically. She held the stare until his eyes rolled up in his head, a small breath escaping as if he'd meant to protest and failed.

"I'm sorry, Garrett," she finally replied, speaking even as he folded up and hit the floor, a hint of magic ensuring he settled comfortably, "you can be angry with me later."

"Was that truly necessary?"

More eavesdropping, it seemed. Her lips pursed into a hint of a dead smile, as she turned the rest of the way to face Fen'Harel. Freedom was with him, displeased, but she couldn't fault him. He didn't understand things like this, it wasn't in his nature.

"Perhaps not. But his survival is far more important than his aid, or his feelings about the matter," she said and then paused. She turned her gaze back to the bow, stroking fingers over the wood. "His emotions are too unstable right now. We wouldn't be able to get much further before he tried to kill you."

"And you know this because..." Fen'Harel began, expectantly.

It amused her, in a cold, flat sort of way. It was not that he cared for the Champion, but he was still hunting for her motivations as if they were blood on the snow. Something to track. She wouldn't tell him, so he would hunt. Turn about was fair play, she supposed. She'd hunted him once, after all.

"Because his husband died only three months ago, Fen'Harel. Because his family was slaughtered in the streets when the veil fell. Because Garrett Hawke has seen more suffering than any man should be allowed to bear, and all it would take is the right word whispered at a moment of weakness for him to snap."

She meant to keep her voice even, but she could not. It was tense, sliding from neutral to cold, every word crisp and hard. "All of this suffering could be firmly placed upon your shoulders, as it has lacked a target for far, far too long. He is my friend. I do not have many. It does not please me to do this, but I have made too many difficult decisions to falter from this one now, so kindly do NOT question me further!"

It was unfair of her to take this out on him, but she couldn't help it, not now. The last thing she wanted to do is walk into this alone with him. It hurt, a wound she hadn't let herself heal from, still raw and throbbing. She kept ripping it open as if afraid it would scar, and now she was paying the price. She wanted Hawke at her back, she did.

More than anything...but it was like releasing a starving hound from captivity and hoping it would
not tear out her throat.

“I will have what peace I can,” she finally finished, into the silence left by her pronouncement, “with as little death, and as little suffering as possible, for as many people as I can. Even if that means I have to make myself an enemy to my friends. You know how to leave the city, should you so choose.”

“I wonder that you trust me, and not your friends,” his response was cool, and she could not look at his face to see his expression.

Gently she slung the unstrung bow over her shoulder, finding a strap there to fasten it into place. Her fingers moved with the ease of practice, despite the unfamiliar weapon. The weight was reassuring.

“I trust Garrett with my life, Fen’Harel. I do not trust him with yours. It is a vastly different thing.”

The other part of the question she left hanging in the air, moving to arrange Hawke more comfortably, and then turning for the door. “I am feeling sufficiently rested. Night or day, it does not matter, so let us depart now if you feel well enough to.”

“As you wish,” he said, slightly confused, which she could not blame him for. “We can leave now, if you prefer.”

Calm. She had to be calm. With any luck, they would be under siege the entire time, and it would leave no time for contemplation. For the second time in her life, she would be grateful for demons to appear.

The fact that she found them preferable to his company was not a thought without its humor, but she didn't dare voice it.

For some reason, she thought he might not appreciate the joke.

“Then let us be on our way,” she decided, bowing her head to Faith and turning for the stairs. “Thank you, Faith. Please watch over Hawke.”

“May you overcome all obstacles in your way,” Faith replied, thickly accented voice calm despite the altercation he had just witnessed, the words following them as they departed, “no night is so dark that light cannot drive back the shadows, so long as you remain steadfast. Remember your purpose and hold to your ideals, for what lies ahead will test them both.”

“Hawke was right,” Freedom whispered in her ear as she trudged down the stairs, “he is a bit preachy!”

The small laugh that escaped, startled from her lips was as bitter and pained as it was humorous, the spirit bright in the corner of her eye.

“Sometimes we need preaching to, da’vhenan,” she told him calmly, throttling back the mixed emotions that made her chest throb, “lest we forget things we ought to remember.”

As they turned back out to greet the corrupted city, Justice meeting them at the door, she wondered what precisely Fen’Harel thought about all of this. He had been so quiet, and was silent again now, pacing behind and to her left with his hands clasped behind his back.

It had not escaped her notice that her terror of speaking to him, letting him in even the smallest bit had been twisting them up together in some sort of enigmatic dance. How else could she describe it? He was understandably intrigued, and she was frantically pushing him away with both hands...and
only making it worse. Was she doing it on purpose? She really, truly hoped not. There was no time for self-sabotage.

He was not the man she loved, she couldn’t forget that.

The man she loved was dead.

“I wonder that you haven’t taken me by the shoulders, shaken me violently, and asked me what the hell is wrong with me,” she admitted, as they approached the limits of Faith's reach.

“It has been considered,” he finally replied, voice still kept neutral.

Her laugh wasn't quite so bitter, as they headed into Lowtown.
Forbidden One

Solas had known the instant that he stepped into this city that it had been the right choice. There was something here, something familiar and wholly unexpected. Faith's words in the chantry had only confirmed it. He had a feeling the spirit had been fully aware he'd overheard him, though the Lady had not been. What awaited him, he could not yet say, but he found it curious that Faith had told the Lady to support him...and she had not contested it.

*Keep your faith in him.*

The words echoed in his mind as he followed her down the many stairs that this city seemed comprised of, the song of blighted lyrium in the air. Why? Why did she have faith in him at all? And why so much so that she would leave behind her apparent friend and travel with him instead? It wasn't flattering himself to acknowledge he was more powerful than the Champion, of course, but she had claimed she intended to go alone at one point.

She was driving him completely mad.

Every single interaction, every single conversation brought up more and more questions, and never an answer. Layers upon layers of them, as if the closer he came to her, the more remote she grew. Still, the hint of an edge he could feel at times, as if he could just reach out and find a single thread that would unravel it all. It left him guessing. Wondering.

And utterly fascinated.

Not even the occasional hostility was dissuading him now, not that he saw the protectiveness it came from. That was it, wasn't it? There was something intensely protective about her, and it extended to everything. Her people, the spirits, even the humans and this city. Even...even him, apparently. It all made some strange sense, pieces snapping into place. Her testing of him, prodding, challenging, even to apparently bullying him into a 'second chance' she had decided he needed.

She was trying to protect him.

Or, at least, protect his people. Perhaps that was the answer after all. She had decided the Elvhen needed him, so she was trying to...change him? That was a line of thought he didn't particularly care for, and it didn't quite fit, either. Certainly changing her people's perception of him had...consequences, and positive ones in this case, but he could not imagine she knew what she was doing, could she?

It had to be his people. She was, after all, not so subtly letting her people fraternize with his, as they'd touched on before. That still needed discussing, but not quite yet.

He felt as if he'd made some progress in puzzling her out, and that was a victory all its own.

“That's Varric's tavern,” she declared abruptly, speaking for the first time as they passed through a narrow alley into a more open street, pointing with the flat of her hand at a half-ruined building. “The storyteller. If you recall him.”

“I believe I do,” he replied, keeping the uncertainty from his voice as he followed her to the left. Why start a conversation now? “The dwarf, is that correct?”

He wasn't quite sure what to think of the dwarves, in their current state, but they had been keeping to themselves. There were other, far more pressing matters to attend to, after all. In time, it would be
dealt with, when the world was more stable. Justice paused a moment, and then strode ahead again, scouting the way.

“Mmh. The human children are doing excellently, by the way. They learn and grow well, they have neatly insinuated themselves into clans and families.”

There was no particular inflection to her words, and her face was hidden from him. Testing his reaction, no doubt, while denying him hers.

“I have had reports,” he agreed neutrally, not bothering to hide the fact. His words only made her laugh, after all, with a hint of cheerful mockery. Perhaps he shouldn't be annoyed, but he was, “Do you take any of this with any degree of seriousness, I wonder?”

It was a valid question, in his opinion. From the start, negotiations had always been brief and lacking in niceties, though he had to admit she had always made time for them even in the midst of war. But now she had gone beyond terseness and into deliberately ignoring conventions and political expectations.

“What, spying and politics?”

There was teasing in her voice, but good natured this time. A wholly unexpected thing. So different from her usual bland, distant tones. This was...free. And yet, he had a feeling that if she were looking at him it would not be. She still would not look at him when they spoke.

“No particularly, no. I see it as a means to an end, it bores and irritates me.”

Well, that was unexpected. They were silenced for a time, as turning another corner brought them to a pile of cracked and tumbled skulls with a rather tenacious despair demon hovering over them, already fighting Justice. The battle did not take long, she didn't even bother to draw her bow. It was a strange thing, fighting with her, she had the oddest ability to anticipate him. A seasoned warrior, he supposed, which fit what he knew of her.

“I wonder that you do it so well, then,” he finally concluded, as she stepped forward through the demon's last screech to examine the skulls. “Something amiss?”

“Children,” she sighed, carefully picking up a skull and turning it over, archery glove-clad hands delicate. Freedom was at her elbow then, making a small mournful noise of its own. “Poor things.”

Frowning, he fell into silence as she gazed into the eye sockets of the skull a moment, and then gently set it back down on the pile. Shaking her head, she continued on, expression more somber again as they headed into Darktown.

If he had found Lowtown unpleasant, well...it was only getting worse. The filth and disrepair seemed older than the ruin that the veil falling had brought. An old place, a sad place. It was no wonder paranoia had grown here.

“Speaking of children, Salla is doing a remarkably good job, but if you'd like to have her change clans to keep an eye on me, I plan to go travel with Ralaferin for a time. They've lost a few hunters, so it might be a good excuse,” she offered over her shoulder, not bothering to hide the bite of gentle sarcasm in her voice. “She's a lovely girl. A little bit too excited to spy, though.”

“She is young,” he allowed, unable to help the smile and slight shake of his head despite their surroundings, “and she seemed quite convinced she could insinuate herself on her own, from my reports. I apologize, I only discovered she’d been sent after the fact, and Felassan seemed quite certain you would not be offended.”
“Oh, by all means. He did send me a letter when I noticed her and asked what was afoot. As it stands, I wouldn't want to ruin her fun. Let her figure it out on her own,” the Lady allowed graciously, with a dip of her head and an impish lilt, “though Orana was quite incensed that she stole some of my sweets when she was going through my letters.”

“I take it you have...noticed the issues with Clan Raleferin, then?” he asked, leaving the rest of that information to stew for now. She didn't seem particularly upset, after all, though he wasn't certain what he thought of her communicating with Felassan directly, when she would not with him. “I'd intended to bring it up.”

“Yes, I'm sorry. Ralaferin has been unsettled, it is entirely my fault for not calming things. Hmmh. I suppose that's not a political enough way to say it, is it?”

The apology was genuine, and it stood alone for a time until they'd turned a corner and surveyed the way ahead. Justice could faintly be seen, a glow as it went down an alley. He considered her words, and then the response he would be expected to make. Polite, political, slightly censuring. He had no desire to.

“I do not regret the loss of formality. I would prefer that we be able to talk to one another. Especially in a situation such as this.”

He shouldn't say it, not even now, but it was impossible to silence his curiosity unless he tried to wriggle this crack in the wall between them a little wider. Either she would shut him out, or he would find some questions answered.

“I hadn't anticipated the dragons pushing them across your borders. I should have, mind you, but I didn't. I'll get them cleaned out,” her response was almost incongruous, and a little stiff, before she sighed and relented, answering him properly, “and I...yes, I know. That rests upon me. It's...difficult for me to speak to you.”

“And asking why would...”

“Get you absolutely nothing,” she finished, wryly, “as a Lady must have some secrets, Fen'Harel, and this one most of all.”

“Lady, you are nothing but secrets,” he said, with a feeling the small barb might work. He was rewarded with her laughter again.

It was a reward he was beginning to enjoy, she had a particularly lovely laugh, light and unabashedly earthy. The sort that demanded freedom, and would not be restrained demurely behind a hand. The kind that would cascade low in the back of her throat when she tumbled back against the pillows. Head arching back, throat bared as his...

He stopped, frowning at the sudden betrayal of his own mind and body, forehead furrowing.

“Did you feel that?” the Lady asked, and a surge of relief overtook him. Good. It wasn't just him getting inappropriately...excited. “Interesting. Well, Faith said there was something else here. It's quite subtle, isn't it?”

“Certainly more so than the paranoia,” he agreed, forcing his voice as neutral as possible. Freedom had returned from its wanderings, and it was giggling. Of course it was. “Freedom...”

“It's funny!” the spirit protested mirthfully, but subsided at the Lady's exasperated sigh. “Sorry, mother. But it is. Not her, I mean, she's awful. But the things it put in your h...”
“Yes, thank you, Freedom,” the Lady snapped, his own embarrassment fading as she realized she was feeling much the same.

Now he was curious just what had been going on in her head. He tried not to be, as that was a line of thought that couldn't end well. It was simply...no, no. He absolutely could not give it any more purchase in his mind. It wasn't difficult to tell what precisely it was...but it felt familiar, and so that meant who, and not merely what.

“Wait, her? Da’vhenan, do you know this spirit?” the Lady asked, thankfully drawing him out of his own dangerous mental meanderings.

“Not a spirit. Worse, worse, worse. Old, very very old,” Freedom contradicted, penitently bringing up a shield around both of them, silvery and cool, pushing away some of the whispers.

Between paranoia, blight, and this new intrusion, it was getting a bit overwhelming. The spirit's aid was a welcome relief.

“Is it possible to dispense with the riddles, please? I know. I know it is difficult, but we...” she began, only to stop short as the next set of stairs brought them face to face with a sudden surge of energy, rapidly fading.

A sudden burst of violence across the senses, unexpected.

Pale blue, it sparked like lightning as the last remnants of it grounded and flickered out. There was no time to exclaim, no time to mourn, as they both attempted to reach for the last remains of Justice before it shattered completely, magic surging.

They were too late. He dropped his attempts, but she did not.

“Shit!” she cursed, sinking to her knees, the explosion of rage barely trembling the ground before she pushed it back in, hands trembling.

She dragged every iota of the shattered spirit she could find, as they attempted to escape. Even Freedom was silent, wavering a little at the edges from the shock they'd just been given. Her voice was strained, angry, nearly a shout in her panicked frustration, “Freedom! What. Is. It?”

The question was answered quickly, by an unfamiliar voice. Echoing, oddly-layered, but nevertheless soft and mellifluous. The pleasant timbre could not hide the corruption underneath.

“You should know better than to yell. Children don't learn if you shout at them.”

A laugh in the air, delicate and sweet, followed by a soft hiss, a little 'tsk', “You're not a very good mother, are you? Such a shame, you've always wanted a big family.”

Familiar. It was familiar despite being unfamiliar, the thing that had been tugging at him since they'd walked into this city. Except...different. The woman who wandered out of a nearby alley looked exactly the same as when he'd seen her last, however, so very long ago. Before she'd been forcibly torn from her body and had been banished with the others.

Tall, slim, with vibrantly sunset orange eyes, she smiled a gentle smile and extended her hands to him in a gracious gesture. Long, graceful hands, beautiful until one realized that they moved like the legs of a spider. Just the right hint of wrongness to blight the entire illusion.

“Solas, my dear friend,” she murmured, and he damned the instinctive half step forward, “it's been far too long.”
“I would greet you as well, if I knew to whom I was speaking.”

Neutral, he must stay neutral. She gave him a hurt look, but he maintained his distance in both voice and posture.

“All things change in time, after all, and you always did enjoy reinvention.”

Giving a sigh, she half turned away, one hand sliding up the back of her neck, lips pursing together. Strands of dark hair slid languidly from between her fingers as she raked them through, eyes turning skyward. He could feel the surge of magic behind him as the Lady attempted to corral and contain the fragments of Justice, struggling as he was left to face the demon alone.

That's what she was now. Through a choice of her own, he reminded himself, despite the horrors that had been visited upon her once. Product of the first rebellion.

“I suppose it is not any wonder that you've chosen not to trust me,” she breathed, and he felt the first hints of her power against him, ancient and strong. She'd been hoarding it for some time, it seemed. “Xebenkeck will do as well as any other name, if you must have one. I've become...fond of it.”

“A fitting name for a demon, I suppose,” he allowed, and she laughed. It was then that he realized just how far she had fallen. It was not the laugh he remembered, breathless and childishly hidden behind a hand.

No, now she laughed like the Lady had, pulled out of his earlier musing. Did she even remember how on her own?

The stare that Xebenkeck turned on him when that thought crossed his mind was malevolent, before it went sweet and placid again.

“Demon is only a word for that which is stronger, Solas, you of all...people...know that.” The words spilled from her lips deliberately, one finger lifting to tap under the lower, drawing attention to her mouth as she spoke. “What is pride but knowing your own power, after all? Why should you be ashamed of that, my darling friend?”

“I wonder that you call me that, after all this time. Indeed, I find that I hardly...know you at all.” He responded, into the silence still from his companions.

He could feel the Lady's eyes on him, expectant. He would not look at her, would not draw attention to her. Even if his thoughts betrayed him. Perhaps she could save Justice.

“Oh, Solas,” the demon's voice scaled from a sigh to a laugh, though she seemed to have some trouble deciding now what it should sound like. He had, after all, disrupted her facade. “You have been alone for far too long. Do you really have to go rolling in the dirt with the animals to find companionship at all? My friend...you are not alone. You do not have to be.”

Just for a moment, her voice caught, something young, something wistful in it as their eyes met. Her smile tugged up at the corner, brows pulling in, and it was almost her. Almost the young, clever creature she had been once, before she'd destroyed it all. Before they'd abandoned the people who had needed them so much.

It would be on some level correct now to look back upon it and say that they had sat on the right, the righteous side of history. That their rejection of leadership, their turning their backs on those who would become the Evanuris was right. After all, look at what had happened, look at his own rebellion. But...he knew better.
It had not been righteousness or moral certitude that had led to their schism and downfall. It had been selfishness, and a disdain for those born through mortal means.

Selfishness that had lead to so many deaths.

“You are no better, destroyer of worlds. You always did take on more responsibility than you should,” Xebenkeck snapped, another tiny crack before she pushed it back again, forcing a smile that skittered across her lips.

His memory of who she had once been had faded at his revelation, and again she couldn't quite remember how to smile. He wondered if she even knew who she was, if he hadn't been there. She was in his mind, a desperate scavenger hunting for scraps of her self. Not out of any wistful remembrance, no, but to try and and find some foothold to lure him with.

And then she found it, the emptiness inside of him that called to what she was now.

“Solas...you're not alone...we...are still here. Lay down your burdens. You have sacrificed so much already, don't you deserve some peace?”

The wrongness slid away again at the beckoning pull her words gave him, and he didn't realize he'd stepped forward until he felt the weight of the Lady's silent regard fall upon him again.

“They're not your responsibility. They never were. Just shadows...don't you remember what I told you last time this happened?”

The question was arch, amused, and this time the hint of corruption didn't fade, but grew stronger. Spidery hands slid over his shoulders, warm, curling around the edges of his neck. “You never learn...but you have another chance. Remember what happened to the Evanuris when they wouldn't leave the animals behind, Solas? Remember what they became? Weak. Corrupt. They corrupt everything they touch. These animals destroy us. No matter what you call them, they all do. Elvhen, humans...your only mistake is assuming one kind is superior, when they are all nothing.”

Her lips were on his ear, words hissed and honeyed. Full of the corruption she was accusing others of so glibly.

“You know that is not true...” she whispered, still insinuating her body against his.

He couldn't lift his hands, as that would require choosing to touch her, and he knew that trying to push her away would be almost more dangerous than this. He just had to keep her occupied a little longer. His mind clear of his intent as best he could make it, she only grew bolder, voice more fractured as she reveled in her apparent victory.

“I am still as we were meant to be. The world you created was an abomination, that may be true, but all you have done is shackled yourself to something that never should have existed. You failed, my friend. Give up. They don't deserve your help, they never did. Look what they have done to you...”

He closed his eyes, and she sighed across his skin, slim arms enfolding him. It was the simple embrace that undid him, without even a hint of sensuality. He let out a heavy breath of his own, eyes closing as she pulled him in against her, holding him.

When was the last time anyone had touched him?

"Look at what they are doing to you both," the demon who had been his friend mourned in his ear, "and what they will do to her. You know it. Do you think they care what you want? You have taken their gods from them, and now they will take you...and her...as sacrifice."
Behind him, he could feel a shield snapping into place at last, securing what the Lady could save of the poor shredded spirit before it could fade into nothingness. It was a signal, and he dredged up the last of his restraint to finally fight back. It was difficult, but once the control snapped, he was free in an instant.

“No,” he finally replied, letting out a quiet sigh as the demon stiffened, “my choices have been made, and I will stand by them. Depart from this place. I am sorry that you were set on this path, but your choices are still your own, and I will not abide you lingering here.”

“You don’t get to refuse me, Solas,” the demon growled, and the web she had been weaving around him tightened, pinning him in place by more than his own will now, “don't worry. You’ll be much happier once you just accept it...”

It might have been enough...were he alone.

But he was not.

“I believe he said no.”

The Lady forced her voice calm and distant, keeping back the rage. It was there, fury both with herself and with the demon. She had failed. She had failed her friends, yet again. Poor Justice.

There was nothing she could do for him now, but turn her anger and power upon the creature who was to blame for this all.

Nails raked across Solas' armor as Xebenkeck was thrown back, hissing in pain as she flew threw the air and slammed into a wall. The crack of the impact was followed by an immediate lash of frost from the demon. With a frown, she deflected it away from the gathered remnants of Justice as the other spirit frantically tried to shield them.

“Petty,” the Lady declared scornfully, sparing a brief glance for Solas as he recovered from the full weight of the demon's power.

She was strong, but that was not shocking for a creature so ancient, and she had expended a great deal of it trying to trap him. It was no wonder he had been targeted, considering their apparent past acquainanceship. Which meant that if anyone was to defeat it, it would have to be her. The demon would have far too much difficulty finding her true weaknesses.

“For someone so old, you are truly, truly ignorant. Is that what you sacrifice, I wonder, by choosing not to change?”

“Hollow words, little sister, hollow words,” Xebenkeck laughed, orange eyes glowing with a malevolent light, “though you would know about sacrifice, wouldn't you? Perhaps the time has come for another one. Do you think there’s enough blood left in the world to undo what you have done?”

Little sister? That was more of an insult than all of the rest, really. Tightening her hand, she felt the crackle of power surge in her left arm, runes etched under the skin flickering to life, hidden under her flesh. Keep it distracted, she had to keep it distracted. Bridging the last of the distance as Xebenkeck struggled to free herself from the weight of magic and uneven rubble, she lifted her right hand and
wrapped it around the demon's throat, shoving her back against the wall.

Keep it struggling, keep it distracted.

“Please, go on,” she sneered at the demon, gazing into solidly colored eyes—disorienting, that, no emotion to read. “I wonder that you've stooped to mockery instead of finding my weaknesses to tug at. Or do you know it won't work on me? Or are you just that feeble?”

“Or perhaps I am just having a difficult time deciding. You want...so many things, little sister. It's like when you were a child at the Arlathven, poor baby sick with a tummy ache because you had to try...everything,” the demon purred, and gave a laugh as her fingers tightened, dimpling its neck. “Ah, a little game, then? I think not...as I said, you want...so much. Don't you?”

“Lady...”

The warning came from behind her, and she lifted up her free hand to Solas, still restraining the power building under her skin. Could he see it? She wasn't certain, it was well hidden.

“I let you fight your own battle, kindly leave me to do the same,” she replied, and then damned herself for a moment, realizing she'd been slipping all this time.

Fen'harel. Fen'harel, not Solas. It was not him.

“Are you certain about that? You can tell yourself that, but that is not what you want...” Xebenkeck murmured against her ear.

Damn him for being here. Damn him for being a weak point in her armor. She had thought herself stronger, thought herself invulnerable, but no. No, apparently his mere existence was enough for the fucking demon to find a way into her mind.

Fuck him.

Her hand was still around the demon's throat, but they were chest to chest now. Too many things, too many things on her mind, every time she tried to fix it, something else slipped through her fingers. Was she slipping even now? The surge of distrust, paranoia crept along her nerves, making her shiver violently.

"Fuck him? Is that what you want?” Xebenkeck asked her, a mockingly gleeful whisper against her ear.

Crude, demon. Crude.

She tried to keep the scorn in that thought, but Xebenkeck just laughed against her, a little throb of magic tingling up her nerves, warm and greedy.

“You want me to tell him, don't you? Then you can stop playing this game. Maybe I'll just invite him to join in...” the demon said, slowly lifting her voice, "so much unquenchable fire, yearning...we are so much alike..."

Relief flooded through her as the sudden surge of magic overtook her arm, crackling violet as the lyrium runes under her skin caught fire. She clenched her fist, and then released it, raising it as Xebenkeck's eyes widened.

It was probably a good time for a witty barb, but none were coming to mind, so she shoved her hand into the demon's chest and ripped out her heart instead. The lyrium-enhanced magic in her rebuilt
arm latched onto the core of the demon, dragging it into the heart as she twisted and jerked it out with a spatter of gore.

The explosion of power as the demon was severed from her ancient body washed over them, tainted with her nature, and she gritted her teeth and rode it out, eyes closing tightly.

The hand that had been fisted around her neck slammed into the wall as the body turned to ash and collapsed, bruising her knuckles. The pain felt good, though, it pushed back the whispers and doubts, and the lingering throb of desire. It was hardly the time for such things.

Or audience.

“Bitch,” she growled under her breath as the swell of power started to fade out, losing its coherence and purpose, drifting away on the currents.

The heart had turned to ash as well, but it left behind the demon's essence, a bright red-orange, swirling in her palm. The desire to tear it into fragments so small that the she would never reform was overwhelming. It was an impulse she'd happily indulge.

Straightening up, she clenched her fingers around the inert spirit, breath beginning to slow back to normal.

“Stop.”

She jerked away from the touch to her elbow, spinning around to face Solas...Fen'Harel. He looked about as good as she assumed she did right now, red-faced and flustered. Fighting a desire demon that old had been...interesting.

“Why? You want me to release her? I understand sentiment, Fen'harel, but she has been corrupt for a very, very long time. Do you really want to risk letting a spirit of desire that strong back out into the world? She'll take a body again the moment she has the power.” she forced her fingers to relax, but it was difficult. She had not felt so...violated in a long time.

“Do you, or do you not believe in second chances, Lady?” he replied, and her eyes narrowed. “I simply don't wish for you to do something...you will regret out of anger. They are your principles, not mine.”

“Fuck,” she sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. She was breathing in slowly when the small cry of frustration from Freedom came.

“M-mother, I'm sorry...he wants to go, I can't...I shouldn't hold him, I can't. It's too hard!”

Cursing herself, she turned away from Fen'Harel and ran to the spirit where he knelt next to the tendrils of blue-white light that were all that was left of Justice. Enough, she could hope, to reform him. It had been wrong to ask Freedom to hold him, it went against his nature, but she'd had no choice.

“I'm sorry, da'len, I'm sorry,” she soothed the unhappy spirit, immediately taking over the shield so he could withdraw. A hint of corruption there, a slight darkening of the silvery light like a damaged mirror. Idiot. How could she have done that to him? “I'm so sorry, da'len. Revas, you will be fine.”

The strong currents of ambient magic faded for a moment as the spirit absorbed it, color brightening just a little, though some darkness remained. He said nothing, just flitted away, disappearing between two buildings, wounded and retreating. Her poor little heart. She hadn't even stopped to think, had she?
“He will return when he is ready,” Fen'harel remarked, and she laughed bitterly and turned back to the shards of Justice, “and I doubt there will be any lasting harm.”

“Comforting me? I assure you, any guilt I feel was earned. Justice...poor Justice,” she said gently, reaching out her free hand to slip through the shield she'd left, soft blue-white magic eddying around a fingertip for a moment.

“It...he is gone, I fear. There is not enough left. Perhaps if you release him, something may grow in time,” Solas offered, and she sighed again, shaking her head.

“I made a promise. I promised I would bring him home,” her voice was weak, she knew it was, but it strengthened as a hint of an idea began to form, “but you are right. There is not enough of Justice left for him to retain his self. But...there is enough left for...something else.”

She didn't give him time to protest or argue, because she knew he would. Oh, she knew he would. Before she could second-guess herself either, she thrust her other hand into the shield as well, pouring power in to strengthen it. Desire struggled in her fingers as she sunk them in, twisting and tearing, and finally fracturing the spirit.

Power crackled down her fingertips, lyrium in her bones burning, but she held on as the spirit expanded, not letting it slip away, forget itself. Not too far, not too far. She wasn't going to murder it, after all, Solas was right. She would just give it a second chance...to be something else.

And perhaps find some atonement.

Magic draining freely from her, she began forcing all the broken pieces back together, fragments of Justice twisting up with Desire now. A strange puzzle, but they melted together slowly, her fingertips trembling as she focused. Letting out a slow breath, she made her mind serene, blank, not letting anything spill into the newly-born spirit.

She would not tell it what to be. It would decide for itself.

“Andaran atish'an,” she whispered to it, as it swirled together at last, the spirit that was all the two had been, now one.

Carefully pulling her hands back out of the shield, she collapsed onto her rear end, letting out a long, exhausted sigh. She hadn't known she could do that. How lucky for her that it'd worked out. Lifting her chin, she gazed up into the face glaring down at her. He was angry, she could tell in the line of his jaw, but also relieved.

She'd solved the problem, after all.

“That was utterly reckless. You could have killed both spirits! Did you even stop to think for a moment...” he rebuked her, but stalled as she lifted a finger to her lips.

“Shh. You'll wake the baby,” she told him, and then started laughing as his glare turned harder, weariness and relief mixing together in a sort of idiotic giddiness.

His irritated sigh only made her laugh harder, shoulders shaking lightly, “I'm sorry...but a decision...had to be made...”

It was hard to talk between the little shudders of mirth, even if the conversation was serious. She was still laughing when he gave in grudgingly and chuckled, and the slight intake of breath at the end was so Solas, and she...
The laughter died, cold and hard, and panic set in. She thrust it back, head jerking down and away from him, every ounce of friendliness in the air dying all at once. She pushed up to sit on her heels, gaze fixed on the spirit now, distorted by the shield as it struggled with itself.

“It will survive. That is what matters. You were right, killing her would have been wrong. I only hope she takes the second chance that has been given. By the time we return, it should be ready to join us.”

She couldn't look at him to see his reaction to her sudden change in attitude, rising to her feet with a thump of her bow against her back.

“I...” he began, and then stopped, for which she was grateful, “of course. We should be moving on.”

“We should,” she agreed stiffly, gazing at the newly-formed spirit for a moment longer, before sighing and turning, gesturing with a hand, “well, there should still be an entrance to the sewers over there that slopes down fairly quickly. After that, I'm afraid my knowledge is limited. We'll be in unknown territory from then on.

“I doubt we will encounter any difficulty tracking it,” Fen'harel kept his voice more casual now, but she wouldn't let him draw her out again.

She couldn't.

Instead of responding, she led the way with her mind reciting over and over, trying to drown out the whispers of paranoia. It was difficult, she could feel them digging themselves deeper and deeper into her mind. It knew her now, which meant it was at its most dangerous.


*You can't let him in, he'll just hurt you again.*

Was it her thought, or the demon's?

Or both?
The Heart of Kirkwall

Too many people. Too many people know too much. Sooner or later, it's all going to spill out. Measures will have to be taken. You've worked hard for much too long, you cannot let yourself fail again. They're whispering your secrets...

“Mother!”

Sharp, penetrating the haze, and she stopped, lifting a hand to her forehead as Freedom pressed against it, a faint contact that he made her feel with a hint of magic. Her mind started to clear, just a little.

“It's only me, and you know I'm safe. You know I can't say anything. Remember? We made sure...”

Her fingers sunk through the spirit's, eyes fluttering back open again as her mind untwisted from the whispers. Faintly through him, she could see Fen'Harel watching them, something wary and searching on his face. She straightened her shoulders, and then nodded to Freedom.

“Poor thing must be bored, with no one else to prey on,” she remarked with a deliberately light tone, offering the spirit a smile before heading down the battered, creaking wooden stairs.

Down, ever downwards, they'd left the remains of sad sewer encampments behind. They followed the power, but they also followed the slight indentations of the floor, the channels. Ever deeper, etched into the stone for the blood to flow.

She knew him too well, he wouldn't be able to let Freedom's words go.

“Cannot say anything?”

Sharp, just a little shard of ice in his voice.

They were both on edge now, as sewers gave way to more untouched tunnels, accessed through a narrow, forgotten doorway. She recognized the stonework. Old Tevinter. Simpler than the places she remembered, like the ornate temple of Dumat, but plenty of familiar shapes and angles.

“It was my choice,” Freedom insisted, a faint sigh escaping her lips. He meant well, he did, but this was not going to go pleasantly. “I am not good at keeping secrets!”

“We are all a bit unsettled. This is not the t...” she began to plead.

“You put a spirit under a geas?! And a spirit of Freedom, of all things! The absolute last...” Fen'Harel interrupted her, and she let out another heavy breath, “it is no wonder it was so easily corrupted! I wonder that it hasn't been already!”

“I'm not corrupted! I'm fine now,” Freedom protested, angrily, “it was my choice, I made it myself!”

She kept walking, she couldn't stop, not now. There was a wall ahead, but she could feel an even older corridor behind it, the call of magic from below singing through the stones. The wall crumbled under the force of her fist, but she kept it controlled, refusing to let her irritation shake the foundations and endanger the tunnel.

You knew all along that he wouldn't change. He won't, he wouldn't. This is only going to get worse, you're going to have to kill him sooner or later...before he kills you...
“You have no way to comprehend the enormity of that choice! The responsibility was hers, to ensure that the right decision for your safety was made,” Fen’Harel retorted angrily. He was so vibrant in his anger, as he was not in other moods. Losing control as much as her. This was...dangerous. “Instead she decided that somehow the secrets she keeps from me were more important than your very survival.”

“From you?”

It escaped, and she cursed her tongue even as it slipped out. They were still walking, but it was slower, more agitated.

“You think that this all has something to do with you, Fen’Harel? Don't you think that sounds a little...”

Paranoid?

They both stopped then, and she let out a long, shuddering breath, lifting a hand to her forehead. Untwist the whispers. How could she? They were part of her, everything it was saying was something she said to herself. Pushing them back didn't really work, did it? Clever, clever demon.

“Do you trust me, or do you not?” The question came from behind her, and she let out a quiet curse under her breath. “I believe I found you an easier riddle to solve when I thought that you did not. How can I have faith in you, Lady, when I do not know why you have faith in me?”

“Mother...” Freedom started as she began walking again, and she let out another breath, “it is all right. Truly, it won’t...”

If he knows the truth, he'll kill you himself. He was always strong enough to do that, it was you that wasn't strong enough to kill him.

It might be the demon, but that didn't mean it wasn't right. Still. Something. Something had to be done. Just a little, just a single...piece. It didn't mean she was discarding her hand, to show a card, yes? But the precedent it set...no, she would simply be stronger next time. A story he could believe was most of a story, or even the whole of it. Set his fears to rest long enough for them to get through this.

A small truth. It didn't mean she'd have to give him everything.

“I am the one who gave Felassan the access to Briala's eluvian network,” she admitted, and waited into the silence. She knew neither of them had been able to discover the source. Only she knew that part.

One more life she had saved. How she treasured his continued existence, and regretted the ripple of consequences it had brought.

She could feel the heaviness of Fen’harel's silence behind her, the slight stiffness in his strides now as he absorbed that information.

“And how...” he began, and she gave a faint laugh.

“Accident, at first. I was...familiar with Briala's network. I suppose you could say I made a habit of collecting information.”

Careful, careful, a dance with words. Don't lie, don't tell the whole truth. Offer a single hand, he doesn't need to see what you hold in the other. Such a delicate dance, one far more palatable than
the minuet of politics. No, this was one she knew the steps to, and would gladly engage in.

“I did not care for what she was doing with it.”

Not quite a lie. A bit too close to one, though. He was silent again, and she let out a faint sigh.

“Very well. Very well, if I must.”

She turned on him with that quiet admission, and it was...difficult. Nearly impossible, but the word couldn't hope to contain the struggle she felt in that moment. Her mind, tearing in two, conflicted with herself in a way that brought actual physical discomfort. Their eyes met, and it pained her more deeply than she'd expected it to, a stab that silenced her for a moment. She could not breathe.

She had been avoiding it so long, which had only made this moment worse. So long avoided, so long built into something greater than it should be. His eyes. She could see the conflict, the anger in his eyes, and that helped, somewhat. Please...do not let his gaze soften. One long, slow inhale, and then she could speak again.

“I am the one who sent Mythal to you. I am the reason she was there when you awoke,” she admitted, lifting her chin, letting the words fall into his sudden silence, his breath stilling after a quick intake, “and I am the one who told her that there was some machinations afoot. She left to find the source. I did not know...this would be the result.”

I do regret that she could not, or would not change your mind, but...what you would have done instead...was worse. So much worse. This is better.

The parts she would not tell him.

“You...knew...” A pause, and then he sighed, lifting a hand to his forehead. The break in eye contact relieved her. “The sentinels. You belong...served Mythal, then?”

“No, I am neither ancient nor bound to Mythal. Her reasons were her own, my concerns were protecting my people. I did not take her vallaslin until after you killed her.”

There, that should be enough truth. Enough of a story to occupy his mind, drag them both out of this long enough to survive the battle to come. Just enough, without forcing her to lose her secrets. And then, a barb she could not help.

“Yes, we know that you did. We know you killed Mythal.”

“Ah...that would explain your...commander's hostility,” Fen'harel mused, still processing that information, and she let him, gaze flicking to follow Freedom. He was a little upset, she could tell in the way he moved. But then, Freedom would prefer she told Fen'Harel everything. He simply didn't understand.

When the Dread Wolf spoke again, it was words she did not want to hear.

“Still, it does not explain why you trust me. Or your lack of hostility.”

Brief memories, then, teased out of a distant part of her mind. Whispers, but not the demon. No. The other whispers, voices of the wells. An excuse to rescue her from the truth. For now.

We few who travel far, call to me, and I will come.
Without mercy, without fear.

Cry havoc in the moonlight, let the fire of vengeance burn,

The cause is clear.

“If Mythal gave up her power to you, it is because she let you,” she responded simply, turning on a heel and continuing on her way. Relief. No more need for eye contact. After a moment, she heard him follow. “I trusted her. I could do no less for the man she gave her life for. You will prove in time if you deserve it or no, Fen’Harel, on your own merits. I believe in people.”

Silence again, and she used the time to sort out her own mind into some semblance of calm, pushing aside the voices to let her own be heard. Sometimes it was difficult to remember which that was, exactly. It was simpler here to change her sight than to light the way, only the illuminated edges of Freedom casting any glow in the pitch darkness.

“I wonder, my Lady…” he mused, and the particular wording made her jaw tighten. It was hardly his fault, however, that he had no other name to call her by. “That this world was somehow capable of creating you. You seem oddly apart from it.”

It nearly broke her. It could have been an insult, but she knew the intention behind it, all too intimately. Too vulnerable, the confession had made her too vulnerable. Her eyes closed for just a moment as she walked, letting out a slow breath between her lips. There was no room for more memories.

*If the Dalish could raise someone with a spirit like yours…*

“You know very little of this world.” The words came out cold, forcing him back, replacing the barrier between them firmly. “And you know very little of me, Fen’Harel. One of those you can rectify. The other, you cannot.”

Her hand felt something echo as she spoke, and she stopped, reaching out for it. A buried spell, woven into wall. She followed the faint echo of it, firmly ignoring the silence behind her. One out of confusion, one out of anger. Freedom could be angry with her all he liked, it wouldn't change anything. She would not...

Could not let him back in.

Her heart faltered, and for a moment she had to pause and breathe in deeply, steeling herself. He had needed something. Something to trust, just a little longer. It would all be over soon.

She never even felt Paranoia wending itself into the cracks her confession had left open.

*He will kill you. He always could.*

*You were the weak one.*

The sudden burst of color from up ahead distracted him from the confused blur that was his mind,
pushing back the darkness. He had finally gotten some questions laid to rest, and yet again, she had raised more by the very act of answering them. After which she slapped him aside as if he were a misbehaving child. Those words had much in common with a blow, short and sharp and meant to end a line of questioning.

He might have been upset by them if they hadn't felt so reactionary. She had given him something she hadn't wanted to, and those words had been her defense. It was an unnerving journey, and an unpleasant situation for both of them. He was grateful she'd given him something, even if the full weight of what she had confessed had yet to settle in. The situation with Freedom was more immediate and worrying.

A conversation for after what waited ahead, for now his mind was quite occupied. She had given him much to consider in that short exchange.

The Lady herself was following the spell she had awoken, pale blue orbs set into the walls casting an eerie glow over the tunnel. They lit the way ahead, as if they couldn't already feel it. The whispers grew stronger, but now he had something else to focus on, a new puzzle to put together. Somehow...he felt that had been part of her intent.

He knew that she was, much like himself, a dreamer, Felassan had told him as much. A Dalish that had protected her people with Mythal's aid. That made some sense. Not enough, but some. Enough for now.

“We are here. Deceptively simple, isn't it?”

Her voice echoed, and he pulled himself out of his reverie to join her, the spirit already examining the door ahead.

Indeed, although massive, the door lacked any sort of decoration. It needed none. The grooves in the floor they had been following slipped under it. The amount of power that had gone into this...there was no intrinsic evil in blood magic, just as there was no intrinsic evil in a sword.

The amount of death that had been siphoned into what lie beyond, however...that was where the true horror lay. Choices, made willingly, to end the lives of others.

Thousands upon thousands of them.

“It's waiting,” Freedom remarked, seeming nervous, its edges wavering.

Such a young spirit to face such an ancient adversary. And yet, in a way, the city belonged to both of them, both of them born here. Different sides to a story. Freedom was far from alone, however.

They would ensure that it was he that survived this.

The Lady seemed impatient, she cast a single gaze over her shoulder to check his readiness before turning to the door. He could not blame her, though his own nerves were much settled by their earlier conversation. She seemed restless now, and he hoped that she was ready.

“I do not feel like knocking,” she abruptly declared, slamming a palm forward against the massive doors.

He braced himself as they cracked, and then crumbled. The rubble cascaded to the floor, and exposed...nothing.

Pitch blackness roiled out of the opening, tendrils of it spilling across the ground like fog. Utter
nothingness, into which she walked with unerring step. After a moment, he followed. It swallowed them, enveloped them in the whispers.

Here they were strongest, and yet faintest, insidious in their deceit. Sparks in the darkness, leading on. Was it the glow of the orbs in the walls? An extended hand couldn't find them. His senses spread out, eyes meant to see without light, and yet...nothing. A flicker of sensation to his left, but turning found nothing. A brush against the back of his neck, making nerves prickle. Where was it?

“It's not a demon after all.” The voice came out of the darkness, just to his left. “There's no...”

A sudden flare of light, flickering up the Lady's arms, outlining her form in a low aura of flames. She pulled it to her as naturally as breathing, making herself a torch in the darkness. Just enough, to push back the darkness.

Tentacles of it surged, but then pulled back at the edges of their light, as she pushed it further, and further. It was all around them now, insinuating itself and then fluttering back again, testing. Prodding. It was everywhere, it was nowhere.

It had no physical form to destroy. No desires or needs to fuel its purpose. It simply...was.

“It's a spirit. That explains why it sent no earlier attacks.”

The magic here was fouled by it, by...something in the center of the room. Disgusting, it seethed, the source of all of it. It tainted the mind as surely as the spirit did. They had to push it all back to fight. So regrettable, this fight, but the spirit had been allowed to grow unrestrained. Paranoia, fear unfettered by any restraints, it did not matter that it was not malicious. It was as dangerous as a wildfire, and as lacking in control.

A hand rose, and so did the Lady's flame, finally casting back against the far wall. The whole cavern, angular and carved with suffering slaves. More of those foul metal statues, chained to the wall, weeping in despair. They reflected the light, just enough.

Just enough to see the source of it all.

An altar in the center of the room, a curving, monstrous thing of dark spikes and etched runes, perched on a pedestal of stone. It loomed, menacingly, each angle glinting in the low light.

It was surrounded by a lake of blood.

A moat, a pit filled with it, somehow surviving the centuries in some ancient ritual that no longer served a purpose. Metal and heat in the air, noxiously thick. It practically crackled with power, the lives of the sacrificed distilled, disgusting and pure.

Immensely powerful.

They were gazing into it with horror when the first attack came from the shadows.

The blow was unexpected, snaking out through the darkness underfoot, taking her balance from her.
Pushed to the brink of the precipice she dug in deep, instinct reaching for the power available. Tainted, far too tainted, but she needed something untouched by Paranoia, and the blood sang a song she knew intimately. It flowed into her, black and crackling, thick and coiling. She could feel the death in it, more familiar than she'd ever want to admit.

She used it to throw them back, to brace herself from falling into the corrupted depths.

Freedom cried out, but she had no mind to spare for him, caught up in mastering the power as it flowed into her. It called, it lured, and it took all she had in her to remind herself that it was only power. Not intrinsically evil, not wrong. Only power, that had come at great cost.

It could be turned to nobler purpose.

Paranoia hissed as she stole it from them, a lash of shadow meeting fire as she raised her arm to meet the strike. The song grew louder, drowning out the whispers for once, and in the heart of the ancient, blood-fueled magic, she found a second of clarity.

“Burn,” she told it, a whisper, a promise and command. The thick, oozing lake of blood roiled for a moment, and then burst into flame at last, roaring in a circular inferno around the ancient altar. It was if the surface was oil, it caught and crackled, a sickly, nauseous smoke filling the air.

The hiss turned to a screech, coming from every corner as the light blazed, destroying the protective shadows. Solas was struggling to his feet now, Freedom's shield a silver skin over him. It was good. She did not need it any more, after all, not with the power of thousands of dead slaves singing through her veins. The fire wrapped around her as she crossed it, hair tossed and tousled by the heat, the updraft as the lake was slowly burned.

The altar called, and she paced for it, stepped atop it. Of course, where else? The highest point to survey, to search. Poised on the pedestal in the center of the vast chamber, she turned her gaze up.

“You cannot hide from me!” she told the spirit...no, the demon, voice ringing, echoing with layers and harmony. Too many voices, but one purpose behind them. “You cannot manipulate me, you cannot...”

It could not be a mere spirit, it was a creature of enmity.

The slither of a shadow through a corner, a flicker of motion out of the corner of her eye. She lashed out at it, a crack of rock, a shudder of the wall. She heard Freedom call out for her again, but he was only a distraction. She could see it, just out of view, constantly sliding across her vision like a film of darkness.

The fire helped, but it was not enough. Where was it? It couldn't hide from her...

Her eyes fell back on Solas again, and she stared at him, eyes narrowing. Of course. Where else could it be hiding? Tricky thing. It made so much sense, after all. The slither of shadows across his features as he rose with far too much composure only cemented her suspicion. It had infected him.

Clever, clever thing, hiding behind him because it thought she would not kill him. She had made a promise. No matter what. It pained her, of course it pained her to have to do it, but she would do what must be done.

She would not fail the world again.

It was him. It had always been him, and would always be him. Her one love, her enemy, it was only right that now the demon would take him. A fight she could win with a clear conscience...it
was almost too easy, too clean an ending for decades upon decades of suffering, but she wanted it to be over. It was over. He was foolish enough to be possessed by a demon.

Such an unceremonious ending to such a long story.


Ir abelas, ma sa'lath. Not in this world, either, it seems.

The first strike he was expecting, it seemed, but perhaps not the power behind it as it sent him skidding back, shield holding. The blood sang in her veins, the fire lower now, but still encircling the center of the room in a ring of smoke and crackling flames. She crossed it once again, striding slowly towards him, reaching over her shoulder for the bow.

“Not as clever as you thought you were.” she told the demon with woeful regret, staring into the eyes that were no longer his. It did not hurt now. Nothing hurt now. “I will make it swift, I promise you that. My h-...you have my word.”

The bow was unstrung, but that hardly mattered. It knew what it was supposed to be. Power vibrated through her palms, the dark, viscous magic dripping from her fingertips as the arrow swirled into life. Crimson and darkness, she poured herself into it, let it spill out of the over-filled container that was her body. She would kill it.

Kill him before he kills you.

A moment of disorientation, eyes fluttering as a wash of power poured over her. She couldn't even feel it. Weak. Her mind felt momentarily muddled, but it passed quickly enough. Was she truly so strong now? Perhaps there was no need to kill him after all. She began to lower the bow, letting out a quiet sigh, and then stopped abruptly as she saw his eyes darken.

It's a trap.

The arrow pulled at her as she released it with a burst of panic, dragging at her chest with a twist so painful that a scream rose and died in her throat. She collapsed to her knees, bow dropping and skidding across the stone floor.

The instant she fell, the despair overwhelmed her. What had she...NO!

The lash of power she reached out to try and stop it was too late. Far too late. Freedom had already moved to intercept it. She felt his power rise to meet it, the surge of purifying silver against bloody ebony heavy with centuries and thick with unjust death. Somehow, he caught it in the air no more than a foot away from Solas, snatching it in an insubstantial hand.

The explosion of power was all force, no heat or light. Still she flinched back, the violent stab of pain drawing a scream from her throat. Denial and pain, the flames behind her roaring up to the ceiling of the cavern, sweltering heat that swirled over her shield. She had no control over the fire, something inside her had summoned it, as it whispered in her mind.

In the end, you can only fail...again...and again...

She could feel the power being drained from her, dragged back out and clawing its way out every inch, every tiny vein singing its protest violently.
Her vision cleared, and she locked eyes with the spirit, a violent cough spilling more darkness from her. Shadow...glancing down, she could see it, clinging to her, twisted around her heart, poisoning her mind. No demon. Just a spirit that had found the worst parts of her, dragged to the surface and exposed.

*It had been her. It had been her that was carrying it.*

“I'm so sorry, da'vhenan,” she whispered, voice lost among the flames.

Her eyes found Freedom again, as silver tarnished, turning black at the edges as he untwisted the last tendrils of Paranoia from her blood, her heart. Tears spilled from her cheeks, but the heat turned them to steam before they could reach the ground.

“It's all right, mother. You're free. I love you.”

The spirit was torn free from her with a shriek, twisting around her own cry of loss. She reached, began to rise, but hands were pulling her back. She collapsed back against Solas with a sob as his fingers clutched her shoulders, shield enveloping them both.

The impact of the two spirits' meeting was violent, and she could feel the fragmentation, the wash of freed, hoarded power flattening the both of them. Untainted by the death of Paranoia, the wave of darkness and nausea subsided as it lost its form, the emotions bleeding out into formlessness.

There was a crack of stone behind them as the altar collapsed into rubble, falling into the emptied pit that had been the lake of blood. The walls started to crack, ceiling rumbling and beginning to shudder...and then it stopped.

In the sudden cessation, a throb like the single beat of a heart.

The flames died all at once, the expelled power swirling inwards, all at once. Like a gale, being at the edges of a hurricane, it tore at them, dragging at the edges of their very being. Even the shield began to fail, until she fed the last of her power into Solas, letting him protect them both as she collapsed at last. Nothing. She had nothing left.

She could feel herself fading, vision beginning to black out. All that anchored her to her body was the slow intake of breath. Freedom. Poor...

“Mother.”

Fingers on her cheek, lifting her chin to meet eyes.

Her eyes.

Her vision wavered as pained tears escaped, and she lifted a shaking hand to his cheek, warm and real. He looked chagrined, face young and awkwardly featured, somewhere between youth and adulthood, and so...hers. She knew it intimately, the shape of the nose and jaw.

It was him. He had...oh, Solas was going to be furious with him. With her. She had a feeling she should be furious as well, but she was just so relieved.
And so tired.

“Freedom...you...I...” she laughed, relieved and heartbroken all at once, exhaustion making both dim. She could hear her voice sliding away, into the darkness. “You are in such trouble, da’len.”

“I’m sorry, mamae,” he replied in an oddly grounded voice, not sounding in the least bit apologetic. A hand reached for her forehead, and even if she had energy to resist the calming magic, she wouldn’t have. She was so worn. “Rest now.”

Darkness rose, and exhaustion claimed her at last.
Echoes of the Heart

They had just fought an ancient, insidious spirit...and one another, in a battle in which which both of them could have quite easily died. She had tried to kill him, and nearly lost her life doing so. And yet, the simple fact that her unconscious body was slumped against him felt...

Incredibly, crudely inappropriate.

It may have been the knowledge that she would never have allowed it if she was conscious, or perhaps it was because it was the first time they had been in physical contact beyond her gripping his arm on the battlefield. Whatever the cause, Solas found himself incapable of handling the...other problem in the silent cavern until he had carefully shifted her aside. She slumped to the ground as he laid her down as comfortably as could be managed, and he gave a faint sigh.

“I'm not sorry.”

It was a challenge, in a voice too young for gravitas. Too young for so much stubbornness. When he said nothing, Freedom repeated himself, belligerently.

“I'm not. Mother would have been heartbroken if I'd changed.”

“I do not understand how you even...were capable of doing this on your own,” he admitted. Anger was there, but it would do no good to turn it on the spirit...the boy sitting before him. Turning his gaze to the eyes so like the Lady's, he frowned.

“Clothe yourself. If you can choose to be born into a body, you can do that as well.”

A brief examination proved he had managed an acceptable facsimile. Someone had taught him, then, it was not simply a whim. A functional body, not merely a temporary vessel.

“Cole showed me how. And Wisdom. It wasn't hard, I just didn't have the strength before to make the body, but Paranoia was very strong. Also I wasn't sure what I should make it into,” Freedom mumbled, recalcitrant and even a bit sulky. It was very...young. Then again, the spirit had always been a bit adolescent. “I wanted to before, but Mother said no. I was...changing. I just wanted to decide what I'd change into.”

“I understand the sentiment, Freedom...” he sighed, as the once-spirit summoned itself clothing with a slightly-wild surge of magic that was an intrinsic part of it. Him. “However, I cannot agree with the choice.”

Not it any more, he was a boy in truth now.

Armor, simple leathers much like hers, in white and silver were what he used the remnants of power drifting aimlessly through the air to clothe himself in. He had a feeling the Lady would be displeased with that. Then again, he was new to all of this, it only made sense that he would mimic her.

It could be the only real reason for the unsettling familiarity of those features, after all. Hers, but...not quite. It certainly wasn't her chin. He was starting to feel a sneaking suspicion...

“You know that...” he continued, pushing that aside, “the corruption is not gone simply because you...froze yourself, so to speak, inside a body. What was begun cannot be so easily undone, and...”

“Are people all one thing?” Freedom interrupted, and he let out his breath all at once, exasperated. “I
am a person! I want to be! So I am a little dark, and a little light. Just like you, just like mamae. I changed before it got too far, anyways.”

“We are not what you should pattern yourself upon, Freedom!”

There it was. He had made himself out of both of them, it seemed. A sentiment as uncomfortable as her Hope going with him. This was not going to go over well. He tried to focus his mind away from those uneasy thoughts, and to the matter at hand. “We are hardly...any sort of model. Life will darken the heart easily enough without encouraging the process.”

“It's already done. There's nothing you can do. Even if I could want to go back to being a spirit, which I don't...I wouldn't be me any more if I did.”

Freedom slapped his hands atop his thighs, glowering. Again, he had the feeling it was meant to be imposing, and only made him look sullen. The expression turned pleading, fingers digging into leather-clad knees.

“I want to help people like you do! Like mamae does! I'm tired of...of...everything being 'not my purpose'. You can have lots of purposes, why can't I?”

He was correct. Not about his reasoning behind what he had done, which was as selfish and selfless at the same time, as young things so often were. The simple fact of the matter was, he had chosen to change when on the cusp of destruction. He was right. Even if he somehow changed his mind-which he had a feeling the stubborn boy would not- he would lose some parts of himself in the war against his own corrupted nature that would follow.

Trust a spirit like Freedom to cling so stubbornly to its individuality.

“I was scared, Solas. Not just because I was losing myself.”

The confession was quiet, and he lifted his gaze again to meet Freedom's. Awkwardly earnest, guileless. The sincerity was uncomfortable in its openness.

“Even..if I was safe, mother would try to make me stay here, wouldn't she? She thinks I'm important for the city, but I didn't want to leave her behind. She needs me. I didn't want her to be all alone.”

