Wolf Dreams, Halla Wakes

by ultrachicory

Summary

"The healer has the bloodiest hands. You cannot treat a wound without knowing how deep it goes. You cannot heal pain by hiding it. You must accept. Accept the blood to make things better."

Mysteries unravel yet the past further tangles as Solas learns the true cost of one impulsive kiss. A fang. A feather. An arrow. A song. Journey alongside Chiyo Lavellan and Solas as they fight to bring the pieces together before it's too late.

Notes

Graciously edited by: Llynnyia
Heavy Rain

Chapter Summary

Chiyo Lavellan, Solas, Dorian and Iron Bull have returned to the Hinterlands to manage some dastardly bandits. It would have been a lovely venturing out, if it weren't for all the blasted early spring rain.

"In ancient times, only Fen'Harel could walk without fear among both our gods and the Forgotten Ones, for although he is kin to the gods of the People, the Forgotten Ones knew of his cunning ways and saw him as one of their own. And that is how Fen'Harel tricked them. Our gods saw him as a brother, and they trusted him when he said that they must keep to the heavens while he arranged a truce. And the Forgotten Ones trusted him also when he said he would arrange for the defeat of our gods, if only the Forgotten Ones would return to the abyss for a time. They trusted Fen'Harel, and they were all of them betrayed. And Fen'Harel sealed them away so they could never again walk among the People." —Codex

"Solas… Solas, it's time to move on." The gently whispered words called him back from meandered wanderings of the Fade, promptly returning his conscious to the present world.

Opening his eyes, Solas awoke slowly from his peaceful dreams to the Inquisitor's soft spoken request. The small, smiling mage gave the side of his arm a light squeeze before pushing up to stand from her crouched position. Stretching as he stood, the bald apostate shook off the dregs of weariness, ready to continue their journey through the rolling foothills of the Hinterlands. They'd been traveling for weeks, seldom stopping long between the potential surveys sites for the watch-towers the imperiled area was in desperate need of.

"My apologies, was I gone too long?" He fought a tired yawn, catching it with the back of his hand. Solas turned to the elven woman who was already busy strapping her pack and staff over the modestly embroidered, somber cloak that hung from her shoulders. Mass commissioned by the Inquisition, much of the company's gear bore the same insignia. Stamped, stitched or stained, the image of the burning eye and sword was spreading quite far.

"Of course not, we all needed the rest." The Inquisitor gazed towards the dark gray sky where clouds rolled and loomed thickly overhead. There were still hours to go before evening came though the light was already thin and failing. Their pause at these lichen-covered, gutted ruins hadn't been wasted, but extending the stay wouldn't come without consequence. Urgent and pervasive pleas had made it to Skyhold's forces in the weeks prior and the Inquisition could not risk further instability in their neighboring occupied territories. The escalated Mage and Templar war had already ravished the once picturesque area, further upset stood to topple it entirely.

"Did you see anything interesting in the Fade?" She pulled an already well-worn hood up and over her short, white crop of hair, guarding her thin ears from the imminent threat of rain that brooded soundlessly overhead in the bruised clouds.

"Some places offer little more than a quiet emptiness. Years of abandonment and neglect say this dwelling was not very useful, never much more than a hideaway or store house in its better days." Solas answered plainly as he prepared for the miles they still needed to cross. "It seems only the
parade of tired traveler is to hold any remaining, fleeting memories of this abode. It is unfortunate many places like this exist."

"Then why are we giving it any more attention!" Dropping down from the cracked stone ledge he'd perched himself on for their rest, the Tevinter mage was keen to move on. Dorian waved his gloved hand back and forth in a hasty beckoning, heading for the open road. He pestered the others with barely concealed impatience, having no fondness for the extended discomforts of their travel. A cot and a hot meal would smooth his mood, but dawdling only peeved him further. "Come now, can't we at least try to find that twice blighted camp before the end of this age? You know how I get if I don't get my beauty sleep. Besides I am sure there is work to be done. Those poor, starving villagers won't feed themselves after all. Man needs more than lentils and ram meat to thrive on."

Finishing the last of the sharply spiced, dry meat strip he'd been chewing leisurely, Iron Bull strode down the crumbling steps, heavy boots thumping with his wide gait beneath the added weight of the equipment he effortlessly carried. "And if we don't clear out those bandits everyone keeps worrying about soon then we can kiss getting paid goodbye." The Qunari said before marching off to join his fellow Northerner.

"But we aren't getting paid." Chiyo shook her covered head with a cheerful, chirping laugh. Her bare feet ambled gracefully on the packed solid dirt road as she quickened her pace to catch up with the odd-assembled party. She made her way to the fore of her little motley band of heroes. Three unleashed mages and a former spy left to their own devices. It was a wonder they hadn't run into more trouble. "The people here have so little. They need our protection and to be able to use trade routes without fear of losing their goods, not charges tacked to their doors."

"Well, Boss, you and your people aren't getting paid for this. I sure as shit am." Iron Bull proclaimed with a smirk that curled his massive, gray mouth while he mentally tallied up his current fee. Albeit exorbitant, he was justifiably worth every piece of gold, silver and bronze tucked into his purse. "Just point me to the bad guys. And if the fight's good enough I might just take a few coins off the Inquisition's bill."

"If we could find them I would let you take the whole gang on by yourself. If it would please you so much." She offered impishly. "But even with our scouts scouring the area ahead of us, tracking them down has been rather difficult. And you can't fool me anymore with the blood and brute routine. Krem's told me all about you and the Chargers. I hear you could give ambassador Montilyet a fair run with the management of those coffers you're setting aside…"

"Ah, you can turn a man's head with talk like that!" Iron Bull groaned, reaching up to scratch under his eyepatch, but her jest left him grinning nearly ear to ear.

"The locals didn't call for aid without reason." Chiyo sighed languidly, taking comfort in their relaxing banter.

At the first word of distress the troops stationed nearby had begun a search for the new trouble makers, but they had been equally less than successful in finding out who these people were or where they might be hiding. It was not their fault they were trained to battle with other warriors not track down ghostly marauders. Nevertheless, each day brought forth new cries from the citizens—missing farming equipment, family heirlooms pilfered, trade wagons ransacked of all manner of food and supplies. There was even word of someone losing their boots to the unsavory fellows, on the edge of plowing season no less.

Then there were the worse accusations. Like the assault of several weary, unfortunate militants who'd happened by accidentally after a recent raid, nearly resulting in their murder. And the one tale the Inquisitor herself had personally verified, of incensed Templars tracking down and burning
apostates alive in their cliffside abode.

The villagers themselves were also of little help in their search as they couldn't even agree on who it might be. Some rabidly cried 'It was apostate mages!' claiming to have witnessed figures in robes carrying staves on the outskirts of despoiled towns. Others attested to having seen men in the distinctive armor of the Templars vanishing into the woods. They also pointed their fingers at a third party entirely. Comprised of rogues taking advantage of the confusion and fleeing refugees, robbing them for all they are worth, even the cloaks off their backs, as threadbare as they were.

And a few select racist fools said that they had perceived wild, blood-thirsty elves over taking carts on the twisting roads, a top undoubtedly stolen ponies, leaving behind a trail of arrows in their wake. The last she discounted not because it was impossible, but because of the sneering hostility they displayed at hearing their 'Herald of Andraste' was a Dalish elf herself.

"If we temper our logic with patience and luck our endeavor should be possible. They will need to come out of hiding to continue their raids, perhaps they may even hear of our search and flee."

Added Solas as he brought up the rear, pondering their current challenge. "We do need to examine the idea that they may be from this area originally and will not leave without a fight."

The fledgling Dalish leader looked over her shoulder as he spoke, eyeing him for useful ideas and keen to find any helpful insight. There was a subtle pleasantness in watching his mind at work. The spark in his storm blue eyes that shone when he solved even the smallest riddle sent small, guilty shivers through her. She couldn't help but toss out a question for him to ruminate on. "And how exactly do you suppose that?"

Solas continued, "Think about what we have heard so far. They attack homes of those who have had wealth, even if they have been forced to relocate over the last few months. The people are known to them by name and face. They choose trade routes that run through quiet places, where travelers often stop in tucked away corners. Places they themselves would have used time and time again. These bandits straightforwardly take advantage of the local knowledge. They are alone in their endeavor; they must pinch supplies because none are being provided for them. They also appear to be stealing only items with easy resale potential, they don't want goods, not for long anyways. They desire wealth. Something this area has not seen much of in recent generations."

"You sound like you have been in the business of banditry before, Solas." surmised Iron Bull while considering his acute answer. He moved steadily ahead on the darkening path, unbothered by the gaining wind that carried the foul weather with into the foothills. "What gives you this kind of insight besides hands-on experience?"

Solas practically laughed, a hearty chuckle escaping almost unhindered. His mouth stretched into a rare, transient smile. Amusement flavored his words as he spoke to the Qunari. "On the contrary, I only take into account what I have heard and borne witness to. There is some logic behind their behaviors; one must only pick up on the pattern. Consider how they have evaded our scouts."

"They're comfortable here. This is their land, their home." Chiyo beamed beneath the concealment of her hood, wondering exactly how long it had taken him to mentally figure it out. She'd seen his foresight before in the effortless way he manipulated an imaginary chessboard with the same mercenary that questioned him now. Always ten steps ahead of his opponent's moves, using a simple pawn to prearrange the entire finale of the game. It had been a true spectacle, leaving her nearly ambitious enough to try her hand at such an encounter—but she had yet to challenge him. Not without more practice first. She pursed her lips in thought and then a slow grin blossomed across her face. "If I were back with my clan, in our usual woods, it would be easy to avoid outsiders and slip
"Well, I for one am so very glad you have this comprehended, do you think we can be back in time for supper?" touted Dorian, twisting his mouth critically. "Now if only that shiny head of yours could set their hideout ablaze and scare them out like the evil little nug humpers they are— ha!" He was cut off quickly, suffocating a high squeal incurred by a carefully aimed and playful touch from the Inquisitor to the exposed skin on the back of his arm.

"Don't be rude! He's only trying to help." She cautioned congenially, continuing her jab with prodding fingers even as he tried to evade her devious reach, strangling the unbecoming laughter before it left his silky throat. The openings in his strappy armor were simply too good of an opportunity to pass up and he'd been doomed from the first fortuitous giggle. "You don't have to tease, that is, unless you are a little…"

"A little what?!" Dorian demanded with a loud hitch in his breath. He ducked away, a meticulous black brow rising at the tawdry insinuation.

"I think she's telling you not to be a jealous prick." Murmured the Iron Bull, trying hard to hold his crassly unforgiving tongue. Even as he chortled, his eye never left the ticklish mage. Dorian would have sworn to the Maker that he had winked when he spoke, but the eye-patch made it rather difficult to be certain.

"Jealous? Ha! A prick is a term I can wear proudly, but envy is mantle I will not be donning. Not that it would ever fit me, far too big you see." Dodging her gamely pokes and prods, Dorian couldn't help but smirk. The youthful Inquisitor, though he was only a handful of years her senior, had a way of bringing out his more naughty antics. "If we are searching for jealousy, why it must be on Solas himself when compared to me. Besides, just look how well he already appears in it. So earthy and… rustic."

"Another stab at my attire?" Tested Solas, his eyes surreptitiously rolled towards the stormy heavens. "At least your outfit will attract our quarry. They'll scarcely be able to help the urge to loot your sparkling corpse for baubles. That is after they kill you and all of us by association."

Their back and forth verbal sparring frugally continued as they ventured across the straggly expanse of the mountainous Hinterlands, looking for signs of trouble as they made their way to the next camp. The last leg of the trip was oddly void of calamity, unless one counted an unpleasant crossing with a lone, hungry bear thanks to the Tevinter's exasperation with caution taken over every rustle in the bushes. Ignoring the pleading of his more wilderness familiarized counterparts, the city-bred mage thrust his staff through the thicket to spook a supposed benign fennec from his burrow. And instead he'd poked the shoulder of a forging young bear. But the growling beast had been the last soul they'd seen since leaving their previous camp. It seemed that most of the locals had taken to holing themselves up closer to town where they could avoid the mountain passes frequented by highwaymen and Carta.

A deep dark had nearly fallen by the time the party reached camp on the western edge of the territory and dinner became a quick priority. Unfortunately however, it seemed that their new enemy had already made certain to relieve their camp of its latest shipment of supplies. Food, healing potions, nearly all the camping materials they would need to resupply had been plundered the day prior as it traveled from Redcliffe Village. All according to the report the requisition officer had remorsefully handed to Chiyo when she first stepped blearily into the compound. Deciding to eat what they had in their packs for the evening meal, the party opted to forage in the morning before they headed out to search suspicious areas nearby.

"It is always better to sleep on a full stomach, Boss. That way the troops are well rested. Never know
when you are going to really need to kick some ass." Bull said with a large shrug before ducking into a tent he would be mostly responsible for overcrowding.

The first rays of morning light were dim and weak as they fought through the thundering clouds overhead. With no extra shelters to spare, the officers had been forced to all bunk in one tent while giving up the second for the visiting party. Normally, when Bull tagged along for missions, he was given a tent to himself. With the smaller mages sleeping shoulder to shoulder on narrow cots, the Qunari had shamelessly taken over the bulk of the floor. His loud, deep snore had almost been enough to drown out the raging storm that had shocked the others from their beds. With ground-shaking booms of thunder rattling them awake, the more responsive elves had lurched straight from their cots. They stumbled out, in a half-dressed scurry, to aid the shambling scouts in securing the straining tent pegs and rescuing the tables and benches that had been blown over in the eye-stinging gusts.

Dorian was the only one who seemed to be perfectly presentable and ready to begin the day, leaving the relative dryness of the tent only when the rest of the camp had already been painstakingly defended. "I thought we were leaving by first light. Ha! I don't think Fereldens even know what it means! It's when light actually wakes you up, you dullards. Not this blighted miasma!" The rain that had threatened their journey from the beginning finally started coming down. Violent and ceaseless torrents battered the old and congested tents, dampening gear, bedrolls and annoyed comrades all the same.

The heavy rain made progress slow. It was hard to look for old tracks in the freshly swelling earth. Local travel came to a complete halt as the streams and rivers stretched their slick banks, reducing the Inquisition's chances of catching the thieves red-handed in the open, to nothing.

The season had only just turned to spring; vegetation suitable for consumption was scarce. Hunting options were also abysmal. Even the animals knew better than to be caught in the unforgiving downpour that soaked its way through several days and nights, ebbing for mere hours at a time before returning to everyone's grumbling displeasure.

Unable to venture far from camp but for mundane tasks, the sheer boredom and lack of adventure was beginning to weigh heavily upon the mind and patience of one rather petite and industriously-inclined Lavellan clanswoman. Becoming irritable as Dorian's frequent complaints about their ruined 'camping trip' mounted, Chiyo found practical, although rather destructive ways to fill the extra time.

Solas found her slowly shredding a fibrous log into easy kindling. Flinging the slightly damp strips aside roughly, it seemed she cared not for whose soggy bed they happened to litter by accident. She'd already crafted a loose pile in the center of the tent, but her persistence for keeping the shreds together had long since waned. Knife in hand, she scored the wood until a new piece could be managed off, creating thin slivers that would dry faster in the dank air.

He tried to entertain her with stories from the Fade as they busied their hands further by stripping the soggy feathers from a few birds he'd managed to snare in the early hours of the morning. The mage told her tales of grand Dwarven engineering and of human soldiers in acts of true bravery. He drifted between stories of lost, floating cities that glistened with crystal towers and languages that no one had spoken in a thousand years. But mostly he spoke in a tone hushed and deep, a voice that pulled forth all the attention of her long, metal ringed ears and filled her morning with small pieces of ancient elven lore. Dreams of magic so intrinsic and natural to her people it seemed inconceivable in comparison to the dying energy remaining in the current age.

By the time he finished the plucked birds lay aside in long abandonment, naked and pink on the crate that served as a tiny table. The mages sat close to one another on a cot, damp plumes clinging to their
hands and knees. Nearly in a daze the Inquisitor breathed slowly and deeply. Her heart was at peace, filled with the languorous gladness that came from his valued presence. It was only the apparent silence of the world around her that broke Chiyo free from the spell he had woven with his rhythmic words.

"We… we should probably get these cooked if anyone is to have a meal beyond raw mushrooms or bread-tack." The Inquisitor mumbled sheepishly as she started to rise, brushing off her leathery breeches and littering the floor of their shared tent further.

"Wait," A flicker of a smile played at the corners of Solas' broad lips. He took her by the forearm, softly pulling till she leaned down to meet him face to face. His hooded, blue eyes peered into Chiyo's wider brown ones, sinking into their encouragingly bright warmth. "You have a little something…"

Solas brushed away a piece of fluffy down that had clung to her rapidly pinking cheek. His narrow fingers lingered for but a moment, skimming lightly across one of the tiny red branches inked into her cheekbones. "There, much better." He murmured before placidly releasing her from his loose grasp.

Catching misplaced composure and straightening herself hastily, she slipped on the loose pile of feathers she'd prudently collected by her feet. Bumbling through her embarrassment, Chiyo gathered the plucked fowl and moved to leave the steep sided shelter.

"Thank you, Solas… I feel better about this trip already." She rummaged for politeness, trying not to trip over her words or unadorned toes again as she left the tent, biting her lip to contain the elated grin that pushed its way to the surface. Stepping out into the damp air that cooled her heated skin, she relished in a joy which was only multiplied by the small change in the weather. Though still gray and moody, the rain had stopped and appeared to be taking a much-needed reprieve.

Chiyo's amendment in behavior did not go without notice. Try as he might, Dorian could not goad his friend into one of his aimless conversations that revolved around his sarcastic commentary. No lack of proper seasoning for the meat, a need for wine suitable to the basic vegetables or want of delicate nut cakes was enough to grate against her lifted mood. Even Bull's grotesque dismembering of the cleaned poultry, popping each tender joint with his bare hands, breaking the leg bones to release their marrow and draining the blood into the simmering pot as a gamey thickener had not served to suppress the light, added fluttering that remained in her famished stomach.

"My dear," Dorian said pleasantly while sneaking a pinch of a bright, golden spice from a pouch hidden in his robes into the bubbling stew. "If only I had been able to find such endearing pacification like yours, I might be more tempted to enjoy this tour."

Pulling a clean tasting spoon from her mouth, Chiyo shrugged away the inference. "It's the weather. If the Inquisition has taught me one thing it's to crave excitement. No rain means we can start searching again, and searching might lead to a good fight. I'm itching to get out there and do something about this mess!"

"You're itching to do something alright…" Dorian uttered suggestively before coyishly putting a piece of broth-soaked tack between his teeth, enforcing his silence as he watched her lips pucker and pierced ears turn red. She hurriedly stuffed her face with the steaming hot broth to avoid further conversation as Solas and Iron Bull neared to partake of the light meal. Finished before the others, Chiyo made disconcerted efforts to engage her hands and mind once more in preparation for their search of the bandits.

"I have piles of this stuff in my dresser, but do I have anything useful when I need it? Of course not…” Opening every tin and container she could lay her paws on among their camp's possessions
she grumbled at the poor state of their stocks. Shaking dull crumbs of old herbs from their jars the
Inquisitor was appalled by the few provisions they'd arrived with. It seemed she was surrounded by
people who never took a spare moment to gather any of the abundantly useful plants that grew all
around them. She would have to bring this lack of resourcefulness up with the Commander the next
chance she had. Going deeper through their packs she took unfortunate note of their
limited potions as well. They had no materials to craft more on site, but if she could muster enough
ingredients she might be able to commission some from the town of Redcliffe, a near full day's walk
from their camp.

Knowing they may not have a chance to attain anything better, Chiyo pulled a spare satchel from her
gear that would easily carry enough elfroot to sustain them, with a little extra room for anything else
they stumbled upon. Considering the known bounty of the woods and fields of the sprawling
Ferelden region, it wouldn't take long to fill, when the season was right. But there was always
something useful to be found if one looked in the right places.

"Let's see, who would like to help me blow off a bit more steam? I need to move, this camp has
gotten too stuffy."

Slightly suspicious but remaining neutral, Iron Bull gruffly spoke first as she approached him. "What
do ya need, Boss?"

"A good pair of hands foremost," Chiyo answered as she eyed one of his scarred and massive mitts
in careful examination, lingering on the missing segments of a few of his short digits. "I'm afraid
these won't do Bull, this task requires delicate fingers."

"He is rather capable of being gentle on request," chimed Dorian, already settling himself into a
bench seat by the low fire with a thick book propped open against his knee. "But you didn't hear that
from me."

"And you'd be capable if you wouldn't take my request so lightly." She scoffed back, rolling her
head under the long strap of the empty bag so that it would cross her chest and rest on her hip
without slipping off. Her clever gaze was caught by Solas' once more as she sidled up to him, thumb
tapping her chin in consideration.

He displayed one of his long hands for her discretion, secretly reveling in the slow and nimble touch.
Her soft fingers lingered over the sensitive skin between his knuckles and trailed down each long
digit; it nearly shamed him to admit how much he enjoyed the sensual way her hands investigated his
in a slow, tantalizing study. Warmth radiated from his palm as she tested the pads of his fingers.
"Might I be of assistance, Inquisitor?"

"Sorry…I guess these will do. Perhaps you are as deft with them as you are with your storytelling.
This could take hours." She responded in an almost uninterested hum, but her eyes were not so
skilled with lying, even in jest. "Grab your bag, and I hope you don't mind getting a bit dirty."

Bull's amused and immediate snort sent the Herald's shoulders rising near to her ears and the
mortification only worsened as he prodded at her intentionally misconstrued innocent words. "If
that's what you were after you could have just asked. Nothing wrong with poppin' a few corks on a
rainy day. I could use a little boredom buster if you're game."

"No thank you!" Her large eyes widened to the limit, Chiyo stammered back with as much pride and
dignity as she could muster. Scarlet rose from her chest, colored her taut throat and flustered face.
She relinquished Solas' hand as her own began to burn hot with embarrassment. She twisted and left
hastily for the woods without another word, her steps only quickening as Dorian's uncontained
laughter echoed through the damp air as he congratulated Bull for having outdone himself in their
favorite game of torturing the modest Inquisitor.
Mud streaked up her shins. Sticky, green stains coated her fingers. The Inquisitor only lacked the length of hair required to catch leaves and twigs in to complete her wild appearance.

Solas trailed behind, watching and listening as Chiyo scoured each bush, tree and rock for fresh herbs, lichens and other useful materials. She spied a tender leaf of elfroot dangling just overhead off a rocky ledge. He offered a leg up and was faintly surprised when she refused. Instead she wordlessly handed him her slender wooden staff and started the climb on her own.

"You forget I was born in the wilds." Chiyo teased down to him, her sprightly fingers and unrestricted toes finding tiny purchases in the chalky, brittle stone. Small pieces of earth loosened and bounced down the rocky wall under the undemanding pace the Inquisitor set as she scaled further upwards. Solas could not help but admire her exceptional limbs as she stretched for the next handhold. Even if her legs were slim and graceful to the point of suggesting frailty, his people were not always so delicately wrought. She seemed even more so than other Dalish he had regarded. How could such a tiny woman carry the weight of Thedas so lightly on her shoulders, how could she hold out battle after battle without breaking under the strain that left most full-sized men battered and slowed. The last events of Haven alone should have ended her. He had seen many warriors fall for far less than her supple arms and legs had endured. However, the hidden strength of her limbs did not fail her, bringing her easily over the obstacle. She assessed the underdeveloped plant, feeling for the vigor in its green veins and determined which leaves would yield the most utility. "What good would I be if I couldn't climb?"

"Hmm, these are a little small. I can't take much from this one." She said as she ran her finger gently along the glistening, green-edged leaf. Picking only a few of the largest leaves Chiyo carefully blotted away the moisture that clung to the foliage with a soft, dry corner of her sleeve and stacked them smoothly together with the others in the patchy satchel. The plant would recover from her tender theft, still young and spry enough to survive in its damaged state.

Solas had to clasp his fingers together behind his back to refrain from offering to help her down. He waited patiently for her to cast off from the edge and return to the sodden ground. "I would never doubt your abilities, Inquisitor, though my manners sometimes get ahead of me." He returned the hand-crafted weapon and they continued along the twisting ravine that led away from
the drenched camp.

The Inquisitor radiantly glowed as she returned to her element, a joyous chance she had rarely gotten over the past several months considering their arduous trials. Her heart seemed lightest amidst a world of trees and valleys instead of towers and battlements of lifeless stone. Her eyes were bright with excitement over the simple task, her fingers trailed over the flora she passed. Solas noted despite her energetic stride, relieving all the pent up energy from having been cooped too long, her steps flowed gently atop the tender, rain-soaked grasses that licked at her heels. Other plants would have been casually crushed under a boot or wastefully uprooted by a less careful person. It was in her character to leave as small of a mark upon the natural world as she could, to only take what was necessary.

There was a lack of greed among most of the Dalish, and if their trust could be earned, they would often share what little they had to those deemed worthy of the expense. This was most likely because of their nomadic lifestyle, moving every few days or weeks meant only keeping what could be carried. The aravels bore the communal goods necessary for the tribe to live, but offered no privacy and no secrecy. Everyone knew what the others might have. The young and young at heart frequently made a game out of secreting away pleasant trifles for others to find. Richly colored feathers, sparkling rocks, bits of carved bone or antler, intricate knots of scrap rope, any small thing another might find and smile upon. Solas and the others had discovered this habit early on, irregularly finding all manner of humble gift left behind after her visits. But none had inquired much into their deeper meaning.

Her pale hair shone in the muted light that broke its way through the rain-laden branches as she moved. To the quiet apostate, it deeply evoked of the many springs he had spent in solitude, wandering the deep wilds and plains to the north. There had always been something incredibly soothing about being near the undomesticated herds of halla that grazed with their numerous young. Bright-eyed and full of life, yearlings with their first horns were the most adventurous. The world was so delightful and new to them, no traces of fear to be found. Some were even brave enough to dare approach him, sniffing at his feet as he rested, oblivious to any unforeseen hazard. Perhaps if they had known the true danger he presented they would never have come within any range… like Chiyo. Her confidence was misplaced, but he could not dissuade her. Though the elf was no susceptible animal often seen as prey herself, she did perhaps match the once noble creature who'd carried warriors into battle. In stubbornness.

"What a perfect embrium!" Distracted from his internal discord Solas looked to Chiyo as she caressed the delicate flora, tracing the fibrous, gingered petals with adoration. "This one even has a gift for us, if we can keep it dry." Pulling a slender, short blade from the belt at her hip she delicately removed a solitary seed pod, plump to near bursting from the excessive rain. Once properly dried and opened it would yield dozens of tiny red pearls that would take root if cared for properly. She expertly made a small pouch out of spare herbaceous leaves to wrap the pod in, twisting the tips and stems to protect them from potential damage. She gently sought a place in her satchel but found all the spaces filled to capacity. A plethora elfroot, spindleweed, blood lotus and even a sparkling piece of crystal grace had accumulated over the stretch of their roving threatened to overflow the bag. Rummaging through her pockets Chiyo tried to find some small, safe home to store her latest treasure, but other trinkets and miniscule trifles had already congested all the usual spaces. Tiny gemstones rolled in a pouch by her waist, a rusted locket, an engraved ring and a marred cameo took up room in the inadequate pocket beneath her vest. She had even tuck a few glossy feathers into the seam of her hood, all to be added later to the growing collection in her quarters at Skyhold. But, somehow they had failed to be left behind from her last journey, or perhaps she should just learn to leave some things for the crows to hoard instead.
Chiyo mumbled, becoming slightly embarrassed by her cache. "Maybe if I had boots I could..." she trailed off, her avoidance of footwear only changed in the most harsh of climates. She hadn't packed a single pair for this trip either. The frowning mage barely noted the thick layer of muck that had built up to her ankles and coated her long toes. She'd traversed uncountable leagues unshod with and for her clan before. And becoming the Inquisitor hadn't changed her opinions in dress much to the disgruntlement of the humans she'd befriended. A simple, ordinary pail of water to wash in by the tent or front door would alleviate most of their concerns if the tracking of mud was to be her greatest offense. Josephine had nearly screamed when she'd first smeared dirt onto the new rug she'd purchased for her reclaimed office, even her polite stifling and remarks had sorely embarrassed the Herald who'd never tip-toed away so fast before in her life. A fresh bucket was now permanently installed by the front door of the main hall, and all further carpets had been spared the abuse of elven feet.

Solas watched with amusement as Chiyo searched her person for a place to store the valued embrium. When she sighed in defeat he reached out and plucked the seed pod from her distracted hand. "If you trust me to keep it, I would gladly see it back to camp." He offered, pulling the front of his outer robe forward enough to tuck it away inside a pocket against his chest.

"Of course I trust you," answered Chiyo, an allusive smile instantly followed as her attentions loitered over the loosely draped lines of his traveling clothes. Solas hitched his eyebrow upwards playfully at her blatant appraisal. "Besides, if you don't remember then I will have to retrieve it from you myself. If those dastardly bandits don't take it from you first, that is."

"Ah," He replied, playing into her suggestive game. Solas could feel the wolfish grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. Where was the real harm in such a simple pleasure as short looks and masked words, even if they left him tussling with his own barely curtailed cravings? Solas doubted any true form of banditry, but the idea of her hunting his person for hidden claim was nigh on risqué for the normally reserved woman. The mere idea of her desire held in check only by her indomitable spirit as her fingers dipped into his clothing, grazing his bare skin by accident was maddening. These were places his mind should not wander, for they were dangerous and widely unneeded. Still, he could not help himself from smoothly continuing. "But then you could discover what other prized possessions I might have. It would be a true shame to see them stolen."

Chiyo stepped nearer with caution and restraint in her deliberate movements, trying hard not to scare him away. He could feel her tentative searching, feeling out the silent boundary he'd established between them. She had never made an attempt to breach it without forcing him back further behind the remote walls he'd built up for himself. Every time she tried to reach out, encouraged by her own sentiments, it was quickly put to an end. Her bravery could not be allowed to affect him fully. At least, it mostly didn't while they were awake. Yet still he stood to allow her to try once more, if but for a few, cruel passing seconds and only so far. A single finger browsed the blackened reliefs and ridges of the jawbone he wore as a constant totem. "I can't imagine how interesting the things you don't display could be in comparison to this."

Resting his hand lightly on hers, Solas stopped her exploration. "Perhaps one day I will tell you that story, but for now..." He reached behind her neck and lifted the thin hood up, covering a pair of slender ears that bore several sets of narrow bands that his palm brushed against before he pulled his hands away. He felt fool enough even for that brief, reciprocal touch. Slow, fat droplets thudded on the moist ground and made the puddles tremble as the weather rapidly became sour once more. "The rain has chosen to return."

Chiyo clasped the patchwork leather bag tightly to herself, complaining in dismay as the crystal blossom cracked just beneath her over-enthusiastic grasp. "Oh no, the herbs! They're just starting to settle, if they get wet again they could mold." Fretting, she took his arm by the sleeve and pulled him
into a swift jog.

"This way!"

They tried hard to stay beneath the shelter of the woods they made their approach towards their encampment. They dashed from the limited cover of the few trees that stood overhead to the equally sparse protection of the wide ravine in the attempt to stay at least a little dry. The seasonable, cold rain returned with renewed vengeance, blinding their eyes as they traversed the verdant and soggy path. Feet sliding in the thickening mud the narrow, uphill track became treacherous and threatened to stall them further.

"Fenedhis, I'm already soaked through." Puffed Chiyo, desperately trying to keep the bag she carried sealed and covered beneath her waterlogged cloak. She nearly slipped and fell into the loose mire when Solas halted unexpectedly, her hand fisted around a portion of his soaked garments was all that kept her from a muddy demise. He had caught her off guard as he veered them briskly back towards the broken hills that flanked them.

"Then let's wait for it to pass again." He ducked beneath a large dead tree that leaned precariously against the rocky walls of the ravine and stepped below a protective ledge of stone, a pitiful, shallow shelter from the storm. "We aren't far from camp. However, this will do for the moment." He added, wiping away the water that rolled unhindered down a hairless head from his angular brow.

"Thank the gods, or the Maker, or flying nugs for all I care." Chiyo wiggled her way as deep as she could into the tiny niche, back against the blessedly dry hewn stone. The side of her body pressed tight along Solas’ front, his warmth abated her shivers, though she was still deeply cold and wet down to her skin. It wasn't long before the Inquisitor let her arms slacken from their vice-grip on the precious herbs and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Sharp eye. I wouldn't have noticed this place."

Solas could not as skillfully evade her inviting presence in such tight quarters. He would have liked to maintain the only tool in his arsenal that seemed to work– a cool and calculated reserve protected through detachment and suitable camaraderie. But that too was rapidly becoming ineffective. It had safeguarded him from Chiyo's well-meant company though he considered it more in her best interest than his own. Close enough to feel her shuddering slightly in her drenched leather armor, to feel her soft breath dance past in steady pulsations; it was harder to keep his sentiments in check. It made her too physically and unavoidably real. That realness alone nearly broke him, when all else about him felt too much like a terrible, numbed dream he couldn’t wake up from. He could scant remember the last time he'd been amiably touched before meeting the Inquisitor, and now all he wished to do was to forget his reasons to stop her.

If he remained distant enough, the apprehensive mage could pretend he had the same control he that he did in the Fade where sense of self and willpower meant everything. But he was on the wrong side of the Veil, and she’d affected him there too. Where every idea and emotion could spring to life with a slip of a thought, she tormented him. There, where he was more himself than anywhere else, where his abilities were more like what they had been centuries prior, Solas was powerless against an elf who didn't even know his most known former name.

He craved to embrace her till she was warm once more, but his actions that morning in the tent had already fringed upon his self-imposed, disintegrating limits. As much as he cared for the respectable woman ensnared by his interest, Solas still wasn’t sure of what he wanted to do about the ever present tightening of their connection. His head called for immediate and blunt severance, to put aside the reckless thoughts and focus again on the task at hand. But his heart… His heart was a capricious creature that whispered maybe and try as it raced in her welcoming company.

It had been weeks since their daring kisses in the Fade. As it happened just before they'd been called
back into the field, there hadn't been time as yet to resolve his request to consider the implications. The fallout of Haven's destruction and the maddening amount of work that was going into restoring Skyhold meant that he didn't have to explain his continued stalling. Everyone was busy, what with the world falling apart in every far-flung corner. Handling the new recruits that arrived daily was a full-time task by itself, though mostly managed by their resident Commander. However, they all wished to speak with their miraculous Herald, to see who and what they'd traveled so far to support. To touch a part of the divine proclaimer, hoping it would rub off on them, that little something to make their lives blessed.

Long hours and lack of time went without saying. He had seldom seen the Inquisitor since their arrival and he was grateful for the short minutes they had found together after their shared dream. He secretly savored them, each one as surprising and provoking as any new discovered reverie. Chiyo did not pry him any further, but he could see through the questions veiling her brief visits to the rotunda. 'I'm waiting. Have you decided?' He could almost hear her say as she inquired about his journeys into the Fade and what vague information she might glean about their enemy, Corypheus.

It had greatly astounded Solas when she requested that he join her on an emergency trip to the Hinterlands, he had even recommended Master Tethras in his stead. But she had refused to take his suggestion and he knew he couldn't decline her the simple pleasure of his companionship. Solas could deny her very little actually; the warmth of her gaze melted the icy, aloof exterior he used to keep others at arm's length. The layers of secrecy and half-truths he had wrapped himself in felt entirely too thin, like weathered gauze, in her presence. Yet he desired, almost desperately, to allow her to strip them away piece by piece till he could hide no more. But then again, what would she think of him if she knew the full truth. What limit to her affections would he careen against and never return from.

The risk seemed so pronounced yet he couldn't abide the notion that increasing his detachment might cause her pain. But nor could he petition for further affections or valuable time, not when the rest of the world required so much of her as it was. 'Let me be her stone, let me be her safe haven, her teacher, her protector... she nor I can afford anything more.'

Dropping his pack from his shoulder Solas drew out an old, thin cloak. He could not offer his arms, but he hoped the travel-worn contribution would be enough. Many a night had been spent under its protection, but the long years had stolen much of the thickness and warmth. "Here, the Seeker Cassandra would never forgive me if I let you fall ill under my guard."

"No one gets sick from a little rain." Chiyo asserted, welcoming his offering nevertheless. She wrapped it avidly around her shoulders, covertly enfolding herself in his temperate scent. Olden woods in dry autumn, soft pines with lingering sap, clean water from an endless pool. There was an effervescent trace about the mage that pulled at an inherent chord. That remnant that reminded her of much calmer places in the Fade. Caught in brief whiffs, it spoke of a depth she could not fathom crossing in a single lifetime. "This was my idea to begin with... don't tell me you're still afraid of Cassandra though."

"Afraid? No, but I have seen the woman wield all manner of weapon on many an occasion. She commands boundless respect from me. The Spymaster on the other hand..." Solas suppressed a shudder, and not because he was damp or cold. "That is a woman who has experienced too much hardship to know what she is capable of behinds closed doors." If anyone in the Inquisition were to fennec out his true identity, it would be her. That spy's reach could delve through mountains and scour oceans, peer into the deepest dungeons and eavesdrop on guarded throne rooms. Speaking with her required all caution, and the surrounding havoc of the Breach had been his only distraction to keep her from investigating his vague story further.
A silence stretched between them as the rain continued to pour; it was a consoling hush yet after a time Chiyo felt the need to speak or listen, anything to put his felt tension at ease. He braced with every shift of her body, noticeably uncomfortable with their current nearness. She offered a smile and refrained from tormenting him further, it was clear her affections were not warranted here.

"Solas… How about another telling of one of your journeys in the Fade, I believe you last told me about a dwarf who lived alone? I'd like to hear how that ended again…"

"Oh look! The filthy bandits have decided to turn themselves in! Praise the Maker, we can go—oh wait, and it's just you two." Dorian joked as the elven half of their party returned to camp, soaked to the bone and all but caked with mud. "And what excellent timing, I was just getting ready to explain to Bull here my thesis on the implications of time travel. How, potentially, going back and changing something as unassuming as what you ate for dinner one evening could result in a full-blown civil war!"

"That sounds all well and good, but I am getting out of these wet clothes," Chiyo grumbled, mentally fancying a hot, oiled bath and the missed comforts of her more favorably feather bed. Having known nothing beyond the weightless balancing of a hammock or the basic amenity of a cot, the luxurious bathing and sleeping arrangements of humans had quickly become her favorite alteration in lifestyle. One she intended to indulge in the moment she stepped foot back in Skyhold. "If I have to do it in front of you, so be it." She threatened, half-heartedly pulling at the ties of her garments and the straps of her leather armor.

Brushing past the sarcastic Tevinter mage Chiyo thrust the loaded bag upon him. "Please, do something useful and get this ready to send out. See if the officers here would mind making a trip to the Crossroads. They can stop for a hot meal and some ale for all their troubles, on the Inquisition's tab. Trust me they will have earned it by the time they get there."

"Fine then, let me ask the excited looking fellow who got here before you, not that he's been dying to tell us some form of news." Dorian divulged as he peeked inside the damp leather satchel, poking at the over-spilling contents with limited interest.

Chiyo stopped, pausing just within the opening of the tent's high-steepled entrance, already mostly relieved of the first layers of her gear. "If he wants to report he can do so now." She sighed begrudgingly as she revolved, waving the scout over.

"Ser!" A young man attentively stood at the ready, he looked tired from his travels but beamed with pride for being chosen to speak directly with the Herald of Andraste. "I have brought something of interest."

"Report, soldier." Directed Chiyo firmly, assuming the role of proclaimed leader as best she could under the miserable circumstances. Though it was a heavy mask to constantly bear, she'd promised to fulfill the role to the best of her ability. She'd sworn to the freed mages, to all the elven people, to the Inquisition and to herself that she would restore order wherever chaos reigned. It was a burden that pressed down upon her very soul. Even in her training to become the next Keeper for the Lavellans, she had never felt such weighty responsibility and command as what was required of her in the Inquisition. A mere hundred elves would have been under her guidance, but now, she had leadership over thousands of all races through the ever expanding network of their army.

Presenting a rolled map the eager scout proceeded. "The remains of a large camp were discovered this morning with obvious signs of both men and freight on the move. It appears to us that they are taking to higher ground, perhaps their previous location is suffering from the weather. We have noted the camp and the direction of movement as well as locations we are watching for activity."
The muddied Inquisitor studied the map and notations, her weariness quickly being replaced by swelling enthusiasm. "Excellent work, we will do our best with your efforts. Now, if you would see to Ser Pavus he has another mission for you that should be to your liking after being out in the thick of things."

Looming over her shoulder the Iron Bull began to nod in approval. "If we can catch them mid-transition it will be to our advantage." He pointed to a small grove tucked up high in the hills. "Leaving now… we might be able to reach this place before they have a chance to scratch their ass twice."

"Grab your gear then," announced Chiyo shaking off the last vestiges of fatigue before she handed off the map to the massive mercenary captain who looked equally as pleased with the latest development. "There is little time to waste."

They moved swiftly in the dying light of the sun as it faded to evening, no more than muffled footfalls between the trees as the party hovered on the outer reaches of a deep-seated grotto. Men's voices could be made audible now, the shapes of their bodies outlined by the feeble red light that managed to bleed through the clouds above the high peaks in the distance. They sounded at ease, hoisting bags and crates from their wagon and setting them in various piles to be sorted. As the hushed party neared, eyeing their targets with sharp planning and determination, the inconsistencies from the early reports became apparent. This was not a singular, greedy band of mages or elves or Templars, but a scheming, false conglomerate.

As a group they appeared at first to be an ill-suited hodgepodge of people. Here the desperate dregs of Ferelden society had gathered to take advantage of the uncertain times. Without homes or family connections, they had each grown tired of watching others thrive where they had failed so miserably. Grave-looking people in similar dark armor worked alongside boorish mages and slighter fellows in bastardized Dalish garb. The longer they looked the more they realized how poorly fitted most of the equipment seemed to be, torn and broken in places with ordinary clothes poking out from under the appropriated regiments. The only items that seemed to be in good repair were the weapons each person bore. Swords and axes mostly, with a few bows and staves, kept ready for battle and always within reach. Those they kept sharp.

"Looks like disguises looted off those lost during civil unrest…" whispered Dorian under a cupped hand before he reached for his weapon. He kept a careful, unbroken watch on what would be his first target. A dangerous looking cretin of a guard displaying a pair of cleavers on his back patrolled nearest to their hiding spot.

"Let's be quick about this, but allow them to surrender if they will." Breathed Chiyo, casting a shielding barrier over herself and her comrades. Electric energies sparkled on the tip of her lowered staff, catching on the static magic that permeated the air without drawing from her own carefully limited reserve. A moment's mercy was all she would offer if the enemy chose to stand down, but any threat would be dealt with promptly. Pity for them was not enough to accept a risk on her life or of those at her side. The Inquisitor had selected these missions, and she would be responsible for her men's protection first and foremost.

"Watch my back. I want the first bite." Volunteered Iron Bull, stepping forth without any hint of hesitation, a severely sharpened axe rested lazily against his shoulder. The urge for battle sang deep in his blood, it made him itch for danger and ever more daring feats. He marched ahead as if he owned the trampled world beneath his feet, the tone deaf Qunari hummed a menacing sounding tune. Men and a scattering of women looked up from their tasks, bewildered by the sight of a horned giant casually walking into their newly pilfered, unsettled camp. They'd only just begun to re-erect the
heavy canvas tents, having arrived in the last few hours.

"I heard that there are some pretty big assholes here that like to fuck with other people's shit." He announced as people began to shout warnings out to the rest of camp. A dozen appeared at first, then another ten or so followed likewise. "Did no one ever teach you manners? No? Well, you have lucked out today! I'll teach you something about those!" The Qunari cried heartily as the first man raised a weapon to attack. Smashing through his sword, the Iron Bull knocked him to the ground with a violent swing from his heavily weighted blade. Metal clashed, sending tremors through the camp that resounded with furious outcries.

Chiyo's lightning danced along the wet ground, bounding off the muddy pools of water and shocking several bandits, beginning a series of brutal attacks as they defended their camp and precious loot. Though numbers were not on their side the tiny team felt confident in their ability to deal out a reasonable fight, picking through the ranks as best they could, working hardest to take down the most hostile thieves first.

Bit by bit, their enemy slowly collapsed in defeat but not without a few painful knocks and strikes of their own. By drawing away from the massive warrior in frenzied bursts the three mages had to act quickly to keep the attackers at bay and off one another when someone needed a moment to heal or replenish their mana. Maintaining the barriers was exhausting but completely vital to their success. It was all that stood between them and the razor sharp edge of a great-sword or dagger. The fight raged on for what felt like seconds and eons simultaneously with the bodies of their enemies falling to the soaked ground all around them, their lives snuffed by the trained team.

Dripping with sweat and splattered with blood, Iron Bull looked like a walking nightmare, cleaving the head of a brute off with sadistic accuracy. "Ha! Meet your death, cowards!" He called to the last two men still left standing. They quickly opted to run for their lives, the bellowing Bull hot on their heels.

"Try to take them alive!" pleaded the Inquisitor, grimacing as she watched the Iron Bull tackle the screaming pair to the mud without delay. Shaking with exertion and the strain of using so much of her magic, Chiyo leaned on her staff, closing her eyes and quieting her mind from the chaos around her. She'd done well; each new battle came with more ease than the last. There were certain to be countless more before the end of her days with the Inquisition. But her strength was still inadequate. At least it was in her eyes. The other mages around her seemed so much more prepared and comfortable with their craft, likely from having started their training at a much younger age. Ten years old had been a rather late beginning. Keeper Deshanna was gracious to take on such an underdeveloped child when her preference had always and openly been five or six.

"How did you fair?" Chiyo groaned to her nearby companions, swallowing the faint jealousy of their expertise. She'd never once seen Solas or Dorian struggling to cast as their magic labored to catch up with them. They were both fluid and graceful, barely having to try. She envied their proficiency and sought to replicate it.

"Well enough," Dorian responded, kicking aside a lifeless man as he tested an arm sored by the twirling and slamming of his staff. "I'll be feeling this tomorrow though. I can already sense a few lovely bruises coming in."

Solas rubbed at a thin gash across his hand and forearm, he could already sense the skin gradually knitting itself back together thanks to his last potion. "I have seen far worse. It is more unfortunate to see such bloodshed over goods; their greed has cost them dearly." He motioned over the fallen men that lay dead or silently dying in the dirt.

Dragging along a single survivor, the Iron Bull rejoined the group. "This one's buddy decided to
fight instead of giving up like the wriggling worm he is." The man's arm was badly broken and he held it gingerly. He remained mute while he was forced to his knees by his well-trained captor. A nasty gash oozed steadily across the Qunari's chest. Although he gave the injury no notice, it looked terribly uncomfortable.

"Here Bull, one left. Could you spare some with our prisoner?" proposed Chiyo, offering up the last of their reserves from a pouch inside her coat. They would soon have to amend the quantity they could carry if they were to continue on such long trips. Perhaps her haggard, battle-frayed vestments were due for another pocket or two to be added. Or scrapped entirely, the old set was quickly succumbing to a state of disrepair.

"If you insist, Boss." He shrugged and held up his hand. Chiyo raised her arm to toss the potion, the bottle had just left her fingers when her sharp ears registered a slight noise back behind her left—the unmistakable creaking wood of a short bow and the thrum of a tightly drawn string.

"Got you now…bitch…" Were the final, unheard words of a dying man just before he let a last arrow fly and collapsed back to the earth where he had lain in a stupor from his mortal wounds. He'd hidden beneath his fallen compatriots, praying for just enough breath to finish his last wish. His heart was filled with hate for the Inquisition and he blamed Inquisitor Lavellan entirely for the complete ruination of his former master the magister Alexius, a man who had promised wealth and power to those in Redcliffe that offered their immediate services during his fleeting escalation to power. With Alexius stripped of his authority and influence all other hopes and dreams for wickedly wrought success had died instantaneously. Unable to relinquish his self-entitled goals this man had joined league with the growing clan of bandits. He would have the coin he so critically desired even if it meant taking it from his neighbors, and now he would have his revenge in its stead. It seemed that the Maker himself had sent his enemy, the heretical Herald of Andraste, stumbling onto his path. And he had the perfect gift waiting for her.

Struck suddenly, just behind her extended arm, the arrow slipped deep beneath a failed point in her scruffy armor, driving straight through both flesh and bone. Chiyo cried out, staggering with the unexpected impact. The neglected bottle toppled, smashed against the stone riddled soil, and spattered the ground with its expensive contents. Iron Bull's rage surged once more as he charged towards the ailing assailant, forcing his way through the wreckage and dispatching the man whose time had already run beyond short. The last survivor tried to run, tripping as he went before Dorian finished the fool off in a flash of searing fire.

Solas hurried to balance the Inquisitor before she fell, clutching at her throbbing shoulder and punctured side in anguish. "Inquisitor!" He shouted, at a loss for greater restraint, as he eased the collapse to her knees on the wet, boggy, already blood-soaked earth.

Chiyo growled viciously, teeth clenched tight. "Son of a- hhhnn! Prear'isa uren!" She sucked for breath and stifled a whimper in her throat. Her fingers stretched for the offending shaft that agonized her so, but it was just out of reach and already too slick with blood to amend herself.

"I've seen splinters bigger than this. Do try to hold still." Calmly recommended Dorian as he knelt down to assess her shoulder. He deftly opened the front of her armor and sighed with relief as he revealed the sharp head that had passed all the way through. Small and compact, it appeared unbroken and could be removed without leaving pieces behind. "Hold her." Was all he said to Solas as he peeled off his dirty gloves.

The apostate took both her arms and she grasped to his while the quick Tevinter worked. Solas shushed her with softly spoken elvhen. Gasping as the arrow was pushed further out and a sharp knife was used to sever the pointed head, her reddened, wide eyes remained locked with his,
listening to his poetic reassurance. She knew what was to come next, hunters had come back such as this, but he would not allow her to look down to see the terrible wound.

Dorian placed his hand on a piece of her armor to steady them both. He wrapped the other around the arrow's dark shaft, being careful not to add any pressure to it. He looked to Solas with matching concern, but in an unspoken agreement the apostate nodded singularly before he tightened his already firm hold on the wounded elf. "I'm going to remove it, not that I think you want to keep this new piercing. Sorry, your Worship."

Enraged by the title she detested beyond all others Chiyo howled. In the blinding flare of her rage, she forgot her pain for a fraction of a second, nearly wrenching herself from Solas to bite back at the Tevinter mage behind her. "Don't call me th-!"

A swift, sharp motion brought forth a torrent of foul curses from the Dalish elf who could hold her tongue no better than she could hold back a river with her bare hands. Strings of mostly unbroken phrases singed Solas' ears. Though they were not perfect, some distorted beyond even his own reckoning, these were still words that he thought he wouldn't hear uttered again in his lifetime. It was almost comforting to know that the elves in this clan hadn't lost some of the more colorful aspects of their language like so many others he'd crossed paths with…

But did she really have to be invoking the Dread Wolf at a time like this?

"And I won't use it again, I promise. You can give me trussed in ribbons to the Venatori if I do. But I didn't want you to tense up when I pulled, it would have been so much worse if you'd braced for it." He wrinkled his nose, taking a moment to investigate the grooved arrow head that he held up for Solas to also see. "Well this doesn't look sanitary, would have been nice if he had washed this first."

Dorian tossed the beheaded shaft aside and performed a healing spell, strong enough to slow the bleeding and ease some of her pain. Cuts, scrapes, and bruises were well within his range of the curative art, but outside of that narrow scope he was severely limited. Out in the wilds with depleted supplies, there was little else he could offer.

"Are you going to be alright?" He inquired sympathetically, keeping a hand on her shaky arm as Dorian worked his potent magic. Solas showed his escaping worry in slipping slivers, brow knit together, jaw holding tension; he didn't like the look of that arrow. There was something unsettling about the shape that he had seen before. It was not one designed for hunting or maiming, but specifically to pierce armor and deliver a nasty addition.

"Hey Boss, I smashed that asshole's head in for you!" called Iron Bull from across the battlefield.

The injured Dalish woman tried to smile, shaking off the adrenaline and burning ache in her chest and shoulder. She was supposed to be the Herald, the Inquisitor and a proud Lavellan after all; she had come too far to show weakness now. She would not allow herself to snivel and cry over her wounds. Steadying her breathing, Chiyo bravely pushed her way to her less than steady feet with Solas' help. "Let's just head back, I'll be ok. I promise."
Chapter End Notes

Prear’isa uren: cut his ear
Wounded and refusing aid, the Inquisitor battles her injuries while Dorian goes for help. Solas is left behind, tasked with keeping her alive and learns that he is not the only one afflicted by his past. Perhaps a little quiet storytelling will ease both their nerves, but the truth is far from what it seems.

The Inquisitor tried her best to feign health stoically for the entire trek back to camp. She was well aware of the signs preceding infection. Sweating had already come on, though it seemed much too quickly. Her heart was thumping rapidly in her chest, like a small bird trying to escape through her aching ribs. The cold shivers were the hardest to hide, yet the tremors caused in her hands were even worse. She hid the symptoms fairly well, however, it became rapidly obvious that all was not right. Chiyo struggled to keep her breath even and continuously fell to the back of the march with frequent pauses for air and drink to sate a sudden, ceaseless thirst. She’d emptied her own water skin and had guiltily accepted Dorian’s, but it too was near spent with miles to go before they returned to their small base.

They had searched thoroughly but speedily over the stolen loot and found very little that would be helpful to them now. It seemed their pilfered rations and medicinal supplies had been consumed long before they’d arrived. Empty bottles and packages littered the bandits’ scant belongings. They would leave what was left for the villagers to recover later. Various heirlooms had been spotted in the hurried rifling but they had neither the strength nor the drive to bear them currently. The scouts would be informed and the owners of the items contacted, but the loot was too much to carry back on foot tonight. What the thieves were going to do with a two-foot high marble statue of a particularly well-carved nug, Chiyo denied to even contemplate. Humans were rather peculiar about their statuettes, fashioning them without much meaning or reverence. They did not craft protective guardians or totems, like those the early Dalish had formed from stone, but of their own images or trivial amusements.

"I'm perfectly fine." The stout-hearted Lavellan claimed, brushing off repeated inquiries about her wellbeing. "Just a bit worn out, aren't you?" Her self-enforced behavior only worsened after the Iron Bull offered to carry her back to the far off campground. Chin thrust high she moved with wavering gusto and refused to say more until they reached the welcome sight of the noiseless tents and unoccupied tables. Lit only by unattended embers and starlight through the broken cloud front it was difficult to see just how far her condition had fallen beyond her shaky, graceless flop onto a bench.

Renewing the flame with fresh logs and prepared kindling they settled around the fire for leftover stew as a victory meal. Chiyo nauseously observed the others take in their fill; the slurping sounds turned her queasy stomach. Forgoing any attempts to eat the Inquisitor offered her untouched food to
Iron Bull. She sloppily poured the hot contents of her bowl into his with tremors running down the arm she wasn’t holding tightly to her side and hip.

Solas did not like the clammy appearance of her skin nor its drained color as it caught the firelight, but without her consent for help it would do little good to question her. Stubborn was too lax of a word, not with the fortification of her persistent pride and unbending sense of dignity. There was iron behind her soft smiles and a blazing fire within her kindliness. She would only fight her symptoms harder with manufactured health if they pressed and she would force her suffering deeper inside, beyond the reach of their offered aid.

"Boss…" Bull began to ask uncertainly as she rubbed at her aching temples. He looked to Dorian with growing concern as he set down his finished bowl on the ground.

"It's a headache." She groaned in frustration through the dizziness that plagued her. The sweat in her hair slicked her fingers as they circled, trying to soothe the dull throb that pounded behind her eyes. "Please, don't worry about me. It was a difficult fight after all. And there is still work to be done. I need to send word to Redcliffe and Skyhold about the bandits."

The charming mage shook his groomed head before he gestured towards their shared tent. "Perhaps you should lie down for a stretch. I think we would all feel better if you got some rest. Those messages can wait a few hours."

"Maybe you're right… Good evening." She took unsteadily to her feet, pushing up from the bench with labored effort. Her vision blurred as she rose and swayed precariously. One uneven step followed another as she ambled to her tent like a new fawn who’d yet to learn where all four of their spindly legs were supposed to go. She stumbled sharply when her knees crossed, arms thrust out for deteriorating balance and muttered indiscernibly about her exhaustion. Too much mana, too much walking in one day became her excuses. "I’ll see you all in the morn… morning…” Chiyo claimed, losing cohesiveness in her words.

"And 3… 2… 1." Dorian counted down on sarcastic finger flicks before motioning to the Qunari. Bull leaned far forward as she passed him, just in time to catch the Inquisitor with one hand as her strength and willpower finally dissolved. Chiyo slumped unconscious over his outstretched arm, the whole of her torso fit easily in the collective expanse of his palm and fingers. She felt too light to the towering, horned mercenary as he hauled her limp body into the empty tent. He’d seldom handled the small build of Dalish elves, but still, Bull had expected more than the meagre deadweight that wasn’t enough to warrant the use of both of his thick arms.

"Who wants to play ‘guess the deadly substance’?" spiritedly asked Dorian. But his chiseled face—a profile proclaimed as worthy of a marble bust—turned from juvenilely chipper to soberly solemn. "Considering all the wonderful flora in Ferelden alone, we should be deducing all night. It could be Varghest bile for all we know. That would certainly account for the sweating and thirst. Maybe it’s deathroot oil, easier to smuggle but causes quite the fever. Very popular in the desert, makes things rather quick that way, cooked inside and out."

Solas sternly stood and began rifling through their supplies. "This is no time for jokes." He snapped, tossing useless items aside. There had to be some form of medicinal supplies left to them. A few wide scraps of clean, white cotton and a half-used roll of natural sticky webbing were all he could find. "We should have dealt with this sooner. You suspected this just as much as I."

"You say that like we could have pinned her down on the road and forced medicine we don’t have into her!" Dorian clucked tersely with a jaded scowl, crossing his sculpted arms over his strap-covered chest. Iron Bull exited the tent behind him, ducking his wide horns through the heavy flaps. "Would have gotten our fingers bitten off, feisty little creature."
"I don't think we have the time to argue over this." Bull warned, rubbing splotches of blood from his hands onto his dark, already heavily stained trousers. "That wound is wide open again."

"Then let's do something before she is beyond our aid." Dorian retrieved his map and studied it carefully as he absentmindedly adorned his castoff gear once more. He pointed and groaned at different locations, trying to decide the best course. "I'm not sure what we should attempt, honestly."

The Iron Bull prepared as well, strapping his war-axe to his broad shoulders. "What's nearby? Most of this area is rural, just farmhouses and barns."

"Not much. Sprinting the whole time we could reach the Cross Roads by dawn if we head due East without following the road. But we could be stalled or get lost in the dark." The Tevinter mage paced with the parchment in hand as he weighed the abysmal options. "A few leagues north is the Dennett farm, we would waste time with the detour… a swift mount could double our pace to and from. Or we could try to reach the other camps along the way to see if they have potions. However a healer in town would have better ingredients—like the ones we just sent—or even an antidote already made up."

"Why are you volunteering to go, I could be swifter considering the terrain. The night will hinder you." questioned Solas, unsure of Dorian's navigating abilities.

Dorian rolled up his chart and promptly disagreed with a harsh scoff. "Why are you so willing to leave her, do you think so highly of yourself? Just because elves can see better in the dark doesn't mean we are bumbling, sightless idiots. Pfft, you're just mad that you aren't being picked to play the gallant hero who will come back on a white horse with the dawn to save the ailing damsel. Though you could use the change in attire, I believe a highly polished armor would suit me much better."

Staff in hand Dorian looked towards the road. But before leaving to follow after the Iron Bull, he pulled Solas aside and spoke softly, trying to keep the shushed words between their ears alone. "You and I both know that, if worse came to worse, our dear Inquisitor wouldn't be asking for me in her final moments…"

Solas glowered at the insinuating mage, stonily clenching his fists to his sides. He breathed heatedly, nostrils flared with the sudden stress as he retorted with firm conviction. "I will not allow her to die."

"Of course not. We aren't going to let her. Half the Inquisition would lay down their lives for her if asked, including us." Dorian proclaimed, patting him soundly on a tensed shoulder before he began to walk away. "And it isn't just because she can close rifts or that the Advisors would skin us alive as traitors for getting her killed. Do your best and trust us to do the same."

Solas watched with plummeting hope as they left, fading silently into the darkness that consumed the world just beyond the camp. He was by no means skilled as a healer. Solas never required much for himself and had minimal experience in mending others, with or without the aid of magic. Racking his brain for any knowledge that might help, he gathered what few items he had. He knew more of the pigments that could be crafted from herbs than their vast healing proponents. He tore a sheet of cotton into manageable pieces and placed them in a bowl of fresh rainwater supplied by the collection barrel kept close to the surrounding tree-line. The wound must be kept clean, Solas knew that much. He entered the tent, unsure of what state he might find the Inquisitor.

Chiyo had regained most of her consciousness but was far from well. She clenched her arm tightly to her body, struggling to use the good hand to remove her taxing, uncomfortable gear. Her anxiety filled eyes settled on him as he slipped through the tent flaps and approached, returning the muted obscurity of the lightless tent.

"I don't have time for this." The Inquisitor groaned where she sat, catching herself mid-sway. Empty
of nothing but water, Chiyo paused only when she thought she was about to be sick. Her hazy mind was plagued with the already foreseen costs of her physical demise. She had seen what would become of the Inquisition, of her friends and allies, were she to fail. A world covered in lyrium, armies shattered on the walls of an impenetrable fortress, and another kindly mage kept in the dungeons, his body infected with the red, crystal scourge. Death now would bring ruin to all. "I cannot be brought down this way or die in a muddy hole in the middle of nowhere."

Solas knelt beside her, laying out the materials he'd brought with him. "Who said you were going to perish, there is no reason for such dread." He counseled coolly, wearing his false calm like a stone mask. With a minor flame from his fingers he lit a small lantern on a crate that had been used as a card table on previous evenings. The last hand remained there still—the winner's spread out in victory and the loser's over turned in glum defeat.

"I could hear all of you speaking, the hushed voices, the arguing." Chiyo's face crumpled with the increasing pain as she gave up her efforts, sinking into an unnerved delirium. She would never openly admit to the fear that chilled her, remembering still all too vividly the future she had witnessed alongside Dorian in Redcliffe only months prior. A horrifying nightmare that must never, no matter the cost, be allowed to come to pass. The world would become completely overrun by darkness and the false god Corypheus if she wasn’t there to stop him. She would not be responsible for the endless suffering that would follow her passing. Solas and the other’s they had freed from the prison thankfully did not recall the anguish and misery they’d undergone for a vanished year as she did. Their eyes hollow, bodies riddled with the cursed mineral and hopes dashed—she would do whatever it took to keep them from such a fate. Her stare burned, locking into his with resolute certainty. "I cannot fail now. There is too much depending on me. Solas… If something happens… you must take this mark. Cut off my arm if you have to."

"That valiant drama will not be necessary. The mark would more than likely fail with you and be lost." He could see the cracks in her confidence widen as her tone slipped into despair. So much weight upon one pair of slender shoulders, a burden she had never asked to carry. But she did, and often with her head held high above the rising waters of endless responsibility. "This is not what I meant that day when I remarked your indomitable spirit. I did not wish to see it broken so easily."

"I'm sorry to have disappointed you." Chiyo dropped her gaze, ashamed, as her dizziness returned with a swift vengeance. She spoke hollowly as she drooped, sinking towards the floor. The sweating had finally ceased, leaving her in a dampened chill. She could smell her blood seeping into her clothes and felt it clotting against her already crusted skin. "I will remember to never let you see such weakness again."

Solas immediately softened; he regretted having spoken too carelessly. "That was not my intention. I am only trying to offer you help. I do not believe that you are anywhere near giving up, but it pains me to see you suffer so. Might you allow me to aid you?" He offered his empty, upturned hands sympathetically. The Inquisitor considered his unguarded words and eventually nodded, trembling as she let her determined defenses fall and allowed her body to succumb to its poor state.

"Your wound, it has waited long enough." With slow trepidation Solas gently began to undo the layers that were supposed to protect the Herald. Scuffed bracers unbuckled, cracked leather belts untied, bloody doublet unlaced. Her armor had been worn thin in places and repaired too hastily with scrap materials. Solas could only guess as to why she would be wearing such substandard gear. Pulling her inner jacket off had been the worst. It tore at Solas' heart to hear her excruciating cries, restrained through the biting of her dry lips. She straightened her inflamed arm to allow the ruined garment to be peeled away. Left only in her soggy tunic and breeches she fell forward, collapsing against his chest and shoulder. She gasped slowly into his high-collared neck as tears stung her eyes, soaking into his already dampened clothes. Every muscle screamed in an agony that could be offered
Solas lifted her good arm up to drape behind his neck and shoulders. "You need not be resilient tonight, lethallan. Rest now. I will be your strength." He allowed her to relax a few minutes, soothed by his reassuring words. Once she’d grown quiet and still he began tearing through the fabric of her ruined linen shirt with merciful quickness.

He let the frayed pieces fall as they may until he could see the small, deep puncture in her back and the flesh that had been torn with the arrow’s removal. He wrapped one arm securely around her before starting the slow process of washing away the blood that had caked her cold skin. Wipe, rinse, and repeat. From under her arm to the crest of her hip, the apostate was thorough in his cleansing efforts. However gentle he may be, the measured, tender movements still elicited a weak flinch with each pass near the oozing gash. He turned the water in the bowl a sickly red and revealed thin, purplish streaks that radiated away from the seeping wound. If only he had something to slow the spread of the poison and ease her pain, but his magic had never been used for saving a life, only ending it.

He suddenly became aware of the small, hard knot that was pushing against his chest as Chiyo shifted. A flicker of joy sprung up within him as he remembered the seed pod protectively wrapped in elfroot and blood lotus leaves that they’d collected that afternoon. The company had tried to search for more as they traveled back to camp, but in the dark they’d found little more than a withered, leathery lone spindleweed. Bull had falsely identified a royal elfroot, and only a quick warning from the Inquisitor had kept him from giving himself a horrendously itchy rash. "Forgive me, but I must use your little prize. You've entrusted me with the only herbs we have."

Chiyo struggled to remain alert, already her eyes fought to stay open and her body felt so utterly drained. "I'll forgive you in the morning if I see it..." But there was a playfulness that survived through the pain, pushing through till it tugged her listless mouth into teasing him with an empty threat.

As steadily as he could he lowered her down to the thin bedroll, propped on her side. Solas removed the small bundle from the pocket under his robes and left the tent, taking the gruesome bowl with him to empty. After cleaning his bloodstained hands he set a small iron pot with fresh water directly in the embers to heat as he worked, grinding the leaves into a thick paste that would soon coat a small cotton square. Into the pot he tossed the embrium pod, split open to allow its juices to be boiled down. He hoped it would be enough. He’d seen other parts of the plant used by scouts of the Inquisition in simple brews to fuel a warmth from within during their travels through the southern mountains when they’d sought shelter after losing Haven. Though not a strong restorative, it could be used to provide some strength and energy. Chiyo would need both if she were to survive the toxins that polluted her blood. He poured the finished, steaming liquid into a cup and returned to her side with the elfroot he’d prepared.

She hadn't moved, but her sore eyes had reopened and they watched him with dwindling awareness.

"You made tea." The Inquisitor faintly smiled, remembering his distaste for the beverage he often forced himself to drink. She must have lacked the same quality in her own tongue, for there was nothing as displeasurable about the flavor to make her grimace the way Solas would. Spiced teas laced with citrus or ginger had become a preferred beverage for most of her meals at Skyhold, though the apostate had failed to appreciate their delicious complexity when she’d offered it to him. He would gladly consume the provided wine served each day, as thin and watery as it was. It often made sleep much more attainable.

"Not quite," He replied as he set it aside to cool, the bitter smell wafted towards her scrunching nose.
"It will taste far worse I'm afraid."

"Thank you…” Chiyo murmured as he crouched back down beside her.

"Thank me after, this might sting." Solas warned as he checked the wound once more for debris before he applied the poultice, sealing it to her skin with a layer of sticky webbing.

Solas was able to pull her up into a supported, seated position once more before removing what remained of the bloodied, tattered tunic that hung uselessly off her shoulders. The blood must have been flowing freely for some time to have ruined the top so. Her stubbornness had cost her dearly, more than the value of any shirt. It had to be peeled from her side where blood still remained and untucked from the breeches that had become equally as stained on one side.

He tried to avert his prying eyes from her bare breasts, but a miniscule item dangling just above them from a necklace he had not seen before stole his complete focus. On a thin strip of rolled leather hung a long tooth, glaringly bone white against the crusted red that framed it and worn smooth. The tapered root had been pierced by a ring that had driven through with great care. It was an upper fang she wore and kept hidden against her skin instead of out for public display.

A wolf’s fang.

An urge to touch the strange artifact eclipsed the care he had taken with her modesty he had maintained around the half-dressed woman leaning into his arm. Solas reached for it, longing to investigate the shiny enamel that had once belonged to a wild beast of the woods.

Chiyo would have blushed if there had been any warmth left in her. She’d grown terribly cold and had shivered even before her damp clothes had been so carefully removed. It was not the brazen exposure that embarrassed her, but the way he stared, eyes bright with unspoken curiosity. It was no precious gem she bore around her neck, hardly a thing of note or value, but it was a token that had accompanied her over the years and across all of her trials. She didn’t know why his attention to the trinket stood out to her feverish mind.

"Would you like to hear the story?" She croaked. Her throat felt dry and raw, the terrible thirst had not left her, even though she’d taken more than her share of water. "It's a good one…"

"My apologies!" Snapping from his transfixion Solas immediately broke his gaze and removed his offending hand. Once she proved that she could remain upright on her own for a moment he stripped off the heaviest layer of the robes he wore and transferred it to her shoulders. Helping her pull her arms through the wide sleeves he covered her befuddling nakedness. The discomfited apostate handed her the brew hurriedly, nearly spilling, still in mortification of his prior actions. The necklace remained visible, standing lone like a guard above her heart.

Chiyo struggled to stay vertical as she sipped the sharp, rather bitter brew. Even cooled, it felt like a liquid fire being poured down her raw throat and into her soured stomach. Unbroken seeds still in their crimson flesh floated in the water, she swallowed them as well.

"If you let me lean against you once more I will tell you." She murmured groggily, taking in another warm, acidic mouthful. With care and reservation Solas sat beside her on the thin, lumpy bed.

He guided her onto his lap limb by limb, pressing her uninjured side to his body and letting her weary head rest upon his chest. She felt so cool to the touch, so terrifyingly chilled. He timidly offered the healthy heat of his arms and was not refused. "I shall listen."

Chiyo closed her eyes, holding the metal cup with both hands, the temperature soothing on her
fingers. "It is my reminder for the day that changed everything…" She began, speaking softly, as if in a dream.

"When I was a young child I always wanted to be a hunter like my cousins. They were older and they teased me constantly, playing tricks and games when I wouldn't let them be. One day, after I had been particularly bothersome and scared off their prey they told me I had to catch a fennec with my bare hands and bring it back alive or else they would never speak to me again. I was so upset I took off right then, dashing into the woods in tears. It was unwise of me, I was never supposed to be by myself, but my cousins let me go anyways.

I searched for hours with little luck, and it was starting to get dark by the time I found one. I was already tired yet I chased it as fast as I could. But I never got near enough to grab it. It tried to escape through some bushes and I pursued it without thinking. Next thing I knew I was sliding down a rough drop, head over heels, and I crashed hard at the bottom. That's how I got this scar." Chiyo gestured at the thin line that ran from her scalp to just above the arch in her brow.

"I woke up surrounded by old, chewed up bones and strips of fur. The fennec had dodged me by slipping past a wolves' den, clever little beast. My face and hands were bleeding, my arm was broken; it was so hard to get back on my feet. By the time I pulled myself together I saw several pairs of shining eyes circling about. Growls started getting louder, I was so afraid… soo…” She began to trail off, her chin nodding droopily towards her chest.

He caught the hot cup as it slipped from her hand, too precious to be wasted. Secured once more in her enfeebled grasp, he felt the side of her face, thumb tracing the thin scar that ran towards the edge of her brow. The skin was dry and worryingly cold, either the herb was not strong enough or she’d consumed too little.

"Finish your tea, it will help.” Urged Solas, jostling her slightly to keep her awake. “I would like to hear how this story ends."

After a long drink she continued.

"One of the big wolves started to come towards me and in desperation I put out my hand and begged him to stop—you wouldn't believe it, but I felt magic for the first time that night too. There was this pressure all over my body, and it pierced into my palm -whoosh! Fire jumped out and scared the wolves away. I was able to make it far enough back to be found. The fire I cast stayed lit all the way back too. Everyone had been looking for me. It was the healer who discovered this fang stuck in a wound on my hand." She faltered, fingering the small totem lethargically as she reminisced on past she'd left far behind.

There had been another elder who’d seemed less that pleased with her newly discovered potential, and they’d tried to throw the tooth away, claiming that it must be cursed. But Chiyo did not like to dwell on those memories. She pushed them aside and returned to the less painful segments of her tale. "I had come back to the village as a potential mage. My cousins didn't pick on me any more after that. No one did actually. I didn't realize it till later but it seemed as though they may have been fearful of me then. Perhaps it's why they weren't too upset when I left for clan Lavellan."

Solas took the now empty cup from her hands and set it aside. Her tale weighed upon his mind, so many questions he wanted to ask her. To him, her story sounded so much like a simplified legend of forbidden and ancient art, of mages coming into their own much to the fear of their kin. It almost signaled a natural act of blood magic breaking down a seal on her own powers. But if that were true, who had sealed her and why had they attempted to keep her from her magic in the first place?

"Does this storytelling ease you?" He implored, feeling for a pulse against her clammy wrist.
Thready and thin, she had lost a good deal of blood but the toxins coursing through what was left posed the greatest risk to her life.

Chiyo closed her eyes, seeking the comforts and painlessness of sleep. "Yes, but it is taxing to speak so long. I would prefer your voice to my own."

Solas held her quietly for a time, praying that her rest would not be filled with continued discomfort. "Then I shall tell you a tale of something most unusual I saw in the Fade. From what I have learned since I can say for sure that it happened long ago, though I cannot mark the year. There are pieces even beyond my understanding. It is a story of a man who tried to do the impossible, and I would not wish such folly on any creature."

"Was he a great hero?" Chiyo’s voice was scratchy and failing, but it seemed finally empty of suffering. She nestled in closer, the low lilt of his voice thrumming alongside the heartbeat that kept time beneath her pressed ear.

Solas allowed his head to droop, resting against the softness of her short hair. It tickled against his skin; he’d long since disremembered the feel of his own locks. "I’m afraid he wasn’t. He believed that he was right however, and that idea nearly cost him his life."

"Sounds like a good story to me…” Whispered the ailing Inquisitor as Solas drew them both to lean against the side of the tent, reclining gradually into the tightly drawn canvas.

"Many ages ago there lived a man caught between two warring factions. Though he was brother to both he could not simply chose a cause to ally with. Each side wished for the control of the land and people they ruled over separately. One side had been in power for generations, but their line was falling to corruption and they were too willing to shatter themselves with grasping greed. They sought to break all dependency from the people that supported them, preferring to order them into lives of servitude. The other faction was growing in strength, feeding off the fears and discontent that some people were harboring against their once beloved rulers.” Solas could no longer see the dim-lit details of the simple tent he stared out into. Instead his mind’s eye was filled with shadows shaped from his distant past, of blaming faces he had not seen in a thousand years.

“They offered up power in exchange for loyalty, but this began a deep grudge between the common folk, inciting them to fight one another and leave a hatred that would burn for years to come. The ensuing battles threatened to tear the world the man loved so much asunder as each group tried to overtake the other, but they were too well matched. They called to their un-sided brother in an act of final desperation. ‘Give us something to smite our enemy with. Help us stop them before it's too late.’ They cried out to him, trying to appeal to reason for he had seen much and traveled to all the places they themselves dared not to go.

He knew of a weapon, hidden between the frays that would turn the tables of favor for whoever wielded it. He told each side to have faith and to wait for him back at their holds to plan a last battle; for he promised both that he would return when he found the armament they coveted above all others. While his brothers locked themselves away to plot in protected secrecy the man foolishly released the great magic in the weapon he had taken for himself. He used it to put an end to both troubled sides, removing them from the world they had struggled so fiercely over. But using it came at a great but terrible cost and took nearly every drop of his strength to manipulate. It left him broken amongst the people he had fought to free. But even that failed to save them.” He’d been ousted by so many that he’d once called friend, he couldn’t bear failing yet another elf dependent on his assistance. Solas couldn’t help but pull the almost dozing Inquisitor a little closer, taking a remorseful comfort in having her so very near.

“The common folk became distraught over the loss of their once mighty rulers. They mourned their
chance for power and fell into deep despair, wallowing in their abandonment. They cursed the man and cast him out, leaving him to die alone for all his troubles. It is uncertain if he persisted long in that state. Though some would believe that he vanished into the darkness, taking his weapon with him. His name would be eternally damned before it was mostly forgotten to time, and few would ever speak it but in anger even as the reason was long disregarded."

Solas fell silent, listening to the slow, steady breathing of the pale woman in his arms, ebbing in and out of consciousness as she had through most of his recital. "Rest easy, Inquisitor." He hummed, pulling a warm blanket around them both.

"Chiyo…” She mumbled, just before slipping into a peaceful oblivion. “Call me Chiyo…”

Solas smiled unseen, testing the sound of her name in his heart. There was a lightness to it that lifted his spirits and clarity to the tone that set him at pleasant ease.

"Goodnight, Chiyo."
Chapter Summary

A woeful slip of the tongue leaves Solas in quite the unsettling bind. His only saving grace is the busy preparation needed for the upcoming ball at the Winter Palace, nearly a more dangerous game than the one he plays upon his own uncertain heart.

Chapter Notes

Graciously edited by: Llynnyia

’What were you thinking? Have you lost your mind?’ Solas asked himself, over and over again as he wandered around the empty camp. Irritably he kicked at small rocks and scattered twigs littering the trampled dirt with his bare toes. He ground his teeth in growing frustration. It was hours past a sunnily risen dawn with no sign from the rest of the party. There was no account for how much longer she could hold out in her present condition. The long night had taken its toll on the both of them.

Chiyo thankfully remained asleep. Her body needed every restful minute available to continue her stalled fight against the poison that had felled her. It had been such an overwhelming relief to find her still softly breathing when he had risen in the weak light of daybreak.

Motionless and pressed up against him for warmth he’d willfully forgotten for a blissful moment why she was there. Her bolstering scent enveloped him, overpowering the stale air of sickness that hung in the closed tent. Waking up to the silken skin of her neck against his face, it all felt like so much more than he deserved. Solas savored the sensations of having another so close, their rhythms in tandem. Her heartbeat echoed his own. Their breath mingled together, as her chest slowly rose with each encouraging lift of his lungs. When he finally gained the resolve to release her from his arms the sun was fully up, sending a warm glow through the waxed canvas walls. He’d noted only a single splotchy stain of blood on his clothes when he helped resettle her into bed, leaving Chiyo to rest unaccompanied for a time. He thought to leave, to seek out any herbs that could be nearby. But he dared not even step more than a few strides from the tent, fearing what would happen if he turned his back on her for more than a minute.

He paused in his maddened pacing to draw the edge of his shirt to his nose, her scent lingered there still. Blood, sweat and the unique trace of her skin. It was all over him, a glaring reminder of his flagrant indiscretions. He could have wrapped her in the extra bedding and slept alone, it would have had comparatively the same effect. There had been no excusable reason for him to spend the night with her in an idyllic embrace, telling personal stories to fill the vacant hours. Just her plea… her plea did something to him deep inside. It clouded his mind, entrapped in some ominous spell that kept him from thinking clearly.

She was alive because of his actions, be they appropriate or not, and his world had not yet collapsed around him as it would have if she’d perished. It was something to celebrate, he hadn’t failed her—
only himself.

"Why not simply paint it on the walls, allow everyone to see!" Instead he was chastising himself fiercely for all that he had said to her the previous evening. The slip of endearment had been the least of his offenses. How could he have told her the bare bones of his own story, a secret he had never once uttered before to a living soul in the two years since he'd been reawoken? It was so imprudent of him and left his situation in a precarious bind. Should she figure out the identity he'd been so careful to bury it could mean the end of all his efforts. Or dare he hope… No! He could not take that chance.

Every plan would unravel. Were she to out or reject him the Inquisition would unquestionably turn against the tolerated apostate who’d lied through omission to them from the very beginning. His old name alone was a death sentence. The one that was known so well... Being in anyway accountable for what had happened to the Conclave and Haven warranted unspeakable punishment. Solas would be persecuted by hundreds, thousands even as word spread and he was forced back into hiding where he would watch the world finally succumb to the madness unleashed by his own rash hand.

"Perhaps she won't remember, or fancy it a dream." He attempted to reassure himself, ignoring the pounding in his chest, his pulse singing fiercely in his ears. Woozy and terrified were only the cusp of the broiled emotions that berated his normally stoic demeanor. Though he remained mostly silent of his inner struggle, his flitting eyes screamed of an entirely disjointed state. He was only grateful for being isolated in his profound agitation.

"How could I be this much a fool…?" Acutely however, he already knew why he'd slipped so far. For the brief moment when Solas considered that he might actually lose her, when the cold of her skin frightened him more than he'd ever thought possible, he had grasped desperately upon a moment where he didn't have to be so utterly alone. That even in death, her knowing but the partial truth would have released the heavy anchors from his tortuous soul. He could have thrown the rest of his life into the void and been content, for his story would have been heard once and persist beyond his solitude. If only for a few precious moments, he would have been free. He loathed the selfish notion of it all. He would never be loosened from the crimes written into the very essence of his being.

Solas the liar, the fool, the madman. The rebel who had stolen the future of the elvhenan. The apostate who’d been driven away from every clan he’d offered knowledge. The unassuming elf who’d played the role so well that not even the Spymaster had dubbed his story worthy of investigation. Fen'Harel, the Trickster God incarnate, He who hunted alone, did not deserve her mercy. Nor anyone else's.

The Inquisitor's kindness and sincerity was wearing his once steadfast resolve unnervingly thin. The comfortable world she extended him, though he could give so little in return, called to his very core. That wondrous spark, the thoughtful, penetrating nature of her soul threatened to bring him to his knees. He didn’t know what alarmed him more—the fact that he could care so much for another or that someone else might… He dared not even think the word. The notion was too hazardous to even entertain. No one could harbor such feelings for the person who had ruined everything out of irrational pride and the lack of other, better options. All the woe afflicting the current age could be traced back to his choices. Chiyo's own suffering was brought upon her by his hand.

If there was anything fragmented about her magic it was from his blunting and blocking her connection to the power that had been her birthright. He’d unintentionally created a world that was widely afraid of what had been the most natural aspect of their existence, where mages were persecuted for being strong enough to still tap into the Fade. If her life had been difficult, her people left to wander the wilderness and lose their heritage, it was because he’d left his kind too weak to fight back against the continued shackles of slavery by a new race of beings. She would never have
been destined or ill-fatedly become the Inquisitor if he’d only reconsidered the greater consequences of his blundering actions. It was all his fault, and he would never forgive himself. Blood was on his hands, but not from healing, but neglectful murder.

"What absurd ruination is this..." He groaned miserably, holding his aching head in his hands as he plopped down onto one of the wooden benches ringing the fire, which he had coaxed to life again early that morning.

Cowardice and guilt would not let him surrender to her affections. Pride, intrigue and some ephemeral thing he dared not name, refused to permit him to flee from her generous company. Solas was so consumed that he'd barely heard the approach of a wagon, the wooden wheel creaking across the rough terrain, the jingle of a harness and the clopping foot falls of a trotting beast.

"Solas! Oh tell me, please, tell me we aren't too late!" Cried Dorian in rapt despair, he jumped precariously from his perch on the driver's bench. Surprised by the sound of Dorian's voice, Solas sprung up from the bench, nearly toppling it in his thankful haste.

Chasing the discarded reins, Iron Bull leapt down to take hold of a sweating, exhausted pony whose foamy flanks heaved with exerted breath. Far from being an idealized and noble-bred white, the old, wiry steed could only be described as the grayest of gawky nags. Back swayed with age and bearing, the mare had seen far better years than her thin face and coarse feet led on. But Ferelden winters were hard on all creatures, beasts of burden or not. The icy cold stripped even healthy, young animals of their fat and vigor.

Solas dropped his hands in welcomed relief at the return of their party, deserting his fanatical contemplations before they could be more mistakenly noted upon. "Forgive me, no. I was lost in thought. She lives on. Much too stubborn to perish. You could not convince her to die even if it was for her own good." He eyed the rickshaw vehicle for a moment, curious as to why it was loaded with crates of vegetables, baskets of fruit, distressed looking chickens in cages— "...Did you steal this cart?!

Dorian took no time to pause as he shrugged and mimed a rascally 'perhaps'. Already fleeing for the tent with the medicine he'd brought back in a lively hurry, the mage hustled before he could be further questioned or detained.

"Inquisitor it is I, your gallant knight in shining armor, come to rescue you!"

The remaining two men heard Chiyo weakly groan in disapproval, rather unhappily roused by the Tevinter's raucous return as he threw back the partition, bringing the bright glare of morning with him. "Why so loud..."

"Sorry, he was practicing that line the whole way here." Iron Bull began to unharness the overworked animal that would be too small to carry him without the aid of the cart. He patted the horse that had aided their journey without complaint. "This poor sack of bones was all we could find on the road. We'll take it back. You look a bit rough around the edges... How was last night?"

"I would rather not repeat it." Solas collapsed back onto the roughly hewn bench, already sapped of energy. Even after his deep but brief rest with the Inquisitor, he was still physically exhausted with the mental stress of his actions only adding to the taxation. What he wouldn’t give to slip back into the Fade for the rest of the day, to avoid any further confrontation with the Dalish elf that vexed him and return to the relative safety of impartial wandering for a few calming hours. Was this weariness what once drove his people to periodically search out Uthenera? Solas shook his head to clear it of his melancholic ruminations. “Let us just return to Skyhold without anyone else nearly dying. That will be enough for me.”
They said farewell to the tiny camp that had housed them and given them shelter from the rain once Chiyo was well enough to travel. Her color and energy having returned after several horrid tasting treatments administered by the far too chipper Dorian. The party made the long trip back to the Keep hidden in the Frostback Mountains, now mounted thanks to master Dennett's earned generosity. Though Chiyo’s freshly amended ailment kept them to a slow walk on their fine steeds. A sturdy gelding bore her without fuss, minding not that she often fell asleep on his back.

Having had enough of the Hinterlands for one extended journey, they were all looking forward to partaking of a few hot meals, a stiff pint or two, and reclaiming their much more comfortable beds. Dorian filled their slow-going voyage with recounts of his most recent act of heroism, adding new aspects and flourishes of artful detail each time he retold the tale of his midnight dash across the wilds.

Bears with a taste for human flesh, ruffians that outnumbered them ten to one, and some watery tart holding up a sword in the Upper Lake calling him to become a king soon stood as testament to his loyalty and bravery. Chiyo would laugh and play along, goading him for more, winking at the Iron Bull who rolled his eye behind Dorian's back each time he re-embellished the tale. Though the Qunari chuckled loudly when Dorian claimed to have fended off a flock of lusty Chantry sisters in protection of Bull’s spotless honor and breeches-less glory.

Solas, however, remained quiet most of the time, avoiding prolonged contact with the recovering Inquisitor as much as possible. Chiyo wondered what she had conceivably said or done on that dark eve to have upset him so. He had never turned such a cold shoulder to her, his scant answers now kept to the barest of speech. She remembered most of the night, so she thought, even if some of the details were hazy at best. But she would never forget the care he had shown her. That much she knew to be real and not a delusion of the feverish nightmares that had soon followed.

More than once she had seen the terrifying outline of a large wolf prowling at the edges of her dreamscape. Eyes shining through the darkness, waiting keenly in the shadows, it stalked her movements in complete silence. The beast was there each night that followed until they reached home. But even then she felt a presence, circling at a distance outside her range. She kept her dreaming constricted, too uncertain to wander past the places she understood to be safe. Chiyo wished she could speak to Solas about the matter, but he seemed beyond approach.

Perhaps the visions of dangerous creatures were just from her mind playing tricks as the body healed.

"Maker’s breath! What are you doing you sneaky fool?" Harritt the blacksmith jumped back from his workbench, dropping his hammer as a pile of grimy, ruined armor was dumped on his table. The pieces scattered across the already cluttered work surface, ringing off the wide square of engraved steel that currently required his full attention. His shouts echoed through the undercroft, loud enough to startle Dagna from her bizarre and arcane work as well. He looked up from the shield he'd been repairing to the unnerving sight of an apostate glaring at him with narrowed, cuttingly blue eyes.

"I would ask you to explain your work." Solas crossed his arms over his chest and waited with icy, feigned patience. He sounded polite enough, yet there was a brooding menace building behind his words; it corroded his intentions with the accusations he insinuated at. "You've heard by now about the Inquisitor's latest ordeal."

Annoyed and in a rough manner, Harritt picked through the dark, filthy leather abomination. He scoffed at the state of the worn armor, tallying the flaws inaudibly as he inspected the bloodied layers. The stitching of the tanned hide was wide and cheap, the metals used had been hammered too
thin. He held up the shoulder guard that had been pierced, inspecting it half-heartedly before pitching it aside. "This garbage is not mine."

Solas did not accept the answer. There had been no one else so relied upon as the man who was disregarding the danger he’d left the Inquisitor in. Solas’ own, newer armaments had been prepared by Harritt, as was everyone who accompanied Chiyo to all the far flung reaches of Ferelden and Orlais. "You have personally been responsible for the entire Inner Circle's gear since our days in Haven. Where else would she have gotten armor from?"

"Not even her size. Probably picked it up from some cheapskate merchant like those louts in the yard." He spoke gruffly, twisting his heavy moustache with an angered frown. Picking up his tools, Harritt went back to work without so much as another glance at the elf that’d snuck up beside him. The head of his hammer precisely tapped the end of a sharp chisel as he continued to remove a critically damaged strip from the large shield. "If she didn't like the armor I made her she should have come to me first. Probably been lying to me about keeping my wares this whole time…"

"That's not true!" Called a small voice from the diminutive Arcanist, bright as a nervous songbird. Dagna approached warily, fiddling with an unfinished blade she had been experimenting on. She twirled the glittering dagger between her gloved fingers, the freshly minted runes flashing in the hilt. "I know what happened to her original set… I mean, it's not like she sold it for coin or tossed it in the rubbish heap. She, ummm… gave it away…"

"Oh for the love of Andraste, why would she do a foolish thing like that?" Frustration boiling, Harritt cast aside the old, favored mallet he'd been swinging. It had been one of the few tools that had made it back with him from Haven, but that did not keep him from chucking it across the room without even a flinch of hesitation.

"Because she cares too much. The Inquisitor does nice stuff for people... When I asked for more research materials she went straight to the Commander to get me them! No questions asked! She’s even going to let me experiment on that funny hole in her hand. I just really want to know what makes it… glow…” Dagna faltered as both men's eyes turned her way, she caught herself rambling. The blacksmith’s temper was commonplace enough, but the chilly apostate’s calm left her unsettled. She stumbled through her responses, trying to direct his piercing gaze focused elsewhere. “I saw a young recruit wearing her armor a few days ago before being sent out to scout what's left of Haven.”

Harritt was utterly beside himself, the edge of his chisel became buried upright in the wood of his worktable. "And you couldn't have mentioned it before the Inquisitor left?"

"I asked her to come by the undercroft. I swear!" Dagna chewed at her lip, staring intently at the unfinished knife she’d never stopped twiddling with. "But she promised that everything would be okay, just a short trip, we could whip up something better when there was more time. She didn’t want to make me rush."

"Then let us all be sure she keeps her new set. If you are of the mind to craft another.” The furious knots in Solas’ stomach eased as he listened to the anxious dwarf expel her meandering tale. He was quick to rescind the ill-placed blame he’d been doling out. He knew too well how it felt to bear unwarranted judgements, at least for such specific allegations. He should have gone to the Inquisitor herself first and foremost, but he had his reasons for staying away. “Please do not hesitate to request whatever materials you need.” He bowed slightly and took his leave.

Chiyo’s shoulders slumped forward and her head felt near to bursting as she exited the war room,
finally having completed the first meeting with her advisors since she'd returned from the Hinterlands. Her stamina just wasn’t quite back up to the demands of her serious-minded colleagues. She felt roasted under Cullen and Leliana's heated questions and mortified under Josephine's analytical gaze. *How many times did she plan on nearly getting herself killed* seemed to be the general theme. It was decided that she should not attempt such irrationality more than once per month if she could avoid it. They needed her alive and in one piece. Inquisitors were expensive to replace and hard to come by. The guilt they heaped onto her didn’t end at that. They also brought up her indispensability because of the mark. No one else could close the rifts, without it the whole of Thedas would soon be overrun by demon spewing tears. Josephine had tried to kindly point it out to her that the work was far from over, with more to do beyond just clearing Ferelden and Orlais from rifts. There were already pleas for aid from as far away as Rivaine, and the Free Marches had been sending more urgent reports as of late.

Cullen especially had acted with grave concern, mincing his cobbled words as he staggered through his distress. Had he not just hoisted her half frozen, nearly dead body down the mountainside mere months ago? She’d been so lucky to escape Corypheus and the Archdemon; perhaps it would be wiser to not try her luck so frequently. The overworked man had dropped to an open chair at her mumbling retelling of events and hid his aching head in his hands. He vexed of predicted ulcers twisting in his stomach and the loss of all of his hair to come with her next venture out.

Some great leader she was turning out to be...

The gambled chances she took had little room for error. The Inquisitor was not ignorant of that. But trouble always seemed to be at her heels, sniffing and snapping until she eventually tripped. It couldn’t be helped, and those around her would simply have to get used to it. At least there had been the distraction of their plans at the Winter Palace to derail them from the latest alarm. The ball was just a few short weeks away, but it was a massive opportunity for them to acquire new alliances and most importantly, end the feud that was tearing the neighboring countries apart. There were never ending lists of thing that must be discussed and decided on down to the meaning of the color of horse she would choose to pull her carriage. So many details hinged on perfection, but everyone agreed a royal assassination attempt and trying to stop it were far more pressing matters than the would have, could have been of her most recent escapade.

It had been unanimously decided, with no hope of overriding their decision that she was to convalesce there at Skyhold until after the obnoxious Orlesian farce was done. No other mission would take her out of those gates until she had recovered and completed their goals at the upcoming ball.

By the time Chiyo escaped them and the befuddling map on which they designed all their plans, her stomach was growling loudly. It reminded her sharply that it was well past midday and she had not eaten any breakfast, having spent those early hours locked away from the general public. She nearly ran down the stairs that led to the lower gallery and to the Hold’s main kitchen. If her feet and appetite had not brought her there, her nose surely would have. The bustling kitchen was controlled chaos, a pure display of wonderful magic as she watched them pull the steaming buns from the oven when only minutes before they’d been less appealing raw dough balls. Tray after tray went into the massive oven, the true, hot heart of the Keep. Before becoming the Inquisitor, Chiyo had never had real bread, only the hard tack the soldiers ate or the stiff, dry brown loaves of the peasantry who were willing to trade with the *Dalish heathen*. Hard, coarse things that kept through the winter without spoiling, they weren’t pleasant to eat without soaking in soup or stock.

The head cook had nearly shouted, on the eve of her first day with the Inquisition, when the Herald herself had sprung unannounced through the door. Bread, yeasty and soft clenched in both fists, she had asked the startled woman what the rare, marvelous things in her hands really were. She’d
bashfully demanded an explanation as Varric’s jolly, proffered one had not sufficed, and another helping were there anymore…

She sighed contentedly before biting into a still warm sweet-bun. The hungry Inquisitor had slipped unobtrusively into the kitchen in hopes of beseeching the serious cook for a morsel or two. Her recounts of the poor meals she had endured in the Hinterlands, of flavorless mushrooms and scrawny bird meat, had been enough to soften the woman's strict heart. How could she be expected to lead the Inquisition on thin broth alone? It wasn't the first time the Inquisitor had come poking around for small treats when the smells of baking wafted through the fortress' main hall. But the white-haired elf had become exceptionally good at weaseling for extra, sweetened delights. Chiyo had even offered to help watch the buns herself while the cook stepped out for more ingredients and to check in on the assistants out in the yard plucking nearly an entire flock of ducks. Claiming that she had observed it being done now enough times to keep them from burning, she had convinced the cook to leave her with the covetous staple.

The main door opened suddenly and she froze mid-bite into her stolen delicacy, eyes wide with guiltiness as she looked towards the latest intruder.

"What a heavenly fragrance, you have certainly outdone—Inquisitor, I wasn't expecting…." Solas paused, freezing to the spot and staring back at the mage whose presence had completely surprised him. The apostate cleared his throat to say more as he gripped the door, but instead of speaking again he promptly turned to leave.

"Wait!" Chiyo offered up one of the warm deserts, delectably spiced and oozing with buttery sugars. “Here, didn't you want one of these?"

Solas stopped inside the narrow doorway, the tip of his traitorous tongue rolled behind sternly held lips. "No, I seldom care for such sweets." But the famished look in his returning eyes gave him away.

Plating the sticky bun, she set it on the table that stood between them as a friendly lure. Chiyo licked at the sweet glazing on her fingertips, waiting for him to take the bait. "Then what did you come here for. If not tea or sweets, dinner isn't for a few hours still…"

The temptation was too great; the Dalish had accurately remembered something correctly after all about the Dread Wolf. Solas abandoned the security of the entryway and sidled over to the wide table with carefully groomed indifference. "I was hoping to have a word with you." He claimed, certainly simple hunger and a freely given offering could not be his only excuse. This must seem to be for business, not pleasure, if he were to come away from the interaction with all his facilities intact.

"And you knew I'd be here… because?" She smiled victoriously and finished her own pilfered snack, teasing him with each slow, deliberate bite.

Solas gave up the small, poorly executed ruse. It was senseless to continue when he'd already been overcome. If he fought anymore she would be sure to hear his belly howl in protest. "You are too clever for me. I'd assumed no one would find out that I have been persuading the poor woman into early helpings. I do not always eat when I should. Perhaps, since you are here, I might request a moment of your time. If you are not needed somewhere else and can spare it.”

"By all means." Chiyo left him to eat while she searched the nearby cupboards for a jug of spicy cider she had happened upon during a previous visit. It was one of the assistant’s private stock, stashed well to keep the cook and any passersby from draining the heady brew. But they had not anticipated a nosy Herald to spend much of her time poking around in their kitchen.
Dodging a preoccupied drudge peeling their way through a pile of roots, he took to an open chair before savoring the feel of soft, sweet and wholesome bread against his teeth. Distracted and pacified by the wondrous treat, surrounded by simple comforts and rich smells, it was easier for him to relax slightly. The rigid tightness in his jaw eased while he chewed and the timidity about his manners began to slacken as he settled into his seat. "Dagna told me a curious tale about your armor. I wished to understand your reasoning. Is it true that you gave your quality gear to a new recruit?"

"She didn’t have shoes." Chiyo answered plainly, having never held the intent of hiding her deed. The act was of her own volition and she wasn’t required to explain her personal choices to anyone. Though the Inquisitor’s motives were hers alone, she was not above disclosing them to the mage that had not judged her directly for any of her other actions since they’d first met. Solas may not always agree, but he’d never once told her she’d been in the wrong. Spying the earthen container tucked behind a sack of tubers, she lifted it from its hiding place and returned to the worktable.

"Poor girl needed real footwear with thick soles and lacings, like shemlens prefer. Just thin strips of hide were wrapped around her feet. She was a flat ear—sorry, that was rude of me.” She said as she glanced up at Solas and corrected her misguided word use. A few months living among such diverse strangers would not immediately undo a lifetime of perceptions accepted by a Dalish tribe. Even as progressive the clan Lavellan was, there was still language they used amongst themselves to refer to outsiders, often being far less than kind. Her own reception by humans had made her think twice about how she referred to others, but still she caught herself slipping from time to time. “She was a city elf, and didn’t even know how to wrap her feet like the Dalish.”

Solas turned over a clean mug for her, having already demolished the sticky morsel while she’d been engrossed with her search. "This recruit you mean, you say she was ill-prepared for the task. What brought her here?” He asked, remaining neutral to the newcomer’s origins.

"Nor a coat or any gear. She was wearing several ratty shirts instead. Yet she survived the trip here and still wanted to undergo more." Chiyo pulled the thick cork with a swift pop and filled the glass to the brim. She gestured him to grab a second cup and poured another. "So ready to give her young life away to the Inquisition. Leaving her home, her family, a life that could have taken any path she wanted. But she chose this one wholeheartedly, even if it was out of desperation. The least I could offer her was coin for good footwear and equipment worthy of her sacrifice. She's even smaller than I am, too vulnerable for such risky work unprotected."

He mulled over her sincere expressions, hiding his frown behind the mug he held to his lips. What value did she hold to her life if she was so prepared to ransom her own security for a complete stranger's sake? When did her safety become important enough to even cross her mind? It was wildly reckless of her, no matter how kind of a gesture. A scout could be replaced, though unfortunate, they had young runners in droves all striving to advance within the growing force. There were not others waiting in line to take her place if she were lost to them, through bravery or folly, it could not be so simply justified. But her compassion was an important factor of her leadership; it would assure people that they were making the right choice in siding with the Inquisition. Those acts made her both more real to the masses and would appear more holy as the story was spread throughout the ranks. He knew these deeds were unplanned and truly from her genuine heart. The loyalty it stood to inspire was in many ways a frightening thing, the power she wielded now was immense. If she succeeded in saving their world, what could she claim for those valiant efforts? Others that had come before her had certainly asked for just rewards, but Chiyo had asked for nothing from the start.

"What would you ask for yourself in return from the Inquisition? You have already given them everything you have freely.” Solas asked as he took another bite and tilted his unadorned head slightly, still listening through his own heavy thoughts and awaiting an answer.
Chiyo shook her head, tracing the heavy ceramic edge of her drink. "There is an opportunity here that is greater than my own desires. I have a chance to do something good for the future of the elves, even if I only succeed in bringing them a little dignity. That would be so much more than they have now."

The enduring injustices of her race always lingered in the back of her mind, surfacing more and more as she furthered her interactions with humans. She’d seen far too few elves since she’d left the safety of her clan. It was disheartening to witness so many straining just to survive in a world that did not always care for them. Though her people were far from perfect, the Dalish too proud of their broken heritage and their struggle to reclaim what had been stolen from them, they deserved to be left in peace.

Solas couldn’t help but implore further. Her lack of selfishness was dumbfounding. "Do you ever think of yourself?" Her low laugh that followed reminded him of distant thunder rolling, a gentle storm on the horizon that promised a nourishing rain.

"Constantly." She vied for another snack, leaning towards the cooling batch on the nearby side table, her mischievous eye looked away from the equally hungry mage. She cocked her head at the boy in the corner, who’d been enviously watching them through his tedious chores and silently gave him permission to take one himself. "I will never be able to live without sugar again. We never had such sweets back home. And such rich butter! Flour was expensive enough to trade for in the Free Marches, but there was little money left over for such luxuries. Wild honey did well enough, but this is on an entirely different level. These would be even better if they were filled with fresh halla cheese."

Solas held out his plate, joining her in the indulgence. Bliss settled where anxiety should have remained in his worrisome heart. "You continue to surprise me, Chiyo. What end is there to your mystery?"

A smile bloomed across her face, beyond that of generous gluttony at the repeated sound of her own name. "Eat; we must hurry before the cook returns and the kitchen begins to prepare dinner in earnest. I may or may not have made off with a whole bird the last time they roasted duck and fear she won’t let me have a second chance at that again…"

"Oh Inquisitor… red is your color. You really shouldn’t wear so much sage or gray!" Josephine cooed to Chiyo as she stepped out from behind the illustrated changing screen. Decorated with stylized blood lotus and water-birds, it was a prized possession of the Enchanter who’d placed it centrally in her private quarters. The long, divided layers of her ethereal skirts dragged across the wooden floor, exposing her pale legs with each stride between the assorted gauzy slits. Tucked at the waist, and tailored tightly around her upper body, the sheer dress hung off her narrow form in floaty waves.

"It just doesn’t seem very practical. What purpose do these clothes serve? Where am I to hide my weapons if I can barely hide my own body?" Ambling forward gracelessly, Chiyo tried not to trip and ruin the exquisite garment. It was an expensive gift she had not been able or allowed to decline. She stepped gingerly onto a short, sturdy stool provided, bringing her height almost to that of the elegant woman currently eyeing her with a critical gaze. Holding her breath as the seamstress
stooped and bobbed about, the Inquisitor did her best not to move. She had learned from the very first fitting that if she did, she would stab herself with the pins temporarily embedded in the dress.

A quick prod from Vivienne corrected her posture, refusing to let the petite mage spoil her vision of perfection. "Don't slouch dear; you have nothing to be embarrassed about. You will be laughed out of Orlais if this hemline isn't straight though. This will be your armor against the court. It must be utterly flawless if you are to be a commanding presence. The nobility must be left speechless. They will see you standing unafraid and unmasked. With this dress, you will announce that the Inquisition has nothing to hide, as our enemies shroud themselves ever more."

"But isn't it a bit much?" Chiyo pleaded, having her hand slapped sharply for attempting to pull at the top of the dress that constricted her chest. The alluringly transparent décolletage cut straight across a pair of breasts that would have never been ample enough to fill one of Vivienne's more customary designs. Her shoulders were left bare but for a narrow band of see-through red fabric cresting over each arm, to show off her fine boning and the lean muscle that had developed from the years of wielding a staff. Still visible, the wound inflicted weeks before had dulled to a dark, purpled scar, though considering the refinery she was swathed in it would hopefully not distract from the beautiful gown. At first after initially seeing the scar, the impossibly impeccable knight enchantress had tried all sorts of schemes to cover it, but nothing suited any of her unbending visions or designs. A collared shawl had been rudimentarily constructed, but the ill at ease elf had been quick to remove the constricting garment from her neck and refused to wear it again. The spidery-thin silk, dyed to the rich standard hue of the Inquisition’s proclaimed colors and the other ornamentations would just have to suffice as a diversion from the blemish.

The loose layers that often twisted around her legs and the sweeping length were not entirely unmanageable. She could learn to walk adequately in anything given enough time and practice. It was the delicately wrought cage about her waist that perturbed Chiyo the most. No matter how many times the finely dressed ladies reassured her that it was only a decorative girdle. She did not revel in the attentions being given to her, preferring to watch such spectacles rather than being central to them. But the outfit felt more than slightly off-putting. These were not the formal, protective garbs of a proud elf, but of a human noble. She was dressed as the people who had subjugated her kind, and thought of donning such silks before those worst offenders made her skin crawl. If the other Lavellans saw her in such a state, ridicule would be the least of her concerns.

Josephine continued her dotage, clasping her hands together with delight. She was giddy to the point of turning pink beneath her rich skin tone with the idea of having a life-sized doll to dress up. "That neckline with those gorgeous sleeves! And the skirts! Nothing of mine skims like that. What an extraordinarily creative girdle! Madame de Fer your designs are ingenious! Do you have your sketchbook?" The bubbling Antivan asked as she neared the table covered in ribbons, thread, beads, pieces of jewelry and of course, the Enchanter’s private, design filled manuscript.

Vivienne waved to the nearby book, busy adjusting a fold and keeping a watchful eye on the apprehensive woman she was decorating. "You may look, but if I see any of my work coming from your closet over the next few weeks I will be most displeased."

"Dancing in this will be a nightmare." She muttered to herself. Chiyo fidgeted with the intricate, golden metal that encircled most of her middle. Hard and utterly stiff in comparison to the gossamer transparency of the gown. Reaching as high as her sternum allowed, a filigreed eye and sword made up the center of the design. The Andrastian based emblem would follow into her next mission. She would walk into the Winter Palace displaying the sign of the Inquisition so none could question her presence or who she was representing.

"Do you like it?" Vivienne asked nonchalantly, continuing to straighten a piece of the glittering
fabric so that the shallow, layered openings that began at her thighs hung true. "You certainly have a figure for formal dress, though suppler curves are much more in vogue this season. A lady will always have the wrong body for what fashion currently demands. It is our curse. But no one else will be wearing a gown like this and they will be unable to compare it to anything present."

"It's breath-taking. Your gift is far too generous." The Inquisitor replied honestly, already wearing her sentiments unchecked, for she couldn't fill her lungs thoroughly with the tight lacing and tailoring that had already been completed. "I have never worn such finery. But what if there is fighting, won't it get in the way?"

Brandishing two distinct looking slippers, the sophisticated Enchanter took her time holding each against the dress. An important detail that could not be overlooked or decided in haste. "Any woman worth her salt should be able to conquer the world and look stunning at the same time. But if you can survive the night without getting blood on your clothes I would recommend it. The color will help hide a few transgressions, but the stains will show before long."

"I hope you're right. I have a bad feeling about this ball." Chiyo wrinkled her nose slightly and curled her long toes at the sight of fancy footwear.

"I would be concerned if you didn't feel uneasy. Court is no place for the inexperienced." Vivienne cautioned, having played the Game countless time during her years both in a Circle and at the empress’ side. "And don't give me that look. You will not go barefoot in front of Empress Celene."

“If only you had more hair…” Josephine sighed softly as she tried to place a decorative hairpiece in the Inquisitor’s short tresses. But as her fingers touched the locks she often romantically described in her letters as moonlit, she startled Chiyo with the unexpectedly personal touch that was too close to the mage’s sensitive ear. In her panic, the Herald nearly jumped from the pedestal and bumped into the seamstress, earning her a solid poke with a sharp needle into her leg, doubling her alarmed shout anew.

“Maker guide me through this and Andraste lend me patience…” groaned Vivienne as she swatted away the mortified Ambassador while the Inquisitor apologized profusely to the cursing consultant. Hopping on one leg, she barely avoided stepping on her threatened skirts that would be torn off in her distress. “May we all survive the final fitting…”
A Dangerous Dance

Chapter Summary

A dancing lesson gone amuck. An elf out of her depths with royal lives on the line. And a Witch who makes everyone's skin crawl. What a lovely party, it should be held every year.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"And one, two, three. One, two, three. Turn, turn, and watch that meter! It's the second step, dear." Dorian's humored voice echoed brilliantly throughout the rotunda, keeping time to a melody orchestrated entirely in his head. The sharp heels of his boots clicked against the floor, shadowed in suit by a softer shuffling that did not always match the expert stride. "Better! Open shoulders. Don't look down, eyes on me. One, two, three. Feel the music."

"There is no music, you just keep yelling at me!" Near out of breath the Inquisitor panted, already at the end of her wits for the refined, demanding tutelage. Her feet moved uncertainly in the practice slippers that had been forced upon her feet. Each step was at a loss for fluidity, she hesitated through each simple motion, deadened of the usual guidance from her toes. She could run swiftly through congested valleys, find purchase in a cliff or manage a desolate ruin. But the memorized, rigid dancing of the most well-bred human elite left her feeling lost and graceless.

"The harmony is in your heart, Inquisitor, follow it!" The Tevinter mage began humming louder to a melodious tune of his own design, ignoring the young elf's harried dismissal. The increased shuffling of her feet marked the escalation of his pace, leaving her no time to think about the motions, only to act upon them.

"Can't we do this somewhere quieter? I think people might be trying to read, the library is full today." Chiyo tried again, cursing as she stumbled once more, churning her silken tipped toes into a throbbing pulp.

Dorian scoffed and continued as the other residents chuckled at the amusing display. "Focus! The ballroom will be full of people. Learn to feel them around you. Head back! Chin up! Command your space from them!"

Solas grumbled in escalated annoyance. He tried his best to ignore the instructional racket coming from the library upstairs. He had been diligently working on the translation of a rather complicated outline of ancient elven rituals. They appeared to have been constructed before the violent expulsion of the remaining elven nobility from the Exalted Plains, but the frequent stumbles, crashes and anxious apologies continued to interrupt his devout focus.

His mind yet again strayed from his meticulously taken notes and he glanced up to catch the Inquisitor being dipped extravagantly. The tips of her finely tapered ears nearly brushed the floor as the talented mage angled his strapping form to support her. The move earned Dorian a short applause from the archive visitors who had not fled for fear of being run over as he gave the dancing lesson.

Solas had never once seen her look so uncomfortable. Yet this was only the beginning of the
charade. The Dalish elf had spent the majority of her years far from human cities, living a life developed specifically around avoiding the historically hostile race as much as possible. And now she was preparing to be thrust into the dangerous center, the nexus of a deadly game she’d never played. Every action, every word, practically every thought would be weighed and judged by a masked court that would be happier by far to see her serving them drinks and cakes than saving their Empress. How would she fair in such hostile company, where a cold sneer and a harsh word from the right noble could be near as painful as a dagger and just as damaging.

But Chiyo would not be going alone; there was that to be thankful for. She would have her best and brightest at her side, watching from the shadows and acting as the Inquisitor's eyes and ears. They would guard her while she desperately tried to charm the Palace riff raff with wits and grace as the only weapons available to her.

"Round again, lovely! If you watch your feet one more time I will cut them off!" Dorian encouraged her boisterously as they began the dance anew. Solas tried to go back to his work, but it was hard to take his eyes long off the pitiful sight of an elf so outside of her element. He imagined instead how she might move to the sound of her own songs and music. To the fiddle, the flute, and the drum. Twisting and turning with the natural grace she’d been blessed with, twirling by hands or arms of her kin. Welcoming in the spring with joy, reveling in the health of summer, reaping the bounty of autumn and preparing for winter to return like an old friend. The Dalish were renowned for their rhythms, inspired by the endless cycles of the plains and forests that supported them, and each clan had their own regional flair. It was one of the few things in which Solas had to admit they outdid their predecessors.

After a few more tiring, heavy-heeled twirls around the second story the pair seemed to grow weary of their exercise as they slowed their formal, regimented motions. Dorian finally put an end to the playful torture. He shouldn’t push her so hard; Chiyo did that enough to herself without the added pressure of her well-meaning peers.

With the returned peace, it was back to dissecting and translating the implied theory of using water as a natural conduit to pool multiple spells together in a collective. Covering the fragile paper were beautifully constructed patterns, designed to keep the magic true and focused. However the annotations scrawled neatly in the margins were horribly flawed, the prior scholar’s deductions were wrong from the very start. It seemed another, less learned hand had long ago attempted at deciphering the antiquated inscriptions. There was merit for trying, but they had failed rather miserably without a full grasp on the native language it had been originally written in.

Soft, floating chatter soon meet his selective ear as he resumed his concentrated efforts. There was worry about forgetting the steps followed by friendly, reassuring praise offered by Dorian. The Tevinter mage was a good friend and ally to their Inquisitor, even if his mannerisms were seeped in superiority and derision. Solas could return to his work without further disruption, the rotunda settling back into unobtrusive routine as the voices became static in the background.

But an abrupt cacophony of crows disturbed him yet again; someone must have bothered them on the third floor. They always squawked horribly when they were startled or mishandled or hungry… or simply bored. The birds jostled and cried out, shifting from cages to rafters in nervous succession, shouting at one another with shrillness behind their calls. A rope suddenly snapped in the chaos, the noise only amplified by the crash of metal and the continued jarring shrieks.

"Just ignore it…" Solas muttered to himself, and leaned harder over the text in failing concentration. Regret for his choice of workspace rose inside him again, but locking himself further away as he had originally preferred would have only added to the quiet suspicions many still kept. The constant public exposure was easier on them, knowing that he couldn't hide in such open confinement. It
made others feel safe and in control. His cooperative actions and obliging involvement had cleared his name to most, though trust never came free for apostates. Not even for those who had volunteered under the direst circumstances and offered up every ounce of their knowledge in their service. They would have never found Skyhold without him, nor would they have managed to close the Breach. But his actions did not change how he was seen and received. He still had pointed ears and magic, though both served to fill in any gaps in his disguise. Being quiet and keeping mainly to himself allowed most eyes to slide right over him. And that was exactly what he wanted.

"Oh no! Poor thing. I can't reach, lend me your staff." Alarm pierced the Inquisitor’s voice. The startled birds still cried out, edged by the commotion of distant struggling high above Solas’ head. "No good. Dorian! Come back, we can't leave it like this! Just hold my arm."

Solas next heard wood creaking, straining under pressure beyond its constructed intent.

"Inquisitor, it's just a crow!" The Tevinter warned through his teeth apprehensively.

"Fenedhis lasa!" Ever defiant, she snapped back with heat behind her words. "Leliana needs it in one piece! Do you know how long it takes to train a messenger bird? Just hold still."

Solas dared a quick glance up away from his work and his stomach dropped to the floor, his jaw not far behind. Chiyo's slipper-less feet were tucked under the thin wooden rail that encircled the second level rotunda. One hand held by Dorian, leaning back as her counter weight. The other arm stretched to its limit, grasping at a young bird tangled in rope and netting that had been supporting a small cage. The full length of her body hung over the emptiness of the round room. A small slip and there would be nothing to keep her from splattering on the unforgiving stone floor.

"Just a bit more!" Chiyo urged, her grasping fingers so close to the distressed avian that wriggled in the ropes just within reach. "There!"

"Have… have you gone completely daft!" Solas heard the loud words escape his mouth, watching the bird come loose and Chiyo nearly do the same. Dorian strained to pull her back as she swung precariously. The dangling bird cage finally broke free and clattered against the floor, inches from his desk, with a garish racket as wood and iron pieces flew in all directions. Solas did not breathe again until she was safe on the other side of the short wall. His hands shook as he stuffed his notes into various books, and then stormed out of the room with the work in tow.

"What utter recklessness! Is there no peace here? And why is it whenever there is trouble it is always the two of you behind it?!

"Ehh, looks like we've upset the poor creature." Dorian chortled as he wiped his moistened brow and bowed over the rail to watch the furious mage go, departing through the first door to his room in a growling fury. “Positively raving!”

Varric jumped as the wooden door behind him unexpectedly swung wide open and met the adjoining wall with a slam. He stared as the peeved apostate passed by. "Hey Chuckles, why the rush? Did Sera set fire to your sofa again, or was it mice in the desk like last week?"

"That woman… If I get my hands on you, ar tu na'din!" Solas fumed and headed for another ingress across the hall, courtely visitors parting from his path before they were bowled over. Angry shouts about how foolhardiness and lack of fear should never be bedfellows echoed through the bustling hall despite the door being sharply reclosed behind the livid elven mage.

Chiyo ran down the stairs mere moments later with delicate silk slippers in fisted hand, looking up and down the hall in shamefaced pursuit. "Was he that angry?"
"Oh, so it was you. I don't know how you managed to scare the shit out of him this time, Inquisitor, but I might consider letting that one cool off. His head might boil if you aren't careful." Varric teased briefly before he resumed his casual facade and leaned next to the fireplace with a small snifter of Antivan brandy in hand that he’d been lucky not to spill. "I really hope those elvish curses don't hold up. Sounded pretty wicked to me…"

"It was just a dancing lesson…” She groaned with embarrassment, pressing the soft shoes to her cheeks to conceal the redness that grew there.

The dwarf snorted, shaking his broadly built head. "Must've been one hell of a lesson."

The finely dressed Inquisitor remained uncomfortable, seeking the solace of his counsel once more. Already the strain of painted smiles and disillusioned exchanges gnawed upon the limits of her passivity. The confidence she had cloaked herself in just hours before their arrival had begun to fray as soon as her formal introduction to court had been given before the Empress. It hadn't helped that she'd nearly tripped in the processional; the restrictive confines of her shoes and the unaccustomed swirling of her gown only added to her awkwardness and fraught loss of poise. Her misstep had won her little favor from the disparaging crowd, but she'd recovered well enough as could be expected.

The title Solas had given himself had earned him quite the flabbergasted, backward glance. He was pleased to see her admiration of his jest, barely containing a snicker as she walked away from the Empress' council. His hat however had not met her approval. It had been removed and tossed back into the carriage that had driven them to the Winter Palace. So much for fashion. But that had been the last of the Inquisitor being at ease. Her entire demeanor had fallen after leaving the ballroom.

'How much further can she bend before breaking? How many whispers of 'knife-ear' or 'rabbit' have been gathered by her sharp hearing as she passed?' Solas wondered, offering her a relaxing sip of a scrumptiously sweet wine and further guidance at his station by the window.

Chiyo’s initial delight and excitement for the experiencing the grand ball had long been burned out from the extended hours in almost entirely hostile human company. Her fellow elves, servants all, had taken one look at her in the fancy garb before turning up their noses when she’d tried to approach them.

It had been fascinating however to watch her attempts at playing the Grand Game from the sidelines. A few toes had been stepped on however, and she had truly given her best efforts. The nobles may have even forgiven her oversights if she’d been human…or at least not a mage on top of being Dalish. Under different circumstances Solas supposed that she may have enjoyed the party to some extent. The witty conversations would have been easier if the consequences not so grave. Introductions might've been remarkably pleasant if she hadn't spent weeks memorizing the names, portraits and favored interests of the elite. Even the tantalizing appeal of the heady sex and power that permeated every hall and corridor could have become a marvelous amusement in comparison to her reserved flirtations and caged aggravations. A smile edged his lips as her fingers brushed over his gloved hand in passing the wide-bellied cup that had already been savored from.

"Are you being treated well?” She asked after a hearty taste from the finely crafted glass handed to her, but the rich liquid hitting her empty stomach left her grimacing. “I've worried that people might be unkind."

"The food and drink are excellent, however, and the servants have been happy to refill my glass. It seems not even a civil war is daunting enough to keep them from preparing and serving the finest
their kitchens have to offer. You should eat something…” The wine she accepted, but she wouldn’t dare touch the expertly prepared food he’d enjoyed through most of the evening. She’d been too nervous to consume anything that day and her distrust of the people around her made her hesitant to indulge in the sophisticated assortment. He would not taunt her growing hunger with describing the delicious delight he had found in the small, frilled cakes that had been passed about just before she’d sought him out again. Starved, brown eyes watched as he took a polite forkful for himself, cleaning the tines of the fluffed cream. He extended her the second bite and watched it turn dry in her mouth, washed down with a wine equally too sugary for her nervous palate that night.

The Inquisitor looked the part of an uneasy, wild creature accustomed to fleeing from all humankind who was now forced into gilded harness, paraded before the nobility. Like a mythically rare specimen captured for aristocratic delight. She’d been pushed into doing small, carefully trained tricks for their amusement, docile enough to allow for humiliating pats on the head, and playing punishing games only to be rewarded with table-scraps. Her elegant gown and pleasantries might make them forget the hidden sharpness of her bite, but to Solas, she looked ever more dangerous. The burning core beneath her corset was already straining against the pressures of rueful society, just waiting for the rest of her spirit to catch feral fire. What a sight it would be once she'd finally had enough of her trappings and contrived amiability. It would be… titillating to say the least, if he knew their Herald.

Let the pompous, whispering cowards of Halamshiral see the untamed heart she held at bay behind glittering red silk and let them recoil from her inherent glory. The Inquisitor was far above them and beyond their contemptuous offenses; even if she failed to recognize her own preeminence. If they did not learn to earn her respect they would fall helplessly beneath it.

"I wish I was as easy as you are around these… people. It seems that court life suits you far better than I'd imagined, as do other things..." An impassioned spark in her remained as Chiyo examined the handsome, dark lines of his chosen attire. It was a worthy expenditure of his short coin. She drained the small cup and placed it beside the massive statue Solas had been inconspicuously inclined upon through most of the evening. He had found it a convenient shadow to spy from. She leaned forward slightly to fidget with the lay of her pleated skirts, intentionally disremembering the amenable, low cut of her gown, the sheer fabric that draped across her bosom and shoulders did nothing to impede his view of the feminine form below. Knowing full well where his eyes lingered, she spoke to her fellow mage softly, her voice melodious to his ears. "Your advice about following the elves was sound. I've asked Cassandra and Varric to meet me by the servants' quarters. Something is very wrong here, but we need more evidence. Follow me in a moment."

Resuming the proud façade of an unconquerable leader, Chiyo strode away and towards the Hall of Heroes with a steeled spine and lifted spirits. She passed the multitude of gossiping guests with feigned indifference and a refined head held resolutely aloft. Solas granted himself the pleasure of giving her a lengthy head start. Perhaps it was the wine or the ball's atmosphere itself, but he felt little need to hide among the masked. Here he could afford to take satisfying liberties seldom allowed back at Skyhold. There was a magnificent intent behind her gait, as if she could feel his eyes trailing past the shoulders she straightened towards the hips dipping at her command.

Though the style and confines of the dress would never suit the Inquisitor's disposition, the view of her walking away wasn't without… asset.

"You cannot be serious." Solas ducked and dodged a flying slipper. "I would advise you against such an idea."
"I... can't breathe! Can't... fight! Damn these shem-shoes!" Chiyo continued to wheeze, severe and gracelessly bent at the hips with little care as to what may threaten to spill from her neckline. The brief skirmish had left her winded. Using only her bare hands to concentrate her magical attacks required more focus and energy than casting with a staff. She had also mentioned to no one that she still didn't feel perfectly sound again from the poisoning. Having been kept away from battle since her last trip to the Hinterlands, her sluggish improvement went unnoticed to most. The Inquisitor was still tiring faster than she would have liked, but she was determined to fight on regardless of her added limitations.

Cassandra growled impatiently, and tapped her finger against the hilt of her sword as she watched the struggling Herald try to catch her breath. "This is precisely why I voted for uniforms, how could we not expect having to engage our enemy tonight?"

"Just get me out of this dress! I won't go on like this." Ripping off the delicately pierced, golden girdle, Chiyo cast it away as she had done her lacy footwear. She began to paw at the tight cords of her clothing viciously and in vain, unable to reach the bows, clasps and knots. Turning to the smirking rogue, she sought her relief elsewhere. "Varric, give me a knife."

"Seeker, everyone thought you looked so splendid in that uniform we decided to let you and Curly be the only models." The dwarf touted spiritedly, opening his vest to reveal his startling cache of throwing knives. He addressed the frustrated Herald. "It would be my pleasure, your Inquisitorialness."

"Don't get me started on Commander Cullen; the man couldn't even size himself properly. He looks obscene in those pants." The Seeker glowered and stepped between the elf and dwarf, knocking a blade from Varric's helpful hand. "Ugh! And you are not going to cut yourself out of it! What will you wear when we have to go back?"

Chiyo's head swam with rage and lack of air as she finally leaned against the stone garden wall for much needed support. Her thoughts were spinning, forcing her to close her eyes tightly in order to stay upright. "I would rather save the Empress in my underwear than fight once more in this horrible human garbage!"

Without prompt or decorum Cassandra hastily began pulling at the corset laces, her gloved fingers making quick work of the metal ornamentation. "This is my cousin's wedding all over again! Ughhhhh!" She dragged the disgusted noise out as she finished with the ties.

"Why?" Chiyo queried with a sudden relieved gasp, taking in the sweetest breath she had ever tasted as her ribs were freed from the fitted, confining disgrace. "Do human bondings typically involve murderous plots and hostile takeovers that will ruin entire countries?"

"When your extended family is as affluent as mine a gathering isn't complete without at least one death, a few affairs and a duel over who drove the most expensive horses." The well-connected Pentaghast mentioned diffidently, pulling the garment over Chiyo's head, petticoats and all. She groaned as one of the layers ripped loudly and beads scattered across the lawn. Knee-length knickers and a restrictive chest wrap had never felt so much like heaven to the thankful elf.

"Now that sounds like the inspiration I need for my next book." Pondered Varric as Cassandra stashed the deserted gown behind a manicured, flowering bush. "Perhaps you'd mind telling me the finer details."

Taking up the decorative sword she'd been allowed to wear, the lady Seeker took no delay in moving ahead. They still hadn't figured out who had been ordering the attacks on the servants and their pause had wasted precious minutes away from the already suspicious court. "Another time, but
who's wedding are you writing?"

"I can't tell you that! It will ruin it for you." Varric toyed and followed her a few steps towards the private apartments of the Winter Palace.

"Fine! Then I won't tell you about having to hand out shields to the bridesmaids." She threatened, but an agreeable smirk stretched the long scar on her cheek.

"Here," Solas shrugged out of his long black coat and offered it to the Inquisitor. "Since you already seem to be in the habit of stealing my clothes." Heat rushed to his face as two pairs of eyes swung back at him. The higher set appeared intrigued and vaguely appalled. The lower pair of eyes were joined and brightened by a knowing, cat-swallowed-the-canary grin.

Varric pried unashamedly. "So this is a regular habit, eh? Apostates aren't really my type, but I'm not here to judge."

"This is not the place for such uncouth discussions." Solas warned, vainly forcing the implications from his mind. In his rush to escape embarrassment he'd missed the sly wink Chiyo had returned to Varric.

"I have knowledge which falls… beyond the realm of most mages."

Solas did not care for the woman familiarizing herself to the Inquisitor. She understood both too much and too little of the arcane knowledge she claimed with her dripping words to have dominion over. It was a dangerous mixture teeming with unspeakable risk. What was worse was her obligatory entry into the Inquisition. Though Chiyo had never rejected a new recruit from any background it was hard to swallow her acceptance of Morrigan. But with the rift in the sky having only just been closed and with the blighted magister Corypheus still a looming threat it would also be foolish to disregard her entirely. However, Solas knew her offer to help came at a price no one could foresee.

