Looking Glass

by Feynite

Summary

She is tired. The world is ash and dust, and she has lost so many pieces of herself; markings and heart, left arm and left eye, trust and faith. It has become such a painful thing, to love him. And yet.

And yet.

Notes

Am I doing another goddamn time travel fic for this exact same fandom and pairing? Yes. Yes I am. I should make it a series. 'Time Travel Therapy With Lavellan and Solas'.

Thanks a lot, Trespasser.
Ash and Dust

“I was a fool.”

The words fall quietly from his lips.

She is tired. The world is ash and dust, and she has lost so many pieces of herself; markings and heart, left arm and left eye, trust and faith. It has become such a painful thing, to love him. And yet.

And yet.

“Sit with me?” she asks.

He is bloodied and beaten, hollow-eyed and worn thin, standing in his tarnished armour amidst the world he’s destroyed. She has no more use for pretense; she is on the ground, her arm in the dirt, staring at their mutual failure. His world could not be restored, and hers could not be saved, and now both are only phantoms lingering on the cusp of death.

She could turn away from him now, but what would be the point? He will die soon, anyway, and if they are the only two left in all of the world, they may as well die together.

He turns and looks at her. It feels like it has been ages since he really looked at her. He has been trying not to, she thinks. Trying not to see, because if he saw what he was doing then he wouldn’t be able to keep doing it, and if he couldn’t keep on, it would mean accepting that he had destroyed his world.

That he was so willing to burn hers to regain it is bitter ash in her mouth.

But then, she has no one but herself to blame for her failure to stop him.

He steps, carefully, legs trembling, until he falls to the lifeless earth beside her. His descent is ungainly. He lands at her right side.

“Any apologies would be insufficient,” he muses.

“Don’t even try,” she agrees.

Overhead, the sky looks molten. Something wails in the far distance. Whatever it is that’s being injured, neither of them has the strength left to try and help it.

Solas shakes. He shakes, and he crumples, and he weeps. And she understands.

She wishes she didn’t. This would all have been so much easier if she didn’t understand.

Her hand moves, and she lets out a breath, and drops it onto his back. Slides it up and rests it at the base of his neck. The only warm thing left is that single point of contact between them.

His shaking intensifies.

The Destroyer of Worlds is a weeping mess beneath her simple touch.
“I did not want this,” he whispers. “I did not mean for this. It should not be this way. Please, please, please…”

“Vhenan,” she says.

He falls silent. As shocked as if she’d slapped him.

“The world is ruined. No one cares about your intentions anymore,” she tells him, softly. Her voice rasps with dryness and dust. The words hurt. Her wounds are bleeding, and will run out of blood sooner rather than later. Her patience is gone. There’s no point in any of it anymore. He’s made himself a monster, and still she loves him, as she always knew she would.

“I should have killed you,” she says.

“You should have,” he agrees.

“I never could.”

“It’s what I would have done, in your place.”

“Of course it is, ma vhenan. You’re the sort of man who burns the world. Only someone who can destroy everything, even his own principles, even what he loves most, can do that,” she replies, wryly.

He looks at her and it is as if the light has finally—finally—gone off.

What terrible timing.

The laugh, broken and hysterical, bubbles out of her. Her wounds spasm and she cringes on it, clutching herself a moment as the black spots eat up her vision. She sways, a little, but the moment for her end isn’t quite at hand yet.

Still. The air is getting thinner, and her legs are cold as ice. It won’t be long, now, until she sees what death has to offer. Mercy, she hopes. At this point she would gladly take pity, as well. But if the trends of her life have been any indication, it will likely offer neither.

They sit in silence until she recovers. Words have failed him. Of course they have; there are precious few for times like these. She doesn’t know of many people who have faced the end of everything together.

“Just out of curiosity, what was supposed to happen?” she wonders. There is a strip of light on the horizon. It would be a lie to call it anything approaching ‘sunlight’, but it doesn’t burn quite as angrily as all the rest of it.

“Does it matter now?” he asks.

“It’s one last question for you to answer,” she replies.

His eyes find hers.

“When the Veil came down, time should have become inconsequential,” he explains. “I planned to revert the world to the state it had been in before Mythal died. It would have been a moment of burning chaos, and then over in the blink of an eye. Your future would never exist. Your future would never exist. As painless an end as possible; the denial of a beginning.”

Tears run tracks through the blood and dust on his cheeks. She’s amazed he even has any left. Hers
are all long spent.

“It didn’t work,” she notes.

“No,” he agrees.

“Why not?”

The wind howls over them.

“I cannot say,” he admits. “The existence of the Veil changed so much about the world. I thought I had grasped the differences. Apparently, I missed more than I ever imagined.”

“I’m shocked.”