“After what she has done...what happened here...Freedom, perhaps it is best if you worry less about what the Lady needs,” Solas said, having no clue how to even begin addressing the fact that she had somehow been weak enough to be possessed by Paranoia.

If he had not been here, what would have happened?

“That was your fault, it was all your fault, not hers,” Freedom informed him, bristling defensively, and he found he could do nothing but stare for a moment, thoughts having left him.

What?

“How could that have possibly been my fault?”

“She made herself weak to make you strong.” Freedom replied, a bit curtly, “because she wished to keep you safe. She does that for people. It got into her because she told you things she didn't want to, to make sure you would stay strong. She told you about Mythal because she wanted your mind to be strong, and that made her weak.”

“I am quite capable of handling myself. It was her choice, no matter what...”
Having a teenage boy glaring at him like that was proving to be rather unsettling.

“She sacrifices herself for people, and I don’t like it. I think it’s wrong. But I don’t like you being angry at her for it, either.”

A pause then, and Freedom pursed his lips together firmly for a long, silent moment. Finally, he spoke again, quieter, casting his gaze to the sleeping Lady. Some quiet moments passed, as the boy’s gaze softened, unsettling in its unfamiliarity. He had never seen her in such a vulnerable state, and they were... her eyes.

“She did it because she knew you’d be able to kill her, if you had to. But she couldn’t kill you. She doesn’t think she could.”

“You...believe otherwise?”

What a bizarre confession. Again, he found himself dumbfounded by the odd revelations. So much contrast in what he thought he knew, and what he was coming to know. As if there was two of her, not one. One that was a complete and unknown stranger, even after near fourteen years.

“I do. I think she could kill you if she wanted to, in her right mind I mean. That is good. I just wished she believed it, too,” Freedom said, starting to stand, drawing Solas to take the boy's arm.

“I can do it on my own! I...”

Solas supposed he should find the topic of conversation upsetting, but he simply couldn't. It was more relieving than anything. Finding the limits of one another and acknowledging that they could destroy each other if necessary was strangely freeing. Handing just an iota of control over to someone else. In this crippled world, only the Lady could stand against him by whatever means she had apparently acquired. Knowing that...someone could...

It helped.

Obediently he dropped his hands, let Freedom scramble up on his own, somewhat awkwardly. Gangly limbs and an unfamiliar body ensured that he promptly listed to the side and fell back down when he tried to rise. Solas stifled a sigh, and offered his hand again.

“She didn’t know why she was doing it. She won’t admit that she was. So being angry at her won’t help. So don’t be. I shouldn’t tell you that, but I can, so I will.”

Reluctantly, and still with a glower, an elbow was tucked into his hand, and Freedom struggled to his feet again as he helped him up. The boy swayed as he oriented himself, ruddy hair falling into his face. He reached up and raked it back with long fingers, and then turned his eyes up to gaze beseechingly into Solas' face. “Please don’t fight any more. It hurts both of you.”

This was growing more disorienting by the moment. There was nothing to be done about the spirit's having chosen to be born into a body, he was tightly twisted and stubbornly locked into it now. There was nothing to be done about what the fight had turned into. The outcome was likely much less horrible than what could have been. All he could do was release it for now, to be sorted in a quieter moment.

This whole... excursion was proving to be a mire of such thoughts.

He released the boy as he pulled back, and gazed down into his face. Not down for much longer than a few years, no doubt. He was already as tall as the Lady.
“Can you not...please change your face, at the very least? It...will raise too many uncomfortable comments and questions from people who do not understand. I can help you. We can find...”

“No, this is me,” Freedom replied simply, not sounding mulish for once, only rather pleased with himself, “this is what I want to be. It's me now.”

“Would you not prefer to look wholly like the Lady?” he suggested. It was a thin hope. For some reason, interacting with this...spirit turned disturbingly troublesome young man was somehow confounding him. Had he been this stubborn before? Was this the influence of his stalled corruption? “Some slight, small changes...I can teach you how.”

“This is me,” Freedom repeated, and then asked in a particularly provoking voice, “why do you not change yourself?”

“That is not...”

Why was he arguing with him? Jaw tightening, he firmed his voice.

“I insist. Please do as I ask.”

“No,” Freedom replied blithely, turning around with a slight wobble, and pacing away with extreme care, “I will wake mother soon. We should go before people outside grow restless. It's nearly dawn.”

For a moment, frustration took over, sharp and fierce. Breathing out, he forced himself to let it go. This was possibly the worst time for any of this. It may have been that the Lady would be able to succeed where he had failed. Freedom seemed to listen to her.

Whatever implications might be drawn from it were beyond his control. It was entirely possible he was being oversensitive. Oversensitive about an adolescent running around looking as if he was the product of...all right, perhaps he wasn't over reacting.

“You do not need to swing your arms like that, it may unbalance you,” he finally sighed, lifting a hand to rub at his temple. The edges of a headache lingered, reminding him of the thousands of problems larger than this. “Do you know if the spirit is ready to depart with us?”

“I think so. It's all a little...far away now,” Freedom replied, settling his arms at his sides as he turned and started walking back, not quite so awkwardly. “Is this how you feel all the time? It's very...heavy.”

“I am afraid that is part of living, yes. It will only grow worse, not better. Are you sure this is what you want? I know the Lady would be upset to lose you, but life is not an easy thing, Freedom.”

This time Freedom paused, and he hoped his words had finally sunk in. Earnest stormy blue-green eyes met his, with a particularly piercing gaze.

“Yes. I think it is,” he finally decided, nodding his head, “I think that it is.”

“Well...” Solas mused, having said his piece. This was the Lady's fight after all, not his. He had other concerns to puzzle over. “Then I suppose you should awaken the Lady so we can leave. I would not want that golem to decide we had been gone for too long.”

No. That would certainly be the least welcome ending to all of this. What was done...was done.
She awoke somewhat slowly, fighting off vestiges of sleep forced upon her. Not unwelcome, but certainly somewhat uncomfortable. The stone beneath her was cold, and her muscles were stiff from lying without moving. The hand on her forehead was a chilled, and she realized after a moment that was simply because it was wrapped in a metal-plated glove. Reaching up, she took it, twisting her less-burdened fingers in long, slim ones, giving a small sigh.

“Da’len, I am...” she murmured, uncertain how to voice all of the conflicting emotions, “glad you are safe.”

“You're not going to lecture me? Solas lectured me.”

Carefully she stood up, trying not to use Freedom for leverage. He seemed a little wobbly.

“Did it work?” she asked wryly, straightening up and stretching, letting a faint hint of healing magic drain her aches and bruises. The use of his name only roused a very faint wince, but she was able to hide it.

“No,” Fen’Harel supplied drily, and she glanced over to him. No hostility in his face, though it was too difficult to look in his eyes, her gaze slid past them and to the floor. “What happened, happened. It was a difficult situation for everyone. We need not speak on what occurred.”

That wasn't what she had expected from him, and she felt a surge of gratitude for it. Not speaking. Good, yes. That would help her mental state a great deal. Her attention was drawn to the side as Freedom offered her the bow she had lost, and with a faint smile she curved her fingers around the white leather grip.

“Must not lose that. Thank you, da’len.”

It slung over her shoulder, and she carefully strapped it into place, turning her attention across the vast, empty chamber.

“If I didn't think it would collapse a street somewhere, I'd bury this damned place in rubble.”

“A sentiment I share, I assure you. It is...cleansed, however. You seem to have a great affinity for fire,” Fen’Harel replied, footsteps echoing as he turned to leave. After a moment of gazing at the pit and the crumbled altar, she turned to follow.

“It comes easiest and strongest for me.”

She watched Freedom out of the corner of her eye as they walked, feeling an odd sense of unreality. Nearly her features, in such a young face. She was glad he hadn't made himself look entirely like her, but the similarities were many and obvious. A child was never something she had considered a part of her future, but here he was. Not a red and wrinkled thing, but midway to adulthood, thrust abruptly into her life.

“Ah, da’len, so many awkward conversations you are going to force on me. Why did you choose to look like me?”

“You are my mother,” Freedom replied, after an odd look over at Fen’Harel, “why should I not look like you?”
“People will not understand the difference. There are implications, and people do not yet understand spirits like they did once,” she said, attempting to be placating, but it was difficult. “I am...we can discuss it later. I am just glad you are safe, da'len. You will understand in time.”

“I thought you might be more upset...” Fen'Harel offered, as they began trekking back up the tunnels.

Why did she feel as if there was something the pair of them weren't telling her? Her head was much too full to go chasing it down. Too much had happened, and there was still the spirit and the Champion to face.

“I assure you, it is one of the many reasons I will be getting very drunk tonight,” she replied, a bit tartly, before picking up her pace. “Let us go see what my whimsy has wrought, shall we? With my luck, there will be a spirit of misfortune waiting for us.”

“I don't know of any spirits of misfortune,” Freedom remarked, stumbling a little over a bit of fallen stone. “But I don't think that's what's waiting, mamae.”

“I...” she started, and then sighed as her joke went unappreciated. Hawke would have laughed. “Never mind, da'len. Never mind. Let us just hurry along, shall we?”

The sooner they could depart from here, the better.

Vibrant.

Uncommonly so, from what she was familiar with, the wisp-like spirit that was waiting for them once they emerged from the tunnels into the city.

It glowed and glinted, brilliant red-violet, the hint of ruddiness to it rousing some worry. She had been hoping perhaps that Justice would be more of an influence on the newborn spirit than Desire had been. Not that desire as a concept and a spirit was intrinsically dangerous, but Xebenkeck certainly had become so. It was far too easy to corrupt. Of course, the color could mean nothing, but she had noticed that it seemed to, when she aided the birth of a spirit. Her bias, no doubt, spilling over onto them.

So, in this case, she had a feeling that it was telling. Of what? Well, they would find out soon enough.

Freedom approached the shield fearlessly, crossing carefully over the broken roadway. His gait had improved somewhat, she noticed. Odd to feel pride in him, especially with the frustration and worry that still lingered. He was adapting so quickly, it was hard not to be pleased with him. There was no going back, after all. No matter how much she wished there was.

Her guilt would remain for some time.

Fen'Harel paused at her shoulder, and they watched together as the boy went to greet the newborn spirit. Two new things, created from this journey they had made together. The desire to cringe away from him came, but it was fleeting. Perhaps her control was improving. She could only hope.
“Are you ready, or would you like me to carry you?” Freedom asked the burgeoning spirit, crouching down before it.

Its surface swirled, and then a hint of laughter drifted through the wild currents of unfettered magic. The sound of it relieved her, just a little. Bright and merry, but with a thrill of breathless energy.

The sudden draw of magic being absorbed from the flow still swirling restlessly around the city was a light tug at the edges of her senses, as Freedom offered it to the small spirit. It absorbed it greedily, beginning to pulse. She kept her hands tightly clasped at her waist, anticipation tightening her chest.

Like a flower blooming from a seed, the orb of swirling light in his hands split, twisted upwards as the spirit formed itself. Strangely amorphous, for a moment it seemed caught between shapes, uncertain and formless.

“It's all right. Whatever happens is what you're meant to be. I know, I just did it too, but in a different way,” Freedom told the spirit, encouragingly. His voice was still boyishly high, and she couldn't help but find it endearing. “Let go, of all of it. I know. You have a lot of memories that don't fit together. Let go of them for now. Push them out, pull yourself in. You can sort through it all later.”

There was a momentary flicker along the edges of the spirit, as if in indecision or nervousness, before it abruptly expanded in a rippling curtain, and then pulled back in, finding a shape. It took the spirit a moment to coalesce altogether, and when it did at last she found herself a bit...amused.

No, she needn't have worried. That was no spirit of desire.

It must have been the age of the spirits that had created it, or the massive amounts of magic still spilling around the city, but it was quite distinct. Feminine-featured, but not female in form, it loomed as it defined itself. It seemed to have taken on some of Justice's more obvious traits, as it wore an armored form, a long, slender blade over its back. It wore no helm to hide a face that was slightly vague, but possessed of a pair of fiery eyes that contrasted oddly with its violet hue.

She was not accustomed to spirits of more than one color. Perhaps because of the two halves that had made it? It would have to be watched carefully, but something about the impression it left had her relaxed.

Despite the martial bearing and size, there was nothing imposing about it. It was almost...puppyish.

“You did very well! It must have been confusing,” Freedom declared, rising to his feet and staring up at the much larger spirit. “You have many echoes. Have you found yourself?”

“We have!” the spirit agreed, in a voice resonant and androgynous, practically overflowing with enthusiasm. “Is the battle already won, then? I wished to help! And...I didn't. But we do now!”

Both words and voice ebbing and flowing oddly, she felt a hint of sympathy for the odd conflict of the spirit. It was her fault, after all, but...

“It is all right! You did what you had to do!”

The spirit interrupted her thoughts, and she ignored the look Fen'Harel gave her sidelong. “It will all be sorted out in time! We want to go, if there is no fight to be had, Anders will be worried! We have things to do, after all. Injustices to right!”

It certainly was...energetic. She cast a glance to Freedom then, who just seemed amused, a little laugh escaping him as he caught her looking, smile broad. So real, so cheerful, that little chuckle. Oh,
her heart. So strange to have him bodily before her.

It gave her the oddest heaviness in her chest, like something that had been dormant, empty, was finally full at last. Perhaps she should be grateful for his defiance.

“Let’s go! I want to see Garrett, and Faith, and show them my new me!” Freedom declared, abruptly bounding ahead, the spirit following him. “Come on, Zeal!”

Her first instinct was, oddly enough, to tell them to be wary. There was absolutely no need for it, they could both take care of themselves, and there had been nearly no demons in the city, but...

“So be...” she called after the pair, before Freedom tripped on the rotted remnants of a broken cart and went tumbling, sprawling out on cracked stone. He immediately started scrabbling up again.

“Careful...” she finished helplessly, a broken little laugh spilling over the words.

“Tell the stars not to shine,” Fen’Harel sighed aside to her, and she stifled a reflexive smile that she quickly pushed down and aside. He started walking, and she did so as well, discreetly putting some distance between them.

“A spirit of zeal...well, of all the things that could have come out of that meeting, at least it is less dangerous than some. Not wholly beneficial, but not intrinsically worrisome.”

“With the right purpose and careful guidance, they will be fine. They seem to be still attached to Anders. It explains much, though. He feels very strongly about...causes.”

The word left a hint of worry behind it in her mind as they walked. Something to distract her from this. From him. “But it was always the mistreatment of mages by the humans before. I managed to redirect him for a time, but I promised him I would help him ensure it would never happen again. I doubt you care about such things, however.

“I care about the fate of the spirit. That is sufficient reason for me to be interested,” he replied, somewhat guardedly, “I would like to be made aware of what happens to it.”

The change in his tone of voice was somewhat relieving. A bit more distance between them was welcome. She clung to it, letting it draw her back into a calmer, harder state of mind. Settle the mask of serenity back over her features.

“Hawke will have to be dealt with before we leave. I will handle him. He will be angry with me, but...” she murmured, mind already anticipating a difficult conversation. Especially knowing Garrett. “…I know that he will see reason.”

She could hope, at least.

As she pulled a few paces ahead of Fen’Harel, they wended their way out of the city again in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

Garrett Hawke was certainly less than pleased with her, as she had anticipated.

“He could have killed you!”
The anger was far from unexpected, but the focus of it bothered her somewhat. She would much rather Hawke be angry with her specifically. His ire belonged on her, and no one else. Withstanding it was part of her penance.

“What would we do if we lost you? Did you even think? How the hell could you just leave me behind like that, and put yourself in danger?”

Garrett turned away from her and paced across the room, and she let out a quiet sigh. He'd worn a path through the dust in the last few minutes since he'd dragged her in after being awoken, barely before his eyes had opened. Her upper arm was still feeling almost bruised. She had a feeling both Freedom and Fen'Harel had been offended, but at least knew enough not to interfere.

“You are far more important to this city than I will ever be. I'm sorry, Garrett, but it was already in your head by the time we got here. I had to make a choice,” she replied, keeping her voice calm as she could, “it was difficult enough as it was, we lost Justice, there was an unexpected desire demon, it would have been...we would have lost you if you had been there.”

“You don't know that! When did you get like this? When did you start deciding you had the right to make choices for other people? High handed...”

She winced at that, taking a step back herself, turning away as Hawke rounded on her again. An unconscious flinch, borne of guilt more than fear. His words died in the air as he stared at her, and then he sighed and continued.

“Shit. I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. Listen, I know what it's like to make the tough choices, I do. I just...”

“No, it was high handed. I'm not saying I was wrong, but...I was afraid you would be reckless,” she admitted, head shaking from side to side, “I didn't give you a chance to prove me wrong or right, I just decided...”

“This is about Fenris, isn't it? Listen, I...”

Neither one of them could look at the other now, and she rubbed her upper arms as she stared at the chantry wall, gazing at a faded painting. Hawke's voice quieted.

“He never really got better. I...borrowed time, I guess. I couldn't protect him forever. We all did everything we could. Yes, I'm angry. I'm going to be angry.”

And she would forever be angry with herself. They had tried, oh how they had tried...and she had nearly stopped the decay of his mind. All it had taken, though, was one small moment of weakness, one second of arrogance and confidence.

One spirit slipped through her wards, curious and innocent, turned into a demon by a mind ravaged by lyrium infection. She hadn't been careful enough.

“And you know how you are when you get angry,” she pointed out, letting the harder topic go. It wasn't worth discussing, he was right. “I'm not saying you have to lie. You don't have to make up a story. No one but Varric will really pry. They'll make up their own stories.”

“Well, I'm not going to tell them you knocked me out and left me in a chantry!” Hawke replied exasperatedly, and she laughed despite herself, quick and sad. “It undermines what you did. Not that I agree with it, but if you wanted me alive that badly to play hero...I'm not going to like the fucker or play nice with him. You can't make me do that.”
"I didn't expect that you would," she replied honestly, turning to face him at last, arms folding across her chest, "but can you at least pretend at some sort of...battle-won grudging respect? Something. Give me something, Garrett. He didn't kill me, that has to count for something. He helped save the city."

"Oh, yeah. One person he didn't kill. Maybe we should give the fucking Dread Wolf a medal."

The sarcasm came with a hint of Hawke's usual humor, and she found it relieving. Garrett had been so...bitter lately.

"He helped save Kirkwall. I'll give him that. It doesn't make up for anything. Not really, but...I will thank him publicly. That's the best I'll give you. In exchange? I want him gone as soon as possible, and I want a guarantee that we're going to have our fucking sovereignty respected. By you and him. I'm serious. I'm not dragging my people out from under the heel of Tevinter to put them under your feet. Or his."

Her relief was overwhelming. She knew it was probably unwise to leave a free state sitting in the middle of unclaimed land and expect that there would be no arguments, but now was hardly the time to be worrying about that mess.

"Kirkwall is free, and will have all of its former lands and borders returned to it. Neither my people or the Elvhen will be allowed to lay claim to what belongs to it. You have my word that if he or his people disagree with that, that I will stand behind you."

Tricky, that promise, but it had to be made. And, above all, she wanted it to be made. She wanted Kirkwall free, and she wanted to be able to allow the humans who had adapted somewhere safer to live.

"But in exchange, I want a guarantee that if there is anyone who is a danger to the spirits who rightfully call this land home, they will be immediately handled. And I mean handled, Garrett. The spirits have as much of a right to live as you do."

That stalled him, and for a moment Hawke just stared at her, arms folded across his broad chest, frowning. She kept her own gaze calm, letting out a quiet breath.

"It's the only way I'll be able to reassure the Elvhen, Garrett. They don't believe the humans can adapt, and you did tell me your people could handle it. The war was hard on both sides, it created a lot of...lingering negative sentiment. The reassurance is needed if we are to begin to work towards any sort of mutual existence."

A plea, but she wasn't begging. She had placed herself as the middle of this conflict a long time ago, and it seemed it was time to make herself the fulcrum again. She would bow to whoever she had to, to ensure they could find some balance. "Please, Garrett."

"Fine. I agree to that. And I know the nosy little buggers will tell you if I don't keep to it," he said, his smile was not very humorous, but at least there was a spark of it there. "If my word's not good enough. I'm sure someone will want to put it all down on paper properly. We can argue about the wording then. Ugh. Politics. They'd better not try to make me Viscount."

"Who else? Aveline won't do it."

They turned for the door together, and she felt some of her tension ease. Time to look forward. "She will have guards patrolling the streets within a day, however. If she can't find any guards, she'll make them."
“Shit...this is...going to be a big job,” Garrett grumbled, getting the door for her.

Freedom was, of course, waiting on the other side. Eavesdropping, no doubt. He grinned broadly at them, unashamed. Hawke paused, staring down at him, and then shifting his gaze to her, and then back again.

He squinted.

“...I...You've got a kid now?” he started, and then looked up and down the hall, where Fen’Harel seemed to be speaking to Faith. Zeal was hovering, a blob of vibrant energy. Hawke stared back at her, utterly nonplussed. “What the hell happened down there?”

“I'm sure Freedom will tell you all about it,” she sighed, gesturing to the boy, who seemed all too pleased with himself, “da’len, do try not to be so smug. Yes, he created his body to look similar to me. The questions will be delightful, I'm sure, about how I suddenly acquired a thirteen year old son.”

“Er...” Garrett said, and she became aware that everyone was staring at her.

All of them. Even Faith.

“What?” she asked exasperatedly, hands going to her hips. She really didn't have the patience for this right now, she wanted to get out of this city. It was starting to feel claustrophobic. “Please, do tell me what foolish thing I've said now.”

Freedom was suddenly guilty, which only worried her more, and she cast her gaze across all of them. Zeal was giggling, Fen’Harel wouldn't look at her, and Hawke...Hawke actually looked like he was fighting back a laugh himself.

“What?” she repeated to him, and he cleared his throat roughly.

“Not...only you.”

It was Fen’Harel who spoke, calm and measured as always, but he still wouldn't look at her. She was quite certain the archway's stonework wasn't that interesting.

Frowning, she turned her attention back to Freedom, who gave her a wide-eyed, sheepish look before turning and making a run for it. It took her a moment, and she didn't bother to chase him or call after. He tripped on his way down the stairs and fell, anyways, tumbling head over heels and landing with a faint 'ow'. When realization dawned, she abruptly groaned and lifted both hands to her face, letting out a heavy breath that heated her palms.

Not just her. Oh...

And so the Lady of the People despaired, the weight of choices made and the cruel whims of fickle spirits heavy upon her shoulders.

“You have got to be shitting me.”
The Story of the Breaking of Chains

When the city of Kirkwall fell under the weight of her own history and the changes looming large over all of Thedas, her people were driven far from home. She was never truly abandoned so long as she lived on in their hearts, and although they suffered, they had not, and would not give up on her.

Time passed, and the world changed, until they had the strength to return and reclaim her from the darkness.

From the north, fleeing the machinations and chaos of the new Tevinter came the people of Kirkwall, following the Champion home at last. They came with refugees from other lands, people with nowhere to call their own. People without hope, without a future. They came together, to fight for their home, for the chance at freedom and renewal.

From the south and east came the armies of the Lady of the Flame, clan and city alike, strong and numerous under her fierce and gracious hand. A beacon of hope, a promise made once to Kirkwall, and kept then, that she would return and free her from an evil laid into the very bones of the city.

From the west came the army of Lord Fen'Harel himself, dark and mysterious, and dangerous. The people feared him, but under the Lady's watchful gaze they were tamed. Their might incalculable, their motives inscrutable, only the Lady truly knew the Wolf's heart, and did not fear him.

They came together in a great army under the banner of freedom and loyalty, to face down the demonic horde that had occupied their home. The Lady made herself a beacon of light, and stuck a blow into the very heart of the opposing army. She lit the way to victory, and they battled fiercely the twisted monstrosities that had plagued their home for far too long, until they reached her side.

The fight was long, but the armies of the world fought as one, and inevitably prevailed. Although the people celebrated, the city was not yet free. Something dark and sinister waited deep inside of her. Something too dangerous for ordinary men to face.

Together, the Lady, the Champion, and the Lord Fen'Harel traveled into the heart of corrupted Kirkwall, united in purpose.

The armies waited, through the day and into the night, until at last dawn broke across the land.

With a great and violent sound, the chains that once bound the city snapped as the ancient spirit that darkened its heart was slain, and Kirkwall was free at last. Emerging from the darkness into the light, the people's protectors returned in triumph. The Dark Lord. The Bright Lady. The Steadfast Champion.

In the center of the battlefield, a tree brought from the furthest reaches of the world by the Lady's allies was planted, as a symbol of this fellowship, and as a monument to those who sacrificed their lives. The Lady gave it to the earth and whispered to it the true hearts of the people of Kirkwall, freed from the darkness that had been given hold over them. Its roots twined deep, and it reached towards the sky above.

The Champion thanked the Lady and the Lord of the Elvhen, and promised then that Kirkwall would always be a place of safety and freedom for all those who chose to call it home. They joined together, and called out to the city, down to her now-untainted core and up to her highest spires...and
the city answered them.

Her heart opened itself to the people once again, and from the ashes of ravaged Kirkwall was born a spirit to watch over them as they rebuilt their home. Born of the people who loved her, and not ancient and evil magics, a spirit of purpose and tenacity, unwaveringly steadfast.

Perseverance in the face of all odds, the soul of Kirkwall was reborn that day and welcomed her people home again.

Chapter End Notes

Varrie is not a reliable narrator...unsurprisingly. Tame? C’mon, man.
Bottled

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What...what have you done?” The words were repeated yet again for a third time, in a voice full of high-pitched shock and confusion. Her head was throbbing. She would have never normally done so, but she was considering asking Abelas to throw Anders out of her damn tent. Not that it would do any good. Sighing, she reached for the bottle of wine, pulling the cork out carefully. “We are still here, Anders! More or less! The Lady did everything she could! I was not our self, or I would not have killed myself!” Zeal declared, completely unhelpfully. It was getting a little better, at least, but she didn't think it was an experiment she'd be willing to try and repeat. The poor spirit was struggling.

“That doesn't even make any sense!” Anders replied, turning his gaze back to her as she tossed the cork and tilted the bottle against her lips. “Please explain this to me!” She took a long swig, letting it clear travel and dust from her throat, and then rose with a sigh. Someone had been kind enough to set up a screen for her at least, and there was a tub. She had a feeling a bath would have to wait. Unbuckling the shoulder of her armor, she ducked behind the screen and started stripping. “Justice was...for a lack of a better word...killed, Anders. I saved every bit of him I could, but there wasn't enough of him...left. To save him completely,” she began, ignoring the burgeoning protest starting to escape from his lips and continuing. “There was an ancient spirit that had become a desire demon. She was the one who killed Justice. When...we defeated her...I used her spirit to save what I could of Justice. For both of their sakes.”

“She did the best she could, Anders!” Zeal agreed...well, enthusiastically. Luckily, some of that perkiness seemed to be fading as they found their way around the odd melding. “It is all right, we still have all of my memories. Yes, we are different, but it is all right. We still care very much about justice. We care a great deal!” It felt incalculably good to be out of armor, and she stripped it off a bit hurriedly, shucking metal and leather as quickly as she could. An undeniable perk of rank, if she had to be honest. She was probably the only one relaxing enough to do so. The bath would have to wait, but a small bit of magic got rid of any sweat and dust that had worked its way under her armor, a refreshing little flicker across her skin. “I...” She heard the bottle scrape against the table as Anders snatched it up, his voice taking on a plaintive edge, “this is very confusing. So you are...Zeal? Was that right? As in righteous fervor, or...? Is that not how this works? Just as I think I've figured things out...”

“It is where both parts could live! And things called to that part,” Zeal agreed, and she stifled a faint laugh. “Just as you call to us, and we are needed.”

“I did everything I could. I...always have, you know that, old friend.” The Lady could not help a sigh, tugging a plain tunic on over her head, pulling her hair out of the neck and then unbinding it from the braid as she paced back out. Simple, unchanged, it skimmed over her skin, a welcome sensation. “What can I say at this point? I did everything I could for Justice.”
“Reminding yourself?” Anders asked brusquely, and then shook his head at her wry grimace. “Just one more thing I have to add to the list of things I thought I knew but did not. It's a wonder anyone can even believe in the Maker any more.”

“People believe in what they need to believe in, you of all people know that. But not everyone has a spirit that believes in them in return. I'm sure that spending some time speaking with Zeal will put your mind at rest. I...”

“Sorry!”

The call came from outside the tent, drawing their attention around. Nerves were high, after such a violent battle. She didn't recognize the voice, but it was in the common tongue.

“Sorry, Lady! Champion sent me, said an urgent message came for Anders, that he'd want it now!”

Anders immediately turned on his heel without a word and departed, and her lips pursed together as she watched him disappear. Hopefully whatever it was couldn't be that bad. Zeal followed, doggedly, and her frown relaxed into a faint smile. No, it couldn't be that bad.

Turning back to her table, she eyed her own pile of correspondence waiting for her. Perhaps she'd have a little time to get through some of it.

With any luck.

The noise and chaos drew her out of her tent perhaps an hour later, bottle in hand, bare feet making her wish she'd wrapped them. The ground here was stony and unpleasant under the thin grass. This was probably the worst possible time to be wandering around with bare legs and a thin tunic, but frankly?

She was at the end of her rope. The trip into Kirkwall had been torture, in more ways than one. Anything that could help her relax, she'd take.

“Mother, you forgot your pants.”

The comment came from her left, as Freedom wandered out of the darkness. He kept speaking, blithe and hapless.

“Varric wants you to come say hello. He was very happy to see me, he laughed and laughed. Anders is angry.”

“I will see Varric later, and Anders is not angry about my lack of pants, da'len,” she replied tolerantly, lifting the bottle again. It was hard to care much right now. They were headed away from the camp, oddly enough, and before long she realized that someone had dragged a table out between her camp and Garrett's.

A circle of golden light was cast over it, and she realized at last what Anders was doing. Suddenly her good mood evaporated, as she took in the map being spread out.

“What's happened, Anders?” she asked, trying to keep her voice low as he rolled it out and weighted the corners. Abelas' war map, the big one they pulled out so rarely. “Anders, talk to me.”

He reached into a pocket of his belt and pulled out a crumpled missive, throwing it across the table at her. She grabbed it out of the air, setting down her wine on the edge of the map and unrumpling it.
This was...

Oh.

“Da’len, fetch...Abelas, the Seer, the Augur, the Warden Commander, and Shianni. And...” she began, pausing as she was interrupted from behind.

“No need to summon me, I'm already here,” Feynriel remarked, taking the paper from her as she handed it to him. “...Ah. Well. A new Circle. It seems our friend is not so friendly after all.”

“I told you this would happen!” Anders snarled angrily, though she knew better than to think his ire was aimed at her. “Those bastards can't leave well enough alone, can they? You promised, don't forget, you...”

“Anders!” she snapped, frustration flaring. Reaching out, she snatched up the wine again, gaze slitting sidelong as she realized he was handing the note off...to Felassan. The other man greeted her with a nod, and a decidedly calm expression. Too calm. “Feynriel?”

“Are you working together or not?” Feynriel replied, and then added, as she gritted her teeth. “Don't you think it's time, Lady? Felassan and I think it's time to get past some of this...”

A lot of weight in those words, and her eyes narrowed, glancing between the pair. Anders, for once, seemed to comprehend the sudden shift in mood, and was quiet as he went back to setting out the map. Freedom had run off to do as she'd asked, thankfully.

“How long have you two been working together behind our backs? Have you been withholding from us?” she asked, their friendship suddenly seeming less amusing, and more infuriating. How dare he decide for her who her allies were? The last thing she wanted was to be forced to work with Fen'Harel again. Being in the city together had been torturous.

“After all I have done, after how I have tried to protect...”

“What will you do, Lady? Turn on that which you saved because it has gone against your express wishes? Will you repeat history, or will you trust me?” Feynriel’s words made her freeze, anger turning small and hard, a weight in her stomach.

“Will you sacrifice the world because of your feelings about the one man that might help us fix some of what is broken?”

Of course she wouldn't...do to him what Solas had done to Felassan. No, she couldn't...but the betrayal implied in this...how dare they trap her like this? And how dare he bring her feelings into this? She had...she had taken him into the city, she had been working with him. He knew how much it tormented her, why would he force her hand like this?

It hurt. Feynriel had been her student once. For him to turn on her like this...

“I believe I would like to know as well what this is all about.”

The words came out of the darkness behind her, smooth and dangerously mild.

“It seems a strange thing, when agents collude together against their leaders. It does not inspire trust.”

“Or perhaps we are colluding together for you, my Lord. There is no betrayal here. Only a plea that you both listen.” Felassan replied, turning his violet gaze towards the table, where Anders was lying out the counters that they used to mark the map, pretending he wasn't overhearing this all. “Or will you two continue to dance around each other, letting things slip through the cracks?”

“This is not a discussion to be having out here.” She hissed, to all three of them, frustration seething.
Why? Things had been going so well. She'd almost had things where she wanted them before this Kirkwall mess. She had nearly been able to function around him. “Come with me. All three of you.”

She realized perhaps belatedly that she shouldn't be ordering Fen'Harel around, but he followed without a word, after a significant look at Felassan. The sounds of celebration and chatter were everywhere, but muted, a constant background murmur of sound and music. It was muffled further by the tent as she pushed it open and strode in, thumping the wine down on the table. Wine was not quite doing it.

Her chest went everywhere with her, even here, despite the inconvenience of going through the eluvian. Her people knew better than to try and part her from it. A quick flick of her wrist dispelled the first of the wards from it, and she knelt down to unlock and open it.

She made them wait. They deserved it.

The squarish bundle carefully wrapped in layers of protection both magical and physical always gave her some courage, and she rested a hand on it briefly before picking up the bottle next to it. Slamming the chest closed again, she silently redid all of the locks and wards before rising at last.

They were all standing around the table, staring at her.

With her teeth, she uncorked the bottle, moving to claim one of the chairs. Politics. Her night was going to be ruined with politics, and she already knew it. This was the last thing she needed, after all of this. So, if it was going to be forced on her, she was going to do it on her terms. Silently, but pointedly, she lifted both bare legs onto the table, crossing them at the ankle.

“Talk.” She finally said, grabbing the only other chair and shoving it towards Fen'Harel. The other two could stand. He sank down into it, with a gracious incline of his head. “I don't know about Fen'Harel, but I'm just so excited to hear what you think justifies this. If you can forgive my lack of propriety, of course.”

She couldn't help the slight dig aside at him, her nerves were singing with tension, the relaxed posture more a hope than a reality. The liquor would help. Lifting the bottle, she took a small sip, chill sliding over her tongue to trickle down her throat, switching to heat just in time to burn in her stomach.

“By all means. The last few days have been stressful.” She offered the bottle, and he refused with a lift of his hand, reaching for the wine instead. “If I had realized we were going to be ambushed upon our return, I would have changed out of my armor as well.”

The retort was halfway across her tongue before she managed to close her mouth on it, tucking the bottle between her lips to stall it. Too easy. Too easy to banter, to prick at him and each other. She'd been avoiding it for so long, she wouldn't let herself get drawn in now.

Distance. Restraint.

She had to remember.

“What will happen when the wards at Adamant fail, my Lady, like the ones at Kirkwall nearly did?” Feynriel began smoothly, before either she or Fen'Harel could speak again. She had the sneaking suspicion that they had been practicing this. Probably while they were gone in the city. “If we had spoken to the Elvhen before, it might not have gotten so dire.”

“What about Val Royeaux, my Lord?” Felassan added, and she could see Fen'Harel's expression darkening out of the corner of her vision.
What? What was in Val Royeaux? Why hadn't she heard about this? But the blows had not stopped, they were still speaking.

“What about Ostagar, Lady? What about Estwatch?”

“Andoral's Reach?” Felassan suggested mildly moments later, still giving neither of them time to interject.

For a moment she was torn between fury and utter and complete despair. As Fen'Harel heaved a long sigh, she lifted the bottle to her lips and took a long, slow drink of the icy liquor, giving herself a moment to gather her thoughts.

“The map is right out there, my Lady. Perhaps it's time to have it out.” Feynriel suggested, and she glared at him as she tipped back the bottle further, pointedly. “What better time to cement this into a proper alliance?”

“I'm sorry, who says this is an alliance? You two?” She asked, disbelief in her voice once she'd swallowed the burn. “We have managed thus far without this interference, what makes you think it is necessary now?”

“Do you trust me to know the minds of your people or not, my Lady?” Feynriel retorted, a little bit coldly. She tightened her jaw at his tone of voice, far too familiar with it. They had been together far too long for him not to have taken on some of her mannerisms. “The both of you have grown too distant to see it. We are trying to help.”

“Then why not leave it to the people? Why are you speaking to us and not to their leaders?” Fen'Harel finally interjected, voice still strangely unmoved.

He had been exceedingly calm since the fight below the city, and it was starting to bother her. Was it because of what she had said about Mythal? Not even Freedom had rattled him, and she knew how he felt about such things. It gave her the uncomfortable sensation in the pit of her stomach that he had something yet to say to her. She would really rather he did not.

“Because they need you. Because they will still follow you.” Felassan replied, lifting his shoulders in a shrug. “Is it so difficult to believe? You both had your chance to war with the other, but now it is just too late. Why not ally in truth? The humans already think you are.”

A heavy breath escaped her lips, and she gave a small, slow shake of her head.

“I'm going to have to deal with Tevinter in the next few decades.” Tired, she was so tired of thing after thing piling on top of each other. There was a list longer than she had apparently even known of trouble spots that needed handling, and now the news that had Anders worked up. “I...”

Reluctance to speak of such things in front of Fen'Harel stopped her, and Feynriel gave her a significant look. She closed her eyes, lifting the bottle to her lips.

“The Lady and I will speak of this alone. You may both go.”

Why did that feel like a pronouncement of doom?

Silence, in the tent, uncomfortable with her continued refusal to look at him. Bit by bit, moment by
moment, it had become exceedingly clear that it was a very intensely personal issue that she held with him. Him, and no one else. He'd tolerated it for as long as he could without pressing the matter, but things had grown too strained.

She knew Felassan worked for him, had apparently known something even before he had awoken, and yet she had no issue with him. She was kind to his people, friendly to humans, dwarves. Protective of all of Thedas, and forgiving to a fault.

And she found something about him so intensely distasteful and uncomfortable that she was incapable of even pretending civility. And when she slipped and showed him any sign of camaraderie? She would immediately, and violently pull back.

She trusted him, and yet she hated him. Two things which should be impossible together. He simply couldn't sit silently and ignore it any longer.

“We are both aware of the stumbling block in all of this.” He began, reaching for one of the untouched cups sitting on the table. It seemed she had a fondness for drinking out of bottles. “I would like to clear the air, if such a thing is possible.”

“I have nothing to say.” She replied, unsurprisingly cool. “Don't tell me you agree with them.”

“Neither you nor I want this.” It was difficult to focus, as it had been since they'd stepped into the tent. He still hadn't quite pinpointed why she was able to affect him so strongly, and always had since first they had met. The casual lack of attire only made it worse, and wasn't the source of it. “The sooner we deal with the issues that no one else can handle…”

“Do you really think that will stop anyone? There will always be more excuses. Always more reasons not to simply leave things be. What will you do, go back to uthenera when you've washed your hands of it, only to awaken and find you do not care for the world, yet again?”

The sharpness in her voice stalled him, though her gaze would still not meet his, bottle lifted to her lips. Her words and discomfort were in odd contrast with her posture, tanned legs still stretched out on the table. If she wasn't so ill-tempered and snappish, he'd assume it was a deliberate distraction.

He needed to stop trying to untangle her motives in the moment, he invariably ended up distracted by the woman herself. Calm reflection later.

“No, I will not. I made a mistake, I have rectified it.” He paused, wetting his throat with the wine, before forcing the conversation onward. It felt almost like trying to fight the current of a river. “Please do not change the subject. I was under the impression that this is what you wanted. You have encouraged our people to interact, to let go of their distrust of one another. I am aware of the stories you spread to try and counteract the myths that made them fear me. A great kindness you have done, to the idea of me, the perception of me, and yet you hate the man himself. All of this work that you have done, and you refuse to ally. There is no logic to it.”

“So it is me. I am the problem. Forgive me if I think it strange that you would wish to ally with the savage, faded echoes of your once proud Elvhen that you abandoned. We are not truly people to you, after all, are we? Or has that changed?” Her gaze shifted sidelong to him, that not quite glance she would so often give him. If her voice was cold, he might have been able to bear it, but she sounded...hurt. “Yes, I am well aware how you feel about us. How else could you murder so many people, unless we were not people at all? You didn't even try!”

The accusation hung in the air, and he could only acknowledge it as truth, though her wording was sharp. He had not murdered...and yet their deaths were on his head. A truth that no one else would
likely ever tell him. He had not tried. And they had survived, despite him. He had continued to ignore what they were, what they were becoming, in order to...assuage his own guilt. It was her that had saved him.

Them. It was her that had saved them.

Though perhaps both were true, on some level. All the more reason he needed to understand.

“I did not. And for that I am sorry.” He replied at last, and was rewarded with a small, bitter laugh. Very well, if he had to unbend to get her to do the same, then he would. This had gone on long enough. “I could not tell you when...my opinion changed, but it has. I have you to thank for that.”

“I do not want your apologies or your thanks, Fen’Harel. I sincerely doubt that you would have delayed or changed your plans even if you had a different view of us from the start.” This time the name spilled over her tongue sharply, all edges and hurt. Vulnerable hurt. Her face hardened as she recognized her own moment of weakness. “It seems I am outnumbered, then. Very well. We will discuss the terms when we return. Is that acceptable, or do you require some great gesture of faith?”

“Answer my question.” Frustration made his voice more clipped than he had intended, but he was growing tired of her sliding out of his grasp when he finally thought he’d made some progress in understanding. “Tell me the truth, please. What is it that makes you hate me as you do? What are you hiding from me?”

Finally her eyes met his, as they so rarely did. He kept his composure as she stared at him, emotions subtly shifting her features in a thousand different ways. It almost appeared as if she was hunting his gaze for something, her own intensely piercing. It seemed she did not find what she was hoping for, because her expression fell in the end.

Before she dropped them, her eyes were so sorrowful that he felt his own breath catch in response, the depths too lost and lonely to imagine that anyone could bear it. Agony, old and heavy, and yearning. Yet he knew that it could be borne, because he felt it as well in some deep, wounded part of himself.

The part that called out to her, that had always called out to her.

He could feel her withdrawing, the vibrant melancholy in the air fading as her posture drew back in, chin lifting, breath escaping softly. And then she spoke, and he understood at last, as she stared at the wall of the tent with eyes that would no longer meet his.

“You murdered the man I love. That I will always love. He is dead, and it is your fault. I will never forgive you for that. Is that personal enough for you, Fen’Harel, or would you like to pry further?”

He had no one but himself to blame for pushing her. He was not sorry for it, at least not yet, but...out of all the things he had expected, that had not been one of them. It should have been, perhaps, but it had not been. It explained enough.

For now.

What could he possibly say?
“No, I will not.” He finally replied, staring down into the cup that he held, not willing to look into her face. It seemed invasive now. “I...”

“Do not apologize. I will not gracefully accept it. I cannot say I ever will. Are you still willing to ally with me?” She sounded calmer, which was relieving. The renewed distance between them made it somewhat easier. Even more so now that he now knew why it was there. “Knowing how I feel about you, and always will?”

“Yes, I am.” He responded formally, inclining his head as she nodded. There wasn't anything else to say, after all, was there?

“If you could ask tell the commanders that I have asked them to mark out the map, then, I will join you soon. A gesture of good faith. Perhaps a gesture you will choose to return.” It was a dismissal, but her voice was polite enough to hide most of the ice underneath it. “It seems I am feeling in a very...sharing mood.”

He couldn't fault her the bitterness, nor the dismissal, so he simply rose and departed.

“I know you're there. Both of you.” She couldn't hide the weariness in her voice, lifting the bottle for another sip. It did little to help her head or her heart, but at least her stomach was settled by the liquor.

“You did what you had to do. You have always done what you had to do. It hurts...it will always hurt, but it's yours, and you're helping people. Helping people makes it all better.” Cole replied, and she sighed, resting her cheek against the pale, insubstantial hand resting on her shoulder.

“It doesn't have to be all or nothing.” Feynriel retorted, and she closed her eyes against his words. “Hahren, I'm sorry for being duplicitous. I am. Did you have to lie to him, though? Couldn't you finally tell him the truth?”

“I know you're sorry, da'len.” She sighed, allowing it without forgiving it. It still hurt. “I would be a very poor sort of teacher if I didn't accept some instruction myself. If you have put Felassan in danger with this stunt, however, I will not forgive you. He needs him.”

Cole's presence behind her a soothing comfort, she allowed the hand on her head, forehead resting against Feynriel's as she breathed in slowly. Two tears, three. It's all she could afford, escaping with a shuddering breath that let out just a hint of the agony that twisted in her chest. She didn't hide them from him, but it was still all she could bring herself to show.

She could cry alone later.

“Please...you can't carry this forever. You need to stop forcing me to do things like this, I don't want to go against you.” He pleaded, and she gave a small, bitter laugh, wavering with the rest of the tears she would not shed. “You can't kill yourself to save him, and carrying this alone will kill you. Either that or it will make you into something that will have to be killed. You can't save everyone.”

“I can try.” She replied, for what felt like the thousandth time in her life, but this time it felt like a shell of the prayer it had once been. “I can try. You and Felassan will have your alliance. He has a reason for me now, something that he can accept. It should be enough to facilitate things.”

“Then what will you do? Disappear again and refuse to speak to him for several years until the world
forces your hand again?” His words were cutting, but low, and she gave another laugh, slightly less bitter. He knew her too well. “Of course you will. But what about Freedom? You know he’s attached himself to both of you.”

“He may come and go as he likes. What can I do to get you all to stop scheming, I wonder?” Easy, it would be so easy to get angry again. She was so tired of everyone trying to wrap them up together simply because they were...the only two of their kind, in a way. “This is not a story, Feynriel. This is not a new mythology. I am not here to play the gentle mother to his angry father. I am not his...his muzzle.”

“It's not you who gets to decide that, and you know it.” He sighed as she pulled back, but his voice was unrelenting, her eyes still closed to block him out. “You love him, I know that. And so do you. You are still a person, and the instant you forget that is the instant that you will find yourself sliding down that slope you've tried so hard to stay away from. Don't do this.”

“I do not love him, I love a dead man. Will you be my enemy, da'len, when I finally fall?” She asked, giving a small laugh again, quiet this time. Not even compassion was helping any more, it seemed. Cole remained stubbornly, however. “Rally armies to put down a goddess? Some days I wonder if the world realizes that the more they push me towards the edge, the closer they are to getting exactly what they want...which is the last thing that they need.”

“Yes. If the day ever comes, I will.” Feynriel promised, and she let out a quiet sigh of relief, lifting the bottle again. “But until that day comes, I will not stop pushing you. I will not let you forget yourself.”

“I know.” Her hand reached out blindly and found his, clasping together gently. “I know. Thank you. I just...cannot. It would undo everything I have done to try and save him.”

Silence then, for which she was grateful. She gave Feynriel's hand a squeeze, and then lifted it to her lips for a small, affectionate kiss. Swinging her legs off of the table, she opened her eyes at last and began to rise, as he lifted up from his knees. A heavy breath spilling over her lips, releasing some tension, she rolled her shoulders back and nodded up at him.

“Well. It seems we have some information to share. Let's try not to give more than we get, shall we?” Crossing the tent, she picked up a belt from where it was slung over the corner of her cot, buckling it on over her tunic.

She still wasn't putting on any damn pants. She'd earned that much, at least. Saving the world and wearing pants was a bit much to ask of her.

“Do you really need to take your daggers to a meeting with your new allies?” Feynriel asked, reaching for the bottle of wine. Sadly, by now the bottle was empty. He shook it anyways, hopefully.

“I hate politics. You know that. Never know when you might need to stab something.” She replied, smirking as she drove a blade home after checking the edge. “Besides, Shianni is here. Nobody else spars me properly. Might help work off some stress.”

“You're going to interrupt the most important strategy meeting of the past decade so you can go try to stab the southern Commander?” Feynriel asked, voice full of dry amusement.

He already knew the answer, why was he asking?

“Feynriel, if I don't, I might stab Fen'Harel, and that would be very bad for the alliance you nearly lost your head for. So, yes, if I'm going to be forced to do this, I'm going to drink, I'm going to spar
Shianni, and I'm probably going to do some cursing. We can leave the ponderous propriety for the people who transfer it to paper with fancy writing.” She paused, glancing over her shoulder, lips pursing together. He stared at her a moment, and then finally lifted both eyebrows, expectantly.

“If you're going to make me do this, I'm going to do it my way, Feynriel. Be careful what you wish for.”

With a smirk, she adjusted her belt one last time, picked up her bottle, and stalked out of the tent.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't edit all of this, sorry. Maybe tomorrow. Or maybe I won't.

I've finished 2 books! I'm editing 1 and working on its sequel. Exciting.
On the Table

Things were going well by the time she'd gathered herself, hair twisted up off of her neck as she stalked out of the tent, hands delving deep into it. She should probably cut it, but she was reluctant to do so. She'd lost it too many times over the years to give it up willingly.

Still, she understood the allure of getting rid of it all.

A pair of halla-horn pins would have to do to hold it up for now, stabbed through to drag against her scalp as she secured them. By now the table was busy, if surrounded by suspicion. Abelas and Shianni had marked out their sections, and the Augur was working on the map now, marking out the Wilds and the Basin.

“How are the Chasind doing?” She asked bluntly, all too aware that Fen'Harel was approaching the table as well to listen. “Last I heard, things were getting calm down there.”

Reaching into one of the wooden boxes, the Augur fished out a pair of smooth, round tokens, one black, one gray. Silently he set them out, at a spot on the map she knew all too well.

“Mmmh...not sure I agree with that.” She remarked, pulling out two tokens herself, gray and white, setting them against the others. “I've heard nothing to make me retract my opinion.”

“The witch troubles them.” The Augur declared, straightening up to tower above everyone at the table. “Displeased and uneasy, Lady.”

“Because of something she has done unprovoked?” She asked, and then gave a small sigh at the look he gave her. “No, it's never that easy. Of course.”

She could feel him waiting to her left, without looking at Fen'Harel. Right. This is what they were here for.

“Allies...at least to me. Witch of the Wilds and her son.” She remarked, gesturing to the contradicting counters with her bottle. “I get along with them better than the Chasind do, apparently. Hopefully they will be content with disliking each other and will not push it any further than that.”

“She's an ally of mine...I have read the myths.” He began, more a question than a statement, and she sighed faintly, lifting her drink to her lips.

Out of the darkness Freedom stumbled, under the weight of a chair. The Seer followed him, jabbing him gently in the back with her pipe when he paused.

“Keep going, now, my boy. Right up against the table. I'm old, I don't plan on moving.” She ordered, and then tucked the pipe back between her lips. “What's this about Morrigan now? Ah, the Chasind are picking fights with her again, are they? You'd think they'd know better, eh? Luckily that boy of hers keeps things under control.”

She settled down into her seat, giving Freedom a pat on the hand, and then turned her dark gaze back to the Lady. Fen'Harel was staring at her as well, waiting. The weight of it clung uncomfortably to her shoulders.

“Mythal's daughter.” She remarked, perhaps a bit shortly. At his taken-aback expression, she gentled her voice. “Flemeth's, rather. She has...a few. They tend to live apart and draw tales to them. Morrigan is an ally of mine...but apparently not an ally of my ally?”
Her gaze shifted to the Augur, who gave a small snort and went back to lying out counters.

“She harries the Chasind, not my people, Lady. I only show what they give to me.” He all but growled, reaching into another container to fish out one of the scarlet warning counters. “The Jaws are behave as you suggested. They do not trouble us too much.”

“Safe, then?” She inquired worriedly, and sighed at the nod she received. “Good. I did not go to all of that trouble to have Hakkon twisted up again. He was bound long enough.”

Idly she began pacing around the table, gaze shifting up and aside to watch him discreetly. Enough. She'd given him enough. For once he wasn't trying to look at her, and so she could look at him. Eyes roving along the line of his jaw, admiring the highlight of his neck in the gilded light, for a moment she could almost believe it was him. It was so much easier to look at him when she wasn't dreading the thoughts behind his eyes.

But no. No. It was time for politics. Not for foolish nostalgia for a man long dead.

“What is in Val Royeaux, Fen’Harel?” She inquired, avoiding his gaze as he glanced aside at her when she spoke, feeling it gliding across her skin.

He reached into the box of vibrantly red counters, picking up one between his fingers, rubbing his thumb over it.

Heavily, it clacked against the table, over the map. A small noise, but a signal.

The fight had begun.

They'd been pacing around the table in circles for what felt like hours now, though she knew it hadn't been. Him stalking, her prowling. She knew they had an audience beyond the commanders and advisors, but she couldn't let it bother her. This was necessary, to be done in the open. To let people see he could be reasoned with, worked with.

She'd save the stubborn bastard any way she had to.

The map was slowly becoming a mosaic of pieces, punctuated with the bright scarlet that signaled trouble, something only they could likely face. They avoided outing each other's spies, avoided showing scouting parties. It didn't need to be discussed, they knew it intrinsically. They didn't need to expose those things. Secrets could stay secrets.

They did not know that none of Hawke's men weren't spies for Tevinter, after all. A careful, dangerous game they played.

She could feel them sliding together the more they mapped out everything that stood against them, and she was grateful to the table.

She kept it between them.

“What's in the Tirashan, Fen’Harel?” She asked for perhaps the third time, a little splinter she could feel gradually working to the surface. The Tirashan had been a thorn in her side for too long, the people there refusing to even speak to her. Strange elves, in their crimson vallaslin, neither hers nor ancient.
This was...dangerous. Matching wits. She hated politics, but she'd always loved this, pitting herself against people for the fun of it. Too easy, with him, with his clever and complicated mind. She'd have to focus on the details, keep things free of emotion. Calm, logical.

“Shall we discuss Tevinter, my lady?” He countered smoothly, and she gave a breezy laugh, stepping back from the table, rubbing her hand across the back of her neck. “You seem quite convinced it should be left free, after all.”

“Maybe before.” Garrett's voice came out of the darkness, and he strode in, Aveline at his side. He tried to meet her gaze, but she sighed and avoided it. “But it seems our allies have failed us.”

“You don't know that.” She countered, circling around him as he approached the table, her eyes locked on the map. “Situations have changed, but that doesn't mean alliances have changed.”

“Madame de Fer has bowed to the chantry in order to found a new Circle. Please explain to me how that preserves our alliance.” Garrett barked, but she didn't flinch. She knew him too well to be phased by that.

“I had faith in her. I still do, but you are right it would not be out of the realm of possibility that she...is consolidating her own power.” She finally admitted, giving another long sigh, raking her fingers through her hair again. She had really not wanted this. Vivienne...ugh. “Your people are out, however? They are safe? We still don't know their intentions for this new 'circle'. If they jail every mage now, they'll have nearly no one left. And in a few generations...”

She couldn't fault Vivienne, she really couldn't. If the chantry was tightening its hold on Tevinter, and reforming the Circle, it would only make sense for her to get inside it and take as much control as she could. She knew how Vivienne handled things, but...she hoped it wouldn't make her an enemy.

And she had better not endanger Dorian with this stunt. That would change everything. That would not be allowed.

“They left a week after we did, they should be here before too long. Some of the men are going to go back and meet them at dawn. Going to be hard to resettle a city with less than three thousand people, but it's a start.” Garrett replied thoughtfully, scratching fingers through his beard. “You might not care that much about Tevinter now, but you're going to start caring soon. That council they've got going there is probably real pleased to have me gone. Nobody to tell them they're being stupid now.”

“Not interfering was always part of the agreement, and I will not go back on that.” She retorted sharply, twisting her hair back up again as all her restless playing with it tumbled it out of its arrangement. “I will not be the one to break the treaty. Yes, removing you from the council shifts the balance of power, but we knew that would happen. We need to have faith in Tilani and Queen Anora to keep things moderate.”

“What if they've already broken it?” Garrett asked her, and she jerked her head up, glancing from him to Aveline. The redheaded woman nodded, twisting her lips to the side.

“What have they done? Are they pushing borders? Sending out people? What?” She couldn't help the sharp note in her voice, but this was...frustrating. And the last thing she wanted.