In passing on the balcony's threshold, he could feel the tension rise between them as they sized one another up. Solas remained unmoved by her subtle, arrogant display. Enough blood had been spilled and violence come to fruition for one evening. Morrigan could be dealt with back at Skyhold. He turned his focus to the slouching Inquisitor; her head hung low, but with relief or regret he did not know.

Solas joined her at the railing, taking in the cool, refreshing night air as the grand party continued without them. The melting release of her stress was palpable as Chiyo leaned against him, shoulder to shoulder. It was the first time all evening that she'd allowed herself to be anything but rigid. "I'm not surprised to find you out here. Thoughts?"

"We achieved all our goals," She rubbed at a sore pressure forming behind her tired eyes, still unaccustomed to the now much more commonplace headache that came with being an Inquisitor. Were her hair not already a soft shade of white she’d joked that it would quickly be riddled with streaks of gray from the hassle of her new station. "I supposed I'd take a moment to enjoy the peace. Suddenly everyone wants to talk to me, but I've had enough of their awful company. I don't feel like playing the Herald anymore tonight."

The hesitation and reluctance in her words troubled him. She’d done admirably, ending a foolish war in a single night practically unaided. Though he would have preferred to have dismantled the entire establishment, to have revoked the power from the hands of both Celene and Gaspard, Solas could
see why the Inquisitor had chosen the more peaceful path. More regrettable choices might have been made, though he believed that the true recourse of the evening would affect people of all races for the years to come, for better or worse. "You do not need me to tell you this, but consider all the positive changes that could come from these events. You've changed history and have the entire Orlesian court wrapped around your finger. The Empress is in your personal debt. The Inquisitor did not blackmail half the court and charm the other half. The Herald did not concede to a plot to kill the monarch. You played the game, saved the night and possibly the future as well. If they cannot see this and allow you to be as you are, then they are fools of the highest caliber."

Chiyo sighed unsurely at the suggestion, ashamed of her prior behavior and conduct. She’d certainly not been the picture of refined power as Vivienne had tried so hard to instill in her. "I can't imagine everyone here tonight is very pleased about what's happened. Think of all the horrible stories that will reach Skyhold after this… Being here was bad enough, but soon half of Thedas will hear of the deplorable tale of a heathenish Dalish mage that ruined the Orlesian's grand ball."

"At least you gave them plenty to talk about amongst themselves. Your arrest of Lady Florianne was rather spectacular," Solas recalled amusingly, a lilting chuckle was swift to follow. "Storming the ballroom in such state was enough of a surprise, shoeless and half-dressed. Was the sparking, electrical display necessary however? I saw at least one woman faint. News of your little rebellion most certainly will not die down overnight. Though perhaps it was high time to shake a few of these noble's from their comfortable chairs with a short-lived storm."

"I was going more for 'feared Herald of Andraste- the woman who doesn't give a damn'. I guess it didn't come across well," Chiyo exhaled in audible embarrassment, looking to the hands that had betrayed her so. "My anger got the best of me. I shouldn't have acted out like that, but my magic doesn't always sit back quietly when I want it too. The dance she and I shared earlier had been outrageous enough. Shocking a member of the royal family in front of an entire ballroom will not be remembered as my best moment."

The Inquisitor stiffened beside him, fighting her own resentment. Why did nothing ever work out right when she needed it to? At every possible chance Chiyo always walked away feeling like she’d made the incorrect decision, been in the wrong place, arriving at the worst time. From the very moment she’d left the Lavellans in the Free Marches disaster had stalked her, leaving wreckage on the winding path she blindly followed, unable to outmaneuver folly or rotten luck. "It's more than that though… I worry that my own feelings may have clouded my decision about Briala, that my mistrust was unmerited. If we hadn't saved Celene and gutted Gaspard instead then I could have stolen back more power for my people. Briala cares about the elves, but one council seat alone isn't going to undo the inequality of thousands. I just didn't want that power to be purchased by idly allowing a preventable murder. Celene has the experience the other’s lack, though now we have to continue to abuse politics to achieve our own ideals through her seat—"

Solas firmly took the rambling Inquisitor by the chin and turned her gaze from the dark world below; pulling her up from the spiral of deep despair she’d been falling into. "You should never mistake your available mercy for weakness. We do not always get to spare as many lives as you did tonight. It is a priceless gift, your compassionate understanding. You placed stability above personal gain, not many would have done such. Our hands are already stained with enough blood. Making Briala the de facto ruler behind an eviscerated emperor could have been risky. What would there be to stop Gaspard from killing her once we left and he'd grown tired of her singular policies?"

So proud and at odds with herself, the exhausted elven mage’s warmly-hued eyes nearly swam with her unsettled emotions. The light in them caught as tiny flecks of gold, her molten gaze could not conceal the burden buried below in her heart. Too many paths to tread and outcomes to consider for one evening, given the limited time granted to their cause. There was still so much of the future
dependent on her success. The sovereign of a festering country would matter little if all else fell to the
chaos and horror that would come with the Inquisitor's failure. Let some fights be saved for a brighter
day, if one ever came.

They could hear the orchestra winding down for an idle, finishing song after a long, turbulent night
of upheaval mixed with the celebration. The tired musicians plucked slowly at their symphonic
strings for a euphonious, lingering farewell tune. "Come, before the band stops playing, dance with
me." Solas requested as he stepped back from the rail and opened the invitation with a courteous
bow. "And is there any hope of you returning my coat?"

"Not a chance." Ah, there is was—the smile he knew that couldn't be extinguished for long. Solas'
heart sang jubilantly as Chiyo took his offered hand, allowing herself to be drawn in to his poised
arms. He lifted her hand in his, the other arm justifying its hold around her waist. Dancing was a
perfectly amiable excuse to be so near. He had promised to oblige in such an innocent gesture as a
short turn about the floor, it would be rude not to.

"You've seen my dancing, I wouldn't risk it." She warned him teasingly, gliding into the beginning
slow spins with a softness and surety that did not require any further thought. For the first time in all
of her attempts, she didn't feel the need to stare at her bumbling feet to get the steps just right. Here
there were no paces, no patterns or rules. She chose instead to follow the natural motion that came
from being with a man that set her snared soul free from unyielding bindings.

"I've had the pleasure of seeing you dance twice now. It is worth endangering my toes." He spoke
warmly into her nearby ear as they moved unhurriedly within a realm of their own. For the night he
would abandon his fear of falling too far into his own desires and give in to this one, simple pleasure
that benefited more than himself alone. She needed him. Momentously. It could not be more plain
than in this precise moment. After her arduous trials, to steal a moment of bliss while they may was a
balm to new wounds. And to be distracted, if only once, from the world that would take everything
from them if they weren't careful was well worth the risk. Solas could no longer to pretend to be as
distant as the high rises of a palace built on lies nor as cold the masks that surrounded them before
such a marvelous spirit that had been worn tender and raw by the callousness of others. "My
curiosity to experience it for myself has grown too fierce, I'm afraid."

"Then I shall do my best to satisfy your interest." Chiyo smiled contentedly, but the firm curve of her
mouth could not hide the growing want that flitted back and forth across the line of should or
shouldn't. She'd done it once before, emboldened by the easier given openness he'd shown her in the
Fade. The inches between them still felt that of miles, with effort though they could be crossed.
Could she summon the bravery needed to steal another taste of his reserved, and hopefully equally
awaiting lips?

Maybe, the dance wasn't over yet.
Chapter End Notes

Ar tu na'din- I will kill you
Conflicted by her own tumultuous emotions, missing her clan and still waiting for Solas' answer, Chiyo seeks out his company and to return a borrowed garment. Plans quickly change, however, when she learns that Solas might need her help more than she could ever imagine.

Another dreamless night, the third in a row, had been claimed by her roving thoughts. Leaving the Inquisitor to brood over them into the late hours till sheer exhaustion finally stole her away. It was early now; the unhindered sun had just begun to pierce through the tall, patterned glass windows of her elevated bedroom. If she hurried, though it meant leaving the agreeableness of her piled quilts and fur throws, there would plenty of time to sneak a quick, light breakfast of the cook’s freshly made porridge. Then she might steal a few moments to tend to the herbs in the newly finished garden before the other members of Skyhold’s society could disrupt the quiet harmony, leaving her to prune in peace.

"I should have kissed him." Chiyo decided, finally rolling out of the thickly blanketed comforts of her barely used bed. Even though spring had arrived to the Frostbacks the enlivening change in season did not take all of the chill out of the highly nestled keep. Not even the dense rug her toes curled in protest against could remove all of the icy bite from the stone and wood below.

Rubbing at her groggy, sleep-deprived eyes didn't make them feel any less sore. To call the slumber she’d been chasing evasive was too generous. Her query had become exceptionally rare as of late.

The smitten Inquisitor couldn’t help but replay the tender ending to their chaotic evening in Orlais, over and over, hoping to find a better resolution. If only their brief interlude had concluded more amorously than an unfortunate disruption from Commander Cullen, stumbling out onto the secluded balcony in a vain attempt to evade unrequited Orlesian hostilities. He was not in the mood for romance himself. At least it seemed, not from a triplicate of identically dressed ladies seeking his unreceptive affections. His timing couldn’t have been worse however.

She’d been so close, leaning in when the dance had slowed to a contented sway. Solas hadn’t immediately withdrawn from her touch, and that had been encouragement enough. Even though she’d been overjoyed by the warm hands that had sought her first and the pleasant smiles given, there was still a nibbling guilt that reprimanded her for wanting more from the habitually modest apostate. And for that, Chiyo would continue reserving her feelings as best she could. It would be horribly unkind of her to push Solas further than he felt comfortable, but the wait for his response was near torment.

The moment they had shared in the Fade seemed like it had happened ages ago. It was only the incredible heat behind his actions, scorched forever to her memory, which kept her from considering it a mere fantasy that he’d amusingly allowed her to believe real. Dreams did not pull you off balance and take your breath away. Nor did they did have pulses that pounded alongside your own or earnest bodies to collide against. He’d practically braced Chiyo to his thigh, pulling her off of her feet, denying her the right to run away from the first fleeting kiss she stole from him so unfairly. No one had ever grabbed her like that, pressing with such need and ardor, hungrily consuming everything
within his grasp during the short-lived lapse in detachment.

Dreams did not right you in bed and leave you shaking, the sensations still clinging to your skin as you woke, making you question the concept of reality to what transpired in the Fade.

What would a real kiss be like in comparison, one that he couldn't wake her up from?

Chiyo stripped out of the long, heavy tunic she'd worn to bed and exchanged it for a favorable wooly-knit pullover, her preferred ward of the chilly mountain mornings. All of her prior possessions had been lost in the destruction of the Temple of Sacred Ashes, and buying a few clothes had been the first thing on her list when she came into some coin. She did not want to remain in the disguise she’d worn to the Conclave and been imprisoned in. Though comfortable and suitable to her needs, the new garments did not compare to what she’d worn living in the wild. The array of colors and availability of fabrics was mind-boggling. Silks made to look like gold. Velvets crushed softer than fennec ears. At least the wools were reasonable, although she stayed far from the glaring brightness of the unsuitable oranges and pinks that seemed to be the most prized by humans.

Even if they had been custom made, the items did not have the same familiarity, lacking the appeal held by clothes crafted by the same hands that fed and protected the rest of the unified group. Every role in the clan worked in tandem with the others, all inseparable. The women who spun the yarn for knits also taught songs to the children. The youths in turn hummed the charming tunes as they played and helped whittle scrap bone or horn for buttons provided by the hunters. The men who tanned the leather and prepared the furs were furthermore stewards to the new halla calves, whose mothers provided milk for cheese and carried the aravels into new lands.

Wearing apparel made by the tight weave of your band and aiding in the fashioning of articles for your kin was an enormous honor. To give clothes was, essentially, to give life and acceptance. Without your clan, you were as good as naked in the woods. But now nothing of the Lavellan’s remained on her person, besides the silvered rings that had been set into her ears and the red lines permanently drawn onto her cheeks. Those tiny vestiges did not leave the homesick elf feeling as secure as she hoped amongst her new peers.

The warning words of the hahren remained with Chiyo still. They’d been ingrained into all children since birth: a lone elf was a dead elf. Separation was certain death. You were safer with numbers on your side. Always travel in at least a pair, though three was better. The clan was there to shield and sustain its members; no one else would be that generous, not even other Dalish.

Keep your clan, keep your life. It was simple enough.

To go very far alone was foolish and would only be done by those who wished to become the Dread Wolf’s next meal, and lost da’len were his favorite snack…

Drawing her drifting hand away from the tiny tooth of a totem about her neck, Chiyo shivered at the thought of the nonsensical stories that had spooked her as a child. She was much too old to concern herself with fanciful tales designed to keep willful youngsters out of trouble and to build their inner compasses. Not that she’d paid them any heed when she’d bolted into the thickets, away from the watch of her rascally cousins. Though considering the trouble the harrowing incident had brought her, perhaps she should have listened to her elders all those years ago. One ill-fortuned trip through the woods began the series of events that had led her to spying on the Conclave for the Lavellans. Maybe it would have been better if she’d simply ended up in the maws of a monster instead. Then someone else could have worried themselves with closing holes in the sky and stopping a madman from becoming a god.

At least something good might come of it all. There was another lone elf teetering at her side, if only
she could convince him to stay.

Chiyo fetched her abandoned breeches from the foot of her bed. She slid them high over her hips, tying the laces as she ambled forward, eyeing the now infamous, borrowed coat that had granted her decency in Halamshiral. It had remained folded on her desk for days, a pleasant memento to an evening that hadn’t gone quite as planned. She had half-hoped that Solas might have come for it eventually, but it seemed she would have to do the returning. The Inquisitor refused to wait endlessly, to hang on every creak on the stair with baited breath in expectation of a fancied whim being granted. No one had come up to Chiyo's room since she'd returned from the Winter Palace, and she suspected that company would not be inviting themselves anytime soon.

The Inquisitor enjoyed the location of her quarters for the reprieve it gave when the world seemed too weighty and fragmented. But the rare peace was paid for with loneliness. Few dared make the trip up the broken stairs and through the dusty scaffolding to visit her besides the tender spirit, Cole. She had discovered him a few times wandering about the generous space, tracing his fingers over the lead latticed windows or rearranging her desk of trinkets. Often remarking in his cryptic speech on why she had kept the useless clutter collected over her exciting journeys around the Southern half of Thedas. Those visits were entirely unpredictable, yet each came with a strange curiosity entailed. The hour never mattered, when Cole came to her room, he always had something unsettling to say.

Once, after finding him perched on the flat back of her lounging sofa, she had shuddered with his soul-seeing exactitude when he had gently slipped a tarnished silver bracelet onto her wrist. His idle musings reflected long dead wishes from her past.

"Just one, but there are so many. I would have kept it safe for her, but... I cannot find them anywhere. Their eyes go empty when I ask; the face is almost gone now too."

Chiyo had told him that she didn't dwell on such memories anymore, that she no longer yearned after her mother's lost jewelry as she had during her rootless childhood. In her wistful youth, she may have found comfort in having anything that belonged to her absent parent, but she had grown beyond the notion now. A bangle would not erase the pain of neglect, the value of its metals would not have softened the sting of relinquishment, and it could not supplant the rearing that had to be performed by a host of others in her place. She did not need anything from the woman who didn’t want her, whose absence had forced her away from the remainder of her blood-kin.

She would find a new family eventually, with enough time and effort. If anyone would have her long enough. The Lavellans had almost been enough, but...

Laying the formal black coat over her arm, Chiyo fiddled with a few delightful items on her bureau. She debated for a moment on the matter of appropriateness before settling on a glossy red feather she’d acquired while exploring the wet coastlands to the North. She brushed the smooth edge across her lip, enjoying the tactile pleasure before slipping it into a pocket of the dark garment. A small gift. A tiny wish. A mere sliver of affection. Certainly her fondness hadn't gone unnoticed or been ill-received, it was impossible not to note the flickers of happiness he permitted himself when she tried again and again to reach out. However, seeing very far behind the careful mask Solas always wore was anything but easy. He was protecting himself, unquestionably. Yet she would not give up until he understood that he could be at ease and feel as safe as she did in his company.

"Maybe he wanted to kiss me too… It was such a lovely dance." She mused before descending the long, twisting stair, finally ready to greet the day head on. The Inquisitor crossed the practically empty hall, void of all but the earliest risers and stopped at the door that would open up the ground floor of the rotunda. Pausing, she fiddled with the intended delivery, smoothing the unfolded collar and lapels. Perhaps she would discover him absent, or even in the rare occurrence of finding him
asleep on the wide sofa, lost in the Fade. It had only happened once before, but Chiyo treasured the
memory of the pleasing gentleness that had taken over his customarily reticent demeanor. More at
home with spirits and distant histories than he was with the living beings that surrounded him, Solas
was most comfortable where many were at least wary if not completely terrified. Her silent feet had
spared her the embarrassment of waking him that time, allowing Chiyo to step near enough as she
dared. However, she'd never considered herself terribly lucky and knew that in all likelihood she
would never be granted such an opportunity again.

Chiyo began to reach for the round handle, braced and ready for whatever she may happen to find.

"Inquisitor?"

Startled, heart jumping high in her throat, she spun on her heels to find a tired looking apostate
holding a steaming cup on a small plate.

"Did you need something?" Solas inquired, observing her curiously over the dark bags that hung
below his searching eyes. Flicking to the garment in her hands, his attentions wavered as he stifled a
lethargic yawn.

"And I thought I was quiet." She exhaled the short panic, trading it for bashfulness as she
remembered her intended purpose. Chiyo lifted the formal coat that had brought her to his door. "I
just wanted to drop this by before Vivienne gets her hands on it to deconstruct. She kept asking me
about the assembly of the seams yesterday. I guess several young ladies are requesting new designs
from her, they think the costume change was intended… Perhaps we will be seeing an uprising of
women in coats and trousers at the next ball."

"Madame de Fer must be exceptionally proud." Solas opened the door for her, balancing his tea on
its saucer with great care. "But since you are present, would you talk with me a moment?"

Chiyo followed him into the rotunda, looking to the walls as she entered. She could smell the fresh
paint and plaster. It appeared that he had found sudden inspiration during the evening as the makings
of his latest installment now occupied another space. He'd chosen a lovely shade of blue to fill in the
extended figure of Empress Celene. It was by far the brightest looking image, with the others mostly
referring to moments of destruction or violent change, but there was still a good deal of room for
expansion on the massive fresco. Room enough for more pleasant events were any to follow.

She placed the coat on the back of the chair at his desk, still staring at the unfinished outlines and
swathes of colors in quiet awe. "Looks like you spent as much time sleeping last night as I did."

Solas glanced at the new painting as he attempted to sip the potent tea he'd made. It was a good start,
but still too rough in places. The detailing alone would take a full week, yet the hours spent would be
a worthy investment for the final image he had in mind. Too many years had passed since the last
time he had an ample enough canvas to work on. He'd done little more than to refresh and preserve
the ancient works of the artists now long dead that were scattered around Thedas. This fresco in the
round would be one of his most grand works yet, in this age at least.

The Inquisitor turned from her absorbed viewing in time to see him wrinkle his nose with a sour
grimace, earning him a prompt teasing. "What's this, a change of heart? Can it be that my ingredient
suggestions still don’t meet your palate? A little ginger or rose hip would do you good, Solas."

"I need it effects; normally I do not enjoy how it keeps me awake. But this morning I need to shake
the dreams from my mind." He set the partially empty cup aside, the idea that anything could alter the
bitter taste and the sharp tang of the steeped leaves that curdled on the back of his tongue was
beyond him. There was more to discuss this morning however than the art of brewing tea. "I may
"You only have to ask." Chiyo did not hesitate and the playfulness that customarily colored her speech evaporated; the worried solemnity in his voice alone had her immediately on edge.

"One of my oldest friends has been captured by mages, forced into slavery. I heard the cry for help as I slept." Solas began with increasing insistence. He shifted on his feet, gripping the edge of the desk that stood between them. The urge to act and move returned. But he had no patience to productively release and focus his flared energies onto his artwork now as he had when he’d first awoken, the new vision still burning in his mind. The dream had been so desperate and jarring, drawing Solas across the Fade in nauseating jumps in order to show him what was happening and how the merciless act was being performed. He had witnessed flagrant cruelty, an appalling binding ritual that went beyond the simple measures of abuse, but he was powerless to aid the gentle being who begged for assistance.

"Your friend," Chiyo's head tilted as she asked, watching him subtly change and grow tense as he stared into the steaming cup he’d set aside. It would take more than tea to settle his nerves; she could nearly feel the knots that had twisted into his bowed neck and shoulders. Solas had never mentioned any of his former companions, there must have been precious few found over the course of his travels. "He… she?"

"It." Solas corrected, continuing without guise or concealment. He released the desk and took to an unhurried pace although his agitation was not so easily soothed. "My friend is a spirit of wisdom who was quite happy to remain in the simplicity of the Fade, unlike most spirits—clamoring to enter this world by the draw of our emotions and magic."

"If your friend didn't wish to come here then how did it get across? You don't mean to tell me…" Her voice faded as the peculiar implications fell into place. Chiyo quickly realized the more sinister dilemma surrounding what the troubled mage was trying to get across. Only in recent months had she been able to study magical theory and various practices essentially unknown to her clan. Keeper Deshanna had been knowledgeable and wise, but there were still limits to what resources the woman had available to teach with. The main one being time; years of catching up had to be managed before more advanced applications could be learned. And the Lavellans newer First was still young, with a decade more of guidance and training ahead before it was expected of her to take over for the aging leader. Chiyo hungrily clamored for every volume she could get her hands on for more than mere personal improvement, but for practicality as well. She would not waste her time in the Inquisition and planned on returning to the clan better than she had left it.

She had also perused multiple texts in relevance to spirits and demons in hopes of gleaning more about them. Considering the vast amount of time she was spending in the presence of both passive creatures like Cole and the more malignant entities that came from the rifts, it had become dire necessity to learn as much as she could about them. The books had been relatively neutral on the matter. But some texts and in speaking with Solas, or the renowned enchanter Vivienne, had given her plenty of warning against attempting a summoning of either kind. Though there were mages who wouldn’t think twice about calling a spirit for aid or to do their bidding. She could not imagine the desperation or insanity of those who would attempt such a ritual, especially during the trying times as they already were. There were demons aplenty, what good would materializing more bring?

"It was summoned against its will, and wants my help to regain its freedom and return to the Fade." The Inquisitor could hear the quiet anger swell deeply underneath his words. It was a worryingly rare mood to find him in, not when clean logic and reserve were such staunch positions Solas always fastened himself to. But the mage was not made of the ice and stone he so often pretended to be. He could be pushed, the matter only remained to how far and what ends. "My friend is an explorer,
seeking lost wisdom and reflecting on it. It would happily discuss philosophy with you in a dream, but it had no wish to come here physically."

"Why do the mages want your friend so badly that they would summon it? Is this a very powerful spirit?" To Chiyo, this friend sounded much the kindred soul to the Fade wanderer before her. It was no surprise that Solas would be so stirred and protective over something that shared his deepest passions.

"No, not in the way that you would consider powerful, through might or influence. It is unique however, an exceptionally inquisitive glimmer in the darkness. But all spirits are susceptible to corruption, especially the bright ones. It knows a great deal of lore and history, but a mage could learn that simply by speaking to it in the Fade. There is the possibility that they seek information it does not wish to give and intend to torture it until it satisfies that desire." Solas stopped his riled wandering, gathering himself with a long breath through his nose before he turned to face the staring Inquisitor.

"Will you aid me?" He looked to Chiyo, his eyes filled with urgency and awaiting her reaction. He’d already settled upon his resolve and was determined to go to the spirit’s rescue. With or without her was all that remained to be decided. Solas could not sit idly by as one of his dearest friends suffered so greatly by careless hands and self-seeking hearts.

"Just tell me what to do. I will support you any way I can." There was no need to make up her mind. The typically self-sufficient mage would not ask for anything whatsoever without utmost necessity, and he’d never requested anything before. And here he was now, as near to being vulnerable and trusting as she’d ever seen him. Chiyo was already choosing to help. A growing firmness took to her features that she hoped would assure Solas that her resolve would not waiver once given.

"Thank you," Relief washed over him as she spoke, melting the strain behind his brow and the worry within his eyes. “I got a sense of my friend’s location before I awoke. We must ready ourselves for the Exalted Plains. I’m afraid this is going to be another hard journey through a very troubled land."

If the Inquisitor could describe the Dales with only a single word it would be—nightmare. Death and turbulence permeated the air, drenched deep into the earth and poisoned the hearts of all who dared dwell there. Cole seemed utterly beside himself, surrounded by ceaseless calls of pain and suffering. Each night that they made camp he would stare out into the desolate land from whatever perch he could find and listen as the waves of pain flowed endlessly about him. His harried whispering flitted from soul to distant soul, broken and disjointed, while tugging at long strands of his pale hair till the wee morning hours when he would grow quiet once more with the console of his new allies.

Dorian had also been struck low. He was no stranger to death and the manipulation of those who had passed on, but the undead hordes laying such waste had exhausted his normally jovial mood. No complaints came from him as they shared their simple meals and camped as sparsely as possible, choosing speed long before comfort. Chiyo would have spared her dearest friends, but their talents could not be overlooked. Their knowledge and individual backgrounds, respectively as spirit and practiced mage, were invaluable to the mission at hand. Though none but Solas had any inkling as to what lay in store and even he could only say little of the trouble ahead.

She wished however that their brief encounter by the river with the traveling band of Dalish they’d crossed paths with several days prior had been more amiable. Though she was now accustomed to being somewhat of a pariah in their eyes thanks to the title given to her, the short dealings with the
surly group had been a stark reminder of how far displaced she had become. Not that her standing had always been well faceted and amiably received. Even her entry into the Lavellans had not come without a few cold shoulders and snide remarks. She’d been the strange child who had walked away from a fraught, Keeper-less set that had no use for her untamed magic. Chiyo had spent years as an outsider inside of a clan that most would consider to be highly progressive and socially forward for her kind. It had not been till she had established herself by becoming the next First, after the disastrous loss of Keeper Deshanna Istimaethoriel's original apprentice, did she truly feel like part of the group. But even that had come with discord; there had been a few who’d adamantly disagreed with the Keeper’s choice, asking for one of their own blood to be selected instead of the adopted mage.

She had long believed her presence the catalyst, in part at least, for both her birth clan and the Lavellans’ internal unrest and civil disagreement. Life had seemed peaceful enough for both until she arrived with the trouble that was never far behind. Even if she was accepted by most, it did not always mean she was entirely welcome by all.

The Inquisitor had long ago accepted her role in elven society—she didn't naturally have one. Just as the travelers of the Dales they were trying to help kept her at length and observed her with suspicion, so had her mother's small clan after she proved her magical talents. The Lavellan’s had at least given her the opportunity to learn and become useful in her own right. Keeper Hawen's skepticism had been expected; she was now the widely proclaimed Herald of a Maker the elves did not believe in. Far from her namesake tribe and surrounded by strange humans, nearly doing work in the name of their oppressively misguided religion. What worse insult and distrust could she tally against herself as far as her own people were concerned. But young, plucky Loranil's freely given offer to recruit himself had taken her by surprise. Telling him no had been out of the question, however convincing his clan to relinquish him would take time they could not currently spare on enlistment.

Solas’ earnestness prevented them from lingering too long and his distress had only grown as the spirit's calling to him each night grew faint and fragile. And then stopped altogether. Helplessness did not sit well with the ruminating apostate; it left room for anger to seep in, to augment his rationale and Solas could afford neither decline of his facilities. The fate of such a priceless voice of reason was too precarious to become lost in the wanton emotion that threatened to overtake his mind. It was silently consuming him along with the guilt of being unable to have done something sooner or to have prevented the matter entirely. He’d turned viscously inward on himself and spent much of their travels walking far ahead, beyond the convivial conjecture of Dorian and the probing helpfulness of Cole, seldom speaking unless pressed.

Yet, there was another voice that could beckon him back from his despondency, when she could get near.

Chiyo had just returned from a short jaunt to fetch more wood, but his mind had been too distant to take much notice. It wasn’t until she spoke, drawing him from his trance on the dying firelight that the dejected mage realized she’d returned at all. The Inquisitor cocked her head towards his unstretched bedroll, dismissing him from the assigned task he’d only half-heartedly been performing.

"I'll take watch. Go get some rest."

"I don't believe I could sleep, it would be a fruitless effort." They were getting close; Solas recognized more and more of the area, but searching in the dark could only yield scarce results. No further guidance came from Wisdom and he fast feared the worst had already come to pass. Dawn would arrive in a few agitated hours, and he hoped it would shed enough light towards the peril they sought. He’d already lost so many. Nearly all those that had known him before the creation of the Veil were long gone. If he were to lose this tender spirit there would be none left who’d borne witness to everything he’d done, none that would recognize his true designation. Solas would be as
alone in the Fade as he was in this age. Surrounded by strangers who called him by a name given in a punishment he’d inflicted upon himself, so that each time it was uttered he would be reminded of his failings.

He watched disinterestedly as she added another log to the fire before settling down on the ground, her back to the rocky bluffs and eyes to the silent landscape. All seemed calm for the first time since their arrival. Destroying the hellish pits within the rancorous ramparts had been an exhausting but worthwhile mission. They had seen few abominations rise again after setting the cleansing blaze, but they would still keep an eye open just to be sure.

"Your friend must be very important to you. Have you known them long?" She asked, helping herself to a few shreds of dried, leathery fruit that Solas had declined when Chiyo had wordlessly offered it to him.

"A very long time indeed," Solas absently watched the flames lick their way across the fresh wood, devouring it greedily, but he could barely feel the heat catching him through the crisp night air. "For almost as long as I care to remember. They were one of the first spirits I found in the Fade and the truest of friends. I have received more guidance from this gentle creature than any other."

Chiyo chewed the tough, slightly sweet slivers as she thought of anything she might say to alleviate his troubles, what furtherance she could possibly extend to the apostate that suffered just out of her reach. She wanted very much to keep him talking, to ease his mind as he had done for her on so many occasions, yet the Inquisitor doubted that there were any balms for the hurts he kept well hidden from view. "You don't say much, Solas, about your past. Is it too painful to mention?"

"You might say that. I chose to leave many things behind to pursue my studies. Whether it hurt or continues to hurt is irrelevant now, there is no altering what has already passed." Solas was on the verge of curtness, allowing his old pain to serve as a cheap wall. Yet he was nearly startled and taken aback by a singular, breaking laugh from the mage who had only offered him a kindness he'd been too swift to reject.

"Sounds like my attitude when I entered the apprenticeship. Don't tell me it was your snot-nosed cousins who drove you into the Fade." Chiyo fell into a short hush interrupted only by the soft crackling of wood and the rustling of the wind through the desolated plains. Her thoughts wandered over the discomforts of her past, of her own relatively removed existence from the people she claimed as hers. Elves that weren’t as quick to return the sentiment. She’d always managed through, refusing to let the misgivings drive her away or turn sour, but their full acceptance would have gone a long way towards making her feel like one of them instead of being there by mere chance and circumstance. How much deeper were the wounds he would never show to her own, what pains had bought his silence? Perhaps if she could be brave enough to expose the suffering incurred, it would encourage Solas to feel secure and trusted enough to do the same.

"About what was said, during that night in the Hinterlands..."

Solas' blood ran immediately cold. His heart clenched deep within his chest, each strained beat knocking hard against his ribs. It couldn't be that she had solved his little riddle and unraveled his history all on her own. He'd been so careful, so very careful besides the dark evening he’d believed she might not have lived through, let alone remembered by the blessed morning that followed. He began to mutely panic, scrambling for an excuse that would buy him even just a little more time. That he’d made the whole thing up to entertain her with, that it was an old tale told to children in an age long forgotten, or that the poison had addled her mind and he’d told her no such story. What web could he weave to conceal himself once more, and if he could not prevent the revelation… how would he justify running away at the most ominous of times?
"It's bothered me for a while now, but I thought you might help me understand—"

His mind whirled; he could barely hear her words over his own escalating dread. If he could deny it long enough to escape, maybe there was still a chance to disappear again before word reached the Inquisition. From here it would take days even for a swift crow to make its way back to the Keep and any dispatching would take twice as long to reach where they were now. He could be halfway to the Nahashin marshes by then if he wanted a convenient, concealing location to lay low in.

"Something always felt a little off, no matter how I tried to explain it away."

He might head west, just as he had always planned to do. It would be easier now that they had traveled so far. Though diverting to the south would be harder, it would serve to shake any following pursuit through the wild, uncharted territories. Who would be able to track him through the Deauvin Flats, and into the ancient woods where he could slip into an underground ruin. There he could watch from the safety of the Fade. It would be weeks before anyone could find a trail and Solas knew quite well how to leave few traces if he wasn't overly rushed.

"—I guess I've just been explaining it away for so long. Convinced it wasn't true. It wasn't until you helped me realize that—"

Lie to her, lie to her, lie to her!- Solas quickly cleared his constricted throat, interrupting the woman he'd only half been listening to. "I can explain."

"Explain what? You can tell me why I lied about feeling magic for the first time?" Chiyo looked rather flummoxed, turning her questioning gaze towards the jumpy man who seemed more ready to bolt into the night than share any buried pieces of himself. She'd only just barely finished mentioning how as a small child there had been secreted attempts to cast spells that had resulted in nothing but frustration, how she had felt the natural urge yet was hopelessly numb to her own connection to the Fade.

Her story. Chiyo wasn't discussing his tale at all. He was still safe, for the time being. Solas felt the smoky air return to his lungs as he skillfully transitioned into his own considerations, evasive still, but far easier to manage than his own truth. Though he kept his original suspicions of blood magic to himself, he presented the confused Inquisitor with several just as viable options to consider. Perhaps she had frightened herself with magic at too young an age, mentally blocking future attempts until the need was grave. Or she could have just been a slow bloomer in a clan who had lost too much of its power to provide her with the correct development.

But as Solas spoke in the groomed, assuring tone he often fell back to, he observed as Chiyo closed in around herself. Pulling her knees towards her chest, she hid her crumpled face against a drooping shoulder.

"We weren't always so deficient. My mother was Keeper before... before..." She would not finish the thought. There were no acceptable excuses that could be given for what she had done to not only her child but to her familial clan. "If her apprentice had completed more training, then I might've stayed."

An old wound still tenderly hidden behind the bright smiles. A deep crack dwelled underneath a heart of gold. Solas remembered sharply that he was not the only isolated to a state of misery remaining from a past that could not be removed or left behind. He had been at fault for failing to see the gracious tie she'd extended to him, trying to pull him up from the self-centered melancholy he negated to leave. His eyes settled on the ash and embers that had formed around the waning fire, but he hoped his paltry attempt would not reach her too chilled. "I'm sorry that she was unable to see the person you grew up to be."
"I should be the one apologizing. Here I am, trying to help you feel better and all I can do is make things about myself.” The Inquisitor exhaled tiredly, long and low across her downturned mouth, before rising to excuse herself for bed. “For as many times as I have had to uproot though, I have always found friends. I feel so surrounded by them now, by good friends, great ones even. But when I look at you... I see someone who needs to have that more than I ever did."

"I would not spend an excess of your time on me," Solas tightly pressed his hands between his knees; the urge to reach out to her as she passed by, to stave his need for companionship was immense. Near unbearable. His arms had not forgotten the comforts he’d found when she’d last been in them, but there was no call to excuse the unfounded need to touch her again, not even once. The Inquisitor had already offered more than he dared accept by simply accompanying him through the war torn countryside in search of his last friend. Certainly the weight of his heart would be too much for her to carry atop her own burdens. He would not punish her with it for her freely given affections. Solas remained still, unable to give in even for a moment. "I have grown used to my conditions."

She paused behind him, feeling for the voice she wanted to try across the uncertain tongue that was currently being chewed. One more attempt, and then she would let him be. Her fingers gently impressed upon his stiff shoulder, smoothing over the travel-fatigued muscles beneath the thin coat and lingering near the base of his covered neck.

Solas felt the congenial warmth of her featherlike breath brush his against temple as she leaned in, drawing near enough to be grasped if he would but release his hands. His eyes closed languidly at the bliss that came next. Sending a delightful tingle over the bare, unmark skin of his head, a pair of sympathetic lips singularly pressed just above the tip of his pointed ear and the words that followed swelled every yearning corner of his starved heart with the elation they instilled.

"You will never be a waste to me, Solas. Don't be afraid to leave behind what no longer suits you."

Don't smile. Ask her to stay. Don't think. Tell her everything. Don't move. Just this once. Don't dare!

"Thank you, Inquisitor. I will remember that."
By eggsquisite-dreadwolf @ Tumblr
No longer the friend that Solas had wished to save, the Inquisitor has little choice but to face the Pride demon created by the traveling mages from Kirkwall. But when Cole gets into trouble, she pushes her magic past known limits to spare his life before the binding circle is fully broken.

"This wasn’t the work of ordinary men." Dorian grimaced, nudging at the hideous corpse on the side of the road with the muddy toe of his once well-conditioned boot. The disturbing lack of skin, the brutality of the snapped limbs and twisted, castoff pose were enough to make even an ironclad stomach turn. The poor fool would have been lucky to have died before the receiving the brunt of the many visible injuries. The sprays and smears of blood that tinged the road and rock, however, spoke of a merciless end. "Still pretty fresh though, see how the tissue hasn’t even gone rigid yet."

She fought the urge to gag as they moved past the fly-covered pieces of the newest carcass. For once, she was glad to have been too rushed to eat much of a breakfast. Chiyō chose quickly not to linger on the body at the Tevinter mage’s feet, averting her eyes from the revolting carnage. A clean death was something of value that all creatures deserved if they weren’t left to meet a natural end. Hunters were praised not only for their skill and ability to fell prey but for the blunt compassion they showed and the suffering they prevented. This was a bad death, as had all the others been. The trail of bodies they had stumbled across was becoming more disconcerting by the find.

In the distance, they all heard a guttural bellow, followed by an unintelligible cacophony of screams and shouts that reverberated throughout the surrounding crags and knolls. Cole tugged at the sides of his wide-brimmed hat, pulling the discolored edges down over his ears. He groaned with empathetic anguish, muttering of fear and pain swirling from too many sources all at once.

The Inquisitor could feel deep tremors rippling across the earth beneath her lightly wrapped feet. A vibration met her toes and pulsed up her shins, leaving the knees above near to shaking from the energy. And from the look of it, by the way he’d braced himself, Solas had certainly felt them too. "Something is wrong here."

"Horribly wrong."
Solas tightened the grip on his gnarled staff before bolting ahead. He could waste no more time. Chiyō and the others followed him up the rocky path, heading higher into the broken hillsides. The shouting became louder and clearer as they went, acting as a startling guide through the twisting prominences. Wet, red spots dribbled along the abandoned road drove the seeking party ever faster towards the unknown peril.

It wasn't long before they spotted a monstrous figure, hunched over and howling in pain. It struggled to escape the punishing confines of a magical barrier; each thrash drew more energy from the enchanted circle crafted for its suppression. Too many beady eyes flicked irately over the tiny, panicked mages that tried to hold the enraged Pride demon back. One of the exhausted humans dragged away the unresponsive body of a fallen comrade, quickly removing them from the gouged edge of the pillared circle. Blood trickled from gargantuan claws and the hostile creature shrieked once more, shattering the clear, bright morning.

Solas motioned a full halt to the others as they neared, blocking them from coming any closer as he
stared at the demon being forced to bend lower and lower to the trampled ground. If the apostate was afraid or angry it could not be so readily determined, his sharp features had turned as hard and unfeeling as the neighboring boulders and peaks of stone. But his blue eyes burned icy and sharp as he assessed the horror his frantic dreams had led him too.

"This looks like no friend of ours. There is little left for us here..." Dorian cautioned as he caught Cole by the arm, preventing the youth from dashing ahead in his hastened urge to help. Dagger in hand, the boy had nearly leapt into the fray, prepared to end the misery that festered before him by the best means he had. This spirit wanted nothing more than to return to the Fade, it was only a matter of release.

"That is not its natural form, it's been corrupted. Forced to act against its original purpose. What did they do!" Solas went numb with a deeply stirred rage that obliterated his more reserved sensibilities. The fate of his tormented friend had already been sealed and his aid had come far too late. He did not rise to this anger, he slowly sank into it. Slipping below the thin, frozen crust of hatred and plunging straight through to the chilly waters of freely flowing wrath. The apostate's clenching fingers crunched, breaking the white, icy crystals that escaped his control. His gaze went steely and distant, narrowed with desolate grief. The unmoving mage could feel himself turn deadly cold as a portly, sapped looking fellow approached, holding up his clammy hands in needless warning.

"Let's try to find out what's going on. Give them a chance to explain." The Inquisitor tried to be tactful in advance of the situation falling to violence, to keep as best a rein she could on her companions. The tension in the air was already palpable and she feared greatly that the wrong word or move would ignite the powder keg they'd walked into. She had long assumed that Solas was fairly capable of becoming enraged if pushed too far. It was always the quiet ones you had to look out for when they finally snapped. But seeing it manifest, anger seeping into his words and setting his teeth on edge made her wary. Instinct, deep and screaming in warning, told her to run before she became a side casualty in the imminent eruption. Willpower alone rooted her to the spot—she would not abandon him, regardless of what brewed just below the normally composed surface.

Sweat ran down the advancing man's face, dampening his thin moustache and dark hair to his pallid skin. He cried out with exuberant relief. "A mage! Several mages! You're not with the bandits? Do you have any lyrium potions? Most of us are exhausted. We've been fighting that demon for days now. Just this morning were we able to finally pin it down!" He gestured to the grunting monster that was being forced into a tight crouch against the rocky earth, the intensive efforts of its captors wearing it down bit by bit. Away from the Fade and blocked from the energies there that sustained it, the Pride demon was just as stalled as the mages around it.

Solas' constricted glare would have pierced holes straight through the unknown man as he rose to his full height, no longer the diffident and near docile apostate he'd carefully assumed to be. It was easy to overlook how much bigger he was than most elves, by the way he carried himself in a compacted slouch. The mage stood more than a head taller than the diminutive Inquisitor, rivaling even the gangly, boyish length of Cole. Pride steeled his ordinarily slackened, broad shoulders and strength lifted his chest, giving wind to the verbal hostility that followed. "You summoned that demon, except it was a spirit of wisdom at the time! You made it kill! You twisted it against its purpose!" He spat, lips curling into a hardened snarl over his clenched teeth.

Cole whispered coarsely from behind the sagging rim of his hat, fingering the edge of his blade, but he no longer yanked against the firm grasp that held him back. "Were there fangs to tear wide the flesh. Go for the throat. Silence the weak fool. Sinew and blood will feed the hate-" was all he managed before being sternly hushed by the apprehensive Inquisitor.

Startled by the swelling power and strange company the dubious mage tried to explain, his
moustache quivering over his thin lip. Fear trembled in his watery eyes as he addressed the sullen man that accused him. "I-understand how it might be confusing to someone who has not studied demons, but after you help us, I can—"

His words snapped in a deep bark. Resentment sizzled off Solas' tongue as he stepped forward, his full attention never leaving the leader of the guilty group even as his ruined friend howled anew. He brandished his staff, driving the alarmed man backwards. "We're not here to help you. I've had enough of your imprudent conversation already. There are no excuses for such flagrant cruelty."

Taking a deep breath and bracing her tenaciousness against every protesting fiber of her being, Chiy stepped between the two mages. Blocking the furious elf in his circling stalk, she cautiously angled Solas' weapon away with her open, marked palm. The power stored in the anchor seared bright, polarized by the building energies Solas was pulling through the runed staff. She turned a cautioning eye, paying little heed to the mage she held at bay. "Word of advice? I would hold off on explaining how demons work to my friend here."

"Listen to me," The condescending man begged as he stumbled away, stiffening against the high rock that flanked him. He looked to his frazzled comrades, but they could not come to his aid and control the demon simultaneously. "I was one of the foremost experts in the Kirkwall circle—"

"Shut. Up." The arctic, bitter words were enough to lessen the fortitude of the other mage's joints. He sunk to the ground haplessly. Days of minimal rest, filled with fear and extreme use of magic left him terribly weakened. The added stress of a vicious looking elf near to bearing down upon him stole everything that was left in him. "You summoned it, to protect you from the bandits."

"I—yes…" The far from home mage did not deny his desperate but reprehensible actions. It had been his decision and he’d followed the guide to the letter. The spirit had done as they'd finally pressed it into doing, but they had not anticipated such a hazardous reaction as a full-blown manifestation of one of the worst demons from the Fade.

Pushing past the shielding Inquisitor, he wrenched his staff free. Solas continued to berate the fallen man. "You bound it to obedience, and then commanded it to kill. That's when it turned." The elf shook his head in indignation and loathing, trying to clear his mind, to think more effectively but the hate would not leave and the anger would not diminish. He turned once more to the corrupted spirit, assessing the spell that had been constructed for foul purpose. It would be dismantled, even if he had to do it alone and with bare hands. "The summoning circle, we must break the binding. No orders to kill, no conflict with its nature, no demon."

"Are you insane?" All the remaining color drained from the Kirkwall native's round face. The obviously disturbed man before him clearly did not comprehend the first thing about demons. Years of study under the best tutors and the most elite, distinguished teachers could not be wrong. Spirits and magic existed to serve; he'd given countless speeches and demonstrations in regards to summoning. He couldn't fathom what an apostate could know to rival his own loftier insight. "Even you must grasp that the binding is the only thing keeping the demon from killing us! Whatever it was before, this spirit of wisdom so you say, it is a monster now!"

Solas turned in dismay, looking over his shoulder to Chiy. His pained eyes beseeched where his words could not. He could bear the fool cringing at his feet no more and deferred to the only party whose understanding he would presently accept. "Inquisitor, please."

"I'll do everything I can to spare your friend." She had already thrown aside her travel pack. Chiy was prepared to give her all, even though she was frightened of the task at hand. Her knuckles were already whitening and her fingers grew damp around the staff's wrapped grip. Fighting demons she could handle, she'd been forced into doing it on countless occasions, but saving one was an entirely
"Thank you." The demon before them caught new wind, struggling once more to rid itself of its captors who were already at their breaking point. They fled for their lives as the horrendous beast broke their restraints, screeching to the heavens above in wrath and misery.

"We must hurry!" directed Solas, time and control of the situation slipping irrepressibly through his grasp. He threw a barrier as the others assembled, knowing it would be their only defense from the massive claws and vicious assaults of the creature that could no longer recognize friend from foe.

"Do we even have a plan?" Dorian asked in exasperation, casting his own passive spell to charge the very air around them. With the ambient energies of the Fade already drawn on by the previous manipulations of the Kirkwall mages and the presence of a formidable being, the whole area teemed with rampant magic free for the taking.

"Keep the demon distracted, but do not engage unless we have no other choice!" Solas cautioned and pointed to the first tall, glistening summoning stone. "If we can break all of those the spirit will be released."

"Cole!" Chiyo called out, but the silent rogue had already slipped from their side, appearing next at the feet of the demon. Ducking, weaving and dropping small traps, he moved effortlessly to keep the creature off balance and focused on him, giving his companions the chance to work unhindered and with haste. He called no appeal to reason. The demon was beyond even his probing reach, only the words of pain, anger and confusion marked the slippery spirit’s diversions. The mages fanned out, taking separate pillars to strike at with their sturdiest attacks. Dorian's fire split the hardened stacks in dazzling bursts. Solas channeled considerable energy through the Fade, shattering his first pillar with hurling stones.

The Inquisitor chose her most suitable and governable trait, directing the power of a fierce storm to break down the furthest column by the river. Lightning rallied at her command, crackling through the air with every fluid twist of her staff. As each section of the spell was devastated in turn, the large demon gained more control of itself, fighting harder and with savage speed. Long lines of magical energy grew from its dark palms, becoming fearsome weapons that it struck out with terrifying accuracy, leaving heavy gashes in the rock-strewn soil.

Cole placed several arrows into the horror’s arms, drawing on his short bow in a quick series of blurred shots. He extinguished a few of the vengeful beady eyes, partially blinding his ferocious foe. But as a fourth portion of the circle fell under Solas’ earnestness the shadowy boy found himself on the cusp of being overtaken, faltering as the ground beneath his feet was set alight by electrifying strokes. Paddling back as he took aim again, there was no room for him to escape as the Pride demon struck once more. His focus remained unbroken even as his leg became briefly ensnared by the recoiling whiplash. His arrow slipped deep into the expansive chest of his attacker before he was flung aside.

Chiyo watched in open-mouthed dread as her ghostly friend was sent reeling backward by the injured demon, losing his footing and favorite hat as he tumbled to escape the next sizzling blow. He looked so small. A mere crumpled heap of a boy struggling at the edge of the circle to right himself with a towering monster lunging his way. Besieged and bellowing, acidic, black blood ran down its torso as it charged.

“Get up! Cole!” Chiyo's panicked thoughts raced as she abandoned her task, shouting out to her endangered comrade that was far from her protective range. She had to reach him. And she had to do it now. Her wish was granted as she leapt forward, the hasty stride burning bright with the magic she demanded to aid her. Time itself grew sluggish, each thrumming pulse the only sound, ringing in her
ears longer and slower than the last as the world around her obscured. Chiyo's focus was aimed entirely at her ailing friend. A fraction of a second, an eternity. She couldn't distinguish until time lurched ahead as she woozily stumbled, sliding across the rocky soil, just ahead of the fallen young man. Throwing her own too small form across that of the lanky youth, she managed to cast a partial shield of thick ice just as the demon tried to slam into the both of them. Stunned and staggering by its own impact, it gave the Herald the precious seconds she needed to help Cole. She dragged him away, fighting her own unsettled sickness from the rapid motion of the rescue.

"Did you teach her that?!" Solas shouted, baffled by the Inquisitor's sudden transportation. One moment she had been reaching out, mid-stride and the next she'd vanished within a dizzying blur only to next be seen at the rogue's side on the opposite end of the circle. Less than a blink of the eye—as true a Fade step if he'd ever seen one. But not what he would have expected of the mage whose magic often came out as unpredictable and incomplete when pressed beyond the intermediate.

"Funny, I was about to ask the same of you!" Dorian directed his concentration to the last part of the binding spell. He'd never attempted such a feat as what they'd just witnessed though he easily recognized the magic. She'd used the Fade, skirting along the Veil itself to hasten her travel. He gave another mighty effort, shattering the final pillar with a ferocious and fiery blow from his staff.

The shock of the summoning circle breaking caused the demon to collapse in its last thrust towards the fleeing mortals, disintegrating as mournful howls echoed through the air. The decomposing mass swirled and contracted, leaving behind a much smaller, ghostly figure in its place. The spirit took the form of a common human woman, haunted and exhausted, they could barely hold themselves upright on the ground. But the wrath and agony were gone. Instead it sat with vacant eyes looking out into the listless sky, emptily longing to return home.

Solas set aside his weapon, his heart filling with regret as his friend fought to maintain their spiritual body, flickering in the wind as the energies that had given it substance waned. The sullen elf approached the corrupted entity, kneeling before them so they could be close enough to speak softly and to help it conserve its remaining strength. He did not want to add to the grievous strain that already threatened to permanently extinguish the thoughtful spirit. The sorrow in his eyes was telling even if his other features had returned to a placid calm. He'd come too late after all and nothing else remained in his power to change that.

"I'm sorry." The hushed words fell from his lips like heavy stones borne across the miles, dropped because they could be carried no further.

"I'm not." The spirit of wisdom disagreed in lilting, breathy elven. It spoke simply as their energy fluctuated. "I'm happy. I'm me again."

"I could have done more for you. You didn't deserve this, old friend." Solas knew how little there was to be done. Once corrupted it was impossible to return to the Fade as it once had been. It would have to be released and cleansed, made pure once more. Though a spirit could not die it would never return as the same being it had previously resembled. It may remember its former existence with diffidence or start entirely anew depending on its strength of will.

"You helped me. Now you must endure." Before their dwindling light failed the spirit leaned forward, letting their functionless gaze fall onto the Inquisitor. They observed through their other senses as she tended to the compassionate spirit in his stolen body. They whispered briefly to Solas, thin words of warning almost inaudibly reaching his ear as they gave him a last counsel. They would never speak again as they were now, and there was no telling what the anticipated deliverance would bring.

"Guide me into death." The spirit tenderly requested, ready to leave the painful world they'd been
forced to suffer. Its generous offer to help had been woefully abused; the knowledgeable entity had been coerced to kill, and now only the wanderer could wash that tainted blood from its being. If he did not, they would never be able to return to the renewal of the Fade. Instead, they would linger and become a revengeful wraith, stalking the crags and riverbanks of the Dales for the rest of eternity.

"As you say. Dareth shiral." Solas tucked the cautionary words away for later examination. He must complete what they'd come so far to accomplish. Lingering would only warrant more pain for his dear companion. With that in mind, he released Wisdom to the Fade, breaking the spell that had been callously woven around the spirit. He stood again only after all the remains dissolved into nothingness, leaving behind no trace. A soft light floated away, fleeing from tormented body that had been reduced to whispers of transitory smoke. It grew dimmer and vanished altogether as it reached towards the overcast sky.

Solas gathered his set-aside belongings, laying his staff and pack over his sunken shoulders before he curved his desolate regards to the Inquisitor, still safeguarding the wounded spirit that worked willingly alongside them. Her hands were pushed firmly into a seeping gash on Cole's leg, stemming the loss of blood that did not seem to perturb the boy in the slightest.

"I heard what it said. It was right." She said as he drew near, having understood most of the hushed utterances in a language that had been stripped from her scattered people. Some of the words were still lost, but the content in which they were used gave her better clue. Solas’ frequent slipping of a new word had already garnered her vocabulary beyond that of what her Keeper had imposed. Her sympathetic gaze reached his distant eyes, but it couldn't permeate his sore heart. Nothing could, he was distressed beyond the offers of friendship and compassion. "You did help it."

"Now I must endure." Solas declined to openly mourn; it wasn't the time or place to relieve his emotions. There were other matters to meet with first.

"Let me know if I can help you." The Inquisitor offered, rotating to see the guilty mages approach the now empty battlefield.

"You already have… All that remains now is them." Solas' anger returned once more as the repulsive cowards dared come near, approaching awash with relief and gratitude. The Inquisition that had employed the mages to help seal the dreadful Breach had come to their rescue, appearing in the hour of their need as a prayer sent to Maker dutifully answered. Malice dripped from each final word and his eyes grew hard as he grasped for his shouldered staff but then quickly changed his mind. He wouldn't need it, not this time. His hands would do well enough. He would never forget how to use them, centuries of violent rebellion had stained his fingers and palms in a way no paint or pigment could ever match. These hands that forged the Veil, which had toppled gods, and paved the road to ruin for the elves—they would do just fine for this.

"Cole, I need you to press here please. Hard." The Inquisitor slowly peeled away the ruined fabric that hung in tatters off Cole's knee and shin. Dorian set her travel pack beside her and turned a blind eye from the brewing storm that was Solas and the Kirkwall mages, focusing instead on the healing of their unique friend.

"Dark, desperate to stave the hate… death will be the only way. He will make them stop, all of them. It won't help. Everything is already lost." Cole did not resist her as she encouraged his hands to hold the fresh wound. His exclusive concentration remained on the brooding apostate who dryly rejected the thanks of the frightened travelers and openly cursed them for their wrong-doings. There would be vengeance in the name of his gentle friend and they would never have the chance to wreak such havoc on the spirits ever again.

"It is not our debt to claim." Chiyo's voice turned low and flat, almost void of feeling as she
disregarded the rising fright. She began to bandage his damaged leg. Cole showed no sign of pain, instead he asked why Wisdom would be so concerned about the speed of a single arrow. There were no archers in the sky that Cole could see. But the wise friend had warned Solas nevertheless, even though it had been left blinded and could not have possibly seen an attack from above or elsewhere.

"We didn't know it was just a spirit!" The far-traveled mages cried as they hid behind the mage that had led them through the Dales. Their voices pled for forgiveness as they faced a man who held no mercy in his heart for them and were ignored by the Inquisitor who they believed had been sent to save them. "The book said it could help us!"

The kneeling party remained unmoved as the guilty were dispatched with pitiless swiftness. Silent bodies hit the ground with dull thuds and they remained still, their lives snuffed in a burning flash of Veil fire. Their fate had been sealed the moment they’d bound and corrupted the spirit to do their dirty work.

"I need some time alone." Solas sounded hollow; his emotion's frayed beyond appeasement or comfort. "I will meet you back at Skyhold." Carrying only his meager possessions Solas left the group, heading for the solitude of the distant forest. There was much to think about now and a good deal to mourn. He only looked ahead as the Inquisitor requested he be careful and to stay safe.

"Wisdom knows enduring is pain."
murmured Cole, he didn't watch the mage take his leave. Instead he combed the rough grass with his fingers, pulling at the blades that tangled until they uprooted or broke. "He hurts for them, another of many he couldn't save. He carries necessary deaths."

"We know, Cole." Chiyo pulled the young man into a loose hug, the blood on her hands smearing into his coat. It was mostly for her own comfort, but the spirit was willing to fulfill the need. "We know."

—Codex
A lovely bust with Chiyo's in game hair by str-gazer @ tumblr!
Here to Stay

Chapter Summary

Solas seeks time for himself and Chiyo keeps her hands and head busy in his absence. But her unbridled actions in the Exalted Plains have cost her with her more prestigious mage companions who seek to teach her a lesson in both skill and control. They don’t call her the Iron Lady for nothing.

Two weeks since she had returned to the Keep.

And two weeks more had passed since the Inquisitor had left Solas behind to disappear into the treacherous wilds of the Exalted Plains. He'd said he would meet them back at Skyhold and Chiyo had believed him. Forging ahead through various camps, she'd trusted that he would only be a few days behind at most. Requests had been made at each that the scouts should keep an eye open for the lone apostate, to be prepared to offer him supplies if needed. She'd been deeply concerned for his wellbeing, not only his physical state but the soundness of his mental one as well.

Chiyo was forced to remind herself daily that he had survived fine enough on his own, possibly for years—decades even if the body of his tales hinted true. He'd proven over their travels that he could hunt all sorts of small game without a bow, having become proficient with traps. He could take shelter and rest in all manner of uncomfortable niches, appeasing even the giant spiders of the ruins he frequented so they would leave him in peace. Solas had intentionally traveled to many dangerous places in his time before the Inquisition, and it was clear that he didn't require their help. If anything, though it varied by who would admit it, they needed his. But this repeated self-reassurance wasn't enough to stifle the gnawing worry that followed her all the way back to Skyhold. It lingered after they arrived, one companion short, and even crept into her uneasy dreams.

Chancing as far as she dared while asleep, Chiyo called out, hoping to reach Solas in the Fade. But no response ever came and she refused to wander far without his guidance.

Chiyo filled the stretched days with nervy busyness, trying to keep her mind off of all the terrible notions of disaster and demise it presented her with. She continuously checked in on Cole, making sure his leg was healing well. He'd suffered from a mild infection on the road; there had been concern over the borrowed body's ability to heal. But the sustained applications of crushed elfroot and other remedial tonics had restored his health and reduced the scarring, not that he was bothered by either. She listened while she worked alone, the healers all being too afraid to come near Cole, to his growing anxiety about ending up like the wise spirit they had tried to save.

He didn't want to be susceptible to such abuses but continuing as a spirit, still impartial and segregated from his body, meant remaining vulnerable. What did it mean to be human, did it mean being safe? He had asked but Chiyo warned him that human hearts were also far from faultless; they too could be easily distorted even without the influence of evil. Man's worst enemy was himself, quick to greed and self-interest. Though she was no expert on the matter and was far from perfect herself, she believed that Cole would be a good person. And if that's what he strongly wanted then he should speak to Solas on the matter. Her magic could not help him with that quest. Cole had thanked her and disagreed, appealing that she only lacked the know-how, not the inherent ability.

The Inquisitor had also spent a scattering of afternoons building a small rivalry with Commander
Cullen over a disrupted game of chess—when she could pry Dorian away from the board. She wasn't an amusing loser, often leaving the table chewing her lips or loosening a curse when her next move was uncertain. Cullen would chuckle and mark his notes, requesting that she sleep on it till the next day if she was so determined to beat him. It aggravated her to no end to be so utterly surrounded by those so challengingly proficient, but the distraction did much for them both.

The former Templar's struggle with his lyrium addiction stole much of his energy and focus, often locking himself away in his office with very few permitted entry there besides the Inquisitor and the Seeker. His job was overtly stressful; the withdrawal fueled nightmares awoke him with the sounds of his own shouts all reflected his worries of defeat. But for a few quiet hours each week he could take solace and put aside his mantle, duties and worries with others who strove for the same goal. For another day they all could feel grounded. The rampant problems of the world could wait till after the well planned removal of a rook or completing a blockade of bishops.

More than one evening had been expended in the Herald's Rest. Often running into the wee hours of the dark morning, she'd excelled more at playing cards and refining her Wicked Grace skills with the Iron Bull, Sera and Varric. Tongues loosened by beer or brandy, all talked of tales from every far off corner the rowdy band could remember the details to. They rolled in their chairs each time the Red Jenny described her earliest plots against the stuck-up nobility, sawing the legs off of chairs, putting lemon juice into the cream, and filling fountains with tadpoles to drive the high society mad.

But it was the unabashed tales of her conquests of all pedigree of lovely lady that had the men at the table hooting and grinning. Watching as the Inquisitor turned redder and redder with each lurid account and crude gesture had become the favorite sport. Though Sera would often try to reenact some of her more memorable accounts, making playful grabs for the blushing Dalish in the chair beside her until she was coerced by the squeals of the shorter woman to stop. These moments always distracted them between hands, and the stories became worse as they played on. For losing hands it was mandatory to drink a hearty swig of ale, winners were required to down even more. There had even been an incident where the Inquisitor needed to be carried back into the castle over the surly dwarf's stout shoulder after a particularly grueling game. The slow trip to the main hall had included an outrageously tuned rendition of the scandalous yet increasingly popular *Sera Never Was* between burping waves of their stomachs attempting to turn.

*She would always like to say, - "Why change the past - When you can own this day?"
*Today she will fight - To keep her way. - She's a rogue and a thief - And she'll tempt your fate.
*Sera was never quite the wealthiest girl - Some say she lives in a tavern.
*But she was so sharp, and quick with bow - Arrows strike like a dragon.

Though, while she wasn't sleeping off a night of mirth or sneaking into the kitchen for extra morsels, most of Chiyo's undeclared time was given to the library. She kept a convenient eye on the door of Solas' room, but several hours were devoted to studying various theories and histories with Dorian. Her interests were broad, selecting volumes near at random. But all books had the potential to hold something of value, even if they were contended or impractical to her needs. Dorian had taken to stacking the newest additions he personally provided, for the sake of selection, by his favorite chair. The library's variety did not meet his high standard and he was insulted by the terrible lack of manuscripts from the Imperium and other northern regions. With his own coin he brought in both original and translated texts on a near weekly basis.

Answering his frequent, prodding questions about her magical training, development and the knowledge kept by the Dalish however was becoming tiring. Her debatable abilities met his expectations, but Dorian's discourteous assumptions about her education did come across as a tad
condescending. No Chantry missionary had stolen into her clan to teach them to read and write in the common trade-speak. Her skills in mathematics were sound and practically applied, though she could use more work on the ever changing value of the various currencies. Just because she didn't know who had been the last Black Divine or the order of the rulers in Orlais didn't mean that she was unfamiliar with history. The history of her own people simply took more precedence and she'd learned very quickly that human accounts had a nasty habit of twisting what was written into a more one-sided, positive light. There was nothing dim about her, and she refused to let Dorian lay claim to any deficiency.

Chiyo had been smart and confident enough to have traveled from the Free Marches and into Ferelden unaided. Stepping off the boat alone and unarmed had been a brave moment, she'd never felt so far from home, but the Lavellans had provided her with just enough coin to make it to the Conclave. She managed through tawdry taverns and slept in shady roadside niches unscathed, hiding her tattooed face behind a hood in public. She'd used her shaved head to gain access to the Temple of Sacred Ashes, claiming pious devotion and correction from her former pagan ways.

They'd eaten that part up. Saying Andraste or Maker enough times and in the right tone had dissolved all suspicions and allowed her to walk through the front doors. The sisters there had let her in never knowing that they'd allowed an apostate that could hold her own into their midst. At least she thought she could, but her first unremembered confrontation with the Elder One must have gone poorly to have ended the way it did. Another hiccup, Chiyo supposed, it had happened before—if only she could recall what happened the day she fell out of the Breach.

Her Keeper had worked with her diligently for years to hone her spontaneous tendencies and given her the room she needed to grow, brushing off the fluctuations in her casting as residual quirks from her untrained youth. Leaping forward with progress in bursts before stalling out again for months, sometimes years even, before she could perform the same feat again. Deshanna had been confident enough in her to permit research into the elven ruins they would pass in their travels, adding their findings to the records they kept for their clan that would also be shared each decade at the next Arlathvhen. Even if her magic was a bit clunky and sticky even, like unbaked bread it would frustratingly cling to her hands, she had never considered herself truly inadequate. She just had to try harder than most, and she'd angrily touted that logic to Dorian before ending an afternoon of studies early.

Chiyo did not expect to be stopped in the courtyard the day after concluding a rather heated debate with the northerner. And she certainly had not anticipated another, very serious mage to be with him. The affluent Madame de Fer herself had decided to approach Chiyo, though by the aloofness of her expressions and the expensive utility of her more practical clothes, the intent of her visit was preceded. They did not call her the Iron Lady without good reason; the woman was as vicious as she was poised and skillful in battle with a staff as she was in a royal court armed only with her words.

"Gossip around Skyhold is that you have been toying with dangerous magic." Her silken, cold voice set the Herald's spine rigid as she took deliberately slow strides towards the elven woman who had been enjoying the midafternoon sun. "Like a child playing with the kitchen stove. You could burn your little fingers, dear."

"You told her..." She rumbled crossly, there was no doubt as to what toying the Enchanter referred to. The Inquisitor's lips pursed tightly, watching Dorian while he innocuously examined his finely trimmed fingernails. Chiyo had purposefully requested that Vivienne not be informed of her accidental discovery in the Dales until after she had a chance to master the new ability and evade further chastising. After the unfortunate fiasco of a stray lightning bolt ruining a particularly charming hat, Vivienne had made it her personal missive to tear the Inquisitor's magical talents apart at the seams and reconstruct something new from the remaining quality scraps. When she could pin the
evasive elf down to suffer her repairs that was.

"I only inquired about the precedence of what transpired that day." He answered, shifting a set of unenhanced staves beneath a loosely draped arm, balancing them lazily on his muscular shoulder. "Madame de Fer's time with such a quality Circle certainly would have yielded experience with budding young talents. You might benefit from a bit of training…"

"As you seem so confident, I was hoping for a thorough demonstration," Vivienne held out one hand with measured composure, wrapping long, powerful fingers around the staff that Dorian respectfully presented to her with a twisting flourish. "But I am concerned about your propensity to control that which you do not truly understand."

"So you're here to punish me for an accident? Should we at least bow first?" Chiyo asked with a whistling lark of arrogance. She caught the simple weapon cast to her and spun it behind her shoulders, using it as a bar to stretch her arms with. Excitement began to course through her veins; it had been too long since her last duel with one of the other Lavellan apprentices who'd rivaled her position as First. She could barely contain the mischievous grin that tugged at her sly mouth. Here was a chance to prove that mages could be competent outside of a smothering Circle. That the wild and natural progress of her learning suited her just fine, not that the additional encounters she'd recently survived had failed to improve upon her prowess. She squared off her with challenger, her back turned to the open gate and bridge.

Dorian was already ridding potential onlookers as the courtyard cleared; shouts of a brawl spreading like wildfire but no one wanted to be caught in the midst of an arcane battle. Not between these two ladies at any rate. A wrestling match between recruits often drew a betting crowd, but fire and lightning did not threaten to burn off their brows in observing plain hand to hand combat.

"Punish you?" The Lady straightened the cuffs of her sleeves with prudent, dark fingers. "Heavens no, darling. But if you're lucky you will learn something. I wonder what it will take to get through that sweet head of yours." Before Chiyo could prepare or remove the staff she'd been flaunting between her outstretched arms Vivienne had already cast her first spell with fluid grace.

"Shit!" The dodging Inquisitor threw up a hasty, insufficient barrier before the frozen blast drove her several steps back. Sprays of ice clung to her clothes, falling off in chunks as she twirled. "What, no procedures? No ten paces before the draw?" She counteracted with an aggressive lightning strike that cracked through the dry air and smashed into the Enchanter's own static field, neutralizing each other in a bright flash.

"You have yet to earn formalities. Those are reserved for the trained." The more experienced mage was already pooling considerable energy to power her next onslaughts. Each physical move just as defined and purposely placed as the last as she sent forth waves of intense fire. It burned away at the fresh, tender grass brought on by the change in season and the reduced trampling of the muddy common grounds.

The Inquisitor jumped, allowing the flames to blacken the soil where she'd been standing. Only her hardened heels were scorched as she hit the cooked ground. "What do you think the Dalish have done with all our freedom? Enchanting animals to do parlor tricks? Turning crops strange colors to frighten farmers?" She slammed the end of her staff to the ground, turning the warmed earth into an icy sheet, trying to freeze her opponent's booted feet to the ground. But there was not enough forethought or power behind the attack, the thin ice cracked even before reaching where Vivienne stood.

"Your jokes are as coarse as your skills!" Prodded the Enchanter at the miserable display. She laughed, dispelling the poorly constructed trap and cast a much better one, catching the Dalish mage
effectively and forcing her to waste precious energy in freeing herself from the frigid attachments. "It is raw hide in comparison to mine. That fur will keep you warm and dry out there in wild but here it will never be enough. I wear my expertise like a fitted glove, a second skin."

As she broke loose Chiyo shouted with alarm, countering a series of sharp spirit blades, knocking them back in rapid succession with her staff. The Inquisitor took a risky chance to become more hostile as Vivienne restored her barrier and drew in another wave of energy. She amassed every ounce of magic she could muster and with a static spark she called forth the impressive lightning that she used most.

In a dazzling, explosive maelstrom she charged on, sending a powerful gale far forward that crashed into the Enchanter's patiently cast shield. She tried to force another Fade step as her lightning burned through Vivienne's dense barriers. She needed to get as close and personal as possible for a finishing move that would end the prejudiced fight before she ran out of strength, but the results were less than spectacular.

More like an embarrassing Fade trip by all accounts. It left her sprawled in the dirt near the Enchanter's polished feet, her head screaming and threatening to split from the mental pressures of a harried and defectively executed attempt.

"This is exactly why I support formal training!" Vivienne placed her heeled boot squarely on Chiyo's aversely surrendered staff. With a mere flick of the wrist, magic followed her unremitting command and sent the scrawny mage tumbling across the green lawn. Weaponless, she unavailingy dug her nails into the tender grass, trying to stop the rolling movement before she slammed into the wall under the gate's archway. Her efforts were not enough and she struck the stone with the full, jarring force of the touchless impulsion.

Chiyo pushed herself up off the ground on shaky arms, collapsing once before a second drive of determination returned her to her naked, dirtied feet. She wiped a small run of blood from her lip, smearing it across a sore cheek with the back of her hand.

"Were I a real enemy that failure would have cost you your life." Vivienne spoke flatly to the short woman who was not crushed enough yet to admit her failed placement and overconfidence.

The Inquisitor's focus never left the strolling Enchanter, her eyes and muddied fingertips sparkled with the energy that surged around her brewing aura. "I'm not done yet!"

"You never even started. How many young mages do you think I have seen tear themselves apart even under strict guidance? And here you are—no teacher, no net to catch you if you fall, trying to make the nature of magic bend with your determination alone. It will break you!" The tall, elegant mage interrogated the elf with an old sting behind her words. With another wave of her hand she pinned Chiyo to the cobbled bricks with heavy binding magic, taking her time in walking forward. Soon they stood toe to toe, their caught, defiant stare speaking volumes through the silence.

"Darling, I will teach you anything you want to learn. But please, I do not wish to bury a friend." Vivienne gently rubbed the red stain from the face of the sinking Herald as the tension finally dissipated. She did not see a wild elf too independent to learn; instead she saw a mage who was decisively ready to consider accepting help.

"Mages need to be free. I will not be caged. I will not be collared or leashed." Chiyo groaned in morose defeat. She had lost, that was obscenely clear, but no duel or circle-trained adversary would ever get her to fully surrender. She would never submit, not to the Chantry or any human. Death would be preferred before compliance; however they were not clashing for simple dominance. The Inquisitor's ego was bruised worse than her disheveled body, but she firmly understood
"They also deserve to be safe from themselves." The Enchanter broke her constrictive spell, keeping Chiyo steady for a moment to let her regain composure. "Find me when you are ready." She smiled, almost sympathetically before leaving in tow with Dorian; she'd had enough excitement for one day.

Chiyo stretched her sore muscles and brushed the dirt from her battered clothes. The crowd on the fringes of their dueling ring quickly dissipated, stunned by the show of force they'd witnessed. What a spectacle it must have been. She hoped they wouldn't think less of their precious Herald for getting into small spats with her Inner Circle in the public yard and getting tossed like a rookie recruit in the training ring.

So much for being the last force standing between the people of Thedas and complete, utter disaster.

"Inquisitor?"

Chiyo would have recognized the questioning voice anywhere. She forgot the sting of her split lip and smiled glowingly as she turned to face the late arriving bystander. Considering he hadn't stepped in to stop the conflict, it seemed he'd missed the better portion of the flashy display. Her relief of his return eclipsed any remaining shame or embarrassment. "You came back."

The apostate's eyes examined the disheveled Dalish elf head to toe, smeared with dirt and a bruise ripening on her face, she was in quite the poor state. "As promised, but it seems I've returned at an interesting time. Is everything well here?"

"It's much better now." Chiyo hurriedly tried to rub the blood and grime from her hands on the back of her pants, too happily distracted to even bother with the traces of blood still on her face. "But how are you, Solas?"

Sorrow quietly replaced the concern that lingered behind his fallen features. He'd walked back alone with his pain, but the solitude of the long miles brought him no comfort. Nor had his remote dreams. "It hurts, it always does. But I will survive."

Chiyo's seeking fingers stretched out but they faltered back to her side. She did not know how well he would receive her presented comfort. Instead she kept them to herself and extended gentle words in their place. "Where did you go… if I'm not intruding?"

"I walked the woods mostly, they give me great peace." He answered, folding his empty hands behind the small of his back. "Then I found a quiet spot and went to sleep. I searched the place in the Fade where my friend used to frequent. It was empty, but there were stirrings in the energy there. Something new may grow in its stead."

"But they didn't die?" Chiyo was curious about his findings; she didn't claim to understand much about the natural state of spirits. Study did not warrant expertise, not on paper and in books at least. Only years of exploration would give her the familiarity that Solas had earned alone.

Solas shook his head and escorted the tousled Dalish up the curved stair to the Keep. "Like all beings, their energy returns to the Fade. That energy may one day reform, but their personality will more than likely be altered and sadly… they will probably not remember me. It will not be the friend I once knew so well."

The Inquisitor stopped him mid-climb; his pain was too audible to ignore out of sheer politeness. It echoed through his recounting, already compartmentalized and reduced away as something merely unfortunate that had happened. A discomfort that had to be quickly reduced and moved past, much
as he physically tried to step around her, but Chiyo blocked him as she turned around. From the small rise, just a step ahead of him, she was nearly tall enough to directly look him in the eye.

Once more she reached out to him, daring to rest her fingers against the curve of his arm. She lightly caressed the textured material that stretched over the firm muscle below, circling just above his securely pressed elbow. Chiyo stood in silence for a moment, listening to the empty space between as the driving wind ran about them in crisp rolls.

"Next time you have to mourn, know that you don't have to be alone. Even if there is nothing I could say or do to help, I can listen and I can be there when you need me."

Solas stared at the bright soul before him, so uncommon and awe-inspiring, not even the developing bruise on her cheek or the dirt she was streaked with could distract him from the breath-stealing elation her presence brought. The words escaped his heart and he did not regret saying them with an honesty unveiled. "It's been so long since I could trust someone."

"I know. But I hope that someday you can learn to trust me."

How many years had passed since he last felt truly safe or understood? He did not even trust himself to do the right thing, to not commit another betrayal. But Solas would have paid any price to have remained in that moment there with her for eternity. However he would settle for what little time the world would spare them, which would be little more than slivers and scraps. Could this small person make up for all the empty years, for all the nights he starved for a love he didn't believe he deserved, in the limited days they could claim?

"Come," he said, pulling his mind back to reality. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Solas had never been to the Inquisitor's quarters in all their months at Skyhold. Under no circumstances would he have imposed on her private space without explicit invitation, but even now it seemed like he was encroaching on very personal ground. The whole space spoke of her character and was brimming with little reminders of her far-flung adventures and curious pursuits. Hodgepods of documents and artifacts nested on various surfaces, from the desk to the low tabletop by the sofa to her night stand, nothing had been left alone for untidy storage. Old letters and notes littered the sitting area by the stair as if she'd been reading them again in her infrequently spare time. Each stained window supported a different variety of well-tended flora. Some of the climbing varieties clung to the glass panes with twisting tendrils as they grew, and others remained content under their protective glass bells. She'd covered the walls behind her bed, where he noted more than a few books to be caught amidst the unmade blankets and furry throws, with pieces of vellum containing detailed maps from the different places they had visited. There were schematics for new equipment—some labeled 'Varric' or 'Blackwall' or 'Talk to Dagna' in the Inquisitor's organic, straggly penmanship. A few crude drawings and caricatures of the Inner Circle even made the busy wall, most of them signed by their own Red Jenny, repeatedly.

There was an unsophisticated image Solas recognized as himself by the sour expression and shiny head, surrounded by a swarm of bees all exposing their oversized buttocks with zeal.

But the desk by the balcony he wandered near to intrigued him most. Many of the items he recognized from their travels through the Hinterlands and the Storm Coast. Someone had taken the time to arrange an assortment of delicate glass halla figurines into an amusing herd. They all stood proudly among speckled fields of uncut aquamarines, freshwater pearls and fragments of serpentstone. Beneath a scrap of lustrously colored silk he spotted a small carving of a wolf. He held it between his thumb and finger, examining the proud profile of the animal resting on his haunches,
waiting patiently for his next meal to stroll by. Solas stepped out onto the breezy terrace with a tightly knit brow, prepared to pitch the rueful creature down the steep mountainside.

"It's a refreshing view, isn't it?" Chiyo called to him as she left her wardrobe and bathing chamber, tucked into one of the two off-rooms below the second half-story behind her bed. A fresh change of clothes had revitalized her roughened mood. She held a cold, damp cloth to her cheek and rested against the heavy stone rail beside the stiffened, uneasy looking mage.

Solas discreetly slipped the accursed item into his pocket, abandoning the disposal for the time being. "Can I ask you something?" He inquired as she joined him. Her quizzical appearance was answer enough.

"What were you like before the anchor, before the rift?" Chiyo looked at her palm, prudently considering her answer; she hadn't given the direction of her previous life much thought since joining the Inquisition, there hadn't been the time. A stubborn mage on her way to becoming a Keeper, a woman who wanted to make her people proud. Common enough traits, she doubted though that they were his true interest.

"Has it affected you?" Solas clarified, he had considered her nature often since their trip to the Exalted Plains. He mainly hoped she might be able to settle his curiosity and allow him to put aside a few precariously ideas the spirit of Wisdom had seeded. This woman was not a threat to him, so why did she leave his heart thumping deep in his chest and his mind reeling at the mention of her name. "Changed you in any way, your mind, your morals… your spirit?"

The balm of her mild laugh soothed his rattled nerves. "If it had, do you think I would have noticed? Honestly though, I feel like I am finding pieces of myself along the way. I am changed, but I am becoming more me and less the imposter I assumed to be."

"You show a wisdom I haven't seen since… " Solas paused to lean beside her on the high banister, close enough that their arms nearly brushed. "Since my deepest journeys into the ancient memories of the Fade. You are not what I expected."

The Inquisitor looked to him, almost embarrassed by the unexpected fondness in his stare. Her toes curled, seeking the cool undersides of her shifting feet. "Oh, I'm sorry if I've not met your anticipations. I haven't exactly been a storybook hero in this tale. I could get Varric to smooth things out when this is over, slay a few dragons, rescue a few maidens, and make up some grand speech. People would buy that a lot more than a heroine who trudges through the wilds gathering herbs and gets lost in wyvern infested marshes all while arguing with her rag-tag companions the entire trek."

"It's not disappointing," Solas chuckled as he took the cloth from her hand, cleansing a missed blemish from her finely built jaw. "Most people are predictable. But you… you show subtlety in your actions and strength in your words… mostly. There is a wisdom in you that goes against everything I expected. To think that the Dalish could have raised someone with a spirit like yours…"

His hand lingered on her face and shivers ran up his arm when she placed her warm fingers atop his own.

"Did I misjudge them?" The tall elf's sharp brow came together as he recalled the many harsh words he'd spent in the drifters' regard. Disjointed fools who grasped in the dark at fragments of fragments, losing so much of who they were that they'd been forced to reinvent an entirely unsubstantiated culture. They upheld it to the point of clinging desperately to false ideals even when the real truth was presented to them. They'd grown dodgy and mistrustful, debating one another for years with worthless evidence and misguided theory. They'd lost their history, their language and their magic, becoming almost a separate race from those they had descended from.
"I would never hold up the Dalish as perfect. Honorable perhaps, but like everyone else they are not free of flaws." She leaned into his indirect touch, the wet towel warming under her slightly swollen skin. "They will never give up their memories of the ancient ways, even if they don't always remember them appropriately. You've shown me that the truth is out there, we just have to find a way of getting it back."

"Perhaps that is it. I suppose it must be. Most people act with so little understanding of the world." Solas felt lighter and more at ease than he had in ages. Not since his most rebellious days with those of like-mind had he known such a sense of security and companionship.

"But not you." He let the fabric fall from his hand so that he could feel her unhindered; he brushed his thumb over the darkening cheekbone. It would be a truly impressive bruise by the morrow even properly tended to. Yet her strength was only made more solid by the way she carried those injuries, it was the same as when she'd escaped from Haven after buying everyone else enough time to slip out unharmed. Her body bashed and broken, frozen near to death when they'd found her on the mountain pass. Seeing her unconscious on the cot, somehow still breathing after everything she'd managed to survive, it had impressed Solas greatly. So resilient and so striking this mortal, this dream made real, if only she could see herself through his eyes might she understand.

"What does this mean, Solas?" She asked as he withdrew his hand and returned to a comfortable distance on the balcony rail. In an inquisitive act of mimicry, she played the same silent game he often used when he questioned others, even though he often already knew the answer. Pensively tucking her hands behind her graceful hips, she sauntered a few teasing steps closer, leaving but scarce, contested inches between them as she mirrored his common stance. Her warm, brown eyes reflected his own growing sentiments, a paralleled soul seeking to quell the callings of another. Chiyo lifted her chin, greeting him with a knowing smile.

"It means I have not forgotten the kiss." The memory of their shared dream never left him for long. He'd returned to that fantasy time after time, sifting through the guilt, the want and the thousand other selfish emotions that commanded his resolution. But they rose once more, eating away at his certainty, forcing Solas to second guess himself all over again. It was wrong to be there, touching her and asking for more of her splendid gifts. She deserved better than to have an old beggar hungrily pawing at her generous side. He shook his head and tried to take his leave before he did anything he might regret.

"Neither have I. Wait!" Her heart plummeted as he unexpectedly pulled away, but the Inquisitor was quick to take a gentle hold of his arm. She needed Solas' answer; he could not stroll away from her so easily this time. He halted, ready to walk through the door if she freed him.

"Don't go." An appeal, a promise, a chance for surrender. Solas knew if he left her then that he may never recover from the hurt that his rejection would leave between them. He didn't know if he was capable of the accountabilities that either choice demanded from him. Could he drag her into the disaster and mire of the path he walked or would he break the spirit of the only person who had not once cast him aside through all their trials?

"It would be kinder in the long run." He warned, beseeching to have the decision made for him. A reassuring squeeze around his wrist was too much to disregard. Everything he tried to dissuade himself with shattered in that moment, crushed by those gentle fingers. There was no more running away, not from her. She'd snared his heart, time and time again, but this was a trap Solas no longer wished to fight.

"But losing you would…" He was already doomed and drawing her near. Too profoundly entangled in the pleasures and possibilities of what could be if he forsook his punishing solitude. The parted
lips he took were a prayer he recited again and again, her pinned arms held him in an encircling redemption which pulled him deeper and closer to a happiness he'd never know. And greatest of all was the offer of her heart and the silently given pardon no sum could ever hope to purchase.

It was only the coppery taste of the wound on her mouth that drew him back; he would not hurt her with his grasping need or sate his desire at the cost of her blood.

"Forgive me," Solas finally exhaled, the first free breath he'd taken in years slipped over his unfulfilled lips. His hands made a last slow study of her form as he rolled the plane of his forehead against her smooth brow, the tips of their noses catching before he released her reluctantly.

Lightheaded, near dizzy with intoxication, the Inquisitor smiled and stole a feathery goodbye from the mouth that stilled pressed for hers. With a short, near tormenting kiss she liberated him to do as he may. "Another time, perhaps."

Solas paused in the doorway, wearing a joy he could not remove with might or magic. It was too late for the warning of his lost friend; he'd already been struck down by the lovely arrow and he would willingly suffer under that blow for as long as he lived.

"Ar lath ma, vhenan."
One Last Lullaby

Chapter Summary

Fighting against her own limitations, Chiyo pushes her magical ability in vain while exploring the Forbidden Oasis. Solas' helping with her problem however only leads to more questions as his reborn friend shows him a memory that should have remained forgotten.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was barely dawn; the deadly chill of the desert night had only just begun its ritual thaw and the first rays of daylight promised all their usual scorching fire. It took instinct and shrewdness to endure long in the intolerant desert. There was little room for pity or feebleness to thrive in the parched sands of the Western Approach; the weak were taken down by the strong. Nature was stingy with her resources in that regard, she would not waste them on those not built for survival.

Solas remained absolutely still even as his muscles protested the low crouch onto the cold sand he’d tucked himself onto. He held his breath but to the barest draws through his nose, fearing that even the slightest hazy puff would give him away. Sneaking out from the dark shadow of their shared tent, his trained gaze stalked each skirting footfall of the agile elf exerting herself on the edge of the newly claimed refuge. Far enough to go unheard but not out of sight. Even this close to camp it could prove unsafe to be alone for long.

He wanted to get closer, to feed the hungry interest that he could abate no further.

Up before everyone else, the Inquisitor had slipped quietly from her insulated bed once more as she had done intermittently the past several mornings. Dressing in complete silence, she’d stepped lightly across the snoring figure of the blonde rogue who’d wriggled closer in the freezing night. Incessant curiosity drew the Fade wandering mage from his own shivering rest again and again; she’d made no mention of her actions once the others had risen for the day even as they asked her about the healthy glow on her cheeks or the sweat she’d been slicked with. Sera had been lewd in her guesses, but the already pink faced Herald had shrugged off every coarse insinuation. The fresh blisters on her palms and the sides of her fingers that had appeared since they had arrived had given her away to Solas immediately. Her hands had been smooth before they stopped at this camp the week prior, and he’d not had to sneak from his bed to investigate her whereabouts till recently either. Though he’d not anticipated such robust efforts from Chiyo this day, it was startling she had any energy left to her at all.

For the first time in nearly a year since being marked by the anchor, she had shown signs of immense pain after closing a small rift. The initial one hadn't been a problem, even with the plethora of fiery rage demons it presented, but the second nearby tear they had discovered mere hours later had proven too great a strain. Exhausted and increasingly evasive, she had withdrawn from the company quite early and retired to the tent to see to the damage alone. Calling for a break in their travels, she’d temporarily canceled their exploration of the secret oasis whose ruins they had traveled so far to investigate. If the pilfering Venatori had any reason to be interested in this strange place, that had been reported as elvhen in architecture, then so did the Inquisition. But it could wait an extra day or
two; it would serve the bastards right to stew at a door that seemed impossible to open without the right keys.

Solas was in no hurry to see those concealed, moldering walls again. After so many years of neglect it was likely that he wouldn’t recognize what had become of the ancient outpost he’d frequented in his youth. In fact, he barely identified any familiarity of the area that had turned to desert only in more recent history. The second Blight had ravished the once lush land and Tevinter ruins, built and abandoned over the missed ages, now dotted the region. There were now many mysteries hidden in the sand and they would be hard pressed to solve them all before their scheduled return to Skyhold. The empty, comfortless desert was taking a toll on the entire group, but none strove harder than the Inquisitor.

He would not have criticized her for sleeping in after so many harsh miles crossed and precarious rows with their demonic enemy, but with vigor seemingly renewed, Chiyo did not seem worse for wear. Not this morning at any rate. Solas watched on as she continued her arduous warm-up, striking at invisible opponents with both ends of her staff. He commended her for the progress, though he did not fully agree with the constrictive methodology she was applying herself to.

The fact remained however that she’d been fared better over the past few months since his return to Skyhold and her hard work showed. The Inquisitor's rigorous training sessions with Vivienne were admirable, repeatedly returning to that hard woman’s anvil to have all of her kinks hammered smooth and edges honed. She'd made great strides under the new tutelage, but Solas questioned if she was pushing her small body too hard. Certainly her accuracy and foresight had notably improved. The endurance of her barriers lengthened and her preference for the hurricane that often boiled-over her control much more developed, brought to heel even, on the best days. Yet Solas considered her change in movement most unbefitting.

Solid, square, regimented and reaching for perfection, there was nothing wrong with her new form except that it wasn’t her. Given enough time she could certainly cultivate herself into a deadly weapon and he feared she would prune a wood too green and be left stunted, unable to grow beyond the limits she would create for herself. These were not the natural motions of a person free and wild at heart. The fluid grace of her arms was lost in the tight circles she dictated to twirl her staff. Each footfall stole its purchase, claiming and conquering, rather than finding effortless traction in the soft, yielding sand. It sprayed with her striking heels, the fine grains caught in the gaining ray’s light glimmered like hot sparks. Fire would have served her beautifully, it would match the passion within, yet it was curious that he’d never seen her cast a single flame.

To Solas, it now seemed she was opposing her intrinsic nature, and therein laid her growing frustration.

The practiced mage could see it behind the concentration that cloaked her face as she worked through her intense exercises. A pattern of disciplined motions, each designed to build a strong foundation for magic to flow from. The learned rigidity and harsh control however had been purposefully designed to breed fear if any delineation occurred. Here was a student desperate to reach the slippery bar set just out of her grasp. It would have been appropriate for a skittish Circle mage preparing for their harrowing. This particular woman needed to learn the value and security of her own magic instead of emulating the thin attempts of mastery developed by a race who was terrified of what should have been completely innate.

She'd grown so much already since they'd first met, but seeing Chiyo struggle and toil like this only brought to mind a pupil's classic copy of a masterwork. Try as she might, she couldn't wholly erase her own flare and creativity while striving for an exact image. As he observed, Solas wondered if she expected to reach her elusive goal this morning. He’d caught her in a handful of fruitless tries since
they’d survived the Dales, but she’d never attempted it again in battle. It wouldn’t be long; already it seemed she’d grown physically bored of the basic exercises, dropping the formally fashioned sections in lieu of more liberating moves. The Inquisitor was already eyeing her target, a tall stone on the opposite side of the alcove.

Centering her body with a deep breath, focusing all her concentration, Chiyo leapt into a quick sprint,—and flew forward in a flickering green blur! A near correct fade step across the sand, but for a poorly-timed double bounce, set her atop a high perch on a smooth boulder. She looked so thrilled, her brilliant smile flashed and—it was too much. The pleased mage transformed into a woozy elf, releasing her long weapon to bounce down the ledge as she crumpled, struggling not to be sick. She slumped down the rock, holding her head and hiding her eyes from the rising day.

Qualms of a deeper flaw grew within the hedge mage, as much as he’d tried to deny them from the beginning, they were much too obvious now. If it wasn’t form preventing her success then the issue must lay in her magic. Removing himself from the obscurities on the edge of their camp, Solas decided to finally speak with the rumpled elf on the troubling matter.

"Good morning." Solas announced placidly, brandishing a fresh water skin to the woman still doubled over against the tall rock. The liquid sloshed as he gave it a light shake above her head, bribing her to unfold herself from the defeated pose she’d remained in.

"It is far from that." Chiyo groaned as she peered through her fingers, but accepted his offering nevertheless. She buried her flushed face in the cool, dampened leather for a few moments instead of taking a drink.

"On the contrary," Solas stole a subdued smirk while the sweat-speckled Inquisitor wasn't looking. "It was a much better attempt than yesterday and practically impeccable considering where you ended up while we camped beside Lake Celestine."

She caught him with a begrudging pout, lifting her suspicious eyes from the relief of the water-skin. "I knew it, you have been watching. Where else have you been following me? Certainly that wasn’t you rustling the bushes near that brook. I would expect that from Sera." Her displeasure faded, even the thought of the modest elf partaking of anything lecherous was enough to make her chuckle.

"Ar’ena sa banal’ras..." Solas teased as he knelt to sit face to face, joining her cross-legged on the grainy ground. Void of most vegetation it offered little comfort, matted only by thin tufts of dry, coarse sward and gnarled clumps of witherstalk.

"At least we didn't have to fetch you from that pool, though why you would attempt to cross water that way..." He began as the Inquisitor sat up straighter from her crumpled heap, but a previously unnoted addition to her person robbed his warm humor. Through the looseness of the simple clothes she practiced in he could see the secret price she'd been charged for her gains. Just past the pulsating veins running down her throat stippled of yellow and brown bordered the yawning collar of her tunic. "What is this?"

"Consequences are supposed to make it easier to get everything right the first time. If I didn’t screw up I wouldn’t get hurt." Her eyes failed to meet him as analytical fingers sought her out. He gradually slid the slack edge of the lightly woven shirt further down her shoulder to reveal more of the damage that bloomed over the leanly muscled joints and structures below. Bruises in varying ages mottled portions of her skin, each marked a separate failure.

"These are not recent." Her stalwart words had not been near the assurance he needed to untangle the knot that had grown in the deep pit of his stomach. The small, fading marks that dappled her upper arm and chest would have been inflicted before they’d left for the desert, but the darker ones,
reds and purples, were much more newly acquired. "Did she inflict these?"

"No." Chiyo diffidently pulled the swathed garment up and gave her removed attentions to drinking from the soft canteen. She’d barely given the unremarkable injuries a second thought, having grown acquainted to her own rough handling. Even Sera had overlooked them when they’d stopped for a pleasing dip after ousting a throng of varghest from Lost Wash creek. Water was rare in these parts and no opportunity for a bath would be so lightly passed up. "You've witnessed firsthand how capable I am of inflicting damage to myself, unaided. You should have seen the scorch marks I gave myself before I could cast my first lightning bolt without making my hair stand up on end."

"Would you…" Solas paused. She was a brilliant and capable mage when she wasn’t snagging upon the jagged patches of her gifts. Chiyo's efforts seemed almost futile if she was incapable of amending her condition. He desired to ease her struggle if he could, it was the least he could do for the continued companionship she offered that he seldom had the chance to fully repay. Allowing himself the smallest of intimacies that she generously gave him without demanding more; even now his hand lingered on the edge of her arm, rolling the fabric of her sleeve under his fingers. The charming elf would tease him for the brevity of the fleeting touches with promises of keeping her teeth to herself, but she’d always let him decide his own comfort within the stolen closeness they shared.

Though there were times when he wished she wouldn’t, to not let him off so easily and steal even more of his forced modesty and composure. The Inquisitor had a subtle magic about her, beyond that of being a mage. It worked against the icy barriers he still clung to, but it was not so simple to walk unaffected out of the prison he’d created for himself. He would have to unlearn the lonesome habits built over the years, yet even now he doubted if he ever could. There was so much he couldn’t give her, that he couldn’t share, it would be wrong of him to not at least attempt to help her in the field he was most proficient. Magic was his ever constant friend, he only wished for her to have the same access. Solas considered his words judiciously, arranging once more to follow the thin line he’d established for himself. "Indulge me for a moment? There is a theory I might hope to test if you’ll allow my curiosity."

"What kind of a theory?" Chiyo inquired, replacing the squeaking cork tightly. They were hours still from locating another water source and could not afford the wanton waste of spilling it onto the thirsty ground.

"A remedial one." He answered before gently taking her unblemished hand, propping it upon his bent knee and tracing a slow spiral over the shallow depression of her upturned palm. "All mages are connected to the Fade; it is the source of our magic. We are conduits of that energy. Channels as you already know."

The Inquisitor softened her eyes to the simple pleasure, watching the lone finger repeat its encircling pattern continuously. Had she been born a cat she may have purred with the languid stroke that prickled the nerves of her abraded hand. "You sound like my Keeper. Don’t fight the magic, da’len, feel it… I feel it all the time now… it’s become quite the thorn in my side."

Solas sustained the motion, luring her into a calm trance with the careful, silent spell he was weaving. It would be a painless method if she didn't fight his enquiring intentions, much like helping another slip into the Fade with him, he would only ask for an opening in her mind and allow a gentle push towards easy recollections. "Then you have by now heard the principles of how those energies pool naturally within."

"Day one apprenticeship." The Inquisitor mocked genially. "Magic flows in and out endlessly in a loop. It enters from Beyond and passes through like air, stopping only to mingle within the well of ourselves and returning to whence it came. The more you expend that stored mana, like our need for
breath, the faster it is drawn in once again to keep the pool full... It's a balance and a partnership..." Her words developed a leisurely tenor, recalling the delights of her initial time spent training in a warm memory.

"And what does it feel like to draw up from that well?" He paused patiently as her focus slipped, sidestepping across the path of the present, allowing a reliving of those early days during distant formative years. Looking in on herself, she might see what had been missed while she’d been actively living those simpler years.

The drooping lids of her eyes nearly touched as she settled further into the repose, leaning far forward in a soft slump. But her brows knit together with former frustration being played anew, clashing against her current efforts, as she drove forth her reply. "Heavy and slow... like someone filled the bucket with rocks... and then too much, it all comes up like a flood. Nothing stops me from letting it go, but it's like drowning if the magic can't find a way out..."

"Show me." Solas bid in a whisper, lifting his palm to hover over her own. He inclined to meet her, letting their foreheads press collectively. With closed eyes he waited for the troubled mage to answer the gentle plea of the wolf asking her to crack the door. With a careful rein on his own strength, he knocked once more, listening for the magic to resonate. The strange fire that was once mastered and perfected by the ancient elvenhansh answered the call. Heat coursed between their hands, oscillating in thick waves until it formed a simple veil-flame with his own added spark. It was all he needed; a modest trail to pursue as her energy slowly spent in a controlled burned. Solas' exploratory magic slipped onward inconspicuously, following the channel as more joined them from the Fade. Together they continued until he felt the smooth edges of her magic's supply turn inward before spiraling down, wanton and constricted. Where there should have been an open basin Solas instead discovered a virtually unavoidable rift. The combative, discombobulated pressures of a tight bottleneck on the energy were, alarmingly, the only obstacle that kept him from being pulled in outright.

Like called to like, already he could feel the eager drag on his untapped magic. Unconsciously she was trying to steal the more balanced power.

Magic always took the easiest course; it didn’t care for the ethics of how it came in and out of the Fade.

Just as new magic tried to refresh the well it crashed against the opposing force of the energy Chiyo was drawing from her reserve to fuel the tiny veilfire they held together. No one was born like this, though it wasn’t unusual for nervous human parents to try to prevent having mage attuned children in the first place. Solas had heard terrible tales from ages past of Chantry sisters encouraging mage-blooded women to sleep with dried embrium under their pillows to ward off the sickness of magic. Worse had been the dream he’d once seen of a terrified mother drowning her own young child, convinced that the magic in her son would die before he did. The Dalish held no such practices; the value they took of their gifted children was a justifiable risk. But not this time.

Someone had tried to seal her, Solas decided as he probed on, and they’d done a terrifyingly fine job at doing it. The nomadic elves didn’t have the ability to make one another Tranquil like the Chanty had become fond of doing, however that left only darker magics to consider. But what had broken through such a powerful binding and released a magic strong enough to puncture the spell without destroying a mere elven child?

Blood.

She’d been covered in blood, from the gash above her eye and the wounds from the fall, when Chiyo had first used magic intentionally.
Solas carefully withdrew, extinguishing the flame by dropping his hand onto hers. He would entice no more answers from her until he had further evidence for the claim of injustices wrought onto her. How she had found any balance at all midst the turmoil was beyond his reasoning, but it certainly explained her unmerited struggles with advanced magic.

Released from the gentle spell, Chiyo rubbed at her eyes and apologized for her unexpected drowsiness. She hadn't realized how tired she'd been, the Inquisitor blearily claimed as she roused, that she must have exerted herself too much too early in the day.

Solas tucked away his thoughts for another time; she would be swift to catch the change in his attitude if he dwelt on the ideas. She would taunt him for being sullen and remark that such heavy thinking would permanently affix his brow in the knot that often accompanied his pensive complexion. The Inquisitor might ask him questions too tempting not to answer, but how might she react if he told her? He refused to offer up the cruel knowledge and inconvenience her with additional concern; Chiyo had enough burdens as the Inquisitor as it was. What good would knowing do without a solution to reasonably follow, it would be terribly unkind and it could wait until he was prepared to fix the issue himself. That would be his offering to her if it were in his power to accomplish. The quite mage would say nothing for the time being, it was not his place to begin with and he’d already pressed too fiercely against her private boundaries without her accord.

Instead of announcing his discovery he accepted a fluttery kiss to his cheek and the amiable promise of breakfast. It would be enough for now. Her happiness was too precious to dash. He could protect that contentment, even if he could not always protect her.

If only he could keep Chiyo from the Forbidden Oasis till he was more confident of the situation, but Solas had already stalled as long as he could. The Temple of Pride would be her next judge and jury, were the old magic still remaining there.

"Oh wonderful, another shitty relic thing in another shitty elf dump. How does he even know these are around? Do they make his nipples hurt or something?" Sera groaned as she grabbed her own ample chest in a rude display. She wrinkled her short nose as the Inquisitor activated another ancient artifact, strengthening the Veil as they had done many times across Thedas. She paced around the decrepit ruins as Chiyo explored, looking for more information that would give them clues as to what the Venatori wanted from the mysterious, cloistered rooms. "And don’t tell me, somebody smeared glowy gunk on the walls just in case someone thought to light them on fire. Maker’s boring balls, we’ve seen this already. I knew this place had a certain stink to it. Let’s get out of this hovel; I want to kick around more dragon dung."

"This isn't a hovel." Chiyo corrected as she took to the damp stair, returning to the upper floor with the snippy rogue trailing ahead. Sera was all too ready to leave the dank, mildew covered halls. She’d practically had to be bribed to enter them to begin with, preferring instead to poke around the fallen behemoth that had taken up in the oasis. "It's a temple, this place was important to elves at some point in history. But the significance has long been lost now; we should honor what was and try to learn from it."

"Why, because Baldie says it was? What is it temple of then if he's so smart. Temple of tusket droppings? Looks more like that giant's toilet. " The Red Jenny jabbed at the hairless elf working diligently by torchlight. She took to leaning ostentatiously against the first door that bore no keyhole, just an inscription Solas had been silently working on. If only there had been more monsters guarding the entrance, then she might still be outside having fun instead of rotting away in a fusty dungeon. Made her skin crawl, thinking of all the wet rot. Sera kicked the solid stone behind her.
back with her booted heel. "If it wasn't sealed with stupid magic then I could pick this stupid door and we could go home!"

"We've already told you about this place, weren't you paying attention?" Tested Blackwall, waiting patiently with the box of mysterious shards he'd been given charge over. The Venatori had been correct to try in using them to open the first door, but they’d simply lacked the numbers they needed to work the bizarre lock. For once, the Inquisitor’s incessant need to collect every strange and shiny object had paid off; she’d already hoarded a good cluster of the softly singing slivers. "Remember, you laughed for ten straight minutes and had to sit down to keep from falling over. And door's get locked so brats like you don't wander off with everything valuable."

"Shove it, broody beard, or I’ll sit you down on a couple o’arrows." The annoyed city elf stuck out her pink tongue and made a lewd sign with a raised fist that intersected her other horizontally held forearm. The Grey Warden chuckled, rattling the sharp fragments in his keeping.

Chiyo recited the lore once more, ignoring their asinine banter. "It's the Temple of Pride, in the common tongue. From what we have been able to learn it was once known as Solasan to the elves that roamed these lands more than a thousand—"

"Ha! Solas—an, this is your shithole then, I knew it. Who else would have named such a weird place after themselves?" Sera squealed loudly, just as she had the first time Scout Harding had said the name. And the second. And the third…

"And I remember distinctly clarifying that it is a pure coincidence. How many 'Sera's have you crossed in your travels? It is a common enough name amongst humans. The Elven language recycles and reuses just as many phrases as the one you speak currently." Solas had already placed a tight lid on his temper; the grating girl was obviously acting intentionally, it was far more an insult however to her own intuitive intelligence. He refused to feed in to her childish antics, not when he was already on edge enough as it was. There were so many dusty memories still clinging to the dark walls and he feared what would happen, if the others could feel them too. The old days called to him, reminding Solas of all the choices he could have made instead of the path he had foolishly taken. It was here that his rebellion had first been officially born, though it had always lived somewhere in the confines of his heart. Here, in these altered rooms whose purpose had changed so greatly since he'd last been in them, he’d conspired with like-minded elvhen to pull down the corrupted gods. The call to justice and freedom nearly echoed off the stone from cries rallied during a bygone age. He shook them off; the words of ghosts were of little good to him now.

"Blah blah, again with the words and the shite. Nug off, you." Sera threw up her hands, deprived of her game she wandered off to explore the lower level again. Perhaps she could have a go at the other doors and get them out of the creepy place sooner.

"Why did you bring her here? A funny girl and all, but she’s no good on these long trips. Not enough brandy to keep her mellow, not enough breeches to steal." moaned Blackwall, watching the narrow elf disappear down the stair once more. "You know how she gets around elf-stuff. But it's like she torments you for spite's sake alone."

"I don't think she's that bad. Sera's a good person, she just doesn't really know it." The Inquisitor defended her choice of not always savory companions. The blonde was quirky, aggressive and more than a little abrasive, but under all her attitude and charm was a worthwhile friend. Even if she was a bit of a lecherous flirt and a bully. Sera cared deeply about the things that were important to her. No one could change her mind about damned near anything, especially if it pertained to the elves. "And besides, her destructiveness is better used here then back home."

The Grey Warden pulled at the tip of his thick beard, trailing over the hairs that had just begun to
spring up in silver. He meditatively amended the wedge between the center split that covered his chin. "Did Cassandra threaten you? I did see her tugging you aside before we left Skyhold."

"What? No! Recommended… She recommended." Chiyo nervously tittered and waved off the accusation. The Seeker had been rather cross about Sera’s latest prank, dancing through the yard with the enraged Pentaghast on her heels. Cassandra had burned bright red as the rogue read aloud a steamy scene from a dog-eared novel pilfered from the woman’s rucksack near the training grounds. She’d been sure to give the Inquisitor an earful afterwards, Sera was there on her invitation after all and therefore she was responsible for the actions of the wild guest.

Resuming his scholarly conquest, the apostate once more held up the rubbing he’d made of the door to the crisp light of the veilfire torch. The words were hurriedly scratched with a sharp point of an arrowhead or dagger, dragging across the stone as if they had been exhaustive to imprint. "Would anyone else like to hear what this door has to tell us?" He started quietly once he had their attention.

"Emma solas him var din'an. Tel garas solasan. Melana en athim las enaste."

"I think… I think I have it." Chiyo covered her eyes as she mouthed the words Solas read, feeling each syllable with her tongue and lips. The natural, rhythmic sounds came to her ear like words from an old friend. The meanings however were often felt in her heart before they were understood, like she’d known them all her life, deep in her blood. Doing her best with the new familiarity gained from her continued studies with the Fade wandering mage, she stumbled through a translation. "Arrogance became our… end. Come not—not to a prideful place. Now let…"

"Humility grant us favor." Solas assisted her translation. He had chosen to remain near mute as they’d explored the remains of the disregarded elven site. There was a haunting sadness here, a forgotten tragedy had unfolded and been lost to all knowledge. And it was most likely at some insolvency of his doing. He would explore it in the evening when they had a chance to rest again and try to find out more about the author of the short inscription. Faces flashed in his mind, those who had been left behind when he’d departed with the readied orb in his possession.

Opening the first door of Spirit with six of the strange shards had only strengthened his suspicions of what had transpired when he’d failed. Witnessing the horrors come to life after centuries of uninterrupted slumber had certainly unnerved his companions, but it was the sight of a stone coffin that worried him most. Though there had never been a moment of worship while he’d been in power, this place was no longer just a temple. It had become a tomb as well. It seemed the last dwellers had tried to preserve themselves through the chaos by entering utherna while the magic was inadvertently breaking down. And they’d become wraiths for their efforts.

He held his breath as the Inquisitor dared to peer inside the artlessly hewn cist only to see little more than crumbling remains before she was struck by a cluster of pure energy. It pierced her aura and entered her being, but Chiyo’s alarm was not of pain but of surprise.

"You okay? That strange stuff went inside you." Sera paused, still fetching her used arrows from the disintegrated residues of the demons that had festered inside the chamber. "Gross."

Chiyo looked herself over and patted the spot on her chest where she felt the fortifying magic slip through; she certainly didn’t feel any different. Maybe a little stronger, but that could be the adrenaline from their battle. "Everything still seems in order."

"It would appear to be benevolent, perhaps a gift for your efforts against this enigma and for releasing those entities back to the Fade." Solas suggested as Chiyo considered the next door. She counted their remaining fragments that glistened in the lined box they’d traveled in. They had enough to open the door adjoining the room they were in or they could go back and fiddle with the other two
entrances to see what lay inside. It might be possible to find more pieces nearby and return before they had to journey home. There had been four shards around the intrinsic pool alone brought by the Venatori, and several more oculara were within easy traveling range. Those bizarre skulls had guided them this far, it would be a shame to go home without having learned more.

"Perhaps," said Chiyo holding up one of the small slivers she had released from the tome like encasing they'd been originally discovered in. It shimmered like mercury under her touch, a thick piece of splintered glass catching the low light of the torches in the room. "But who would have put together such a strange puzzle?"

'*If only you knew, vhenan, if only you knew.*' Solas kept the words to himself, letting the memories of both ancient dreams and his former life toy with his woeful considerations.

This was not the vision Solas had expected to find, not so close to the Temple of Pride, but the whispers of the spirit that guided him overtook his intended search. It was softly insistent, pulling him away from the ruins and deeper into the Fade. In the place where his lost friend had often stayed when it wished to speak with him called a new voice, shifting and breaking as it formed. To his surprise he found a lone being, who'd chosen the form of an elf, had claimed the reclusive wayside station. It waited for him, standing tall upon the remains of a colossal fallen tree whose thick roots had been ripped from the primordial ground of the dreamscape. Wisdom had been toppled by pain, fear and cowardice. It lay in testament to all that had been lost in the death of the previous spirit.

"So this is what you last saw." He supposed to the burgeoning spirit of wisdom, recognizing their unresolved energy immediately. Their final vision before being released back into the Fade clearly still haunted them, strong enough to have survived with it even as it lost every other part of itself and became something new. He crossed his arms as he studied the progressing form, fluctuating through a kaleidoscope of appearances and bodies. Tall, short, thick and thin. Skin of browns and ambers and ivories. Dalish faces flickered, the tattoos were immediately telling. The spirit returned to one face again and again, it was different but not entirely unfamiliar. "Tell me what troubles you, friend."

They descended from the massive trunk in a swirl of black, the last façade remaining, for now. A strong profile, a fine chin, sensible ears and long, silvery hair that seemed no heavier than starlight spun into loose knots atop her head. The dignified, discerning face of a Keeper if he'd ever seen one. They might have been mistaken for the Inquisitor at a passing glance, but a second look would have noted the distinction. He'd studied that face far too often to have been easily fooled by a reflection of her bloodline.

"Come see." The voice wavered through a broken range, sweet lilt gave way to a heavy tenor, and it beckoned him to follow a narrow path into the woods. Solas obliged and trailed behind, unconcerned as the spirit vanished and reappeared between the thickening trees. They were still too new, too freshly formed to reenact more lifelike patterns that the former spirit had perfected over centuries of watching and wading through mortal dreams. He was amazed to see them reformed at all. There must have been grave urgency his friend had tried to impart, more knowledge it wished to share before it was too late.

They continued for unmarked hours, passing several reveries of the wandering people to the warm north. He could hear the distant voices echoing through the deep night, the glow of ever distant veilfire that illuminated his serious guide was the only beacon. Solas conjectured about how old the memory he was being escorted to was; there were no indications to hint at the when, no buildings or roads, only dark forest thick with trees that remembered no years. After an eternity the cold fire ahead finally drew nearer, scorching a permanent ring on the edge of the event. The miasmatic spirit
slipped effortlessly through, taking solid form as they passed. They grew strong arms that bore a staff and powerful legs with wrapped feet. From under the eddying blackness came sturdy robes that suited the high occupation. A formidable voice broke free, urgent and unwavering.

"You will not take her!"

Other figures surrounded the Dalish woman, young and old alike. Their long fingers pointed to the shouting Keeper in anger as they made their case. Fear and mistrust thickened the air as they cried out to the leader of their roaming band. Their bodies rose, stretched garishly within the nightmare that came to life as Solas watched on from the other side of the bright ring that contained the emotionally replicated memory.

"She can't stay here, that child will kill us all! We only just escaped that fire she created."

"Demons! She calls them in her sleep and speaks their names!"

"What of our children! How will we protect them?"

"Tassali, the girl shall become an abomination for sure!"

The churning mob began to push forward, driving the dismayed woman back. The Keeper threw down her sacred wooden staff and held out her empty hands, trying to soothe her clan with goodwill and appeal to their same instincts. "Chiyo is my daughter! Flesh of my flesh. What would you have me do?" she pled, her back getting closer to the charred aravel that she defended persistently even as others made a grab for the lashed hatch.

Some demanded that she be left outside a city to be dealt with by the humans—there'd been rumor of men who could deal with dangerous young mages. They’d seen the towers built and guarded by the Chantry. Others insisted the child be left in the woods; to die from exposure or be eaten by the Trickster if such was her fate. A graven few pressed for immediate action; no heart would be lost over removing the hazardous girl themselves.

"Give me time." Tassali stood firm, her well-bred face becoming hardened stone. The terrified clan wouldn't be allowed to reach her child. The distressed mage would fight them if given no other choice; already she had cast defensive spells against them. "Please, I only ask for that."

"Till dawn." The other elders converged and permitted in agreement. "Fix this by then, or we will."

Her clan turned a harsh back on the one they'd trusted above all others, her failure to control her child had spent much of their devotion. After they'd left she opened the door to her caravan, procuring a tiny girl cowering just beyond the door. The mutely crying Keeper fiercely held the wide-eyed little one to her shoulder. Here was the scary monster that stole the security of the wanderers and made them turn against their own. A small and innocent creature who'd seen no more than four winters, five maybe if she’d always been so undersized. Her mother rocked as she wept, trying not to sink down to the ground.

Little fists wove through the mage's light grey hair. "Mamae, I'm sorry. I'll be good this time." She joined in her mother's sorrow.

"Da'len... You've done nothing wrong." The woman they’d called Tassali whispered, her words heavy with mourning but they were still strong with conviction. "I won't let them hurt you. They fear the stars that shine too brightly; it makes them question their fate."

The white-haired child sniffled into her mother's neck. "Auntie is wrong, my friends aren't demons. They help us."
“Shhh. Let’s go to bed now, there are dreams we must sing to.” She hummed to her daughter a favored lullaby, the song echoed through the dream.

"Halla, Halla, guide me where the river runs free. Owl, wise Owl, show me the oldest, tallest tree. Bear, Bear, who stole my favorite hunting bow? Wolf, clever Wolf, spare me of your woe."

Solas watched as the memory went dark and all remained still for a time till a swift sunrise livened the scene once again, casting an unforgiving red glow. The clansmen pounded on the wooden door, demanding an answer. When only silence came they opened the aravel and watched in horror as their wise Keeper descended the short stair. She bore out her child, limp and unstirring in her arms and marked with blood from tiny white head to naked toe. Tassali was on the verge of succumbing to the corruption that radiated from her body, it had already claimed her sight, leaving her fractured and blind.

"Sister!" a woman wailed, the only elf who dared approach, pushing through the terrified mass. She took the unconscious girl from her kin, struggling not to collapse from shock as everyone around her drew back.

"Keeper, what have you done?" It was the young First who spoke, a man barely free from boyhood. Tassali stripped sylvanwood rings from her fingers and silver bracelets from her wrists, letting them plummet to the shadowy earth to never be seen again.

The hollow mage displayed her slashed arms, surrendering to her clan with a command on her darkening lips. "You must fulfill the promise. I have fallen. End me before I turn."

"Ma nuvenin." The man bowed with solemn honor. He would not deny his teacher her dignity. There was little time; soon the Keeper would become an abomination, the price for striking deals with demons in the Fade. The stoutest among them trailed the saddened First, leading their ruined leader away from the group. It was the sworn duty of all Dalish to stop the corrupted before they destroyed everyone.

“Do not plant a tree for me.” Were the last words Solas heard before the dream dissolved, releasing him back into the open Fade.

Chapter End Notes

da’len: little one
Ma nuvenin: As you wish
Ar’ena sa banal’ras: From the shadows I emerge
Chapter Summary

A nightmare leaves the Inquisitor shaken and in need of a friend. Recent events surrounding the fate of her claim has left her bristled with the Inner Circle to say the least. Perhaps another, more composed mage could help her relieve some of the anger that threatens to turn her heart into a smoldering pile of ash.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

'Da'len… Da'len… why are they leaving you?—Don't they want your help?—Let us give you more, sweet child, free our flames too—We're your friends, stay-Stay-STAY!

Screams, fire, panic—everyone was running away, but she was too slow. Too burdened by the troubles of others, clinging to the same massive greatsword she'd held aloft the day she was made Inquisitor. But it was so heavy that it dragged on the dirt, leaving a deep gouge in her harried wake. She was left behind and struggling for air in the thick haze. Alone, alone—countless eyes piercing the swirling smoke. Red. The eyes were sharp and red and bearing down with glowing hunger. She couldn't hide from the stalking gaze or block her ears from the voices that pulled against her soul. Dropping the sword, she tried to bolt. A pain seared through her palm and tethered her to the spot, but when she turned to free herself Chiyo saw her hand caught in the great maw of a w—

The Inquisitor sat up in her bed, unable to stomach her tumultuous, interrupted sleep. Pieces of her dream clung to her conscious like tacky spider silks, unnerving and frantically removed as she kicked free from her tangled sheets.

It all began to dissolve as she listened to the mild, flickering wind against the window panes and the ragged breath that passed through her clenched teeth. Daring to open her eyes she looked out into the familiarity of her dim room, the darkness softened only by the lambent moon that still drifted in the late night. Chiyo was not reassured by the emptiness. There were no fanged fiends here to torment her, but nor were there any friends in her lonesome loft. She could not guess at the hour and it was certain that there was to be no more rest found in her current state.

Perhaps Varric would keep her company—if he would first and foremost accept an apology. The friendly dwarf might be found writing away on his manuscript with the fresh winds of creativity that often took him. He had deadlines to keep, but a new installment and the pestering of his handler did not always account for the long hours he kept simply staring into nothing, lost in his own distant thought. Chiyo doubted if anyone else would be up so late, but maybe one other soul that also yearned for home might stand her needful company.

['Care to chat? You seem off today.]

['Not now. I am in no mood for conversation.]

['Oh… that's fine. I'll let you be… Sorry for being a bother.]

It was a bad day followed by an equally spoiled evening. Why for the love and wisdom of Mythal,
could she not keep the edge of her tongue to herself. Pain begot pain if it could not be stifled. Her suffering didn't warrant the abuse of others, especially not her friends.

She abandoned her bed and crept down the creaky stair, tightening the sash of a comfortable robe as she traversed the pitch black steps with ease. Her feet knew every poor spot in the boards and her eyes needed no candle to guide her path. Peeking through the first doorway she looked past the dreaded throne and sought the dwarf at the end of the hall. But all was quiet and empty, not a visiting noble, scullery maid nor guard to been seen. The normally rolling fires were little more than thin embers, casting a dull glow onto the floor. From high above, the Enchanter's lights were expectedly out. The great Madame had excused herself some days prior with urgent business to attend to.

Chiyō followed the wide hall, listening for any sound as she approached another shut door. She gave a soft knock, but her inquiry was followed only by further silence.

The tired Dalish pinched the edge of her lip between her teeth. If he was sleeping, it would be rude to wake him. But Solas had always offered to discuss dreams or present issues with her before, a council of reason and understanding, always pushing her to think beyond the immediacies of her private dilemmas. He'd continuously been an open ear when she needed to take the Inquisition's weights from her chest. Unquestionably her latest nightmare warranted discussion while it was somewhat fresh in her mind. She seldom recalled many details of her more ghastly encounters and avoided prolonged trips through Fade when she could manage. Such nights always left her with roughened emotions upon waking, except it seemed, when the perplexing apostate was present.

More and more frequently they would meet in dreams, often when the day and other duties had kept them apart. She was more than content then to follow him through most of his own visions as long as they didn't traverse far into the empty Fade. She trusted him to keep her safe, something she rarely granted even to herself.

Yet the far from home Lavellan wasn't sure if she could handle discussing her unimagined vexations either, not after her atrocious manners that morning…

['Ehhh, someone is being a bit of a sour priss. Shouldn't bark at the dwarf like that, he'll never pull his head out of the stone if you do. And don't glare at me, it'll give you wrinkles. What's the matter, someone step on your toes or pull on your ears?'

'Ha! That's so fucking funny right? Because I'm an elf and we have such horribly long ears?! Tevinter's make the best jokes. I swear, oh your servants must find you absolutely charming! Shove it up your frilly arse, Dorian!'

'I…hmm… you…Hhh. And this is silk, not lace. It's distinguishing!'

The Inquisitor had many people to apologize to, once she could cool the boiling rage in her heart and stop hating the entrails of every shem that crossed her path. Poor Josephine must still be beside herself, she'd done her best after all and had used her highest judgment. The ambassador had immediately stopped the grieving Herald in her office once the meeting had completed. She'd pulled her aside to explain with the kindest words she could offer and the promise to find out the full truth of the report. There had to have been a mistake, Josephine was sure of it. Chiyō knew she shouldn't be so angry with the clever, dedicated woman, but this was one blunder that couldn't so easily be forgiven…

Chiyo nudged the hefty, hinged wood. It moved noiselessly, the door hadn’t been latched properly to her disbelief. Perhaps the late night visit had been anticipated. Solas had an odd way of predicting her comings and goings, to the point of having an extra lunch on hand at the right off-hour or a book she could study on any of the many subjects she pestered his vast knowledge of.
Practically tip-toeing, Chiyo dared pass through the entryway. The door closed slowly behind her and she eyed the dimly lit rotunda. A low, lingering fire still burned in the hearth and the enchanted lantern on the scaffolding added its uncanny color. But the solid desk she'd requisitioned on his behalf, instead of the rickety spare table that had been left behind during construction, was empty. All of the usual artifacts set aside neatly or put away in the sturdy drawers. He wasn't actively working on anything tonight. The sofa was also void of life. No mage's lost in more pleasant dreams than she'd been having here.

She frowned in the gloom, but the disappointment was not with her fellow mage. He was probably avoiding her too, like the rest of the Inner Circle, fleeing to escape her unbridled irritability before they too were lashed out at. Yelling in the great hall that morning in the middle of breakfast had not won her any favor from her dedicated companions.

The Inquisitor sighed heavily and meandered across the threshold of the large study. The tightness in her shoulders loosened as she took in the welcome coziness of his abandoned space. It was peaceful, reasonably warm and most importantly, it felt secure. The subtle smells of timeworn parchment from the library and roasting hardwoods smoothed the ragged edges of her nerves. She gazed up the curved walls, following the imagery round and round again. So much had come to pass, yet the open spaces spoke wordlessly of trials yet to be imagined. What else would Solas paint in the weeks and months to come, like their untold future, it was impossible to even guess.

Curiosity stole her shyness as she considered the short ladder across the room. Chiyo mounted the sturdy platform, pleased to see another of his habits unbothered. Solas' sketchbook remained, left where most would never know of its placement except one small elf who'd come to enjoy watching him draw from memory and nature alike. She'd seen him take a few moments when there was energy to spare, often during the easier days of straightforward travel, to fill the blank pages when they rested on the roadside or made camp early. With sprightly fingers, she turned the thick pages, stretching out on her front across the planks as the tidy images captivated her focus. Harsh mountain ranges, densely wooded valleys, crumbling, dead ruins and bustling cities alive with people stood as tribute to their explorations.

The Inquisitor couldn't help but gape as she flicked through some of the less organized renditions. There were many new drawings she hadn't seen yet. He'd certainly kept himself busy over the past few weeks. Towards the end of the book less finished work covered the pages, and amidst the mysterious doodles she was surprised to find a few sketchy portraits of herself. Caught in a warm smile or in mid-speech, leaning bored into her palm, tiny moments tucked away for the pleasure of another. Chiyo's cheeks and ears flushed. They were wonderful images created with noticeable commitment and observation to each fluid pencil stroke. From the delicate tattoo on her cheeks to the scar above her brow, all the little details were there. She set down the journal and rolled onto her back, speculating on what sentiments had adjoined his artistic inspiration.

He'd proven himself rather calculated in his regards. A silky word slipped into an innocuous conversation played with the rhythm of her heart. Maddeningly soft touches caught the edges of her hands as they walked together when they could or stole enough time to study on the couch. Brushes between their bodies that never lasted but briefly, unpredictable enough to seem by chance. Yet when she caught the look he would give her as they drew apart she knew them to be flagrantly intended. It was only in the exceedingly rare incidences they found themselves completely unaccompanied did the Inquisitor find any semblance of relief after days or weeks even of what felt like prolonged teasing. However, those secreted and leashed embraces only added to her afflictions.

The dutiful mage would catch her off guard with a kiss so painfully and curiously light that by the time she could even think to react he'd already withdrawn. Chiyo still shivered each time she recalled the one occasion when he'd leaned exceptionally close while she'd been deep into a tome and his lips
had found the firm tip of her ear, sending an immediate heat coursing through her skin. He’d chuckled with her sudden gasp as he rose to leave, allowing her to smolder quietly in her seat, unable to return or even recall what she’d been reading. Solas’ carefully applied, tender affections made the world stand still. For a brief moment, there was no infuriating training, no war, no Elder One, no world to save. It was a unique and cherished freedom they’d found together. But something more daring lurked behind the poised reserve he presented. Chiyo could feel it just beneath the smooth skin of his full lips or the gentle hand that would seek her out, and then he would politely withdraw. The glimmer in his hooded, knowing eyes and the puckish smile that always escaped before he would uncurl the ruffled edges of his resolve gave him away. It was the look of a man who knew exactly what he was doing to her, one who was relishing every unhurried minute.

Chiyo covered her conflicted face with her arms as she was tossed about the storm of emotions that plagued her so, nearly laughing through the sting of her grief. For the first time in years she didn't feel alone and ancillary standing in a room full of busy people, but only now did she realize how absolutely rootless she truly was. Their reclusive romance was going to drive her utterly senseless, and she would be more delighted if her world hadn't been so newly dumped on her head and her future dashed at her feet. Little smiles couldn't abate the pain and fresh anger that festered in her heart, and kisses would not bring back all that had been lost.

What good was love when she couldn't go home.

Could she even call herself a Lavellan anymore, if she was the last one left alive…

Solas slipped back into his room for the first time since nightfall, returning from his late wanderings without having made much headway. The spirit of wisdom he sought had vanished once more, disappearing into the deepest reaches of the Fade that even an expert like himself struggled to scope. He'd hoped of watching his friend's progress more closely, to observe their developing personality. They were very different from their last incarnation, less trusting of visitors, prone to replying charily and they'd become increasingly elusive. He suspected the undeserved trauma sustained by the mages from the Kirkwall circle the cause for their feral behavior, but their new uncanny form would have been imprinted from the nearby Inquisitor. As Cole sustained a likeness of the starved child he’d tried to help, so had Wisdom crafted their new image. Perhaps it was the power contained in the anchor that sealed the idea to the ethereal being, yet it did not account for the ravenous thirst of knowledge it had berated him for lacking. This spirit was not content to sit and discuss ideas at length. It required action and demanded answers Solas could not yet provide, and Wisdom refused to wait.

On some quiet nights he would still hear the call, howling hints telling him of things he didn't wholly understand and granting visions that were too disjointed to hold any merit. Young children being cast to the void, damaged arrows straining for their mark on a splintered bow, sacrifices willingly given at empty altars, and the latest addition: broken mirrors running red with blood between the fractures. Where was the connection in the chaos and why did it unsettle him so?

He crouched at the stone hearth to stoke the remaining coals still glowing beneath the thick ash that had built in his absence, sending renewed sparks up the flume. As he reached for a fresh log from the provided stack, a quiet noise, a faint creaking of wood startled Solas from his task. He wasn't alone. He'd been too self-absorbed to bother checking the shadows. The assumed security of Skyhold had slackened his normally well-minded diligence. He'd become too comfortable with his surroundings, having grown more accustomed to being encircled by gentler fellows, and now he was caught off-guard.