It’s his turn to laugh inappropriately, then, though soon enough he is back to weeping. The air around them trembles. The light on the horizon grows, like an angry dawn. Like a serpent rising up to eat the sky.

Solas stills.

He turns, and looks, and suddenly there’s just the faintest glimmer of something in his gaze.

“What?” she wonders.

There’s no possible way things just got worse, is there? If there’s a bottom below this one, she doesn’t want to find it.

Solas gets that look on his face, though. One that makes her feel centuries younger, like they’re back in Skyhold and he’s just had some brilliant epiphany, and all the pieces of a puzzle have fallen into place. His fingers even twitch, the way they do when he wants to cast a spell or pick up a quill or find a paint brush.

“What new horrible thing is happening now?” she presses.

“It’s a fold,” he says.

She considers that sentence. Allows it to sink in a bit.

“Was that supposed to make sense?” she finally asks.

He turns to her, a thousand conflicting things dancing in his eyes.

“It worked after all, in some fashion,” he rasps. “That is the point where time has turned back. If we can reach the opening before it collapses, we can salvage something from this mess.”

Ah.

Well.

Better something than nothing, in the end.

Her cracked lips split in a pained and painful smile.

“I guess you succeeded after all,” she says.

“Come with me,” he asks.
Finally, finally, the fool wants her to go with him. She laughs. Shakes. Looks to the pool of blood spreading like a banner behind her.

“It’s sweet that you think I can even stand,” she tells him.

There is a moment of silence.

At last, she slumps against his side.

“Go. Live well in your new, old world,” she asks.

There is a part of her that has always been more selfish than he is, underneath all the rage and hurt and resentment; and it’s actually glad that he might make it. That he might be happy, one day. That at least one of them will dig something out of these ashes he’s made. That it’s her love, of all the people out there, who gets to survive. Even if he doesn’t deserve to.

He looks at her. All his pain is written so clearly on his face.

Then he struggles to his feet again.

She lets out a breath, nearly topples over, and is not too shocked when he catches her. She expects to be lowered gently to the ground.

With a tremendous force of effort, she is lifted upwards, instead.

He can scarcely stand under his own weight, let alone the addition of hers.

She is amazed when he takes a step forward. And then another.

“You won’t make it carrying me,” she tells him.

“Then I won’t make it,” he replies.

“Solas.”

He keeps walking.

“I’ll be dead before we get there.”

One step. Another.

Of all the moments for him to suddenly decide she was too much to sacrifice.

“You bastard. Drop me and go,” she demands. It’s getting harder to stay focused.

“No.”

“Now. Now I’m worth saving?” she spits.

He keeps walking.

“You always planned to let me die.”

One step. Another. His right leg is dragging, now. His arms are shaking.

“Well, your plan has worked. So let me die.”
He keeps going, apparently by sheer stubborn pride alone.

“Plans… change,” he grits at her.

“Remember your goals, and do nothing that does not further them,” she parrots back at him.

He stumbles, and they both fall. The crash to the ground is painful enough that she’s almost convinced it’s actually going to do her in. For a few seconds the world goes dark. But then it blinks back, and he’s crouched over her, on his hands and knees.

Somehow, she works up the strength to touch his arm.

“You are right, vhenan. I cannot make it with you,” he admits.

“Go,” she commands, again.

He leans down, and presses the most painful of kisses to her lips.

His eyes gleam silver.

“Dareth shiral,” he says. It seems a strange choice of parting words, considering he’s the one due for another journey.

Then something strikes her like a bolt of lightning.

It’s a painful feeling. It reminds her of the anchor; like a piece of the universe is trying to wedge itself under her skin. She screams, she’s certain. It’s wrong, wrong, wrong, a thousand burning knives cutting into her flesh, and why, hasn’t she suffered enough, why is there more pain?

Then it stops, as suddenly as it began.

Above her, Solas turns to grey stone, and thence to dust, and is gone.

She stares in shock at the empty space where he had been.

What?
What?

Her breaths are ragged as she sucks them in. After a few seconds, she attempts, carefully, to sit up.

It’s painful, but not impossible. The bleeding has stopped. Her legs can move, too. She rises, shakily, looks around the horizon. Her chest burns. She’s not sure if it’s the pain of her injuries, or something else.

No. That’s a lie.

She knows it’s something else.

But she can scarcely process it.

“Solas?” she calls.

He won’t answer. Of course he won’t. She saw, even though she can scarcely believe it. Or comprehend it. He’d won. He’d won, and then… why hadn’t he left her? That was his plan, all along that was his plan, he was supposed to go back to his damned world and do whatever it was
he needed to do and ensure the ancient elves never fell from their damned pedestal and – and…

And he is gone.

He is really gone, now. Whatever he did saved her from death, and took the last of him.

She turns, slowly, as if to make absolutely certain that there is not even a ghost of him on the wind.