“The Maker's first children are not people, and so are exempt from the prohibition on slavery.” Aveline informed her with a sigh, giving a small shake of her head. “They've started binding spirits again. Openly, at least. Who knows how long they've been doing so privately.”
The only one that didn't cringe slightly at the furious sound that tore itself out of her throat was the Seer, who merely shook her head and sighed. Turning away from the table, she paced into the darkness, anger trembling down every nerve, stiffening muscles. The litany of cursing she managed to contain to her mind through sheer force of will, but she could feel her back teeth grinding together.

The betrayal stung.

She'd saved their lives! She'd...lost people, lost friends. Lost so many spirits trying to save their lives, and this was how they repaid her?

“Who?!” The question was a growl as she stalked back out of the darkness, and she knew she must have been losing control a little, because there might have been some withdrawing from her. Normally she'd care, but this was... “Who thinks they can do this under my damn nose? I was very clear with the terms. No slavery. No fucking slavery.”

“Did you truly think they would give up centuries of selfishness? They are comfortable now, they have no need to adhere to the letter of the law you imposed upon them.” Fen'Harel's voice was calm, but she knew it was a ploy. She could see how angry he was, the look in his eyes as hers drifted past them. Oh, he was angry. His words fell like a pronouncement of doom. “I have been tolerant long enough.”

Trembling, she let out a long sigh through her nose, hands gripping at the edge of the table. She could feel the anger, tense in her chest, toes curling in against the grass as she lifted her gaze finally to meet his. And then she was...caught.

Held.

They stared at each other across the table, tension vibrant and heated. She was quite certain at some point she'd have to remember to breathe, but not...quite yet. With his eyes darkened by rage, she could almost believe it wasn't him, that the warmth in her stomach that twisted fluidly through her own anger was roused by someone that wasn't him. So much for keeping emotion out of it.

Fuck it.

“You will be tolerant longer.” She replied smoothly, throttling down her own anger, calming it.

“Will I?” He asked, short and sharp.

“You will.” Slowly the words spilled over her tongue like a promise, fingers relaxing their grip on the edge of the table as she straightened up with a sway. “I will not sacrifice the work I have done in Tevinter. We will send official censure.”

“Will we?” The words were nearly the same, but the voice was ice now, their eyes still held. He tucked a hand under his chin as he stared at her.

She didn't want to do this. It was a depths she hadn't wanted to stoop to, especially not in front of people. She was fairly certain it was Varric standing just outside of the light with Freedom, and she knew all too well that he would latch onto anything. No one could read people like Varric. But she had to, didn't she?

Oh, but it hurt. It hurt so badly. Earlier had been worse, but this would only compound that pain, twist it a little deeper. Open the wound a little wider.

Her gaze softened, still holding his, and his eyes narrowed minutely.
“Please.” She replied quietly, coaxingly, “Give me time. Don't let all the sacrifice be for nothing.”

She knew he was aware of the weight on them now, the tension of standing on the brink of something. Of change. They didn't quite know what to make of him now, especially the people of Kirkwall. He was the enemy, who had saved their city. Would he let her try to save Tevinter as well, or would he bring his wrath down upon them?

Her anger was vast, but his was dangerous.

She could put hers aside for now. She couldn't say she'd save everyone, and throw aside Tevinter now. It would undo their trust in her.

She had made herself vulnerable for him earlier, and she knew him. She knew it was weighing on him, and she couldn't let herself be above using it against him. She couldn't let it be about them. Not now. Now he was just her partner in this dance. It wasn't her any more, or him, after all.

It was only the Lady and the Wolf.

The Lady did not plead, the Lady did not bow. She would guide and be merciful, but she did not bend a knee.

Except to him.

“Please, Fen'Harel.” She murmured as she sank down.

Someone may have gasped. Actually gasped, like an Orlesian at the theater. Anger, nerves, and pain abruptly bubbled over into hysterical amusement, and it was all she could do not to burst into bitter laughter. It was an accurate sentiment. This was the most theatrical thing she had done in some time. She could already envision the paintings, the murals and mosaics. Her likely in something white and flowing, lifting her hands in supplication as she lounged gracefully, not in bare knees on the cold ground as she was.

It would be very dramatic. Very mythological. The Lady pleads with the Wolf to save the humans.

She didn't realize he had stepped around the table until she felt the hand on her elbow, pulling her back to her feet again. A brief contact that she knew he felt her flinch at it, and once she had risen, he dropped it immediately, stepping back.

“My Lady, you are the last person who should ever kneel to me.” He finally replied, voice smooth and calm, and then added graciously, “I find myself humbled by your earnestness. Very well. I will bend to your will in this for now. This situation will not be borne, but I will follow your lead in the handling of it.”

She inclined her head, keeping her expression placid until the words he murmured for her alone as he walked past her.

“That was ruthless.” He offered without even a hint of emotion, and then put the table between them again.
Silence reigned for a few moments, before she lifted her chin, hands clasping together.

“I believe I need a few moments to collect my thoughts. Abelas.” Her gaze shifted aside to the Sentinel, who had been utterly silent this entire time, unsurprisingly. The look he gave her was inscrutable, jaw cupped in his hand. “If you would be so kind as to mark out what we know of the movements in the Amaranthine with the Seer, I would be extremely grateful. We can go over it when I return.”

Infuriating.

She knew she was being so, which made it all the worse. Before she had been restless, unhappy with being backed into this situation. He could read her, then, and had made the mistake of thinking that meant he had her anticipated.

And then she had decided that she needed to calm his anger. That had been...clever. He couldn't have denied her without undermining both of their positions. Not with the audience, not in front of all of her allies and commanders. She had all but stabbed herself in the foot and then left it up to him if he would defend her or not.

He could not make the mistake of underestimating her again.

The eyes of the aged Seer flicked back to him for the third time as she directed the Sentinel in laying out markers. Far be it for him to ignore an unvoiced summonses like that. He had a feeling the old woman knew more than anyone at the table, barring the Lady and himself. Or perhaps including them. He'd always known she was dangerous, though they had never truly spoken.

“Thieves. Wherever there's more than four people gathered, there's at least one thief.” She told him as he approached her chair, hands clasped behind his back. “You don't want to sneak people in and unbind the spirits, might hurt them. But I can get them out and into you or the Lady's hands to free them, lad.”

He could hear the slight collective intake of breath as he was addressed so familiarly, but all he did was incline his head politely.

“It is not a solution, but it will appease me somewhat until one is found, Seer, thank you.” He replied, and then turned his gaze to the map. Fairly ordinary, from what he knew of the region. Two groups of raiders, one allied, one not. Only one glaring red marker. “What is that?”

“Estwatch. Something's been lurking there for a while now. Nasty. Clever. One of the ones that plots, plans. More of a priority than some of the others, because it's consolidating power. Controls the armada now.” The Seer tucked her pipe back between her lips, tapping it with a finger to light it. “Lost an old friend to Estwatch a couple months back. Spirit of Wisdom.”

“What do you know about it?” He inquired, glancing up briefly as Abelas brushed past them. The antagonism in the brief glance was as he'd expected. Knowing what he did now...

It was not as hostile as he might have expected, however. Wary, but not sharp. Odd, considering the scene with the Lady just now. Were they not...involved as he'd assumed?

The Seer was still speaking. He blinked and glanced back to her, not missing the brief amusement on her face. No, the old woman missed nothing.
“...Something nasty. I believe the Lady knows a bit more than I do, she looked into it once.”

“Greed. I can't say if it's working with, or has possessed Ianto the Talon, I didn't bother getting close enough.” The response came out of the darkness, as the Lady stalked back towards the table, the southern Commander on her heels. They both looked rather disheveled and battered, and she was in the midst of sliding a blade back into its sheath.

She'd...interrupted the strategy meeting to spar? It seemed so, because her lower lip was split, and she'd not bothered to heal it. Reflexively he offered a hand, and she shook her head at the silent offer of healing, more fluid than before, turning her attention to the map instead, finding a place to stand on the other side of the Seer. Placing her between them, much as she had had the table before.

“Frankly, I'd be perfectly happy to live and let live, but he's becoming more trouble than he's worth.” Her tongue idly ran over her lower lip, examining the injury. He turned his gaze back to the map. “Sooner or later, I don't know, but I need Isabela, I can't leave her to go up against him alone forever.”

“You'd better not leave her to deal with it alone.” Hawke called from across the way, glancing up from a letter that he was reading with the Warden Commander. Interesting. They appeared to be related. And vaguely antagonistic, from how they had been interacting. “I need them, if we're going to work out any sort of trade and travel with Rivain. And...”

“I know.” She assured Hawke, lifting a hand placatingly. “It is a high priority. I think we can both agree that the demon squatting in Val Royeux is the most immediate issue, however. Arrogance needs to be dealt with.”

“It is dangerously close to far too many settlements.” He agreed, finally speaking up again, surveying the nearly completed map. The bigger picture he had acquired was worrying. Decades worth of effort awaiting them. “I am not clear on the entirety of the Southern situation. What is...”

Even as he tapped the token at the tip of what they were calling Lake Calenhad, he could see the Lady stiffening. She said nothing, it was the Southern commander that spoke up, glancing away from cleaning the length of her plain, sharp longsword.

“No idea. Trouble spot. Lost fifteen people to Crestwood.” She replied bluntly, turning her attention to the map. “Nothing that goes into Crestwood comes back out. There's a lot of weird spots like that lately, but it's usually just a particularly bad demon that can be flushed out. Crestwood's the worst one down south, though. Can't get in far enough to figure out what it is.”

“I believe I told you Crestwood was dangerous, and should be avoided.” The Lady declared, folding her arms under her chest, tightening with anger. Once again, he was forced to look away from her. “Did I not?”

“Too many undead coming out of there. You can't blame me for trying to push them back.” The redhead woman replied, somehow managing to sound respectful and belligerent all at once. “You told me to leave it alone for now, and I have, but there's people trying to live around there, and it's my job to keep them safe.”

“You lost fifteen people. You wouldn't lose fifteen people to some undead.” The Lady replied sharply. A little too sharply. Defensive. He could see the Seer giving him a look out of the corner of his eye, and he turned his head just in time to catch a slight nod from her. “I told you Crestwood was dangerous, why did you let people settle?”

“Why?” The question he asked made her stiffen, her fingers curling in against the edge of the table as
she leaned over it. He could afford to be magnanimous, she had just been all but called out by her own people. “My Lady, if there is something in Crestwood I can aid you with removing...”

“No.” The response came instantly, and was followed by a heavy sigh. “What lies in Crestwood does not kill anyone.”

“Fifteen seasoned scouts!” Shianni - that was her name - retorted instantly, starting to sound a little angry. He wondered that the Lady let herself be spoken to in such a manner. The two seemed rather familiar with each other. “I didn't lose them to boredom, my Lady, something damn well killed them!”

“They killed themselves.” She snapped back, and turned away in the silence that followed, pacing from the table restlessly, hands raking through her hair. “It did not kill them, they killed themselves.”

“Despair.” The Seer supplied calmly, glancing up from packing her pipe, gnarled hands surprisingly deft. Somehow he had the impression she had known all along. “Sounds like a nasty one, yes Lady?”

“It calls itself Regret.” The Lady replied, reluctantly, giving a small shake of her head, hands dropping to her sides. “It is...not a danger at this time if it is simply left alone, as I asked in the first place. It's not malicious. There are more important issues, it would take a great deal of power to uproot Regret. We simply need to move people away and leave it alone.”

“You knew?” A silent look from the Lady quelled the commander's anger, but she gave a faint scoff under her breath as she restlessly strode to a cask that had been set out. When she spoke again, her voice was tense, but calmer. “That's the worst of it. There's something nasty in Highever, and a few dragons here and there, but nothing we can't handle. Apart from Ostagar, of course, but we're trying not to go that far south. Leaving the Witch alone.”

“You are certain Regret poses no danger if left alone?” He interrupted mildly, watching her face. If it was in fact a spirit that had merely claimed the area, he could understand wishing to leave it alone. But it seemed to be at least partially malicious. Or at least uncontrolled.

“Yes.” She snapped, and then rolled her shoulders back, letting out a quiet sigh as she relaxed. “Regret...he does not wish to hurt anyone. He never did. I simply cannot get close enough to ward the area.”

The admission spilled from her lips as if unbidden, and once again, he had the impression that a vulnerable spot had been found. This time, however, he chose to ignore it. Whatever it was in her that Regret preyed upon, it was not his place to know about it. Bringing it up would do no good at all. He may as well play her game at this point.

“For Commander Shianni's peace of mind, then, I will ward Crestwood myself until such a time as we are able to handle it.” He decided, inclining his head to the amusingly suspicious redhead, who squinted at him. “It is the least I can do. The pride demon in Val Royeaux should be a simple matter, that can be handled on our way back. Yes, my Lady?”

“Yes.” She agreed, regaining her composure with a gentle sigh. “Tevinter is a priority, but it is complex, and must be monitored while we await an opportunity to intervene. Adamant is...”

“Warded, for now. Six or seven years, perhaps, we have, before it must be faced. Estwatch is apparently a closer priority.”

“Not for your people.” She replied, guardedly, gaze shifting sidelong. He met it, oblique though it
He didn't quite know why he said it, apart from the fact that it was true. It was true, and he felt that somehow he owed her some vast debt...and had a rather worrying desire to right himself in her eyes. That should not drive such a decision, of course not, and yet...

“My people seem to be more than I anticipated that they might be, my Lady.” He replied, inclining his head minutely to her. “The world needs righting yet.”

“Then, Fen’Harel...” She invited, gesturing to the table as she turned back, tension returned to her shoulders, face blank once more. He could feel her withdrawal, but this time understood it, and would not press. “Let us begin our plans to right it.”

The meeting continued late into the night, and he did not make the mistake again of underestimating her. At least, he did not think he had. It was difficult to say. They parted ways in Val Royeaux two days later, and he left behind in her possession a key to access the eluvians, and she left with him something far, far greater.

The tentative, newly-born trust of her people.

In the nearly three years that followed, he neither saw her, nor received any direct communication from her personally.

No matter how many letters he sent.
The Lord's Spy

It was harder here to fit in, the Ralaferin clan was a suspicious one. Still, it had only taken a year to get herself insinuated, which was pretty impressive. She wasn't sure why the Lady was still here after two years, but it had given her time to get a really good disguise going. New name, new face, new everything. Even Felassan said she'd done a good job, and he hadn't even laughed when he'd said it.

Well, he hadn't laughed too much.

The Lady had left in the morning, something about 'checking wards', so it was the perfect time to get in and get some real information. She knew there was something hiding in that chest, and she was pretty sure she'd figured out the wards by now. Orana was resting, she was always resting now that she was so close to having the baby, and her helper was off somewhere, probably yelling at someone.

Ember yelled a lot. She was really bossy for a kid.

Basically? It was the perfect opportunity, one she'd been waiting for all year. When she'd told Felassan he'd just handed her a package to deliver to the Lady, which she'd been getting pretty tired of.

She was a spy, not a runner!

The tent was quiet apart from the little noises the halla made at her, even though she shushed them. It would have been easy to hide herself, but there wasn't really any reason. Nobody was around. She'd know if they were.

Wandering over to the table, she plopped down in the chair and pulled the package out of her satchel, curiously examining it for a few moments before unwrapping it, chewing on her bottom lip.

The first layer of waxed fabric came off, and a small note tumbled out. Frowning, she picked it up.

Salla, why are you reading this?

Okay, that wasn't funny at all, Felassan. Frown becoming a scowl, she crumbled it until it turned into dust under her fingertips and drifted away. He could at least get her new name right. Turning over the package, she started unwrapping the next layer, and let out a sigh when another little note tumbled out. This time it was warded, sparking against her fingertips as she tried to open it.

Ouch!

Mean, Felassan. She puzzled her way through the simple little ward easily enough, and then opened the second note, already dreading the contents.

Salla-the-Halla, are you certain that one of these notes won't actually turn your hands purple? Give you a boil on your nose? Set your rear end on fire? You really should be more careful.

She couldn't help a squeak and a jump in her chair as the note burst into green flames and then crumbled into ash in her fingers. Flushing, she glanced around herself rapidly. Okay, good. No one heard her.

Why he always played these tricks on her, she didn't know. It wasn't funny. Snooping was part of her job, after all. Maybe not snooping on things she'd been asked to deliver, but how was she supposed to know everything unless she checked?
Finally she managed to get down to the box, wriggling off the plain wooden lid after checking for wards. This time she remembered to check. There was another note inside the box, atop the wrapped up sweets. They were the kind she liked, the sticky honey candied sour fruit things. Those were good. Why was Felassan sending the Lady sweets? Were they... courting?!

Intrigue made her pick up the note, after checking it for wards and magics like the other one. Unfolding it three times, her intrigue quickly turned to annoyance.

_I'm sorry Salla ate all your sweets, I had someone fetch you some more from Enasal. The village is growing well, you should stop by soon and look in on it. Let me know if you do, and I'll meet you at Arlathan and I can show you the progress there._

_Salla, stop reading this. And stop eating other people's sweets._

_-Felassan_

The wrapper in her fingers tore away neatly as she wrested the candy free of it, shoving it into her mouth and glaring at the note as she chewed. Gradually her chewing slowed, and then stopped as shocked horror set in.

Wait. Wait.

The Lady knew she was here? This whole time?! How? Had Felassan told her?

How? She was so good at...

A loud yelp escaped her lips as a sudden surge of magic knocked her off the chair she'd settled in and onto the floor, landing hard on her hip. She was getting ready to defend herself when she heard the laughing, and her fear turned into anger. Oh no.

_Not him._

Freedom hopped up onto the chair and peered down at her with his hair in his face, and she scowled at him as she struggled up to her feet.

“Salla, you are the worst spy ever.” He teased her, and she frowned all the more, eyes narrowing. “Well, you are? Seriously, sitting around on your butt stealing candy?”

“How did you know it was me? And that's not my name any more! Like you'd know anything about this sort of thing, you're just an annoying little child.” She tried to sound lofty, but it was hard because her hip was sort of hurting and she still had half a piece of fruit in her mouth. Glaring, she finished chewing, defiantly.

“You're two years older than me.” He pointed out, and she rolled her eyes. Not even the same thing. “I know why you're here. Leave mamae's chest alone. I mean it. I'm not going to warn you again.”

“You're just two years old, remember? And I don't even know what you're talking about, I came to read the scouting reports.” She extended a hand for them, approaching the table, and he slapped her hand away.

Frowning, she reached over and smacked the back of his head in retaliation, smirking at the look of
shock he gave her.

“Don't strike the first blow if you're not willing to strike the last, spirit-born.” She told him, giving a small sniff. “You really are just a baby, aren't you?”

This time when she fell, it was on her butt, and she was blinking away the afterglow of the blast of magic when she heard him snickering at her. She couldn't see him, but she could feel the leg of the chair underneath her foot, and that was enough to yank it out from under him.

He squalled as he fell to the ground, and her laugh of triumph was caught short as her hair was caught and jerked sharply. Hey, that actually hurt!

“Don't pull my hair!” She demanded, reaching for his leg as he tried to sit up, pinching through his leggings and twisting. “You are \textit{SO} immature!”

“I'm immature!? You're one to talk!” He replied, kicking at her knee, making her wince.

“What is \textit{WRONG} with you two?” The shout came from the entrance to the tent, and they both turned their heads guiltily to meet the slight, but ferociously scowling girl with hands on her hips. “Get out \textit{NOW}! Right now! I mean it!”

Framed in the doorway, her ruddy curls lit by the sun, the small figure looked more imposing than she ought. That and the voice, which was very loud...and the disapproval, which was even louder.

“Sorry, Emby.” Freedom replied, shamefacedly, and she gave him a look of disbelief. Letting himself be bossed around by some little kid? “Salla was just being an ass again.”

“Excuse me?” She started, but abruptly found herself picked up by a surge of magic, dragged through the air, and then deposited on the ground outside the tent, landing on her rear end in the dirt. “Hey!”

“Sorry, Ember.” Freedom repeated penitently as he ducked past her, reaching out to give a pat to her tangled, ruddy curls. Her scowl faded minutely. “I'm gonna go see Solas, okay? So if mother gets back before I do, that's where I am.”

“Shoo.” The girl replied dismissively, flapping her hands at them as if they were stray chickens. “I shan't tell, as long as \textit{she}...goes with you.”

“I...” Who did the little brat think she was? She was still trying to formulate a response, as Freedom helped her up. By then it was too late, Ember had slipped into the tent. “What did she mean, 'she'? Rude.”

“C'mon, let's go to the eluvian.” Freedom replied, and she scowled at him, jerking her arm free. “I found a book in Jader I wanted to show you anyways. It gave me an idea about how we were talking about how we should go rescue all those spirits in Tevinter.”

“What's it about?” It was hard not to be mad, but he always found the strangest stuff, and it was always interesting, at least.

Such a weird world, with so many lost stories in it. She barely remembered the old one, but Freedom was here to tell her about the new. No one else seemed to care, they were too busy making another new world on the bones of the new old one.

It was a shame, there were so many things to learn still from the ruins left behind of the place they called Thedas.
Freedom understood.

“It’s about a guy...that...okay, so he’s a thief, right? But he steals to...help people. And he’s smarter than everyone else, so he’s always just...one step ahead, you know?” As they walked, he turned to face her, and the last of her annoyance faded as she listened.

Freedom was good at telling stories. He got really into them, flailing his arms and things. And he barely ever tripped over stuff any more. As they wandered to the eluvian through the forest with absolutely no fear of bandits of demons, he told her all about the Black Fox's adventures roguishly righting wrongs and being more clever than everyone who tried to stop him.

Just like them.

He wasn't sure what Felassan had done, but wow. Salla sure was mad. Well, she was mad a lot, really. So it wasn't that surprising.

It was funny to watch her yelling at Felassan, who looked like he could care less about it, but he was on a mission. It was high time he started doing something, after all, but he had a feeling that mother'd just say no without listening. Maybe Solas would feel differently. Or maybe he could bribe him. That could work!

“You should stop and think before you do this.” Wisdom told him, and he sighed at them, taking the stairs two at a time. “Perhaps your mother is right to tell you to be more careful. You have only fifteen years of experience to base your decisions on, and only two of those in a body.”

“Someone has to do something!” He retorted, and Wisdom gave a slow sigh. “Oh stop it, you sound like mother. Shianni has been teaching me how to fight, you know.”

“People train for many years to learn how to fight. You are special, yes, but you still have to learn things, just like anyone else.” Wisdom replied placidly.

Grumbling at the spirit, he pushed open the door at the top of the stairs.

“Solas!” he called, wandering up the shorter flight of stairs, “I need to talk to you!”

“I believe what you need to do is learn to knock.” The response was sour, but he knew better. Solas liked it when he visited, but he wouldn't say so because of mother. “Did you come to deliver something?”

“No, mother went to check the Crestwood wards with Shianni. She didn't tell Abelas to write any reports to you.” Popping his head up out of the stairwell, he wasn't surprised to find Solas at the table he'd put in the corner. “You know you have a desk downstairs. And that table wobbles. Why don't you fix the wobble, you could do it with just the tiniest little thought.”

“When I am at the desk, people bother me. Though today it seems there is no respite from interruption.” The censure in the words just made him grin. He knew Solas wasn't really angry with him. “What is it you need, Freedom?”

“I want to go to Tevinter!” He hadn't meant to blurt it out, but it seemed to happen all the time. It was weird not saying whatever came to his mind, anyways. “See, Salla and me...”
“No, absolutely not. There is nothing you could say that would make me think this is even a remotely good idea.”

“Okay, but if you let me talk...” He protested, hands going to his hips. “At least let me talk!”

“Did you ask your mother if you could go to Tevinter? What did she say? What possible reason could you have to travel there?” Solas set his book down heavily, and turned to face him at last.

“I thought if you said it was a good idea, she might...” He started, and then scowled at the disapproving look that got him. “Okay, but, we were reading the Black Fox...do you know that book? It's a good book, and it's true, which makes it even better, and we thought we could...”

Solas sighed, and his frown only got deeper. Why was everyone always sighing at him? This was important, and no one else seemed to care.

“Well you and mother don't seem to think it's important to rescue them, so I...” He trailed off, shoulders hunching under the stern stare being leveled on him. “Just...thought...I could help...”

“It is extremely important, but it is also complicated, Freedom. This is not...an adventure story. You cannot swoop into Tevinter and go...running about on rooftops rescuing spirits. Life does not work that way.”

“Okay but, why not? You're not even trying!” Frustration was rising, his hands clenching at his sides. Why didn't anyone else seem to get this? He was trying to help. “Why can't I do something? Why?”

“We are trying, but it is complicated. It takes time to navigate these sorts of things. Yes, your mother and I are doing everything we can to protect the spirits, but going into Tevinter and exercising our power would...create more problems than it would solve.”

“So then let me go! I can help!”

“You are a fifteen year old boy! You cannot even begin to comprehend the consequences that could come from something like that. Absolutely not! I will not condone it, and neither will your mother!”

The small, cutting gesture of Solas' hand through the air only made him seethe more.

“Why did he think he got to be so...so...dismissive?”

“How would you know? She won't even talk to you.” He shot back, only to stop, anger dying sharply out as Solas crossed his arms and stared at him. Oops. Too far. “I...I'm sorry...”

“I should think that you are. We make a great many allowances for you, which I know that you are aware of. Yes, you are different, but you are still young, Freedom. You are not invincible.”

“I'm not...it just...everything's so awful about it, Solas. It's...” He couldn't even explain it, the sheer wrongness about it that twisted in his gut, made him so angry. He hung his head, drooping. “Why are they doing that? They like to help. We...they like to help, all they would have to do is ask.”

A hand rested on his shoulder, fingers curling in with a firm, secure grip that made him feel just a little bit better. He breathed in slowly.

“Because as long as people exist, there will be those who would always choose power and control over acceptance and understanding. We are doing everything we can, I promise you, but we must be cautious.” The hand released his shoulder, resting briefly on his head before falling away again. He raised his eyes to meet Solas' again, lips twisting to the side. “I know. It is difficult to know you can
help, but to know that you must not. It is never easy.”

“I'm...sorry for saying that about mother. She just...it's hard for her.” He knew neither one of them wanted him to meddle, but she'd just been so closed-off lately. “I keep telling her she should write you a letter back. She's...really lonely, but...she doesn't listen to me.”

“I...this isn't something you should be prying in, Freedom. I understand your intentions are good, but she has her reasons.” Solas looked a little uncomfortable now, but not as much as when he usually brought it up.

“They're not good enough ones.” Should he? Maybe. He was starting to get the hang of this whole...knowing when to push thing. Because there were consequences now, probably. Boundaries were just for breaking anyways, and at least this stuff he wasn't all geas-ed about. “I mean, she's happy for Abelas and all, that he met someone, but...it just means she's spending more time alone. I'm just worried about her.”

“She...has you.” Hah! He knew it. It was hard not to gloat at the surprise and then the tiny bit of pleasure on Solas' face, quickly covered up. “If you are concerned about her, you should make more of an effort to spend time with her instead of coming to bother me.”

“Or you could try writing her a letter about something besides wards and politics and junk. There's got to be something else you could talk to her about. Who else could understand?” He retorted, incapable of keeping the smugness out of his voice. He knew he'd been caught, but he just grinned at Solas. “She doesn't hate you, you know. Not really you you. It's just...all the...stuff.”

There his tongue stalled. Right. Stuff he shouldn't talk about. Whew. Not for the first time, he was grateful for the geas, no matter what Solas thought about it.

He didn't know how Hope did it. Of course, she didn't talk much at all, so...maybe it was easier for her to avoid saying the wrong thing.

“Stop interfering. If you're concerned, why don't you go head home. I'm certain she'll want to see you when she returns from inspecting my work.” Solas turned back to the table, and he rolled his eyes.

They were as bad as each other. Ugh. Oh, wait. Right.

_Crestwood._

“When you...made the wards, you didn't go in, did you? I mean, to talk to the spirit.”

“No. While I trust when she says it holds no malice, I...had very little desire to face Regret.” Solas replied after a moment, and he sighed in relief. “Why do you ask?”

“I agree with mother. I think he should just be left alone. He's not really trying to hurt anyone. He never wanted to hurt anyone.” He stalled a little at the odd look that Solas gave him. “What?”

“Nothing. That's simply...almost exactly what the Lady said about this spirit. Is there something I should know?” Cautious, his voice.

He didn't want to say anything, not really. More than the geas, it...well, it scared him a little, how much it pained mother. How much it still hurt her. He didn't want to make it worse. What could he say, really?

“I don't know. What do you know?” He asked evasively. Something else he was getting good at. 
“I suppose that tells me everything I need to know. She cannot face it because she created it, is that it?” Solas concluded, and he winced.

Oh. Maybe he wasn't as good at that as he thought he was. Lying was complicated.

“She's just...not ready.” He mumbled, shuffling a foot. Mother was going to be angry with him about that. Or sad. He sort of hoped she'd be angry, actually. “Can you...not bring it up? It makes her upset.”

“I will not say anything for now. You should be getting home.”

There was the 'end of conversation' voice. Okay, he knew that one by now. Giving a sigh, he lifted a hand and turned away. He'd have to go tell Salla they couldn't go to Tevinter after all. She'd probably be a pain about it. She was a pain about everything.


He didn't get an answer, but he didn't really expect one, either. Ugh. They were both so stubborn. Sometimes he felt like he was the only one that saw anything clearly. Why did they have to make everything so complicated?

He just didn't get it.

Solas sighed, turning away from the stairwell and shaking his head as Freedom slumped off. Hopefully some of the impulsiveness would wear off as he aged. It was an issue for the young in general, but the boy was hardly an ordinary youth. He was reaching for his book again when he heard a soft rustle to his left, turning his head to gaze down at Hope.

They offered a small smile, barely visible in her vaguely insubstantial shape, and extended the sheet of paper to him.

“Not you as well.” He sighed, and the spirit laughed gently as he took the paper. “I have the distinct feeling, not for the first time, that I am being herded.”

“It will harm nothing to try.” Hope responded, and then added, very quietly, as if imparting some great secret. “She keeps all of your letters. She always has.”

“I...” He began, and then stalled, idly running his thumb down the sheet of paper as he gazed at it. That was...information he didn't quite know what to do with. “I suppose you are right, though I confess I do not know where to start.”

“I'm sure you'll think of something you want to tell her.” Hope replied, and he could hear the smile in her voice. “I know you will, Solas.”
Forgotten Gods

The summonses received less than a week ago had been strange, and for a moment she had been tempted to come alone. It had distinctly specified that she would 'need no guards' and that it would be preferred if she arrived alone. But no, for some reason she sincerely doubted Fen'Harel would be pleased with her if she had done so. After all, he knew the summoner far better than she likely ever would. It was only a stop on their way on to deal with issues in Rivain at last, but it was an important one. He was tense already, and they had barely reached the edge of the Tirashan forest.

A multitude of reasons for that, she had no doubt.

“You're quite certain this will be all right?” She finally broke the silence, as they both scanned the way ahead. No wards, which bothered her somewhat. No scouts. It was eerily empty. “I was told to come alone. I doubt I'm in any danger.”

“You are likely correct, but I have no doubt that the assumption was already made that I would be traveling with you.” He replied, before falling silent once again. “Asking for you to come alone was a test.”

Three years was such a small time now, but something in that time had changed things between them. She wasn't quite sure what it was, but she felt oddly...comfortable. What a strange situation. Perhaps it was because they had been working together all this time, albeit by proxy. It may have been due to Freedom bouncing between them, or because the lightly conversational letters had finally worn her down some.

Maybe it was only because he didn't seem to mind that she hadn't responded. Her silence had neither stopped him, nor made him treat her any differently.

It was a relief, when there were no expectations. She was surrounded by them, drowning in them. Every single person that looked upon her was waiting to see what she would do for them. But here, in the silence that was his company, a brief respite.

“We are being watched.” He finally spoke again, moments after she had felt it as well. “Though they do not seem to be guiding us.”

“Would he be inclined to ambush us? Certainly he has to know it wouldn't go well for them.” She breathed in the air, heavy with moisture and decay, the ground underfoot spongy with undisturbed rot and moss. It was a beautiful forest, in its dark and crowded way, warmer than it should have been. “I can't imagine he would.”

“Time perhaps has not been kind to his mind, but...no. That would not suit his purpose. I would imagine the letter he sent you was truth. The sort that can be twisted any way he likes on a whim, but truth all the same.”

“He sounds charming.” The words slipped from her lips easily in her relaxed state, and she found for once she didn't mind that she had. “I expect we will be fast friends.”

“Not so much as he thinks he is, but...I suppose you could say that he holds some measure of charm.” Fen'Harel sounded somewhat disturbed by her statement, which only amused her all the further. “I would not suggest becoming incautious, however.”

“It was a joke, you know.” Somehow she managed to keep a placid voice.
“Ah. That must be why I did not recognize it. Unfamiliar territory.” He replied, startling a laugh from her.

It lasted only a moment before it died out, sharply.

Silence, then, as she fought to unfreeze her suddenly stalled chest, feeling his eyes on her as they walked. Eventually he took pity on her and glanced away again, both of them all too aware of the figures among the trees tracking their progress.

“I apologize, I know how uncomfortable you must be.” His words made her laugh again, this time without humor, only a noise. He was being far too gracious. “I do appreciate you allowing me to accompany you.”

“I am grateful that you offered. Thank you. I am sorry for how circumstances have conspired against you.” She finally replied, gaze focused ahead, piercing through the maze of trees. “Your reassurance and knowledge has been invaluable. It seems...we have arrived?”

The statement became a question as they broke through the trees to find themselves in what must have been a village. For a moment she was stalled by it, confused and somewhat in awe. It was...like nothing she had seen before. Oh, there were Elvhen touches, shapes of doorways that led nowhere and particular carvings, but long removed from the great stone structures and ruins.

Almost everything was alive.

Latticed walls formed of branches, bridges stretching between trees heavy with lichen and vines. It must have been breathtaking once, and it still was, but in a way removed from the graceful, intricate lines of the oldest structures. Shapes, but no substance. The actual dwellings were crude, walls of earth and deadwood rather than living trees. It was if pieces had been stripped away entirely, leaving only the framework of what was once a great village.

Then again, knowing what she did about the creation of the veil and what it did to the cities of the Elvhen, that may have been exactly what happened.

“I don't believe I've ever seen trees like these before.” She mused, glancing up as they paced through the silent village, not a single person to be seen. “The bark is so smooth...”

“They only grow here, I believe. It is as I expected. He must have only returned recently, otherwise it would not look...well, he sets a great store in appearances. As you can see, only the foundation of what was has remained.” It was almost a warning, those words, and she inclined her head to him silently in acknowledgment. “He would never have let things get in such a state.”

She was tempted to pause as they passed a mosaic inset into a massive trunk, appearing to have been broken and then crudely rebuilt, vibrant greens and golds of the ancient pieces gleaming through the moss.

“A snake, hmm? Interesting choice. I assume he picked it himself, from what you've told me.” She couldn't help the dry note of her voice.

“I...” He paused, and she did the same, catching the note of uncertainty in his voice. “I know we have discussed this already, but there is a point I would like to emphasize...”

“No, by all means.” With her attention taken up in examining their surroundings, it was much easier to be casual. “Please speak your mind.”

“There is something he wants from both of us. Some sort of deal will be offered, I have no doubt, but
it won't be phrased as such.” She waited patiently as he gathered his thoughts, tilting her head to watch a near-invisible serpent dozing on a branch. “And he may behave...inappropriately towards you.”

“Ah. Well, I'm not worried about that.” Laughing might be inappropriate, but she was rather tempted to. He thought she'd be offended? Then again, had he ever really known her when she wasn't stiff out of terror of relaxing around him? “Though I appreciate your concern about my dignity. Thank you for warning me, I promise I won't get upset and ruin any negotiations. I'm the primitive savage, after all, not you.”

She shouldn't tease, it was a slippery slope, but after this they had a rather long trip ahead of them, and honestly...she was exhausted. It was exhausting keeping up the wall and playing pretend, especially after the last three years left alone to contemplate what she wanted the future to look like. She had to have her wits sharp for this, not split her concentration trying to keep up a facade for him.

“How far must I bend, I wonder, before you stop needling me?” They began walking again, having little difficulty feeling the direction they were being called to. Especially not so close. It was like walking towards the center of a whirlpool, magic eddying around something. “I have been very patient with your reticence.”

“Don't bend too far, or I might take advantage and kick you in the hindquarters. I believe I've proven I'm not above using your guilt against you, Fen'Harel.” She retorted blandly, features smooth and unruffled as he stared at the side of her face. Somehow she managed to keep her lips from tugging up.

“A dangerous woman, using guilt and humility as weaponry. I believe I am familiar with your tricks by now.” This time she couldn't hide the hint of a smile, but couldn't maintain it as he continued speaking. “Cleverly hidden as they are until you have need of them.”

“You are mistaken if you believe that if you've found all of them. And I will not do you the disfavor of thinking I have found yours.” She replied tartly, and then paused yet again as they ducked through a curtain of low, untrimmed branches. “Well...that's something.”

The effort that had been spared the rest of the village was in evidence here, where a massive tree with the same pale, silvery bark loomed over all. The building wrapped around its base had much in common with some spiraled seashells, though she had a feeling it was meant to be more serpentine than oceanic. Work had been done to repair it, mosaics patterned across its curved walls.

“He looks to himself before looking to his people? I suppose that does match what you told me of.” She remarked in a murmur aside, and received a brief nod. “Hmmh. Right.”

“He is better than most, but if only because he sees them as an extension of himself. If we handle it as discussed, it should be simple to navigate.” A small pause, and then he inclined his head to her, and she returned it. “Shall we?”

“Shouldn't keep him waiting.” She agreed, and began heading down the slope to the massive door awaiting them.

The hall in the heart of the tree was circular, vaulted, and rather overdone to her eye. Lots of inlay and carvings and unnecessary pillars. A single piece of furniture in the whole place, a massive,
twisted chair being occupied by a man who...had apparently forgotten wear a shirt.

Not that she was in any position to judge, really, she forewent pants whenever possible. She understood the allure.

Long limbed, dark of skin and pale of hair- undeniably attractive -his face had that sort of unsettling perfection of features that made one look sculpted. Likely closer to the truth than not. The air was smoky, heavy with elfroot, filtering the light in odd ways and making the shadows of the room strange. Another bit of deliberate ambiance, she had no doubt.

This all felt very scripted. No one actually sat like that, did they? He looked like he was about to slide out of it and land on his ass, with all the slumping and splaying. It partially ruined the nice view. Not entirely, but partially.

“Well. A pleasant surprise.” Rolling his head lazily to the side, the man offered a lazy, but oddly feral smile. “I send a letter to a pretty girl, she brings a grumpy old man with her.”

“Well.” Fen'Harel greeted blandly. “Thank you for the kind hospitality.”

“Solas?! That you?” The shock was obviously feigned, as Anaris oozed to his feet and meandered over with a swaying stride. An arm slung around the other man's neck, and he dragged him down to grope the top of his head. “What have you done to yourself? Did not even recognize you!”

“Time changes many things, Anaris.” Solas didn't look in the least bit surprised, but he did shrug the other man off almost instantly, straightening up. “Though not all, it seems.”

“Some of us have no need to change, hmmmhh?” Anaris slurred, ending in a small, rough chuckle, almost a growl. “Not pleased with you, my friend. Not too pleased.”

Slapping a hand roughly against Solas' shoulder, Anaris turned to swagger back across the room, all of them owlishly watched by the people ringing the walls. Crimson vallaslin, and almost uniformly brilliant green eyes, there was a certain oddness to them, taller but even leaner than the elves she was used to, and yet smaller than the ancient Elvhen. Hard to see them clearly in the shifting shadows, which was no doubt intentional.

The only light in the room was a single lamp casting a pool of light over the chair. Very dramatic.

“I appreciate your welcoming us regardless of that.” Solas replied, still studiously unemotional and smooth.

She felt no need to interfere, herself. This was...interesting. She was expecting grandiose manners, careful and delicate interactions. Instead she found...a shirtless, posturing old god with an audience of curious elves and a very uncomfortable Fen'Harel.

She wondered if the discomfort was for her sake. He'd casually inserted himself a step ahead and halfway in front of her, all without her noticing. They hadn't discussed that, but it certainly made sense.

She could feel the power Anaris wielded, and found it rather...small. How strange to notice such a thing about someone once called a god by her people.

“Don't curse the spirit for being true to its nature. The distaste is not due to...” His voice went a little slower as he lounged back against his chair again, every which way but the right one, a leg over the arm, elbow propped on the other. “Not the sheer arrogance, you are fully aware. It was an excellent trick, and I respect that, Solas. Suffered far less than the others for it. Well done.”
One of the...women, it had to be a woman, though they all bore a sort of commonality of features that made it difficult to say at a glance, scurried over to offer him his pipe again. He took it, tucking it between his teeth.

“It pleased me, immensely. Near enough to almost make up for the fact...” There was laughter in his voice, but high, unhinged, spilling over the words and twisting them up with something dangerously close to menace. “That you didn't fucking warn me, Solas! I had to find out just like every other fool out there. I mean...I started aging, Solas. Do you realize how unsettling that was?”

All right, this was a little disturbing. The abrupt shift in cadence and speech patterns only highlighted the rapid change in mood. Luckily the vicious look in his eyes faded as he inhaled from the pipe, and then let the smoke trail from the corner of his mouth. He slung his arm back over the rest of the chair, free hand splaying across his bare stomach.

“I apologize.” Solas replied simply, which roused another chuckle from the lounging man.

“If only it were that easy. If only. See this nonsense I have to put up with?” He gestured with his pipe vaguely at the people gathered, watching. Her eyes narrowed at the motion, but none of the elves seemed inclined to cringe. That made her feel a little better. “Few...however many centuries, and this is what I come back to! Cults...broken languages...do you know how many perfectly preserved bodies they destroyed trying to 'summon' me back? I've got halls full of people waiting to come back, and nothing for them to come home to because of these idiots.”

He seemed to enjoy listening to himself talk. Not that he didn't have a particularly pleasant voice, but the brief flashes of anger that snapped through the slow, languid rhythm were rather jarring. It put a person on edge.

“The passage of time is not always kind. Much less survived than I anticipated.” Solas seemed to be handling it by speaking as little as possible. She didn't blame him, but she wasn't really interested in playing the same game. Too much to be potentially gained.

“What is with you?” The question was posed to Solas, but then turned to her, as Anaris' head lolled back against his arm. His eyes gleamed in the golden light, narrowed. “He always like this now? Wasn't this bad before, old man attitude to go with the old man face? Could tell you stories...but then again, certain you'd much rather hear about me, wouldn't you? I am far more interesting.”

The wink was far from subtle, but it made her smile all the same. Dangerous, oh, he certainly was, but she couldn't help but find a bit of humor in all of this. That and this seemed an excellent time to get some information she might otherwise be denied.

“It would be impolitic for me to say anything in either direction.” She replied, and smiled slowly as his grin deepened, with a hint of teeth. “Very clever of you.”

“Flatterer. What's a little honesty between friends? Friends, or...?” A little testing prick, but she could do the same.

“I confess myself curious as to the reason behind the summonses. I'm being terribly rude, and I hope you will forgive me, but I am beyond intrigued.” She deflected smoothly, tilting her head to the side and maintaining her lazy smile. “Was it the pleasure of your acquaintance? If so, all I can do is chide you for not offering it sooner. I regret having missed out on it for so long.”

She knew it was rushing, and probably impolite, but testing his reactions was proving to be interesting. She doubted they had the same measures for 'good manners' at any rate. The Game had never appealed to her, but the rules here were her own, and she didn't have to worry any more about
hordes of onlookers waiting for a misstep. No, all she had to worry about was the 'Forgotten One' lounging in his chair smoking his pipe, and the Dread Wolf standing stiffly next to her.

Two evil gods of her once-people, and her. This wasn't a trial by fire in the heart of Orlais. This was far more interesting.

“Oh, you're good! You're very good!” Anaris laughed, short and sharp, echoing around the hall before he settled again, grinning at Solas this time. “I like her. Careful, or I might try to keep your little one. Always were bad at sharing, though, weren’t you?”

Another little testing prod, a near-insult. Though, to be fair, in comparison she was indeed very young. She stifled her impish smile, refusing to let herself be drawn out. He was fun, though, it was hard not to play along. Try not to forget the danger. They all had to find a way to live together, after all.

“Sadly, I wither without sunlight, much like your lovely trees, Anaris. May I call you Anaris, or am I being unforgivably rude?” Her head tilted to the side, and he grinned drowsily. “It seems not, if you smile at me like that. Unless you enjoy rudeness?”

“You...are a flirt.” Anaris replied, lifting the hand from his stomach to waggle a finger in her direction, rousing a laugh. She couldn't have helped it if she'd tried, not with the tingle of adrenaline. “Need to stop, or Solas is going to stare a hole right through my head. I wasted all the remnants of my poor magic on this body, I don't want to lose it.”

“If we could address the reason for this summonses, Anaris, I would be grateful.” Solas interrupted smoothly, voice darkening a hint as Anaris rolled his eyes across the way at her. Hiding the smile took some work. “Please.”

“As you like, old man.” Anaris sighed, kicking to his feet. She wasn't terribly surprised that his swagger over ended with him proprietorially tucking his arm through hers. She allowed it, though there was something almost condescending in the way he led her. “Come. I have a present for you, nameless little lady.”

“A present. For me? How very kind of you.” She replied, and was graced with another smile that probably would have been charming if not for the cruel edge he barely hid. “I'm afraid the only present I have for you is my presence, Anaris.”

“We may find something yet.” The words came with another of those winks, and he gave her a small tug before leading the way.

Taller than her by far, Anaris was, probably even more so than Abelas, though she couldn't really tell without putting them side by side. It made walking arm in arm a little awkward, but he compensated for it by slouching. Honestly, she wasn't certain he knew how not to slouch. She could feel Solas following, and glanced once over her shoulder to make sure, as she was drawn into a long, curving hallway.

“So dull. Used to get into the most spectacular fights, you know.” Anaris remarked to her, drawing back her attention with a slight tightening of his arm. The grip relaxed the instant her gaze turned back to him. “Back before he got boring. Certainly the problem with getting dragged into...all their political...nonsense...”

The word was sharp, almost feral again, but he gentled it with a liquid, drowsy chuckle, gesturing with his pipe as they wended their way in what must have been an ever-deeper spiral, green lights flickering oddly. Underground by now, certainly.
“Oh, I agree. Politics. Just the worst.” She confided, and then pursed her lips at the faint sigh from behind her. “Uh oh, I shouldn't have said that.”

“Belrenan.” The slurred-together word was delivered sidelong with a faint smirk, and it actually surprised her for a moment, though she fought to keep it from her face. “So small, with so many voices. My mind is yet clear. That's what happens when you live in and out of the song, rather than trapping yourself. Mind you...did not have much choice. Aging or giving up...neither sounded enjoyable. Takes so much damn power to keep the body from decaying.”

“I wonder that you can hear the whispers.” She replied, momentary panic rising, only to be pushed aside. No, no. She was far too used to hiding everything. Not secrets, just things unspoken. “I must sound very busy, I'm quite sorry.”

Not everything had to be a secret. Had she forgotten that?

“A bit confusing. Makes you very difficult to read, Bel, and I was always good at getting in people's heads. Will call you that, I quite like it.” He didn't ask, but that was hardly surprising. They walked through a ward, thick and old enough that it made her skin crawl, sending little sparks up her nerves. “Also interesting. So tiny, so busy, so full. I wonder that you don't shatter. Born ones are so much more flexible.”

He was smirking down at her, uncomfortably close, but he drew back with a roll of his eyes at the noisy clear of a throat behind them. She stifled a smile.

“What, precisely, are you two speaking of?” Solas' voice was a hint frigid, and while she knew it was partially...well, their bit of playacting, but she knew he wouldn't be above digging at her as well. This was something she hadn't told him, after all. If she had known Anaris was barely more than a spirit...

“Old man Solas doesn't know about your busy head, does he Bel? Wicked girl.” Anaris smirked slyly as he released her arm and slunk ahead to the door awaiting them. She recognized the style, tugging at memories of a temple she had visited once, a very long time ago. “Your pretty little fledgling Evanuris has a very very noisy mind. All sorts of whispers speak to her.”

“I contain the collected memory of two wells. They can be noisy.” She admitted, and before any protest could be lodged, she finished over Anaris' snickering, “I rescued them from destruction. It was less than ideal, obviously. I could not save everything, but I saved what I could.”

“Less than ideal.” Anaris scoffed, and then gave another slurred laugh as the door wards finally unlocked, swung open. “Sly little words. Is that what you will do with everything people try to destroy, Bel? Keep it in your head? Tsk. So much in common, you two. Still prettier than he is, though...could stand to do something about that nose.”

Oh now, that was just mean. She wasn't vain, but that was just...unnecessary. Self-consciously she lifted a hand to her face, which only made Anaris laugh again, reminding her uncharitably of a sleepy hyena.

“There is nothing wrong with your nose.” Solas sighed, and she glanced aside suspiciously, lowering her hand. “Anaris just has very...narrow standards. Namely himself.”

“Perfection has been reached, nothing else compares!” Anaris replied over his shoulder, striding onward, posture straightening slightly, though his gait remained the same loose-limbed swagger.

It seemed Solas was willing to let the matter of the well aside for now. That was good. Considering
the bent of Anaris' conversation, it was of very little surprise to find a pool of water beyond the pillared antechamber inside the doors. Different than the one she had seen before, though as carefully preserved. It rested in a vaulted, gilded hall, walls practically crackling with magic, inlaid in every etching.

“Every single one was destroyed?” Solas inquired, gazing at the well with less surprise than her own had been. Of course. Perhaps he had even been here before.

“Every single one but my own, and mine was damaged due to lack of upkeep. Took me years to get perfect again. They couldn’t get through these wards. You try, and you try...but you know how it is. They lose track, stop paying attention to their dreams, get weird ideas...” Anaris sighed, throwing up his hands dramatically, voice rising and falling again, echoing around the hall. “And before you know it, they've destroyed all your damn hard work! Did you see them? It's going to take me centuries to fix it all!”

“I am quite certain we could aid you in beginning your rebuilding, of course.” Solas interjected smoothly, and she knew enough to keep silent for the moment. “It would be the least I could do.”

“It is. I agree.” Anaris replied, rounding on them again, walking backwards. “Very right! So...you do something for me...I have something for Bel...we all get along. And nothing is owed.”

“What, precisely, is it, that you have for me?” She couldn't hide the intrigue in her voice, her bare feet barely making a sound in the echoing chamber as she followed. “I hope it's not a new nose, because I will have to decline.”

“Unappreciative! No, but no. No, no, no. You see, when the Dread Bore here went and played his little trick on all of us, some of us...some of us were left with nothing at all. I always told her, I told her she should get her head out of the clouds...” A little chuckle, dark and nasty. “Silly Daern'thal went tumbling from the sky.”

“You were able to rescue something from her halls?” Solas sounded intrigued, but she was just confused. Listening seemed to be the best option. “I would think nothing would have survived.”

“Very protective of her toys. We're confusing the little one.” Anaris retorted, as they finally reached the back of the hall. A blank wall there, but she could feel the ward humming, and then the tingle as he casually dispelled it. “Daern'thal liked eluvians. Built maybe a quarter of the Crossroads herself. Sloppy work.”

“Opinions aside...” Solas interjected, which was probably for the best. Anaris looked ready for another rant. “You managed to recover some of them?”

“It was only neighborly. No idea what happened to her, of course. Very sad.” He sounded about as unsorry as possible about that, as he led the way through a door that appeared when they approached it, swinging open under his palm. “Probably ended up like the poor little twisted ones. Broken somewhere, lost. Reach too far, fall too far.”

The small hall held a massive eluvian at the back of it, behind a bier that must have been the resting place of his body. It was ornate enough, all gilt and covered in carvings of snakes. Less well arranged were the eluvians up against the wall. A full half dozen of them, all of the same size and smaller, fairly ordinary apart from some simple carving of the frames, patterned like flames.

This was not what she had been expecting, but it was excellent. There were far too few eluvians left, and far too much ground to cover. This would help immensely. Almost enough to make her suspicious.
“It's as if they were made for you, little Bel! I thought perhaps you might be her, when first word reached me, but it seems you are not! Curious little riddle. I would have called you sooner if I'd known. Snatch you up before the old man got his hands on you.” She didn't particularly care for that leer, but she only smiled in response.

No point in taking offense.

“You are older than I, Anaris.” Solas pointed out, deftly changing the subject, and simply got a snort and a long sigh. “Shall we handle the other half of this, then? Our time is precious.”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Anaris turned to pace back out again. “Cannot blame me for wishing for company with more than half a brain. Going to take centuries to...Company. One to start, one to start. Don't wish to be indebted to you, after all. Seen how well that works out. You remember Alintharis, do you not? He's been napping long enough.”

As he strode back to the well, she followed, trying to contain her eagerness. This she had been wanting to see. She'd never seen a well used for its proper purpose, after all.

What followed had been...educational. Not the creation of the body, she knew that well enough at least from her own efforts with her arm. She'd ever made one entirely before, but she'd seen plenty of...well, war was always nasty, and she was a hunter. Anaris had been picky, but after the third or fourth 'correction' had been flattered and chided into submission. He could fix it as he liked, after all. As he kept reminding them, he had centuries of work ahead.

Summoning of the spirit back from Uthenera had been the intriguing part, as far as she was concerned. She knew the memories resided in the well, she had plenty of them in her own head, after all, but it was fascinating to see the way the creator of the well themselves could manipulate it.

And a little disturbing.

Three parts to make an Elvhen, a spirit, a body, and a memory to make a whole person. Remove any one part, and they were changed utterly. Without a body memories lost, without a spirit magic and emotion lost, and without a memory...well, the person that they were was lost. She knew that he had once thought that the veil had sundered the Elvhen from their spirits, made them tranquil. She would imagine that they had felt much like that to him, though they were not truly.

She had seen Tranquil, worked with them, spoke with them...mourned them. Both who they had become, and when they were discarded by the Chantry, mourned their loss. Such a terrifying existence, spirit held at bay, emotions muffled and gray. How much horror he must have felt.

And these 'gods' of her people could control not only the severing of the spirit, but the removal of memories into a well. So much power there, so much responsibility.

So much trust people put in them, letting them all but decide if they would be allowed to return, and in what form. Allowed to retain their memories or no, or to have nothing more than whatever the centuries in the fade had left them with. It was no wonder they had slipped so easily into godhood. Still, it had all been successful, and the eluvians would be retrieved soon. It wasn't terribly surprising Anaris saw little value in them, he didn't seem to care about anything but his own little kingdom.
And even then, he only cared about how it reflected him.

It didn't seem like a very fulfilling existence to her, but at least it made him predictable.

“That was excellently done. I am pleased it went precisely as you anticipated.” Distance was needed, but she owed him the compliment, especially considering how well they worked together. It was precisely that, however, that made it necessary to regain the distance. She was beginning to feel vulnerable. “Thank you.”

“I was fairly confident it would work. You played your part with a great deal of enthusiasm.” His voice was mild, but she knew the tease was there. She couldn't let it draw her out.

“Those eluvians will be incredibly important. I'm grateful he seems occupied with...his own endeavors.” She kept her voice aloof, and it seemed to work, his own tone withdrawing in response.

This area of the Crossroads was unknown to her, but Fen’Harel seemed to know where he was going, leading them across broken pathways towards an intersection ahead. All the other eluvians ahead seemed to be shattered, or damaged.

“He always was. A difficult man to ally with, he's far too self-absorbed. It would not...have gone so well if one of us was there singly.”

“It makes me wonder that he stood against the Evanuris, before. Seems strange, I would think that more power would be precisely what he would want.” It was a piece of it that puzzled her. Why, of all people? “Or have I misread him?”

“It was the expectations and responsibilities. Not wishing to be seen as a god does not intrinsically make one a good person. Or bad, as the case may be. Anaris cares for very little beyond his own vanity. As long as it remains unruffled, he is generally easy enough to get along with. If...irritating.” A pause, and then a long sigh. “Very irritating. More so than I remembered, in fact.”

The man himself was easy to puzzle him out now that she realized what he was, and where he came from. Some form of Conceit once, no doubt. He would become more subtle over time as he re-adjusted to living in a body, but for now was quite easy to predict. There were still some aspects of all of this that remained a mystery. Well, for once she should actually ask. Fen’Harel was right here, after all.