His sensitive ears took in the low sound of a deep breath and directed his attention to the tall scaffolding. A foe from up high, or another gift from the Red Jenny who took no greater pleasure
than assaulting him with all manner of foolery. With steeled nerves he approached the narrow ladder, watching for movement and waiting to be attacked at any given moment. He gripped each rough rung with careful, deliberate motions to avoid excessive sound and ascended the platform. Solas stopped once his narrowed eyes could assess the potentially hazardous space, but seeing the Inquisitor curled up on her side nearly sent him sliding back to the floor, rubbing his hands for splinters.

The hedge-mage mouthed emptily before deserting the ladder, stepping away until he felt the solid surface of his desk to brace against. The questions pooled as he bid his heart not to recklessly race, knocking at his ribs with nervous gusto. How long had she been in his room? Had she waited for him all night? What did she want? Did she even want anything? Should he wake her? Might he… Solas reined control where he could find it and banished the passing panic before it overtook him. This wasn't one of his subdued games, ones that he'd artfully planned for well in advance, but an entirely new arena. Solas reminded himself, as he drew a calming breath through his high-bridged nose, that he needn't be afraid of the small elf who'd permitted herself entry into his unoccupied room. She certainly felt relaxed enough around him to be falling asleep alone in the little refuge. Perhaps if she could be so accepting he might try the same. Wasn't this what lovers were supposed to do, to pleasantly surprise one another, to be customary within certain proximities without having to make constant formal requests?

Still coming to terms with the late night visit, he collected a tightly folded blanket from the sofa. Running his fingers through the rough knit he attempted to banish most of the audacious thoughts that jostled his equilibrium and finally braved the ladder once again. This was no different than all their weeks in the field and it would be crass to consider anything otherwise. He'd had no qualms bunking beside her then. This was no perfumed invitation to her bedroom and her mere presence required no action of any kind of his part. But the knot in his throat refused to settle. They hadn't spent the night together—just the two of them, since that fated trip to the Hinterlands.

Stepping warily as he reached the dreaded summit, Solas carefully spread out his only blanket, pulling it up to her shoulder. He'd seldom seen anyone sleeping so soundly, not since the Breach had first opened. Many had taken to sleeping with one eye open, always somewhat guarded in even repose and waiting for the next disaster. Chiyo was not free from the shared paranoia, even guarded by the strongest in her band she would often alert to the changes in the wind or noises just beyond their tent. When the nights were uncommonly calm the Inquisitor often buried herself deep in her bedroll when they traveled, stirring only when she seemed at odds with her private reveries. He did not wholly concern himself with them, knowing all too well the effects of miserable visions. Her world had grown dark and troubled, the stress always following her every move, it was not surprising that her dreams would reflect that taxing state. She was perfectly capable of handling her demons on her own, without his expertise and guidance. She didn't need him, at least, not like she had during their terrifying first meeting in the dark prisons of Haven.

Chiyo would never know it, but he'd adamantly fought for her life before he'd ever even known her name.

Long before his feelings had started to cloud his judgement, after she'd first fallen out of the Breach —Solas had been there to guard that fitful sleep, watching a young elf in protested bonds struggling to remain alive as dreadful magic vexed her from within. Those were not days Solas looked back to with any fondness, where he'd spent his hours and energy trying to pull her up from the dark pit the mark was dragging her into. Try as he might to reach her mind, she'd remained out of his grasp. Her murmurs of unspeakable nightmares she couldn't wake from had been disconcerting and Solas had been left mostly helpless to do anything but give her a path to follow back.

Where had her dreams stolen her away to this night, and were they bringing her more peace than his
own had? Solas still hadn't been able to tell her about what he had witnessed while dreaming near the Oasis; there was already so much she had to balance as the Inquisitor. Even now further trouble brewed in all corners of their crumbling world and everyone turned to her more and more to save them. Tallying additional concern to her already harried accounts threatened to topple the scales. The stress of her ordeals was already long apparent, it hung heavily about her person. What cruelty would it be to add to her misery. How could he even begin to tell her?

'Oh, Inquisitor, while you have a moment. I saw your mother essentially kill herself on your behalf because your birth-clan thought you would become a demon and massacre them all?’ He had no answers for Chiyo as to why she’d been born such an upsetting child or how to release her true potentials. It would not be an easy feat, but eventually there may be reason enough to try. The Inquisition couldn't expect her to face their greatest foe during the darkest hour of Thedas' history so hindered. To take on Corypheus as she was would more than likely result in horrendous failure, and if she fell to the blasphemous Magister they would all topple with her.

Solas considered leaving her be, though he doubted he'd find respite on the empty sofa below. He carefully removed his sketchbook from under her outstretched hand, gingerly holding up her curled fingers to keep them from smearing the edges of the drawing she'd last been looking upon. Perhaps her evening wasn't benevolent after all. In the dying light he could see the dark smudges beneath her lashes that reminded him far too much of the ones he carried beneath his own tired eyes.

All day something had been bothering Chiyo. A blind and bumbling fool couldn't have missed the disquiet that consumed her after the regular morning meeting with the Advisors. It seemed that more than deciding what to do about the rising problem with the Orlesian Wardens in the Adamant fortress had transpired over those short hours. But he'd had no chance to speak with the Inquisitor about the incident. Nor had anyone else, considering how she'd snarled at Dorian upon leaving the castle, heading for the stables. Though to her discourteous credit, the snarky mage had been ill-timed with his usual antics. The baffled Tevinter hadn't even bothered following her to the courtyard, choosing to stand and stare at an equally confused dwarf who'd also tried to question the agitated elf. The pair had turned to accuse Solas for the Inquisitor's fouled mood, but he too had been left entirely out of the know on the matter and was free from such guilt.

Solas had watched her go from his doorway. She was clearly in no disposition suited for public talks or one of his idle walks as he'd been prepared to offer.

"Vhenan…” He whispered as her fingers tightened in his palm, it was the only pull he needed not to leave. It was almost too easy to join her on the wooden boards, though he left ample space between them. It was sinfully simple to extinguish the lantern of veilfire and usher forth the quiet night, shrouding them in heavy darkness. He considered the bubbling feeling inside his chest rather peculiar as he dared close his eyes. Solas would ask of her troubles in a few lethargic minutes once he found her in the Fade, and if she permitted, some of the other questions that had kept him awake on many a late evening.

"Chiyo?” Solas called as he entered her dream. They were far in the north tonight, among woods and plains he did not often traverse for their emptiness. The populations were so sparse and unsettled between the borders of Tevinter and Antiva that few dreams were strong enough to remain whole in the impressionable Fade. Solas listened for the return of her voice, the Inquisitor's energy a distinct beacon, but he only heard a faint scraping of rock and earth, clicking behind the scrubby timbers.

He followed the sound into a loose glen, the noise echoing softly through the trees. Soon Solas spotted the dreamer he sought, bent down in the open center and toiling in the thin light. She was busy and gave him no notice, focused entirely on stacking a short ring of cobbled stones about a
freshly planted sapling. Dirt smeared her hands and peppered her bare knees. Chiyo was loosely dressed, appropriate for the ephemeral, intense northern summer that she’d chosen to remember for this particular vision. Beyond her construction, there was little of note to mark the special quality it had for the Dalish elf; perhaps it was no more than a quiet, peaceful reach generalized from her youth.

"What do you plant this for, is there a memory to be remembered here?" he asked, handing her another stone from an assorted gathering scattered across the open ground.

She shook her head, continuing her solemn efforts. "Not for what, for whom. I don't believe I will get the chance to otherwise. The garden of Skyhold isn't an appropriate place to bury this. I don't think…" Chiyo waned, her dark eyes never leaving the churned earth. She moved away from Solas, to the far-side of the small ring, correcting some fault unnoticed by the other mage. "I've known this for a while, you probably see it too. Duty shall keep me tied here, a promise was made and I will see it through. But whether I succeed or fail the Inquisition... I will never get a chance to go home. Not that there is anything left there now. They asked for my help and I let them all down. Without even lifting a finger I managed to get them all killed."

Solas froze, clutching a second rock tightly in his fingers. He now realized the full significance of the freshly planted tree. "The reports from Wycombe came back."

She'd only ever mentioned it to him fleetingly as she waited, refusing to relive the terrifying initial status of clan Lavellan they'd received several weeks ago. Settling in an unoccupied valley near the northern city, the clan had initially expressed much concern over Chiyo's new occupation, further contacts gave wind of their developing problem with bandits. The advisors had deliberated for days as they decided what aid they could afford to give so soon after the tragic loss of Haven. Josephine had volunteered her influence and connections, electing to seek the aid of those already in the distant area.

"They did. The findings were presented at the war table this morning. Written in the hand of Duke Antoine himself. Our actions were met too late. I should have been more aggressive about this, but I thought they were strong enough to defend themselves better." The young elf added more soil to the tiny tree's base, her hands worked slowly, burying the painful and distracting emotions beneath the roots. Her salty tears would not water this tribute. She'd already cried more than her homesick share when word from her Keeper had reached her before they'd abandoned Haven and more still with the knowledge of the trouble they were in. But the truth was undeniable now, there was no more clinging to naïve hope that all would turn out well in the end. She would not settle for letters and accounts however, she wanted more proof and had already arranged for scouts to watch the woods. This time, ones unaffiliated with the official Inquisition and at the expense of her own coin. "The Lavellans are truly gone. No one managed to escape as far as anyone can find and all contact has gone quiet. My clan is dead and I am the last one to hold their memories."

Solas joined Chiyo down by the rocky circle, her stable, hard mask so thin and brittle it would break with merest efforts. And not by any doing of his, she did not wear the falseness well and her own indomitable soul would not be so cheaply contained. But what exactly lay beneath the discrete grieving. And would he dare embolden it. "My condolences, they were important to you."

"It wasn't just them though," Ire touched her voice, but she attempted to inture it as well. Chiyo exhaled heavily, considering all the lives that had been cut catastrophically short and the loss for her people as a whole. Few clans were like the Lavellans, but their openness had ultimately led to their downfall. "The whole area is under stress. A handful of elves that we know of were able to sneak into the city, but even the alienage is feeling added pressures from the humans there. Too many rifts making everyone wary, too much upheaval to risk movement. There are hundreds and hundreds of
elves trapped behind those walls now with nowhere to go. If they leave the city they'll be hunted
don the roads, if they stay they risk dying in their beds."

"How many more generations do we have left before we are no more..." Her frustration flared and
she chuckled a stone that refused to lie correctly with the others. "If only... if only... You told me
before, how things used to be. Before the humans took power over the elves, captured them and
made them slaves. A world of crystal spires and spells that took years to cast. When we were one
People, not scattered and separated."

"The days before most of the magic was broken. Before men brought their animosity. When the
essence of the Fade freely came and went with the breeze." Said Solas as he added handfuls of loose,
crumbly earth to the low mound, burying his own useless remembrances that would serve him little
now. "Those days are lost to us, Lethallan. You assume the elven people weren't already in the
process of self-destruction by the time the first man knocked on their gates. The Fade has taught me
such, even that old strength could not save them."

"Doomed from the start then." Chiyo rose, sweeping away the crumbly earth that stuck to her
exposed skin. "Perhaps we should just accept our fate and return to the Beyond. It would be easier,
wouldn't it? To just give up while we can choose to before we are finally forced." She walked away
from the glen with no intention of ever returning to this corner of her dreamscape again. Already it
was changing and dwindling away, the clarity lost with her altered purpose.

Solas was surprised by her despondency and near callousness. But he chose to encourage the angry
embers that lingered in the Inquisitor's heart as he pursued Chiyo out of the dying glen and back
towards the amorphous plain. "You are dispirited by this single loss? Is there no fight left in any of
you? No wonder the elves have fallen so low. They shall follow the paths that take them straight to
slaughter, forever subjugated or running away." His provoking words were laced with chilled
mockery.

She turned hotly on her heels, breaking the turf beneath them. The suppressed flame immediately
caught and burned its way to the surface. Chiyo did not oft-rise to proper anger, but the old gods
themselves couldn't halt her once she'd crossed that sharp, unforgiving edge. "You think this is what
they want? To die like animals, clinging to ruined temples and shivering in shacks? Do not toy with
me. I know you care little for the people." Pride swelled her thin chest and forged a high-held chin of
cutting iron. She stared narrowly at Solas through red-ringed eyes, daring him to test her for another
insult against her anguish.

"I think they have forgotten what it means to be free. They've accepted their lot too readily." He
challenged dispassionately, snubbing her idea of suffocating alone in buried pity. The more veteran
elf who'd lived through unimaginably difficult trials would pull the Inquisitor from the depths of her
despair kicking and screaming if given no other option.

"Or was one rebellion all they had in them, oh blessed Herald of Andraste?"

Solas did not flinch as he revolved; her scorching cast fire only just missed him. Instead he casually
brushed the singed fibers from his sleeve with an unperturbed wave of his hand. His turning eyes
gleamed with arrogance and mischief behind his cold veneer. Like venom from a wound, her hate
would be drawn out and he would show her just how effective it was as a weapon. The aloofly
frowning mage was curious as to how dangerous the petite elf could still be, if there were any
monster left in her to warrant the frightful ousting from an entire clan. Or had that too been tamed.
He still had his fangs and claws, however weathered and battered with the years, but did she have
enough bite to match him.

"I detest that title." She hissed through a clenched jaw, awaiting the apostate to contest her anew. Her
magic was stronger here, it came so naturally that she didn't need to consider her movements or
regulate her usage. Her emotions came with similar freedom, near impossible to tranquilize or stuff
behind a plucky smile.

He baited once more, ready for whatever would come next. "Why, because a human woman actually
spearheaded and achieved a real victory for the elves? Or do you not like being in such a large
shadow, da'len?"

It was an impressive eruption, one that he combated with well-timed ice. It burned away at the grass
and dried out the air, filling it with smoke and sparks. But he had to be careful, so very careful,
before they attracted too much attention from the nearby spirits. He must keep this bout brief, even if
he took a secret liking and a stirring pleasure to the rather stimulating, unseen facet of her nature. It
was practically effortless here, to slip into his former self and draw on the potential of others. The old
Wolf was in his element, but so what the Inquisitor, whether or not she accepted the liberating state.

"Why does everyone shit on the elves?! The Orlesians make us into invisible serving pets! The
Tevinter Imperium still keeps slaves in droves! The Circle of Magi believes and proclaims that we
are murdering our own children! The Chantry wants to save our damned souls by flattening our ears
and erasing our faith! And the elves… we hate ourselves more than all the others combined." She
spat out each name and insurance as spoiled vinegar as her undirected and lashing flames grew.
Days, months, years of resentment and oppression came to a sudden head, so ready to be lanced and
set loose upon the world that had wronged her.

"Who gave them the right to such mistreatments? And now you…” Solas could feel the heat of her
anger upon him, bringing a glistening sweat to his skin. "You're doing it too."

"Come now, this is not the fire you need." He blocked her brutal flames with a high, frozen wall,
scoffing as she melted it down into an evaporating puddle. He only defended himself while tracing
slow, precise circles, letting her expend her frustrations with whatever intensity she required.

"What would you know of fire while pretending to be so cold? What have you done outside of
critiquing from a far?” Chiyo flowed through the weaponless dance, par for par they neutralized each
other. "You watch but do not act! Even now you hide and stay away from what is right in front of
you!"

Solas continued to goad, his more primal appetite whetted and exhilarated by her animating spirit. It
made his heart sing loud beneath his artfully maintained composure. "And what were you doing to
help the elves before being sent to scout the Conclave? Hoarding fractured knowledge in the wilds.
Studying half-dead arts with inaccurate information. Hiding the meager scope of ancient language
from your own kin. Would you have rallied your scattered brethren when the Breach finally came or
would you have packed up and fled as far as you could to buy a few more hours of miserable
existence?"

"I don't know! Those days were stolen from me." Chiyo's mind whirled as she recalled a life she
could never get back, one she would most likely not survive long enough to reclaim. She would
certainly not be allowed to live quietly with her people, let alone govern a clan as Keeper,
considering her dangerous entanglements with humankind. Her attacks escalated, urging him to fight
back with each new and potent spell.

"Then what shall you do for them now? You have already felled countless enemies for the
Inquisition, but what would you do for your own kind? If offered the power to set every last one of
them free, would you take it? Tell me, I am curious as to how you personally would save the elven
race where others have failed innumerable times before.” Solas evaded the clash with only barriers
and shields. He remained aware of the Fade, watching for signs of trouble. Already the sky was
darkening, her violent magic drawing unwelcome attention. Even now, red eyes lingered on the border of her dream, but they did not give Solas any worry.

"I would take such power if it actually helped! But at what cost, Solas? Would such might given to one single person end the struggle and pain of the countless? Would destroying everyone who opposed us give them back their dignity? How strong would I have to become to keep a million elves safe? I want them to fight for themselves, not to be rescued like lost children!" Chiyo retorted, struggling to find the bounds to the anger spilling from her core. Even now it burned at her skin leaving it red and sore as it escaped her control. Yet Solas' cold evasions hurt her far more than the blisters she was giving herself. He was playing with her and calling her out on the emotions even she knew to be terribly childish, but they were hers and she would not feel guilty for claiming them now. "Stop holding back!"

"I have nothing that needs to be contained," He nearly laughed, low and slighting. "Fighting would not benefit me. I have no quarrel with you."

The Inquisitor struck out with sweltering fists, demanding his action be given. "You taunt me like a coward skirting from reach. Do you always play such cold, spiteful games?"

"You think I have always been so withdrawn? I almost wish you'd borne witness to my impudent youth. My blood also once ran hot and spirit overly cocky." Solas skillfully caught her by the wrist and tried to twist away her balance. He drew her near, straining to keep her still and from striking him. He pointed to the small, deep scar above his brow with his available hand before he had to block her other flame-enveloped arm. "But I learned my lessons the hard way. Yours have come much more easily and I will not let you suffer as I had to."

Chiyo revolved within his grasp and turned the tables on Solas, weakening the bend in his legs and catching his ankle with the hook of her strong, bare foot. With a yank she sent him mercilessly to the ground, but the hard slam wasn't the only thing to leave him stunned and breathless. The Inquisitor followed him down to the charred earth, her wrist still seized but she furiously pinned him with her knees. Her free hand pulled roughly at his collar and she glared unbrokenly, redden face inches from his even as she shook from her immense efforts.

Solas gazed up into the fiery eyes that had already set him ablaze. Here was the wild one within, a spirit that yearned for revolution as much as himself. But she did not know how to attain such a desired future, something that would be amended with time and consideration to all of her new political gains. "Your remorse will eat you alive if you allow it to. It will burn through that beautiful heart and leave you spent." He warned her softly, only wishing to spare her the pain he'd carried most of his long life.

"You don't care. When have you ever known such terrible guilt?" Her words fractured with the muted brush of his kindness. Already Chiyo was beginning to un-ruffle as her quarrelsome opponent acquiesced, his sincerity smoothing over the anger that had tangled her so. The loss of control and accusations shamed her, but she felt these raw emotions openly instead of being bottled up as she had always done before. Regret loosened her disgraceful tears, stinging as she tried not to let them fall onto the welcoming cheeks of the mage below her. "Their deaths are because of my failures. Mine. I am I… am I not allowed to mourn? Ma halani, Solas… ma halani mara eolas'isala enasalin."

"You are wrong. I want you to grieve, but not by wallowing in the dirt or striking out at your companions." Solas relaxed and released her arm. He had her full attention and had seen more than enough of her inner—and outer—fire for one day. "I see a woman who could change everything for her people if she truly wanted too, who could spin that blaze on enemies and reduce them to
smoldering ash. With a word you could turn the armies of the Inquisition to your favor but you
would never abuse that command. I see a lost version of myself in you, Chiyo. A self I could have
guided with what I know now. I care very much, what little I have to offer is yours. You have but to
ask.”

"I'm just one person though." Her incurred rage had temporarily subsided. There was no more need
for such anger. Not here, not today, not when other's deserved it far more than the man beneath her
slackening fists. The suffocating doubts and fears of failure drew near once again, but she banished
the notions swiftly as she fought for each rough, panting breath.

Solas reached up and took the side of her dampened face into his palm. He slid his fingers up her
warm cheek, across the tattooed temple and over the fine ridges of a pointed ear, skimming each tiny,
silver ring set into the tapered edge. "And you are enough."

Chiyo burned anew, her eyes still sore and wet, but not with animosity as the tips of their noses
brushed. The fresh flame was indulgent, honeyed, and much more at ease than the inferno that'd
passed on like wildfire.

"You're an ass." Chiyo whispered with a weak smile restored, his teasing lips staying just out of her
reach. His tender words had consoled her sorrow-soaked heart, reminding her of greater purpose
once again. If there was anyone that could find a way to bring peace to the fragmented and drifting
elves, the Inquisitor stood within the political nexus to make it happen. She'd already made great
headway with installing Briala in Orlais. If she played the game and directed the power given to her
well enough, she might stand a chance at bringing about the end of a centuries long nightmare for her
people.

"I've been called much worse." He assured before surrendering to her ardent affections while there
was still time to linger. Solas could keep the encroaching demons at bay for a moment more, but it
would be dangerous to remain here in the Fade any longer with the energies so stirred.

Ambassador Montilyet,

I regret that my help for your Dalish allies came too late to be of use. By the time my forces arrived
in the area, the Dalish had been scattered or killed, and there seems little left of their clan.

I understand your Inquisitor must be feeling the loss of her clan. Please accept these gifts and my
promise of future help whenever it is necessary.

Yours,

Duke Antoine of Wycome
Solas? ...

Came to share
what's so important,
that you couldn't wait to draw it
instead of helping us set up camp first?
Chapter End Notes

*Ma halani, Solas… ma halani mara eolas'isala enasalin: help me, Solas, help me find the knowledge I need for victory
Heaven Help Us

Chapter Summary

The Lavellans are presumed dead. The Grey Wardens have lost their minds in trying to stop the next Blight. And a good man is left behind after the Inquisitor faces her fear in the physical Fade with the help of a nearly forgotten song.

The Inquisitor sat upon the lone throne of Skyhold. High backed and severe there was no room for softness or comfort, even for a tiny elf, on a massive seat emblazoned with razor-sharp blades. The great hall was somberly still considering their Herald had just resumed their ranks, returning on the side of triumph no less, after a lengthy journey across Orlais. She'd been gone for weeks with her company and without much word of progress to foretell their fate. Such returns would have been customarily accompanied by some form of unstructured celebration; a hearty feast of whatever the cook had extra on hand for indulgence sake, a rowdy dance in the tavern to liven the late hours, but there was to be no applause today.

Only confused stares fell upon the Herald and whispers of misdirection behind concealing hands. Chiyo cared not for their speculative words or the adverse contingencies they held against her latest decisions.

They weren’t there. They hadn’t seen. But she had and no amount of wishing or hiding from the truth of the events could undo either.

The many onlookers remained unobtrusive as they waited for the public trial to begin at the appointed and reached hour of midday. No one moved from their stations, all but for the three solemn people that slowly advanced to the seat of judgment that would also serve as jury—and possibly execution. The stifled stride of hefty boots on stone and the dull clink of irons echoed off the soaring walls and vaulted ceiling. Chiyo dejectedly watched the approaching feet of the guards and their prisoner, seeing nothing more than stout and sturdy legs. The faces she avoided, because she already knew the grave looks they would bear. Her eyes were too sore to rise far from the gray floor, with a head so heavy she held it in her tremoring hand. There was a low and muting buzzing in Chiyo's ears, a dwindling leftover from their frightening trip.

She’d barely slept since they’d left the Adamant fortress; slipping into dreams and entering the Fade was the farthest thing from a restful respite. A dragon’s nest would have felt safer than her own bed, hatching eggs preferable to pillows and fiery breath more comforting than winter quilts.

Her heart, or what was left of the pieces she'd managed to affix together, lurched at the sight of a forlorn human woman in heavy shackles taking her place before the throne. She didn’t struggle in her bonds. The fallen soldier, who’d once commanded esteem and wide respect, was in full acceptance of her fate and only awaited public declaration of her folly.

"Ser Ruth, one of the Senior Wardens of the Order." Josephine tallied her orderly documents. "Josephine tallied her orderly documents. Turning to the Inquisitor she commenced the hearing with little pageantry and even less satisfaction in the circumstances. "She was one of the many who slit the throat of another to bind a demon. She does not contest this. In fact she surrendered to us. She requests no mercy; she wants the public justice of the headman’s axe."
"You're very serious about this, Ser Ruth." Chiyo forced her weary head up, to look the Warden in the eye with as much dignity as could be spared. Even if her posture failed to fully follow the steeling of her low spirit, she was still the Inquisitor and it was expected that she act the part. Though that heavy title was too much for her narrow shoulders now, she could drag it along just a bit further. "Is more death what you really want? Have I not done enough to your order to fulfill the need for punishment…"

The Warden hesitated, trying to stand proud within her ultimate disgrace. "There is no excuse for my actions. I murdered another of the order. That blood marks me more than the blight ever could."

"With the exception of their actions while thralls of Corypheus, many treaties allow Wardens any extreme, if it opposes the blight." Josephine added to the Inquisitor's considerations. She had scoured as many documents as could be found for precedence of the reprehensible engagements the Orlesian Wardens had implemented. All manner of deed had been pardoned, but none were comparable to the blind horror that had become of the once revered sect.

"I can't do it! I can't use the greater good to justify my crimes, as if it would create a future I could be a part of!" Ruth would not stand for the leniency the Inquisition had tried to offer. She'd already rejected the proposal of exile and would not been joining her fellow officers away from Orlais. "It is wrong that this broke me. I've done worse with full sanction. I can do nothing except be an example of the cost."

"The greater good?" Chiyo began to titter, low and harsh before once again burying her face in her thin hands as she shook with the audible release. The empty laugh reverberated off of the thick walls in ailing waves. She was not ready for this, everything felt much too raw and bruised after their latest ordeal. In all her life she'd never once expected to be a part of such a brutal onslaught, or to have ended up within a living nightmare. To be the one to have to choose between who would live… and die in order to save her own worthless skin.

"Then I am also guilty." She mumbled through her clenching fingers as the ringing in her ears grew louder, blurring her senses into a dense, impermeable numbness. Chiyo walled herself in and heard little more as she remained motionless on the throne; the nightmare returned. It mattered not that she was awake now as it all flooded back to her, soaking around her mind as a quagmire.

"I left a better man to die…" Chiyo groaned thinly, her eyes and ears deadened to those around her.

"Inquisitor?"

"We still need your verdict."

"Inquis…"
Gods, but for himself."

"But then you came. You disrupted his plan and the orb bestowed the Anchor on you instead." Divine Justinia returned her impassive gaze and limited comforts to Chiyo who was still trying to make sense of her own recollected memories. They stitched themselves back into her hole-riddled perceptions, the raw emotion of each still just as fresh and sharp as when they’d first been felt in the Temple of Sacred Ashes.

"So this was what, an accident? Some ricochet in the middle of a fight?" The Inquisitor was staring back, dumbfounded as the pieces fell into place. She’d heard shouting as she wandered the empty halls, all the attention of the visitors and guards focused elsewhere as the debates tarried on. Her whole world had changed the moment she pushed upon those doors and saw the Divine in the grasp of senseless Grey Wardens and the monster who called himself Corypheus. They’d been draining her spirit, calling whatever holy essence Justinia contained into the orb. And then she’d reflexively reached for that ball as it rolled her way… everything was still black after that. She almost wanted to keep it that way, to avoid the hints of horror that still tormented her as she drifted into sleep, just beyond her recognition.

"Then this was not the will of your Maker, or Andraste. They weren't involved in any of this. I'm just… I'm just a mistake…" Chiyo held out her hand to view the glowing, green mark before her fingers balled over it, covering the treacherous Anchor. A coincidence, that’s all any of this was. She was never meant to lead an army, to head a revolution, to stop a civil war, to save the very world that hated her on sight alone. "Yet another place in this world I wasn't supposed to be a part of because I was meant to be… I am worse than a false Herald… I’m a joke…"

It was Varric who reached out to her, placing his stocky hand over her marked fist and giving it a solid, neutralizing pat. He showed no alarm as he brushed so near dangerous rift that pierced her palm, a hole that held the power to split open the barriers between their worlds. "You know that's not true, no one here doubts whatever fates brought us together. You were born for this kind of crap, bred for it even. Just a run of bad luck, like the rest of us. It could be a worse hand, but the game’s not over yet."

"Please, just don't start calling it divine bad luck…” She almost smiled, and would have done so fully if they weren't in such dire straits. Surrounded by such crumbling chaos and thin odds for hope, Chiyo would save her joy for when they freed themselves of the latest mess she’d gotten them into. "And no bets, not here. Because I know I’ll lose.”

"If you do not believe that the Maker made this world and everything in it, including your accident then nothing has changed." The Divine was unmoved by the Inquisitor’s un-devoted indications or collapsing mental state. "Your path is unaltered and cannot be undone by your lack of faith. But if you wish to escape this Nightmare you must take back all that it took from you."

"Make haste," The spirit warned before she disappeared, vanishing into the stagnant darkness that threatened to swallow them whole. "I will prepare the way ahead. He knows that you are here now and you still have much to recover."

Chiyo continued onwards, they could not linger even as Hawke and Stroud began to argue, bickering over the newly revealed truth. The entire unfortunate party had witnessed exactly what the Grey Wardens had done to the Divine. It was troubling, even if the Wardens had been under the control of Corypheus, to think that they would have ever tried to align with the agents of a madman before he'd taken hold of their minds. It was becoming clear exactly how dangerous these militants were to themselves and the rest of Thedas. They had gone too far to stay ahead of the Blight, a more than worthy cause, but it had nearly cost them the lives and freedoms of all who’d survived the
tumultuous and grieved ages. Just as the Templars had been corrupted by their need for stronger lyrium and greater power, as the Mages had torn themselves apart at the seams in the name of independence, so had another ancient order fallen under its own misdirected, hierarchal cannibalism.

And now they were here, six living souls trapped physically inside of the Fade because of another little accident, another great plan gone awry. In wake of the Archdemon that destroyed the bridge Varric, Dorian and Solas had all tumbled into the rift Chiyo had torn open in a mad panic to save their endangered lives. This version of the world was unnerving, disorienting, and terrifying, with their resident Fade expert showing the only contrast in emotion. Solas was utterly fascinated, everything was so different and unknown, though he would have never openly suggested such a dangerous place for their exploration. His proficiency provided little in regards to security, but at least it gave them small insight to their enemy and surroundings.

The Inquisitor had already apologized profusely to her companions and repeated herself as they fought their way through the tangible nightmare. Their trip to the Western Approach had been her idea; a chance to amend poor behaviors and lashing out during rougher bouts in her disposition with the thrill of adventure. For Varric, to spend time with his treasured friend Hawke. For Dorian, to have a chance at destroying a few Venatori agents along the way. For Solas, it was the opportunity to find new dreams in the far-flung waysides they would pass by.

Her latest magical mishap was certain to get them all killed if they couldn't find a way out of the Fade. But hearing everyone's worst fears made the Inquisitor wish they'd been left to fight the damned, corrupted dragon instead. It would have been easier and far less painful in comparison to the small and seemingly endless hell they had to wade through. It was the graveyard that struck Chiyo the deepest. Each of her companions' souls lay bare on plain stone; she saw pieces of them that should have been kept private, but from what she knew of each none were entirely surprising. Most were comprehensible: Despair, Temptation, Helplessness, Madness. Such things as many people would reasonably fear at any given point in their lives. Even her own, Failure, was to be expected.

But Solas' stone was one of the saddest, and the one she thought to understand the best. She had never probed him for how long he had wandered, the stretch of the years he had between having friends or trust in others, or why he had renounced the people he must have come from. She wouldn't press for the details if he didn't want them known, no matter how apparent they often were. Little bits would slip through in their talks, hints of a terrible mistake, tidbits of the village from his youth, words of his willful adolescence and strong-minded adulthood. Solas told many a story, going into detail of dreams and forgotten histories lost to time, but the rarest seemed to be of his own tale. A pain sat in his chest like a stone, too big to be a pearl as Cole would have said; one that wouldn't be shook loose with gentle cajoling.

Sweet Cole, if there was anything to be thankful for it was that she'd asked him to stay in Skyhold. Not that she wanted any of her company to suffer; those currently among her were at least stable and experienced in handling such stresses. What kind of shock would being forced back into the Fade have inflicted been upon the troubled, empathetic spirit?

With more of Chiyo's memories returned to her, of the Divine being the one to allow her escape through the Breach, the fighting only continued both within the party and all around them. Demons, spiders, accusing the Wardens, the incitement of the mage rebellion and association with man guilty of blowing up a Chantry, all exhausted the party with neither Stroud nor Hawke backing down until they'd practically been ordered to. The Inquisitor did not wholly blame the Grey Wardens for most of their crimes, their lunacy was almost comprehensible, but they had grown far too dangerous to be left unchecked and unanswerable.
"That's a big one!" Hawke shouted as they approached a massive Pride demon that blocked their path. The beast wasted no time in lashing out at the lost party, joined by a host of smaller demons. Power undiluted as it would have been in the real world, it scattered the group, burning through the shields the mages desperately cast.

Chiyo ran, trying to take higher ground, she drew the minor demons with her calculated retreat. The Inquisitor's lightning and unrestrained flame would make quick work of them, sparing her companions the hindrance so they might better focus their efforts on the bigger challenge ahead.

The looming Nightmare however was not content to remain silent as the mortals slowly wore down another of his horrendous pets. "You have me shaking Inquisitor. What a powerful mage you have become, such a fine specimen must be the absolute pride of her clan…" His toxic words reverberated through the fragmented, cavernous Fade.

"Shut up!" Chiyo barked to the disembodied voice, shocking her way through the fiends as they flocked to her rocky perch. On all sides she was surrounded, but none of the grotesque minions could get close enough to hurt her as they were forced back again and again with each rolling wave of her strength. She’d pulled all the brakes, letting the magic dictate each of her moves and come forth without being called. It answered, but it was barely under her control, slipping and lashing were it wasn’t meant. It kept away from her companions, though they had incentive enough to not lose focus on the task at hand. Pride was proving a tough adversary, even in the face of strong mages and stronger warriors. Hawke and Stroud worked in tandem, their blades mincing through the thick limbs of their foes.

"Don't listen! He's full of shit!" Dorian warned as he cast another barrier around those still near and grounded, Varric taking aim nearby to his oldest friend, keeping the stragglers off of the rest of the busy, frenzied party.

"Or perhaps that's why they didn't need you anymore. Expendable. Weak. Is that why your Keeper sent you out, to risk capture or death over shreds of pointless information? Your lack of control must have been their bane, but they were stuck with you as their First. You would have gotten them killed yourself even if you stayed." The derisive aspect laughed as his monsters started physically altering themselves to match the acidic pain he desired to inflict, becoming a personalized torture for the mage they surrounded. Their bodies stretched and grew familiar, assuming sickly humanoid features as they changed, adopting long ears and swathes of braided hair.

Chiyo's frantically growing efforts doubled as she burned her way through the morphing creatures till only the stoutest remained, its shape solidifying into a distorted rendition of an elf she'd known longer than any other. Ragged hair hung in damp dishevelment over pointed ears, clothes torn to bloodied rags, eyes utterly void of their once known temperateness and shadowy beneath the haunting, glowing marks of her intricate blood writing. The dark, false Lavellan Keeper approached and Chiyo froze, her hands shaking around her brandished staff.

"I told you…" hissed the fabricated Deshanna, a dark and sinister imitation of the formerly celebrated and renowned leader of a progressive clan. But the glaring image was more than enough to shake the Inquisitor's already rocky state of mind. "I told you to listen and to return, why did you not? You killed us all by siding with the shemlens. Did they show you more kindness than we did? I took you in and made something of that bothersome magic and this is how you repay me."

"Go away!" The Inquisitor dropped her flickering weapon to cover her ears as the air filled with a cacophony of shrieks, of screams, of shouts from nightmares long past. But she could not tear her eyes from the face and figure she wanted to force from memory and dream alike. At her feet lay the motionless bodies of those she had come to love as friend and family alike. They’d taken in a
stranger from an unrelated band when they could have simply let her be, to let her become someone else’s problem. But they’d accepted a new mage into their ranks, letting her prove herself over the years and allowing her to remain at the conclusion of the next Arlathvhen when customarily she could have been ousted and left to find another group. "I tried! I tried to help, I swear!"

Solas was caught far across the battlefield, the massive demon stood squarely in his path. There was no reaching her until the hulking beast was slain. "Inquisitor! Whatever you see, it is not real! Things are not as they seem!" He called out to the failing elf, releasing the icy blizzard stored within.

"Useless girl; why not sing with me… what was the song your mother taught you, the one you were always humming when we took you in." The demon reached out for Chiyo with atrociously long, gnarly hands, driving her back in stumbling urgency to the cold stone walls that entombed them. The words were coarse and grating, coming from the gaping mouth of the soulless creature. The snaking fingers began to twist around the Herald’s throat; weaving into the black stone she’d trapped herself against like ghastly roots. "Halla, halla, guide me where the river runs free. Owl, wise Owl, show me the oldest, tallest tree."

"Stop it! No more!" Begged Chiyo raspingly, the dwindling air in her chest compressing so tight she thought her ribs might explode inwards as she cowered away from the lengthening woman. She had to breathe, to get away, but there was nowhere to run to escape the nightmare. Everything blurred, her vision spotted with stars of blackness. The once ceaseless fight in her was strangled with cords of guilt. But it wasn’t dead, not yet.

"Push it down, push down the fear. Be better, be stronger! You can do this!" She futilely told herself again and again, clawing at the rough ties around her neck. This was not the horrendous version of a once wise and caring Keeper to be cherished. She didn't want to die remembering such horror with her mother's gentle song, corrupted from its intended purpose, on its cracked, bleeding lips. It was supposed to be a song of dreams, meant for ease of sleep and to give protection from atrocities—real or imagined. But if that were true, why did it not work on the demon using them now.

"Chiyo!" Who called out to her? Why was the voice so faded and far away…

The monster did not falter, her mouth grew wide and fanged, and a hungry tongue flickered behind the overly stretched skin that tore under the strain. "Bear, bear, who stole my favorite hunting bow? Wolf, clever Wolf, spare me of your woe."

The simple words were wrong, that was not the tune that had been hummed to the Fade. The limerick wasn’t meant to be strong or powerful, it was meant to be evoked— more than the Conclave had been forgotten. Words beneath the words, ones that she needed now more than ever.

"I said no more! End this game. You are not Deshanna Istimaethoriel!" The Inquisitor gasped and ripped her hands free of her ears. She struck out at the demon that had drawn too near, breaking its knotted fingers with a savage blow. "How dare you! How dare you dishonor her name, her very memory with your wretchedness?!

"Are you certain, foolish child?" It croaked back in anguish, startled by the oncoming frozen wave that rooted it to the spot. But it was no dissuaded, driven on by its master to tear the elf down piece by piece with scornful words. "Perhaps we have been here this whole time, lost in the nightmare because of you…"

The Inquisitor hardened her heart with the emotionless, cold ice that flowed from her soul and stood firm, long disremembered training recalled as she faced her fiendish adversary. She'd had enough of the Nightmare's toying and would hide no more as her wits began to return with each heavy draw into her burning lungs.
"Finish the song."

"What?!" The demonic liar was taken aback, its ruse weakened by the direct order.

"The real one." Chiyo commanded and took a deep breath, regaining her weakened color at last. "If you are her spirit then it should be simple. You yourself asked that I keep it safe, don't you recall? That it could be useful under the correct application."

The demon balked, becoming more gruesome as the embodiment of Fear's grasp was shaken by the confidence and assertion, so coldly certain and proclaimed that it burned. It did not know the hidden words of the Keeper's melody it had tried to foully use. It used the beloved voice stolen from Chiyo's memory and tried to draw her into the abyss of guilt once more. "Why do you treat your teacher so poorly, where is your respect?"

"No? Then I shall remind you." Chiyo faced the ghoul, knowing the power of her mandate. The song was more than simple lullaby, there were words saved only for the worst of dreams. "Ghilan'nain, Ghilan'nain, grant my journey all your favor. Andruil, Andruil, make arrows fly straight and never waver. Dirthamen, Dirthamen, none dare steal our secret breath. Falon'Din, Falon'Din, in your arms I shall find death." Her song rang clear through the darkness, searing away the façade with her cathartic spell as the ice that's seeped from her limbs held the assaulting demon firm.

"Come now, Keeper! Sing the words of banishment, cleanse the disillusion that pulls us from our rightful path! How do we finish the Dream Singer's Call? This is what you started, see it through." The Inquisitor sneered aggressively, retrieving her staff from the ground with forte renewed. She wrapped the ruined image in boiling fire, cracking the thick ice she'd entrapped it with and reduced the howling creature to back its previous, non-Dalish form.

"Sylaise, Sylaise, add your bless'd fires to our song. Elgar'nan, Elgar'nan, loan your wrath unto this wrong. Mythal, Mythal, give protection when your children are spent." She clamped a green shining hand over the demon's disintegrating face, taking no delight as she overwhelmed her enemy with the last of the citation and the swelling of her own power, called through her depths, through her anciently traced blood.

They would answer her.

And she'd saved the worst for last, the one which’d been strong enough to seal the other’s away.

"Fen'Harel, Fen'Harel, may the Dread Wolf catch this one's scent."

"Inquisitor?" Josephine repeated as she cautiously touched the unresponsive Herald's shoulder.

Chiyo lifted her head once more and rose from the considerable chair. The world of the present resumed the muted colors and the hushed sounds steadily returned, though the recent past would not be cast far from current thought. She descended the shallowed steps gradually and stood before the guilt-ridden Warden. Rising to every inch of her full height, she nearly matched the accused woman. "I left Stroud behind to face certain death. I banished your diligent order from the land they have protected for centuries. I destroyed your revered fortress. I conquered that which I do not claim to fully understand. I left Stroud behind to face certain death. I banished your diligent order from the land they have protected for centuries. I destroyed your revered fortress. I conquered that which I do not claim to fully understand. I have no standing to pass judgment over you, though I will offer what I can. If you seek death for your actions, find your peace in the Deep Roads. Take arms against the darkspawn and perish with whatever swiftness you require. I shall find my fate elsewhere. Do as you will, Ser
Ruth, we shall accommodate your last requests."

She did not watch as the stout woman was led away by the guards or answer her dwindling objection. "Commander Cullen." Chiyo turned a stony eye to her perplexed advisors, implementing the lofty title they had lashed to her being.

"Yes, Inquisitor." The fatigued former Templar stood to attention and corrected the aching sag of his shoulders. Combat and travel had not physically treated him well and there had been too few hours to recover. War was difficult for all involved, green or seasoned. He was no exception to the rule.

"Have we completed repairs to Judicael's Crossing?" She queried flatly, already wishing to escape the confines of the hold. The Inquisitor needed open skies, simple woods and something to busy her hands. What lay across the ruined bridge would satisfy her enough—she would make sure to not be unprepared the next time she crossed paths with the Archdemon.

"Completed as promised during our extended absence." He answered, observing her walk away with weighty concern. Their Inquisitor had returned from Adamant chipped and battle-scarred. He saw her as a blade that had taken too many hard knocks and spent excessive lengths under the grinder's wheel being honed back into usable form. Razor-sharp and brittle, capable of effortlessly skinning a man or shattering into unrepairable fragments with the wrong strike. "Though our scouts have yet to find any survivors across the river. They have requested assistance in removing the Red Templars that have taken over the buildings and grounds."

The agitated Inquisitor headed straight for her quarters, keeping her hands firmly clenched to her sides to abate the shaking that threatened to expose the weakness within. "Good, I shall pack a coat. I'm taking my leave at dawn."
If You Leave

Chapter Summary

She's had enough and has the means to flee, but will Solas be able to keep the Inquisitor from going renegade or shall he follow her to whatever ends necessary.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's quite early, Inquisitor." Solas rounded the divider of the tall, wooden stalls and found the industrious Dalish woman tacking her mount. It was a large beast that towered over the diminutive elf, patiently standing with his long head and neck over the gate of his pen, waiting for the preparations to be completed. The Ferelden Forder's dark bay coat shone with health and excellent grooming, his chest and barrel glistened over the dapples that marked the rich mahogany hue. He was considerably exquisite in both conformation and suitability by equestrian standards, though the quiet mage lacked an enthusiastic stance for riding. The decent mounts were tolerable, but many were also terrifyingly independent creatures that he avoided when his legs would suit the task.

And this one had a reputation that preceded him, having earned the charming name Da'dava from the enamored Inquisitor. The stable-hands however feared for their fingers and referred to him in passing as Ser Bites a'Lot, though Master Dennett was never so formal when the inclement mood struck the prized horse. Bastard had become a right proper noun in this barn.

"I didn't sleep much." Chiyo said as she made her busied rounds with the horse's hooves, working by lamplight in the barely lit morning. She diligently checked for small stones in the deep set of grooves under each hoof and for loosening nails from the flat, iron shoes. The journey wouldn't be horribly time-consuming. Two long days if the thoroughfares were clear and the weather mild, three easier ones if she traveled unhurriedly, but finding a blacksmith on the road always spelled trouble. She would prefer not to stop or be delayed by a thrown shoe or allow the hefty creature to suffer with a bruised sole.

Solas stood at the animal's silky, brown neck, offering a brief stroke beneath the length of black mane where the softest hair grew. He watched the other mage labor, cradling each stocky leg that dwarfed the thickness of her own strong limbs. She could have roused any of the young hands to have done this task, but by the hour she chose to work and the quietness she maintained it seemed the Inquisitor wanted nothing to do with any of Skyhold's other members. She'd kept entirely to herself since they'd returned, the judgment in the hall the day prior had been the first time he'd seen her since they'd departed at the gate. Solas leaned against the unpolished wood, pitted with teeth marks and stained with use. He kept his voice low and soothing, calling to the woman who refused to look at him. "Chiyo…"

"What?" Her response slipped out with involuntary bite that she rescinded immediately with a grumbling groan, withdrawing the ire that was not meant for him. The Inquisitor continued her final checks with little regard for the other mage. Her twisted leather stirrups were still at the correct length and all her travel bags properly knotted and tied down. The ropey girth of the saddle she'd had specially commissioned was snug but not too tight, it stayed put even as she gave it a testing pull. She did not sit as comfortably in the rigid, formed contraptions of human design, preferring the softly
padded and giving utility of an open Dalish seat. It was supportive enough for long distances, but much closer to riding unaided.

"Will you not wait for the others?" asked Solas as the hungry Forder nudged his probing pink nose against the small pack on the mage's back, searching for anything that might do for a treat. Hardly anyone else had risen yet, still enjoying the comforts of their frequently missed beds while the light remained far and un-rousing. No stirrings could be heard even from Blackwall in his lofty retreat nearest to the stables.

"They can catch up, I want a head start. Da'dava." Chiyo clicked to the gelding to get his attention, drawing him back into the stand and ending his voracious hunt. He willingly dropped his substantial head to be bridled and subsequently led from his stall by the tiny mage. "A few hours between us won't hurt."

Solas watched as she tossed the reins onto the mount's withers and vaulted herself up high on its broad back, settling lightly in the simple saddle. She looked so small upon the great beast, the soaring height only added to the developing distance in her eyes and withdrawn demeanor that she wrapped about herself like a heavy cloak. He touched the mount's expansive shoulder, slipping his fingers around a supportive strap that crossed the horse's breast, asking for a pause from the rider. Even to fully dig his heels into the dirt, he would be no physical match against the toned animal he held back.

"May I join you?" He entreated as she turned to consider, glancing towards the ever climbing sun. Time was fast running out before the bulk of Skyhold rose for the day. Chiyo hadn't asked anyone to journey with her this time, instead she had requested volunteers were there any, refusing to be held responsible for putting anyone in such immediate dangers so soon after Adamant. Varric and the Iron Bull had been swift to sign on for another trip to Emprise du Lion. Visiting the once famed hot springs sounded grand—if they weren't chock full of dragons when they got there.

Chiyo glanced down while straightening her furry winter coat out from under her legs so that it could hang freely over the equine's trim flanks. Her fatigued eyes, dark with sleeplessness searched him fleetingly, trying to mark against him some excuse, but none presented themselves. She finally spoke, teetering indecisively. "Do we have to talk? That's all everyone wants to do… and what of all your research, wouldn't the time be better spent here?"

"Only if you wish it, and the work can wait." He held his breath with uncertainty as she rolled the idea around mutely, weighing the heavy choices surrounding his offered companionship. Solas contended with the idea that she might want him left far behind; that the reserved link they shared was not enough to warrant the quietly urgent request he made. What was he truly to the Inquisitor? Through all his evasive games, the indulgence of their mutual company, it had never been made fully clear and he was to blame for that lack of clarity. Solas knew her to be happier when he was by her side, but did the ground beneath her feet shift as his seemed to with gently given regards, did the troubles of her world vanish as when she gifted him a dear smile? Or was he simply a pleasant distraction from duty to fill the empty hours with, a convenient shoulder to lean upon. If she were not the Inquisitor would she ever have given him more than a passing look, continuing on with her life a complete stranger, another face in the crowd?

The stretch of her silence portended a no, the long deliberation raising a thick, worrisome dread in his chest he had not known to exist there before.

"Ok." She finally extended her arm and held out an open palm. Chiyo loosened a mostly bare foot from the minimal stirrup to allow him easy purchase instead of the leap she had made herself.

"Oh no, I'll walk." He dithered and took a step back, though he was immediately relieved by her acceptance. Horses were troublesome on each separate end, considering their knack with blunt teeth
and hefty hooves, and they were dubious at best near their centers...

"But I shall not." Chiyo thrust her rejected hand lower until he reluctantly took it and she pulled him up onto the considerable steed who would take little note of the added weight of a grown man. The horse had ponied their resident Qunari on more than one occasion, what were a couple of elves in comparison to the bulk of the Iron Bull.

Solas tucked himself behind her with little room for propriety to spare if he didn't fancy being bounced off Da'dava's round rump and swishing tail. Knee to knee and hip to hip, he sat as her disinclined double. She pressed her naked heels against the gelding's sides, urging him forward into a leisurely trot. The uneasy apostate was quick to grasp onto the smaller mage, holding her waist snuggly as he was jostled by the wide cadence of the four legs that carried them on.

Chiyo did not speak to the yawning guards who gave her a farewell salute over their sipped, hot mugs that steamed beneath their noses. She said nothing to her clinging companion as they passed through the open gate and crossed the long bridge that lead to the narrow, twisting paths of the Frostback Mountains. The hours crept on with only the gentle puffs of breath the horse released in steady snorts and the clack of his shod feet on the solid ground to break the maintained quiet. Chiyo guided them down the mountainside with knowing straightforwardness, following the same trails they traversed time and time again on foot or in caravan.

Solas soon found himself growing more comfortable as a passive pair, tolerating his rigid body to unwind and move with the regular, springy tempo of their charge. He no longer needed to brace fiercely to her back or grip to her torso for dear life. He remained near enough to conceal his chilled nose in the warm, fur-trim of the hood she'd left down about her back and shoulders. Initially he'd been anxious about such extended hours in her immediate physical presence, but it was near natural to find a diffident, secreted pleasure in their fitted nearness. Solas lastly allowed his hands to slide from their white-knuckled hold on her midriff to rest laxly over the mesmerizing musculature of her leather bound thighs. Beneath his stretched fingers and palms he could feel the taut ligaments and tendons sending their nonverbal instruction down the bent length of her legs. A nudge to the left to avoid a risky patch of ice, a stronger grip to ease down another uneven slope, relaxing completely to give approval to a rolling canter across a short plain between the steep prominences. The horse did not ask for her words but it listened regardless, and that was all she truly needed.

After mid-day they'd reach the base of the mountain range and found a decent place to rest the steed near a small waterway that rushed from the snowy mountain pass they'd left behind. Solas dismounted first, twisting his back and shaking sore legs while the Inquisitor took their cohort for a much needed drink in the fresh steam before setting him loose to graze on the long, vigorous grasses and meadow flowers that grew nearly to their knees.

"One question." Chiyo murmured and broke her long, wall of silence while stretched out across the heavy coat she'd cast off in the improved warmth of the valley. The thin wind was still crisp and strong enough to rustle the nearby trees, but it was not as biting and stripping of heat as the gales that whipped across the higher peaks. She watched the immaculate sky above as they helped themselves to a cold lunch of the prior evening's leftover meat she'd weaseled from the cook's stash and a few tart apples they managed to keep, mostly, away from the foraging Forder.

Solas curled a small knife around the crisp fruit. The clear juices ran down the sharp edge and clung to his fingers. He removed a wedged section and offered it to her before wiping his wet fingertips across his lips. "Hmmm?"

"You can ask one, I know you've been meaning to." She ran her thumb over the precise, hard edge, appreciating the distinction between the slick red skin against the grainy white, sweet flesh. "Just…
The mage cut another slice for himself, chewing it slowly as he considered the minor compromise in their previously agreed upon arrangement. He already knew the subjects she wished to avoid by having experienced much the same horrors; Solas didn't need to harass her about the Divine or the Wardens or even the nightmare only she had seen. No one else had been affected as she had by the demons that had mentally assaulted them. They'd each witnessed their own personal horrors made real. Varric had seen darkspawn; Dorian had called out against a sinister Magister. The Keeper she'd fought against did not appear so to Solas. Instead... he'd seen himself as her attacker, or at least the dangerous man he used to be. A man more than capable of being pushed to commit such despicable atrocities. Given the right reason, Fen'Harel would have taken down any elf that kept him from his goals. He'd not been renowned for his meekness or mild handling of his power. Were the Inquisitor to have existed during his time, to have addled with the orb when it had been in his possession—he would have probably killed her as a foe and a rival.

The curious magic she'd used against the Nightmare had certainly interested him, it called to something in the Fade even older than himself, but he'd wait for those answers until she was ready to offer an explanation of her own volition. That spell was old, very old. It should not have survived the many ages that had followed the fall of his people.

"May I consider it, for a short time? I would prefer not to waste the opportunity." He asked, returning the useful knife to its unadorned sheath.

Chiyo nodded and finished her cold meal, presenting her empty hands to the roving creature that crept near to the enticing, sweet smells of the sugary fruit. Da'dava's warm tongue and ticklish, whiskered lips checked her fingers for anything left behind, eliciting a short lived chuckle before she picked up the emptied waterskin, leaving to refill it—and to give her greened, slobbered hands a brisk rinse.

The horse eyed Solas, spotting the last piece. "Here, my friend. You'll have earned it by days end. Just leave me my skin."

He waited until they had remounted again and continued well onto their westward path along the meandering border of an evergreen wood before considering his lone question further. The Inquisitor nestled against him lightly as she permitted their indolently trotting steed to find his own footing. In one hand she held the end of the reins that flopped loosely against the horse's ponderous neck. The unassuming demands of riding and horsemanship became the perfect reprieve for the trials she singularly met; constantly holding a brave, bright face towards an endless night to keep the monsters that lurked there at bay. She was lulled by the return to simple nature, fresh air lifted her lungs and the high sun warmed her bruised spirit.

The tall trees with their aromatic boughs did not ask her how many soldiers she wanted to risk on the field—the day came, the rain fell, and that was sufficient for them. The wind held no whispers of noble plots or sly deceit against her opposition—what did it care if the breezes filled the sails of fleeing aravels or lofted the wings of ravens bearing ill-tidings with the same force and compassion. The horse was not hampered by the additional burden of her chaotic world; he would carry her just as far with half the lives of Thedas on her shoulders as he would have if she'd never once left her own quiet woods. The hares that skittered across the road sought only their cozy burrows and tender grasses—they vexed not that the purported Herald of Andraste was Dalish or a mage or a disbeliever of the Maker or worst of all a coward terrified of her own twisting dreamscape.

"When this is over, and the Inquisition no longer relies so incalculably on you where would you like to go?" Solas asked as he dared encircle her waist with his arms once more, but not out of need for
stability or fear of falling. He genuinely liked the feel of her in them, though he hoped the comfort he found was equally as mutual. Her lurch with his sudden questioning however nearly sent the crown of her head into his chin, luck alone kept them from smashing.

"I'm sorry?" Chiyo was taken aback, detached from the distractive train of thought that stole most of her attentions. Her focus was elsewhere, miles from where it should have been.

"If the question makes you uncomfortable I will rescind it." He offered; her subtle flinch had him keen as to what sore wound she'd predicted him to salt.

The Inquisitor clicked to her trudging mount, encouraging his sluggish pace into a brisker stride. "No, it's… that wasn't what I was expecting."

"I can give you a moment to ponder." Solas suggested, empathizing with her innermost reflections as she tensed against him, diverting back to the unnecessary guidance of the massive horse.

She shook her head, wagging the stubby tuft of white hair she'd twisted and tied back off the top of her head. Chiyo had neglected to cut it over the long months and heavy traveling, but its care had not yet become so tiring to amend just yet. The lengthening waves would soon drive her to a pair of shears; she could not stand the way the unruly tresses would wrap around her sensitive ears and catch in her sparse piercings. "Actually, I already know the answer. But you will laugh at me…"

Solas raised an unseen brow, flipping through his recollection for such an occurrence. Certainly there had been jovial moments between them, but directly in her regard there were few instances that came immediately to mind. "Have I ever laughed at you?"

"…Yes… after Wintersend, when I minced those elvhen words up." The tips of her ears and the points of her cheeks began to show the hints of pinking embarrassment. "You snorted so loud that Dorian heard it and he made me repeat the joke because he didn't believe you were capable of finding anything funny."

The memory returned, warm as mulled wine. Oh how her tongue had forsaken her intentions into an averting twist of a compliment. She'd done quite well with her grasp on her native language, picking up the vocabulary, patterns and filling in the holes the Dalish had left her with, but her structuring was still lack-luster. The hilarity revisited him, giving way to a new chuckle. "Did he understand the amusement?"

"Of course he did… after he got me to repeat it three times." She grumbled under his subtle teasing, chastising herself anew for the near loutish mistake. The meaning had been all there, in theory, but the humor lay in the particular ill-use. *Isalathe* was vastly inappropriate, and there was no need of such kind in respect to the Dwarf's burly size. She'd tried to quickly correct with *nuven'in* but the egregious mistake had already been made. "Please don't tell Varric what I accidentally said about dwarves… I am not curious about such private matters."

"Ir abelas, lasa dara del'ma, vhenan." Solas apologized with a lissome kiss on the side of her unprotected neck, grazing against the tender skin beneath her ear. He'd found that a man could grow accustomed to such fond vicinities, though it was cruel of him to take such advantages of her accommodating state. "Will you pardon my prying once more? I promise not to make jest."

"Where do all elven children dream of going when they are grown?" She fought the urge curl against the unexpected touch, a rare gift of half-bridled affections left her near breathless. Chiyo's flustered face continued to burn as she pushed her way through to a promised answer as the pleasantly warm, little waves of his close breath skirted about her naked nape, prickling the skin into tiny puckered bumps. "When they want to see for themselves if any part of the great story was ever true. So they
might bring back a golden tile, unearthed for the first time in millennia, glittering in the sun or a trivial piece of crystal, caught in the knot of the oldest tree, to be valued above all other possessions? When word and legend aren't enough, when real, solid proof would unravel the lost story of millions?"

"Arlathan?" Solas guessed knowingly, her desire was not the least bit vague to him. Yet another revelation had him enquiring, his question only giving rise to more of the same. "You refer to the suspected forests in the north."

"The Lavellans never got near the place," She murmured on, idly rolling a thumb across Solas' defined knuckles that bridged her center. "Though we traveled almost that far on some of the harder years, when we were driven from less hospitable lands. Most humans don't venture that route—they believe those wood to be haunted."

"I never thought you much the treasure or fable seeker, chasing myths and hunting shadows. Many would pay a high coin for that kind of evidence, and more still would pay to have it destroyed. The Chantry has been very thorough in their cleansing of history." Solas tried to imagine her excavating the prehistoric prominences in search of rusted cutlery or broken pottery, pilfering tombs for chance artifacts, documents and relics. But she hadn't stepped so much as a single foot on the guarded graves they had investigated in the Exalted Plains. Nor has she touched the carved slabs placed round the ancient trees that held secrets and probable access for the sealed grounds at the base of the shaded hill. Her sense of reverence ran as deep as her principles measured, she'd gone even so far as to mark the alcove off limits for the Inquisition's scouts they'd left behind and under the care of the clan that had retaken refuge nearby.

"No… I just… I just want to walk among those trees. I want to spend days—maybe weeks out there without sighting another person, human, elf or anything on two legs. If there are ruins I want to see them, just one shred of proof that it wasn't all made-up to make children dream of better days when the world has been too cruel or for elders go peacefully into their last rest. Such would be enough." She continued, chewing her lips at the audible inanity of it all. "It's silly, really. I know those are not the woods our predecessors would have recognized. Those trees have long since fallen and given way to their offspring, and those have rotted away now too... But I would have peace in knowing them for myself."

"Maybe someday I shall take you, if you'll have me. I have often wished to dream there and learn." He wistfully proposed into her ear with tempered promise before they fell into a comfortable calm for a while, following the trek of the road as the afternoon passed swiftly on. Dusk was not long off by the time they approached a major crossroad, but the Inquisitor firmly pulled the gelding beneath her to a sharp halt before the wide fork. She looked to the separate passes hesitantly, ignoring the impatient shifting of the mount who longed to reach camp and have his hard-earned grains.

"Should I get out the map?" asked Solas equivocally, though he'd hidden his primary suspicions well. "I can't immediately recall which way we take either."

"I don't need the map; I looked at it all last night…" Chiyo gripped the smooth leather reins between her fingers. It was getting cold, darkness would fall soon and she still hadn't made her decision. Her stomach quailed once more with concerns and culpability, as it had all the previous evening and throughout their trip home from the Western Approach. "I know where these roads lead." "But which is the one you will take." His words fell flat on her ears, not so much a question as it was a provocation. Solas remained motionless on the back of the saddle. Sitting tall and firm, he waited for the Inquisitor to make her next, and potentially, exceedingly perilous move.

Under what banner would she continue when presented with the off-chance of stolen freedom? Was there a renegade, a deserter sequestered in some dark corner of her being that she'd kept hidden from
them all.

"What do you think would happen if we went to the right?" Her head hung low with untying ignominy. Chiyo corrected the budging horse and he finally stood complacent, releasing a low snort as he acquiesced to the short cessation of their travels. The path directly ahead would send them on their way to the snowy, ravaged township in need of aid and support. But if they veered just a few simple steps they would eventually be cast towards the tapering sea to the north.

"I'm not certain of the current penalties of horse theft, to begin." Solas' comment sidestepped her request for derailment, a mocking and evasive joke against the position she'd willingly put them both in.

"Solas." She abruptly cautioned his quip.

"The Inquisition depends on you." He stated, declining to stir her tumultuous emotions with his own. They were not necessary and would only add to her vexations, though secretly he was thanking every star he'd ever hopefully looked towards for having sought her out that morning when he did. Something deep in his gut upon waking had told him to grab his bag before dawn. A moment's pause would have left him to watch the sun rise alone and she would have been gone.

"Would they hate me? Would they hunt me down?" Chiyo asked between slow and steady breaths, struggling with the apprehensive acid threatening the back of her tightened throat. "How many miles would I cross before they took me back, probably in chains, for treachery? Would they drag me around the country, closing rifts in shackles?"

"It was not my intention of coming here to stop you."

Chiyo closed her eyes as he spoke, listening for any hint that the encouraging words may be untrue. This little elf did not feel courageous, or gallant, or ordained like the hero the Inquisition proclaimed her as across all of Thedas. Her choices hurt everyone. She tried to assist them with all she had to offer, often helping too much, making everything worse in the end with her efforts. And then there were those beyond her expansive reach. Calling out to their Inquisitor, the one sent to save them, a woman who was powerless to aid all of the suffering that turned to her for resolution. She desired the terrible decisions wrested from her command or diminished entirely through absenteeism. She did not want this, and would gladly hand the title to someone more capable.

"Because you already knew." Chiyo had supposed it of him when he'd found her in the stables too early to be happenstance. Her planned ruse was known after all, but the choice was still in her hands. Her voice struggled to maintain its composure, fracturing under the strain; the truth came off her lips as plucked thistle barbs. She'd waited days for this chance at shaking off her duties, away from the companions who'd encouraged her every step. But how could they keep such trust in her feeble character? A genuine hero would never bolt from the greatness thrust upon them; a real champion would rise to meet every challenge, made nobler by each trial. "Your real question was going to be different, wasn't it? You were going to ask me—would I still be lingering at these crossroads if you hadn't come along or would I already be escaping as fast as this horse could carry me… Am I so plainly read?" She asked, wondering who else had seen her for the skulking weakling she was.

"Vhenan'mar tel'durlahn ma'uren." The compassionate words in elvhen bore more weight than their light, poetic sounds should have carried; they slipped around her shoulders like a warm cloak, thick with understanding and welcoming honesty. Your heart is not silent to my ears.

"It could be so easy; to just keep going north until I ran out of road and found the sea. Would you… would you run with me?" She turned in the soft leather saddle, studying him from over her shoulder. "Away from all of this mess? Even if it meant watching the last days of Thedas as we know it come
I asked to join you. The fate of this world rests in your palm and I am determined to see this tale through." Solas' eyes meet hers with unmoving persistence, but there was ardor behind his stoic gaze. She would reveal herself wholly before the sun sank below the tree-line, for good or ill, that much was certain. "What you do with your gift is your choice; I cannot tell you which path is the correct one, Inquisitor."

Chiyo furrowed her dark brow seriously, stretching the old scar into a tight line away from her hairline. She doubted what he could possibly see in her now at the weakest hour of her convictions. "I am just a raindrop in a river... Just some trivial nobody who thought she was crafty enough to spy through doors and instead involved herself with matters out of her depth. Just an elf with half the world waiting for her to save them. I am not brave, I am not wise, and I'm not strong, or steadfast or good enough for the title given me."

"You're a terrible liar; yet I would go every stolen mile with you just to prove how very wrong you are. Certainly, you are more than capable of bolting yet more still of continuing on." Solas inflexibly retorted, his mouth held in a hard crease. "You are letting this feign of cowardice make your decisions because it is easier; such indolence is not part of your true nature. It shall pass, as do all such troubling ideas."

"How are you so certain? What part of me do you see that I cannot?" But she didn't need him to answer. Chiyo could see his fixed determination in every rigid feature. Solas did not often humble himself to being wrong, and now was no exception.

The coursing wind rattled through the trees, pushing with all its insistence that she make her next move.

A murder of drifting crows passed overhead, their rough call cracking through the dying light in caveat.

The warmblood chewed peevishly at his metal bit, testing to see if she was still at command.

"Has the Inquisition misplaced their faith in you?" He queried resolutely, withholding none of his conviction.

"I don't know." Her jaw tightened to match before she looked away, escaping the piercing gaze that confronted her firmness of person. She'd stumbled over every step and barely survived the seemingly endless parade of difficulties. The Inquisition might just be better off without her; certainly the Advisors had a better grip on the plethora of dilemmas that came to the table each morning. How many would die if she chose to stay and continued to pretend to be something she wasn't, how many more would die if she didn't? She had not been quick to forget the terrifying events at Redcliffe. That future shadowed her thoughts and plagued all of her choices. One fatal slip, and Corypheus would win.

"Will you let them all perish, regardless of your self-slights?" Solas sensed a steady change in the elf before him, her quickened pulse thumping hard enough to feel against his own chest as she took up the limp reins once more.

"No." She set her dark eyes to the waiting path. It was a fool's notion to begin with, wanting to escape fate. There were some chains that couldn't be broken, only rattled and strained. But being allowed to test the cage door had made enough of a difference.

Solas only had one more question for her.
"And does this last Lavellan run away?"

"…Never."

Her heels spurred the horse to sudden life, carrying them westwards, to whatever end that waited in the looming distance.

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On Horses

You’ve never had a mount like the Ferelden Forder, a hardy warmblood. Don’t let the size fool you: they’re no meant for the farm. Centuries of careful breeding have taken common stock and produced a glory. A creature as much at home in a charge as they are in a march across nations. But for all the stamina and speed they place at your command, press too far, and you’ll be picking dirt from your teeth. They know their role and expect that you know yours. Warning and promise and all that.

—Codex

By: apostatesalwaysbreakyourheart @ Tumblr
Chapter End Notes

Da’dava- little taste, nibbler

Isalathe, nuven’in- need (sexual vs normal)

lasa dara del’ma- let go of my wrong, forgive me

ir abelas- I’m sorry
We'll Fall

Chapter Summary

What could possibly go wrong? Dragon slaying, red templars, dangerously high and precarious summits. Oh, and untested magic being the last hope for survival. Splendid.

The far traveled apostate could have imagined at least a dozen better ways to be woken up after a chilly night under the open sky, warmed only by a brief fire before bedding down for the evening. Acceptably, the aroma of the bountiful earth and the pine woods gradually being thawed by the sun's first light or of breakfast searing in a seasoned pan would have been desired over the singed odor of hair and leather that offensively greeted him. The insufferable trill chippering of dawn birds a preferable chorus to the alarmed yelps and heavy, roaring voices that met his sensitive ear. And most certainly a whiskery graze on his drowsy cheek from their gluttonous horse, better still—something kinder from the mage he accompanied, could have been a much more agreeable rousing than being shocked out of sleep by sudden electricity, raising every fine hair on his skin with the passing energy.

"There you are you little shit!" The Iron Bull had tauntingly boomed as he snatched the snug bedroll off of the sleeping Inquisitor in advance of being zapped in her distraught, upturned panic, reacting before even reaching for the long weapon that lay by her side.

"For the love of Andraste's leaky left nipple, Tiny!" Varric hollered as he took cover, knocked over by the dazzling blast. "I said we should spook her for kicks, not get us killed!"

"You could have just said good morning!" Chiyo huffed in exasperation, scooting across the tarnished ground and away from her assailant before the nicked bedding was unceremoniously dumped at her feet in a lumpy pile, scattering the few items she'd bedded down with. Including a borrowed volume from the secretively romantic Seeker she'd hidden among her blankets that landed too far away to be immediately stashed again.

"Tracked down by complete idiots. How unfortunate." Solas groaned tiresomely as he lowered his own staff; even in sleep it was never out of reach. He dissipated the raw energy from the Fade he'd called forth for their protection. His pithy gaze directed itself to the disastrous pair; it was the look of a man silently wishing the skulls of his foe set afire. Had he not recognized them sooner, they may have soon found themselves just as bald of head as he. "Must there be such stupidity in spades at this hour? This is no place for such ill-mannered pranks. I would expect more poise from Sera."

"Would idiots leave such nice trails for practically anyone to follow? Shit. Not even a hundred meters from the road and I could smell your old campfire almost a mile away. Who trained you people in stealth or do mages' not believe in such a thing as basic defense? My feet are fucking huge, but did you hear me? No. Will you find any prints? Hardly. What if someone had actually been trying to dispatch you?" The Qunari patted away the prickling sensation that still coursed over his half-naked torso, stippling his skin in tiny, puckered dots.

"And you especially." Bull singularly eyed the sour looking elf he'd overturned from her bed. "If someone grabs you in your sleep you strike to kill, not stun. I should double my rate for nitwit-crap like this. If you were one of my men I would kick your ass and then I'd let Krem beat whatever was left."
"We'll then it's a good thing you are one of my men." Chiyo wrinkled her round nose as she rubbed at a sore hip. "But you guys are quite a bit later than I expected."

"We would have been here a lot sooner if someone hadn't stayed up all night writing damned letters." Iron Bull shook his massive, horned head as he looked towards the seated rogue. "Leaving at dawn means leaving at dawn, Varric. Not two cups of tea and a plate of bacon."

Annoyance painted the dwarf's good-humored nature as he crossed his arms over his wide chest, bunching the deep gap in the fabric of his shirt to reveal ever more of the thick tufts that coated his sternum. "Hey, those letters were important. And it could have been interpreted as after breakfast by any decent fellow. If you'd asked me I thought people only said 'at dawn' because they wanted to be dramatic."

"I wasn't being dramatic," Chiyo corrected bluntly, scooping up her belongings and shaking them clean. She made a quick grab for the infamous serial before Varric could lean for it first. "I fully intended the hour of our leaving."

"And you left us behind anyways, what was that all about?" Varric questioned, finally picking himself off the ground, feeling much too old for such knock-abouts. Stretching his sore back he took to his heavy feet. "At least from the looks of it Buttercup won't be filling asses with arrows after she finds out that ol' reliable Blackwall was wrong about your ill-anticipated departure. Thought she was going to set loose the bees right there in the hall. Maker knows where she keeps those blasted jars."

"Just needed some air..." The Inquisitor answered quietly as Varric rambled, mostly justifying it to herself. She cocked her head as she listened, wiping the dregs of ruined sleep from the corners of her tired eyes on her sleeve while she repacked. "And what are you talking about? He wasn't present when we left."

"Something about gentle, hushed tones that boded of untold promise and looking longingly into each other's eyes, the silence saying what the heart could not..." Varric took a moment to correct his static-ridden hair, forcing it to lay smooth again, but a falsely diffident gaze remained on the quickly coloring Herald who'd tucked his scandalous book beneath her arm. "Hero said that he spied it all through a gap in the floorboards, quiet as a Chantry mouse. Don't tell me my old writing gave you any ideas... According to our favorite, hairy Warden, he saw you two leaving in what he suspected as an elopement excursion."

"E-elopement! You're joking? He did not say that, you are mistaken!" The Inquisitor stumbled across the incriminating word; the tightlipped and accused lovers briefly turned to face each other in hastily lived mortification. Solas immediately began to busy himself by rolling up his bed things and securing other effects, refusing to take further part in the humiliating jest in matters that were of no one's business but their own.

"Sera's probably lit my bed on fire by now..." Chiyo reddened from nose to ear as she muttered to herself gracelessly, stuffing the pillow-appropriate book into her saddle bag. "I'd almost prefer spiders in the dresser again."

"We don't have weddings in the Qun," Iron Bull joined in the pesky elbowing; he was enjoying the young elf's fidgeting evasions and blatant discomfort of discussing anything romantic or worse still, erotic in nature. She'd been utterly dumbfounded when he'd told her all about the major roles of the Tamassarans and other carnal commonplace practices held by the Qun. In comparison the Dalish were nearly prudish, keeping their antics to youthful experimenting and bonded-pairs as the Inquisitor had shamefacedly explained. Sex in the clan was normal and all turned a blind eye and a deaf ear towards the soft sounds coming from a shut aravel or on the end of camp. There was no humiliation in plain nudity, a body was simply a body, but they did maintain one of the few privacies
available to a nomadic life by not verbally poking and prodding at another's relations. Everyone already knew what you were doing; there was no need to uncouthly be discussing it in public like the other races in Ferelden rudely did all so often. Bull had quickly told her to lighten up and jokingly offered to help her become more acquainted with the unseen, sensual side she must have been hiding somewhere in her tiny body. "But I hear there is always lots of good booze… and cake. Or is that just human events, Boss?"

Varric laughed heartily, rubbing it in even more. "Do elves even do that, elope I mean? I could see a City elf leaving their alienage in the dead of night to abscond with a lover, but a Dalish one? Thought that everything you guys did was some sort of mysterious ritual beyond outsider reckoning. Wouldn't want to miss a wedding though. I could write a beautiful toast if you want. Just tell me how he swept you off your feet. I'll add the prose, you just give me the passion, and it seems you already have a taste for my imagination anyways."

"It's not like that." The Inquisitor began to nervously chew at a dry patch on her lip. Up till now she'd assumed her budding relationship with Solas relatively unknown beyond Dorian's flair for observation and Sera's blatant dislike for the time the mages spent together. If the Tevinter mage had discerned more than what he'd occasionally alluded to then Iron Bull would undoubtedly be privy to all the small details and speculations. And if the Red Jenny suspected anything that didn't suit her idea of acceptable, then all of Skyhold would be speedily informed. But for Varric to know, the man with the biggest mouth and most widespread penmanship, it wouldn't be long before half the literate population of Thedas would become aware of the hushed romance, even if their names were altered.

"Then what is it like?" asked Varric with a sly wink. He'd been suspicious of their amorous association for months, practically from the time they'd established themselves at Skyhold. His favorite work table was so conveniently placed by the lowest entrance to the rotunda; it was easy to note the coming and going of the beloved Herald, catching the improvements of her mood after her frequent visits. She could claim simplicity and friendship all she wanted to, but Chiyo was her own worst give-away when it came to these interests, often hinting at it herself when the mood struck her... or the wine loosened her private tongue.

"It is not open for discussion." Solas warned curtly and with indisputable finality. "That is all that should concern you."

Chiyo peered over her shoulder, catching the apostate's backwards glance as he readied his meager possessions for travel, setting his pack to his shoulders. What was her real role in this and what did Solas receive out of their growing camaraderie. Certainly she was more than a lonely mage in desperate need of a mentor, a willful companion to spend the peaceful days with, or a mere flirtation teetering on the brink of restrained desire to the quiet mage. Yet to officially call him her lover felt... inadequate and near inappropriate. Something strong was forging between them; beyond that of a bodily need that could be satisfied. She craved his mind and his words above all else, the regards she kept for the physical body he would not easily share were a mere bonus, though both left her yearning for more.

Solas called her his vhenan, but he'd yet to define exactly what that entailed.

So this was it, this was how he was going to die. Splendid.

Not the ending Solas had expected, but he'd never accounted for dragon attacks on his list of probable outcomes. At least it wasn't a beheading, he'd always thought in the end it would be an axe at the back of his neck. But here he was, dangling several hundred feet off the edge of a soaring plateau above the icy valley below. Spared only by the slipping grasp of the Inquisitor, his own blood slicking her desperate hold. He could feel the grinding pressure in the bones of the wrist he
clung to—her sharp fingernails dug into his skin, but the pain she inflicted and endured had bought him time to think. The tension of every muscle and fiber in her arm protested like bowstrings drawn too far back, threatening to snap with the next provocation. And there was the stomach plummeting awareness of the staff she’d miraculously wedged into a rocky cleft rapidly disengaging. It was tilting them lower and lower, on the cusp of breaking free all together.

Another shift, an inch of leverage lost, and they would both fall to the harsh, hard ground far, far below.

There were precious seconds left at most; and Solas was going to excruciatingly expire realizing that the last thing he had done was yell at her for foolishness. Knowing that their last morning together had been filled with concealment and disgrace. He was going to meet his end without telling her how he felt, what she meant to him or even a real fragment of his own skillfully hidden truth. Why hadn’t she released him yet? Chiyo could buy herself time, or perhaps even save her life by merely opening her fingers and letting him fall. His fondness had certainly not warranted such a gift, to be liberated from the ending he feared above all others. But he had already condemned himself undeserving of their paired demise, even if it would fulfill his self-regarding need, it wasn’t worth her chance at living. The people needed her more than him now; she still had a chance at setting everything right.

And why now, at the worst of all ends, was her voice so full of unbending, indissoluble hope? The same woman who doubted her every move, every action, every choice had never sounded as certain as she did right then.

_Do you trust me?_ It was a simple enough question, so why did he struggle to answer? He’d followed her across the long, newly repaired bridge less than an hour ago of his own free will, and believed that she was resilient enough to survive the dangerous challenge. But it became clear once on the summit how unprepared they’d all truly been to exterminate the areas latest threat.

Solas had immediately thought of at least twenty reasons why taking on a dragon without full a military back up had been a questionable idea at best. Who needed healers, or lines of archers or anyone who’d actually had sufficient experience in taking the massive reptiles down to assist them anyways? Like, for instance, a Pentaghast who had slaying singing hot in her blood.

Making up such adventures as they went along always ended so pleasantly, it would have been a shame to have tried any new tactics now after all the amusement they’d had. Bears, giants, hordes of the undead, they should consider taking to a boat and spearing the monsters of the deep next time they sought some excitement. It also hadn’t helped that this particular beast had a predilection to take to the air, out of range of the mostly grounded party, and had knocked them about like children’s toys. No matter how many multitudes of small holes they’d torn through the Hivernal’s expansively webbed wings it would take to the sky and attempt to scatter the group with its bitter blasts and swirling winds.

Varric had fared physically the best out of their small party, staying far back from most of the fray, but by the finale of their battle he’d run precariously low on bolts, caltrops and poisons. Though he had managed to damage one beady, cold-blooded eye with an extraordinary shot, his distanced advantage in the fight had quickly come-up short.

Iron Bull’s bloodlust had only swelled his overt brazenness. He’d been hell-bent on staying within dangerous reach of the dragon’s massive, snapping jaws. The Qunari spy barely noticed the gashes and scrapes that ravished his hulking form, the blood that ran down his arms and legs boiled as it dropped onto the hot, sulfuric water at their feet. The pain that would have toppled another man was vigorously welcomed, each injury only added to his single-minded aggression. He’d appeared to be having the time of his life, hollering with the thrill of each victorious hit.
Chiyo had drained her limited mana faster than she could recall it, burning through her spells and pushing through the exhaustion to reach her absolute limit. Gasping for breath and depleting her tonics, unrepressed lightning arcing over her shaking form, she was quickly overwhelmed by the challenge. But there'd been an inferno raging just beneath her skin, stoked higher with every successful strike she made and further fortified by the many knockdowns she suffered as penance for her failures. The Inquisitor's bolts and shocks were well placed, she'd blackened and cracked the magnificent hide of their foe but the sting of the burns only elicited more wrath from the great wyrm.

Solas had barely been able to keep their barriers up before the dragon's breath and beating wings had worn them down to bloody pulp. He could only have manipulated the delicate nature of the Fade so much while maintaining control of it. Hurting his companions with haste would not have solved their current predicament. But he'd spared what power he could offensively, the dragon mostly immune to the ice he'd mastered; their combined efforts just hadn't been enough.

Even better still, they'd consumed all their potions and the monster still wasn't quite dead. It seemed the more blood the great beast shed, and it was losing it in droves, the more incensed it became. But if they'd just held out a little longer, they might've stood a chance at exhausting the dragon's strength before getting killed. Or they'd have at least been able to escape if the Iron Bull hadn't been taken out by the beast's extended, swinging tail, leaving him unconscious on the wet ground.

"Son of a bitch! Get up you tart humping bastard!" Varric had exclaimed and stood alone, guarding the stunned Qunari as he peppered the dragon's gaping mouth and throat with the last of his bolts, running Bianca's stock dry. The crossbow was now no more useful than a bludgeon, but he would use it in defense of his huge friend.

"Varric's in trouble!" Chiyo's focus had shifted immediately from the thrills of battle to her friends in grave peril. With her best shot she'd used the conductive water around them to powerfully electrocute and scorch the massive face of their opponent, stealing its livid attentions. She had to give their rogue a chance at reviving their warrior, if any of them were to endure and not be made into a heaping pile of dragon dung.

"Hey! Over here! Look you nug-brained lizard!" She'd shouted and whistled, waving her staff high in the air. The Hivernal pivoted on thunderous legs, drawn off by the racket. Its jaw hung agape, partially broken by a destructive blow from a flaming war-hammer. With an outraged glower set on the Inquisitor the dragon had stampeded.

"Are you mad, do you have any sense at all?!" Solas had shouted. He'd unleashed a powerful spell and crafted the thickest wall of ice he could muster, using up what had been left of his already exhausted mana, before pulling the Inquisitor into a run by the neck of her robes.

"I had a plan!" She'd yelled back, laying as many spells on their path as she could spare. They'd exploded as the dragon smashed through the barrier, but there had been too little power behind them to inflict much lasting damage or to distract it from the incensed goal. "But I only got so far with it!"

"What do you mean had?" Solas had failed to keep the heated words down as their dash was stalled on the towering edge on the far side of the Pool. "What sort of asinine plan do you call this!?"

"You know what Solas, when we get out of here you can yell at me all you want, okay?" Chiyo had pressed her back to the formerly well-constructed archway, barely evading another icy outburst. They'd heard the Iron Bull shout as he returned to his woozy feet. He'd swung a hooked chain into the flesh of the dragon, trying with all his strength to pull it back around. The Qunari had been ignored and the beast slammed its great head against the carved stone, toppling the elves' last protection and subsequently pushed them over the edge.
"Take my hand!" It had been a direct, irrefutable order, not an invitation. Grabbing each other fiercely by the wrist, the floor beneath them gave way in chunky fractures.

In a split second decision, Chiyo had thrust the serrated blade of her staff's end into a fissure in the stone, lodging it as deep as she could. She clung for dear life as the walls and ground around them broke loose, tumbling down the high peak and leaving them to dangle on the ruined side.

Solas would not look down. His eyes remained fixed to the frozen sky and the shadow of the dragon that searched for them, hindered only slightly by the resuscitated combatant.

"Do you trust me?" She firmly asked, the strength of her confidence shaking him from his flurry of half-rooted thoughts as they lurched again.

There was no pain heard in her words. The threatening displacement of her shoulder under their combined weight should have emitted agony but she remained stoically unaware of the torture she was inflicting to her own body. The Inquisitor struggled to catch a toe hold, her to prevent their bodies from twisting in the open air, cutting her wintery footwear in the process. The staff in her marked hand gave another nauseating wobble as she kicked for purchase.

His heart pounded twice in his long ears before he heard himself answer from unknown depths.

"Yes."

It was too late.

The dragon had spotted them and was reaching out to finish the kill with what remained of its broken teeth as it roared so loud it distorted all of his other senses.

A flickering grin before Chiyo replaced her attentions, turning to face their foe head on. To Solas, that radiant inner light was bright enough to blur the vision of certain death that loomed just above them, or was it his eyes failing him as his power waned away... He felt suddenly drained of any remaining strength he'd held on to till then; it flowed upwards from his body towards the glowing Anchor, leaving him woozy and drifting on the edge of consciousness.

"Please try not to die—"

She let go of the staff.

Solas opened his eyes to find the world about him in a state of endless flux. The landscape pulsed in steady flickers, moving through untold ages that even history books had long forgotten or since been purged of. Open, grassy plains gave way to lengthening sapling trees. Great woods thickened and choked the twilight sky. People appeared, transforming the forest into humble homesteads. Fire came next, burning everything it touched to the ground. Rains came and grass grew once more, healing the land and starting the cycle all over again.

This was most certainly the Fade, some arbitrary crag he'd yet to investigate even after all his extensive travels. But when, exactly, had he fallen asleep? Solas couldn't recall setting himself adrift to be caught in such a swirling nexus of disconcerted memory. The magic in the peculiar place pooled where he stood, thick with tangible currents that tingled as they circulated across his form and danced about his outstretched hands that curiously probed the raw, rolling energy.

"What do you see?" A voice of cold reason, more settled and definite than when they'd last met. The once delightful spirit he had not perceived for some months now appeared assiduous before him; they were the only constant as the progression continued through flood, barrenness, stone cities,
abundance and malady.

"The world as it has always been." The tall mage answered, unmoved by the ceaseless chaos as he considered his oldest friend. They must have called him here; having garnered whatever information it so desperately sought without his rejected aid. This spirit was growing more powerful; to be able to maintain itself here must be placing a great strain on its inherent abilities.

"What do you hear?" The studious tone commanded his audience; they had not come so far and through such depths to discuss anything—but to tell. Cloaked in darkness and battered by the elements of the Fade, the spirit of Wisdom was barely recognizable save but a few loosened tendrils of silver hair spilling out from under their heavy shroud.

Nothing. Solas heard no sound beyond the abandoned echoes of their voices, even as the junctures of mortal war played out across the capricious dream. Shields and swords clashed noiselessly, warriors fell and dissolved into the dark earth, towers built of brick and iron rose only to be pulled down to rubble.

"You must listen." The entity spanned the short distance and indicated for one of his hands. Solas held it palm up between them before the spirit presented a tightly packed fist, knuckles down and hovering over his.

"As you say." Solas remained calm. The spirit's fingers loosened, releasing a fine trickle of sand. Soft and shushing, he focused on the granules, catching sight of intermixed, tiny bone fragments and splinters of glass that bounced off his skin, piling in the center and spilling off the sides to be lost to the evolving nothingness that surrounded them.

"You ignored it last time. The warning was always there." A horrid chill seeped deeply into his chest, tightening around his lungs and clutching at his newly pounding heart; each of the spirit's simple words a biting reminder of prior disasters committed.

Wisdom scoffed— their discontentment breaking through their maintained poise and indifference. "But you will understand now or you will fail. We can give you no more." Solas staggered back as the spirit cast the remaining contents of their hand at his brow, blinding him with the abrasive material before he could shield himself against it. He stumbled in the churning mire, cursing his imprudent compliance as he wiped at his burning eyes.

By the time he'd cleared his vision enough to function the spirit had departed, taking the evolving world away with its disappearance, but Solas had been left behind on familiar ground. He'd walked these derelict stone paths before; he'd touched the Andrastian designs of the walls that rose about him. This site was known to Solas, he could smell it in the air even if he couldn't see with full clarity yet. It couldn't have just been his eyes that made the haze, or blurred the finer details. This was a dream, soft around the edges and half-formed, stitched together with turbulent emotions and harried perspectives.

Dark and ruinous, the shadowy remains of the Temple of Sacred Ashes came to unsteady light as he surmounted the long stair, carefully feeling each step in the gloom. The shouts of battle burned past his hearkened ear in ricocheted waves.

Swords sparked against crystallized flesh, shields thrummed with their thunderous defenses, spells snapped with unquestionable force, the dying bellows of a great demon filled the frenetic night. The Fade pitched violently and Solas stumbled, the shifting field hurtling untold moments forward into the timeline of the dream. Intense dreams were often unhinged and not fluid, jutting in patches and losing portions as they were formed. But this throw had even his experienced legs wobbling.
Solas steadied and continued, catching only glimpses of many of his companions, but they were not in motion. Still as the statues that had once glorified the holy courtyards, their bodies remained carved in form. Cassandra was caught mid-swing, her sword transfixed centrally through its forceful arc. He saw Sera unsupported, dropping from on high, knocking her arrows in pairs. The Iron Bull and Vivienne worked in tandem, frozen minions being smashed to scattered, transfixed pieces under the Qunari's massive hammer. Solas could barely make out the tiny Inquisitor, forging ahead past the stilled body of their deteriorating Archdemon foe. Wrapped in a maelstrom, her focus appeared entirely on the enemy that remained. Clinging to the orb that gave him the power he should never have been able to access—Corypheus remained at the peak of the next stair, primed to deal with the thief and spoiler of his greatest plan.

How long had he been slumbering this time? A month, a year, a decade? Centuries had passed when he’d first begun to dream, lost to time as he searched for answers, but he’d never been thrown into the Fade like this. Something was wrong here. These were most definitely not past events he had prior knowledge of in his last conscious moments. This felt like no other dream he'd ever undergone, save one, but that had been another lifetime entirely... The vision he shouldn't have ignored. He'd been young then, young and foolish enough to believe he was right.

It was clear that this was the final battle they'd endeavored so hard to meet, and he had somehow missed it. If this were truly a dream in the Fade then all he was seeing had already come to pass.

‘Could this be my punishment in death? Though not as I imagined it, I guess dying wasn't so difficult after all...’ He thought himself a permanent wanderer of the Fade, his spirit not allowed to diminish into nothingness. His body must have failed at the base of the cliff, but she had survived, a last wish come true. Now his soul was cursed –forced to watch his influences take their lasting tolls. Solas moved on, keen to see how the world had fared without his continued manipulations. Maybe it was better without him. He’d certainly done enough to ruin it with his last attempts at making a difference.

The Inquisitor clashed with the false-god first, shimmering with the energy that surged from body and staff alike. She was magnificent; galvanized and sharpened. Fastened to her resolve, she'd transformed her body into a weapon for the most paramount skirmish she would ever bear witness too. Chiyo appeared to have amply blossomed without his tutelage. She did not seem to be using magic—she’d become magic. It exuded from her even in captured stillness. Weapon raised high—his own staff from what he could recognize, blazing bright in the middle of casting a powerful spell, she was awe-inspiring and resplendent.

The cry of battle pierced the muteness; an explosive cracking of wood joined the sound, followed by the rushing winds of a disobeyed tempest. A jump in the fragmented vision had the observant apostate reeling. Solas cringed at the erratic change in volume, but his path was unaffected, caught now in the stationary crossfire. He looked behind to find the other warriors, mages and rogues pushed back with the forceful blast, failing behind shields and toppling over one another.

Roars of corroding anger, magic hissing in the air, and then a second explosion of ineffable magnitude all but ruptured the deep chambers of his ears and stole his balance. The air filled with viscous smoke as thick to part as slurry mud, Solas moved staggeringly through the battleground, defending his tender eyes from the inert light that flooded the ruined temple. Still he pushed on until he tripped over the remains of a splintered weapon: a ruined staff that had known his hand, the crystal at its gnarled, twisted tip beyond repair.

There was a ghastly crackling from above, like that of fired glass being thrust into cold water—Solas looked to the heavens and saw a horror that petrified him to the core. The Veil, inadvertently flawed from the moment of its inception, was fractured from horizon to horizon and disintegrating at each jagged line. Soon the spirits that lingered there would come through the spreading tears. Their
suffering would be incalculable as they were forced to enter the physical world. It would certainly destroy all those being, mild or malevolent.

The atmosphere began to fall in chunks, the only motion in the now silent world. It burned as the green essence of the Fade pushed through the devastated divide. The ancient Magister's might had been enough to forge the Breach, yet this wanton power had ruptured the entire divide. Corypheus was nowhere to be found. All that remained in the haze was a tiny body, dashed across the crushed tiles of a darkened sanctuary floor. The elven orb, forged from eons of dreams, she'd exploited had rolled away from her open hand. Fissured into jagged pieces, the last of its power evaporated and left a worthless husk behind no more valuable than the rest of the mashed stones around it.

The lost mage dared kneel down beside her, the grief of the lost orb did not compare to what else lay in ruin. His heart plunged towards the abyss at the sight of scorched hands and blank, empty eyes. The Inquisitor was crumbling; mind, body and soul shattered from within by the draw of using the foci. With nothing left to burn she'd set her life-force on fire, using it as fuel for her overwhelming magic. Solas probed, begging the magic to resonate back with a more hopeful response, but it was dull and hollow, a cave-in over a depleted chamber. In a final effort against their blighted adversary Chiyo had obliterated the inner barrier that had kept her safe, the seal that had spared her original fate. No mortal body could ever have withstood such power, to be a conduit for the magnifying effect of the Orb. To have so much extracted at once, magic torn free of the flesh, had been the Inquisitor's final downfall.

Now she lay broken by her own potency—strong enough to defeat Corypheus, to manipulate the foci of Fen'Harel, to shatter the Veil that had cost him his godhood in its creation with a single, all-consuming strike; but not strong enough to rise from her efforts.

Their enemy was vanquished, wiped from the face of Thedas, but was it worth the irreparable cost?

"Not like this." He heard his voice crack through a throat tight and swollen with the ache of complete and utter loss. The orb he needed to restore his people was devastated, the separation between the worlds he'd given up everything for was dissolving faster than it could be repaired, and the demolisher of both still held one last trace of a smile on colorless, split lips, proud to have given everything she had to save Thedas from the would be god. Solas reached for the fallen mage with trembling hands before the world was ripped away from his conscious once again, leaving him beside a hero's tomb in an endless field of clotted graves.

But no flowers grew from the hurried, shallow mounds; only shards of bright, red lyrium, singing the realm's last epitaph to the lone soul who could hear it. He'd been wrong. This was the death he'd anticipated.

"It was never supposed to end like this."
Must Be Dreaming

Chapter Summary

This isn't real, it can't be. The graves were marked and many. Demons shall never take over Solas, no matter what form they take. She is not his vhenan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Soft.
Caught in fingers.
Wrapped.
Over—under all.
Warm.
Too warm.
The soft is heavy—but it moves.
Chill.
Cold gnaws the damp of… flesh?
A body—must be in one.
It has a face.
The nose is right, but on the head—not hair.
Cloth, clotted hard to skin.
Tongue rips away… stuck to the roof.
Breath.
Expands— it hurts.
Hand on the aching ribs.
There's a pulse.
Alive? Can't be—another terrible dream?

Solas forced his shaky legs off of the low, narrow bed, leaving the warmth of the thick, fully haired ram pelts that had covered him. He sat up in a deep hunch as his feet finally touched the cold floor. The room swam in unsettling circles as his bleary, sore eyes adjusted. The yellowy light of a lantern
offended their sensitivity. Even through his tight-lidded squinting it was much too bright. He did not recognize his surroundings; the cracked, plastered walls seemed regular enough, but the windows were boarded shut and scant other furnishings filled the dingy space. A discolored, slanted table held the offensively burning lamp, smudged with soot and spent oil. An empty picture frame, the canvased image stripped, sat in the front corner, leaning against emptied crates. A wooden chair with a broken leg was left propped by the door. A small pile off castoff, bloody bandages, and ruined clothes lay near the cot he sat upon.

He tried to stand, woozily compelling his quaking limbs to move, haphazardly tripping as his toes tangled in an abandoned blanket left on the ground at his bedside. His ribs screamed under his supportive touch and he nearly buckled, catching himself on the nearby wall to remain willfully upright.

The ache that drummed inside his head was nauseating, but it compared little to the swollen, bruised mash that his flank had become. From under his arm to the top of his hip, the damaged bones protested each of his tottering movements and left him gasping. Step by leery step, he made it across the single room, seeking out his effects and a weapon, anything to protect himself in this state. But none were to be found in the bare abode.

The voices of men caught his ear, rallying the acid of a bitter stomach as the mage dared lean against the closed wooden door. Humans by the coarse sound of it, their common speech was rough but unalarmed. Someone laughed briefly, deep and booming, it was almost familiar to his rummaging remembrances. Perhaps they didn't know he'd come to. Though it was more likely a trap built to lull him into complacency, to weaken him to the point of easy possession. This wasn't real; he highly doubted anyone, even a former god, could have survived that fall. His actual body must have fallen into an unanimated state, hopefully, buried in elvish tradition where it might remain whole. The Andrastians would have burned the corpse and he would be trapped in the Fade permanently. He had to escape before they found him. Solas would not be taken prisoner by their kind, genuine or imagined, not again…

Holding himself together, Solas pulled at the loose door, its hinges did not forsake him with loud squeaks or groans. Met by the cold evening wind he shivered, struggling not to cough. The body that did not feel entirely his own burned from within, dampened with sweat, the wintry air was a shock to the sickened senses. Not far off was a blazing campfire, blocked with the lumpy forms of soldiers, the smell of a cooking meal turned his empty stomach in knots. Their shadows danced across the snowy ground as the flame wavered in the light breeze, bringing with it the temptation of warmth and stewed meat. Some among them were of a strange build. One hulking and the other short, the familiar figures that he saw could not have been sincere. He'd walked the graves again and again, all had perished, the Inner Circle being the first to fall.

'Another dream. Demons showing me what I want to see. They shall not fool me.'

Each footstep came with great effort and cost as Solas tried to stick to the building's perimeter, but his dwindling energy did not permit for proper silence and a stifled cough finally gave him away.

The largest male looked up from his conversation; abruptly turning the excessive horns that spanned the breadth the Qunari caught sight of the escapee elf.

"Hey, look who finally got out of bed." Solas found no aggression in the voice, but he would not trust the beings before him. That's exactly what they wanted, to lure the dreamer in with calm and safety, but demons were tricksters by nature and would prey upon the feelings that would entice him the most. He must call their bluff; force them to reveal their true nature if they denied to let him pass.

"Whoa there, Chuckles." The shortest, stoutest among them rose to his feet, the firelight glinting off
the golden threads of his tunic, the rich red of his hair and the impressive armature on his back. "You feelin' alright there buddy?"

"Tel'ma eosala dinehn ar'ame…" Solas growled through his rough, desiccated throat, in no condition to fight but he couldn't stop the weighty draw of magic he called forth with the verbal intimidation. The frazzled apostate wrapped the essence of the Fade about himself as armor and weapon alike. "Lasa'em etuna!"

"Maybe we should get the Inquisitor…” Varric recommended under his breath to the Iron Bull as their unstable companion spoke again in a language neither had the vaguest understanding of beyond a few random phrases they'd picked up over their travels. 'Hello' and 'don't shoot' were as far as either had gotten. Harsh, biting words were snarled incoherently at them, but the threat being made was apparent. They would not fight their raving acquaintance without good reason, but nor would they allow themselves to be overtaken in his hostile disorientation. Mages were dangerous even under the best circumstances. They would need utmost caution to handle this apostate.

Bull immediately cocked his bulky head, sending the two soldiers they'd been keeping company skittering off through the trifling cluster of repeatedly abandoned and wasted buildings. Both the dwarf and the Qunari began to regret sending Chiyo away, persuading her into having a few moments to herself. She hadn't gone far off, but it was the first break she'd been convinced to take in days. Sleeping only in short shifts, she'd worn herself ragged and exhausted her energy.

The defensive spell Solas had summoned began to burn, melting the fresh and sparsely falling snow at his feet in a wide ring that steamed back up into the cold air. He could barely maintain the energy required for forging a barrier. Even simple standing was taking a heavy toll on the ill mage, but he pushed himself on, taking risks with his magic that he normally would never consider without extreme duress. "Tel'garas mith…"

"Easy now." Iron Bull kept his deep voice low and his hefty hands utterly still, but he was still armed with a blade strapped to his hip. Varric made no move for the crossbow on his back and stayed a step behind the creeping Qunari. Together they trailed the stumbling mage as he managed a few more steps, melting a wide path and turning the thicker patches of snow into slush. "No need to get hasty. Why don't you drop the babbling elf shit and actually talk to us, Solas?"

Tense minutes passed and the irate shouting continued, the cautious pair were nearly struck when they dared get too near in their slow pursuit, but the elf they followed was quickly becoming exhausted—and more unpredictable. The Fade weighed heavily about him, becoming more unbalanced with each manipulation.

"What's going on here?" Their advancing Herald huffed, having returned from her short stroll in haste on a splinted limb. She limped doggedly, the damaged leg just barely supporting her weight.

"Careful, Inquisitor. This one's cracked…” warned Varric under his breath, hearing the uneven approach of their typically light-footed Herald. He kept his sharp, flinty eyes on the ailing mage whose threat had not diminished with the new arrival.

"I thought you guys were going to watch him." Chiyo hissed angrily, handing over a freshly filled rations bag to her wary companions.

"It's not like he was going anywhere when you left. I've seen dead people more up and about than he was." Muttered Bull before the Inquisitor marched ahead, her sole concentration on the progressively agitated fade-walker.

"S-sal'him banal! Harel'asha." Solas faltered, refusing to look at the newest apparition. Not this one,
not the face of the last person he'd failed so miserably. He could not bear the torment of the deceitful presence. This abomination was not worthy of her beloved image, death would have been preferable to seeing it so heartlessly abused. His barely controlled power flared, driving her away as he made a hectic scramble towards the icy woods and unusable dwellings.

Chiyo kept her balance through the shocking blast and bid the others to stay with a halting gesture. She followed the fraught apostate through the less habitable remains of what had once been a prosperous township, dodging the poorly-aimed attacks with quick turns that left her leg ever more painful. Utterly bewildered by his behavior, she tried with all the knowledge she'd gleaned to translate his harried speech. He pressed his thinly clothed back to the frozen, residual wall of another devastated home. Solas could go no further and was now cornered, hardly staying on his feet. 

Solas' words came forth in arduous gasps. You cannot trick me… not real… you are a monster… masked in flesh… I will destroy you!

"Solas, wait." The soft-spoken Inquisitor cringed as he lashed out once more, confronted and failing to keep her away. Struck by a hefty blast that loosened an alarmed cry, Chiyo fell to the snowy ground but determination kept her from toppling far. She had never seen such panic and fear, nor lack of recognition on the habitually disciplined apostate.

You did this… the guilt is on your hands… wounded me… thief of hope…leave now!

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm sorry… you're right. This was my fault." Her voice persisted as forgiving behind the sudden wash of remorse while she pushed back to her feet. Chiyo's choices had hurt yet another who'd depended on her for safety and she would never forgive herself for the pain and danger she'd put him through for her rash decision in taking down a dragon.

"Ane'ma eth sahlin, ane'ma eth sahlin…" She whispered with gentle assurance, forcing her way through the punitive barrier that shocked each slow advancement made and stung at her unarmored flesh. Solas was visibly shaking. The meager garb he wore was soggy with sweat—skin red and slick with fever. She knew he could hear the kind words she spoke, but his nervous, detached gaze wouldn't rise high enough to meet her eye. Instead he vehemently cursed the Inquisitor with every harsh phrase and dispel he could remember. However, his wavering threats fell on unlearned ears.

"Banalfelas ma vhenan!" He yelled fiercely as she came near, proclaiming the ruinous state she'd left upon his heart. Hearing that hurt more than the mending fracture in her leg, it left her head hanging low.

"It's freezing out here, Solas…" Regret splintered her voice as Chiyo slowly stripped off the long, heavy robe she'd been wrapped in, exposing herself to the biting cold. Full, fat flakes of snow sprinkled her unprotected arms and speckled the short garment she wore underneath the draped, furry garb. She offered the warm layer, holding it within easy reach. "Na inan ven'ar, falon."

Solas shook his throbbing head in useless disobedience, but his eyes betrayed him and in looking to see the image of the one that had meant the most he noted the scarcely washed, splotchy stain that spread across the front of her light, thin tunic. Old and browning, a mark of blood that had not been washed clean, but the fabric was untorn. It had not come from any gash of hers. Whose blood had been spilled on her small breast? Solas' hand strayed towards the bandaged wound on his temple, but he pulled it back down in uncertain swiftness. "Ar'tel… nuvena dala. Elvarel ma telir'nehn…" There was more to his mournful, deteriorating discourse, but they were not terms he had ever used with her before.

I don't want to kill you… you were… my only joy.
"Ir abelas, but you have not taught me all those words yet. I can barely understand you." Chiyo dropped the presented robe, letting fall into the crunching snow and offered up her empty hands. She didn't object or struggle as he forcefully grabbed at her lean wrists, one still bearing the dark bruises of his last touch. His own arm still had the marks of her fingers, five deep gouges from where she'd adamantly held on. Solas' strength finally dissolved, knees hitting the frozen ground, his grasp on the Inquisitor the only thing keeping him upright still and his flushed face out of the icy slush.

"Isalama hamin." She murmured sadly, her heart breaking with each of his timorous tremors as he buried his burning face in her captured hands, soothing the feverish skin on his cheek and brow against her cold fingers. This was her fault entirely, she should have never let him come with her nor taken this terrible path. "We have to get that fever down. Will you allow me to aid you?"

**I cannot rest … already dreaming… demons shall not tempt me…**

"Somnial? Dreaming? Solas, vhenan… where do you think you are?" She carefully lifted his head, finally able to look him in the eye. Chiyo searched through the overcast, evading windows of his soul to find the source of his rage and madness. He truly believed that the world about him was made of falseness, lies and twisted memory. The shuddering Dalish wordlessly joined him on the snowy ground, resting her damaged leg on the abandoned clothes. *Din'somniar, I am here*, her chilly lips promised against his febrile, chapped mouth, sealing on that guarantee before he had the chance to turn away.

Real.

So very real. Solas could smell the faint traces of herbs that clung to her skin beneath the salt of long dried, worry spilled tears. Wisps of her soft, unruly hair tickled his face. He could taste the wretched, detestable spice of the tea she drank to ease the multitudes of her stress, a flavor lasting behind the feel of the lips whose shape he'd learned through careful study. What demon could ever copy such tiny fragments of her being? His constricted grasp loosened, but he clung to her in delirious despondency.

"The Fade… I cannot wake up." Solas groaned exhaustedly, the staunchness of her presence steadying his distress and giving him strength where he had none to spare. "I've always been able to wake up…"

"But you are awake. This is real." The Inquisitor encouraged him once more, placing a forgiving kiss beside each drooping eye. She was troubled by the absolute emptiness in his tone and the poorness of his color. "I tried to find you. I called each night when I could sleep."

"You died, you were dead, and I saw it. What happened, Chiyo, we fell and then…?" He trailed weakly, nauseous at the recall of their peril, hiding his face in her hands once more. "I think I'm going to be ill."

"A nightmare. Ma sa'lath. A terrible nightmare. You've been unconscious for four days; I don't think there is anything left in you for that." She carefully helped him to his unsteady feet once he was ready to stand. Shaking with the cold, she placed the discarded robe around his shoulders and let Solas lean against her for as much support as she could give. "Come back with me, I will tell you everything you want to know."

"You're serious? You didn't see her open a rift in the dragon's face? But you were right there, practically in its jaws!" Varric balanced on the rickety chair that would have served more efficiently as kindling than furniture. His jaw was still agape with the retelling and he'd been hoping for Solas' added perspective on the wild affair. For research purposes, of course, not that the author was
concerned with getting all the savory details to write down, he could fill in the blanks later anyways.

Solas pondered, feeling much more himself again as he settled back into reality. It certainly explained the bright light he'd witnessed before all had been lost to him. The Inquisitor had been shining with hard-pressed strength, not just brilliant confidence. A fantastical turn of events that most would believe mad had they not been there or had the carcass as evidence. However, thus far the retold events failed to explain why he'd been thrust so deep into the Fade.

"Boom! Tore its head clean off." Bull added in excitement, making a twisting, explosive gesture with his massive hands and lolling his head to the side, letting his tongue hang limply out of the corner of his scarred mouth. He too appeared just as well off as the Inquisitor and their rumpled apostate. A set of new claw marks shone red and on the mend against his bulky arm, smeared with salve as were the other gashes his body had endured. From his pocket, he pulled out a fine looking tooth, stroking the serrated edge with his shortened digits with great personal pleasure. "We should show him what's left! Just a headless corpse hanging off the side of that cliff! Boss, that was a great fight, I owe you a drink or three."

"That takes care of the dragon though I worry that it is humanity's own expanding encroachment driving these creatures to seek less hospitable breeding grounds... but what about the fall itself? Killing your enemy does not always guarantee victory, and in our incidence we sacrificed all safety to accomplish the feat." Solas continued to sip the thick, warm drink that he'd been handed. Milk still heavy with fatty cream laced with sugary dollops of last autumn's honey; it was far more palatable than the restorative the Inquisitor had prepared. A potion doubled with concentrated, crushed chunks of herbs to give him much needed energy and to cool the fever that left his skin hot and red.

"I finally did it." Self-satisfaction snuck its way over the face of the elf at his side, a joy almost worth the consequences of her ill-considered attempt. "A real fade step—I guess it was more accurately a fade fall. I mean, it wasn't perfect... you paid the price of my miscalculations... But it worked, my timing was just wrong. I used to it make us fall closer to the ground, I should have held out one more tiny second."

"With what energy did you have to do such a feat?" The mage inquired, clearly remembering both their states of exhaustion. Opening the rift through sheer willpower alone had been impressive, but there would have been nothing left in her to spare for another large spell.

"I pulled it," Chiyo tried to explain, grasping at the empty air with her marked hand. The Anchor glowed dully as she recalled the strange energies that had answered her risky command. "It felt like I snatched it right out of the rift, straight from the Fade."

"I-Impossible!" Solas choked, nearly spraying the sweet drink in his alarm, but he managed to cough the rest down without making a mess of himself. The thinly packed mattress he'd returned to felt as if it had fallen away. Magic didn't work that way; it must be drawn from within first, not completely circumvented and stolen out of thin air. Certainly, the ambient energy could be tweaked, toyed with and bent for effect, but flat out and freely used? And on top of that she'd stolen what little energy he had left in him, the last dregs at the bottom of the barrel. Therein lay the answer, she'd pulled and twisted physical energies from the raw source, opening channels that he shouldn't have been able to follow back in a state of unconsciousness. But she'd tangled those magics together and sent his mind along for the harrowing ride.

"I really don't have a better explanation." The Inquisitor ran her fingers over her unkempt hair, smoothing the loose tendrils back towards the messy knot. "The rift was starting to close and I just... took what I needed. But I think some of your magic got caught up with it too, I could feel it pooling with mine. It was... weird. Sorry, there really wasn't time to ask. Does any of that make sense to
"Your theory needs further examination and I am in no place to dissect it now…" Solas placed a shaking hand over his dry brow. His dizziness had returned, but not because he hadn't eaten or drank in nearly a weeks' time. What she spoke of was perplexing, disturbing even and she seemed entirely unbothered by the implications. She'd often manipulated the Fade, using the magic where the Veil was thin, as a free catalyst for the storms she charged. Taking advantage of those static energies, but this was on an entirely different level. He would have to study her further, but not until he found a way to do it without risking himself. Solas could not afford to be tossed into the Fade like that again; the results had been disastrous enough as it was. The fact that his magic had answered her call in the first place was enough to make any studied mage weak of constitution considering the hows alone. "…I should lie down."

"You're not going to get all weird on us again, are you?" Asked Iron Bull warily, standing nearest to the only door. His wide shoulders pressed to the cracked plaster walls, giving his braced leg a short break from his bulk. "Really thought you were possessed or something…"

"I cannot ask you to forgive me for my behaviors." Solas was ashamed of his reckless display, of how far he had slipped from the prudent presence he'd been so careful to build and maintain. They could not know him for the man he was or had been, and he would be hard pressed to repair the damage that had already been done. The state of his health might let some of the behavior slide, but their guard had already been raised against him. "It was completely inexcusable. Mere dreams should never have affected me so."

"Chuckles, you were stuck in the Fade from what we understand. As strange as it sounds to people like us and please, don't explain it any more or I might ever sleep again. I've never dreamt before, but I've had the chance of physically going there twice now in my lifetime." Varric shrugged his cumbersome shoulders. "I can't imagine what it could have been like to be trapped there for days on end. How you haven't already gone mad from it is beyond me."

Days. They said it so simply, a momentary passage of time. A brief collection of hours, a mere blink compared to his extended years. But why had it felt so much longer…

Bidding him goodnight, the rest of the apprehensive company did not wish to test the limits of his recovery, nor did they trust him enough yet to stay within any close proximity. To Solas, that was clear by their tense posture alone. Tight shouldered, backs to the wall, hands kept close to their centers. Bull and Varric were still on edge, and rightfully so. He did not blame them for the trepidation or prompt dismissal. They'd spoken with friendliness well enough, but he had unsettled their once steadfast confidence.

But one remained even after the others had tried to beckon away. A small woman who knelt on his bed stayed near, tending to the wound above his ear with fresh poultice and bandages. No more afraid of him than the wind that rattled the shutters or the snow that pushed through the cracks beneath the door.

A silence had stretched between them, one that he was glad to leave unbroken. There was so much to tell her, but what fate would come to be if the knowledge was shared. How might the Inquisitor alter her choices if she knew the potential outcome? She'd handled disbanding one horrendous future already, it might press their luck to try for a second alteration. But could she reforge the path they now walked and turn it once more from the impending doom? What if it came to choosing between sealing Chiyo's powers permanently to keep her from using them as he'd seen done or risking a likely death by having them unleashed before they broke her? The mounting questions only served to worsen the ache in his head, leaving him tired and ever more miserable for the lonely lot he'd
sanctioned himself to.

The soundless Inquisitor did not protest the arm slipping behind her hip or the long ear that pressed to her breast, listening to the constant, strong strumming of the resilient life below as she tied off the clean cotton wrapping. She gently stroked the hairless crown of his head, tracing a light touch from his knotted brow to the bowed back of his neck. Everything hurt, fresh was the old pain of his failures that plagued him just as much as the new injuries done to his flesh. Yet she was real, so very real, and that was enough. Even if it made all the other wretched truths just as tangible, it was worth enduring. She changed everything, even when she shouldn't. For now his world had not yet crumbled in around him and he would do what he could. There was still time though he didn't know how much. There was still a chance to fix this, even if he knew not where to begin.

It was difficult to loosen the memory of cracked, blackened hands and stilled hearts under caved-in chests, even as their unmarred versions soothed his bleak burdens and guided him from the dark corners of his own mind.

Solas did not have to ask for her help in finally laying back down, still unbearably sore but on the mend with all of the restorative tonics that coursed through his destabilized system. Nor did he need to tell her to stay, though he would have begged if Chiyo had tried to leave. She settled beside him between the heavy furs that held off the frigid evening and the chill of his breaking fever instead of taking to the floor as she had done nightly since the nearly fatal fall. The despairing mage wasn't required to admit that he needed to simply hold her then more than he needed answers to their dilemmas or rest to let his body heal or freedom from the pain that addled his bones.

With his face pressed against her neck, he hid his eyes from the world around him. As far as he was concerned nothing existed outside of that door, outside of the bed he shared.

One night. Just one silent and selfish night to make it through to dawn.

It would have to be enough. Let it be enough.

Solas entered the second level of the library, but he had not traveled up the curved stair in search of any book. Instead of perusing the multitude of available text he approached the pensive man who'd usurped the only window. There were solutions the apostate had tried in vain to solve for alone over the preceding months, but everything he had once considered had been turned upside-down several weeks prior in the Emprise du Lion. The Inquisitor had quite the way of balking his plans, making them worthless with little more than a flashy wave of her hand. Yet after all his pondering and scouring for answers he was no closer to an answer that could help her in their common goal. Perhaps another outlook would shed fresh light onto the quandary that pride alone could not solve.

"Is there a moment you could spare?"

Dorian slowly lowered the book he'd been lost in, entertaining his quick mind with advanced theory and deliberated applications. He peered over the heavy text and eyed the apostate that infrequently sought him out for conversation of any kind. But by the sound of it, Solas seemed to be asking for aid instead of the usual repriming of previously discussed philosophies. "That depends on if we are just going to talk or if you are going to square off with me about my comments on Tevinter casting techniques again. I conceded already that I should not have claimed such originality on our last venture. It seems there was much we borrowed from the ancient elves, you have obdurately brought that to my attention."

"And there is much you take from them still." Solas' eyes narrowed, but he'd already mentally prepared himself for the northerner's usual witticism. There was no end to the man's defensive
rebuttals, ceaselessly grasping for the last witty word. It would take skill to wade through the droll nonsense to reach the cultivated intelligence hidden beneath the highly polished, pompous veneer.

The seated mage closed the leather-bound volume with a snap and added it to the tall pile nearest his over-stuffed chair. "Forgive me if I cannot single-handedly correct every misgiving the Imperium has ever set to its name. I wasn't exactly the most popular and powerful man in Tevinter before I left. Did you come here for worthless politics that arguing changes little of, Solas, or something more within my capabilities of changing at present?"

"Entirely otherwise." The tall elf answered categorically, remaining unmoved by the disregarding speech. He stepped to the side, hands tucked firmly behind his hips, opening a pathway out of the narrow niche. "But not here. Outside, if you're of the mind."

"If we must, the day is nice enough for the South. I could use a walk anyways." Rising to his feet, Dorian straightened his rounded shoulders, eliciting a sound pop from his spine while he rolled his neck. "This chair is not conducive to the health of my posture. I fear it shall soon have me slouching like you over your desk all day." He followed Solas out onto the empty battlements for both privacy and fresh air, shutting the sturdy door behind them to steal a few moments away from other company. The stationed guards across the way could not hear them from where they were.

"How may I humbly be of service?" Dorian asked as they stopped, overlooking the hustle and bustle of the thriving regiments and livelihoods below. It was a busy time for the Inquisition, their homebound size nearing capacity. There was work plenty to be done with new stone and timbers to correct the old fortifications for those with skillful hands. Deliveries from all corners of Thedas crossed the gated threshold and slowly dispersed through the hold. Food, firewood, clothing, all had to be managed by someone who had not chosen to wield a sword or learn a bow. More unhurried men stopped by the Herald's Rest, in need of a mid-day pint or two. The busied troops made their last preparations for the fast approaching mission to the Arbor Wilds, a month long excursion before they would reach their target and send word back to the Keep. It would be their biggest operation yet in thwarting Corypheus, and all were glad to finally have a chance at dealing a blow after what he had done to Haven.

Solas held his bothersome question momentarily, weighing his words with great care. He required aid but he had no wish of exposing the full truth before it was necessary. There would be consequences certainly if it was misinterpreted or received by the wrong ears. "You are an educated man Ser Pavus, a rare thing in these dark and troubled times. Your standing has given you access to that which most would envy, even if they could read it, let alone comprehend. I'd hopes that you could enlighten my understanding on some of the finer details of using a particularly misjudged branch of magic. I have no experience, but the general application has caught my interest. The practices of which are… as you know, frowned upon by most even if it is no worse than any magic drawn from the Fade or produced by lyrium."

"I believe to have caught your meaning, though you are either brave or foolish to trust me with that pursuit." Dorian snorted with amused amusement, but he kept his velvety voice low. He already had enough strikes against him for nationality alone and had no wish to see the inside of a Ferelden prison. Only one man was allowed to put him in restraints, the knots the mighty lady Seeker would fashion if allowed were more likely to snap his neck in haste than what the Iron Bull could do with a simple rope. "And what makes you think I would know anything about such a foul thing? I mean yes, I do know a good deal about most subjects, but that in particular?"

Solas crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for the tedious joke to pass. "You come of the correct background."
"So because I'm from Tevinter I must know something about blood rituals, right? How assumptive, you give me too much credibility." queried Dorian, brushing at the tips of his well-groomed moustache, smoothing the tidy hairs away from his postulating lips. "I will tell you all of my dirty little secrets, but only if you spare me no detail of what it's like to dance naked under the full moon, growing flowers with a song."

"…Point taken." Solas admitted to the equally trite conjecture, it was incorrect of him. Not all those of Tevinter descent were ravenous blood mages seeking to conquer the entire world. Only the majority it seemed at times. "But you do know something?"

"Of course I do! I'm a Tevinter Altus after all!" He chirped, enjoying the annoyance clearly inflicted on the other mage. "But it is not something I observe. I don't care much for some of its uses. It gives others too much power to change the people that don't suit their whims. I would prefer to have more wits about me than a living doll to fulfill another's requirements… or a potato were things to go wrong. I have seen those affected where death would have been kinder than survival. With a clear conscious, I can tell you that I never used my slaves as sacrifices, not that many still keep the old practice."

Solas pushed past his broadening irritation, but the knowledge he pursued was now vital and worth obtaining even through disagreeable consultation. He would need every shred of information available were he to make an attempt at circumventing the future he'd been privy to witness. Even if it had all been a carefully crafted illusion meant as a warning and not an actuality, the message of blatantly clear. "And what do you know about undoing this kind of magic were it wrought onto another? Perhaps not for puppetry or even anything intentionally malignant, but harmful nevertheless. To put it plainly, can the work be removed?"

"That depends…" Dorian paused to consider, intrigued by the mage's unusual bluntness that pressed his tempered words more forward than was accustomed. "How much blood are you willing to use to wash away the old? How much time, magic, and possibly lyrium do you have access to? How strong of a spell are you trying to break? I cannot even begin to guess as to what you'd want this information for…"

"It is unlike me, but I'm uncertain of the finer details. Only recently has it been brought to my attention. I've never seen anything quite like it before, that is all I know for sure." The apostate leaned heavily on the short, patterned stone wall that faced the courtyard, watching the steady milling of the people below. There was now so much that he was doubtful of, for a man who'd once believed himself to have all the answers it was a sharp dose of reality to be so irresolute.

"Aren't you helpful." Dorian clucked his tongue behind his fine teeth before joining his fellow mage in the surveillance. It wasn't long before they spotted their equally gifted companions, talented mages in their own right. The Inquisitor and the Enchanter rambled along the tall edge of the level divide, tracing the built-up wall above the healer's camp. But by the looks of their interaction they seemed at odds, on the verge of an argument with their frequent pauses and dogged steps.

The Tevinter drew his eye from the developing scene and observed Solas, noting a forlorn gaze buried behind the unyielding face. The elf was obviously vexed, but it seemed for the first time that there was more than just magic on his pondering, pensive mind. He'd seen that same stare before, unbridled and unabashed when the Inquisitor had fallen to an arrow on their last extended stay in the Hinterlands. Solas was as terrible of a liar as he'd ever met; he was only better about keeping it to himself. "Maker, how you look at her. Like the last brilliant dawn before the fated noose."

"I know not of what you are talking about." But Solas couldn't force himself to twist his longing eyes away. Head held high, hands on her hips, it was clear she had no intention of backing down from the
much taller, more experienced woman daring it point a finger into her thrust-out chest. Puffed up and as tall as her frame would allow, smallness did not dilute the intimidation Chiyo could exude when pressed. He was not afraid of her, yet he was terrified of the effect she had on his being.

"It seems you don't know a lot of things. Varric told me what she claimed to have done… Please tell me you took notes or I will never consider you a scholar ever again." Dorian began, sighing heavily, considering the unmanageable implications of the near ridiculous magical feat the Herald had managed to perform. "I tried to ask the Inquisitor myself about the matter, but she wrestled with how to put what she'd actually done into words. Magic isn't made of fabric. You can't just yank on its skirts until it gives you a treat and a pat on the head."

Solas could almost hear the other mages, their voices rising to terseness. "And let me guess, you mentioned the new skill to Madame de Fer?"

"No actually, she pulled it from old Bull like a silk ribbon, Ben Hassrath training my ass. That hat of hers does strange things to a Qunari male." Dorian shook his head in dismay. "But I did give her a few sovereigns and told her that she was out of her league as a trainer. She threw them back in my face and referred to me as 'sweetheart' in such a manner I considered hiring a guard for my bedroom door."

"So we should presume that the Lady Enchanter might seek someone better suited?" asked Solas. They were all out of their depths in the matter; the Inquisitor had left all their areas of expertise far behind, leaving them to sort through the dust and wreckage of her advancements.

"Yes," Dorian pointed a long finger towards an unmoving figure standing near the medical tents. "I believe it's that uncanny woman waiting by the gate. Showed up this morning and hasn't budged an inch. I've kept an eye on her all day, strange creature if I ever felt one."

"Hey! Are you my new trainer?" The Inquisitor's voice rang out through the spacious courtyard. It seemed that Vivienne had also informed Chiyo of the stranger's intended purpose.

"I am your trainer!" Replied the eccentric woman, her voice matching in loudness. "I have studied the rifts!"

"Good! Well study this!" Solas tilted over the battlement, hands clenched against the hewn stone as he watched the reckless Herald leap from her perch. She dropped in a blur of luminous green down to the lower level of the yard, much to the equaled exasperation of the accomplished confidante at her side and the many onlookers. A spying Red Jenny, hanging from her window, cackled loudly. She whistled at the vocal snark and the flashy departure, rallying for an encore. But Sera quickly ducked away when the richly dressed mage turned in her boisterous direction before marching away in utter disdain.

"I think I've read poetry about that emotion— I so wish you could see your own face my friend. Let me guess; boulder on the chest, lungs made of lead, nerves full of spiders, is a nug simply kicking at your heart? —dare I say it Solas, you tied in quite the lover's knot." Dorian chortled and nudged at the overwrought elf with his elbow, beaming at the sight of such a stoic man lost for words. "That mark has certainly made a very special mage of her."

"What if it's not the mark though?" Solas questioned, finally looking away as the Inquisitor continued her introductions to the newest resident of Skyhold. "What if this has been her destiny all along, with or without the Anchor?"

Dorian had just begun to walk away, leaving the other man to stew unaccompanied. But he halted,
having one final thought for their original conversation. "About the blood magic…"

"About that indeed."

"Let me write a few letters. Take it easy till we speak again. You still look like that dragon just spat you out yesterday."

By: destinyapostasy @ Tumblr

Chapter End Notes

Previously Unclarified Available Translations:

Tel’ma eosala dinehn ar’ame, Lasa’em etuna- You don’t know who I am, let me pass

Tel’garas mith- don’t come near
Sal’him banal, Harel’asha- become nothing again (dissolve a false image), trickster woman

Ane’ma eth sahlin- you are safe now

Na inan venar, falon- look at me, very close friend

Isalama hamin- you need to rest

Ma sa'lath- my one love

Banalfelas ma vhenan- you are not my heart
Chapter Summary

Nobody said learning Rift magic would be easy. They also never said that the skill would be well received. Sera has plenty to say about it however, and Cole won't stay silent either. Time for a much needed drink...

The front door of the Herald's Rest gradually creaked open and was left inattentively against the wall as sluggish, bare feet scrapped the wooden floor with uncouth encumbrance. Another late in the afternoon customer seeking refuge and relief from whatever the day had assaulted them with, no doubt. Though fatigue shouldn't excuse poor manners the robust barkeep had seen far more disrespectful displays in other institutions of inebriation. He'd been in Skyhold for months without so much as a single incidence involving a live goat, or mages doing dangerous parlor tricks to pay their tabs. No one had set fire to the bar-top with help from a spilled imported whiskey and a badly lit pipe. It was commendable considering his industry.

Without even glancing to greet the newest guest, the dwarf gave a tall mug a quick shine with the corner of his apron and set it down, empty, before an open seat at the high table.

"Cabot." Unable to stand a moment longer, the slight-built elf dropped every expended ounce of her weight onto a sturdy stool and set a hefty tome on the counter with an inelegant thump. So much for appreciative academia with such an expensive looking text; schoolchildren would have given it better care. She sat in an aching heap, as if every fiber in her being had personally taken a thrashing from the illustrious Seeker herself. There were reasons why that particular woman always trained alone, but the drained Dalish woman at the bench had done all the injuring unaided.

"Yes Inquisitor?" The dwarf paid her little attention, it didn't matter what celebrated title was borne when you entered his establishment—everyone paid the same coin for their drinks at the end of the night, except for the Herald. Hers were on the house, therefore she could not complain about waiting to receive an exempt beverage. There were other customers flagging him down for their tawdry pints to attend to first. Shifts in the guard would change soon enough and the last few laggards still hadn't all reached their thirsty fill.

'At least they aren't requesting Dragon Flagons, thank the Maker.' Thought the surly dwarf as he went about his usual business.