The band of light is much closer, and growing closer still.

But it is also growing narrower, as if the back half of it is catching up. As if it is closing.

She stares at it and suddenly understands; this is how you fall below the bottom.

By realizing you're going to have to climb back up.

Alone.

She takes one step, and then another, and then with a cry of rage she charges, all of her meagre strength pushing her, staggering into a run. When she hits the light it’s almost gone.

When she hits the light, it’s like hitting water and glass.

It breaks around her, and the world goes white.
She wakes to the sight of a woman staring down at her.

Tall and beautiful and elvhen, with golden hair that cascades in rivers down her shoulders, and eyes the colour of the sun. She is clad in silver and cerulean and rich, emerald green, and when she moves she is whisper-silent, her expression wide with surprise.

The sky is blue behind the woman’s head.

That arrests her attention even more than the woman herself. It has been so long since she’s seen a blue sky.

The woman asks her something in elvish. Lyrical and lilting. A question. When she doesn’t immediately respond, it gets repeated to her.

She has learned enough of the ancient language in her quest against Solas that she can gather the gist of it.

“What are you? Where did you come from?”

Her eyes turn over blue skies, and leafy trees, clear air and the feeling of magic on her skin, so close it’s like she just fell into a rune trap. But there’s no sign of any spells being cast around her. The woman’s face is unfamiliar, but she’s seen those kinds of eyes before; peering out at her from an old human woman’s visage. From beneath Morrigan’s brows.

“Mythal?” she guesses.

“This is I, yes,” the woman confirms. “What are you? Some sort of… construct of flesh?”

What a promising reception.

“I am a person,” she says, with the firmness that can only come from meeting those who would deny that claim. It is a phrase she has memorized in the ancient tongue.

Mythal looks her over. Deliberates a while. Then she gestures to something behind herself.

“You are damaged,” the evanuris informs her. “We will repair you, and then we shall see of that claim.”

A spell lifts her.

She can’t tell what the source of it is, but at the moment she isn’t really concerned. She’s hollowed-out, shocked and exhausted, and it’s all she can do to keep her eyes open, to stare blankly at the beautiful scenery as she dragged past it, and then dumped one the back of a very pretty wagon. Like some stray piece of loot scavenged from a battlefield.

Her gaze locks onto the embroidered canopy over her head. Something closes around her limbs and locks them into place.
Prisoner and curious cargo in one, she supposes.

She blinks when they pass through the familiar gleam of an eluvian.

After a moment, they pass through another one. And then there are faces peering at her; sharp features written with Mythal’s vallaslin. Murmured questions.

“What is it?”

“Where did you find it?”

“Almost, it has the look of a person.”

“Much more than the Stone Workers do.”

“Can you repair it? I wish to speak to it more, but the damage of it is unnerving.”

That last is Mythal, voice rich and ringing with authority; and though she asks a question, it’s done in the tone of one who expects entirely that her request will be met.

“It shall be done,” one of the other voices readily replies.

Hands reach out and grasp her. She is hauled indelicately over someone’s shoulder, her wounds protesting their ungentle treatment.

“It speaks?” someone asks, at a whisper.

“It must,” another replies.

She stares at the floor as her blood drips onto it, a trail of red across a sea of elegantly carved tiles.

Eventually, she is placed onto a table, and someone tuts.

“It is still a working body, not to be carried like a bag of fruit when injured,” a woman says, heavy with disapproval. Her limbs are rearranged into something less awkwardly painful, then; though she finds she still can’t move them on her own. A dark face with pale vallaslin and beautifully woven hair stares down into her eyes for a moment. Then the owner whispers, and a wash of healing magic floods through her.

It feels different than what she’s accustomed to. Powerful, but also… closer, somehow. It’s difficult to describe, but she supposes, with no Veil in place, all magic must be stronger. And stranger.

Something ghosts by behind the healer’s back. A spirit, she sees. It regards her curiously, drifting through the open, utterly unremarked upon by anyone else present.

“It feels,” the spirit says. Its voice is gentle, like a summer breeze.

“Pain?” the healer asks.

“Both kinds,” the spirit replies.

That seems to bring everyone in the room up short.

“I sense no emotion,” the healer says, curious and a touch disbelieving. “Feel it not in the air.”
“Not in the air. In its skin,” the spirit clarifies.

“Physical pain, then,” the healer decides. She sounds reassured.

“Not just. Other is the pain, too, in the skin. I sense it,” the spirit insists. “Very strange. It is all within itself. But it is all there. Very strong, very hurt.”

The temperature in the room seems to drop a notch.

“Bizarre,” someone finally declares.

The healer shakes her head, as if chasing off an unsettling notion, and then another wash of magic courses through her. The bleeding stops. Most of her wounds feel like they’re knitting themselves shut, itching along the way. Then the stump of her left arm and her missing eye are tutted over, discussed in some terms she doesn’t quite recognize.