Seemed a bit too foolish to ignore the opportunity, just to make herself more comfortable.

“Do you think you could do me the favor of answering some questions?”

There was a long enough pause that she had to glance sidelong at him, lips pursing together. His own attention was fixed somewhere in the distance, as they headed down the path between eluvians. There would be some relief soon, when they joined the others.

“Certainly, provided I have answers for you. If you will do me the same kindness, of course.”

“What, tit for tat?” She laughed faintly at that despite herself, somewhat bemused. “Are we to play children's games now?”

“It is only fair, is it not?” He responded, and inclined his head at her exasperated sigh. “If you decide the price is not worthwhile, then feel free to decline.”

She took just a few moments, as he turned his attention to rebuilding a set of broken stairs. The path here hadn't been used very often, fragments of the path shattered into the air. Still, was but the work
of a moment's thought to repair it as they walked.

“Do the Forgotten Ones like our friend there come from the void, or is that simply propaganda? I have...studied it, but there is far too little known, and far too much danger. As you are no doubt aware of, considering my association with the Wardens.” She paused in thought, but a passing spirit of purpose decided to tug on her when her gait faltered. Of course, they had to keep moving. “It seems very unlikely to me that it is true. He feels no different than you, only less powerful.”

“Only propaganda. They were once exactly the same as the Evanuris before they became gods, the eldest and strongest of the spirits taken physical form to lead and guide. As you know, of course, there was some slight differences of opinion about what that should entail.” There was a note of dark humor to his voice, but with old weariness behind it. “They were simply...the luckier ones of the dissidents. It is what happened to the Evanuris after that made them different.”

“Well, schisms are natural, I suppose. And what...” She stalled as he interrupted her smoothly.

“I believe it was one for one, was it not?”

“Hmh. You're right.” She allowed, gazing up as they passed through an archway, eluvian ahead. She hadn't been through this one before, but she trusted that it would bring them closest to their destination.

Bit too many cracks there, it didn't quite look stable. It only took a moment to repair, fissures in the ancient stone sealing over as she stared overhead.

“What is your name?”

The question hung in the air after a brief, surprised huff from her lips, hands going to her hips as she turned her attention to his back.

“That's what you waste your question on? Really?” She asked, exasperation leeching into her voice.

“You could have learned what you asked of me from Felassan, had you a mind to, but you did not. I am simply asking questions of you that I could not have answered by anyone else.”

“I don't have a name.” She responded after a moment, a bit more snappishly than she intended. A pause, a sigh, and then she relented, grateful to be speaking to the back of his head. There was absolutely nothing unreasonable about his question. “I gave it up, several long decades ago. I prefer not to have one.”

“I suppose that technically answers my question, without, of course, answering it at all. My fault entirely for leaving it open to interpretation, I suppose.” The implied disapproval she had earned, undoubtedly. “Well played, my Lady.”

“I...” She began as the eluvian flared to life, letting out a sigh as she resigned herself. For once she wasn't trying to be slippery. It seemed it had become too much of a habit, which she noticed for not the first time today. “That was not my intention. I wasn't trying to avoid answering, I just do not care to ever hear it spoken again. My name was Ellana once.”

“I will respect your wishes.” A brief pause, and for a moment she wondered what exactly was going through his head. A dangerous line of thought, that. “We should move on, if we are to meet our guides before dark.”

“Why, over all of these years, have you not changed your name? Some of the Evanuris did, after all.” She had always wanted to know, but doubted there would ever be a better moment to ask it. All
these centuries, even wearing the mantle they had chosen for him, and all through it...

He was always himself. Pride. Solas.

Not that she would ever let that name cross her lips, either. A promise had been made. She had to cling to it even now. He had destroyed too much, killed too many.

She owed it to the world to keep watch, she could not get complacent. If she decided she had the strength to be more relaxed around him, so be it, but she could never forget. She had decided not to kill him before, and so it was her duty to keep watch over him, and judge him if it became necessary.

Kill him if necessary.

“The Evanuris believed they had transcended their natures, and in some ways they were correct. However, some of that was arrogance, a desire to fill roles beyond the nature of their spirits. Parts of us never truly go away, even if we attempt to bury them.” The implication there made her lips purse tightly, but she didn't voice it. “To forget or ignore where we came from makes us a danger to ourselves and others.”

It was likely for the best that he gave her no chance to reply, striding through the eluvian and leaving her behind. Letting out a quiet sigh, she squared her shoulders and moved to follow, grateful that company was likely awaiting them on the other side. Too much to think over, too many considerations.

It was time to move on to Rivain. Their ship was waiting.
“You may come with us to Afsaana, but no further.”

It was the third repetition in as many hours, and she was starting to grow tired of it. While she appreciated the tenacity in theory, in practice it was getting frustrating. As was the fact that she had to look up to speak to her son. When had he gotten so tall?

“Solas said I...” Freedom started, only to get interrupted from behind them.

“No, I did not. We went over this three days ago, you may recall. If you are bored, you may help Patience and Abelas organize the retrieval of the eluvians.” Fen’Harel offered, and then added, after a sidelong look from her, “Provided you stay away from Anaris.”

She inclined her head slightly to him, and he nodded as Freedom squinted between them.

“I preferred it when you two weren't speaking.” He grumbled, and then grinned and staggered sideways as she cuffed his shoulder. “Mother, don't abuse me. I'll tell Varric.”

“Go right ahead. Please. I'd love to hear that story. If you'd rather not help with the eluvians, you may go visit Kirkwall or go see Shianni.” She invited, and then grimaced as he slung an arm around her shoulders. “Freedom, stop. You're too tall for that.”

His presence was an anchoring thing, she had to admit, keeping her more relaxed. Part of her wanted to bring him with for that alone, but it was selfish of her. And dangerous. Both to him and to her. She couldn't afford to be relaxed for what lay ahead.

It was only a small journey, and admittedly they could have done it much faster, but she'd become accustomed to walking. Time flowed a bit oddly in the gathering places where no one lingered, and the sun had barely moved since they started. They wandered through it without disturbing it, drawing the occasional stray spirit to follow along with them for a time.

She wondered now and again if she would actually be able to do what she had done before now, without the veil in place. Part of her thought not. Time was almost a plaything of the fade now, though the humans and the more focused elves seemed to keep it marching linearly. She had to admit it was difficult for her not to do the same, though days could slip by like water, or a treasured second stretch far beyond its length.

So lost in the contemplation, she didn't realize there was an ambush ahead until she heard Freedom drawing his blades. Blinking placidly, she glanced aside at him, and then sighed.

“Darling, put those away, it's only some bandits.” She chided him mildly, and then paused as Fen’Harel lifted a hand. “Hmmm?”

“Far too well organized and armed. Mercenaries of some sort, I believe.” A pause, and he admitted as she lifted a brow. “But no, they are no threat. Freedom, please.”

“Why did I even learn how to fight? It's not fair, you know.” The complaint didn't crack despite high emotion, she noticed absently. His voice was nearly settled. “You don't let me fight the dragons, you don't let me fight these bandits...”

“Mercenaries.” Fen’Harel corrected, and she stifled a smile as Freedom sighed in exasperation. “One should only fight when necessary, there is nothing to be celebrated about loss of life. Human,
“draconic, or otherwise.”

“I wasn't going to *kill* anyone.” Freedom responded disgustedly, “Just defeat them!”

“It's not always so easy to avoid, my love. Battles can be frantic and confusing, even for someone such as you.” She pointed out, as the path firmed under their feet, breeze flickering by as she breathed it in. “Well, I suppose this explains where our guides wandered off to. I doubt they're injured.”

“Scout ahead, and a few dozen traps before the ambush.” Fen'Harel remarked, and she tilted her head slightly, lips pursing in thought as she let herself follow his searching through the trees. “They seem to have a semi-permanent encampment up a ways beyond the ambush point.”

“Hmm.” She mused, and then took a half-step forward before Fen'Harel lifted a hand, out of the corner of her eye. “What?”

“It is only a scout.” He pointed out, and she sighed in frustration and glanced aside at Freedom. “We are right here, there is no danger to him.”

“Thank you, Solas!” Freedom declared delightedly, and was already off before she could even respond. As always.

“Disarm and disable!” She called after him, and then stifled a small sound of irritation in the back of her throat. “Lovely, now I'm the one who tells him what not to do.”

“Better this than him trying to test his mettle while we're away.” Fen'Harel pointed out, and she gave another faint grumble as they strolled after the enthusiastic teenager in a more leisurely fashion. “I understand your concern, but he adapts very quickly. Which is fortunate, as he will be fully adult in only a few years’ time.”

“You're saying I'm being over-protective?” The urge to tell him to butt out was strong, but the time for that had been over three years ago. It was a bit too late now. A bit of foresight might have saved her from this incredibly awkward 'family' dynamic, but there had always seemed to be more important things to worry about. “I am not over-protective.”

“It is only a scout.” He pointed out, and she sighed, pausing to examine one of the traps Freedom hadn't bothered to disarm. “Something strange?”

“These glyphs are just a bit odd. I think they may have one of the people with them.” She replied, dispelling it with a thought and rising. The bear trap concerned her more, but they required even less attention to destroy. Still, one forgotten could seriously injure a halla or other animal. “Well, we'll...”

She paused, giving another exasperated sigh as they came upon Freedom just off the road, grinning quite proudly, arms crossed over his chest. Sitting. Sitting on the fully-bound scout. Oh for...

“Freedom, stand up.” Fen'Harel ordered him smoothly, and she let out a faint sigh as the boy bounded to his feet. “I understand your pride, but simply because you have defeated someone does not mean you can humiliate them. That is a person, not a piece of furniture.”

“I'm terribly sorry.” She offered mildly to the scout as Freedom squared his shoulders under his scolding, barely hiding a sulk. Carefully she dispelled the magic bonds on the man's legs and mouth, guiding him to his feet with a hand under his elbow. “His enthusiasm can get the best of him. Do you require any healing?”

Having taken in the man at a glance, she was far more relaxed now. Blades of Hessarian. Oh, she
knew how to handle them, and that made everything easier. The scout was looking a bit disoriented, staring at her with a mixture of confusion and terror.

“No? Ah, well. Could you please go ahead to your...five fellows up the road, and let them know we would appreciate being escorted to your encampment?” She dispelled the last of his bonds, and gave him a gentle push towards the road. “Thank you.”

“Mother, they're the enemy.” Freedom told her disgustedly as the scout made a break for it, and she turned on him, hands going to her hips. “Well, they are!”

“And we are in no danger from them. Humility and graciousness are things we can easily afford, and so we should. The measure of a man or woman, da'vhenan, is not in how they treat their equals, but in how they treat those who are weaker than them.” For once he didn't roll his eyes, but looked thoughtful, and she reached out to gently squeeze his shoulder. “In some circumstances, yes, we must posture and frighten, make a great show of force. But only if it prevents a greater loss of life.”

“We have no need to prove ourselves. They now know that we are fully aware of exactly where and how many there are of them, and that will deter them sufficiently.” Fen'Harel agreed, and for a moment she felt a brief twinge of that old pain, exhaled slowly as Freedom gazed worriedly at her. She managed a small smile, and he relaxed as Solas continued speaking. “You were in such a great hurry that you ignored the traps. Please go back and ensure that none remain.”

As Freedom grumbled and turned to stalk back through the underbrush, she sighed and picked up a stone from the ground, turning it over in her fingers. It was only the work of a few moments to form the thoughts that shaped it in her fingers, and Fen'Harel remained silent until she offered him the medallion.

“Blades of Hessarian. Almost a religious order, I suppose, which could make them more of a danger than otherwise. The crest will allow us safe passage to negotiate with them.” A pause, and then she admitted quietly, “They may not listen, however. I'm afraid our sheer existence may be too blasphemous to be borne. It depends on how much of a zealot their leader is.”

“If that is the case, and your negotiations fail, I would ask that you take Freedom and continue on the way to let me deal with them alone.” Fen'Harel replied, and she pursed her lips together. Not pleasant, but likely the best way to handle things. “I would spare you the blood on your hands.”

“I do not care for this.” She admitted, letting out a faint sigh. “I cannot like this. But...if I fail, and there is no other way...I agree. But only as a last resort, and only if they seem to be a clear danger to people who cannot defend against them. Keeping my hands clean is a futile endeavor, though, and I do not appreciate the sentiment.”

“Understood.” He replied simply to her censure, turning for the road as Freedom returned. “Let us be on our way.”

“Here, da'vhenan.” She offered, sliding a second medallion over Freedom's head, having to reach further than she liked to do it. “We are going to try negotiating. These are the Blades of Hessarian, they are a religious militia. You remember how Faith taught you about Andrastianism, why it is important to the humans? They are Andrastian, so please try to be respectful.”

“Don't Andrastians hate you, mother?” He asked worriedly, and she offered a faint smile as she slipped on her own medallion and turned for the road. “I won't let them try to hurt you or Solas.”

“We will be fine. They're still alive, which means they haven't tried to hurt our guides.” She assured him, with a small smile. “You must keep all of these small things in mind when assessing a situation.
It is a great picture with many small pieces. Why would they not harm our guides?"

“Hostages?” He asked, and she nodded and gestured onwards as they continued up the road. “Or...I guess they could just be trying to lure us in to talk? Or...I don't know why else.”

“It could be a trap.” She finished, and nodded encouragingly as they caught up with Fen'Harel. “Or they may not have our guides at all, and something else might have delayed them. I, however, know that is not true, because I am very familiar with one of them, and I can feel them up ahead at the encampment.”

“Maybe the guides aren't...imprisoned? Maybe the Blades are just trying to get us to come talk?” Freedom posited thoughtfully, and she smiled.

“If that were true, they would not have laid traps and an ambush.” Fen'Harel pointed out, and Freedom gave a faint 'oh' under his breath. “It seems your warning was insufficient, my Lady.”

The road was still barricaded ahead, and the Blades were waiting with weapons drawn. Sighing, she adjusted the medallion around her neck and started trudging towards it, giving a small shake of her head.

“Stop.” She suggested mildly in the common tongue as the one of the archers lifted their crossbow, and he stalled, nervously. “Thank you. Will you take us to your leader?”

Their guard didn't lower, though they were looking more twitchy by the moment. Freedom uncertainly took a step forward before she could stall him, and both archers trained their weapons on him.

Her eyes narrowed.

“I thought we were supposed to be humble and gracious, Solas.” Freedom hissed aside at him, and he stifled a faint sigh behind the hand cupped around his chin. “I think mother's lost her temper.”

“Would you care to interrupt her?” He asked, gesturing with his free arm to the barricades, which had quickly burned themselves out and were crumbling into ash as they spoke. “By all means.”

“Umh...no.” Freedom decided near-instantly, and then winced at a scream. “No. She's not...going to kill them, is she? She'd feel really badly about that.”

For a moment he simply watched as the Lady systematically disarmed the six mercenaries, tucking his thumb against his chin again. There was no need to interfere. She was obviously in control of herself. They might be terrified, but no one was getting any worse than a burned hand or some singed armor.

“I think she's simply upset that they turned their weapons on you.” He informed the boy, who gave a faint scoff under his breath. “Yes, I know they would not have been able to hit you, but I don't believe she feels that was worth the risk.”

“She worries too much about me.” Freedom grumbled, and he could only agree to himself. Not out loud, of course. Having that temper turned on him would be counter-productive, she'd been almost disturbingly agreeable. ‘I'm from Kirkwall! Varric says everyone that comes out of Kirkwall is tough. I should be the toughest of all, shouldn't I be?’”
“Being sensible and wise requires much more cultivation, and will serve you in greater stead in the long run.” He replied, gesturing forward as the Lady pulled one of the mercenaries off of the ground by his arm and shoved him towards the encampment up a trail leading away from the road. “You must learn to temper your nature with the knowledge that you gain over time. Your mother may not fully understand, but she still wants the best for you.”

“Yes, Solas.” Freedom sighed, and then loped ahead to join his mother as she smoothed hands over her hair and smiled tolerantly up and aside to him. “Mother, you didn't even draw your knives. Why do you have weapons, if you're not going to use them?”

“I didn't wish to hurt them, da'vhenan. Just make them do as I asked.” She replied placidly, seeming perfectly calm again, which amused him.

He followed after them, watching the mercenaries run ahead of them to the encampment, gate already beginning to open to allow them in. He wondered if they would bar it behind themselves. More than likely, of course. It seemed there would be no way to avoid at least a minor show of force.

“Mother, you melted their swords.” Freedom pointed out drily. “If I did that, you'd tell me I was being excessive.”

He cleared his throat, which got him a brief look over her shoulder, and he lifted a hand in placation. Breathing out through her nose, the Lady turned her attention back to Freedom. Another simple interaction, and he took a moment to contemplate the ease of it as they walked, and she spoke to the boy.

It was...pleasant. It had been, since they met for the first time in three years to go deal with Anaris. Oh, certainly there was the occasional spike of prickliness after she realized she was being friendly, but they were far fewer than when last they had dealt with one another. If he hadn't seen her interacting with others before, it might almost make him suspicious of duplicity. But no, this was her, wasn't it? The playful teasing, the quick and intelligent mind, the sly humor and protective warmth. So far away from what he once thought she was, like night and day.

She must have been truly suffering before. There was no more conflict between action and attitude. No more demanding kindness for others while showing nothing but icy disdain and boredom. It was that kindness that was her nature, even to him, when she swore she would never forgive him. His second chance, as she claimed. Somehow she found the grace to offer it even when she hated him for what she had gone through.

He couldn't stop to second-guess what was already past, of course, that would serve absolutely no purpose. It would be the height of arrogance to mourn a single death out of the many that had been, to ignore the loss of life and focus on the one that affected him personally, but...

He regretted her pain.

Again, it felt selfish to do so after all he had done, the destruction he had wrought upon Elvhenan and his own people, and then upon hers and her world. It was a dissonance that he was becoming all too familiar with. She had been inevitably dragging him into the world beside her, and at some point he had lost the fight. And now she had began opening up to him while she resisted that every step of the way, and he had started losing another.

This time, he was losing the battle against himself.

Denial would do him no good, a fascination born out of loneliness and attraction had turned to something else entirely. The more he saw of her, the more he came to care for her, and it was only
growing worse. It would be easy to blame it on Freedom, on Hope, on any of the myriad tiny things that had slowly but inexorably tied them together...but he had not fought a single one of them.

Trying to untangle her feelings and motivations would be pointless, although he had an inkling that it would be impossible not to let his mind drift there from time to time. He simply could not let it absorb him. She would heal from, or deal with her pain in her own time and in her own way, and he could not expect anything. He could hope, however, which he had a feeling had been part of that particular spirit's plan all along.

Quiet, gentle Hope, who had come to him when he had needed it the most. Even if nothing came of these newfound complications in his heart, he would always be grateful to the Lady for its companionship. He was quite certain he could not have made the transition necessary to move into this world without it.

It had always been a comfort to think that one day his people would no longer need him. That he could disappear, give up at last and let himself...

There was safety, in the hope of letting go. It made the work easier, the years go by with less anxiety, because one day it would be over. And then the silly, impulsive spirit child that walked beside her had decided that he belonged to them both, and had given him just a glimpse of something he had not thought possible.

A family.

Suddenly he was not thinking of an ending, but a beginning, and things had...changed. Dangerously, but a change none the less. Even if nothing came of it, it would not disappear. It was simply a part of a greater whole that was slowly shifting what he had intended to meet what was. A much bigger compromise than he'd ever thought he'd have to make. It was not as onerous as he'd anticipated.

“Well, I certainly don't want to break down the gate.” The Lady murmured musingly as they approached it, hands on her hips, fingers tapping the hilts of her blades.

“If you lose your temper again you'll just burn down the whole wall anyways, it's all wood!” Freedom laughed, and got another light cuff on the shoulder. “Solas! Mother is...”

“Do you really think I'm going to insinuate myself in the center of this? I think not.” He replied to the boy, who heaved a long sigh. “Perhaps we should knock?”

“They're mercenaries! You don't just go up to their...” Freedom declared disgustedly, and then stopped as the Lady stepped forward and politely rapped on the gate with her knuckles. “You two ruin everything!”

“You read too many silly adventure stories.” The Lady replied placidly, and then sighed as the knock garnered nothing, though they could hear the rumble and shout of voices from beyond. “We need to stop this nonsense before she's forced to defend herself. I don't want anyone getting hurt. They're too unsettled.”

“Then may I suggest you let me handle this part?” He understood her reasoning, but she was quite right, things were dragging on too long. “It will go faster.”

“I hate playing these games.” She sighed, but stepped aside of the gate all the same, lips pursing as she gestured to him. “Very well, let us prey on their superstitions. Again.”

“I understand.” His sympathy was probably unwelcome, but he would prefer that she knew he felt the same way. It was...distasteful. Expedient, but distasteful. “It will be over soon.”
For a moment it looked as if she might say something sharp, but instead she sighed and stepped back again to stand next to Freedom, as he moved for the gate.

“Da’len, this is one of those...measured use of force sort of things.” She murmured aside to him, voice calm now. “Try to pay attention, yes?”

It took very little power to make the gates explode inward into the mercenaries' compound, sending scattered pieces of wood flying every which way. The sentries just inside got the worst of it, though no more than a few surface wounds, nothing lasting or life threatening. Still, they were stunned and knocked back, which is what he had intended. Silently he strode through the wreckage, scanning the suddenly rather quiet encampment.

A few semi-permanent structures ahead, a path running up the center of the vaguely circular area. It looked as if this had been a village or perhaps a logging camp once, and they had simply finished fencing off part of it. The worn path sloped up a hill, which was where it seemed most of the mercenaries had gathered.

“Try to stay back, da'vhenan.” He heard the Lady murmur from behind him before she moved to follow him.

Hands clasped behind her back, she drew up beside him, and gave a faint sigh through pursed lips. He could only agree with the sentiment, as they began to walk up the hill side by side. This was not exactly how either of them had wanted this trip to go. There was enough to be dealt with ahead without adding more troubles to the list. Hopefully this would be quickly solved.

The mercenaries were waiting for them, no more than thirty. A decent sized group, and well armed, but jumpy. It wasn't difficult to tell who the leader was, a hard-eyed, steel-haired woman awaiting them at the end of the path. She was holding a knife to the throat of a rather un-concerned looking elven woman, her hands bound in front of her. It was a relief, that she didn't seem upset in the slightest, but it matched the Lady's lack of concern.

“Hello!” The dark-haired elven woman called cheerfully, and then sighed as the knife prodded her throat. “Oh, would you stop that?”

The Lady lifted a hand towards him gently as he took a half step forward, and he settled and minutely inclined his head towards her. She lowered her hand, and then turned her attention back towards the mercenaries.

“Please release her, and we will be on our way.” She offered graciously in the common tongue, inclining her head to the mercenary leader.

“I suppose this level of sheer arrogance would be expected from warmongering would-be gods who prey on the weak and foolish.” The woman spit, and he stifled a brief flare of annoyance. He could be patient yet, but this was seeming less likely by the second to end well.

“I make no claims to godhood. You have waylaid my companion, and I would see her freed, and that is all that is happening here.” The Lady replied, calm and measured. “I am not here to wage any wars.”

“You are a heretical abomination! You come here, before the Blades of Hessarian, to be judged for your greed and corruption.” The woman flinched very slightly as her gaze shifted to him and found his eyes, and he kept his expression calm.

“I wonder. If you truly believe the stories to be true, then why would you possibly wish to stand
against us?” He asked, hands remaining clasped behind his back. He had said he would let her handle it, but there were limits. Being put to trial by zealots was one of them. “Either you believe them true and you are leading your men to death, or you believe them falsehoods and acknowledge that all you have is rumor and not truth.”

“Does part of being a judge of the corrupt involve holding a knife to the throat of a woman who has done you no harm?” The Lady interjected smoothly before the mercenary commander could say anything else. “If you had asked me to come and speak to you, I would have. I come here bearing the crest of mercy, to speak. I come to speak to you. I did not come in violence, I did not harm your men when they raised their weapons to a CHILD.”

A visible flinch flickered through the crowd before them when she raised her voice, though it gentled immediately afterwards, as her hands folded together neatly.

“What will suit your desire for righteousness, I wonder? Will you raise the Blade of Mercy to strike down those who have done you no harm? Will you cage innocents and raise your hands to children? When will you become the corruption you seek to fight?” He could see that the commander was trying to talk now, but had been silenced. He tried not to be amused by that, but all he could do is keep it from his face. The Lady didn't care for being interrupted, it seemed. “I do not see before me a commander who is worthy to judge me for the crimes she claims I have committed. Fen'Harel, do you agree?”

This time the flinch was a bit more of a cringe at her deliberate use of his title. He had to wonder what this particular pocket of humans thought of him. Was he their Adversary as well? Not that he truly wished to know, if he was being honest. Watching them pull back from him in such a manner was unpleasant enough. Perhaps before, it would not have bothered him, but now...

“Yes, my Lady.” He responded simply, inclining his head to her. “I agree. And if I were one that chose to follow her, I would quite seriously reconsider my loyalties.”

“Merrill, we are leaving. Come, please. Thank you for your patience.” The Lady beckoned with a small flick of her wrist, and then turned on her heel.

With a sigh, the elven woman reached up and removed the knife from her own neck, pulling it out of the commander's hand and dropping it on the ground. Ducking down, she pulled her head under the suddenly immobile arm that had caged her, and straightened up with a bounce of her short braid.

None of the mercenaries seemed to be ready to charge them without orders, not when their commander had been neutralized without even the slightest display of strength.

“I don't have any things, I left them with Feynriel when I asked them to go back to town and wait.” She told the Lady as she caught up to meet them. “Sorry! I just didn't want to cause any fuss. Well, any more fuss. They didn't try to hurt me or anything.”

The quick, cheerful cadence of her voice was an easy sing-song, completely unruffled by her captivity.

She was also eyeing him with an almost disturbingly intense gaze, as if practically bursting with something she wanted to say to him. He frowned and turned his gaze away from her, as the Lady dispelled her magic with a discreet gesture, and began to turn away.

“Strike them down! Strike them down now, every single one! Their tricks are no match for Andraste’s justice!” The commander shouted the instant the bonds dropped, and he saw the Lady stiffen, beginning to turn back around.
It was too late, it seemed, for men already on edge. Especially men wielding weapons too easily fired. It seems there was someone who had been anticipating it more than them, however. The first bolt was let fly, and one of the mercenaries dodged in from the left and raised her arm to meet it. There was no way she could have been fast enough, of course.

He may have discreetly ensured that she was. It barely took any magic at all, and was a far better solution than interfering himself. No one noticed but the Lady, who was in the midst of casting a shield herself. Luckily it was not necessary.

The heavy sound of the projectile hitting wood met silence as the tall, broad woman lowered her shield and stared across the way at the commander, her lips thinning to a line. Avvar, she had to be from the armor and paint on her face, expression sternly blank. Slowly she shifted her grip on the axe she held in her other hand, a silent threat.

“I hold the Blade of Mercy, and you will answer to me! Stand down, Hekla!” The commander barked at the woman, who seemed utterly unmoved. “I am she who is chosen by Andraste herself, and you will bow to my authority and strike down these heretics!”

The Avvar woman stared down the mercenary leader, and he lightly reached out a placating hand to the Lady when she instinctively started to step forward. She was far too quick to interfere, he had noticed. Her compassion was admirable, of course, but her tendency to step in impulsively was a bit dangerous. Her gaze shifted sidelong to him, and she finally sighed and nodded, withdrawing again. He could feel her reinforcing the shields.

Unnecessary, but it seemed to keep her calm.

“If you can be defeated, you are weak.” Hekla finally replied, and there was a murmur of agreement from some of the mercenaries. “The Lady defeated you without raising even a hand, and you call for us to strike down the unarmed, and a child with them. You are weak, and I challenge you. Give up the Blade.”

“Why does everyone keep calling me a child? I'm sixteen!” Freedom hissed from next to Merrill, who gave him a placating little pat on the shoulder and shushed him.

“I will not! If you stand in my way as well, then you will fall as well! Blades! At my side!” The commander demanded as she charged towards the Avvar woman, who simply shifted her stance.

They clashed heavily, a shield raised to meet the heavy blade, which didn't seem terribly special to any of his senses. Not that he was here to be deconstructing anyone's religious beliefs. The commander seemed to have been counting on support that didn't appear to be coming, as the rest of the mercenaries had silently drawn back. There were a few uncertain looks among them, but no one seemed willing to interfere.

The fight that followed had even Freedom silent, a far cry from magic and arrows and clever swordplay. It would likely be a sobering thing for him to watch, but perhaps for the best in the long run. He would rather the boy learned from watching, and not experience. This was not battle against demons.

This was brutal, harsh, and bloody.

Blade met shield, and they threw each other back. There was no battle cries now, no rallying or fearsome words. Only the thud of metal and wood, as they tested each other's strength and endurance. It would not be a long fight, but it was dangerous, when any blow could rend a limb as easily as it could bruise flesh. The Avvar's blood spilled first, but the slash to her upper shoulder
barely even made her shield arm sag. Her retaliatory axe strike rent a bloody tear in the commander's armor, and she staggered visibly.

It wasn't difficult to see who would fall first, especially after a harsh block that made the older mercenary's feet skid back a full two paces. Neither one of the women was in their youth, battle-hardened and strong, but the commander seemed to be slightly past her prime.

She fell when the shield struck her across the face, jaw bleeding, sending her sprawling across the ground. A hand reached for her sword again, but Hekla brutally stomped down, and he could see the Lady wince at the audible sound of breaking bones. It was the scream that had Freedom jumping, and Merrill patted his shoulder soothingly again, looking rather unphased herself. Much more sturdy than she seemed.

Silently the Avvar woman leaned down, sheathing her own blade before heaving up the heavy sword in one hand, muscles tightening in her bicep with the strain.

“"I would ask for mercy for her.” The Lady spoke up abruptly, calm and quiet. “Please. All we wish is to depart, and for the safety of all those who wish to travel this area in peace.”

There was silence from the Avvar, as she drove the point of the massive sword into the ground and leaned her weight against it, staring across the mercenaries waiting. Seconds quietly slipped by, until one of the mercenaries finally saluted her, and the others followed suit one by one.

She waited until every single one of them was acknowledging her before she spoke again.

“"I grant mercy.” Hekla informed the woman bleeding on the ground, and then jerked the blade out of the dirt again, slinging it over her shoulder. “I will see you to your destination, Lady. The Blades of Hessarian will give aid to people, not hide in the woods like common bandits.”

“"I am grateful.” The Lady replied mildly, and inclined her head. “We must be going on to Afsaana to meet a ship, however. I'm afraid we cannot wait for your men to gather themselves, commander.”

“"They will follow.” Hekla replied simply, and then raised her voice again. “Blades of Hessarian, gather your things and set out for the city of Afsaana. I will meet you there. Those who do not arrive as I have commanded are no longer one of our company. That is all.”

Turning around without another word, the Avvar mercenary strode down the path past them, towards the shattered gate. After a moment's confusion, Merrill shrugged and turned to do so as well, and then he and the Lady followed, Freedom tagging confusedly along behind.

“"That...that's it? She beat her up so she's in charge?” The boy hissed in confusion, and then frowned at the Lady's nod. “Really? So I could have been in charge?”

Perhaps he'd underestimated the ability of a teenage boy to look past the violence and bloodshed. He didn't seem in the least bit deterred by it. Then again, he'd always been quite resilient. Frustratingly so. Solas couldn't help but be pleased that all of it had been solved without their overt interference. The less they were forced to intervene, the better.

“I do not think your mother would have let you have a mercenary company.” Solas pointed out, trying not to let his amusement show through. He was already getting a bit of a look from his left. “You are only sixteen, Freedom, at least allow for a few more years.”

“I beg your pardon!” The Lady hissed, and Freedom stifled a laugh as she glared at both of them. “This is what I get, for being the reasonable one. I see.”
Freedom was still laughing as they passed through the wreckage of the gate and headed back for the road, racing ahead to join Merrill, bounding up next to her to chatter away. It left them walking side by side, but he said nothing further, and neither did she.

But it was a comfortable silence.

The journey was not terribly long, and the day was turning to night by the time they'd caught sight of the city ahead. Or rather, what remained of it. The outskirts they were passing through were little more than ruins now, overgrown buildings collapsing in on themselves, but the harbor in the distance still seemed lively. The slope of the land led them ever downwards towards the sea, last of the evening sun gleaming across it, a distant glare.

He'd found himself walking next to the bubbly, cheerful elven woman, who still looked at him as if she was about to burst. He was beginning to consider asking her just what she wanted when she finally managed to speak to him at last, starting with a nervous little laugh.

“This is a bit awkward, isn't it?” Merrill offered, lowering her voice a little as she leaned in towards him, only to pull back again skittishly. “Not for you, I mean...probably not. But...oh, I used to take your name in vain all the time, you know. So...a bit awkward.”

“I...see.” Solas replied at last, gazing aside at her as she stared at him owlishly, biting her bottom lip for a moment. What was he supposed to make of that, precisely?

“And now I'm...well, it's a bit funny, isn't it? Because before I'd always say it...” She paused, and then continued in her blithely scattered way, “And now I'm really...by the Dread Wolf! Right next to you!”

She stopped for a moment, stared at him, and then lifted a hand in a tiny wave.

“Hello.”

He couldn't think of what to say. Obviously this wasn't the first slightly odd interaction when it came to misinformed old legends, but this one was...unique. Granted, it wasn't quite without its humor, and he could appreciate how odd it must be for her, but he hardly equated himself with those old Dalish stories.

“...Hello. Solas will be fine.”

It seemed to be all there was to say, and apparently it was enough. She beamed at him and nodded, seeming satisfied at last, and then loped ahead to join Freedom and the oddly silent Avvar woman who had attached herself to them. He didn't think he'd heard her say more than two words since her speech, but she had unerringly led the way.

“By the Dread Wolf!” The teasing little call came behind him, as the Lady caught back up, a hint of laughter in her voice.

He would endure the teasing if it came with a smile like the one she wore, fixed as it was on the people ahead, and not offered to him. He'd noticed that even now she had issues with looking at him, and meeting his eyes seemed all but impossible. Still, it was an improvement. Hopefully Freedom's departure in the village that lay ahead wouldn't draw her back to her protective silence.
“I've had worse greetings, even only today.” He pointed out, and she shook her head with a sigh. “We did what we could.”

“Yes, I suppose that we did.” She agreed, and then offered quietly, before passing by him to join the others, “Thank you. You have been very patient with me.”

“Of course.” He replied simply, and then followed them into the city as the sun set.
The People of Llomeryn

They'd disembarked from their first ship a few hours before dawn, arriving at the port town of Llomeryn. The sparse peopling of their departure point was not in evidence here. It was near to dizzying, not taking into account the betrayal of balance that came from traveling ship to shore. All senses were assaulted, exaggerated far beyond what he had grown accustomed to. Bright and garish, dark and weathered, both were mixed together into a cacophony of lively coarseness. Elves, humans, even one or two dwarves all mingled with spirits, a sight that had also been missing in Afsaana.

The dwarves were more of a surprise than the spirits. Solas wasn't aware any yet lingered outside of Orzammar.

The salt-stained wood creaked with the sway of the sea as they disembarked, he and the Lady going fairly unnoticed in their innocuous garb. Feynriel, on the other hand, had been noticed within moments of his leaving the gangplank, wandering off shoulder to shoulder with Felassan as a human summoned him with a shout. Curiously, he turned his attention to the Lady, who was watching them as well. The faint tilt of her lips was amused for a moment before she pushed it aside. There had been no true smiles since they left Freedom behind.

He was still enjoying the memory of them, however.

“I have never been here before.” She informed him, somewhat surprisingly. “He handles all of my business in Llomeryn. It's the sort of place time can slip away from you, and I can't afford being drawn in. I would like to spend some time here with the clan, when things are more settled.”

“A Dalish clan on an island? I take it they do not do much traveling.” He remarked, already feeling the Avvar woman looming over him from behind. She'd simply decided she would be coming along, and had made herself a shadow to the Lady and occasionally himself.

There had been no protest, but it did rather give him the sensation that they were in the midst of being judged. Which they likely were, but the opinion of a zealot mercenary hardly concerned him.

“No, we don't right now. The clan isn't from Llomeryn, though. We're bits and pieces. Scraps, I suppose you could say!” Merrill remarked, ducking past them to head up the wharf confidently, and much more breezily than anyone else of their company. “It doesn't bother us any. There's so much to do, after all. I do miss it, a bit, but every now and then there's an errand that needs doing, so...”

“Merrill is Keeper to the clan, but doesn't really believe in staying put.” The Lady remarked drily, stepping to the side as a gaggle of children swirled past them. He felt a brief tug on his clothing, but ignored it, ghostly fingers finding nothing to steal. “But she and the Seer share duties, more or less.”

“We're...oh, blending things together, I suppose the best way to put it would be.” Merrill remarked, and then peeked over her shoulder. “I was First until just a few years ago. Oh, I forgot! Watch your things.”

“They already tried me twice.” The Lady admitted almost impish before she pushed it back. She lifted a hand with a leather purse in it, and offered it over her shoulder. With the barest edge of a scowl, Hekla snatched it out of her hand and murmured thanks. “It's more fun to let them steal and then snitch them back. Are they fed well enough?”

It would, of course, be the work of a moment to prevent thievery altogether, but he had a feeling that she knew and did not care. Once that would have confused him. Now he understood that it had to do
with her rather contrary sense of humor. They drew ahead slightly as they discussed the state of the island's population of children. A necessary thing, he supposed, as they seemed prolific and moving in packs. Orphans, perhaps. It was not that long after the war, in the end, if it had ever truly stopped. Whether it had or no depended upon the humans of Tevinter.

They wended through the noisy dockside markets, and he kept half an eye on what they passed. Mundane mixed with the strange, though for the most part there was...fish. Quite a lot of fish. Less luxury goods than would have been anticipated, even with the current state of the world. Felassan returned to his side at last, and responded to his raised eyebrow with a faint grin.

“Council business. Nothing you need worry about, just shipping and imports and things. Not much of an economy yet, but barter's a start.” Felassan explained, and rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “Self-sufficiency is fine, but population doesn't allow it right now.”

“The Elvhen should be able to provide for themselves...” He began, only to stop at the look it garnered him. “But you are right, it is none of my concern.”

“Be grateful for that, trust me.” Felassan retorted with his usual humor, turning his gaze to watch Feynriel speaking with the Lady a few paces ahead, their heads bent together. “I'm practically just the message runner and that's more than enough for me. Our people...are beginning to adapt. Slowly.”

“If only it were not necessary.” He murmured quietly, and then gave a shake of his head. “No, do not mind me. Seeing Anaris again has put my mind in a strange place.”

“I don't blame you. I don't suppose the years have changed him much.” Felassan remarked, and then grinned at the dry look he responded with. “I didn't think so. He'll be useful to trade with in time.”

“He attempted to curry some favor with the Lady. As subtle as he ever is.” Solas admitted, as they headed ever deeper into the island, leaving the chaos of the markets behind. “She handled it well enough. He may have been successful at convincing her to underestimate him, however.”

Planks had given way to old, smooth-worn cobbles, and then finally dirt, a stone bridge ahead spanning a small river. Beyond it, gnarled trees, that skimmed fairly close to the shoreline cliffs.

“Well, she has you.” Felassan replied absently, and then paused at his disbelieving sidelong look. “What? I...that isn't how I meant to say it. You understand what I intended?”

“Unfortunately, I believe I do.” He murmured under his breath, shaking his head slightly as they crossed their bridge on their way to the Dalish encampment seen faintly through the trees ahead. He lifted his voice very slightly. “The meddling can cease any time now, Felassan.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” Felassan replied blandly, clasping his hands behind his back as he moved on ahead.

“No, of course not.” He sighed, and shook his head as he followed, bringing up the rear of the group once again.

The Dalish encampment was as noisy as the port had been, and about as blindingly colorful. A cohesive culture, the people of Llomeryn seemed to have, no matter who they were and where they came from. Blending together while staying apart, he supposed, a sort of harmony he hadn't seen anywhere else. The Lady seemed fairly delighted by the camp, and the elves in turn seemed delighted to see her, recognizing her when the people of the town had not.

They drew her off immediately, and he was offered some privacy and space of his own at the edge
of the camp. Again, as had been true of her people before, no one seemed afraid of him, simply respectful and distant. He accepted both, but found himself, strangely...at loose ends.

He had never traveled before on his own when it was not to handle some small, swift task. There were...matters to attend to, correspondence and plans and tactics. Even with Felassan here, anything necessary was being handled with him, and did not require Solas' interference of any sort. It was an odd situation.

He took the opportunity to do something he hadn't had the chance to do in quite some time.

He went for a walk.

The calm solitude of the forest drew him in, and before long a few local spirits had come to join him. Their company was welcome, and as they wandered together through the trees, he listened to, and spoke with them, putting aside all darker thoughts for a time. By the time night came, the brief freedom from his burdens had brought him some peace, and the assurance that he was doing the right thing. His departure from the world would be the best possible thing for its future. Hopefully she would feel the same way, when it was time. He would not like to have to remove her from it by force.

He held himself aloof from the evening when he returned to the chaotic Dalish camp, as there was far too much to watch and absorb. This journey wasn't precisely one he wished to be on. Too much meddling in affairs that had nothing to do with him or his people, but she was stubborn. She was determined, and he had a feeling she would overreach herself far too easily. It had to be avoided, and Greed must be dealt with.

“You know, usually people come to me. One of the few benefits of age.” The voice lifted his contemplative gaze from the fire, and he politely moved over as the Seer settled next to him, pipe between her lips. She let out a sigh as she sunk down, exhaling it with the scent of elfroot. “I suppose you should feel special you're the exception, my lad. Good to see you again.”

“And you as well.” It was a surprise to him that he found it to be a truth. Despite that, as always he found himself unnerved to see elves so decrepit. “The Lady has not offered to...if she has not, I would certainly be willing to aid you.”

“I've earned every wrinkle. I think you know sometimes you have to let go. Try to remember that.” She replied, creaking voice humorous. He wasn't surprised the spirits spoke so freely with her. Perhaps she had even sent some of them to keep him company. “I plan to put in a couple more years, but then I expect you two to see me off. You hear me? Planned to die in bed a decade ago, and you thwarted that quite thoroughly.”

“My...apologies.” What else could he possibly say? The sharp eyes fixed on his face saw what he had no intention of giving away, reminding him as always that this woman sensed things that she ought not. “You are quite certain of that decision?”

“Aye, my lad. That I am. That girl you brought with you, she'll do. I need to pass on some knowledge before I go, and she needs training. I'll keep her.” The Seer decided, pointing across the fire at the stone-faced Avvar watching the dancing. “Blood of our blood despite the ears. She doesn't want the command she took, at any rate. Appreciate a woman who does what has to be done despite her own feelings. Good quality for a seer, and if someone doesn't train that magic she's acquired, she'll set her ass on fire.”

“I was under the impression that the Keeper was your student?”
“Not the right sort of mind for the task, no. She does her best, Merrill does, but still some old prejudices about the spirits that get in her way. She's had some bad experiences in her day.” The Seer offered her pipe, and then chuckled when he lifted a hand in polite refusal. “You're going to have to keep an eye on the girl out there.”

“The Keeper? I am quite certain that my interference is not welcome or needed there...” He cut off again as she laughed and shook her head, earrings in her sagging earlobes rattling. “Or are you referring to...”

“Lady. You let her drag you in, my lad, you can't leave her to it alone now. Not seeing and knowing what you do now. That big heart of hers is a gift, especially as much as she's suffered, but it makes her stick her nose where it doesn't belong.” The Seer laughed, echoing his thoughts from earlier. Sharp, this old woman, sharp as ever. “You even her out, just like she'll even you out, and you two will do fine. Body needs a heart and a mind.”

There was that piercing gaze again, and he gave a very slight shake of his head. He couldn't decide if he should be annoyed or amused. His mind seemed to settle on resigned. It only made her chuckle all the more, tucking the pipe back between her teeth.

“I doubt she would appreciate you saying as much.” He finally managed to say, eyes fixing back on the flames. He'd lost track of the Lady in question a while ago, but she seemed in need of some distance. They hadn't spoken since the docks. “I cannot say she and I agree entirely upon how much interference is necessary, however.”

"Hmh. I thought that once. I also once thought humans were humans, and elves were elves. How could we know we were more than ears and history?"

"You could not. I am...I will always feel regret for those unintended consequences," he admitted quietly, watching flickering of the flames. "The elvhen blood is laced through the blood of these lands...my people are not merely spirits, or those of awakened from Uthenera, or even those of small frame and pointed ears..."

"As confusing for you as it is for us, I'd imagine, my lad. We all had an idea of who we were, and we were all wrong."

"It will be confusing for the humans, as well, when some of them begin aging...and some do not. I would imagine there will be some difficulties.” A future he would not witness, but he could not help but worry for the inevitable conflicts. "Perhaps even wars. I do not know..."

“You did the right thing.” The words hung in the air, as the old woman turned her own gaze to the fire. He couldn't help but stare at her now, utterly uncertain what he should say. Did she mean what he thought she did? “Oh yes. And you won't hear me ever saying that in front of anyone else. Can't even say if I'm right or no for thinking so, but...taking down the veil was the right thing to do. Keep in mind that this is coming from an old woman who spent her life with spirits. Ignore my jawing. It's what you make of it now that matters.”

“I would rather leave things to work themselves out, if not for...right now I would be leaving my people at the mercies of old evils left free, and with no clear path to a stable future. Their own conflicts I have no desire to meddle in, even if I regret them.” He admitted, and the Seer gave a faint 'hmh' under her breath. “And I suppose you are right, I do not...trust that the Lady left unchecked would not find herself becoming...”

“It's good of you to look after her. Just as it's good of her to look after you. Makes me feel better about moving on.” Too quick, too clever, that mind and the hint of a smirk in her words. “Nothing’s
inevitable, but some things might seem it at times. How do you feel about all that, I wonder? You're a hard man to read."

“I don't believe I understand what you mean.” He began, feeling the slightest bit irritated with the casual prying. From the look his answer garnered him, just a little humorous, the old woman was aware and simply didn't care. “Is it truly important?”

“It may be. No such thing as fate, no matter what stories are being peddled around. Remember that. You always have a choice.” The seer's words were no sudden revelation, but it was good to hear them spoken all the same. Ones heard all too rarely. “They've paired you off because it's part of their way of making sense of the new world. You black, her white, it makes a balance. Stories to explain, molds to force you into. That doesn't mean it's true.”

“Right and wrong, good and evil. Uncertainty breeds a desire for such things.” He agreed, and she nodded aside at him. It was...easy enough for him to separate the view of himself from who he was. Old and familiar. “I must do more to separate myself from the Elvhen.”

“Time should do that on its own, but you never know, it may not be necessary. She's doing well enough, in her little redemption game.” The Seer replied, and then gave a chuckle, smoke clouding the air. “Thought it amusing the first time I met you. There's a dangerous man, certainly, but not in the way the world thinks he is, eh? Glad to see the shell's cracked a bit. Just don't let her cloud your judgment. Can't say I think there's any place for humans now, when all's said and done.”

“I sincerely doubt the Chantry will be giving up its grasp on this new doctrine, 'game' or no. They desperately need to retain their control on their people. Who better than an enemy to unite them?” He pointed out, and the Seer gave a small 'hrm' under her breath. “Are you Andrastian? Are any of the Lady's people?”

“Me? Hah! I haven't been anything in years, far too bitter.” The Seer laughed, raspy as a crow, and about as raucous. “Some Andrastians, yes. You'd be surprised what people can find it in themselves to reconcile when everything they've ever known has blown up in their faces. Such as gods walking among men while the Maker still refuses to show his face.”

“That may have worrisome implications for them, if they truly wish to convince their people that I am the Adversary of this Maker.” He pointed out, and she gave a slight snort of amusement, sending up smoke. “Hopefully it will become meaningless in the long run. Simply more myth.”

“Immortality will be a lot less interesting when people start living longer and longer.” The Seer chortled, and then gave a small clap to his upper arm, the casual contact startling him. “Not much you can do about it either way, eh? You take care of this nasty demon, and mediate this whole Armada nonsense, and your work here will be done. Let the small things take care of themselves, let ordinary people tend to ordinary people.”

“I wasn't aware we were mediating.” He replied cautiously, once his slight discomfort had faded. It was slightly alarming how unused he was to such gestures. “I don't believe I'd been informed.”

“Ah, yeah...that sounds like her. Probably trying to avoid you getting involved. For...a few different reasons, I'd wager.” The Seer replied cannily, eyes narrowed. He wouldn't be surprised if this was her interfering. Her further words only confirmed it. “Well. I suppose you should make sure she doesn't overstep herself. Someone has to.”

He stood as she began to rise, and she swatted him as he attempted to help her up. Defensively he lifted his hands, and she cackled slightly, jabbing at his chest with her pipe.
“Solas.” She demanded, and he stiffened slightly again, unnerved to hear it from her lips. “Look after Ellana. I'm worried about her. Even with the boy, she's starting to get a bit lost.”

The only thing more unnerving than hearing his name, apparently, was hearing both of them. It was obviously what she’d intended, to drive the point home. And, undoubtedly, to gauge his reaction. He stared at him for a few seconds longer, and then finally inclined his head. The reminder was welcome.

They were both people, after all. Somewhere, underneath all of it.

“Thank you.” He replied, intending it sincerely.

The Seer grinned, baring her stained teeth, and then bit down on the end of her pipe to turn and hobble away. She grabbed the startled Avvar by the arm on her way, and dragged the much larger woman along beside her. Hekla looked rather confused, but followed along regardless.

He believed he understood how she felt.

In the morning they departed for the docks again, her with what appeared to be a new list of concerns and worries, and him with a remarkably cleared head. Feynriel and Felassan appeared to be hung over. He probably shouldn't be amused at that, but for some reason...he was in a rather good mood. He even endured Merrill’s attempts at chattering away at him, though he was only paying half attention to what she said. She seemed nervous, he'd noticed, and that had only made the cheerful babbling worse. Her eyes were tight at the corners.

At the docks, a ship was awaiting them, a flag emblazoned with a red-slashed skull proudly flying. He found himself vaguely amused by that. A strange world, where the only ones left sailing the sea were pirates. Felassan caught his look, and raised a brow.

“I'm just wondering who are to be the villains of this tale, when this story is told.” He informed the man, who looked vaguely disgusted with his good humor, eyes squinted.

“Everyone, probably, my Lord.” Feynriel remarked tiredly, glancing over Felassan's slumped shoulder as they headed for the gangplank. “It all depends on who you ask.”

A call came from the ship, and he glanced up as the Lady did, to meet the piercing gaze of an older human woman. She stood with hands on her full hips, grey-streaked hair tumbled around shoulders that still showed no signs of stooping from age.

“Well, don't stand there all day!” She called, voice arch and wind-roughened. “The sea waits for no one, after all.”

“Of course, Admiral.” The Lady replied, some of the weariness and worry in her eyes fading as she started heading up, extending a hand to greet her. “It's good to see you, Isabela.”

“You may not be saying that for long.” The woman replied, lips quirking to the side. “Though to be fair, at least this time I didn't start the troubles. Remember that, when all of this goes tits up, would you?”
“I'll do my best.” The Lady promised amusedly, her brief smile fading quickly enough. Worry returned to her eyes, and he felt some of his own pleasant mood fading. “Let's be on our way, shall we?”

“Right you are.” Isabela replied, gaze sweeping across of them quickly, as she stepped back and turned away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Merrill finally begin to follow as their eyes met, and the human woman gave a smile that seemed less cocky, more sad. “Hello, kitten.”

“Hello, Isabela.” Merrill replied, sober and quiet for the first time since they had began traveling together. “It's nice to see you.”

“It's...good to see you, too.” Isabela replied, and then turned swiftly away, striding off across the deck.

He paused for a moment as Merrill passed him, and then finally followed. Obviously not even remotely his business. He shook it off, boarding the ship at last.

Another interesting journey ahead, it seemed. Hoping it would go smoothly was likely a bit much to ask, but it was pleasant to not have the weight of various duties and expectations hanging over him. The Lady, of course, was not quite so lucky. He might have offered to help if he thought there might be the slightest chance she'd accept.

They were allies, of course, but there were limits. Even if he wished it were otherwise.
It had been a cloudy day. She didn't care for the threatening sky, traveling by sea was unpleasant enough. She didn't know how Merrill did it so regularly and with so little concern. The past tense was, of course, because she didn't feel like dealing with a storm.

“I believe we both agreed that we wouldn't interfere in such a manner.”

It came from behind her as she watched the clouds dissipating, wind pulling tendrils out of her braid and twisting them around her face. It was no surprise.

“Do you really want to sit through a storm at sea, Fen’Harel?” She asked, and then gentled out the sharp note of her voice. “Please bear with me. I do not care for ships.”

“If you intend to ask forgiveness instead of permission, a good place to start would be with apologizing.” He replied, and she forced herself to glance sidelong as he came to stand at the railing, arms clasped behind his back. “Not that you will. Meddling with the weather is rarely wise without much preparation.”

“Are you angry with me?” Surprise, and then a hint of amusement overtook her, lips pursing together. She shouldn't needle him, but the idea had piqued her sense of humor. “If I had known that it was sunshine that would provoke your ire, I would have left the clouds to suit your temperament.”

“No, I am not. I am finding you a bit more casually prone to bending the rules than I am comfortable with, however.” The neutrality of his tone was unchanged, but there was a hint of a smile on his face. She swiftly turned her attention away, but he continued speaking. “I am actually in a rather pleasant mood, even despite the knowledge that you were not completely forthright with me about this expedition.”

“There will always be pirates. There will always be bandits. There will...always be those who take instead of aid, even when everyone is suffering.” She replied, after a moment's annoyance. He did have some right to pry, but she didn't have to like it. “But for now, they must be brought to heel. If they will not help, they can at least avoid hindering.”

“And is that your duty? To cow them into submission?” His voice was neutral, but the words themselves were enough to leave her bristling. “Lord your power over them, perhaps? You are not content with saving their lives, you must rule over them as well?”

It was a test, she knew it was, and she should respond calmly. Nerves frayed to breaking, all his words did was infuriate her. If it had not been safe to turn her ire on him, she would have held it back, but he, of all people...

“It is better to save lives and broker peace than to murder everyone who does the least thing that you disagree with!” She snapped, vicious and cold, turning to face him. He continued gazing out at the sea, which shouldn't make her angrier, but did. “I do not wish to rule, you know that as well as I! I want nothing to do with it, but I must do what I can to save lives!”

“Is there not wisdom in knowing when to remove an infected limb, before it kills the body?” He replied calmly, and she turned away to pace across the deck. “You would see everything saved, at the cost of saving nothing. You coddle and protect, you rescue and then feel betrayed when they continue behaving as they have always behaved. They learn nothing, and do not grow. In the end, what choice will you have but to rule over them, for their own safety?”
“That will never happen.” She promised, cold fury giving way to despair. He was right. She was not angry at him, she was angry at people for behaving as they always had. An idiotic reason. “I cannot take lives. Even as it is not my place to control, it is not my place to kill.”

“You have created a dependence. They see you as the solution to all of their problems. When you refuse, what will they do?” He asked calmly, and she let out a long, shuddering breath, restless pacing slowing.

“I could ask you the same thing.” She replied shortly, back to him now, voice cold. “If you think so poorly of my methods and I, why do you allow them? Contrary at best, and foolish at worst.”

It was unkind. She was unkindness itself to him, she always had been. Manipulative, cold, delicately playing a game where she knew most of his moves, and he knew none of hers. Her pain, her knowledge of another world used as weapons against him.

He was only one man against the entire world, and even she had decided he was her enemy.

Condemned for crimes against her he had not even committed.

“You have proven me wrong before. Perhaps you will do so again, my Lady.” He replied mildly, and she felt a small twinge of pain at those words, echoes of others. All it did was make her own self-censure all the more deserved. “I was wrong about you, and your people. You brought them out from under the heels of tyrants, and yet you let the tyrants live. I would not have. I cannot say I am wrong about the humans. I still believe I am not, but I gave you my word.”

Silently, she turned her gaze back out to the sea, hugging arms around her midsection, breathing in heavily to settle her mind. He had not moved, nor had his expression changed, and she felt a twinge of shame. Yes, she had suffered greatly. What had she let it make of her? That was what she could control, in the end. Or could she?