"Ale… I don't care what kind." She pressed her forehead to the hand-polished, grainy wood and held the empty container aloft with halfhearted effort. From head to toe her body throbbed, shaky with the hours of exertion that had been required for her new training. Though, as unlikely as it was that she would manage such given her role in the Inquisition, Chiyo never wanted to create another rift for as long as she lived. The novelty had most certainly worn off. If there was ever a day for a drink, it was this one. Though tomorrow looked equally as promising. Might as well mark the rest of the week for all it was worth, she knew her luck better than anyone. Only a steady flow of libations would help her forget her rotten odds.

Were she to name anything the shemlens had ever done right, it was their fine cultivation of spirits—the liquid variety that only possessed you for a night and helped a poor mage forget the Fade all together for a few hours.
The bizarre new teacher had wasted little time upon arrival, pushing the Inquisitor to her utmost limits down in the frozen valley below the hold—a wise location incase her developing magic left her ability to control it. She'd opened rift after rift, executed fade step after fade step. Driven into an unrefined, survivalist frenzy the drill left her panting, on the verge of losing her last meal with the maddening exertions. The Inquisitor had been forced to put aside practically all the formal regiments she'd previously picked up from the punishing enchanter who’d worked with her last. Mannered moves required energy she couldn't afford to waste, not if she wanted to keep up with what was being demanded of her. The ambiguous trainer seemed just as interested in experimenting with Chiyo's bounds as she was in broadening her inept aptitudes. The worn out Dalish mage hadn't minded the extended study or being put through grueling paces, but she'd been unsettled by the tutor's vacant stare, flickering only at the hitches and subtle stumbles incurred. The pain endured had not interested the gray haired woman taking extensive notes, seeking only to give the best instruction available. She'd already taken the great risk needed to be able to share the newly garnered knowledge. The price had been paid, what was a little physical discomfort in comparison to having survived what had killed all of her fellow academics.

"You'll care if it's piss, Lady." Cabot answered, filling another foam-covered, potent order before plucking away the wooden mug and leaving to correct its dry vacancy.

'Try again. Incorrect. Your magic is wrong. Fix it. You cannot harness this power going on about like that.' Her trainer had said throughout the exercises, shaking her head in unclarified disappointment and furiously writing down each mishap.

Wrong. Chiyo turned the word around in her head, manipulating each angle. She'd heard it before, but it had been over a decade since a teacher had commented on the frustrating irregularities. Vivienne had only blamed her remote training, claiming the fault must have come from her instructor. But now a second mentor had seen the flaw in her and had found her lacking for it. The sharp corners of the embittered term cut at her confidence, but it additionally gave her a sturdy shove with all its bulk. She had to prove the speaker incorrect, no matter what. There was nothing wrong with her.

However the attempt to overturn the proclamation had also thrust her straight into an inner wall that could neither be scaled nor circumvented. Something had snagged against the unyielding blockade as she attempted to twist the Veil to do her bidding. The Inquisitor could almost sense it—like a hooked edge in glossy marble—as she drew every last ounce of strength through the depths to perform the advanced magic as requested. Again and again, the flow of magic tore with overuse, leaving her winded and weary. Whatever it was, this hang up that ruined her performance, Chiyo wished only for a hammer large enough to break it down. There was little time to spare for delays in improvement. She needed mastery, and she needed it soon.

"Anything but piss then…" The Inquisitor groaned, letting her spent arms flop down against the counter until she heard the beverage finally sliding down the stretched bar. Chiyo lethargically reached out to catch the common swill but another hand beat her too it.

"Look at you, like real shite, ain'tcha?" Chiyo opened her dark eyes to find a feisty blonde helping herself to the fresh beer, resting a curvaceous hip on the edge of the bar. Her torn tunic, likely stolen from its original owner, strained to contain her form. The red fabric stretched over her ample chest and wide, split runs in the knit rode high on her hips, revealing the obnoxious yellow plaid of her trousers below. "You need something way stronger than this crap. Thank me later, right."

"I'm training again tomorrow." The tired elf sulked, watching an unpredictable rogue tilt back the foamy drink, grimacing as she chugged the barely palatable ale with zest. It ran down the sides of her mouth, wetting the extended sides of her long throat. "I'd rather not be hung-over for my next
scheduled beating… You know, I would hate to throw up on the instructor's boots. Doesn't typically make for good impressions."

Sera slammed down the half-empty mug, sloshing the ale with her gusto. She turned her deep-seated, shameless eyes to the Herald, wiping at her mouth and neck with the back of her hand. "Getting serious about the mage-y stuff. Magic. Things. Not even Vivvy could kick your arse like you do to yourself." She twisted her lips into a disapproving pout, thoroughly assessing the bothersome state the Inquisitor was in. Not much fun to be had when she could barely sit up on a stool straight.

"I kind of have to, don't I? The student must take her studies very seriously." Chiyo swiped for the beer, but came up short as the Red Jenny pulled it away, held just out of reach as a bribe. Sera leaned forward, the edges of her puckered lips softening as she neared the frowning Herald.

"How about… how about not so much?" Sera asked narrowly, holding the cheap prize higher as Chiyo vied for it again. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, her eyes wavering over the thick book, perilously close to the spill she'd made. The ringed velvet would absorb up the stinky swill, but even booze failed to make the very idea of it any more appealing. "Just asking, for… not so much magic? Great, yeah?"

The Inquisitor pulled at her sleeve, covering the palm of her hand to mop up the mess before it soaked its way into her new guide, the smell of ale would be near impossible to remove. She was already filthy from her earlier trials; sweat, dirt and degradation, what was a little more grime going to hurt. A bath was in due order, and she would seek one soon enough. "Do you have any worries about how my magic is developing, besides just not liking it? I remember you approving some of my new talents just the other day… Or do you only agree when I use it for ruses or games and not what it was meant for?"

Sera wrinkled her short nose in agitation, almost into an ugly snarl. "Really, you have to ask what's so bad about the magic stuff? Rift-whatever. You know, like tearing up the world? We've already got one shit-lord doing that enough as it is."

"Rift-mage," Chiyo civilly corrected, but she was stung by the uneasy questioning of her typically brazen friend. Sera's discomfort was more than apparent, but it wasn't the first time Chiyo had seen that same apprehensive look from a pair of elven eyes. And here it was again, staring down at her from on high, the same expression as the elders who'd reared her. Concern. Unease. Afraid. "If I can understand the Fade's forces better I could possibly control them. It could mean a lot to our efforts if I get stronger. It might even keep my friends, like you for instance, from getting hurt. The Fade is already all around us; why not tap into it more?"

"Not helping!" Sera reeled back, unnerved by the implications of constantly being encircled by dangerous magic. She shook violently, trying to force off the itchy feeling that played at her nerves. "I don't understand that stuff, it's scary to anyone smart enough to think for a second. You shouldn't be scared, you're the Inquisitor."

"What has you so scared, Sera? I had magic before this but you didn't complain then. You barely said anything about it at all besides asking not setting your ass on fire." She watched as her companion drained what was left of the ale, seeking courage or drowning her feelings. "I don't understand that stuff, it's scary to anyone smart enough to think for a second. You shouldn't be scared, you're the Inquisitor."

"You really don't know." Sera ogled, dumbfounded by the Inquisitor's complete blindness to her own outward effect on others. She set down the empty cup, shaking her bluntly, self-cut hair over her long ears in discontentment. "Most people are scared, I mean, there's lots of mages here, but most
never see one. Never. Still holing themselves up and away from normal people. Dorian, Vivvy, even Baldie does that. You keep puttin’ it in everyone’s faces. It’s too loud like that. You're weird, and I know you, so you're not scary, but lots of people don't know you… I don't want you to be just a scary mage.” The freckled city elf teetered on the edge of the counter before stepping to the floor at the encouraging side-eyed request of the dwarf attending it. Tired soldiers were already filling in as singles or pairs and there were only so many seats to spare.

"I... people are afraid of me? Actually afraid?" The Inquisitor's dark brow knit into a hard knot as she fumbled with the new knowledge given to her. She turned in her seat and set her eyes to pan over the men and women settling around the tavern. Their conversations full of pleasant jest between peers or the common begrudging of everyday life, but their tones fell hushed when they eventually caught her searching gaze. A quick nod to their leader, and they promptly turned away, much quieter and more hunched than they’d previously been. The seats to either side of her remained unoccupied, besides Sera, no one else came within arm's reach. There was an impenetrable social bubble built up around her now, and she hadn’t even noticed it forming.

Chiyo could accept being weird, nothing about her existence or role resembled any kind of normalcy but people had still been capable of standing her presence or camaraderie before her magic had begun to change. Weird could be forgiven or overlooked. But fear… fear was an icy wedge that most would never tempt to thaw. She’d done that to herself with her pursuits, and now she would have to live with the consequences of being the kind of mage she was rapidly becoming.

Certainly her enemies had every right to be afraid. Unavoidable battle had turned her into a formidable opponent. However if Sera, a determined and stalwart friend in her own right was ill at ease then what could she expect from the rest of her company or even the Inquisition's ever expanding forces? It wasn't just the Red Jenny though; another elf had also withdrawn from her company with the emergence of her new talents... Another mage had resumed the distance maintained between them as they returned from the Emprise du Lion. But that too was her fault, because of her magic…

"I want to get stronger so I can keep everyone safe. So no one else accidentally gets hurt." The Inquisitor muttered dejectedly as she collected her text, no longer in the mood for public drink. She would not remain to the discomfort of others. And she certainly wasn't going to break into tears in front of them either. She’d cried for failed chances she’d had for her people’s gain, for the loss of her precious clan, for Solas when she’d been unable to wake him from the injuries she’d been the cause of, but Chiyo would not cry for her self

"It's not a dagger, Inky. More like a jar of bees; you can't pull magic back once you've done it. Just be careful, all right?" Sera appealed and gave her a sprightly pat on the back before she spun on booted heel to head back towards her sequestered room.

"Ah! Maker's rotting nug-sized balls!" Sera screeched as she caught herself from walking headlong into an unobtrusive young man in a wide hat standing very near behind her. She staggered back, clutching at her chest as her heart raced below. "Creepy! You scared the piss out of me! Spooky little shite. I should clock you for that!"

"Did you need something, Cole?" Chiyo asked as he extended a long arm, running his pale, gangly fingertips over the velvet-bound tome tucked to her side, feeling the crisp new edges and the tight binding. She offered Cole the book and he took it with pallid interest. Sera eyed the odd pair with suspicion before taking her leave; two daunting people were more than enough for her.

"Threads pulled, sky unravels and becomes whole again. Tears opened, but mended with the same hand. You destroy to rebuild. Break the crooked bone and set anew." He answered in his steady
monotone. He'd heard her growing pain and the temperate spirit wanted to help if he could.

Chiyo smiled placidly and joined in him a slow amble out of the quickly filling tavern. Her seat would be better use to someone else and it was occupied by the time she reached the open door. "I'm glad you see it that way, some of our friend's think I'm going to use it to open rifts under their beds."

"You're different, it shines on you, shimmering, sharp. You *make* magic from rifts." Cole hid his face beneath the brim of his hat, much as if he were shielding his eyes from a light that glowed too brilliantly. The mark lay undisturbed in her palm, but through the eyes of a spirit it was a burning beacon. They were drawn to it, like tiny moths to a flame. Yet it was almost too much for them to stand, so concentrated and condensed as it were. Magic in the Fade wasn't so stable and fixed to a point, it went against its own nature to do such. In the eyes of Cole, the Inquisitor had essentially packed the might and force of an entire river into a porcelain teacup. But she would have to be careful, the edges were already chipped and there would be no spare vessel to pour into if this one broke.

"Do I seem that different to you?" the Inquisitor asked simply, curious as to the changes that did not seem so apparent to her but had everyone else on nerdy edge.

"The Fade sticks to mages, little fragments, flitting, floating free, then forced into shapes- fire, ice, lightning." Cole began to flick absentley through the completed pages, ignoring the ones that had already been filled and instead loitered over the blank sheets. He ran a thin finger over what had yet to be ascertained, like a scribe stumbling over a mislaid secret that no one else could read. The emptiness fascinated him. He held the text close to his body, cradling the important item that held no value to him for its intended purposes. "You use the Fade itself; you make it charged but not changed, channeled enchantments. It's strong and pure. And loud. You ripple like water when the stone is dropped. But there could be more. A rising sea to swallow mountaintops, a flood to drown the sky. Why trickle, puddles when there could a typhoon."

Chiyo watched his studious examinations, the way his eyes whizzed over the emptiness beneath strings of golden hair caught aflame in the sinking light. She wondered if the boy understood what reading was, that books were made of words that stayed. Perhaps his only interests in the text were the emotions that clung to the journal, caught between the paper and ink. He was certainly a strange creature that had made her nervous when they'd first met, but there was no end to the kindheartedness he held and the tender help he offered to those around him. Many had believed him to be too dangerous to keep near, unnerved by his insights and tangents. Cassandra and the other Advisors had been strongly against his recruitment, but the Inquisitor had found in him a kindred soul who was probably as best understood as she herself was. "I take it not all mages feel the same way I do? Are we really that different?"

Cole paused, turning the next page and marveling at some unseen illumination, tracing an arching pattern with swirling branches that stretched to each corner with the rough tip of a nail. "Solas is the same, but quieter. The Fade is his friend; he doesn't need to look to know where it goes... Vivienne is crisp and cool, the Fade dances, darts, lashed and leashed... Dorian pulls at pieces, pushing them to bodies. I like him more when it's just fire." But his voice shifted as he spoke, thick with sonorous rage in stark contrast to his distinctive poetry. He clenched at the tome, wrinkling several of the blank pages. "And the Venatori are dark and hard and cracked and old. They pull the Fade with blood and pain and ancient lying whispers."

"I hope you like the way I feel now. I don't think anyone else does." The Inquisitor touched his tense arm, breaking his bitter traction with soothing, silent reassurance. Cole returned the ruffled book and finally looked at her, reading the Inquisitor plainly as any notice or ledger. And he listened, words behind the words, to the pain she could not hide from him. Like the Anchor, it too drew the curious
"Yes, it's different, but familiar, it reminds me of me. But they don't see them in you. They see death and terror and tomorrows that will be lost and yesterdays that couldn't be saved. They see a mother, a Keeper that didn't choose them." Cole stared through her and into the swirling nothing that lingered between their worlds, his piercing rainwater eyes immobilizing the Inquisitor where she stood.

"Who are you talking about, Cole?" Chiyo swallowed, hard. Her throat suddenly becoming dry, and tight, preventing her hitched breath from rising in full. Alarm and an inner warning began to rise, formed low in her belly, climbing and clawing towards her tensely held limbs. But fearful curiosity remained, daring her to pry into the dark cavern of her own memories and disturb whatever dwelled inside. "Who is 'they'?"

"One over many. Flesh of my flesh. What is an arrow without feathers or head? How will it slay the beast when it opens its mouth?" uttered Cole, his words a flummoxed torrent breathily sighed instead of clearly spoken. He drew closer until his head loomed over hers and his wide hat eclipsed the dwindling light. He slipped a lone finger beneath her unbuttoned collar, fishing out the thin cord that had lived so long against her skin that Chiyo almost never recalled that it was there. He drew it till the fang came free, dangling in the open air between them.

"S-stop." She stammered, immediately regretting ever asking for more. Her palms grew hot as she clenched them to her sides, stopping them from observably trembling. A bubbling dread gurgled from the forgotten corners of her mind. A maternal aunt who packed an extra bag before the commencement of an Arlathven. Young cousins not permitted to say goodbye. Silent answers when she asked if her mother will be there. Cole spoke not of the Inquisition, but a past she had removed from most recollection for her own wellbeing. What good would come from dwelling on what could never be undone.

"You don't make any sense!" But he did—almost—and that petrified the Inquisitor even more.

"They prayed for a weapon that would grant a victory. And they were heard." Cole continued, numb to anything beyond the hum of her concentrated suffering. There had to be understanding before there was help. She would feel better if she did. The confusion wouldn't hurt anymore and there would be no pain. He pressed the pad of his thumb against the pointed tooth that had lost its edge, which would have drawn blood if it hadn't been intentionally blunted. "But they forgot for fear and failed. They were so frightened. There was no bow left to aim with. They broke the arrow, cracking it with low, little lullabies. But not enough."

"Please, no more!" She could feel a frightful stirring within herself, a frequency that threatened to shake loose a pearl of pain from the heart she'd buried it in. Chiyo tried to bolt, anyplace would suffice but where she stood. She didn't want to listen, not any more. She snatched away her charm, straining at the aged leather until it snapped free from her neck, but it remained tangled in his fingers. Cole caught her by the arm and refused to let go, his strength overshadowing the thin body he maintained.

"You could still save them. But you have to accept it first." He beseeched in a whisper so tender she nearly wept as he pulled her close, his hold unrelenting but not harmful even as she fought to get away. Cole called to the broken child that had never fully healed as she'd grown up and moved beyond her past.

"You can't help me, Cole. Not this time." The Inquisitor had closed her teary eyes, breathing deeply as the pressures inside her chest immediately dissipated with her refusal. She searched her heart, wrenched upon by his gentle prying, for the truth she'd always been too frightened to ask for and found nothing inside but nauseating chaos.
"I'm sorry," Cole finally sighed, withdrawing and releasing her from the struggle. She would not let him in and he could not heal through refusal. "I can't make you let it go. You have to want it. I can try again."

"No. Just tell me though… what do I have to accept?" Chiyo asked as he placed the ruined necklace back into her hand, carefully closing her fingers around the white fang.

"The blood to make things better."

By the time she opened her eyes again, Cole had already vanished.

She could use that drink now. A hot soak first, and a very large bottle to follow.

Way of the Rift Mage

There are no tomes dedicated to this manipulation. There has been no time for academics, only the practical - and not in a manner that mitigates risk. Power in a raw form has found an outlet, both visible and in ways that only we of arcane proclivity can sense. The risk is great.

An account:

From this page forward, these are the notes of Thelric. They began as the work of my mentor Julion, and I will continue in the research she began, as she cannot, because she is dead. The rift we were examining did not react well to her last investigation. We believed ourselves prepared for demonic manifestation. We were not prepared for how the energies we expected would be encountered. Well-versed in the forces that magic can produce, my senior was surprised by an alternation, a deviance. That which previously had to be coaxed is now a flood that must be staunched. The same amount in different intensity, quick to expose fault in the way it is accessed. She drew too much, expecting resistance. There was none, and her form suffered the brunt. Tread carefully in studies of new matters, for I cannot unsee the end of her.

-Codex
Solas has been hiding from Chiyo long enough, their paths must cross again. He can no longer keep his sentiments in check in her presence and one more kindly touch will certainly be his ultimate undoing.

**Chapter Notes**

**Warning:** NSFW. Contains- alcohol references, adult language, super vague anatomical descriptions, and non-explicit sexual situations.

Solas could not remember a time when dreaming held so little appeal. For once, remaining on the side of the present—of reality, was more than enough to hold his full attentions. And there was much to consider. Trouble was brewing deep in the south and what unknown beast laid below the Dales would not be left undisturbed for much longer. They only awaited new reports from the scouts, just that morning been sent ahead, before leaving to join the fray. Solas himself had not explored those dark and twisting woods for some years, and could only take educated guesses as to what they would find still lingering there. To speak with any certainty about what Corypheus sought or what lay deep in that shadowy forest denoted madness, not intelligence.

He’d vexed through many long, pronounced evenings, having learned of the suppositions that Morrigan over confidently spouted across the war table after their return from the Emprise du Lion. To think of the nerve that woman must possess to audaciously tout her alleged knowledge of elvhen lore and even to rub the nose of their Inquisitor about her Eluvian was demoralizing. The condescending Witch had certainly been most wise to decline his entreat to view her appropriated mirror, and wiser still not to trust him being anywhere near it. Let her dabble while she may, but her antics would eventually come back at her for owed recompense. Such foolery always ended thus.

As much as he did not want to expose himself to the same Fade that had battered him during his decline in Orlais, Solas would not waste a chance to seek out his now silent friend. No whispers, no hints, no energy left where they often had dwelt. He feared the gifted vision had cost the spirit dearly. Such rare contributions of foresight were never exempt, but much of the price had not been paid for by him even if Solas had not left the dream unscathed. If only he knew what to do with the information granted, use it to prevent what must never come to be, if that were truly the path before them. A plan would make the suffering endured worth it. But he had none.

He’d snuck away yet again, abandoning the rotunda where he normally resided. Finding solace in the oft unused study deep beneath the Keep, he was free to pursue all manner of plagued thoughts, unobstructed and uninterrupted by any company—amicable or otherwise. Solas pushed open the habitually overlooked door. The castle had been in a ruinous state when they’d commandeered it. No one had the energy to waste on repairing the forgotten personal library of a long dead scholar, stuffed from floor to ceiling with archaic texts. It still had yet to be amended or repurposed. Replete with dusty, moldering books and sagging cobwebs, he doubted anyone but he and he alone ever
beckoned its walls but in passing. Not with the wine cellar and the larder so near a distraction.

But he stood corrected. And very wrong.

The Inquisitor had balled herself into the frayed velvet armchair, her knees pulled tight to her body and crammed beneath the over drawn wool of her sweater. She hiccupped, looking up from her red-eyed stupor, cradling a tall bottle beneath her chin. Registering the man filling the dark doorway, she deliberately set the bottle to her lips once more for a stretched, unhurried sip.

"I never thought you much the drinker." Solas watched her with masked unresponsiveness, returning once more behind the wall he’d so carefully maintained before he’d allowed their incurred frivolities. It was necessary now; she had already seen too much and worn his staunch resolve nearly through, leaving wide perforations in places that could not be painlessly repaired. He’d already considered that it might be better still if he left. It would be easier to avoid her entirely with miles or an entire mountain chain between them, but they were both still intrinsically part of the Inquisition and their paths had to cross again eventually.

"I'm not sure what anyone thinks of me… anymore." Chiyo groaned lowly, rolling her stiff neck until it gave a satisfying pop. "Oh wait, that's a lie. Forgive me for being so naïve. They think I'll open one damned rift too many and end the world before Coryph-ehhh…ypheus gets another chance. Wouldn't that just be perfect? All this hard work and sacrifice wasted because of an elf trying to fix things for people who don’t care what it costs."

She began to chuckle, blunted and rough and mostly to herself.

Solas eyed her as he crossed the narrow room, spotting the newly crafted tome she'd cast aside, pages carelessly splayed on the shabby, smudged floor. He corrected the volume, returning it to the safety of the desk. "Their entire lives have been altered by a sole manipulation of the Veil. They lack understanding, but they will forget such apprehension once they see the magic put to better use."

"And once this is over?" She hiccupped again, pressing the cool, green-tinted glass to her overly warmed cheek. "What will they do with me then? How long will my good deeds keep me from behind bars or out of… of exile? Oh… Oh, or their favorite option for dangerous mages. Death. They might jump at that chance. Grind me up, put an end to my nonsense and name a temple after my decaying ashes."

"It would not be the first time." He pried the nearly empty wine bottle from her hands, soliciting an unbecoming pout from the despairing mage in the chair. Solas spotted the cork on the worn-down desk—with her small utility knife stuck in what remained of the destroyed stopper. It had been an excellent vintage before she'd abused it with her excess; 8:69 was a notably decent year. There was no sense in wasting the last few succulent mouthfuls. He swiftly drained the last of the bold, acidic contents, finishing the theft before she made herself sick.

"Thank you… for the confidence." Chiyo huffed, watching the exceedingly provoking pulses of his taut throat from the corner of her peeved eye. For a roused moment she wondered if the tart liquor would taste any different on the broad lips currently puckered around the narrow mouth of the bottle. "And then another steals my drink...wonderful. Not that I was thirsty or anything."

"I think you've had plenty." He set the consumed bottle on desk beside the book, ignoring her evident irritation. His tongue and esophagus burned as the flavor passed, sending a slow liquid fire all the way to his stomach. Solas would have pegged the sweet-toothed mage to have been lighter in preferred taste instead of the heavy red she'd pilfered. Though more likely she’d only made a grab for whatever was nearest in reach.
"And I think you are being un…unfair." The Inquisitor's words were beginning to blunder a bit more, but even through her wine induced haze the intent was sharp-sided and clear. She was not pleased with their new conditions, not when all had been going so well before he’d recuperated from his injuries. That following morning had begun the painful separation anew. Chiyo had not been accepted back into his arms since that terror filled night had passed, his reverted iciness and separateness had both confused and bruised her deeply. She’d rescued him from the depths of his despair with empty, open hands and forgiving lips, and in turn he had discarded her affections and withdrawn fully from her company.

Solas set his face into a solemn veneer. It hurt, to force the distance again—they'd hardly spoken since their return. Nor had he touched her once since his frightful recovery. He had made himself intentionally unavailable. Not as punishment, but for his own sake and vulnerability. His disposition had already failed him miserably; Solas was his own worst betrayer. He dared not even to entertain what another gentle stroke might do to his current state, and knew not if he would survive the temptation of having her so near again. Already he struggled to keep his seeking fingers still and away.

"There are other duties we must consider vh—Inquisitor." Where there should have been solid responsibility and good intention Solas only heard his own growing doubts. He evaded her direct gaze, denying the corporeal plea of wine-stained lips asking for the end of their afflictions or the short waves of white hair that solicited to be tucked back behind a delicate ear.

"I don't care. They do not suit me." Lacking all sense of the grace she'd normally be capable of Chiyo rose. The woozy Inquisitor stood on the seat of the chair, using the added height to force his recognition. She wobbled tentatively, knees unsteady beneath her, towering a full head over the taciturn apostate that had pulled away.

"Why do you do this?" He chafed and forbade his hand the attempt at bracing her, even as Chiyo faltered on the worn-out upholstery.

"Emphasis. You wouldn't understand because you are tall." She tried not to lurch, catching herself on the high back of the precarious chair that rocked on stumpy pegs. "So when Krem does it its chair—charismatic and eccentric. But when I do it—"

"You are drunk." Solas cautioned, shaking his head in apparent disappointment. He must be firm. He must not break from his resolution again. He could ill-afford to have her change any of the scant remnants of his once balanced world. Conviction and resolution had abandoned Solas' mindset, his plans no longer held any weight or value while he was in her presence, not if he couldn’t include her in the future he strove for. She was never supposed to have exceeded the limits of a pleasant distraction or flirtatious colleague—

"You love me."

The bold words hung in the dry, stagnant air, remaining between them thick and rich as Orlesian tapestry. Each tiny syllable an effervescent hue in the woven emotion that wrapped its way about his ears, it fell heavily over his shoulders and knotted against the increase of his desperate heart. A repressed fantasy from her mouth made real, given weight and composition. An offering to come in out of the lonesome cold and into a warm embrace.

"You hardly know of me or my interests…" More lies to feed himself, but they refused to be swallowed, clinging to the back of his tongue more than the thick-legged wine had. That was the problem, wasn't it? That she knew but didn't know, that she had slipped so far into the dark reaches of his heart with no light of honesty to guide her path that he doubted he could ever remove her wholly. He might place half the world between them and still never be relinquished by this one small
elf. Solas could spend the rest of his cheerless life drawing out tiny, glowing filaments of golden bliss. Threads left behind in her brief stay from where she'd tried to piece him back together, forever marking her well-intended attempts at loving him.

"Oh, don't I?" The Inquisitor swayed as she tipped forward, leaning as close as she could get without touching him. Her lips curled into a seductive grin round binding words of wrinkled silk, looking down through lowered lids how miserably breathless the man before her had just become. "I can prove it."

The weakness was coming back again, how easy it would be to give in and have her once more. It had to be the wine, Solas thought, making his heart race as he stared into her softening eyes. Solas raised his rejecting hands, on the cusp of turning her words once more against her wit. But he was forced to revoke his withdrawal as she unexpectedly slipped off of the tattered seat.

"Careful!" The apostate dipped to catch her, managing to seize the drunken Herald against his shoulder without her ever being in danger of hitting the unforgiving floor.

"You are reckless, and rash, and-" His sharp-tongued rant sizzled out as she laughed, her body shaking with all it had against him. Realization dawned on her intent. He'd misjudged her superficially random behavior, not entirely or honestly as arbitrary as he'd first concluded. Chiyo must have discovered that he'd been hiding here, then figured out his routine patterns on when to find him and finally she'd calculated exactly how far she had push to draw him right back in. Solas had been outwitted before he'd even known he was playing a game. "You knew I would catch you…"

"Please don't hate me." Chiyo wheezed through her delight as he hoisted her higher onto his shoulder so that she hung down his back as grandly as a sack of vegetables or bolt of limp cotton. Rump in the air and hip pressed to his ear, it was not the most honorable appearing transference.

"I could never hate you," Solas sighed in conceding resignation, hooking an arm behind her knees to keep her steady and from being dumped on her curly head. "But I am putting you to bed before any more trouble comes of this indiscretion."

"So serious…" Chiyo grumbled, hiding her eyes from the dizzying array of patterns passing on the tiles below as she was carried off. "Varric said the exact same thing, not so elegantly mind you. Too important for shena-na-naigans… or something. He also said I was quite heavy."

"You're not." Solas was not burdened by the weight of her body. He was by no means imposing in feature, but he was not as slight of build as many of the modern elves had become through necessity and scarcity—it was the nearness that hampered him. Her promising warmth could not be disremembered as it permeated his rigid body where they met. The smell of her skin could not be kept from his nose, lingering fragrances of recent soap, currant and apricot; undoubtedly a gift of Antivan origins. The laden mage industriously carried her up the stairs, back towards the main public hall. At this late hour they were likely to find it empty, all for the better considering their strange, indecorous entanglement.

"Cole says our magic is comparable. What do you make of that?" Chiyo mused as they surmounted the first climb. Her gentle tracing of the ribbed-knit in his tunic was already enough to drive him mad, fingers toying at the tight fabric above the small of his back. Solas was doubtful if he would mentally endure the following flights.

"You speak much of your friends." Solas jostled her, his own unminding fingers finding scornful reason to trail against the back of her snuggly bound thighs. Perhaps he could keep her talking, to move away from the especially recent declaration and focus on matters beyond their condemned liaison. Any distraction would suffice, to force his mind onto other notions. "I use similar techniques,
yes, although it took me years to learn them. But why did you choose such an esoteric area of study? Surely, there were other options."

"It seems to be my calling, wouldn't you say. You know, the whole mark business and using the Veil as my personal plaything." Her voice dropped in velvety mimicry, disapproval of the suggestion profoundly audible. She gestured a hand flippantly, brushing away the grieved ridicule.

"Is that how Madame de Fer termed it?" Solas speculated if that's how their argument had sparked; through patronizing insinuation. He paused at the next doorway, glancing first for unwanted spectators before crossing the quiet hall. Solas caught only the retreating figures of an enigmatic Warden and a dark haired, gold swathed Ambassador on his arm. A quiet courtship of respectable and chivalrous nature, there was nothing so insidious to hide between the virtuous twosome. Their slow departure left the hall uninhabited.

"Possibly…" She returned with sheepish indignity, straining as her ribs pressed too hard against the breadth of his shoulder. The Inquisitor would have sworn her previously soused endeavor with the dwarf had been more comfortable, but perhaps it was because she'd been so much closer to the ground the last time she'd been hauled off from overindulging on drink. He most certainly had not managed to carry her up the creaky stair to her quarters. Varric had only been kind enough to drop Chiyo, deserting her at the first door and wish luck for her dubious journey. The tall mage took each step with the same careful treatment given to her as he had before his changed attitude, mindful, gentle and steadfast. "It's not a game though. I just… do things that don't make much sense. They just happen and make a mess. Shit, that didn't make sense either…"

"Are we adding tonight's foolery to that list?" He flinched with her harassed jab, soundly poked with a sharp thumb to his flank. The mean joke had not been missed by the quick Herald. Finally Solas reached her lofty, well-furnished room, still mentally intact for all he could measure.

"You're an ass and you know it." The inebriated elf wiggled again, seeking the solid floor that was far from easy reach. If she stretched, her hands might find the back of his knees, but instead she used them to try to push away from his sturdy torso. "Hhh… my head already hurts."

"And with that I am certain that you're still drunk." Solas proceeded to march with her still caught on his shoulder beyond the short sofa by the stair and past her available bed. As an alternative to simply depositing Chiyo to her mattress he continued into the small washroom tucked beneath the unused second level.

"Hey… Hey, you missed it… my bed is that wa-" Was all she could manage before being brusquely dumped into the cold, undrained bath that she had enjoyed several hours prior when it had been freshly drawn. The Inquisitor had flat-out refused any additional service on her behalf, requiring nothing more than someone to watch her cultured plants while she was away. It embarrassed her to think of anyone coming behind her, handling her messes. She could manage her own effects, make her own bed and empty her own bath. But even then it seemed that a servant or two couldn't help themselves but to dust and tidy the Herald's room when they found reason enough to be there.

The chilly water made her sputter and gasp as she burst upright, coughing and soaking the floor in her startled haste. Curses fled from her furious mouth towards the fleeing man who left her to recover from the sudden shock. Hackles raised, she clamored out of the wooden tub—slipping on the slick surface as she went on tumbling hand and knee, livid as a cat tossed for a soak. She had righted herself by the time she reached the open door.

"Oh good, you failed even to drown. Feeling better?" Solas asked callously from his poised seat at the foot of her bed. A dark, severe gaze met her, knowing all too well how harsh he was choosing to be.
"Fenedhis nan, harellan!" Chiyo viciously spat, stumbling across the chilly floor, water running off her clothes in heavy rivets.

"I've taught you better words than that." He jibed in return, arms crossed and waiting unwearyingly for her next onslaught. A sharp brightness had returned to her eyes as she forced the dripping mop of hair away from her reddened face, though he couldn't say that the light in them hadn't come from an unbridled storm. Lightning lived in her brilliant soul and she'd never shown hesitation in using it. "There are other matters you and I must discuss. Your new magic being one of them. What you are trying to master is dangerous even at best, but it seems you are more concerned with how others perceive you than the hazards of using rift-magic."

She fought to liberate herself from the cumbersome knit that hung from her frame and sagged nearly to her knees in watery weight. With effort, she finally cast the sopping lambswool aside to splatter thickly on the stone. The Inquisitor's chest rose and fell with riled haste beneath a thin undershirt, undaunted by the transparent exposure. Resentment coursed through her veins as she scrutinized him, with clenched fists shaking to her sides.

It wouldn't be hard, Solas thought, to get her to despise him. A few little pushes, the right words, enough unsympathetic rejection to spurn her affections and the fatal agitation of his heart would be over. No involvement, no conflict, just pure objective and rational once more. It was simple.

Except that it wasn't...

Nothing about evading his love of her could be. Together they had never known uncomplicatedness, through everything that had transpired, except in the inescapable falling itself. That had been wretchedly easy, so tempting and innocuous at first. Only in trying to retreat did he even realize he'd already been hopelessly trapped. Instead of the anger he'd anticipated to ignite Solas instead watched as she slipped into sinking sorrowfulness.

The prior prodding at her worst fears had left her internalizing each choice and mistake, keeping every ounce of perceived blame for herself.

"If I succeed they will reject me once this is done. They will look at me as another potential threat." Her voice cracked bleakly as she shuddered with a turbulent mix of being cold and a drowning concern for the future. Solas sat in silence as she emotionally spiraled, standing immobile in the midst of a spreading puddle. Chiyo had already constrained her fury inwards, forcing it back down without self-mercy and merged it with the pain a compassionate spirit had recently renewed.

"And if I fail they will soon denounce and forget me. Because we'll all be dead or worse." They were weighty words for such a light and expressive mouth, for one who hadn't seen the final cost of failure. But Solas was content enough to hear her understanding of their situation at large. He considered her, the devoted heart he should have never taken or played with, grown so morose and resigned and… unbelievably beautiful. It was difficult to prevent his eyes from tracing the outlines of her saturated chest. The evident blush of stiffened nipples a tantalizing display beneath the clinging cotton tunic she shivered in. A guilty glance was enough to make him regret ever bringing her here in the first place. He should have turned and walked away from that dusty study door the moment it had been opened.

"There are many who will see you through to the end." He added with feigned indifference, however hers was a story Solas was already far too familiar with. His efforts to change the world had come with a debt he feared would never be paid off, no matter how many years were left to him. He'd had lifetimes to slowly create what was supposed to have been the perfect solution and it had failed woefully. But the Inquisitor had mere months, maybe a single year, if fortunes were generous to do the same. There were no odds in her favor beyond dumb luck and courageous perseverance.
He’d had the fully powered orb to help him then, she had nothing more than an unstable key.

"Will they step away and watch from a safe distance? Could they…" The Inquisitor suppressed words that felt erroneous as she began to approach him. "They’re frightened… they always have been, but now they have real reason to." She crossed the open floor, her wet feet slapped the hard stone until they found the thick rug beneath her bed. Chiyo stepped near but held out her hand, flinching as the mark flickered sourly from overuse. Breaching the forced gap, she placed her infected palm over his chest, studying the gaining thrum below.

"Are you afraid of me too?" She asked, fingers sliding upwards, crossing his collar and throat until they found the sharp line of his jaw, the vivid green light from her palm glowing against his wanting skin. One meager touch would have broken Solas; but now his fate was sealed and doomed entirely.

"Look at me and tell me you aren’t afraid. I remember what you called me that night… the way it fell from your tongue." Gazing down her thick lashes Chiyo searched through his impassively held face for unexpressed truth. She inched forward, pressing her dampened thighs against his knees. "Monster masked in flesh. You meant that."

He closed his eyes, bidding in vain for his hands to lay unmoved, but he was captivated by the bewitching and perilous invitation. The ravenous want within him strengthened, chasing away the qualms of retribution and the fallacy of his need. There had been a time when he would have bowed to no one or bent for any conceivable reason. When others had trembled while he'd dare darken their doors and no adversaries challenged his will. But the Wolf, lurker of nightmares and harbinger of dread, within him had been laid low by a mere mortal woman who knew not his designation or the grievances he bore against her people.

"I am afraid," Solas turned into her feather-light trace, his lips chancing the flesh of her wrist as he spoke. "Very afraid." He couldn't lie; she'd stolen all his willpower and left him defenseless.

She'd been born in the wrong age. Had she existed in the golden era of the elvhen her gifts would have been celebrated and praised through the centuries. She'd stood a chance at rising through the ranks of any circle of her choosing, with enough following to have ascended the highest honors. But then again, who was to say the fates wouldn't have been equally as cruel, left in a caste where her talents would have been squandered or even abused. Where rivals could have torn her apart for her advancements or killed her out of jealousy.

"But not because of that." The Inquisitor's breath hitched in awaited misery, but Solas continued, covering the offending hand with his own, pressing it firmly against his face. The strain of the flailing attempts to sever his affections had grown too fierce. He couldn't do it, not like this, his longings were already sown deep. How long had he been so shamefully tangled in her kindly traps, spared this last killing blow. "You've undone me, Chiyo. All of me, what do I have left to fight with that you have not taken?"

Solas ardently pulled her to him, hating himself ever more as he did what could not be permitted. He had to let her go, to forge the distance once again, but that did not stop him from grazing her granting lips and offered jaw. Duty did not halt him from satisfying the emptiness of the hands that had sought her in vain each night since they’d returned home. Guilt failed to stall his fingers from sliding over the damp clothes that clung to her chilled skin. Shame had lost its leash; his starved mouth skimmed the pulsing vein of her throat, provoking a sudden gasp when he applied his blunt teeth.

"Why do you tease me so?" He protested as Chiyo pulled away, her cheeks rosy with gratified discomposure. Solas stretched for her again as she evaded his hungry hold, he was lost for the security of inhibition. "Will you make a beggar as well as a fool of me?"
"You think too much, vhenan'era." Chiyo goaded with a playful smirk, wresting away her second layer with deliberate gradualness and letting it join the sodden sweater. She too could play the little game he’d often tortured her with, denying satisfaction throughout their briefly amorous interludes. "I'm tired of thinking, and talking, and worrying, and lamenting. Aren't you? Now, your turn."

Solas hooked his fingers into the nape of his shirt, pulling it and the totem he no longer wished to bear off in a clean swoop. They slipped away to the floor, dropping in a small pile. It was senseless, to cast aside such ancient resolute, but he felt entirely subject to her whim. His determined eyes never faltered from her form, lingering over modest, damp breasts and down a slender waist and the unexplored beginnings of curved hips.

"You have led most of tonight's conversation, have you not?" Her nakedness had been witnessed before; the sight should not have caught the air inside his lungs. The scar from an arrow removed remained from that dark, terrifying evening when he’d first compromised his reservations. There was nothing uncommon about her physicality, small and leanly muscled, flecked with earned markings from her trials in various degrees. But the bursting soul that lived just beneath the skin—rare and remarkable, stood before him now, accepting and unashamed. That alone was marvel enough.

"Just making up for lost time." The little flicker of mischievousness returned as she played with the lacings on her breeches. He dared not consider if she knew the torment each slow, deliberate pull created. "I don't want you to avoid me anymore. I won't let you."

Solas had not been wrong in his initial description of her person; indomitable indeed, in both focus and will. He gathered that the rest of the world could turn their back on her and she would manage, somehow—but not him. She would never accept such a discarding and there would be punishment in retribution for the attempt. How far gone had he already fallen when he'd spoken to her then in Haven, ensnared by bright eyes and inquisitive words?

But just as quickly as it had been ignited, her heated mood immediately floundered when she tried to slide the undone, tanned leather off of her hips. "Oh shit." Her annoyed voice cancelled the sensual entreaty.

"Have you… changed your mind?" Inquired Solas, his fervor rapidly draining. Leaving behind only a budding amusement, he watched her strained attempts to dislodge her breeches, hopping in place, and pushing to minimal avail. The dehydrating leather had begun to shrink, constricting around her hips and legs. Chiyo turned shamefully red as she struggled, nearly tripping on the moistened carpet in her untimely misfortune. Still not on the dry side of sobriety, the Inquisitor began to panic, gracelessly bent over at the waist. "They won't come off!"

"You… you're not joking." The apostate gaped as she spun, flopping belly down onto the bed as she whimpered in defeat, unhappily pleading for aid and an end to be put to her embarrassment.

"Just shut up and help me. This is your fault." Chiyo griped as he began to chuckle faintly, the absurdity of her condition disarming the havoc of his strident convictions. Solas leaned over and took a firm hold of the tailored material around her hips, his soft snicker growing ever more into an open, robust laugh. She caught hold of a bedpost before he gave a rather sharp tug, releasing her nearly to the tops of her thighs and stole a diverted stroke from her exposed rump with a passing finger.

"Says the woman who steals extra sweet rolls…" He teased lowly, barely evading a well-deserved kick. He pulled again, turning her trousers inside out and setting her free as he himself was nearly dismounted from the wide bed.

One more chance, he could still walk away. It wasn't too late. The sincerely smiling apostate knew he shouldn't be here, more than well enough. However knowing alone wasn't sufficient to stop him.
He shouldn't be in her bedroom, not at this hour, stripping her of clothing like some boyish reprobate caught up in an illicit dalliance. But the horrified, indignant look she threw at him then was almost enough to make up for the disgrace he'd become.

"You do it too!" With rosy cheeks puffed, humiliatingly provoked, she rolled over before dashing the offending garment away to the sopping pile.

"I'm not the one getting stuck in my clothes." Solas paused, standing to leave. But he was consumed by her stark nearness, donned in nothing more than the blood writing that tarnished the high reaches of her cheekbones, of branches that never had swayed through every storm she'd borne them through. But something was missing. Marked only by a thin, red line at the base of her neck; a cherished memento was glaringly absent.

"Your necklace..." Solas could not hold his questioning. It seemed much unlike her to have it removed for all its sentimental significance.

"Don't ask, not tonight." She denied to answer as she reached out and hooked her fingers into his belt, encouraging his unhurried return to her bed. Solas didn’t argue against the light pull, it was all the reinforcement he needed to justify his next excuse to touch her. His hands slipped haltingly down the supple skin beneath her breasts, stopping only when they had discovered a more than satisfying home against the outer curve of her hips as she straddled his reseated lap. He would not be so quick to escape again and disbelieved that another occasion to do such would find him anytime soon.

"Your turn..." She whispered again beside his ear, indulgent lips tormented as they danced against the lobe while she spoke. The allure of her skin against his own was maddening, but the mage didn't dare stop considering the ways to make the forbidden delight he felt go away. He should tell her no. Decline her tempting offer with some shade of politeness. Wish her a good evening and leave without pushing his boundaries any further. It was wrong; he'd never intended to let things stray so far from their original plan.

But Solas could not abuse her benevolence knowing that with all likelihood they both would never see the end of this era. What was one more night enfolded in her arms when the first one—so chaste and broken—had not been enough as he had so hoped it might have been? The second, weeks before, had shown him how to feel whole again even as he lay shattered beside her. Maybe a third would teach them both a lesson and they would finally part, but already Solas could picture a fourth and a fifth and an endless line of evenings that were possible. Their destiny could already be finalized despite all he knew; with no choice, no changing enough to spare them the fate he'd been privy to foresee.

Solas could have lied well enough to see her off, but she stole every word he wanted to say through spirited kisses alone. They beckoned for a free answer to all she offered. She deserved the truth, to know his name, his crimes, his past but he failed to recall why any of that mattered now, reason taken by the same lips again. The eagerly fallen mage could not break the heart of the lone soul who'd let him in, even though he'd distorted her emotions like a ruled and regimented game. Perhaps he could play a little longer, while he still had the opportunity.

"I don't believe you are ready for that..." They were not the words he knew he should have said but they sought her delicately pointed ears regardless. He shouldn't covet her embrace, her smile, her love but the overthrowing want again refused to listen to his waning pleas. How many bounds from platonic had he left behind since he'd first felt the soft calling, each tiny step explained away as necessary or well intentioned. What had one kiss been in the scheme of everything, what was another for all that it mattered?

But this… this was provocative and perilous. How many ages had passed since he'd last touched
another so? He had no right to explore her body as she assailed his lips again, leaving them warm and swollen with breathy veneration. The soft sighs at the enticement of her breasts, the arch of her back as he traced his fingers along her spine and smooth rear, the stiffening of her hips as he trailed further below, all encouraged his ardent voyaging. The awakening, flushed Dalish woman in his arms reacted in a sudden squeak of alarm at his startling discoveries, surprised by the forward intimacy of his strumming fingers.

"If I've made you uncomfortable, we can stop." He nervously assured, hurriedly removing an apprehensive hand as she hastily dislodged from his touch. The tense musculature of her legs trembled against his own.

"No… just, just slower, please..." Chiyo confessed, eyes cast down and blushing. Her cheeks radiated with tangible heat as she relaxed, guiding his hand back accompanied by her own. “Like this.”

He continued as she wrapped her free arm about his shoulders, pressing her brow against his more tensed one. Her breath found his skin in light waves, each a new, inspiring indicator of preference. With her added subtle instruction, the more skilled hands of an artist took over, almost disconnected of their initial over earnestness. Generous and considering, adding a flourish of layers to each touch, his silent hands made a careful study. The ministrations made her shudder and seek the stable warmth of his neck, leaving miniscule, promising bites as Solas persisted, letting her roving hands stroke his face and trail down his back. His touches were emboldened by each welcome solicitation until she could bear no more of the physical repartee.

Chiyo pushed him back in earnest, catching him in a stunned daze. She daringly began to liberate him from the constrained confines of his trousers. Small, nimble fingers unknotted the simple belt, ignoring his half-hearted objections as the patch-worked linen was filched off his limbs and tossed away with far greater ease than hers had. Her quick work left him unadorned on her comfortable bedspread. But her staring eyes, bold and curious, could not veil their justly confused inquiry at his exposure.

"Are you disappointed?" Solas probed, an unapologetic smirk sneaking across his lips. Pride had little to be embarrassed of, but her audible puzzlement only exhilarated his more impish antics.

"No, no, I just didn't expect… auburn." She further noted the hairs that thickened low on his belly. Her exploring fingers taunted and beguiled him further. Deliberate and stirring, the touches stayed just light enough to punish. He had still not been forgiven for his prior, extended evasions it seemed. "You'd call it that… almost? I can't imagine you with a full head of hair that color. I never pegged you for being redheaded."

"I believe I have forgotten the image myself." Solas assured her, provisionally conceding to the pleasant handling. Those alluring hands traced his body, unabashed in their curiosity as they left him further wanting. Leisurably caresses strolled in free-floating passes. His skin tingled beneath her florid fingertips and the added, occasionally delightful torment of her nails. Pleasing lips followed her hands. Tiny nips with her teeth were smoothed by reconciling kisses, climbing his laid back form.

He claimed the wandering lips as he slowly pulled her back up to meet him face to face. Solas laced his fingers through her short, snowy tresses. Holding her steadily, he buried his mouth and nose against her rich smelling hair that was still moist at the root, keeping them in a moment of worrying stillness. Chiyo stretched, resting lightly atop his chest and torso, respecting his need for a clarifying pause.

"Is this what you truly want of me? I do not deserve you, I ...I have made horrendous mistakes that will not wash away..." He fought to hold in the secrets that rushed at the chance to be heard. His
name. His name! Why could he not say his own damned name? The one he'd once worn with pride instead of the intended insult. He sealed it away with all he had left. There would be no end to the suffering if he could not commit to withholding it. "You refuse to leave me to suffer and heal what I neglect. There is no part of my life that I could possibly offer to you that would ever surpass what you have already gifted mine with."

"You are enough. I need nothing more than as you are, Solas…” The name he'd rebranded himself as a constant reminder of failure changed as Chiyo murmured it and sealed it against his availing lips. No longer heavy and dead with damnation, tarnished with the unkind years. The word became alive with the possibility for renewal, replenishing as a rain shower rushing into an exhausted, parched pool. Welcoming him as whomever he wanted to be or whoever he'd always been from that moment forward.

That name. He was going to make her say that name again and again until the old surrendered; to be slain by love and hands that would never hurt him.

Late morning light had finally cast itself low enough to disturb the sleeping Inquisitor. Groaning satisfyingly, she rolled in her empty bed, pandering the still warm sheets for the missing occupant.

Chiyo cracked open her eyes, she hadn't heard him leave. Judging by the brightness, she was already hours late for training and many other duties—her muscles protested at the mere thought. She'd more than earned a day off for her exertions.

An object on her bedside table caught her eye as she sat up, stretching sleepily and smoothing the tousled hair that had caught about her ears. She reached for the tiny carving, holding the vigilant guardian between her thumb and finger. Chiyo recognized the miniature runaway, smiling at his return. She ran a fingertip across the proud profile, his eyes always watching for dangers ahead and ears pricked with unyielding focus. Even as an outcast, he had not abandoned his sacred duty.

"Where did you go, little wolf?"

"In the story, Fen'Harel was captured by the hunting goddess, Andruil. He had angered her by hunting the halla without her blessing, and she tied him to a tree and declared that he would have to serve in her bed for a year and a day to pay her back. But as she made camp that night, the dark god Anaris found them, and Anaris swore that he would kill Fen'Harel for crimes against the Forgotten Ones. Andruil and Anaris decided that they would duel for the right to claim Fen'Harel.

He called out to Anaris during the fight and told him of a flaw in Andruil's armor just above the hip, and Anaris stabbed Andruil in the side, and she fell. Then Fen'Harel told Anaris that he owed the Dread Wolf for the victory and ought to get his freedom. Anaris was so affronted by Fen'Harel's audacity that he turned and shouted insults at the prisoner, and so he did not see Andruil, injured but alive, rise behind him and attack with her great bow. Anaris fell with a golden arrow in his back, badly injured, and while both gods slumbered to heal their wounds, Fen'Harel chewed through his ropes and escaped."

Codex -Felassan, to Briala
 Chapter Summary

Loser Buys All

A snooping rogue is none too pleased when she finally figures out what her friend has been up to, and soon everyone else will be aware of all the wretched things she's learned in watching the secretive lover's from the shadows. Jealousy suits no one, and the Red Jenny even less.

Sera didn't like it. Not one bloody bit. Not what she saw, or heard, or felt or thought. And she wouldn't get started on the dreams—vile things that made her sweat and throw her pillows—that neither beer nor brandy could pacify. Probably would make her puke anyways; drinking only seemed to fuel her nightmares now instead of letting her slide quietly into unremembered sleep.

She knocked another arrow to her bow and indolently trailed the quirky bobbing of the pigeons pecking around the crumbled bread crusts she'd dumped as bait. The tittering coos of the common bird normally didn't irritate her so and the glinting of their iridescent purple-green necks had never been such a tempting target. But lately, she couldn't bear the sight of them. Picking one out of the small flock she settled on her mark, letting her shallow draw on the bowstring pop through her fingers.

"Ass biscuits!"

The birds scattered again as a third arrow joined the others stuck in the dirt without so much as nicking a feather, much to the grumbling, swearing disapproval of the markswoman above. The fright wouldn't keep them away for long, spooked or not, they were hungry. Sera threw herself back against the shingled roof of the tavern while she waited, watching the rusted, dusky sky above through knotted brow and pinched eyes.

Damn rumors, loads of piss for all they were worth. They'd only succeeded in making her feel worse instead of settling her corrosive suspicions. Eating an entire plate of dry cookies would have left a better taste in her mouth than admitting what was happening to their Inquisitor. Turning into a scary mage was one thing, but getting involved with another weird mage on top of that? It couldn't be true. Chiyo couldn't be that horribly daft.

The not so subtle glances and the awful chatter she'd suffered through the past year had been bad enough. What with the constant, girdled flirtations between the unnerving discussions about the Fade and the Veil and unnatural magic and Elder Ones and being an elf with all their high and mighty elfy-ness. It was enough to put her off her lunch, hearing mages talk the way they did. But the last few weeks had been unsettling enough to make her squander her practice marks. Couldn't they just go back to uncomfortably not speaking again? Sure had freed up more of Inky's time when she wasn't spending it all in the blasted library.

She almost missed the short stretch where the two other elves seemed to be avoiding each other's company, or maybe, just one elf in particular. Sera had listened to the Inquisitor's story of slaying the dragon, still kicking herself for not tagging along, but she didn't see how nearly killing Solas warranted such unfriendliness. She hadn't killed him, sounded more like she saved his sorry, pale ass. Must've been her weird magic that drove him off, opening holes where she shouldn't of. Chiyo hadn't liked it when Sera told her that, she'd pouted something fierce then—made her damn face all
squishy and sad. But it was true! Calling it rift-magic only made it sound worse, not better.

Through her small network of little people scattered throughout various standings in Skyhold, disturbing reports of the actions comprising a certain pair of affable mages had made their way to her ear. More than one servant had seen a guarded apostate crossing the main hall, always with a book or document in hand, slipping quietly through a door behind the seldom used throne. How many nights did he really need to bother the Herald with such studious interruptions? Their fast approaching departure for the Dales couldn't warrant such late night planning or common excuses. The Inquisitor also needed her rest; poor thing was getting dark circles under her eyes. She didn't need a dull bookworm pestering her all night with such boring stuff.

"Look at this vhenan; this proves that the Fade smells like—" Sera imitated and made a satisfying raspberry sound with her short tongue. How she hated that elfy word he used with Chiyo when he thought no one else would hear. It left her tongue rancid.

Solas had also been seen, multiple times, delving through every old and crumbling text he could get his hands on in the library. It seemed not even Baldie the Brain knew everything about everything. Served him right, to have to work at an answer for a change. Solas had also been spotted trading hefty, dog-eared volumes and a few unsealed letters with Dorian; but every attempt to find out more had come up empty handed. It seemed the elven mage had taken to burning the correspondences after he'd finished with them. Only tiny, unintelligible scraps survived to be found in the fireplace when the rounds were made to collect the ashes each morning.

The letters and snooping Sera could handle, it fit into her constricted concept of who Solas was; but catching an earful of the mage's conversation with the resident spirit just the day before had only made her head ache terribly. Creepy had certainly lived up to his name, going on and on about how he'd tried to show the Inquisitor the useful blood on her memories but she'd rejected his offer of relief. He could not disconnect her from the pain. But for the elfiest of elves to ask if Cole could see blood on a soul… Sera shivered, pushing the damnable remembrance aside.

She worried about her friend; it wasn't like her to turn down a chance at pulling a fresh prank on the Advisors or just to sit on the roof where she lay now for a good chat. Not even stopping by for a game of cards. Beating Varric just wasn't as fun without her there to help. Chiyo kept coming back from training with her new teacher drained and unsatisfied, putting herself to bed earlier and rising later than she'd ever been accustomed to. Exactly why the Red Jenny never stood to be taught, too much effort when all she had to do was point and shoot. Easy—just fill something with enough arrows, throw enough jarred bee bombs, and add a couple of daggers for fun—you'd eventually win.

Sera had also caught the Herald staring acutely into her cursed hand when she should have been tucking into a well-deserved dinner instead. A crude joke or two had at least gotten her too eat. She was boney enough as it was, would make her tits shrink right off if Chiyo wasn't careful. The Inquisitor kept shaking the marked hand, banishing a sting or sudden ache when she stood alone. But never, never ever, when she was speaking to others. Just little clenches when she thought no one would notice. But Sera noticed, and she didn't like what she saw.

Then there was that smile if Solas happened to be in the room. Some secret contentment tugged at the corners of her mouth until it slipped through entirely. Subtly seeking his eye, that wistful girl. Speaking to each other without real words, just silence across the bridged distance. Sera gagged.

And what was with all the tiptoeing and jumpiness in the rotunda earlier that day? Practically tripping over her naked feet; the tart should buy some bloody shoes. For the love of the blessed Andraste, what could be so special about some ratty journal that the Inquisitor had to creep in and out of Solas' study to fetch, constantly looking over her shoulder as she scribbled a note on his desk. Looked like
a fine thief pinching the Empress' golden pantaloons! Sera hadn't thought twice about stealing down from her observance in the library, much to the ignored chagrin of Dorian, to see what all the fuss was about.

'Treasure for a treasure. I'll want this back, but until then.' - C

Sera hadn’t touched the hurried note or the bizarre gift left behind. A horrible animal tooth on a knotted up string. Some treasure, wouldn’t have been worth a single coin in any market. Probably some backwards Dalish custom anyway. Trading useless drivel for even more useless rubbish.

It was luck alone that Sera, after taking the long way back into the main hall to avoid being discovered, had stumbled upon Chiyo handing the same wretched book over to Varric with a look of shear, albeit flustered, gratitude on her tattooed face.

'You take care of the shit about that mirror, eluvian or whatever, Corypheus wants; I'll take care of this. Should be done by the time you get back.' Had been all the timely Red Jenny managed to overhear, but she’d been left wanting for more information. Varric… now there was a man who liked to talk.

'Cough it up, short stuff.' She'd demanded from the hairy dwarf and presented him with an open hand.

'I am not paying that wager today, Buttercup. Find me after I get my next chapter published. Already bought all your drinks. You can wait for the rest.' Varric had settled into his favorite chair and tucked the mysterious journal away into his vest for safe keeping from the light-fingered rogue.

'It's not about the bet you lost, dwarf. I want that book!' Sera had scoffed and crossed her arms over her ample chest. Remembering the agitation made her repeat the action as she frowned to the uncaring clouds. She'd been further insulted when Varric had teased her, asking if she could even read. Of course she knew how to read and write and figure numbers for all that it mattered. Lady Emmald had been gracious in that regard.

"It's a private business affair." She mocked aloud, forcing the pitch of her voice into being husky and satirical. That had been practically all he would tell her; it was between him and the Inquisitor, officially unofficial in every way that pertained to the knowledge of anyone outside the contract. He did have a reputation to uphold and Sera was just going to have to wait to find out from the Herald herself. Fat chance, that.

Speaking of the little white-haired blighter…

Catching sight of the Inquisitor ambling below, a pencil tucked between her teeth, Sera set aside her bow. She waited for the distracted mage to pass before dropping down off the roof with ungainly bluntness. She hit the dirt with a thud, startling the nibbling birds that had returned for more crumbs and the diverted elf into a panicked shout, fumbling the scrap of paper she'd been acutely concentrated on.

"Sera!" Chiyo caught herself mid-screech, trying in vain to snatch the floating sheet before it hit the ground.

"Ohhhh, what's this?" The Red Jenny beat her to it, snagging the paper between her fingers and continued the shameful game of keep away. "Spill! And I won't tell anyone else!"

"Please don't read that!" Chiyo begged, turning redder by the second as she wrestled against the slightly taller, younger woman.
"Is it a naughty poem for me?" Sera squealed with delight. She was so adorable when she was embarrassed, burning up to her skinny ears! But this new, sneaky shame was marvelous; it made the game all the more fun. "Inky, I thought you were a classier breed than that! Give us a read."

The Inquisitor groaned as their continued antics caught the attention of onlookers. "It's private!"

"I'll show you something private." Sera underhandedly ribbed through pursed lips. Using the full length of one arm to hold back the struggling, humiliated mage, Sera righted the note. "How bad can it be, lemme try it?"

"No!" It was funny to hear her yell, so easy to taunt and get a rise out of, their Inquisitor.

Her eyes skimmed over the first few words, growing wide with flashy amusement. "Even better, it's a love letter! Ah hmmm! 'I wanted to commemorate' blah blah blah 'where our journey has brought us', flowery shite and more shite, 'made all the difference'. Ugh, your handwriting is so bad!"

"Sera, stop! Those words are not for you." Chiyo ordered, but she was left unheeded. She could pretend to be the Inquisitor all day long, but Sera didn't care. Just a weary looking elf stood beneath the heavy title and nothing more.

"Oh come off it, what will it hurt? One more line! 'You told me once that I changed everything, the whole world. But I never got the chance to say that you made everything more than real'… I can't… I can't read that last part." Sera's joy began to cool as she read, snagged on the deeper meaning and the wretched look of the elven words at the very end. Something about them put her teeth on edge. She turned her attention to the mortified woman snatching the paper away from her at last as all the little pieces began to take their truer shape.

"Oh no, you're really in it… I've seen the way you look at each other… "Sera began shrewdly, watching the Herald shove the rumpled parchment high up her sleeve. She chewed her lips sharply, throwing up her hands in repulsion. "But this, just drop it, drop it you. He's no good, that one. Don't trust him, not for a pile of steaming horse apples; his head's crammed! And he's got your head all screwed up now too!"

"If you know something about Solas then say it." Sera didn't like the nip in Chiyo's words. It wasn't like the friendly woman to be accusative, made her sound almost elfy.

There it was—that scrunching fist again, pressed hard against her scrawny thigh. Sera wondered if she could plug up the hole with enough arrows to close the damned void in her palm forever. "That's just it, yeah? We don't know nothing about him! All nonsense about dreams and being all shifty when he won't tell you what he's really thinking and the brooding, does he ever stop brooding? I've been watching him and something ain't right! Ask Dorian! He's in on it, all these books and letters they keep shoving about!"

"Sera, they're mages." And now she's shaking her mop-y head, great, so much for being believed. She wouldn't listen and already she was taking sides against her. Elf through and through, shite. "They study and research all sorts of things all the time. I've been doing the same thing myself out in the field. Solas has spent months measuring the strength of the Veil. He's almost made a break through that could help us predict where the next tears are going to happen. Knowing that could spare many lives."

"It doesn't feel right! Maker's rotten breath. Scary little pusbuckets, all of you!" She tried again, wishing she had more evidence than rumors and hearsay. If she could get one letter before it reached the fire Sera knew she could pin the manipulative man to the wall; exposed as who he really was for all to see. Traitor, the word tasted almost right but it wasn't quite sour enough.
"So you don't have anything but what, your gut? I know Solas; he's trying to help our fight as much as anyone else." Sure he was... But how could she make Chiyo see it too? "So either you know something you aren't telling me or you're just trying to stir up trouble where there is none! You worry about you and your rebels and let me make my own mind. Good night, Sera."

"You're going to end up hurt!" Sera warned heatedly as the Inquisitor marched away, head held high. She pulled at a loose thread on her frayed shirt, wrapping it tightly around her fingers and counting the twists as Chiyo retreated back towards the main hall.

"Or dead..." She grumbled to herself, wishing she could prove what her insides felt. Her gut never led her wrong, mostly; there was that cheese she shouldn't have tried... But when it came to people Sera had full faith in her intuition.

Sera kicked at a lodged arrow, snapping the shaft with the side of her foot. "You could end up dead..."

If she couldn't make the Inquisitor stop, there was still another she might be able to convince—through force if she had to. Sera followed after, leaving copious distance between her and the tired elf. She lingered just outside the door as the comforting smell of a hot meal met her nose, might as well stop for a bite while she was here. The cook had an approach with vegetables that reminded Sera of the way mothers were supposed to make them, fast and good for you, eat up elsewise someone will take your seconds. She entered the hall, not the only one who was pretending like the fight hadn't just happened.

There he was, the self-righteous bastard. Nose in another crummy book, did he ever stop reading? If he was going to seat himself so publicly Solas could at least feign an attempt at being social, or he could stuff himself in his room like he routinely did.

'Getting brave, aren't you Baldie, like no one can touch you.' It was the dinner hour after all and he couldn't even be bothered to just sit and eat like a normal person. What could he possibly find in a book that would help make everything go back to the way it was again? Oh right, piss nothing.

Great, and now he was smiling too. A matching closed mouth, complacent smirk as the Inquisitor passed him with slow intentions. Just for a second, she would have missed it if she hadn't been staring so fiercely—he reached out with a feigned stretch, barely brushing his fingers against the edge of her hand before Chiyo retreated up the hall and towards her quarters.

Sera grabbed a wooden bowl and spoon. She sauntered her way to the simple spread adjacent to the bookish man who'd happily returned to his reading with a renewed intensity, completely unaware of having been caught in his flagrant mistake.

"So, you and the Lady Inquisitor. Interesting." Sera smiled through poisoned words, dishing out a solid scoop of beef and gravy pie, stuffed with hurriedly chopped vegetables. She pulled at a piece of the chewy crust, shunting it into her mouth, thumb and all, with a rude slurp.

Solas answered without so much as glancing up from the text he was skimming, but the ill-mannered noise had crinkled his harsh brow. "Your interest is not my concern."

"That's all right, because I meant boring. The elf always takes the elf so that banging bits will mean something." She dropped herself onto the bench beside him, her back against the table and her legs thrust out into the wide walkway. With uncouth deliberateness she began to eat part of her dinner, clacking her utensil snappishly to the side of the bowl.

"It is not a topic for discussion." He tried to sound final as he flicked through several pages, but she would not be so easily dismissed. And then she saw it, the ugly little tooth the Inquisitor had left on
his desk. It dangled from his wrist, thin, snarled leather looped several times over. The white, glistening enamel of the fang caught the sinking light, and it sparked her brewing rage.

"Are you fucking her?"

She asked Solas, brash and profound enough to instill a sudden hush from the people nearest to them. Most of the tables consisted of a mix of their friends and close associates, their astonished eyes slowly turning Sera's direction.

Varric's steeping tea made a ghastly ringing. It echoed throughout the stiffening hall after the metal mug slipped from his loosened hand and crashed against the floor. "Did she… did she really just say that?"

"I'm done." Solas snapped the book shut, rose with fixed solemnity and abruptly departed from the table he'd been enjoying peaceably till then.

"Oh no you're not, prick. I'm still talking to you!" She cast aside her barely touched dinner, spoon flipping from the bowl and sending gravy-slick peas onto the floor. She stalked the stern faced apostate as he forsook the whispering gallery for the quiet of his usual dwelling, crossly closing the door behind him as he passed.

"You're going to listen, damn ears are long enough and you at least pretend to be smart. So this should be easy for you to get through your thick, bald head, yeah?" Sera yelled reopening and slamming the door in her wake. She strode up to his desk brazenly, already insistent for a confrontation. "Leave the Inquisitor alone. Simple. Think you can handle that?"

"Tell me, since you've pushed me into speaking." Ha! Now he was pissed, staring down the length of his nose as he forced his wrathful hands to straighten the documents and shuffle books on the surface between them. Probably to keep from strangling her. Sera could almost feel the icy daggers in his words, but she'd been cut before by better. "Why this is so important to you? She is not some powerless vagrant under the thumb of nobility crying out to the shadows for salvation."

"Again with the friggin' bullshit! I don't like you! You're cold and despicable and full of shite! You're going to use the Inquisitor and turn her into some sort of uppity elf!" She circled the desk, keeping him moving away from her and in a state of compulsory agitation. "She needs someone to tell her she's walking into a trap that you've got her all gooey-eyed out of seeing!"

"I would never cause her harm." Lies, lies, lies! Sera knew better. She'd done everything to wash what she had seen away but the memory stuck to her like the smell of putrid mire. You couldn't burn the clothes you wore in a vision and you couldn't just forget something so horrible either.

"Liar! I saw it! How bout I tell you about a dream I had after you came back from getting each other almost killed. You'll love this one; you're obsessed with dreams, all that matters to you. Take this, our Inquisitor, she goes off— save the world, be the great big hero, kick the biggest arse—to knock down Corphy-shit and dies! Dies!" Sera rushed and pushed him back, driving him away from the safety of his writing table. "Dead as a bloody stone. And guess who was lording over her corpse, eh? Some great dream, right? Seeing the Herald off to the Maker's bosom were ya? Right shit you are, course you'd let her take the fall!"

A burst of confusion escaped before Solas constrained his expressions behind an unmoving mask. He planted his feet, refusing to take another step before she had his back pressed to the wall. Good, had his full attention now, squirmy, stinking dog. Dog, that one felt almost right too. "You are beside yourself. Your wild imagination has destroyed what little sense you ever had."
"Imagination?!” Sera spat, poking a sharp finger at his proud chest. "I have eyes and ears too, more than you do! I know you're up to something, dusting over your tracks and all. I swear, I swear to Andraste herself that if you so much as twang her ear I will rip yours off and shove them down that arrogant throat!"

"Have you enough now?" Taciturn and biting, talking down to her like some spoilt child. Who did he think he was? She was a Red Jenny after all, with all sorts of people working for her. Who did he have but the Inquisitor on his side? Nobody. "Or is there more nonsense you wish to spew at me? Possessiveness is not your strongest side, Sera."

"Sod off! What the hell are you getting at?" Her hands constricted into tight wads. The skin about her knuckles and across the backs of her hands tingled as if they were covered in scuttling, tacky moths, fluttering about her fists like they were asking to be swatted off or smashed into a pasty smear.

"It means you are acting like an envious—" She swung. Hard.

The first strike slammed into the thick shield of a book he'd never released. It hurt; her bones throbbed after impacting the unyielding surface but it gave her the opportunity she needed and the pain fueled her further. His defensive was left completely open for the second blow that grazed against the harsh line of his jaw as he turned away, letting her own motion to send her fist into the painted wall. A sizable chunk of the new plaster broke away as she cursed, clutching at her injured hand.

"I'm not daft! Don't talk to me like I'm stupid! And envious? Of what? Of you wrinkling her sheets? Pfft, like you could." Sera rolled her bleeding knuckles into her mouth, tasting the copper and spitting out the crumbles of chalky grit that clung to her bruising skin. She gave him a final, unforgiving scowl before leaving, having made her ruthless point.

"She's going to fix this mess, she's my friend and she doesn't need you!"
The Missing Tale

Chapter Summary

Gossip spreads fast through Skyhold, but whispered words will not keep the Inquisitor from her promises. Too much remains at stake when she overhears a pair of mages chatting in the early morning hours and tensions ensue once she sees the damage of her relationship with Solas.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Whispers. Small trivialities really—what were inconsequential conversations exchanged quietly to another—such softly shushed slights, hardly more than little breaths stifled in the sunlit hall. It was the flickering glances of the scant denizens, most of whom had rose early for their habitual sunrise absolutions in the Chantry which struck a nerve with the refreshed Herald.

The impish hairs that now too often tickled the back of her neck began to rise as she bypassed the secretive clusters, feeling their eyes stealing bits of her person, with hands raised to cover their unpleasant, speculative mouths. Chiyo shook the unsettling sensation of being the source of their gossip, instead turning her focus to not spilling the simple, hot bowls of porridge she had sequestered from the already bustling kitchen. Cradling both in her unaffected arm she manipulated the door to Solas’ study.

‘Oh…must be true…’ The muttering words trickled into her pointed ear as she left the sleepy main hall. A vinegary glance back over her shoulder promptly nipped the wiggling, discourteous tongues.

"Good morning, thought you might like… some breakfast?" She enquired softly before stalling. But no elven mage, awake or asleep was there to greet her. Not a soul occupied the round, dimly lit space; instead Chiyo was welcomed by the smell of damp plaster and a sweet, lingering— smoke? She set the steaming dishes down on the orderly desk.

Looking up from the well managed papers and stacked velum texts she spotted a stark white gap on what only yesterday had been a completed section of fresco. The recent repair was broader than the span of both her hands; one of Solas’ handsomely crafted, howling beasts had lost the majority of an upright, richly black tail. Painted, crumbly chunks and a dotted layering of dust littered the floor just below the patch, chipped away and left in an untidy pile near his box of pigments and brushes.

She’d thought the image in its developing parts and as a whole to be beautifully organic; cryptic with untold symbolism and intricate detail, but the perplexing artist was fast running out of room. Chiyo could not recall an imperfection that would have warranted the destruction but perhaps there had been a structural flaw only recently discovered; some unseen buckling of the smooth coating or a thin fracture that threatened the integrity of bigger picture. The Inquisitor had previously spent hours letting her eyes wander across the mural, finding satisfaction in many of the recorded deeds; but she curiously had never caught him in the act of actively painting. It seemed Solas saved the work for sporadic, restless hours when he was alone or perhaps the rare times she didn't have him join her on a mission. It seemingly was his preferred state when he wasn't seeking her out for company or she him.

The rotunda was routinely so calming in the earliest hours of the day, but today the quiet lull was
broken by voices from beyond another cracked door. It bespoke of a deviation to his nature as she knew it. Chiyo drew cautiously nearer to the exit that connected the lowest level of the rotunda to the battlements, the same entry she had used time and time again in route to her tactical meetings with the Commander.

She knew better than to pry, but the expressive speaker drew her ear deeper, seeded with the idea of another elf. Ask Dorian, he's in on it too. Sera didn't understand the naturally studious and abstract temperament of mages, one could sneeze wrong before her and she would probably deem it foul. However there had been conviction behind her agitated words, so certain of ills that the Inquisitor knew nothing about. Chiyo trusted her fellow mages—formally trained or not; even the Iron Lady herself was held in high regard irrespective of their clashing opinions. Nevertheless, it was impossible to deny her growing, almost doubtful curiosity.

"So what is your final inference, now that you've been struck with more evidence?" The distinct northern voice had given the flashy mage away; the rise and fall of his well-tended mustache over an animated mouth nearly visible as the Inquisitor listened to his satirical inflections.

"They're waking up; latent dreamers who would elsewise remain undisturbed." The distinguished, meditative lilt of Solas paused, drawing a long breath and exhaling. "That troubled magic we keep seeing beckons to them, re-forging a connection unknown or forgotten. The scope of my own dreaming has exceeded prior ability. Have you truly felt no change?" A lack of worry denoted the apostate's inquiry, even at the insistence of a potential setback.

"Dreamers? Now, that was a bit strange. Solas had mentioned little of dreams as of late, only telling her that the nightmare he had suffered had been a wretched disillusion, a false world crafted by some demon he had slipped into during the weakened state. He would not plague her with the details, but the frenzied babbling that snowy night had given her enough of a taste to understand why.

"Can't say I really have been actively trying, perhaps I may amend that. I can say only that my perception of magic has now been scrambled thanks to you trying to dump it on my head at dawn of all hours." Dorian chuckled melodiously in agreement.

Sera was wrong; to the Inquisitor it sounded purely of theoretical mage-ish conjecture, nothing to be so outlandishly and belligerently concerned about. "It might make relative sense if it were just elves, but for Cole to be affected as well? I'll have to revise my hypothesis." His voiced lifted at the unseemly notion of admitting he could be corrected.

The apostate was prompt to amend his musing comrade. "Perhaps you should, the elvhen people and spirits have had a bond that has survived countless ages. It is only in recent history that much of that union has dissolved into misunderstanding and fear thanks to your Chantry teachings alongside the guidance of the institutions you call Circles."

"I'll take your word for it, my Fade-walking friend. But best luck in proving your theory, resonating magic and all. What it could mean though, if that skill were aimed instead of being left untried or deferred to innate chance?" The well-bred Altus sounded wistful, almost sidetracked by the potential.

Though perhaps there had been some merit to her concern, it was entirely possible the Red Jenny had over-interpreted the magical theory as something weaponized or heretical. The idea wasn't far-fetched considering the sources.

"Undoubtedly dangerous, especially if it were directed at the populations of the Tevinter Imperium. Consider that while we're away." Solas shot back swiftly just as one of the men began to push unhurriedly on the unlatched door, the iron hinges creaking as they pivoted. Chiyo took several rapid, scrambling steps backwards, bare feet padding across the cold, stone floor. She noiselessly
returned to the desk in the center of the room. With near contrived disinterest, she pretended as though she'd just happened by with the modest meal for two. The Inquisitor turned her head to Dorian and immediately resettled the small dishes onto the wooden surface.

"Well, aren't you up bright and early on this magnificent morning?" The charming Tevinter mage razzed to the inattentive elf as he reentered the study, booted heels clicking sharply against the smooth stone floor until he stood beside her. "Goodness, you even brushed your hair. Been a tad unruly as of late; I simply can't imagine what has been disheveling it so."

Faking a lethargic yawn, Chiyo nodded behind her hand but she failed to manage the riled glare his backchat had tugged from her. "I even dressed myself without the Left and Right hands to do my buttons, or has my wear also been lacking your sanctioned polish?"

"Are you always this charming at these hours?" Dorian probed as he eagerly stole one of the bowls she'd been toying with. He held it to his nose, enjoying the appealing, delicate aroma. "So kind of you to bring me a warm breakfast, not quite in bed however, I still feel positively special."

"No, that's—" The Inquisitor groaned as he maneuvered a spoonful of the plumped cracked-oats and crushed, dried fruit into his shapely mouth. "I'll swear to any god of your choosing that I'm going to set fire to the next person who takes my food." Dorian quickly swallowed; the threat of fire 'warmed' trousers speed the process along.

"If you'd used honey on it I would agree to those terms; how about that horrid trickster fellow, if I must elect to just one." Handing the despoiled meal back, Dorian snorted as she proceeded to wipe the used spoon on her soft sleeve before she set to claim her breakfast for herself with sincere, unabashed zeal. She had skipped dinner last night again in favor of the sinking comforts of her feather bed after all.

"Be careful what you wish for." Chiyo warned under her breath between sticky, creamed bites.

"I simply must show you someday what a real breakfast tastes like, but I do lament as our dearest Josephine absolutely will not let me import the essential ingredients." Dorian bowed with an extraordinarily unneeded flourish, swirling his dramatic hands in jest as he was ready to take his leave. "Forgive me for my preventive theft, oh blessed Herald of Andraste; how lost we would be if something ever happened to our priceless leader."

Chiyo punctuated his departure with a less than formal curtsy, warm bowl still in her hand and snickering, creasing her face in falsified dignity. "Thank you for your unwavering protection, Ser Pavus. I'll be ever so careful not to slip poison into my own sodden grains." She rolled her eyes as he finally ascended the curved steps in a snappy march. She knew her friends' intentions were kind and well-meant if a bit eccentric. She would be entirely adrift without their guidance, encouragement and help, but Chiyo would not let any one of them forget that she was more than wholly capable of keeping herself out of peril—most days.

"Always trouble..." called a familiar and entertained voice from just beyond the open door. Crossing the still chilly, sundrenched threshold, the smoky whiff she had detected before became more pungent, fragrant and earthy. It clung to inside of her nose, not entirely unpleasantly. "When the two of you are together."

"New habit?" She asked arching a brow, and taking in the sight of the reclusive elf leaning resignedly against the icy stone of the outer wall. The bit of a long, modestly carved black pipe was caught between his full lips. Arms closed loosely over his chest, one hand acting as the rest for the other upright limb, created an easy support for the small, smoldering bowl held in his lengthy, graceful fingers.
"No, an old one." Solas blew his breath outward, releasing a long stream from his lungs, forming a quickly dissipating cloud of the aromatic smoke. "I've been out of the custom for a quite a while, but the appeal returns from time to time."

His eyes hadn't left the steady rise of the sun over the crests of the snowy mountain peaks, though the Inquisitor doubted his thoughts were fully focused on the scenic brightly growing day. She found a comfortable enough resting spot on the chilly masonry, joining him in the leisurely rapt, their shoulders touching lightly. "Rough night, I take it?"

"You could say that. There have been worse evenings." She fondly watched his profile as he spoke, her warm eyes softly focusing on the easy rolling of his lips even with the tapered vice tapping at his teeth. Chiyo wondered what stories lay behind the fine lines that bracketed the sides of his mouth, what gladder days had set them there through past-lived jollity or enjoyment. What tales could she draw from him if she were to trace those lines and the smooth edge of his lips with the tip of a finger; smaller touches had rewarded her before, gifting visions of who he'd been years before the world had tried to destroy itself. Solas smiled more now than the brief months then he had when they'd lived in Haven. Little contented slips, stolen moments, cherished like no other memories she'd ever hoped of keeping. He smiled like a man who'd forgotten how to naturally settle within a group, to share in their joys. To not expect immediate discourse for botched attempts at being social. But the pleasing changes he expressed rarely ever touched his aggrieved, distant eyes. Had they always carried such thin pitting; a permanent weariness that lingered no matter the hours he kept.

It wasn't until he turned to face her that she saw the true coarseness of his previous evening. An irregular bruise had just started to purple on the edge of his jaw, marked by deeper, distinct points that trailed towards his chin. Like that of knuckles, the pattern immediately reminded her of the harsh passing of a fist.

"Solas…" Her fingers lightly investigated the mark, careful not to press into the heated, slightly swollen skin. Her eyes sought an answer, but the compassion in them was slowly replaced with a hard flint. Pride or shame turned his own gaze from hers, but Chiyo was uncertain as to which. Her words escaped, lost for warmth and left hollow of pity. "Who... Who did this?"

"Do not concern yourself with this transgression, vhenan." The mage tamped down the coarse leaves in his pipe, fixating his attention on the floating ash to keep the words she sought of him from coming out. What havoc could he possibly create by giving her the name of his attacker; gone were the days when he would have set the smallest of well-placed sparks just to watch everything around him burn. Solas silently pondered if the audacious rogue would be allowed to aid the Inquisition further, even with her rebel band's gainful contributions. But Sera, for all her faults, remained a valued friend of Chiyo's and he would not so tactlessly dismantle one of the precious few relationships the Inquisitor dared to keep. However if the brazen woman came forward of her own volition, by all means, he wouldn't stop her. "A mere miscalculation on my part, but I was never in any real danger."

"You should have told me immediately! And outright! If there is a problem in Skyhold I need to be informed." Chiyo's oft disused inquisitorial demeanor flared, but she'd never once used the weight she could potentially throw about, that with the position granted. There was fear she could command if the Dalish mage dared ever to wield her strength, but such shameless displays were not common in her nature; Chiyo knew that, but it felt good to envision it for a moment.

Having packed the narrow bowl of his pipe, Solas slipped the worn piece into a deep pocket in his woolen vest. "There is little room for lenience within these walls for favoritism. No action of yours is required; do not waste valuable time distressing about my state."
"You say that as if you don't matter! If someone is hurting you..." The Inquisitor clenched her finely angled jaw and ground her teeth together, struggling to rein in the mounting pressures of the swelling anger. She wanted names to curse aloud, useless explanations told, and apologies to receive but not accept. But far, far down, at the lowest pit of her churning gut she felt at fault. Their all but cloistered romantic involvement had already been the base of occasional ridicule and barbed teasing, but for there to be violence because of their private entanglements—she would not stand for it, not from anyone. If they wanted so desperately to witness the terror of a rift mage she would gladly concede; the mark already flickered hotly in her palm, ready for an audience. "I meant what I said in Haven, I don't care if I have to take down the Seeker or the Spymaster or the damned Hero of Ferelden. I promised that I would protect you!"

His guardedly maintained silence only drove her further. "You won't tell me, I'll find someone who will. This whole place reeks of gossip." Solas seized the glowing hand as Chiyo furiously wrenched away from the wall and prepared herself to leave while she spoke hastily, rising to the cusp of overwhelming wrath.

"If this happened because of our relationship—" But Solas denied her the privilege of finishing that guilt-stricken thought, spinning her back around to quiet the fury of her rambling lips with the beseeching composure his own. He stilled her instantaneous protest, by encircling the turbulent elf in his arms and pressing their bodies tight together as he worked devotedly to disarm her cutting temper. The furious tension in her arms and shoulders gradually dispersed as she pulled at the high collar of his shirt. The sifting Inquisitor's fingers laced around the doubled cord bearing the jawbone that dug sharply, but lay near forgotten between their converged torsos.

"People might see us—" She cautioned half-heartedly before he silenced her again, ruefully submitting to the smoke imbued pacification and the warm, distracting assurance that all was well. It was near flustering to admit how proficiently attune he'd become at kissing her, stealing her senses with stirring self-confident enticement. All consuming, hard-pressed bravado followed by playful suppleness and evasion, always with the reserve of heated teasing; holding back just enough to make her defiantly lean in for more, daring the intelligent mage to continue a favorite game between them of tongue and teeth.

Solas murmured alluringly, pulling up the corners of his baiting mouth, barely out of reach even as she impatiently stretched to claim his lips once more. "And I care little, their happiness is not my own. Forgive me... I cannot tell you not to be angry, but I also cannot have you fighting my battles in my stead. We are not a secret anymore, as you will certainly come to find before long." He whispered, just a tormenting breath away.

"People will say cruel things; there will be repercussions I'm assured..."She taunted back affectionately, a drifting hand thieving a mischievous pass across the seat of his well-fitted trousers. "We're going to be in so much trouble later, two elven apostates caught in a conspiring tryst. The gallows await us for sure; we should enjoy our last hours. Are you certain you don't wish to run while you still can?" Rebellion flashed in her eyes, a dangerous settling for the curling inferno that had tried to escape just moments before.

He shook his head, not even having to try at an honest, divested smile. "There is nothing anyone could say or do to make me bemoan our companionship, ma da'shalen." He released her with a contemptuous peck on her wrinkling nose at the trifling honorific.

"I want to show you something." Chiyo's eyes brightened with further excitement as he raised a quizzical brow, taking a precursory glance at their surroundings.

"Here?" He teased, a snaking touch slipping onto the soft skin of her waist just beneath the loose
hem of her tunic. Solas leaned into her ear, letting his words torment the sensitive structure. "Seems a bit public, even for you."

"Not that!" The Inquisitor suddenly blushed brightly, mouth agape as she pushed the toying, chuckling mage away. "I have manners; do not even put such heinous thoughts in my head."

"Ah, you certainly do. Perhaps the wild of the woods then, unless there is some ruin you'd fancy desecrating." Solas took great joy in the amusement she'd played into, but he was far more content with the peace he'd restored.

"Stop!" She laughed and gladly urged him inside through the open door. "There's not enough room here and people might not like seeing it—no more jokes! If something goes wrong you'll need to be able to get away without jumping off a ledge." She kidded, in no real doubt of her ability.

Without complaint but still smirking, Solas tucked his hands behind his back and followed the Inquisitor into his spacious study, curious as to what hazards he should prepare himself for next.

Chiyo found the uncluttered space she'd been after, standing square and solid beneath the concealing cover of the high ceiling. "I've been working hard on this one. I wanted you to be the first to see it."

Holding up her anchored palm she began to raptly focus her energies, knitting her brow in the endeavoring concentration.

The apostate watched intently as her hand started to shake, sending tremors back up her arm as a crackling light began to form. Small and surprisingly contained, Chiyo popped open a tiny, green rift. Miniscule in comparison to her typically unrestrained attempts, but it blazed bright with thickened, pulsating power.

Solas was astonished at the speed of her learning; even at his prime he'd never shown such quick expertise. What she had accomplished in just shy of a month rivalled even his best years of self-teaching. "You are beginning to show such mastery—"

"Not yet." She interrupted strenuously, beads of sweat already beginning to speckle her face with the intensity of her exertions. Her fingers spun in an arch, fluidly snatching the raw energy from the rift with savage elegance, taking the power not into herself but letting it fall about them both in a warm, swirling wave. The dazzling white-blue, sparkling magic tingled across his skin—eddying at the ready for free use and there was a healing prickle against the soreness of his jaw that remained even as she closed the tiny tear.

"This is," Chiyo huffed laboriously as she released the lingering spell to dissolve on its own, wiping the threatening moisture away from her eyes. But she smiled stalwartly, so exceptionally satisfied of her hard-won accomplishment. "A Restorative Veil. I can't pull enough of my own magic to do it, but this… I don't have a limit with this. I can cast almost any spell I need."

Solas' impressed expression diminished as she constricted her marked hand against her sternum; even as he began to feel the alleviating effects of her magic it seemed that there was a severe and abrupt cost on her part from using of using such an extortionate skill.

"Let me see." It was not much of a request as he gently took hold of the affected limb. There had been only a few rare opportunities to examine the anchor as he once had when the Inquisitor had first fallen from the Breach. Those first days were filled with ample hours, given permission to study and run tests on its nature while she had been unconscious. She'd struggled just to remain alive as the anchor threatened to kill the then nameless elf in her painful agitated sleep. Now, he feared she was rapidly burning through her own finite flesh.
Lately though, when she lay next to him on their shared nights in bed, he would use the closeness to steal hasty investigations of her dormant palm. It concerned him dearly, to sometimes find her so spent that his entering of her room or lying down beside her provoked no stirring, no reaction. That was now one of his many self-given excuses for the deplorably repeated returns—just to check in on her, to ensure she was well, that her needed sleep was untroubled; what happened when she awoke to find him there was coincidental, Solas told himself again and again.

Worse still when he'd caught her in the middle of applying a poultice and wrap after an extended training session, shoving the medicinal supplies into the top drawer of her cluttered desk, claiming to be experimenting with a newly crafted mix to add to their traveling cache.

Testing the tension of the fine tendons in her stiff wrist and the outward strain that radiated hotly from her wounded hand, he grew solemn at the Inquisitor's stoically masked pain. "You do have limits; the body can only take so much abuse." Solas warned as he softly palpated the discolored flesh, the edges around the anchor had grown blistered and red from her repeated exploitations. His stomach clenched as he remembered the terrifying details of what had remained of the same hand in his haunting dream. Charred and cracked from forced excess, the rest of her small body shattered from within.

"I'm fine." She answered tolerantly with a sudden yip as his prodding fingers found a rather tender hurt.

"Take today off. No more practice." Had he not expressed himself so somberly, Solas would have sworn he sounded on the verge of begging. "We're leaving for war tomorrow; you should not expect yourself to be ready to fight in this condition."

She didn't resist as the numbing ice he'd called to his kneading touch began to soothe the sweltering discomfort. "The soldiers out there are giving it their all. I can't expect to do any less or give any less."

"You've done admirably and exceeded all expectation; to whom are you trying to prove these talents? I don't believe that you are doing this just for the common soldiers of the Inquisition." He caught her negating eye as he sustained the curative work a little longer.

"I always thought…" Chiyo paused; her once proud shoulders fell crestfallen as she considered her intent. "I always thought that one day I could show my Keeper that I'd finally mastered my magic, that I was worthy of being her First and would be capable of managing the Lavellans when the time came. I'd hoped that I could stand before my mother's clan at the next Arlathven in a few years and let them see that their line hadn't failed, that I was just a strong and adept as the Keeper they had been deprived of."

"But both of those clans sent you away, there is nothing you owe them for that." Solas had finally stopped his treatment but he'd not released her hand, it remained entangled in his own.

"They were still my families and they both deserved a little bit of pride if it was mine to give. I'll never be able to do that though." She sighed in the new relief, appreciating the welcome escape from her persistent physical pain. But even his therapeutic fingers could never reach the old aches living inside her heart; there was little reparation to be had for what could never be restored.

"You've told me the fate of the Lavellans, but little else of the first. What came of them?" He asked as they finally fetched their now cold breakfast and took to the sofa, neither allowing the wanton waste of food as both had felt the pinch of true hunger and could not abide it.

Chiyo shrugged, breaking apart the congealed mash with the spoon while she tucked her legs
beneath her. "They weren't at the last gathering and no one I spoke with had any contact with them during the ten years since I was handed over. As far as we could deduce they disbanded, were wiped out or travelled extremely far to the north where we seldom ever get contact from. There are scattered bands there, but most go two or three decades between seeking their southern brethren. I suspected the disbandment; a Keeper abandoning a magic-lacking group leaves it unstable. The hahren can usually manage for a time, a few years perhaps, but most clans rarely thrive after that kind of loss without converging with other groups."

"Abandoned?" Solas asked, taking advantage of his self-trained neutrality but he was abruptly confounded. He hid his pondering well behind slow, deliberate eating. All this time he'd only ever considered the Inquisitor at least somewhat aware of her parent's demise.

"She walked out and never came back." She said straightforwardly enough, having long ago acknowledged her own relinquishment, but her passive words could not conceal the aged soreness. "I guess she couldn't handle the pressure of having a child outside of a bonding. I don't remember much of her any more. Just a song I almost forgot and little tokens that were never passed down to me."

She didn't know.

Were there a Maker he would have cursed their name.

Solas suddenly struggled inwardly to keep all that he should never have been privy to see from spilling out of his drying mouth, making it difficult to swallow. Too many secrets threatened to break his chewing silence. The mob-driven terror, the last tearful night together, the sacrifice of both blood and self; not a single member of her kinship had ever deemed it necessary to reveal that last horrible faction of the truth. She'd been dispatched by her own people, leaving a child behind to the care of less than sympathetic hands. It must have been easier to rid themselves of the troublesome girl as she budded instead of handling who she was on their own or telling her that her mother was dead. Had they even told the Lavellans of what had transpired? It was doubtful, considering what he knew of the superstitions and rampant mistrust he'd witnessed in modern elves.

"That song sounded much more like a spell to my ears." Solas pushed the secreted information away as he questioned her more on the unusual magic she had presented during their disheartening trials in the Fade. "You did annihilate a nightmare demon with those words."

"It Calls to those that swore their aid, to protect their children, their people from darkness and despair. It was their promise and would always be." Chiyo recited, the words remembered and not her own. "That is what Deshanna explained to me when I repeated the song I'd been taught. Old magic, lost invocations, on the brink of being forgotten. I don't dream much, but I was going to pass it along to those who did and never got the chance. I don't dream much, but I was going to pass it along to those who did and never got the chance. I'd certainly not thought to use it till then, against that illusion."

"Considering how little you've actively explored the Fade, it probably wasn't needed." He conjectured openly.

"I have you to thank then, for those few remarkable explorations. At least the dreams we share don't shake me from my bed. They don't bother you much, the demons or spirits, unless you want them too. When I dream alone—I never know what will find me, so I don't stay long." Chiyo wedged herself deeply into the high back of the sofa, shuddering at the thought of wandering the Fade unaccompanied. She seldom chanced it; her bravery had been pressed to its breaking point from the repeated lone venturing when she'd attempted to find Solas' conscious after their fall in Orlais.

"I could teach you what defenses I have, there is much still you could learn from the Fade. With your
talents, I suspect it will be simple a matter of practice." Solas offered with all seriousness, tucking a short, wayward wave of white hair back behind her ear. He brushed the back of his knuckles along her cheek, slowly lingeringly.

A sly smirk snuck across the Herald's face, the words playing with her twisting lips until she could hold them no more. She feigned a breathy whine. "But that means I have to sleep with you."

"I've heard no real complaints yet." He quipped back good-humoredly, shaking his head in novel agreement. What would be the damage of one more day of stolen happiness when there was little else he could give her? Solas could not yet free the Inquisitor of her harrowing past or her indeterminate future. He could not yet give her the entirety of the truth he bore or share much of the wealth that had come with his years. Love though, he could grant her that while there was still time, such as he felt was slipping through his contemptible fingers.

Another devious justification to add to his growing list, teaching her a new skill would require hours of time together. "But if you need more convincing, perhaps there is room in your busy schedule. I'm sure your trainer will be more than understanding, a new study will help keep you… well rounded."

And safe, he wanted to tell her, it would keep her safe.

By eggsquisite-dreadwolf @ Tumblr

Chapter End Notes

ma da'shalen- my little protector
Murky Waters

Chapter Summary

Battles always bring forth blood. Lots of blood. It will take more than that though to avenge an ancient assault with unforeseen consequences.

"You should accept the offer before our patience runs dry!"

Another unrestrained smack seared across the already pummeled rebel's face, knocking him back down to the solid ground again. The expressionless elf crashed hard enough to shatter the macabre, war ornamentation adorned above his harsh brow, loosening chunks of brittle bone and tiny fangs that cut into his skin while he lay unmoving against the polished tile.

It almost loosened his teeth, that last blow. Good. How about another? He'd already learned to grow fond of the tang of blood flowing against his tongue. Let that wetted silence be his reply as well.

"Impertinent pup, you will answer me!"

And he had to hand it to her. The once principled slayer of atrocious beasts still had quite the strike, considering her proclaimed age—though the passing millennia had barely touched her dignified features, even if outrage and momentary madness eroded them now.

Never laying a blow too soon in the same place, it seemed there was control in her once again, however fleetingly she grasped on it. Perfect; he needed her to hold that frail lucidity for the time being. It shouldn't be long. Sunrise would be more than enough and he was a patient creature. This single act of destruction alone had been years in the making, and the hour of its completion mattered no longer.

What were a few new, conciliating wounds and the endured spilling of his blood when he'd already won.

"I have existed tenfold your meager years and seen greater upstarts than yours rise and fall with the seasons. You think your insignificant rabble will alter anything?" The deranged Huntress jeered with artificial friendliness dripping from her words as she stooped down, slowly wringing the long, tapered ear not shoved against the hard floor between her calloused, culpable fingers. "You are but a juvenile. Having barely just learned to stand and lo, he thinks to run wild with the wolves. Pitiful. You have squandered and wasted the gifts bestowed to you and stolen others beyond the reach of your status."

He sucked a hissing breath between his clamped teeth, still doubled over from her devastating knocks. His defiant silence remained throughout the brutal reinforcement of his well-earned punishment. Still unsatisfied with the injuries she'd already inflicted it would not be beyond the drive of the incised ancient to slip a blade between his unprotected ribs. The obstinate prisoner could already see the idea playing in his attacker's mind, her hatred lashing out through her once keen green eyes. He nearly felt the Huntress playing out the notion through the expressions that flitted over her blemished face in quick succession, tiny glimpses of the pleasure and satisfaction it would bring her.
The Lady was readily contemplating how enjoyable it could be to give her much beloved dagger a
grueling twist and simply let him bleed out in her garden, but he had not yet suffered enough for her
liking. No, she was in no mood for hunting and simply conquering her prey this night. Only
collecting copious screams for mercy, salty tears of pained despair and a flowing rush of plentiful
blood would quell her insatiable appetite for slaughter.

But she would receive none, he was not that gracious.

"She offered you the highest glory and power to match the service. The best a despicable slave like
you could ever hope for, but it wasn't enough. So selfish, you dashed the rarest of chances at the
Mother's feet! Disgusting brat! Merely hearing your name brings a sickness to my ears." She seemed
to be stuck, reliving past events… perhaps her memory was starting to slip alongside of her reason.
She just couldn't let it go, could she?

No one had dared to refer to him as a slave in hundreds of years. That part of his history had long
since been shed. He had defied his master and removed all of the markings that committed him to
that eternal service. But he had not taken his freedom only to remain discreet and inconspicuous, not
when the rattling and breaking of his chains had been prevailing enough to shake the very
foundations of Arlathan.

As the fearsome hunter withdrew at long last, returning to her frothing ire, he took the chance to spit
the excess of fresh blood she'd brought to his mouth. Casting a runny, red spray across the golden
tiles he'd been thrown down upon the tenacious radical started to right himself once more. Wresting
with the ungainly bindings that she had snared him with, he rocked forward and leaned heavily onto
the least damaged shoulder she'd left him with. The typically managed twists of his dark auburn hair
clung to an oozing wound above his eye, but rubbing on the opulent pathway worked well enough
to push back most of the now sticky tendrils that had not been intentionally shorn from each side of
his head.

With steely blue vision finally unobstructed, he fought against the agonized howl of each battered
muscle and the sharp protest of the throbbing fractures she'd inflicted onto his bones until he found
the strength enough in his shaky knees to sit up once more. He groaned sorely, settling as
comfortably as could be allowed and watched her once hallowed temple in the darkening night
continue to burn. The elaborately crafted stained-glass windows that had been the architectural
splendor of the shrine shattered as the blasting fire spread, allowing the horrendous cries of battle out
to sing through the tepid air. The pillaging rebels that now kept the flames fanned high were
indomitable and hungry, and all that had been required of him was to open a single sanctuary door.

"Just a little while longer, just wait, endure a moment more, soon it will matter not. The waters are
already fouled, all must come to drink." She was raving; pacing frenetically about the courtyard and
tearing at her cascading flaxen hair as her petrified followers tried to soothe their leader from afar.
The Huntress repeatedly smeared the dark paint around her eyes, sullying the ritualistically blocked
design applied to enhance her outward ferociousness. She desperately wanted him dead, but she
wouldn't kill him, not yet. Not when he could still be useful to her fated upheaval.

The still much adored Lady may be fragmented and polluted beyond redemption, but she wasn't a
true fool and never had been. It was her obstinate blood-lust however that would lead to her long-
awaited and utterly crucial deterioration. Better still, he could trust the woman to destroy her
wretched self entirely without his goading. But where was the fun in that?

An arrogant grin spread across his split lips, letting a thin ribbon of scarlet trickle out to run, staining
against his tightly bent knee and strained calf bound in supple leather.

His harsh assailant neglected him for a short time, too concerned giving belligerent instruction to the
anxious remains of her diminished yet stanch followers. There were few elves of any rank or power left to her here. He'd been very thorough of that. Those that remained steadfast to her cause skittered away, none dared to come anywhere near him. Even badly battered and in taut bonds his menacing presence was hardly diminished. She swore urgently at each of her present and eternally faithful slaves before dismissing them, assuring the gathered few that their sacrifices had not yet been spent in vain, that no failure waited on the horizon. A mere setback, their success was all but guaranteed. Nevertheless they still must prepare, they must still be willing to die if need be. She personally would handle the appalling renegade, and she would do it alone.

Putrid blood of her tainted high priests and priestesses, noble-born fools who chose the path so willingly, saturated his short, loosely draped robes. It matted in the fur of his shouldered pelt, and crusted the hands responsible for their deaths—he couldn't have left such choice atrocities to die by chance, but snuffing their threat had been an exhaustive albeit necessary feat. There was little alternative now, if he were to contain this growing blight. They were too fervent and too degraded to have allowed for a gentle mercy. Death was a far kinder end, compared to the fate that would have been left to them had he not released the sanctified mages of their eternal bonds.

The towering blonde was still formidable, ever the magnificent master of the hunt, even if her once sterling glory had been corroded and much of her ancient magic left beyond repair. Not that she lacked for potency. Though in a fair fight, before she'd been corrupted, she wouldn't have beaten him so completely. But now, with the added force of her seized powers he was at a severe disadvantage. Still, there was not a sinewy muscle on her scarred body that failed to exude her strength. The might of the celebrated archer's hands alone had been sung through the ages and there had been few to ever dare challenge her excessive proficiency with a bow or underhandedness with a short blade.

But this dominating position had left the immortal to stew in perpetual boredom. A state which only the thrill of chase, the drawing of blood and threat of death would pacify. She had no patience for peaceable governing or aiding the elvhen empire as Mythal demanded her to do. The people had grown revoltingly weak and content in her eyes, unworthy of her protection or prowess. So when, after eons of stalking the beasts of her native lands no longer proved to challenge her skill, the relentless cruelty began. She'd started by taking aim at those souls unfortunate enough to offend her for simple sport. Eventually, when she'd finally grown tired of preying upon her helpless, lesser kin she'd left their corporeal realm entirely, seeking trophies in the Void. She predominantly claimed the blasphemous heads of monsters that had never known the threat of an elvhen arrow, returning victorious—but more mentally broken each time.

"If only you were as complacent as your sister… she seemed almost ecstatic when I requested your watchword." The words slipped with charming care. Of course they were bitter lies. The Hearth-keeper would never sully herself by aiding his cause, but the idea alone would drive the accusatory wedge he was placing home as it was intended to.

His silvery tongue effortlessly plucked at strained and frayed familial bonds. Those decaying threads were still woven so tightly, but all it would take was for one to snap in the right place and the rest would soon come to follow.

Many would call him too prideful for his short span of years, though another held the title of youngest. None had come into their own such as he had, at least not on this side of the abyss. Refusal of devout obedience, theft of divine power and the incitement of rebellion were only some of the most critical of his offenses. It had become easy to compile a near endless list of crimes committed over the last few centuries alone. Any single one of them would have warranted swift execution if his position was any less than it was, but few in their rank stood capable or simply willing to serve the justice by themselves. The matter of his capture was equally as problematic; even cornered the rebel could always find an escape.
However, without a unanimous convergence he was left free to do as he pleased, just as they themselves, the omnipotent elvhen pantheon were left almost entirely unrestricted, free of the shackles of philanthropy, morality or law. It had been nearly a thousand years since the highest had last agreed to anything in unison and their further disintegration would not alter that escalating course. Only sufficient public outcry or personal attack could call for any penalty, and only one of the illustrious nine had the remaining strength to overwhelm the others. Her wrath was enough to splinter their abilities and none could stand against the Mother for long. At least for now.

Returning to her captive the irate woman whom many heralded as a goddess crouched down onto her muscular haunches. The lengthy plaits of blonde hair curved away from her scowling face swept the polished walk of the closed, private courtyard where she'd captured the heretical agitator unaided. Each adorned, gilded end clicking and rolling as she settled on the balls of her wrapped feet. She took the smirking delinquent by his blood-spattered throat and stared, her already murky eyes grew vacant and dead as her sturdy fingers slowly started to squeeze.

"We had a deal and I have kept my side of the bargain, least you forget your own. Andruil."

Fen'Harel began to chuckle impishly as he was immediately released from the bow roughened hands, much to the spiteful annoyance of his imprisoner.

"Are your eyes failing you in your old age or can you not see what he has stolen from me?" Andruil snapped back as she rose to her full height to face the lone approaching entity, appearing from within the hazy, manifested darkness before her.

"That is not of my concern." It was not the new man's lack of imposing size that made the elvhen deity he spoke to look almost inconsequential. Where the high elves before him were tall and graceful, he was cut from dense stone, unyielding and thick limbed in comparison, nearly regressive. The black-brown abundance of hair that framed the sides of his hard face had never known the management of a braid or the metal of a cutting edge. He was poison and loathing made into deceptively striking flesh, a physicality heavily rumored in certain circles to have caught the lustful interests of the diminished and void-struck Lady of the Hunt.

"Why should we not pare his skin from his wicked bones now and stab the howling beast within..." There it was, cracking just a bit more. Fen'Harel could see the spreading fractures just behind her momentarily hollow eyes. Which was it though? The smell of fresh blood in the dry air, the screams of revolution burning through the night or was it the itching hilt of the unused dagger at her side that sang to the darkness brewing in her mind.

"His debts are mine to collect first. You may have your revenge upon his remains when you come to claim them from the Void." Pestilence incarnate spoke indifferently, unmoved by the fragmented prattle. A jaundiced stare left the splintered divinity and settled on the maltreated form of the disputed hostage. The flickering light of the ransacked ruins glimmered off the polished streaks on his armor as the enchanted red veins began to glow hot with his climbing ire. "Give us the Dread Wolf, I will not ask a second time."

"Anaris, my old friend," Immediately recognizing the voice of the circling foe, the youthful man on the ground slowly turned, popping a crick from his neck and carefully observed his known adversary. A contemptuous smile never wavered even as his movement elicited an uncomfortable grunt. "A pleasure to see you again. Remind me though, before you cut off my head, which slight you hope to repair? Ahhh...You can't still be mourning poor Geldauran, can you? I witnessed his execution myself; it was a very honorable end, much too gracious for his deserving though. I thought you would appreciate my myriad of gifts, but it seems I have displeased you."

The impassive, shadowy general stepped forward, as far as Andruil would allow him near her
disheveled trophy. "No, it was exceptionally considerate of you, my brother's ears in a trinket box."

"I wanted his tongue, but the crows relieved him of that first." Fen'Harel mocked harshly, his tone dropping the false playful banter. It twisted to utter revulsion before he was felled again by a coarsely laid, leathery heel that followed his collapse back to the hard tile and pinned him there beneath the snapped Huntress.

"Then let yours take its place!" Andruil's finger pulled at her honed blade, ready to gut the spiteful monster, the demolisher of her vengeful plans, but she was ripped away by a sizable grasp of her long bound hair. She spun her aggressions onto Anaris and crossed blades with her treacherous accomplice. Their alliance had been doomed from the start; both had always considered themselves well assured to be the one to come out on top in the end of their doubly deceitful dealings. Fen'Harel had been thorough of that too. The right words, the dangling promises, Anaris and Andruil each had been played in turn with their early, respective and hence revoked alliances with the cunning Wolf. Brother to both indeed.

"Enough, he's playing you for a dolt and you are letting him! I need his power more than you desire your pitiful revenge." The demand was rough and clear, but the unsound Archer had been pushed too far. The sinking gradation of her psychosis threatened to flood all of her facilities, leaving Andruil enslaved to her own unsettled emotions, scattered memories and perverse thoughts.

There was little else left to her but unmatched rage, violence and retaliation. She already had been forsaken by her less than altruistic siblings and ridiculed by the rest of the pantheon for her lamentable zeal and need for vengeance.

None of them cared to be pulled into her self-inflicted mess while they each fought their own battles. Falon'Din had still not recovered from the terrible assault spearheaded by their mother's forced hand. Dirthamen refused to leave the safety of his hiding places. Still sewing his secret, masterful plots with the added aid of the young Ghilan'nain, no one had seen him in years. Only Andruil alone, the great Lady of the Hunt, stood at the ready against their forbidding opposition and her perceived failure of their kind.

Unstopped, she would be free to throw open the scattered accesses of the Void and hunt there unhindered until her desire had finally been sated. Why not allow her some satisfaction now by slaying the malicious brute, the one who'd first guided her into forgetful obscurity.

It pleased the Dread Wolf, knowing all too well that he had set their forces into motion and soon they would neutralize each other for him, just as he'd always planned.

Anaris had already delivered on his promise of providing Andruil the means to a dastardly attempt at weakening Mythal. He was needed no more and could be disposed of without further consequence. He was in her realm now where not even his precious armor could protect him for long against her.

"If you want this feral beast so badly, try and take him."

Fen'Harel hummed quietly to himself and waited. He could almost smell the blood of idols just aching to be spilled, so ready to thicken the smoky air. This plan had certainly gone far better than expected; but the amusement of watching them tear each other into pieces certainly was an added benefit, well worth the trifling loss of his blood adorning the tiles they stood upon.

"I recall damaging her hip earlier," He paused, flicking the hair that had fallen once more into his face back over his shoulders with a quick jerk of his head. "Consider it another gift."
Massaging his raw wrists, Fen’Harel deliberately mounted each step of the once grand stairs leading into the still smoldering temple. He took considerate care in stepping around the silent bodies of the fallen elves that now cluttered the shallow steps. Thankfully, few were of his well-prepared rebel band, but he had expected no less considering the drained mindlessness of Andruil’s enslaved masses. It was doubtful many plagued had survived to see the newly breaking dawn. For a brief, mournful moment he looked up at the fading night sky as it was chased away by the sun’s first piercing rays. The growing light made the carnage seem all the more real and bloodstained, a shadowy veil lifted from nightmare it had become.

At least they were liberated now. If their spirits hadn’t already departed along with their stolen free-will. He told himself, as he rolled his achy shoulders back and raised his weary head high. People needed leaders capable of instilling confidence in their warriors. His wounded and ragged appearance would not discredit him. Rather it would prove that he too fought beside them, further uplifting their once crushed spirits.

But this was just the beginning; the fallen goddess had many more blindly devoted forces waiting for his rebels to eviscerate as well. The Huntress had taken ample years to cultivate and poison her following, usurping many of their people in the aftermath of the warlord Falon’Din’s vain, endless quest for worship. She had numbers on her side but not real power. Andruil greedily ripped away as much of their magic as she could instead of leaving her slaves whole and sane. He could not even begin to fathom how many she had burned through this night alone, considering the fight she’d put up not once but twice. How many of the empty husks that littered the temple’s halls fell not to swords, axes or arrows? But rather simply collapsed lifelessly to the glittering tiles, their light extinguished.

Mythal had best be prepared to meet her turbulent child; there could be no room in her heart for sympathy or mercy.

"Are there any still clean?" He asked, his tone authoritative when he happened upon one of his agents amidst a swift dispatch of a remaining, afflicted worshipper. The deformed elf, flesh covered in ulcers and skin turned motley gray, struggled momentarily beneath her restraining hand and then went forever still.

"Few, if any… This is worse than anything we feared." The comrade looked up from her woeful, obligatory task and observed his battered state. Depleted and despairing, she wiped her blade before returning it to its sheath. Rubbing away the blood from her trembling hands, the elven woman pulled the fabric covering her nose and mouth higher, wisely keeping the sick, smoky air away from her lungs. "The Huntress?"

"Will endure. Was the central chamber breached successfully?" Fen’Harel had little time for consoling, or mourning the dead. If they were to stave the infection that was spreading all too quickly through the populace it had to be dealt with unwavering swiftness. They could grieve when the work was finished, if they survived at all.

"It was…” Her muffled, haunted words sufficed his lingering uncertainties as she pointed down the scorched, vaulted hall that was full of the scattered remains of the ageless temple. The mesmerizing, mosaic clad walls had been blasted through, spiraling pillars demolished, and all the wreckage pointed towards their recently captured objective. "See for yourself, I won't go nearer to that… that thing. It sings."

He followed the devastated pilgrimage alone, disregarding the stomach turning sensation of his bare feet sticking to the death-strewn floor; the motionless, heaped bodies of ally and foe alike growing
thicker the further he traveled. It was slow going, the sore ache of his bones and the exhaustion of his trials gave him as much pause as the hazardous rumble beneath his feet. Reaching the contaminated source of Andruil's sacrifices had always been their goal, though it seemed to have come with a great cost of many immortal lives. Countless years sacrificed in a matter of hours for the cause or in an attempt to defend the very holy epicenter he sought.

The elaborately patterned timbered doors that failed to protect the temple's heart had been violently rent from their hinges and the riven debris had been forcefully pushed away from the shattered archway. Lushly decorated with the decreed goddess's own Vir Tanadahl, the three trees of her guidance, the massive entryway was now little more than charred ruins. But the inner contents remained untouched and it was here that most of his surviving, dissident group had gathered, standing in horrified awe of the defiled alter.

Where once there had been a pure, nourishing fount of sacred honor, used in declaration to a noble path now gushed a decaying source of death and disease. Littered with monstrous skulls of slain demons and glowing sickly red with bizarre, nauseating crystal splinters, Andruil's spring had become a true atrocity. It was here that her most faithful came to partake of the holy waters and give themselves entirely to their favored god even as she was failing. From there, they would spread the illness onto the less willing by defiling every healthy water source they could gain control of. There were even reports of some elvhen becoming infected through intimate touch with the recently afflicted, but little evidence had yet been presented to support the claim. Regardless of how they were dispersing the sickness, those already tainted were creating a self-expanding army of mindless slaves at the whim and disposal of a mad deity and her agreeing kin.

With mere water Andruil, the goddess who now often forgot her own name, had been given profane power over thousands.

"Drain it, then we'll tear it down." ordered the Dread Wolf, a tiny flame popping to life at the end of a finger after he rescued a simple, hidden treasure from his robes. The bowl had been cracked in the skirmish, but the short draws he could pull would give some clarity back to his fatigued mind. He would need all his caution and wisdom to help dismantle the unholy fount without making things worse than they already were. "But don't touch the water if it can be avoided, we don't understand how this spreads."

Whispers from the Well of Sorrows

"She shook the radiance of the stars, divided them into grains of light, then stored them in a shaft of gold. Andruil, blood and force, save us from the time this weapon is thrown. Your people pray to You. Spare us the moment we become Your sacrifice"- Codex
Hand Be Still

Chapter Summary

It's called the Well of Sorrows, no one should want something formally dubbed so. One tiny touch shouldn't matter, its only water. Right?

"I am willing to pay the price the Well demands. I am also the best suited to use its knowledge in your service." Morrigan offered haughtily, her thinly shaped brow angled inwards with the depth of her proclaimed self-worth that none present could match. But her offered altruism could not be taken for more than polished veneer. The Inquisitor was not unmindful of the scornful woman's unconcealed aspirations, but Morrigan's knowledge was needed, even if it were despised. It was clear to Chiyo, that the Witch of the Wilds coveted a second eluvian and wasn't above false-hearted means to attain it.

"Or more likely to your own ends." Solas added disapprovingly, his words openly harsh and condemning. His repugnance of the untrustworthy woman substantially grew with every utterance that came from her scheming mouth. There was a grasping desire in her that even a static stance and impassive appearance could not entirely conceal. With the same breath that held knowledge as both desirable and vital she spurned any notion that would deny her access, be it lacked worthiness or acceptability. But it was her superior airs, not just her unquenchable thirst for power, which set Solas' teeth to grind and his innards to twist sourly.

"What do you know of my ends, elf?" Morrigan rebuffed nonchalantly, not even bothering to acknowledge her accuser by name. There was no further hiding of their mutual contempt. Their extended and arduous trials in the Arbor Wilds had ruined what thin decorum the clashing mages had originally reserved between mostly avoided conversations, but there was little evading each other in the presence of the Well of Sorrows.

Elf, the way it rolled off her deceitful tongue made his skin crawl.

"You are a glutton drooling at the sight of a feast!" The elven apostate snarled, tightly wrinkling his nose in blatant disgust. Solas boldly stepped forward, interrupting Morrigan's manufactured philanthropy. She was a childish and distressingly imprudent sorceress, toying with the work of ancient's with no true understanding of the immense peril that waited in the glistening waters. "And you cannot be trusted."

Just the sheer notion that he might allow her to steal this last vestige of the elvhen people, their great and lost knowledge took all of his will to restrain the rage that boiled inside him. But there was more to the dilemma than the insult to himself and all that he had sacrificed to attain his goals. Likely, the fate of the Inquisition now rested in the decision made—all could fall to ruin if the choice were made in poor haste ...and the fate of Chiyo seemed entangled as well.

"Listen to me." Ignoring the unforgiving inference, the yellow-eyed enchantress pressed the issue again. She turned back to the deliberating Dalish mage, choosing her melancholic words as wisely as she may. But the small band was already pressed for time and lingering at the water's edge would not benefit their assault on the Elder One. "Of those present I alone have the training to make use of this. Let me drink, Inquisitor."
"You alone? This is my heritage. My people's shattered history, which we are debating handing over to a... to a shemlen!" Solas nearly jumped upon hearing his private thoughts made real, set free from the exasperated Herald's own frowning lips.

Chiyo's fist clenched to her flank, beginning to shake with resentment until she could press it down no longer. She'd clearly heard enough, Morrigan had made her disproportionate grasp of elven knowledge quite known as they'd explored and penetrated the puzzling temple. She spoke to them as if they were all clueless. Much to the discomfort of not only herself but to Solas, who seemed to be growing infinitely less capable of reserving his more than mere studied familiarity, rebuking her assumptions at every possible turn. The humans present may not be fully aware of all the nuances and importance, but no favor had been won by Morrigan when she'd tried to explain to a Dalish elf who Mythal was and she still had not recovered from the affront she made against Fen'Harel. Were they not standing on such hallowed, reverent ground, the Inquisitor doubted her ability to keep the argument from escalating to brutality.

Gesturing to the red, winding branches that had been so painfully wrought into her cheeks, she nearly growled through bared teeth. "Whose marks do you carry on your face? None. I choose these in veneration. I suffered for her blessing and gave my own blood to earn them. I may not be the most faithful or believing of anyone here, but you can't assume some part of me doesn't want this to be true!" Her index and middle fingers pointed towards to the undevoted, flawless skin of Morrigan's face. They came within inches of the glaring Witch then flicked away with anger as Chiyo spoke.

"I have studied the oldest lore; I have delved into mysteries of which you could only dream." Morrigan asserted defensively, her sallow eyes turned severe and piercing with an aggravated sneer. "Can you honestly tell me there is anyone better suited? I am willing and able, but I doubt that you truly are."

"What about you, Solas?" Whirling bristly away from Morrigan, the Inquisitor spoke to the only other elf and experienced mage among them. She would never offer such an exceptional and substantial asset to the humans at her side, no matter how genuine their relationship to her. Neither Cassandra nor Blackwall were appropriate for the task, excluded by both background and race.

"No. Do not ask me again." Was all he could firmly manage through a forcefully clenched jaw without fully losing his sliding grip on the disdain that threatened to undo him further. His pulse rang thunderously in his ears. He wanted to yell in protest as she dared even offered up or to entertain the idea of partaking of the mysterious waters. But they were left with no other option, one of them had to drink, and he could not do it himself. That much he was entirely certain of. It was to him though, that Chiyo requested with unfaltering trust, a reliance she should have never placed in his treacherous heart. He was not deserving of such freely given regard.

"Thoughts, everyone." But the Inquisitor directly deferred not to the cautious Seeker, the prodigious Grey Warden or back to the self-qualifying sorceress of Korcari for guidance as she crouched low beside the tranquil waters of the Well. She may detest the Witch she'd allowed to enter the Inquisition, but her dislike did not make Morrigan entirely wrong either. It was with Solas however that her conflicted eyes locked, a curious hand straying ever nearer to the perilous liquid. So close to the knowledge she desired, not only for herself but for her scattered, dying people deprived of their unique culture and most their rhythmical language. She wanted him to tell her that it would be worth it, that nothing bad would come of her attempt or to be given reason enough to permit Morrigan to assume the unknowable duties. She needed his guidance such as she never had before but he remained unyielding and silent.

'Please,' Her indecisive eyes begged to his before he turned sharply away to stare at the problematic Well, 'help me'.
Cassandra spoke first, keeping watch on the shadowy woman in question. "If it is between you and her, then let her take the risk. Maker help us all." The Seeker justified it to herself silently—better a dead Witch than losing their Herald and Inquisitor to an ancient magic they knew so little about.

"I would trust you with that power more than her," added Blackwall, shifting deliberately away from the convoluted pool. "But that is not for me to decide."

"Solas?" Chiyo asked as the apostate kept a pause, his response unnervingly delayed and withheld. Even his face gave her no clue as to what she should chose, beyond the crinkled nose and tightly knit brows, his focus remained trained on the shimmering water.

Not to him, let her ask anyone else and receive a truer answer. She shouldn't request such of the wretched failure whose blind arrogance had guided his hand, the traitor who had inadvertently stripped the elves of their magic and long years, the mad man driven away from every wandering clan to cross his path and alienage he'd ever approached, cursed for his tries to help amend.

Solas forced his troubled thoughts to steady; there was no room for error here with wanton emotion scouring at his reason. Even simply destroying the Well may not bring them the outcome they needed and there was little time to attempt to undo the powerful enchantment. Yet with upmost care and with all the magic he could spare, he had not been able to prevent the ailment and suffering that had adjoined the dismantlement of Andruil's unholy spring. Many of his fearless rebels had fallen terribly ill after they'd aided his plot against the Huntress during his over confident youth. Just having been near the vile fount had begun an all-consuming sickness of their hearts and minds. Their misery was immense and so was his, he'd given the order and he had directed them to their doom. Not immediately, weeks for many or months for the unfortunate few. The especially strong, for those exceptional warriors, it had passed by without sign of a problem. But one by one, most of those who had helped him that disastrous day fell into madness and soon thereafter he gave them a merciful death—they deserved that at least. Some took their own failing lives. Others choose to walk into the darkness with an afflicted shield-brother or sister, each with bearing only a small ritualistic blade; neither would return.

It was then that he first pulled away, leaving the endangered comradely of like-minded elvhen to pursue his goals completely alone. They were more than capable enough to defend the threatened, enslaved masses and they did not need him to do it. Though he continued to provide them with whatever means were left available for him to give. His small, unadorned sanctuary and all the potent magic stored there was at their disposal, their calls for aid answered when they could find him and many of the battles they would survive to meet felt the impact of his distant hand. He could not ask another elf, immortal or not, to take on what had been originally his own responsibility or to suffer so devastatingly with the cost his failures. Perhaps, the Dalish were right to vilify him. He had not given near enough in return for those who willingly laid down their lives at his command. He should have joined them in death—and almost had.

Had he only accepted Mythal's proposal when given the opportunity, there would be no Well of Sorrows posing such a current danger. Nor would there be an Inquisition, for there would never have been a Breach to pull the people of Haven together. So much was his fault, his burdens, leaking from the past into this very day. Countless sufferings would have been prevented had he not rebuked the goddess' offer of salvation. Fen'Harel had been strong and smart enough to have played the role of Mythal's Exalted; the highest honor bestowed only second to what had been gifted to Ghilan'nain. But instead of gratitude, he'd laughed in the faces of original ancients before they exiled him to the abyss, leaving him to die.

Every choice had a cost; some were just steeper than others. "You should consider the possibilities, there is more to this than simply stopping Corypheus. But we must take the power that lies in that
"Well." His tone was still clipped and short however it lacked the searing heat it had when he spoke last, instead there was a lingering echo of mourning that meet Chiyo's hearkened ear.

"Enough deliberation! You lead the Inquisition. This is not a risk you can take." Morrigan warned coldly, demanding the right once more. "I have the best chance of making use of the Well… for everyone. Let. Me. Drink." The Witch's voice grated as broken glass over rough stone to Chiyo's already frazzled nerves.

"What could be worth such a terrible price? Being bound forever… even to Mythal, if she still exists." Chiyo had finally stopped listening. Instead she closed her ears to the concerns of her companions as she directed her attentions to the unassuming waters. They did not sound hungry to her, as they did to Morrigan, rather it sung of willful compulsion. The Well was challenging her to take it for herself, pulling deeply at her core. She groaned in brewing frustration, the two equally unpleasant options demanded her immediate choice.

The Inquisitor pondered quietly to herself for a few stretched moments, weighing the disagreeable alternatives. Her fingers traced the cool, stone lip of the well, the luring glint of the clear, seemingly harmless water acutely drawing her attention. "Haven't I already gotten myself into enough trouble with the Anchor… but what's one more curse to add to my troubles." Chiyo's voiced trailed as she stared, intensely seized by the soft, whispering call.

"What is your decision?" pressed the Seeker, growing anxious the longer they belated. "We cannot stay here forever."

"Why shouldn't it be me…" she asked to no one as her marked hand slipped and the tip of a drifting finger betrayed her, barely brushing the beckoning surface, sending a faint ripple—but the lingering calm was immediately broken by the Inquisitor's startled scream and a flash of an enchanted barrier's light.

"Chiyo!"

"Inquisitor!"

A crackling jolt followed up her arm as she fell, clutching at the marked hand that had been hypnotically drawn to the water. She howled fleeting curses as the agony passed, and then she rapidly sank into a dumbstruck silence. Panicked, the rift magic bound in her small palm sputtered to life as her limb numbingly tingled from fingertip to shoulder. Chiyo scrambled while the unexpected pain left her as quickly as she'd been injured. Facilities returning, the Inquisitor struggled to stand once more. Her affected arm quivered and drooped unworkably on the ground while she used the undamaged arm to right herself.

"What have you done!" Solas was immediately at her side and utterly livid, pushed to the brink of his personal control over his flaring emotions. He roughly pulled her to her unsteady feet, his hands shook as they tightened around fistfuls of her armored clothes. "What irrationality would drive you to touch such a thing?"

"It's just water, what was the harm in—I can't feel my arm." Her eyes went wide as she tried to move the limp appendage to no avail, only the blazing green emanating from her mark showing any sign of life or change beyond the throbbing that seared her nerves. It grew brighter and more agitated in her distress, witnessing Morrigan as she immediately stepped into the water, entirely unconcerned and unaffected. She pled, even if she hated the foul woman she didn't want to see anyone hurt. "Morrigan, stop!"

"It seems the Well does not agree with you. Your time to choose is up! If you are incapable I will
take the Well myself." called the Witch, traveling further into the pool. Spreading her arms out to meet the rising waters the Well began to change, acknowledging their new host in a swelling, swirling torrent of unlocked magic. "But it does not appear to reject me."

Unchallenged, Morrigan drank deeply from the Well of Sorrows, and without a moment to spare.

They stumbled through the second mirror in a frantic scramble, just scarcely evading the unleashed might of the unknown figure that had risen from the pool to meet their monstrous foe head on. The giant woman made of the remaining water in the Well had bought the fleeing party enough time to escape through the opened eluvian that now stood utterly useless to Corypheus. Crashing to the dusty floor, some more gracefully than others, the harried group returned to the distant safety of Skyhold. Or so they hoped.

Still staggering from the potent magic coursing through her being, Morrigan quickly closed her eluvian as the Inquisitor passed through last behind the others.

"Shit-shit-shit! Get back!" Chiyo warned in unrestrained horror to her companions. They had barely begun to recover, the call to battle still singing loud in their ears. They spun to meet the adamant cry of their Herald as she balled her unheeding hand into a fist with her usable one, trying to contain the mark as it strained towards eruption. She'd been on the verge of utilizing it to assault their greatest enemy when they had forcibly dragged her through the awoken mirror. The troubled mark still answered her natural impulsion to open rifts but she felt no instinctive means to stay the dangerous magic on the cusp of being released from her numbed hand. "Get away … from … me… I can't!" She panted through the anguish of holding back the magic never intended for her body to control.