The fierce need to save, protect those she had failed before...it could not be denied.

Deep under it all, the suffering had created something hard, something immobile. Perhaps it would be her great downfall. Perhaps it would be what necessitated her destruction, in the end, but it was what she had forged herself into. There was no turning back, not now. She had been tempered, and she had cooled into something that could not be changed so easily.

“I believe.” She replied, voice soft and slow, a whisper torn from her lips by the constant wind. “I believe that there is a way. I believe that one day there will be a balance, and that I can let it all slip from my hands and be free. I have faith, and the hope of the people...all the people. For every bandit there is a child, Fen’Harel, and for every selfish soul, a selfless one. Tyrants are made, not born.”

“Then, my Lady...” He began, slow and musing. His expression, when she glanced sidelong, had not changed. “Please. Unbend enough to let me speak freely with you. If I cannot question, if we cannot discuss...what hope do I have? Trust and understanding must begin somewhere, and you cannot have one without the other.”

“It hurts me to do so.” She admitted, quiet and calm. There was no denying that, it was obvious to anyone and everyone. “But...I would not wish to force you to kill me, after all. I hope I will never fall beyond saving.”

“As do we all.” He agreed, and she let out a slow sigh, reaching for the railing to brace herself, fingers digging in. “You are not alone. It feels that way, I imagine, much of the time...but if you begin to think that you are, it becomes much easier to do things that you would otherwise regret.”
“Speaking from experience?” She asked dryly, and when he inclined his head, she continued on, speaking the title with deliberate flippancy, “You’ve made your point. I shall let the storms be, my Lord, and keep my poor stomach calm with blood magic and far too much rum.”

“Storms and people will take care of themselves.” Solas replied, shifting his stance slightly, folding his arms across his chest instead. “We must move through them, apart from them, my Lady. For now.”

“For now.” She agreed, and then lapsed into silence, resting her weight against the railing.

The clouds had fallen back to the horizon, but they threatened again. It was difficult to resist banishing them, knowing that she could, but she held herself back. Reluctantly. Instead they stood in silence at the railing, watching as the storm rolled back in again. She could almost admit to it being comfortable, though that would be denying the ever present tension. A sickly, heavy weight in her stomach, refusing to be pushed aside.

Guilt.

Eventually the weight of it became too much to bear, and she had to break the quiet again.

“Is...it true that Freedom moved an entire litter of baby nugs into your home? I'm terribly sorry.” She had laughed over it, when the letter had arrived, before the source of it had sobered her again. Still. It had made a particularly bad day a little easier to bear. “Sometimes I don't quite know what to do with him.”

“Nor do I. Dissuading him from deciding that he had attached himself to both of us did little good.” Solas replied, giving a slight shake of his head. “They are irritating, will not stay confined, and make the most piercing noises.”

“Freedom or the nugs?” She asked, and the small laugh he gave brought a small stab of pain to her chest. So familiar, that breathless chuckle. It was unwise, all of this had been, but what choice was there? “I suppose it is too much to hope that there is a demon behind all of this that can be slain? Something...to excuse the rumors of slave trading, the attacks on ships, the...all of it.”

“We know that Greed is there...” He finally replied, eyes fixed on the darkening horizon. The air was chilling, sharp on the inhale. “But we do not know in what strength or influence. It may be...”

He was being careful with her, a fact that should annoy, but she had already vented unfair anger upon him. How could she blame him? She breathed out heavily, lips pursing downwards.

“I am being childish. Too...idealistic, perhaps. Foolish. Hoping that I can blame a demon instead of...”

“There is great value in your kind heart, my Lady.” He replied, and when she scoffed and turned away, his voice sank back into more neutral tones. “It would not hurt to assume that it has nothing to do with Greed. Doing so will keep us wary. It has still killed spirits, but we do not know that it has done anything else. Only that it is powerful enough to do so, and claims dominion.”

“Greed is...” She began, a protest rising in her, stopped as he turned his attention to her.

She dropped her eyes to avoid meeting his.

“No more intrinsically evil than anything else. It serves a purpose.” He replied shortly, syllables clipped. “But yes, unlikely to remain uncorrupted, especially in such a place. Still, their lives are not worth less than its.”
“It will take...generations for people to understand that. Even when we know it, feeling it...” She murmured, reluctantly. “It takes time we may not have.”

“Well...we can hope that we do.” His voice was slow and sonorous, watching the edge of the storm as the sky grew darker than his eyes. “You've given little other choice at this point, my Lady, with your entrapment.”

“It seems there was some value in letting Hope go with you after all.” She sighed to herself, shifting with the rhythm of the deck under her feet. It had been easy to adjust, easier by far than the last time she had traveled by ship. She lifted her voice again. “Are there...many of the nugs?”

“Are you looking for a companion? There are more than there should be. I'm not certain, the number seems to change by the day.” The surprise in his voice nearly made her smile, a slight tug at the corner of her mouth.

“No. No, certainly not...but I can try to find homes for them.” She responded, trying not to look too dismayed with the idea of dragging a squeaking, wrinkly little pest in her aravel. “Good homes, so that Freedom doesn't fuss too much, and your patience isn't strained any further.”

“Thank you, my Lady.” He replied graciously, with the slightest incline of his head.

“You are welcome.” She said faintly as the wind rose again, finding it less onerous to say than she anticipated. It slipped from her lips far too easily, words that should be rote laden with genuine emotion.

Too dangerous. It all was.

She was relieved when he turned and left her alone with the rising waves and the rhythmic creak of the ship. Solitude was really all she wanted. A hard thing to find in such close quarters. Alone for a few moments, she watched as the storm overtook them, and rain began sheeting down. It was uncomfortable, trickling down the curve of her cheek and dripping from her ears, but she allowed it.

 Apparently that was what she was expected to do.

The relief he had felt at the actual conversation he had managed to hold with the Lady had faded when it became apparent she would make herself as scarce as was possible upon a ship. It was too much to hope that she might be unbending, he supposed. Still, there were his own thoughts to gather, and he felt that at least his point had been made.

He had his own cabin, small that it was, but somehow he had ended up at a table where the others were staying, before Felassan wandered off to go gamble with the crew. He'd return soon enough, it never took long for him to lose too thoroughly to continue. Oddly, that left him with the Keeper and Feynriel, who seemed rather familiar with one another. Enough so that they chatted easily despite the uncomfortable situation.

The storm outside made things a bit rougher than usual, though it wasn't a fearsome one by any means. Still, it was unsteady enough that Feynriel looked a little uneasy. Merrill was completely unruffled, with the same unrelenting cheer as always. Lost in his own thoughts, he finally returned to the conversation at hand when he realized they were speaking about the Lady, and Merrill had
turned her vivid green eyes to him.

He realized she'd asked him a question.

“I'm sorry?” He asked, and she smiled.

“Oh! I asked if you'd met her before...I mean, before that meeting, during the war? Everyone knows that story, after all.” Merrill replied, still beaming from ear to ear.

“Actually, no. I wasn't even quite certain if she were real, or instead a fiction.” For a moment he remembered it, that first meeting. When his purpose had been tested so thoroughly. “And you, Keeper?”

“Oh, yes. I remember when we met her! It was...it was when she came for you, Feynriel, wasn't it?” Merrill blithely asked the young man, who suddenly looked slightly uncomfortable, shifting his gaze aside. “That was right. Poor Feynriel was having trouble with demons, being a Dreamer and all...but she came to Kirkwall to fetch him and teach him! It all turned out all right in the end. I didn't do so well in the Fade, though.”

He knew the gaze was directed at him, but he simply ignored it. This was interesting, he didn't want to stall things now.

“Yes, that's right.” Feynriel finally agreed, reaching for his drink. “I thought Garrett was going to run her through. I'll be going to Kirkwall when this is over, I don't suppose either of you would like to come with, Merrill?”

A deliberate change of the subject, obviously, as Feynriel skirted the topic and moved to a new one. He hadn't been subtle about it, either, which made the apologetic smile he offered aside make sense. It was the same thing he had been told by the young man before, but wordless this time.

*Not his story to tell.*

“Either? Oh, you mean...Isabela.” Merrill stammered awkwardly, cheeks reddening. “There's not really a...well, we're not...precisely. Things haven't been...good. For a few years now.”

“I'm sorry, Merrill, I didn't realise.” Feynriel assured, holding up both hands, and then reaching for the bottle to offer it. “I should have been a bit more thoughtful.”

“Oh, it's all right. Just...difficulties.” Merrill replied weakly, letting her cup be filled, and then clutching it to her chest. A hopeful gaze was turned to him, and he lifted a brow. “There's not a way...to make them like us, is there? To...”

“I can no more make a human Elvhen than I can change the stars in the sky. Some things are beyond our reach. As a people we are kin to spirits, and parts of us will always be.” He replied calmly, watching the hope fade to resignation. “The blood of the Elvhen has been mixed liberally with that of humanity, but for most, not nearly enough.”

“For most? Do you mean like...oh, sorry.” Merrill started, and then cast an apologetic gaze over to Feynriel.

“What, like me?” Feynriel replied, relaxed. He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “It's okay, Merrill. No point denying it. My father was human. The ears give it away.”

“Feynriel is one of the people.” Solas interjected, smiling faintly at the looks cast his way. “It is true. Humans cannot be Dreamers, it is not part of what they are. The shape of his ears matters little, that is
not what makes one elven. Obviously it is...standard, but not the core of it.”

“It was before, my Lord.” Feynriel replied with a faint smile, and he inclined his head in understanding. “Very strange to think of, especially considering that there are, and have been Dreamers in Tevinter. I think they would be rather offended if you informed them that they were not human.”

“Tevinter stole a great many things from the Elvhen. I suppose at this point the peoples of Thedas will have to decide for themselves what the definition of each is.”

It was, after all, as the Seer had said.

No room left for humans. They had made slaves of the Elvhen, bore children with them, mixed and strengthened their own blood and magic by stealing that of elves. Now they were seeing the price.

“I suppose...if I wanted to, I could change my ears, couldn't I?” Merrill mused, reaching up to touch the tips of them, hesitantly. “It wouldn't make me human, after all. How curious, though. Once it was only how we looked that made us what we were, in a sense. And now that's not quite the case. It's a bit confusing, isn't it?”

“Much like the dwarves and the Titans, the veil sundered the people from an intrinsic part of themselves. It was...unexpected.” He admitted, feeling the conversation moving in an uncomfortable direction. “It was not what was supposed to happen, but that is far in the past now.”

“You're much easier to talk to than I expected!” Merrill confessed, beaming at him. As always, her abruptness was the slightest bit disorienting, but he was coming to find it amusing. “A bit scary, but that's hardly your fault. The Lady always frightened me a bit as well, but she can be...very stern, when she's upset. She used to be so cross with me!”

“I can't imagine why.” He replied, and she laughed.

Feynriel had gone quiet again, watching Merrill with some wariness. Obviously the Keeper knew something he'd rather Solas didn't know.

“I was saying it just the other day! I always used to take your name in vain. It took me ages to stop doing it, she’d always get so cross when I did.” Merrill started, and then jumped in her seat, blinking and glancing across the table. “Why are you kicking me?”

“I expect because he thinks you should not be telling me that.” He suggested, and Feynriel sighed and slapped his hand over his face. “I was aware that she...spent some effort trying to untangle the negative mythos and stories.”

“Oh! No, I meant before then, before the veil came...” Merrill bounced in her seat again, and then glared, unconvincingly. “That's quite enough, Feynriel!”

“What's quite enough?” The door swung open, bringing with it stale odors of the hold and a hint of outside air. Felassan poked his head in, grinning faintly.

“That didn't take long. Win all their money already?” Feynriel asked, relaxed voice hiding relief that he couldn't cover up completely.

Solas was listening for it, of course, and recognized it when he heard it. It wasn't as if it were a new revelation, that there were things she was keeping from him. Things she did not want him to know. He still hadn't gotten a straight answer from Freedom regarding if he was still under a geas or no. It would be kind to think this was only Feynriel trying to respect the Lady's privacy and her desire to
leave her past in the past.

He'd given up any hope of that being the case quite some time ago.

And now he knew that whatever it was, Feynriel likely knew as well. Interesting, but not something to dwell over tonight.

“Lost, more likely. Felassan is the worst gambler I have ever had the privilege to know.” He interjected, accepting his glare as his rightful due, and beginning to rise. “I believe I would like to get some rest. Please excuse me. Good night.”

“More things to win in a dice game than money, my Lord.” Felassan replied, taking the chair he had just vacated and slumping into it. “Dream well.”

“May...” Merrill spoke up, tentatively, “May I ask one last question, please, Solas?”

He appreciated that she had used his name as he asked, though she still said it with some hesitancy.

“Of course.” He assured, glancing over his shoulder and waiting.

“Did you expect...when the veil was torn down, that the people...would regain what they'd, well, lost? Or did you...” There she stopped, playing with the end of her braid for a moment with a frown.

He could tell her what she wanted to hear. There were excuses, of course. Time spent dreaming, dedication to his people, to his goals...memories of what was lost, fear of the future. He could reassure her that he had always intended to save them, that he had done this for them, for all of the elves, and not only his own people.

He could lie.

“I did not.” He admitted, shaking his head slowly. “I did it to restore what had been lost, to rectify my own mistake. That your people survived is owed wholly to the Lady, and I cannot claim I had any grand design to save you all.”

“Then...what has changed?” Merrill's curiosity seemed enough to even push back her disappointment, her frown fading. “Obviously something has.”

“A great many things. More by the day it seems.” He finally replied, having no better answer to give her. “I am sorry if those answers are...unsatisfactory.”

“They are a bit, but...I suppose that just proves you're a person after all, doesn't it? Life doesn't really make for easy answers, in the end. Sometimes when you think you're doing the right thing, people suffer, don't they?” Merrill replied, pensively. She offered a smile and a nod to finish more pleasantly, chasing away her own concern. “Well, thank you. Good night.”

“Good night.” He replied, and then turned to leave, the chatter beginning behind him as Feynriel needled Felassan, Merrill laughing along.

His sleep was uneasy that night, and solitary. Few spirits on the sea to keep him company, he traveled his dreams alone, finding little worth drawing him out of his contemplation. Only the memories of endless, formless seas, vast creatures born of short lives and shifting depths. Melancholy as distant songs of the great leviathans, these spirits of the oceans brought no memories to explore, no knowledge to earn.

This was not a place where history had been able to leave a mark.
Finally he pulled himself into dreams of his own making, and left the sea behind.
Estwatch

All ports were alike in some ways, and yet this one had its own sort of charm. Rough-hewn, noisy, it was home to all manner of free-living filth. Boisterously unapologetic, both for good and for ill. They kept lodging on the ship, rather than wandering one of the dockside bars, where it seemed they found little beyond fish to fill their bellies. At least the food on board the ship was better. Not something Solas ever thought he'd be grateful for, provisions on a ship. Sea travel did not improve with age.

Estwatch was small, and thus unsustainable on its own for those who called it home. It was little wonder that it found itself a haven for people who spent their lives taking instead of creating. A rocky island in the middle of restless seas, the village, for lack of a better term, was built in tiers leading away from the harbor. The building overlooking it all had much in common with the Andrastian chantries, albeit worn and bereft of iconography.

They left the ship as a party of six, with only the Admiral armed. It seemed she shared that with the citizenry of Estwatch, as he could not see a single person without weapons.

“Home sweet hovel.” Isabela remarked flippantly, and then gave a faint sigh under her breath as she glanced over at them. “You're more likely to get robbed or stabbed in that than anything else. You know that, don't you?”

“You're the one who wanted presence, Isabela.” The Lady replied placidly, though a smile was at the edge of her lips. “You know I don't wear gowns. I'm not quite certain how that would be more intimidating than armor.”

“I expect it would be the shock of it. You would confuse them so thoroughly that they wouldn't know what to make of you.” Solas interjected, keeping his own tone light. “In contrast, fine armor with no visible weaponry just appears to be baseless posturing.”

“Well, next time you may wear a gown.” She replied tartly without looking in his direction, and he smiled faintly. “For I certainly won't. My armor has served me well thusfar, and I doubt my preferred clothing would project the right image.”

Unbidden, the memory of long sun-gilded legs bare under the hem of her tunic. It shouldn't affect him as much as it had then, and it certainly still shouldn't be doing so. A moment's distraction, he could acknowledge it as an aesthetically pleasing memory and nothing more.

He should be focusing on the task at hand. Perhaps it would embarrass her, to know that he was here in the event that she needed reining in. An insult, perhaps. He wasn't quite certain how she would see it, but if anything, it was quite the opposite. She had the potential to do a great deal of good.

“Do you really think he should?” Merrill inquired curiously, only to stall as he lifted a brow, her gaze sliding away from him nervously. “Oh...well, certainly not. Of course.”

“Never change, kitten.” Isabela sighed, and for a moment the two women shared a smile, before the Admiral's slipped away. For a moment her expression was flat, and then it returned to its more shallow, affable lines. “Ianto owns most of what goes on these days, what with his little friend's help.”

“I wonder that the inhabitants of this place have so little trouble adapting to the spirits among them.” He mentioned, broaching a subject that had been bothering him as they headed up another wending, filthy stairway of stone and warped wood. “I have seen a few now.”
"Certainly no stranger than some of the flesh and blood bastards about this place. Not everyone's adjusted, but we're all fairly live and let live. And in some cases die and let die." Isabela replied lazily, smirking a bit to herself. "Was chaos for a good few years, but things have settled down. Got one aboard my ship at times myself, strange thing that it is."

The Admiral, or Captain...he wasn't entirely certain of her title, seemed affectedly disinterested in him. He found it curious, but had no wish to upset things by inquiring why. She spoke to him casually, but avoided him whenever possible. A better reception by far than it could have been. He seemed to recall she was an associate of Garrett Hawke, so hostility had been anticipated.

"I hardly think you are in any position to be calling anyone strange, let alone Savvy. They do their best to be helpful." The Lady quipped, gaze shifting sidelong as they passed a curious gaggle of dirty, villainous-looking men and women, eyes tracking them as they passed.

"Savvy...is a duplicitous little pain in the arse. I thought spirits were supposed to be straightforward." Isabela groused, stepping around a broken cart, hand reaching over her shoulder briefly for a hilt as a young elven man dashed past them. She only relaxed once he'd hopped a pile of refuse and continued on. "Useful, though, when it wants to be. Especially during negotiations."

"There were a lot of issues with desire demons, at first. And one particularly nasty rage demon that killed a few dozen men. But people here can take care of themselves." The Lady remarked quietly, giving a small shake of her head. "For better or for worse."

"If equilibrium has been reached in one fashion or another, that is all one can hope for." He finally replied, trying and failing to find anything less non-committal to say. Company was far too mixed to be any more free with his words. "It is an interesting population of spirits, at the very least."

"It's an interesting population of people living with them." Isabela retorted, eyes narrowed as she surveyed the way ahead, becoming more tense. "Less so than there used to be, on both accounts."

"People are disappearing?" Merrill asked quietly, speaking up for the first time that day. She seemed more sober now, dressed in her Keeper's robes with her hair pulled back and up, attitude matching the formality.

"No one that would be missed." Isabela replied, gaze shifting up as they approached the Chantry, the men flanking the door eyeing her warily. "Good evening, gentlemen."

"You're late." One replied, a slight sneer, though he noticed they were both avoiding looking a him or the Lady. The speaker glanced his way once, and then flinched and turned away. "Ianto didn't say anything about extra people."

"Oh, does Ianto run everything by you now, Corwin? How wonderful, that you've moved up in the world." Isabela replied placidly, pushing past them with a slight smirk, turning to keep them in her sight as she passed through the doorway. "I'll let Ianto know he forgot to tell you."

A glare was her only answer, and then a flinch aside as the rest of them followed. Feynriel and Felassan had been quietly speaking together, but they were silent as well, as they all trooped into the worn stone building. It was, unsurprisingly, crudely decorated. Mismatched, damaged furniture piled up haphazardly, walls emblazoned with tattered flags and banners pinned by old knives dug into the mortar. More than a few were singed, or torn. The air smelled of smoke from the lanterns, oily and unpleasant, leaving a haze in the air that clung to the skin.

"He's going to make us wait. He always does." Isabela remarked, turning to face forward again once they were safely inside. Her eyes never stopped roving. "The tactic's so damn old it'd be more
unsettling if someone were on time for once."

"Then we will have to set the table." He decided, pulling ahead and passing through the open doors beyond, feeling no eyes on them to cause any wariness.

For a moment she was puzzled as Fen'Harel strode ahead, Isabela casting a narrow look at his back as he passed through the doors. There was indeed a table beyond, long and rectangular, the chair at the head of the table looming over the others, fireplace at its back. Positioned to intimidate. Her confusion turned to amusement as he moved immediately for it.

"Are you claiming our host's chair, Fen'Harel?" She inquired after him, hearing a faint laugh from both Felassan and Isabela. "Tsk. What manners."

"The Adversary at the head of the table?" He replied, surprising her with the returned levity. She wasn't certain she'd ever heard him acknowledge that title before, and certainly not with the humor in his voice. "Of course not, my Lady, I was simply attempting to be polite and aid you with your seat."

"How gracious." This time it was her that stifled a laugh, leaving the others behind as she followed after, sinking into the chair as he tugged it out for her. She kept her face sober, acknowledging him with a slight incline of her head and a sidelong look. "Thank you."

"Of course." He replied, returning the nod and pacing away, claiming the foot of the table for himself casually.

The conceit remained diverting enough that she actually managed to meet his eyes for a moment, at least until she realized she was smiling at him. The expression faded instantly, and she could see his fall into more neutral lines as everyone else trooped in more fully.

"This is ridiculous." Feynriel informed her as he grabbed a fairly intact chair and dragged it to her right hand side. "You are aware of that, are you not?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about." She replied, leaning on the thick, heavily carved arm of the chair, offering him a slow smile. "Where else should the Lady of the Flame and the Lord Adversary sit but at the head and foot of the table? Besides, we are not here to negotiate, we need not face them directly."

"I didn't say I didn't understand, just that it was ridiculous."

"Oh, I quite agree. You know I hate this sort of thing." She agreed mildly, gaze shifting upwards at the creak of floorboards up above on the landing, a door opening. "But it serves a purpose. And so do I. Right now that purpose is to be intimidating and aloof and assess the situation, and I do that much better from the head of the table."

"Do you want me to talk for you, as well?" Feynriel inquired, and she stifled a small, amused smirk. "Well, this will be fun. Try not to enjoy it too much, hahren. Sets a bad precedent."

The heavy tread of footsteps announced the arrival of their host, and Merrill and Isabela finally settled down, side by side, leaving the other open. The man that tromped down the stairs was surprisingly young, tall and lean with a wicked scar from ear to chin. Only a single streak of grey in
his dark hair, and that seemed to be of the premature variety.

His eyes, however, were old. Hard, cold, and flat, like the eyes of some deep sea predator.

"Well! Isabela. Seems you've brought all manner of friends with you, haven't you?" He asked, voice rough and easy, footfalls heavy. His gaze turned on Merrill almost instantly, as if hunting for the weakest link. "Llomeryn's sent a Dalish, have they? Hello, pretty thing."

"Yes, I came to speak on behalf of Llomeryn." Merrill replied, keeping her voice steady and quiet.

"Only the Keeper and I have come to speak. The others are here in case mediation's needed, Ianto. Me, I'd rather run you through and be done with it, but they tell me things should stay stable." Isabela remarked, pulling his attention away from Merrill. "So I'd much rather get you back in line."

"Ah. Well." Ianto replied lazily, swaggering over to the table, approaching the chair at the head. She tried not to pull away slightly as he leaned in, coming rather too close for comfort. Seeing if she'd flinch, no doubt. "You're in my chair, knife ear."

There was a motion from the foot of the table, and she lifted a hand placatingly to Fen'Harel, who settled back down in his seat. She'd seen the momentary nervousness in Ianto's eyes, and that was all that she needed.

He may have been a predator, but he was only testing them.

"Thank you for your hospitality." She replied in her most serene voice, and then turned her stare away from him, gazing down across the table.

It was inevitable that her eyes would meet Fen'Harel's, with how they were positioned, and he sat leaning forward, elbows on the table, hands folded together. It wasn't his usual posture, so she could only assume it was some form of artifice. She could feel Ianto continuing to loom over her, so close he was practically breathing on her. After a few seconds, Solas' eyes shifted aside, slowly and deliberately, and Ianto pulled back at last, giving a faint scoff under his breath.

As he turned away and moved to drag a chair to the table, her attention landed on his shadow at last. Boyishly pretty under a few prominent scars, the light-haired young man was fairly ordinary, if one ignored two very glaring issues. One being the ring of black bruises that encircled his neck, the impression of hands standing out starkly.

The second issue was the fact that he was dead.

Their eyes met, and the young man offered her a cheerful smile, lowering his chin. The movement was just a little awkward, but not enough to make her think this was his first day as a corpse. After a moment's deliberation, she returned it.

When her gaze shifted back to Solas, she found his eyes awaiting hers, acknowledging what they had both noticed.

\textit{Ah. There he was.}

Greed was quiet, as Ianto and Isabela argued and snarled at one another. Knives had come out at some point, pounded into the surface of a table scored with many such marks. It was almost as if
there were two conflicts at play, one silent, one loud and furious. Merrill had given Greed many odd looks, but eventually was drawn into the conflict at hand.

"I'm not sure what you mean by 'what can I do'." Merrill replied to yet another angry threat, seeming wholly unconcerned. "I can do a great many things. I can set your ships on fire. I can hire other raiders to protect our ships, since it seems not everyone likes you. But...I think..."

Ianto narrowed at his gaze at her, trying intimidation again. Merrill, as always, was a bit of a puzzle. She would shrink, just a little, and then slip another little blithe comment past that turned everything on its head. She felt fear, and pushed past it, resolute and determined. One of her greatest strengths, and her greatest weaknesses.

"Well, I suppose what I could really do...oh, well, it would fix the problem entirely, wouldn't it?"

"What is that, exactly?" Ianto asked, sneering as he leaned in over the table, hand on the hilt of his blade. He'd noticed by now that he couldn't move it past the center of the table.

It was a bit of a boundary she felt necessary, just a simple shield, invisible to the eye. It was almost disturbing how easily Fen'harel bolstered it for her, all without them speaking a word.

"Well, we could leave, couldn't we? It's only three, four thousand people, after all, and there's plenty of space." Merrill replied, more thinking out loud than challenging. "Sea trade is convenient, after all, but we moved to the mainland, it wouldn't really be necessary."

Silence reigned at the table, and she found she had to stifle a smile. Trust Merrill to think of a solution so wholly unexpected and strange that still made perfect sense. It was true. Llomeryn was dependent on the sea. Not everyone would go happily, or quietly, but a place could be made for them, and trade routes could be changed.

It would take a good many resources, and food would be difficult, but they...

Her mind was already racing on, trying to find a way to make it work, lips pursing together. Obviously doing so would leave Estwatch stranded, slowly dying. They needed Llomeryn far more than Llomeryn needed them, only history and the fact that half the Armada was helping instead of hindering keeping them alive. Removing Llomeryn would make Afsaana more exposed, but it could be defended. There were few settlements on the coast.

"All I am trying to say..." Merrill continued on easily, into the resulting silence, "Is that it'd be best for everyone if we worked it out, wouldn't it? I think we could all try a little harder to get along. We need those ships, and if you're going to keep causing trouble for them, we're going to have to fix the problem."

"All of Estwatch depends on Llomeryn..." Isabela pointed out cautiously, seeming somewhat taken-aback. She couldn't blame her, Merrill's solution was elegantly brutal. "Not only Ianto's people."

"Yes, it would be very unfortunate, but, well...I have to think of my people, don't I?" Merrill replied, keeping her voice calm, though her gaze shifted aside to the other woman a few times. "I suspect...one way or another, it'd solve the problem. Par Vollen is still an issue, of course it is, but they've been awfully quiet."

"And you're just going to gamble that the Qunari bastards are going to stay away, are you?" Ianto sneered, knife jabbing into the table again as he threw himself back in his chair, glowering. "Going to throw away your protection over a few little shipments that keep my people fed?"

"Shipments? Is that what you're calling slaves now?" Merrill asked, her outrage doing a good deal to
calm Ellana's nerves. It was difficult for her not to say something. "Is that what you call trapping
spirits?"

There was no denial from Ianto, just the faintest of smirks, and a sudden surge of anger overtook her.
It was difficult not to rise, slay him here and now, muscles tight with forced restraint. Betrayal, yet
again. She had worked so hard for every damn life, and here they were, throwing them away.
Abusing them.

The fire under her fingertips burned, demanding release, until a memory surfaced, harsh words
thrown in her face on board the ship. When Solas had spoken them before they had only made her
angry, but now they cooled her ire with despair.

You coddle and protect, you rescue and then feel betrayed when they continue behaving as they have
always behaved.

He was right, after all, wasn't he?

Her restless gaze shifted across the table, meeting his again. Solas gave the slightest shake of his head
and her lips pursed, eyes tightening. It hurt to sit here and say nothing, and it hurt to sit across from
him, no matter what she had thought of the artifice before. Humor had faded, idealism had no place,
and she was simply sitting, raw, with a shell around her exterior she could not crack, no matter how
she wanted to.

When her gaze fell, it was because a hand had found hers under the table, clenching it tightly. Her
gaze shifted briefly sidelong to Feynriel, but she forced her expression to remain placid as she
tightened her fingers around his.

She was so grateful he was here.
This is half a chapter, but for some reason I only posted half of the previous one. I realized I only re-posted most but not all of this fic. I probably won't edit what remains, but I'll repost it eventually. It's not a completed fic, so don't get techy.

The argument that had once been two sided was rapidly becoming three sided, which meant no further progress would be made tonight. Ianto had noticed as well as Solas, and was smugly pitting Isabela and Merrill against one another. There were emotions there, things that had yet to be dealt with impeding negotiations.

It was not a useful state for anyone to be in. No, they were done for now.

"Enough." It was not him that spoke it, but the Lady, her facade uncracked despite the pain he had seen in her eyes, the fury he was concerned would break through. Her voice was cool, dismissive. "You will solve nothing tonight. You will meet again in the morning."

For a moment it looked as if an argument would erupt, but he added his gaze to the mix, and Isabela forced her way up from the table with a curse, turning on her heel and striding out. Merrill rose as well after a moment, and then turned to follow, expression withdrawn and troubled. Ianto eyed them suspiciously for a time, but eventually pushed up as well, chair falling to the floor.

"None of you have anything to say? No? Well, that's bloody creepy." He asked lazily, glancing between the four of them, and then down and aside at the young man still seated. "Come on, my treasure, let's be going on now. Had enough of this."

"They want to talk to me." The corpse replied, a slow smile crossing its lips.

"They can fuck off, that's what they can do. You belong to me." Ianto replied, sneering icily. "I'm not afraid of some knife-eared bastards. They all bleed the same, beg the same."

This farce had gone on long enough. Irritation rose, and the pale-haired young man laughed as he turned his gaze to them, shaking his head slowly. Well aware of the level gaze from across the table, he rose to his feet calmly, turning his gaze to the raider. Narrow, hard eyes met his, and then abruptly rolled up, the heavy thump of Ianto hitting the floor loud in the sudden quiet. He didn't soften the fall. Petty, perhaps, but he was feeling petty.

At least they had found a source of some of the enslaved spirits. He did not fool himself into thinking it was the only one.

Her head the Lady sigh, and then the slight scrape of the heavy chair.

"This is quite enough." He declared simply, arms clasping behind his back as he turned his attention to the young man more fully. "What shall we call you?"

"I am greed." The young man replied mildly, but with a near-skeletal grin. It widened as the Lady rose and shoed the others onward. The pair remained, but fell back to the doorway. "Isn't that enough?"
"It is, but not all feel so. Some take a name, a greater purpose." He replied carefully, testingly. "What is it you want? Please leave that body."

"I want nothing. You want a great deal." Greed replied slyly, like a child pleased with a clever lie. The rictus smile was unsettling on the dead man's lips. "But not nearly enough. You are dull."

"Thank you." He replied mildly, taking it for the compliment it was, but not intended as.

Laughter, surprisingly cheerful and bright was oddly hollow, and he saw Feynriel start as the man abruptly slumped to the side, eyes dulling, mouth going slack. The body hit the floorboards with a meaty thud, splayed awkwardly. The Lady managed to keep her composure, but he could see her features tighten slightly as Greed left the corpse it'd been possessing. The spirit itself was spindly, greenish-gold, cheerful grin a wide, glowing slit.

"That's very disrespectful, you know." She informed Greed smoothly, and the spirit laughed again, this time without a throat to voice it. "You should let the dead be. Even an unliving body could trap you if you are unwary and become attached."

"It's mine, I want it Ianto likes it, and so I wear it until he finds a new one. Picks a new one, takes it in, quiets it for me." Greed replied, sounding immensely pleased with itself. "They are not mine, they are his. I leave as I like."

Disgust, and then sorrow, as they both turned their gazes down to the poor fallen body of what had once no doubt been a slave, or at least a man captured to be one. The very idea was repulsive. The man was...killing bodies for the spirit to possess? That certainly explained the bruises.

The purpose was as repulsive as it was obvious, and did not bear thinking about, let alone speaking of.

"Greed." He drew its flickering attention back, patiently, starting with a simple question, in the hopes of a simple answer. "Tell me what happened to Wisdom."

"He went on a journey." Greed replied evasively, which was worrying enough. Still, an odd spirit, this one, and as far as he could tell it was wholly untainted. "Or did he? The knowledge is mine, not yours. Why should I share?"

The tenuous spirit folded its legs, perching atop the corpse, still looking quite smug. That could be forgiven, it could hardly help its nature, after all. The body could not have been more than a day dead, and that part was concerning. How often did he kill for it?

"Because if you share, you will gain more." The Lady remarked, and he could see her relaxing, very slightly. "If you share it with me, you will still know it, so it will be yours, and I will give you something else of value."

He shared the relaxation, on some level. Greed seemed wholly itself, not fixated upon this nonsense it had bound itself to. The possession was unpleasant and distasteful in the extreme, but it did not seem overly attached to it. Drifting along on the currents, getting caught up in this place that so called to its nature. That was as it should be.

He had not been corrupted by ego, or its own vice. It was wholly a spirit, albeit apparently one attached to a madman.

The Lady did not seem relaxed, as if the revelations had escaped her, or as if she found them distasteful. This whole business was distasteful, he could hardly blame her.
"Wisdom went to Tevinter, to whisper in the ear of the Divine." Greed said instantly, making no attempt at artifice. Another relieving thing. "We put him in a puzzle that they sent us, little baubles to trap spirits. Just the small ones, the ones that aren't clever like I am. They're mine now."

"You were clever to find a purpose here." He agreed, ignoring the cold sidelong look the Lady gave him. "But I am afraid it is not a useful purpose. Are you willing to find a different one?"

"This is mine, it is all mine. I belong here. They tell me they will reach further, take more, take and reach, but they stall, they stall because they fear you."

The spirit flitted away briefly, agitated, before turning back again. Difficult, a spirit like this, who could be content one moment and miserable the next, and never, ever satisfied. It was his nature not to be, and that created a fickle, restless being.

"If you push them too far, they will all die, and then you will have nothing." Solas pointed out calmly, watching the Lady with caution. "You will rule over waves and ashes, nothing more."

"You don't want. But you could." Greed informed him, gaze encompassing both of them. "Up to the stars, down to the bowels of the earth where the blackness surges through the cracks, you could push it all back. Back, and back again. Perfection, peace, everything where it belongs, being what it should be."

"That is enough, Greed, you know that won't work." He ordered calmly.

"All the screaming would stop. If you take it all, if you stop letting them hurt, stop letting them kill, stand over them and everything is peace, and then the screaming would finally stop. You should take it all, for their own good." Greed was looking at her now, changing targets, their eyes caught as she gazed at the spirit placidly. "Bones do not scream. Corpses do not cry."

"Do I have a willing place for you?" The Lady asked after a moment of silence, and the spirit made a small, disgusted noise. "I know you do not care for us. It is all right, Greed. You've become a bit spoiled, I think, all these people who enjoy your company. I'm afraid the most I have for you is stealing an extra sweet or two with my meals."

"You could have three. You should have three." Greed told her, and she laughed abruptly, a pleasant, free sound. "If you don't take, you break. You are going to break."

The laughter stopped just as quickly as it began, her eyes widening slightly, jaw clenching as she closed her mouth. Her mouth tightened angrily, and then she forced it to relax. Rather than draw attention to it, he cleared his throat, pulling the spirit's attention away from her.

"He takes, Ianto takes, you said. Spirits and people alike, Greed?" Solas interjected smoothly, distracting its attention away from the Lady. "Coin is all but worthless for now, what is it that the Tevenes give him?"

"Magic, to defend his place, and take more. And coins. And food, and weapons, anything they will give him he takes." Greed seemed more than pleased with that, a slight lilt in its voice that almost made him think...oh, wonderful.

Was the spirit besotted with the raider? That certainly made things complicated than a minor attachment. Not unprecedented, spirits often attached themselves to people who needed them most of all, or drew them strongly. Even those who had been the source of the sentiment that shaped them. The level of attachment implied was worrying, however.

Still, it made the extremely unstable spirit somewhat more manageable.
"If he does not stop trapping spirits and selling people into slavery, I will kill him." He informed the spirit mildly, enduring yet another sidelong look from the Lady. "This is not a threat, you know that. There are other ways to make coin, other ways to live. I will not interfere in other matters, but on this there will be no negotiation."

"If you kill him, others will take slaves, and trap spirits." Greed replied slyly, attention sliding to the Lady. "Then Solas will have to kill and kill. You don't want that, do you?"

"I will not allow slavery." The Lady replied quietly, calmly, holding her position as the spirit drifted close to her. "I expect after a few deaths, those who remain will think the price a bit too high."

"You could stop it all." Greed told her, long limbs abruptly twisting around her as they clung to her, wrapping her up in its power. He kept a stern gaze on the spirit, but that only seemed to amuse it, and it clung tighter with spidery limbs. "Make them be quiet, make them be good."

"I don't want it all." She sighed, not looking in the least bit tempted or even irritated. "I am sorry, Greed, but either something must change, or you will lose him."

"He may die." Greed acknowledged, resigned now, still wending around the Lady in an odd fashion, only semi-substantial, chin on her shoulder. "Sometimes they die. They want slaves, they will keep wanting slaves, and spirits, to make people things. Someone will always make people things, wanting more and more. If you take it all, they will stop."

"You seem very insistent on this line of conversation, Greed." Solas remarked mildly, interrupting at last. He found it amusing that the spirit seemed to have latched onto the Lady, in lieu of their absent lover. Not out of character. "We will not conquer, that is not what we want. You know what it is we want."

"You are boring. It is not what she wants, she wants it all to stop." Greed replied sullenly, long limbs wending all the more around the Lady, who was equal parts disturbed, and grimly amused. He was sharing the sentiment. "You cannot have her, you cannot want her, she is mine now. You may kill Ianto and she will have me."

Suddenly neither of them was finding this very funny, his gaze shifting up and aside as she cleared her throat awkwardly. Silence reigned, except the sudden snickering of the spirit. It wasn't as if he hadn't acknowledged it himself, but he'd had absolutely no intention of saying anything. Especially not considering her continued ambivalence towards him.

"That is quite enough, Greed. I will not be had, and I do not want you." The Lady chided gently, her own flustered cadence easing out as she spoke. "There is no need to delve where you aren't wanted. We will not take your place or your Ianto from you, provided some small rules are followed."

"Do not take people. You have made it clear." Greed replied with a sigh, the spirit easily diverted, for which he was grateful. "I want to."

"Make Ianto aware of the consequences. I suppose we will see if he considers them dire enough or no." Solas replied simply, flatly, gaze shifting to the man sprawled out on the floor. He would be rather uncomfortably stiff when he awoke. "You know that we are telling the truth. That it is what will happen."

"Yes." Greed replied sullenly, finally unwinding itself from around the Lady. "You will kill him."

"I will." He agreed, at peace with that choice. It was the price of allowing her to save the humans, it seemed.
"There will also not be a market for them much longer. He will have to decide if courting death is worth whatever last drops he can squeeze out of Tevinter." The Lady added, that restrained rage surfacing again, trembling across her words. "I will be dealing with them."

"It seems things have gotten too comfortable." He agreed mildly, clasping his hands behind his back. "But this is neither the time nor the place to discuss it."

"No. It is not. Greed, leave." The Lady replied, and the spirit gave a small noise of annoyance and abruptly skittered off. Her gaze turned down to the strangled body collapsed on the floor, fingers clenching into her palm. "If I burned it, he would just kill someone else, wouldn't he?"

The question was still angry, but with a plaintive note behind it, helplessness. He shouldn't let it affect him as much as it did, but he knew all too well that pain.

"Yes." He agreed quietly, finding no other answer that wouldn't be a lie. "I am sorry."

Her jaw tightened, muscles clenching, and then abruptly relaxing as she breathed out slowly. The mask fell back into place, and she lifted her chin, turning away.

"We can discuss the events of today once I have settled my mind and spoken with Isabela and Merrill." She suggested quietly, but frostily, the sudden distance wholly expected. "If that is acceptable to you."

"It is."

As she turned and departed with a sharp stride, his gaze shifted thoughtfully to the unconscious raider. It would be the work of a moment to end the man, here and now. Finish him completely, turn him to ash, leave no traces.

And whatever took his place could be far, far worse. More difficult to control. A known enemy was almost always preferable to an unknown one. A small reprieve. How long it would last would have to be up to Ianto himself.

Breathing out heavily, he turned as well, moving to meet Felassan at the door.

"You cannot have her?" Felassan asked quietly aside as they paced out, lips quirking up minutely at the reproving look he received. "Well. It seems like you two have some things to discuss."

"If you think she will actually care to discuss it...then you know something I do not." He finally replied, resigning himself to it at this point. "Rather, I expect she will suddenly develop a pressing need to never speak to me again unless forced to."

Feynriel and the Lady pulled far ahead of them, her steps more restless than his measured pacing, as she disappeared into the night. Felassan had fallen quiet by his side, but the heavy sigh he exhaled spoke volumes.

With nothing left to say, they quietly headed back through the noisy, filthy city to the harbor, where the ship, and a very long night awaited them.
“What do you expect us to do? Abandon our ships? Abandon our lives?”

The shouting had begun before the Lady had even reached the captain's cabin, settling her own unsteady, unhappy thoughts to rest as she focused on the trial before her. Knowing the source of the troubles between Merrill and Isabela made it more difficult, not less. It complicated everything. She wondered even now why the Seer had insisted upon sending Merrill instead of someone else. It seemed her presence could only make things more convoluted.

The crew was wisely absent, likely somewhere in the port or below, light from a few small lanterns pooling on the worn decking. The main source of illumination, however, was from the half-open door of the cabin, which drew her closer. Feynriel left her side, pensive, and she watched him pace away before continuing on to her destination.

No, she could not focus upon the altercation with Greed, not now. She had to set her own thoughts aside. Even if the revelations were...upsetting.

The door swung open under her hand with a creak, and she paused in the doorway, gaze sweeping across the pair who had turned to her. Merrill simply looked distressed, but Isabela was angry, eyes hard and tired. She took it in with a glance, keeping both expression and voice steady.

"We cannot negotiate if both of you will not work together. I know that I am not here to interfere, but it seems I am needed to mediate between the pair of you now." She remarked, moving to the small table and claiming the single seat for herself. "Please, continue."

"We don't need a mediator." Isabela snapped, turning and pacing away, restlessly.

"So this is personal, then?" She interjected, voice serenely curious. "If that is true, then you are letting personal issues effect these negotiations."

The pleading look Merrill turned on her she was forced to ignore, sadly, no matter how much she might not want to. If they wanted help, they were going to have to decide if they could work this out or no. The time for being sympathetic had passed when the world had kept changing and left her standing alone, left behind.

The thought drifted through her mind, and then she pushed it aside irritably. Why did she keep thinking things like that? It did no good to pull herself away...and yet, it felt inevitable. She grew slower, and slower, watching everything rush past her. Noise and chaos, feelings and violence, all growing distant. Irritations that tried to force their way past the numbness.

It made so much sense now why it was so easy to give in and abandon life, or to forget that every other person was one as well. It kept the pain at bay.
Her stillness and quiet had pulled their attention back to one another, volatile emotions in the air. It was much, much deeper, in the end, than a simple negotiation.

And, of course, in the end it was Merrill who cut straight to the heart of it.

"A very smart woman once told me...never bet something you aren't prepared to lose." She finally spoke up again, words tumbling together slightly in her nervousness. "So, Isabela, if you're willing to bet that I won't stay beside you as you grow older, then perhaps you should be willing to be proven wrong."

"I am dying." Isabela's voice was tired rather than ringing, a broken statement and not a cry of anger. "There is no way to change that, you have said as much yourself. We have been over this, Merrill, again and again. Let it go. We have more important things to worry about. Let us not bother anyone else with this nonsense."

"Why is it nonsense? Because you say it's so?" Merrill replied provocingly, head canting to the side as she folded her arms. "I want to talk about it."

"And I...don't." Isabela replied, reaching out to swipe a bottle from atop a chest, working out the cork. "Can we please focus on you threatening to leave hundreds of people dying on a rock in the middle of the sea?"

"They chose to live there, they chose the consequences. Besides, you could get them out. That's not what this is really about, is it, Isabela?" Merrill was relentless, impressively so, but for all her scattered manner, the Lady was becoming increasingly aware that the Keeper was at the end of her rope. "I've had quite enough of this, vhenan. Why won't you come home?"

"This is my home, kitten. This ship...is my home. I held onto her while the whole damn world fell to pieces, and I won't give her up now."

"A ship can change ports. That's a very poor excuse." Merrill replied, stepping closer. "I think you're afraid."

"And I think you're trying to get a rise out of me." Almost a hint of humor there, but Isabela washed it away with a swig of the bottle. "I am many things. Old, is one of them, and only getting older."

"That changes nothing. Before I was as well, were you going to leave the instant I had a grey hair?" Merrill countered stubbornly. "We always knew things were going to change, it's not as if we weren't warned."

She could feel the conversation changing, and kept herself silent. This was not her fight, it never had been, but it seemed her presence had been enough to steady things. If they could keep working it out, she could likely find a point where it was safe to depart.

"It's different now, and I will not be your anchor." Isabela retorted, turning around and pacing away. "I would rather not live with that reminder hanging over me."

"Why does it have to be? Why can't we just live?" Merrill asked, worry turning to frustration now, hands clenching at her sides. "Would a few gray hairs make you feel better? Some wrinkles perhaps? I can do both."

"It is not that simple, you know it isn't." The words were almost vicious, denial sharp and short, coming from a place of hurt. "Nothing ever is."

"And it doesn't have to be that complicated, either." Merrill retorted, lilting voice hardening as well.
"Not everything has to be."

Silence once more, but restless silence, fragile and frustrated. She could see Isabela drawing herself up, jaw hardening...and then the facade collapsed. The bottle rested heavily on top of the chest again, falling from limp fingers.

"There is nothing you can do, kitten." Isabela replied, resignation heavy in her voice. "Everything has changed."

"I may not be...well, I'm me. And I'm not always...good at saying things the way they should be said." Merrill replied quietly, hands twisting together as she took a half step forward. Nervous, but steadfast, open and enduring in a way few people could manage without becoming cold. "But I swore to love you forever, didn't I? And perhaps that means something different now, but it doesn't mean that how I feel has changed. That...that will never change."

Isabela remained turned away, arms folding under her chest as she stared at the wall. From her vantage the Lady could see the stubborn set of her features, and the sadness in her eyes. She had outstayed her welcome, and her presence would do no more good, it seemed.

"Isabela, I love you, and I will love you until the day I die. When...whenever that may be." Merrill finished, bridging the distance between them and reaching out a hand for the other woman's arm.

When the Lady rose and turned to depart, she did so without disturbing them, a hint of magic ensuring her disappearance went unnoticed. She ensured that the door closed behind her, soundlessly closing out their conversation, leaving her alone in the darkness.

Whatever was between them was only between them now, and all she could do was hope they could work it out. She had a feeling that Merrill would get through to her.

She paced out onto the deck, feeling an odd twist in her chest, a hint of old pain. Now was the worst possible time to speak to him, not with those words still ringing in her ears. It was true, wasn't it, in the end? It was what kept her fighting, made her so desperate to cling on, to keep dragging him back from the brink.

She had loved him, and lost him, and then tried to save him from himself and only failed.

She had run from him, been caught by him, and then fled from a possible future at his side because the price had been too high.

Too many people had died. This...this was better than what had been.

This future that to attain he had to die. She had tried to save him and only destroyed him, and then clung to the remnants of him instead of letting him go. Regret was her punishment for that choice. It was intensely selfish to put so much of this upon his shoulders, but she couldn't keep going for an ideal, that had never been her way. She fought for people, not for ideas.

And now? Now she stood here lying to herself constantly. Lying again and again in order to keep herself from breaking down, building up a shell around herself layer by layer. Duty, restraint...distance. The shell had hardened, made something of her that was not her yet again, and this time it was her fault entirely.

It was not him, he was not the man she had loved. The man she loved was dead.

Was that another lie?
She had found herself at the railing, clutching it with both hands as she stared at the water, moonlight undulating across it until the reflections of the port took over to outline the peaks of the waves. The air was cool enough to dispel any sour smells, a saltwater breeze that tugged at the edges of her hair. She did not care for sailing, but these moments made it a more bearable experience.

She heard him approach, moments after she felt it, breath exhaling in a long shudder. Isabela's words came back to haunt her, echoing until she had no choice but to voice them herself.

"I can feel myself dying." She admitted, words catching in a way that hurt, cracked and broken. "It sounds so dramatic to say it out loud, but I know no other way..."

"I understand." Solas replied quietly, moving past her to join her at the railing, as always leaving a polite distance between them. "You have sacrificed much of yourself."

"I would do it again." She decided, steadfast, jaw tightening. "That is the worst of it all. To look at my face in the mirror and know...I would make the same choices a second time."

"Even now, you do not think it was a mistake to save them?" Almost a testing question, and it made a sour sensation rise in the back of her throat.

"No. I...no. I do not. Any...of them."

Not even him. That was perhaps the worst of all of it, that so many people had died because she had not killed him and even now she could not regret it. The world was falling apart at the seams, cracks that centuries widened slowly. It could be healed, and like him, she saw no other way but the death and destruction they had endured.

He had been right, in the end, even if his methods and impatience had been so wrong. Even if his intentions had been misguided, and his pride too rigid. She could have helped him find another way, if only he had allowed it.

But that didn't mean he had been wrong. If he was, so was she, and all of this had been for nothing.

"I want to save them all." She finished quietly, listening to the soft lap of the waves, a loud laugh from one of the docks breaking through the murmur of the port. "I...I want to save them all, and they will not let me."

"Ah. Will you make them, then?" He asked her, too calm to be provoking.

It was a conversation she was starting to grow tired of.

He knew if he were polite he would stop digging at that small open wound, well aware it upset and hurt her. Two things he admittedly did not want to do. Unfortunately his desires, in more than one fashion, had absolutely nothing to do with this. The war might be over, but it was still an ever-present threat, and he could not back down now.

She was still his enemy, ally or no. Just as he was hers.

They needed one another to be.

"You know that I will not." Resentment in her voice, her eyes fixed across the water, too dark to see
what their depths held. "I have said that I will not."

"And I do not believe you, which is why we must keep bringing it up." He countered, voice calm and quiet. "You do not believe it, either, and that is why you allow me to keep saying it. It is so easy to forget."

She laughed, slow and tired, hands tightening on the railing as she leaned down, braid spilling over her shoulder. When her forehead finally rested against the wood between her hands, she let out a sigh.

"It makes so much sense to simply make them stop, that is the most difficult part of all of it. To calm them, quiet them, force the peace on them that they refuse to accept." The vulnerable crack in her voice was a weakness, another symptom of that trust in him she seemed to so hate acknowledging. "Why must it continue to make so much sense? People are dying. People are suffering, and I...I must keep myself apart and let it happen. Why?"

"Wisdom does not always feel right." He replied, helpless, having no other answer for her yet again. "All I can tell you is that it must be this way. You know the reasons as well as I do. It would never stop, you would have to become what you never wanted to be."

"I force myself to tell him so, you know. I say to Freedom, we must not interfere, it is difficult, it hurts." She whispered, rising and turning away restlessly, arms wrapping around herself, fingers pressing harshly against the skin. "I speak the words I know are true, and I cannot feel them. I could fix it. I could fix it all."

"I cannot let you do that." Impulse drew him to follow, the pain shared between them demanding something, anything to try and ease even the slightest fraction of it. Only a step, however, and then he forced himself to still, one hand still tight on the railing. "You know that as well as I."

"It is wrong in my heart, and my mind follows suit. What is left if neither agrees?"

A forlorn question, and all he had was trite, unfeeling truths that they both already knew. One of them had to say it, for it had to be said. Sometimes that was all that they could do.

"Your heart feels their pain, it suffers for them. It can...cloud things. You have to look beyond." They were speaking to one another, but he was speaking to himself. "You already know all of this, my Lady."

"As do you. Why do you need to say it to me?" She asked, fingers curling a little tighter, skin dimpling under her nails. "What good comes of repeating things that we both know, over and over again?"

He was struck by the desire to take her hands, pull them away and help her let it out some other way. Seeing her hurt...he would by far prefer to let her hurt him, but they each had their own pain to bear. Separate, not shared. He had no right to ask her to share it with him.

Instead he clasped his hands behind his back, and turned his gaze away, fingers digging into his palms discreetly.

"I am hoping that eventually one of us may believe it enough to convince the other." He admitted at long last, breaking the silence, and she gave a small, humorless laugh. "A slim hope, but it is something. I never expected to still be here once I had undone my mistake. I never expected to have to set so many things right again before I faced the end."

"It is my fault that you are." She acknowledged quietly, the apology almost forlorn, and heavy with
something he couldn't quite pin down. "I...am sorry."

"I wonder, do you truly believe that?" The question was curious, not accusatory. "For all the time we have spent dealing with one another, my Lady, we know very little about one another. At least not as people."

There was silence from her as she paced away, crossing the deck with shortened steps. As the distance between them grew, so did his confusion. That simple statement, of all things was what bothered her?

Why?

For a time he simply watched her, but she seemed disinclined to say anything else. When she took in a breath it caught, shuddered with an abrupt vulnerability, and he suddenly felt extremely out of place. No, this was not a place he belonged in, at all.

Why she would let it out now, he did not know, but he could feel something beginning to happen. Something was breaking between them, had been breaking, but now was not the time to press her. They still had to manage the negotiation tomorrow. Part of him felt he should apologize, worried that the altercation with Greed had brought this about, but interrupting the silence felt like more of an imposition.

As she wept with her back to him, he quietly turned and departed, leaving the rest of the conversation unspoken.

She would not want him to stay.

When the sun had risen once again things were calmer, on nearly all fronts. Feynriel had met him that morning and informed him that the Keeper and the Captain should no longer be at odds, and that would make things go more smoothly. He had hoped that Greed might approach them, that its attachment to the Lady might lure it away from the object of its affection. It seemed to not be the case.

All they could do, then, would to ensure that Ianto knew the hard limits they were placing upon his 'acquisitions'. He would not punish a spirit for being itself. Greed had a place, just like any other, and it was not their right to tell it that it could not exist.

Part of him still hoped it might latch itself onto the Lady again, simply so they could draw it away from this volatile area, but it seemed well entrenched. Some spirits were simply like that, drawn to a single place and holding on steadfastly to it. Like Perseverance in Kirkwall. It did, after all, say that Estwatch belonged to it. It would be doubtful that they could change its mind.

Ianto was waiting for them this time, no doubt to avoid a repeat of yesterday, having claimed his chair at the head of the table. If he was hoping for a reaction, he received none, as he and the Lady took seats opposite one another, this time across the table in the other direction. It only took a few moments for his self-satisfied smirk to fade, and irritation replaced it. Greed was at his side, this time in a new body.

It seemed their restraint in not destroying the other mangled and murdered slave had not been rewarded, likely to make a point.
The argument was no more productive than yesterday, and this time Ianto seemed even more
determined to be difficult. Angry with their restrictions, from the looks he would give them, sharp
and vicious. The more the tension rose, the more he tried to play Isabela against Merrill, but it wasn't
working any more. His frustration was palpable, but it only made him more stubborn, not less.

Now Greed was whispering in his ear, a sibilant hiss when he would settle back down into his seat,
the spirit draping its mangled body across the arm of his thronelike chair. The spirit seemed highly
pleased with itself as Ianto's agitation grew.

The man had made a mistake in chaining the spirit's affections to him.

"You want me and my men to abandon our trade, our livelihoods to what, kiss a bit of knife ear arse?
They may have won the war, but they don't own the seas." Ianto asked, with offense that rang utterly
hollow. "Shoddy leadership there, Isabela. Maybe it's time you stepped aside."

He'd tested them with words for a while, but when they had not responded, it seemed he'd decided to
act as if they weren't there. The words had gotten nastier, insults coming faster now. It wasn't the
insults that were bothering him, and from the Lady's face, she felt much the same.

"And maybe it's time you learned a bit of manners, Ianto." Isabela replied archly, voice smooth and
relaxed. "You've gotten awfully cocky."

"You think you can do a damn thing to me? We all know you're slowing down, Isabela." Ianto
responded, and then spread his hands wide. "What say we settle this? I'm sure these creepy fucking
bastards would much prefer to deal with only one of us. If they're determined to cut into my profits, I
sure would hate to have to split them even more."

Greed smiled to itself, a slightly lopsided rictus marred by a slash up the cheek of the corpse it wore.
Pointed, that mangling, the young woman's body it wore battered, pooled blood black under the skin,
the tips of her ears cut off. Not a very pleasant threat, that mutilation, and he could see how it was
bothering the Lady.

Her eyes were tight, the slight flexing in her arms indicating that the hands hidden under the table
were fisted. When he caught her stare, she flinched away initially, and then visibly steeled herself
and met it again, something pleading in her eyes. They both wore their masks, serene and cold, but
the depth of pain she bore could not be hidden.

It seemed their conversation had made it worse, and not better.

"Really, Ianto? You've never wanted to dance with me before." Isabela replied lazily, resting elbows
on the table. "Do you really think I've lost my edge? So very sure of yourself, aren't you? Is a bit
more money really worth your life?"

Ianto leaned back, cold eyes narrowing, a hand scraping down his stubbled jaw. The air was heavy,
not only from the stare being exchanged by the captains, but by the edge of control he could feel
slipping from the Lady's grasp, the pain in her eyes a symptom. Every threat, every insult pushing
her closer to the edge they both knew she had to stay away from.

In the silence, he heard the faint murmur of Greed's sly encouragement.

"No, I suppose it isn't." Ianto finally agreed, letting his head fall to the side, lips curling up nastily
into a smirk. "But it's certainly worth your life."

"Well then. I suppose we have a duel, don't we?" Isabela asked, and then shifted a glance sidelong at
the Lady. "No interference, if you please."
"We will negotiate with the victor." Solas agreed smoothly, before the Lady could speak, keeping his voice as even as possible. "Make whatever arrangements you need. You have wasted enough of our time, please settle this as soon as possible."

"Sun high, then." Ianto decided, slumping forward and then rising to his feet, sneer still on his lips. "In front of everyone, down at the harbor steps. Everyone knows you're a cheat, Isabela."

"Oh, Ianto." Isabela slurred, swaying to her feet, a little cocksure smile on her lips. "I won't have to cheat to beat you bloody."

"We'll see, you old bitch. Come along, my treasure."

As Ianto caught Greed's body by the arm, Solas became uncomfortably aware that the spirit had locked eyes with the Lady, a smug little smile on its mangled lips. She held the stare, and then forced her gaze away, ignoring everyone as they began to depart, taking the murderous tension with them.

As she lingered, so did he, and eventually Merrill slipped out, casting a few strange looks at their silent tableau until she hastened to catch up with Isabela, her voice faintly heard outside calling after her. Finally the Lady lifted her hands, fingers uncurling from her palm as she pressed a hand against the table, leaving behind a smear of blood on the aged, scarred wood.

Her movement stalled, and she turned over her hand, examining the four gouges worked into the skin, a few drops of blood falling onto her thighs. No sound but the fire, as she stared at the wounds, the tiny rivulet of blood coursing down the inside of her wrist until she finally healed them with a small flutter of her fingers. It seemed she intended to say nothing, and so he stood at last, waiting for her to do the same.

Without a word she rose with a quick, agitated movement, turning for the door. He followed, leaving Feynriel and Felassan to trail after, the pair uncommonly quiet. Then again, they had been this entire trip, it felt like. A quiet word with both of them when it was all over would likely be needed. Their collusion had been accepted and managed, but now it almost felt as if they needed to conspire again.

This time against her. He couldn't be the only one who saw her control slipping.

She had paused at the outer doors, staring down the stairs, down the layers of the city that spread out below them. The guards were staring at her with some wariness, but none of her attention was fixed upon them, the distant, sorrowful gaze watching figures moving between buildings, tracking them one by one until they left her sight.

He drew up to her side and the guards pulled back further, giving them as much room as possible without abandoning their post.

"People are dying and we are waiting for a duel. Look at this place." She whispered to him, melancholy in every faint syllable. "I can almost hear the screams. They never stop. All the pain I could prevent."

"Then, my Lady, begin killing. Burn them all to ash, leave no one behind, and then continue until the whole world is silent." He replied, forcing his voice cold as his heart broke for her. "When there is nothing but death, there will be no suffering. That is the only way, unless you would rule over them."

"Is that how you managed to convince yourself, in the end?" She asked, voice calm and quiet, but still on the edge of tears, the slightest catch letting in a hint of her melancholy. "Is that what you told yourself? That the deaths meant the suffering was over?"
"Perhaps I saw only the violence and injustice, the tragedy of living half lives. The Fade...distorts."
Solas replied, and then forced himself to honesty, admitting what he had been reluctant to do all this
time, ever since she had started drawing him out. "If I had...been awake longer, if I had
lived...among the people, all of your peoples, my Lady, I do not know if I could have. You sending
Mythal is what allowed me to..."

"No." The word was clipped, spilling from her lips violently, though her voice gentled afterwards,
eyes still fixed upon the port, but no longer seeing. "You still would have done it. You would have
made the same choice."

"So certain, my Lady?" He asked quietly, trying not to be taken-aback by the accusation.

Did she truly think so little of him?

"I am, Fen'Harel." She declared quietly, final and incontrovertible. "You would have still done as
you set out to do. Just as I would do as I have done."

He had no reply, but it seemed she had no desire to hear one, either. Movements brittle and
deliberately careful, she swept ahead, pacing down the stairs with her gaze fixed ahead.

Something inside of him chilled, hard and cold as Fenyriel and Felassan drew to either side of him.
She had been so certain, something there that had nothing to do with the words that passed between
them. It was not the first time he had felt that her secrets were far too heavy for her to bear, no matter
how desperately she tried to keep them from him. She seemed determined to carry the burden alone,
but he could see her cracking under the pressure, under the weight of a world she wanted desperately
to save from pain and misery.

A world she could save; all she had to do was tighten her fist around it.

If she tried, he'd have to kill her.

"Will she break, or will it break her?" He asked simply, with no desire to demand answers.

One would lead to the truth, the other would lead to death. It seemed they had run out of middle
ground. Her heart was a gift, the Seer had said, but right now all he could see was that it was killing
her.

"I don't know, Solas." Feynriel replied, shaking his head slowly. "I just don't know."
The Adversary

It took mere hours for the entire island to know what was coming.

She doubted, as she watched from the railing of the ship, that there was a single soul in Estwatch that wasn't lurking around the harbor steps. There had already been a few fights, fists for the most part. Gazing out across the island from here, it almost looked harmless. Just a rock in the sea, just a crowd of people. A crowd of people awaiting a duel between a murderous madman and a woman she was still terrified she could not trust.

Unbidden, the memory of the poor dead girl with her ears cut came back to her, and her fingers tightened on the railing.

No, she had to trust Isabela now. Merrill did, and that would have to be enough. She had already interfered too much.

"Shall we, my Lady?" A voice suggested calmly from behind her, and she heaved a sigh before turning to face Fen'Harel, giving a small nod of her head as her gaze slid past him. "One way or another, it will be over soon."

"I apologize that I forced you to come." She remarked quietly, walking past him for the gangplank. "Now that we know that Greed can be safely left alone..."

"I have my reasons for being here." He replied calmly, following behind her as they began heading up the docks where the others awaited them. "And yes, I agree with you on that account. The spirit may be dangerous and fickle, but so are many. Dangerous to those who listen to it, at least."

"Those who listen to Greed deserve what they get." She said grimly, and he made a small sound of agreement. "The business with the bodies, though..."

"Cannot continue to happen, I agree."

"Good, then it seems we are in accord. On...this, at least." She murmured, voice trailing off as they approached the others. "Speaking with Greed again should..."

Anything else she might have to say was swallowed by the tense atmosphere, Feynriel's gaze shifting to her instantly. The crowd was already pulling back at the top of the steps as people noticed their arrival, and Isabela strode ahead, something dark in her eyes.

"What? What is it?" She asked, letting Feynriel take her elbow. He was leaning in towards her when the shout came, momentarily eclipsing the murmur of the crowd.

"Lord and Lady of the bloody knife-eared conquerors!" The call came, harsh and darkly pleased with itself. "I've brought you a little present!"

"As far as titles go, I've had worse." She remarked under her breath, though levity died completely as she mounted the wide harbor stair. "What in..."

Her intake of breath and her slight stall brought a small sound of inquiry from Fen'harel, but he too had nothing to say as the sight of what awaited them sank in. She was still walking, because some small, hard part of her mind had taken over, forcing her face blank. Her stomach, however, was betraying the shocked, cool exterior.
She had seen bodies before. Far, far too many bodies. She had killed far too many. It never became a simple thing to endure, especially not when what awaited her was what appeared to be a pile of dead, emaciated slaves. Marks of suffering on the corpses.

There were at least three dozen of them, and they had been dead for some time, piled haphazardly to one side of the unevenly-paved space.

Standing in front of them was Ianto, looking even more nastily pleased than he had that morning. It nearly broke her, nearly snapped through her control. Bastard. Nasty, evil bastard. She took a half step forward at the top of the stair, aborted at the lightest touch on her elbow. It was all she could do not to jerk away from Fen'harel, but he dropped his hand immediately when she froze.

"There are no more slaves in Estwatch!" Ianto declared, spreading his arms wide, feral grin on his face. "Just a little show of good faith."

Fen'harel mounted the last step and stood at her side, the crowd pulling even further back, muttering beginning again. With a sound of disgust, Isabela strode past them, Ianto smirking as she strode into the center of the landing. It wasn't a terribly large space, the crowd wending into alleys, on the other sets of steps. An awkward place for this, but public, and relatively flat. Greed was nowhere to be seen, as far as she could tell.

Every shred of her self-control was absorbed in not reacting as he strode closer, leaving her rigid, staring. She wanted to rip off his head, anger beginning to grow, mixing with disgusted nausea. What sort of person would think that an even remotely possible solution? Was he mocking them, attempting to rouse a reaction?

He couldn't possibly think this was an acceptable compromise, could he? Perhaps he was more insane than they had realized. He was talking the instant he was close enough, but when he stepped a bit closer than was comfortable, Feynriel rose to the top stair and extended a hand, stalling him. It just made Ianto grin, wide and feral, his voice lowering conspiratorially.

"You want information about Tevinter? I know you do, that's why you're here. I know how the wind blows. The things they're doing there...I know where the bodies are buried." Ianto informed them, gaze shifting between them. Unhinged, that stare, she noticed from somewhere in the depths of her forcibly detached mind. "I know things. I know how bastards like you work, I do. You may have them all fooled, but we're of a kind, aren't we? Cold bastards. Not rising to any of my bait...I like that, I get that. Don't let 'em see you flinch."

The claim of kinship was enough to make her vomit, but she knew well enough that it wasn't true. Somewhere deep inside her, she might have admitted that one day, a much colder version of herself might have felt some guilt, but now...no. Not even remotely.

He made a small sound of disgust at their continued silence, stepping back from Feynriel's upraised hand, shaking his head. It was a strange movement, restless and tense. Considering his proclivities, she supposed it shouldn't be terribly shocking that he was truly insane and not just murderous. None of this quite made sense, however. At least, not enough.

"When this is over, you remember that. I have things you need. Names, all of it. Tevinter in the palm of your hand." He stepped in again, stalling as Fen'harel cleared his throat. "Fine, fine you knife eared bastards, but you listen to me. I can help you. Greed told me what you asked about, told me you wanted to know what they've been looking for. Show of good faith, didn't I say? Got rid of all the cargo."

"Ianto, how long do you plan to keep stalling?" Isabela called across the steps, drawing the man's
flitting attention over his shoulder. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were over there begging for your life."

With one last searching stare, as if hunting their faces for some sign, Ianto gave a small grunt of disgust and turned to stalk off. Her mind was racing now to try and catch up with his logic, puzzling over it to try and ignore the sick sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Those poor dead people.

"I am not certain...what exactly to make of that." She murmured quietly aside to Fen'harel, Feynrie giving a small snort of agreement. "Does he really think we're here looking for an excuse to invade Tevinter? Did he really think that we'd be happy he killed those poor people?"

"It seems so. I sincerely doubt he saw them as people at all." Fen'harel agreed, voice mild and low. "I suppose that being so attached to a spirit of greed has done his already unsteady mind no favors."

"It still doesn't quite make sense, does it?" Merrill remarked from behind them, worry leeching into her voice. "I don't understand, why go into this duel at all if what he wants is to help you take over Tevinter? Is he really that mad?"

They were all silent for a few moments, listening to the murmur of the crowd. She couldn't quite fathom it herself, but she didn't really want to delve into the cesspool of the man's mind.

"He's going to lose. Give you what you want, let Isabela take it over. He doesn't care." Felassan replied abruptly, exasperatedly, rousing a small laugh of disbelief from the Lady, short and bitter. "It is funny, I agree. It's one thing to have a wild theory about why we're here, but it's another to bank his entire life on it. Man likes to gamble, I'll give him that."

"I suspect that Greed has much to do with that." Solas replied musingly, and then gave a small shake of his head. "And of course the state of Tevinter. It makes perfect sense to his mind. Why else focus so strongly upon Estwatch? Surely not altruism."

"No, of course not. Bastard." She could feel her voice break, but did her best to keep it steady. "Those poor people. What sort of person assumes such a thing?"

"A madman. If Felassan's surmise is true, which I assume that it is, this will be all over soon, my Lady." Fen'harel assured her, and she kept her gaze fixed aside rather than let herself consider taking the comfort offered in those quiet words. "It is unfortunate, and this is not expected, but..."

There he trailed off, but she understood the sentiment as Isabela and Ianto stopped posturing and squared off. Isabela looked remarkably relaxed, which helped a very small amount. She could not look at the bodies. Not and maintain her control. Just the very thought of them made that sick, angry feeling in her stomach surge again, her mind loud and restless. She'd failed them.

The whispers were easy to ignore, when she was at peace, but right now they drowned her.

The duel, when it finally began, was short, brutal, and terribly one-sided. Isabela had slowed with
age, she recognized distantly, but not nearly enough. The woman had always had been formidable, and still was. Ianto fought her in earnest for only the first few minutes, seeming terribly pleased with himself for drawing blood. Just a shallow slash, a sharp line across her shoulder, and a favor she returned swiftly.

He made a fairly good show of it, but as she was watching for it, she could see the instant he let himself be disarmed. Surely the strike wasn't hard enough to send his blade flying like that. His style wasn't intimately familiar, but she had been fighting with daggers herself since she was younger than ten.

The instant his blade went skidding across the ground with a metallic clatter, she knew it was over.

She had to hand it to Isabela, though, the fact that she slammed him across the face with the guard of her blade instead of the edge was brutally efficient. Even if he hadn't been preparing for a fall, it still would have sent him to his knees.

"I suggest you yield, Ianto." Isabela declared, something irritable in her voice. She had likely noticed, then, that he'd let himself be disarmed. "Not that I wouldn't mind running you through, but I have a feeling you have some things to answer for."

After a few moments, hand cupped against his jaw, Ianto gave a small, rough chuckle and dropped his other blade. There was some angry muttering in the crowd, even some money changing hands, but for the most part people seemed pleased. That boded well. As her gaze scanned across the crowd, it almost fell on the pile of abused bodies again. Forcibly, she jerked her attention away, bile rising again.

"Congratulations, Admiral Isabela. Good clean fight, lads, money change hands." Ianto declared lazily, wiping blood from his mouth as he rose, grinning. Examining the back of his hand, he lifted his gaze to the crowd, voice rising. "Well, you witnessed. Guess I'll be stepping down now. Enjoy my retirement, eh?"

So flippant, that, casual. As if this were some silly little game to him. A rat. That's what he was. A rat leaving a sinking ship because he thought they were as sick as he was, and he could climb up them to power. Stories and circumstances, and an insane mind had decided that they were monsters, like him. She wasn't certain what was worse, the idea that people truly thought that way about her, or that one day they might be right.

It was all Ellana could do not to cringe back as he approached, unpleasantly aware that he was heading straight for her. Assumed she was the weak link, no doubt. As if his refusal to speak to him meant she was somehow meek, or afraid. Disgusting.

"So, thought a bit more about what I said, have you? Knew we'd all be on the same page in the end, eh?" He asked, close enough that she could almost smell the liquor on his breath. "There's a lot more in this world going on than you know."

A small gesture kept Feynriel from reaching out as Ianto rather familiarly reached out a heavy hand and clasped her shoulder. This time she did cringe, and he grinned, hand tightening.

She wasn't certain if the man was brilliant or idiotic. Oh, if his assumptions had been true, he might have been leaning more towards the first. He was a rat, as she'd thought. Could he be fleeing for another reason besides simple power? That idea made her think that perhaps Estwatch was not as safe as she thought it was.

Could there be trouble with the Qunari coming? Something he knew that they did not, besides his
claims of knowledge about Tevinter?

Sadly, if he had truthfully kept it only in his head, they would never find out.

It was a consequence she was willing to live with.

"I think you have made the grave mistake, Ianto, of mistaking my kindness for weakness." She replied calmly, ignoring the repulsive crawl of her skin at the touch of his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you won't suffer the way that they did."

He didn't have time to respond. Quite honestly, she didn't care to hear anything more from his disgusting, foul mouth. His eyes didn't even have time to widen as he turned to stone, meeting hers as she stared him down coldly. Merrill's inhale was loud, but less dramatic than the reaction of the crowd. All celebration and chatter stopped, a few shocked shouts echoing and drawing the attention of all. With Ianto's hand unmoving, it was but the work of a few seconds to pull her shoulder from his immobile grip, and she stepped to the side of the statue. Clasping her hands at her waist, gaze lifting very slowly to examine the stunned onlookers. She hoped she looked serene.

She did not feel so.

"That was very kindly done, my Lady." Fen'harel remarked from her left, and she breathed out heavily. "I know. You were right, it was time. Whatever knowledge we might have gained was no longer worth it. I suspect I would not have resisted the urge to make a thorough example of him, however."

"I wanted to. I wanted to make him bleed." She admitted, still feeling raw, unsatisfied. Such a lackluster end for such a monster. As the crowd began to murmur again, she shifted her gaze to stare at the statue. "There's no such thing as justice for the dead. They are dead, they do not care."

He made a small sound of dubious agreement, and then lifted his voice, gaze slowly shifting across the crowd. Perhaps it was amusing that people cringed back from his stare. She could not say, herself. She was not feeling amused.

She was feeling like an open wound.

"Ianto the Talon has paid for his crimes against the Elvhen and all the peoples of Thedas. This is the price of listening blindly to greed. Those of you who yet live, do so by the Lady's mercy. I suggest that you avoid following his example." Fen'harel declared calmly, voice carrying across the harbor steps.

Necessary evil, she reminded herself as she turned to stride back to the docks, restless and angry yet. Fear, the great motivator. Necessary...

They were all murderers, and she was letting them live. Live in fear of her in the hopes that it would keep them from killing any more. Why? Just to save their worthless lives? She should have stayed, supported Isabela, but right now it was all she could do not to damn well kill them all. They stood by and did nothing! Some of them were laughing over it all. Disgusting. And she had to stand there and playact being unmoved by it all. It made her feel unclean.

She didn't realize how hard her nails were digging into her palm until Feynriel caught her arm, and she tried to pull away. The motion was quick, violent, and he sighed and relented almost instantly, keeping pace with her.

"It is over now. We can leave, hahren." He told her, quiet and calm. "We can go home. Just a few loose ends, and we can sort things with Isabela on our way back. No one's going to contest her
"Yes, let us turn our backs and pretend this never happened. Ignore the fact that we failed utterly to save lives." She replied sharply, letting out a heavy breath of irritation as she recognized how unfair she was being. "I apologize."

"Hahren, you are upset. Getting away from here will help." Feynriel replied, still seeming completely unruffled. "Get some rest, and..."

"I have reached my limit for well-meaning advice, da'len." She growled under her breath, stalking up the gangplank, hands flexing at her side. "It did nothing to save those poor souls. They are dead, and these monsters live."

"No, but securing the trade routes and cutting out a source of the slave trade will do a great deal for saving other people. Some of them may be murderers, but we need them for now." Feynriel pointed out evenly, following her up. "Felassan and I will go through all of his things, find any communication that we can, secure any more of those spirit traps that can be found."

"Don't let Isabela hide anything from you or take over until you've gone through that damn place top to bottom. And his flagship as well." Reaching the top of the gangplank, she cursed, lifting a hand to her forehead. "Damn it, Feynriel, this is not what I came back to do! I came back to stop this all, not become a part of these sorts of machinations! Perhaps I should have left things as they were. Given in and let him play his martyr games."

"You don't believe that. It won't be forever. I know this isn't how we planned for things to go, hahren, but what has been?" He asked, and she gave a tired laugh.

"True, this has been going wrong from the start, hasn't it? Regret is evidence enough of that. I will need to..." The words died on her lips as she turned and realized that Solas had followed them silently.

Their eyes met, and she pulled hers away, turning an accusing look on Feynriel that he avoided. In fact, he avoided her altogether, turning around and heading back down the gangplank. Betrayal and rage rose, blindingly furious. Yet again. Yet again he had turned on her. He had known Solas was listening all along, hadn't he? And he had let her speak without saying a word, encouraging it. He knew why she would not tell Solas, they had been over it again and again! He knew, and he had manipulated her into speaking in front of the enemy.

How dare he!

Fire under her skin, she could feel it surging, demanding, the ever-present whispers becoming a cacophony in her head, drowning out conscious thought. Somewhere in the noise, a single suggestion surfaced, insinuating itself easily.

Kill him.

Solas could feel the edges of her control slipping, eyes staring past him blankly, jaw rigidly tight. He was prepared, of course, to intervene, but was sincerely hoping it would not be necessary. The
silence was heavy with tension, growing all the worse as seconds passed by.

Abruptly her gaze snapped back into focus, shocked and pained, and her eyes finally met his. Painful vulnerability, quickly pulled back as she turned and strode away, arms wrapping around herself. After a moment to let her put some distance between them, he followed.

"It went as well as it could have possibly gone. Yes, we are left with more questions than answers, but some of them may yet be resolved." He pointed out as she prowled restlessly, forcing his voice to remain mild. "Do you not feel that your business here is concluded? Or do you not trust Isabela to remember that the spirit is far too dangerous to listen to? Greed is all but harmless."

"I should have realized he still held people, I should have ensured that this would not happen." She snapped in response, and he could hear the pain and self-recrimination in every word. "I could have saved them, but I was too busy playing politics with a madman. This is not what I wanted!"

"We did not know the situation, we have done the best that we could." He replied mildly, even though he felt much the same.

Her words with Feynriel were to be added to the list of things she had let slip, but for now there was a much more important thing to be concerned with. Her losing control of herself.

"Best that we could? That has always been my excuse, but it is not good enough! I...I know that you heard." She replied brusquely, angrily, turning and beginning to pace across the deck. "I know that you overheard. I am quite tired of pretending."

"Pretending what, my Lady?" He asked patiently. The patience was for her benefit, but only due to caution, no attempt at being tender with her feelings. She was teetering on the brink.

"Everything. I do not...I do not know."

Hands, restless at her sides, nails biting into her palms again. He fought the urge to reach out and stop her from injuring herself. At the moment, he was having some difficulty remembering why, precisely, he should not. If she were to lash out, he would be the person to lash out at. Perhaps it would do her some good to let it out.

But certainly not here. Every ship was needed.

"Let us go for a walk." He suggested abruptly, turning away from the gangplank. He felt her stare boring into his back as he headed up the dock.

People scattered at his approach, which he tried to not let bother him. Soon they would be done with this, he could return to his solitude, be free of the stares and hatred. She had done what she could, and he was grateful that there was some corner of this world that welcomed him, even uncertainly. It would not make it easier to do what had to be done, however.

It had never been like this. Certainly, he had been an enemy before, but never so apart. Never so above, forced by necessity to pretend to be what he so despised. It was a terrifying feeling, he could admit as much. Being seen as some sort of all-powerful being simply because the world had become so crippled. Crippled because of his own mistakes. It was some comfort to acknowledge that time would heal Thedas once his part was done, but by then he would of course be long departed from it.

He felt it when she eventually began to follow, her footsteps restless as they caught up with him.

"I am not going to lose control. I did not lose control! He deserved to die, and I did not let him suffer." She snapped at him as she drew up beside him, voice barely gentling as he glanced sidelong
at her. "Are you simply going to ignore what you overheard? I do not like playing games."

"My Lady, all we do is play games and avoid speaking of things that seem uncomfortable to
address." He countered mildly, pausing to let her pace first down the stony, uneven steps that led
away from the quay to the shore. "I have not pried yet, have I? Or are you simply asking because
you wish for me to press you?"

"You are just going to ignore it?" She asked him dubiously, glancing over her shoulder, eyes hard. "I
don't believe you for a moment."

"What do you wish for me to say? Are you truly so blind that you think that is the first indication I
have had of something being hidden from me?" He asked, keeping his voice calm despite the words.
Oh, he was certainly trying to provoke, but he needn't be cruel about it. "If you realize it or no, you
have been leaving crumbs behind for years. If anything, you should be grateful that I have chosen
not to pry."

"Grateful?" Rather than turning to face him, she paced away, following the edge where sand met
more fertile ground, weeds and detritus tangled together in rotting piles. "You truly think I should
have some...some gratitude to you, after what you have done?"

"Would you prefer that I throw myself on your mercy? Let you whip and chastise me? Grovel until
you feel I am sufficiently punished?" He asked, letting his voice turn cold, distant. "You seem to
resent me a great deal."

"Resent? What a mild word for the man who destroyed not only my world, but his own!" Not for the
first time, he found himself tempted to take a half step back as she rounded on him, fury in her eyes,
jaw tight.

"Indeed, I agree. You should hate me. I thought for so very long that you did, but...you do not, do
you?" He replied, cursing his curiosity for following this line of thought.

It wasn't quite where he had intended to go with this altercation, but it was a question that dug at him
more than any other. For selfish, personal reasons.

"I do hate you." She lied, not bothering to make it sound like a truth. Anger rose again in her voice,
teeth catching on her lower lip as she spun away, heels striking, darkening earth as she prowled.
"You have destroyed everything I have ever loved. I should hate you."

"Everything you have ever loved? That is a bit dramatic, my Lady." He responded distantly, well
aware by now that the edges of the city perched above them had become peopled with watchers.
Protecting them from her wrath would be a priority, but considering how close she was to snapping,
it should not take much to scare them off. The ground smoked in her wake, a fact she seemed to be
unaware of. She was lost in her mind, in the spiral of duty and self-recrimination he knew she must
feel.

It worried him, it would continue to worry him how dependent this world was upon her.

She was only a person, in the end, a vessel cracked by its abuse, overfilled and overworked. Perhaps
it would be condescending to say it out loud, but it was truth. She should not still be alive. He was
fairly certain she was less than a century old, and the power and responsibility she bore should have
killed her long ago.

In another time they never would have asked any of this of her. She would have been allowed to
rest, give in and wander the Fade until she found peace, and balance within herself. Instead, it
seemed that she must break, shatter, and then perhaps they could put the pieces back together once again. Perhaps then she might be able to remember who she was.

He could not think of any other way to save her.

"Yes, of course, it must be dramatic to acknowledge the truth! How foolish of me to be honest, when what I should be doing is pressing down my own emotions, further and further and further..." Her voice broke on the last word, cracking like the ground beneath her feet, smoking and steaming as heat seared the wet detritus of the shore. "Is it a pleasant thing, to martyr your own heart, your own ideals for a goal, Solas? It must be, for you do it so well!"

The use of his name was enough to stop him, startle him for long enough that he nearly lost the words themselves. It was difficult to understand exactly what she meant in that moment, but the fury and pain in her eyes as she stared at him directly was impossible to deny. As was the heat scorching the air, beginning to waver.

Finally he regained his composure, setting aside his own feelings. Now was not the time for them.

He switched to the common tongue, quite certain she was in no shape to notice, and would simply follow suit. She did so constantly, after all. No, she would not notice now that he had goaded her into performing for their audience.

He felt badly for the deception, but as she had told him once, the posturing was necessary.

"Do not turn your weakness on me, my Lady. I am not the monster here, not today." He chided, forcing his voice to stay in control. "If you cannot control your anger, that is hardly my fault. Then again, why need you control it? It is, after all righteous, is it not?"

"Those poor people. No one stood up for them. No one at all. An entire city of people..." Her voice broke, sorrow there, the heat momentarily fading before betrayal rose again. He had been correct, she followed suit in changing tongues, without even a flicker of recognition. "No! No, I will not believe it. Fear, suffering makes people hold back when they would otherwise step forward."

The audience above had become more than a few curious onlookers, a sensation palpable in the air. Witnesses, perhaps. All he knew was that he doubted many in this harshly unforgiving place truly believed the stories. The fear was understandable, even without belief behind it.

He hated this. It had been easier to bear before he had awoken, being part of the mangled stories of the Dalish that called him a god. There was little he could do about it, and there had been no need to try. Now he was an active participant in the lie. Unlike her, he could not manage the self-deception to believe that was not what was happening.

The disdain for the lies, for the playacting sat deep within him, and nearly made him want to turn around and flee. He had accepted his guilt for what he had done to this world, and he could accept this now as part of his penance. It sat very poorly, however. It was dragging her down as well, and it was not what he wanted.

"I do not believe you, and you do not believe it either." He told her, gaze shifting upwards slowly as she paced, prowled, arms clasping behind his back. "Every hand in this forsaken place held that blade. They are all guilty."

"They all deserve to die." She agreed quietly, and then cursed again, turning away. "No! No, I don't believe that. If I do, what have I become?"

"Do you really think they will fear you any longer than it takes for the next mark to present itself?"
He inquired disdainfully. "If so, then you are foolish as well as weak. How many more people need to die because of your arrogance?"

It seemed that was what pushed her over the edge, the little barb he felt no real pleasure in saying.

The ground underfoot blistered, cracked, ferocity and fury surging up from the shattered shards of earth. Where the fire below touched the sand it began to run together, melting in a molten, undulating sheet that began to ooze towards the ocean, sluggish and black-edged. She was surrounded by searing heat, but even now he could feel the modicum of control that kept her from succumbing to it. Even lost as she was, she clung to that fragment of it, keeping it from killing her.

As the heat rose, water-laden wood filled the air with tendrils of steam until finally surrendering, blackening and then bursting into flame, consumed in seconds. She was doing her best to limit it, but he could feel it growing and expanding, watching the line of scorched earth creep across the beach, growing dangerously close to the cliffs.

"Let go of it, let it free." He told her coldly, watching the people out of the edges of his vision, cringing back, but fascinated. Once again, she was doing exactly what she did not want to do. It felt somewhat inevitable that she would break. "Kill them all. Let the ground break, swallow them, fire consume them. Leave nothing behind but black glass and restless seas. Peace."

"No. No, no..." She denied, high and broken, fingers gouging into the rapidly-melting ground. The leading edge finally hit the sea, with a great gout of steam as molten earth hit water. "I will not, I cannot!"

"It is what you want, is it not? You do not wish to rule, you do not wish for them to hurt one another, but I tell you, my Lady. As long as people are alive, they will destroy one another." He replied, saying what he had to, and not what he wished. "They will betray you, they will betray one another. But...you could stop them. You could stop them all. All you have to do is give in, be assured of your righteousness. Let yourself believe that you have the right to cast judgment down upon them."

It was ridiculous, to throw himself in opposition to her like this, but she needed to fight. Hear the words from a throat that was not her own. If it meant he had to use that hidden resentment of him, that strange and twisted trust in order for her to hear it, truly hear it, then that was what would be done.

He was already the world's enemy. He could at least use that to do some good.

The earth was growing restless under her assault, but he held it steady, prevented the instability from growing. An earthquake here would mean disaster, a tidal wave could destroy every single one of the much-needed ships docked here. She was not in control of her power, but that made it easier to defend against her, as she came dangerously close to letting herself burn. Even through his own defenses, he could feel the heat, but it wasn't aimed at him.

It wasn't him she wanted to punish, but herself, a feeling he was all too familiar with.

"Strip it clean, burn it to ash and glass." He ordered her icily, gaze shifting slowly up towards the crowds gathered, high above on the island. Likely out of reach of any harm. Good, he doubted he could split his attention any further. "I see very little worth saving in this place. Even those who may be innocent now will not be forever. They are all the same."

A few arrows had been shot by now, brave ones at that, but they hadn't made it past the heat to strike at him, bursting into flame and flaking to ash in midair. If there was a thought to spare for humor he might be amused that they were trying to protect her from him, when it was her on the edge of
destroying them all. The raw ferocity of her power was disturbing, primal and barely under control. All emotion, held at bay by control forged out of sheer determination.

The air wavered, growing hotter and hotter until he could see her skin reddening, armor scorching, the edges of her focus fading. She turned her gaze up to him, tears leaving pale tracks down her cheeks, hissing and evaporating the instant they left her skin. He held her eyes, letting the mask fall.

"Will you, my Lady?" He asked her quietly, allowing the sympathy to leech into his voice at last.

And that sympathy hurt her, a stab of pain that seemed to come from one of the myriad cracks in her careful and brittle facade. He could feel it crumbling, and he knew she could as well. Hair spilling over her face, glazed eyes staring out from behind it, she wrapped her arms protectively around her shoulders. He could feel the heat receding, slowly escaping as she gave up her anger.

"No." She denied at last, relief flooding through him as her gaze snapped back into focus, chin lifting to stare at the sullen glow of her finger gouges in the melted earth. "I will not."

"I knew that you would not." He responded quietly. It did not matter if it were true or not, it was what she needed to hear now. "How much more must you test yourself before you believe it?"

There was no answer, unsurprisingly, her gaze shifting down and aside as she blinked back tears.

He extended his arm, offering his forearm, but she took his hand instead, fingers curling around his palm. A light contact, but he could feel the tremble in her fingertips, his own grip reflexively tightening. Such a small thing, but it was a massive step forward.

"Whatever has forged you into what you are is strong. Never doubt that again." He offered quietly as she rose to her feet, face unreadable, eyes averted.

Immediately he began to release her once she found her footing, but the grip on his hand only tightened, her fingers curling in.

Silence between them, as he gazed at her hand in his.

He could see the slight hint of forward motion, his hand tightening at that shifting of her weight, willing to pull her in against him if she gave the slightest sign. Even when she froze, chest stilling, he nearly did so, but relented at her resistance.

He let his grip, his arm go slack, acknowledging her refusal.

"I cannot." Her hand finally released his, slowly, fingers sliding across his palm before falling away. Her gaze turned away from his, but he could see the determination return, peace and resignation. "It is...built on something that is not truth, and I...cannot."

He never would have blamed her for the distance, not with the pain he had caused her. He had, after all, destroyed her world, and the man she loved. Even now he did not know if she agreed that the veil had to fall, but it was an incontrovertible truth that people had died.

He wasn't quite certain what she could possibly be speaking of. Certainly she had not told him everything, that was clear, she held her secrets close, but she had not to his knowledge been untruthful with him.

Yet...that was exactly what she was claiming now. Perhaps it was time he finally pushed her.

"What exactly is a lie?" He could not help the caution in his voice, slow and careful, all too aware of
the audience yet.

When their eyes met again, the guilt in her gaze spoke more than mere words. Weight too heavy for her shoulders any longer. The single regretful word left her in nearly a whisper, head bowing, hands folding together at her waist.

“Everything.”
She knew.

Every mantra she had told herself to keep him at arm’s length, every vicious denial was gone now. She knew the truth, and had to accept it to move on. There were too many things pressing in on her, making her dangerous. She would not put the world in danger any more due to her selfishness. No, she knew now, that she had been lying, and that lie was putting far too much strain on her.

It was him.

At the very heart of things, it was. The man she had fallen in love with was so much more than the brief time they spent together, after all. It hurt, in a deep and empty way, an abiding ache. Old, the groove of a scar etched into the very heart of who she was, who she had become.

It was him, and he did not remember her.

"I would like you to tell me what you mean by that." His voice held a hint of chill now, distance. She felt badly for it, that she could not give him reassurance. "Can we please return to the ship?"

"Yes." She agreed quietly, more to be free of the prying eyes staring down at them than anything else. He made no effort to take her arm, just gestured for her to precede him, a motion she saw vaguely out of the corner of her eye.

Silently she turned back to head towards the pier, vaguely ashamed of the smoldering, black earth under her feet. It always embarrassed her when she would lose control, it reminded her far too much of when she had no magic at all, and it had come suddenly upon her. She had been so dangerous then, so terrified. It had taken Vivienne weeks to get her under control. She liked to think that she was older now, more learned, and while she was...these moments of failure made her all too aware of how young she was yet in comparison.

How weak.

Something of her feelings must have escaped her, at least by expression, because when he caught up with her he murmured quietly aside to her.

"No one could be expected to wield what you do without centuries of peace to master it, my Lady." He offered, and then sighed at her small, unbidden scoff. "I felt a need to say it, even if you do not wish to hear it."

"I understand what you are trying to say, but please don't comfort me now." She replied quietly, guilt growing the further they walked from the site of her embarrassing tantrum. "It will only make this more difficult."

He said nothing further, for which she was grateful. The docks were empty entirely, and she had a feeling that was entirely her fault. It had been a day of regrettable displays, which could only make things worse in the end. Fear might stall them for a time, but would it really change anything?

Could making people afraid make them change their ways? She didn't truly know. Only time would tell.

She spared one last glance behind her at the island as she reached the bottom of the gangplank, letting out a quiet sigh and shaking her head. He had paused as well, and followed the turn of her
head. The harbor steps were still rather populated, small clusters of people rather than crowds.

"Do you think she can hold it? Hold them."

"I have not known her long, but from what I have seen she will make a stalwart showing. I can't imagine she could have risen to where she is without a great deal of resourcefulness." He replied, a bit cautiously.

For a moment she absorbed the peace, just a few seconds. The sounds of the sea, a few birds calling overhead, the slow creak of shifting wood. She wasn't ready, but she never would be. She never was. That was a fact she had become all too aware of. Some things you would never be ready for, you simply did them anyways.

"When is it easier?" She asked, already knowing the answer.

"When you start to become that which you struggle against." Solas responded, voice taking on a hint of chagrin. "Thank you for pulling me back from the edge."

"You still would have done what needed to be done." She replied dismissively, turning on her heel and pacing up the gangplank. "You always do."

"You know me so well?"

Careful, that question, and she breathed out a soundless, humorless laugh. Now that she had decided to tell the story, there was an unsteady dizziness to her mind. She had fought so long, so hard...but under it all, the pain remained. She had a feeling it would linger, but perhaps that relief could see her through. Break the bone to set it. A slim hope that speaking would solve anything, but at the very least some of the weight could be lifted.

“I...suppose I could not lie to you forever. Not when I keep sabotaging myself. And it seems...” This time her small laugh was sad, faint. “It seems I cannot stay away from you after all. It will take some time to explain. Will you be patient with me?”

Her accommodations were small, but comfortable enough for a ship, below the deck and quiet. She would have preferred somewhere else, but what she had to show him was there. Her chest always came with her, it needed to. She could not trust anyone with its contents.

“Three years of unanswered letters, and you ask if I have patience now?” He inquired mildly, following her down the steep and narrow stairs. "My Lady, I think you know the answer."

"I know the answers to many questions I ask. We have had that discussion before." She reminded him, politely getting the door for him, gaze averted as he paced past her.

The lights were dim, but it too little effort to light the lantern as she followed in after him, casting an orange glow over the weathered, curved walls. Too small a space, it made her panic, just a second of tightness in her chest that clung to her, refusing to let her go until she breathed in slowly, forcing her lungs to fill. Giving it nowhere to hold on to.

Pushing it aside, she exhaled, and closed the door as he moved for the makeshift desk, strewn with her letters. Nothing there she could be bothered to hide from him, she was about to reveal something far more shaking than some damned spy movements. It was the only seat in the room, and he claimed it.

It was just as well. She was far too restless now to sit, even if she had wanted to.
But where to begin?

Her feet moved without a thought to guide them, to the chest. Of course, it would have to be the chest. Only not...not the letters. She couldn't tell him that part, and she shouldn't have to. It belonged to her, the memories that had been theirs and he no longer knew. She would not give him those. But...the other part, that he had a right to know.

The wards were as much a part of her as her fingerprints, they opened with only a thought, and the lock clicked loudly in the silence. Hinges oiled, the chest gave no protest as she opened it. There was very little in the chest, the small bundle of letters in their warded wrappings, some old bottles, a tangled necklace with a pendant of carved halla horn. And the bag. Old, worn suede, rubbed bare in spots and twisted up with a leather thong.

The massive spell etched into it still gave it a strange heaviness, much as his orb had once had, though they were vastly different things. Still, great power left a weight of its own behind, it bent the world and the fade in strange ways. She gently closed the chest again and let the ward slide back into place, swaying up to her feet. Steeling herself, she turned to face him, tugging open the drawstring as she approached the desk.

It gleamed as she drew it out, the oddly pyramidal shape of the pendant, swinging from her fingers as she offered it over. The grooved surface caught the light unnaturally, absorbing it in places, reflecting it in others. He took it in both hands and examined it as she reached for the bottle of wine next to her correspondence, uncorking it.

“This is...” He began, and then glanced up to her sharply, fingers closing around the amulet. “What precisely is this?”

“A foci, containing half of a spell. It took nearly twenty years for us to create, which I'm sure seems a small time. But...in those days it was an eternity. In those days...the limits of our paltry mortal abilities.” Again she could not meet his eyes, but he didn't presume to comfort her this time, remaining silent as he examined the pendant again. “We discovered the unprecedented magic by accident, in our travels. A Tevinter Magister's strange experiments that had failed, utterly, until they abruptly and unexpectedly bore fruit. When your foci, your orb damaged, but did not destroy the veil.”

Silence, at her words, and she stiffened her resolve with a long drink of the bottle, welcoming the artificial warmth. It wasn't much, but it chased away a little of the chill. She had a feeling her beginning to this had been wrong, but it had drawn his attention.

“When my...” He began with a caution that was almost humorous in her current state. “Starting from the beginning would be appreciated.”

“Another beginning. A different one. Shall I tell you a story?” Tears in her voice for a moment, but she breathed them in, pushed them aside. It was no time for tears. “Very well then. But there will be no 'long ago' or 'before the world fell' for this tale. It is long, it is cruel, and it will hurt both of us. But you most of all, I think. I had to live it, the pain is old for me.”

“The truth is rarely kind, but that does not mean it should be kept from me.” His stare was fixed upon her with an intensity that made her uncomfortable, made her want to run and hide.

She could not, not now. Start again, Ellana. Tell it as if it were not your story, just another tale. Where to begin? Well...all stories had a true beginning, did they not?

One last drink of the bottle, and then she corked it and set it aside. A clear mind was needed.
“I was only a hunter in my clan, a lifetime ago. The humans were holding a conclave to deal with...political issues. A religious intervention, it was to be, but in that time, their religion controlled all. The mages, the politics, the Andrastians had roots in all endeavours. I was sent to observe. Discreetly.” Trying to escape from the weight of his regard, stepped away from the desk, pacing across the floor. “That is to say I was an expert at going places I didn't belong, and taking things that did not belong to me.”

“You were a spy?” Surprise in his voice, and she laughed, letting nostalgia overwhelm pain.

Just for a moment. Just long enough to get through it all.

“I was a spy. And a thief. And a woman who thought she was cleverer than any who had come before. There was an attack, at this conclave. A creature known as Corypheus. Despite our past conversations, I know that you know who he is. I've always known.” So many small lies, the bones of their strange relationship being ripped free. All the tiny untruths that she had built their alliance on. “Just as I know what you had planned. Would you like to know what happened if you had done as you had originally intended? If I had not sent Mythal to you?”

She could hear his breath stalled as he absorbed that information, but again, she could not look at him. Could not know what this was doing to him. It was all she could do to push aside her own pain, hearing his would undo her.

“Yes.” He finally replied, voice quiet and grave. “Yes, I would.”

“Corypheus could not be killed by the orb. He simply...infected the nearest blighted creature and reformed himself. But that did not matter even then, because the ritual had been interrupted.” A breath, slow and shuddering, and then she finished. “By me. I happened...upon it, in the cruelest twist of fate I think has ever befallen anyone...”

She had thought it wouldn't hurt this badly, but she had been wrong as it struck her again. Mourning the death of an entire world was not a luxury she had afforded herself, and it seemed that had been a mistake. It was like exposing a wound that had been festering. Her breath caught in the back of her throat, nearly a sob, gaze wavering for a moment as moisture gathered. A drink of the bottle pushed it back, and she swallowed heavily.

She had lived with it too long now to be stalled by these moments of suffering. Still, he was patient as she took a minute to pace restlessly, silence reigning.

“I was bestowed with your anchor mark. Isn't that funny? And the veil was ripped, hundreds of tears forcing unwilling spirits into the world, twisting them into demons.” This time he was silent and she was grateful, clenching the fingers of her rebuilt hand, curling them in tightly, feeling the warning prick of her nails. “It nearly killed me. I was thrown into the fade, and saved by a spirit, who showed me a way out again. While I was there, the Nightmare stole some of my memories, and so when I tumbled out again, I had no idea what had happened.”

Crisp and brisk, that would solve it. That would make it easier to tell. She let her eyes follow the shifting of her shadow across the wall as she paced, low light distorting it, twisting it.

“It would have...killed you swiftly. Within days, if you were...” He began, and then stopped when she laughed harshly yet again, caught up in the tug and push of emotions. “Ah. Of course.”

“You did an excellent job keeping me alive. I can't imagine what you felt when you insinuated your way into the humans holding me captive. They were desperate. Too desperate not to turn away even a humble elven apostate who knew things none of their mages knew.” She could feel her hand
clenching again of its own volition, remembering things it had not lived through, but another limb had. The anger in her voice was beyond her control. “They couldn't kill me, they needed me to fix the tears. When I closed the largest breach, they decided that...against my will, of course, I was somehow the Herald of their prophet Andraste. The bride of the maker.”

Bitter, her words were bitter, but she couldn't fight it. So many angry, ancient memories layered in regret and tainted by betrayal. Better to skim as lightly as she could, not dwell.

“Corypheus still had the orb, and of course it was of the utmost importance that he was stopped. All across Thedas, there were plots, troubles. Tears in the veil to be fixed, wars to be stopped...allies to be gathered. All the while, I was moved like a little piece in a great game.” This time she found she could look at him, but her gaze was somewhat unfocused. She could see the darkness on his face, however, the withdrawal there as he simply listened and absorbed. She knew it too well. “More games than I realized at first. Eventually Corypheus destroyed our stronghold. I, of course, in another of those nasty whims, somehow let everyone else escape and still survived myself.”

She was looking at him, but not seeing him, his own stare much more intent. She let her eyes slip past at last, rather than trying to meet it. His face was a puzzle of light and shadow, sharp lines cast across him making him almost sinister.

Once she had thought he was, and had nearly convinced herself that he was nothing but the enemy. It had been easier in that brief time she had hated him.

“If there had been any hope for me, it was gone then. They...sang to me. People were kneeling.” Pain in her voice again, and the disgust she couldn't help, remembering the weight of it, the terror. They had needed her, but they had no idea what it all had done to her. “They murder the woman whose name they attach to mine as a title, they burn her and then sing her praises, and now they were singing for me. They had no idea...none...how terrified I was.”

She was getting off track, of course she was. Mind mired still in the scene in the harbor, on the fear she had roused in those poor people. Inhaling deeply, she closed her eyes and let out the breath, slow and steady. Get through it as quickly as possible, attach as little emotion to it as possible. She had to keep reminding herself, as it tried to drag her under.

“We had nowhere to go. A fledgling organization. They called it their 'Inquisition', working to restore order with the whole of Thedas against them. Me their figurehead. And our humble apostate friend luckily knew just where we could go.” She couldn't help the sharpness in her voice, but for once it was tinged with humor. So many tiny clues that things were not as they should have been, so easy to overlook at the time. “Such a well-informed humble apostate, who knew so many things from his dreams of the Fade. Such a flimsy trick, looking back upon it. But you always have liked being right. I'd imagine not being able to say anything would have driven you mad.”

Unnecessary, those little barbs, and she heard him breathe out heavily through his nose. She couldn't help it, she'd been wanting to violently shake him over it all for so long. A few small little pinpricks were the very least she could do. Finally he sighed, and spoke.

“...Skyhold. I...gave you Skyhold.” A statement, not a question, but she was nodding in response already.

“I will never set foot there again.” A promise, but a sorrowful one, as she let out a quiet breath. It had been her home once. “Many things were done, many wrongs righted, or at least decisions made. I will not bore you with the full tale of it all. It is not relevant, at any rate. Killing Corypheus destroyed the orb, and you disappeared with the remnants of it.”
Silence for a moment, as she gathered her thoughts, letting out a slow breath. So much there glossed over, things he did not need, or deserve to know. A dance, a kiss, a lifetime of love forced into frantic moments and a broken heart at the end of it all, with her left to the mercy of the humans. Funny, then, that at that time she thought that was something she could never forgive him for.

He was patient still, though she imagined part of it all was discomfort. It could not be easy to hear. She paused near the bed, leaned against it for a moment, fingers twisting in the chain that held it to the wall. Her voice slowed, thickened with memories of the time between, searching and hoping.

Hunting for her heart.

“Two...years later, I was dying. It was killing me. You were very clever, in the way that you lured me to you. Instead of asking me to come, or making it clear, of course. Clues, breadcrumbs. I didn’t understand why then, but I do now.” She reached up with her free hand, giving a faint sigh as fingers smoothed over her upper arm, finding the spot no one but her knew, like an invisible scar. “You took my arm to save my life, and then walked away. I knew then who you were, what you planned to do. You left me with that knowledge and my life, and you...walked away.”

Her hand clenched again, and she felt the faint tingle of the runes dug into the bones, but pushed it back. She had to keep that part out of it, he had no right to know, and she had no right to burden him with it. He had no right to know.

It was her pain, and he had not caused it. Yet he had, and would never know. How could she help but resent him for his blissful ignorance of that fact? Seeing possibility, while she saw history.

He still asked no questions, a silent presence at the other end of the room.

“They had made of me a savior to the world, but I was still alive, which was inconvenient. People don’t care for having their religious icons survive, it makes things awkward. So I did my best to disappear, as we struggled...to find you and stop you.” So many parts of the story there that were simply not relevant. The fights, the intrigue, the spies and politics. Navigating Tevinter desperately, trying to uncover clues and turn agents. “I failed. War with the Qunari in the way, among other things. The whole world was in chaos by then, and next to nothing survived what followed.”

“But you did.” His voice was completely unreadable now, which she knew was only him absorbing this all. "Obviously you did.”

You are alive.

The ghost of his voice, relief and wonder, a memory she would never share with anyone. So much horror and regret, and yet those small, fragile moments that began to lose their sharp edges and become precious. The last of their time together, when she had learned how to handle the dreams, to shape the world, shape herself. When his hands had held the pieces of her back together until she could flee from him.

When the man she loved had held her captive because he could not stand to lose her again, and she had betrayed him.

“I did.” It pained her to hear her voice break, but she kept her back to him, hand tightening in the chain. Two tears, three, she let them escape, and then carefully throttled them back again. "I was... broken, damaged by the falling of the veil and the magic of the orb. It changed me, in unanticipated
ways. And...one of the dreamers that had escaped death taught me, because I was on the verge of killing myself, killing my friends."

She took a moment, then, trying to find a way past the story that would not reveal her altogether, wiping her cheeks dry. What could she say? That he had kept her, tried to heal her while she had learned in her sleep in defiance? That while he thought she was pitiful and on the edge of death she was planning his downfall?

No. Best to ignore it all. If there were holes in the story, so be it.

"I had not been able to find another way for the world, for you. You had...so much death and suffering on your head. I had failed us all, but how could I give up then? I had only a tiny hope, but it was enough. It took almost twenty years of struggle, research, gathering power, weaving the spell...I could not find the power to enact it in the end.” She bowed her head, voice slowing. She couldn't tell it all, but this part...she felt it was important for him to understand. “My friends...those who had stayed with me through all that time, who had fought their own people who had tried to kill me, had hidden our activities from your agents...they killed themselves, to give me the power...to go back again. Every single person I had saved, who had saved me.”

She heard a sound, a creak of the chair as if he was thinking of rising, but she lifted a hand pleadingly and it stopped. Not now. This was the last thing she wanted from him. All she wanted was for him to listen, and then to leave.

She needed no comfort.

“Everything I loved. Every...one. I loved. Dead by their own hands. It's strange, how much more that hurts. The trust they placed in me. And I failed them.” She breathed in then, eyes closing, back turned to him. The slow shuddering intake couldn't clear her head, nothing could now. "I failed. All the time I had to prepare, and the best I could do...apparently...was keep some of them from dying. I could have killed you. I could have waited until you awoke and I could have taken the orb and killed you. Destroyed it. But I thought I knew better. I thought Mythal would...I will never be able to say that I did everything I could. I will never be able to say that I made their deaths worthwhile. That is my burden.”

She could hear nothing now but the creak of wood and the distant sounds of the surf, not even her own breath. She held it until she was lightheaded, and then exhaled heavily. With her eyes closed, she forced herself to finish.

“I have placed so much guilt on your head...for things you never did. And yet? You would have done them again, I think. I don't believe I ever could have stopped you, or changed your mind. I thought she could succeed where I would fail.” Her hands were trembling now, stomach so sick that she could taste the wine in the back of her throat again. "Maybe I need to believe there was nothing I could do, to make the guilt bearable."

In the silence that followed, she sank down onto the bed, staring at the wall. Her heart was a weight in her chest, thudding in her ears, hands twisting violently together in her lap.

“Thank you for answering my questions.” He finally replied, with a voice that was utterly unreadable, and then quietly added, “Would you like for me to leave now?”

“Yes...if you could, please, I cannot...” She began, and then stopped. She had no right to ask him.

“I will leave altogether, I trust you to handle the rest of this. I...believe I need some time alone as well. My apologies.”
She could see his shadow shift on the wall, and even that she could not look at now, the dark shape of his form looming as he rose and crossed the floor. Every footfall came closer, it made her cringe, but she knew he would only go for the door, not approach her.

He must be hurting so much.

It was petty, to be grateful that he would leave her to make the voyage back without him. To be quite honest, she didn't know if she could last the trip to Llomeryn herself. Perhaps once matters here had been handled, she would make her own way back, as he was doing.

“My apologies as well.”

They were the only words she could force past her throat, the tears beginning to spill before the door had even creaked closed behind him.

As he departed, she wept, but this time there was no screaming.
"When your orb damaged, but did not destroy the veil."

It was perhaps the last thing Solas had ever expected to hear, quite honestly. Was the Lady truly implying what he thought she was?

Shadows cast across the walls by the ship's oil lamps almost gave her a sinister appearance, dark shadows slashing across her skin, leaving her eyes dark. It was only midday above, but here below decks it may as well have been night.

The soft, distant sound of the sea was finally broken as he found his voice again.

“When my…” His mind, racing past the barrier of shock, forged onward in search of meaning. There was no understanding, not yet. “Starting from the beginning would be appreciated.”