"Here?! In the middle of Skyhold?!" Cassandra yelled, immediately reaching for the long and deadly weapon strapped at her hip. The swift, deliberate pull of steel grating against the engraved sheath sent the terrified Inquisitor reeling until she slammed backwards into the nearest wall within the narrow confines of the room they'd returned to. She trembled against the solid stone, pressing her glowing hand between her rigid spine and the unyielding wall in hopeless concealment.

Morrigan stood protectively before her priceless eluvian, tottering woozily as she prepared to defend her hard won prize. "Get her away from my mirror!"

Chiyo's wide eyes locked on the drawn sword in the grasp of an expertly trained woman renowned for her honed aggressions. Death at the hands of a human, it was the end she'd always anticipated. The Inquisitor had once felt a tightly limited trust for their kind, even the wonderful friendships she had made since the Conclave had not amended all of her wariness. Dorian, Cassandra, Blackwall, Cullen, Josephine, Vivienne, and countless other individuals had all shown a level of kindness, understanding and companionship she'd never considered possible during her more narrow-minded wanderings as a nomad. But humans as a group had always spelled trouble when it came to elves, continually selecting their race's desires long before any regard was given for the disintegrating elven people. If they wanted land, they took it, even if it had been decreed elsewhere. If they wanted slaves, they found them in droves, offering such generous opportunities to the impoverished elves living within their city alienage.

What was one Dalish elf when hundreds of other lives instantly lay on the line?

But even being the Inquisitor, a protector of their blighted world, did not exemplify her from being removed from the title if her gift became an endangerment. Her chest rose and fell with each frightened breath drawn as the magic she tried desperately to contain began to take form. The air
around her began to ripple as the Veil was worn thin by the disruptive force caught within her limp palm. "I have to get out of here!"

"To where?" Compellingly asked the approaching Seeker. The powerful muscles of her dedicated arm clenched in preparation as she raised her weapon. The inhabitants of Skyhold were Cassandra's first and foremost priority, and no one was above being dispatched if they posed a risk. "There are innocent civilians in the garden, in the halls. You will put them in danger!"

"Please Seeker, Chiyo. Try to remain calm." Solas lifted his hands unhurriedly, realizing that any added emotions of his own might ignite the brewing upset into full blown violence.

"If she can't stop it... I will make her!" The Seeker cautioned as the impassive apostate deliberately maneuvered between herself and the perceived peril, standing as a composed shield. She turned an uncongenial eye to Chiyo and demanded a response. "Mage, have you lost command of your powers?"

"I'm trying!" Chiyo appealed, crying out as her push of willpower struggled to bridge the deadened gap between her mind and her hand. The alight green mark grew hotter, scorching her pressed fingers and steaming against the naturally dank wall. The Anchor was on the brink of a complete breakdown, and one way or the other it would take her with it.

Morrigan hissed vehemently, her own brandished staff at the ready. She cast a sturdy barrier, wrapping the magic about herself in a protective shroud. "Well try harder, you imbecile!"

But it was Blackwall who reached out to Cassandra, cautioning her assault with a halting block of his wide hand on the hilt of her weapon. "I think if you put away the sword it would help… It's hard for anyone to find ease when bare blades are involved. And if I know anything, a mage cornered is not relaxed…" He trailed off, holding his breath as he waited.

"We can't allow her to kill everyone in Skyhold because she was fool enough to touch the Well!" added the Witch, antagonizing the already stressed situation. Her head swam with the multitude of ancient voices that all now whispered in her mind, the dizziness forced her to lean heavily against the support of her staff. "It clearly didn't want her."

"She is a danger to—" Cassandra began before being cut off by the elven mage before her.

"Everyone halt!" Solas ordered, his voice reverberating off of the narrow walls. He then lowered his tone and took several slow steps backwards, hands still held up. "Chiyo, close the Anchor."

"I don't have any control! I can't … it... it isn't responding like it should!" She confessed and fought a quickly losing internal battle. The first hair-thin streak of the opening tear shone threateningly bright above them. At any moment, a rift would open fully and they would all be drawn into the Fade or die trying to escape the perilous forces of the magical deadlock.

"Then pray tell. Why did you train so hard?" Solas asked, his focus never faltering from the protective Seeker even as the area around him ebbed and pulsed with impending destruction. His words hit her with heavy weight, forcing her emotions abruptly from acidic fear into a plunging shame. Had she wasted all those countless hours, each day brutally pushing her magic to the absolute limit until all she could do was make it up the mountain every night to collapse into her bed? Had she driven away the company of her precious few friends and most of the Inquisition only to be taken down like a mongrel gone rabid?

"No one will be allowed to hurt you." He assured, coldly certain that they would desist the attempt or meet him for trying. He would not go down easily, comrades or not, Cassandra wouldn't be
permitted any closer.

"But she's right..." She could feel her throat growing tight with the ache of knowingly accepting her own imminent death, but her fright slowed. A disturbing, acquiescent calm spread in her heaving chest. The Seeker was well within her rationalization to defend not only herself but everyone around her. That had been the long, catastrophic history of mages and Templars, had it not? The swords and shields standing at the ready to strike down a mage who had gone too far or lost control, making themselves a threat to others that had to be nullified. "... Save them Cassandra... my life for Skyhold. You are ... justified." She closed her eyes, but the pain in her arm increased. Chiyo feared it was unraveling too fast, slipping through fingers that no longer responded. Cassandra's actions might be callous but her judgement was not. She slowly opened her tightly clenched eyes to meet with the Seeker's. "Strike me down... before..."

"She has no claim to execute you when you've done nothing to warrant such." Solas stood firm in this resolve, magic danced along his fingertips. He refused to lower his raised arms until Cassandra had finally and begrudgingly done the same with hers. "Cassandra you, yourself once entrusted me to the management and investigation of this mark. Or does that merit no longer stand. Which is it, Seeker?"

"I ... Yes. I did," Cassandra answered, sliding her sword back into its sheath but her hand lingered over the pommel. She grimaced at the sight of the expanding wound high above their heads, already the air in the room was being sucked in, drawing in dust and debris. "But I can see with my own eyes now that the situation has changed. I cannot allow anyone, not even a friend, to destroy the last hope the people of Skyhold have for survival."

"Solas... I... I could kill us all! In Haven... I told her if I failed... if the mark became... I told her to kill me!" Chiyo closed her eyes tightly once more and took several deep breaths through her flared nostrils, focusing all her will towards her unruly hand, begging, pleading and flat out demanding that the power obey. She whimpered in rising anguish. "I can't do this."

"I have faith in you." Solas said steadily as he turned his back on the apprehensive warriors and the uncompromising Witch. He reached out, spanning the destabilized distance.

"No... No!" She dithered as he drew dangerously near, darting towards the door but Solas left her with nowhere to run. He crowded around Chiyo's dodging frame. His remarkably broad shoulders blocked out everything else, confining her world to him, the burning mark, and the cold stone of the wall behind her. Without another word he collected her hand, the mark's pulsating glow radiating so brightly that it could be seen even through his own skin and bones. She tried to jerk her hand away, to protect him from it, from herself. But, he would not relinquish her even as the mark began to spread in thin cracks down her wrist or step away as she urgently begged him too.

Instead she felt him open up to her, letting her take whatever stability from his offered magic that she needed to balance out the unsettled rift. With the heat of his allowing body against hers, the terrified shudders that wracked her lessened and then fully subsided. The flickering of the mark eased, she pressed harder in her mind to slow it even further. He breathed in and out in calm measured intakes and exhales, giving her a rhythm to follow in suit. Chiyo did not know how long he stood there with her, but eventually the intensity in the mark diminished and the light gradually lessened.

"Vhenan." Solas whispered as he kissed the back of her hand and he placed her palm open against his vulnerable chest. "You have never harmed me with these hands, has that changed?"

With one last mental shove the hostile magic in the air fizzled out with a loud crack as the rift snapped shut and gradually began to dissolve, the emerald light faded away. As she finally relaxed, the stress of her ordeals draining and leaving her empty, her arm slipped from his unharmed chest.
How it had burned brick but not him was a question for later once she had the energy to stand without the blackened stonework behind her supporting her weight. Chiyo's arm hung uselessly at her side. It was neutralized and stable once more.

"Maker's breath..." Blackwall released a pent up sigh, pushing several disheveled hairs away from his dampened brow.

"You are no more a hazard to these people than a passing storm." Solas solemnly crossed his hands low behind his hips and stood firm, determined to guard her passage even at the cost of the thin allegiance he'd been granted by their companions. Their harrowing trials may have brought them all together and allowed such dissimilar peoples to strive towards a common goal, but it did not wholly erase the centuries old guardedness between race or natural ability. He'd lived long enough to know that more than well enough. But keeping Chiyo out of harm's way was far more important than affable appearances or maintaining the fledgling bonds a year in the Inquisition's company had bought him. "Please, tend to your arm."

"That's it?" protested Morrigan, heeding to the opposing whispers she alone could hear. "You're just going to let her walk out of here? I think that is most unwise considering what's just happened."

Sliding cautiously down the wall, step over leery step, Chiyo made her way nearer to the exit that would set her loose into the community garden. But seeing the icy crystals building up on Solas’ loosely curled fingertips made her pause. It seemed she was not the only one losing a firm grasp on their magic. "I'm not leaving you alone with them."

"Go." He did not watch her depart.
Blinded By Pride

Chapter Summary

No matter the cost, he shall not let them touch her. Her freedom is more important than the fragile bonds he has forged over the last year. Chiyo escapes to recover, but she is not entirely alone. A compassionate spirit is there to help the hurt and make her feel a little less small.

"You're just as senseless as she is." Morrigan ridiculed the unflinching apostate as the heavy door to her tucked away chamber was soundly shut by the Herald. She'd made her escape into the sun-drenched, halcyon inner garden, and now walked amid those who'd only moments before been oblivious to their peril.

Remorseless, yellow eyes flicked towards his stationary hands and narrowed as she considered the Solas' burgeoning iciness. She'd been given ample opportunity throughout their recent journey to see him fight; and though the Witch would never agree to being daunted by the disagreeable fellow she'd witnessed enough to know better that to concede to a bout. Not in her current state at least, and not in such narrow quarters. She nearly snorted at the thought. "What were you going to do if that little stunt hadn't worked? Leave the rest of us to die as collateral— to satisfy what exactly? This obvious entanglement with the Inquisitor you seem to be rather severely involved in?"

Critically, Morrigan looked to each of the perturbed warriors also waiting for the elven mage's next move. "I'm certainly not the only one considering to dare call it… inappropriate."

"I have none of the reservations you unfortunately carry. It was your poorly added fears and evident hostility that would have led to our demise." Solas frowned unseen, still facing the scorched wall that smoldered from the disintegrating touch of the mark. The placement of each of Chiyo's heedless fingers was now forever etched into the stone surface as a blackened testament of her narrowly escaped ordeal. "My relationships here are also not any of your concern. Tell me though, since we are discussing appropriateness, what you felt usurping yet another rare sliver of elvhen history? I want to know how the last knowledge of Mythal's most dedicated tasted on a human tongue."

The slightly swaying Witch of the Wilds found herself pinned by the elven mage's stormy stare as he glowered over his shoulder. But the disapproving severity swiftly faded as some amusing thought, boding of ill luck to Morrigan, must have tickled his mind. The hardened gaze diminished and the thin skin around his lids crinkled perceptively at the edges. "I hope the price will be worth it. You should prepare yourself."

Morrigan scoffed, low and annoyed as she rubbed at her aching temples. "Pffh. Excuse me while I tremble in fear of a goddess whose power couldn't keep her from being murdered. Please, fetch the salts before I faint."

"Maybe we should leave too." Suggested Blackwall with an anxious cough, keeping a careful watch on both of the remaining mages, but it was the Seeker at his side that seemed to be the most displeased. All could feel the cutting tension in the muscles of her firmly compressed jaw. "The Commander and the rest of the troops don't know about our departure. I'm sure they would appreciate some news of our safety and changed location. We should report to the Spymaster sooner rather than later."
"Perhaps Cullen would also like to hear of what has transpired in our very own halls, considering his experience with the supervision of mages. But what I don't understand is what made you believe you could handle the mark, why any of that...whatever you wish to call it, worked in the first place. You've studied the mark, certainly, but have your observations truly given you that much insight? What are you not telling us!" Solas could almost feel Cassandra's eyes on his wrists as she spoke, perhaps envisioning them bound in thick iron or lashed to a post. But he had remained utterly judicious, amidst his own mounting fears, and in the face of impending devastation. There was no call yet to lock him away for his actions even if he had defied both the Seeker's authority and the Inquisitor's harried order. He had been allowed into the Inquisition for the benefit of his unusual understandings, but that stance did not give him any power to lead with. The former Right Hand and the renounced Templar Commander had secondary authority over Skyhold. With his sway, Solas considered himself little more than a favored guest kept for his vast knowledge and expertise. Had it not been for the agreeable alliance of the Inquisitor and even the better portion of his fellow comrades, he would have likely sought to continue his studies from afar.

"Seeker, you speak as though the events that transpired were not an accident. In all honesty. Can you say that you have always been in control of every one of your actions? Worse yet, you seem to imply that I had something to do with this." Solas straightened his tired shoulders further as he continued the slow count of his own pulse, using it as measure for the valuable time he was buying. Each beat afforded the injured elf more time, distance and a better chance at escaping the added pressure of unnerved company. "Do you truly believe me to be so conniving? She is important to me; I could never use her towards such imagined, foul ends."

No one outside of this room ever needed to know what had come to pass. If he could somehow convince Cassandra of the necessity, that was. Others learning of such a profound loss of restraint would only lead to grave disturbance amongst the masses, at best. And if the event was recounted poorly… He cared not even to consider the chaos that would follow. Just how deep did the love they held for their Herald go and would they continue to follow her if they knew how close to danger they’d all unknowingly come?

It was bleak to consider what would have befallen Skyhold if the rift had successfully been opened. They would have been the first to have perished, undoubtedly, from the pressures of the forged breach alone. Without warning, their Keep would have seen an outpouring of demons attracted to the flaring magic and the open doorway into the physical world. Solas anticipated that Fear demons would have been the first to come through, drawn by the Inquisitor's anxious state of mind and the panic that would have ensued throughout the rest of the castle. There would have been a terrified skirmish as some of the braver citizens would stand to fight, allowing others the opportunity of an escape.

But with the majority of their forces stationed away from the fortress, Skyhold would have succumbed rapidly, long before any could reach out to the far flung Commander in the Arbor Wilds or any nearer ally. The demise of the Herald would have gone unknown for weeks or months, if it were ever to be discovered, with the only witnesses vanished alongside her. Cries for help and searches to find the Inquisitor would have spread throughout Ferelden and Orlais as their desperation to close the new rift, as well as the others still scattered throughout each country, increased. Without an answer or leader, the rising power would have dissolved; leaving no one prepared to meet Corypheus—whenever he happened to strike again.

All would have been lost the moment she'd wavered and completely dropped control of the mark. Luck and faith alone had spared the Inquisition, for now.

Solas took a calmative breath, releasing the frozen magic he'd called to his fingers. "You cannot think she would endanger the Inquisition purposefully. I know beyond any doubt that she would
rather have you lop her head from her shoulders first. You assumed she was at that precipice and it was impossible for her to regain command—and you nearly sealed her fate with a hysterical idea. But you of all people should know how far a tiny amount of faith will go. I beg you. Consider all the impossible things she has done so far, just because we have believed in her till now."

"I know she doesn't want to put people in harm's way Solas," The warrior answered firmly. She certainly trusted the Inquisitor as a person, even if they seldom agreed on the handling of mages or their conflicting views of the Chantry. Chiyo had carried herself admirably from the very beginning, ever since she'd first awoken from the coma they'd discovered her in. It was the disturbing and unpredictable magic that left her convictions unsettled. "But no one here fully comprehends what she is capable of if she can't keep a grasp on that mark. Not even you. Her good intentions alone do not make her any less dangerous than Corypheus, only more regrettable. She has to be dealt with, not excused."

"Allow her actions to determine her outcome, not your condemnations." Solas immediately retorted with the serious Seeker. "You are not responsible for her. She is neither a child nor your prisoner—you yourself set her loose after forcing her to wake up in chains. You trusted her enough then, why not now? The Inquisitor, she is your sole tool in closing the plethora of rifts that defile Thedas, without her help your world will be choked by an endless surge of demons. The fatalities would be beyond measure, how would you justify those preventable deaths? How will you tell the Inquisition that you ended their Herald out of mere fear and misunderstanding?"

"Should we hold you accountable instead? Seems fitting as you appear to be the only one blinded enough to be unconcerned." Added Morrigan sarcastically, painted lips drawn into an unbecoming scowl, but the dizziness increased to the verge of nausea. It drove the compelled need for her to sit down in a nearby chair. "I care not what happens to that imprudent girl. Just keep her from troubling me further. There is much I need to sift through. I cannot do it with her reckless instabilities threatening to knock me into the damned Fade."

"I do not like this. There is too much at stake to put you in charge of something so dangerous!" Cassandra brooded tensely, muttering under her breath as she stomped a few angered steps, mulling over all that had happened. She exhaled loudly through her nose, as she ground her teeth together. Even if she did not fully agree with the apostate, Solas was correct. Locking up or killing their Inquisitor would not do well for the morale of the civilians or especially the multitude of free mages living among them. There would be mass confusion and outcry. The people would quickly become disheartened if they learned the foul magic had finally corrupted their proclaimed Herald, the one sent by Andraste herself to guide them through their darkest days. The expansive group would lose much of their public face, as it had in recent months with the banishment of the Orlesian Grey Wardens, if the Inquisitor's continued spread of noble deeds and selfless support was diminished.

She stared at the back of his motionless head and gave a conclusive, aggravated grunt. "Is that what you are agreeing to, Solas, taking accountability for the Anchor?"

"My people did this to the Inquisitor; they addled her fate and set ruin to her path. The labors of your hands did not make this nor should they be the ones to undo it. Please though, since you seem so worried for your precious Inquisition, allow me to humbly take the responsibility from your burdened shoulders. And know this—if she ever falls that far again, I will deal with her myself." Solas answered as he finally stepped to leave, un-dismissed or free to do as he pleased, it mattered not. They could not hold him there. "Now, if you can excuse me, I have important work to do."

"They don't answer any more. Legends or lies? Maybe they never did to begin with… So far away."
"Hello, Cole." Chiyo heard the boy materializing on the narrow ledge on her balcony, but her distant gaze remained fixed to the frigid and cloudless midnight sky. Not even the peppered starlight and the remembered tales of her youth, once skillfully woven into their formations by her hahren, brought the Inquisitor any comfort. The wide-spread wings of the Owl gave her no hints of wisdom nor revealed their ominous warning. The barren branches of the Tree did not call her to remember once cherished duty or honor. And the wandering Wolf, whose patterned stars had just crossed the black horizon, only made her heart sicker for a home that no longer existed.

"I didn't mean it... why don't they want me? Try harder; this time, this time, I can stay here this time, right?" Brokenly began Cole while fondling an appropriated blanket of questionable origin, his unkempt fingernails catching in the thick knit of the cabled yarn. He left his perch on the carved railing and tread slowly, rolling on the balls of his worn out leather boots.

Chiyo sighed, tilting her head to meet him as the wide brim of his hat blocked her view. "There is nowhere else to go, not this time. I have to stay. I'm needed here." But her impartial words were not enough to convince even herself that they were true. She should have followed through with Varric's half-hearted advice and run when she'd been given the first opportunity.

The spirit cast his pallid eyes down onto the despondent elf lying quietly on her back, her unmarked hand caught behind her head. The other was left almost abandoned where it awkwardly lay, her wrist inflamed and crusted with blood from shaky, failed attempts at stitching the newly extended tears shut. "No, they're scared, they always get scared. I didn't mean it..."

"You and I are alike in that regard, lethallin. We don't want to frighten others, but it seems we just can't help ourselves, can we." She murmured as the young man closely joined her with his back on the flagstone, pressing the folded covering to his thin belly while he stretched out his gangly legs. He took in the same stars, but the Inquisitor doubted that the tiny flecks of light meant much of anything similar as to what she thought of the constellations.

"Not everyone is afraid. They just aren't ready to see. Truths made untrue. Not him though. Not afraid. For you, not of you. It eats and eats, pieces that were supposed to be gone are refound... there was so little left." Whispered Cole to the untroubled stars as Chiyo rolled forward and brushed the stringy blonde hair from his unblinking eyes. Silently, he offered her the blanket, holding an edge as she shook its meager size out over them both.

The Dalish elf settled once more against the cold floor, pulling her recovering left arm to her side to keep it warm. "He should be though; he's the most at risk. I just don't understand why... why he would so stupidly gamble his life like that."

"Hat and ears and forgetting and help, little more." Said the mysterious boy as they both stared up into the infinite nothingness. "But you make us feel real, like people, not things, but names. That is worth it."

"Do you want to be more human, Cole?" asked Chiyo, hearing the echoed longing in his voice.

"Maybe..." He answered uncertainly with a limp shrug, saying nothing more for a long, long time. They both observed the slowly deepening night sky, the stars glimmering back down as silent companions.

"Would you like me to tell you story about the stars?" She asked after a while, unable to drift into sleep.

Cole nodded, shaking the awkwardly large hat out from under his tilted head so that he could mimic the more appropriate star-gazing position of the Inquisitor. "Yes, but not the one about the dragon
you keep trying to remember all the pieces to. Tell me the other story… The one she told you before you left."

"Alright," agreed the Inquisitor hesitantly. "But that story isn't as happy…"

"Many years ago, when the People were still very young, there was a place where the night sky was nothing but endless black. With no moons or stars, everyone lived in fear of the dark because they could not see the wild beasts that would draw nearer to their village when the sun went down. They were afraid of the night, and would shut themselves inside their homes to wait for dawn, cowering beneath their roofs and behind their shuttered windows. All but for one boy who wasn't afraid of the dark at all. His eyes were very special, he could see better and farther into the blackness than any of his kin. He used his gift to guide those late to return home, and to chase away the monsters that ate their livestock, but mostly he used it to wander the forests. It was there, in the dark peace, that he was free to explore a world no one else had seen. He watched the gentle creatures of the night live splendid, shadowed lives without the exposing brightness of day.

Each night, when all were safe in their beds, the boy would travel deeper and deeper into the woods. But one evening, when he'd traveled to a glen he'd never explored before, he saw the most beautiful white light shimmering inside of a hollowed tree trunk. He was amazed by the glow and drew near, laughing with delight. He sang and danced around the tree filled with a dazzling, magical liquid until he became exhausted. He felt so weary that he decided to rest beside the lovely light, but as he got closer he heard a voice coming from inside of the opened trunk. The voice was kind and friendly and it told him that they were a simple spirit who wanted nothing more than to see the world. The boy smiled, he'd never turned away anyone who'd needed help, and he asked what could be done to aid the amazing light.

The spirit told him that someone had to trade something precious for the light, because it was priceless and could not be given away. If the right person took it, they would not become trapped as they had for trying to move the light somewhere safer. So the boy thought, considering what he could give to bring back the magic light to his people, how it might help end their eternal fear. He told the voice that he would come back the next night when he had thought of the right offering to present. For his trouble and willingness, he was allowed to take a single drop of water; it floated and glowed in his hands as he carefully walked back through the forest. He went home, returning with the dawn, but he was so tired from his adventure that he lay down to sleep. He placed the brilliant drop in a tiny bottle and hid it in his clothes. When he woke again it was already night once more, he'd slept the whole day when he'd meant to speak with the wisest Elders about what he should offer. He ran back to the glen, hoping that the light would still be there, and it was. He knelt beside the tree and called to the spirit, saying that he had returned. The spirit was happy to hear him and asked what he had chosen to give.

The boy cried in dismay. He'd brought nothing in his excitement to see the light again. But the spirit consoled him, promising that no material possession would ever amount to the worth of their trade. The boy pondered, confused as to what the spirit wanted. 'I wish to see the world through your remarkable eyes', tempted the spirit who lamented on not being able to enjoy the world he himself loved so much. The boy sat in silence, looking at the light in the magnificent tree and considering the tiny bottle in his pocket. He felt sad; the kindly voice had never known the bliss he had found in the woods. He asked the spirit how he could help. The voice sounded overjoyed and let the boy fill his bottle, just as they had promised he could. He leaned closer to the glowing hole in the tree as the light filled the little jar. He beamed with pride, imagining what he could do with the light when he returned home again. The spirit told him to come even closer, so that they might see into his memories of the beautiful forest. He did as asked, nearly sticking his head in the gap.

But the spirit reached out and pulled him down, forcing his head into the tree. They stole his gifted
eyes, leaving him sightless. The boy heard the spirit laughing in glee as they took in their first vision of the shadowy world, free to leave the blindingly bright waters and return to the secretive darkness they'd long desired. And then all went quiet—the spirit was gone. The deceived boy wept as he groped the ground, finding only the bottle full of a light he could no longer see. He held it in his hand, desperately trying to escape the glen and return to his people. But without his eyes, he became horribly lost as he felt his way through the trees. He could hear snarls and footsteps of the beasts circling him as he stumbled, drawn in by his fear. He tried to run away, but he tripped in his hurry and the bottle broke, casting the light into a thousand tiny droplets that caught in the passing wind. He never made it home. But soon, the little drops of light were scattered across the sky and they re-faceted themselves into the endless darkness they once belonged to. The spirit saw how happy the people had become with the return of their stars. They were free from their fear of the dark night and longed to celebrate even as they mournfully grieved the loss of the kind boy. The spirit of the glen felt tricked out of their mischievous ruse, so they discarded the blessings from the stolen eyes into the air. But this only spread the gift back amongst the People. With so much new light from the missing stars, they didn't need the boy's extraordinary eyes to protect them anymore. But whenever one of his kin found themselves wandering the night, even in a starless dark, they were never again truly blind."

"The spirit stole the stars to begin with…" Whispered Cole in conclusion, his eyes left open wide as he took in their own starry sky. "That's why they were trapped…"

"Funny… That's what I first thought too." The Inquisitor mused tiredly before they fell into silence for a few moments more.

"You think you were lucky," Pressed the compassionate spirit before she drifted towards sleep. "But you didn't get back any stars."

Chiyo began to breathe raggedly. She placed her good arm over her scrunching face to hide the refreshed hurt. But the muffling of her thick sleeve could not soften the brittleness in her words, though it did keep the stinging tears from spilling down her cheeks to flood her ears. "I'm just glad I got to keep my eyes."

"You need those."

"The spirits grew jealous of the living and coaxed from them into the Fade when they slept. The spirits wished to know more of life, hoping to find a way to regain the Maker's favor. Through the eyes of the living, they experienced new concepts: love, fear, pain, and hope. The spirits re-shaped the Fade to resemble the lives and concepts they saw, each spirit desperately trying to bring the most dreamers to their own realms so they could vicariously possess a spark of the divine through them.

As the spirits grew in power, however, some of them became contemptuous of the living. These were the spirits that saw the darkest parts of the dreamers. Their lands were places of torment and horror, and they knew that the living were strongly drawn to places that mirrored those dark parts of themselves. These spirits questioned the Maker's wisdom and proclaimed the living inferior. They learned from the darkness they saw and became the first demons."- Section: The Maker's First Children, Codex
Oh Lionheart

Chapter Summary

A terrible fate diverted, but the only thing everyone can agree to is that word of what happened should never get out to the rest of Skyhold. The stability of the Inquisition is far more fragile than the affected Anchor or Solas' own disintegrating plans. He needs her, but Chiyo's withdrawal has left everyone in shambles.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The grim words he’d left with Cassandra days before echoed in Solas' mind as he unhurriedly mounted the creaky wooden stair. He'd meant every single one of them. If any were to put an end to her incurred suffering it should be the man that thought himself as blameworthy as the would-be-god who'd reactivated the cursed orb. It should be someone who cared for who she was more than what she could potentially do, for good or misfortune. Not some callous mortal woman, desperately trying to protect the proximate few at the grave foreseen cost of the many.

The Inquisitor was more than a loftily handed title or role to be merely filled; she was a good person, and a brave one at that. He would always see that in the ill-fated elf long before viewing her as the afflicted leader of an arising power. Solas had lost so much of his own self when he'd taken such a comparative mantle in his younger days, but it was part of the steep price that had to be paid. To become more and to do what most could not. But the need to save his people did not alter how being set apart from them felt.

Solas hadn't spoken to Chiyo once in the days since they had returned. Instead, he had taken to the quiet solitude of his desk and waited. Hours of futile ruminating and more hours of disconcerted agitation, there was not much else to be done. He could not bear adding his own remorse and exhaustive distress to her own, but he'd hoped to at least have been able to feel or be met by her in the Fade. It was safer to talk there, easier for him to maintain some semblance of control, but mostly he wished to see how well she'd mentally managed. Chiyo had been outright rejected at the last standing pilgrimage of a much-loved deity. The same maternal figure who's ancient markings had been tattooed across the Inquisitor's otherwise charming face for the entire world to see. Such a denunciation could not have been taken lightly or easily.

The Well had not deemed her worthy of being a vessel and punished her for even attempting to touch the magic-infused water. But what unknown stipulation had triggered the Vir'abelasan to judge her so harshly in the first place? Perhaps an essence remained in the Anchor that Mythal had intentionally safeguarded against. Abelas himself had remarked its familiarity, recognizing the magic that burned in the Inquisitor's palm when they had first entered the unsealed temple. Perhaps the enduring elvhen guardians had been forewarned of the powers that survived the destruction of Arlathan. Or more simply, prepared in advance for what had become of other holy sites, if the Dread Wolf or others like him managed to slip in. Solas could all but briefly speculate without any evidence to support his guess as to why the wretched witch Morrigan had been found acceptable where Chiyo had not. However, more than a small part of him was grateful that it hadn't been the Herald to take in the contested power.
Solas had questions, but the Inquisitor had become deliberately unavailable, here in the waking present or in the unconscious dreamscapes of the Fade. When he'd slept, Solas waited patiently for her in their preferred meeting place, attempting only to seek her out after a second long night without so much as a hint of her recognizable energies. But the Inquisitor had also blocked the experienced wanderer from her cloistered, limited dreams with a barrier even he dared not directly challenge. For both the respect of her privacy and trepidation for the untested strength of her magical ability on the far side of the Veil; she had a rather striking predilection for fire while asleep, if he recalled correctly...

His tutored lessons had already been learned proficiently well though there was much still for her to master. Solas had yet to fully convince her to leave the relative safety of their own protected dreams and she remained mostly unwilling, balking even, at his suggestion to venture far beyond the more known territory. Chiyo's trust in him was not the reason for her apprehension, as she'd once confessed, but the deficiency came from somewhere in herself. For a woman who had seen the true, physical nature of the Fade first hand, it was difficult for Solas to blame her for the hesitation. Nevertheless, she was a quick learner regardless of her deep-seated anxiety, showing a strong knack for the specialized skill. He'd expected no less of the clever little mage. The Inquisitor always approached any new difficulties with determination when she didn't naturally do well with first attempts.

The practice served wonderfully as a distraction for them both. It kept her reduced hours in the field with her bizarre trainer put to constructive use. Although, waking up from each session to a warm body nestled in the crook of his arm had been an equally rewarding side benefit for the efforts of the typically lonesome apostate. And while she was currently protecting herself, just as he had taught her to do, it still worried him to be pushed so far away from her pleasant company. He now understood how she'd fully felt, from all the times he'd done exactly the same to her.

The relative calm of the Keep boded of the secret remaining maintained. Even so, there had been a good deal of confusion and some predicted agitation with the sudden return. She'd also locked herself in her room, and away from others—much to the vocalized, and repeated, complaint of Dorian. The Tevinter mage had been utterly insulted when Chiyo hadn't visited him after being gone for several weeks traveling in the precarious southern wilderness. Their boisterous Red Jenny had also made her displeasure equally well known. Her soured demands to see the Inquisitor had been snubbed and she'd taken it upon herself to dislodge her mop-headed friend. But Sera had returned, spewing rambling curses, from a brief trip up the half repaired stair. She'd fumed her way back to Herald's Rest without any explanation to the others in passing.

It was curiously unexpected, for Solas to find the door at the end of the same long stair unbolted. In fact the knob rattled as if it were forcibly broken— he pushed after receiving no answer to a polite knock. But he was taken aback by the vacuum of pressure that slowed his entry. Squeezing through the contested gap, the door instantly snapped hard behind him. His eyes widened as he took in the sight of the chaotic, windswept room upon reaching the top of the inner steps. She'd managed to open most of the tall windows whose untold age had hardened the iron hinges, letting the cold mountain gusts into whistle through her secluded chambers unhindered.

The trailing plants that had grown vigorously over the stained lattice work, many having just come to bloom, fluttered and kited in the breeze. Some had already wilted from the unaccustomed cold, their leaves danced limp and wrinkled. Loose sheets of paper fluttered from the untidy desk and shelves to litter the floor, continuously lifting and churning as they smacked into the furniture. Books lay out in rummaged piles. Several were left open on their spines, the wind fanning through their pages. Empty dishes presumably left at her door or snuck from the kitchen in the middle of the night, strewed the modest table by the wide sofa.
"Mind the mess. Needed some fresh air." Called a familiar, preoccupied voice from within the small chamber behind the Herald's tightly made and seemingly untouched bed; she didn't take such meticulous care with tucked corners or straight pillows. Chiyo hadn't slept there, in a bed made by others, if the spare quilts piled on the low couch were an indicator.

With a cursory glance, Solas was somewhat surprised to see the blanket that normally remained on the back of his sofa haphazardly draped over the railing outside her room. He'd scarcely left the rotunda during the day, but in his acutely pensive state he hadn't noticed its absence. Only the rough grit in the stone caught in the fibers kept it from tumbling down the sharp slope and into the frozen valley below. "I was half expecting to see your sheets tied into a rope, hanging off of the balcony." The elven apostate said flatly as the sounds of splashing water also caught his ear.

"Those kinds of knots need two hands." The Inquisitor poked her head through the open entryway to find him carefully stepping around the chaotically cluttered floor. She ambled towards the adjacent room nearest to her humble bathing compartment. Empty bucket in her workable hand, the Inquisitor meandered across the short separation to collect more water from the spouted rain-barrels tucked away in the furthest corner. A wise invention—she would never suffer anyone to cart so much water up the stairs just for the simple pleasure of bathing.

Solas' brow knit together as he watched her manage the sloshing pail single-handedly, the affected arm hung unrestrained and disregarded at her side. "Care for any assistance?"

"No thank you." Her words were short and dispassionate as she strove to finish her task. Solas followed curiously behind her, observing as she balanced the bucket on the edge of her small tub and added its contents, raising the level of the already steaming liquid higher.

"Would you prefer me to leave? You... seem preoccupied." Solas asked as the busied mage recharged the small glyph on the side of the wooden tub until it softly glowed. It heated the water sufficiently without the need for real flame or kindling, feeding easily off of her ready supply of magic.

The material resources had been deemed, by the Herald herself, better spent elsewhere. Maintaining the fireplaces in the chilly Keep alone took over a cord of wood per day, all of which had to be brought up the mountainside. The cost of keeping the Inquisition and all of its extended forces fed, clothed, warm and equipped was exponential. They relied heavily on the finding and redistribution of the resources that came from every new territory they claimed. Quarries and logging stands were readily managed by civilians looking for work, spare military forces were often employed for extra coin. Each successful mission in the aid of nobles or troubled townships kept the Inquisition one more day from bankruptcy, but it was the Ambassador's endless work and magic with her pen that prevented the coffers from going completely dry.

"Do whatever you want." Chiyo answered as she placed the bucket beside the unadorned dresser housing a stash of bath sheets and a gifted bar of scented soap. Josephine had eloquently insisted on her acceptance, telling her it was just what she needed to help unwind after extended trips in the field. She'd been right; there was something about scrubbing away the sweat, muck, and occasional blood from her skin that helped the petite leader set aside the harrowing trials and to take pleasure in her limited time at their home base. The Antivan had an undoubtedly finessed way of smoothing and oiling all of the many pieces that kept the Inquisition running, and that included the powering Inquisitor.

Solas watched her rifle through the narrow drawers, pulling out a fistful of thin towels. But she wouldn't look at him, not truly. The tight-lipped elf kept her troubled gaze elsewhere or glanced nearly through him when her constrained eyes betrayed rueful convictions. "I deem you are offended
by my presence."

She huffed in leaking disquiet, struggling to hold the festered agitation at bay, but simply being near him again had the Inquisitor reliving the stressful event anew. The separation had done little to abate her duress. "You! Damn it—you put yourself in immediate danger... because of me. You should never have attempted something so reckless. Solas..." In her disconsolate upset, she tossed the neatly folded fabric into a rough pile at the foot of the heating tub. Chiyo turned her face away from him, further hiding her straining features behind the shield of her functioning hand.

"You could have... could have..." Even pondering what she almost had done was near too much. The deplorable shame of the incident had eaten away at every shred of confidence and certainty she'd ever garnered. All of her accomplishments, efforts and trials would have meant nothing if her foolish folly had destroyed not just the people—but the person—she'd come to hold nearest and dearest to her heart.

"I calculated the risk and I believed that I was capable of convincing Cassandra—" Solas tried to explain indifferently before being interrupted by a raised and anticipated yell. Her bottled emotions were all but hemorrhaging before his very eyes, seeping from the chinks and wounds in a shining spirit she'd tried all her young life to repair. Fear, anger, worry, and guilt, all struggled to be the first to break loose from her slipping grasp.

"That is not what I meant and you know it!" Chiyo's furious cheeks puffed out, stretching the thin branches taut over her skin as she blew a hot, agitated breath. The Inquisitor kept her focus firmly settled to the undecorated floor, fixating on tiny nicks and blemishes as a diversion. Her voice threatened to crack as the functioning fingers snuck down from a crumpled face to gather and stroke the limp palm at her side. "What if... the mark had hurt you? Had... killed you when you touched it?"

"I had to try. I would never have forgiven myself for leaving you to such a fate." He reassured kindheartedly, remembering a distant night in the freezing snow when an open pair of hands had reached out to pull up him from his lowest hour. She had not forsaken him then, even when the undeniable pain of penetrating his barriers and protested threats of death had been used as a deterrent. Solas had said deplorable things to her in his fallen state. And instead of being cursed for the slights he'd been salvaged from utter misery with fearless acceptance. The apostate almost felt himself smile, recalling exactly how that silent pardon had spared him. "You did the same... for me once. You too could have just let me fall to begin with and simply saved yourself."

"It's not the same! And that was my fault too!" Chiyo shook her head sharply, sending her short, wind-snarled hair into a tizzy. But she was finally forced to face him, her resolve crossing into unyielding seriousness. "This was different! You should have run away and not looked back. Everything could have gone wrong! We both knew what was happening and I shouldn't have to beg you to stay alive."

"So you were just going to accept a beheading, without question." His lips drew into a hard line as he imagined the edge of a long blade lining up against her fine neck, the honed steel being sharply arced back and returned with precise force. Cassandra would have held nothing back in order to stop the rift from opening. The swiftly dealt death would have been messy, but near painless and the threat over by the time the Seeker had re-sheathed her sword.

"If it spared you, and the others. Yes. I would have." There was no pause in her answer, no hesitation behind the resolute eyes that decisively sought his out. Too daring, and far too bold, but the certitude of willingly given sacrifice only stood to terrify him more.

"That is irrational. There are surely better reasons to die." Solas said through tightening teeth as he
stepped to walk away. He felt promptly ill, his hands threatened to shake as he considered just how close he'd come to actually losing her. Why, for as much as it seemed like Solas was acting as her vigilante guard, did it feel like he wasn't the one, in fact, doing the protecting. For every precaution he took, Chiyo was a step ahead, already meeting the hazard head on before there was pause even to collect the pieces of his ruined plans.

"Why do you value yourself so little, so expendably?" She hastily caught his wrist. The riled bewilderment she'd harbored in his regard fell away, leaving her closer to the real concern. "Do you truly believe I'd not do just as much to keep you safe?"

"The problem lies in knowing that you would." He replied softly, a once proud head bowing in resignation as he remained fixed to where he stood. "My life does not change the fate of the Inquisition, my importance does not compare to yours. I am only as advantageous as they allow me to be."

"You are wrong. I wish you could see that, how you are important. We would be—I would be, utterly lost without you..." Chiyo announced with genuine sympathy, her hand sliding down into his. "It's hard to even count how many times you have caught me before I even knew I was falling..."

The Inquisitor's fingers found room to weave between his, rooting him to the spot. She needed to make him hear her. And needed him to understand why she was so adamant. Her next declaration came easily and without reserve, gathering on the strength of a stubborn soul who refused to go unheeded.

"Ma'arlath."

Solas shot her a baffled glance, glaring as if he'd been struck. The derailing words slid before he could hold them in check, "You do not mean that."

But she sounded assured and proud of her feelings. Just as his lone confession, much the very same phrase, he'd uttered in passing when they'd first begun their entanglement all those months ago. That first real kiss had pulled the gratified admission from his still tingling lips. Solas hadn't even paused to consider if she comprehended their true meaning, with so much of her own native language broken into fragments or entirely unknown. There had been no occurrence to use such a term when speaking to a modern elf; for all he knew it to had been lost to the erosiveness of time. But the liberation that came from the simple phrase had made all the difference and he would never forget how he'd felt finally having reason to say it to another.

His heart began to pound. However lurching and distressing the words she had never once uttered to him before, hearing them only increased the tightening of his fingers around hers. Her occasionally granted endearments had always satisfied his buried craving for reassurance. My heart, my desire, even a singular my one love had slipped into his ear, but this resolute pronouncement plucked at a deeper thread within. The strong, concrete statement reverberated through the profound hollowness of his soul. In his head, in his very core, he'd always known how she felt. But to hear her delightful lips shape each lyric syllable lit a new and startling spark beyond any that he'd ever experienced.

"Don't force me to prove it to you... I have a bad habit of getting myself into trouble when I think I'm right." The Inquisitor laughed softly even as her eyes beaded with relieved tears. She indulged in the traces of joy, the first to brighten her face in days. She pulled him closer, still beaming from her loosened revelation. But she was far from content to leave him to stew alone as he had done to her; Solas would simply have to come to terms with it in her presence.

"Would you," She toyed with a playfully selfish notion, pinching the slim edge of her lip between
her teeth. "Take a bath with me?"

Solas tried to evade the invitation, still reeling and unsettled, except his desperate need to stem the panging loneliness dissolved his unfounded convictions. He'd learned too readily over the recent months to find soothing comforts in her cordial company. "I don't believe we both will fit."

"That wasn't my question." Chiyo's renewed smile grew. She released his hand and pulled at the tailored edges of her tunic, but the task stalled halfway through as she became stuck. "Besides… I may need an extra hand. I seem to be short one."

"If it would please you." With considerate care, he deftly eased her shirt over her head and off of her unremarked, functionless limb while she busied able fingers with the lacings of her more comfortable breeches. She shimmied her way out until they bunched around her ankles on the floor, easily kicked aside. Freed from her clothes, she began to work the slack belts from his hips has he managed the rest of his garments, stripping the wrappings from his feet, easing out of his linen leggings and peeling the old, snug pullover from his upper body.

The jaw bone totem found a temporary home on the dresser, in exchange for the heavily scented soap. Seeker Cassandra had already alluded to a lingering aroma that exuded from his being as they traveled south, he might as well commit to it fully to amend the erroneously unwashed aspect that others saw in him. However, he genuinely liked how the Inquisitor smelled, often catching happy, reminding wisps of her person between the layers of his clothes and on his skin.

Solas gingerly entered the almost too warm waters first, lowering his back against the smooth, sloped posterior of the tub. He presented an accepted hand, supporting the injured Dalish woman as she settled leisurely down into the bath to face him. She sat slowly, the steaming waters rising up to her breasts before spilling over the limited edge. It splashed wastefully onto the floor while she tucked her raised and sharply bent knees between his.

"It's a bit snug." He commented as she dipped a small towel into the hot water and leaned forward, gently placing it across his hairless crown. She carefully tucked his pointed ears beneath the pleasantly alleviating heat.

"I've never heard you complain about being close before." The Inquisitor hummed while she repeated the process for herself. A comfortable sigh emitted from her throat as she sank a bit deeper into the heated bath, her feet and ankles sneakily slipping around his hips to make a smidgen extra room.

"How is your arm fairing?" He finally inquired as he began to relax, watching the tension slowly melt from them both as they settled into the security of welcomed companionship.

Chiyo flexed as best she could, and was rewarded with a small contraction plumping the slackened bicep. She fetched the marked hand and supported it on her knee. With concentrated effort, the second to last finger flicked slightly towards her palm. "That's about all for now. More than yesterday at least, but the pain has stopped. It's starting to feel things again, temperature, touch... and it's been quiet." She spoke confidently as she let the limb slide back into the water. But when she looked up from her demonstration she caught the worried stare of Solas, the guilt-ridden ache of what he'd just witnessed building behind his withdrawn blue eyes.

"I had an opportunity to stop you… This is my failing." He muttered emptily, his strong shoulders slumping down to match his melancholy.

"How could you have known?" The concerned Inquisitor promptly sat up, splashing out even more of the displaced water. She reached for him, caressing his high cheek with supportive tenderness.
Chiyo was only then finally allowed to see the weary man shrouded beneath the reserved, staunch mage that always carried himself so rigidly. Mentally exhausted, emotionally bruised—heart sore even—hiding behind his permanently adorned and perpetually stoic mask. "Don't beat yourself up over this. Please. I'm just happy we all made it out in one piece."

"I… there is something…" Oh, but he did know. Solas knew so much he wanted to scream of his culpability and wrong-doings from the rooftop before he drowned in the ever swelling secrecy he was bound to. This must be his true penance, to watch the only person who'd dared get close suffer for choices he'd made over a thousand years ago. Rare and remarkable in spirit, trying so hard to stand where he had failed and mend what he had broken. And she loved him. There was no mercy or hope left; she loved him. But could that tolerant love survive if she learned of the truth? He had to tell her, sliver, a fragment. She deserved to know, he had to—

"Come here." A kind hand guided him forward. She let him bury his creasing face into the warm, damp curve of her neck, to be comforted by the steady pulse just below her welcoming skin. Her hand slipped under the drenched towel atop his head, slowly kneading behind his ear on the faint, lingering scar from their last trip to Orlais. It had mended well, but a pale trace would always remain in that thin, delicate skin.

"I know you were trying to tell me something… when we were standing at the Well of Sorrows. I could see that, but I ignored your warning because I neglected to look past my own self-interests."

Solas ventured to drape his arms around her, letting his hands hang beyond the edge of the tub. Water dripped slowly from each fingertip as he surrendered to her loose embrace, listening absorbedly to her encouraging words. "For that, I am truly sorry."

"You have a past. I am not oblivious of that, but you can tell me things… if you want to." The muscles in his arms tightened nervously, drawing her closer as he pressed his chest into Chiyo's. "Your pain is neither silent to my ears nor unseen by my eyes. There is more to your story than you let on. I can feel it, right here in my heart."

She affectionately kissed the side of his head, still rolling her fingers gently over the well-healed wound. "You have been through a life so hard and alone… I could not even begin to imagine what nightmares you've had to walk through. I know that you are not happy with your history, the choices you must've been forced to make, but I want you to understand that I'm not afraid of you either."

"Chiyo…" His breath hitched, precariously giving away the grief of honesty that plagued him so incurably. It was dangerous, what she offered; the prospect of a freedom he'd so long denied himself.

"I will never force you to speak of things that are too distressing. Just realize that someday, if you are ever ready, that I will be prepared to hear what you have to say." Her lips traced around his ear and jaw as she pulled away the cooled towel, letting it slide down his back to disappear within the warm bath. "And it's ok too, if you can't tell me everything, because there is nothing wrong with needing to let go of a life that no longer suits you… sometimes you have to release the past entirely to have a chance at a future."

"Could you give it up, your past?" Solas calmly lifted his head from her shoulder, but his eyes shone with a manifested presence of clarity she had never recognized in them before. "All of it. Even if it meant never being able to go back to how things once were."

"That depends on what you mean by my past." Chiyo murmured, receptively rubbing the round tip of her nose against his, but an old sadness remained. "I have no clan to return to. No family beyond what I have made here to impart with my struggles or joys. And no gods—if there ever were such beings—to pledge my dwindling faith in. Unfortunately, as far as I'm concerned, my past has already abandoned me all on its own."
"And what will you do with all that is freely left to you, without a past to steal away your time. What
with your present, your future?" The apostate asked devotedly, his softened mouth longingly
stretching to meet hers as he spoke, seeking the promising reprieve.

"I don't know." The Inquisitor teased with feigned naivety, her legs sliding further about his arched
hips. "I guess I'll have to find someone decent enough to share those days with."

You can't. **There's no need to hide. You aren't thinking. Tell her everything. You mustn't give
in. She won't run away. You have to stop this!**

"When you're feeling up to it," Solas implored before stealing the first of many ardent kisses. His
blood sang daringly in his veins with the triumph of his wrested decision. "I want to take you
somewhere, just you and me…"

"Another trip? Ahh…" She curled into his roving touch, a pair of broad lips traced below the edge of
her jaw and the dip of a long throat. "I could be bribed, I suppose. Hmm… After the dust settles from
all this mess, pack a bag."

His fingers nestled in the tangled hair on the back of Chiyo's head as he worked his way back up
towards her amused mouth. "I shall gladly wait till then."

Solas had waited a long time to find the right person to confide in, a few more days of idle secrecy
would matter not.

Another lovely sketch by Destinyapostasy!
I only have two words I want to say about the next chapter: I'm sorry...
A stunning gift arrives just in time. There is so much she wants to say and offer to Solas, beyond what lies in the artfully constructed book. But love does not always go to plan, and her closest friends fear the worse when she doesn't immediately come back from a short trip to Crestwood.

"Varric…it's…" She had anticipated a certain level of craftsmanship, trusting her literary comrade and his connections, but Chiyo was in joyous awe of the parcel that had been returned to her as promised. It had arrived shortly after their unexpectedly prompt return from the Arbor Wilds, much to the amused grief of the stout man seated before her.

The dwarf was entertained as he watched her fingers tremble, pulling at the binding twine and smoothing back the thick brown layers of paper. A shine had taken to her eyes, as if the simple parchment and leather within was worth more than lustrous sea-silk or rare dragon bone.

She'd seldom ever held a volume so crisp and new. The tomes studied in her youth had all been passed from Keeper to First over the generations, the edges worn thin and the pages stained, frail from ceaseless travel. Flowers and leaves of prior peers left as place markers had bled their colors onto the paper, leaving behind tiny mosaics. Others were yellowed, musty and littered with added notes—depending on the reception of the subject matter. There were a handful of highly debated texts, tiny wars waged in the margins by nameless passersby left behind for the amusement or annoyance of the next reader. Even most of the books in the hold's library bore the signs of use and age.

The Inquisitor ran her fingers timidly over the newly bound book, lingering over the firm spine and the fine grain of the red-hart leather cover. She longed to trace the intricate pattern of knots that had been detailed across the front in the shape of a sprawling tree, but feared marring them with the chance oils on her hands.

"I didn't give you enough money for this." The beaming Dalish elf gently pressed the plain back of the embossed book to her wool-swathed chest. It was more than she could have ever hoped for. Of all her talents, leather work and book-binding had never been particularly within her range of mastered expertise. Several of the pages of her hand-crafted rift tome had come loose and required additional time to repair. Shoddiness would not sit well with the occasion she had in mind. But if being involved in the Inquisition had taught her anything beyond the necessary skill-sets of combat, diplomacy and warfare, she'd also learned the value of asking for help from someone who knew better.

The burly dwarf smiled nonchalantly, removing his heavily booted heels from the edge of the low table before him. "Consider it a favor or two repaid. You and Ruffles went out of your way to assist me with that whole *Re-Punchening* fiasco. Plus you spared Hawke and helped me keep 'em out of trouble… as well as several feet away from our favorite zealot, Cassandra. What are a few extra coins spent on a friend after all that nonsense."

"Thank you. You don't know what this means to me." With her better, untroubled hand she cradled and opened the refreshed sketchbook, examining the carefully arranged drawings that had been
expertly sealed and preserved. All their journeys together were marked somewhere in the tidy pages, precious memories left between the penciled or inked lines of mountain ranges, ancient forests and shambled ruins. And all it needed now was a few specifically chosen words to dedicate the first and only blank page. The Inquisitor had been working on that part for weeks, reading her practice notes again and again, praying that they would sound true when she read them to Solas.

"Beginning to think I do actually." Varric eyed her knowingly. There was no mystery as to whom the valuable present was for. He would have to live miles beneath the stone to be ignorant of the nature surrounding her more romantic entanglements.

It felt to him as though a lifetime had passed since the first time he'd met the curious woman who would soon become their Inquisitor. Bright-eyed and full of questions, they'd found an easy repertoire amidst the chaos. She'd readily listened to his stories and laughed at the crassness of his jokes, but Varric had quickly noted a subtle difference when she spoke with their accompanying elven mage those early days. A perceptible shift had also been noted in Chuckles as well. They'd traveled for days together after the Breach had opened and the Conclave had fallen. But Solas had never openly smiled as he had when he'd pleasantly introduced himself to a woman he'd already met, albeit originally unconscious, on the snowy steps. The unusual fellow had sounded damn near young too, enlivened by the correct guess he'd made of Chiyo's untested anchor and its explosive application. He'd blatantly stolen her attention then and had never fully released it.

It had been just a flicker, a trivial spark of interest. The dwarf severely doubted if either had known exactly how far that initial magnetism would pull them—following one another across all the many roads and trying reaches of Thedas it seemed. From the icy Frostback mountains to the scorching sands of the Western Approach, they'd forged a bond along the way and it had sustained them through nightmares so unreal they made his most outlandish fictional works sound mild and tame.

The pulse-racing excitement alone from their dragon slaying escapade had inspired more than just a few jotted notes. Even if Varric would have to rehash the mechanics of the decapitation, the story had the potential to make an appearance in some yet to be defined publication; once he'd plotted how to successfully incorporate it into one of his fanciful tales of course.

"I'm not one to pry…" Varric smirked brazenly as she gave him a satirical, unbelieving look. "But, this seems pretty exceptional. It's not just a gift, no more than you are just an elf. Gonna let me in on the big secret?"

"Big secret?" She cocked a playful brow. However her twisting lips couldn't help but to betray the greater intent. There had been plans long in the making for the secreted, amorous surprise she had in store for her fellow mage. It was only after the recent events however, that Chiyo was truly certain of what she fully anticipated to say when presenting the leather-bound memento. "Can't a gift just be a gift?"

"I would say that about the socks you gave me for my birthday, Inquisitor, not a specifically commissioned token like that book. I looked through it myself, so you know, there were a few rather lovely doodles at the end..." Varric chuckled, not having to wonder if it was the radiant heat of the crackling fire that made her cheeks look suddenly red or something else entirely. "Might I propose another piece of advice, if you'll suffer to listen to an old man who's written too much about all the things he should have done better the first time around?"

"From you—always. You are wiser than you give yourself credit, even if you couldn't convince me to leave when I had the chance." Chiyo took her time before joining him at the small table. She cooled her embarrassment by wrapping the book back in the protective covering it had been given to her in, least anything were to happen to it or the wrong, prying eyes catch sight. The Inquisitor knew
all too well that her relationship was no longer a mere rumored suspicion, but she wasn't yet ready to inform every one of its true nature. Her business was still her own, leader or not, and the guests currently lingering late in the hall were not privy to the finer details of her personal affairs or afflictions.

She was doing better physically, much to both private and public relief. She shook her marked hand only once when the fingers stumbled with the tight folding of the parcel paper. The remaining twinges were little more than minor inconveniences, most days. With some effort, she'd been able to play off her injury to most of the Hold. Claiming a mild infirmity to her arm and shoulder that rest and a short period in a sling would cure. Just another common hazard of war, nothing for anyone to concern themselves of or fret about. A pinched nerve or a sprain at worst, she'd promised to anyone that thought to ask.

"Don't let go of real happiness. We aren't always lucky enough to have more than one crack at it." He counseled, fishing in his half-buttoned vest for a tattered deck of cards. Upon finding the worn set he placed them on the table, opening a silent invitation—an amiable excuse to extend their shared company. Her Wicked Grace skills were sufficient, but her attempts at Diamondback were still paltry at best. The plethora of endless duties demanded by the Inquisition offered infrequent opportunity for such relaxed leisure. It would be a shame to waste the occasion. "So, when are you leaving for this special trip?"

"Tomorrow." The Inquisitor answered, offering to shuffle and indulge in a quick game or two if her coin-purse survived. Perhaps Varric could win back the extra money she believed owed to him, if he was ready to work for it. She'd been practicing. "Just a few days out and back. Though, between you and me, I wouldn't have picked Crestwood for a romantic getaway."

"Hmm," Varric waited for the deck to be prepared for the first draw of a high card that would decide the course of the rest of their match. "Must be important then, just be careful. The roads aren't always safe that way. And good luck. Coppers or silvers?"

"Silvers." Chiyo winked slyly at the Dwarven man. Though the orphaned Inquisitor had never known the counsel of anything that echoed of paternal, it didn't hurt to imagine that it would have felt something similar to the agreeable company she kept with the witty author. He often offered an attentive ear. The advice given was free and open to choice, but laced with enough sly goading to remind her that he cared. "I'm feeling confident tonight."

Varric only grinned wider, his broad teeth flashing at the boldness of her statement. "Guess we will just have to see about that."

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_Herald's out on an unusual mission, should be back at any time. Everything's fine, don't concern yourself with it._ Load of rotting shit.

Did they really think she was that dense, that her finger wasn't always on the pulse of their little supposedly ordained organization? They'd been gone nearly an extra week with no explanation, no word back to the Keep. No reported news from the scouts beyond a missing horse and unclaimed supplies. The mages were last seen heading out from camp after a brief stay, but all efforts to track them down again had come up empty. Just some rubbish about traces leading to a boring, old cave full of weird paintings. Useless.

Everyone had their mouths all shut up about it to. Nothing was being said officially—always with the official nonsense. What did fancy stamps and seals really mean anyways—but Sera could see the
panic building just beneath the false-calm surface. Each had their own speculation as what they thought had happened. From Dorian's ludicrous notion of a Tevinter led kidnapping to Blackwall's idea of plain old-fashioned desertion, nothing sounded probable enough. The Herald was too smart to be snuck up on and stuffed in a sack like some frail prey and she would never abandon them all to deal with Corphy-penis unaided. She was too loyal to make a run for it, probably too much for her own good. If not dead or snatched or run-off, what remained?

"Shite that's what it left—shitty Shit SHITE!"

But the tense stretch of days had worn at Sera's certainty. What if she had been knocked over the head and tossed in a box. Chiyo was kind of on the small side and her spooky magic was still all wonky from screwing around near that worthless Well of Elfy-Stupidity. Maybe someone had gotten the best of her, used the cover of darkness or a dastardly distraction. The Inquisitor would have probably traded herself in a deal if they'd gotten a hold of her darling butt-chinned Solas. More than likely, damned lash-batting tart was in —no, even the word was too disgusting. Made her all barfy, L-words like that.

Blackwall had told her all about how strange and chummy their elfy-elves had recently been; how the fade-obsessed weirdo had prevented some kind of serious trouble. But the Warden had refused to say more on the matter except that he slept better at night knowing the two unusual mages were looking out for each other. It was not a task he personally felt he could handle and would be driven mad for trying. Sera liked that about him, fixing things with his hands and sword, not magic and politics. Though considering what she'd learned from her bearded pal perhaps it was Baldie who'd made off with Chiyo, if they really were so joined at the blasted hip. He'd been allowed so close to her, much closer than should ever been. It would be easy for him to put something in a drink, cast a hex in her sleep or maybe twist her thoughts into trouble with his brainwashing drivel.

Her guts had bothered her every night, stealing her already vexed sleep. Sera had taken to stalking the foremost tables in the Keep's versatile main hall the past several evenings, knowing that all news and all persons would have to pass through to deliver word or enter the premise. The big door led to all the smaller ones; just the bottle-neck she needed to stay in control. Vivvy did the same thing, only preferring to do it from high above—smart bitch, always keeping her eye on the petty world of little people below.

Sera had been enough of a pest that she'd even driven the snarky dwarf away from his favorite chair by the fireside. He still wouldn't tell her what he knew, only that his part in the matter was done.

She'd harassed every messenger and Ambassador to trail by her sequestered seat but each had been just as pathetic as the last. No one knew anything, and that was scarier than knowing a secret was being kept. You could always weasel out the details, pick a few locks, pay off a guard, but knowledge that didn't exist couldn't be attained. Nothing could be done about that. Fuck all.

The front door quietly creaked, opening just wide enough to let a solitary person pass through. Sera pressed her back to the opposing wall, carefully tucking herself away from immediate view. With head turned, she waited for the trespasser to cross through the next open entryway. It was late, very late. No one should be milling about at this hour, let alone sneaking into the Keep.

They shut the massive door with deliberation, avoiding the known squeal of the iron hinges. Pale hands adjusted a heavy hood concealing the face below before they made a slow march across the stone floor. Dirty, blistered, bare feet padded almost noiselessly and in a direct line towards the last door behind the throne.

"Andraste's wrinkled tits, where have you been!!" Sera threw her half-empty cup across the pathway at the small, cloaked figure trying to sweep past her without so much as a word or glance. The finely
stitched emblem on the subtle curve of a left breast gave her away, even if it was covered in dried filth. She'd sent no word ahead and now the Inquisitor was just going to waltz back into Skyhold as if she'd never been gone at all. How dare she, how friggin' stupid was the little blighter!

The slinking, hunched mage halted as she was forcibly and physically blocked by the riled rogue. She opened her mouth dryly, as if it had been days since she'd last spoken aloud. "Walking."

"Walking?" Sera barked, her voice echoing through the empty hall. "You've been missing and you're choosing now of all times to become even more of a shit! They were talking on forming a search party and everything! Piss, ass, shite! We've all been worried sick and all you're going'ta say is walking."

"Yes." The exhausted Herald answered too plainly for Sera's liking, but her evasion of eye contact or even showing her shadowed face only stood to elicit the Red Jenny's ill-placed rage even further.

"Little shit, what's with the fucking hood!" Sera fumed and snatched at the head covering, pulling it away before she could be dodged or barred. But she stood, momentarily dumbfounded as she tried to piece together the change noted on her dirt-smeared companion. Her eyes were swollen and red, but they were the same molten, golden-brown as they'd been before. Her hair was matted and gross, but all there. Her nose seemed chapped from sniveling and the tops of her cheeks were puffy, but—her cheeks. The lines were completely gone and even fully dressed Sera felt suddenly as if she was peeping at something more than stark naked. "The fuck did you do to your face? You go off with Solas and now your elfy-dealies are gone."

"They weren't what I thought." Chiyo choked on her explanation, drawing it from herself in sorrowful splinters. "There was a… misinterpretation. When I learned of what they really meant I didn't want to keep them anymore."

Sera scrunched her broad nose as she evaluated the change. The Inquisitor was less elfy now for sure, but she also seemed less herself. The Dalish were proud, shitty and wrong, though it didn't necessarily make Chiyo a bad person for being one of them. It just didn't feel right, not yet at least. If that's what she really wanted, then fine, whatever, but she couldn't just sever the parts that made her who she was, could she? Sera certainly couldn't just pick off her ears or change her past, not that she liked either, but they were hers and she could learn to live with them. "Maker's balls, look at you! What happened out there with you and Baldie? Did he die or something? He ain't here that's for sure."

"No, Solas… it wasn't…" The Inquisitor paused, trying to form the words of what had really happened. How could she fully express the vulnerability, of the chance she'd taken? In what way could she make the other elf understand what she'd experienced when her heart had been deliberately stolen. The devastation suffered by watching the man who'd taken it walk away without ever stopping to give it back whole, leaving only a trail of pieces for her to collect and stumble off with. How could Chiyo confide that she'd felt Solas change when he'd kissed her one final time, that his lips had grown hard and cold to match the ice of the words to follow. "Another misunderstanding."

"Eh, good riddance. What was he really needed for anyways? Tell you what, come to the tavern with me and I'll set you up with someone who will really get old baldie-bones out of your system. I hear Krem does this amazing thing with his—" Sera teased indecently as she brushed at the sticky, stinking grime on Chiyo's garments, but she halted when the first hot tears began to roll down the mage's bare and crumpling face.

"Oh fuck. No, no no no. I don't do crying, no good with that stuff. Shite! All the icky wet and the noise and the sad things." She reeled backwards, grimacing in deep disgust. Sera started to gag squeamishly as she backtracked towards the foyer. "Ugh, and the snot! Gets snot all over your
"I'm sorry..." The Inquisitor whimpered and wiped at her spent tears, watching as yet another elf pulled away. It had become quite clear that her own kind wanted very little to do with her, she should never have expected anything else.

"Brought this on yourself, you did." The antsy called as she felt blindly for the handle. Each tiny, muffled sob drove her need to get further and further away. "First your arm and now your face, I told you he was no good!"

"If this isn't some report about a new hole in the sky I'm warning you now that I have no qualms with—" Dorian growled, mustache twisted with a sleep-disturbed scowl as he ripped the door of his private quarters wide-open. But his hostilities were promptly snuffed upon recognizing the person whose knuckles had uncertainly rapt upon the wood. He rubbed at his eyes, clearing any chance of mistaking the sorely missed mage. "Oh, Inquisitor… You're not dead. Splendid."

Chiyo shifted tiredly where she stood, utterly drained and struggling to maintain any sense of politeness left to her. Thin and trying, her mild words could not veil the wretched state she'd come to him in. "Can I come inside?"

"Ah yes, where are my manners." He stepped aside, watching as she painfully dragged herself over the threshold and into his darkened sitting room. She was alive, but her deplorable condition spoke of trials he dared not consider. The Inquisitor's extended absence had unsettled much of the inner circle, imaginations quietly ran wild. Dorian himself had half-expected to be presented with a ransom letter from their Venatori foe, with threats in gruesome detail and grandiose demands used as punctuation.

Hearing Iron Bull's complaint snapped the Herald from her grief-stricken squalor and in the forgiving cover of darkness she flushed with burning mortification. Chiyo whispered frantically behind the fingers pressed against her mouth. "I'm so sorry! I'll go, I didn't mean to intrude."

"Intrude?" Dorian yawned, lowering his tone to a smooth murmur. "On what. Snoring, blatant pillow theft?"

The Qunari captain grunted lowly. "Welcome home, Boss." The wooden supports of the bed creaked as Bull settled back into the generous down and silk he'd come to frequent.

"Any particular reason for this pre-dawn rendezvous?" The drowsy northerner asked as he lit a lone candle with a tiny ember from his fingertips. Holding it aloft, Dorian illuminated the Herald. Mud speckled up her cloak and leggings. A foul stain of what he could only guess to be some clotted bile discolored the once light fabric and sturdy leather that made up her gear. And no guess needed to be made at the dark red, dried matter that streaked in her tangled white hair.

He set the candle in its holder carefully on his dresser before gesturing at the polished goblets and pitcher that resided there. The dreadful looking mage declined the hospitable offer. "Or could you simply not wait to see your favorite and most handsome confidante?"

Chiyo had directed her sore eyes away from the glaring light and fumbled once more, evading the freshness of the wounds that plagued her heart. It was easier to breathe again, to be in pleasant company once more, even if it strained her dignity to seek such demanding, selfish comforts. She
shouldn't be here, bothering her truest of companions with personal misery, not after all the worry
she must have put them through.

Though there had been need for her to be alone, to handle the hurt unaided, the mournful Dalish
woman dared not fathom locking herself away after a near week unaccompanied. For the second
time since joining the Inquisition, she'd been left with the fleeting chance to run. But the will to do
such was long extinguished. Solas' last gift of freedom was now the furthest from what she'd ever
desired. The Inquisitor didn't want to be free; she wanted to not be alone. "I tried going to my
quarters, but couldn't open the door."

"We'll have someone inspect it later." He deliberately ignored the misery clinging to her meaning,
knowing the probability of there being something physically so wrong with the latch that she couldn't
assume her own room, was slim indeed. The dark and loosely robed Tevinter poured himself a short
draught of red wine before dropping noiselessly onto the comfortable sofa. "So you've returned,
excellent. I hope you're not going to tell me of some grand adventure you had without me."

She shrugged, staring at her blistered, grubby feet. "Wouldn't call trekking all the way back from
Crestwood on foot an adventure."

"You look it," He took a quick drink, wrinkling his nose slightly as he eyed her over the lip of the
silvered cup. "And I'm sorry to say this, but smell of it too."

Chiyo began to raise a questionable sleeve towards her nose, but upon seeing the crust of travel and
battle stains stopped before venturing to take a whiff. She gave only the vaguest of explanations to
her haggard condition. "Wyverns…"

"Ah, that would account. Would you like to see the wash basin I found in Val Royeaux, it has the
most marvelous pattern painted in the bowl." Dorian cocked a shapely brow, curiosity piqued. It
would have been a sight worth seeing, the young Dalish woman caught in a skirmish with a garish
beast. He wondered momentarily how she'd fared, considering her recent, self-imposed magical
limitations. She still had all her limbs and most of her faculties; but how had the hazardous, stout
relatives of dragons come away from it?

"I should go." The Inquisitor hesitated, rubbing at her filthy clothes uncomfortably. But with the
point of a lethargic finger she was directed towards the refined washbowl in the corner. A shaky
hand transferred the cold water from the readied pitcher into the beautiful dish. She felt horribly
guilty; sulluing the folded white towel she dampened, using the soft cotton to cleanse her face, neck
and hands. The water quickly became muddy with her efforts, especially after she wiped her sore
feet. But Dorian waited patiently and without interruption, allowing her to freshen up at her leisure.

"I'm disturbing you, tell me to leave and I will." Chiyo mumbled as she gave the ruined cloth one last
wring after mopping up the splattered mess she'd made in the dark.

"Nonsense, do stay. It would be an insult to my hospitalities. You look about ready to fall off your
feet." Dorian immediately rejected the notion. He patted the empty space beside him and closed his
eyes, head resting on the back of the couch in a sleepy loll. "Come, just lose the… fragrant
armaments."

"You don't want to know what happened?" Chiyo asked timidly, peeling off the more offensive
outer layers and leaving them in an untidy pile on the finely crafted rug. Each clunking piece of her
armor fell away heavily along with the stashed, shattered chunks of her broken heart. They littered
across the floor in her wake as she shuffled to the hush-toned mage. She was relieved to leave them
behind, too tired to scoop them up and carry them any further.
"Inquisitor," He began sleepily, the wine easing him back into a restful stupor. The nearly snoozing man was jostled slightly as she filled the seat beside him. Dorian lifted an arm, giving her a place to fall into. "Losing love leaves a rather signature mark, all the best romance novels go to great pains in detailing such. You left with a man and came home seemingly without him. What else is there to say?"

"...I'm a fool, Dorian." She shook her head, slowly rubbing her sorrow-sored and irreverent cheeks against the alleviating, body warmed fabric of his night shirt and robe.

"Shh, you need rest my friend." His long, whiskey-hued fingers slipped across her knotted crown and his thumb found the shallow dish of her temple where it began to gently circle, rolling against the barely washed, dampened skin and hair.

"I tried… I tried to ask him," Chiyo could barely hold back the tears she thought she'd run out of on the road, but they were back again. First in front of Sera, now Dorian, how many more would see her cry? Her eyes stung once more, burning with distraught pain and profound confusion. She could feel her nose threaten to run, but she did her best to keep the mess to herself with ragged sniffling. "… I thought he wanted to be my…"

"And I take it he told you no." Dorian conjectured as the small mage began to tremble in her collapse. Her body would not be so quick to pardon the miles she'd crossed and the camps she'd passed up for rest. To have made it back on foot in the time allotted, there would have been little room for pause.

She breathed a roughly broken, singular laugh behind the restrained sobbing. "He said yes actually, but that he couldn't… and then goodbye. I just don't understand why. This wasn't supposed to happen."

"In the morning, after you clean up properly," The Tevinter altus sighed deeply and waited for the tired tears to subside before speaking again. "I think it's time I told you something about our dear mysterious Solas. I hope you will forgive me for harboring it from you this long."
Solas justifies his choices, but they don't sound good enough, not even to himself. But he has to try, for if he fails, there will never be a chance to make any of it right in the end. Love cannot survive on a lie, and Chiyo learns of a big one.

*Ar lasa mala revas.*

The Dread Wolf had set her free. He'd erased the shackles made of blood from her face, yet doing such came at dear, personal loss. With the sharp edge of short words he'd both relinquished the woman who loved him beyond rationality from the appropriated markings of slavery and unraveled their imprudently intertwined fates. She couldn't come with him, as much as it pained him to leave her so far behind. Even if she'd full heartedly agreed to attempt, he would not lead her blindly through the dangers that lay ahead in his path.

As much as it wounded him to abandon the only happiness ever granted to him, Solas knew he must bear it. The words of the nightmarish demon that had tormented all who'd fallen into the Fade remained with Solas still—*Ma banal enasalin. Mar solas ena mar din. You will have nothing again. Your pride will be your death.* There had been much unfavorable truth instilled behind the fear.

He would now walk the roads once more alone, for her, and do what must be done with the last few untold days that remained. Corypheus would not wait forever to amass what was left of his strength, no matter how severe a blow he'd been dealt at the Temple of Mythal. With the dangerous foci in his possession, there was no telling how much power the twisted magister could draw from the orb; he'd already exceeded all the conceivable bounds Solas had considered possible when the artifact had been first passed over. He'd been so weak upon waking, there had been few options left to him that would have ended any better.

Fen'Harel, the rebel god who had set ruin upon the world, had been within covetous reach of obtaining the one thing he assumed to not ever possess. It was the harsh, unbending wisdom of ages that stole the conviction and earnestness from his ardent desire, and reminded him that there was a greater need beyond any he should claim for himself. A dwindling race needed him to finish campaigns now millennium in the making. They were not his kin, but they were all that remained of what had once been a glorious people. He owed them that at least, for all that had been taken away, but there was one still that immediately required his help beyond all others. The headstrong woman that suffered because of yet another failed plan with the Orb. The well-intentioned lover who would disastrously undo all he'd sacrificed for if left unchecked. Whose slender elven hands would be left charred and eyes lightlessly hollow for trying to be the hero the Inquisition so desperately craved. To live the righteous lie they demanded, would be her death.

A mere piece of flimsy paper had been all it had taken to ruin the intent he'd left Skyhold with. That woe beholden letter provided the necessary insight and a revitalized sense of solemnity; it lay inside the breast pocket of his robe like a leaden stone over his sore heart.

Solas had nearly left it behind too, unread on his desk, after Dorian had futilely tried to convey it on him within the last few moments before his anticipated departure with the Inquisitor. The journey and purpose were supposed to have been a true testament and tribute to the strength of their connection;
he did not wish to entertain any form of interruption. For once, he was choosing to do something entirely for his own personal gain, and he’d selfishly held on to the idea that honesty would finally bring him joy. He’d breathed freely across the miles, without a shred of doubt to dampen the agreeable hours spent together in the saddle or relaxing beside the road.

His heart longingly had begged him to wait, that whatever was written inside would not alter the need for his confession, but his vexed mind forced him to eventually take diligent pause. It lay buried amongst his travel-things. Solas had retrieved it only when they were well on the path of their final destination, once his restless curiosity could be deferred no longer.

Only the sounds of the crackling fire and the slight rustle of parchment had joined his reading; quite strange for it to be so silent when everything about his hard-won inner balance had just dizzily skewed. A sleepy head rested unaware on his lap while he read with ever increasing inner turmoil on the dilemma. All hope fled him on the cool evening breeze. So much time had already been lost, there was none left for him to formulate anything better without risk of losing the evidently flighty contact entirely. The mage had almost intentionally forgotten the danger of the future he’d already seen. He nearly chose himself and a new existence, even before the penance was yet paid.

Love sacrificed and the truth of his name concealed by a hurriedly scrawled note that promised to give him the answers so anxiously pursued. Had it only come to him sooner, Solas would have never agreed to bring her to the place where it all began. Had the letter arrived any later, by a day, an hour, he would have doomed himself a woefully happy man. To live a mortal life alongside his beloved. But it hadn’t.

This was for the best, he reminded himself once more strengthening his resolve, and all would be made clear before the end. His decision being for the greater good was not enough to stave off the anguish and self-loathing he’d wrought upon himself. It would have been so much kinder for them both, to have never allowed the entanglement, but being in those merciful arms had shown him the prospect of an actuality he’d never thought conceivable. Going through with telling Chiyo all of the truth would have led to too many questions that he could no longer afford to have her ask, not yet… if ever. Perhaps in another world, perhaps in another life.

His utmost fear could have been slashed down by the extraordinary blade of her acceptance; however the cost was too dear for him to take that happiness, he risked abandoning all of his original plans. With the same slipping breath that had latched on to her last offer Solas rejected bliss, exchanged contentment for pain and watched the hurt that had festered inside himself infect another. But not until after mercilessly agreeing; he’d already foolishly and hopelessly said yes to a proposition that should never have been considered. Openly acknowledging what had already become of them. He mistakenly gave into his own desire and into hers, if for a moment that had lived only within a pause and died upon her blissful lips.

The sincere proposal was but a considerably formal tradition at best, a confirmation of what Chiyo already knew. A lovingly given request to simply name their relationship for what it genuinely was, and he’d dashed it callously. Their love had never been given a definitive beginning; they’d slipped in so gradually that the changes had gone by without notice. But he had given it a punishing end and an unclean break, hurting her even more than he would ever wished-for.

No one should want Solas—the liar, the fool, the madman— so completely, so fully, to join themselves with him.

It had been impossible to solely tell her no, not when he'd already decided to leave. She'd been so utterly sincere, so blind to the cruel dagger that waited in the cold shadows of his response. Nevertheless, Chiyo had wanted him passionately still and pleaded to allow her offered aid,
that 'whatever it was that he needed they could find together.' Those simple words had struck his core the hardest. The Inquisitor would have forsaken her post and followed him with but an approving nod.

Bond. That's what she had asked him to do.

Even if the Dalish had done their damnedest to correctly apply the term in their short, fleeting lives they could never fully appreciate the magnitude of what they sought to replicate. Combining one life with another's undeniably meant more when the now demolished elvhenan had known no real limit to their years, choosing to rest only when they wished it. But even in uthenera, a true connection would most assuredly linger. At least it had, until he'd in his inattentiveness destroyed the natural magic that sustained them all, both dreamers and conscious elves alike. How many lovers had he torn apart and cast into the nothingness? What made his love more important and sacred then theirs had been?

In his hasty, proud youth the man who deemed call himself Solas had degraded the destiny of his immortal people. The mighty Fen'Harel had fractured their link to the Fade in a final effort to free them from the corrupted gods that slowly dissolved their culture from the inside out. He'd been correct in his application; conversely, the not entirely unforeseen consequences had been discounted. To be completely right, but also so very, very wrong, that choice had demolished his entire world and nearly cost him his own dishonorable, shamed life. He deserved no clemency for his crimes and he could not ask the brightest of all the elves that his ruinous choice left to undergo any more anguish alongside him.

Hadn't he already done enough to her? With the half-truths he'd shared and the hungrily stolen tender kindness she possessed. What madness had overtaken him, driven by receptive smiles and whispered assurance. Solas had distracted Chiyo from her many overwhelming duties and then guided her away from the safety of the Inquisition with the full intent of laying his entire abominable truth at her magnanimous feet. He'd planned on using the ancient cave and its connection to his own memories in the Fade as his means to show her everything he'd failed to say to anyone in all his long, empty years of wandering. She would've seen him for what he truly was, for who he'd formerly been and why he'd made the decision that had changed the fate of the Elvhen. For her to judge who he was now, with full knowledge of how it all came to be.

Solas should have come clean to her in the bath when he had the opportunity and courage to do it. But the timing felt wrong, he held back deeming that his word would not be enough to convince her. Fearing he would sound like the lunatic he'd been labeled when he'd first awoken and tried to help, he wanted to take her deep into the Fade where even the lies couldn't reach him. He'd been so sure before they'd left that Chiyo would hear him out, so certain that the last Lavellan would understand. But in the final moment a gnawing, nagging doubt had chewed its way through his resolve and left him floundering for another, easier truth to offer her. Instead, he'd selected one of the most painful in the long list of Dalish misconceptions. The sin of cowardliness was now his burden to bear alongside all his others.

Solas had first thought to tell her about the vallaslin that morning after their shared soak. He'd watched from the comfort of her warm bed as she worked the remaining, stubborn wind-born snarls from her hair with the aid of a mirror and comb. She'd paused in the midst of her efforts, setting aside the comb and finding some new interest in her own face. With probing fingertips, the Inquisitor traced each of the long, twisting branches that covered the highest reaches of her cheeks and swept towards her scalp. The expression he'd witnessed, catching sight of the reflection, had slipped from neutral notice to aggrieved contempt. Covering one side with the back of her hand, Chiyo had asked him too casually what he thought of the elvhen gods now that they had learned of such contradiction from the guardians of the Well. If they could be murdered, could they really have been all that
powerful?

Once more, he'd reiterated the idea that one would have to expand the definition of what a god was so obscenely that it would have lost all the original meaning. Certainly, the names or lofty titles referred to in the pantheon had existed in some sense, but it was clear that they weren't much of anything like what the elves of the present or any age thought of them. They'd been influential indeed, but overly proclaimed as divine? No, not when the truth of what the gods were probably far from such ordained, sanctimonious origins.

Perhaps Solas should have selected better answers, for they had not given her the reassurance she'd quietly sought. Instead she'd rubbed her palm across the marked, rounded crest, as if she were trying to wipe away a contended stain. If her gods weren't entirely real, the ones she'd been taught all her short life to believe in, what exactly had she painfully dedicated herself to?

With seductively honeyed words Solas had drawn her attention away from the mirror and coaxed her out of the paint-stained, overly large tunic she'd stolen from him. He wished for her to not dwell on such unimportant matters. At first he tried to shift her mind over to the well-worn trials of duty. Like her barely responsive arm, there were plenty of more pressing problems to consider, including the ones he'd remained utterly silent of. However her mind had already chosen its admittedly delightful trail that followed the removal of his nearly ruined shirt.

The weary, self-afflicted mage reached for the letter stowed within his robes, but he quickly changed his mind, leaving it untouched. Reading it again and again would shed little new light on the predicament that he had sworn himself to correct. The spirit of Wisdom had made themselves very clear, in their own manner; if he didn't find a way to alter the path the Inquisitor currently forged ahead on, the final ruin from his dire plans would come to horrendous fruition. There would be no world left to return to his people if her sealed magic was not prepared in time to face their greatest foe. The troubled mage would not survive a second encounter with the Orb of Destruction currently in Corypheus' possession; no one would.

She would be the last link in the chain to break, and with her fall Chiyo would bring the Veil and the Fade down with her in one explosive, final shot.

After all of his time and extended research with Dorian, he still did not know enough about the implications of intemperate blood magic to reap sufficient confidence in removing the damaged seal himself. It ran so deep, beyond even the jarring spectral reach of Cole, who'd been kind enough to warn him of the panic that had quickly ensued when he'd tried to pull the spell and the pain surrounding it away. She'd sensed the danger she was in, even if she hadn't comprehended why. That dark magic curled around her shining soul in a tight snare, waiting for the trigger to be sprung. Solas disbelieved that the fearful mother who'd given her blood and life to protect a gifted daughter had placed it there, likely it had been some undetected trap laid in pitiless jest by the demon she'd conspired with to accomplish the feat. Fate was often like that, thieving victory from your very hand at the last possible moment.

Were he still in his prime though, filled to the brim with the potent, primordial magic he'd been able to access, the matter may have been a simple one. His unmeasurable might had crafted the Veil that separated worlds, what would breaching a single blockade placed on a child have been in comparison to that.

But those days were long behind him now, and his last act as Fen'Harel had left him shattered, unconscious for the centuries to follow. The steady march of years, one upon the other, over and again stole what little strength had been left. There was no sense in wishing for former vigor, Solas would have to make-due with the means and abilities that were left available to him.
If Solas needed to learn more about blood magic, he would have to go to the source, find an expert who had mastered the maligned art. Thanks to the extensive associations of the mustachioed northern mage, it seemed that such an advocate was at least somewhat willing to help. Could they be found, that was. It had taken months to procure the contact. An acquaintance of an old school colleague, from what the Tevinter refugee had imparted. Nor had it come cheaply either, for it seemed even in the Imperium that there were just some lines that weren’t supposed to be flagrantly crossed. The writer of the letter had been driven to the outskirts of society because of their experimentation and now desperately required assistance for the trouble it had brought them. But until that single letter had secretly made its way to Skyhold, no one else had claimed such capability or even success as to what they’d desperately inquired for.

In the end, his reasons for separating from her truly had been paper thin at best. However what he regretted most was that it wasn’t his pride or self-regarding aim that had made it easier to hurt the one he wanted to protect above all others, but the fear of being mistaken had decisively fastened itself to Solas’ decision. So much of his plan had depended on her approval, that the Inquisitor wouldn’t reject him for his past, and assuming that love would be enough to conquer a lifetime of deeply ingrained fear and warning.

*May the Dread Wolf never catch your scent.* How many times had she been cautioned such against even the idea of him?

What if she did fear him upon learning his name? Or if she reacted in anger, seeking retribution for what he’d done to her race. When she’d offered to hear of his past there could have been no anticipation of the horrors that littered his history. His story was not one of the simpler, broken world she’d always known.

He could not afford to be stopped, and there had to be the faint possibility that she would still permit him to set her free entirely—before it was too late. Chiyo needed her own magic, to access what she’d been blessed with from birth and nothing would prevent him from trying to return what was rightfully hers. Not when she would need every last shred to endure the battle yet to come.

He’d entered that cave with her, silently breaking inside, clinging to her warm hands and mutely begging to be stopped. Thieving kisses that he hoped would be enough to assure her that he loved her more than he’d ever loved himself. Had Chiyo firmly pushed away at his dissolution he may have toppled and given in, but he’d been so through and quick to cut her down. She hadn’t said a word to him when he finally walked away; leaving her alone with nothing more than her misery and the book he’d declined to accept.

That would be his last memory of her, for if he failed in his mission it was likely that he would never see that astonishing and marvelous spirit before the end of their worsening world. He doubted fate would ever be kind enough to allow him to make amends for his deplorable actions, if it allowed him to reach his goal at all. But if he could learn and report back to Dorian, or on the rare, odd chance that he could return himself, Solas promised that he would make things right with her, with everyone.

Each surefooted step that the horse took, forced him farther and farther from his vhenan, from the flame that had enlivened his soul. Wordlessly the mage nudged the stolen mount beneath him, pressing his heels lightly to the gelding’s ribs and urged the begrudging Forder on. The noble creature had not been particularly enthused by his new lone rider, nor the insecure way he was being directed. A shared apple had appeased the steed, but only the Inquisitor had known how to remain on her mount’s more agreeable side. It had been difficult to convince himself into taking Chiyo’s favorite beast and robbing her of the little comfort she attained from the gelding. The bay was often a keeper of her independence when the world around her became too constricted.
But they had only brought the one horse and his bare feet simply would not fulfill the haste needed now.

His fate pointed west, away from her, and there were still many miles to go and no account for the precious time that was left. But Solas would adjust that as well, a few stops along the way would be more than enough. If there was anything he was good at, it was stalling for time.

"What's the matter, kid? Cat got your tongue?" Varric asked, looking up from his warm breakfast peculiarly as the blonde youth fell suddenly hushed, head slanting and ear nearly pricked towards a sound unperceived by the familiarly chatting dwarf.

"No, my tongue's still…" The spirit's bemused words drifted mid-speech, attentions focusing on the distant call of bright pain. Cole twisted his gangly hands around the hot tea he'd been attempting to drink, bringing it to his thin, parted lips each time the burly man beside him did with his own steeping beverage. Learning to be human took practice or so Varric told him, at least the Keep's maids and other less spiritually-inclined folk had stopped screaming every time he appeared.

His watery eyes darted about as he swam through the new torrent of emotions, struggling to pin them down as they churned through one another and crashed into his hearkened ear. "The fragments don't fit, how long have they been hidden? Raw and razor-edged, silent and suffering. Won't see what isn't there. Can't fix what isn't broken."

The dwarf frowned at the susurrated verbal onslaught, tediously trying to return to the steaming hot bread and fried egg on his plate. "Well, that's pretty true, I guess depending on what ain't broke. What are you digging at this time? Kind of early in the day for puzzles."

"Pieces; pressed and preserved. They are still here." Standing quickly he bumped the table in his hurry, splashing the drink he'd imitated to appreciate. Cole scrambled for his floppy hat, pulling it hard over his stringy hair before vanishing in a swirl of dark smoke without another word.

"So much for a peaceful breakfast." Varric mumbled, mopping at congealing, golden yolk with a chunk of flaky crust. But he dropped the morsel before it could reach his mouth when the sudden opening and slamming of a door against the wall startled him. "Inquisitor?!"

"Have you seen him?" The Dalish mage growled fiercely as she crossed the main hall without pause, her pink skin and wet hair clued him into a recent use of the bath Dagna had proudly and ingeniously designed for the Inquisitor's tower. A short tunic drooped loosely from her graceful shoulders, the thin fabric clinging to her damp figure. Her appearance spoke of haste, even her pants had yet to be properly tied, the long strings swayed in time with her quick steps.

Varric raised a heavy brow high, surprised as the rest of the waking Keep to see their Herald so troubled suddenly and unannounced. He had to admit her worried vestige was upstaged by the state of half-dress and it took a moment to reply blinkingly. "Who? Cole? You just missed him."

"No." She answered hotly in disgruntled tone, "Solas." Her voice dropped on his name, noiselessly pulling at the laces of half-tied breeches as she passed him by.

"Can't say I have. Wasn't he out frolicking in the moonlight with you?" He turned his head, tracking her stomping path as she headed for the rotunda door and entered without waiting for his response. "Guess things didn't go as… planned."

Chiyo skimmed her eyes around the unoccupied study, still reeling from the somewhat hesitant revelation she'd gleaned from the suave Tevinter mage only moments before. Dorian had divulged
much and little while she'd scrubbed herself clean and permitted him to inspect the mild injuries from her trying journey. He'd barely been allowed to finish once the truth had been made abundantly clear.

She paced uncertainly in her agitation, looking to the tidy desk, the empty sofa and the sturdy scaffolding for previously unnoted indications. Finding no immediate sign she spun on her heels and prepared to walk past the snooping yet wise dwarf, and go once more up the long flight of stairs to cast herself onto the overgenerous mattress. To sink into the thickly packed down, buried beneath the pillows and quilts and become mute to the world that would ask too much of one elf. But the mere thought of the bed they'd shared had her instantly circling back to face the Inquisition's pioneered victory—the recruitment of the rebel mages to their cause.

Her first moment of triumph, he'd painted it well. She jerked her head sideways to the next panel, and then the next. Chiyo hoped that each time she turned about her eyes would not land upon the familiar murals, but be met by a peculiarly stony and discerning gaze. The eyes that had lost the brightness to their blue, the ones that had belonged to the man that had called her vhenan.

He wasn't there; and deep inside the gutted, broken remains of her heart there was the plummeting consideration that the quiet mage may not be coming back.

After all this time, she'd never seen it, never suspected. Solas had made no hint or mention of the trouble he'd accidentally discovered months ago, only realizing it fully after their unfortunate accident high above the frozen cliffs in the Emprise du Lion.

Tainted, all along unknowingly, by foul magic—if such a thing could be possible. Is that why he couldn't completely give his trust to her? Is that what had lingered, keeping them from the bond, what had made up the base of the impenetrable barrier he built around the deepest part of himself? That wall she couldn't breach no matter what she did? What else had he endured silently and why had he waited so long to do something about it? Why had he walked away, was this truly so dire? She wasn't afraid and would have done anything Solas had needed to undo the despicable magic so cruelly wrought. Why had he rejected her offer of help? Did he think there was a danger to her? That she wouldn't understand? Her racing thoughts came full circle as did her body, leaving her facing the spot he so often occupied.

Chiyo began to rifle through the unsurprisingly organized desk drawers in the exact center of the round room, shuffling through the stacks of notes and research abound. She found plenty on his detailed studies of potential new rifts locations, the effects of the ancient elvhen artifacts that seemed to stem the tide of demons, and journals stuffed to the brim with magical theory, but nothing on the perplexing issue secretly studied with the aid of their resident Tevinter mage.

An orderly record of bizarrely vague and varied descriptions of dreams caught her attention momentarily, but with the only constant being paired initials she could make neither heads nor tails of those varied accounts. RJ, C-, DP, near a dozen others dotted the accounts. In frustration she tossed it aside, the resounding noise it made as it skid off the desk and hit the stone floor was gratifying. She found it just as worthless as the rest of the contents of the wooden writing table.

The Inquisitor braced herself against the desk with stiff arms and a bowed head, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth slowly, trying to gain some sense of equilibrium, or any kind of sense at all. Once the sting of rejection had dulled with the rising clarity of the sun in the morning sky, her anger and intractability arose from the wreckage left behind. She would help him and woe betide anyone who tried to stop her, including the absconder himself.

She required a plan. But even before that she had to understand what he needed, what was he looking for, and most importantly—where had he gone to find it? There were so many questions that
not even Dorian could answer, because he frankly didn't know and had only been allowed to assume so much considering the secretive nature of the resident elven apostate. He divulged that there had been one last, and rather interesting, letter from a contact who was on the lam in the eastern fringes of the Tevinter Imperium. Beyond that, everything thing else was a conjecture at best.

Considering the quiet rookery, where the crows were just beginning to stir, there was one woman in particular who had means about finding information not so readily available. A visit to their Spymaster might just be in due order. If anyone could possibly help her now, it was Leliana.

"Inquisitor!"

Cassandra could be heard boisterously shouting in the hall. Someone must have run to fetch her, word always had a way of traveling fast around the Hold.

"I must speak with you immediately!"

Glancing up from her seat on his desk, still searching for any clue Chiyo saw the tall woman's form begin to darken the doorway. However she was in no mood to be chastised for her unwarranted absence. With a flash and a sharp motion from her marked hand, she grimaced and pushed the door shut with a loud snap before the Seeker could step through. The elf held it closed from a distance with nothing more than a glowing, clenched fist, ignoring the ensuing pounding that followed.

"Open this door!"

She despised the unnerving feeling in her tightly clamped fingers, sensing each vibration in the wood and jiggle of the handle as if her hand were truly on the door, not some phantom reach that spanned the room. This was only the third incidence, but it proved to her that the others prior had certainly not been flukes. The first had been the most terrifying; happening only moments after Sera had forced her way into her bedroom. Finding the Inquisitor brooding and tending to a limp arm, they'd argued doggedly until Chiyo had demanded her to leave. When the rogue had refused, the mark had flared briefly and all the windows had flown open as the rest of the room exploded around her.

"Why did you not send word?!"

Chiyo had been in utter bewilderment, startled by the unexpected outburst as much as the terrified elf who fled her quarters in a stream of curses, blaming Solas the entire length down the rickety stair. It had to have been an accident, a freak calamity from the bizarre interaction with the Well. The terrible magic in the anchor had temporarily gone awry while her arm remained numb and unfeeling. She'd made no mention to the dreamer who warmed her bed, choosing to disregard the event entirely and move past the disaster that had nearly finished them all.

"Ugh! I have no time for this juvenile behavior!"

But she hadn't given it another thought until crossing paths with a territorial wyvern late in the night as she made her way back to the only home she could attempt to claim. Alone and only lightly armed, there was no out running or out muscling the stout, leanly built reptile. In an act of desperation, she'd tried to push the pouncing creature away, just as Vivienne had demonstrated during their rigorous training sessions. Instead of knocking the violent animal aside, it had hovered above her, writhing in an invisible grasp it could not escape before meeting the bladed end of her staff. Perhaps not the best death she'd ever given, considering the mess it had made all over her armor, however she'd walked away relatively unscathed. Shaken to the core, but mostly uninjured. Had the same thing happened to her before the reformation of the Inquisition, Chiyo questioned the odds of her survival. She'd done so much growing since arriving at Haven, time gradually inching into a second year, but the prowess did not equate to her being happy with what she'd gradually
become.

Solas had been right; she really was a monster masked in flesh.

By the sound of it, Cassandra had raged off once more, giving up on the barred door. The Inquisitor dropped another uninformative ledger onto the disarrayed surface, ignoring the small tide of papers sliding down unto the floor. She peered about, unheeded by the growing murmurs not so subtly uttered, coming from the level above. But her eyes sought not the confused faces of the residents meandering in the library. Instead they fell once more to the newest installment on the nearly finished wall.

Barely an outline, the remaining segment of the mural now held the thinly sketched imagery of a massive beast leaning low before the body of a defeated dragon. Miniscule in comparison and impaled with sword, the high dragon had been brought low by unseen forces. She'd watched him prepare and paint it over the empty evenings prior to their trip. Curled up on the sofa or stretched across the tall, wooden platform, Chiyo had observed Solas as he'd applied fresh plaster, drawn out his references and lastly daubed the beginnings of colossal forms in broad, gray strokes with a wide brush.

He'd worked in a dutiful silence she'd helped him keep, mostly, leaving him to his process without interruption. Chiyo had been happy enough to simply watch the artistic work take place in her presence; she'd been allowed into the safest place in his waking world, where he was free to leave a permanent mark instead of humbly observing the past without influence through his dreams.

She held her breath alongside her lurking sorrow as she walked away from the mess she'd created, approaching the unfinished painting. The box of pigments and brushes remained on the floor, waiting to be picked up again when he was ready to complete the massive work.

Hissing suddenly, she lifted a pained foot, spotting a tiny shard of ceramic caught in a crack on the floor. A spot of blood oozed from a cut as she stooped to collect the fragment, recognizing it as coming from the mug of tea that had slipped from her weakened hand during their last night before leaving. She thought she'd collected all the sharp little pieces, but it seemed there were many things she had missed.

He'd trusted Dorian enough to help him in his quest to find a solution, why not her? Where had she failed him so miserably that she'd been deemed unfit to have any knowledge of the problem carefully hidden away. She'd tried hard to be a better mage, a stronger person, but her efforts had still not been enough. Solas must've found something inside her so poorly lacking that he'd turned to another for support. But what was amiss? Her heritage was disagreeable to him but mostly unoffending, her education the best it could have been under the conditions, her magic... that was called wrong by those who'd trained her. The magic that threatened her friends each time it slipped from her control. Even the distant family that had given her away to the Lavellans had made their opinion silently clear the night she'd come out of the dark woods cradling a tiny, flickering flame in her palm.

Wiping at the wet wound on the thick pad of her heel, Chiyo considered the shining red that smeared across her fingers.

Solas should have told her that he assumed himself cursed, by blood magic done to him long before he could remember. She would have helped him, had she only been deemed good enough to try.
Chiyo was never any good at spying or dredging up hidden information, and the Nightingale who would help her is nowhere to be found. The answers she needs though may lie within, and Cole tries to be the one to force them to the surface.

"Your Worship," The senior scout seated behind the shadowy table looked up from the fledgling crow, still mottled with black baby-down. Perched atop his finger it playfully tugged at a long hair from his silvered beard, insistently on being fed. He rose swiftly, balancing the young bird as he bowed as best his stiff back could allow. "What brings you to the rookery this morning? My apologies for not being prepared for a visit, I'm sure I missed the notice."

"Be at ease, our Spymaster was not expecting me."

"Perhaps you will permit me to help in her stead. Magnus the bird-trainer, at your service."

"She is absent?" Chiyo knitted her dark brow as she made a quick study of the nearly unoccupied floor littered with barrels, bundles, cages and crates. Magnus was alone but for the black birds under his care. The dangerously sly and far-reaching redhead was nowhere to be seen. Not that the Orlesian woman was tethered to the isolated spot, it was rare to not find her during the common hours. Her responsibilities were just as endless as the Inquisitor's, but much less likely to be noted or even known by the public. A good spy was one you didn't even have to think about, if she was doing her job well then it was assured that no further action was required. Leliana knew what needed to be done, though her methods were often far from savory, she was a vital part of the Inquisition.

There was to be a scheduled meeting at the War Table that afternoon, one that the Inquisitor was not necessarily looking forward to with joyous enthusiasm. She'd felt little of either in the stretching weeks that she'd last seen Solas beyond the soreness of sorrow and the anger that fought bridling. Even Dagna's most recent accomplishment, her advancements often a source of awe and wonder, had not broken through the numb neutrality. Today's gathering promised even less enjoyment. What with most of their forces stationed far from home and no assurance of the state of their enemy.
It seemed however they were going to be short one valuable Advisor, though Cassandra would be likely to fill in. Chiyo was eagerly awaiting what the Seeker had to say to her. Considering the added conditions of her absenteeism over the recent weeks, she was sure to be in store for quite the reminder of the responsibilities she'd sworn herself to. Solas was right. He had distracted her from her duties. Perhaps the fleeting romance had served little more than to pacify her through the worst of her ordeals…

She could already feel her demeanor turn cold at the thought, but she refused to let her fouled mood disrupt the purpose of the visit. Straightening her shoulders and slipping into a mask not of her own liking, but one she'd had ample time to study, Chiyo continued on as the strong, unflinching Herald. "Where to, was there an emergency?"

"Not any that was disclosed to me, your Worshipfulness." Answered Magnus, gathering the thickly stacked ledgers he'd kept up to date. "Tis a personal trip to Val Royeaux as far as I was made aware. Visiting a temple in regards to the late Divine Justinia, Maker bless her departed soul."

"Then it must have been important enough for her to leave the Inquisition. I want to know when she returns. I need her skills." She huffed shortly, dragging the chair back across the floor before she plopped down. Leliana had her faith and reasons, with the raging debate of who should become the next Divine always lingering on the lips of the sisters residing in the Keep. Both the Right and Left hands were being considered, but the probability of either being selected was slim without extensive support. At least they were not asking it of their Herald. Being an apostate had already made some in the Chantry rather uncomfortable, to the point of decreeing her heretical and fabricated. The delicate point of her long ears drove the rest downright petrified. A Dalish heritage and upbringing only added a bonus of pagan faith to their perceived threat. Unbeliever, Elf, Mage. Three-strikes that were more than enough. There had been one hastily extinguished petition for the execution of the false Herald of Andraste, but Josephine had been swift to put an end to the nonsense and no further word had come from the originators. "I have questions about a letter delivered to Ser Pavus before my last… excursion."

The scout ran his finger down the first open page, flicked back another and tapped repeatedly on the date in question. He rotated the text and presented it to her, bending at the waist to lean across the table. "No letters that day, or the day prior. And I was here for sure, this one hatched that daybreak." Magnus smiled to the curious bird stretching his growing wings as he bobbed on his high perch.

"Are you sure?" The Inquisitor gloomily peered over the judiciously blocked writing, propping her elbows atop the grainy wood as she skimmed the inked lines in vain. "Dorian said he'd received it first thing that morning."

"No Ser. Just a pair of boots arrived from Tevinter. Black. Particularly sturdy." He dictated with a muffled, nervous cough, turning several more immaculate pages. "And the week before, a letter from the Pavus household arrived. He promptly sent it back resealed and unread. Did that right in front of the courier. Problems with inheritance noted. A case of Antivan sourced wine arrived under his billing during that same period. Red. 6 year old vintage. Claimed it was for his health."

Groaning in harsh disapproval, Chiyo tugged the record closer, pouring over it acutely. The further back she went only showed more items being distributed and very few individual letters—all of little note being sent to Dorian. And nothing to Solas. The Tevinter mage had been relatively honest about the secreted correspondences, but he'd only glossed lightly over how the letters had entered the Keep without alerting suspicion of maleficarious activities. Surrounded by Andrastian faithful and former Templars, even the notion of blood magic was enough to risk serious questioning, if not imprisonment or death. The scheming fools had been smart enough to avoid getting caught outright; she could not deny them that. "Did you inspect the parcels he received? I need more details on the
"Is the lad in some kind of trouble?" Asked Magnus, tottering off to fetch another completed ledger for her seemingly peeved discretion. "I wasn't aware that we were checking thy inner circle for illicit smuggling. We've maintained a tight grip on anything hazardous like lyrium, as per orders. But little of suspicion has crossed our gates. Things have been rather peaceful here as of late; forgive me, blessed Herald, if I should have done otherwise..."

"I thought our Spymaster would be more paranoid than this. You are under her instruction, not mine." Trying not to sound snappish, Chiyo was short in offering her clemency as she kept her narrowed eyes directed at the paper and away from the undeserving fellow. She ticked off the assortment of items that preceded the shoes and expensive drink. Bolts of fabric dyed in Rivain, a box of medicinal creams to ward off the drying cold of the South, heavy coats commissioned by his family tailor, a pair of carved sitting chairs, all arriving in regular intervals spanning back the past few months before a sharp decrease in all postal activity that wasn't clearly accounted for came to a sudden halt. There were a scattered half dozen contacts marked as 'scholarly interest' listed before the arrival of the luxuries. The notes were relatively useless, giving little indication beyond what Dorian had already confided. There was no mention of blood magic whatsoever. Perhaps both parties had been careful enough to avoid the blasphemed language of the forbidden art, speaking in a confusing manner of suppositions and conjectures as they were often prone to do.

"We have been increasingly busy. Preparation for the assault on the Arbor Wilds was near a month in planning. It usurped many of our assets and took much of our time. All able-bodies have been needed elsewhere." The elderly scout explained concernedly, his sharp gray eyes twisting with the shame of proposed failure, that his diligence had not been enough to fulfill the duty asked of him. "The Venatori have been a nightmare to stay ahead of, I believe Lady Leliana deemed the resources better spent there than at home where she has a nearer handle on such matters."

"If you have other tasks, you may see to them." Chiyo bid with strained graciousness, setting her head in her hands as she browsed the unhelpful pages. All the deliveries had originated from the Imperium, just as Dorian had told her, though he did not remember some of the finer details of who had eventually responded through his sprawling network of associates. And they'd been sure to burn the remnants of their contacts. Most of the replies had been simple declines or offered regards; a scant few salacious outcries of inherent madness had come up as well. All that the suave Altus could confirm was that there was a skilled mage undergoing social difficulty, cast out of acceptable society, drifting around the borders of the balmy north-western countryside. They'd offered to help Solas, however, only if they weren't dead by the time the letter had reached Skyhold.

She'd hoped that Leliana would have become wise to their plan, making note of an easier path to follow. According to the ledger the markings and mailing seals on the shoe parcel had all indicated they had been delivered first to a town closer to the Anderfels. In Hossberg they'd been readdressed and continued on their way to the Frostback Mountains.

There just weren't enough pieces to reduce the map. Dorian had said for a fact that his main contact resided in Minrathous and seldom had reason to travel from their home to go visiting members so far removed from civilization. A cousin of a friend of a colleague, the contacts were all fleeting and second-hand, removed from the situation for personal safety and to remain mostly anonymous.

Turning with rising frustration to other accounts procured by Magnus before he left her alone to see to the rest of the flock, she found notes on their trip to Crestwood were equally as disappointing. Scouts had reported their lack of return. The cantankerous mount the mages' had arrived on —having apparently bitten a well-meaning cadet just hours before—had gone missing in the night between patrols. The Inquisitor's possessions appeared rifled through and left empty of food, healing supplies
and coin. What was left would be sent back to the Keep if they did not find the Inquisitor. They’d tracked the hoof-prints down the boggy camp trail in the moist dirt, but as soon as they’d entered the more trafficked thoroughfare several miles out there was just no telling exactly which way the horse thief had vanished to.

Releasing fistfuls of hair half-pulled into a stubbly knot on the back of her head, the Inquisitor scoffed in aggravation as she slid down uncouthly in the chair till her shoulders sunk below the wooden back. Ignoring the growing clamor of the hungry crows she stared out at the dark rafters, watching the fine particles of dust glinting in the broken rays of thin sunlight that still pierced the old roof in a place or two. So many repairs had been made, but it would be months, or even years before the castle stood at a fully polished glory.

She was no good with snooping and paper-trails, lacking both the trained feel of a hunter flushing out their prey and the couth-ness of an ambassador who could discern an affair simply by studying the flourish of penmanship. There were others in her company that were skilled in such, but it seemed even they had grown too certain in their flimsy understandings of the apostate amidst their ranks. They had all failed to see what was right in front of them the whole time. Some much more than others— the Inquisitor being the worst of all. How could she depend on them again, on herself even, to find out where Solas had gone if not one of them had the insight to see his deep, deep suffering? The Inquisitor was surrounded by experts of all kind, masters of unique craft, so why did it feel like she was wandering alone in this fiasco entirely unguided and unprepared?

Perhaps it was better to be alone.

Though no one had stopped her when the Inquisitor had all but thrown Morrigan out of the secluded chamber, the air of displeasure had not been cleared with the removal of the Witch. She’d mouthed off in a poetic elven beyond even the gained comprehension of the brooding Lavellan. However Chiyo had garnered enough of the rude speech to have been thoroughly insulted. The tension from their last encounter returned unforgotten, reinvigorated by the sharpness of her shouts and the slamming of the smaller door built into the side of the massive, spilt entrance.

Morrigan had tried and failed at using her new found fangs to strike at the wounded Herald, but the ripples of lightning curled around her clenched fists had been a speedy reminder that she was in no mood to be trifled or toyed with. By anyone.

Unworthy of great knowledge. Blinded by tiresome love. Mythal had chosen wisely by safeguarding her power from such pitiful folly. So much for being marked in the goddess’ name, it seemed even proud faith could also be misconstrued.

She'd dared to say more of those jabbing words in lilting effortlessness, rubbing them as velvet into a feral ear, until she’d been brusquely shown the exit.

Trudging up the creaking stair whose boards bowed slightly beneath her light step, Chiyo bit back the toxic rage that swirled in her gut and pounded above her eyes deep behind her brow. It was worthless, the anger would solve nothing and served little more than to chafe at her already sored nerves. But she couldn't let it go, the unfairness of it all. To be so stripped and embarrassed, her emotions displayed for everyone to see. They were too wild and monstrous to force back into their cage, locked inside of a heart too shattered to hold anything, which rattled thinly under even the lightest of breezes. Clarity was needed to lead effectively, yet her mind loitered on ghosts and murky shadows.

She sought to move, to decompress, but all she could do at current was push open the door to the only refuge where no one came to bother her. Within the confines of the last room Chiyo wanted to
be in, where traces of a life she'd almost grasped could still be felt, she was permitted to cry, to scream, to drink, to simply be in pain with no one pressing her to do otherwise. Dorian had tried to help her, offering knowledge as the only outlet available to him. Yet it had only achieved in adding contempt to her unbearable sorrow. She craved to be on her horse, riding out valiantly to rescue the missing mage from whatever trouble that plagued him. Arriving with the dawn to vanish his demons by whatever means necessary, to be the hero he'd always been for her. But the Inquisitor could accomplish neither rash fantasy without a trusted mount to carry her nor a direction beyond west to follow in pursuit.

Love was no compass; she would need more than that to find Solas.

With more of Solas' notes and the stand-in bird trainer's accounts shoved beneath her arm beginning to slip from her grasp, the Dalish elf quickened her stride and mounted the last of the stair. She thrust the broken door open with a bump from her shoulder, hoisting the disassembled pile of documents on her hip as bare feet met the cold stone of her bedroom floor. But as she crossed onto the ornately patterned rug to find a suitable place to dump her carried cargo, Chiyo realized she wasn't entirely unaccompanied in her lofty quarters.

At her desk stood Cole, his arms equally loaded with books that he was carefully stacking atop the uneven surface of the knick-knacks that covered the barely used writing table. The pile wobbled with each new addition as the hodgepodge grew with the dozens of volumes he'd already arranged. Thick and thin, old and new, the boy amassed them as a child would stack the slender rods in the Dalish game of sticks.

"Please leave." Chiyo barely repressed a terse growl as a few sheets of paper slipped onto the carpet around her naked feet. She struggled to keep them together any longer, already disarrayed by her previous viewings, but the Inquisitor was certain that Solas had left behind some clue that would lead her to him. She just had to find the right connection. Someone, someplace knew where he would be found, if she was smart enough to figure the dilemma out. "I have work to do and little time to spare. I want to be alone for this."

Cole continued his stacking unaltered, nudging another pilfered tome into place, pausing only when the stack threatened to topple. He resumed when all became still once more. "The wise must sometimes give people what they need, not what they want. He told me that once, but I don't think I am wise. But I can hear the hurt, I can help. You still need to accept."

"You would help me more by being upfront. I will not be playing word games." Chiyo said with a hissed muttering, stooping to collect the fallen pages and only succeeding in dropping more. She had not forgotten the task the spirit of Compassion had daunted her with, but only now did it finally make better sense. Cole must have seen the foul magic that cursed the man who'd walked away from everything to pursue his goals unaided. "Why didn't you tell me Cole, I would have listened."

"You weren't ready to hear." Hummed the boy flatly, only a few books remaining in the crook of his lanky arm waited to be placed haphazardly with the others. But his tone shifted, the changed words striking at the memories that haunted the Inquisitor's infrequent dreams with wretched accuracy. "Stumbling, dark, my arm. It hurts… Which way is home?"

"Please, don't dig in my head!" The meticulous writings started careening across the rug, Chiyo cursed as fear smashed into the raw pulp of her other unrestrained emotions, churning and knotting together into an overwhelming chaos. The crackle of wood met her ringing ear, acrid wisps singed her nose, and sweltering heat licked across her crouched body though the fireplace was unlit, dead even of cinders. Feeling the pull—no, not a pull, this was a downward push. An unwavering shove
drove her towards the floor. A constrictive pressure deep inside her chest returned as it had when he'd grabbed her in the yard beside the Herald's Rest. The remainder of the pages slipped in a white, crashing wave. "I'm not the one that needs help. Tell me how to help Solas!"

The spirit stared through her and into the swirling void that was invisible to the creatures living on this side of the Veil. "Lurking, hungry in the shadows. It came when you called it."

"Nothing was out there!" Chiyo protested hotly, barely holding herself together as Compassion ripped into her mind again. But as much as she wanted to and was capable of forcing him to stop, with an instructed block from her thoughts, she also desired the truth that had always evaded her faltering efforts.

"Offer up the parts you don't need. Give them freely and be greater." Cole pressed on, only two books to go. The pile was losing stability and he wasn't quite finished with his strange task. His words lurched again, wrenching at the memory of the day that changed everything, a path reforged in fresh blood and broken magic. "Mage, mage, she came back a mage! With fire and teeth in her skin."

"I thought it would make them happy, that it would make them feel protected again!" The Inquisitor groaned forcefully, trailing into a whimper. It was too much for her to bear. The twisting, pulsating utterances of the emotionless blond set her flesh internally aflame, prickling and blistering as the old embers in her core were stoked. Sinking to her unsupported knees, Chiyo fought the compulsion to release the fire that surged for its freedom, to burn away at everything till all that remained was cleansed and simplified ash.

Not here, never here. In the Fade it didn't matter, she couldn't hurt anyone real in her dreams. There, only the memory of screams and smoke could haunt her, but she was alone in that suffering. Just thoughts, just terrible nightmares. She began to violently shake, clinging to the scattered velum, spooking at the first hints of a smolder under her touch. She remembered, so clear and sharp, the hahren smothering her tiny hand in hers, killing the tiny blaze that had lit her path through the dark woods. The same woman who would give her away less than a year later had demanded the offense never be repeated because it was so utterly wrong. "Stop! I promised! I swore! Don't make me do this!"

"Little flames like candlelight, always in control. They dance and float, colors bleeding, blending. I didn't mean it, Mamae, I'm sorry. Don't go. Don't leave—" The last book fell into place, but it was more than the rest of the pile could bear. Thumps and crashes, it all came down, toppling off the desk in a heavy slide.

But by the time the last text rolled down the leather strewn wreckage, Cole had already vanished without another word.

Palms damp with sweat, Chiyo slowly began to peel the darkened papers free from her hands. Shaking them loose, she let them fall where they may. Sucking in the shuddery breath she'd been winded of, her world came more into focus with each new draw of cold air. But the throng in her chest remained, knocking against her ribs with the rattled racing of her heart. It burned hotter than the scorched bits of parchment on the floor.

She'd finally pushed him back with a massive spiritual barrier. The truth had just been within her confusing grasp, free to claim. Yet it was spurned once more, leaving her drained and empty of understanding. Her anger had dissipated, the fear dissolved, but the sadness held firm. Snuck into her soul with barbed ends, it would not be so easily removed.

Slipping on the loose sheets with a botched attempt to stand, the Inquisitor pulled herself on hand and
knee towards the disaster that surrounded her desk. Scrounging through the volumes closest to her, she stared in disbelief at the assortment brought to her bedroom. These were books impractical to her goal, serving little purpose. Why would she, or anyone for the matter, ever need to read such compilations as:


None of them were going to give her the answer she required. Their ink and paper worthlessly wasted.

However, it wasn't until she leafed through one unsteadily, that the spirit's interest in them was brought to light. In searching numbly out of halfhearted curiosity and a drive to force the memories out of her head she found that there was more to the items Cole had secured than printed words. A red feather fell from the open book in her hand, slipping from its pressed place between the pages and twirling to the messy floor. Glistening against the chaos, she reached for it with trembling fingers and instinctively brought the tiny quill to her frowning mouth. Chiyo rolled the silky edge against her bottom lip in long strokes, considering the other books.

Who had placed it there, and why would Cole… Her eyes suddenly widened.

With fervid zest, Chiyo picked another book up and shook it by the cover until it dropped the hidden token on her lap. And another. And another. Each yielded a small feather, ranged in hues from rich burgundy to gilded yellow to shimmering turquoise. Gathered together, they made a fistful that she pressed to her chest, covering the heart that called and throbbed anew. It had been ages since she had placed a similar trinket deep within the pocket of the coat he'd so graciously loaned her at the Winter Palace. Back before the enamored Dalish elf had known the realness of his kiss or the clarity of his arms, she'd hoped to pass on her feelings in the silent gesture.

These feathers were not idle bookmarks. They were small gifts. Tiny wishes. Slips of unspoken hopes and dreams. Mere slivers of affection stored away. Prayers that his fondness wouldn't go forgotten or turned against him. She could feel that in each one as her fingers fanned across the soft mass that had been secretly collected and kept with her in mind.

"I will find you." She mournfully promised to the emptiness of her room as she stretched exhaustedly across the floor, laying her head on the cold, unforgiving stone between the cascade of upturned books. "And we will solve this together…"

Thank you Eystaa, for spinning straw into gold. Your editing is a true treasure!

I would like to take a moment to welcome her work into the world! Of Inquisitors and Stewing is a delightful- and adult- tale of the romance between Iron Bull and Dorian. Come follow them on a wild adventure that may lead to some very naughty fun... Available on AO3
Wolves Without Teeth

Chapter Summary

Waking up once again to a terrible day she'd soon rather forget, Chiyo relives what happened after the fall that left the snow red with Solas' blood. What she finds waiting for her might be more than she ever bargained for in her quest to discover where Solas went after he failed to come home.

Dirthara ma. Maybe this time she would learn.

Chiyo opened her eyes to find her face pressed to the snow, bitter and biting against her unprotected skin. The compressed flakes had melted around her nose and mouth with the heat of her breath, but the moisture only made it burn against her cheeks and delicate ears more. Rolling to her side she first saw her own outstretched hand, empty, with blood frozen under the fingernails. The Inquisitor pushed up with her spent arms, the sockets of her shoulders screaming in adamant protest from having borne too much weight and dangling unsupported off the edge of the precipice. She tried to collect her bearings as her vision struggled to focus. The world grew momentarily dark as she rubbed the frozen crystals from her lashes. Ice and rubble formed from the eddying blur, a high rising cliff face followed next. Soaring taller than her sore neck could crook to see she scanned the craggy base for the elf that had toppled with her.

Not far away lay the remnants of the dragon's severed head, what little remained of the rent jaws and mostly shattered teeth. Heat rose from the mangled flesh, thickening the air around it. Her head still reeling from the terrible fall, she nearly believed the remaining great eye to have shifted in its socket as she looked away, more concerned with her missing companion than the slain foe.

"Sol—" She woozily strained to stand and fell again. The leg she'd tried first twisted out beneath her as pain spiraled from her ankle and flared up the leather-bound shin. Chiyo ran her hands down the long bones, feeling for breaks, flinching as she struck a sore section just above her booted foot. Hot and increasingly swollen, but no bones stuck out and the limb remained straight. Forcing herself up once more, she put as much weight as she could on the good appendage, letting the other limp along. Standing erect, she could see a familiar shape several yards away poking out of a thick snowbank. Muted and motionless, a dark green corner of a patchy, winter-weight coat spread across the disturbed white bank gave the apostate away.

"Solas!" Chiyo shouted, shambling her way through the valley's rocky basin. He didn't move and no sound came from the buried figure, her cries went unanswered. Forcing herself to go faster than her leg would stand caused immense pain, but a hobbled jog was all the knee-high snow would allow. She urged the damage limb along, swallowing the agony that left her head in a fog and her throat raw with the contained straining groans. Fear further numbed the pain from affecting the fumbling Inquisitor, consumed by the growing dread in her racing heart.

She called his name again as she reached the mage and was answered only by the whistling wind that was chilling her even through her layered clothes. The Inquisitor began to furiously dig the drift out from around him, caring not that her hands were already frozen as she pushed crumbling armloads aside. She unburied a leg first, then an arm. A pair of hunched shoulders followed that she swiftly grabbed to pull the elf around with. Blood. All she could see was blood as his reddened face
lollled to the side, frozen over his eyes and running slick from behind his ear. It congealed brightly against the rock and snow beneath him, a glaring accusation of the shuddering Inquisitor's folly.

This had been all her fault. The cost of staying with the Inquisition, the price of her stubborn arrogance. Who was she to take on a dragon, to lead people into imminent and expected danger. How could she save anyone when all she seemed capable of was getting them hurt or—Chiyo refused the thought as it brought wretched tears to her eyes, threatening to freeze them shut yet again.

Groaning with her own escalating pain, she dragged Solas from the sleety pile by his arm, pulling him out enough to assess on flatter, clearer ground. Limp in her grasp, his body carved a channel as it was lugged away from where it had landed and remained. "No, no, please, don't be…" Kneeling down, Chiyo immediately clasped a hand to the side of his neck as she dropped an ear to his chest, listening and feeling for any reassurance. A breath, a heartbeat, anything would suffice in lieu of his lacked response.

A wash of relief came over her frozen form as she found both, sparse and faint, but there. His ribs lifted shallowly, releasing a barely visible puff from his blood-clotted nostrils. The wide veins beside his throat echoed feebly beneath the frigid skin, sending an outpour of his life force to the open wound on the side of his head, each slow pulse leaking a little more. A thin trail remained where he had been tugged along, only the constricting cold spared him of it gushing excessively.

He was alive, but he wouldn't rise, no matter her plea or how she shook him. With her sleeve Chiyo tried to clear his face, her hands shaking as she smeared the clotted, crystallizing red fluid from his lids and nose. Apologies fell from her lips and ran from her eyes as she beseeched the fallen man and promised him the world if he would only respond. But Solas remained unmoved, only the ever expanding new puddle of his blood changed as it thickened against the fresh snow.

She madly started to search through her pockets, for anything that might help though she already knew the contents to be lackluster. Worthless trinkets spilled from her coat and became lost to the snow. Fragments of what began as amber, obsidian and moonstone morphed in her palm, the colors refused to settle. A handmade feather charm floated away, one that she knew already to have gifted to Cole long before. An undelivered message that had been found caught in a thorny bush, but the letters no longer formed words but gibberish. A tusket tooth with a deep crack that Chiyo distinctly remembered submitting for creature research, but the Inquisitor found no herbs, salves or bandages. All of those she had in bulk, but they remained in her pack at the top of the Pool, along with all the others stashed just below the dragon's lofty perch. Her only relief came with a potion flask she'd failed to throw aside, having pocketed the nearly empty vial instead of smashing it in haste. She'd only been able to drink the better portion of it mid-fight before being interrupted and luckily had the wits about herself to not waste the last few dregs.

Chiyo considered her few options as she eyed the potent liquid that wouldn't even make a meager mouthful. Her companions knew which side they had fallen, but they would have to backtrack far to reach this part of the valley. It could be hours before they came themselves, though if the Dwarf and Qunari were wise they would go for support first. A few miles back through the abandoned springs and across the soaring bridge, they could bring able-bodied Inquisition troops with them. Bull had been in rough shape when she'd last seen him and couldn't be expected to carry them back to the developing military base. Varric was sturdy, but the downed mage who needed the most help was twice his burly size. She could drink the limited potion herself. It might just be enough to fortify her and her damaged leg to get Solas someplace safer or to make a run for help.

There were still red Templars roaming this providence, always with their lyrium stricken beasts at hand. Staying or fleeing both posed a grave risk. To be caught weaponless and alone or with vulnerable wounded… Chiyo didn't want to consider the odds, but they had to be weighed. The
injured elves wouldn't stand a chance if they were found by their enemies in the open. She looked
from the paltry, almost barren bottle to the silent man on the ground. He needed her to make the right
decision this time, for the both of them.

Popping the cork from the potion, she knocked the contents into her mouth and threw the
emptied vial aside. No sound of breaking glass followed as it landed and was obscured in the dense
snow.

But Chiyo didn't swallow. Instead she carefully lifted and tilted the apostate's head back before she
pressed her cold lips to his and gradually gave him their only and very inadequate source of
salvation. Holding his head up so he wouldn't choke, the potion deliberately trickled down his throat,
too little for her liking and to unknown aid. It might not even be enough to make a difference, but it
would have to do. She rolled her thumb across his slackened mouth, wiping it clean and dry. She
placed a kiss above each bloodied eye as she prayed for them to open. The minutes passed with no
change, and soon more mournful tears joined the horrid mess she'd made of Solas' face.

Already it was starting to get dark, the sun falling behind the towering, sheer cliff. There was no
telling when nor if the others would find them there for certain. Solas was too heavy to carry, even if
both her legs fully worked. But she had to get him out of the snow and protect him from the bitter
wind that stripped them of their much needed warmth. And so began the painful haul, bit by
exhaustingly small bit, she continued to drag the unconscious mage back towards the ramshackle
shelter of the cliff's base where the recently ruined rocks and walls lay as their only cover. If she
could get beside them they might be able to hide better and block the blustery weather, though the
drag marks and fresh blood would give them away before long were the wrong eyes to spot the trail.

With muted cries of pain escaping through her tightly closed mouth, she pushed her body as far as it
would allow, soon leaving her skin damp and steaming with the concentrated exertions. They hadn't
fallen far from the cliff's immediate base, but every grueling inch put terrible stress on her rent
shoulders and swollen limb. Each step left her gasping as throbbing jolts objected every faltering
footfall while she tugged Solas along with tight handfuls of his coat. The soft snow made it only
slightly easier where it was thin, but there were rocks and drifts she had to maneuver around.

Chiyo paused, nearly tumbling as she looked over her shoulder at the remaining distance yet to cross.
Just a few more steps, two or three good tugs at most. She steeled her shaking body, willing it on till
her stooped spine finally bumped the back of the narrow alcove in the rubble she'd made her goal.
Dry and free of snow, the wind could no longer claw at them.

Giving one last effort, she hauled Solas up after she finally collapsed behind him, utterly wearied and
leaning against the stone for needed support. Her expended arms managed to pull his bleeding head
to her chest, where she pressed the slowed wound to her own heart. Using her clothes as bandage
and blanket Chiyo opened her heavy, fur-lined coat and wrapped him into the thick layers. She took
his icy hands and shakily rubbed them with her own. Their toes would survive awhile still in the
rarely worn boots they'd donned for the glacial region, but the tips of their long fingers and fine ears
were susceptible to frostbite. She continuously brought the flaccid hands up to her mouth, breathing
the air warmed by her lungs on them.

"It's going to be ok… I promise, but I need you to wake up.” Chiyo whispered as her teeth began to
chatter, she held him tighter but not for her own sake. He was so cold. Already his lips seemed blue
and his exposed skin pale where it wasn't crusted with darkening red. The gallant efforts she'd
persevered through didn't seem to be enough. Her body was too small and chilled itself to provide
him with much more. If Solas were awake he would craft a small magic fire once his mana had
replenished that would need no wood on which to burn. They could survive for hours that way and
no smoke would alert nearby enemies.
However, Chiyo did not manage fire as he and many other mages did, using it as a handy tool and a common weapon. Most foes would submit to an intense enough burn, often causing panic as they tried to put themselves out. Lightning was her personal staple and well within her realm of control. Ice an occasionally used defense, and spirit was supplementary to all her practices. Fire though, she couldn't—she'd sworn... And was still sent away even though she'd complied completely.

Was that promise worth it, even now. A solemn swear given to the woman who had smothered her first fragile flame. The same auxiliary leader who'd unfairly compelled a child to vow, before her, before the frightening and vengeful gods that she would never craft another fire ever again. Chiyo pulled her hood over her numbed ears before she tucked her chin across the top of Solas' head, offering him what little warmth was there against her throat. She remembered all too clearly, nearly twenty years prior, what her aunt had done once the clan healer had released her from being mended. Forcefully dragged by her unbroken arm past the far edge of camp, the unsympathetic elders who'd watched on did little more than turn away from the alarmed cries. She'd been cast at the feet of a lichen covered statue whose back was always kept towards their seasonal settlement. Cowering and wailing at the massive paws of a dreadful stone beast, she was given a choice. Though it was much too kind to call the callously made ultimatum that. No fire or no home. Either she found a different path to walk, a way to keep her magic from becoming a risk to the clan, or she would be left for the Wolf to decide what would become of her.