“Another beginning. A different one. Shall I tell you a story?” Her voice broke over the words, soft and forlorn, bringing to mind the last story she had told him, on their way to Kirkwall. “Very well then. But there will be no ‘long ago’ or ‘before the world fell’ for this tale. It is long, it is cruel, and it will hurt both of us. But you most of all, I think. I had to live it, the pain is old for me.”

“The truth is rarely kind, but that does not mean it should be kept from me.”

Solas said the words because they were true, but beneath them, dread lingered. He watched her face as her mask broke, only to be forced back into place again. It hurt to see how much pain was there, but he had to know. This had all been going on for too long. If what she was claiming was true...

His gaze fixed on the pyramidal pendant in his hands as she set the bottle upon the desk, the weight of it, the soft song of its faded magic. A harmony with no melody. He couldn't imagine how they had gotten such a thing to work. Perhaps before, when the world was so stiff and linear, but not now. This was magic that required a human mind. One that saw the passage of time as immutable.

Fascinating, to think they were capable of it. Fascinating and frightening.

“I was only a hunter in my clan, a lifetime ago. The humans were holding a conclave to deal with…political issues. A religious intervention, it was to be, but in that time, their religion controlled all. The mages, the politics, the Andrastians had roots in all endeavours. I was sent to observe. Discreetly.” She turned away from him, gaze avoiding his as she paced across the floor restlessly, with a swaying, graceful gait. “That is to say I was an expert at going places I didn't belong, and taking things that did not belong to me.”

“You were a spy?” He never would have imagined it, but somehow it suited her.

Strange to think of her as other than what she was, and strange to think of her free and unfettered, simply Ellana.

“I was a spy. And a thief. And a woman who thought she was cleverer than any who had come before. There was an attack, at this conclave. A creature known as Corypheus. Despite our past conversations, I know that you know who he is. I've always known.” Another small shock, her voice just a little wry under the pain, but that surprise was nothing to what came after her next words. “Just as I know what you had planned. Would you like to know what happened if you had done as you had originally intended? If I had not sent Mythal to you?”
If she had not...it seemed that she was indeed claiming that she had...reversed time.

It was exactly what she was claiming. The scope of such magic was more than concerning, it was nearly terrifying. Vast, horrifyingly vast, and the implications of it were even more so. So many small pieces, and he could feel the first of them falling into place with a final, heavy weight.

It seemed he would have some truth at last.

“Yes.” He finally replied, voice quiet and grave. “Yes, I would.”

The tale she wove was no less horrifying for the fascination of it, as it was an incredible claim. Unbelievable, except that it made so much sense, it filled every gap, turned every lie and avoidance into truth. He could nearly see it in his head, how it would go, keeping the anchor mark from destroying her, giving her...Skyhold. It had been hers, his home.

And then the veil had fallen, it seemed, whatever they had planned had failed. Something more there, in those cracks in her mask, in the lilt of her voice that made him all too aware that there was much she could not tell him.

And somehow, despite all of it, she had survived. When he pointed out as much, her reaction pierced through his distance, pulling him away from his consideration of the story into the reality of it, the moment. It left him breathless, the return to feeling and reality, emotions held back rushing in again.

“I did.”

The crack in her voice was agonizingly honest, breaking through the careful truths with a sudden burst of pure emotion. So much there, so much weight and grief, and before he could think of any words to offer, she was speaking again.

"I was... broken, damaged by the falling of the veil and the magic of the orb. It changed me, in unanticipated ways. And...one of the dreamers that had escaped death taught me, because I was on the verge of killing myself, killing my friends."

That too made sense, but not enough. Even as a dreamer, it would take centuries for her to build this sort of power, to gather and hone it. It made no sense. Part of him thought she might not realize that, that he might not see that bit missing for all the many she was offering him at once. He was almost irritated that she felt even now she had to lie to him.

Focusing on that kept his mind sharp, let him drag himself back out of the emotion and return to logic. Any hope he had of remaining there, however, was destroyed by the next part of her confession.

"I had not been able to find another way for the world, for you. You had...so much death and suffering on your head. I had failed us all, but how could I give up then? I had only a tiny hope, but it was enough. It took almost twenty years of struggle, research, gathering power, weaving the spell...I could not find the power to enact it in the end."

Her voice grew throaty, dragged over every syllable as if they were taken from her by force. He was grateful she was turned away from him, even the edge of her profile brought him pain, the tremble of her lower lip, the harsh catch of her breath that made her shoulders shudder. When she spoke again, there was no hope of cool reflection.
Not now.

“My friends...those who had stayed with me through all that time, who had fought their own people who had tried to kill me, had hidden our activities from your agents...they killed themselves, to give me the power...to go back again. Every single person I had saved, who had saved me.”

Reflexively he began to rise, desperate to give some comfort, do something rather than sit and spectate. Her hand raised sharply, more an order than a plea, and he sank back down again helplessly, lifting a hand to press fingers against the bridge of his nose. If she could say it, he could stand to hear it.

Her pain, caused by his choices. He had to force himself to hear it, and accept that she did not want comfort.

How could she, from him?

“Everything I loved. Every...one. I loved. Dead by their own hands. It's strange, how much more that hurts. The trust they placed in me. And I failed them.” He heard her breath catch in a sob as she inhaled, but she soldiered on somehow, voice barely above a drone except when it would catch, broken on the edge of tears.

Something more there, something more unsaid, but his earlier annoyance with her continued reticence shamed him now. How could he demand from her, after this?

“I failed. All the time I had to prepare, and the best I could do...apparently...was keep some of them from dying. I could have killed you. I could have waited until you awoke and I could have taken the orb and killed you. Destroyed it. But I thought I knew better. I thought Mythal would...I will never be able to say that I did everything I could. I will never be able to say that I made their deaths worthwhile. That is my burden.”

The last pieces fallen into place, enough of them to see the picture of it all. A story of suffering, of death, a price she never should have had to pay. His fault, all of it. Her pain, all caused by him. And yet, she had tried, she had tried for him, for them all.

He had never known.

“I have placed so much guilt on your head...for things you never did. And yet? You would have done them again, I think. I don't believe I ever could have stopped you, or changed your mind. I thought she could succeed where I would fail. Maybe I need to believe there was nothing I could do, to make the guilt bearable.”

He could think of nothing to say as she collapsed down onto the edge of the bed, the defeat in her posture demanding comfort she would never accept. No. There was nothing he could do or say now, was there? Nothing she would allow. That she let herself be vulnerable at all was more trust than he could have once expected from her. He had caused her so much pain.

And she had tried to save him. Why?

“Thank you for answering my questions.” It was all he could truly say, in the end, unless she would bid him stay. “Would you like for me to leave now?”

“Yes...if you could, please, I cannot...”

Painful, the catch of her voice, tears she barely held at bay. He suddenly felt as if he was invading upon her privacy, forcing himself into things she had no desire for him to see. She had exposed...far
more than she had likely intended, and perhaps even more than she realized.

Just what that all was would take some time, reflection, and some uncomfortable truths of his own.

“I will leave altogether, I trust you to handle the rest of this. I...believe I need some time alone as well. My apologies.”

He rose, hesitation making him linger for a moment behind the desk, watching the line of her back as she curled in on herself. Her braid spilled forward over her shoulders, fingers curling in against her upper arms, and for a moment the desire to take her hands and pull her in against him was almost unbearably sharp. It hurt, to see how much she was suffering, to even begin to consider the scope of the pain she had exposed to him.

In the end, however, he turned for the door, his own fingers curling in against his palms as he crossed the floor. When her voice came again, it was little more than a whisper, saturated with pain and resignation. He almost wished she had never spoken, the weight of a guilt she did not deserve to bear like a bleeding wound in the quiet words.

“My apologies as well.”

Feeling like a coward, he fled, closing the door on a stifled, broken sob. However it might have felt, he knew that it was what she wanted. He couldn't imagine how she could bear to be around him at all. There was enough truth now exposed for him to see the edges of things she had obviously never wanted him to see, and the implications were...disturbing. Far more than he'd initially thought. His mind rejected it automatically, for far too many reasons to count, the least of which was that it felt grossly inappropriate.

At least he knew who to go to in order to clear his mind.

The part of himself buried deep under Skyhold was enough to orient him, once he reached the deck, and he let it draw him in, body enveloped in a swirl of darkness as he stepped through the intervening space with the help of the Fade.

A tactical retreat, that was all. Felassan would handle things in his stead.

He needed help.

It was not mistrust that brought him striding up the stairs to where he knew the spirit would linger. Hope had an odd fondness for the balcony, and would forever be found there or in the rotunda, drifting around. They had been a bit odd, before they had left, but he understood now.

Hope had been waiting.

His initial, impetuously pained question received the answer he hadn't wanted to hear, the implications behind it too numerous, too painful.

“I am sorry.” Words so gentle that they broke his heart, as he knew they went against their nature. It wasn't Hope that they brought him, but a momentary despair. “Yes, Solas, what she told you is true. It is not the whole of it, I doubt she will ever be able to speak of it all. It is better now to focus on the future.”
“It...explains nearly everything. All this time, and I believed what I wanted was answers, and yet...”

Fingers dug against the balcony’s railing, as he stared out across the mountains. The view did nothing, not today. “It seems we have more in common than I realized. I am the source of both of our suffering.”

“That is unfair to both of you.” Hope replied, patient and quiet.

It was difficult, to extract himself from the layers of it, his own emotions, his own memories. This new knowledge was wholly unwelcome, harsh and unforgiving. The scope of it, the purpose, the motivations...when he tried to untangle them, what came to the forefront was an unexpected emotion. Anger.

"Why does she feel as if she has the right?" The sharpness of his voice echoed, but there was no reason to temper it, not now. "She has no right to make these decisions, to take this burden upon herself. How dare she? What could possibly drive her to this?"

"You already know the answer to that." The spirit responded, an insubstantial hand resting above his, white-knuckled against the stone.

Her voice, those vulnerable cracks that kept showing through, the tears and suffering, returned to his mind. The stab of pain was stronger than expected, but he forged through it, eyes closing. No, Hope was right, he already knew the answer. He'd known it in fragments, but it had come together when she was trying to justify her choosing not to kill him.

He understood the need for logic, even now. It would bring him truth.

"She never hated you." Hope told him, a gentle nudge as his mind spiraled down again. "She was protecting herself. Why?"

“No. No, I suppose she did not, and...” It was not something he wanted to face, because it felt so wrong to presume, but there was no denying her pain, a deep and personal one that showed in those seconds of open sorrow. “I have hurt her. Deeply. Not simply...as an enemy who betrayed and destroyed the world, but I...I have hurt her."

“It was not you. But it was. And now you care about her, a great deal, Solas. Can you care about her even with the weight of knowing that you are the same man who broke her heart?”

The words were simple, but they cut through the layers of it with a delicate brutality, an incision to the very core of the matter. Not a problem of worlds, or gods, but of another man who bore his burdens and the woman who had tried in vain to save him.

It had to be denied, but he could not. And he knew it was the last thing she had wanted him to know, which hurt him all the more. Even if Hope had not led him there, he would have found his way there eventually.

Nothing else fit all the pieces, which she had tried so carefully to hide from him.

Closing his eyes, he breathed in deeply as he absorbed the information. It was true. Nothing else fit. Her unwavering faith in him, her persistence in saving him while simultaneously hiding from him, avoiding even meeting his eyes for so long.

She cared for him, had...loved him. And he had done her so much evil.

Only it wasn't him at all.
“I am not that man.” Why did that fact fill him with regret? He should be grateful that it was not him that had done those things to her, but he knew... “I would have done the same, in the end, if I had been there. I would have done the same.”

“You are not that man. And still you are. Everything has been so unfair to both of you...but you have each other.” Hope decreed quietly, and then did something he had never heard them do before.

The spirit sighed, soft and deeply weary. He turned to face them now, the shifting features in the gilded glow fixed downwards, their hands twisting together. He had been on the edge of breaking, and still felt ill, conflicted and unsteady, but he had never seen Hope anything less than composed and peaceful.

"What is it, my friend?" He inquired lightly, the discomfort of the moment magnified by the strange posture. "This is...difficult, but..."

"It is time for me to go." Hope informed him, simple and final. "There is someone who needs me more now."

Shock silenced him for a moment but eventually it thawed, leaving behind a quiet resignation. It only made sense, he supposed. Her Hope, they had been a gift, but now no doubt the Lady needed them more than he ever had. It had been a kindness, to have them for so long.

Ellana needed Hope far more than he ever could.

"Of course. Please, go to her. I expect that she will welcome your presence more than any." He agreed. "I have been selfish long enough."

"No, mother has you." Hope negated, and he only noticed then that she had never called the Lady that before now. It was surprising enough that he did not try to contradict them. "Come with me, please. There is somewhere we need to go."

"I...Of course." He agreed, pushing aside the myriad questions racing through his mind. Prying would do nothing. "Of course I will come."

Hope had never done anything without a purpose behind it, and he doubted they would start now. Still, his mind was uneasy, thoughts twisted up in a morass of new knowledge and guilt, far heavier than ever anticipated. Walking would clear his mind, hopefully, enough to begin sorting through it all. For now, all he knew was that it changed everything.

There was no coming back from those revelations.

Solas had known, the instant that they stepped out of the eluvian where Hope was heading. The wards ahead hummed comfortingly, strong and steady despite the restless spirit contained behind them. He had never quite understood why the Lady insisted upon it being allowed so much territory to claim, but he had bowed to her will in it.

Regret obviously troubled her greatly.

His companion had been silent since the Crossroads, drifting a ways ahead of him, leaving to mull over everything in his mind. It was a disturbing puzzle, with far too many implications and entanglements. Another world, where things had gone much worse, but where some other self had loved her. A strange thought, but undeniable now.
She must have been suffering so greatly.

"It was not a lie, precisely." Hope informed him as they headed up the narrow, overgrown road towards the edge of the wards. "What she told you in Kirkwall."

"What was not a lie?" He inquired, attention fixed upon the barrier ahead now, mind still unease and troubled.

Too many revelations, too much recrimination and pain he was holding back by sheer force of will. There would be time for it later, now was for cool reflection, not emotion. He had always known, of course, the price for what he had chosen to do. He had accepted it as being his curse, his destiny. A price that would have to be paid when creating the veil had proven to not be the solution he had envisioned.

It was his price to pay, but it seemed he had been spared from the full weight of it.

"When she told you that you killed the man she loved. She told the truth." Hope informed him calmly, far too much so for such a statement. "And again, she tried to save you. She will always try to save you, Solas. Even when it is unwise."

He did not realize he could feel worse than he already had, but it seemed that undid him, pushed through the barrier he had held in the way. The simple truth in the words she spoke were gutting, viciously harsh. The truth so often was. He had said he would not want it kept from him, but the...

"I...he killed himself?" Of course. Of course he had, she held his power, given freely to her. By his death. "She said that she survived, so obviously he succeeded much as I had. Something had survived, the void held back for a time..."

He forced the emotions back again, but the effort left him ill, unsteady on his feet as he swallowed them back. It made sense, logically, but why? Why would he have done such a thing?

"She didn't have the power. It wasn't enough. All those lives at her feet, and it wasn't enough." Hope informed him quietly, waiting until he drew ahead, finding his footing at last. "You gave her the last."

He walked, simply because it was preferable to standing still, though the pain in his chest was far from eased. Was he truly so selfish that he would sacrifice himself, knowing as he did that he was the only one who could stop it all, once and for all? What if she had failed? What if she had been incapable of performing the spell in the end, even with his interference?

If he had succeeded the first time, why give her a second chance at all?

The only answer was selfishness, and he could not reconcile that.

To help the woman he loved to try again, with the whole world at stake, no. He could not reconcile it with what he knew of himself. Even...another of himself. It could only be selfishness.

"No, you are wrong." Hope informed him, and he cast a glance sidelong at the spirit as they passed through the wards, a vicious tingle across that swept across the skin as they pierced the barrier. "It was trust. It was love. You could not believe in her before, when she had a chance to stop you and did not. In the end she could not change your mind, and she could not kill you. And so the veil came down, but she did not surrender."

Part of him wished Hope would stop referring to this other self as being 'him', but he expected for the spirit they seemed much the same. Their mind did not work the way his did, after all, needing to
protect itself from the idea that it had indeed been him who had done all of it. Spirits accepted, when men faltered.

"What was it, then, that changed his mind?" He inquired faintly, as they followed the road into the long-abandoned city, regret creeping in at the edges of the mind almost instantly. It made this all the more difficult to hide from. "I do not wish to pry, but you would not be telling me this unless..."

"She never gave up on you. At first it seemed like defiance, ignorance, that she didn't truly understand why you felt it needed to happen." Hope replied calmly, faintly, drifting ahead and nearly disappearing in the rising fog that concealed the gray world around them. "And yet, even when she understood, she still fought against you, she still tried to find a way to save you. All of this was to be your second chance, but you knew there was only one way she could stand against you. To match your power."

"And she thought she knew better than I?" That rankled, from some old, defensive part of himself, a part all too familiar with being dismissed, discounted. "I suppose she still thinks that she does. It is my burden to be borne, I must..."

"Solas." Hope chided gently, and then fell silent as the wolves began to howl.

The sound came from nowhere and everywhere, fog concealing and confusing the senses. Regret grew stronger, pushing past his defenses and brushing them aside again. There was nothing to but to accept it, with a long and wearied sigh. Rising and falling, the melancholy calls of the pack echoed across the uneven landscape, reverberating.

For a time they travelled in silence, down a long road, through a path shadowed by overhanging stone. The wolves still sang, back and forth, slowly packing together. They were following them, of course, tracking them over the faded, rain-saturated landscape. When they turned off of the faint road and started up a hill, Hope spoke again.

"You were willing to give her the chance because she had given up everything to try and save you. You could not let it be in vain. I know that it was not you, but you have to understand the price of not letting her past your pride in what will inevitably come."

"You think she will try to stop me again." He declared, flatly, certainty there. "Stop me from doing what must be done, and why? Only to save my life? Or does she truly think I am in the wrong?"

"You will have to ask her yourself." Hope replied placidly, ignoring his rising frustration as they drifted ahead, lighting tendrils of fog with their golden luminescence.

"Then why exactly, have you brought me here, if not to tell me?" He snapped, and instantly regretted it. He felt ill, mind and stomach uneasy, but the spirit did not deserve it.

"Regret has been waiting for you, Solas, he always has been, you are the fulfillment of his purpose. I do not think mother realized it, but he has decided that you need him."

"They are not my regrets, they are not my choices." He replied stubbornly, trying to fight back the anger. "I cannot be blamed for what happened in another world, another time that no longer exists."

There was no response from the spirit.

The wolves had converged from the darkness, and he could feel them, lurking just out of view. They no longer sang, but trailed in eerie silence. He could feel Regret twisted through the heart of the pack, watching them walk with hundreds of eyes.
"What is Regret's interest in me, Hope?" He inquired, dread overtaking nausea, something wholly unsettling about all of this.

"That is the wrong question." Hope replied placidly, seeming oddly at peace. "We are close now. Can you feel him?"

Strong this spirit. He could only imagine the weight of the Lady's regrets that had created it. He couldn't have understood before, but now he did, all too well. So much death, so much suffering, and she had let herself drown in it instead of keeping herself apart. He could not imagine how she could still do what must be done.

"Then what...is the right question?"

The answer was one he already dreaded, as they headed up the slope, the mouth of a cave awaiting them. He could feel the spirit beyond, waiting. The weight of it rested heavily on his shoulders, kept barely at bay by his will. The answer, when it came, made that burden crushing.

"What happens to Pride when it shatters?"

*She tried to save you.*

*She will always try to save you.*

"No." He denied instantly, as Hope continued into the tunnel, leaving him behind.

The single word was swallowed by the fog, the light ahead of him fading, leaving behind only the slightest glow of mushrooms clinging for purchase in the stone. The wolves surrounding him were a silent presence, leaving the way forward as the only option.

*All those lives at her feet, and it wasn't enough.*

His feet moved of their own volition into the tunnel, with an inevitability to every step. At first reluctant, finally he steeled himself, rolling back his shoulders, lifting his chin. No. Whatever awaited him was not him, it was not his burden. He could face it, there was some purpose to this.

Still, the sickness remained in the pit of his stomach, the weight upon his shoulders. Facing regret was never easy.

When he emerged from the tunnel, he was surprised to find Hope waiting for him, the spirit turning its attention to him as he stalled, staring into the cavern. He knew the space, of course, it had once been a place belonging to Ghilan'nain, long, long ago. Now it held only small remnants of statues, walls of the small valley covered in greenery, nearly obscuring what appeared to be old scorch marks. Patches of the ground still remained bare, with no purchase for plants, glassy earth gleaming faintly in the low light.

He knew that sight all too well, having seen it earlier that very day.

This was the place then, that she had come through. He could feel the faintest echoes of it, likely to be ignored if he had not held the source of them in his palm when she told her story. When she had come through...
"No. Not alone." Regret agreed, and he forced his gaze to lift, meet the spirit that awaited him. "She should have never tried to bring me with her."

It was easier to accept what this was when facing a spirit. A spirit could not help what it was, and he of all people knew, whatever Regret had been before, it was its own creature now. He could face this remnant of another self.

For that is what it was. There was no denying it.

Whatever there had been of his other self when he had died, this was what remained. A wavering, faintly azure figure standing at the edge of the water, and a crushing burden that spilled over the landscape, driving all that entered Crestwood into taking their own lives.

Regret.

Forcing them to take their own lives, as he had once...

"He had killed himself, she was overwhelmed with grief." Solas replied, uncertain why he was defending her, and to all things, some shattered echo of himself from another world. "She tried to save him. Surely she cannot blame herself for that."

"She can blame herself for a great many things. A great many things that are, in fact, your fault." Regret contradicted, for a moment wearing his face, and his voice, before the impression faded, bearing remaining. "She is going to die trying to save you. It has always been for you. All of this suffering, all of this pain."

Hope was strangely silent, and he took a step forward to steel himself, leaving the gentler spirit behind. Lifting his chin, he dug within himself for some surety, some purpose.

"I cannot believe that. She saves others she cares about, she strives to save all lives, not mine. She will see reason." He denied, giving a small shake of his head, keeping his voice even. "These regrets are not mine to bear, nor are they hers. I will not be forced to carry the burden of another world that has ceased to be."

"She saves lives to take their deaths from your shoulders, and when they die it becomes her burden because it is her who failed. But no. No, you are right. You have your own. Your regret destroyed a world, Solas. Your regret destroyed her world." The spirit replied, wavering at the edges, small now, with the earnest, accusing voice of a child. "You accept that they are people, you accept that you murdered them."

"I did what had to be done!" He responded, harshly, taking every ounce of will he had to push back against that crushing weight, bearing down on his shoulders, voice ringing around the valley. It nearly sounded righteous. "Someone must. Someone had to. There is no way the veil would have survived, and it was not even doing what had been intended from the start!"

"If you had not been so impulsive from the beginning, your people would not have been crushed, destroyed. You have built a wall of duty around yourself to shield yourself from the consequences, because you must do what has to be done." Regret informed him unrelentingly, disorienting from the small child's lips, which was no doubt what the spirit intended. It took on a thousand faces, voices, pale blue and cold. "You play at humility because you fear what you are, but you have never been truly humble in your life. If you had been, you would have let her show you another way."

"There is no other way!" He denied, anger rising now with his voice, echoing all around them, and
yet ringing hollow for all of its volume. "The blight is here, it has been here since it was let free, and if I do not do something, it will consume everything! I can feel the cracks in the earth widening, the return of the Fade has only slowed it."

Only a few steps behind them now, and again it was his eyes gazing back into his, making lies of his firmly held beliefs. His denial did nothing but make it all the more sharp as the spirit dug into him, forcing him to make way for it.

"And all that creating the veil did was destroy your people and buy some small amount of time that was squandered. Squandered because you made them weak, made them vulnerable." Regret told him, sorrow creeping into its voice. "You cannot be wrong, because it means it was all wrong. You cannot be wrong, because it means that they died in vain. Solas, you have learned to accept your mistakes, to change your mind, why can you not bend on this?"

"I cannot falter now. They need me. How could I have known that it would continue to spread? That they would find it again?" He argued as Regret surrounded him with its presence, breaking down barriers at last, working its way into his mind, into his heart. "How could I have known? How could I have known that I was condemning my people to death and slavery?"

He fought, and could have found the strength, but part of him had given up long ago. Part of him wanted this, to let him give in. Perhaps it was weakness, perhaps it would damage his purpose, but he needed it. He needed to be brought to see.

He had never wanted to become what he was.

"You could not have." Hope murmured from behind him, as he fell to the ground, head bowing. "You did not know, but now you do."

He could not even lift his hands to shield his face, tears falling as he gave in to Regret, insubstantial arms surrounding him as the spirit forced itself upon him. Thousands upon thousands of voices, faces, the deaths he had wrought, the mistakes he could not face fully.

Not and do what must be done.

"I have a duty, I must..." He denied, though it was all for nothing in the end.

Tears began to spill, as he was forced to acknowledge the truth he had been hiding from for so long.

There was no denying it. He had killed, he had compounded mistakes with death, and more death. He had judged, and been mistaken. He had freed slaves and condemned their children to slavery in the process. He had ignored the world that was, and had not even sought another way, had not tried to save the people who lived in it because it was easier to dismiss them.

He had been wrong.

Regret had brought him to his knees, broken its way past all the barriers he had been protecting himself with. When he could speak again, forced past the painful, soundless shuddering of his chest, they were broken.

"What can I do?" He asked, helplessly. "What...can I do?"

"When was the last time you truly believed that you are only a man? It is time to let go of your pride." Regret told him, still twisted into him, sunk into his very being. "She has become what she has become out of love, to save you, and it is your fault."
"She made her own choices." Hope contradicted gently, voice quiet and soft. "She has her own pride as well. It is one thing to become an icon, it is another to believe that you are. Neither of you has gone that far."

"But you have come far, far too close. Standing on the battlefield, watching them die as you told yourself they were not people." Regret continued, more sorrowful and heavy. "Letting pride stand in the way, chastising one another instead of asking one another for help."

"There may be another way, you may not have to die. She would not have come back unless she thought she could help you stop it." Hope encouraged quietly from behind him, sinking into him as well. They did not fight the control of regret, but rather joined it, a buoyant counterpoint to the weight. "Let her try. If you truly care about her, even knowing all of what you do now, then you will listen to what she has to say. You will let her try to find another way. A whole world died to give this second chance."

"I have accepted my death." He replied faintly, hands lifting to find his cheeks wet, wiping tears away to make room for more. "I always have."

"And accepting it has let you go further down the path than you ever wanted to go. Accepting life comes with regret for the things you have done." Hope, or perhaps Regret told him, voices more felt than heard now. "Humility means truly accepting that your way is not the only way. This was, and always will be your second chance, but it is also hers. Please, don't let it go to waste. Please. Don't make the same mistake twice."

There was silence then, and it settled into him, surrounded him with a hollow peace. It was true. He had made himself a martyr, to avoid life, and avoid the crushing weight of what had been done, and what needed to be done to save the world. She had tried with everything in her to find another way, and even now she had felt she failed.

The very least he could do was humble himself to ask her to help him. Perhaps together, they could find a way.

"I am sorry for what happened to you. For what happened...to him." He offered quietly, to both of them, two halves of a whole. It was no wonder Regret had been so malicious without Hope. "Thank you for this."

"This is where I belong." Hope told him as they withdrew, leaving a strange catharsis behind, empty and yet accepting. It would not last, but for now made everything more bearable. "Solas, another way may be found. There are no more lies between you, now you can find another way."

"It could have been found before." Regret informed him, turning and drifting away, now a melancholic, all too familiar figure.

He had a feeling it was not only the echoes of a dead man's memory that made the spirit wear his form, but some fragment of his regrets as well. He could only assume as much, but there was no more energy for revelations, not now.

He was exhausted, in a way he had not felt in far too long.

"Solas." The other spirit murmured, drawing his attention to them. They seemed stronger now, a warm glow casting itself over him. "With all that remained of a broken, shattered heart, she forged hope. It is one of her greatest strengths. She can give you hope, and in return you can bring it to her."

"And what if there is no other way?" He asked, already knowing the answer. "What if even no
matters... how we strive, one of us must die to seal it back again?"

"Then at least you will have lived, Solas." Hope replied, voice soft and peaceful. "Death is not all you have to give."

If there was an answer to that, he did not know it, and remained silent as the spirit drifted away to join the other. On his knees, he watched as they joined Regret at the edge of the pond, a slim golden hand twining together with pale blue, sending a verdant light across the water where they bled into one another.

The instant the spirits touched, the oppressive atmosphere eased, and the moon broke through the thick clouds. Resting his hands on his thighs, he turned his gaze up to watch the sky as it cleared, mist and gloom giving way to a starry sky, bathing the world in silvery light.

He remained there until strength returned to him, and then he rose to depart, leaving Crestwood behind.
Breaking and Mending

Truth had not brought peace.

The world kept on changing, no matter how many secrets were faced, and the exposure of them left wounds that needed time to heal. Time that was difficult to come by. The Lady's solitude was unbroken for a full three months in which things moved on without her, and she haunted the hills at the base of the Anderfels alone.

It was not enough, it would never be enough, not now. In another time, in another world, she would have been allowed the centuries she needed to rest. Eventually, reluctantly, her commander came to fetch her, and she let herself be drawn back into living once more.

It was, after all, time again to gather together.

"Solas, I need your help."

The words came tentatively from the top of the stairs, and he bit back his instinctive irritation, setting aside the letter he was reading. It would do no good to sigh at the boy, the fact that he was asking was a start. Generally he just did as he liked, and then told them afterwards to deal with the consequences.

"Yes, Freedom?" He asked, leaning back in his seat as the teenager shuffled up the last couple stairs, hair flopping in his face. "I hope you have not moved more animals into your rooms. We did discuss that before, did we not?"

"No, it's not...I didn't do anything." The boy protested awkwardly, the agitated expression dispelling the last of his annoyance. "I don't...I need someone to talk to about something and I don't..."

"I apologize. I did not mean to make you feel as if you were unwelcome." He replied carefully, gentling his voice. "But if it is advice you seek, would your mother be a better choice? I have heard she is returning."

"I...it's about..." Stammering now, surprisingly, something he didn't think he had heard the boy do before. "It's about...girls. Solas. Mother isn't well, and...and I'm too scared to talk to Varric about it, I tried before but he just laughed, so..."

Oh. Well, this was an unexpected conversation. Still, a fairly simplistic one, he imagined, gesturing to the other chair in the room and waiting as Freedom wandered over and slumped into it. He was all slump these days, as if he found the body he wore to be slightly the wrong size. He wondered how much of that was being a teenager, and how much was having once been a spirit.

"Such things are natural, Freedom. Your body is still growing, and it is at a stage of development..." Difficult to think of a way to begin this that wasn't awkward, so better to simply get to the heart of it. "The urges are different for everyone, but..."

"I don't." Freedom interrupted him, cheeks red, voice awkward. "I mean. I don't. A...a girl likes me, but I don't. I do, like a friend, but not..."
Relief flooded through him, and Solas fought to keep it off of his face. This was a much easier conversation, and certainly far less awkward.

"That is perfectly all right. It is not a requirement of being embodied, you do know that, do you not?" The question was mild, but it seemed to cause some consternation in the boy, who fidgeted and glanced aside. "Freedom. You know that some differ in their desires, yes?"

"I don't want to...with men, either, if that's what you're saying." The boy mumbled defensively, shoulders hunching. "Everyone makes such a big deal out of it. It all...all the...mess."

"You are who you are. You need not apologize for that, and you need not feel pressured to be anything else, especially when you are still discovering who that is. Whatever people think of...development and ages, you have all the time you need." He replied firmly, a hint of concern breaking through. "Your mother hasn't dismissing your feelings or making you feel pressured, is she?"

"No! No, I just...wanted...to talk to you. She's been away, but that's not why..." Freedom muttered, picking at the ragged edge of a nail, feet dragging across the floor as he attempted to swing them. "It's that she worries so much already. I just want to be...normal."

"Normal is a standard that does not exist, Freedom. All you should ever strive to be is yourself." He lowered his chin, attempting to catch averted blue eyes that darted across his before roving back again. "You are who you are. That may change, and it may not."

"I don't want to hurt my friend." The little crack in his voice was plaintive, reminding Solas just how far the boy had grown in the last few years.

Such a short few years, but so much change. He had chosen a very tumultuous age, after all. It was a wonder he had been having so few problems. It would be important not to dismiss them, he was a fragile age yet, for Freedom most of all. He had missed out a great many years leading up to it, after all.

"It will not be you that has hurt her, Freedom. And yes, she may be hurt. You cannot hold yourself responsible for that." Solas replied firmly, finally holding his gaze. "Just as you cannot help your feelings, she likely cannot help hers. What matters is how you treat one another. Treat her with respect, let her down graciously and with kindness and understanding. She may be hurt, she may lash out. That does not mean she does not want your friendship, but you may need to give her space afterwards."

Silence from the other side of the laden table, Freedom drawing circles with a fingertip as he stared blankly. Solas waited quietly, resting an elbow on the arm of his chair, feeling far more at ease with this now. It was, perhaps, not the most comfortable of conversations, but helping the boy acclimate was something he was far more at home with. Certainly more than having to give him romantic advice. No, if that changed, that was better left to his mother.

"Am I wrong?" Freedom finally asked, a bit awkwardly. "Am I...do you think I made my body wrong? Do you think that's why I'm different?"

"No." He denied instantly, keeping his voice firm and resolute. "Absolutely not, there is nothing wrong with you."

"I want to be like everyone else." Freedom declared, and he fought back the desire to chide the boy as he picked off a piece of fingernail and dropped it on the floor. "That's why...that's why I became me."
"As I said, there is simply no such thing. Yes, romance and sex and things that many people spend a great deal of time focusing on, but it is a very small part of what makes a person a person." He lowered his chin again, and finally eyes flicked back up to his again, partially veiled by tumbled hair. "You are who you are now, for better or worse, Freedom. That means being different. It is part of what makes us people, that no two of us are alike."

"Okay." Freedom finally replied, reluctantly.

Solas waited for a moment, but that seemed to be all that was going to be said. Unusual, but he was quite obviously upset.

"It may change, or it may not. The people that love you will love you just as you are, even if others do not." This time he got no more than a nod, and finally he sighed. "I understand it is not something that mere words can help, Freedom. I am sorry that you are trapped in this situation. I wish I could promise you that she will understand."

"You could fix me, couldn't you?" The question was plaintive, and it hurt him.

He hadn't expected that, the surge of sympathy and pain, but he fought it back. It would do no good for him to get emotional, he was already more attached to the boy than he thought was wise. Still, it was obvious that Freedom needed him, even if the relationship was far more...paternal than he was comfortable with.

"There is nothing to fix." He replied quietly, once he managed to steady his voice.

This time when Freedom glanced up and met his eyes, it seemed to help. His only response was a silent nod, but some of the pain and confusion in their depths had faded.

"Okay." The boy agreed quietly, nodding again. "I...okay. Thank you, Solas."

"You're welcome." He responded, leaning back in his seat as Freedom rose and turned for the stairs, shoulders falling into their habitual slouch. Horrible habit, he needed to start working on his posture. "...Freedom?"

"Yes, Solas?"

"Please clean your rooms before we leave for the Arlathvhen. Thank you."

Turning back to the pile of letters awaiting his attention on the desk, he hid a smile at the exasperated sigh, exaggerated and loud. The stomping down the stairs and muttering was less amusing, but the smile lingered despite the very expressive show of annoyance.

Differences or no, he was still very much a teenage boy.

It was jarring to return to so much noise and activity after her quiet, thoughtful sojourn. Luckily her aravel had been set to the very edges of the camps, far away from the city, with some distance between them. Abelas left her as she reacquainted herself with her halla, letting them jostle and nudge her, breathing her in curiously. Their quiet company was welcome, slowly drawing her back into the flow of the world, letting the breeze flutter across her skin, the scent of cookfires and the sounds of distant laughter gently breaking through her solitude.
Eyes closed, she absorbed it all, let time return and resume its unyielding march. She was not at peace, but it was sufficient for now. Some facade of it, at least, something to keep her intact for what would invariably come next. There was too much to be done, and...

When the arms were flung around her, it was a surprise, a little start that caught her breath in her throat, shoulders stiffening. Relaxation came soon afterwards, but it was still an uncomfortable thing to be loomed over so thoroughly. She supposed she should enjoy that he was still affectionate with her, but it felt almost unnatural to be held.

She wondered when that had changed for her.

"Mamae." Freedom sighed, hugging through her resistance until she relaxed. "I'm sorry, mamae."

"Never you mind, my love. Never you mind." She reassured quietly, reaching both hands up to rub across his bare forearms. "I am sorry to have been gone from you for so long. Has Solas been looking after you?"

She felt him stiffen, momentarily, and despite her exhausted calm she almost felt a touch of amusement. She supposed it must sound strange to hear her say his name, but the artifice had grown too wearying. Better to simply accept it. It was a hurt she could be accustomed to, and she had been doing herself no favors by being so pigheaded. Yes, there had been a reason once, but she had clung to it far past when she should have.

Even if the peace of her mind was a lie, a lie could become truth in time if one simply treated it as if it were.

"I am almost grown, I can look after myself." Her son mumbled sullenly, and then gave a small irritated noise when she chuckled soundlessly. "Yes, I came with him. I am going to go and meet Varric and come back again with them, but Cole said you were coming."

She endured the face burying against her shoulder, though the weight of him was a bit, much, giving the arms around her another little pat. Eventually he sighed against her, and his grip eased at last, unfolding.

"Solas won't tell me what happened." The edge of an accusation there, but it melted as she turned to face him, lips twisted to the side relaxing. "You aren't going to either, are you?"

"No, my little heart, I am not." She agreed, reaching up hands to gently cup his cheeks. Did she have to reach even higher? That was hardly fair. "I am sorry for abandoning you for so long. Things have been very difficult. I will have to thank Solas for looking after you, when I feel up to seeing him. I need you, however, to be patient with me. Please."

Their eyes met, his so like hers but unclouded, reminding her briefly of a long-forgotten younger brother that she was quite certain she'd once had. Hadn't she? It was so difficult to remember these days, with her mind so full and worlds away so faded.

Another second chance she had missed.

"No pestering." He agreed, but shifted restlessly from foot to foot, finally giving a sigh. "Everyone wants to see you, mamae."

"I expect I will be bothered soon enough." She replied comfortably, trying not to let the hesitation and dread show on her face. "I also expect that there is a table covered in piles of letters waiting for me."

"Abelas took care of as many as he could, but yes." Freedom responded, frowning at her as she
released his cheeks to brush his hair out of his face. "Mamae...Hope is gone."

Her smile faded slowly as she stared at him, hands stilling, and then dropping to her sides. Something in his restlessly worried expression demanded some sort of comfort, but her mind was too full of confusion to provide it just yet.

"What do you mean, da'len, that Hope is gone?" She inquired carefully, voice a bit stiffer than she had intended. "Did something happen to her?"

"No! No, mamae, she just went home. Solas said she wanted to go home to Regret." Freedom replied, expression still concerned, tense. "She said Regret needed her most now."

"You really need to learn to phrase things better. Well, I always knew she would go to him some day. Perhaps it is for the best." She sighed, some of the tension in her chest easing until the deeper inferences sank in. Frozen, that thought, a shard of panic that she tried to suppress. "She...did she go on her own?"

"I don't know." Freedom replied instantly, apologetically. "I didn't ask, mother."

She wanted to panic, wanted to retreat yet again and push it all aside, but she simply couldn't. It was exhausting living on edge, and she was so tired of it that defeat seemed like an easier option at last. Perhaps he had gone. Seen Regret, knew what she had done.

She had avoided telling him, but if he had been told, she could hold no ill will. It was not only her story. It belonged to Hope and Regret as well, and she had to remember that. It was their choice to tell him or no, how they had come into being.

"That's fine, love, that's fine. I...it is not worth thinking about right now. Thank you for letting me know." She assured gently. Once the thought of losing Hope would have gutted her, but it was only her own fault if she could not summon the courage to go see her. Without lies in the way, she felt more exposed, but also more calm. "It is something I cannot control."

"Mother?" Freedom asked uncertainly, and she couldn't fault him for his nervousness, writ guilelessly across his face. "You seem a little odd. Should I stay?"

"I am just trying to find a new shape for myself." She replied absently, and then chuckled at his confused expression. "Things have changed, I am not quite certain where I fit, that is all. Unstable ground. Things will settle, love, things will settle."

"The ground is very unsettled." Freedom replied, nervousness breaking through his voice. "Things are strange..."

"Hush, my love, I know. You're very young, sometimes I forget you have never seen a blight. It is only the darkspawn." She assured calmly, lifting both hands in reassurance. "It is not a blight, not yet. We will make sure they find no leader to guide their armies."

"The cracks..." He started, and then calmed when she nodded slowly. "You and Solas won't let anything happen?"

"No. We won't." She assured, hoping she sounded confident. It pricked at her, that issue she had yet to find a solution for. There were a thousand other things that had needed doing, and she had assumed they would have time. They did, didn't they? "One way or another, we will keep it from happening."

"All right, mamae." Freedom replied, somewhat dubiously. There was a pause, and then finally he
informed her, "I should go meet Varric, I guess. Oh, and...mamae?"

"Yes, my love?" She asked, already turning to face her aravel.

"Anaris is here." He informed her, and then went haring off through the underbrush with a crash.

Spinning around, she was only in time to watch his back disappearing, lips half parted for a retort she never voiced. Irritation rose, and then amusement, eyes closing as she let out a long, exasperated sigh, shaking her head.

Of course. Nothing could ever be easy, could it?

Well, that was certainly one way to drag her out of her solitude and into the Arlathvhen.

She found him at the edge of a clearing, with a very stiff Patience at his side. She had never seen them look so uncomfortable before, usually Patience was completely and utterly unruffled. Surprisingly, Shianni was with them, her arms folded over her chest as she stared at the man leaning against a tree. It seemed to be a habit of Anaris' to twist himself into positions that looked fairly impressive, but far from comfortable, with a bare shoulder resting against the bark, one foot tucked up against the trunk. It'd probably been too much to hope he'd wear a shirt.

The area was fairly clear, though a campfire nearby looked recently tended, with a bit of magic left behind to keep it under control and keep the pot above it from boiling over. She wasn't terribly surprised he'd chased people off, though a glance upwards proved there was a curious child still perched in one of the trees, watching.

She raised her brows as she glanced upwards, and received an impish smile in response, and a little wave. Returning the wave, a smile tugging up her own lips, she finally approached the trio.

"...and if I'd come to subjugate you, you'd know." He was saying as she wandered up, a feral grin on his lips, voice that casual mix of lazy slurring with just a hint of unhinged malice that she seemed to remember. "Because you'd be subjugated, and my damned boots wouldn't be dirty any more. And I...hear the ringing of a Bel sneaking up behind me."

"And here I thought I was being clever." She replied, seeing Shianni relax minutely as she approached, taking a step closer to Patience. "Are you bothering people, Anaris?"

"Just making new friends...and renewing old acquaintances." Anaris replied, and she endured a heavy arm being slung over her for the second time, this one far less welcome.

Patience frowned, the barest curve of their lips.

How awkward it had become, being touched. It almost felt strange that anyone would do so, especially so casually. She would imagine it was meant to feel affirming, grounding, but it only made her feel...all too aware of how strange it was now.

"I apologize if you weren't sent an invitation directly." She offered, hoping she hadn't stepped on some ancient etiquette she wasn't aware of. Then again, that seemed like the sort of thing Solas would be aware of. "I've stepped away from the organization of such things for some time now."
"No, no...no no. No insults." He assured her, the arm around her shoulder curling in, until he plopped a hand directly on top of her head. "Getting out of the house, you know. Thought I'd poke my head out and see what sort of mischief you and the old man were getting into."

Shianni looked on the edge of drawing her blade, but relaxed when the Lady rolled her eyes expressively, reaching up to remove the hand from her head. The scowl faded into a small smile, deepening as Patience reached over and tucked their fingers in Shianni's arm and the two glanced at each other.

Oh! Well. She'd been missing a lot, it seemed. She wondered why that bothered her so much. Not them being happy, of course, but perhaps being so at ease with it. Perhaps a bit of jealousy. Unflattering, certainly, but likely true.

Anaris resisted her attempt to remove his hand for a few moments, and then sighed and let it fall to the side, arm dropping off of her. Her being free was short-lived, however, because he then slumped against her side. Irritably, she turned and glanced up at the face looming over her.

"What?" She asked more sharply than intended, utterly failing to be polite. "I am uncertain where Solas is, I expect if he is not here, he is at Skyhold or in the city."

"You need a nap, Bel." Anaris replied, sly and self-satisfied. "Woke up on the wrong side of the Fade. A few centuries, and..."

"I have heard it before, and I didn't care for it then, and I won't care for it now." Her voice remained tart, but she relented with a sigh when he leaned a bit heavier on her, weariness replacing annoyance. She'd forgotten how exhausting he was. "Anaris, are you capable of keeping your hands to yourself?"

"Liked you better when you were afraid of me, Bel." Anaris replied snidely, and then snickered as Patience frowned at him again. "This place is a mess. Chaos. Needs someone to straighten it up."

"We happen to like it the way it is." Shianni abruptly said, with understandable hostility. "We don't need any help. Especially not from some..."

"We do well on our own." Patience agreed placidly, their use of the word 'we' somewhat surprising. Though, considering the pairing she hadn't been aware of until now, she shouldn't be shocked. Anaris gave a small snort, expression still easy, though she could feel the slightest bit of tension in him. No need to get him worked up.

Even if he had deserved that.

"Is this because your boots are dirty?" She teased him, getting a grin for her trouble, wide and feral. It was a relief to feel him go limp again, even if the weight was an irritating burden. "Spoiled brat. Go back to your forest, Anaris, let us have our mess."

"A brat, am I?" He drawled slowly, forehead bumping against her temple as he hunched over her, "Does that mean I can call you mommy?"

Oh, that asshole.

"Boundaries, Anaris." She replied quietly into the incredibly tense silence, Shianni's mouth gaping open as she stared at them.

She couldn't laugh. If she laughed, he'd have won. But, she had to admit...that was more than a little
funny. He gave a small 'tch' under her breath as the corner of her mouth twitched, before she managed to stifle the threatening smile.

"Hard to remember them, I was asleep for so long, Bel." Anaris sighed, thankfully pulling away to give her a few more inches of space. "Might need to be reminded."

"How would one do that, exactly?" She asked, already knowing it was the wrong question to ask.

Exhaustion had faded, and the sudden humor was something that had been sorely missed for far too long. She knew she shouldn't indulge him, he was unstable and dangerous, but it was so nice to be around someone who couldn't care less about anything.

"Could use a spanking, if you're offering, Bel." Anaris replied, slow and sly, and then started cackling as she shoved him off of her at last.

Abruptly, he shoved away from the tree and started striding away, leaving her laughing with a hand clapped over her mouth. The cocky swagger lilted dangerously close to being drunken, but she was well aware by now it was only an affectation. Shianni was staring at her, but her gape had turned into a bemused grin, though Patience's attention was fixed on the retreating 'god'.

"I should follow him." They decided, soft, calm voice unruffled. "Please excuse me, my Lady."

"Of course, Patience. I am sorry for the inconvenience." She replied, laughter still breaking through her words. "Has he always been this much trouble?"

"I did not know him well, my Lady. I served Sylaise." The name was said with a shocking amount of scorn for the usually gentle ancient elf, their face giving none of it away. "But...yes. Yes he has been."

"I'll come with you, my heart." Shianni said as Patience nodded and turned to follow Anaris' wandering progress. "My Lady. It is good to see you again."

"Thank you, Shianni. It's good to see you as well."

They shared a smile, and then the commander offered a respectful nod and turned to follow after Patience, a brief jog bringing the shorter woman to the other elf's side. The vestiges of laughter died as the two took each other's hand without even a glance, and she smiled, wistfully.

It was nice to see people happy. It felt like a victory, in some ways. That was the part she should focus on, after all, that people were thriving and doing well. Their happiness should be her happiness.

Shouldn't it?

A few moments searching her mind giving her no answer, she turned to retreat back to her aravel. Patience was watching over Anaris, which meant that Solas' people knew he was here. They would handle it, she could wash her hands of it.

Did that mean he was here, however? Etiquette dictated that she find out and make appropriate greetings, but she would much rather he chose to approach her or not himself. Tactics, not cowardice she told herself, and nearly believed it.

Her aravel was all the quieter for her sojourn into the Arlathvhen, even brief as it had been. Someone had been by to offer the halla some food, which was kind of them. She spent some time in their peaceful company, greeting Hanal'ghilan when their lady came to look in on her as well.
By the time the golden halla moved on, no doubt to see to her herd, the sun was beginning to wane and the camps were getting noisier. The sounds of music and the scent of food was tempting, but in the end she simply retreated into the tent, forcing herself to consider going through the correspondence at last.

There was yet some daylight, low and casting shadows across the thin walls, a lattice of leaves and branches that swayed constantly. She hadn't realized she'd simply stopped to watch until the pattern shifted, a darker shadow casting itself across the peak of the tent.

She could feel the weight of it, as he came to stand in the doorway, and the few greetings she had practiced could not find her tongue. Calm, she was calm, but her heart was thundering, pounding against her chest.

All she could think of was when last they had spoken on the ship, the pain and the memories she had shared with him. The burden she had never wanted to place on his shoulders.

She was grateful when it was him that broke the silence.

"May we speak?" He asked calmly, voice low enough to be little more than an insinuation in the quiet.

"Of course. What do we need to discuss?" She asked, wishing her own voice was so controlled, sounding unnaturally stilted and loud. "Is it something that requires the council?"

Panic was pushed aside as she had earlier, trying to force calm back in once more. She heard him breathe in, sigh, and then he spoke once more.

"No, but I would not want to lie to you. Hope took me to see Regret, I thought that you should know." He informed her, and she was grateful for the detachment in his voice. "We need not speak of it, but I would not hide it from you."

Silence, for a few moments, as her mind raced to absorb that. She had perhaps already known that he might have, ever since Freedom brought up Hope, but to hear it? What could she say? There was no way to lie about it now. She had been desperate for him never to find out, to know what she had done. Selfish, foolish, and in the end, ultimately futile. She could not control everything, after all.

As the silence stretched onward she heard him turn to leave, and she took in a swift breath, consciousness returning as air filled her lungs. She had no energy for anything but honesty, everything else had been wrung from her.

"I am...I am very sorry, Solas. I have been...I have been wracked with guilt over it, I would never..." She started, tears already forming as she tried in vain to blink them back. "I never should have tried."

"My Lady, I do not blame you." He assured quietly, and she was grateful they had their backs to one another. "Nor, I suspect, would he. I know that means little, but I hope it is of some comfort."

"He saved so many lives by giving himself up and I...I could not save him." Broken, that quiet confession, a hand lifting to her mouth and muffling her words. "He was not...in the end when it mattered most of all, anything less than a good man who felt he had no choice but to do terrible things, and I...I never could have saved him."

"You did, in the end, my Lady." He replied quietly, and she gave a small, pained laugh that caught in the back of her throat. "I know. It is no comfort, but it is truth. It was always meant to be my regret to bear, it never should have been yours."
"How do you not hate me?" She whispered, lost and forlorn, wishing that he would, take some of the burden of recrimination from her shoulders. "I do not comprehend it. So many years of lies, and I..."

"I could no more hate you than I could hate myself. I expect it is self-preservation that makes me so understanding." He replied, and surprise roused a rough laugh from her, a quiet chuckle from him accompanying it. The sound died quickly, and tension returned until he spoke once more. "I will leave you in peace."

Blinking away a few tears, she found the weight on her chest somewhat lighter than she had expected, the words had spilled from her with more ease. Forcing herself to breathe again, clear her mind, she tried to focus.

"Is...Anaris. Is he going to cause any trouble?" She asked hesitantly, all too aware of the reactions from his people to the man. "He does not seem to be well liked."

"It will fade. My people are deeply suspicious even yet, and many of them never knew him, they only know he is a child of the Evanuris." Solas said placidly, voice slow and thoughtful. "Once they realize he has no interest in anything but his own amusements, it will pass. As for trouble? No, my Lady. He has far too much to occupy his time even now. If there is to be trouble, it will be far in the future."

"I suppose that is some small comfort." She sighed, turning her attention to her table. "I hope that you enjoy yourself. It seems we will have few opportunities to do so."

"Yes. I..." So much hesitation in his voice that she half turned to face him, gaze flicking away from his eyes before he could meet them, though her eyes traced the patterns of shadows swaying across his cheek from the trees outside. "I stopped by the village...though I suppose it is large enough now to be called a city in truth. Enasal, not Arlathan, and..."

"It is growing well. They seem to be doing..." She agreed, but stalled, trying to find a way to finish the thought, mind blank. "Well. Yes."

It almost made him cringe, the sudden awkwardness of the moment, though she still wasn't quite certain why it was. His voice had become earnest, more so than she was comfortable with, and the tension was rising by the second. Trying to break it, she started turning towards the table, only to stop as her restless gaze wandered past him again, still avoiding his face.

He was holding something in his hands. A small box, one that she was all too familiar with.

"Felassan...told me that you enjoy them. I was passing through, and so I thought..." He began, and then cleared his throat. "I will leave it on your table, if you would like...or I can take them away."

"No! I..." She hastily replied, and then let out a quiet breath and nodded. "Thank you. It is very thoughtful of you. It will be nice to have a chance to enjoy one or two before they start being stolen."

She held her ground as he took a step back in, quietly setting the box of sweets on her table, next to one of the imposingly large piles of letters awaiting her. Her eyes fixed on his hands, she watched them withdraw, and then disappear as he turned and left her in silence.

Alone at last, desperately trying to cling to the remnants of peace her quiet sojourn had left her with, she wrapped her arms tightly around herself, fingers digging into her upper arms. As she closed her eyes, she could feel the warmth rising in her cheeks, and she indulged in a small, private smile, teeth catching on her bottom lip.
Oh, Ellana. You fool.
Diplomacy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Orana led the way through the trees hastily, the baby tied to her back laughing merrily with the bouncing movements. At least someone was enjoying themselves. Flustered, attempting to wring and twist up her hair as she followed, Ellana's eyes shifted ahead of her maid, piercing the maze of firelight and slender shadows, hunting until she found their destination.

It was already too late.

As they approached the clearing, Anaris flopped down on a stone bench, staring at the dwarf seated next to him like one might examine a strange insect. Garrett was already beginning to scowl darkly.

"How bizarre. And it thinks for itself and everything?" Anaris asked, leaning down until Varric slid the glasses down his nose and stared at him. "Unintended consequences everywhere you look, aren't there?"

She hadn't known he could speak common.

"Usually people just call me by my name." Varric said slowly, his expression fairly neutral. "And yes, I do tend to think for myself. Got opinions and everything. Keep it up and you'll get to hear some of them."

"Well!" She interrupted sharply, trying to break through the rising heat before it boiled over. "Isn't this just a lovely evening."

Eyes snapped to her, though her dagger of an intervention did little to drain the tension from the air. Still, she smiled, though she could feel all joy draining from it as Garrett's dark expression turned on her.

Things between them still were not well.

She took in the silver in his beard, creeping up his temples, his outside appearance finally beginning to match the age of his eyes. They met hers, and held, as Anaris examined Varric.

They were seated around a fire, the Kirkwall contingent, welcome at her Arlathvhen more than Anaris could claim to be. She did not see Aveline or her husband; perhaps they had not come. More bags than people, she imagined some were off enjoying other parts of the festival. How reassuring, that things were still amiable.

The growing discomfort in the air was broken by a welcome sound, the bright laughter of a baby.

Garrett's expression eased instantly, and he rose to his feet, extending both hands.

“Let me see her," he demanded, laughter in his voice, “I have a right, I believe.”

Shy as she was, Orana still smiled, ducking her chin as she lifted the chubby-cheeked baby from her back. Bethany was alike to her father as Young Garrett was, but with the bright green eyes of her mother. A contented child, easy to carry about on errands.

“Ah, your namesake would love you,” Garrett said contentedly, moving in to take the elven child
from his once-servant, lifting her high. Tiny his massive, scarred hands, Bethany squeaked and babbled, waving fat little fists in the air.

“I hope she will be half the joy to those around her that Mes...that Carver always said she was to you,” Orana interjected softly, much to Ellana's surprise.

“She already is,” Garrett assured her, shifting the little baby to his side, tucking her into his arm. “May I hold her a while? I would like to make friends.”

“Yes Messere...Champion...Hawke?”

“Garret,” came the response in a tolerant sigh, as he returned to his seat next to Varric, stretching out his legs. “Don't start calling us by titles now, or Viscount Tethras might have words with you.”

“They...wore me down,” Varric said exasperatedly at her surprised look, now steadily ignoring Anaris. “What was I going to say, no?”

Some noise from the woods, a soft crashing of underbrush, and they all paused for a moment. Ellana settled next to Anaris, allowing his lean against her shoulder with silent sufferance. If it kept things peaceable, she would endure his eternal need for attention.

He was beginning to remind her of a cat she once knew, who would slap things from her desk while she was trying to handle business.

“Of course you weren't...going to say no.”

The voice came from the woods, growing stronger as the noises through the brush increased. It was Aveline's bright red hair that caught the firelight first, glistening across the short-shorn strands as she led her husband out.

His arm was slung around her neck, the false leg that had been made for him tucked under an arm as they moved unevenly along. She felt a twinge of sympathy, the seam of her recreated arm briefly aching as memories swam to the surface.

A different thing, an arm rather than a leg, but she still remembered.

“Well, hello everyone,” Donnic greeted, letting Aveline help him to an open seat. “It's a nice night for an evening.”

“Oh, Maker,” Aveline sighed, as Garrett laughed to himself in a rumbling roar.

“Evening,” Varric greeted, and turned his offended attention to Aveline. “I tried to say no!”

“Yes, of course, while rebuilding the entire city out of the goodness of your heart,” Aveline said dryly, settling down herself after Donnic got comfortable. “Frankly, I think you're just offended they noticed and made you take responsibility.”

“Well, when she's right...”

Garrett laughed, and then winced as small baby hands twisted in his beard, little Bethany apparently enamored of it. Ellana smiled, ducking her head a bit, only to be drawn back sharply as Anaris spoke again in his languidly idle voice. His weight against her increased, and she met his unnaturally emerald eyes with a quirk of her brow.

“This is all very well and good, but where's the fun, Bel?”
“I expect your sort of fun could be better off found at home,” she retorted to him, but with a smile that was only half forced. “Why must you insist upon attending, if you find it all so odious?”

“I missed you terribly,” he lied, “it gets so lonely being worshipped and adored and working your fingers to the bone.”

“Your life is a tragedy, Anaris, writ large across the ages.”

“It is,” he agreed, throwing himself upon her shoulder dramatically. Somewhere behind him, Varric snorted. Anaris pulled himself, turned, glared at the dwarf narrowly, and then looked back at her. “Short-sighted, short-lived creatures cannot hope to understand the magnitude of my suffering.”

“Shall we go find you a divan?” she asked, not bothering to hide the sarcasm.

“That would be exceedingly welcome,” Anaris declared, pushing to his feet, “but for now, I'm going to see if I can go find an orgy...or start one. I'm not picky. Coming, Bel?”

“You'll have to go without me,” she said, glancing sidelong at a motion out of the corner of her vision.

Garrett was holding his gigantic hands over the baby's ears. When she raised an eyebrow at him, he grinned at her. She stifled a relieved sigh. Children always seemed to sweeten his mood. Perhaps they wouldn't end up fighting after all.

“I think you mean I'll have to come without you,” Anaris replied in a parting retort, and then swanned off into the darkness to the sounds of barely-stifled laughter.

Ellana felt a surge of relief, brief as it was. She had successfully diverted him. How exhausting Anaris was, she couldn't imagine the sort of chaos and danger the Elvhen courts had been, to create a creature such as him. If that was the world of the Ancient Elvhen, she was grateful not to have born into it.

“That wasn't funny,” Aveline told Garrett, who was beginning to turn red.

Orana was already scarlet, but not from laughter. Poor thing.

“It was pretty funny,” Varric allowed, and then glanced at Ellana from over his glasses, “but even so, that may have been the worst person I've ever met in my life. It took him less than five minutes. I feel like there should be some sort of award for that amount of skill.”

“He's charming, isn't he? I'm so sorry.”

“Don't...apologize for other people,” Varric sighed, “this isn't a diplomatic...incident.”

“Thank the Creators, I think...” she paused at the looks being given her. “What?”

“Do you even get to say that any more?” Varric replied with a little grin.

“Oh...shut up,” she replied, and then endured the laughter being turned on her instead.

As the merriment faded, she became aware of a figure emerging from the trees at the edge of the clearing. A young Elvhen woman, wearing the brown and red waist-satchel of a message runner. Ellana met her eyes, and the tension in the girl's face relaxed, a bow of her head offered. She was obviously waiting.
“Please excuse me, everyone,” she said regretfully, rising from the fire and their pleasant greetings. Approaching the message runner, she tilted her head expectantly, maintaining her smile. No point scaring the girl, who already looked horribly nervous.

“I'm sorry...my Lady, I am sorry to interrupt your evening,” the girl said, stammering softly as she gazed down at her. “I could not find your maid.”

“Not at all,” Ellana assured her, forcing a soft smile, “it seems urgent.”

“A human woman has arrived with some people. She said she has a letter for you,” the girl said, distress increasing, “she would not give it to me. I am sorry. The Sentinels are guarding her.”

Frowning, she gestured to the girl. With a nod, the messenger turned and started walking, Ellana pacing after her. The trees swallowed them, bringing them slowly towards the edge of the Arlathvhen as Ellana considered the possibilities.

Someone from Rivain, perhaps? Or from Isabela? Trade was not within her purvey at all, the Hahrens and their advisors could handle such business. As far as she could see, Feynriel and Felassan were delegating those things quite well.

From Anora, another entreaty to return to Ferelden? She certainly hoped not. Things between them had been quiet and chilly since her marriage to Gaspard. Frustrating, that. She realized Anora felt Ellana and Solas had forced her into the marriage by refusing to return land to the humans, but that was simply ridiculous.

Desiring power and control in Tevinter was the culprit, not her refusal to allow Anora to go back to slaughtering spirits. Her choices were her own.

They broke through the trees, light spilling over them both as Ellana breeched the wood and came face to face with the awaiting humans and Sentinels, arranged around a fire. She was surprised to see Abelas' wife to be standing with them, arms crossed and face suspicious as it usually was.

It wasn't Velanna that truly shocked her, however, but the woman rising from the fire.

The sudden freeze of her chest seemed to clench around her heart, pressing with a well-known pain that never truly left her. No, every time, every single time...

She tried to keep it from her face as her eyes roved desperately, drinking in the sight that made her want to weep. Beloved, familiar, one more life saved. The dearest of friends, last seen bleeding out on the lifeless ground, one last sacrifice for the good of all, made willingly.

Josephine.

She stood there, not knowing how much time had passed in her agonizing reverie, abruptly snapped back into focus when Josephine spoke. It was then that she saw the differences, the age, a small scar along her jaw, the traveling clothes of obvious Tevinter make, even if the jewelry was familiar.

“My Lady, I apologize for intruding upon your festivities,” she said, in a voice so familiar it hurt all over again. “We were going to the village to search for you, and happened upon this...festival. I hope our presence here does not...infringe upon any rules or customs, if so, we are deeply sorry. It was unintentional.”

“Of course not,” she assured, approaching Josephine with a smile that was likely too warm, “you are welcome here, Lady Montilyet.”
“You...know who I am,” Josephine said with surprise, and then laughed softly, “of course you do. I was asked to deliver a diplomatic letter. As well as handling any discussions that came from it.”

“May I see it?” she asked, approaching.

The letter was extended to her, and she took it with care, making certain not to touch her. Why, she couldn't say, but it was a discomfort she had felt before when encountering those she had known once. Especially those she had seen die.

The letter was surprisingly without fanfare, she realized as she turned it over. A simple vellum sheet sealed with wax, no design stamped into it. How odd. Certainly out of the norm for any political dispatches she had ever been sent by the Tevene allies. Usually there was gildings and ribbons aplenty.

Thumbing between wax and vellum, she split it open as she glanced aside to Abelas and nodded. He returned the gesture, and then began quietly dictating to his men in Elven, leaving two behind to guard the camp before the rest departed. It was pleasant to have such familiar, wordless gestures between them.

Her momentary better humor died when she looked back to the letter.

The address was so familiar that she instantly knew who it was from without even glancing to the end. Swallowing back more emotions, she began to read.

_Lethallen Ella,_

_I'm sorry to write you this. I know you are very busy, but unfortunately so are we. Darrian is insistent that we go, and so I only have time to write you this letter before we leave Tevinter (a place I am happy to say goodbye to). He is insistent that we are facing a Blight once again, and I must follow where he goes. I will always follow._

_Our husband will not be dissuaded from joining him, nor will I, and so I think we will simply go without alerting anyone. We leave no one behind to suffer for it. It may cause some noise, but it is not in Darrian's nature to accept being used as a political pawn while his purpose goes unfulfilled. We go to the Deep Roads beneath, through the Thaigs and into darkness. The Archdemon is calling him._

_We will protect him, so do not fear. But please, I do not want to let him die to stop this Blight._

_You promised before that you could save him, and you did. Please come and save him again, before he must do what you stopped him from doing before. It is much to ask, I know, but you promised me once that you would always be there for me as family is supposed to be._

_So I ask you now, my sister, my cousin, my friend...come save my husband. He would be very distraught if I had to tie him up and sit on him to keep him from foolishness._

_with all my love,_

_Lyna_

She glanced up, met Josephine's eyes again. Keeping a stern professional expression, she folded the
letter up with care, tilting her head at the woman curiously.

“The Hero of Ferelden has gone missing,” Josephine said, face giving away nothing in its pleasant neutrality, “and Tevinter is of course very concerned. There have been signs of Darkspawn, and other such strangeness, and with the last of the Wardens having disappeared…”

“Of course there is some concern,” Ellana finished agreeably, tucking the letter into the front of her tunic.

“Yes, of course,” Josephine said, and then gave a faint ‘ah’. “The letter I am to bring to you, I am so sorry. One moment.”

With some amusement, Ellana watched as a second letter was produced from a satchel, this one with the requisite pomp and frippery. Now this was a diplomatic parcel. She accepted it with a quirk of her brow as Josephine passed it to her, nodding slightly.

Josephine's innocent expression hadn't changed.

“Thank you,” she said, and scanned the second letter.

This one was from the Council, a request that she find, locate, or otherwise reassure them about the Hero and the current state of the world. The Blight, of course, being a concern worthy of the whole world's notice, rather than one country.

She could feel Gaspard's fingers all over this letter, from the thinly veiled accusations to the simpering implications of 'of course you wouldn't want such a thing to happen'. Tiresome. Couldn't the old man just ask for help?

“Let me consult my powers,” she declared, glancing up into Josephine's face. They locked eyes for perhaps three seconds. “…The Hero of Ferelden is alive,” she finished, smiling very faintly.

This was a silly bit of playacting, but so much of politics was. It was a relief that Josephine of all people had gained Lyna's trust in that court of vipers, enough to entrust with this letter for her.

“We all feel a great deal of relief at that news,” Josephine said, as if she hadn't already known, complete with relaxed smile. “Will you be wishing to send a letter back with me?”

“I will. Will you stay the night? I will have someone bring you and yours food and drink, and I will have something for you in the morning for your trek home.”

“That would be delightful! Thank you so much for your hospitality.”

“The pleasure,” Ellana said with more fervency than she'd intended, “is all mine.”

As she stepped back and into the darkness, the weight of relief and pain came crashing back into her, an agony of disparate parts combined into an overwhelming whole. It caught in her throat, siezing painfully as she kept walking, breathing through her nose to try and force air into lungs that wanted to refuse.

Too much.

She managed to find a quiet place to collapse, curling in against the trunk of a tree in search of protection. The first cry escaped in a ratcheting, painful gasp, the second swallowed by her hand as she clamped it down. And then the tears came after, hot and prickling, spilling down her cheeks,
dripping over her fingers as she rocked and tried not to make any noise.

A short-lived storm, but they seemed to come more frequently these days.

No one disturbed her, not even the spirits, and when she was done weeping over memories that would not stay buried, she rose to her feet to find Solas.

Her pain didn't matter, this was an opportunity they'd been looking for.

Strange to be summoned by the Lady, considering their earlier awkward encounter.

It had raised some odd hope for Solas, hope he dared not acknowledge or put a name to, but when he arrived at her aravel it was decidedly quashed. Her face was drawn, eyes reddened, but her expression was all seriousness. Whatever grief had struck her was to be ignored.

He certainly wasn't going to draw attention to it.

She was sitting at the small table that was habitually strewn with letters, bottles, and forgotten food. It did not escape his notice that the box he had brought her from the nearby village was open, half-empty. Despite the gravity in the air he smiled faintly to himself, but set it aside when she began to speak.

“I have had a missive, from Tevinter. From the Council.”

Faintly golden in the mage lights he noted she had now opted to use, she extended a bedecked and belabored document across the table. Taking the silent offer, he moved to settle across from her, accepting it with an incline of his head.

He scanned it briefly, forehead furrowing.

“The Hero of...”

“The previous blight. He...stopped it. He is a Gray Warden, and my friend,” she said, challengingly.

“Yes, I have heard the tales,” he replied, feeling not a single ounce of animosity for her aggression. “I know how much you care for your friends. Are you saying you wish to...look for him?”

“No, I am saying I know where he is,” she replied, to his surprise. Their eyes met, and she smiled, sadly. “A fact that no one will say directly, so please do keep that private. But I had thought, considering our conversations...”

“It is an excuse to see to Tevinter at last,” he finished, mind racing over the possibilities.

“Terrified of the Blight, they are...reaching out to us at last,” she said, quietly persuasive, “we have a proper diplomatic reason to enter their lands. To...hunt the Hero, the last Gray Wardens, to find them
and stop this Blight.”

“And you know where they all are.” A statement, not a question.

She smiled, this time a bit more genuinely, and lowered her head into a small nod. The smile faded, ever so slightly, and her habitually-averted eyes grew hard, face stony.

“I know where they are. Tevinter does not, and does not know that I know. It will remain that way, for as long as we need to be in their capitol to root out the source of this...slavery of men and spirits.”

“The Blight will not wait,” he reminded her, though not disagreeing, “and we cannot guarantee the Wardens will be safe.”

“I am surprised you care, I know what you think of their mission,” she reminded him.

A pause, as he considered her words. It was true, he found what the Grey Wardens had done, did to those Old Gods to be horrifying, detestable. And yet...

“In the last Blight, things went differently. As they will this time,” he said, shaking his head slowly, “as they will continue to. You did not let them sacrifice the spirit of Urthemiel, I do not believe you will let them do it once more.”

“Have you...met him?”

“I have not, no,” Solas denied, watching her face curiously.

“He is...a friend. His mother and I are...not-friends, but I respect her wholeheartedly. She raised him...well. She raised him well, he is wise, and gentle, and at peace with the duality inside of himself. A difficult thing, two souls in one body, but Kieran is managing admirably.”

“A feat that could be replicated?” he asked her, curiously.

She made a bit of a face, wrinkling her nose, “I suppose? I would really rather not sleep with a Gray Warden to give birth to Razikale or whoever, if it's all the same to you. There are...better ways with the veil gone.”

He cleared his throat awkwardly, and she laughed to herself, shaking her head.

“I hadn't realized that was...the method utilized. I apologize for the unwanted implication.”

“It's all right, really. At any rate, I am Blighted as they are, so...”

“Does it give you much trouble?” he inquired quietly.

“Not particularly. I did it to save a friend. Unfortunately I did not manage to save both of them, but...I manage well enough. Blighted lyrium is unpleasantly loud, but your...gifts keep the mortal symptoms at bay. Sometimes I wonder if I sing to the darkspawn, like an archdemon does.”

“I would imagine you would have noticed.”

Another quiet, sad smile, and she nodded her head. “Yes.”

She was silent for a time, turning over a different letter in her fingertips, staring down at it. He was patient with her, watching her in contemplative silence of his own.
This was...complex. Tevinter, while not as time sensitive, was perhaps the larger threat. The blights would not end even if they freed the Old God, it would simply delay things for a time. The blights were not...

“They're not stopping any longer, are they?” she asked, interrupting his thoughts with nearly the same ones of her own.

“No,” he denied, “they will not stop, only be slowed. A greater force is required to end them at last.”

“A greater force, or a greater sacrifice?”

“You already know,” he surmised, and then sighed at her pained grimace. “I will wait as long as I may, Ellana.”

The use of her name stalled her, lips pursing into a line. She went still, and there was an intensity to her suddenly. He watched as her hands clenched into fists, fingers digging into her palms in a way he was all too familiar with. Extreme tension in the air now, and before he could voice an apology, she whipped her head up and turned her gaze on him, meeting his eyes with a sudden ferocity that silenced him.

“You have no right!”

The shout nearly echoed in his ears despite the quietness of the tent, her face a mask of rage as her eyes pierced into his.

“I...I beg your pardon?”

“You don’t even know it will work, Solas, and no, before you ask...I don’t know either. But I do know when last I saw him...I doubt it was working.”

“Impossible to say until it was over,” he denied, dismissed, “and I would rather not speak of...him.”

She slapped both hands on the table, a bottle rolling off and falling to the rug, rolling away onto the grass. He blinked at her, and she glared at him, a crease between her eyes as she rose to her feet, leaning over the table.

“I said, you have no right,” she spat at him, and continued, “and you are far more necessary to the continued survival of this world than I am. I am more dangerous, more untrained, more...fickle and weak.”

Anger rose then, and he did as well, standing to face her accusations against herself. It hurt, strangely, to hear her speak this way. Not just of herself, but of him.

“Do not speak of yourself in that manner. It is not your decision, I have made it. It is I who did those grievous wrongs to the world, not you, and I would ask you kindly to set aside your self-sacrificing foolishness and acknowledge that! I have accepted it! I have accepted this fate!”

His voice was rising, but so was hers, and he found he could not stop himself now. He had always been too prone to these rages, and right now her own was goading him.

“Foolishness? This is what I have become, it is my sacrifice to repay a debt. How dare you minimize that? How dare you minimize what those people sacrificed to give us this chance.”

“I am not speaking of them, I am speaking of you,” he retorted, watching as she threw her hands up
and stomped away from the table. “And your continued insistence on taking the burdens I have 
rightfully earned. I have earned the hatred, the reputation, the disdain. All of it! I have done the 
crimes, and I have made the decision! It is done, your tantrum cannot change it.”

“Fuck your decision!” she responded harshly, stunning him into silence for a moment. “And also 
while we are on the subject, Solas, fuck you! You are not allowed to sacrifice yourself. There. 
Would you like me to decree it?”

“You have no authority over me;” he said, finding no other words coming to his lips from his 
benumbed mind.

“You would never hurt me,” she replied, turning to face him, expression frigid, “you never would. 
Not intentionally. I'd always known that, always. But I? I am fully capable of hurting you. If that's 
what it takes to save you? I will.”

In the renewed silence as they stared at one another, him in shock, her in icily passionate rage, a 
single sound split the air.

Clapping, slow and dramatic, from a dark corner of the tent.

“Splendid!” said Anaris, walking into the light, “When do we leave for Tevinter? I'm so excited.”

Chapter End Notes

Un-edited, let's pray there's not too many egregious or glaring flaws. This was a nice 
change of pace, I'm working on a re-write of a finished book. Hopefully one last round 
of editing afterwards before I start sending query letters out to literary agents. Cross your 
fingers for me!
Letters

Chapter Summary

A history in letters, kept safe in a trunk through the years and worlds. Mildly NSFW.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9:41 Dragon

“The Herald...has disappeared again.”

The words came from the doorway, and he glanced up to meet the gaze of the Seeker, her sculpted face full of concern and conflict. “I had noticed she came...to speak to you. I had hoped she had said something.”

“We spoke of no plans to depart. She had some questions about the mark.” He replied smoothly, expression betraying nothing. “I no more know where she is than you do.”

“But...she does speak to you, yes?” Cassandra continued, prying, taking a half step forward over the threshold. Her words were firm as always, but her hands clutched together, restless. “She says nothing? I cannot...I have tried to speak with her.”

“Scarcely. She gave her word she would stay, did she not? Perhaps she's gone for a walk.” Irrationally, he felt a slight surge of annoyance. If she had ran...it would make things difficult. “I cannot imagine having her every move tracked and scrutinized would be a comfortable thing for a Dalish elf.”

For a moment Cassandra looked chagrined, which he found interesting. She had proved to be slightly more flexible of mind than anticipated. How much so, only time would tell. ...Time. A necessity that rankled yet, though impatience had already cost him dearly. And yet, it was a necessity, for time was no longer on his side. Sacrifices had to be made, and had been made.

And would be made.

“I...simply wish to ensure she is safe. It is dangerous, even here in Haven, and the Herald cannot defend herself.” Cassandra finally replied, and then gave a long sigh, shaking her head. “No. There is no excuse. I have been...stifling. You are correct. I should trust in Leliana's people to watch over her.”

He wondered why it was that they seemed so thoroughly convinced that the Dalish woman was helpless. Certainly she hadn't fought until now. At the breach she had simply avoided the pride demon, crippled it with the anchor. She was not a mage, and she admitted to not being a healer. She moved like a seasoned warrior, but only when she thought no one was watching. A curious deception.

It hardly mattered.
“She is shy, I suppose. Or uncomfortable.” Cassandra said, musingly. “I have tried to speak to her, I know that Varric...in his particular way...has as well. She does not willingly speak to anyone but you, however.”

“I am the only one who has studied the mark on her hand. I expect that is a more pressing issue for her than making friends.” He pointed out dryly, but admitted the truth of it to himself, all the same. They had spoken, once or twice. Perhaps it was a misplaced sense of kinship on her part. “What do you wish me to do? Attempt to find her? Is that not what Leliana’s people are for?”

He forced his shoulders to bow when they wished to straighten, kept his voice mild. It would do no good to show his irritation now, to sharpen his words. Progress had been made, and he would not let himself destroy it. Despite being useful, his position remained precarious.

"I would like things handled more tactfully...than I have been thusfar. I would be grateful if you could try to speak to her instead, Solas." Cassandra offered quietly, glancing aside. "I have...done everything I can think of, but she says nothing to me."

"Hoping for some divine guidance from your Herald, Seeker?" He inquired, more curious than accusing.

"We must work together. I would like for it to be as pleasant an experience as possible, despite the circumstances." Cassandra finally replied, letting out a long sigh. "We must find a way. I cannot do anything if she will not speak to me, and we must leave for the Hinterlands soon. Please, Solas. I need your help."

"I can hardly refuse." He replied simply, and then turned to move past her as she watched him.

It wasn't difficult to know she wouldn't be hiding within the walls of the village, and he picked up her trail easily as it followed along the edge of the frozen pond. She'd made no effort to cover her tracks, the snow having barely blown over them to soften the edges. No point in hiding her path when she was constantly followed.

He knew it was her. She never wore the human-styled boots that they stubbornly left at her bedside.

The trail ended at a copse of tall pines, tops swaying in the ever-present mountain wind. He didn't need to look up to know she was there, and he made a point not to while he ascertained where she was.

"I wonder if I might know the purpose of all this deception.” He remarked, leaning against the trunk of the tree and gazing up through the branches at the woman sitting with her back to the trunk. If not for the faint red tint of her undershirt, she might be all but invisible in her mottled leathers.

"It's called camouflage.” She replied placidly, voice low in the way that everyone seemed to misinterpret as timidity. "Not deception."

"Ah, we feel like speaking today, do we?” He asked, and she hid the very edges of a smile, eyes shifting sidelong and down to him. "Josephine and Cassandra are beginning to grow a bit worried about you. They need you to put on a good face for this Inquisition of theirs."

"I cannot put on a good face.” This time her voice was full of impish humor, in a way he'd never heard before in their brief interactions. "The vallaslin doesn't come off."

Her smile blossomed at last when he frowned up at her, bringing a bit of warmth to her eyes, mischief to her features. It suited her much better than the false modesty and shyness. There was an easy mobility to her mouth, the way it curved up an invitation to a private joke.
"To what deception do you refer?" She finally asked, relenting under the weight of his stare.

He held his words until she finished swinging down from the tree, sliding down a few branches and then dropping, landing neatly in the thin snow underneath the evergreen. Rising from her crouch, she dusted off her rear end, and then set off, further away from Haven. He considered inquiring, but her movements were purposeful, searching. She no doubt had a destination in mind.

"Apart from pretending you are too afraid to speak to anyone so that they do not bother you, or the pretense on several occasions that you do not even speak the common tongue?" Again, his words roused a smile, this time with a small, private laugh. Despite himself, he smiled, shaking his head. "In this case I was referring to the fact that the Seeker thinks you are completely helpless."

"It has saved me from having to speak with Orlesian nobility, and so I consider it a necessary deception." She retorted, and he had the feeling she was mimicking his cadence. He hadn't heard her speak often enough to know if it were the case or not. "As for the matter of the Seeker, that too I find necessary."

"Is that so? You do not deny it is a deception, I notice."

"Perhaps I simply enjoy having well-muscled, stern Andrastian women rescuing me from danger." She replied, voice more slow and ponderous than before, and this time the teasing mockery was plain. "I do enjoy a good swoon, Solas, wouldn't you agree?"

"I fear the Seeker would not catch me if I fell, and so I will not attempt to test her reflexes." He replied, and she laughed, bright and quick, trailing off into a small sigh, a hitch of breath.

"You're harder to annoy than I thought you might be." She admitted, and this time her voice sounded more casual, at ease, dropping the pretense of mimicry. "But I'm surprised they sent you to pester me. Perhaps the shape of your ears makes me more liable to hear you?"

"They've not seen you seek out anyone else to speak." Solas replied, and she gave a faint 'ah' under her breath. "What quarry do we hunt, my Lady Herald?"

The humor was perhaps inappropriate, but seeing her unbend was unusual enough to intrigue him. He'd not seen her smile even once, and now he had heard her laugh, found her wit was both edged and playful. It was difficult not to return it.

"A message, my dear apostate, a message." She replied blithely, and then shot him a sidelong look, voice growing more tense. "And I would ask that you please never call me your Lady again. I find the title makes me queasy."

"So noted." He replied smoothly, taking that bit of information and tucking it into an appropriate place for later consideration of her character. "This message, may I inquire as to where it has come from?"

"You may." She replied, but did not answer.

Startling him, her gait smoothly shifted from a lazy amble to a loping run, braid bouncing over her shoulder as she darted ahead of him. For a moment he simply watched her fly, half-bare feet leaving a neat trail across the unbroken snow, disappearing over the crest of a hill. No. She was no helpless thing.

He followed more sedately, with no fear of losing her, feeling the pulse of the mark in her palm as she drew ahead. It sang in the back of his mind, a harmony without its melody.
When he reached the top of the hill, he saw her destination awaiting them. A single arrow, upright with bright red fletching, tucked into the crack of a tumbled boulder. She'd paused to observe it, eyes scanning the horizon, and then sighed and trudged closer, movements heavy, without the previous fluidity.

"Far too much to ask that they'd leave someone to speak with me." She complained, weary words not quite hiding the plaintive note. "At least they left a message at all."

"Your people, then? I was surprised no other Dalish elves have hastened to join in, or look in on you." His words roused a small, sly quirk of her lips as she plucked the arrow from the crevice and untied the note. "Unless no one knew you were at the Conclave, I suppose."

"Hmmmh." She replied blandly, using a thumb and finger to unroll the small message, eyes scanning over it. Her displeasure touched her lips first, and then her eyes as they narrowed. "Arse."

He watched in silence as she methodically ripped the paper into tiny pieces, with a bit more vehemence than necessary. She continued tearing until the last piece proved too small for the edges of her nails, and dropped into the snow to join the others.

It was likely not the right moment to ask why she'd decided to convince everyone she was illiterate, on top of being too shy to speak. He already knew the answer; the same for both questions. She wanted nothing to do with any of what they were foisting upon her.

"Arse." She repeated, this time resigned, and then shook her head and turned on a heel. "Well, it looks like I'm stuck here."

"That was in doubt? I had thought the breach in the sky, the Left and Right Hands of the Divine, all of the soldiers, assassins...might be some small impetus to stay."

He followed her, back up the hill, and this time her steps were leaden, resigned. He could feel her withdrawing once again, pulling the protective veil back over herself. Shuttering herself away and back behind the lies. Understandable, but frustrating.

She still seemed to think she had some choice in all of this.

"No, only you, my wayward apostate friend. It seems you are all that is keeping me alive." She replied, and then extended her hand, green light flickering over her fingers as she clenched her hand. "The closest Keeper says they know nothing, and so I cannot leave. I had hoped that they might know...something to break my dependence on these Andrastians."

"You would put the world in peril by running away? What happens here affects all of Thedas, and puts many more lives than those of your Dalish elves in danger." Perhaps irrationally, he felt a surge of annoyance.

"You know as well as I do that these people make martyrs of every elf they touch. I saw a statue of the Hero of Ferelden not too long ago. Ears, filed down. The worst part was, you can tell they'd made him a proper elf once. Hero of Ferelden...a title to wipe away Darrian Tabris' unfortunately elven name." The disgust in her voice was overwhelming, and he bit back his irritation to listen. "But years change the stories, don't they? I expect it was done for something like the good of the children. It always is. I was still going to close the rifts."

"Without the resources and connections of the Inquisition? Who would protect you if the culprit behind all of this finds you?" He pointed out, aware his voice was rising again. The slight scoff she made only irritated him all the further. "If you die, who will close the breach?"
"I am already dead!"

The shout echoed as she turned back to him, fury and pain in her eyes, standing above him on the crest of the hill. For a moment he was silenced by it, tendrils of hair pulled from her braid whipping around her face, features set in steadfast, unwavering lines. The stare held, and rather than faltering she lifted her chin higher, voice ringing.

"There is no ending to this story in which I am alive. I can feel it crawling inside me, burning. When I close a rift the bones inside me tremble, and I wonder if I will shatter." Her eyes were wet, but no tears spilled, and her words remained clear and calm. "The Andrastians call me the Herald of their martyr. They murdered her, and now they say I speak for her. I face a tear in the veil! An unknown enemy, an unknown power, and you have the audacity to scold me for turning to my people instead of trusting those that murder us?"

She could not possibly know the accusation those words laid upon his head, and he was silenced by them, momentarily humbled. After a few moments of holding his gaze, she shook her head and turned away again, expression going blank once more.

"Forgive me. I will trouble you no further. Please keep this excursion to yourself." She requested dully, trudging over the rise and continuing on, posture withdrawing.

"Ellana." The sound of her name, at least, made her pause.

For a moment he found himself lost once it had, searching the depths of his mind for anything he could possibly say. She waited, wind tearing at the edges of her coat, and he gazed up at her and tried to put into words even the slightest fraction of his feelings. She had opened up, and he could do no less, even if it was unwise.

Finally, barely over the whistling of the mountain air that sent tendrils of snow swirling around their ankles, he found his voice again.

"I am sorry."

Solas,

Josephine has found someone to teach me how to write and read! Isn't that exciting? Today I have learned the alphabet, and associated words. They even drew pictures for me. Now I am delighted to inform you that, in fact, A is for Andraste. I shall be writing letters in no time.

Thrilling, isn't it?

I'm going to hide and watch you reading this just so I can see how irritated you look at what an absolute arse I'm being. I'm anticipating it thoroughly. Would you like me to be very sorry when you tell me how much of Josephine's time I am wasting, or would you rather I laughed in your face?

I'm only joking. I already know that you enjoy it when I laugh in your face. I almost saw you smile the earlier when I almost convinced that nun to get naked for the Maker. 'But the sun is His Light and you're denying Him by hiding from it! How dare you, Sister!' I'm getting very good at pretending to be offended. I think that's about half of politics from what I can tell.

Do you think when they make a statue of me, it'll be with my tits out like those Orlesian statues? I do hope so.
Then again, they'd just chisel them off and convince everyone I was a man. I bet you that the only reason they haven't done that to poor Andraste is because she's a bloody martyr. Women and elves are only historical when they die. Maybe that's why they took Tabris' ears, he didn't have the good sense to cack it to the archdemon.

Luckily, I have never been sensible, but I am, sincerely,

The Thorn in Your Side,

Ellana Lavellan of Clan Lavellan, Definitely Not Some Sort of Prophet for a Heap of Charcoal in a Jar

P.S. Is that how titles work, or do you tack them on at the beginning?

P.P.S. My name doesn't look nearly as long as Cassandra's, I stole some of her letters, she has about fifty names. Do you think I should get some middle names? They seem to be in fashion, I don't want to get behind the times; people will think I'm positively savage!

P.P.P.S. In case they didn't have humor when you were a child...that was a joke.

He wasn't surprised to find a note on his desk that morning, she was an exceedingly early riser, and they never shared a bed. She'd always grumble something about Josephine's scolding and slip out of his room before he could entice her to stay the night. It was slightly frustrating, but he understood. He didn't have the heart to tell her she was fooling absolutely no one, the complete cessation of her overt flirtation as telling as being open about it would be.

Then again, knowing her she only did so to entice people to pry.

She was fascinatingly clever, with her sly little tricks and subtle misdirections. All in impish humor, to amuse herself rather than out of malice when it came to him these days. If she didn't hate the artifice of it all, she'd be excellent at courtly intrigue. Instead, she seemed to enjoy teasing him.

The note was folded into a butterfly, and as always he took a moment to admire it before carefully opening it. An odd hobby for them to have found in common, they had both discovered with some bemusement, but it had become a joy as the letters became more frequent. He still kept the very first one she had made him, that mockingly flippant little note. He understood the bitterness and fear it had come from now, but...it had taken her a long time to open up to him.

It had taken him longer.

His first glance at the unfolded letter was surprised to find it smudged and scribbled on, her hand was
actually quite neat ordinarily. Then he realised she'd attempted to write it in elven, as he'd been teaching her in their free time. Taking a second look, he settled into his chair and started reading it, free hand quickly splaying across his mouth, elbow on the arm of his seat.

Well, this was...

Atrocious, honestly. Grammar alone, never mind her spelling.

It was also, he had to admit, positively filthy.

The lack of vocabulary had just made her more creative, which he appreciated. It didn't make up for the mistakes, of course, but it showed some promise. Once he'd read it over...three or four times, he reached for his pen.

And started correcting it.

He handed the note back to her over lunch, folded into a book she'd lent him, barely peeking out of the top. She'd taken it gravely with thanks, and then disappeared to tend to the pile of correspondence that Josephine had left for her. He didn't see her again until dinner. A rare enough thing, generally she'd be too busy even for that, when they found themselves at Skyhold.

Normally he'd eat at his desk, but she'd lured him out to the hall easily enough. He'd had some misgivings about her choice to sit next to Sera and Varric, though the pair didn't pay them too much attention. Her expression remained innocent as they were served, and that alone was evidence enough of some wickedness on her part. Normally she'd be laughing and joking.

“Here you go.” She remarked after some companionable silence, pulling a folded note out of a pocket of her belt and passing it over to him. Folded ordinarily, not one of her careful little creations. He took it, feeling a surge of amusement at her placidly bland little smile. Wicked creature.

“Wot's that?” Sera asked nosily, leaning in against her shoulder, making her laugh and shove the girl away.

“If you have to know.” She started, and he listened while hiding his smile, curious to see how she would respond. “Solas is teaching me to be even more elfy. It's true. Soon I shall be the elfiest elf in all of Thedas.”

“To be fair, you're not doing a terribly good job of it.” He added, as Sera made a noise of disgust. “Your spelling is abysmal.”

“Ouch, Chuckles! That's a little harsh, don't you think?” Varric asked as he finally gave in to her arch look and unfolded the note.

“He's being fair.” She admitted, as he leaned back in his seat to read the note. “I try his patience constantly.”

“Constantly.” He agreed, barely managing to stifle a flush as he read over her little love letter. Switching tongues deftly, he murmured across the table, “My heart, the right word would be dripping.”

“Really?” She asked, a flush in her cheeks, a breath of laughter fluttering over her words. “And, let me guess, the word I used is...”
“A particular shade of blue.” He responded, giving a small shake of his head as he turned back to the oft-corrected scrawl, scanning over the lines. “Are you punishing me for correcting your first note, I wonder?”

“It isn’t not impossible.” She responded, tripping over the words a little clumsily, and then scowling at his smile and snapping back in her more learned tongue. “At least I’m trying! Don’t you dare laugh at me.”

“I would not dream of it.” He assured her, setting the note down next to his plate casually, reaching for his knife. Her small flush and instinctive reach for it nearly made him smile, but he refrained. “If it’s just a language exercise, why shouldn’t I leave it in the open?”

“I think they might be flirtin’.” Sera hissed across the table at Varric, who was eyeing them both with open suspicion. “S’gross..”

Ellana just scowled, turning her own attention to her food, but he could tell she was hiding a flush. Any sense of victory he might have had was immediately destroyed by her next words, which forced him to rapidly clear his throat, covering his mouth with his hand. No. No, she wouldn’t defeat him so easily. He pushed back the embarrassment.

“Did I at least get the next part right? Fuck me in the behind?” She asked curiously, tearing a piece of bread in half with her fingers as she tilted her head to the side.

“I think you’ll find that in this case, behind is the direction. You cannot use it both ways as you can in the common tongue.” He replied, switching between languages more fluidly than her, but keeping the elven slower, so as not to lose her. If she was determined to make this a contest of wills, he didn’t plan on losing. “I believe in this case, what you meant to say is fuck me in the ass, or fuck me FROM behind. Should I even ask how you know that word?”

“Some things endure the passage of time. The Dalish do know a little elven, at least. Snippets.” She retorted sweetly, and far too innocently. By now they were all rather aware what that tone of voice meant from her.

“Yeah, I think you’re probably right.” Varric agreed with Sera, nodding at her. “Either that or she’s trying to piss him off.”

“I would never!” Ellana gasped, and then hid her smirk behind a bite of her dinner. “Ask Josie, I’ve been very good lately. Been a very good little figurehead. If behind doesn’t mean ass, would that mean that ‘slap my ass’ would be righteous?”

“Correct, and yes. Or spank, if you prefer.”

“I would, thank you. But probably later.” She replied, and it took him a moment to realize she’d responded in the common tongue.

As he gave in to the inevitable and laughed, Sera leaned across the table again and hissed to Varric, theatrically.

“...Whatever it was, I think she won.”

Which she had. Oh, she had indeed.

For now.

“I will get my revenge later.” He promised her, still laughing as he picked up the note and folded it
again, enduring her smug little smirk.

“Good.”

When you receive this, I expect that we will already be on our way. Knowing me, I will have slipped it into the pocket of your belt, the one on the right hand side. Will you be surprised to find it? Pleased?

I do not know. I think I would have assumed I did, once.

Maybe I still do. I hope I do.

Cracked, in the rubble, it lay in pieces. He could feel the tremble in his hands, as he sank down, the wan shimmer of the healed sky overhead casting it into stark relief.

What had to be done, it would be...regrettable.

As of late, what had not been?

I will hold you to your promise. That is what I wanted to tell you. It's almost over. One way or another, I think it's almost over, my heart. I will call you that now, despite what you said, because it's true, and not much any more feels true to me. So many things have been taken from me and I have so little left. The facade, the veneer placed over me has been slowly rotting away my insides, leaving me hollow. But I can still feel my heart, ma vhenan.

I have done something very foolish. Will you laugh at it? I hope so. And then I hope that you smile, and that...you hope as well. I think you need to hope.

Gently he curved his hands around the largest of the pieces, lifting it up, the jagged interior catching and reflecting the light with a dark gleam. Nothing. Nothing there to be saved. Still, perhaps something could be...

“Solas?” Hesitant, worried. She thought it merely a dangerous elven artifact, something old and incomprehensible. But she had known how much he had wanted it saved.

“The orb.” It was all he could say, he couldn't even face her now. It was...

“I know you wanted it saved. I'm so sorry.” An apology for his pain, not for doing what had to be done. Of course not, not from her. She...she had tried.

More than she should have, more than he deserved.

“It is not your fault.”
Take a moment. I want to think about how you're smiling right now, wondering what foolishness I've gotten myself into this time. I know you are, now. All right. Are you ready?

I've bought a home.

It's true, I have! I didn't even steal it. What else am I to spend their worthless money on? It cannot buy freedom. Do you remember when we were traveling to the Arbor Wilds, and we camped in that area of the Dirth with all the the trees? Near where I broke into that chateau so I could sneak you in to show you the paintings. I loved the way you smiled that day.

I made Josie find out who owns it, and I bought it.

I don't expect you'll want to live in such a place, I know that I don't. But I thought...we could build something in the woods. Just you and I. Let the trees and vines and earth overtake it all, crack the stone walls, and make something real and warm with our own hands.

“There's more, isn't there?” So much resignation in her ragged voice.

“It was not supposed to happen this way.” He admitted, briefly turning to face her, and immediately regretting it. He couldn't hold her gaze, the expectation and the wariest hint of hope. So much pain, and still she had the strength to hope. Breathing out, he turned away and offered her all he could.

“No matter what comes, I want you to know that what we had was real.”

I want children. They don’t even have to be mine, just...children. Around, existing, filling the air with laughter, because I don’t think I know how any more. Is a dozen all right? It means a lot of building, but that's fine. I can do that part. You can paint the walls with stories.

“Inquisitor? Are you alive?” The shout came, and she turned towards it immediately, worry for her friends. Her head turned once, minutely, the slightest angle of her chin, as if she would look at him.

He could see it, a moment they paused, neither one looking at each other, barely at the edge of vision. Waiting for the other to turn.

When he did not move, she continued on, saying nothing further. There was nothing to be said.

They're never going to let me go, are they?

When I sleep tonight I will dream of what it could have been. if I weren't bound to this funeral pyre built on the bones of rhetoric and faith. In another world. In a quiet home in the woods, with joy, and walls covered in stories. And when I die, because they will surely kill me sooner or later, I hope that maybe you will find a home there.

And I hope that home will be filled with laughter.

I love you.
She descended the stairs, and he felt himself drawn after, feet moving slowly through the rubble. He could see the shoulders rolling back, chin lifting as she gracefully moved to meet her friends. Warmth, there, light and smiling faces...friends. And her.

A half step, he didn't even know he had made it, following the sudden twist in his chest as his heart walked away. No, it was not...the shattered orb behind him waited.

Breathing in, shuddering sorrow, he turned away, fist clenching tighter around the note crumpled tightly in it.

Purpose kept him moving until he reached the crossroads, but could take him no further. Shattered, falling, he wept until there was no more breath, no more voice.

Alone, he mourned the death of the hope she had given him.

9:73 Dragon

It wasn't enough.

How could it not be enough?

The blood in her veins sang with it, sacrifice and pain, an agony that pulsed with every beat of her heart. She felt swollen, lightheaded, every tear that spilled down her cheek molten and yet chilling.

The twisted, bleached corpses stretched out before her, vast numbers of them, a field of sacrifice. Not all of them had been killed on their own blades. That was not what she wanted.

This was...not what she had wanted!

It hurt, it twisted her heart to see the ones that had fallen as if turned to flee. No...why had they? How could they turn on each other?

So much trust in her that they had made themselves murderers when others had faltered, and it was not enough.

She could feel the spell woven into the ground at her feet, in the air around her, etched into the walls in the cup of the valley. She could feel what it wanted, what it needed, and she knew...their deaths had not been sufficient. She had drawn every single one into her, every droplet of spilled blood, every ounce of power...and she had failed.

The knowledge clawed at her, dragged ragged talons down her throat, her spine, twisted around her heart and squeezed until she felt it shriveling in her chest. Blank staring eyes, mouths open, fallen where they lie bereft of life, poured out of wounds both willing and unwilling. Life thrumming in her chest like a second, violent heartbeat.
The first sob came, harsh and broken, forcing its way out of her lungs as the tears spilled down her cheeks all the faster. She would not close her eyes, however. *Don't turn away, don't lose what they've done for you.*

The sea of blood spilled over the stones, leeching slowly into the water. Black, and gleaming.

Tendrils swirled as the blood trickled into the pool, slowly turning the surface dark in the flickering of the torches dug into the ground. The night sky overhead gleamed down, cold and impersonal, distant and uncaring.

Everything had been sacrificed. Every single one of her friends, her companions, her comrades in arms...fallen. She could see them where they lay, but her mind refused to see their faces, blurred into vague shadows of who they had been. No more, please...no more. She had seen too many of them dying on the ground already in other fights, other battles, but now...

Shuddering, shaking, she knelt down and lifted a bloody hand from the edge of the water, feet sinking further into the mud. It was cold and limp in hers, wet with blood and earth.

“Dorian...” Her voice was cracked, shattered, warped beyond recognition. He lay where he had fallen, the last of them. With her to the end. He had believed in her, believed all of their hard work would mean something. “Dorian, I'm so sorry...”

There was no answer.

She had nothing, no one left, and their deaths were on her head, singing in her veins.

Singing like lightning and shards of glass that shredded her from inside.

They had trusted her, believed in her. She had promised them a new beginning, a new world free from the death and terror they had lived through. She had promised them another chance.

*And she had failed.*

She was weeping on her knees when the Dread Wolf came to her, every tear burning skin, leaving blisters on her palms as she hid her face at last. Blocking out the dead, the wasted, worthless sacrifice laid at her feet. She could feel him long before he arrived, and he let her, gave her a chance to leave.

She would not; not this time.

For a time she could simply feel him, like a shadow cast across her mind, weighing heavy over her. She had nothing for him, no words of defiance, no strength to hide her tears from him.

Everything.

She had done everything in her power, and she had *failed* him. She had failed them all. In that moment, more than anything, she wished he had come to bring her peace at last. Take it, take this burden from her at last, give her freedom.

Give her death.

Years. Years upon years of suffering had culminated in this. Him chasing, her running, hoping...hoping that she would outpace him long enough to do what had to be done. And...it was all for nothing. She was swaying as if to fall when he caught her at last.

Captured her.
Reverently soft, the barest glide of his fingertips against her hand, sliding over her protective fingers to what of her cheek lie exposed. Curving against her jaw, cupping it as he drew her in slowly, inexorably. Even if she had the strength to fight him, she would not. There was nothing left for her to fight for.

“I have nothing.” Her voice was the barest edge of a whisper as he pulled her in against his shoulder, her hands falling limply to the sides. She couldn't open her eyes, couldn't look at him. “I am nothing.”

She was battered, broken, a skeletal husk of a woman overflowing with stolen life, but he cradled her delicately. As if she were precious, instead of a loathsome monster. The rise and fall of his chest as he sighed rolled against her, body so limp that she swayed with the motion.

“You have me, vhenan.” He replied, already anticipating the bitter laugh that spilled weakly from her lips, and holding her despite the venom that spilled from her lips. “I know...”

“I hate you.” She wished it had been strong, defiant. She wished...

“And you are right to.” He breathed quietly against her, arms wrapping tighter, but gentle still, as if afraid she would break.

She felt that she might as well.

“They trusted me. They...took their own lives because they trusted me...” She was too worn for grief beyond a rasping sob that shook her violently, all of her energy bound up in containing the raw power tearing through the weak vessel that was her body. “They took each other's lives. They...and I have failed them...”

“Not yet. There's no way for me to save you now, is there, my love?” Exhausted. He sounded so tired, her enemy. The sound that rasped from her throat might have been a laugh in another life. She couldn't even resist the healing he poured into her, as he freed a hand to reach for hers. “All this time, I hoped that it would not be too late...”

“It always was.” His fingers twisted through hers, and the runes etched into the bones of her arm flared to life, sending power crackling through her veins, her skin. “It was always too late. You had your chance...”

“And yet you defied everything to give me another.” He released her hand as the power rose inside it, carefully smoothing back her hair, short and ragged under his fingers. “Look at me, vhenan.”

She resisted the words for a moment, before finally letting her wavering gaze lift, blocking out the view to either side. Only his face. Sad and tired, with eyes she knew too well. They were hers now, something they shared. As he recognized what she had become, a certain peace overtook her, weighted down by sorrow.

They were the same now.

They had destroyed everything they loved.

The violet echoes sparking over her fingertips cast strange shadows on his face as he lifted her hand. He turned it over, stroking his thumb over the back of it, bones stretching the thin skin taut. She knew what he wanted, just as he knew she would not. But he would try.

“It is yours, vhenan. Please take it.” He whispered to her, and she shook her head, violently. It hurt, the motion made her dizzy and made the power jump into the back of her throat like bile, but it was
instinctive. “If you will not, then I will have to do one more thing you will never forgive me for.”

“Just kill me.” She begged, unable to fight his grip as he slid his fingers around her wrist. Even with the ocean of blood at her feet, he was still far more powerful than she was. “This is not what I want...”

“This is not going to be my second chance, vhenan, it never was.” He whispered against her, and she gave another tearing sob as her fingers curled in towards her palm, denying him. “I love you.”

Only his hand on her wrist was holding her to him now, but she couldn't pull away. She felt the travel satchel at her side sag as he tucked something into it, and then lifted his palm again to cradle her head. That was all the warning she was allowed, before he thrust her hand into his chest, power violently surging down her arm.

“NO!” The shriek tore itself from her throat before he violently silenced her protest with his lips, kissing her fiercely, cracked and bleeding.

She couldn't have fought him if she'd tried, and so she did not, crying against his mouth as she felt the blood and runes that surrounded them flaring into life, drinking the power he poured into the spell, into her. It hurt, it tore her apart, but she had been ravaged too many times now not to be hollow enough to accept it. Even as it broke her, it strengthened her, and she never quite shattered. She could feel him fading as she grew, bloody tears in her skin healing, his body faltering, weak.

She could tear her hand out of him now if she wanted to, but all it would do was waste his sacrifice, release the power surging between them and let it slip away.

If she let it escape, his death would mean nothing.

“You...bastard...” Her voice was rough, weak, the hand on her head gentling as she opened her eyes, meeting his as tears spilled, mingling together on their cheeks. “How could you...how DARE you?”

“Let me go now, vhenan.” He whispered in response, nose nudging against hers in a painfully familiar caress as he sagged in. He was already dead, they could both feel it, only her grip on him keeping him anchored. “Let me go. It is time.”

She didn't know what he meant until she felt the tug, the last of his power departing her and leaving her with her hand twisted in what remained of him still. As soon as she opened her fingers, he would slide from them, forever.

Gone. Shattered into something that would never truly be him again.

Her eyes rose to meet his, hope flaring somewhere deep inside them. It didn't have to be this way, she could...

“No! Vhenan, you cannot!”

The spell was rising, crackling to life, and she could feel the pendant around her throat resonating with it. The warning that came from his lips was stolen by hers, as she silenced him much as he had her. Twisting the very heart of him around her fingers, she pulled her hand back out again, saving what she could of him before he died.

“I love you.” She sobbed against his cooling lips as she ripped his spirit free, body already turning to ash against her. It cracked, flaked, and then faded completely into nothingness, leaving behind his power in the warped vessel of her body, and his heart in her hands.
Clutched to her chest, tenuous, twisting, she held him to her as the walls of the valley glowed with incised magic, and the pond turned into a whirlpool. It raged, it crackled, fierce and wild. The portal rose, enfolded her, and she curled herself protectively around the faded spirit as it dragged her in, pulled her through at last into the past.

Into a new future.

Vhenan,

If you receive this, then I have made my choice at last, as I should have done ages ago. There are no words that express what I owe to you, nothing that encompasses the grief and regret I feel for what I have done. It was not supposed to happen this way. It never was.

I can already hear your laughter at that statement, as only you would. Bitter, and sweet.

A moment in my life, that is what we were together, nothing more than that. And yet, like a spark that lasts only for a breath, you began something that has utterly destroyed me. You were never going to be the tinder, my heart. You are the fire.

I could survive anything else, but not seeing you become what I am.

The instant I realized that you had survived the chaos of the veil’s destruction, I knew this would be the outcome. There was never any way that both of us would survive, was there? The lengths I would have to go in order to keep you, the depths you would have to sink to in order to save me...no.

There is only one choice left now.

No one should forgive the abandonment I have put you through again and again, and so when I say that I am sorry...know that it is not meant in hopes of forgiveness. If you forgive me, do it for yourself, and please do not forget. Never forget what I have done; what I am capable of.

I love you. I have seen you create happiness from tragedy, and selfishly that is what I must cling to in these moments, when thinking of the weight of the world and the possible new future is too crushing. It is my wish for you, my heart, the last of my hope that goes with you.

Smile again one day.

The rest of this letter is not meant for you. I hope that you will read it, but I understand if you will not.

What can a man say to himself?

Knowing myself as well as I do, and seeing all of my choices that I have made, what can I truly say? Something in anger, more than likely. I have killed my closest friends, I have betrayed the woman that loves me, the woman who was destroyed by that love. If you knew what I had done, you would hate me, just as I hate myself.

She should have killed you; I know she did not. She truly believes that a victory built on the backs of the dead is meaningless. Let her have her belief, do not mock it. You are hardly a model of success, Solas, need I remind you. It is entirely possible that the future will require more hope than
pragmatism, or at least some balance of both.

Shelve your arrogance and compromise.

Our anger and self-hatred will bring nothing of value to this conversation. Set it aside for now and listen. Yes, I see the hypocrisy. I am dead. I suggest you deal with it.

The greatest gift I can give to you, my other self, is the cruelest thing I can think of to inflict upon her. I would never consider it, not in a thousand years, except for the fact that it is what she desires. I have fought her for too long; denied her what she wanted because I thought that I knew better.

I failed.

If I did not do this, I would leave this world in her hands...and she is broken. Even if I succeed there will be absolutely nothing of me left, and she will be alone. I have already abandoned her, as I promised I would never to do again. I am a liar. If I sacrifice myself to her, it may be that she will find a way to heal. A new past, a new future. I could not do it, but she can.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that you can save your world, recreate it. It is already lost. Yours, and hers, they are gone, but there may be another world to come, one we cannot even imagine. But I...you cannot find it by looking back, and that is the lesson I have learned too late.

I will give you no secrets here, no stories of what happened in another world. I will not tell you of my mistakes, my failures...I know myself too well. I know my pride. You will try regardless.

And so, all I can say is,

Please listen. Humility is a skill I learned far, far too late. I would rather die knowing the man she will save in the end is a better version of me than what I am now. Keep a mortal heart. And if she is so foolish as to let you in her life, please help her to remember hers.

The world will try to take it from you.

Never forget that.

Goodbye.

19 FV

"And I suspect we shall be some time, but..."

"Don't worry," Felassan said breezily, laughter in his voice, "you're practically vestigial at this point. Go have fun in Tevinter, we'll just make statues of you in horribly bad taste and go about rebuilding the world while you cavort in politics and scare slavers into behaving."

"No statues," Solas murmured, his gaze arrested by the letter waiting atop his rapidly depleting pile of correspondence. It was ancient, edges so creased that one tore as he lifted it from the top and began to carefully unfold it. No seal, no ribbons, and warded to his touch, magic fading in a delicate
hum. "Where did this come from?"

"With the letter from Ellana's camp. Looks like it took its time getting to you."

Solas glanced over the first two lines, and then stopped, the words not even penetrating. It swam into nothing more than smudges of ancient ink as his eyes unfocused, refusing to acknowledge what he was holding. He recognized his own handwriting.

"I..." he glanced up, and realized that Felassan was staring at him curiously, head tilted to the side. Desperately his mind raced to try and remember what it is they had been speaking of. "Yes. It seems as if it was...delayed."

"Better late than never."

"Yes, if you could...I need to finish preparing to depart."

As Felassan withdrew, closing the door behind him, Solas settled down at the habitually wobbly table that he was using as a makeshift desk. These days even Skyhold was becoming less and less his, it felt. Too much noise and distraction when he worked below; but here he was left in silence apart from the occasional intrusion by Freedom.

Keeping Freedom out of anywhere required a great deal more force than he was willing to employ.

Blinking, he shook his head and glanced down to the letter in his hands once more. Although he could have kept it from falling apart with a thought, his hands were reverent, careful as he unfolded the parchment. There were some smudges in the ink, spatters, and he could not fool himself into thinking it had been spilled wine or raindrops that had blurred the words.

Running a gentle thumb across the marks of Ellana's fallen tears, he steeled himself and read.

Chapter End Notes

Some of this is quite old, some of it new, but I wanted to work it back into the story for Reasons. Please forgive the slightly differing styles in parts. If you don't, just don't say anything cuz IDGAF. ;P

Snowed in, so I thought it might be fun to post something. Hope you're all safe and warm, if you're stuck in this hell.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!