Chiyo's aching fingers sought the totem around her neck, the same one she'd frantically clung to as the Hahren demanded her decision be immediately made, indifferent to the stammering tears or runny nose. That tiny keepsake had almost been seized from her too. But the budding mage had refused to relinquish the tooth that had been painfully drawn from a wound in her hand. It would be kept as her reminder of the pledge she then made under the hewn face of Fen'Harel. She'd never told anyone, not even the maimed apostate in her arms that woeful detail. Former friends had asked about the scar on her brow and the curious tale of a little girl trouncing into the woods and scaring off dangerous beasts had been satisfactory enough. Returned safe and sound and a mage most of all, bound to do such fantastical things. The recourse of that discovery did not make for pleasant evening chatter. Reminded of their own youthful follies they'd all chuckled and moved on to tell favored tales from their childhoods.

She fished the old token out from under her tunic and found the sleek enamel smeared with blood that wasn't her own. The Inquisitor wrapped the fang and knotted leather necklace inside her palm and trembled, considering the harshly spoken words that only then sounded justified after years of believing them to be purely uttered for punishment. Her magic had always been a serious liability posed to those she kept close, they'd been right to be afraid after all.

Let the Wolf take her then, if she were already damned and destined to forsake her people. She'd stepped so far away from her intended path by joining a human mission and dabbling in unstable powers that any other reasonable elf would have bolted from without a second thought. Chiyo held the tooth tightly in her shaky grip while the air around them slowly began to warm. Just a little came out, slipping between the widening cracks of her staunch restraint. If she could let it loose in tiny increments, she might raise the temperature of her own body enough to keep them both from freezing to death.

Help would come. It had to.

With every thawing increase the deep-seated anxiety of her conflicted actions spread, she struggled to maintain consistency and control of something she'd only ever used once.

"I can do this... nothing bad will happen. M-magic is magic and—"
But her shaky statement was snubbed and the nervously emerging fire faltered as a howl echoed through the dreamscape and the injured mage in her arms immediately vanished. The fang disappeared as well, no longer in her possession. Solas had not given it back before leaving the wyvern cave... The remembrance as it had been was over, yet she wasn't alone. Another had been watching her relive the distressing reminiscence from afar, waiting for the right time to advance.

She heard the soft crunching of creeping paws in the ice encrusted snow long before spotting the beast that stalked her Fade-ensnared imaginings. It would have gone unnoticed if her ears were not already pricked and waiting for that lone, probing bay. Again and again she'd returned to this dream, seeking the knowledge that had affected Solas so, recreating the excruciating event over anew until it yielded what was sought. It always ended the same; however she was determined to cling to the quickly dissolving image longer each time.

Stretched and low, it began to slink out of the shadowy trees. A great, broad head set on a dipped neck, followed by a pair of slowly rolling shoulders that lifted each hesitant paw. Narrow hips bobbed with the ambling track but the long, kinked tail following behind stayed down and unmoved but for the bent tip that stood rigidly upright.

Chiyo held her breath as the creature neared, smelling out the luring, fresh blood that had soaked into her clothes with each quick sniff of a leathery black nose. Its darkly mottled, charcoal gray coat ruffled in the whipping wind that carried out the dangerous scent, but the wolf was unaffected by the biting chill. Curiosity or hunger drove him on, but not knowing which left the Inquisitor in a precarious situation. Caution was needed around spirits, no matter what shape they took.

This was as close as she’d ever let it get, before she spooked herself awake and abandoned the dream all together. Just nigh enough to see the engrossed flicker in the wolf’s eyes as it spotted her. Warning upon warning screamed in her head, repeated tales from her Hahren, and years of instructed tutelage by her Keeper. Demons in the Fade assumed many forms in hopes of possession, one mistake or faltering in her willpower could lead to becoming an abomination. Heeds had come from Solas himself, advising her against emotional influences that would cause a typically harmless spirit to turn foul. Stability and a strong will would be enough to keep most spirits pacified, naturally being no more dangerous than most people when left undisturbed. Often they were merely curious about the strange visitors to their world than they were defensive of it.

Motionless she remained, casting no barrier or willing herself to flee to the safety of consciousness.

Step after crouched step, more of the creature became clear as it investigated the frozen, bloody trail that led back to the cliff. The wolf was old and thin from too many harsh winters, not enough prey to keep in better condition. The hair around a scarred mouth had turned near to white with prolonged age. Notches had been made in each ear, with one tip nearly gone. The dark coat, though heavy, was matted in places and shaggy, hanging from the creature’s too lean form that had lost the vitality and fullness of youth.

Gnarled paws single-tracked up the drag mark left behind, the pace broken only by a subtle hitch in the joints of a stiff back limb. The wolf no longer ran it’s snout along the ground but continued the approach with a lowered head, eyeing the mage with mutual attentiveness.

Her pulse ringing in her ears, Chiyo carefully raised a trembling hand. Solas had instructed her well in the art of exploring the Fade, as far as he’d been permitted to take her, and had always mentioned with fondness the amiable companionship he found there. That even wild spirits could be beneficial to befriend, in a guarded sense. And always, it was the spirit that chose or rejected the dreamer, attracted to some akin inner quality. If one kept their wits about them and their impressionable wishes or assumptions secreted away there was no real need for fear. If she could maintain control of both
the situation and herself, untold knowledge stood to be gained.

Lifting a massive, angular snout, notably larger than the flesh and bone wolves of the waking world, Chiyo could feel the deep inhale of the nose nearly touching her palm. She strangled a terrified whimper in her throat as the snooping creature slowly began to open its mouth and a rough, dripping tongue stretched for a cursory taste.

The wolf growled at her weak display and the guttural snarl grew louder as the jaws spread, exposing the haggard remnants of teeth. Broken, worn round or missing entirely, there was little left functional in the old hunter's decimated lower maw. One strong canine in the upper remained whole with a scant few others. Saliva dribbled over the pale gums and flattened tongue of the angered beast.

However, it wasn't until Chiyo jerked back her hand did the wolf's eyes turn bright red as it bore down upon her. Back compressed to the stone, she watched in horror as a second set opened and followed the first in changing hue. And then a third. Six red eyes stared piercingly straight through her and—

"Inquisitor! Inquisitor wake up!"

Answering the call with a shout and a swing from her already clenched fist, Chiyo started out of the anxious dreams. Her disconcerted momentum nearly sent her rolling to the floor, slipping off the low sofa she'd fallen asleep on. Documents she'd been reading before drifting into the Fade scattered at the feet of the redacted, blaspheming Templar.

Unexpectedly struck, Cullen reeled back as the Inquisitor caught herself before tumbling to the floor. "Andraste's knickers! Why did you hit me?"

"Why are you yelling?!" She sputtered in return, searching the room for any lingering eyes that should not be there. But the rotunda was void of the stalking creature. The only wolves present were the howling caricatures on the frescoed walls.

"Rifts!" answered Cullen promptly, furiously rubbing at his sored nose with both of his hands. Still in his bed clothes and rumpled, curly hair unattended to, the stressed Commander was in a poorly state for the exceptionally early hour.

With a dumbfounded stare, Chiyo shook her head quickly, believing to have misheard the alarmed human who was always so stalwart with his charge of their expansive military forces. "What about them?"

"You must see this. Immediately." He said, caught between a command and a plea as he pointed to the door. Without another word, Chiyo rapidly followed the harried man through the main hall, across the empty courtyard and out onto the bridge where several of their men already stood.

Even without the viewing instruments being used by the frantic scouts, Chiyo's sharp eyes could already see the alarming issue that had drawn her out of bed. Scattered like green stars, distant fissures speckled the northern landscape, one near as the far valley down below.

Clutching the stone wall on the side of the high pass, she stared out into the developing morning at the horror that had befallen them overnight. The sun rose on a nightmare made real, worse than any her imagination could have daunted her with.

"H-How… how many…when did…" She could not even manage a full sentence.

Cullen hesitated before he spoke, considering the untold chaos looming in the distance. "Unknown. I was only informed just before fetching you."
"Horse." Her heart's rhythm began to rise, hammering in her head. Chiyo was left fumbling and unable to conceive the innumerable atrocities waiting for her to find them next. She had not gone within miles of any known rift since returning from the Arbor Wilds, having come too close to ruin within the very walls that were supposed to keep everyone safe. Now they were surrounded by manifested abominations that only she could put an end to.

"You are not going alone, Inquisitor. I can think of nothing so unwise as that." Said the Commander, already busy directing the available guards to alert the rest of the Keep. He was surrounded by nervous men, all looking to him for instruction.

Beholding to her glowing palm, Chiyo made the order clearly heard as her voice rose above the panicked pandemonium as more troops were roused from their bunks. "Then find people more foolish than me and in the hour. Now get me a damned horse!"

"It is rather unfair, the reputation that the wolf possesses in Ferelden. For a people that so clearly adore their hounds, Fereldans simultaneously harbor a distrust of wolves that borders on the unreasonable. Unreasonable, that is if one were not familiar with the ancient legends regarding werewolves. There was a time in Ferelden's past when demons inhabited the bodies of wolves in great numbers, causing the wars against werewolves and spreading great fear and panic. The werewolves were slain, but even today the noble wolf is still looked upon with distrust."—From Legends of Ferelden, by Mother Ailis of Denerim, 9:10 Dragon. Codex
No Less Worthy

Chapter Summary

Solas recalls the better life he'd lived for the short time he'd allowed himself to be happy. His new plans to protect a future he might never regain carry a high cost when it involves a man who also bears an equally heavy name.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Solas lay curled, snug and content, atop a mattress whose comforts eclipsed any other he’d cared to remember. Years of sleeping deep beneath the scattered ruins that dotted Thedas or even the year spent on the wide sofa, worn and lumpy, had ruined his concept of a cozy rest. It was difficult to imagine ever returning to a bed that lacked smooth sheets and heavy blankets to fend off the mounting winter chill. Spring was months off still, but the bitter weeks were not to be coldly spent. However, such ideal amenities could be done without. As long as he had the mage who’d first welcomed him to share one of the few luxuries she had. He held no qualms with taking full advantage of that which was near at hand.

They’d both equally denied themselves much of the world, for good reason; that which was unpossessed could not be stolen away. But for a rare few hours they would hide their secreted treasures, protected behind closed doors and the veiling guard of night. She’d gifted his desolate soul with handfuls of pearled affection that filled the hollow space inside him. She gave him tenderness worth much more than the lapis and gold that had been laid at his feet when he’d first risen to power and joined the ranks of the gods. But still, he feared them wasted when others would have yielded her more reward.

What little he had to give in recompense, turning out his empty pockets, was hers. Be it only dust or crumbs or the thin poverty that accompanied being a rootless apostate. To return to a bare cot or a hard floor, he would barely notice the hardships with her by his side. With only her love and presence, he would feel rich beyond measure.

But presently, she was ruining the grand appeal.

He scrunched his sleepy brow as the rustling turning of a scratchy page hissed through the quiet night, once again disrupting the slip into agreeable dreams that awaited his arrival. The narrow chest beneath his ear shifted as the Inquisitor moved her book from one hand to the other, holding the text aloft and tilted towards the single flame of a short candle beside the bed. Her marked hand could only brace the trifling weight so long, but each new day brought more strength and dexterity back to her once numbed fingers. She’d Thankfully come away whole and hale from the Well. The extended splits in the Anchor had seceded, leaving behind only blanch, colorless lines in her wrist once they healed. A permanent reminder of how close Chiyo had come to being torn apart had she not allowed him to help hold the pieces together as the magic splintered in their shared grasp.

“It’s late…” Solas murmured as he nudged her knee through the thick pelt stretched across her lap, but he received no reply from the preoccupied mage. Far too absorbed in a section of historic literature to take much note of the man attempting to snooze against her breasts, Chiyo’s strained eyes skimmed the tattered pages. Relentlessly seeking the information that had evaded her through
most of the evening, she’d let the lone taper burn low in its holder. Sadly wasting the wax to no avail. Frowning with her bottom lip caught between her shifting teeth, she loudly skipped over several more yellowed pages and began her search anew.

Loosening a disgruntled exhalation, the apostate would not be so easily dissuaded from his comfortable rest. Lifting his arm from its stretch across her legs he wrapped it high about her middle and attempted to roll the late night scholar away from the wavering, golden source of light. When that failed to stop her pursuit, Solas blindly felt for the book, hapless fingers brushing against the leather cover and aged paper that perpetually evaded his swiping reach.

“Chiyo,” His voice thin as he pled for allowance to sleep, too drowsy to play such aggravating games. The day had been long. Recourse from the Arbor Wilds had usurped much of his time and energy. Overhearing Morrigan in the communal gardens, as she babbled through her recently attained enlightenments alone, had left him weary of the world. So much knowledge lost upon her conceited and grasping person, pilfered from the race who needed it most. Like most of the stolen and abused assets of his People, it was now in the hands of a vindictive human. However, circumstances had not given them a better option and he could not fault Chiyo for the outcome. No choice would have been flawless. All he longed for now was to take a few silent hours to replenish both his spirits and reserves instead vexing upon the latest blow against the scattered elves. “You’ll miss your Advisory meeting again if you stay awake much longer.”

“They started fine without me last time, besides this is…” Chiyo trailed off as she continued to read with the book high above her head, distracted once more by the less than subjective Chantry record that had caught her recent attentions.

Disturbed enough by her persistent and noisy perusing, Solas furtively raised his head. He filled his lungs before leaning across her form to blow out the stumpy candle with one quick puff.

Dissatisfied groaning followed his sly dismissal as he settled back down against her warm skin, pressing his cheek to her exposed sternum and hoisting the layered blankets nearly to his nose. They were warm enough. The windows still rattled where they’d been forced open, hinges loosened and in desperate need of repair and neither could summon the courage to cross the cold room to rekindle the diminished fire. With a contented sigh he closed his eyes once more and waited for sleep to take him, fully prepared for the chastising that was sure to be given by his restless bedfellow once inside the Fade. But her atrocious evening habits were costing him dear hours of sleep now that she’d eased up on the dangerous training, vitalities seemingly restored by not forging a dozen rifts every afternoon. Though he could not blame her wholly for all the time they spent not sleeping, he was just as guilty of incitement. However, Solas simply could not always keep up with the Inquisitor’s more youthful vigor. She was so young compared him, in both body and spirit. He could scarce recall how old he truly was, but it had been centuries since he’d refused to bed at a decent hour when given the opportunity.

Nearly drifted off, Solas slowly took note of an increasing new light. At first he thought it the candle light renewed though she would produce no rekindling flame herself, but the green that filtered through his heavy lids revived his perturbed state. “That is not what I think it is…”

“Just a few more pages.” Whispered Chiyo beseechingly, holding her marked hand close to the weathered paper. The green light illuminated the worn print just softly enough for her sensitive eyes to perceive what had been written ages prior when the Chantry had been young and the Templars recently formed.

Solas shook his weary head, giving up on the tormenting woman who would not let him be at peace. “If you want to use the most dangerous piece of magic known to this age as a reading light, I am
powerless to stop you.”

“Might as well get some good out of the damned thing.” She shrugged and speedily read on, mumbling the text to herself as she squinted at the blocky print. “Though if word gets out about my abuses… I’m sure to be remembered as some blight-addled, heretic mage making a plaything out my position and my power.”

“What has you so concerned with history yet to be recorded? We do not get control of future interpretations of deeds and doings.” Opening one bleary eye, the apostate watched as she finally quit the book, setting it upon her cluttered nightstand with an unsatisfied thump. Apparently it had failed to yield up the answers demanded and held no further offerings to appease her pursuits. Each night he’d watched her read when the mood struck the knowledge hungry Herald, returning from the growing library with all manner of tome and guide. But none had yet produced the little surprises left behind in his passing. The odds would have to be in his favor at some point, Solas had stashed away dozens of tiny trinkets with her in mind. One feather placed for every wish he could not let her fulfill, no matter how capable she stood to grant them. Not yet, at least. Not until she knew the truth.

Wiggling down to her pillows, Chiyo disturbed Solas one final time as she roosted in beside him. “A precedence was brought to my attention. Do you realize how little we know about the Inquisitor before me? Beyond disbandment and forced retirement? Then nothing, Ameridan is all but vanished from record… I think the worst part for me is that no one, not even the most dedicated scholar, believed him to be an elf. Funny how history repeats itself, over and over again… Fate has placed yet another Dalish in this position.”

Burying his face into the side of her neck the mage yawned as the room once more returned to an uninterrupted darkness. Her hands slid beneath the sheets and sought him out, finding their warm homes for the night. “The Chantry has been very thorough to cleanse what does not support their claim.”

“So what will they remove of me?” Chiyo asked, staring pensively at her shadowy ceiling. Idol digits, soft where the wielding of a staff had not calloused the flesh, found the top of the arm that enveloped her. She began to rhythmically stroke, running the pads of her fingers over the fine hairs that lightly coated Solas’ pale skin. “What shall they erase… or keep. Chiyo, the disbeliever who gutted the Templars or the hero who ended a war that ravaged every corner of Thedas? The renegade who banished the Wardens from Orlais or the vanquisher of a fated red lyrium demise. Will they trim my ears or blot out my magic? Assert that I worshiped the Maker with all my poor pagan heart? Unsullied and pure, a shining example of devotion in Andraste’s own image…” She snorted at the thought of chastity, but no such vow had been required of her when she’d assumed the illustrious title of Herald.

“You’ve forgotten what become of the Inquisitor’s mage lover they’ve denied from the beginning. Nameless and hidden on the fringes.” He breathed languidly, lulled by her soothing touch. Solas more than understood her genuine concern. The records of the last Inquisitor had been excessively sanitized in lieu of the cataclysm that followed the formation of such infantile sects. The Circle of Magi, the Seekers of Truth, the Templar Order, all had come into being as a broken legacy of the radical upheaval that shook Thedas to its core.

Chiyo remained still and hushed for a time, long enough that Solas believed that she’d begun to fall asleep. Her fingers slowed to lazy flicks until they curled loosely about his wrist and moved no more. But a soft voice brushed his ear with a promise heard resolute through the somnolent murmuring. “I won’t let them forget you. I don’t care what they say of me, but you are an important part of this story and I refuse to see that removed.”
“Time will tell, vhenan…” A sad smile crept across his lips and in the dark they traced across her jaw until she turned to meet him, permitting his silent, sleepy thanks.

“Where are we dreaming tonight?” She drowsily sighed, content at last to succumb to the night.

“Find me,” Answered Solas, nearly gone himself. “Perhaps I shall surprise you…”

Picking himself off of the abandoned tent’s floor, Solas shook out the old cloak he’d rolled up as a small cushion. Dust scattered and began to resettle on the scavenged remnants of gear. Insects had wandered through the gaps in the flaps and become trapped; dying on the un-swept floor or becoming snared by the spiders who’d constructed thin homes. No one had used the ragged, wayside abode in months. Little remained for the lone apostate’s use, the food stuffs and supplies were long gone or spoiled. He had found a few moments rest beneath the sagging red canvas walls, only his favorably recalled dreams served to fuel him on.

Solas collected the horse from his poor attempt at grazing, pulling at watery weeds and thin roughage that grew between the crags and atop the thin, boggy soil. Dragged away from his meal, the gelding was less than enthusiastic to be saddled and bridled, returning once more to the sloppy marshes they’d taken a short reprieve of.

Da’dava chomped uneasily at the metal bit behind his teeth as he was guided through the crumbling, stony ruins and downed, leafless tree trunks that floated atop the tepid water. He shifted nervously away from the bizarre totems, wrapped standings of painted sticks and precariously stacked stones, tripping over his own feet to keep well away from the strange, elven ritual bundles. The horse’s wide, heavy hooves sunk in the peaty loam and the murky water churned about his knees and hocks. It splashed up towards a wide belly, sending vigorous contractions across the mount’s sensitive skin, hard enough to be felt beneath the legs of his solemn rider. It was not the water however that put the creature on edge, but the smells and distant dins of the gurguts that lived in the enclosed marsh. The Ferelden Forder had been plucky and undaunted thus far by the remote places and byways that Solas had taken him through. He’d braved through Crestwood’s rotten mires, stolen past cutthroat lyrium smugglers of Orzammar in the dead of night and abandoned the Imperial Highway all together before reaching the outskirts of Halamshiral, veering for the south to pass through the mostly barren Dales.

The stalwart horse had barely protested when Solas had unlocked and entered the dark, twisting tunnels carved into the rocky outcrops littering the eastern edge of the Exalted Plains. Led by hand and with an eerie, bluish veilfire torch, the pair had spent the better part of a day without the pleasant rays of the sun to warm their backs or fresh air to clear the dankness from their lungs. Using the ancient pass to penetrate Ghilan’nain’s once revered grove, the apostate had circumvented the potential nearby troops that had last been occupying what they called Fen’s Camp. Undoubtedly word had been sent out by now to the scouts to keep their eyes open for a wandering elf and a stolen horse in marked gear. Solas had been careful to disguise or remove as many of the outward signs of the Inquisition as he could, but the quality of the horse he rode and the distinctive brand on the gelding’s hip could not be concealed or cut away. He’d already lied his way through one brief questioning, but his play of servitude had allowed him to slip past most of the guard’s suspicion. Elves were not often granted such fine steeds, and Da’dava’s worth had not diminished under Solas’ meager care.

They’d lingered only a few hours at the vacant site tucked onto a rare piece of dry land near the tunnel’s exit, pilfering a deserted red tent of what scant provisions had been left behind by the last fool to have spent the night by the reptilian infested waters.
Continuing on past the sulfuric pools, they maneuvered through the humid glades and evaded the native inhabitants without incidence. They’d entered the seemingly unoccupied, derelict structure whose high arched and hollow windows had become so overgrown with generations of trees that only a few allowed in any spots of light, casting suspicious shadows across the root-snarled floor. But a juvenile gurgut, taking shelter within the erect remains of what had once been a central gatehouse that connected the Crossroads for the area, had spooked the great steed and sent Solas sprawling in the dirt. The commotion was enough to detour the scaly creature from an assault, but the unsaddled rider had been left bruised and scowling at his cowardly mount.

On foot once more, having collected the reins of the snorting horse, Solas had limped his way along the diverting path and headed up the broken trail tucked deep in the rocky, rising tors. Recently unblocked, the way was still cluttered with half-buried boulders and raw lumber for scaffolding. The site had only recently been rediscovered, but the resources to devote towards investigating the excavation fully were sparse at best. More pressing locations needed the Inquisition’s engineers and manpower to rebuild important public infrastructure; roads, bridges, watchtowers and housing would always take precedence over desolate relics of a bygone age. An old, puzzling elven ruin was not often first on the list for coin expenditure.

Solas paused at the crest of the hill, guarding his narrowed eyes from the setting sun that burned intensely behind the surrounding natural stony walls. Casting a sweltering, orange glow across the massive, stark white hand hewn from soft marble, he could only just make out the tall, dark forms perched atop the curved, towering fingers. In quick succession, three arrows sang through the air and lodged themselves only inches before his bare toes, striking the hard dirt as a clear blockade of his unhurried, sore approach.

“You have destroyed one invaluable site, what makes you believe there will be another?” An unmoved voice hit Solas’ ear, coming from the elevated figure perched on the tip of the stone thumb. He reached not for his weapon, but his hand remained outstretched to signal his archers if there was a further need. “You may have tricked your new companions, Fen’Harel, but we Elvhenan are not blinded upon returning to the sun.”

A heated tremor ran beneath his skin at the sound of a name that hadn’t been used directly towards him in nearly a thousand years. He’d been suspicious and almost grateful for the distant prodding that had gone between them deep in the Arbor Wilds, the yellow eyes of the guardian had watched him suspiciously from the moment they’d opened the temple door. Whether he’d fully known when they’d parted, or if the murdered goddess whose fractured spirit still remained had solidified the idea for her devoted follower, his identity was no longer fully secret. No modern elf had ever known Solas under that frightening title and none lived to recognize the proud face that had not aged, only grown weary since the terrible fall of Arlathan. The stern elf that tersely addressed him now was of a dying breed, part of a lost race of people that still lingered, just as Solas himself clung to the current era.

“Abelas, if the name has been kept.” Solas spoke firmly without denial or confirmation and watched the tightly armored warrior descend from his perch, the dying light flashing off the patina of his immaculate, coppery gear. Ornate and splayed plates added to his intimidating bulk, intricate chainmail left no penetrable weakness and the lengthy, gray cape that came off of his lined hood draped heavily from his widespread shoulders. Not even the extensive miles of travel that must have been crossed to reach this point had tarnished the awoken being’s brilliant veneer. Only recent dust from the buried ruins had settled into the polished boots that crunched against the dislodged gravel underfoot. He was spotless elsewhere, where Solas was donned only in the same travel-worn garb long in his possession. Stained, patched and unkempt, the better gear given to him by the Inquisition had been left miles behind in Skyhold. “This place is not yours to protect, what of your given post? Have you abandoned it to be pilfered by shemlens at last? They will strip the walls bear given the
chance for the gold alone, least of all erasing the truths in those halls.”

“A few endure behind a barricaded door, those unprepared to face this world. But the actual valuable once held within has already been removed, or should I say, what remains is now worthless. The waters are fetid and empty, the mirror is shattered. Your arrival has always brought destruction and her temple lays gutted in the wake of the last siege upon our doors.” Abelas strode to the edge of the recently constructed scaffolding and wooden hoists erected to aid in the removal of the rocks that had been used ages prior to seal off the underground structure. The wind pulled at his cloak, catching against the edge of the plates on his knees that had been forged to resemble rounded faces.

He spoke on with molten resentment, crusted and cooled, but sweltering beneath the seemingly equable surface. “The walls may hold, but the heart is dead. You stood by as mortals dabbled in what they cannot possibly understand. Worse, a human now holds all the memories we fought so long to protect. That woman… the one they called Inquisitor, did she survive the punishment for being unworthy?” But by his unremitting glare it was clear that he cared not for the question to be answered, that it mattered little to him what had truly become of the elf who was far from being one of his people.

Solas unconcernedly stepped around the sunken shafts at his feet and walked further up the rock-strewn hill before tying the fidgeting Forder to the side of an empty construction cart. The tips of more arrows were kept permanently trained on his person. The bows were drawn tightly back by highly trained hands, but he showed no concern that they could potentially be released with a word or gesture from their dour leader. “Then what brings you here. You could have reentered uthenera, slipped towards the beyond and surrendered with the completion of your task.”

“We were sent and continue to follow order.” Abelas turned a cold, golden eye towards the fallen former deity. He glowered out from beneath his wide shroud, casting his ashen face in a heavy shadow. Hundreds of years in the shadows, rising only to defend the sacred walls of the Temple, had left the entire group drained of color. Unfeeling ghosts in ancient armor, mere glimmers of the glory that had once shone through their entire race. His deep voice, strong and unyielding, resonated off of the surrounding stone. Only the brilliant luster of his gray lips caught the light, exposing the solemn sneer that shaped them as he considered the deceptive apostate that continued his undaunted approach. “The guardians were not given permission to rest again. Mythal still speaks to us and we are at her command.”

“And what does Mythal want of this? An uninhabited waystation of eluvians that no longer function, there is nothing here for you.” Solas stopped only when the heavily muscled sentinel directly blocked his path, keeping him from the planked stairs that curled down into the dark pit beneath their feet. Ages prior, before the first humans had ever settled in these desolate lands, the place where they now argued had once been a prominent hub for travel. Central between many temples and outposts, the brilliant elves had constructed implements for powerful relays, substructures that had consequently served as perfect devices to power the plethora of now ancient artifacts that littered Thedas. Strange, mounted orbs designed to polarize the Veil and prevent ruptures from needlessly forming. They had to be recharged every few centuries or so and would function as long as the main instruments remained whole. Like the mystical mirrors that had once connected the land, in Solas’ long absence many of his spheres had dropped inactive or been removed from their original postings.

But thanks to the Inquisitor and their extensive travels, nearly all had been restored, allowing the unassuming apostate to calculate where future tears would next form. His Fade expertise had spared him from skepticism then too, no one besides Sera had questioned his ability to read the Veil or his sensing of the artifacts. It came with the bizarre territory, almost expected of him to have such an intimate knowledge of the separation between the physical world and the realm made of dreams.
“That would be true, but those doors are openings that would remain shut. There is magic here that shouldn’t be and it is not for you. The claim is ours.” With a gloved and armored hand held out determinedly, Abelas showed no fear as he stood his ground against Fen’Harel. Former god or not, his sworn duty came before any thought of himself or his own safety. The Wolf may not have had anything to do with his goddess’ murder and had even acted on her behalf in the past when it benefited him, but that fact did not resolve him of other atrocities committed in the act of a massive rebellion. Names like his were not given to the kindest, most loyal of elves, even Solas’ new name stood as a warning to others against whom he truly was.

“Ah, is that so.” Solas found his hands quietly tucking themselves behind his back, palm to wrist, however the rest of his demeanor failed to follow in suit. Equal in height, Abelas was only physically heavier, but that did not make him the stronger of the pair. Even accompanied by fellow guardians, Solas was unintimidated by the warrior before him. Only being a fracture of a former, formidable self, his stance exuded unwavering confidence in his control of the strained situation. Newly awoken from their last rest, it would be awhile still before strength returned in full to the small gathering of ancient elves surrounding him. “Then tell me friend, what the Lady deems necessary here and what intent you believe I have towards this place.”

“You would see it destroyed, like all the others. Andruil’s honored fount, Dirthamen’s dark pools, and most of all, Mythal’s oldest well. We know of none left untouched by your hand or others more foul. We shall reactivate this last stand and guard its power.” Abelas raised his chiseled head high, letting the hood fall back off of his forehead to shed light upon the bright green markings etched into his stony face. Plucked free of hair, no surly brow blurred the dedication conscripted into his skin, but his anger was not removed. The tight muscles beneath his skin nearly bunched beneath the weight of his scowl. If his goddess had given the order, he would see it through without question. Solas calmly tried for composed reason once more, but his purpose would not be stalled, not even by his own nearly extinct people. Fen’Harel had not been above stooping to violence when pressed, but age and experience now dictated first for alternatives when given the chance. The Inquisitor had exuded more mercy than he ever hoped to replicate, her compassion was often the source of inspiration. He thought to himself for a fleeting moment what Chiyo would have done if she were present, how she would have nullified the tension stifling the air. A peacemaker if he’d ever met one, she would have worked diligently to satisfy the needs of both parties. The Inquisitor had already talked her way into Mythal’s temple; certainly she would have tried with poised words once again. These elves had not personally wronged him or earned his wrath yet, nevertheless they were close to crossing that dwindling line. Others had fallen for less, and he had no time to waste on explaining himself when there was no warrant. “Then our goals may just be similar. If you would let me—”

“No. You are not to be trusted, Harellan.” The guardian slowly reached for the hooked sword at his side, catching his thumb on the long, wrapped handle. He felt the weight of the Veil around them grow heavy as the dangerous mage pulled at his innate power. Tension creaked in the bows aimed at the unwelcome visitor, fingers drawn to their strings and at the ready to let their knocked arrows fly.

“*Esha’lin ane shem pana,” Coughed a stooping, enfeebled woman as she slowly tottered up out of the darkness, ascending the contested stair. A heavy tome in hand, only her walking staff kept her balanced on her shuffling feet. The years had not been kind, beating down her body as the centuries passed and the broken sleeps grew less replenishing. “Atisha felas’el sulshan.”

“He has no right to be here, Mythal granted this to us.” Abelas retorted to the unbothered elder who took no note of the brewing conflict, but the weathered mage waved him off. Her age gave her rank and her magical ability established undeniable station. The intense warrior may be their leader, but tradition ran deeply through their roles. He would concede, even if he did not agree in the slightest.
She spoke in elvhen that sounded old even to the apostate’s ears. “I don’t need your insinuations, I need another mage and we have none.” A wrinkled face turned to meet Solas bearing the same marks as her fellows, but the image was distorted. The branches had grown gnarled across her aged brown skin. Elves had once been incredibly slow to age; millennia would pass before the bright polish of youth began to diminish. But stress, especially that of war or of using immense amounts of magic would forever mark the immortal people. Old injuries beyond the skill of their healers or supplication of magic would plague the elvhenan, the battle-hardened often sought rest long before their more academic brethren.

“It seems you are all not of equal opinion.” Solas fleetingly smirked as the heavy book the woman carried was thrust towards him by a pair of curled, shaking hands. He recognized her as the same old elf who’d guided the Inquisition through the assaulted temple. She’d shown no problem with accepting them into their halls with the angered disappearance of Abelas. Having passed her brief inspection, it seemed the elderly woman was much more interested in having her own task completed before the squabbles of the younger elves turned to petty violence.

“Then consider yourself welcome here while you can be made useful, but you are not absolved of suspicion.” Abelas warned as he followed the respected elder and her requisitioned helper down the twisting, roughly constructed stair and into the dark first level of the musty ruins below. Mold and mildew laced the lightless walls and rubble shambolically piled in every available niche. Bare and booted footsteps both echoed off the firmly packed walls. The false chamber had been built into the earth to distract from the elements bricked up below, but the excavators had already discovered what lay beneath the hollow floor and dropped another hurriedly-crafted ladder into its awaiting depths.

“I have done little to warrant your hostilities, Abelas. Would your goddess not have cautioned you first if she ill-considered consider my interests in this place? Mythal was once my dear friend, failing her was never my intent. Our goals have always been connected in most regards.” The apostate questioned the sentinel dispassionately as he took to the second ladder rung by shaky rung, trailing the slow moving crone into the dark pit that had been opened up in the bricked floor.

The bitter guardian grimaced and pursued, his fellow warriors close at his heels. Even with the magic left to them, they had been unsuccessful in their attempts to reactivate the massive devices in the hidden chamber. Though he would take no excuses, with no further instruction granted, Mythal had left them entirely unprepared.

Taking hold of a glowing torch from the dank wall, Abelas stayed nearby as the mages stood at the feet of the carved elvhen archer. Towering high above their heads, his unbending bow was aimed at an equally tall pillar that blocked the line to the decorative, treelike structures whose branches twisted roundly about nothing. One had been activated already; the magic burned bright blue behind the gray, snaking limbs, but three more remained dark. All four would have to be lit to open the adjacent chamber and reveal the deeper mystery of the extraordinary configuration left behind from a much more advanced age.

Reviewing the text and the recent notes made on the crumbling paper, Solas patiently explained his own theory to the hunched mage at his side. Unbothered by the tense stares and repressed muttering, he took little notice of the elves waiting on the edge of the bizarre compartment. Even they had forgotten the power that had once been at their races command, recalling scant more than fragmented memories of days past. They’d seen little of the new world that had changed around them as they slept, empires and rebellions had come and gone unobserved as they kept their eternal guard. He wondered when they’d last left those humid halls and twisting pathways. Had they even stepped beyond the heart of their woods when they’d awoken or had they simply chased away their enemies and returned to their rest, uncurious as to the realm beyond the mossy trees and bright flora.
“Are you going to brood the entire time or shall you be lending a hand?” Solas looked over his shoulder to Abelas as he placed the book carefully atop a toppled pedestal. “This ritual requires immaculate timing and substantial magic, if such can be managed.”

“So you say…” The sentinel signaled to his crew, allowing the wanderer to give his instruction. He took the nearest posted switch, his cold eyes never wavering from the uninvited mage. They’d already fiddled with the various levers, pulls and pressure plates for hours, but the correct sequence had yet to be discovered. In the decimated state, much of the energy stored inside the pillars had corroded, but Solas freely offered his own power for the recharging.

With two mages it would be a much simpler task, they both laid their hands upon the archer once the others had taken their positions. In tandem, they began to release the magic from their bodies, channeled through the Veil and infused it into the dormant statue, powering the tip of the wrought arrow in his stony grasp.

Solas knew he would only have one chance at this and a narrow window to accomplish the feat before Abelas would have a chance to turn on him. Once all four vessels had been rekindled he would have to both send a surge of excessive energy through the entire system and cast a barrier to protect himself from the explosion that would likely stun, if not kill, the elves left unprepared. With no genuine wish to hurt them, he would do his best to leave them unharmed, but no guarantees could be made. Mythal had offered up their uninformed services, agreeing to his petition for aid sent across the Fade to the dark corners she often wandered. Even now her influence remained, puppeteering the wrinkled hand of the last priestess left at her disposal. Her need of them had been fulfilled and the last of her worldly powers passed on, a loss would not be felt were they sacrificed for the furtherance of bigger plans.

Another necessarily regrettable measure to tally with the others. More sacrifice to add to his own debts, though he knew it wouldn’t be much longer until the price would have to be paid. Solas had sworn to correct his misguidances and blunders, the chance to amend the ancient mistakes were slim and far between.

For the People. He justified as the third beacon was lit and he prepared, carefully arranging the spell that would require all of his precision.

It would soon be out of his hands regardless, Solas’ role in his current strategies was but fleeting. What came of it would be for the Inquisitor to handle, he trusted with every lamentable fiber of his being that she would meet the challenge however daunting. For if she could not…

There could be no turning back now.

He refused to consider failure as the archer was turned one last time to the north.
Chapter End Notes

*Children are quick to squabble, for the old peace comes slower.
Chapter Summary

Making new friends is never easy, especially with creatures who hold silence behind a few remaining sharp teeth. News arrives from Skyhold, but this Lavellan doesn't want the Inquisition’s help. Some things are just too personal.

Another massive thanks to Llynnyia! This chapter just grew and grew under her diligent care and endless support! It has been such a wonderful journey to create alongside such a kind and compassionate person, these miles have been made all the better because of it! Onwards and upwards.

This was definitely her dream. Wasn't it? Yes, she was sure. So why couldn't she remember where she'd left her own damned traps? Chiyo had never been formally trained as a hunter, not in the same way her cousins had been brought up. But a Dalish incapable of catching simple game was not worth the salt they begrudgingly traded with humans for or the cost of the steel needed for the practical blade each carried upon adolescence. Every child was given the skills they would need to subsist both within the clan and on the possible, but rare event they were separated. From earliest youth the elders would spend their free hours ingraining these abilities, leaving the actual practice work to be offered by those near grown and more spry. It was left to the oldest of children, those who’d yet to earn their vallaslin to take the youngsters into the forest and show them the ways of survival.

By the season they would guide as to which herbs and wild grown foods were ready for harvesting, how to collect the various seeds, leaves and barks, what animals were best and most plentiful to catch and how to stay out of trouble when it could be avoided. Even young hands and eyes were sometimes needed to get the clan through the leanest winters. One wrong berry in the stewpot could sicken the entire camp for days or worse. No matter what profession or inclination, nearly all elven children were given the same essential upbringing. But that did not mean Chiyo knew her way around every rock, tree and bush, especially not in the ever-changing and manipulated landscape of the Fade. A true Dalish hunter would have made quick, diligent work of the clever task; a mage could seldom compare.

Poking through another shrub with the end of her wooden staff, the Inquisitor roughly groaned again upon finding the niche devoid of game and any hint of the artless snares she’d left the evening prior. Curbing her annoyance, she scarcely kept her bare toes from colliding with a convenient, minuscule rock that happened to be underfoot. Of course a little pebble to kick would appear when needed, but not anything she intentionally came for.

What a horrendously inane plan to begin with, feeding a spirit, a juvenile idea that was quickly weighing against the worth of her efforts. Though without more advanced training to guide her, the Inquisitor was left scrambling for anything better and unbearably anxious at the mere thought of another failure. Stability of her emotions had to be maintained above all else, and she frequently had to remind herself of such. There was no use for the mounting frustrations that would only serve to turn against all of her goals. With a deep and extendedly held breath, she released the stresses that stemmed from her harrowing reality and continued through the humid, balmy woods. Bright with
wide green leaves that filtered the intense summer sun and bursting with vigorous flora of every kind, the forest she'd recalled was the picture of health. It was just the escape she needed, with so many of her former distractions now no longer available to bolster Chiyo to the ever increasing heaviness of the world.

Bit by bit, the more she ventured out and constrained her fears, did Chiyo finally understand the relief that Solas had often found away from the waking world. Here she could begin to take some tiny hold of control, dictating her dreams and managing them in turn. But she was not satisfied to remain in their safe comforts, not when what she needed most lay beyond the sheltered borders forged from experience. There were no charts useful to her cause, many had tried before to map the Fade and lost a good deal of coin in doing it. The Inquisitor needed a companion, one who knew the winding paths that she remained too uncertain to tread unaided.

She was going to find Solas, and she would have help in doing it too.

Back behind a sizable fallen log she finally spotted the edge of a little trap placed the last time she'd entered this idealized reverie. Lifeless in the thin, twisting line a plump hare had been strung up by the neck. Tiny eyes that had once been a gleaming, bottomless black were now gray and dim. Taking up the lengthy, tufted back feet, she lifted the small game and loosened the snare's strangling hold. The creature hadn't struggled or suffered more than a moment; a quick yank had given the rabbit an equally swift end. As she stroked the fine ears, smoothing them down the length of the animal's limp back, Chiyo offered quiet thanks. No change came; it seemed no spirit was fulfilling her quest in ruse, merely a construct of her own dreams. Perhaps the felled prey was simply recalled from the hunts she had partaken of, pieced together from many only vaguely recalled kills.

Fetching her knife from its keeping on her belt, Chiyo began the swift process of gutting and skinning the modest animal. She prudently split the finely haired belly from groin to sternum, turning out the membrane contained entrails onto the grass to discard. The rich, darkly colored liver, a thumb-sized heart and other offal bits were set aside, far too precious to waste wantonly. With a careful slice she separated the silky pelt from each boney limb and peeled it away from the small body. Next she severed the round head just beneath the base of the skull, keeping the supple neck muscles intact just past where the spine had been broken. The brains and cheeks would have been boiled to a delicious broth were the rabbit real; however there was to be no cooking that night. Raw meat was required, if she knew anything about carnivorous palates.

The coppery smell of blood tinged the damp, warm air, carried off on the low breeze. With the carcass in hand, she perched herself up on the fallen log and waited, slowly trimming the hare into manageable chunks. Chiyo set the slick, soft strips onto the pelt she'd placed hair down against her lap and continued the nervous, gory whittling. With care she kept most of the carnage to her hands and off of her lengthy, belted tunic and the wraps that twisted from ankle to knee.

It wasn't long before a visitor slowly peered out from his hiding place in the densely grown thickets, always observing with tattered ears ever pricked for oncoming danger. Paw over paw, curiosity and hunger encouraged the ragged beast to emerge from the shadows and investigate the dreamer he had regularly stalked for nearly a year. The anxious mage had often been too wary to allow for a direct approach. But now Chiyo was consciously letting her defenses down, remaining still and composed as the scrawny spirit ambled on closer and closer.

A warm breath brushed across the back of her neck and hunched shoulders, sending barely repressed shivers up her rigid spine. Swallowing the lump forming in her throat, Chiyo gingerly picked up the wiggly, slippery liver and cupped it in her unmarked palm. Holding her hand out, low and far to the side, she kept her wide eyes focused on the grass around her clenched toes as a sniffing nose gleaned down the unadorned, extended limb. He focused finally on the presented hand, the Inquisitor froze as
The heart beating in her tightly clad breast began to calm as they repeated the more often painstakingly slow ritual. It had taken weeks for this fragile trust to form between them and just as long for Chiyo to trust herself. With patience pushed beyond her known limits, the first few attempts at forging what most would call a hazardous relationship at best, had left them both on edge. Night after night, where one would make another attempt to try the other would irrepressibly fail. Carcasses left behind would go untouched, rotting without so much as a bite removed. His stalking approaches, when he risked to encroach at all, often led to panicked lurches straight back into the waking world. Continually, Chiyo would bolt from her bed. Sweat shining on her skin, often unnerving whoever happened to be sleeping nearby.

But this repetitive coaxing was working. It had to. She could not risk spoiling such a rare chance out of instinctual fear.

With upmost calm and deliberate movements, she selected a pared, pink muscle from the portioned pile contained in the turned pelt and repeated the poised offering. The thin creature obliged, patiently awaiting the generous meal, lavishing over each deboned piece that his worn teeth would not have been able to manage elsewise. More than he'd received in a long, long while, a single rabbit went far to sate an often empty stomach. It took the large beast little time to consume every available scrap till all that remained was a delicate heap of a segmented skeleton. With the bulbous end of a tapered thigh bone removed, having been cracked open by nibble fingers, the wolf leisurely gnawed to release the creamy marrow stowed within. He dropped his large head, settling down to rest against the log where the Inquisitor also sat with a canine sigh of contentment.

Chiyo listened as the voracious chewing slowed. She rolled her sticky fingers against the smooth bark, daring only to glance at the dark, bulky skull and bowed shoulders of the beast relaxing at her side. The unfussy meal left the wolf dozily full-bellied, but it seemed that the voiceless company suited him just as well. Lulled and quiet, she was relieved that no red eyes emerged with the rise of her own uncertainty. Instead the creature paid her minimum attention, black lids nearly drooped together left only thin slivers of pale gray marked by lolled pupils.

Solas had been right in his teachings; her troubles came from her own failures as a dreamer. Not from the spirits themselves. They only became what she wanted or imagined them to be, for good or ill. She had expected the terrible beast woven of nightmares and childhood lore to have come up from the shadows at her lowest hour, to have eaten her whole and consume her for the seeping weakness that she could not rid herself of entirely. But the wolf near dozing at her side, resting a scarred, misshapen jaw against the rounded wood acted no more a threat to her than any other figment or illusion. How had this world become so maligned? The human-formed Chantry had bred fear so deeply into Thedas that even the wild elves had become suspicious and less trusting when the truth was so much more. Spirits and their relationship with dreamers wasn't inherently bad, only more complex than widely understood. The only enemy that she had to be concerned of it seemed, the only real danger to be protected from, was herself.

_Dangerous_, to everyone else too, if the hissed words of a witch held any credit. That had been the labeling granted by Morrigan when everything had gone so terribly wrong that very morning. It wasn't supposed to have spiraled so far out of control, but everything had slipped from the Inquisitor's grasp upon reaching a ruinous altar buried on the edge of the Arbor Wilds. They'd temporarily diverted from their quest to close the overabundance of rifts that now plagued much of the eastern landscape, spanning as far out as their scouts and outposts dared report. A garish, green
hole had even formed just outside the gate of the sacred grotto, barring their entrance to the forgotten vestige of a once powerful and renowned elven deity.

With a short skirmish and a grimace, the Inquisitor had managed the lesser rift with trifling difficulty. The tears were wide spread, but they also varied. Some discovered were scant more than pinholes peppered across the land. Others stretched in glaring streaks, thin as pulled threads that disrupted the separating weave of the Veil. A notable few had been utterly massive and the first to be dealt with before civilians or passersby could be harmed. Word and any available protections had been swiftly sent to all corners, but that had only likely stemmed the received accounts of loss and destruction to follow. Every day, word reached Skyhold of more and more fissures being found. So many that the map in the War Room was now littered with chips of emerald colored stone; they'd run out of the miniature bronze icons that had been customarily used.

Leaving the others behind, Chiyo and the Witch of the Wilds had entered the peaceful grove and begun their search for the altar they'd traveled far to reach. Tensions between them had still not fully cooled, but with their world once again in overwhelming upheaval they'd managed their biting differences for the few short hours needed to convalesce at the sacred site. The Temple they'd entered a few months prior had been a place of pilgrimage and worship, but this hidden away junction was where the ancient elves had beckoned to their goddess directly. Here they had made their personal pleas heard and prayed for a swift response. Desperate for any help from the one that had frequently been called for protection and vengeance alike, the wayward Dalish mage had nearly shouted in relief upon discovering the fragments of an unrecognizable figure. Instead of an elegant face, worn, wide scales made up the shape of the tilted head. Where arms should have been stretched out only the graceful shoulders of sweeping wings remained.

'You know who I am: The last to drink from your Well of Sorrows. Come to me Mythal. Whatever you are, whoever remains, I invoke your name and your power.' It was there that Morrigan invoked the Great Protector, though they'd both held reserved skepticism until discovering the altar's location. Chiyo's face was now just as unblemished as the sorceress working alongside her and the sacred waters had not allowed her attempted claim. Aided by the whispering voices that had channeled her to the secreted spot, the witch called whatever persisted to present themselves, using her dominion of the Well as her pronounced right of petition. But for a time only the rustling wind answered.

Near turning to depart, a wavering faith wilted once more, Chiyo had been taken aback by the apparition that then emerged from the swirling smoke in the center of the glen before them. Bright gray hair spun into ominous horns, piercing eyes of covetous gold, the smirking old woman was bound from head to toe in dark burgundy leather. Lustrous black plumage spilled from her stately shoulders, yet the Lavellan First did not immediately think bird. Another, much more treacherous flying creature came to mind. One with crushing teeth and life-snuffing breath. The doubting elf had been left temporarily winded, but not out of engulfing veneration as the powerful being sauntered her way across the weedy knoll.

The ears, flat, round and weighted with heavy piercings, immediately set Chiyo's teeth on edge as she evaluated the woman who proclaimed herself to be the remnant of Mythal. Disgust echoed hollowly in her head as she barely listened to the ensuing, spiteful conversation. The fact became rampantly evident that Mythal, Flemeth, the Woman of Many years, whatever name she chose to assume, was just as human as the baffled, sputtering child she claimed to be her own. That Morrigan, drinker of the seized waters, had been birthed and reared by no other than the very same entity whose worship had once been displayed on the Inquisitor's own skin.

A low rumble met Chiyo's growing agitations, quaking up a roaming hand that had crept away while she'd been lost in reminiscing thought. She did not recall seeking out the silent spirit or summoning the courage to risk touching him. With fingers loosely tangled in the matted hair that lay against the
beast's neck, the reciprocated agitation reminded her swiftly that disagreeable sentiments were not best expressed in the Fade. Bravely smoothing the rough coat, the Inquisitor was not dissuaded as she began to gently pick at the snared hairs. Pulling apart the tangles and relieving several hidden painfully buried burs, the wolf resumed the prior peace and submitted for the time being to the amenable handling.

Soothed by the repetitive and gentle action, the fidgety mage felt more at ease appeasing a monster whose common being had made multiple appearances as a figure in tales of warning, villainy and treachery than she had in the presence of the most revered name among the Dalish. If that cunning woman was anything like what the elvhen gods had been during more a golden era, she wanted nothing further to do with any of them.

And she'd dared to make that sentiment blatantly known before the draconic crone.

Ingrate. Like mother like daughter. Chiyo had been aptly named by the scowling woman upon being called out for her misleading personage. The Inquisitor could not contain the gurgling resentment and disappointment at these latest turns of events. It was all so wrong and deceiving, to have ever believed in such ridiculous lies as what she'd been fed as a child. This was not her goddess, in any shape or fashion. Mythal could not have abandoned the elves who still cried out to her for help, she could not have picked Morrigan to be worthy, she could not be human!

The white haired matriarch had been quick to cut her down, reprimanding the enflamed elf with a retelling of how the splinter of the fallen goddess had clawed and crawled her way through the eons until finding another soul, seeking much the same vengeance upon the world to bind with. Becoming unified, the fragment of Mythal's shattered essence was as much a part of Flemeth as was her own beating heart. They were one in the same and had been for centuries, harboring the same memories and experiences. There was no division between the carried soul and her own. It was a hard truth to swallow, as Morrigan had regrettably assured, the voices of the Well claimed no falseness had been pronounced. Yet still the horrified Herald had adamantly refused to accept what was being presented before her dubious eyes.

However, the unraveling aggressions that soon followed had actually been the only moment in their brief encounter that had seemed to garner Chiyo any semblance of respect. Upon taking temporary control of her daughter, now forever bound to her mother's will, Morrigan had been commanded with the ease of a child's toy to repress the sneering Herald if she would not hold her incredulous tongue. But it hadn't worked.

Combating the forces with her own extended hand, the small Dalish mage had held her own, neutralizing the constrictive magic with the same unsettling power that had arisen after the rejection at the Well. Caught in a magical deadlock, the fragmented goddess had released her manipulative control with a coarse chuckle and a wave of her menacing, sharply pointed fingers.

Curiously entertained, Flemeth had offered up the only aid she was willing to give before departing from the mages who had sought her out. She had more than enough knowledge to help them in their quest against Corypheus, however her plans were not exclusively beneficial to the Inquisition. The corrupted dragon would have to be swiftly dealt with were they to stand any chance at stopping the madman responsible for the state of Thedas. She needed the blighted Magister dealt with, but by her lack of concern it seemed the havoc wreaked upon the world was little more than a trifling inconvenience to her plots. Mythal had her own reckoning after all to conduct, yet the means and the time were not quite within her grasp. The crone had little choice but to offer up the solution.

"You'd think I would have recognized a god when I saw one…” She sighed to the wolf who had lifted his chin, sanctioning her busy fingers to work at a terrible spot that had tangled to the side of
his shaggy throat. The thick, dark outer guard hairs came loose cleanly enough, but several wads of scruffy undercoating floated away across the grass or caught against the bark of the felled log. A small sore had formed around a large thistle and had incrustated the insulating fur quite badly, but with cautious fingers Chiyo managed to free him of the irritant.

Chiyo did not know what to expect of her open inquiring, certainly not a reply. At least, it seemed, this spirit wasn't of the mind to give any. Other spectral entities she'd encountered before had answered her or Solas' questions with recognizable, intelligent speech. Some would mimic events linked to the visited dreams. Actors on an endless stage, the emotions that had enraptured them most were amplified and embodied till the reality of the event was eroded beyond all historical recognition. The absent mage who had first gotten her to wander in dreams that were not her own had accompanied her to nearby visions of both turmoil and accomplishment. She'd watched shining kings take to their lofted thrones, enveloped in hope for the unknowable future only to be darkened by entire villages succumbing to the Blight, lost souls festering in the ceaseless gloom of horrific disease. Wars had flared and seceded in lightning fast pulses as enemies repeatedly clashed, their sieges bursting across the Fade in dazzling displays of violence and bloodshed, interrupted by lulls of sterling peace and brotherly camaraderie.

While exploring the Dales together they'd stumbled across a rare gem, a memory imprinted by the noble elves that had once flourished for a brief age. Proud and strong and cohesive, Chiyo had been astonished by the image of her people before they'd been forcibly removed from the pledged domain. They had begun to rebuild, constructing lasting vestiges that would later be claimed by the same people who drove the survivors out from their burning homes. For a time the elves had settled and rejoiced; their lost language blossomed and such songs came forth as she'd never known, but stirred deep in her heart.

With such priceless images granted to her, curiosity had begun to win over what had once been unshakeable foreboding. There had been times when she had left Solas' preoccupied side, speaking to more verbose and rare spirits, to wander off a ways without his steadfast supervision. A few evenings had fallen when the expert mage was behind Chiyo in sleep, leaving her plenty of time to try the Fade unaccompanied, leaving from the more well beaten paths and entering the unknown by a few cautious steps. But she always kept the road or whatever tether she'd depended on in view. Time and training with the unusual apostate had instilled the beginnings of confidence, and just enough knowledge to know not when to try her luck.

Turning on her seat, she straddled the log and faced the lazing wolf. Her marked hand joined the first as an idle hum lingered on the back of her tongue, the words lost but the tune vaguely remembered. Perhaps this wild wanderer could show her more unimaginably precious memories, but for the time being she was content to remain at peace and enjoy her own meaningless song. The Inquisitor would have to find a way to ask for what she sought more effectively before she chanced leaving the safety of her own dreams. But soon the night would come when she would enter the true unknown and begin her search. And hopefully, she would not be venturing out unguided and alone.

Lifting the extended, slightly sweaty limb of the snoring rogue, Chiyo wormed her way off of the sleeping bag she was tangled in. In the heavy heat of the deep south they'd all stripped to their smalls to survive the muggy nights. In unembellished, sleeveless shifts and plainly crafted bottoms, the mage had felt exposed enough to sleep soundly through the night without her bedding clinging to her skin. But the much more buxom blonde, who had the tendency to stretch out across multiple beds, had no concerns with whatever happened to spill out of the overly loose and shortly cropped shirt she'd donned for the evening. Near accustomed now to waking up to a pair of freckled breasts threatening a full display, Chiyo was undaunted by the tricky clamber needed to escape the splayed arms and legs that had crossed over her while sleeping.
With a care normally reserved for pilfering a dragon egg out from under a sleeping mother's nose, the Inquisitor slipped her own pillow into the clutching rogue's grasp. Ginger fingers pulled up a thin sheet, giving her snuffling friend at least a modicum of basic decency. Not that the nudity was anything new or shocking, nursing babes at the bosom and bathing a common sight among the Dalish, the privacy of more military camps was little improved from her former nomadic life. Chiyo would attempt to spare Sera some unneeded exposure out of respect alone.

Hopping into a pair of breeches that had been hung across the support rail of their tent to air out, Chiyo slipped through the untied flaps and left Sera to continue her sleep-in undisturbed. There was just no getting the younger woman out of bed before she was damn ready, not if you didn't wish to be cursed at or left sore for trying. After the last bee-jar debacle, no one had dared since disturb the slumbering red Jenny, at least not until they were already well at the door of whatever shelter they shared. There simply had not been enough spindleweed in the entirety of the Hinterlands to soothe all of the red, raised bumps that had covered the Inquisitor and her unfortunate companions the morning after Iron Bull had made that dreaded mistake.

Greeted by the cooler, fresh morning air, the welcoming scent of breakfast passed through her stretching nostrils. A kettle was just beginning to bubble on its stand above the revived embers and the savory smell of starches wafted from the simple iron crock tucked amid the hot coals. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of the tubers cooking inside, shredded and salted or even thickened with seasoned slivers of meat. The bottom of the pan would be a contested favorite as everyone tried to get a scoop of the crusted, golden layer hidden under the rest of the mouthwatering mash.

Near the simmering fire sat Dorian, leaning against the roughly hewn table with his chiseled head caught in his hand. Several creased sheets of paper lay spread out before him, but he held one in particular up for a closer inspection, seemingly lost in the words scrawled across the travel-battered page. The Tevinter mage ran his thumb repeatedly over the small waxy seal that clung to the letter's edge and he began to chuckle as he read on.

"Good news, I take it?" Chiyo yawned as she leaned over his shoulder, perfunctorily searching the table for any additional messages directed towards the Herald.

"Just an update from Bull. Things are going splendidly around the Storm Coast. The Chargers have quite the knack for thrashing darkspawn and demons alike. They spotted a dragon a few days ago, but miraculously he managed to refrain from slaughtering it on sight. He must be having the time of his life up there…" Dorian answered as he set the correspondence down, but his eyes continued to loiter over the brief, personal memo scrawled on the end that left him visibly brightened with joy. The thick, artfully curled hairs of his moustache failed to hide the wide smile that spread across his shapely lips.

Not since returning from the Adamant fortress had either been kept so far and so long apart from the other. A few scant weeks here and there had made for lovely, private homecoming celebrations. However it had been clear as they'd parted on the dividing passes stemming from the Frostback mountains, to head towards their opposite goals, that this departure held just as little certainty as the fate of Thedas itself. It was not often that one witnessed a mage so flustered as he was lifted off his feet by a massive Qunari, turning back around to steal a last kiss before their companies parted ways. "Maker how I miss that man…"

"If there had been a better way…" She began to apologize as she disentangled a few stray white hairs that had woven their way into the small rings set in her ears. There had been so little time to formulate any better plans or assembly. The Iron Bull and his Chargers were too invaluable, and notable expensive, to waste during such trying times as they were. They'd been quickly assigned to return to the north where they could best handle the turmoil of the rifts opening there and the foul
creatures who were also emerging amid the rising chaos. Cassandra and Blackwall had marched towards the west with the troops they'd recently reconnected with in the Arbor Wilds. Vivienn had been given command of several of the mages that had assisted the Inquisition with the Breach, pooling their knowledge and efforts together with the strange Trainer requisitioned anew to find a way at managing all the additional, terrifying tears. Varric and Cole had taken up important roles as well, now under the leadership of their Spymaster. Their combined stealthy skills and practiced social invisibility were just what was needed to try to find out more behind what had caused the latest upset. All suspected Corypheus or any of his following, yet nothing had been seen of the accursed Magister since he'd been forced into a new body after failing to take the Well of Sorrows.

The Inquisition was splintered and spread thin, but they all hoped to make quick work of the distressing dilemma at hand before the divided weakness was made apparent to their enemies. The risk however had to be taken, they had asserted and claimed responsibility, now it was up to them to reclaim control.

"I would not have separated you if given a kinder choice."

Dorian inclined back, tilting up his head to catch the slip of sorrow that clouded her eyes and dulled her pale cheeks of their usual healthy glow. It hurt his heart to see her so bruised still. Her life had become little more than difficult travel, fighting demons and exhaustive sleep, spending more of her unoccupied hours in the Fade than she'd ever done before. Spring had arrived and no word from Solas had come to the Keep or any of their scattered stations. Each week passed as they endlessly moved about the countryside and Dorian had watched their Herald grow less and less hopeful with every empty handed messenger to make it to their wayside camps. Another had appeared with the dawn along with a refresh of supplies for their journey northwards again, but he'd seen to the delivery himself, anticipating his own more likely received missives.

"You did get a letter from Skyhold… Josephine's seal, I can almost smell her perfume." He held the narrow sheet up between two fingers, fetched from a small stack on the edge of the weather-stained table.

The dark haired mage nearly beamed as she rested her arms about his strapping shoulders, leaning into him for a moment as she eyed the singularly folded sheet that bore the Ambassador's usual, lovely penmanship. But her voice met his ear too heartbroken, though he'd done his best to plaster the fragments back together with what friendship and understanding he could offer. "It won't have what I want."

"What can I do to ease this burden? I would offer you a kiss but you seemed to have preferred far less hair." He asked, having already tendered her every ounce of information and detail of what had passed between himself and Solas. The interest in blood rituals, the unspeakable troubles found inside of terrible dreams, all of the growing concern he'd gleaned from the worried apostate of the magics that were beyond even his expert control. Dorian had laid out every scrap of knowledge gained, all the notes and texts that had been safe enough to keep from the fire were given up for her discretion. Months of work had yielded little and had given Chiyo even fewer answers. He was so worried that she would hate him for the secrecy and withholding, after she'd been so honest and immediately on his side when his father had tried to draw him back home. The Inquisitor had supported all of his decisions in the matter. She'd even called him brave for standing up to the man that had tried to change him, and he'd repaid her rare friendship with a reserved tongue that could have spared her so much pain.

He puckered his mouth in a short-lived dally, but she gave him no reply, only the added slump of her weight. He returned his gaze to the fragrant letter. When her chin found the top of the groomed crown of his head he broke the red, wax seal with a twist of his little finger. Dorian unfolded the
sheet and cleared his throat before giving the note a brief reading, his brow furrowing shortly after Josie's particularly crisp foreword.

"There was a young dwarf in Skyhold who was rather desperate to speak to you. She was found bumbling around the Herald's Rest and asking everyone when you'd next return." The Tevinter defector explained as he continued to read in her stead.

"I am not going back to Skyhold just to bless the ashes of another deceased Andrastian parent." Chiyo muttered, removing herself from the other mage and ambling towards the whistling teapot before the delicate, earthy leaves inside over-boiled and soured the potent brew.

Rotating on the short bench Dorian continued. "This one claims to have been hired on by Sutherland's crew."

With a hooked stick, the Inquisitor lifted the shrieking kettle and set it on the grass. From a small crate she fetched two humbly crafted wooden mugs, filled them to the brim and placed them on the table as she waited for the beverage to cool enough to be consumed without taking the flesh off her tongue and the roof of her mouth. "Sutherland is currently investigating the area surrounding Wycome at my personal request. They are not officially part of the Inquisition. She reports to him then, not me."

Hoisting the opened letter again in her direction Dorian began to shake his head. His warm hazel eyes turned sharp with seriousness as he countered the overcast Herald. "And he's been imprisoned."

"By who?" Chiyo snatched it from his hand and brought it to her own scouring eyes. A thick, dark brow immediately knotted at Josephine's much too brief retelling of what the informant had been willing to divulge.

"Duke Antoine." Said the charming mage with feigned disinterest, who promptly began to restack the documents he'd been reading that morning, folding them neatly into a tidy pile on his knee. He knew exactly what that name meant to the elf at his side and doubted that a rift the size of lake Calenhad could keep her from destroying the man who was rumored, though yet to be substantiated, responsible for the annihilation of her entire clan. She'd only been waiting for the evidence and the chance to question him herself, with or without the Inquisition's backing. Not that she trusted them any more with the handling of the elves.

Her Advisors had failed her miserably in that regard, when she'd given her word and her trust to their cause and capability only have it fall to unrepairable ruin. Since that terrible meeting where they'd had to inform her of the death of all her loved ones, she'd taken management over the distant investigation. With her own coin, Chiyo had funded the extensive journey required to send a mercenary group across the sea and into foreign lands once they'd proven their competence.

"Write to Bull." Chiyo requested, still hurriedly reading as she made her way back to the tent to wake the woman who had yet to get out of bed. "Ask him to meet us there."

Though Chiyo had never once considered herself to be anything resembling a 'nug-sucking whore' or wished to have her eyes popped out of her skull with the blunt end of an arrow, Sera certainly and loudly proclaimed the title and punishment to be suitable. Insults earned by no more than a gently shaking grasp on her shoulder, the rogue growled her drowsy disgorgement of profanities without reserve.

"Don't you want to consult back with Josephine or the others?" Dorian raised a brow, picking up his tea as the terrible curses began to spew from the wide tent. "Leliana has offered you the use of her best infiltrators; certainly she could send them ahead to thwart trouble. There is no backup across the sea for us."
"No," answered Chiyo, barely avoiding a thrown boot as she scurried away from the parted flaps. "I'm doing this my way, not as the Inquisitor but as a Lavellen. Send one to Varric too. I will have my own spies."
Chapter Summary

Being an apostate has its advantages. Being an elf is sometimes more trouble than it's worth. Solas is close to finding the blood mages who offered to help him, but there are more problematic barriers to cross beyond overly taxed national borders. What he finds is far from what he expected and might be more than what can be endured.

Swatting at the fly that seemed resolute on landing atop the tip of his pointed ear, Solas silently observed the scrupulous evaluation of the animal in question. The short breeze from his passing hand did little to cool him. He'd forgotten the yearly onslaughts of the north, having long endured the chilly seasons of Ferelden that seldom rose above tepid. And to think that it wasn't even summer yet.

Already the skin of his face and exposed head had felt the first stinging burns of the overbearing sun, darkening the freckles on his cheeks and nose. When it could be managed he kept his head covered, but the hooded green coat that had seen him across the exhaustive miles of the Imperial highway was now too densely woven for the climate. The back of his tunic damply clung to his shoulders and hips, pressed beneath the small pack holding the elf's scant belongings. Refusing to tug at the uncomfortable clothing, the mage's hands returned to the small of his back, tucked one over the other as he waited.

The apostate's sweat-moistened brow knotted once more as the horrid buzzing returned. His aggravation, however, was not entirely centered on the terrible afternoon heat that thickened every breath or the pungent waft from the crowded barn-sheds that offended his high nose. The irritant lay solely in the burly man scrutinizing every angle of limb, the musculature of each joint, and insect repelling flick of Da'dava's long black tail.

"Look at his feet, when were they last done? I'm not paying you eight-hundred coins for a horse you couldn't care keep shod." The trader growled lowly, dusting off his leathery hands after inspecting one of the Forder's massive hooves. The artfully constructed plates of iron had long since been torn away, leaving a snagged edge where the carefully placed nails had pulled through. They were not as appalling as many of the worn-down beasts' hooves that plodded the Imperial highway often were. Indeed Da'dava's dished soles were still well out of harm's way and unbruised. The damage the coarse shemlen complained incessantly about was all superficial. The horse was hardy and sound, Master Dennett would have never allowed a flimsy creature to bear the Inquisition's mark. Solas had done his best, when expediency allowed, to be as diligent as his former rider had been.

Turning his back to the gelding who was busy munching away at the small pile of fresh hay provided to him, the sharp-sighted buyer turned a critical gaze upon the travel-worn, bare-footed elf who'd happened by his stables.

"Not that you would know the difference."

Fingers balling into loose fists, Solas held his tongue as he felt the judging pass across his person. The callous attentions especially lingered on his tapered ears. It seemed his own conformation and breeding was more problematic than the steed he petitioned for sale. He'd only been in this town a few days, yet already the limited toleration for the elves here was apparent and no better than any other municipality. Far off the main thoroughfares, Perendale was not large enough to have a
segregated alienage outright. The few elven dwellers he had seen were just as poor as any other city elf. Carving out a meager existence amidst those that did not care for their kind in the slightest. Earlier he'd spotted two elves, faces blank and utilitarian of spirit, employed as labor-hands for the stable master, mucking out the stalls and feeding the animals.

"Then I'm sure under your care that could be amended without constraint," Solas answered the horseman bluntly, keeping his sentiments well in check. He had no other goods to barter with and the other stable had already thoroughly rejected him, refusing even to hear out his offer before shooing him away. "Would you overlook a quality cloak because a button has come loose?"

"You're lucky I'm even talking to you." The man shook his head before fetching a canteen from a peg on the wall, handling the unseasonable heat unflinchingly. To the handsome horse, he had extended a bite to eat and a bucket of cool well-drawn water, but the elf who'd gabbed and weaseled his way into the barn was offered nothing. "This is a questionable business at best."

"Theft should not be of your concern. This creature belonged to my…" A soft term nearly passed across Solas' broad lips that had once again reverted to a permanent, joyless droop. It withered on the edge of his faltering tongue and rejoined the long list of words his own ears yearned to hear again. Definition of their entanglement had been denied though the Inquisitor had proposed to him such clarity before the cruel severance of his afflictions. Even now though, with countless miles between them and nearly two months time since he'd left her in Crestwood, Solas could not relieve himself of the strained pull upon his heart. "She would have understood."

"Sorry for your loss." Gruffly answered the trader after a silent moment had passed. One of his large hands brushed across other, rolling over an unadorned finger as if to twist a ring no longer worn. Forgoing the compulsive motion he quickly smoothed the dark hair on his temples, thickly braided and pulled cleanly away from his broad face.

Solas did not correct the misinterpretation, still mourning the forfeiture of all that could have been, even if only for a short while. "Can we make an agreement for the gelding?"

The man began to walk away with his thumbs hooked into the sides of his loose vest, but after a few wide strides he paused and spoke without turning. "I can do four hundred, but only because his back is too nice to be put to the plow. Wait here."

Alone with the horse, the apostate approached the stout beast who had carried him so far from the only place that had ever begun to feel like home. A gentle pat to the creature's tall shoulder and a pleasant scratch high upon his withers, just where the end of his black mane stopped, was all Solas could offer for the horse's troubles. The animal had accompanied them on so many journeys since the prior spring, having first been given the duty to bear their ailing Herald back to Skyhold after being pierced by a bandit's arrow. Charging into battle or fleeing from avoidable perils, the mount had seldom ever hesitated in his given tasks. Unless gurguts were involved. He was just as responsible of Chiyo's safety as Solas himself had often been. Da'dava had borne them both through to the Emprise du Lion, the Arbor Wilds, to the camp near the hidden cave in Crestwood… and now he was being handed over to a stranger for a trifling amount of coins.

Another lamentable extent of the disgraceful depths he would sink to. There seemed to be nothing left untouchable if it furthered his goals. He'd already expended every copper lifted from the Inquisitor's coin purse, spent on provisions when none could be scavenged and the toll roads when no other crossing could be found. Entering Nevarra had cost him nearly everything left in his pockets even though he'd brought nothing to trade or of tremendous value, no one crossed the border from Orlais without paying the steep levy.

The returning sound of boots crunching across the yard caught the mage's ear. He looked at the fine
Bay horse one last time before accepting the payment that, though correct in amount, still felt too light in his palm yet incredibly burdensome once set within the pouch on his hip. Each piece of gold and silver rattled as he set off on foot, leaving behind the unworried animal and the custom saddle made to the Inquisitor's exact specifications. Although his journey was far from over, he had no use for either without attaining the information so desperately sought.

The shop door's bell tinkled sharply, but the small attendant behind the low counter had already turned the window sign for the day. With a sour scowl from under a pale brow, the Dwarven woman sweeping up the scraps of hard leather and the tiny tips of trimmed iron nails snapped at the late in the day visitor before resuming her menial task. "We're closed. Come back tomorrow morning."

But when the door clicked shut and the soft padding of wrapped feet crossed her otherwise immaculate floor, the cobbler glanced up from the tidy pile of the day's work to see a tall, broad-shouldered elf somberly approach. "You again! I told you the first time that if you weren't here to buy then you had to get your blighted arse out of my store!"

Leaning with her dust pan, she glowered, hurriedly brushing the remnants up. With conscientious fingers, the metal fragments were picked out and pocketed, but the rest was dumped into the collection bin in the corner. After casting the tools aside roughly into their customary spot by the leftover basket she instinctively searched for the wooden mallet used in her common trade. She was more than prepared to escort the bothersome vagrant out of her abode if necessary. "I don't know what it is that you want but—"

The woman paused, her skilled fingers stretched for the hammer kept beneath the counter as the shabbily dressed apostate slowly placed several short stacks of coins in a row on the work table. He straightened each and began to place them together till they were nearly as tall as his slender palm. The mage kept his cold blue eyes narrowly fixed upon the presented sum, taking his time in creating the peculiar hoard.

"Perhaps we should start over." Solas imperturbably began, allowing the dwarven shopkeeper to make a quick, rough count of the money laid out before her. "You have information about a pair of mages that were using your wares to smuggle correspondences past some very watchful eyes."

"And what makes you believe I would know anything about damned mages?" The short blonde queried as Solas carefully removed a solitary coin from the tall stack once he had stopped speaking. He slipped the shining pence back into his pocket and replaced his long, pale fingers on the edge of the counter. "I make shoes here, nothing magical about them."

"Because this town is the first of many postmarked before an expensive pair of boots were shipped to another shop in Hossberg, then rerouted to Val Royeaux before being delivered in Ferelden. That seems like an awful lot of misdirection for an inconsequential pair of shoes."

As the piece of silver vanished the cobbler crossed her arms over her aproned chest, but her eyes continued to count, noting the slow and steady diminish of what was being proposed. More than a month's worth of raw materials could be purchased with the current costs of quality, sturdy leather.

"My cousin in the Anderfels is of the same trade… sometimes I send peculiar work for him to manage when I have enough on my hands."

"And why would a Tevinter native even bother purchasing footwear from Nevarra, the tax alone would have been better spent in Orllais or Antiva. I have not seen anything here that is unavailable
elsewhere." She immediately began to feel unnerved by the flat, false smile that curled at the corners of the elven man's mouth. She'd ignored his slouched, yet now incredibly intimidating size, the night before last when he'd first entered her shop. The surface-dwarf hadn't noticed anything as cunning or sly about him then as he'd almost too easily been urged out the same door he'd first strolled through. Shoeless and not even considering her wares, the strange elf had been an unfortunate waste of her time. Another coin was lost, but the growing dread in the pit of her stomach made her wish that he would just take all the money back and leave.

Her hand crept deeper beneath the counter, just barely in reach of the rounded mallet and the honed trimming knife kept there. "You don't look like a Tevinter slave-trader to me. How do you know about the packages?"

"I am answering their letter." Solas placed a finger atop the dwindled stack, resting it against the thick, engraved currency. "Whatever trouble they are in is none of my concern."

"...They don't live in the city limits." The dwarf answered as the elf began to lift the coin, but then he set it back down with her forfeited answer. "Not that mages are supposed to be away from the bigger cities to begin with. But they don't go about zapping folk or slinging curses."

"How long have they been here?" asked the calm apostate, idly straightening the circular amassment once more.

"Why does that matter?" The cobbler nearly kicked herself at the sudden loss of another coin when she failed to divulge promptly. The silvers at the top of the first stack were nearly gone, leaving a few larger pieces of gold next in line to be reclaimed. "Fine. A few months. They arrived with the last caravan that came through on their way south. Odd pair. Looked like they hadn't stuck anywhere for more than a day or two, but they kept asking around town about places to shack up for the winter."

Solas leaned over the counter, keeping his baited voice disconcertingly low. She could see a precarious severity building in his half-lidded gaze that set her heart into a thundering rhythm. His steely eyes locked with hers, but they stared into her as if the emotionless black pupils were about to draw her very soul into the Void itself. "And if one wished to find them now?"

"There's an abandoned farmstead to the west of here," The shopkeeper nearly stuttered as her instincts screamed out in warning. She knew she should never have gotten involved with the northern dissidents to begin with, that somehow it would lead back to trouble. And now she had a bizarre elf looming over her, threatening enough without having ever said a harsh word. "It's not far off the old footpath that leads through the goat hills. Trust me; you'll smell the place before you see it. Nobody heads that way anymore."

"Thank you." Solas said graciously and with a polite nod before slowly turning away from the counter he'd been leaning upon. Leaving the unclaimed coins behind, he quietly opened the front door of the shop and left just as silently as he'd entered, collecting his staff and pack before resuming the nearly unoccupied street. Once he'd passed by the unblocked windows, the cobbler slowly slumped onto the nearest stool, resisting the unbearable urge to shake.

She hadn't lied. The whole area stunk, and to spare his senses Solas had done everything to stay upwind of the desolate farm. Sharp, acrid and nearly caustic enough to make his nose scrunch when the breeze blew just right, the apostate had tucked himself behind the remains of a dilapidated shed. Hidden amidst overturned crates and fallen walls, he studied the lights issuing from the boarded up windows of the tiny house and the workshop connected to the ramshackle building, listening for the
number and tone of the voices within.

There had to be a good way to plan this approach. The tactics he'd employed within the town would likely only cause him more misfortune considering the attested abilities of the mages in question. He had never trifled with blood magic beyond academic study or ever met a true practitioner of the widely feared art. The Templars of the south had a long standing procedure enforced with any accused of maleficarium—immediate execution. Be it an apostate or a circle mage, the allegation warranted death. There was no tolerance for the secreted art outside of the Imperium, only prevailing assumptions of madness, depravity and desperation.

To Solas though, magic was magic in any of its forms, only the source differed. From the Fade, lyrium, or from the blood coursing in a mage's own veins, it was not inherently evil. Only in the way it was used was the magic changed; all power could be used for ill or become corrupted from original purpose. In the right hands, anything could be a weapon. But knowing as little as he did of the matter, the elven apostate nevertheless remained wary. He was more than skilled enough to hold his own if it came to blows, however experience told him that caution would be the better route than open hostilities. They were wanted offenders after all, likely armed and ready to fight for their lives if needed.

What ruse would he try this time? Would he knock on the door and cry lost on the road, too weary to travel further until they allowed him entry? Or should he be more brazen, with their letter held resolutely out as proclamation. They had offered their aid if he were to find them before their pursuers, certainly if he stated his intent they would refrain from immediately attacking him. He should find out more of these mages before directly approaching them, perhaps if he were to look around a bit…

Solas crept towards the rear of the abode and pressed his back to the weathered siding, hearing the soft chatter from between the thin, uninsulated sides of the boards. Peeking through a small outlet, screened only by a tattered rag, he caught a glimpse of a large metal vessel over a low, open pit of hot coals, steaming and bubbling out a noxious smelling odor from the brewed blue contents within. The steam wafted up towards a simple flume and allowed the horrid smells into the open night air. But the pot was left unattended and the room dark except for the embers contained inside the round brick pit. It was enough light for his sharp eyes to declare the room void of danger or persons. Continuing on to the back door, he fought the terrible urge to sneeze as a tickle built high inside his nose. The mage snuck his way around the workshop and felt the door's handle, finding it unlatched he dared give it a gentle push as he cautiously poked his head within.

But just as he moved to slip further inside he heard a startling yowl as his toes stepped upon a small, bony structure that immediately lurched away. Solas felt something small rush about his ankles and clamber its way up the back of his wrapped leggings in a panic, causing him to stumble and do much the same as he tumbled into the dark room. While he kicked and spun to relieve himself of the tiny demon clawing into his thin linen trousers his shoulders careened into the unseen nearby shelving, sending a cascade of small bottles and jars tumbling down about him. As the flasks broke and the canisters unplugged, his clothes, head and feet became slick with whatever oily liquid had been stored inside.

Shouting issued from the adjacent room as he wrenched the hissing creature from his attire and slipped across the floor, nearly stumbling into the boiling cauldron in the center of the workspace. Solas’ eyes began to water and his chest grew tight as he stumbled to make it back to the exit but it snapped shut and bolted itself just as he reached for the worn handle. The connecting door was thrown open, immediately brightening the dark room and revealing a willowy woman with a staff raised at the ready in the doorway.
Dropping the furry, sputtering animal caught in his grasp, Solas lifted his empty hands. He watched through his rapidly swelling eyelids as the cat that had attacked him fled for the open door. The feline—no longer a cottony white but streaked with damp reds, purples and greens—left behind a multi-colored trail of hurried paw prints in its wake.

"Who the fuck are you!" Yelled the dark-skinned woman as the tip of her staff began to glow, her voice sharp as desert glass. Solas didn't struggle as the foreign weight of her magic crashed around him, threatening to snap with the slightest provocation. A young man cowered behind her, huddled and pale, but he held a steady blade against his offered wrist.

"You wrote to me." He wheezed as he tried to remain calm, the air in his tightening lungs had grown too thin. The bleeding scratches up the back of his legs, on his hands and arms burned hot.

"How did you find us!" The woman sneered as she traversed the short steps down into the workshop. Already her eyes glowed and the defensive spells she'd wrapped around herself pulsed at the ready.

"My name is Solas, should there be any introductions." His head dizzily spun as he pulled himself together, wiping at the crimson dye that had leaked onto his bald head. The remembered words were issued near naturally and for the briefest of moments Solas recalled saying almost the same amiable phrase to another unintroduced mage. It was strange now, to hear his own name from his tongue. It sounded hollow without the gentle cadence of the elf who had cleansed the word of the original, self-inflicted punishment he'd assigned himself to.

He slowly reached for the front of his robes, seeking the document that had finally forced his decisions in Crestwood. "You offered me aid through a mutual friend."

"Oh no you don't!" The blood mage barked, using her magic to forcibly restrain the creeping hand. "What kind of shifty trick is this?"

Solas sneezed repeatedly into his shoulder, succeeding only in turning his nose and cheek a terrible shade of violet. "I have no intent of attacking you. The letter you sent is in my clothes—" was all he managed as the crystal-end of her weapon was thrust upon his constricted throat. The woman's dark brown hand slid up the staff as she drew near, keeping a threatening eye upon the intruder. With her free hand she pulled the anterior of his ruined vest aside and rummaged for the record in question. Finding the now crumpled and worn sheet, she backed away, resuming the distance before handing the letter off to the nervous assistant that had followed her down the stairs.

"Read it Marlo." She ordered to the gawky youth, thrusting the paper in his direction. With shaky hands, the boy she commanded opened the folded sheet and turned it around, having started upside-down.

"It's m-my handwriting, Edolie." The lad confirmed, still clutching the knife. His lanky, sleeveless arms were covered in scars in varying degrees, some faded and pale, others a new, glaring red. "This is the letter we put in those boots."

"I was not told that these were being relayed to an elf." Edolie spat as she glared at the puffing apostate trapped in her now disheveled dwelling. The colorants that they had worked on all winter to sell in the upcoming market were completely ruined, the contents soaking into the dirt floor. "You are not the Altus my friend described, the one who was supposed to have gotten us clemency!"

"If there was an arrangement made I was not aware of it." Gasped Solas, trying not to rub at his itchy wounds or sway on his rapidly unsteadied feet. Why couldn't he breathe, he'd been perfectly sound just moments before. The air he sucked in rattled in his throat and a deep cough refused to be abated.
"But I believe you are referring to my colleague in Ferelden."

Shaking her head angrily, the tense mage poked at the wilting elf with the end of her staff. "So what? Did they send you to help us? Maker's balls, what kind of moron are we dealing with here! You look like you can barely stand, how are you going to help us cross borders or evade capture!"

Leaning back into the wall, Solas slowly lowered his hands and inspected the red, streaky gouges the animal's claws had made. "Your cat… is it… venomous?"

"He's a cat, don't be daft. Haven't you ever seen one before?" Edolie righted her staff and placed a hand on her narrow hip. The elf before her looked absolutely miserable and just about as unthreatening as he could get. Covered in dye, scratches and struggling just to draw breath, she could only feel sorry for the incompetent interloper as he slid down the wall and into a seated position on the floor. "Just because I'm a blood mage doesn't mean I have the power to turn everything and anything into some vile weapon."

"Marlo, fetch the kit." She groaned, rubbing at her temples with her staff-less hand.

"Yes ma'am!" squeaked the boy, more than happy to get as far away from the stranger as possible.

The delicate bracelets about her wrists jingled as she soothed the dissipating tension. She crouched to give Solas a better look, leaning into her weapon for support, as her assistant skittered off. "Looks like they only send sickly strays out of the South. Wonderful."

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**Codex:**

*Not many people take the road west into Perendale for the sake of pleasure. Few living things inhabit the rocky countryside save for silver miners, wyverns, and an astoundingly pugnacious breed of mountain goat. In far-off days, the mountains around the city were full of dragons, and perhaps this was what first brought it to the attention of the Pentaghast kings. Certainly, it was not the goats.*

*Although the region has belonged to Nevarra since the late Blessed Age, travelers here will find much that reminds them of a provincial Orlesian town. A great carving depicting the Lions Slaying the Dragon adorns Perendale's gate, and many Orlesian lions decorate the city's buildings. And there are still many citizens who cling to the hope that the empress will restore the city to the empire.*

*Historians mostly agree that it was not the dragons, nor the silver, and certainly not the goats that began centuries of warfare between Orlais and Nevarra. It was Emperor Etienne Valmont and the Pentaghasts.*

*In 7:82 Storm, the Pentaghast family, fresh on the throne again for the first time in generations and eager to build up the alliances lost by the Van Markham dynasty, approached the emperor to solidify a peace treaty through marriage. The emperor, who was under great pressure to produce an heir, set aside his empress of 17 years and wed Princess Sotiria Pentaghast, theoretically cementing a promise of peace and cooperation between Nevarra and Orlais.*

*Promises are hard to keep. By 7:97 Storm Sotiria was still childless, and the emperor sent her to a cloister so that he might marry his mistress. As anyone other than Etienne might have predicted, the Nevarrans took this poorly. Angry letters arrived in the Imperial Palace by the cartload. A small war party of Pentaghasts rode into Orlais and reclaimed Princess Sotiria. But the Nevarrans did not take...*
military action yet. They were strategists, and knew to bide their time.

In 8:46 Blessed, while most of the Orlesian army was committed to a war in Ferelden, the Pentaghasts began their war against Orlais. The Orlesians rallied a defense and drove the Nevarrans from Ghislain and Arlesans, but at the cost of much of their northern territory. Perendale was lost and never recovered. A lingering sign that peace between the two nations was impossible.

—From In Pursuit of Knowledge: Travels of a Chantry Scholar, by Brother Genitivi
Surviving his first encounter with Marlo and Edolie was one thing. Stomaching their twisted tale is quite another.

The soft clatter of a dull chime echoed through the dawn. Distant and muffled, the tinkling sound was only joined by the gentle bleat of a kept animal from the nearby stock pen.

Solas forced open his sore eyes, finally relieved of their puffiness. Rolling over on his thin bedroll, he began to rub his aching chest, trying to soothe the strained muscles atop his ribs. Breathing was much easier now, the terrible constriction lifted from his lungs. He looked out through the wide gaps in the disused shed he’d nearly dragged himself into the night before. His tunic hung from the remaining crossbeam, blocking most of the dawn’s first light. However, it was not the burgeoning sun’s rays that stained the normally off-white fabric into the multitude of colors that remained from his most recent of miscalculations. He’d washed to the best of his ability in the adjacent brook where he’d first cleansed his wounds, soaking the deep scratches on his skin and rinsing off the spilled colorants in the trickling waters. The shirt was now streaked with reds, greens and violets all bled together down the back and splattered on the sleeves.

Begrudgingly medicated and then promptly kicked out of the appropriated home, the wheezing elf had tended to his stinging injuries within the darkness of the only reasonable shelter left available to him. He had been in no condition to even pull out his bedroll none the less pitch a tent. Woozy from the potent rashvine tincture he’d choked down before being shoved back out through the same door he’d entered, Solas had fallen asleep as soon as he’d finished applying the offered, greasy salve to his hands and the backs of his legs. The reaction that had brought him to his knees had been mostly diffused, yet there had been little option but for him to immediately trust the medicine the blood mages provided. He’d accepted the treatment from near strangers, knowing scant more than their names and precarious situation. Suspected poison should have passed his lips, instead they had aided the intruder of their tucked away hideout.

Feeling much the complete fool, having been outed by an unaccounted for sleeping cat, Solas fetched his ruined garments and gingerly dressed. For a moment, though he knew better than to hope, the mage pressed the collar of his shirt to his nose and inhaled.

It was gone. And had been for weeks.

There was no trace of the Inquisitor left amid the fibers to glean as much as it had comforted him those first few days since he’d last held her near. Releasing the garment and straightening the edges, his hands busied themselves with the belts looped about his hips. He left his feet unwrapped, avoiding the terrible pressure it would have inflicted upon his calves where some of the longer gouges had been inflicted. Even the worn wool of his shirt chafed against his wrists and forearms however the salve had done much for them already.

Ducking through the lopsided doorway, Solas paused at the sight of a short bowl covered by a small square of cotton laid just outside the decrepit shack. Carefully lifting the thin sheet, he was surprised to find several fresh sprigs of herbs and seasonal blossoms lightly crushed, all of which could be readily seeped for a replenishing brew. He picked through each, taking care to note anything that
stood to make him sick, or worse. But not a trace of deathroot bark or any other insidious ingredient could be found. Elfroot, mint, marigolds root, sweet grass, would all make an astringent, but revitalizing drink once prepared.

Returning to the creek with the earthen bowl in hand, he dipped it into the water and let the shallow basin fill up. Solas set the bowl high upon a smooth rock, giving the herbs time to soak as he took in the surrounding countryside. There were scarcely any trees in the immediate area, leaving wide swaths of open field amidst the rolling hills and distant, steeper inclines. This lack of coverage seemed both very imprudent and yet rather wise. In desperate times it was difficult to be choosy when it came to good hiding places. Solas himself had been forced into less amiable conditions. Without the dense screening of the woods they could more easily be seen, but out in the open few could hide from them either. And where best to lay low but in plain sight, where no one would think to look first.

In the concealment of night, he hadn’t discerned any of the peace or respite that permeated the old farm that had long ago fallen into a state of disrepair. Though humble and lovely in appearance, it still smelled. His nose could not dull itself to the pungent odors fast enough. Even now the stench of dye-crafting and of goat seemed to cling to every breeze. It had been abhorrently detected previously, but now there was time to give it full consideration.

Solas’ sole focus had been finding his query, the people he’d traveled hundreds of miles to speak with. No aroma or sight would put him off his goal. He’d taken little notice and no pleasure from his time on the road and was certain to glean even less here. The dire consequences of his quest outweighed every discomfort and overruled the fierce protesting his heart had berated him with throughout.

It wasn’t until he took the first sip of the cool brew that tingled on his tongue and softened the coarseness of his raw throat did he spot the figure of the young man crouched within the goat pen as his eye passed across the corralled animals. The gawky Tevinter youth seemed to have regained some of his color after the terrible fright suffered, but his skin was far from the rich hue of the older mage that commanded him. An odd pair, Solas had noted during their brief and bristled introduction, he struggled to define the connection between them. Certainly they weren’t kin unless it was distant, but the boy seemed too quick to obedience for their relationship to be by mere chance alone. Solas soundlessly approached, his bare feet padded across the grass without raising Marlo’s attention that was conspicuously kept on the animal tied to a post before him.

“Thank you for the herbs.” Solas tried to speak quietly as he paused by the roughly hewn fence, lashed together where it had fallen apart with frayed ropes, but his voice broke through in a harsh rasp.

Startled from his monotonous task, Marlo jumped up from his stool and disturbed the idly chewing nanny he’d been milking. The pail beneath her nearly toppled as the goat skittered away, but in the upset he managed to catch the bucket with the side of his foot before it spilled the morning’s work.

“My apologies.” Offered Solas, watching as the nervous youth reached for the twisting animal and began to stroke the sides of the goat’s head and leashed neck. The dented bell hanging from the horned creature’s collar jangled loudly, piercing the calm like a cockcrow’s call. “My intent was not to scare you.”

Marlo kept his watery, green eyes fixed upon the shaggy grazer pressed into his palms, soothed by the gentle touches and rubbing issued behind floppy ears and across its bony back. “It’s alright…” He mumbled barely opening his mouth to speak, but Solas wasn’t sure to whom exactly he spoke.

Solas sighed and took another sip of the earthy infusion. This was not the introduction or reception
he’d imagined having with these reclusive contacts and his entry into their domain could not have
gone worse if he’d tried. He could barely envision the shock he must have given them when they’d
first heard the blundering made in their workshop. How every fear of their pursuers would have
surfaced and they would have been forced into making a choice that very instant. But they hadn’t
fled. Instead, he’d been met by a pair brave enough to face the unknown, prepared to defend what
limited safety they’d claimed for themselves.

“You care for these animals well.” He remarked, trying to soften his tone between short, regularly
taken doses. The lad before him was skinny, much like the compassionate spirit whose friendship
had also been left far behind. But if the size of his maturing jaw and the length of his boots precluded
the growing in to fit them he would have to do, Marlo stood to become a large man given enough
time. “They look healthy.”

“Just good grass and clean water… all anything really needs.” Marlo carefully resumed his squat
stool and ran his too-big hands down the sides of the pacified nanny until she went back to nipping at
the grass she could reach. With temperate fingers, he touched the swollen udder and began again to
milk before the day became too hot to work in.

“Did you look after animals before this?” Solas queried and received a feeble nod that followed a
short-lived glance. Once again a pair of human eyes traced his bald head, pointed ears and measured
the rugged condition of his clothes. He must not have looked much like the rescuer promised as the
boy went back to work without any further attention.

“When I was little… before… Sheep aren’t much different from goats you know.” Marlo trailed off,
staring at the thin streams of fresh milk that sprayed down the sides of the pail as his digits rolled
each dangling nipple in turn. “Things changed. It was a long time ago.”

Solas paused his tongue for a time, not wanting to press the lad or turn his constrained acceptance
into an interrogation. His elbows found the edge of the fence and he leaned lightly upon it, fearing
that too much pressure would break it. But a soft whine issued by his feet immediately caused him to
hold his breath and wrinkle his nose as the fluffy creature passed beneath the wooden slats. Still
streaked with a motley of colors speckled all over his snowy fur, the cat trotted by with a taunting
brush against Solas’ leg from a poised tail. He waited until the feline began to cry at the feet of the
assistant before releasing the air in his lungs, but a terrible tickle started anew in the back of his throat
at the mere thought of the lethal cat.

Mewling and rubbing upon Marlo’s boots with audible affection, the white cat began to beg for the
creamy contents that slowly filled the small bucket. “Yes Kitty, we all want our breakfast.” Assured
the tall boy, his hands never wavering in their task even as the purring grew louder.

“You’ve befriended that vile creature?” Solas wiped at his nose, forbidding a sneeze as the same
animal that had viciously assaulted him flopped down in the grass, impatiently rolling and making an
endearing display of himself. But to Solas the cat was anything but cute or cuddly looking, there was
a dark twinkle in his almond shaped eye that boded of anything but.

“Edolie doesn’t care for him much. But he keeps the mice out of the food so he can stay. Guess he
likes me well enough.” Marlo answered as he moved the pail and released the finished goat to go
back to her herd and her kid. “Be nice if he would talk though…”

“Normal animals seldom speak to us.” Solas emptied the remaining brew in the bowl and set it upon
the flattest looking post. The herbs inside could be used again if set to hot water for a time. There
was little sense in wasting them, although he was already beginning to feel better physically.

“But what if he weren’t… normal.” Supposed the assistant, pouring a splash of the milk into his palm
and allowing the awaiting feline to lick the fatty liquid up from his offered hand. “There are ways, you know. I have tried a few things…”

“It would not be my recommendation to bind a spirit to an animal without grave reason, as a mage it would be more beneficial and less risky to seek companionship within the Fade.” Cautioned Solas, eyeing the cat with even more suspicion. The feline hadn’t felt right, beyond the uncomfortable sensations the cat’s scent had upon him. Even Edolie’s dismissal hadn’t settled the odd notion in his mind. Something about ‘Kitty’, mainly his particular aura, had seemed off from the moment Solas had tripped on him in the dark.

“I don’t really dream. Besides, whoever said I was a mage?” Marlo answered flatly, wiping his damp hand on his pants and hoisting the milk-filled vessel with him through the simply tied off gate. “Edolie’s the mage; I give the blood and write the words.”

Solas stared at the Tevinter native, his eyes scanning the array of scars that seemed etched into every inch of his dusky arms. He had clearly felt the presence of multiple magical entities when he’d surveyed the property, feeling them out through their thin draw upon the Veil. “Then how do you experiment on your cat without the aid of magic?”

“Well… I can do magic, just not like my master or you. Wasn’t much born with the gift. But she pressed some onto me.” Marlo rubbed at his neck, beneath a small knot of tangled gold-tipped hair, alieving some crick earned through milking. “Well, more like sewed it. Now I can do a few things when she needs me to and I do some tests of my own. She lost her support when they found out about me. Guess it was against the rules, and now here we are.”

“Is that…” Solas was baffled, but he kept his alarm well buried as he evaluated the boy once more. He was glad to finally get him talking, but the words offered up were disturbing to say the least. Solas began to wonder just exactly what he had gotten himself involved with. Master. The word burned his ears to hear it, and the way that the Tevinter escapee uttered it did not bode of a mere apprenticeship and tutelage. The nervousness, the scars, the obedience, the accompanying word, all began to form a warning in Solas’ mind. “Did you consent to those experimentations? Were you not afraid of what might have become of you if it went poorly?”

Marlo slowly began to turn the bucket by twisting his wrist, keeping the fresh milk agitated and the fat from settling. “Maybe a little, could have gone too far, been made an abomination like the Chantry is always warning everyone about. But things turned out fine. She wants to keep going, make it better, stronger. Hasn’t called on any demons yet, but Edolie is only so powerful by herself. And out here, she won’t find much other help outside of the Fade.”

Solas could already feel his hands begin to tighten, pressing into the wood enough to make the scrap board creak before he released it. “Where is your master now? I would like to speak with her.”

“Probably still making rounds. Wait by the front door, should be back anytime if the bounty-hunters haven’t snatched her yet.” Marlo said calmly, heading off with the goat milk. He was seemingly unbothered by the mention of the experiments, which many would have dared call atrocities, performed upon him. “Just promise me something…”

“And what would that be?” He asked as the young man walked away with the hungry cat at his heel. “Don’t tell her about Kitty yet, I want it to be a surprise.”
Solas had waited by the door long enough to feel the sun begin to bear down upon his uncovered head and neck. He’d stood patiently, leaning against the wall until his eyes began to grow heavy and his chin drooped towards his chest. But the sharp crack of a stern voice brought him abruptly from his stupor, leaving him to stare blearily at a dour looking woman carrying a laden basket.

“If you are well enough to stand then you are fit enough to open the damned door for me.”

“Certainly.” Taking the handle, Solas pulled the wooden door out for the mage, allowing the older woman to haul her load into the single roomed dwelling before he followed after. Filled with dozens of bottles, sealed boxes and knotted sacks, there was little space for any actual living inside the commandeered hut. Two small cots tucked into the corner, a small hearth with a crock, and a table that had only a single chair were the only furnishings. He had to maneuver carefully to avoid the longest, drying bouquets dangling from the rafters. “May we speak a moment?”

“Only if you keep your hands as busy as your mouth.” Edolie groaned as she dropped the wicker basket onto the table and pulled a pair of gloves from a pocket in her skirts. “You used up enough of my herbs last night and got blood all over my workshop. Not to mention ruined all those dyes, might as well put you to work.”

“I have little experience with herbs.” Solas admitted as he neared the table, leaning over to inspect the gathered bunches of leaves and flowers, clusters of mushrooms and bundles of twigs. But he immediately withdrew his explorative probing when his fingers were swatted at for getting to close to a stack of long, wrinkly red leaves.

The mature mage narrowed her dark eyes as she fetched a second, rougher pair of gloves from the nearby shelf before tossing them at the apostate trying to rifle through her day’s collection. “Don’t you know not to touch raw rashvine?”

“Perhaps you might enlighten me then.” Solas answered, swallowing his pride as he donned the protective gear and followed the tiresome instructions given for the various preparations. Though he was not a master herbalist, the mage was familiar enough to at least identify many of Thedas’ common plants and their various preparations, but he would appease the sour woman by doing just as she asked. The leaves had to be hanging perfectly for drying or they would mold. The petals of the bright blossoms pressed just so to preserve their hue. The fungi had to be cut vertically, elsewise certain brews might come out with inconsistent potency. Barks had to be peeled with great care to keep their bitter oils from bleeding out through the fibers before they were needed. It wasn’t until he’d proven himself competent enough to manage the assortment without constant instruction that he found the chance to speak.

“Marlo is a curious lad…” Solas began, using the butt of a small knife to sufficiently crush a few already dried nettle husks into a loose mixture before they were swept off the table and into a small pouch.

“Not really, the boy himself is not the interesting part. You missed a piece.” The blood mage began to pulverize several elfroot leaves into a thick paste, adding tiny dollops of a natural oil into the mix to create a useful, common salve. “It’s the magic you care about, just like those damned Venatori.”

“I have met a fair share of them during my travels. My associates and I have been working to stop their madness from further spreading.” Solas continued to busy his hands, slowly working his way through the diverse handful of scavenged plant material to satisfy the other mage’s incessant need to prevent idleness. “You were assured protection and clemency, perhaps there is something yet I can do to fulfill that promise. I believe that if you were to offer your aid and wisdom that—”

“Oh cut the crap. Speak plainly or get out. I have no patience for your politics.” Edolie barked lowly,
nearly losing her grip on the mortar and pedestal in her gnarled hands as she vigorously churned. “I was born in Tevinter where mages lower than you say one thing, mean entirely another and have enough sway to do both. I am old and tired of being used and thought inane. Already you have lied to me, I see no reason to believe anything else coming out of that smug mouth of yours.”

Solas blinked slowly as his brow began to knot. She knew no concept of the age or to whom she spoke, but raised aggressions would not win him what he wanted. Already, the abrasive woman was trying his tolerance yet her mood would not deter him. “We have barely shared our names; explain if you would be so kind.”

“You wanted my help with blood magic, plain and simple.” Edolie’s piercing gaze burned into Solas’, leaving him little to hide behind but a solemn veneer that offered her no more clues. But the longer he looked into the angered face that glowered at him from a nearly equaled height did her own expression betray her. The wide set of her large eyes, the highly chiseled features of her cheeks, even her nose spoke of being familiar. A shadowy, suspicious notion that lacked any substantiation toyed in the back of his mind. “For weeks I was told that the friend of a powerful Altus who held influence in Ferelden was cursed and needed relief. But here you are, not a mark on you, clean as a new mewling brat. What are you truly after if not for yourself?”

“You can sense blood magic on others?” Solas asked. He should have suspected as much. It seemed that the prowess pronounced by this mage was not a fallacy or an overstatement. The letters had promised much, enough to make him put aside the thought that they could have been too good to be true.

“Do I look like a blind old hag?” Retorted the woman who had her fair share of gray hairs caught inside her voluminous black tresses. “Nay, I can nearly smell it, almost a taste in the air. You are not afflicted. Which means that you have come from Maker knows where to seek knowledge for another. Must be a woman behind all this.”

Nearly biting his broad lip, Solas took a briefly calming breath before responding. “And why would you assume a woman is involved?” The unexpected laugh of the peculiar mage was enough to leave Solas feeling as close to boyish embarrassment as he had ever experienced. Not in all his recent years had he been confronted by a person, regardless of race or gender, who had been so quick and adept at cutting him down. Certainly she would give the Inquisition’s well-worded Enchanter or even the illustrious, sharp-tongued Dorian Pavus quite the row were they ever to meet.

Ignoring his increasingly cold stare, Edolie prodded him further as the chuckle reverberated in her chest, entirely undaunted by the knife in his hand or the nerve she had struck. He needed her, and she knew her own indispensability. “Because you are a man with some youth still left in him. And with a handsome face like that, it’s probably some poor, fair, helpless creature who would wilt if you weren’t there to save her from all her problems.”

The truth slipped through his firmly held jaw with a razor-edge. The other mage could insult him and say whatever rude nonsense at his expense that she wanted, but he wouldn’t stand for an attack that the Inquisitor was not present to defend. “That could not be further from the truth. Your evaluation is beneath her entirely.” Chiyo’s appearance was a pale comparison to the compassion that dwelled inside of her brilliant spirit. Her strength of person eclipsed any compliment towards the pleasing shape of her face or the fickle ideals of feminine figure. To call her weak was an affront to all the impossible trials that she had managed through.

“Perhaps one day when you are as experienced as I then you will see the difference, Da’len.”

Solas nearly froze as the word that sounded so foreign and so equally natural was uttered to him with sly insult. And that was when he saw it, as Edolie turned her attentions back to the table and a piece
of her thick hair shifted away from her ear. Small and round, it was the simple shape of the shemlen race, all except for the topmost edge. Instead of being the same warm brown as the rest of her skin, the curled crest of the ear was a light tan and scarred. His breath was caught in his lungs while a deep rage slowly began to boil in his gut as all the traces that had gone unnoticed before became near glaringly obvious.

Worse than any flat-ear’s disinterest or any Dalish misconception... Edolie wasn’t the human mage he first suspected her to be.

She was an elf who’d had her racial characteristics removed.

“Who cut your ears?” Solas gravely demanded, almost too quietly as his hand clenched into a tight fist about the knife before he chose to cast it away across the table.

With a pride worthy of the name he himself bore, Edolie smiled. “I did. My first real attempt at blood magic. I told you. I was born in Minrathous. No one would let me pursue my talents if they knew I was some alienage bred rat. My parents could not afford to have them done when I was a child, they would have healed better. But it would have cost a whole year’s worth of a tanner’s wage, and there were many mouths to feed.”

“I have one more question.” He had to know. “Why?” Solas asked with bile rising up from his stomach at the mere thought.

Edolie paused in her work, she squinted her eyes at him before nodding. “It was either losing my ears or becoming someone’s pet. Their own personal rabbit mage, to do parlor tricks, make the tonics. No matter how hard my father worked they could only afford to have my brother’s ears nipped as a child. His mended nicely. Some aren’t so lucky. I was left to fend for myself with the matter if I didn’t want to be sold out, ‘for my own good’. I wouldn’t have lasted a year on those streets without ending up in bonds or on a rented bed. No elf makes it out of a Tevinter alienage in one piece. So I stayed and made something of myself. Went on fine for decades.”

Solas silently stood as the room about him began to spin. He barely listened as the troubled mage retold the gist of her tale a sudden nausea began to brew, leaving an acidic taste high in his throat. This was his fault too, another on the endless list of lives that had been ruined by the loss of magic as a natural facet of their existence.

How many elves had been pushed to such extremes to survive? How many ears had been sheared to suit the desperate need to assimilate with humanity…Things could have been so different, but Fen’Harel had never been one to back down when he believed so adamantly to be right. To have the best possible solution, though it came at such a terrible cost.

By changing her appearance and disguising her race she had garnered a decent name for herself and was allowed to take on apprentices. She was granted pupils and gifted educated slaves like Marlo to do whatever was needed to advance her investigations.

“Maldinra thought that his original purchasing documents meant that the boy was still his property, and any effects were essentially an extension of his intellectual rights! Tried to use my bloodline, which he had no evidence of as blackmail, shitty bastard.”

Her chief patron had tried to take claim for her accomplishments once she’d finally succeeded. When she countered the allegations in a civic forum, she was denounced as an imposter. Edolie had been publically charged for doing atrocious things to children and committing unspeakable acts towards the Imperium.
It seemed the woman held no qualms with her own story, finding no wrong in her actions and justified in her deeds.

“I did nothing to Marlo that I hadn’t tried on myself first. He was mine to do what I wanted either way.” The mage scraped the green paste she’d crafted into a small, empty jar before setting the finished product on an open gap in the shelf. Settling herself into the only chair, Edolie began the delicate process of carefully removing the hair-thin thorns from the thick, rubbery skin of a succulent leaf with a pair of bone-whitted tweezers. “There, you know my dark, terrible secret, before the boy gives you anymore outlandish ideas. I will be expecting the same honesty from you.”

“If the information is necessary.” Solas clarified, peeling off the gloves and setting them together on the table’s edge. “Your history does not alter what I seek, nor does my own tale need mention.”

A pair of dark brown eyes stole a long look at the elf excusing himself from her presence. “Get me into Orlais and I will teach you anything you want. Help us into Ferelden, and I’ll help this girl myself. Deal?”

“Agreed.” The apostate confirmed, already reaching for the door. He needed air, and to think, before the corrosive guilt consumed him from within.

“When you have deemed it necessary, I will need a full account of this curse as you call it. And I also want to know with whom you call these friends, your allegiance against the Venatori.”

“You have certainly heard of this new organization. Even as a vagabond, I doubt that the deeds of the Inquisition have not been brought to your attention. There is welcome there for mages, perhaps even for some like yourself.” Solas explained dispassionately, and with that said he escaped with every ounce of his reserve demanding that he not abandon the farm all together. It was all so wrong, and none of it had to do with the actual blood magic. “Excuse me.”

He’d barely made it to the door when the bitter brew began to rise in the back of his throat, no longer as palatable as it had been going down. Solas pressed his hand over his mouth, breathing heavily through his nose as the image played again and again in his mind. Of young elven children being held down beneath a pair of scissors, screaming out in pain. Piles of pointed ear tips swept up at the end of the day while the healer counted the blood-earned coins. Those removed pieces of flesh being cast into the garbage with the same regard as the cobbler’s scrap leather…

Before he could stop himself, Solas made a grab at the side of the hut before becoming violently ill.

Elves without ears. An elf owning slaves and using magic on them at her whim. This was only the beginning of the desperate and disgraceful depths he’d forced the descendants of his people to assume. The Dalish may have been wrong on so many accounts, but at least their goal was to remain somewhat elvhen. But the elves of Tevinter, left to rot and suffer within their alienages, had abandoned every remnant of who they once were.

They wanted freedom, yes, and they were attaining it by not being elves.

He would gather this wayward pair to leave soon enough. The less time he spent in their company would be for the better. Much longer than one border crossing… He dared not even think of what else would be said to leave a despairing sickness in his soul.

Once the door had closed behind the retching elf, Marlo silently slipped into the room from the connected workshop. Held tightly in his grasp, he brought forth a rag smeread with a few browned stains. “The Inquisition is very powerful… If we had allies like them… Do you think he’s telling the truth?”
“Of course he’s not, not in whole. Why would he?” Answered Edolie lowly as she extended her hand to accept the blood smeared cloth. She spread the wrinkled fabric on the table and began to trace the streaks and the red prints in the form of tiny cat paws. Traces of the remaining essence wafted towards her hovering palm, telling her much of the man that needed their help. She’d gleaned much when the wounds sustained had been fresh, but even dry there was something left to yield.

“The apostate might try his hand at deceit, but the blood doesn’t lie.”
Sights set on Wycome, Chiyo doesn’t exactly look forward to finding out what became of her clan or of the mercenaries acting on her behalf. Sera wants to make things better, but good intentions alone never made for uncomplicated relations.

As always, I want to thank Elystaa for doing a great edit and being a constant friend! Your help has always been such a blessing in my life.

I hope everyone else is hanging in there equally well, how are we doing so far? I know this is a long one, bigger than I ever expected, and feedback is welcome no matter what. If you've made it this far, I can only congratulate you!! It's hard to gauge something when you love it, and I want everyone else to enjoy it just as much as I do. Let me know if there are questions or concerns. :)

Inquisitor Lavellan,

It is with cautious concern that I direct this second letter having heard no reply from the first sent after you took leave of the Storm Coast three weeks ago. Our agents have enlightened us that you boarded an undisclosed vessel of Antivan origins with not only Ser Altus Pavus and Master Tethras, but that you also procured the services of the Chargers for this unannounced escapade. We were unaware that you had such urgent business outside of southern Thedas. After the recent incident with the young dwarven recruit, Rat as she called herself, it is certain that this disappearance involves the current state of Sutherland and the new mercenaries under his command. While the other Advisors may not be aware of all the details surrounding your departure, I only hope to convey our offer of help. I assure you that the Inquisition would gladly send whatever resources requested. Simply send word. The Inquisition has little influence that far North and few trustworthy allies outside of my personal few, in so aid will take some time.

Your faithful counselors will manage Skyhold with upmost diligence in your absence. As for an update, there has been no increase in the new rifts that have plagued much of Ferelden and Orlais. Your speedily organized and redoubled efforts in closing them has reassured many of your ability to manage whatever our enemy may threaten when he chooses to resurface.

Conversely, if you happen to find pause while visiting Wycome, there are a few tears noted from prior reports.

Please, for all our sakes, be careful.

-Josephine Montilyet
The sea wind blew warmly through Chiyo's hair as she leaned over the ship's high rail, letting the solitary sheet of sweet-smelling parchment unfurl as it slipped further through her loosely held grasp. The Ambassador's letter had been sent ahead by crow, meeting them in the last port along the coast where they had stopped to refresh their supplies. She had yet to answer to this correspondence either. But instead of relishing in the new found freedom of leaving the Inquisition far behind, she only felt ever more bound to it.

A sudden gust released the letter and sent it twirling into the rolling waves, now forever lost to the foamy waters below. Chiyo's stomach threatened to turn with the next big swell. Her feet remained somewhat steady in the sway, though they longed to feel the solid ground again. The few hours they'd spent in the docks of Hercenia had not satisfied the need to feel the grass and dirt beneath her toes. Though cleanly kept, the wooden top level was often damp with the ocean's spray and left the Inquisitor's well-traveled feet lost for their usual balance. This was made only increasingly worse when traversing a freshly soaped sundeck and tripping over the lad holding the scrub brush and bucket.

She'd once already made a disgrace of herself by stumbling headfirst into some of the vessel's other northward bound passengers, who'd been picked up along the way. Chiyo had collided with a curvaceous dwarf and been met by quite the startled tongue-lashing from the redhead. Adversely, it had been much to the amusement of the svelte Antivan elf accompanying the short woman whose impressive bust spared the Herald a swift impact against the mast. The entangled, flustered ladies had given the petite, blonde man far too many sexually explicit ideas which he'd shown no concern in vocally sharing. This had earned her quite the onslaught of laughter from the craft's crew and half the roster of Iron Bull's private army.

After that incident she'd kept mostly to her shared quarters, avoiding further embarrassment and any more illicit offers from strange men with odd tattoos on their faces. It gave her time to perfect her hand at Wicked Grace, as well as to distract the shared misery of her companions. Only the Iron Bull appeared entirely unfazed, but everyone else seemed some shade of green about the gills while seafaring.

The excessive time below deck however had become stifling, leaving her too much time to think. The cool evening air, laced with salt and the effervescent aroma of seaweed, did much to clear her head after a long day of narrowing walls and idle, aimless chatter. Everyday brought her closer and closer to what had been her entire world, her home. The land on which she had been born was only a scant few miles inward, the region where she'd spent her more emergent years training with the Lavellans, almost in reach. A day's ride would take her back to those same forests and fields of her youth. Yet she could not feel further from it even with the coast still well within easy view.

Her heart was no longer there. Or anywhere, for the matter.

It had not been reclaimed or re-forged from the night she'd left the scattered remnants strewn across Dorian's sitting room floor.

Still no word from Solas had come in the now months since his disappearance, and he had vanished entirely from her dreams. She could no longer conjure up a solid illusion of the man, only faint, fleeting shadows, even as she reproduced more and more details into her visions from memory. Pieces of him would come into focus, long enough for the wolf to inspect and then unsympathetically dismiss before deciding on a near random direction to pad off in. Every night she crafted and wandered, leaving a long trail of honed, concrete thoughts. Much like waystations behind in case the road became too treacherous to follow or the silent guide abandoned her.

So far, the wolf had never strayed from her sight. He ate often, and well. Always patiently waiting
for her to offer him another conjured piece of her dreams. Chiyo could always spot the upright, quizzical crook of his tail or the dark bulk of his thickening body if he roamed away from the unexplored places they traveled each night. As fantastical or sometimes frightening as the things she witnessed were, none of them held answers of what she wanted. No track or sign was found and the wolf cared little for her forlorn disappointment.

Where could he be? Had he vacated the Fade entirely to prevent her from following? The frustration left Chiyo's stomach in knots as she dropped to her forearms, resting tiredly against the rail and letting the salty water spray her slack hands.

"Don't tell me you're out here to feed the fishes your lunch again." Groaned Sera while dropping down onto the ascending nets and rigging from her higher perch. Slipping her legs through the knot-work, she turned to hang upside-down beside the postulating Herald. No nook, cranny or roost had escaped Sera's pervasive explorations. The whole ship had become her personal amusement as she spent her hours expending the pent up energies that often drove the other's to irritated madness if she didn't relieve them. She was certainly an elf not designed for small, confined spaces. The crew members however, had not been pleased to find her using the crow's nest or crossing the sails in order to shoot down some of the accompanying albatrosses. Arrows confiscated, the boredom had resumed and pranks ensued.

"I didn't eat lunch, wasn't much in the mood for chunked fish-stew again." Mumbled Chiyo, glancing up at the dangling blonde hanging precariously near the water's churning edge. Swinging by her knees, the feisty rogue stretched out with her hands tucked behind her head.

Sera ignored the frayed, loose shirt sliding away from her back and belly, exposing her freckled skin to the bright orange light of the sunset being reflected off the shining sea. "Or breakfast, right? Saw you eyeing that bucket like it were full of all the Maker's bless'd salvation. Beginning to think that egg-head left you a goodbye present…"

Her curious gaze turned into a dulled glare that did little to wipe the rude smirk from the rogue's upturned lips. "You have been stealing more elfroot out of my bag the last few days than I have been using myself. Half of my clean cotton is gone too… At least I wasn't up at dawn scrubbing my bed-clothes."

"Aww, Inky that's gross. Don't have to bring that crap up do ya? Embarrassing twat, no manners in this one." Sera scowled, wrinkling her short nose and thrusting her tongue impolitely from her mouth. But a well-deserved eyeroll from the white-haired Inquisitor soon had her smirking anew. "Or do the Dalish not keep nasty stuff private? Takin' shits must be the most declared part of your day."

"Blood." She murmured with intended eeriness. Chiyo smiled, matching the same peevishness of the imp who was trying to goad her into a hormonally induced fight. But she knew all too well how to win with softly spoken words, like the spirit who often spooked the young city elf. "On your knickers. Sticking on your thighs… Feel it as it leakss—"

"Ugggh!" Sera gagged as she nearly came loose from the ropes. "Ain't supposed to talk about it! Nobody wants to hear about lady-junk all out and about."

"Why? It's normal enough, nothing to be ashamed of." The Inquisitor chuckled as the rogue dislodged herself, rolling off the net in disgust. It had baffled the Dalish elf from the beginning to see the other women around her so tongue-tied about their own bodies over a simple fact of life. Perhaps it was general prudishness. Though they were overt enough when it came to sex, which seemed the more uncomfortable topic in her opinion. Even when outright asked, Sister Giselle had formally declared that nothing in any of the Chantry's literature mentioned anything vilifying the natural
occurrence. Except that the Divine—were she still of the proper age—was often blessed with cessation, since that blood was not exactly the most holy of substances to emit.

"Is your pain better today? It's not like you to go to bed so early. Or leave knives in the door… Just how many do you sleep with anyways?" As a second thought however, Chiyo almost didn't want to know the number of blades her mischievous companion frequently kept beneath her pillow.

"I'm fine. Your stinky leaves help some, been chewing them all damn day. Stuck in my teeth, makin' me spit." Sera answered sharply as she righted herself, but not without a shame-faced glance at her own behind. Hands on her gracious yet sore hips, she pushed on the wide bones to force a deep stretch.

"Well if you need, I could make you a stronger blend. A little witherstalk can sometimes provide a temporary easement, as a tea—please don't chew the twigs…" Chiyo offered to her silently suffering friend. Time and time again she had watched Sera shove her way through the monthly misery, teeth bared and attitude unchecked. It seemed even the Red Jenny knew the bother she became to those nearby who could barely tolerate her normal antics, let alone when she was lashing out from pain. She would somewhat seclude herself when possible, lest anyone dare come near her during the peak of her wrath.

"I don't want nothing to do with your weird, herbal magecraft, ain't natural. Ladies are supposed to just deal with it. Grin, have a biscuit, stay off the good seat, and that's what I do." Sera immediately declined the suggestion, scowling as if she'd been asked to sample a piece of nug excrement. But she leaned in to whisper, glancing about in case anyone was to potentially overhear. "Never seen you doubled over or soaking your britches 'cus you overslept just a little bit, anyways. Is that from herbs too, Inky?"

"Sometimes, but I can't say that I have been the picture of health since Haven." She answered honestly, though she could count on both hands with room to spare the number of months when her cycle had actually come. Seasons would pass unmarked, mostly when the worst of circumstances plagued her on all sides. But during the few lulls, things had slowly returned to normal. It seemed Sera's own patterns were starting to rub off on her though, as she'd noted over the long excursions with the puckish woman. It was a woeful tandem, and the ship's strains did not make it better for either. "Stress does some rather terrible things to one's body. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Why do you think I keep trying to shove food down your throat? No tits, no lady pain, and all you do is sleep now." Sera's hands fidgeted at her sides for a moment, picking at the seams of her pants, until she reached out to gesture at the more problematic portions of the Dalish elf's features in turn. She poked at the petite chest hidden beneath the draped layers of loose tunics, her fingers pinched smartly near the darkened depressions beneath Chiyo's warm brown eyes.

"Still got some hips on you though, yeah." A teasing swat had the Inquisitor lurching away with a squeal until her own backside careened into the firm railing. The rogue grinned down at the shorter elf while her ill-behaved hands found a hold on either side of the Herald, effectively fencing her in. "Wonder what ya can do with those… Bet it'd be all sorts of clickity-clack."

But her rude joy slowly drained as she softly stared into the wide eyes of the Inquisitor and found less amusement than she'd hoped to garner. Chiyo's provoked, faint smile did not eclipse the impermeable sorrow that lingered deep behind the returned gaze. Not even the bright pinks of her more-than-naked cheeks could quell the resistive doubt that grew on Sera's brash decision. Her overconfident shoulders wilted and her sharp chin sank low. She knew the predicament was…

Complicated.
Sera hated complicated, but she saw no way of untangling the charming woman caught against her from the unsettling term. This wasn't what she wanted, it didn't feel right when just moments before the idea had seemed so brilliant... so why was she doing it? "Andraste's droopy nips, you're a sad one. Sorry, damn it. Shouldn't tease like that. Not when you already feel like week-old horse shite."

"Now you really sound like you don't feel well." Chiyo tried to console the tall woman who'd turned her grimacing face away in the awkwardness of her own behavior.

"You gotta stop being nice to me. No one is nice to me." Sera sucked in the sides of her mouth to avoid an oncoming pout. "And here you are, going about fixing half the fucking world and still saying things, words, like I matter. I cause all this trouble and you go draggin' me out on a boat. It doesn't make sense. I don't belong here and you know it... don't even really know why I'm in this ta'begin with."

"Because you are my friend and you wanted to help. That's a good enough reason in my book to be anywhere." The mage's weak smile turned to surprised concern when the full weight of the other elf was pressed upon her and the arms that had blocked her escape loosely wrapped behind her back. "Forgive me if I don't always express that enough. Things haven't always been perfectly smooth between us, have they?"

"Can you… just tell me that bit again every now and then?" Sera asked quietly, her cheek pressed against the wild white curls that grew against the Inquisitor's temple. But the cropped tresses of the mage she held seemed to glow as though they were on fire, caught in the brilliantly dying light. She stared out into the dark, open ocean as the sun finally sank below the blurred horizon. "The friend part, don't wanna forget it. It's important."

"I'm not going anywhere Sera, you won't let me." Chiyo reassured, returning the impromptu hug around the Red Jenny's higher waist.

"Don't go making promises that you can't keep, ain't fair." Sera huffed before squeezing the small mage much too tightly and rubbing her jaw abrasively against the already messy locks until the Inquisitor's scalp felt nearly raw. "Just say things will be ok even if they won't and that you'll smile for real again, not this fake shit. And that you'll eat."

"Ok! Ok! Let's go get dinner!" She wheezed in the crushing embrace before being cast roughly from the ship's rail and herded away towards the galley with several persuading pinches to move her hurriedly along.

"And make up for lunch too, damn it! Grow you some tits!"

"Thank goodness that trek is over. Boating as a way to travel holds no elegance. Any longer in that damp hull and I would have grown barnacles." Dorian pulled his pack higher on his back as he watched the ship that had borne them along the coast begin to set sail once more. It had taken quite the bribe to even get the captain to agree to make the stop in the first place. Dealing with a displaced giant who'd claimed their dry dock for his own stomping grounds was no easy feat.

The sailors had been exceedingly tight-lipped as to why they were so apprehensive, finding excuses to hurry off to a chore—ropes could never be too tidy— and left only the vaguest of nervous explanations. It was clear that they feared some disease or contamination, of which they could not explain. From one of the older crew mates, after a liberal supply of Iron Bull's personal brandy had been consumed, they learned that the last passengers from the unmentionable city had died a terrible, disturbing death while on a return trip southwards. All the evidence had been swiftly dumped overboard to protect the crew and the surviving passengers. No amount of reward or coin could get
any of them to go to Wycome for more than a passing glance.

They had refused to even accept the Inquisitor's generous offer of purchasing more supplies from the renowned harbor for the trouble they were being put through. Loaded onto a small rowboat, the main vessel stayed far from the coast as the Inquisition's small army was deposited on the shoreline.

"Well, so much for a welcoming party." Sighed the Tevinter mage as they left the near uninhabited docks. He stepped gingerly around a putrid stain that had leaked from a discarded, but not unoccupied, poultry cage. "Thought they would have at least cleaned the streets for the Herald of Andraste's processional."

Only a few souls milled about, keeping mostly to themselves and offering no greeting to the newcomers. They were told to leave, that this town was cursed and had no safe harbor for strangers. The shady folk disappeared between the silent dwellings when the Inquisitor or any of her company tried to get closer.

"Where is everyone? Wycome is a large city, shouldn't there be more people?" asked Chiyo to her equally uncertain gathering. Breaking into groups, the Chargers and the Inquisitor parted ways to seek out any survivors that were willing to give them a better account of what had come to pass. They looked to the first and largest nearby houses whose finely arched windows had been boarded up and intricate doors barricaded. At a first glance the expensive homes appeared untouched, but a closer inspection revealed many had been expertly broken into.

A few deft maneuvers from Varric's fine lock-picks had granted them access to a near intact mansion whose halls' were dead but for the echoes of their footsteps and the ornamental furniture covered in ghostly cloth. A handful of letters were discovered in a drawer, all described a terrible plague that had been brought down upon the noblest houses and the plans made to abandon the ailing township. A deceased elven servant was found in the cellar, hidden behind several foul smelling barrels of stagnant water. With hands bound behind his back and throat slit nearly ear to ear, his death was clearly not of natural causes.

A key stashed away in the kitchen cupboard had opened the lone trunk left inside the servant's quarters. The elf murdered in the basement had planned on exposing his masters' falsified testaments of health, if he wasn't allowed along to leave the area. His silence had been purchased. But not with gold or silver…

The further in they traveled through the well-off section of the town, the more chaos and upheaval was discovered. The quiet inner streets were littered with abandoned carts, overturned crates and more than one lifeless body wrapped in heavy textile had been left in an alleyway. A pile of charred corpses was spotted in the middle of a private garden plot, but the barred gates kept the unnerved group from investigating them any further.

It wasn't until they reached a shift in the style of the buildings did they find any signs of life. Far past the most expensive dwellings stood much more humble abodes behind a maintained barricade. Scruffy men and women, all gray-faced and solemn were surprised to the point of outrage when they saw the four strangers poking around at their gates. They had been immediately asked to lay down their weapons, but more concern seemed to stem from the questioning of if they'd eaten or drank anything from that side of the divide. Declared clean after an unnervingly thorough investigation, they were allowed entrance. Each had to submit to a battery of physical checks, any sign of fever, paleness of gum, and particularly a red tint to the eye would have resulted in expulsion.

"No knife-ear plague, state your business. Does the Duke know you are here? Visitors have been advised to travel elsewhere for months." Questioned an authoritative, tall man who'd been brave enough to check the scowling Red Jenny for any sign of the local infliction. He'd taken hold of the
fine bow on her back, but immediately released it upon finding it warm… and lightly pulsating.

"Get your greasy paws off that! Rotten-piss for brains! No touch. Get it, got it?"

"We are with the Inquisition." Chiyo announced over Sera's shouting. She felt her teeth immediately set on edge with the uttered racist remark. Her own pointed ears began to burn with the bright flare of rage. No one had dared to mention an elf by such a term since her actions at the Winter Palace, the word rabbit had also gone under a similar banishment in her presence. These strangers knew not her face or name, but she would keep that unmentioned while it stood to work in her advantage. "What's going on here?"

"The Inquisition?" A resounding alarm bounced through the people nearest to the postern. "Maker, we never expected… We were told that they were too preoccupied with Ferelden's own dilemmas to come to our aid."

"Your circumstances were never made known to us, not until we sent our own agents to find out more. But they never reported back." Chiyo scanned the crowd, searching the astonished amassment. The people looked healthy but worn to exhaustion, burdened by their trials and the darkness of their circumstances. Blacksmiths, cobblers, shopkeepers, common folk all. But not a single non-human stood among them. "They went missing several weeks ago. Do you know anything of their whereabouts?"

Several of the small crowd's members shrugged and shook their heads as they discussed what was known amidst themselves. A fur-trapper had seen an odd encampment out in the valley where he normally looked for game, but when he returned the next week the tents remained with no one living inside them. One guard made her way to the front, declaring that her cousin who served Duke Antoine himself had mentioned the capture of southern spies around the same time as the claimed disappearance.

"Sutherland was not a spy, at least not one of your enemies." Assured the Inquisitor, lifting up her voice to be heard above the murmuring townsfolk. "Where is your Duke? We must meet with him at once."

"Antoine speaks to no one as of late. The council members have fled or died. He's too afraid of the plague to leave his home."

"Well if that's the case I guess we should just start walking back to Ferelden. Could stop in Kirkwall for a few drinks." Varric chuckled deeply, reclaiming his crossbow from the Wycome native who'd temporarily secured it from him. His fingers ran down the finely tuned arms, checking for any mishandling incurred. "I'm sure he can make one exception. We've come a long way…"

"He will speak to me." Chiyo retrieved her staff and turned to the guard who had spoken out with a graven face. The stocky woman towered above her in height, the breadth of her shoulders nearly double that of the elven mage, but she held no confidence with those differences when a soft green glow escaped the foreign woman's palm.

The guard shook her head, but she dared not look the angered mage directly in the eyes. Instead she hid behind the lip of her wide helmet, fixated on the light of the awoken Anchor. "Impossible. The Maker himself could come down from heaven and not dislodge that man by will or might."

"Then I guess the Herald of Andraste will just have to do."
The Devil Within

Chapter Summary

Chiyo, Dorian, Sera and Varric storm the manor of Duke Antoine. They've taken down better men and won harder fights. The truth and what they find, however, may just be too much to bear this time.

"Don't they know it's rude to keep such prestigious guests waiting?" Dorian chirped as the Herald knocked on the massive, reinforced gate for a third and final time with the twisted head of her staff. The loud whacks rang across the iron plates, certainly audible to any within the tightly locked compound. A Venatori agent now lay dead at their feet, slowly dissolving as the necromancer's magic left the reanimated corpse. He'd served well as a puppet to drive off the others, fleeing back to whatever rat-holes they'd emerged from with a cacophony of curses. It seemed the Venatori were quite fond of threatening feces on another's tongue.

They would be dealt with soon enough, once more pressing matters had been seen to first and foremost. The whole city stank of decay and deceit, the people disemboweled of their dignity and any sense of security. The townsfolk they'd encountered, however, had been more desperate than they'd been scared. There could be no healing or cure of this forsaken place until they scoured the infected source.

The followed trails of misconduct all pointed straight at the cloistered Duke Antoine.

Dorian pressed his bare shoulder to the barred guard door and gave it a piddly push. "Old Bull would have this pathetic thing down before you could cry twinkling tits on a twirling tusket! Where is that massive man when you need him? Shouldn't they have caught up to us?" The mage looked to the west at the tiny curls of black smoke that had been spotted earlier. The band could only hope that the Chargers were the ones in control of the distant blaze, and not broiling beneath their enemy's flames.

"That's not exactly what I hear you crying in your tent late at night, when everyone should be asleep, Sparkler..." Varric chortled, much to the dark-skinned man's immediate displeasure.

"Oh stuff it, the both of you. Just get back and let me crack this." Sera barked as she shoved one of her hands down the front of her shirt behind her leather armor. She fished out a small, glazed container from the dark, unknown storage between her ample breasts.

"Please tell me you didn't have Dagna craft more infernal contraptions. The undercroft still reeks of sulfur!" Varric groaned while he began to back away, warily eyeing the egg-sized ceramic ball. Sera was a bit too full of surprises for even his comfort. No one knew from whence she removed the jars of bees she often carried. And no one wanted to ask either. "That thing already looks primed!"

"Still needs a spark. Whatd'ya say, Inky?" Sera wedged the tiny bomb deep into the gate's central crevice after pressing it to her pursed lips. "Give it a go, yeah?"

Chiyo had already retreated for cover as a protective barrier was cast by her fellow fleeing mage. The stability of the mischievous rogue's little gadget was questionable and she wouldn't be fool enough to trust it for long. "Dorian is the one you should ask for fire."
"Come on, zap it!" Sera pointed at the grenade before she thrust her fingers deep inside her ears. She took refuge behind the nearest nook in the estate's outer wall. "Unless you're too scared of a quick bang!"

"Am not!" If Sera wanted a spark, Chiyo would show her a spark.

A constrained flash of lightning emitted from the end of her staff ignited the minuscule dwarven bomb. The blast had most of the party hitting the dirt to avoid being struck by the expelled shrapnel that ricocheted and rebounded off the nearby walls. A spray of metal shards and wooden splinters peppered the ground, plinking like solidified rain. The air briefly burned, assaulting everyone's nostrils with acrid smoke. One door was completely decimated, the other hung only by a single, twisted, squealing hinge for a moment before slowly collapsing into the rest of the rubble.

"Get me a whole bushel of those! Plug one in every noble's fat arse at once!" Sera shrieked in delight, rolling and kicking at the air with the destructive excitement of her newest favorite toy. She patted her chest as she finally got to her feet. "That one curled my nips!"

The party walked through the settling dust and jumbled debris. They stormed the compound with honed weapons drawn. It seemed however that their flashy entrance had scared off all but the most stouthearted of the Duke's personal guard and the Venatori agents too crazed to flee when the opportunity arose. Chasing their limited query, the foursome entered the stagnant keep.

An entire wing of the extensive building appeared recently removed. Only charred stone and beams remained where once many rooms flanked the middle courtyard, now half choked with unkempt shrubberies and weeds where the grass had not been burned away. The walled-off manor had seen far better days and much grander years than what had befallen the aristocratic estate.

Room after room had been stripped of goods and lavish, loose materials. Ruined paintings hung askew in sundered frames filched of their ornamentation. Fragments of fine statuary and porcelain stippled the marble or rare hardwood floors where the dirty outlines of massive rugs remained. Tapestries and heavy curtains had been sliced from their holders or ripped from the rungs, leaving snarled edges behind. As the group worked their way through the lowest levels and passed the seized living quarters of the western agents, they discovered a storeroom that held crate upon crate stuffed to the brim with dense packing straw. But a cursory investigation revealed the glowing red shards stowed deep within, and Varric's uncommon silence named the loathsome material for what it was.

Red lyrium.

The auspicious instructions that joined the mineral made all too clear just what had happened to Wycome.

They returned to the main hallway, but not before leaving behind another of Sera's latest acquisitions to deal with the tainted crystal before it could harm anyone else. The accommodations closer to the hold's center were cleaner and less ransacked, the library, the kitchen, a small servant's bedroom and several workplaces showed little sign of siege or banditry. But no people. Certainly there had to have been someone. Fresh flowers stood in the vases and unspoiled food had been recently left out in the pantry. Fireplaces remained warm though in need of more wood to keep them going.

After much searching to limited success, it was a sizeable desk in the main office that finally yielded some actual answers. Letters and documents lay in heaps about a high-backed chair, spilled over the edge of the bureau and scattered across the polished floor. It took all of them to sort. They skimmed over the ledgers of public outcry to the city falling to disease and political corruption. Of noble outrage for their water still not being purified enough though they'd paid their coin for the new
amendments. Demands for action against the elves whose poor populations remained untouched by the new sickness that ransacked their betters. Dorian found an old letter bearing Josephine's own artful scroll, asking for help in the name of the Inquisitor's personal interests.

"Fucking prick… Don't look, Inky." Sera warned and chewed her lips. Chiyo extended her hand once the uneasy rogue failed to reveal much of the newly discovered matters. Sera had located a sizable, hidden stash of correspondences and deeds of payment sealed within a secret compartment behind a false drawer. But the blonde elf balked as she silently read on, her wide eyes flicked to the curious Herald and back to the sketchy orders. "Details do nobody any good. What's done is done. You don't need this, promise."

"Sera… Let me read them." Chiyo's mouth went dry as the last shred of frayed hope she'd clung to was drawn taut across the moment's tense edge. Months had passed and the thin optimism had not entirely diminished though no new word ever reached her. She'd never wanted to believe the accounts that had been given to her by the Advisors and their sources. There had to have been a mistake. Josephine's contacts had to be wrong, Leliana's spies amiss. It couldn't have happened to her clan, not the Lavellans, not to all of them. Someone had to have survived, nearly a hundred strong elves couldn't have been wiped from the face of Thedas because of a solitary bad decision. Deshanna wouldn't have allowed that, she'd always kept everyone so safe, looking far to the future to protect what little they had for the present.

But one by one, Sera presented the hoarded notes. Orders to cease and desist on expensive vellum were answered to on weathered, scrap paper. Her Keeper's elegant and educated print stood out in bold, claiming that the empty lands they temporarily stayed upon were of no consequence. That the elves they met with were old friends, not spies from the Duke's own halls. A few short weeks to hunt and gather, then they would be gone. Mercenary contracts followed. Orders to stage a bandit's raid, to treat the infestation before the disease the elves had conspired together with was further spread. Ledgers that the deed was done, that no rabbit remained in the burrow. Promises of payment once the sum could be raised. Brazen coercions over money, a cut in the center of the threatening page might have once held a blade. Amounts paid in full, given the night after the keep had been raided of course.

The Lavellans had been murdered for less than five gold coins a piece. Chiyo had spent more on gifts for each of her companions during their last trip to Val Royeaux than the agreed upon value of Dalish lives. She shuffled the sheets over again, looking for any sign that someone had gotten away. The last living Lavellan found nothing, not a shred of pity or mercy granted. The same lacking aspects stayed quiet within herself, lingering in the dark shadows. But the sleepy eyes of anger opened as arisen slits. Rage took a yawning breath to show its teeth, and hatred stretched in its deep den.

Chiyo didn't even realize her hands were shaking until Dorian cupped them with his own. He gently supported them even as the evidence slipped through her hold and fluttered to rest about her wrapped feet. "Let's move on, shall we? Help those that we still can and find the ones responsible."

The Inquisitor nodded and stooped to recollect Deshanna's letters before stowing them away in her vest. She wouldn't believe it, not until she found the valley in which they'd perished and saw what remained with her own eyes. She would plant a tree, a real tree, an entire forest, to honor them one last time.

They left the scavenged office in silence. There was work yet to be done and no time of which to mourn.

It was Varric who found the locked door to the manor's innermost room. A woman's warbled words
warned them away as he picked through the hefty, excessive locks.

"No visitors! He needs his rest!"

"Oh, we'll give'em some rest alright. Got a nice lullaby for you right here." Sera spat on the hallway floor while Varric sprang the third latch and opened the finely carved door.

The small crew entered the dimly lit bedroom, footsteps softened by the thick rugs that had been laid all about, one atop the other. The room was overly full of fine furniture and heirlooms, all hoarded away behind the most secure door in the entire estate. A wrinkled woman leaned over the lone bed and its occupant. Her back was humped enough to prevent her from ever standing fully straight. The woman's long gray hair was spun into a tight knot that pulled harshly at the side of her eyes and brow. A large set of keys rattled at her hip while she worked, looped securely to her broad belt and skirts.

A thickly-built man propped up on several pillows coughed repeatedly, his face and features obscured by gauzy curtains draped from each post of the bed.

"Duke Antoine is not taking guests. Leave or I'll get the guards." The maid thinly cautioned, but she was seemingly unrattled by the armed militants entering the Duke's most private quarters. Her bony fingers finished dispensing the ill man's spoonful of medicine without so much as spilling a drop even as strangers breached the secure chamber.

The Tevinter Altus scoffed as his eye passed over the apartment's more atrocious decorations, particularly the bizarre assortment of beastly heads and stuffed animals tucked into every corner. Everything spoke of being heavy, stale and old. His mother would have loved it. "And while you're doing that I'll get a torch for those curtains, what age is this now? Blessed? Or have we traveled even further back in time." His humor, however, was not met by the sour biddy or the focused Herald.

"There are no guards. Only us," growled Chiyo, approaching the bed and the addled master kept in it. Here was her enemy, the man who bore elven blood upon his hands, whose name had been signed to his own death in doing so. In his lap, he clutched to a silvery urn and kept it pressed constantly to his person. His once handsomely tanned skin had blanched to a sickly white, the veins in his face and full neck pulsed a dark red. Scornful eyes met the mage, glowing softly as rubies caught in candlelight. She returned the contempt, ignoring the hissing remarks of the nursemaid who dared not raise so much as a finger to the dangerous apostate prowling on the other side of the stately bed.

"We have much to discuss, banal'len. You have lied to the Inquisition after offering to ally. We could have helped you with the Venatori and your people!" Her voice was curt and cutting. It was her eyes that sought to do the most damage, lost for all the gentleness they'd ever held. The elf crossed her battle-conditioned arms over her chest and awaited an explanation as if one would ever suffice.

"Another protester, or a spy?" Antoine wheezed, lungs squeezing out the haughty words through a heavily plagued chest. His tawny beard, twisted into several fine braids, clung to the sides of his damp neck. The remaining hair atop his head flopped as he began to cough again. The old woman caught the ejected bloody phlegm on a fresh handkerchief before it could sully the silken sheets or the elaborately woven bedclothes the Duke wore. "Did they run out of able men in Ferelden? Tell me who you had to screw, little rabbit, to get this job?"

"You won't even let me a chance to feel sorry for you?" Chiyo shook her head as she settled with enforced poise on the side of the bed. It was wide enough to keep her out of immediate reach, so obscenely spacious that several men could have found room to sleep without bothering another. "I came all this way to thank you for the generous present you sent and all the effort you went through
to inform me of my clan's demise. Tell me, would it appease you to hear a blessing from the Herald of Andraste before you die?"

"You're the Herald?" The Duke shuddered, his body responding to the intimidation even if his mind no longer knew better or cared. The jeweled rings on his unsteady fingers pinged off the engraved silver vessel he desperately drew to his chest. "You? What heresy is this? Don't you dare tarnish the Chant's Light with your heathen threats. You can offer me nothing, false prophet. Your words are worthless and I will not hear them once your soul is swallowed up by the Void, your awaited end no doubt. You and your kind may have poisoned us, but you send me only to the Maker's eternal side —"

The noble was cut off by an exceptionally loud and very rude, wet noise from Sera's puckered mouth. "Don't know what slop the Sisters up here have been feeding ya, but the Maker's love don't work like that, pissface. It's for everybody, not just nugshit richy turds like you."

"Better. I'll have her recite you the whole thing if you need a refresher." Chiyo's mouth curled into a tight, involuntary grin. The man she stared down was already on death's door and suffering all the while. It would almost be kind of her to kill him when nature alone could take its own luxuriously sweet time in accomplishing the task in her stead. "Now, I really don't care what you choose to believe in. What I do care about is getting my men back. Where are they?"

Antoine motioned for a drink as he first tried to speak and faltered, barely able to breathe with any form of efficiency. The extended chatter was already wearing him down. The wrinkled maid poured a generous goblet and added a splash of tonic for good measure. She kept her narrowed gaze on the intruding elf, but her attentions were drawn away when the nobleman began to sputter, leaving a fine purple spray on the front of his clean shirt. "The other infiltrators. Now those were some worthy emissaries. I've been trying for weeks to wring the truth out of them. They are my bartering chips to keep the damned Inquisition out of my business now."

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, but his feebleness did not prevent his own reddened eye from giving the already aggravated woman a momentary, lewd glance. "What are they worth to an elfy cunt like yourself? You aren't as ugly as most. Maybe you can bargain a dying man something pleasant after all. You'd almost pass if it weren't for those terrible ears."

The maid screamed as the duke was ripped from his bed by his arm and tossed to the floor. The wine cup in her hand splashed across the pillows, medicinal liquor soaking into the white satin. But an arrow aimed right at her head and a fiery staff pointed in her direction kept her from moving even as Antoine howled, already in agony from his self-inflicted illness. Lyrium was slowly taking over his body, a crystalline fungus affixing even to his bones. The upturned urn clattered to the floor in the upset, lost lid loosening its powdery contents and coated the sweat-slick skin of the man who'd been holding it in a fine gray film.

"You heretic! You whore!" The dying noble wailed, desperately trying to scoop the ashes back into the container as the mage that loomed above him shirked her weapon and pack. "My son, my heir! You damned elves have done enough to me!"

"No Antoine." Chiyo snarled as she slipped her coat off and tossed it across the footboard of the Duke's massive bedstead. Her brown eyes flashed as she decreed her judgment. "You are to blame. You sicken your own people with red lyrium. You harbored the Venatori. You accused innocent elves to cover up your mistakes. The crystals you put in the water made everyone ill, not a curse."

She turned her frigid attentions towards her companions, gloves joining the small pile after she pulled them from her fingers with her teeth. "Take granny on a walk. She looks like she could use some air. Maybe it will clear her head and she'll remember where Sutherland is being kept." The Inquisitor did
not suggest as much as she ordered. A chilling voice that didn't sound entirely her own met their ears. Dorian and Sera were quick to escort the now sobbing woman from the room, each taking a hold of one of her sinuous arms. They dragged her forward against protesting kicks and heels that caught against the carpets. She howled and hissed that she'd seen the Duke born in that very bed, that she'd raised him at her own breast.

Ceramic shattered in the scuffle and water splashed as a vase was destroyed, bumped from its spindly table. "No knife-ear is going to hurt my Tony!" Her final words echoed through the hallway as she was removed from the chamber.

The Tevinter mage could still be heard shushing the woman like a spoiled child. "Of course not, because there aren't any knife-ears here, you old bat. Now the Inquisitor on the other hand… I make no promises dear."

This left only a dwarf and an elf behind to deal with the Duke. The man on the floor's pitiful shouts and pained squirming did little to earn him sympathy beneath the Inquisitor's predacious stare.

Varric observed as the kindhearted woman who had rescued them all from the Breach turned icy. His hands tightened around Bianca's handle when Chiyo began to drag the ailing man away from the side of his lavish bed. A darkness had settled into her eyes and a stony, compassionless sneer shaped her normally cheerful mouth. Certainly this wasn't the same friend who'd spared the self-serving Tevinter magister that thought to dabble with the stability of time. The creature laying her prey in the center of the room now bore little resemblance to the elf that'd shown forgiveness towards the Mayor of Crestwood, allowing even him to live in exile after all his atrocious choices.

Great men and women had been brought to kneel before her ruling and all had survived, made more useful than a headless corpse would have allowed.

But it wasn't until a cold breath passed through her pale lips and briefly clouded her feral face did he actually feel the first pangs of fear freeze his heart as she made her short request of him.

"Go. Lock the door."

"Inky? Ah, come on now. Some people are here who wanna talk to you." Sera called out through the overgrown inner garden after she forced open the only other entrance to the yard. The bedroom had still been shut up tight when she'd gone back to find the little mage. The closed door wasn't enough to block the acrid, sicky smell that wafted into Sera's nose when she'd first knocked. She'd anticipated a peculiarly absent copper tang of blood, not vomit. Maybe it had been a tidy death, smothered with a pillow. Clean and simple.

Receiving no reply then, she figured it was safe enough to track Chiyo down, once the revenge was all said and done. She sure as shit wasn't going to stick her nose in whilst magic of any flavor or fashion was involved. She glanced to the now dead silent and darkened room that looked over the once manicured grounds. The grass and flowerbeds were terribly overgrown and overcome with vigorous flora. The nearby balcony door had been left wide open. There weren't many places here for an elf, no matter how small, to go.

"I told you not to read that plottin' shite, it'd just mess up your head. Rich-tits like that deserve what they get anyways. This place is better already without his lot on top." Sera's pointy ears pricked at the soft sound of a sniffle that led her to the florid bushes behind a low, trickling fountain mottled with cloudy algae. Hidden amidst the newly opened blossoms, the rogue spotted the unmistakable
white, curly mop of the Inquisitor's hair. Once she weaseled her way through the snagging branches, Sera crouched down next to the huddled Herald.

"Hey you, rooting for grubs again? Make Dorian try 'em this time—what… what are you doing?" The Red Jenny reached out, her open fingers grazed an ice-cold, shivering shoulder before she quickly removed the hand in shock. It was passed noon, the sun's strong rays were easily felt beating on her back, but the Inquisitor was frosted over like she'd just stepped out of a wintery storm in the Emprise du Lion.

"D-Don't touch me. S-something's wrong…" Chiyo's teeth chattered loosely in her jaw while she cowered deeper into the corner she'd placed herself in, as far away from the bedroom as she could have managed.

Sera frowned severely, bolting back up to her booted feet with a shout. "What happened in there? If he did something to you I'll put all my arrows up him pointy bit first!"

"The magic… that wasn't my magic… that wasn't me. I don't… I can't be capable of doing such things to a person." Chiyo stammered, turning her traumatized gaze up only when Sera withdrew at the dreaded word that she hated most.

Sera could tease all she wanted and make light of the Lavellan's abilities when they were convenient, but that didn't change her inherent fear of what Chiyo fundamentally was.

"This is why mages is so scary, right. I can't help you with this. That would be Dorian or Vivvy… or Solas if he actually cared to be here." The rogue gawked back at her petrified friend whose quivering lips looked almost a shade of blue. Sera retreated until she knocked into the edge of the fountain. With a swift pull, she yanked the bandana from around her neck and wadded it in her hands, twisting the snarled fabric until she found the words to say next. "You get why we're all afraid of people like you. Maker, half the shit you do for fun gives me night terrors. About piss myself to think that at any time you could just get stuffed full of demon and…"

Chiyo remained silent as her flighty companion dipped the crumpled square of cloth into the warm waters and gave it a hardy shake before she tossed it for the Inquisitor to catch. "There's sick on your shirt. Bunch of elves gathered outside, can't see you like this. They heard the Herald's here. And Heralds don't wear puke, the Chant shines out their asses or something. I'd give you some booze if I had any, but you'd probably just up it again."

"Where are you going?" Chiyo croaked as Sera started to walk away.

"To get rid of the nasty stiff before they catch wind of what actually happened. Prop 'em up, shut his eyes. We'll make the death all regal sounding, noble and for freedom and blah blah blah. Fuck."

"That won't be necessary… or easy." The Inquisitor wiped the side of her mouth and slowly began to rub at the stain on the front of her clothes, focusing so intently on the fabric that she could see the minuscule, slowly melting beads of blood caught in the weave. She scrubbed hopelessly at them too.

"Why's that?" Sera paused, watching the open door as the heavy curtains billowed out with the breeze. What nightmare would she discover concealed within the forsaken bedchamber? Fighting the urge to curse and shout, she pressed her tongue hard against her teeth.

"Because he's in hundreds of pieces."
Belly of June

Chapter Summary

Time does not heal all wounds. Scars grow even when memories fade away. Summer is coming, but life doesn't always wait for the right season.

Chapter Notes

Contains depictions of birth, blood and mentions emotionally abusive behavior towards children

Another massive thanks to Elystaa for pushing me above and beyond, for helping me reach towards great goals and finally grasp them. If you guys haven't checked out the super funny, tragic and soon to be smutty "Of Inquisitors and Stewing", you are missing out on a lot of fun writing!

Carry on, and as always, thanks to you readers for staying with this. It means the world to me.

"Is he really dead? Who's left in charge now?"

A mass of people crowded through the shattered gate, filling up the empty courtyard with the Chargers mixed among them.

"Those guards kept us barricaded for weeks! We thought we were going to starve!"

Elves. When was the last time she'd seen so many elves all in one place? Surely not in Haven, or Skyhold or any residence she'd recently visited in the distant south.

"The only thing we ever did was set part of his house on fire, but that was after he started taking prisoners. We had to do something!"

Young and old gathered round, of every make and size imaginable. Their desperate faces blurred together when they caught sight of Chiyo and they shouted louder to be heard by the renowned Herald. They swarm, surrounding the Inquisitor in a tight throng once she'd descended the front stair.

"The Duke's the one who started locking people up for no reason! We didn't poison anyone!"

People began to take her hands, shaking them with praise and relief springing up in their hearts at the news of one of their own coming to their salvation. So many elves... she had never felt as surrounded or wanted by them while their bodies flocked with the spreading excitement. Not a few years prior would she have considered them apart from her nomadic people. Now she wished to claim them, all of them, to bring as many elves as she could out of the muck they dwelled in so long.

But the tighter they pressed, as introductions and countless thanks blended to unintelligible speech, Chiyo began to drown in them.
"So it's true! The Maker sent an elf!"

Someone stroked the back of Chiyo's short hair, causing her to spook and twist away. She tried to speak out, to reclaim her space, but none were yet ready to listen. Their trials too recent and their grievances too new to hush down, her proclaimed holy embodiment too enticing to relinquish. Innumerable captivated faces, and names to accompany each, all with a story to tell. It would take a lifetime to hear them individually.

And then there was Iron Bull, pushing his way through the crowd, arms bigger than the full thickness of some of the surrounding elves. He wore a grin of victory and beamed with the recent decree of his well-timed heroism. The Qunari bent on his good leg and wove his gray fingers together. He offered her a higher—safer— perch above the excited masses. Chiyo took to the mercenary's bulky shoulders, grasping one of his lengthy horns for stability as he rose to his full, impressive height.

It didn't stop people from trying to reach her, to touch upon the Maker's manifestation of their long-unanswered prayers. Some of the taller elves were still able to brush against her feet until Bull held them back.

Soon Dorian appeared with others in tow, including Sutherland's maltreated company, all shielding their eyes from the bright light of day. Deep from the bowels beneath the Keep they'd been retrieved, elves, men and even a handful of dwarves, who'd all been waiting for the mad Duke to put an end to their caged days. Now they breathed freely as their families and friends reached out to reclaim them with open arms.

"Aye! Aye! Pinch your tongues and listen!" The Inquisitor felt a nervous relief grow as Sera made the news known for any who could hear her rough voice shouting sharp above the rest. They'd squashed the dying Duke in his bed while he raved, snuffed out his miserable torment and sent him on his way to be lost to the Void for his crimes forever and ever. Not quite the truth, not exactly lies either. The confirmation spread quickly, and soon even her rowdy words were lost in the joyous noise.

The Duke was dead, the Inquisitor—their Herald— was there to protect them; soon all would be well again.

No one else need know what had happened inside those darkened walls where the shining, black glass eyes of poached animals had looked down upon her and she'd felt a living, breathing, commanding part of the stuffed menagerie.

"Herald of Andraste! Freedom bringer from Ferelden! Duke slayer!"

She'd finally done something good for her people, Chiyo thought as she shoved the dim memory of her violent actions as far aside from this happier moment that she could. She'd brought an end to some of the oppression within a small niche in the world, even if she'd had to bloody her hands to do it. This victory wasn't everything. Nonetheless, it was a tiny start in the right direction. With Antoine removed and the population emptied of troublesome nobility, along with the correct support from the Inquisitor's own sources, Wycome had the promising potential to do better. To be the first seed of many for change. The smallest of smiles flashed over her features only to disappear as more and more people crowded around them.

Only with several deep blasts issued from Bull's signal horn did the crowd begin to hush, giving Chiyo a chance to speak up and be heard.

"There shall be no further dilemmas from Duke Antoine. I only wish I had come sooner, were your
plight made known to me. We were kept far too unaware and I am sorry of how long it took us to come to your aid. I am sure there are concerns and we will do our best to address them. But for now, if I can declare on behalf of the Inquisition—"

"Your mother would be ashamed of you!"

The blood that had finally warmed drained from Chiyo's face. That voice, tart with curdling outrage suddenly made her feel twice as small as she'd been on the ground. Instinct or memory, she could not tell as to which, had her clutching a once broken arm snug to her ribs. The phantom smell of the wet leaves that had been moldering at the base of the massive wolf's statue hit her nose. Her palm twinged, not the dormant mark, with a much older pain. A forgotten wound and the old scar above her eye burned, threatening to make her eyes water. Long, unrelenting fingers that had grabbed at her would soon drag the little elf away in punishment. She was going to be cast out into the woods, to be swallowed whole by her fate.

A robed woman with blunted hair the color of hardened steel passed through the other elves that parted for her, a quiet murmur passed their lips. No one wanted to touch the outsider who'd come to live in their midst, respected and feared. Muted brown ink sharpened half her brow with a mirrored designed, the only face in the throng bearing a Dalish tattoo. Tall, proud and rigid, she was the alienage's last elder, even if she wasn't their first choice. They'd had no one else to turn to when their situation grew dire over the last few months. A prudent woman who had escaped the Duke's initial capture of all the other Elders approached. She strode with a stiff, hitched gait up to the Inquisitor and her flanking companions.

"What misfortune have you brought upon us now, da'len! What have you done?"

Chiyo stared down at the stern, fissured face she'd not seen in nearly twenty years. Her bare hand dung tight into the worn furrows on Iron Bull's horns as she looked into eyes so like her own but full of hate and disgust. Crinkled lines had formed around her lids and mouth, the seam of her jaw sagged. The glowering woman had grown so much older than Chiyo thought she would have, and not anymore soft or kind with age.

"Can she talk to the Herald like that? Shouldn't she be happy about being rescued?" hissed an elf at the front of the crowd, his brethren asking much the same. He reached to draw the elder back, but his hand was stayed by another, least he focused the spiteful woman's attentions on himself. The Dalish had curses at their disposal, and many would prefer to keep the mysterious woman on their side than against it.

"Who's this pleasant lady, is she in charge around these parts?" Asked Dorian, his stately face tying itself in aggravated knots. A gloved hand brushed against the staff on his back, a quick, instinctual check in case there was trouble. His eye panned the crowd, noting the rising discourse. If one of their own decreed the new hero false, how long would they stand in support of the Inquisition's recent infiltration and actions. "Perhaps we should move this talk elsewhere before the rabble starts to riot… I like this coat without pitchfork holes in it, thank you." A quick cock of his head had the confronted group peeling themselves away from the gathered elves, but the older woman followed regardless.

"T…Tamaris…" Chiyo whispered before sliding down the Qunari's broad back once they'd stopped. She landed hard on her wrapped feet. Naked toes curled hard into the firm, crusty mud, gripping to the earth beneath her as if at any moment it stood to be entirely ripped away. Her shoulders sank in and her timid chin dropped so low that it nearly touched her thrumming chest. She stayed behind the giant man who'd held her aloft, and maintained a halting touch on his raised elbow.

Sera looked from the scowling invader of their celebrations to Chiyo and back again. Same round funny nose, same long and thinly tapered ears. Not a copy, but a similar branch on the elfy tree.
"You know her or something?"

"Please. Go look after these people." Chiyo said quietly to her companions. "They need to know about the red lyrium and how to handle it… If you would warn them, Varric…"

"You sure you want to be left with her?" The rogue took a step forward, making herself another body to block the conflicted pair. "Thought your clan was done in. Who's this elf and what does she want with you?"

"I'll be fine," The Inquisitor answered as the Bull and Dorian left first to manage the confused crowd. Someone in their ranks had started a call for blessings, joined by their fellows in a rising chant. "This is my ma'isa'ma'lin…"

Tamaris placed her hands on her curved hips and leaned heavily off of a bad knee that creaked and cracked beneath her thick, draped skirts. Sera passed by her, nearly bumping shoulders with the glaring elder. "Are you not far too old now to refer to me as such? The Lavellans obviously failed to teach you any better manners. I have not been your aunty since you went away."

"Went away?" Chiyo caught a ragged breath in her tightening throat. Her arms began to tremble at her sides, fingers clenched so forcefully that they grew pale and cold. "You placed me out and made me leave with them! You didn't even say goodbye! I didn't want to go."

"Inquisitor!" A nervous man's voice called out from behind them all. "Inquisitor Lavellan!"

"I think she's a little busy right now…" answered Varric over his shoulder, not one himself to impose upon such a heartwarming reunion though he'd lingered behind to listen in. He glanced back to see Sutherland slowly making his way down the manor's stairs with a burdened woman grasping on his arm.

Tamaris' focus didn't falter, even as she shook her head in clear disappointment. She pinned the Inquisitor with her grave look alone, shrinking the grown woman back into the same child who'd brought with her so much woe. "And look at all the good that placement done. I have heard of your frightening tales for months now even before I knew that it was your name affixed to them. You return worse than you were."

"Yes, yes, special service with the chantry sisters at dawn. The Herald will be there to bless you personally. Bottle some wine to mark the occasion. What do you mean you don't have a winery?" Dorian could be heard promising above Sera's much ruder and more threatening dispersal tactics. "Now we must amend this. Who wants to raid the Duke's pantry with me to celebrate?"

"Maybe you should have left me to the wolves then…" Fraught tears blurred the Herald's eyes while her world collapsed around her. What value did she have if her only family thought her existence too difficult to bear, if they still rejected her now after all she'd accomplished? Had she not become a skilled mage despite her late start in training? Did the honorable role of First mean nothing? Was her part in the Inquisition so atrocious that it eclipsed all the change she'd brought about?

"Inquisitor, please! I do not have the training for this!" Shouted a nervous Sutherland, pausing as the comely elf he supported came to a sudden halt, her hands pressed hard to her wide belly. "Commander Cullen had nothing listed in the drill books for these kinds of emergencies!"

Chiyo turned away from her bad-tempered kin, prepared to bark at the interrupting man she'd come so far to rescue. Yet another familiar, though much changed face stole the words from her mouth before they ever had a chance at being uttered. June's green marking stood out against a reddened, puffing face as the second Dalish elf strained her way down the shallow steps, waddling and rocking
as she went.

"It's true! Eir'ean, you have flown back to us!" The earthy brunette groaned out in a mix of pain and uncontainable joy, nearly dragging the captured captain along to reach the Inquisitor faster. "Mythal enaste, she has brought you to me."

"Vahari!" Chiyo cried out instead. She almost forgot that the harsh elder still stood behind her, not with the brightest spirit in Thedas so near a diversion. Three leaping strides were all she counted. The rest were lost in a spirited green blur, and her arms were fast around the tall elf, their bodies held back only by the ripened bulge between them. "You! You're here! You're alive! And you're huge!"

"It's good to see you too!" Vahari teased before she grumbled with the next low wave of a contraction. She braced against her short cousin until the worst of it passed and continued on, "Just barely in time, like always. Mother hasn't been too mean to you has she? I'll be most cross if she's made you upset."

But Chiyo was already openly weeping into Vahari's long brown hair that cascaded in soft waves nearly to her wide hips. And she no longer cared who stood to see the great Inquisitor, Andraste's chosen champion, crying like a child finally allowed to come home.

Vahari's waters had broken on the slow walk back to her shared home in the alienage. Moving out of the cramped cell had done much for her progression. The accompanying men were outright forbidden to enter the tiny house tucked into the furthest corner of the compound, not that any felt the urge to attend the stranger's labor. There was plenty left for them to do, with the constraining walls of the racially segregated slum having recently been submitted to fire and the bulk of Antoine's remaining forces still focused nearby. Not all had wanted to die over the confinement of elves or stand against the illustrious Chargers. A few had up and abandoned their duties at the first sign of real trouble by the trained militants.

The people were also hungry for more than the thin vegetable stews and rough bread they'd survived on. Their stock animals had all been eaten over the last few weeks in desperation. More than one friendly neighborhood cat had disappeared when the shelves grew bare. They'd shown no shame in raiding the dead Duke's remaining larder for all it held with Dorian elected to handle the food's distribution. Children first, and no one argued against that. For the first time in months, they had reason to celebrate and ample food to fill their lean bellies. Vahari was in good shape for having been imprisoned, they had not starved her at least though many of the others were far from being in excellent condition upon release.

Vahari simply refused to relinquish the supportive hold on her cousin's hand no matter how much her mother obstinately disapproved. "She stays, she stays."

It was only at her daughter's urgent, gasping plea did Tamaris permit even Chiyo to follow them inside the two-roomed residence that the Inquisitor recognized almost immediately. Here stood the boards and beams of what had once been a small aravel, the wood still bearing a muted red paint and curved shape. Even the door remained the same, though worn the carvings that had been so artfully constructed endured. She couldn't help but worshipfully touch them as Vahari showed her inside.

Sera had gone off on her own to find any willing—or unwilling—help she could. No one could convince her that there wasn't a midwife alive somewhere in the accursed town inclined to work on a Dalish elf or any being with ears that weren't perfectly curved. No human practitioner had ever come to their aid before. The alienage had lost so many of their own, including healers who'd been forcibly conscripted to find a cure for the lyrium-fueled disease. If an elf had supposedly made people sick, then certainly an elf could undo it all the same.
Even with her dearest kin at her side, Chiyo crumpled every time her aunt looked her direction though she said little while preparing their room beyond bids to fetch items. Extra blankets were laid out across a narrow, straw-filled mattress. A large kettle, blackened with years of constant use, set in the simple hearth. The shutters on the windows were drawn shut, keeping several pairs of prying eyes away as many still clamored for a glimpse of the Inquisitor.

"You could barely stalk nugs when I last saw you, tell me how you tracked down a bogfisher of all beasts!" the Dalish huntress spoke eagerly and often as she paced, the rhythm of her body still allowing her comfortable stretches between the waves of sharp pain. She recounted many of the tales that Sutherland had told her of while they'd been in prison together, of all the heroic acts that her tiny, rascally cousin had done in the distant South. She asked Chiyo for any missing details as she was helped from her dirty, now rather sodden clothes and into a cleaner, loose shift. Demon hunting and dragon slaying. Saving empresses and ending wars. Fighting Templars and freeing mages. And however had she come across a man with such extraordinary horns!

With each new account, however, Chiyo could see Tamaris growing more and more agitated. Her face remained hardened and her stiff motions equally severe while she did all she could to create the appropriate setting for the imminent birth.

Story after story fell from her busy lips, her cousin laughed and moaned heavily all the while. "I thought I'd seen it all until I found an Avvar catapulting goats at the battlements. For his shamed honor. And this was after I had to judge a box full of remains."

Chiyo's tongue soon felt sore from the constant talking and her throat dried out from extended speech. Vahari was gradually becoming more focused on her own building troubles as she tuned inwards, her time drawing ever nearer. The foretelling cramps had started early that morning, the little warning tremors several days before had awoken her from sleep. This was her first babe, and they were always notorious for coming sluggishly into the world.

"Ma halani, Venuralas." Vahari cried through her gritted teeth when a deep clench took hold. She clutched at her quilts, but her mother wouldn't let her lie down. They'd never get her back up if she did.

"You'll only slow it. Ashalan, stay on your feet. The halla do not lie for birth, nor shall you." Tamaris warned while she rubbed a dollop of herb infused oil onto her weathered hands from a small jar, releasing the aroma of mint into the air. She slipped a carved wooden ring from her slicked finger and placed it inside a simple dish on the lone dresser. Chiyo nodded in agreement with the senior elf when her cousin looked to her, hazel eyes begging to rest. The upright positions used were the best for both babe and mother, and sacred to the introduction of new life. The Dalish did not submit, not even to pain.

"Are you in much discomfort? We could prepare some stronger herbs." The Inquisitor offered, supporting the laboring woman in a deep squat against the side of her bed. She got her to drink some of the revitalizing brew Tamaris had prepared while they'd talked, holding it carefully up to her tattooed lips once she escaped the latest wave. It would help soothe the rawness from her cries and the heavy stress of the birth. "I have plenty in my pack if you need them."

Her cousin wore the vallaslin so strikingly, it accentuated the strong boning of her cheeks and jaw, framing her beautiful face and brought out the subtle colors of her lightly green and brown eyes. They made her so proud, so Dalish. Chiyo wouldn't dare dream of taking that security away, not when she couldn't perform the same spell that had been cast on her. Let Vahari believe if she wanted to, she'd be better for it to hold on to the faith that made the Dalish strong. Let it give her a shred of comfort in a world that gave back so little and took so much.
"This is nothing. I was there when you were born. I don't remember all of it...but..." Whispered Vahari as Chiyo wiped the beaded sweat from her face with a moistened rag. Her fingers couldn't help but to trace some of the bold, emerald markings that curled from Vahari's brow, down her long neck and near to the tops of her swollen breasts. "You did not want to come out into the cold. Tassali promised you the moon and stars if you'd just—hmmmm! Now I'm starting to understand why."

No one had asked her yet as to why she had no colorations of her own. She was more than old enough. She'd carried Mythal's branches for almost a decade before choosing to have them removed. Looking at another that she loved wearing such cruel marks, she thought of Solas and the brittle pain she'd received with his last gift. There had been such a sadness in his voice when he told her the truth and offered her a choice, but in the freeing from those misconceptions he'd only condemned himself.

_Ar lasa mala revas._

Chiyo hadn't been so physically close to another Dalish in almost two years, not since she'd left the Lavellans in the Free Marches. And now she couldn't feel any more detached from them.

"I like getting out of bed just as much these days. It's too chilly in the Frostback Mountains for my taste." Said Chiyo with a soft chuckle. She forcibly buried the permanent grief that accompanied the difficult knowledge as she studied each carefully made line and dot. She wondered how old Vahari had been when she'd earned them, and what she'd done to earn the sacred rite. "I think you remember it too well. Every time you retell that tale the snow seems to get deeper and the ice thicker. Nearly piled over the roof of the aravels last time I heard it."

"Such is why we do not aim to have eir'shena." Tamaris finally commented as she set a stubby stool for herself to rest upon. The older woman dropped down carefully, minding her stiff leg as she sat behind Vahari. Her sturdy digits began to work on her daughter's hips, smoothing out the bunched muscles to allow them to open further. "Infants should come in the spring, or by mid-summer at the latest. The small do not keep well during the winter. They eat too much and chill easily."

Chiyo's eyes settled on a crack in the cleanly swept floorboards as Vahari moaned intensely into her blankets and rocked back on her heels. Even her outset had been a sore displeasure to this bitter woman, it was not the first time she'd heard a complaint of the circumstances surrounding her birth. It was true, the Dalish in the clan she'd come from were much more organized in the rearing of young than even the Lavellans had been. Nearly all the youngsters, elf and halla alike, were timed in a way to avoid the most unfavorable seasons. Common enough in the small bands that frequented the harsh regions, that there was even a snide name for children birthed during deep winter. They were a sign of bad luck and hardship. Eir'shena, snow-born.

Vahari had been caring enough as a juvenile to usurp some of that name. Eir'ean, snowbird, had a much kinder sound. The other clan fledglings had eventually teased with that name too, taunting Chiyo's scrawny limbs and the shape of her then too-big nose. The woman soon to become a mother was tall and sunlit, strong-limbed and sturdy. Even in youth she had always been the more handsome of the two above her gawky little cousin. Her expressive features had never appeared awkward, nor had she fretted over growing into her inherited round nose. It had spared her much of the common mocking amongst the children who'd find fault in each other for sport more than pure spirited meanness.

A hand rested on Chiyo's arm, drawing her out of the silent stupor she'd slipped into. Her cousin smiled in consolation, readying herself for the next timely wave to take away her ability to speak. "Remember that time you got stuck in a tree going after a bee hive? We thought you were going to grow wings and fly before we could convince you to come back down."

A groan of her own crossed the Inquisitor's lips before she joined Vahari in the recounting of old
tales of her past, and that of those come to be once she'd left. "Better than when your brother knocked down a hornet's nest by mistake, I at least could spot the difference!"

"My brother? He was your kin too!"

"...Was?" Asked Chiyo, though the current circumstances of her remaining family should have hinted sooner.

"Was," Vahari confirmed with another comforting squeeze.

Hours passed on slowly, and through the rhythmic agony Chiyo was able to piece together what had become of her first clan through Tamaris’ limited inclusions and Vahari's kinder recounts. Without a Keeper strife and fear grew when the young apprentice proved unskilled enough to assume the role. Families began to drift apart. A bonded pair or two would pack an aravel if they had one and their children before going their separate ways, seeking new homes and bigger clans until only Tamaris and her brood remained. One by one, her other kin had been lost, to the Blight, to humans, or to tragic misfortune. The youngest sister had simply vanished after they'd joined the community in Wycome, she'd never returned from a foraging venture along the nearby beach. Chiyo's uncle just a few years prior had succumbed to a long illness that left him short of breath and dizzy, weakened till he would rise no more.

"He wouldn't have wanted you to see him like that," Vahari promised. Her leaked tears were for than just the growing force in her belly. She strained, fighting the urge to begin pushing before she was fully ready, but the drive was strong. "Father was too proud for his own good."

As the light that snuck through the shutters dwindled, Vahari lost more of her composure. Soon only the glow of the fire and a few candles warmed the dark room. The pressures she felt intensified and her flesh began to burn with each deeper effort. She was getting close, with only her mother to guide her. No midwife, seasoned like an old crock with experience or new to the practice, would come to impart their wisdom. Tamaris had borne many children over the years, but now only one survived. Vahari was her second child, and she'd yielded her third by the time Chiyo had come along.

"Mamae..." The lone daughter whimpered through a sudden sob while her mother dressed her hair, smoothing the damp tendrils away from her drained face and arched back into a braid. "What if this one's too big for me... this is taking so long."

"Hush child, you will forget this pain soon enough." Tamaris tied the end of the brown plait of with a scrap ribbon. She stroked her child's bowed head once the task was done, rolling her fingers gently behind Vahari's reddened ears. "You loved enough to make, and you'll love enough to see this through."

While the laboring woman requested a brief moment to relieve herself without added company, Chiyo took a chance to steal a breath of fresh air. She slipped through the back door and pressed her stiff shoulders to the wall. She looked through the twisting paths of the alienage that sprawled out before her. These people didn't have much, but they'd managed to keep the small, confined world somewhat clean and organized. There were still plenty of houses though, all smaller than her bedroom at Skyhold, which lacked for solid roofs and well-made walls. Instead, they'd been patched over with scrap materials. Each cluster of tightly packed dwellings bordered a shared garden, likely the source of the only foods that had sustained them when Antoine had called for all the elves to be sealed inside their alienage.

Those caught outside the barriers during the worst of the plague, without official reason, were arrested. Those arrested in turn were never seen again. Too few had come out of the subterranean prison and efforts were already being made to locate any remains or whereabouts.
Tamaris pushed her way through the same unlatched door, with a used bucket in hand that she hoisted over to the corner of their fenced lot to dump. She'd barely acknowledged Chiyo as she passed, looking to her own relation as an inconvenient stranger or a bystander on the street. Considering the contact they'd had the past several years, she practically was for all intent and purpose.

Chiyo caught her aunt's gaze when she returned, but the unexpected soreness in the woman's deep blue eyes gave her motive enough to speak. "I have changed. Why do you still hate me?"

The older woman sighed, releasing some of the corrosive ire that she'd held since that afternoon. Her hand paused on the door handle. For a moment, she no longer appeared so much bigger and scarier as Chiyo had first felt her to be. "You look so much like her. You almost sound like her too. She had such great plans for you..."

The Inquisitor tilted her head, sending several wavy strands that had come loose from their twist to spill over her eyes and tightened brow. She had no solid memory of her mother. Time had taken away almost all of what few recollections had ever existed in the first place. The sound of a voice caught in gentle song, sung through a pair of merrily curved lips. Of endless silvery hair slipping from a looped knot. Of polished bracelets jingling against an out-stretched hand.

"She was so happy when you showed promise to become a mage. She woke me up the first night she found you in the Beyond with her," Tamaris' lapse in softness began to take a new edge as she continued. "You were going to grow up to be a dreamer too, to be just like her. To spend your efforts in the Fade together, instead of focusing on duty, on the people. What madness were you introduced to, singing to spirits, giving demons names."

"They aren't de...mons." Chiyo shivered and the fine hairs on the back of her exposed neck puckered, remembering the pressing cold, wet nose of her silent new friend. She had to have something to summon him by, and the wolf didn't seem to mind what she called him. It had just slipped out one night when he hadn't appeared immediately to eat, and the name stuck ever since.

"No. You aren't still doing that. We put an end to that nonsense long ago!" Tamaris said as she spun from the door and slammed the bucket down beside a water collection barrel. With a splash from a ladle, she rinsed the pail of anything left behind. "Too much has been paid already."

"I don't understand." Chiyo's skin began to crawl. The air was cooling, but it wasn't the breeze that lifted every hair on her neck and arms. She felt sticky, something not quite sweat that had been years ago washed clean. "What do you—"

A loud cry for help from behind the door had them both turning. This was not the time for the argument that needed to be ventilated after decades of concealment. Nevertheless, the implying words had already leaked out and the memories stirred would not easily resettle.

"Wait! Tell me what you know!" Chiyo called after her evasive aunt and followed the newly scowling woman back inside. "I need to understand!"

Vahari was on all fours, her spine rounded and her belly nearly touching the floor each time she curled. Her hands were smeared with the fresh blood that she'd tried to wipe off on her long shirt, more reddened her thighs and a few drips had found their way to the ground.

"Knowing won't change what is done. Time to get up dear." Tamaris shushed, helping her daughter carefully back to her wobbly feet. "Shhh. Sit on the bed, let's have a look."

"Eh-Eir'ean please... help me." Vahari sobbed as she reached out for the wide-eyed woman standing
in the doorway. She would only be soothed and quieted by the elf joining her on the mattress. Chiyo wrapped her arms around her groaning, panting cousin and allowed Vahari to lean back into her for support. The little elf gripped the back of her cousin's clammy knees, ready to pull them in a sustained pressure when the next set of contractions came.

"Try a real push, easy girl, not too hard." Tamaris resumed the stool between her daughter's spread, shaking legs. "Here, feel what pain has brought you." She took one of Vahari's hands and guided it past the burning agony and the blood. A rounded crest, a patch of wet, fine hair had just barely presented itself and vanished when the elf tried to lean forward again.

Chiyo held the other, searching hand, and gave it a place to hold on to prepare for what was to come so that she could pull her own knee. She hauled her back into a lean, straightening Vahari's body from the hunch she'd resumed. The elf strained and cried out, her clothes clinging to her hot skin. The Inquisitor looked fiercely to her aunt, emboldened by her kin's braver presence. "I just want the truth…"

"And I want my sister back." Tamaris breathed deeply with long holds and slow releases, showing Vahari the way. "I wanted you to live a life worthy of her sacrifice, for my clan to have held together instead of being scattered to the wind. The truth is not for you, it certainly is not mine to offer."

"Where is she?" She asked again, struggling to hold the taller woman in place as every muscle in her hunting-honed body worked through the final exertions together. "Why does no one speak of her when I ask? Why has her name been stolen from our accounts?"

"Come on da'len, see this through," Tamaris reassured, her dark indigo eyes never left the task as she spoke, but Chiyo saw a shine growing in them that threatened to spill over onto the mature woman's cheeks. She'd never seen her aunt cry. Not ever.

Tamaris wiped at the building tears with a clean spot on the back of her hand that was now stained a dark red. "Mothers spend their blood for their children to grant them life and to give them a future. Tassali gave more than most long after you'd been born. There are things a mage, a Keeper, should under no circumstances do. But she made a choice, and her choices had always been for you."

"Eir'e'an, we were there." Vahari tried to speak, but her words broke with each new wave of pain. "Let the past remain—Oh Creators! It needs to come out! Get it out of me!"

"No more riddles, I'm grown now. You said so yourself." Chiyo demanded, squeezing Vahari's hand hard in return. But her aunt said nothing for a time, her mouth set into a firm line that showed no signs of breaking as she directed Vahari through the next extended sets of pushing.

"You were too immature for magic, too naive to walk the Fade," Tamaris finally explained while she hooked her fingers carefully around the babe's fully crowning head, supporting the child as it descended.

"Mother, don't do this!" The laboring elf was gasping too deeply to protest with any effect. Instead, she bellowed and swayed back into Chiyo. "She can't—Hhhhhhh!"

"Push, push hard. The time has come." The old hahren gave a soft, guiding tug, helping the wider shoulders come forward bit by bit. "There was a fire started while you played a game with my eldest son. Several aravels were set ablaze, the halla scattered in the panic. People were hurt. Souren did not survive his burns."

Chiyo buried her face into Vahari's damp neck, sifting through the fragments of her distant past. The screaming, the smoke, the rows upon rows of bright red eyes. Too young to remember, too young to
know better. Souren, a name through the haze without a face. He loved to put lizards down the other children's shirts…

Tamaris scooted closer as fluid splashed the floor around her feet. She spoke quietly between her daughter's hefty grunts and groans. "You were dangerous and your mother loved you, she put an end to your magic. And we had to end her for it in turn, to keep the demon she accepted from overtaking our Keeper. It was our promise. Blood magic has a cost; it was not just Tassali who paid it in the end. And then when you started doing magic again a few years later, there was nothing left in us to keep you further."

Chiyo went numb, her ears rang in a low, dulling tone. The mage was lost in the noise and the sweat and the blood. She didn't even register the intended verbal daggers her aunt had thrown her way, redirecting their focus back to the birth. This was not the truth she wanted or even the honesty she'd hoped to attain by confronting Tamaris after more than two decades of silence. She looked to her aunt and stared, nearly removed from the emotion that had set a redness to the old woman's eyes and a tightness to her throat.

The Inquisitor didn't want to ask any more questions. She didn't want to do anything...

"Vahari, give me your hands."

Chiyo released her cousin's grasp as she gave one last shout, and with the help of her mother they lifted something tiny and scrunched and terribly pink up from between her quaking thighs.

A little baby boy howled as his sobbing mother clutched him to her shaking breasts and placed her lips against his wrinkled head. He stretched his slender fingers and long toes into the fabric of her shift, leaving minute red prints behind. Covered in white, sticky gunk, wrinkled from head to toe, and blood clinging to his faintly red hair, the newborn was immediately the ugliest and most beautiful creature in the room.

"Get the towels," Tamaris asked as Vahari was allowed to lie back at last. She began to massage the now soft, deflated round belly, pressing the muscles together to stem the bleeding. "And the big bowl."

The Inquisitor didn't argue while she slipped off the bed and did as asked. The large wooden bowl was given to Tamaris in silence. Towel in hand, she busied herself by rubbing down the crying infant in Vahari's arms. With care she wiped his chunky legs and thumb sized feet, she patted his back dry and blotted each clenching arm as little hands snagged the fabric. Chiyo fluffed the baby's hair, but her motions halted when she moved Vahari's hand and went to clean around his ears. They were round and short, like tiny shells tucked on each side of his furrowed head.

"Who is his sire?" She asked distantly as the room became quiet but for the wailing babe. She looked dumbfounded down at Vahari sprawled out on the bed. "Where is he?"

"The former Duke's son." Said Tamaris, as ordinarily as mentioning the weather. She held the newborn's cord in her hand, waiting for the pulses to subside before she severed the link to his mother. "And he's dead."
Rabbit Run

Chapter Summary

Little mages should not wander the woods alone, and others would be better off not to play with fire.

Tiny toes wove through the long grasses, shaking the wildflowers with a ticklish touch. The white petals of daisies began to curl away shyly. Dangling bluebells jingled under outstretched fingers that skimmed them, crafting an airy melody to accompany a child’s whistle. Hefts of goldenrod covered in fat, fluffy bumblebees released their dust in glittering waves that sprinkled her curly hair until she shook it loose. Butterflies scattered, colors altering with each beat of their wings, flashing into the open sky above the floral meadow. The child that stirred them picked her way through the marvelous field, giggling with delight with each new find as the fresh growth parted around her in a winding path.

She followed the narrow trail at leisure, no wider than a hare’s worn running track. Her small feet fit just right, leaving no trace as the way blurred once crossed. It guided her past a quiet pond. She paused long enough at the silty shore to gawk at the massive fish that swarmed to see her. They were big enough to swallow an elf child in one great gulp, churning over and under one another just beneath the water’s tranquil edge.

Through the spindly, immature trees the path went on, pale on the forest’s dappled and mossy floor. But even where it was dark when the woodland grew denser, the route was never lost. A soft light glowed from clusters like delicate bubbles that popped when a pesky finger or two would poke them. The little girl squealed at these shimmering luminosities, spooking the animals that had been peacefully lingering nearby. She caught the fleeing tails of rabbits, white as the cottony hair on her own head, taking to the cover of the bushes laden with ripe berries. They all looked so delicious; she licked her lips with the promise of something sweet. The young one tried to recite a melodious rhyme to help decide which ones were safe before she picked any. The tune was recalled, but the words garbled on the tip of her tongue.

She loosely hummed and passed over the tight bunches of white berries, the shiny green-black orbs the size of her thumbs nestled under satin leaves, and the squishy reds with dished, seeded centers that looked like tiny eyes. Instead, the lumpy, dark purple fruits were gathered into her fists, staining her hands with sugary juice. Their insides splashed across her tongue, each held a flavor like a memory of safety, of happy summer days with her clan. What she didn’t eat then she pocketed in the pouches of her hand-me-down tunic dress to share later when she returned home. It had to be nearby. She’d just been in her camp a few hours earlier.

On she went, drawn on by the soothing glow. The delicate lights soon began to hang from the larger branches, big as ripe apples but far from her reach. At the end of the path stood a massive tree, arms stretched out wide in all directions, bent and sprawling, it blocked the entire sky. The delighted elf had never seen a trunk so large. Her whole clan could link arms and still not encircle it. She ran, up on her toes and scrambled over the knotted roots to get a closer look at the biggest orbs that hung overhead. What she wouldn’t give to touch just one of them. The constant luminescence was so beautiful. Before she knew it her fingers were finding clefts in the bark and ridges wide enough to pull herself almost to the lowest laden limb. Just a bit further, were she just a bit bigger…
The curious elf nearly slipped when a cool finger tapped her wiggling heel. “Da’len, one should not try to scale the wise old trees. You’ll fall.”

“Mamae?” Warm brown eyes met bright blue ones that firmly told her to get down. But a soft smile did much to reassure that she wasn’t in trouble. Trusting hands released their holds, knowing she would be gathered by familiar open arms. She looked identical to the woman who’d tucked her into bed each night and the voice sounded the same as the one who taught her songs. Of course it had to be her mother. Right?

“This is not a place for little dreamers to come alone.” The silvery woman advised, carefully setting the twittering girl back on the ground atop the interwoven roots.

“But the pretty lights. I want one! Please.” The mop-headed child pleaded the tall, kneeling elf who tucked several white curls back behind her slender ears.

“Then here. Let me see those hands. Make light of your own.” And up they were offered, stained and sticky as they were, then clasped together by the larger pair. The girl felt a stirring warmth grow when the Keeper pressed their lips against her palms. Indeed, they did glow, but not blue like the orbs but amber and gold. A tiny, harmless flame flickered, fluttering gently between pale fingers.

The child could not contain her delight and thanks as she passed the flame from one hand to the next. Her cheeks stretched with the size of her grin. She couldn’t wait to entertain her cousins with the playful blaze that rolled across her skin like a weightless ball. Already she was wandering off again, distracted by the shimmering gift. She had to get home to show Vahari before it went out.

Even if her eyes left the enchanting, obedient fire, the woman who’d kindled it was gone.

Solas settled on his haunches to craft a small cooking fire while the others lay out their equipment, dropping heavy packs with a fatigued slump of their shoulders. The elf had grown rather accustomed to performing this duty and the habit continued even now. He had started nearly every functional blaze since the Inquisition’s first venture out of Haven into the chilly Hinterlands. The Conclave’s lone survivor—a mage who should have been capable enough—had curiously shied away from the task herself when asked. Chiyo had mumbled, red-faced while searching her newly gifted clothes for a missing flint; he’d spared her the incurred embarrassment. Only verdant veilfire seemed to escape her avoidance, excluding the explosive outburst he’d goaded her into once inside the Fade…

He could no longer look at a flame and not trace its warmth or hue back to some fond memory of the woman who’d caused his entire view of the world to change. Without so much as a single scorch mark upon his person or even a searing spark, the small elf had managed to cause a permanent fire to take to his once dispirited heart.

As he watched the bark splinter and twist, growing to a bright orange, the mage’s mind began to wander. Even now he could almost feel a pair of hands gliding across his stiff shoulders and a pair of warm lips find a fond home on the back of his head. And yet, for all the love and forgiveness he’d been shown, Solas anticipated no pardon were he to return. Still he was compelled to try, to stop a terrible magic before it broke the ruined world even more. Those compassionate hands would never blacken and palms never split, not when there was a chance that he could change fate once more—for everyone.
The longer he was away, the more the mage began to miss the multitude of company he’d found in the last few years. The shared compassion of Cole, a like-minded spirit who’d wanted nothing more than to help. The wit and lively criticism from the Tevinter native who’d helped him in this goal at his own personal risk. Solas missed the constant, uplifting faith of Cassandra and the strength of her person. He longed to delve into the often overlooked intellect and friendship of the Iron Bull. To some degree, he would have preferred even Sera’s inflexibility and drive, to suffer her antics than to be making tiny camps with demoralizing strangers.

A short while before the un-merry band started to tire he’d pulled a dry, dead branch from a tree they’d passed under and hauled it along. It took him only moments to strip the bough of its brown leaves and stack together the brittle twigs. In his cupped palms he held a pinch of withered grass, a flame from his fingertips and a few life-giving puffs of breath soon had the small bundle ablaze. Wisps of thin smoke dispersed as the twisted sward was consumed in darkened curls. With expert care, he set down the fashioned flame and slowly fed in the rest of the tree limb. The light of the sheltered fire would not give them away, but too much smoke certainly would.

The day’s emergent glow was just beginning to bleed through the pitch black of night, dulling their cloak with ever increasing grays and thin golds. The trio had managed many miles since the evening prior, they had grown weary and all longed for rest. It was Marlo who’d spotted a decent enough shelter while trekking ahead. Hidden deep in a crag among the rising hills. The overgrowth around the small niche would conceal much of their stay and offer them as good a place as any to try and steal a few hours of sleep away from prying eyes.

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They’d spent just enough coin in Perendale to supply them with simple foods, after selling everything of value that remained or had been collected before the elf’s hazardous arrival. He’d inadvertently destroyed a good deal of the dyes crafted for market that would have sold for enough silver to have taken the twosome far. But it was the money he’d pocketed from the horse’s sale that would, with luck, see them one step closer to Skyhold. A hefty coin purse hung from around his neck, a constant weight kept concealed against the skin of his chest. The perpetual ache in his wrapped feet nearly made him miss the cantankerous mount, though the mage had not forgotten the many nips and sour starts he’d suffered after the theft.

A phantom pinch passed over the back of his arm, Solas idly rubbed at a long gone crescent bruise made by blunt teeth.

Every day in the wild brought them closer to the civilizations of Orlais and the border that would require some unquestionable skill to cross. He’d barely managed it himself as a lone traveler, three mages together were far more suspicious and the obvious accents wouldn’t help. One passing look at Marlo’s crisscrossed arms by a guard or Templar would see them all jailed. The apostates had evaded the Imperial highway thus far, traveling instead on forgotten paths that led through the Nevarran rough country. With the darkness of night as their cover and the stars as unflinching guides, Solas had escorted the Tevinter fugitives for over a fortnight since they’d left the jeopardized safety of the farm.

“I’m getting too old to sleep on the ground this much.” Edolie groaned as she lowered herself to sit on her spread bedroll. A complaint was never far from her dark lips. Though by appearance alone, she could only have been a slim decade Solas’ senior. She behaved more elderly than her years warranted. The bereft kindness of her life had taken any youth she’d once held. With a grunt she pulled off each tall boot and peeled away the threadbare socks beneath, one long brown toe poking through a newly worn hole.

“Shall I mend it for you mistress?” asked Marlo while stealing an early snack from a sack tucked inside his bedding, he dropped the ration bag to offer up his handy services. He didn’t see Solas’
subtle flinch nor the tightness that clenched his hands, as it did with each time the young man spoke such. Were he just another apprentice it would have mattered little, the deferment justifiably expected. It was the ownership that sent familiar tremors of rebellion through the elf’s veins.

Eons could not erase the memory of when his freedoms and choices had been so equally purchased, though not for coin, but obligation to the falsely named divine. His own parents had bestowed him as a gift to bring honor to the tiny village in which he’d been born.

Servitude had been expected of him then. They’d called it a blessing, those marks forced upon his young face.

The heel of his palm wiped at his brow, reminding himself that the lines were no longer there.

“I know I packed it somewhere.” The blood mage waved him off with disregarding grouse, already digging through her woven-reed carrier for the carefully stowed bone needle, “Where is that damned thing… Certainly you have other tasks to see to. Find something more useful than harassing me about laundry.”

“A bit of extra firewood would be appreciated, if you can bring something that won’t produce smoke.” Suggested a busied Solas while he nurtured the small blaze into a controlled vigor with loose kindling and a few dry leaves. A hot meal before resting for the day would help ease the myriad discomforts they all felt.

While Solas could suffice on little without grievance, his new companions were not pleased to subsist on pressed apple loaves the Nevarran’s had called a cheese and air cured, salted meat. Marlo especially needed more to eat than what they often could spare. They would have to restock soon to make it much further without wasting time for more hunting than simple snares left only for the day or the fish they’d pulled from small rivers on lines left out.

“Pft, so no wet branches or sappy sticks. Said the same thing last time, I’m not dense.” The lad grumbled to himself, but a sharp look from Edolie had him scurrying off without another smart word. Marlo snatched up his scant treat bag and was gone, disappearing into the still dark thicket behind the new makeshift camp. With a sneaking glance at the turned woman’s back, a tiny ball of mage light popped to life in his hands that he kept hidden between his fingers. He’d gotten in trouble for using lights before, but the lad was rather nervous about the dark.

“He’s getting a mouth on him. There it is.” The callous woman found the little box containing a few sensibly kept needles and a line of thread that she cut with her teeth. With a lick and a squint, she passed the line through the eye before twisting off a simple knot. “These will never make it to Ferelden. My toes will freeze off before we get that far south.”

“Does it truly not bother you?” Solas couldn’t help but ask. He watched over the fire as Edolie prudently repaired the ruined sock, placing several tactful stitches into the worn material that already bore several similar seams. “An elf keeping others in bonds, after all your people have suffered through. Truly?”

“What would you know of my people when clearly you have never been one of them yourself, apostate.” Edolie focused on her simple task, each stitch exacting the same attention to detail as the last. It was tedious, but soon the black wool resumed its former shape. “Why shouldn’t I keep him, I’ve worked rather hard to make something unique of the boy. He’s just as much mine to have as any. I’ll need him as an example of my skills.”

This was not the first time they’d begun to argue over the social complexities held far to the north. Often when the contested boy slipped from earshot did they pass many heated words back and forth.
Even without the law on her side, Edolie was resolute in her custody.

“Tevinter is far behind; they will not allow you a slave where we are headed.”

“Well there are servants and apprentices in droves,” said Edolie, testing the first layer of stitches for strength. “Marlo won’t be noticed at all for his usefulness to me once we become established with the Inquisition’s mages.”

“You believe that they would accept you so easily?” Solas snapped a bigger stick against his knee and lay half across the flames, keeping the other in case the young man dawdled in his task.

The woman laughed, a deep chuckle that had her white teeth flashing in the gaining light. It sent her thick hair shaking about her head and shoulders. “Your presence and attention assure me that my knowledge will have no rival. If there were mages of my skill at your Inquisition’s disposal then you would not have sought me in the first place. I will be a feared curiosity and will find my own usefulness quickly enough.”

Solas’ jaw clenched, she wasn’t wrong. With the right protection and clemency, as the Herald might offer, Edolie could prove to be too valuable to dispose of. Her brief letters had alluded to theories apart from any other. But except for that first crushing wave of raw strength he’s felt during their informal introductions, he’d not borne witness to any of her proclaimed prowess beyond her slave’s shared claims. “Perhaps evidence would make this seem less contrary. Your charge bears the marks of your magic, but what enlightened understanding makes you so exceptional?”

Edolie cocked a fine brow before she took to her tired legs and allowed the uncovered soles of her feet to touch the soft, cool grass and velvety soil beneath them. She strode up to Solas still crouched by the low flames. “How about an example, we’ve come far. Perhaps you earned the beginning to your solution.”

When he glanced up at her, Solas caught the glint of polished metal in her hands. He jerked back when the mage reached out to touch him, but she’d already caught the fabric that crested his shoulder, holding the bumpy weave between a thumb and finger.

“Do you want the lesson or not?” She warned with annoyance tinging her words. Solas held his breath and his magic at bay while she examined the rough sutures he’d placed on his clothes in a hasty repair. Edolie released him and selected the hem of her own sleeve, showing off the fine craftsmanship of the quality coat. “From what little you have been able to convey, I believe your answer to be a simple one. That is, were the sealing done correctly. Blood magic is all skill and intent, offering up the very magic in your veins without need to steal it from the Fade in most cases. Though there are limits. Handle it like expensive silk and it won’t wrinkle or tear. In the wrong hands and with the wrong purpose, it can be ruinous.”

“Is this why Marlo believes you sewed magic into him?” asked Solas, keeping a wary, blue eye on the woman as she slipped a tiny pair of scissors over her fingers.

“That I did, it took all of my precision to accomplish the feat. Blood is so much more than fodder for spells.” With a quick snip, she cut a stitch on her attire. She grasped the severed end with her trimmed fingernails and pulled, the thread came out cleanly with only the faintest of puckered marks where they’d been placed. “When something is done right, it can also be easily separated.”

Solas stiffened when the tip of her shears repeated the process on the sloppy repairs at the top of his sleeve. A single snip sent a light tremor down his arm. But when she tried to free the thread the fabric bunched, refusing to relinquish the thick floss that held everything together. A second clip followed, and a third, but each stitch caught, leaving quite the mess behind. “Shoddy work crafted by the
ignorant or untrained is much, much harder to remove. It requires more cuts, more effort and leaves much wasted.”

He wrinkled his nose at the state of his tunic, knowing fully that the other mage would not correct the destruction done. The split fabric hung open like a small wound that Solas fingered with his thumb, brushing against the exposed hole of skin beneath the stained knit. He’s done his best to scour the dyes out with lye soap, but a shade remained permanently. He knew what Edolie meant, though it was difficult to stomach the concept of what would have to be done. “I knew not the mage responsible. She was a Dalish Keeper left desperate, but there was no mention of her training.” Solas did not mention what he knew of Tassali’s dreaming or dealing with spirits, those details he kept for himself. They would only led to more frustrating interrogations to which he had no response.

“I will know more when I see this elf for myself.” Edolie assured, pocketing the tool as she returned to her mat to amend the damage dealt to her coat. “But will she accept the removal, I wonder? Even if done perfectly, I suspect there to be pain involved. If it was indeed her mother who’d performed the ritual then we will need the girl’s blood. The former’s would be more effective, but the daughter will have to do.”

“How much blood?” Solas felt a lump grow in his throat, recalling the sticky feel and almost the very smell of that same substance that had covered his hands when an arrow had nearly felled the woman over a year ago. He was no stranger to blood, but the mere thought of spilling more of Chiyo’s had him on the verge of becoming woozy.

“As much as it takes.” Edolie shrugged, glancing up as Marlo returned with a small armload of dry wood in the crook of his arm. The lad dumped the collection of sticks beside Solas roughly, only to be chided for the clattering noise he made.

“Do you want every bounty hunter and Templar within a mile to hear you?” Edolie scolded in a low hiss, “Foolish boy, I will skin whatever they leave of your rotten backside once they catch you.”

“Sorry mistress. It won’t happen again.” Mumbled Marlo as he sorely eyed the mage at the fire who’d only just set a small skillet into the thin coals. A little cured meat warmed up would be their dinner. He dropped down onto his unrolled bed beside Edolie and stretched out on his side, keeping his scrawny back towards Solas and the flames. “Tired is all.”

“Should have left you in Tevinter. You are lucky I like you.” The woman rolled her eyes upwards and went back to sewing. Soon only the soft sizzle in the pan broke the silence, until a rustle in the bushes had all three turning to address the sound. Staffs were snatched up when the leaves shook again.

A quiet trill issued forth, melting the nervous look that had painted Marlo’s tan face. A white cat slipped through the foliage and trotted past Solas who’d taken to his feet. As always, the feline took a moment to rub against the tattered backs of the elf’s legs, a deep purr rumbling in the animal’s chest at the smell of meat and sight of company.

“Kitty!” Marlo called out softly. The cat immediately joined the boy on his travel bed and rubbed his smooth chin with the fluffy top of its head. “It’s been days, glad you are still following!”

“Quite…” Solas griped with a frown, he could already feel his eyes threatening to water.

“We can’t feed him Marlo.” Cautioned Edolie, breaking one of her remaining, crumbly tack biscuits in half before she leaned forward to catch the cured ham Solas forked from the skillet on a small tin plate. “And he’s not coming to Ferelden.”
The half-grown boy flipped onto his back, wiping the feline’s smears of happy drool from his cheeks. Kitty clambered onto his chest and perched himself there, purring ever louder with each blissful stroke. “Made it this far, if he wants to keep going I’m not going to stop him.”

“Perhaps he will find a good family in Ghislain, from there it won’t be easy for him to follow.” Said Solas, setting himself and his gear up farther from the irritating animal that caused his throat to close and skin to itch terribly. “I doubt he will want to venture through the Emprise du Lion or the Frostback mountains.”

With the tip of a knife, Marlo hooked his share of the meat and placed nearly the full slice in his mouth. He chewed sleepily, but still pinched off a few morsels for the affectionate creature. He swallowed the ham and wiped his mouth, but his eyes shot a hard stare to the mage tucking in to his light meal.

“I’ll carry him if I have to.”
Chapter Summary

At her breaking point, an elf soon discovers she hasn't come home at all, but that she left it far, far behind in exchange for a waking nightmare. She'll help the elves in Wycome, but her efforts do not come without a cost.

Chapter Notes

Another great big shout out to Llynnyia for working with me on this rather dark piece. She is my guiding light and my biggest supporter. I can't thank her enough. xoxo

For the agonizing third instance that morning, Chiyo started to scrub her hands. Each time the terrible urge struck she crept to the small washbasin in the corner and squandered perfectly clean water and soap. Over and over she worked to remove even the tiniest of imperfections caught beneath her shortly kept nails until the beds felt raw. The Inquisitor scoured her knuckles with a rag. She polished away at the fine scars and calluses earned through countless battles until some of the old skin on her palms began to come off in soggy flakes. There was more to be eliminated than dirt though the perceived red refused to come off in the grayed, sudsy water. It wasn’t until the soap slipped and was sent flying out of the bowl to clatter on the floor did the numbed woman stop her repetitive task before she wore her flesh down. Any further and she might bleed. She even suspected she had already, but Chiyo dare not look too closely even as the soap began to sting.

“Shit…” the mage hissed, chasing after the dark, gritty bar. With a few fumbles, it was returned to the wooden stand and the old water was dumped out the open window into the garden.

‘Foolish girl, should we feed you twice as much now too?’ The old hurt echoed in her mind. At least Tamaris wasn’t there to chastise her for the current waste. The stern elf had seemingly lost the use of her hurtful tongue. However, that still didn’t stop Chiyo from flinching at the thought.

Tamaris had left the tiny cottage at dawn and in silence after seeing to Vahari, as she had every day since the birth, returning only when Chiyo was needed elsewhere a few hours later. Though the other elves had turned to the Inquisition for direction, it was their crisis-elected elder that had taken up a decisive, central role. There was so much to be done. Crucial matters had been placed upon the Herald to delegate and resolve when decisions could not be made independently or without conflict. Not everyone was happy with the rising elven insurgency, but nobody dared contest the Herald of Andraste or wished to be caught in her hollowed gaze. The Maker had given this woman unquestionable powers and sent her to them, who were they to reject such a divine blessing as the Chantry had called it. Divine or not, there was much to be amended by mortal hands and hard labor.

The tainted wells had to be cleaned and sealed, not even a sliver of red lyrium could remain behind. Bodies of the dead collected for proper burning, stopping the spread of more disease. Venatorii had to be tracked down and dealt with before they could further influence Wycome. A dead town full of lyrium-infected corpses would have served perfectly as an eastern port with a ready supply
practically at the docks. Food sources desperately need to be located until trade routes were reestablished. Hundreds of elves needed to be made useful again after weeks of forced idleness, losing them what slim pay they’d earned before the destruction of the wealthy, noble class. There was work to be done, and even with the help of the remaining human populations it would be difficult to accomplish it all before the southern, independent forces had to return home.

Chiyo leaned over the now empty bowl, bracing both her hands against the table’s worn edge. In the damp basin where the remaining water pooled she caught her reflection, shadowy and indistinct, distorted by the curve. She had to put aside her demons and forget once more of the atrocities done by the same hands that began to shake until she compelled them to stop. “You’re fine, see. You have your family back. You need to be happy.”

A forced smile pulled on her lips, growing wider till she saw the whites of her teeth in the wavering image. Never once had she thought to call them sharp, but the coerced grin was utterly monstrous. Chiyo let her mouth return to the same neutral line it had perpetually assumed, the external apathy just the mask she needed to appear strong and in control before everyone else. She couldn’t fall apart, not now, not when people required her competencies most. All of Thedas needed her, and for the dutiful love she held for this fragile realm she would put one foot in front of the other and continue. She would never be able to escape the people’s needs. The weight of the world would ground her bones together into dust, turn her sacrificed blood to acid and her heart would soon implode from the endless pain. Yet she still had to carry on in this never-ending nightmare. If she didn’t lead them, they would surely fall.

Even then she knew, no matter her successes there would always be another fiend for her to fight. Demon, darkspawn and people alike but when did a good leader become a tyrant? And a tyrant devolve into a monster?

The elf began to fold and unfold the wet rag, fiddling with its lay over the glazed lip of the basin. It wasn’t square enough, still looking like she’d used the cloth in secrecy no matter how she reset the creases.

Corypheus could resurface at any time. His plots would not wait if an opportunity arose and her extended absence left the Inquisition immensely weaker. Their armies had to be ready and leaders prepared. Such could not be accomplished, however, while holding the hands of grown and capable elves. As soon as Wycome was stable, Chiyo knew she had to leave. Only Vahari’s presence and needs kept her from fleeing, to help from afar. That, and the desperate pleas of the enraptured faithful who all turned to her in the dawning after their darkest hour. She would not abandon them to suffer anew without protection though she was the last person in Thedas who felt much akin to a savior. They should all leave before she hurt them too, they should not look to a monster to save them.

An erected banner now swayed in the duke’s courtyard, the claim of the city made by one with power at her disposal. It would be days still until she received word from Skyhold, but the letter she’d forwarded to the ambassador had been clear and without timidity. Josephine had offered her alliances and favors, and now they were being called upon. All of them. Until help arrived, Chiyo would place as many elves as she could in positions of power, to build a stable foundation of betterment. She would use the authority granted her to make the changes needed to alter the town’s future permanently by severing the oppressive heel. She’d take off the whole, damned, racist leg if she had to.

Even if only half the stories she heard from the elves living here were true, Wycome was long overdue for a cleansing burn. Plans were already underway to move out all of the elves once new housing could be distributed. Many had already left to assume abandoned estates, entire extended families making use of the space that had once sheltered an elite few. Fire would consume the
derelict homes they’d been bled dry to rent from pitiless shems. What was a rebellion without a little destruction anyways. Chiyo only hoped she’d be there to watch the blaze consume the shacks and confining walls.

“Eir’ean… is something burning?” asked a sleepy voice stirring from the other room.

The Inquisitor jumped away from the stand she’d braced against and caught a whiff of the smoke that existed outside her own troubled mind. Chiyo spun to look at the small, wood-fed oven she’d been trying to keep an eye on all morning.

She tried so hard to make the bread she’d learned to bake from the cook in Skyhold, but the needed ingredients hadn’t been easy to come by. The flour and eggs had been taken from the duke’s pantry. Sera had scavenged for an entire day before tracking some un-rancid butter down. Chiyo had requested yeast, though, and she’d paid for it with ample coin from a begrudging seller. Now her lumpy efforts were overcooked, and she couldn’t force on a woven mitt fast enough.

“Hot, hot!” Nearly sending the browned loaf to the floor, she rescued their breakfast, blistering her fingers in the process. Cursing her failed attentions, Chiyo dished up the last of the celebratory Dalish stew Tamaris had prepared after the birth. It had done much to restore Vahari’s strength though the newly mothered elf still spent much time in her bed. With ruined bread in tow, she took her cousin the light meal.

“Sorry, I thought this would turn out better. Just pick off the black bits…” The mage groaned softly as she entered the room. She tip-toed her way across the bare floor, glancing at the basket hanging in the corner only briefly.

“Wasn’t expecting breakfast in bed again.” Vahari pulled herself up in bed, making room for company. She kept a hand on her tender belly until she found the headboard to lean against. “You spoil me too much.”

Sitting cross-legged on the old quilt, Chiyo shook her head and offered up the dish. “Say that after you’ve tried my cooking.” She tore off a hardened butt of the bread, but her fingers only managed to pick at the crust while she watched her cousin dip a chunk of the softer middle into the thick, iron-rich broth.

“I like it crunchy anyways, eat with me. I hurt too much to finish this myself.” Vahari cocked her head, refusing even a mouthful until Chiyo joined in, dryly swallowing a few bites until hunger finally took hold after days of anxious malnourishment. It would be rude to reject the meal, the Dalish did not make such offerings lightly. She would not add insult to injury, not after all her other wrongs. The mage ate without another word.

Using the hard crust as a scoop, Vahari finished her restorative portion. Enough herbs and stock made anything palatable even prepared after-birth. “If I had them, I’d bake you those apple quiches we made ourselves sick on as kids. You ate so many of those in the fall I thought you’d explode. Do they feed you enough in the south to survive the awful cold?”

“They manage, the diet is hardy stuff. Most Fereldens eat more in a day than we did in a week. I’m small, I don’t need much.” Chiyo assured, trying not to recoil when Vahari reached to brush away a few crumbs caught below a jutting collarbone, just visible inside the gaping collar of a borrowed baggy tunic.

“Lethallan.” Vahari watched her cousin tidy up in haste, setting the bowl and inedible crusts on the floor. She tried to catch her by the arm, anything to get Chiyo to look at her directly. It was the first time she felt well enough to confront the white-haired mage, the last few mornings filled with hazy,
continued sleep and ebbing aches. There had been little time together while she’d been able to talk much. “Please, don’t punish yourself. You deserve to eat and be healthy.”

For a moment, Chiyo thought she might start to cry, but her eyes only burned dryly behind tired lids. Her face did not crumble and crack as she anticipated it to. The emotion she expected to pour out remained still inside her chest. She was too weariest, too spent, too accepting of the punishment. “No, I don’t, not when… I don’t even remember what he looked like, but he’s dead because of me.”

Vahari tugged, pulling the stone-faced elf closer. She traced the silver rings set into a long ear and followed the arm down until she found the other hand. “Listen, I know mother only said those things because she was angry, but I forgave you for my brother a long time ago. And I’d like to think that so did she.”

“How can you—”

“No. You need to hear me.” Vahari held her firmly, grasping both of the small elf’s wrists. “Tamaris is not angry with you, or Tassali, only with herself. For everything that you have blamed yourself for these last few days, my mother has been consigned to for over twenty years. You were only a child, not even five, Souren was an accident.”

“Antoine was not. He’s dead because I wanted him to be.”

The brown-haired woman scoffed, but her strong fingers began to roll slowly across the back of Chiyo’s palms. “Antoine was a self-serving bastard who had his own son killed because he married an elf. I do not mourn that loss. I would have done the exact same thing.”

Dark brow knitting, Chiyo gave her cousin a confused look. She could not imagine Vahari prowling about a dying man’s bedroom, freezing him limb by limb as he begged for death. Shoving it from her mind, Chiyo touched upon the other matter. “You didn’t tell me you were married…”

“What? Do you think I got this way from some illicit affair?” The Dalish faithful caught a laugh in her throat that made her shake. With a sad sigh she continued. “I met Remy after we were forced to settle here when the aravel gave out. Father was getting worse and it was left to me to hunt, otherwise we’d starve. The short of it is… I shot the duke’s son in the ass while accidentally poaching on his lands. I panicked and hid him in the woods for over a week until I was convinced he wouldn’t hang me for maiming him.”

Releasing her, Vahari began to rub the top of a sore, swollen breast. While her belly began to shrink her top half only grew impressively larger as milk came in. “We kept meeting in those woods for years, sneaking away when we could. And one night he had a Sister with him and she married us out under the stars. That was good enough for me, even if I don’t believe in the Chantry’s teachings. I wanted to be his wife though no one else could know.”

“Wasn’t Tamaris upset? To bond with a City elf would have been one thing, Vahari, but a human?” Chiyo was bewildered. It went against everything she’d grown up to understand. Was it not their duty to continue their failing line? To have children to send into the future. Not that she herself had fulfilled that obligation, but the Lavellans had not allowed their Keeper’s to pair-bond. An apprentice might rear a child or two before rising in rank if magic was weak in the clan, but that marital tie was severed after surpassing the title of First. The clan became their children, and they were expected to be just as devoted. With other mages available, though much younger than Chiyo herself, Deshanna had never selected any potential partners for their adopted member. “How did she not disown you?”

“I was happy and alive. She’s not as heartless as you think, only as stubborn. She was actually rather indifferent until I became with child, and then Wycome fell apart. Things weren’t so bad until
Antoine tried to marry his son off for an alliance with Tevinter. When my husband declared he was already wed and had the documents to prove it, Antoine nearly lost his mind and killed him on the spot…” Vahari’s hazel eyes began to water as her tan hands curled over the aching heart in her chest. “Remy was a good man, the elves weren’t lesser, disposable begins any more than I thought he was a raping, elf-slaying monster once I got to know him. He wanted to believe that if the Maker could love everyone then so could he.”

“Ir abelas, losing someone you love…” Chiyo wanted to reach for her cousin, to hold her and carry her through her pain. But her own throat grew dry at the thought of another person who’d once been so close and important, who might never return. She didn’t even know if Solas was alive, and she dare not even say his name for fear of making the terrifying notion true.

What she wouldn’t give to see him, even just once, to know that he was okay, that his mission to fix the blood magic that…

The mage’s eyes slowly grew wide.

Now it made sense. What if Solas wasn’t the one affected, if he’d known all along the truth that had finally been revealed.

A soft complaint began in the basket, a low whine to match the mood, but loud enough to make the Inquisitor jump. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t feel her deadened limbs, only the pounding of the hot blood in her veins. All the air was stuck in her chest, it burned as it failed to escape her flared nostrils and the continued crying only made her want to scream. He knew, he knew! Solas had left because of her magic after all.

“He’s only hungry, no reason to panic. Grab him for me, would you? It’s hard to stand just yet.” Vahari asked, already pulling at the ties on her blouse. Glancing away from her heavy breasts, she caught sight of the grave look that had glazed over her cousin’s appearance. “Eir’ean? Are you alright?”

“I should go now…” Chiyo rose to her feet, drawing in a quiet breath and forcing another slow one through her round nose. “There is a meeting today with the Chantry… I’m going to find those papers, or forge them if I have to. If you were married, then that makes you legally head of Wycome until your son comes of age.”

“Maybe you should sit back down.” Vahari stared with concern as the blank-faced elf in her bedroom walked over to the little basket and slipped her hands into the blankets, fetching the tiny, helpless, red-haired boy. With the shades drawn open and the morning light streaming in it set the tinkling mobile that hung from the ceiling, made from slivers of colored glass, send out its glittering spectrum about the room. A few reds and oranges, yellows and greens flickered across her cousin’s pale skin. It would have been beautiful, such a vibrant memory to cherish. Yet the way Chiyo was studying her baby, so void of feeling like he was some foreign thing made the former hunter suddenly nervous. A mother’s compulsive worry flared, something was wrong.

One hand cupping a round rump and the other holding a palm-sized head, Chiyo held out the grandson of the man she’d killed like a feral animal in cold blood, the squalling nephew of the elf who’d suffered from unremembered flames. Vahari accepted him quickly, hiding the babe in the safety of her strong arms.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone anymore… Let me make this right.” Was all the nonplussed woman said as she excused herself from the tiny chamber and further still out the curved front door, closing it quietly behind her with a solemn click. She let her ambling feet steal her through the tight byways filled with unserviceable scraps. A short rain had fallen the morning before, turning the unpaved
roads into goopy, littered paths and the crudely fertilized gardens into stinking lots when the heat of day steamed them.

Chiyo didn’t know where she was going. And she didn’t care, as long as she got out of the alienage.

She knew she was being followed. A presence was sensed even without the chance glimpse of darting shadows crossing the alley the mage milled through in hopes of stumbling across the main road. Not that the Inquisitor would ever admit to getting lost in a large city, being so much more organized than any forest she’d traversed, the buildings did make navigation more difficult. They were expecting her at the Chantry soon. The sisters had all requested her presence shortly after their daily dawn salutations.

By the stalker’s avoidance, they certainly were not approaching to offer her any assistance in getting to her detestable destination any quicker.

A suspicious inkling led her to round a tight corner and press her back to the wall sliding down its length until she tucked herself into the narrow dead end. It was perplexing, she should be more concerned about being unarmed and out of her gear. The thin tunic would not deflect a blade or absorb a blow. Chiyo didn’t even have to think to artfully construct the called upon ward, laying a defensive spell in preparation. This was what the Inquisition had prepared her for, to fight with whatever she had available, yet this felt more akin to a hunt…

The fresh air had helped to clear her head though it had served little to stem the self-hatred that festered deep inside where cleaner breezes and uplifting winds couldn’t reach.

“Hey lady, a bit far from the burrow aren’t are ya?” She heard the mocking male voice ask before she saw him, large and top heavy across the shoulder with a chin that might better serve as an anvil. He would have to be knocked down first, least he have the opportunity to strike with his thickly knuckled fists. The mage was small, but that didn’t mean she would be easily over-powered. She’d faced rogue, lyrium-addicted Templars and filthy, mongrel bandits far more menacing.

“I don’t have any money.” She assured in honesty, shifting guardedly from side to side as the human stepped closer. Just a bit more, and his clunky boots would trigger the inconspicuous line she’d made.

“Course you do.” The man laughed, wrinkling the deep scars that crossed his jaw. “They’re handing out all the good jobs to the elves. Ain’t nothing left for decent folk like us but ditch diggin’ and horse muckin’.”

Heels then firmly planted, Chiyo kept her arms motionless at her sides. She buried her increasingly chilly fingers against the tight weave of her pants. Cornered apostates made people more violent, it was better they know nothing of her magic until it was too late. “Maybe you need a change in vocation anyways.”

“No sense working harder than I have to.” It was the flick in the man’s eyes that gave him away and all the spur she needed to let the swelling wave of the cold, cold new magic topple her reserve. The rogue hiding high above on the roof jumped down in a concealed blur. The smaller, lighter man was fast. Chiyo was faster.

She forced a fade-step that sent her straight through a swirling cloud of poison and ducking just below a ferocious, swinging arm. Brass flashed off the clenched fingers that came within a hair’s
breath of grazing her head. The mark flared, joining the frozen burn that climbed up her arms and hardened her features with the ghastly glowing green. The little mage charged forward, driving the startled, massive man back into her trap as his partner bolted for her again.

The sizzle of lightning and the smell of burnt flesh should never have pleased her so, bringing a vicious grin to her lips. Then a keen hunger took over, compelling a wintry spell from her grasp to pin the injured men where they stood. Yet it was not herself that needed the cruel feeding. Why not swallow them both up by opening a tear in the Veil? There were creatures there that would readily sink their teeth into the offered meat. Men like these were garbage, taking from the world an undue share. A waste of life, they would snatch a meal from the mouth of their starving man. The beckoning magic whispered to her, the compulsive call brushed against her ear louder than the mortal screams. Use me, it asked, offering up whatever she required to fulfill the dark desire.

For a moment, she considered her palm and the yawning split in the skin. And then she raised it high above her head.

“Darling, I think that’s enough now.”

A smooth voice of reason washed over her dangerous focus and a buttery, leather glove cautiously encircled the aloft forearm. With a growl she turned, near ready to take down the interrupter with the same magic that pulsed behind fingers curled like claws. It took every last shred of her sanity to keep from striking her friend down on the spot.

A smile beneath a groomed mustache turned nervous, but a tease was never far from the Tevinter man’s brown lips, even in the face of deadly peril. “I’ve been looking for you all morning, barely finished my breakfast. Not that anything around here is worthy to call food. Now put that away and leave these riff-raff to me. No need to sully yourself with them, I doubt they require the full dose of the Herald’s wrath for flimsy crime. Save that for bigger brutes.”

Her darkened eyes cleared, melting under the unflappable warmth of Dorian’s presence. Even in the emerald glow of the Anchor, Dorian remained undaunted of the beast he’d dared stall from its cornered kills. The creature within slipped away, back into the shadows from whence came. She had called it, had she not? The hunt had been spoiled this time, but there would always be new prey.

“…I want to go home…” She finally mumbled as the light died down. Back to Skyhold and away from all this mess. Chiyo wanted to return to her real family, exhausted of the bonds too broken to repair here in Wycome. “Please.”

“Of course you do. On the next boat to Ferelden. After the horrifying dinner I suffered last night I couldn’t agree more.” Dorian promised, his relief palpable as the other mage desisted. For a moment, he slipped his arm around her shoulders and gave a squeeze, like comforting a friend through nothing more than a bout of homesickness. “This place isn’t good for you, my friend. Rather toxic, wouldn’t you say? They don’t exactly have the kindest welcoming committee, but I guess these fine fellows were all they could come with on short notice.”

“Just get them out of my sight.” Chiyo pulled away from his hold and stood aside while Dorian prepared his binding magic, preferring to take them alive for punishment instead of adding to the corpse pile building on the edge of the city. They were led away, limping and scorched, chunks of ice hanging off their clothes. To the authorities, the newly installed crew under Sutherland’s command would be handed their first prisoners. “And keep them quiet.”

“I’m sure these fine folk will repay this mercy with silence. Won’t you boys?” The tall mage chirped, goading his captives to their shaky feet. “Though I could always force them to eat the eels Bull tried to feed me last night. Have you ever seen a Qunari work a pan or skin a live creature with nothing
more than a pocket knife? Here I thought the man could cook and come to find he sautéed the poor slimy creatures with turned brandy! Vinegar and fish, my tongue will never recover. It was a true travesty if I’ve ever seen—or tasted one.”

“Don’t… don’t talk about food right now.” Chiyo didn’t feel sorry for their spared fate or their earned wounds. She only felt hungry, more than she’d ever been even when food was sparse, but that too soon dissipated as they marched out of the alley. It was so strange, but the fading anger didn’t feel her own either. In fact, she couldn’t quite remember why she’d been so provoked in the first place.

Dorian was right. The sooner she returned home, the better.
"Haol… Come on boy, slow down." Chiyo struggled to keep up with the sniffing wolf who seemed not to care how far behind she fell on their nightly excursion. Perhaps it was the lack of fear in her heavy heart that unleashed him, sensing no urge to continue the security of a close presence. What did a monster have to be afraid of here anyways? She was becoming more at home amongst the demons than her own flesh and blood people. There were more frightening things locked inside herself than there were in the dreamers' endless Fade, at least across the Veil she felt in control of them. Maybe she should just stay here and sleep away the rest of her miserable days. The friends left standing around her might live longer if she did.

The Inquisitor had almost hurt one of her dearest companions again, the violent notion had flashed across her mind when he'd grabbed her in the alleyway. She had not seen a close comrade standing there, only a human, a shem, an oppressor who'd dare stop her. Chiyo, for a moment, knew she hadn't been much herself. But she'd been in full command of the Anchor then, no excuses left to be made, and no Fade Expert or Seeker had been there to stop her that time.

What was the point in resisting any more if everyone and everything she loved was made worse for her affections and attentions. Nothing was left unspoiled by her inadequate attempts to help. Maybe this was to be her fate after all, to be taken over by the darkness within and then snuffed out. The Inquisition had extinguished many abominations before, what was one more mage to behead, to put an end to a worthless fool not fit to lead.

Dorian hadn't probed when she requested a short list of herbs be found, he'd been more than willing to help ease some of her stress while in Wycome. She began to self-administer a potent mix she’d learned through her studies to help induce sleep and encourage serenity upon waking again. Taking them had given her more clarity of mind and settled the rawness of her nerves, though it dulled the natural magic that had been a part of her since birth. She just could not afford risking further anxiety, preferring instead a constant state of numbness to the unrestrained shifts in melancholy and hostility that berated the uneasy mage.

As much as Solas' absence pained her, she was glad only that he wasn't there to witness the wretched thing she'd become, a rabid beast ready to be put out of its misery.

"Haol." She called out again, only just able to track his trotting figure through the jungle of trees with her keen vision. He'd barely held still long enough to eat his freshly killed dinner. The impatient creature had been in such a rush to move ahead that only one of the snared fowl had been swallowed — whole, feathers and all.

The Inquisitor knew better than to expect anything remarkable to come of this Fade wandering, what would the wordless spirit gain in helping her anyways. Solas was an expert in this domain; he'd made that evident from the beginning. Certainly, if he didn't want to be discovered, he wouldn't be. This shifting place did not follow the same rules as the waking world, footsteps did not remain, scents did not linger. Memory alone and desire crafted into fancy, nothing more to be found.
This was certainly the far, far South, muggy and humid, where her people had once flourished in numbers. Perhaps he was leading her to another vision of elvhen glory, brief and shadowy glimpses of a life that had been centuries lost. Yet even that chance promise held little appeal. Something was terribly wrong. She could feel it growing each day, a deadly disease claiming more and more of her body and mind.

How long before her soul too soon followed?

There were not enough good deeds left in this world to turn her back into an innocent person again.

And the man she would seek for help in the matter was nowhere to be had. Maybe Sera was right, it could be that Solas no longer cared enough to be there, that what had been learned in secret of the blood magic he’d neglected to tell her of had warned him enough to run when the opportunity struck.

Chiyo wanted to be angry for that, to hate him for the clever cowardice, but only a softly broken chuckle escaped her closed lips when she tried. Yet she could not, knowing that if the issue were reversed that she would have probably done the same. She’d almost left him behind once before, he was better for having gone through with the harsh decision. Maybe it would have been kinder if she had left that day. What rage could she point for blame when it wasn’t Solas’ hands that were covered in murderous blood. Those deaths merited whatever the frightening Fade had in store for her, and she would meet it with acceptance instead of running away like a traitor from earned punishment.

In another world, another life. One where she wasn't cursed, then maybe he could have loved her. For months now she’d struggled to put those words away. That hurt would not help Chiyo in her goal, that pain would not see the Inquisitor to that final summit. Worse was the love that she couldn't kill, as much as she'd sought to smother and neglect it by staying busy to excess.

The unhappy laugh she failed to bottle turned into a tear spilling guffaw that left her bent against a mossy tree and wiping at her moistened eyes. It made sense, much more so than the untrue gist Dorian had been able to provide when she’d returned from Crestwood. The problem had been in her after all. At least Solas had been humane, or perhaps cautious enough, to not share that small detail with the Tevinter altus. What would Dorian do or say if he knew, how much longer would he have remained her steadfast friend. She considered the mage's sore history, rubbing her cheeks to dry them, with what his father had endeavored to do. Chiyo’s mother had succeeded in her alterations, but those chains were beginning to dissolve.

Surely the well-bred man would withdraw as well. She hadn't told a single soul what she'd surmised inside that repurposed aravel. If Solas had thought the knowledge too dangerous to disclose, perhaps it should remain thus.

"He would know what to do… He always knew… Damn it, Solas." She drew a rattling breath as she looked up from her pause, drying her rewetted face and nose with the side of a shaking arm. At the top of an abrupt rise in the steamy forest floor she spotted the dark charcoal body of the wolf perched along the edge before he vanished again. She had to move on, or she really would be left behind.

Up the steep slope she climbed, finding holds in the snarled roots that made the ascent easier. How the wolf had traversed it so quickly with his massive, gnarled paws, Chiyo couldn't fathom. Likely, he hadn't scaled it at all, only needing to will himself anywhere he wanted to go. With a last scramble, she pulled up to the top, but the sight the impressionable Fade presented was oddly… familiar.

The perimeter of an empty, uninhabited Inquisition camp greeted her, home now only to a colorful array of birds that cawed and took flight as she stood. A few crates left behind in the forward march
bore the stamped insignia. Worn, muddy foot paths were still clear amid the grass. An old fire pit, little more than a gray, rained-over pile of ash marked the center. She could almost make out the distant din of troops, their calm words ebbing in and out of the strange reminiscence. Chiyo picked her way through, nearly remembering to the day when she'd last visited this faraway location. It had been late winter then, not that the jungle was ever less than tepid.

She still wished that following spring had never come.

They'd stayed here, traveling deep into the Arbor Wilds on their way to stop Corypheus' disastrous plan. Days away still from the war front and the chaos. They'd recovered a few short, blissful nights upon this cliff.

Haol snooped about down a bit further, and to her ever increasing surprise she saw the hidden side of a concealed tent between the ferny growths. She'd put it there herself, tired of making camp atop what had to be some of the most rock infested sites each time. Her densely feathered bed in Skyhold had ruined her immensely to the once accustomed roughness of the wilderness.

The wolf pricked his ear by the sagging tent flap before he gave a small shake of his massive head, issuing a low, discouraged whine. Then he wandered off again, having lost interest in the peculiar spot. Chiyo approached it herself, her hand crept out to touch the first toggles that kept it closed. A peek inside, a curious inquiry to the oddity, her guide couldn't go far in that brief pause of time.

The closures took a moment to finagle, stuck tight in their loops, but with focused work she had them undone without much fuss. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched the unbothered wolf slip off into the dark undergrowth and shadows, tail low except the sharp bend at the end. If he wasn't worried then neither was she.

Solas rolled over on his pillow when the tent flap opened. He pulled the thin blanket up to his nose. Rough fabric rubbed as it fell, hushing through the narrow space. It was dark and the continuous flick of a dulling downpour riveted the tent's sloped ceiling in whooshing waves. The smell of dry earth soaking in the rain whisked by his nose when the wind crept through the briefly open gap. He'd only just fallen asleep, eyes too heavy to part even to see whose feet tracked carefully over the tightly crowded bedding, just enough room for two in the tiny tent.

When the intruder settled in beside him, only then did Solas peer through his lashes to see a crop of soft waves drop against a plump pad, the white tresses fell away from a long, slender ear. The merest glint of light caught against the polished rings set from lobe to tip, but he could not make out the details even with his nocturnally well-adjusted gaze.

Her entire form seemed too heavy as it collapsed into the simple mattress, the muscles of the spectral body trembled with relief to lie down, tense from the endless weight pressed upon those small shoulders. The Inquisition had demanded so much of her, each day just as grueling as the last. Crumbling joint by joint, she allowed herself to fill in the empty space on the low bed. Solas could not see her face, instead he knew her by the delicate bones of her spine that tucked against him and the sloping curve of her waist that felt perfect for his arm to slide across. He knew her by the way she released a tired sigh when her head began to warm the pillow's cool top. He knew her by the smell of her skin, freshly washed in the stream and peppered with rain that clung to her loose night clothes.

If only she were real. Solas had utterly removed himself from coming anywhere near her dreams for months now; instead he carefully recreated her exact presence from memory alone to soothe the growing emptiness. This he could hold and never forget, for a few stolen hours he could relive what
had been sacrificed for the greater good.

With a shift he moved in closer, finding just enough room to share the cushion beneath her head. Solas buried his nose into her hair, he curled around the noiseless mage limb by limb. One bare arm draped sleepily around her middle as the stretch of his long, lean body curved to match her own. She'd been holding her breath from the first moment he'd touched her, but a contended nuzzling against her white whorls and the exposed skin of her neck released a shallow gasp.

Warmth that whistled between Solas' lips brushed her each time they rhythmically parted and rightfully named her in an inviting murmur. "Vhenan."

"Solas…" she answered in return, the name that no longer meant damnation. Rather, salvation was granted by her voice alone. It filled in the old cracks and reminded him that he could be whole if he allowed the caring repairs.

It sounded just like her, that same breathy acceptance that rounded his mouth and swelled his heart with the indulgence of her words. He needed her to say it again, to hear that love that she wove into each syllable. He pressed that want into the arc of her neck, rolling the firm curve of his lower lip as he always did when he'd embraced the smaller mage from behind. Waking fingers traced the side of her arm, drawing her in deeper to the enveloping hold.

Silence only followed, broken by the gentle breathing issued between them both. Solas was not satisfied with the prolonged quiet, her reassuring tone often enough to sustain him. But tonight Chiyo kept those welcome whispers to herself, the dream just as unpredictable as the original had been. She never had been what he expected, but the new dream was appreciated all the same.

Tiny kisses graced her, nape to ear, pleading for the craved responses Solas desired to be uttered. A muted keening noise began somewhere just behind her trembling but firmly closed lips.

Another arm snaked beneath her and crept unabashedly inside the not quite dry tunic. The sneaky hand spread out across the soft plane of her belly, copying the arches at the end of her ribs, aiming a little higher with each slow, deliberate pass that sent a heat rushing up through the thin skin of her neck. Even in the dark, he could imagine the color filling in those branch covered cheeks.

No complaint, were there one, survived to escape her resolutely held tongue when the loose-gathered hem of her pants was breached and delved deep into without shy reserve. And still she would not speak till his teeth ever so lightly nipped beneath her ear, asking her sweetly if his advances were unwelcome. "Ady'ar diana?"

When this memory had been made she'd taunted him when he'd done much the very same thing on the other side of the Veil, toying Solas with the delightful notion that if he went much further that their companions might over hear all the terrible things he was doing to their highly regarded Herald. She was a divine figure after all, supposedly above such lascivious lures.

"Ma halani dera ma'vhenan nuven'in…" Were the whispered words that came out instead, silently followed by a touch that asked him to continue with a promising stroke of her hand to his and a deepening arch in her back.

He responded elatedly when she spoke to him in elvhen, the lyrical encouragement all the inclination needed. A muted sigh fled from her opening mouth once lengthy fingers began to caress the delicate side of her breast, swirling in to graze against a stiffened tip. The matching partner in the lethargic investigation did much more to tease further down, though the sought goal was not easily met betwixt a pair of squirming limbs. Another, harder nip followed the first, gentler nibble when her knees clenched tight. Ticklish trembles took over with the earliest brushes to her inner thighs that
stirred a low moaning hum from Chiyo's stretched throat. A third bite along her neck had her freeze, shuddering in place with want.

"Ahn'ane ma dialal amahn..." Solas murmured, coaxing a gap to return between the Inquisitor's shaking legs. The soles of Chiyo's feet pressed against the leisured elf's shins, letting him feel every elicited contract in her toes while his fingers did their own special brand of magic, much like the electricity that often answered more forceful commands. Each gentle flex of his long thin digits illustrated what was quickly becoming his latest work of art. Slow strokes outlined the curving form, fast short ones filled in the finer details, and he needed no reference to blindly create this masterpiece.

"Min era'vun telir enem," Here in the Fade, the night could indeed be forever young. This moment existing between the pages of reality, Solas was comfortable here. It was easier for him to act upon the whim. The Fade enamored mage would never stand to be called a lover in a hurry, even in a dream. Time was inconsequential when one had lived as long he, though Solas had been motivated into more than one fervid affair over their previous travels. The Dalish woman was nothing if but persuasive. But he'd never forgotten the insight granted from that first careful study when she'd made clear a preference in touch, in taste, in want. That knowledge cleverly applied to the steady rolling of his thumb and the added flare of just a hint of tingling magic.

He couldn't quite place when her shirt had disappeared, his focus lost somewhere in the building haze of lively fingers. The Fade had never been much for perfecting exact detail without prompt, and even then it took effort. The flesh of Chiyo's back melted into where it touched his chest. A directive tug on her jaw both rewarded and silenced the eager noise encouraged by the continued touch that must have made her dizzy by the tight way she held her eyes, what he could see of them in the deep night. What felt like a century had passed since those soft lips had last pressed to his, and they found him as rain amid a drought. Warm and wet, he drank in every transference, every teasing move in return with the evasive, provoking tip of her tongue.

"Ir veraisa..." It was difficult to dampen a growl when a smaller hand snuck back between their pressed hips, a strong enough distraction in the limited space to break the claim Solas held on her mouth. An added encouragement of his own slipped deep inside the almost panting Inquisitor, ending the short-lived, elusive game. A new moan was repressed as he overtook her in a kiss once more. He needed her too desperately, the strength and realness of this evolving dream nearly overwhelmed his senses.

She whimpered when he finally withdrew his hand, knowing he left the heated flesh he'd awoken starving for more. Chiyo did not fight when Solas freed her from the increasingly troublesome confines of her trousers and left her on her back. Not a word was pronounced when he settled atop the little mage or when he pulled her legs to cross about his hips. He pressed into her palms that cupped his sculpted cheeks, grown red with excitement, matching the ears Chiyo stroked with shaking fingers. He expected an enthusiastic yelp or salacious taunt when he allowed his hips a slow, controlled grind. She certainly felt it, the clench of her legs about his body confirmed him that much.

But the Dalish elf said nothing, denying his heart what it needed above what his body hungrily craved. Perhaps this was his own conscious trying to punish him, refusing Solas even this. He could never hurt her with his selfish wishes, not even as the figment of his dreams. His head drooped to meet her collarbone while his arms sought the comforts of drawing Chiyo near.

"Please, ask what you want of me. Name it to be yours." He breathed against her jaw when he lifted his head to speak. Solas grew anxious for her voice, anything to make him forget why he'd come to this selfish construct in the first place. Hands that would never hurt him, words that held the power to heal, he wanted her to be real in his grasp. Just for a moment, a single pause from misery would be enough.
Brow pressed to brow, he longed to see the face he missed most, only the outline stood out strong enough to define who exactly lay beneath him. Magic answered that yearning, a soft ball of mage light no more potent than the distant stars grew from the pitch black to illuminate the tent.

But it was enough to see what had first been missed.

"Ha'lam ma'nun, banal'ras." Asked the woman still holding his face even as he drew away in slow alarm from the graven request. Not a single, delicate red branch marred her cheek, only the lines of tears that slipped from her eyes and spilled back into her ears. The lips he'd kissed till they felt swollen were not quivering with eagerness but wrung with fear. The shuddering of her chest, a bird cornered in its cage, had not been brought on by excitement. She looked so ready to surrender, not to his affections, but to an accepted demise.

"…Chiyo?"

And the intimate little pocket of a world went green.

She'd tried to push him away as the mark reacted, but he'd held fast even as the dream dissolved outside of a swirling aegis. A protective bubble of rift magic encapsulated the two elves, the invented landscape beyond had turned to murky, amorphous nothingness.

Solas had taken hold of her hands, fingers woven with hers for the only stability left amid the chaos. Had he truly been a demon, the maneuver surely would have obliterated him. Lucky only for the fearsome magic had once been a part of himself, the anchor that had found a misplaced home in Chiyo pulsed beneath his pressing palm.

"Not like this! It can't end this way!" The naked mage sobbed in gasping surges. There had been some fight left in her after all, rising only at the true edge of destruction. She struggled against the man who pinned her to the floor. "Release me, demon! Let me go!"

"Chiyo," Solas pleaded, using all of his will to keep her immobile and what was left of the devastated dream stable. His mana, even here, was draining fast. He no longer had the strength to match her, his powers too diminished to withstand the magic much longer. His gaze never left her reddened, crumpled face, even with the painful realization of what she believed he was. "Open your eyes, ma'lath, look into mine. Let me help."

"No more torture, please. You are not him… just let me die here." She whimpered back up to him, too tired to continue the vigorous thrash. Her combative arms slackened while she cried, only then did Solas loosen his own bruising hold.

"I never meant to hurt you so." He almost choked on the words. Solas knew what his leaving would inflict, but to hear her again ask for death was the knife plunging through his already broken heart. He thought the full separation would make things cleaner, simpler, easier on them both. His shaky lips pressed to the damp side of her cheek, he let go of her hands entirely. Let her strike him down with them if she may, he could ask no more appropriate a penance. "Vhenan, forgive me..."

"Forgive you? I can't even forgive myself…" Through his own blurred regards, Solas watched the tightness around her eyes diminish, exposing the bright golden brown below. Her stressed breathing began to slow and the pressures of the containing barrier eased. "Solas... help me understand, how can I believe you?"

"Because no demon would last a moment before you, you would turn them to ash." He assured, pulling the wet curls away from her face. With a soft shush he began to hum a soothing tune, the words found his tongue like a prayer. "Halla, Halla, guide me where the river runs free. Owl, wise
Chiyo sniffled, listening to the almost forgotten song. She picked up where he left off, though there was little beautiful to come from her dry mouth and panic-sore throat. "Wolf, clever Wolf, spare me of your woe... I think the wolf would be more afraid of me than I of it anymore."

"I will never be afraid of you." Solas promised as juddering arms came to rest about his bent neck.

"I'm a monster. Solas... I've... I've hurt people. There's something wrong with me." She allowed herself to be pulled up and braced, caught in a tightly woven knot of limbs. "And you knew..."

Her soft words cut him deep; he'd kept so much from her on so many accounts it was difficult to see where there had been any factual truths at all. Silence was almost worse than a lie, and he'd done both. And now, she needed to know more than ever, and there wasn't even time to explain. The barrier was going to dissolve soon, and they'd be leagues apart, if they made it out of the Fade at all. "I'm going to fix this, all will be made clear."

"No, now. Give me a real answer." Chiyo tensed in his embrace, she fought the capsized magic trying to disband around them. A few more seconds, she would deplete herself to buy them.

"Tomorrow, I will find you tomorrow." Solas swore with everything he had when the Fade finally broke through, rushing in an icy surge that would shock them both awake. "Wait for me—"

Translations-

Ady'ar diana? (should I stop?)

Ma halani dera ma'vhenan nuven'in (help me reach my heart's desire)

Min era'vun telir enem (this night has barely begun)

Ir veraisa (you tease too much)

Ahn'ane ma dialal amahn (what are you hiding here?)

Ha'lam ma'nun, banal'ras (end my pain, shadow/fake)

Another MASSIVE shout-out to my dearest Lyn for helping me through on of the most emotional and difficult chapters this story has presented me with. Where would I be without my friends!! And thank you, Zara, for beta reading when I felt unsure!!
Solas awakens after his terrible dream. He is running out of time, and there are many miles still to go...

He sat up in bed and covered his eyes to the first real dawn he'd awoken to in weeks. His body thrummed, exhausted and empty. A warmth lingered in Solas' shaking arms, raw and real and ruinous. She'd thought him to be desire, and he'd been far crueler than that. Lust would have consumed her quickly and granted her heart's desperate wish at the first chance. Solas had all but brutalized Chiyo, beside him—beneath him. She'd waited to be overtaken, expunged, and he'd only drawn-out her pain.

Solas could almost smell her on his clothes. Traces trapped in the old fibers that dissipated with the devastated delusion. Apricot and currant, the way the rain mingled on her skin. But there was more, blood and death and decay signaled to his acute senses as well.

The Fade was his home and particularly well-versed mastery. Centuries had been spent learning and honing his astute abilities. He'd developed and created the splitting reverberation known as the Veil almost entirely unaided. The original theory had been his and his alone. No one should have been able to open the tucked away places he'd constructed for himself, buying both peace and security of mind. Now, he was scrambling just to make sense of anything.

He thought first to blame the anchor, a power that was well known to wreak havoc upon the Veil but had been utterly untested inside the Fade. This, however, was worse. He could not think himself so lax as failing to distinguish between dream and truth. How could he not have known, not have felt the reality of her person long before? The baseness of his need, there were no excuses for the behavior. He'd lived his life through imaginings on countless occasions and always maintained control.

Finding him was a feat in and of itself. Perhaps he remained too confident in his dwindling aptitude.

Hers was a soul unlike any other, blending and breaking in tandem. Solas dared not to imagine what would become of it if forced against its essential purpose. Elves and spirits held more in common than most would prefer to admit, the Inquisitor it seemed even more akin. Before the Veil, before the fall of the Elvhen, both had walked as brothers, inseparable as the wave from the water.

He slowly dropped his hands from his eyes and met the unexpected gaze of another, gauzy green staring out against the dark tan of the boy's skin.

"Some dream, right? Never heard you talk out like that." Yawned Marlo with a growing smirk. The fractured light between the derelict boards of their shelter further bleached his honey-streaked hair in the sunny glow. "Whose name is that, the one you kept saying?"

Solas said nothing as he busied himself, rolling up the scant bedding, strapping it tightly. If only his mind could be so easily bound, the racing thoughts trussed before they devoured him.

Devour, now there was a notion that sent his nerves alight with fear. Something that could eat
through aura and magic, to make another so indistinguishable from the Fade itself. That which waited for the trap to finally be sprung, an easy feast to be had of the remains. Graver still was that he'd left her to deal with the distorting creature alone.

"Chee-o…Chi-yooo." The lad tried the strange name on his own tongue, rolling the syllables as notes to an off tune. But it was the horrifying tone that bordered a teasing explicit that had Solas' face suddenly flush. "Maker, it's right there on the tip of my tongue. It's northern, like, really northern. I know that name, heard it somewhere before..."

"Have you now?" The mage asked indifferently as he glanced towards the vacant corner Edolie had been occupying when they'd settled in for the night. He'd not heard her leave, but considering the tumultuous events of his reveries he could not blame himself for the dulled physical senses.

The Inquisitor was often a distraction when he needed to adhere to his staunch resolve, yet even from this distance he could not escape her sway. Perhaps there was no place on Thedas or beyond which he could elude her, some bonds were rather impossible to unknot once made.

"No, not a name, not really. A poem?" Marlo tapped his chin, lost in his own projected thoughts. "Maybe it was a song. There was this part about the rain, how it sounded as it came down every year upon the fallen pillars that once marked an old road."

Solas unfolded his sweater and pulled it over his head, donning it out of habit more than a need to combat the increasing cold. They had many preparations to attend with before setting out for the Orlesian border that evening, perhaps Edolie had taken a chance for an early start. They would wait for her return though it irked him to think she'd left unaccompanied. There was safety in numbers, but stealth is solidarity. Either choice was a gamble, this venture alone a serious risk on all parts.

And it was taking too long; things were collapsing far too rapidly if any of his suspicions were correct. He'd tried to buy so much time by destabilizing the Veil—to of course be mended in turn—but his efforts were coming up terribly short. If he didn't reach Chiyo soon... time would wait for no man.

He'd been thoroughly warned. She'd undo everything in one blow if left to fate.

"Yeah," Marlo began to hum as he flopped back down onto his mat, lazily lounging while his master was too far away to reprimand him. "The markers stood for centuries, but each rain, with this noise that goes—che-chi-o che-chi-o—takes just a little more away. Everyone knows what they were for, but the water has worn off all the letters."

"You are very well read, for your upbringing. I would rather much like to see this writing, I've not heard of it." This was not the first piece of literature the boy had referred to, peppering their travels with not quite complete or accurate quotations that annoyed Edolie into snappishness.

"Part of the training when my parents sold me. Literate slaves bring more money, ones with some mage blood in their pedigrees even more. I liked the words..." He trailed off, staring lazily at the dusty rafters of the abandoned warehouse. "I miss my books in Tevinter. There were hundreds that I couldn't take with me."

A deep breath preceded his response as the terrified state finally loosened its hold, though the acid in his stomach remained, twisting his innards deeply. Panic would do Solas no good, not until he learned more in a few hours' time. "They let you escape. Books and dreams are not all that different."

Few tomes, however, did not leave the pulsing life in his veins cold or the heart in his chest shuddering when it was time to close the pages and return the text to the shelf.
He had many questions for Chiyo, the least being of how she'd nearly allowed a demon to take her and in such a way. Yet there were grimmer things he knew to walk the Fade, and most of them had such unassuming faces. A friend at first, ally even for a stretch, but they would take everything from the unwary unless a strong disposition took control first. If his hunch proved in any way exact, she would need more than his added will to help bolster her own.

Solas had done it, once, when he was young and full of vigor—or enough pride to not know the difference. He reached for the blackened bone about his neck and ran a thumb over the protruding teeth. A trophy, a reminder, the conquest of that which was more ancient than the Fade itself. Existing somewhere in between. He'd met those red eyes and fangs that circled a castaway elf thrust into the Void. Solas had clashed with them and stole from those devastating jaws the power that would make him undeniably feared amongst not only his enemies but the people as well.

In the shadows, the creature stayed when the battle was won and its collected potency as prize. Tamed and diminished, but the ancient name of nightmares followed Solas out of the darkness. Once touched, tainted, never to be the same.

Fen'Harel, insult and title, a designation he had claimed in blood. He'd risen out of necessity; Chiyo would have to do it just to survive.

Would she emerge anywhere near as cleanly as he?

"Do you get to meet pretty girls in dreams?" Marlo interrupted the elf's brooding thoughts. He rubbed his lean, grumbling belly, but their bags were empty of supplies. There was to be no breakfast that morning unless the missing mage brought something back from her unannounced excursion.

"Not always." Solas stopped his fidgeting and sought to center himself. He needed a clear head before he saw her again that night. It would be far too easy to lose control for a second time. "I seek knowledge in the Fade, but I find companionship there as well on occasion."

"Did you meet her last night, this Chiyo?" The Tevinter youth pawed for his canteen, a bit of water might quiet his hunger for a moment or two. He took a swig, but while the liquid slipped down his throat he caught the subtle shaking in the mage's hands when Solas failed to answer. "So… the Inquisitor, Andraste's Herald. You never talk about her except that she'll be willing to help. I heard that she's scary sometimes, that she takes down whole armies like nothing and that her prisons are empty because she takes none there. What's she really like?"

"Have you ever seen sand that has been struck by lightning?" Solas asked, the dream's better beginning played again across his mind. For as wrong and brutal as the entanglement had been, knowing himself to be the crux of her deepest desire did serve to soften part of the blow. Even now, he knew that she still loved him and needed him. Selfishly he clung to that idea though she deserved far better and that he could not submit her to the unkindness of his returned love again. Once was more than enough, exactly why he'd kept her so distant all these harrowing months. Dreams had been what had led them to their amorous affairs in the first place; they'd only serve to steal both their focuses. Love did not diminish duty though Solas had almost walked away from his own because of sentiments held for another lost and lonely soul.

His mission, his people, they had to come first. Yet if he could help this one elf then perhaps he could aid more.

"Ehh, maybe once or twice. Kinda rare, ain't it? Gets all contorted and hard like glass." Marlo grumbled, scratching his head as he pondered. But his eyes gleamed as he listened to Solas, sifting for clues hidden beneath the words. His lanky fingers ran through his messy hair before he began to pull the strands back into a sloppy knot at the top of his neck. Pieces were missed that remained
about his face; a few wispy twists stuck to the first hairs that sprouted from his chin. "Looks like creepy roots."

"She is like combing the desert and finding such a piece, so natural and bizarre. The deeper you dig the more unexpected spirals surface. From blinding violence and darkness emerges something breath-taking, and difficult to break." The last part Solas said for his own comfort though the reminder alone would not stem the immense tension brewing inside his skull. She had to be strong; Chiyo had never once succumbed, albeit he'd never seen her so close to shattering either. But she hadn't, that he would not deny.

Could she fight, lost as she was on a path that held no guiding lines? He feared Chiyo now walked head on into a danger not even he could save her from.

Marlo snorted, nearly spilling the water he was handing over to the stressed elf with the lurch of his body. "That's… weirdly poetic. Can't you just say she's cute and nice like everyone else says about their sweethearts?" A knowing smile bloomed as he finally fit the puzzle pieces together.

The mage shook his head, he'd been found out indeed. He drew the folded, rough map from his pack for a refreshing study of the area. He looked at the loosely sketched borders, a quick copy made from the more detailed one on the War Table. Those lines and mountains reminded him of the miles yet to cross. Just a bit longer, if she could wait a mere hurried week or two, Solas would stop the dark magic before it ate her alive.

Soon, vhenan, soon.

Solas held no fondness for tavern life, not for the seediness in the air and the stench of too many warm bodies sloshed with the crude, fermented grain that dribbled its way to the floor. His mostly bare feet crunched against the more freshly spread rushes that kept the mess manageable. A sudden texture change from dry to soggy sent shivers of disgust rocketing up the insulted leg. The randy, drunken crowd churned about the room, men and women sidling up to the bar before staggering off with renewed drinks in hand. More than one had bumped his cloak covered back without many apologies. A hood concealed his ears, doubtful that they would have let an elf waltz in without sour looks cast... or a fist. He wanted no attention drawn and would have preferred to settle such a stressful matter away from the public eye. But it had not been left to him to decide. For now, he would play by rules beyond his own making, the passage worth the risk and rush.

Again his dreams had grown plagued when he allowed himself to drift. Only that night before, he'd sought reprieve when he could bear the replication no more.

The same vision returned without prodding. A distant, warning shriek across a murky blackened marsh. Each time Solas was drawn in, he waded through the mists with a bright, burning light growing ever dim inside his palms. The fire's eventual death left him lost in the endless dark, grasping at smoky wisps that dissolved in his ever beseeching fingers. There whenever he closed his eyes, the wavering glow urged him to reach the other side of the quagmire before it was extinguished, forever. Enduring the apparition no more, he'd sought kinder refuge.

His own tongue longed for a draught of wine, to drown out the bleak dreams, to ease the weight of both his mind and increasingly worried heart. He had not the coin to spare to purchase the cheap, watery drink. The mage couldn't fathom drinking the bitter tasting spirits resided in the many bottles that lined the back of the barkeep's wall. Popular drink to suit the common palate of the folk living in Ghislain, a town that had grown fat on the heavy levies it demanded for the easiest, surest border crossing to Orlais. Not that much of the money trickled far down. No one present looked much like they could afford the rare vintages Solas had grown fond of, borrowed from the cool cellars of
Skyhold. It would have been rude not to sample them, to experience the heady blends crafted during exceptional years missed throughout his expansive sleep.

Perhaps he had grown too spoiled inside those once well-known halls though they'd been repeatedly built over in the centuries since the keep had last held the Dread Wolf. There had been many comforts found in those both ancient and recent walls, of food, of friendship, of knowledge, of hope, and rarest of all, love. In the same place where he'd held the sky back, the very birthplace of the artificially constructed Veil, where he'd broken the world against his proud knee Solas had been gifted more than he would ever merit.

A hand slipped deep inside his snug sleeve out of a new habit, fishing for a carefully tucked away token. He should have given it back, that had been the promise. Had it not? That it be returned to complete the amorous exchange. Yet even the thought of removing the snarled twist of leather or the worn fang left him feeling low. It was the only piece of her he'd kept, to remind him that what short time they'd shared had been real. And the unspoken promise, the reason for his leaving in the first place.

He would bend fate for this woman and undo all that had been set into motion even before she'd been born.

The dour mage had never seen a dawn so beautiful as it had streamed through lead latticed windows and caught in a still sleeping elf's tousled hair. He'd stroked it carefully away from the peaceful face resting but inches from his own and gazed upon drowsily parted lips though he dared not kiss them for fear of waking her. Instead, Solas had left a carved figure in his place after forcing himself from the shared comforts of Chiyo's warm bed. In silence, he'd offered her all that he was, all that he had been, and still knew it would never be enough.

Maybe that promise was still worth something. If he succeeded, if he survived, if she would have him, perhaps there would be time enough to steal one last shred of happiness for them both before he had to complete another of his world-altering plans.

But first he had to lower himself to this.

He snagged a crack in the enameled tooth with the tip of his thumbnail as he made his way over to the inattentive man behind the congested counter. The heavily bearded human seemed more interested in taking stock, shaking a bottle to hear the slosh of its contents, than he did in the hooded figure leaning across the bar between the bodies of other inebriated patrons.

"I heard a tempting rumor in Orlais." He kept his voice low, knowing he was heard by the dull glance that was given in return, "That one might purchase a most peculiar local tonic here. My friends have been waiting all night for a taste, we've traveled quite far."

Solas paused, fighting the urge to bite his own lip. He'd memorized the prepared lines from the source they'd encountered the night before. He knew the passwords that would open the lines of bartering, and still his heart hammered at the probable chance that somehow he'd mess this up too, like everything else in his life. No one should be born beneath such unlucky stars as he'd wandered under all his terribly long yet almost wholly unlived existence.

"I might." Answered the gruff man, and from below the counter top he pulled out a dark amber bottle, the neck thick with dipped black wax, and a single metal cup that might have been mistaken for a large thimble instead of a proper drinking vessel. "But it's not for men light in the pocket, and I don't do tastings neither. Only the old guards here can pay for this stuff, perks of a salary."

"Ah, then it should be shared with those who know it well to fully appreciate. Enough for three? The
bottle looks half full." Solas cocked his head towards the table nearest to the fireplace, seated only by the senior city soldiers. "Certainly those men deserve another round for all their efforts in safeguarding this town during such trying times."

"Three eh?" Another rifling around produced two more tiny cups of cast pewter. With a squeak, he pulled the hefty cork free and ran the plug beneath his pronounced nose. "I've been told Andraste herself would shed a hundred tears and sing a new chant were she to know of this."

A hundred silvers. Each. He'd never heard of a passage arrangement so steep. The shifty fellow at the gate had said eighty at most, and even then they'd nearly taken their odds with sneaking through the heavily protected border. Orlais and Nevarra had not been on friendly terms in generations, no one crossed into either without expense. Being a group of illegal mages only made the matter more complex and costly.

How would they afford supplies if every coin they'd scrimped from a winter's worth of dyes and fattened goats was spent here? The slim stash hidden in the bottom of his bag would only last so many miles between the three of them.

For a moment, Solas almost considered walking away, but even that move might end in trouble by the underhanded business now being known. With solemnity, he fetched the purse from around his neck and discreetly shook out a handful of silver coins that he counted twice in his palm. Putting one back, he slid the pouch across the slippery counter and watched it disappear, the weight judged sufficient with a quick estimation.

"Let me get these in order for you." Was all the bartender said, his hand tucking into his waistband. A few sharp snaps of his fingers had an attending tavern-wench at his side holding a tray. Three minuscule splashes and the expensive bottle was put away. The cups were whisked off before the bartender had a chance to steal into the backroom while the prompt serving girl made herself useful.

From the corner of his eye, he watched as the drinks were carefully borne to the right table and words exchanged once the booze was taken up. Solas turned—least they could spot his face, but not before seeing the woman sent off with a rude smack to the seat of her skirts, eliciting a shrill giggle that could be heard over the surrounding ruckus.

As he kept watch for the barman to return, the undercover mage jumped when his arm became suddenly wet when a returning platter loaded with partially empty pitcher jarred him. Beer saturated his cloak and sleeve, but the waitress immediately began to apologize, pulling several kerchiefs from the side of a deep gap in her blouse to mop him up. His scowl only deepened when the stranger touched him coquettishly, running her fingers across his tense forearm and giggled with little decorum.

"So sorry, Ser! How clumsy of me, here, take these for all the trouble! I'm sure they'll be of use again." The falsely apologetic woman said over her pouty leer and winked when she readjusted the sagging neckline of her dress, not that it helped to cover the excessive display that likely got a few extra coppers left on her tables. Into his hand, she placed the wadded, damp cloths, painstakingly embroidered around the hems. She glanced up through her lashes into his hood and shimmied at the sight of a striking face, her gaze lingering on his full lips and dented chin. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"No, you've done more than enough." He answered shortly, his business there was done. She was sure to get her cut of the coins he'd just handed over. He owed her no further attentions. Lacking a continued need to stay, Solas pushed through the crowded pub without another word to the flirtatious woman.
Between his fingers, he held out a square of the delicate textiles as he walked, three in all, flimsy handkerchiefs with scalloped edges and initials hidden in the designs. To be presented at the border crossing and the guards would look the other way before returning to claim their share of the fees. The informant had briefly mentioned the unknowable rotation of items. Some weeks it was wooden spoons, others had been certain knots made into leather jewelry, and when the season was right, a specific bunching of flowers was carried. Only the guards involved, all getting a hefty sum of the money, knew which inconspicuous items were to be next.

He’d traded a fine horse for little more than rags. He would deserve every sharp bite and toe crushed under hoof if this foolishness failed. Solas held his disbelief tightly as he escaped the tavern, grateful for the cool night air that didn’t reek of grainy ale.

"We can't turn back. The only way is forward now." Solas verified under his breath to no one but the distant stars. The late night streets were dotted with people who would never notice his presence in the slightest.

This had to work, though, there weren’t exactly many options left available for people such as they were. The desperate paid steeply for their insecurity, and as expected no exception was made for mages. He hid the passes away in his pocket while he set out to find his acquaintances and locate a bite to eat while he had the chance. Daybreak was hours off still, they’d hidden most of the evening on the outskirts to avoid attracting unwanted notice. A few bits spent at a hawker's stall would be enough to fill three bellies for the night. Marlo was gangly enough as it was, perhaps something with fat and meat would tide him over. Pine-needle tea, mushrooms, and tough bread did little to sate the lad's needs, the speed of their travels left little time to forage for more.

He had other contacts in the south, a handful of men and women who would help him through, but Solas had to reach them first. Small as his faction was, he'd spent a careful year building up spies of his own throughout the Inquisition and its territories. Informants dotted the countryside and infiltrated almost every known network, he had but to contact them and whatever he needed would be done were it in their ability to give.

Just a few weeks more, if they traveled swiftly from here, and they'd be in Ferelden. Hopefully near enough beneath the Inquisition's widespread protection to do what must be done. He only need wait a little longer, and then he could finally bring help to his vhenan. If she didn't oust him first for leaving, or worse…

"Edolie… you really think he's not gonna to help us?" Marlo twiddled nervously behind his master, following close to her heels. He tugged anxiously at the buckle of his belt, striking his thumb against the metal tong with a repetitious click. She'd already taken his knife away for fiddling with it, using it to trim loose threads from his clothes and gouge holes in the walls of the forgotten old building they'd been hiding in.

Marlo didn't want to be scolded further for his behavior, but he was just as worried as the mature mages, only shoddier at hiding it. His summers were too few in number, but he knew still that he didn't want to die making a desperate grab for freedom.

The older woman swatted at him for the annoying fixation, the sound grating against her crimped ears. If his hands needed something to do then he should carry her pack, she pitched her bag at Marlo. "Do you see him here now? He's been gone too long, we're on our own. His blood is sick with betrayal and deceit and death. We can protect ourselves and I am rather tired of his opinions."

"We should go back, what if the Inquisition won't take us without Solas?" The boy's worry squeaked into his words as he shouldered her possessions. This was the only time the tall elf had gone far from
their side; he'd been both their protector and shepherd through unknown territories. Edolie's own recent excursion hadn't unsettled him in the slightest. He was used to her leaving when she was required elsewhere. But she always came back, she always fetched that which was hers. He was valuable, the boy knew what she thought of his worth, Marlo only hoped that it would be enough to keep him safe. "You said so yourself. Wouldn't have made it this far without help."

She spun around hard, stopping her march so abruptly that the nervous lad almost crashed into her. He stumbled backward, but his whole body froze when she snatched him by the arm. She gave it a hard twist. The rough fabric of his attire scraped his narrow wrist. "If you think that much of him then go find that stubborn fraud yourself. Foolish child, there was never going to be an Inquisition for us!"

"I thought… but, you lied to him... and me." Marlo stammered, but he dared not try to wrench himself free even when her fingers began to dig into his skin. That would only make her angry… Edolie had only hit him once since they'd left the Imperium. His mouth was always getting him into trouble, Solas' own rebuttals had added to its recent looseness. And it had been Solas who'd shown concern when the bruise had darkened his cheek. They'd talked awhile once Edolie had gone to sleep, and for the first time in all his memory, Marlo had been asked what he would do if he were free. It was a curious question…

No one stood up to his master like the strange mage did, no one had even ever considered his choice. Again and again he was defended, even after he acted out as rude. Marlo wanted to believe Solas had honorable intentions.

Yet something still whispered to him, a warning in the back of his mind. What if he were wrong? Others had used him time and time again, only Edolie had bothered to keep him, had given him a chance. Magic was worth something in Tevinter. Maybe it could still be valuable elsewhere. "But what about that girl, really sounds like she needs your skills. The Inquisitor wants to free mages. Maybe she'll free us too."

"Plans change boy, and I for one am not going to wait around for that damned elf to decide if I'm worth the trouble. I have looked into his blood and found only treachery. I cannot even count the offenses, they run so thick in his veins. He will use us and then continue with a terrible plan, leaving all others to be crushed underfoot by his schemes." He looked into her deep-set eyes and saw nothing but resentment. Edolie had never been afraid. Not when they fled Minrathous in the middle of the night, not when they'd seen their descriptions posted in the first town the pair had dare enter. She hadn't flinched when she'd been forced to kill a lone Templar who found them camping inside a cave. Nor had the mage worried when they settled for the winter in a desolate farmhouse with little but thin walls to shield them.

But Edolie always put herself first, Marlo knew this. Had things been different it would have been another of her slaves on this same journey. However, she was all he had.

"Where are we going?" He finally asked when she released him, only when she turned her back did he massage his sore arm. His obedient feet had followed without question till then, but curiosity couldn't be abated long.

"To get out of this forsaken country, he's going to help us alright. I will not play into his game." Edolie tugged at the scarf looped around her neck and pulled it high over the crown on her head, the cloth squished down the sides of her voluminous hair.

Marlo repeated the additional layer of secrecy as they'd done time again while fleeing as unwelcome refugees. He kept his questions to himself as they stole through the far side of the town and approached a graciously built chantry.
He nearly thought his master mad, she'd brought them both unarmed to the religious center, the place where southern peoples were taught to fear mages and magic above almost all else. In Tevinter they had respect and political power, but in Orlais and further down… Marlo had heard many tales from travelers about infants being drowned in chantry founts and older children with signs of magic buried alive beneath the floor and pews.

"Aren't… there are Templars here…" He whined softly, a whimper caught in his rapidly drying throat. They were walking straight into the hands of their enemy, the last place any of them wanted to be.

"Shut your mouth before I stitch it closed." She hissed back as they mounted the shallow steps. The massive door creaked when she pushed it open, they both slipped inside the softly lit vestibule. Edolie paused long enough to straighten Marlo's clothes, checking compulsively that none of his scars were visible. "Wait here. Don't move."

His lips trembled when the dark mage walked off, leaving him to stand in the entryway alone. He pressed his back hard into the corner, trying to force his gangly features into the wedge and shadow. 'Don't look at me, don't look at me…' The mantra rang in his mind when an idle Sister passed, her head lost and bent towards a book. He didn't breathe again until the long hem of her robes disappeared around the next corner.

The chantry was so hushed, the walls thickly built to muffle any external sound. He heard only the release of air through his nose. Marlo figured most of the devout occupants to be in bed at this hour. They would soon rise with the dawn and begin their daily exaltations, offering up songs to the Maker in hopes of calling him back to them.

This world was wretched enough to drive away its creator, Marlo didn't believe for a moment that mumbled music would do anything to turn his gaze back to his children.

Time stretched on, and slowly Marlo felt the tension in his shoulders ease. Drawn by the dwindling candlelight, his too-big feet crept cautiously towards the empty altar. At the far end of the main hall stood a motionless figure carved from wood, Andraste in her stately armor. A pointed crown upon her head. She bore a sword in one hand, raised at the ready.

"You were small once too…" He whispered, peering up at the shadowy face. Here was the Maker's bride, a woman who had almost conquered the country of his birth with her might. It seemed Thedas was a world of women who shook the very grounds they walked upon. Divines, Queens, Empresses, Heralds, he was glad the work was in their hands and not his. Marlo didn't want strength and power and fame, his only desire was to be safe and to live in a world that reflected such. "And now you are everywhere, a name spoken on almost every tongue.

"I was looking forward to meeting the Herald, I guess this will be close enough." His fingers had slipped from his side, brushing the skillfully carved feet worn to a polished gleam from the frequent touch of pilgrims.

A raised pair of voices from deep inside the chantry's halls had the boy scrambling. One of them had sounded like Edolie. Sweat immediately began to form on his neck and under his arms. Why hadn't he listened? Why did he never listen? All he had to do was stay put and still he'd disobeyed.

In a mad dash, he lurched for the nearest shelter, storing every lanky inch of himself in a small alcove beneath the central table. He pulled his knees to his chest and the words grew louder and angrier. The magic in the air grew tight like wires around his throat. Edolie was reaching for his help, the flesh of his wrists burned anew beyond the recent bruising.
"Where is her assistant?"

Marlo reached for a knife that wasn't there. Edolie had it on her belt because he'd been playing with it like a child. "Maker help me. Maker, Maker!" The words were mouthed but not made. His Creator could not hear him or save him from the soldiers who'd sworn their lives to the Chantry's service. The men whose heavy boots now boomed across the solid floor.

Blood, blood, he needed his blood. Marlo raked his nails hard against the scarred skin beneath his sleeve, desperately trying to draw enough to perform a spell.

They were coming for him.

Maybe he could bite his hand, a kit with a paw caught in a trap. His teeth weren't sharp, adding to the marks without much result.

Marlo saw the metal of a broad toe flash in the candlelight. It turned sharply in his direction.

They were coming.
A Veiled Confession

Chapter Summary

Just one more day before they cross the border, a short exchange should see them through the gate. Solas has never been more wrong...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was the boy, but the spiteful woman was nowhere to be seen. Just as planned, Marlo was waiting in the same out of the way corner by the gatehouse that they'd all spotted the night before. Quiet and concealed, the location was perfect for a regrouping. Behind an old, broken caravan whose axis had been shattered in two, the derelict junction amid the longstanding structures was far enough off the main path that few would chance by the spot on accident.

Dawn wasn't far off now. The night was at its deepest. Merely the cold, distant stars and rare lamplights penetrated the dense blackness. Only the wish to cross and quickly fall asleep kept him going, so that he may dream and seek the Inquisitor as promised. Solas could feel the long hours weigh sorely upon his eyes, burning acidic between refreshing, heavy blinks. It was not the time, however, to become tired, not until they were safe on the other side. Perhaps it was his age that was finally catching up to him, but the mage was not so old as to give in to every moderate discomfort of his body.

He brushed away at the nervous twinge that crept up his spine as he approached the silent lad, noticing a flighty flick of the boy's gaze that didn't appear to relieve his own anxiety. They were so crucially close, a meager wall of iron and stone and wood stood between them and the last sprint to freedom. This arrangement held such untellable importance, every tactic hinged on its success, yet he took no joy in bringing it nearer to fruition. Every choice he'd ever made had hurt so many.

Still, he could not leave Chiyo to be the last in a long line of victims. Not this time, not when he needed her as much, if not more, than she needed him.

This he would fix, not only for the sake of his plans but to finally make amends for taking nearly all the magic away. The birthright of the elves, the power that should have sung in each and every one of their veins. He'd been too proud to think they would have survived the wages of men without it, that they would have remained their equals if not their betters.

He'd been wrong. And for that mistake, he would pay the greatest penalty.

Solas waved once and received a sharp nod, noting that it was safe and they were unfollowed.

"Has your Master forsaken you yet again? Twice in one day, a tad excessive for such a shrewd creature." From his pack, he produced a small, meat and vegetable filled pouch made of chewy bread. Still warm, the thin, waxy paper wrapped around the meal was spotted with grease, too sodden to crinkle as it was offered to the voracious Tevinter youth.

"Privvy. Nature called." Solas saw Marlo's hand tremble as it reached out, hesitant at first before accepting the quick dinner. Long fingers closed around the food, but he held it to his side instead of
tucking in like a famished young man should.

"Ah, then we shall wait for her to return." Said Solas, curious as to the drained complexion his companion was taking on and the damp appearance of his skin. Hunger should not have agonized him so though perhaps Solas had forgotten with the years what it had been like to grow into a man. How many extra helpings he had snuck from the kitchen late in the evening and fruits plucked from the trees while exploring those primary years. The healthy fat of his adolescence had not followed him long into maturity, leaving him nearly as rakish as Marlo by the time he'd reached his full height. Decades still before the narrowness of his neck matched the width of his jaw, the knobby bones of his shoulders filled to fit the span of his long arms. Marlo was a few years from that completion, his hands and feet too large for his limbs. But he had the look about him as if he'd been born starving and had never had the chance to recover from all those lacking suppertimes.

"Ya, sure…" No thanks followed, only the firm settling of the boy's attentions on his dirty boots. He wouldn't look at Solas and he shifted subtly away when the elven mage took to the shadowy wall beside him.

He watched him swallow dryly and pick at the wrapper; maybe this adventure was too much for him. Fear conquered hunger uncontested, a man could go for miles with nothing to sustain him if the urgency were there. One could always eat after they survived; better to live than taste a last meal instead.

"Eat while we have the moment, tomorrow shall be swift but I hope the road to be easier on us all." Solas tried to assure, his next glance to Marlo revealed more than fretful nausea. Gangly fingers clenched around the pastry, squishing some of the innards out. He stopped himself short of mushing the whole thing by shoving it deeply into his coat pocket. Sweat now beaded the boy's brow and his breathing sounded near ragged. "Are you well?"

"Yes." It was harsh, even for as blatantly rude he'd been known to be. Marlo loosened the frayed end of the scarf coiled about his neck to mop at his face. His other hand moved to conceal his throat, but not before Solas spotted a line of red running across the briefly exposed skin.

A warning screamed across his mind when Solas reached to reveal the wound, a dagger drawn the moment he grasped Marlo's elbow brought all his ignored instinct to a head.

His protective ward popped to life within a hair's breadth of being grazed as he held back the other, bruised and scratched wrist beneath a knife too ornate to belong to the hand that held desperately onto it. Solas heard the marching of boots and the clink of armor from both sides of the passageway shortly before he saw the men in silver armaments, a sword emblazoned on each chest plate, and red robes hanging down their fortified legs.

"I'm sorry! I didn't have a choice!" Marlo struggled, trying to break the hold, caught in a clash with the larger man. A cut stood out in the open air, dried, beaded blood marked the line dividing his neck. Solas doubted immediately it had been put there by the boy's own hand.

"There is always a choice." His blue eyes were wide, almost glowing with the magic he'd drawn upon by instinct and years of warfare. Solas didn't want to believe for a moment what was rapidly being revealed, to have come so far only to be betrayed.

"They said I could go home!" The runaway slave stumbled when he was abruptly released, striking the dilapidated side of the abandoned cart with force. He knocked one of the leaning, disconnected wheels over, spooking a white cat out from under its hiding place.

The desperate stare hit Solas hard as Templars flanked the lad, one reached to hold him up by the
shoulder. The gauntlet grasped too firmly to be friendly, the silent forewarning made excessively apparent. One wrong move and they wouldn't hesitate in snuffing the kid as well if it meant leashing a powerful mage in his place. Marlo stood, frozen by the touch, his hand remained tight about the blade another knight offered to take back from him. With cautious cajoling, the knife was loosened and returned to a sheath.

Solas held the spells pulsing in his palms and dancing along his fingers at bay, he hadn't moved for his staff yet. Now was not the time to let the ice issue forth wanting for a plan, with but a thought it would coat his limbs and chest as another encapsulating layer. He considered the Templars, choosing a side that would be easier to break through. Heavily fortified and prepared for battle, there would be causalities no matter which way he went.

The livid cat had woven itself between Marlo's ankles, every snowy hair puffed high off its back and tail. A low snarl whined through the stifling alley, but he kept his feet steadfastly and protectively planted around the small animal.

"Apostate, you are under arrest by order of the Chantry for crimes against humanity and principal decency. The unlicensed magic is the least of the offenses your captives have revealed to me. This tirade against civilians ends now." The senior Sister among them spoke clearly, her voice sharp as the long swords of the guards at her side. She commanded these men, and their revered silence showed the absolute belief and obedience demanded of them. No one so much as stepped forward without her signal.

Carefully, Solas lifted his hands to the level of his bald head. Not once did he break the hard stare he'd captured with Marlo, reading every tensing of his jaw and quiver that shook his narrow chest. "One can only guess as to the lies you have been fed Sister, these people have been my traveling companions and nothing more."

"How does that explain the atrocious marks all over that child's body? And the allegations by the woman, Maker, I have never heard of a man so deranged. She was lucky to have escaped you." They were surrounded now, the soldiers crowding ever closer. Solas could almost feel their breath in waves on the back of his neck.

"You would be fool to believe everything you hear." Solas kept his cadence calm, it was not to the faithful woman he spoke to, but to Marlo. He couldn't react, even as he sensed a brave soul slip his plain staff from its holster, not at the cost of another who'd been dragged into his mess unwittingly and without knowledge. This was not the boy's fault, but his own. "They were not in any danger, least from me."

"On your knees." Two sets of gauntlets met his wrists, the metal fingers encircled his bones. He allowed the muscle behind them to send him to the ground though the added kick to hurry the joints was unwarranted. He grimaced, suffering to be disarmed and removed of his travel pack.

"Wait..." Marlo whispered between shuddering lips as the proud man went down. This wasn't supposed to end like this; he knew that though he'd been told the plan in full. They were going to capture the wicked mage, with force if necessary. If they couldn't make a use and profit of him with bridling, they'd brand him Tranquil. If he fought too much to merit the effort, they'd simply kill him as an example to others. Ghislain held no tolerance for mages outside of their circles or necropolises this close to Orlais, they could not be seen as weak and overrun as their northern, heretical brothers.

"Are you going to come quietly?" One of the guards asked gruffly, keeping his unwavering grasp on the potentially hostile mage.

"There is always a choice..." Solas repeated, the clank of shackles met his ear as they were loosened
from a belt. A tightening of the boy's hands into combative fists at his sides was all the permission he needed to let the full fury of winter seep from his core, freezing the arms of the men who slapped the first heavy bracelet to his wrist. Icy crystals formed up the polished steel and his imprisoners screamed as their hands were turned painfully cold, unusable blocks of frozen flesh.

As the first knight shouted Marlo twisted, pulling the recollected dagger from the sheath on the nearest Templar's hip. With one slash he drew it across his forearm, straight through his clothes and the flesh below. He cast the blood, though not at any person but down at his own feet. It splashed, brilliant red against the cat's fur, changing the small animal into a massive beast with a caustic swirl of smoke.

Paws the size of dinner plates, fangs and claws that would send even the stoutest mabari cowering. Kitty was gone and in his place a terrifying lion as white as snow but for the smear of offered blood on his snarling face and shaggy mane.

A feline shriek pierced the night, and a red moon would rise next over Ghislain.

Solas did not recognize this dream, misty with the rising dawn as it were. He could not place the location for all his travels and the thinning fog only served to partially blind the elf. His memories and experiences with the Dalish were limited at best and far from peaceful, but he knew their aravels immediately. This arrangement was certainly more than just one of the nomads' temporary settlements. Clusters of vessels with dulled crimson sails lined the whole embankment as far as his eye could see through the murky shroud.

With their bows all pointed towards the clouded sea, the land-ships stood as eerie markers of the elves who'd once left them there. Buried up to their spokes, the bottoms of the hulls were in the soft, earthy sand. They'd been there a while, the sediment had swirled in graceful eddies that lay undisturbed until he crossed through.

A limping trail of impressions marred the naturally smooth surface. Each slowly filled with water, tiny pools of his fleeting touch tracked singularly up the ghostly gray shoreline.

He was so tired, so spent, even here he could feel the added toll of the injuries left upon his physical body. Only a few years out of utherna and already Solas wore exhaustion as a near constant cloak. For a time the Fade had served to restore him, he'd take his fill of it each night and awaken renewed by its forces. But for the last few months, he'd been slowly scraping away to the bottom of his energy's own barrel. With little time for rest and poor access to food, his ancient body simply could not keep up with the demands he made of it.

There wasn't much left now and the journey was not yet done.

The sun never seemed to rise any higher than the bare crest of the distant horizon. Miles slipped away beneath his unwrapped feet, but the aravels slowly grew sparser apart and more broken. Keels had large cracks leaving decomposed splits in the wood. Masts had fallen over, allowing the once proud, heavy fabric to rot away on the ground. Some were left toppled on their sides, leaving their planked bellies exposed to the tide and spray, crusting them with salt while they collapsed under their own weight.

Solas then came to stop before an aravel that had been forcibly dragged back from the water's edge, uprooted from its muddy grave and propped up higher on the pebbly slope. Parts and pieces of other housings had been used to make a few repairs, reinforcing holes in the hulls and patches over the ragged sails that had been repurposed into a canopy roof. He approached the rough shelter and halted when he caught sight of a faint green light passing beyond the darkened open entry. There were no
door or hinges where one had long since been ripped away.

With added caution, he drew near. Solas took note of the small litter of fragmented bones off to the side and the hollow, wide depressions too large for the petite woman he was after. They were much too blurred to have been made recently. Solas' fingers brushed the splintered trim, catching on the rough grain as he poked his head inside. Instantaneously the overwhelming scent of noxious herbs swept over his senses, the heady musk of mushrooms, drying boughs and barks that made his head swim with a groggy, stifling pungency. The combination threatened to make him drowsy and numb, but a touch of mental magic quickly fortified him against the foreign effects.

A dissipating breath cleared his perception enough to produce a few balls of light, erasing the dark shadows as they hovered through the cluttered space. It was a scratchy rifling behind the partition that brought him forward to find the Inquisitor leaning nearly half-inside of an old, dented leather trunk. He observed for a moment as she continued her unremitting toss of disregarded items, already a small pile of castoffs had built up around her knees. Chipped wooden bowls, incomplete squares of embroidery, handfuls of loose buttons, unraveled foot bindings, arrow shafts, wads of twine, threadbare tunics, tarnished spoons, all of it, scooped out like the innards of a gourd.

"It has to be here." Her focus was so fixed on the search that the Inquisitor didn't even flinch when a hand embraced her shoulder and settled on the cold curve of naked skin at the crest of her arm. She was dressed much too thinly for the crisp morning. Solas knew her to bundle in cozy sweaters and layers at the first hint of a chill, and now she didn't so much as shiver. She had survived their last encounter, but her mind was clearly amiss for its ingenuity. The cost, though, came at the failings of her emotional state.

"What do you seek in this place, my heart?" This was most certainly her dream though the level of detail recalled was beyond any he'd witnessed from the same mage only a few seasons prior. Timid and always remaining close to the places she actually was, Chiyo was not the venturesome dreamer that now stooped before him. This entire landscape was constructed by her doing and memory, seamless and complete, suited to her whim and temperament.

Without coaxing, she pulled away from the container, her face marred with frustration. Dusty hands pushed the overgrown hair from her brow though the waves would not obey the command for long.

"It's somewhere, it has to be. If Tamaris had one then there must be others." She gripped the trunk's carved ironbark edge, decorated with rudimentary imagery of young children linked in a playful dance. She still scanned the jumbled contents for what precious token had been lost.

"I can do many things, ma'lath, but I do not possess the gift of reading minds. Not even here." Fretful hands slipped down her arms, persuading her further till she stood up among the mess, knocking several rejected items over in her wake. She did not turn to confront him, her mission unfulfilled, the Dalish elf continued to scour.

"It struck me as we were leaving, she was holding the babe while Vahari said goodbye. That was Tassali's sylvanwood ring." Chiyo's head lolled when the worried mage gently swept several loose strands behind her ears. His fingers lingered over the icy tips, holding them in an attempt to impart some of his warmth. "She must have kept it secret while I'd been a child, but I'd know a Keeper's ring on any finger. A reminder of the great betrayal, to stay ever vigilant and cautious for the sake of our People."

"They took her, all of her, from me. Am I responsible, it should be my burden to bear…" Solas relinquished his hold with the first low, predatory growl, but the noise changed to that of a troubled sigh when the small mage turned on her heels. "I need something in this damned world to be real, to make sense because every time I wake up the rules have changed and the truth is altered to be easier
There was no light in her eyes, the brown hardened and compact as trampled earth. Her gaze was muddied by the dark, tired bruising below. Had Solas not known her in person he would have never thought Chiyo's pallid cheeks, depleted of all their hue and drawn taut over the bones, to have ever held joy. The Inquisitor's fine chin stuck out too sharply, stretched far away from a sinewy throat and collar. Solas stopped himself from looking much further than the shrunken breasts atop the stretched muscle behind the gaping divide of the thin slip. This was how she saw herself now. Unable to forgive, the punishment had been inflicted upon her own flesh. "I killed a child, my own cousin, so why didn't I pay that price?"

"Chiyo… Ir abelas." The name slipped from his lips without warning, but even the soft, consoling syllables were enough to wrinkle the woman's nose.

"Do not come here to offer me pity, I don't want any either." Her white teeth flashed, exposing briefly the light color of her gums. He did not remember her teeth to have been so sharp, each in its correct shape had gained a razor-edge.

"You knew too, didn't you? And said nothing." Her tongue struck the back of those severe incisors with a harsh click.

Solas slowly tucked his hands behind his hips as she spoke, convinced if he were to reach out and touch her again that he stood to lose a few fingers. "I would not consul you on your own history, my discoveries were accidental. It seemed crueler to torment you with details that held no resolve."

He was a better liar than to glance away, but to see hatred cross her features was enough to make any man waver.

"Bullshit." Her eyes grew wide and she stared nearly through him, with an angry step forward Chiyo drove him back. "How long? When did you start lying to me?"

The elf's lips failed to move. They held a hard crease on his stern face when the words remained unsaid.

"How long did you know about my mother, about what I had done?" She demanded again, one foot crossed the other, sightlessly slipping around the clutter.

He took a breath, feeling the pull of the endless line of truths he'd kept hidden, a rusted chain of honesty. Each a weighty link attached to the others, pieces that traced back to the very beginning, back to the anchor that lay deepest beneath it all. But there was no more running, not from her, not from this. He might die before getting another chance if his luck continued on the same darkening path.

"I knew something was wrong when you lay bleeding in my arms, reciting stories of your youth. A mage born in blood, striking fear into the hearts of all… I knew of the binding next when I traced your constricted magic to its source. It was Wisdom, whom you helped me release, that revealed to me a memory deep within the Fade. Of a Keeper with a terrible choice to make with few good options to spare. I have sought to release you, to give you back what should have always been yours… You cannot fight Corypheus in this state." His chin dropped, matching the quietness of his tone. "There are… concerns."

Solas felt his words come up short, there was a risk in telling her too much of a future yet to be. What if in divulging to her he made things worse. That knowledge would be what drove the Inquisitor to that last act of destruction. Knowing that fate might solidify it indefinitely, a self-fulfilling prophecy.
There were things that were better left said in person, not in the ever mutable Fade.

"What made you believe you had the right to keep this from me?" Solas did not flinch as a fist was made around a handful of the warm wool of his shirt. He closed his eyes to the building fury that glowered up at him from below. In truth, no reason would suffice, it had all been done to alleviate is own selfish anxieties and protect his crumbling plans. From the very start, he'd measured much of what she'd been allowed to learn, keeping on the perfectly poised mask till almost the end.

"Didn't you love me enough," He heard the accusation catch in her throat. "Even for that?"

All of his inward focus burst forth at the notion and he glared at the elf, startled with surprise by the swiftness in which she was grabbed. He did not wish to bear down upon her, but Chiyo's upsetting words all but shattered the heavy mask behind which he caged his emotions.

"Love you?" She shrank away with his cruel and serious laugh, pulling against the immovable hold he'd taken of her strong arms. The ground beneath them began to quake, leaving the warp boards to groan with the strain. "I have nearly ruined this abysmal world to keep you safe. Alive. I could not even begin to describe the actions I have taken, the rules I have broken, the changes made to my plans in protecting you. Tangled so deeply within me, that you have become my very heart. Ma'nas falon! All of this, the lies and the leaving, all that I have yet to do, is because of this terrifying love that will not forsake me even if I beg it to."

Too angry to fully back down, Chiyo's chest rose with the swell of the words she spat back. "How has running away solved any of this? Things have gotten worse or have you not seen the rifts that—"

"I opened them." He interrupted with the placid and weighty admission. Solas would have smiled, were the situation not so grave, at the spark of light that shone anew in the eyes he peered into through hooded lids. "I knew they would distract you. The research on the Veil, that is another thanks I must offer to you. It proved to me how truly weakened the magic had become. With your efforts, it is nearly whole once more."

"We have been trying to save people, Solas, not risk more of them." The skin beneath his hands grew warmer, rapidly losing its deathly chill. A little more, he would goad the life back into her is that's what it took. A soul entrapped in ice would not do, he needed that fire she hid so well. Chiyo's rage would fuel her forward and she would find him with daggers drawn. Solas was certain of this callous plan.

He thought of his actions in the ruins beneath the Dead Hand, of the elves that had helped him destabilize the troublesome Veil. Their lives too had been gambled though the necessity hadn't negated his guilt in the slightest. "It was a calculated maneuver, and you were not the only one to balance sacrifices and lives."

"You have to end this," Steam hissed between her snarled lips as the air around them crackled with tiny floating flames. Like fireflies, they settled onto the wooden beams and soon their color spread, burning away the shadows with rapidly increasing light. "I will not have you hurting others for my sake. I'm not worth their lives!"

He felt the first hot licks at his heels, it would be but a moment before the entire aravel went up in smoke. "And how would you stop me?"

"Solas!" The fire was hungry, having waited so long.

There wouldn't be a scrap left of this dream by the time the flames had their fill.
Someone once told me that humans flee when they see the sails of our aravels flying above the tops of trees. I say, good, let them flee. The humans took everything from us--our homeland, our freedom, our immortality. What's a little fear compared to all the horrors inflicted upon us? I recite the Oath of the Dales to myself each day when I sleep and when I wake: "Never again shall we submit." Never again.

The Keeper says that one day the Dalish will find a home that we can call our own. But why? Why should we tie ourselves to stone constructions like the humans and the dwarves? What is wrong with the life we have now? We owe nothing to anyone, we have no master but ourselves, and we go where the halla and the gods take us. There is nothing more wonderful than sitting on an aravel as it flies through the forest, pulled by our halla. We are truly free, for the first time in our people's history. Why should we change this?

(Codex)-- From the journal of Taniel, clan hunter.

Chapter End Notes

Another massive thanks to Elystaa for kicking my ass and getting me out of my hiatus!!!
Chapter Summary

The time has come to return to Skyhold and prepare for what must be done. The only question that remains is if Chiyo is going alone on this journey or if anyone will still stand by her side.

Chapter Notes

Another big thank you to Elystaa and the best of luck to her and her new story "Uthaan-Endless"!!

The first breath was boggy, dragging through parched, parted lips. A heavy waft of peat, dense with watery rot clung to her lungs thick enough to muster a cough and a sickened groan. The next came cleaner, that of fresh air. The sweet smell of hay, dry and abundant cleared the groggy elf’s throat as she shifted within the loose, warm embrace her body was ensnared in.

Far away, the suck and sloshing sounds of deep muck reverberated, but it all faded as the last tendrils of the dream evaporated with the new day.

Narrow, calloused hands soon stroked her brow before the firm fingers slipped to pat at Chiyo’s numb cheeks. Her eyes were still too heavy, and no amount of prodding could get them to open.

“C’mon Inky, like the sun don’t shine out your arse. Birds won’t even chirp till you get out of bed.”

The joke was lost to the sleepy grunt that soured when the Inquisitor was pulled up by her night clothes and forced to sit. Drunkenly, Chiyo slumped forward to be met by an annoyed archer and a firm shake. Limp swats, a paltry attempt, only aggravated the uncouth blonde. Quick to give up when her companion barely managed to fend off the impatient assault, Sera huffed as the other elf drooped back down onto her blanket atop the crunchy hay pile they’d been snoozing on. The straw whooshed with the weight, sending a plume of dry dust and bits into the air.

“Sera darling, that’s quite the bedside manner you have. I’m surprised to not have seen you in the medical tents helping our less kindhearted healers with your ministrations.” The sharpness on the edge of Dorian’s more distant tongue did cause a stir, leaving her to stare through parted lashes at the dark roof of the serviceable loft they’d borrowed for the night. An echo in the back of her mind recalled the farmer agreeing to the proclaimed extension of Andraste’s will taking use of his property. He’d offered up his own home for their divine needs, but the barn had been decidedly more than enough for a handful of sea-soggy travelers.

And their newest attendants —some of the Inquisition’s finest troops— placed in charge of seeing that the Herald return home. And at once.

“Shove it, this ain’t natural and you know it. A stiff pint for sleep wouldn’t last on halfway through the morning.” Chiyo was jostled when Sera left the depression of a nest their short rest had made.
Another cloud of hay was sent flying with a frustrated kick. “Fucking mages and your stinking poisons, I’ve seen you dosin’ her with that piss! Darkspawn have more life in them then she does now!”

“Buttercup, you’re no Chantry sister but you’re starting to sound like one…” Varric’s forced chuckle drove its way into Chiyō’s ear, sifting through the induced haze and fog that was beginning to dissipate at last. She could still taste the bitter herbs adhering on her teeth and lips as she licked them, attempting to banish the slackness that kept her motions sluggish and responses repressed. “I remember more than one morning where you weren’t up before lunch and half the Chargers couldn’t drag you from bed after a good couple rounds. I could have set fire to your sheets and you’d’ve just pissed on them to douse the flames and nodded off again.”

“Your mouth’s a crock full of pus and shite! An arrow’d shut you right up, it would!” A dark shape flew past her improving field of vision and a hard wallop, followed by a shrill shout, finally had the Inquisitor recovering some of her self. She rolled to see the burly dwarf in the corner massaging his arm, a boot left upturned on the floor beside him. Another blur of blonde hair zipped down the loft ladder, a hard thump hitting every other rung with a projected curse. Sera abandoned them half-dressed, wearing only one shoe, having used the other as an impromptu weapon.

“Dorian…” The name finally cracked free, tongue regaining in soberness. By the time she’d brought herself to rise, the mage was by her side, offering water from his canteen. He held it carefully to her mouth, adding a guiding hand under the Inquisitor’s own till her sleepy hold would suffice. The infused sprigs of mint sent a tingling wash of refreshment down her throat, encouraging the small woman to drink even more. These were her mornings now, always sharp with thirst.

Perhaps she is right. These tinctures have only become more potent…” The rich hazel of his gaze was a warm beacon, but it withdrew when he rescued a nearly empty bottle from the straw. Dorian gave it a dispirited shake, sloshing the murky contents against the cork stopper. “Had another nip or two, did we?”

She did not answer; a lie would not conceal the apparent truth regardless of how it was spun. There had been no further incidences since she’d begun the regiment. No violent outburst had slipped its leash. But she was far from herself, and that removal of personality weighed heavily upon the others. Chiyo was their glue, their mortar, they would crumble were she not there as a constant bind.

“Has it helped your dreams at all, my friend. I doubt you would be doing this for the sheer pleasure of it all. I’ve found far better escapes, and been delightfully awake for them.” Chiyo looked at Dorian seeing an endeared friend, and not an opposing stranger, amid the gentle worry he bore. Never again did she wish to harbor such unaccustomed hatred for this man, or any other. She would cling to any aid of that control she could, even with the risk of it becoming a crutch.

It was not the effects of the potion that held her replies at bay, only a simple nod answered Dorian’s probing. That was the problem, was it not? That she’d found it so easy to become accustomed to living in the Fade to such extents. Forsaking fear and lucidity for the possibility of answers and freedom. She’d attained a sliver of both, worth more to her than a fabled slice of pickled apple from Arlathan, yet still Chiyo doubted that even a fellow mage would understand that appeal.

Finally, after months of fruitless searching, she’d picked up a long-cold trail. One that even the Left Hand had failed to find, though locating his spirit proved just as difficult as tracking down the man himself.

“There was this fine lad who accompanied my tutor, stunning creature with legs that put even mine to shame and a jaw honed by the Maker himself, he was simply perfect for forgetting my daily woes.” She held still as he plucked the bits of straw from her hair, drawing out each one smoothly
only to fling it aside. “If only we could acquire someone so adept for you, I always sleep so soundly after a thorough de-stressing. Anything to keep from drinking so much of that rather pungent brew, but I’m afraid out here there will be not but farmhands and old men like Varric.”

“I’m not too old for a fine lass, Sparkler, she’ll just have to do all the work! These bones have been on the sea and road a long time, can’t seem to get out of bed easy enough. Getting into it’s a whole new matter.” The dwarf snorted as he made himself ready to leave the barn.

He was right; their dogged trip homewards had been exceptionally hard on them all. The Chargers had been sent ahead for more secure travels, but there were few places deemed safe enough for even a small collection of the Inquisition’s forces to bunker down. Several towns were still unstable amid the turmoil, most inns decreed too public of a space while the Herald needed an added layer of protection. At least, the food was slowly getting better. Many a night had been ruined by rolling guts and dashes to the bushes for all who partook of the traveling meals.

“I would bet any number of coins that were we to stop at a decent tavern you would turn down any lady I sent your way!” Dorian chirped in return, missing the failed mouthing of words from his sleepy companion as she tried to stop the rude jests. Their haughty jokes always went too far, and every morning they would jab at one another to new provocation, often to bruising insult. There were dawns she remembered a tense silence cropping up between all her companions from such waggling tongues. And then there were many more she didn’t remember at all.

The days since leaving Wycome had slipped from her grasp, each blending into the last as they traveled quickly back to their southern keep, pausing only to sleep after adjourning a much swifter trip inland from the sea. A week would pass without garnering her attention, only for her to become irritable by the dragging hours spent in the back of a caravan cart, listening to the ceaseless squabble of her equally exhausted party. She’d kept them far from home for most of the spring. They’d not seen their own beds or eaten their familiar, favored fare in ages. Hard tack and flavorless mashes did not hold up in comparison to the soft breads and herbed meats refined by the masterful cook in Skyhold. It had been unfair of her to tax them so. Their short jaunt had been overly extended, but already Chiyo was planning her next departure, unbeknownst to them...

She couldn’t tell Dorian, not for all her hesitation, whom she’d found encroaching upon her last dream. Chiyo wished the honest discussion would have brought with it a sense of relief, if not joy. Instead, the heavy press of guilt had followed her out of the Fade. If half of what Solas had said had been true, forbid the entirety… there was no choice left but to stop him before he committed more atrocious acts. Even if they were for her sake.

Now there was a pull, a blind path to follow, an instinct that called to her soul. Solas had begun the hunt anew, she had but to pursue.

Not yet, though, not when the quest might scare him off before she was ready to meet the apostate in the end.

“When... will we be back at Skyhold?” The words were stuck at first, but a second attempt allowed them to be plainly heard.

“A few days at most. Though I wouldn’t blame you for not going back. That letter from Lady Pentaghast was rather poignant. It’s not as if we fled to Tevinter to rub elbows with a few old Magister friends of the Black Divine.” Dorian continued his search for debris amidst the tangles, humming a low tune while he worked.

“Don’t remind me...” She fought the urge to steal another sip of the sleep-giving brew. Chiyo found waking as of late exceptionally stressful. Coming back into contact with the Inquisition had not come
without issue. Some were not pleased with those traveling homewards. “I think we may have smoothed that trip over easier, Cullen left less than a dozen words for me with the last Scout, and that includes his signature…”

Dorian scoffed in quick disagreement, but it wasn’t his name that had been ordered for questioning. “With those dreadful rifts gone most of the roads have reopened, the people should be dancing for joy as we pass. I promise I’ll keep all those squalling infants they want you to bless away, but I can’t prevent them from naming them after you.”

“Let’s avoid the towns then, I don’t want to be stopped.” As soon as she returned to the Keep, for the sake of relieving her companion, she would be leaving it again. Like a line left in the water, Chiyo could feel the tug upon her compulsions, a wriggle that honed all attentions to the West. Solas would lead her right to him, whether that was his intent, another part of his unearthed plan, or not. The real search had finally commenced, she only lacked for a horse swift enough to carry her to whatever end lay in store.

There was the bog unicorn still in the stables… but then again… Chiyo shivered at the thought. She’d find a new horse elsewhere if need be.

Bare feet brought her through the hall, followed in time by heavier, thicker soles of standard issue boots. Each a slapping, ringing thud upon awaiting ears. The solitary drum parted the milling masses that shuffled away from the approaching Herald.

The tender idol who had left them had returned with hardened eyes that caught the torchlight and a heart stonier than the mountains that secreted their base.

No apology for the sudden absence was given in the firm cadence of her stride or cowering from voiced suspicions. The woman moved as though her bones would no longer bend, a will of iron had filled in any once suspected weakness. Her taller peers looked down upon the small elf that had outwardly fled her duties for a personal affair during their darkest hours, her return just as narrowly unannounced. Chiyo strode up consciously aware, not bothering to even glare at a noble whose head seemed caught in a permanent, scowling shake.

There had been the remnants of scaffolding when she’d last left the main gallery, but in her absence, the great work had been completed. In their place stood tapestries and ancient tiles, pieces of which still being added from travels all across Thedas. Repaired closer to former glory, the previously fallen images of legend and lore were resurrected. Flanked by massive stone hounds with throats and heads stretched up high, Chiyo was better greeted by their silent bays than she was her own gathered people. She veered before reaching the sharply constructed throne. The destination was not to her lofted bedroom though she desired for its forsaken comforts and solitude.

Champion or Traitor? That had yet to be judged, she could not rest until the case was made.

Her escorts, men trained by the Commander himself, would not be quick to see Chiyo off to any but one clearly specified door. They flanked her, a formal blockade, and stood at the ready with a salute pressed to helmed brow as if an honor guard.

Admitting herself into Josephine’s prestigious office, she let the door fall behind her with a solid click. They need not follow her in, there was no place else to flee too unless she was desperate enough to leap down the mountainside.
It was with surprise that Chiyo found the high-backed chair empty of the adept Ambassador who could turn plain ink into gold and near endless favors for the cause. Not that a massive-looking hole in the sky hadn’t encouraged some to come forward without prompt. The Inquisition would never have succeeded as it did without the Antivan’s profound abilities.

Instead, she reached an unoccupied desk cluttered with letters and scrolls, some had been organized into stacks but the rest were deserted for the sheer number. Crates had been piled nearby the fireplace, each box stuffed with more correspondences. Another office suddenly came to mind, one she had ordered the raid upon in siege, eerily similar to the avalanche of paper.

No one would be writing to the Duke Antione anymore, at least, not if they were expecting a response.

A glance at the wide table revealed an abandoned quill, forgotten beside a dried ink spill and an overturned well. Ruined paper left unfinished, it was unimaginable to think of anything upsetting Josephine’s polished hand. She’d never seen the room in such a state; it was unlike the tidy dignitary to dwell amongst such disorder or to let her work overwhelm her.

The Inquisitor continued on into the War Room, passing through the ajar inner door into the secluded headquarters of their organization. Countless missives and missions had been orchestrated from the once derelict chamber. Empresses had been saved from assassination, civil wars brought to an abrupt end, secret plots thwarted. Countless redirections of influence and power had first been born upon the expansive table, many unbeknownst to even the denizens of Skyhold or anyone not present when the colossal doors were barred.

Her hand paused upon the old iron handle. Chiyo gripped the cold metal and prepared, letting the icy breeze from the broken wall cool any embers of a temper before she entered. Eons had passed since the days she’d once been afraid to be summoned here, terrified of the responsibility and duty.

And now? Now it would serve her and her plans, the weight of the Inquisition would be thrown in her favor one last time—if no one stood in the way of the one wishing to wield it.

“Ah. Here comes the hero of our age.”

The brusque, annoyed voice gave her reason to pause as Chiyo crossed into the imposing space. Perched upon the table roughly carved from a massive tree and stump sat Cassandra, a presence rarely seen in this room since taking up other duties. The gleam and upkeep of her constantly worn armor—left in a rude pile on the floor—had not faltered, but the woman almost always encased within the steel certainly had. She’d come unarmed, but that did not remove the Seeker’s capacity to be dangerous.

“Mighty tamer of the dreaded Mage rebellion, uhh…” A wide, rounded bottle swayed in her fist before she placed it squarely above the mapped illustration of Orlais, pushing a few brass markers aside. Halamshiral was as good a place as any to hold her drink. “Once lowly prisoner, now the fabled Herald of Andraste. I would toast you and your latest successes, my lady, but I’ve about run out of wine.”

“You’re drunk? That’s a new one.” Chiyo scanned the rest of the sunny room, daylight poured in from every latticed window, illuminating the Pentaghast heir in a near blinding glare. But the other advisors were nowhere to be seen. She couldn’t have blamed any of them though for abiding by Cassandra’s claim on the matter…

The Seeker was blunt and brazen enough sober to be intimidating, it would take an act of divinity itself to avoid hostilities with the woman who strove to become a living weapon of the Maker. She’d
called for this meeting with their renegade leader, ordered the armed securement, and it seemed she would handle the re-appraisal of Chiyo’s governance alone.

“Yes. We’re all changing, aren’t we? Everything’s changing.” Cassandra’s slow drone held some bite, a honed and waiting razor held between her teeth. The tall Nevarran rolled her neck sorely with a groan before she spat a more directed insult. “Reports are still coming out of Wycome from those you drove away. I don’t even recognize the woman they mention in them. Cruel, biased, intolerant. Tell me they were lying?”

“I’ve been called worse. In Haven.” Chiyo stood squarely in the center of the room, halting well out of reach of the unpredictable Seeker. She was in no mood to lose a few teeth if a fist were to come her way though that did not prevent her from goading her accuser. “I thought that’s why we joined in the first place. To make change. Now what, that makes you unhappy?”

“Unhappy?” With a lurch, Cassandra slammed both her palms to the wooden table and pushed forward. She may have been drunk but her stare was just as sharp and strong as ever, weaker men would have flinched beneath such a harsh, foreboding gaze. The stabbing voice behind it would have certainly punched holes through their spirits as well. “Ours was to stop Corypheus and end the Breach. Not to coddle Mages and hand entire cities over to a bunch of elves!”

The small elf took a deep breath through a tightly clamped jaw, and then a second for good measure. Chiyo watched each inhalation release just as warmly as the one before it. She would not lose control of her emotions inside Skyhold although they stirred perilously beneath the surface. No. She could not go cold again. Her home, her friends, enemies even, she’d promised to herself that they would never suffer the icy brutality inflicted upon the fallen Duke of Wycome. Never again.

“If you have forgotten, Cassandra,” She paused long enough to tuck her hands low behind her hips, taking a stolen stance to maintain the grounded effect. “I am very much both of those things. Or have my ears grown shorter since we last met? I will not sit here and watch those like me suffer if I can offer them something better. I was an elf first—”

“You are the Inquisitor!”

A physical blow would have felt kinder. It would not have rung in her ears so loud and with such apparent loathing. The taste of blood in her mouth better than the resentment swelling in its place.

“And so that means what exactly?” Chiyo felt herself begin to shake, a tremor that started quietly enough inside the clamped balls of her fingers. But it soon ran up her arms in waves, threatening to topple the surety in her voice. “That I have to erase my heritage, my race, my magic? This is the position granted to me, and you were fine with who I was then when you placed that sword in my hand!”

“I did not do it so you would straddle the world for your own gains! Your actions have placed this organization in a terrible bind!” Cassandra had left the table and strode forth in a stomp. A gloved digit now pointed at the thin center of Chiyo’s proud, bony chest, an inch forward and it would have stabbed with bruising force. More than a head taller, she loomed over Chiyo, each angered word ripe with pungent wine. “Elves from every city have been contacting us, begging for you to come save them from their alienages, to unseat their mayors and dukes and lords. Poor Josephine is drowning in their pleas and the enraged of our allies. Friends of Wycome now want to withdraw their support. We are trying to save this world, not turn it to utter chaos!”

“He killed my clan! He was poisoning his own people! Should I have done nothing?!” Chiyo stared up into the scared face, the first she’d peered into upon waking up in chains. It had been just as livid then, but now there was hurt in Cassandra’s eyes, a redden sting from refused tears.
“You should have come to us for help! Not gone off on a vendetta!” The Seeker’s voice cracked, every muscle in her perfected arm bunched as it held the extended hand still. She was on the verge of lost control, the physical restraint wouldn’t hold long. Chiyo could feel them both at their diminishing limits.

“So I am wrong for not letting more people, not just elves, die? I’m wrong for stopping a murderer of the masses, of my friends and family?” Chiyo hissed and blamed the glaring sunlight for the wetness that made her eyes burn. Cassandra wasn’t there to see the bodies left rotting in the streets. She hadn’t smelled the fetid waters brought up from the wells. The Seeker did not have to look upon the starved faces of forgotten elves, imprisoned and blamed for crimes of which they were innocent.

Cassandra had not wandered the valleys alone in search of the Lavellans and failed to find even a handful of bones to bury, only patches of ashen soil where the grass had begun to regrow.

“Tell me, what would you have done differently?”

A stunned silence eclipsed Cassandra’s scowl, and slowly her accusing finger dropped. She swallowed some of the rage that had consumed her, but her strong jaw did little to soften. Caught in a sway, the Seeker lifted an arm. She looked in hesitation, an expectancy to be left to fall remained.

Before she could stumble, Chiyo lent her shoulder and supported the larger woman in a shared hold back to the table.

“I would have drawn my weapon before my enemies and shielded those I could... You and I are not so different, are we? But I am not the Herald, and you are not an expendable soldier. Others could have gone in your place.”

“My friends are not expendable. And some things must be dealt with in person.” A sigh of relief whistled through Chiyo’s lips, even if they did not agree to the means of her actions the ends were understood. The tension in her feet finally lessened and for the first time since entering the War Room did her heels rest lightly upon the stony floor. “Don’t give up on me yet Cassandra, I can’t afford to lose any more friends…”

“There is a time and place for vengeance, unfortunately, for you, that option cannot be easily granted. Too many look to you for guidance and hope.” Cassandra turned woozily, the aggression that kept her standing straight no longer there to burn through the slosh of booze in her belly. She felt for the table to brace against, least her pride slip to join her temper. “Some more than others, or so we thought. Many did not keep faith in an elf, but I always thought Solas one to have seen this mission through. I called him a friend too… have you no word of him? I knew you were close, but you never explained to me what happened.”

“I was not my wish to keep secrets.” Months had passed, unable to shake the pain of the rejection that clung to her heart Chiyo had buried it deep in her person. Only Dorian had been privy to that night’s detail and the silence she held in Solas’ regard had fueled much of the suspicion around his disappearance.

“And it was not mine to pry them from you.” Cassandra’s hips met the table’s edge, with a groan she reached for the discarded bottle and extended it in the only offering of forgiveness she could muster.

“Then would you help me find him?” In a moment of trust, she reached out to the only other person whom she thought would understand. Accepting the drink, she placed her fingers over Cassandra’s and held them there firmly for a moment. “I’m afraid we must stop a friend before he becomes an enemy… I want this kept quiet, though. He will not be accused without evidence first.”
“You make it sound as though he is in league with Corypheus.” The Seeker’s brow rose sharply when the elf before her took uncorked bottle and finished the last few dregs, sealing the apology.

“I don’t know,” Chiyo gasped at the acidic burn that passed down her throat. The label across the vessel’s belly marked it as Hirol’s Lava Burst— that would have been warning enough to have kept the toxic brew from touching her tongue had she read it first. “But something tells me that this could almost be worse.”

Cassandra gave her a firm pat on the back, helping the bitter wine go down. “I shall leave that judgment up to you, my Lady. Maker guide you, but let me keep you out of trouble.”

“Well would you look at that Josie, they can be civil after all… Not a drop of blood spilled either.” Both looked up when the small inner door creaked open enough for a hooded figure to poke her glorious redhead inside. The quiet, knowing smile of Leliana and a soft, Antivan giggle from behind her was enough, however, to warrant the empty bottle’s pitch in the direction of the intruding spies.

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I expressed my incredulity to the shop’s assistant, who coldly noted that he did not like my implication. He insisted that every article in the Black Emporium was genuine—no fakes, imitations, or cheap knock-offs.

I must have appeared unconvinced, for the assistant narrowed his eyes at me and disappeared into the bowels of the shop, returning several minutes later. He removed the jar of pickled apples from its display case, and proceeded to carefully, reverentially, remove the wax seal from the lid of the jar.

I watched with fascination as the jar was opened, and a single, rosy apple pulled from it. It looked as if it had been picked just that day, at the peak of ripeness. With a paring knife, the assistant cut the tiniest sliver of flesh from the apple and presented it to me.

The flavor of that one small sliver was astonishing. It was as close to a perfect apple as ever there was. I was experiencing the essence of every apple ever eaten, and that ever will be eaten. When it was over, the sense of loss that filled me was sharp enough to move me to tears.

The rest of the apple was returned to the jar, which was then resealed. I paid five sovereigns for that single taste, and I believe I got the better part of the bargain.

Codex —From the letters of Brother Ferdinand Genitivi to Sister Petrine, Chantry scholar
The right path is not always the easiest one, but what lays at the end of the long road may just be more than either lover has prepared themselves for. Soon, when, soon.

"See how the rain has washed away, the tears that you were crying?" A solitary sniff interrupted the lethargic rhythm. Soon it was picked up again, dragged across limp lips.

“Though the darkness sings— no. Kaffas!—” The young man stumbled, brown water sloshed and the nearest wetland birds scattered, shrieking.

So much for remaining quiet, if the noise didn’t give them away the wildlife would.

“Not *sings*, get it right…” Marlo groaned and collected himself once dislodged from the submerged roots that had tangled around his ankles. He returned to his blundered, morose melody, like a tedious chore. “The darkness *calls*… calls me down, you know… we all are dying.”

*Likely*. The older mage no longer had the heart to bid him silence. They’d made it this far without recapture, and there was a comfort even in dispirited words when his own were lost to a stilled
tongue. Solas hadn’t spoken much since waking from that deplorable night, that fog-filled, twisted dream. Somehow, it had been truly worse than the one before. The shame of fantasy, of reminisced vices, far kinder than the implacable truth.

If his own waking eyes reflected but a sliver of what Solas had seen, a glimpse of the monster, a ripple of dread beneath mortal skin, Marlo had chosen to say not if he’d witnessed any or heard more murmured in slumber.

Two full days had come and gone, sleep stolen in briefest spans. A third dawn rose newly above mossy, colorless trees that littered the wide Nashashin Marshes. The ceaseless pull of thickly-mudded slop at their fleeing legs wore the already exhausted band beyond thin. Solas’ skin felt no more solid than spider silk, his spirits further transparent still. This place was brutal in its trials, barely worth the penance paid for freedom. Yet the dense swamps were a sole salvation. They’d travel swiftly where heavier men and horses could not. Armor, swords, shields, and hooves, the apostates were free of such taxing trimmings.

But that distance would be their only safeguard, and the gap would surely close if they lost any more drive. Diminishing willpower and stubbornness goaded Solas on, but his companion was not so equally equipped. A mutual quiet, broken only by the Tevinter youth’s self-pacification, had fallen between them. It was better than the initial tears and weeping, hushed in harsh fear for their lives. Marlo’s withdrawn march through the muck had slowed to a deathlike crawl, a funeral procession…

This journey was slowly killing him, the both of them.

They had to stop.

But his legs did not remember how. No rest had come from the previous night. The far-off echoed voices of men spurred them to make more ground, following the pale moon’s limited path. They’d not paused or touched dry land in hurried miles he’d forgotten to count. Solas’ soaked, swollen feet no longer cried out with each stride, numbness had set in once the pain had given up its punitive persuasion. Exhaustion was winning and whispered words that no man could ignore forever.

Take a moment. Allow this body to rest while it’s calm. Yes, there, good a spot as any. Take it.

To a fallen log Solas finally bowed. Hand and knee, he leaned all his trembling weight on the decayed wood that sagged into the peat. With an arm in a makeshift sling, his torn shoulder burned anew but held. Only time would tell when, and if, it could wield a staff again. The crusted gash on his thigh began to weep, oozing out onto already ruined trousers. The flesh itched from caustic attempts at keeping it clean in a bog; healing would be slow without further assistance. Running was out of the question, and had been for some time. That hastened speed abandoned not long after they’d escaped apprehension in Ghislain.

There was little respite and even less sustenance than what they’d previously traveled with. No time given to properly mend old wounds or nurse new bruises. Thinking at length required too much energy. Survive was the only thought worth considering to an extent. All else was too burdensome, and would serve scant purpose when forward sufficed.

He knew they were alive—for now, lost in the remote, unkempt backside of Orlais. Each sucked breath from the moist, earthy mire and hour expended without sight of civilization reminded him of that acutely. They were sure to be headed west; the sun raced them towards the last place in the wretched realm that Solas felt safe. It was close, much closer than Skyhold, but the harshness amid that span would prove his last effort were care not taken.

To the desert, none could pursue them out there least they were possessed…
Water and sand, tracks had the same chance of survival as the fugitive pair.

He sought a unique and most unusual oasis where forests had formerly grown and rains fell frequently.

Halls of empty stone and tombs split open, where spirits had resided, awaiting the passage of the centuries behind doors with keys made of glass. Secret chambers with treasures millennia forgotten lay deepest within, beyond the reach of Venatori or even the eminent Inquisition for all their prying.

Magic teemed there. The Veil gossamer thin. Were the ancient elf to rest within perhaps he might find himself replenished after extended disconnection. He wasn’t constructed to be separate from the Fade so long or to endure the passage of lethal time—weeks, months, now even years, each preyed upon him fiercely. And now he’d learned to fear that which had never once been regarded or occurred.

Seated upon the moldy trunk covered in frilly fungi, he pressed his hand to the wound on his leg. Solas used what little magic he had at his disposal to seal it shut again. Dorian wouldn’t have batted an eye at the task, though never admitted, the elven mage had watched and gathered a few new tricks from his human companions. Learning to heal had been a true challenge, and still was, unaccustomed to the act in the absence of free-flowing mana.

Solas stared absently at the damp blood on his fingers, it cooked with a foul odor, that of slowly sizzling meat. Using magic now felt too contrived and forced, no longer as natural as it should have been.

Once, before he’d ruined the world, a rare injury caused little grievance. Most of his people needed but to wish the repair and it was done. At a time when elves knew only of health and vitality, they were devastatingly unprepared for the sickness and exploitive warfare brought upon them by the Evanuris.

Elves had only ever lost their lives at the hands of other elves, but that too changed.

Everything had changed.

Solas looked up from his task to the mollified follower who trudged barefoot up the same watery path. His shoes had been sucked off, lost eternally to the bog. A wound kept a weft of hair matted to his tanned brow and cheek, the first scar to mar his face. His arms were crackled with residual dark red, dried where the water hadn’t reached him. Some was his own, some not. Those bloodied limbs cradled a bundle made of his headscarf, and from between the folds hung a limp white tail, draped across the lad’s wide wrists.

Marlo had finally stopped humming to the cat for the first time in days. Perhaps he’d run out of tunes and the strength to sing them.

Nothing Solas might say would evaporate the blackening cloud of grief that had surrounded the newly freed slave. Understandably, his entire world had been turned inside-out and torn asunder. He felt so incredibly heavy—and old—sitting there in a hunch, observing the dejected eyes and solemnness of the boy. No. Not a boy, not after the nightmare he’d braved through. Children did not kill soldiers, with or without magic. Marlo was just as much a man as he. Any enduring part of his youth had been left behind on the street turned battlefield back in that disastrous border-town.

He thought for a moment that the tired Tevinter might join him on the natural bench, but to Solas’ surprise, he continued on. Marlo’s feet, though slow and hindered, maintained their marshy, squelching tread. Without having to seek it, Solas could feel the energies wafting from Marlo’s light
load. These were not the tendrils of life flitting through the air, but of enchantment. A heady scent of darkness and rage lingered on long after the fighting had finished.

“Does your small friend yet live?” Solas gently queried, his voice clearer than he’d expected it to be.

“He stopped breathing… an hour ago or so… startin’ to get cold…” Marlo halted, the ripples of his trail softened until they finally disappeared. He took several breaths through his nose while his features tightened with sorrow, crinkles formed around his youthful mouth. “I said I would carry him. I swore it.”

Solas dropped his head, dizzy at the thought of returning to his feet. “And so you have. Honorably. The matter does not lay in that fulfillment, but what will become of him.” The apprentice was too learned to ignore the warning, his dabbling too obvious to disregard.

“I’m not done yet.” There was a crackle quickly coughed away, he pressed his mouth into the bundle brought closer to his scrunching face. “Kitty followed when he didn’t have to. He stayed when he could have gone anywhere else. He made me not alone… and saved my life.”

His grip tightened on the wrapping, and he let fall his chin to touch a tuft of exposed fur. For a moment, he rocked and stroked, muzzled by his own distress. “He was my friend.”

“I would hate to see something precious to you turn against that attachment. But it was you who pressed a spirit on the animal. Exposed to violence, that former benevolence might transform. Release it before that happens.” Solas stared out into the endless marsh, looking back at the forged path they’d taken. No evidence remained of their habitation, yet staying in one spot for more than a moment threatened that security. A lost thread, a drop of blood, a footprint, anything minuscule might serve to bring their enemy swift upon them.

The water sloshed again, but instead of moving away Marlo paced his way back to Solas and took up space beside him. A few leeches stuck to his exposed calves, shining and slimy, black against his brown skin. His young joints bent slowly, a hundred years too rigid, too tired, too afraid. He’d lived only a blink in the span of the crumpled, sodden elf’s existence. The tepid green eyes that met Solas’ drained blue, however, were incredibly old.

“How do I let go…” Marlo wouldn’t let himself cry, but a strangled hiccup and a lip that quivered in its tight draw escaped his forced control. “I can’t just leave him here. The birds will get him…”

“Look for a good spot. You’ll know it when you see it. And remember the sacrifice. We’ll find someplace dry, peaceful.” A tickle brushed Solas’ nose, he took to his feet before the aroma grabbed more hold. It seemed even in death, Kitty wasn’t done tormenting his senses.

The silence was just too loud. Worse than any scream, screeching and scared, but a sound meant alive.

Absence left room for monsters to grow. Dark and waiting, gnawing at the shadows to fill the Void with emptiness. Breaths muffled and fangs curled around offered throats.

Nothing was dreadful. It threatened to undo all the good he’d brought forth, all the pain alleviated. Silence, a cancerous apathy to the soul, was akin to death. Just as the real Cole had learned. Hadn’t he? Yes, he remembered the empty pangs of hunger and the slow, slow passing of unmarked, untold
hours. A nightmare that clung to the body still and left tremors flitting deep inside the bony chest.

He pressed his sharp fingers to his ears and explored the furrows and channels and cavernous depths. Blocking them didn’t stop the hums of suffering. Vibrations not of voices, but echoing all around just the same. This was different, so very different. The calm eye was merely passing over. Thunder rolled miles and miles away. The brewing storm of emotion made his skin tingle. The fine blond hairs stood on end with the subtle energy. Yet not even soft clouds burgeoned on the horizon, the skies were painfully clear.

Cole turned his back to the hailing warm breeze and set his pallid eyes on the Inquisition camp.

The rain would come, soon enough.

He could help those hurting closer to him. Others would have to wait for compassion to reach them. Pull a thread the rest unravel, not the knots that made the tangles worse. They would understand.

Ears unplugged, the spirit tilted his head and listened for hidden pain. So many suppressed hurts, but which needed him most?

There.

The tired sigh of a soldier came as a soothing relief. Cole caught sight of the quartermaster working diligently on their gear, perfecting the polish of each pounded plate. “Sweet sister left behind. Her hair in braids I made before leaving. I’m sorry. So, so sorry. These hands will soon forget those silken strands, but the sword feels right... I wonder if she is thinking of me now?”

The stoical soldier stopped buffing with her oiled rag for a moment and then began again once Cole stopped his search. No pearls of pain hung off her heart that Cole could pluck out. They were sad, and yet, content with the tough decision. She was helping and could sleep well each night. A wall that kept the wolves at bay, from snapping at small heels and toes.

Not this one, maybe another. Try again.

An ache in his shoulder returned, almost hourly it piled upon his bones like a snow drift until he shook the weight off. The spirit cradled his lanky arm to his chest and rested his pointed chin upon coiled, bony knuckles.

Too far away, but desperately calling. A chill without a shiver, bow without a quiver. How long would anything survive without its heart?

He’d asked, and asked again. But no one had the right answer. Dorian had only twisted his inquiry, citing so many books that Cole’s head had felt cramped and he vanished from the library. Blackwall had advised him to stop being so spooky and shooed him out of the stable loft. He’d probed Varric last before leaving Skyhold and left receiving little more than a laugh and an empty stare. The seasoned dwarf knew but didn’t know. A pat on the head, take care kid. Of you and her. He would, he’d promised. He was needed.

There were other anguishes to sift through. Find them.

Cole stared at the jagged scar that laced his shin and calf like lightning as it peeped out from beneath the open straps of his pant leg with each monitored stride. He was already pale, but these lines were utterly blanched and bloodless. A sizzling blow had left them there, Pride’s own angry lash had struck Compassion low.

The Inquisitor had mended the tears in his borrowed flesh the same as the ones that had perforated
the Veil. She had saved him then, endured the Fade’s call to her limit and used it to spare an awful fate.

But she still did not accept. The blood would make things better, slicker. Let the noose slide loose and be free. *Ar lasa mala revas*. Solas had removed one chain. He would help break the other binding.

The sallow boy strolled through camp, feeling where to go instead of seeking it through sight. A maze of stakes and ropes and crates and barrels proved no disrupting matter. Sockless, booted feet trod blind without fear of tripping. He might not be able to shape this world by will alone, but he could navigate it well enough.

A pause, one foot raised and frozen in place. He felt Cassandra’s heaviness even through the nearest tent wall. It remained about her person always, so many years and burdens. Enough to break a woman’s spine into cowardice. Yet it only made her resilient and surer of her envisioned faith. Helplessness was held aback by a resolve hard as dragon scales.

Cole clutched the buckles of his coat, bidding his fidgety hands stay still. It took everything to keep his dirty nails from reaching for the canvas siding. *Relax. People listen more when they aren’t afraid. You make ’em nervous when you do that stuff.* Varric again, a friendly reminder from within his own head. There had always been voices inside him, but now they had faces, many of them grown fond.

He’d best leave her be. The Seeker had proven limited in her reception of his person. She no longer called him a demon like the Enchantress did, though wariness stippled her speech. And there had been balking when Cole had appeared amongst their departing crew. Even the Iron Bull had his concerns though he kept them locked deep inside the heavy-lidded vault of his intentions. Refusal to leave the Inquisitor’s side had caused a stir but all agreed in the end of his use towards their mission.

To find Solas. Yes, that would help everyone. Some much more than others. They would see, and then all would understand.

Off on the edge of camp, Cole traced the lingering steps of the one he sought, whose pain called ardently to him. Up, up, up, tucked against the sturdy trunk of a lofty tree and nestled in the shade of young, unfurling leaves. Toe to heel, he pulled off his dingy shoes just before vanishing and left them behind at the base of the grand old oak.

The bough barely wavered when his effervescent weight descended upon it. He appeared before the hidden elf whose eyes were downcast, transfixed by the glow stored within her slender palm. A glassy sheen beneath her sooty lashes, sight slipped beyond the real and into the vast unknowable.

“Be careful, lethallin.” Chiyo closed her hand into a loose fist when the wide branch creaked and naked toes balanced their way towards her. Lightly perched atop the bark, Cole dropped into a gawky crouch, poised precariously before her.

He reached for her hands and tapped the mage’s knuckles until her fingers uncurled. A lone digit traced the mark’s serrated outline as it pulsed dimly, a throb of magic caught in flux. Only in the cool shadows could that subtle change be clearly seen, the glimmer so soft that daylight masked much of it. “Key to a key, but there aren’t any doors. Light to lift the dark, to illuminate the lost.”

“At least, it doesn’t hurt anymore. I much prefer it so sedate if I’m to bear this wretched thing at all.” The woman hiding in the tree held still as Cole followed the pulse up her arm, chasing the path the anchor had affixed to a her body. It pooled in the shallow basin of the elbow, wove through the firm bicep, pierced the shoulder and twisted like a noxious weed about the collar of her throat.
“It was not meant for you yet still found a home. No longer alone. Now the hunger grows…”

Chiyo lifted her gaze when a second inquisitive hand joined the first in the feather-light palpation of her throat. His thumbs mapped the hard bone of her jaw and rose to meet the center of her lips. Not one for inhibition, she did not startle when he pulled the lower down, the top rose reflexively.

The plush pads of his fingertips pressed to the wet enamel tips of her incisors but for a moment, and he withdrew. “Those will have to come out soon.” He brought his fingers to his own face and inspected them closely as if wounded.

“Another gift from the mark?” Her questioning was bare, the only fear she had left was that of herself.

Cole shook his head and finally sat down, letting his long legs dangle in the open air while he straddled the branch. He had his own questions he wanted to ask, one that had been on his mind much of late.

“The letter in your pocket, the one without the words. Why do you not write them?” She’d been carrying it for weeks, avoiding the wound that was so desperate to be aired and open.

“Because I left my family a monster and returned a worse one. Their lives are better with me not in them. Vahari has enough troubles and…” Chiyo filched the tattered, folded sheet from within her vest. The limp paper rattled in the breeze as the whole tree swayed with a brisk billow. “Tamaris was right. I have my answers, I cannot return the guilt that came with them.”

Cole watched as her blank expression creased around the edges. With sudden, sharp conviction, Chiyo tore the unfinished note in half and gave it to the wind. Disturbed from her placid solitude, the Dalish elf shimmied back down the oak’s thickened branches. They were leaving again soon, following a trail denoted only by whispers within dreams. The spirit was gone before her feet touched the ground, his forsaken footwear vanished as well.

Battening down the loosened emotions, Chiyo made her way to the next distraction once dislocated from her hiding place. Having packed next to nothing for this journey, scant possessions even for a nomadic person, there was still one matter of business that had to be attended to. Downwind of the encampment were the horses, corralled together for the brief stint of their stay.

Soft nickers and sweet smells. They were not as revered as the halla she’d grown up with, but there was an incredibly soothing quality about their nature that settled something ragged in her soul. Slipping into the makeshift paddock Chiyo trekked her way through the foraging creatures, stocky, cumbersome beasts of Ferelden propagation. Behind the gargantuan brown brutes was a downright diminutive mare feasting readily at the budding heads of pinked clover.

Rich gray that dappled to silver covered the small horse, darkest on the finely-boned legs above wide, white hooves. A thin, stringy mane atop a long neck beckoned to be combed through, Chiyo couldn’t help but approach to run her finger through a small snarl. Large, black eyes, a chiseled face and tiny muzzle rose to greet her, rewarded with a pleasant scratch about her muscled shoulders and flat back. The desert-bred animal was as beautiful as she was strong.

Size was not the only manner of prestige, speed left many mouths gaping. No one dared chuckle at the Inquisitor’s new mount, even if it was barely larger than a pony. For the petite rider, the elegant
mare was perfect though nothing would fully replace the adoration felt for her lost Da’dava.

She’s what you need, Boss. Bull had that way about him; his lone eye could tell what people required without having to ask. That and the horse wasn’t exactly the prize he’d been promised in a high-stakes game of cards. A beast of supreme breeding, of bloodlines traced back to the noblest stallions of the last several ages, winner of several races in swiftness and endurance, worth more than master Dennet’s entire herd. The traveler only failed to mention the wee detail of proportions before the behemoth Qunari who went on to win the entire pool. To his surprise, the promised animal could barely look him any higher than his sternum. He’d wanted a dracolisk anyways, or so the former Ben-Hassrath claimed.

“Come on Eireth, the road calls us on.” One last gentle stroke of the coat that reminded her of the icy patterns that formed on the window panes in her long abandoned bedroom and Chiyo gathered the horse’s braided halter.

Glancing for onlookers, Chiyo closed the gate quietly before leading her little mount towards the tack pile. No one was watching, and with a brief bite to her lip, she chose instead to vault up onto the naked back of the gray mare. The open field was far more tempting than the stack of leather and bags. The breeze was too encouraging to be ignored. A brief ride alone would do her good. She’d need a clear head to continue on with.

A click of her tongue and a squeeze with her heels sent the mare forwards into an easy pace.

Bull was right. This was what she needed, a sense of freedom that came with four fleet hooves.

Solas had barely closed his eyes when a noise startled him from a few minutes sleep. He’d woken himself up with a muffled sneeze. He held his breath, there was another noise, low and rumbling that caught his attentions.

He’d been so careful to form a perimeter, an early warning if anything got too close during such a vulnerable moment. Was this magic failing him now too?

Solas peered through the reeds they’d bedded down in, nothing moved in the dark stillness of the night. He turned to look behind Marlo, who’d fallen asleep even before hitting the ground. Hovering near the young man’s curled up form, the mage was certain that for the briefest moment a pair of small, red eyes were looking back at him from a sharply tufted face.

The creature disappeared with a bitter hiss, but not before the elf caught sight of a raised, fluffy cat’s tail.

Marlo stirred, mumbling as he rolled over in the dirt that was his mattress. “Ki… kitty…’ere… kitty…”

Even in the pitch black Solas could see them. There were fine white hairs stuck to his face.

The curiosities of blood magic still held many surprises for him it seemed…
Hear the rain upon the leaves, above the sky lies grey.
A shred of blue would be denied. Alas, he could not stay.

There was a stir within his blood
And the dreams lay thick upon him.
A call did beat within his heart.
One road was left before him.

Hear the rain upon the leaves, above the sky lies grey.
A shred of blue would be denied. Alas, he could not stay.

"See how the rain has washed away
The tears that you were crying?
Though the darkness calls me down
You know we all are dying."

Hear the rain upon the leaves, above the sky lies grey.
A shred of blue would be denied. Alas, he could not stay.

And so he came upon the place
Where so many tread before.

One last look upon the world
Before he crossed that final door.

Hear the rain upon the leaves, above the sky lies grey.
A shred of blue would be denied. Alas, he could not stay.

Birds reel across the endless sky, above a house upon the plain.
In memory she sings to him of a time before the rain.

Sweet Andraste, hear our song
For his road will be ours too.
Before darkness claims our souls
Let us see that shred of blue.
Hear the rain upon the leaves, above the sky lies grey.

A shred of blue would be denied. Alas, he could not stay.

—Words to a song, scrawled on spare paper, writer unknown, Codex
Dread Wolf's Woods

Chapter Summary

May the Dread Wolf never catch your scent...

Dark, wet paw prints dotted the tidy footpath. They evaporated into wisps of steam as each was reached in turn. The wide stride and claw-tipped toes were telling enough, but Chiyo recognized Haol's unique, irregular gait. Healthy as he was with her frequent feedings, the wolf still had an incurable limp though it didn't slow him. He traveled further ahead of her every night they spent searching, but this was the first evening she'd not seen him from the start of the chase.

Her calls had gone unanswered, the fresh, proffered kill untouched. She'd no choice but to follow the tracks and comb the dream alone.

Yet try as she might to keep her eyes focused on the disappearing trail, the scenery around her proved to be most distracting in its simplicity. This place felt too much like a forgotten home, a cozy niche of idyllic design.

It could not have just been the fixated Fade that rendered the boundless forest so brilliantly red. More than magic made the foliage burst bright with scarlet over striking underbellies of golden amber and sun-drenched orange. Deep in fall, not a single speck of a brown leaf littered the floor. Not a twig drooped out of place or root lay exposed. All was alive and eternal, clinging steadfast to succor the vaulted branches high above.

Each sanctioned tree pulsed healthy and strong, feeding on the energy of the rich earth about their roots and the ubiquitously revitalizing air. Crystals glittered from the boughs, hung as dazzling pendulums above the maze-work path. A smattering of light refracted across the clean, limestone tiles, each an ember caught in the unending stillness. No breeze breathed this deeply in any forest's chest.

This rarest of memories was more than a mere dead reflection, a pale impression of what had once been. Solid and sure, one of the most complete and stable she'd ever born witness to. Seamless, gapless, and utterly calm. A return to Haven after its destruction, the shared tent in the Arbor Wilds were the only dreams similar enough to compare. Unwittingly having stumbled across Solas' reveries then she'd come to recognize the weightlessness of her own recollections—and the distinctive features of his. Walking here felt real and lasting, the ground immobile beneath her feet. Most of all, it was empty, solitude his signature even in sleep.

The vacuum vacancy of people and animal alike was the sole telling sign, but that seclusion did not remove the subtle prickle of instinct that warned to being watched. Chiyo clenched her jaw and honed anew, picking up the pace on calloused heels. She had to stay alert. Any hidden danger could dwell within such vast tranquility, trespassers lulled to complacency.

Were it not for the thrum that drew her onward, nearer to the vision's heart, Chiyo would have easily lost herself amongst the barely marked byways, all directions indistinct from the others. The open corridors followed the trees without force or measure, bending to the will of nature and the lay of the land. The forest stretched on, crimson and gold, living and fantasy. With no material indications or any discernable change as she moved what seemed like miles forward, Chiyo found it more and
more difficult to swallow her growing frustration.

Something was here, waiting to be found, but it was proving to be rather elusive. Even after an extended jog, bare feet slapped sore on the smooth tiles, she felt no closer to the true memory itself.

It was just her luck that the paw prints vanished entirely around the next bend. Maybe the spirit wolf had given up too…

She paused, lightly puffing until the acid left her lungs and stared hard at the hollow, shadowed expanse. Her brown eyes narrowed, the Inquisitor squinted as her head turned in a curious tilt. Perhaps this forest was too perfect after all. Stepping from the pathway, her toes splayed over the cool, loamy dirt. She crept forward, focused on a singular spot.

Chiyo reached out to touch a knot in the wood of the closest tree, and instead of meeting the textures of bark on the protrusion her fingernails clicked on the edge of hard, level glass. Biting back a curse, she spat at the deception. It was an ingenious illusion, placed so well that any happenstance drifted dreamer should have wandered until they woke unlearned of the truth just beyond the pretty colors and peace.

"What are you hiding, were you not safe. Even here…" She pressed to the firm barrier for a listen, and sure enough there was a muffled, distant sound. Searching for a crack, nick or seam proved fruitless. The only way through would be by force.

"This is the Fade. I have but to will it." But the desire itself held no sway. Not even a ripple.

Chiyo called upon a focus that had yet to be dominated as she placed both hands, whole and holed, upon the facade and directed her magic through them. Sweat beaded and rolled to meet her dark eyebrows, the scar above bunched tight. The palms of her hands all but sizzled as a current heated the surface until it began to glow molten beneath her touch, yet it held. The reflected false trees grew dark, their leaves crisped brown before frosting over white with a sudden winter—and then all fell away in crackling, sparking splinters.

Through the jagged fissure, the very air beckoned her in with a whistling howl as the remainder of the illusion dimmed and died. She stepped over a pile of shards and slipped into the darkness of the dream buried deep inside another. Chiyo entered the much more confined space. Constricted, hewn halls of the same limestone she'd walked before but carved all-around from living rock. A cavern, though clearly refined by the hands of men—or elves—bore its wild nature at the fore. The atmosphere within was cooler and damp, her skin peppered in tiny bumps. The only light came from that of a veilfire torch, her eyes adjusted to the shadows as readily as her ears to the building sounds of voices.

Elvhen voices. Filled with rage, praying for retribution, retaliation. Vengeance. The upsurge of emotions rubbed against her own and provoked them to tug hard on their enforced leash. Her throat itched raw and dry, hoarse though she'd not been the one to shout. Chiyo's still chilly fists clenched into little balls, but the bubbling anger was not of her own make.

She stalked the passageways, some bearing smeared illustrations of paint, uncertain of what might meet her around any bend. Every step led her downwards, spiraling lower into the disrupted gloom. The words grew louder, the sounds more distinct but in a lost language discernable only in slivers.

As'an dalem!

Felt more sharply than it had been heard, fathomless grief swept over her next. The heaviness that came upon her chest soon had the wandering elf crumpled, fighting not fall to her knees. Who had
been killed? There were no given answers, only more dangerous sensations, the kind she'd all but extinguished from her waking self. A leader, someone important, tenfold the endured anguish of the loss of a Keeper and clan pressed all its weight on her spirit.

For a moment, Chiyo fought back with every ounce of stubbornness she could draw from her core. Her jaw clenched and teeth gritted together, she grasped at the humid stone of the corridor, but it wasn't enough.

Her joints finally failed and she plummeted to the floor.

Chiyo's brow knit as the resounding cries for justice shook the dream at its core. The very walls about her began to judder, the roots of a deep mountain quaked. She clutched her temple, grieving with no understanding as to why. The sting of tears threatened her eyes, and she shut them up tight.

When the Inquisitor dared open them again the stairs were gone. The dream had shifted to a crowded chamber, the inner sanctum, with corners flanked by baying beasts formed from dark granite. The anger and confusion that wafted about from the potentially lethal mob was strong enough to make her pause in a knotted hunch on the ground.

Figures stood all around though none were aware of her added presence. They were too focused on what was transpiring in the center. With a brave push, she returned to her feet amidst a churning throng of faceless elves.

Each bore a bone-white mask that covered them from brow to nose with harsh, feral features. Slits for eyes, long tapered snouts and sharp points for pricked ears. Their mouths parted with furious outcries remained exposed, cursing tongues wagged and teeth snapped under a fanged edge. Elves, hundreds of elves, all gathered together and bound by their anguish. It dripped from them, a heady tang from every pore, their piqued fervor anteed by whatever they'd congregated for.

Low like an intruding child, she felt painfully small next to those of her own blood, their dreadful heads and fists stretched far above her own.

There was no telling how long the vision would last or what knowledge stood to be gained. Through thin gaps she slipped, trying to get ahead of them all, to see what was important enough to hide.

Chiyo elbowed in when the bodies converged, her curiosity too potent to be polite. She lurched away when her brief touch dissolved the elves she moved through. Only the disguises remained, falling to clatter on the floor forgotten.

A chain reaction erupted in her upset as a wave of dust and masks swirled. Silence filled in the spaces, but the expressed ire remained.

Amid an ocean of wolfish faces, cast like blanched seashells about her naked feet, she was left alone—but for one—

Another elf in a similar guise, but it was black as the well-known, ornamental mandible that lay against his uncovered breast.

There in the center a man stood tall above a felled, great beast with a pelt of dense charcoal fur and a distinctive kink in its listless tail. The hulking monster lay motionless at his side. No life lifted its massive ribs. This was some trick, another ruse. It had to be. Her wolf had never been so big even fattened up, but she'd seen warhorses with less impressive girth and limb. Looking closer only made her more uncertain, the bruised tongue lolled from the animal's mouth did not hide all the places smooth, without teeth. The limpness in the ears didn't conceal the tattered edges. Surely, this wasn't
her wordless friend, her Haol.

It must be some trick of the Fade, trying to elicit an emotional response, to crack her defenses. She turned her worried heart to stone, lest the illusion grab hold of it while she stood witness to the scene.

"Tundra din'ara lanaste on’ala elvar’nas…" Her breath caught in her chest as she watched the shadowed lips work the lilting words. A shape so familiar, a curved hunter's bow drawn taut to the narrow point, an arrow's notch in the cleft of a chin. A set much like those she'd spent gladder days to study, moving as they matched the vocabularies that had once been taught to her in another world, in a different life than the one that had assumed the altered interim. Now, instead of love and learning, those similar lips spoke of death and destruction, of wrongs that would soon be righted.

Another hoax, another falsehood. Chiyo's self-reassurance was precarious at best, the urge to bolt growing in her feet. Do not drink from murky waters, do not believe these lies.

Auburn hair pulled high to the crown and spun into twists spilled over his neck and broad shoulders as he knelt, drawing a knife from his belt. The blade split the noiseless wolf's soft, yielding belly. Into the wound, he next stuck his fingers, tore the gap wider and pushed in past his elbows. The muscles of the elf's back bunched in ridges with his efforts as he toiled through organs and sinew.

Chiyo gagged at the sight of steaming entrails that slopped about his exposed ankles, uncoiling, membranous, and wet. This was not an honorable kill, a justified sacrifice of life, a reasoned death for hunger or menace. What purpose lay in the destruction of such a creature that'd laid no perceivable harm unto its slayer?

When the straining man rose next he held not the knife, but something larger, rounder, and not of any flesh she'd ever seen before. In his stained, bloodied hands he clasped an orb that pulsed with verdant light from beneath where it wasn't coated a slick, sticky red. He turned his back to the wolf and faced what was now an empty room but for her surveying presence.

"Esh'var tarsul melana." The throbbing glow flashed into the dark slits of the mask and glimmered off his eyes as the ball was brought closer to the elf’s severe, half-concealed face. It was then she saw a set of sharp pupils set affixed upon her, aware and knowing as a wicked grin twisted the arched lips up. Chiyo dared not even move so much as to swallow the lump in her esophagus or blink. Only her heart raced in a shaky chest and every vein thrummed, waiting and worried.

The visceral blood on the sphere's surface followed the copious, entwining channels and was drawn in, the orb left clean and shone brighter. She'd seen it before, memory restored, a foci of ancient origin in the hands of a blight-riddled Magister. But that wasn't the first time a man from Tevinter had been in contact with such an item, paintings from the North had been described depicting such articles though no explanation adjoined them.

Somnaborium, Dorian had called it thus after Corypheus' last assault, a vessel of dreams.

Magic popped and fizzed in a static field, but the person who held it appeared unbothered by the shocking energy. Not a flinch or grimace, though Chiyo remembered nothing but pain from her brief and chance encounter when she'd lunged for the blasphemous object in reflex. That single touch had sparked the fateful destruction of the Conclave, and here the weapon was again, harmless and in control.

Conducting the artifact, the disguised elf padded his way towards her. The discarded masks crunched under his idle heels and turned to a fine ash in his wake. The powdery film stirred up and clung to his blood-soaked legs and wrappings, it filled the air once more with suffocating debris. She covered her mouth and nose with the front of her dress, the weave of the tunic a paltry filter.
Conceit emanated from the fearsome elf who now stood before her, the heat of his silent wrath seared acrid through the chamber. The previously cool, damp air turned desert dry and hot. Chiyo's thin garb adhered to her skin as it slicked with sudden sweat.

To stay here promised death, beings such as this would not be content to release her from the Fade, yet she could not wrest herself from this vision.

This was no dream she'd forced her way into, but a nightmare woken from its carefully sealed tomb.

Cold blue eyes burned when the anchor began to blister, bright in her palm. She held it out in warning, a beacon to abate the darkness. Even here, it held power.

"Who are you? Reveal your true self!" A demand, not a question or invitation. A battle of will should beat brawn in this realm. Only a spirit would behave so horrid, or worse. A demon. Chiyo struggled to discern which one of the many it could be, for there in lay the key in defeating her new enemy. She'd destroyed demons before in the Fade, sending this one back to the Void would bear no grievance. Only the acquainted face, what could be seen, gave her pause.

"Ah'no mar, vhenan." The voice was cold and biting, but her heart knew those tones were they not so cruel. It changed in inflection, to one she understood in gentleness and candor though hearing him in any tone would not improve the punishing words. "Ane'ma dinar daris?"

Courage loosened the pressed cloth and earned her a heavy, rasped cough. "Never!" She shouldn't have answered it, she knew better. All those years training under her Keeper were wasted if she couldn't maintain control. Give nothing, and walk away unscathed. One foothold would be more than enough for a possession.

He chuckled, comfortable and arrogant. The elf drummed his long, defined fingers across the channeled surface of the orb, delighting in the sparks the taps solicited. She felt each aggravating strike in a phantom sweep against the stolen magic of her palm.

"We are not so different, you and I. Even if you were not born for this, made for it as I was, your hands are just as bloody. Are they not?"

Chiyo lost short hold of a yelp as blood poured openly like a fresh-made wound from the expanding mark. It twisted up her wrist and arm, a green infection following the veins and arteries below the pale skin. She clutched the searing limb to her body and glared, revolving on her heels as he circled about in a lazy turn.

The elf rested the ball on his hip and smiled, he ran a sticky hand through his twisted hair. Red, congealed flecks caught on the auburn locks.

"So proud, too much so to even plead for help." The walls contracted, drawing in close, tightening the trap. He was so close now. Chiyo's uninterrupted gaze noted the fine speckle of freckles on his defined throat and collar. The hard line of her mouth softened, she knew those sculpted ingresses, the depressions below that jaw where her lips would loiter for warmth. How well her nose fit tucked behind those long ears in an embrace.

But this wasn't him. It couldn't be.

A mockery of a copy, a husk empty of the man she truly missed.

None of this was real.

"Brave, brave girl, but foolish. To wander the wolf's woods alone…" He thumbed his chin, smug to
watch her stew in silence, but he strove to rattle her calm cage once more. "Your companions. You'll kill them all with this charade. Best stay here where you belong. Relinquish your stolen inheritance. I'd do much better with these gifts, blessings that you have cursed to the depths of your heart."

Chiyo's small chest swelled and spine went rigid as the figment leaned at the waist and brought his dark mask close to challenge her invisible one. His tongue darted across plush lips, leaving a shine over the pouty protrusion. "Give me your meager body, and I will lay the world at your feet."

"Your name," She too, could play the game. As long as her will remained unbroken, there was nothing he could do to harm her. Fear, however, was easier tamed than anger. "I will not ask again."

"Speak it and thus, I will be." A long, deep breath was sucked through the formed snout. And the grin he'd borne flattened into a hungry leer. "My, my. What a marvelous scent. You smell good enough to eat."

Sparks flew as an expelled flame careened with the carved visage. The mask caught fire before it was ripped away with an enraged bellow. He clutched the burn on his face and more than one set of eyes, dark and beady opened to glare with indignation. The blisters etched into the freckled flesh, revealing the darker scales and ridges below. The elf, the demon who wore Solas' appearance, dissolved.

Pride, wounded and wrathful, rose forth from the ruined remains. A height that dwarfed even a tall elf, hulking shoulders wide as a troll, saber-length sharp claws, only a fool would stand and fight.

Chiyo felt a tad wiser than her bravery’s boast. She fled, with nowhere to go.

"Wake up! Wake up!" Her short legs bolted for the furthest corner of the shrinking room, a lightning lash cracked not far from her heels. With fists she struck the wall, demanding release. Almost on cue, the seams of a horseshoe door appeared, but there was no handle. No keyhole. Only little gaps, like a leafy vine, began to glow in succession.

"Viane!" A cry from her own tongue, a word she didn't know, and the door opened. She went through into the dark unknown with the last screeched blast stinging her ears.

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Chiyo tried to lurch up when she awoke, but her motion was stalled by massive hands clasped to her shoulders. Early morning lit her opening eyes, just enough to outline the bulky, horned figure looming over her camp-bed. The stench of burnt leather clogged her nose when she snarled. Bared teeth won her no freedom though no hostility came from it either.

"Easy, boss. I gotcha." A deep, sonorous voice met her ears, but the soothing safety in the tone did little to stop her from attempting to swat at the new massive, gray body. Where one hand went, so followed the other, lashed and leashed by the wrist.

"Come on now, don't start this shit. Had to put your pillow out and this is how ya thank me?" The Qunari chuckled, the humor of his relaxed words was lost somewhat to his uncompromising demeanor. Bull's face was lax, his gaze soft to the point of being sleepy. His grip, however, was constant and firm.

"Untie me," Chiyo growled, feigning a frustrated kick when the Iron Bull restrained her hands further. He pulled them away from her without difficulty, they were no match for size and strength.

"Feisty today, that's good. Look what a week or so sober's done for you." He didn't yield. Instead, the Qunari waited and kept a careful eye over his twisted, irritated charge. "A bodyguard is a bodyguard, even if I have to protect you from yourself."
After a few deep, huffy breaths, the Inquisitor began to calm as the effects of the dream released their lingering hold on her emotions. Free from the demon and the fight, her blood cooled and soon her senses returned. Several minutes passed, and at last, the tense heat in her fingers dissipated.

"That's good, you're gonna be just fine." He patted her cheek with what was left of his digits. The better hand worked the knots in the leather strap that kept the small elf bound in a secure hold. "Varghest hide would hold up better, this one's all singed now. Maybe you should get me a piece."

"I'm sure we'll see plenty of those," Chiyo rubbed her wrists, wincing as she touched the abraded, bruised skin. This was the worst morning yet since they'd left for the open road. It had been more than a week since she'd stopped drinking the potion that kept her from dreaming—or at least remembering much of what transpired in the Fade. "The Western Approach is chock full of them."

Those tendrils were too essential to her quest, they were her only clues or tracks. That drugged disconnect blocked her from the answers she sought. Weaned and cleansed from her system on the barren mountains of the Frostbacks, the Inquisitor had purposely dumped her reserves in a field by a little stream at the mountain’s base. That meadow hadn't changed much since her runaway stop there with Solas, and sleeping unaltered there had gifted her the first of many useful dreams.

"Want any breakfast?" Bull offered as he jimmyed his way to stand on a braced leg. With a great heave and a push off his thighs he stood with his head held low, too many tents had patches in their rooves because of his sharp horns and limited perception.

The image of raw meat and offal bits came to mind, she shook the thought away. "Give me a moment, I don't want to be sick. Tea, if there's any. I'll come for it myself."

"Sure, I'll leave you to it." Bull stepped around her with care and started to slip through the tent flaps.

"Bull…” Chiyo pipped as she turned her pillow over to hide the burn marks.

The Qunari paused as he gave his flank of solid scratch. "Yeah, boss?"

"Thank you." Chiyo waited until he was gone before beginning to change. She slipped out of her night shirt. For a moment, she pressed it to her nose. It was there, but faint, an ashen smell that made her nostrils curl.

She tensed when the thin mattress depressed behind her. A silent presence, one she knew well though he could still spook her were she not prepared.

A piece of paper was presented to her at eye-level, the gangly hands and arms on either side of her head were recognizable enough. Cole suspended his drawing, crude and made with haste. The horseshoe door again, without a handle or key, notches like leaves.

"You saw it too, didn't you?" Chiyo asked flatly, she took the smudged sheet as it dropped, floating down unhindered to her lap.

Cole had delivered his message and was gone.

She traced the penciled sketch with her little finger, she'd seen several like it before. Buried in a cliffside, concealed behind a waterfall. Doors that led to more doors, chambers of empty tombs.

"What else have you been watching?" The elf asked to no one, and she put the clue away in her pack before finishing her daily dress.
Translations:

As'andalem- (she's dead)

Tundra din'ara lanaste on'ala elvar'nas. (a kindness such as death would be too merciful for their crimes)

Esh'var tarsul melana. (their time is over)

Ah'no mar, vhenan. (what about you, heart)

Ane'ma dinar daris? (are you not more demon than I?)

Viane- Open
"You've never seen a Tevene forum, have you? If you're ever in Minrathous…" Unable to tread another painful step, Marlo had dropped himself onto a low, dusty boulder more suited to housing lizards than functioning as a seat. He glanced at the prominent points of Solas' ears, evident even under a shade-giving hood. "Wait, better not actually…"

"One can imagine it." The elf groaned as he settled on his haunches and removed the makeshift bindings that began at Marlo's ankles. He wasn't practiced enough to work them himself. Solas, however, would be unburdened by the customarily elven task even in sleep.

"Can you? Stuffed corner to corner with magisters, enchanters, philosophers, scribes, academics, researchers like Edolie. It's utter chaos, everyone trying to show they are the smarter, better-bred person, but once in a while something actually brilliant sparks instead of the regular snide insults and pompous decorum." He poked at the gritty, encrusted blisters on the soft skin of his toes that hadn't sloughed off in the boggy waters before the elf swatted the intruding fingers away and held forth an open palm.

Marlo loaned his knife to the mage, clean as any out on the road but necessary. He wasn't the least bit shy around a blade, every scar on his body had been placed there by one.

Even with continued, mild discomfort, his mouth sustained its ramble now free of his master's chastisement. With a pair of ears near to listen, he now took every opportunity to chatter. "Some theories say the Chantry might be on to something with all their hymns and mentions of song, just not in that exact way. It's not a curtain or a cloth that can be slashed; it's a disruption of energy, vibrations, and all that stuff. Just don't ask me for the details, I may have nodded off at some point that session… You don't care about that anyways, its blood magic you're after, right? So back to it, where was I? Blood magic allays the Veil, we know this, and it does it by counteracting those resonances. Though Tevinter scholars suggest lots of possibilities as to why the practice has been so utterly damned, a few believe it's because the Chantry wants to keep the power to itself. Templars, mages, lyrium, phylacteries, possessions, it's all connected in some way by blood and guess who has the tightest hold on all that?"

Solas snorted, the interpretation was ludicrously strung together. But facets of the concept weren't exactly wrong either. It was so much simpler than that, yet profoundly complex to explain. He dared make no comment unprepared and assured not to lead to further questioning. Nervousness tingled on the back of his protected neck and he kept his narrow gaze focused on the task at hand—or at foot rather. They weren't going anywhere with injuries like these. "Are you suggesting that mages can just murmur a tune and the Veil simply complies? Next, you'll tell me that spirits are tone-deaf."

Marlo rolled his eyes and his lip turned to a scowl. "Humming like an off-key Sister in the back of a choir at the Fade doesn't get results. Magic is the real music. And blood, it also sings. The more blood, the louder the song and demons clamor to listen. There are limits, you know, to what a mage can do alone—Oww! Andraste's mercy upon me, that hurt!" He howled, interrupted from his accounts as a thin sliver of wood was pulled from his swollen heel.

Shoeless, the lad's tender feet had seen kinder miles than the ones they'd endured the last few weeks. Calluses came with the blisters; wrappings only protected him so much while the flesh thickened. The dryness of the desert would toughen them, but he'd be pained all the while. Solas' soles were leather smooth and light, perfectly suited to sliding across the desert sands and rocky crags. Human feet were no match for a pair conditioned by traveling elves.
"Focus, please. This shall be over soon enough." The mage investigated the wound that had slowed their trek to a limping crawl. Red and enflamed, the puncture would heal soon enough once relieved but it was costing them precious time.

"As I was saying…" The sharp tip having served its purpose, Marlo picked up his borrowed knife while his feet were rewrapped with the remnants of his sleeves. He ran the blade against a flat portion of the stone beneath him, honing the edge. "Blood magic has different limits when more is presented, the caster and donor assume just as much risk if they offer a wrist. All have to be willing to give more if demanded. The magic will take it from them regardless."

"What did you write about intricate magic, in the regards of how much blood should be needed? Did your debates speak of such?" Solas queried, probing the only source of information he'd gained for all his troubles. Though not the mage who'd advanced the craft, or even the ledger upon which the notes had been originally writ, he did have the hands and mind of the person who'd detailed the studious accounts for several years. Edolie's illiteracy had been well concealed, a genius in her profession who had never mastered the ability to read and write in full or with confidence.

"One look at me will tell you how many it can take." The Tevinter renegade exhaled, his sallow green eyes flicked over his empty lap, turning invisible pages of a tome long abandoned, seeking any recollection that might help. "A single cut suffices for a simple spell, but a complex one? Lots."

Solas grimaced as he pushed to his feet, the bones of his hips and back cracked as he straightened. His shoulder still wasn't well, but it would suffice as long as he didn't lift the limb too high. "Lots? How specific. What a fount of knowledge." He hadn't intended to be curt; the abysmal quality of his sleep had done little for maintaining much in the way of manners.

"What kind of answer did you want? A thimble? A bucket? A bathtub?" Marlo scoffed, haughty once more with a measure of food in his belly. The desert provided for those who knew where to look, though not always in ways expected. An overturned cart loaded with preserves had been a fortuitous gift. Dried, shredded fish, hard, seasoned jerky, roots soaked in jars of brine, even a piece of amber suspended honeycomb. Raided for richer valuables, the food had been left behind. Another's misfortune had saved their lives, though a few fennecs and a nug had sustained them previously.

"You don't even know how much blood it took the first time, but I'll bet you double to undo it," The lad stared at the mage who'd come to him for help. "And you'll be dabbling in demons too by the sound of it. Think they'll make deals for a few scratches and timid droplets? Best make it a big nosebleed if you're going to be that skittish about it."

Snatching up his satchel, Solas hoisted it over his back and held his tongue between his teeth before it loosened again. He marched off, leaving Marlo to scramble for his parcels lest he be left behind.

"Hey, come on. You'd sour dracolisk milk with a face like that!" The young man teased after darting back for his blade upon feeling the empty sheath bounce on his belt. He caught back up, hobbling a few strides as he tested his amended foot. Solas' silence and forward stare left him pleading and flashing a youthful smile. "I can't just bend old experiments and citations to mold into something you want. You have to figure that part yourself. It's half ritual, which I already drew out for you, and half intent. Don't expect to find the latter just lying about. Throw enough magic at a problem and something is bound to happen."

He could not goad Solas into speech with his supplications. Marlo gave up his efforts as they climbed the next dune, his flippant breath taxed away in the ascent of unstable ground and stony weeds. By the crest, though, he was ready to try again. "How about another riddle? Pass the time?"
"If you must." The elf's shoulders sagged. He stuck his hand in the narrow pocket of his traveling cloak, seeking any ounce of passivity left to him. Oily and a bit tattered, he brushed against a soft trinket and smoothed the crushed feather to the hidden seam. Solas still wore the old fang lashed to his wrist, a memento to a promised duty. The burgundy feather reminded him of a life that had existed but briefly, a story caught between two pages with a marker he revisited again and again. The good part, the happy part, but all fairy tales must end. "Choose one of your liking. My mind is elsewhere than on proposing puzzles."

A response came garbled, Marlo had snuck a pinch of fibrous beef into his mouth, sucking first the pepper and salt. The morsel pocketed in his cheek, he spoke again. "Lemme think. I'm better at answering them than asking…"

His chewing renewed as they skittered down the dune in a slide, the shifting sands consumed their transitory trail. Within minutes and a few puffs of wind, all traces would be gone. Anyone who attempted to chase them this far would have been mad to try.

"Named and nameless. We come out at night without being summoned and are lost in the day without being stolen. What are we?"

"I don't know." Solas lied, his empty eyes peered further away than the vast vacant desert and hills. A darkness danced in them, a memory stirred up of stillness, hush, and intrigue. The only witnesses shone from high above to the thieved midnight scene, a promised excursion to forgotten ruins without a modicum of decency, wild like youths caught in a tryst. That dangerous glint in her eye guided his wayward passions and brought the first curl of a grin to the corners of his parched mouth. And a remembered flush of flesh hidden in twilight, a moment escaped from responsibility and stress left Solas feeling warm beyond the desert's waning heat.

He should have known then it wouldn't last. He should have known many things before he'd laved his affections over a mortal woman…

Tangled in a destiny already fouled by his hand's cruel make. Her suffering a punishment that should have been his own.

What was he in this inescapable riddle? A fool, were any to ask.

"You're not even trying," Marlo balked to his distracted companion, he craned his neck to make his disapproval apparent from behind his head scarf. "It's an easy one too."

An exasperated sigh hissed between Solas' dry lips, he reached for his water flask to improve upon the thirst brought by speech and the aridness that surrounded them. "The curious entities that are the stars, since you demand it from me."

"See, was that so hard? Like pulling nails from an old mule's hoof, I swear." Marlo clapped his hands and rubbed them together, ready for a challenge. "My turn! Make it a good one."

Solas took no time in selecting; he'd had a favorite primed from the start. "Echoes from the shadow realm, whispers of things yet to come. Thought's strange sister dwells in the night, is swept away by dawning light. Of what do I speak?"

"Umm… shit. Give me a moment, course you'd pull a tricky one." Marlo pondered long and hard, a piece of unruly hair pressed between his teeth. He spat the sodden lock out when the answer dawned on him and then pointed an accusing finger at the mage.

"Dreams! Ha, thought because I don't do that that I wouldn't get it! Can't pull a fast one on me!" He
hollered with triumph, par for par with his opponent. "Let's go best of three. What do you call a dog with no legs?"

"Miserable."

Solas waited for the lad's breathing to slow before he rolled over on his cloak. He looked out over the crackling embers of their tiny cook-fire and watched Marlo's chest rise then drop with slow regularity. Oh to be young and spent, rest came vigorously upon those who'd left their troubles fathoms far away. None came to those who ran headlong towards it. The tanned adolescent had no trouble in falling asleep, no dreams waited to vex him nightly as ardent beasts clawed and gnawed their way through once peaceful, impermeable walls.

And vexed he had been, ancient memories from his past were being penetrated and rattled violently. What incredible mayhem he saw, each disturbance echoed across the Fade like rolls of thunder. She certainly followed as intended, but the destruction left in her wake was an unexpected and nerve-wracking addition to be left unplanned for.

Too daring, too fervent, too close. The dust of a thousand-year-old secret stirred and the truth poked out from beneath the muck of eroded deceptions. In the wrong hands, that knowledge would be a devastating force wielded across all of Thedas. What would come of it in her hands? Those small, delicate fingers that camouflaged so much strength beneath earned calluses and earthy stains?

In her hands, that woe-some past would become a dagger to bear with demand against his throat or plunge with rage into his heart. He was being ferreted, pursued, there was but one end to this led on hunt. Blood.

It would be kinder in the long run if the far-flung apprentice who snoozed nearby kept his distance, least his outcome become snared in a future foreseen. Be it a few days or weeks, years too long for promise, he should be left to enjoy his freedoms. Marlo had endured enough and had plenty of his own demons to contest with, some even who loitered both in and out of the Fade.

He couldn't follow, not any more. A mere day's travel was all that separated Solas from his modified goal. Every moment was needed to prepare, there could be no interruption, not this time.

A swig of watery red wine offered with a large dinner had bought added assurance. Marlo would sleep hours on and go unbothered, he'd wake in the morning wholly free to a world of choices.

Solas rubbed the sore circles beneath his eyes. Woozy with exhaustion, another age's worth of sleep would not be sufficient. How much more could his body take when it was certain to be tested to its very limits. Now, more than ever he missed the potency of his youth and the boundless magic he'd relinquished. Consigned to death, he'd sacrificed all with no expectation to survive, let alone awaken from utherna with a physical form though weakened as it were.

With honed silence, the mage gathered his slim possessions and cast a protective ward. He left behind only what remained of his stolen coin, still jingling in the depleted purse taken from the Inquisitor. It was Ferelden silver, but the canyon merchant and his attending mabari would take it nevertheless having already swapped some of the money for more food and a new set of clothes.

Marlo would need them to cover his scars. It was his best chance to forge out on his own. He could take any caravan passing through, head towards any city, or even approach the Inquisition allied
camp at the top of the ravine. Solas had brought him as far as he dared, to a place that was marginally safe.

The rest was up to him.

He was a decent kid, for all the trouble and slight help. His potential aid, however, was not worth the risk to his short life were he brought those last few miles. The only blood he was willing to spill in the matter, was his own.

With one last look, Solas made a silent goodbye. And sure enough, to both disturbance and relief, there were tiny paw prints in the ashes on the shallow cave's floor.

_Dareth shiral._ May you not walk it alone long, my young friend. Surely we will never meet again.

---

Lightning laced the low hung gloom that churned restless over every blackened corner and impenetrable horizon. Each invading boom resonated in the rock of the cliffs and chasms. The clashing sounds reverberated through the ravines, though only the stone had stood there long enough to recall what it meant. Rootless and wandering, life seldom lingered long in such arduous places. Instinct drove man and animal alike to shelter, least the ground swallow them up in its awaited thirst.

The rain had finally come to the desert, an era's rare event. It broke gentle enough at first, shallow teasing breaths above the parched and fading land, but at any moment the sky would give way and flood would meet the sand. The air surged so heavy and the clouds loomed so dense, one pinprick, no sharper than a harsh word and the heavens would be torn asunder.

Yet not all the wasteland's guests were content to hide safe in their holes.

Chiyo kicked and tossed in her cot as the canvas walls rattled around her. The wind sucked and scraped, urging her to leave the small comforts of her bedroll and reenter the bruised and dangerous night. A deluge burgeoned, matchless for this locality of the Western Approach where a century could pass without any change to the endless drought. Tiny droplets plinked on the sand and stone, they strummed the more outward tents and gulch walls with caution of a sky ready to burst at the seams.

Cassandra had moved them, the area's scouts, equipment and all, to a more sheltered camp tucked into the canyon walls carved by the very floods that drove the long-traveled party to seek higher grounds. Exhausted and sore from their battles, they'd lugged most of the minor settlement beneath the overhang of a barricaded cliff face and relocated the horses and gear into the fore of an unoccupied mine.

She brought her wrists to her mouth and nearly had her teeth upon the knots when Chiyo exhaled and abandoned the idea. It was a strained self-worth that swung her legs out from under the blanket, and dignity braced her to stand.

_Only a prisoner if you act like one, just don't make it suspicious._ Something else entirely had her leave the tent, to sneak past the Seeker who snored beneath her sheets.

"What are you still doing awake?"

Iron Bull didn't look up from his task, a lone eye focused firm to the intricate rebinding of his maul's
long handle. Tiny leather strips wove together formed a solid grip but needed frequent replacement
having endured the strenuous demands of the Qunari who wielded it. That day's fighting had been
the final use, but the trustworthy weapon had served its brutal purpose in demolishing a demon of
impressive girth.

It seemed that Pride wasn't done with her, in dreams or in the waking world. At every chance it
appeared, crueler and more mutilated with each encounter. From rifts and dreams the creature
stalked, the Anchor a beacon unable to be screened. This one had quite the vendetta, enraged enough
to manifest deep inside the last chamber of Solasan, behind a door without any keys.

Chiyo straightened; she considered a subtle yawn but opted for directness instead. Bull was an
intelligent spy in his own right, he'd see through any imperfect ploy.

"Nature requires my urgent attention." Good, a humble, unassuming lie with little room to be
poked through.

"Gotta piss? In this weather?" A fresh howl of wind tore across the mine's hewn opening and an
echo of thunder answered its call. Still his eye remained fixated, steady in the lamp light it never
wavered. Left, right, left, each progressive plait was made in turn. "Might need your hands for
that…"

"Or new trousers." Her bare knees tipped together with the hopes of being an understated enough
cue to make her case. She watched and prayed that her nervousness only added to the feigned
urgency.

Bull finished a knot and beckoned her forth with a curled motion of his fingers. "C'mere then, just try
not to drown on your way back. Feels like the Storm Coast is about to have a rival for its namesake."

"I'll do my best." The elf held out her hands and with practiced finesse was released. The man had
quite the skill with a simple piece of rope, Dorian had remarked privately on that talent many a
morning, always with an exceptionally relaxed demeanor and almost disheveled hair—if the style
could be anything other than perfect.

An oiled coat and hood atop her night clothes were all Chiyo took with her. She'd almost reached the
blockade of wooden boards painted with an artless skull, red wiped over the eyes when the Qunari's
voice sent a jolt down her spine that matched the white hot lines that clipped the sky.

"A smart person sure wouldn't check out that temple again alone, and unarmed, would they?"

Chiyo said nothing as she waited for another, more accusing remark. They'd already investigated
every nook and cranny of the hidden sanctuary, she'd been so sure to find him there. Every rounded
door had been opened, all but a single shard used. Naught but empty cists and a handful of gold
coins.

Nothing. After weeks of travel and chasing the shadows and ghosts of clues.

She had to see it. One more time, to be sure.

"I'll do all your guard duty for you when I return. An hour, that's all I need." Chiyo affirmed, and
then slipped out into the squally night before she could be stopped. She held no ill will concerning
Bull himself, but there weren't restraints solid enough to prevent her from fighting through the
mountain of a man if need be. The mere thought of him scrambling to grab her set Chiyo's course to
a fleet one, the speedy pace spurned by the violence of imagination. A Ben Hasrath fully blinded and
bleeding. Her companion's gray skin turned stone-blue with magic cold. Bull with his throat torn out,
meaty arms flopped to his sides as he fell onto his knees—stop!

The mage willed the intrusive wicked notions away.

*Not now, not this close to the end.*

---

Half a mile slapped away beneath her feet. She crossed gritty gushes that trickled down the desolate causeways. Dodging debris sent skating by the forceful storm on the wet rock, Chiyo toiled towards the oasis from which all the water flowed out of. The clouds above had begun to tear open, the wind whipped the slight rain into a fury that soon left her damp despite suitable gear.

Overgrown curls atop the Inquisitor's head hung wet about her face, but not even the murky evening could steal the hunt-honed sharpness from the eyes that peered from beneath the unkempt shroud of hair.

The pool's tranquil edge was already beginning to swell past its lush bounds, stretched out to the foot of the former campsite. It swamped up to her knees in places and drowned out the flora that had been fostered in the desert's only haven. With difficulty, she waded through the water's strong current. A speedy push nearly knocked the small elf over when her legs tangled in submerged strands of spindleweed, she scrambled not to tumble.

Chiyo braced against the dilapidated pillar in the center and watched the illuminated lip of the hidden temple's entrance with each frequent flash. She couldn't see the entrance through the expanding waterfall, veiled by the muddied flood that surged. Into the inundated tunnel, she slipped and through the dark twists and turns the elf ascended.

She halted at the open door, its rim glistening and greenish-blue from the veilfire torches that burned just within. Hours earlier, she'd passed through that same egress angry and frustrated, sweaty and sore from battle. Entering these tombs now, alone, left the fine hairs on her arms erect with an icy tinge of fear.

The heavy stone walls hushed the clamor of the outside world within inches of the entrance, though the earth still tremored with each electric strike and water dripped from fissures in the ceiling. Chiyo shirked her sodden coat onto the floor and from the pocket she withdrew the last and lonely shard. Every other of its make had found a home, there seemed no reason for a spare.

From the chamber just ahead a light wavered where none had been before beyond the steady sconces that had since been dimmed. The room had been left to rubble with their prior onslaught.

Her stomach clenched, her tongue went dry, but Chiyo's horribly heavy legs carried her onwards.

This was not the battlefield she'd laid waste to behind the tenth door, silenced magic teemed anew. The elven artifact from down below had been moved to sit atop the burial box. The once mild flux that enveloped the odd item had expanded, the glow refracted off of dozens of crystal slivers suspended in ring about its new position.

Chiyo clamped her fingers hard around the similar piece in her hand though it began to grow warm and the sharp edges bit into her palm.

Solas had always been so cautiously curious around the bizarre spheres she'd activated during their
many journeys. Did they really strengthen the Veil, as wards against demons, or was their purpose entirely different...His reasons had seemed sound enough then, a part of his studies, knowledge granted from the Fade, but how had he sensed them in the first place or known what they were for?

Perhaps it was the same energy that made her shoulders tense with the sensation of another's eyes being upon them. She'd never considered once over the weeks and months what she would say to him once he'd been found. Why had she always assumed that he would be the one to speak first, to answer for himself without provocation?

No, not him. He always waited for the questions and gave no unsolicited answers.

"You..." Biting words bubbled up, an old and festered anger that broke its way to the front of a long list of grievances, though she dared not turn on her heels to face the observer.

Her fingers were already bitter cold. Dread scalded in her veins, but for the moment, she knew not in whose regards it came. Ice or fire, which would take first control. Chiyo ripped her tongue away from the waterless roof of her mouth, "You took my horse."

This man, who she'd pined long days and hunted long nights for.

"One of many regrettable measures, I'm afraid." His voice was fragile as it spun about her pricked ears, delicate as the first tendrils of the weedy vines left to strangle the untended herbs in her garden.

This man, whose mislaid dreams were so bizarre they could only have been taken as real.

"Why? You will tell me the truth." Her eyes stung and a drum pounded in her chest, ready for war. She twisted trembling limbs that would rather stay unmoved and forced a gaze unshielded upon her quarry.

She hardly knew who he truthfully was.

And there he stood, hands clasped behind his hips, darkening the doorway with what little was left of his faded spirit.

"Because we are running out of time, vhenan."
For my sake and sanity, after a much needed hiatus, the following chapters will likely not be the giant 4-7k sagas. Not that this means the story won't be told in its entirety, only broken up into smaller pieces that I can readily accomplish. It's good to be back, but I know what trouble this led me into last time. Everyone's continued support has made all the difference, I hope you will still stand with me as we approach the final bend in this tale. <3

‘Vhenan.’ His shaking breath lingered on the word torn from his very chest. How long could a man live without his heart, even if it hated him?

No flash of teeth or ferociousness of a gaze had ever sent a tremor down the would-be god’s spine, feared by many and forgotten by most, but a tight tingle jolted through each tensed vertebrae as the small woman circled close.

“You would still call me that, or do you wish to torment with the word?” Heel over toe she stalked, her frame pulled low, the muscles in her arms tensed from clenched knuckles to pinched shoulders. Solas braced his tall body and set his features to match the same stone that encased them, ready for whatever assault he rightly deserved.

He’d done this to her, to them, to himself. If this were his ordained punishment, to be despised, so be it.

How many elves had attacked him before? A hundred? A thousand? Through the ages, the count had been lost but to a select and memorable few. From deranged goddess of the hunt to suspicious Dalish migrant, he’d borne the wounds readily, as unavoidable, spoiled fruits for his labors. Certainly, she wouldn’t be the last by any measure, not with the plans left burgeoning on the horizon once he’d recovered the orb. If he lived that long.

“I will not deny my part in your pain or the trials you have faced since we first met, or even prior. My only intent lay in your release from this fate none should suffer.” His jaw drew taut, already he felt what could only be the urge for a fist upon its edge. “Even now, I see the hourglass but a few grains from empty. These are my failings, they should never have befallen you.”

“From the moment you knew, I should have been told!” Caught between a growl and a sob, her words stuck where physical blows could never reach. “My life, my magic, my history, are these secrets so repulsive to you they couldn’t be shared, even with me? Did you think I wouldn’t listen? That I wouldn’t believe or recognize the truth that has been staring me in the face for years? Or was it I couldn’t trust you to tell me that I’m a monster?”

If she truly were a beast, then what did that make him?

Solas could not discern which hurt more, her loathing of him or herself. The air caught in his lungs, he drowned below the torrent of her demands. It was hard enough to stand, let alone breathe beneath the tremendous guilt of his choices. Flailing for a response, he tried to sway some of the justifiable rage she harbored towards him. “Would I the chance to do it differently—”
“Were you not listening? I’ve killed. A boy who was kin to me! With these very hands, I took a life!” She snapped and hissed, with a hard pitch Chiyō threw a reddened shard aside as fresh blood dripped from cuts made on her fingers and palm.

“My own mother died because of me…” She sucked a few rapid gulps of air and wiped at her eyes, but she wasn’t done, there was still too much of her diseased self to expel. “She gave her life for a wretch who’d only make the existence of those around her miserable, who’d put them in danger. So many… The clan who gave me a second chance, every last Lavellan, dead. Because I couldn’t keep them safe. I should have been stopped years ago.”

“There are things beyond even the most resolute’s control.” Solas pleaded of the crying elf before him, though he saw much of the same shame and guilt he’d flogged himself with for centuries. “Do not blame yourself for that which was beyond yours.”

“And the man ill, dying, in his bed? The one I grabbed and dragged as he kicked, screamed, begged me for mercy?” Her rage condensed to damnation. With a roll of her wrists she offered up both hands, one smeared dark red, the other glowing with cursed green. “Duke Antoine should have been executed. But I slaughtered him. I ripped him apart till there was nothing left to find. I… cannot help but feel he deserved it, as sick as that is.”

Solas bumped the cold brick behind his back in a subtle recoil as the cast-off glass skittered along the stone floor and joined its brethren in the ambient glow around the artifact. He watched her struggle, pushing for clarity and governance as she confessed odious sins, laying them out in turn for a judgment he wasn’t prepared for or capable of giving.

“Then… Then there is you. Should I even ask how much you risked? Of yourself, of others? No more lives… Not for me.” Chiyō approached till she was almost within striking range, bare feet padded up the wet floor in procured silence. Her head tilted up and eyes affixed to his own, though they were not the same warm brown he’d remembered them to be, awake or in dreams.

Too murky, too gray, too honed on the hunt with black pupils blown wide. A less enlightened man might blame the dim light of the tombs or the energy that teemed in the dank air; a Fade-walker of any merit would never make such a misidentification.

She played the host, though not to a lowly parasite, but a consciousness shared, bolstered, and robbed blind all at once. A spirit grown fat upon the healthy reserves barred from the elf’s own use, offering up its infectious blend of magic instead. They fed on one another, filling in the gaps and crevices in a less than fair symbiosis.

“You promised something once. The only one you ever really made.” She crept so close, Solas could smell the iron dripping between her fingers and the rain soaked into her travel-stained clothes. A longing burned in his nose, a wish to seek out some trace of the sweetness that clung to irremovable memory. Apricot and currant, kindness and sympathy and unbreakability, there had to be some piece of her that still remained uncorrupted. “The anchor may be in control, but I am not.”

Water dripped from Chiyō’s hair and with a cautious reach Solas brushed the limp strands from her austere face and tucked them behind a chilled ear. He’d almost forgotten the softness of her skin, the knowledge renewed as a thumb glided across the wet cheek wiped clean of its former cruel markings. She leaned into his touch and the rage grew still, content to slink away into the shadows, for a time. In its place, something else rose, equally disquieting for that simple fact that it had survived at all.

Oh, what a monstrous thing a heart could be indeed. But she was still in there. Somewhere.
The brightest spirits always shone out from the darkest recesses, their light burning briefly before being consumed.

“I will help you.” Another promise, one he’d give his life to guarantee. Both hands had her now, cupping each side of her face and neck, they were joined by her own. His lips fell first to the thin scar above the black border of Chiyo’s brow. Slipping down, Solas tasted the salt that trickled in drips to her jaw. Finally, he closed his eyes as the swirling shards behind her began to tessellate into the frameless form of a narrow arch, the spaces between mended with magic drained from the unlocked spaces below.

It would take every ounce of this place to complete the repair. He’d need infinitely more--and would find it in droves once beyond the finished doorway. There was only one chance in getting this right. So much had been sacrificed, so much remained on the line, the direction of a breath’s blow spared this world from utter annihilation. But he could think of none of it, not now. His sole attention remained upon the gentle press of her lips that bespoke more a mournful goodbye than a welcome home.

They braced for a war with consequences already known. And he bore only a sharpened knife, along with a hardened will to do what must be done.

The storm was only beginning its onslaught. After years in waiting, the clouds lashed out in relentless torrents. Lightning struck the stone and left it vibrating throughout the natural-made and mined hollows that peppered the entire canyon. Water ran in rivulets between fissures in the rock, it dripped from the slanted cave’s roof and left the distant branch of the Inquisition dampened. Though it was far better than the flooding they would have endured if they’d remained at the first site.

Arms crossed over his bulky torso, the Iron Bull’s chin rested lightly upon his robust chest. The repairs to the weapon in his loose grip had been completed, the subduing sounds had lulled the giant into a few moments peace. Cassandra’s snores slipped through the tent walls, unmatched by the thunder booming just beyond the blockade. But not everyone was sleeping soundly through the wicked weather.

Cole lay on the cavern’s floor, his hat perched safely atop the conical tip of a stalactite. In the dim dark depression behind the camp he’d discovered a nesting of nugs who were content to trade a few scraps of leftover dinner for their company. They nuzzled against his arms and rooted by his pockets for crumbs, one had even stretched across his scrawny belly and fallen asleep. The young man himself appeared nearly napping upon a pillow of burlap, serenity found in the quiet hideaway from the pains and sufferings of people.

From his restful repose, the spirit suddenly stirred. Pale blue eyes split open wide and his thin jaw began to judder. His ears strained to listen to the nothing. It wasn’t as discernibly loud like the frequent callings that often willed their way into his ear. Too dull, too distant, but there, drowning in desperation. He held his breath and pulled his borrowed body up to sit, carefully holding the tiny creatures that wriggled with the loss of warmth.

The sensation tickled at first as it slid down his senses, muffled and far, far away… One fiber of his nerves at a time came alight as realization dawned, drawing his throat tight with a notion he’d previously wrestled to understand. His lungs seemed too shallow to draw sufficient air, the heart in his chest thrummed with urgency, his guts tightened. But where was the battlefield, bursting and
booming, the bloodied bodies of soldiers seeking their suffering to be soothed or snuffed?

Pinky-gray bodies bolted as Cole shot to his feet. His hands pulled upon his mouth, trying to make the tangled words come out. Stumbling several steps, he darted back to the lamp-lit center of camp, choking on the thing he’d frequently recognized in others that went by the chilling name of Fear. He knew of it and the deceptive games it played in the Fade, the plague it became on the hearts and minds of the living. But never once had he been so thoroughly ensnared by the dreaded clutches himself.

Lengthy boots tripped over haphazardous gear left unattended in the urgent move, but the bump released the first scream of horror as it crashed around his inner hearing.

“It hurts! IT HURTS! Stop!” Cole clutched his arms, the skin burning in unseen strokes. His voice cracked with pained gasps, but they were not his words.

Bull toppled from his seat with a startled bellow, his weapon clattered on the stone in the upset. “For fuck’s sake!”

“What’s going on!” Cassandra lept from the tent, tangling in the toggles and rope, the sword she slept with ready in hand. Both stared as Cole reached up, clawing at his throat, and continued to shout with phantom anguish.

“Please, not again! I can’t, I can’t, I can’t!” Even the accompanying scouts peeked out from their shelter, terrified and unwilling to go anywhere near the strange boy who’d joined them in the desert.

Cole pulled at an unseen lash about his neck, strangled as it drew ever tighter. Lost for breath, he crashed to his knees when the shaken Qunari reached for him. His head swam with red and knives and vacant eyes and-- “NO!”

With a crack, Cole vanished into the ether and followed that most desperate call.

From the dark smoke that clouded his appearance, Cole wordlessly emerged into the Crossroads. A peculiar place, not of the Fade or the real world. Void of many spirits, and almost always of people, there was no reason for Compassion to have any interest in the site. The magic that stood stagnant in the air hung low, like a mist, thick and windless and forever. It churned as he moved forward, rippling away from the frightened spirit drawn forward by the hazy glow of a mirror without a frame.

“I thought you agreed not to intervene…”

At the eluvian’s base, the fog cleared in a faultless circle. In the center, a body laid prone. She wasn’t moving. And neither was the man huddled at her side.

“Was it the first cut or second when she began to seem unsure? What if I’m wrong, this doesn’t feel right. We must continue or it will fail.” Cole didn’t ask so much as he merely drew upon the thoughts of the only conscious person before him. He pulled off his shoes, toe to heel and left them aside.

“The third, she pleaded, keep going. The ritual cannot be stopped once begun. Just a little more, you’re so brave, be strong. Don’t give up just yet.” His coat joined the unkempt footwear in a crumpled heap. “But how many was it until she finally bolted, was it the fifth or the sixth? Why isn’t
it working? No, please, vhenan. Keep your eyes open. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm…”

With a solemn gaze fixed upon the elf who would not respond, he watched as fingers clenched tighter about a poorly wrist and the slashes that marred the clotted flesh. Was there even a pulse left in those depleted veins? Cole could sense a flicker no livelier than the last ember left glowing on the wick of an extinguished candle.

Solas said nothing, his head bowed low. The arm cradled to his chest ran red with blood. But the color that stained his clothes was but a dribble compared to the puddles and spilled streaks strewn across the etched circle from edge to glowing edge.

“You should not have offered yours. There’s too much guilt in your blood.” Cole crossed the perimeter, his bare feet trodding over the sticky smears. He stooped to pick up the discarded knife, grasping its handle in a firm fist.

“I was going to lose her.” His voice croaked and his body trembled, too tired even to draw from the limitless energies around him. Not a single drop of mana had been spared, Solas was utterly spent. Nothing in him remained to fight back as the spirit lifted his injured arm away with an intent tugging at his sleeve.

The tip of the blade grazed his protruding wrist bones. Solas closed his eyes, preparing to be cut again, to be used in his entirety. That had been the warning risk, had it not? That the magic would take everything and more if he offered it once. But instead, the edge turned outwards, slicing through the thin strap wrapped around his lower arm. The pierced fang fell away, and Cole collected it from the ground.

“She needs him. She has to accept.” Into Chiyo’s sprawled, limp hand, he set the tiny token and closed her fingers around it. “I will make it better.”

Cole ignored the frantic hand grasping at his shirt as he placed the blade against his own wrist. He knew he could bleed, but the spirit had never learned how much.

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