Finally, the healer looks at her full-on again.

“You speak?”

When she swallows, her throat feels less like sandpaper. Her lips no longer burn.

“I speak,” she confirms.

A brisk touch is pressed to her cheek, under her missing eye. As if to draw attention to the absence. Under normal circumstances, she would feel ridiculously self-conscious. As it is, she only stares, and somewhat wishes that she could bat the hand aside.

“Your shape. Can you fix it?” the healer asks.

“Fix it?” she wonders.

“You are missing pieces.”

True enough.

Oh, they probably want to know why she hasn’t just regrown them. Of course. A society of shape-shifters, missing limbs and eyes probably aren’t permanent inconveniences. They’re likely wondering why she hasn’t just shape-changed into a whole new body and solved the matter. Or healed herself, maybe.

“I cannot,” she says.

The healer glances at the spirit.

“See? Just a construct.”

“Construct that feels,” the spirit insists. “I am not wrong.”

“Stubborn,” the healer tuts. Then she produces an unfamiliar object, and without further ado, shoves it into the empty socket of her ruined eye.

Her entire skull burns, hot enough to make her scream, until there is another wave of a hand, and the sound is silenced. By the time the pain fades her lungs are burning, and she blinks past the disorientation, and realizes that she has two eyes, again. Her head throbs and she wants to vomit and the world spins, but hey, her depth perception’s back. The part of her that notices this feels
slightly hysterical.

Whatever spell had swallowed her screams vanishes again.

“Why did you scream?” the healer asks, as if she’d just done something violent and incomprehensible. Like throwing a plant pot at a wall.

“Because of pain?” she suggests, awkwardly.

“A lot of pain,” the spirit confirms.

She’s getting the distinct impression that it might be the only being in the room that isn’t a complete, unsalvageable ass.

“It should not have hurt. Your body takes the magic strangely,” the healer muses. “We will keep you silent for the arm.”

Oh, joy.

“No,” she says. “No arm.”

Dammit all if losing that thing hadn’t been fucking awful, but she’s not about to let them just shut her up and grow it back without so much as a by-your-leave.

“Your shape offends Mythal. It will be repaired until it is presentable,” the healer insists.

“Don’t touch my fucking arm!” she snaps, slipping back into common rather than elvish. It earns her another round of curiosity, both from the healer, and from the spirit, and from the other occupants of the room that are outside of her range of sight.

“Is its speech broken now, too?”

“That sounded like language almost.”

“Like the gibberings of the Dirt Walkers?”

“Like, but not the same.”

“What did it mean?”

“It meant ‘I am angry, keep your distance’, if the words matched the feelings,” the spirit says.

“Bizarre. It wishes to remain damaged?” the healer asks.

“No. It wishes not to be violated,” the spirit clarifies.

“It fears the pain too much to understand the long-term benefits. Its mind must be very simple. Silence its cries,” the healer requests, and she curses as the spell falls again. The fabric around the stump of her left arm is cut away, and something is clamped down onto her flesh. It looks like wisps and crystals and leather, to her eye, stranger than any of Dagna’s inventions.

Then the magic kicks in, and the pain, and she arches upwards against the restraints on her body and nearly flips the damn thing off the table. It hurts. It’s not the worst pain she’s ever felt in her life, but it might just be a draw for the honour. It reminds her of the anchor at its most terrible, towards the end. Silver eyes and fire and she grabs his shoulder and holds on to him, takes his hand with her good one and feels it all breaking away…
There is a humming in the air.

She blinks, and sees the spirit, holding her hand. It’s reverberating gently; almost like a purring cat, in fact. Her whole body aches, like she sprinted through a rift and then dropped off the edge of a canyon, and hit every ledge on the way down.

And her balance is different. Not like wearing a prosthetic. It’s hard to articulate the difference in the sensations, but she feels them just the same.

Damn.

The healer looks surprised.

“What are you doing?” the woman asks, eyebrows raised.

“You are being very cruel,” the spirit tells her. Keeping hold of her.

“No, you are being over-sensitive,” the healer counters. “You have been too long from the Dreaming, I think.”

“Not true,” the spirit insists.

The healer rolls her eyes.

“Compassion,” the woman grumbles.

Her heart lurches in her chest, and she thinks of Cole, so suddenly and viscerally that it hurts. Her gaze locks onto the spirit, and it reverberates again, spectral mouth reshaping into something akin to a smile. It presses warmth against her palm – her real palm, not the thing they’ve just jammed onto her – and makes comforting noises.

It’s not Cole. But she never thought she’d meet another Spirit of Compassion again.

“I will stay,” the spirit promises her.

“Mythal wishes to speak with it. You must ask her permission to remain,” the healer warns.

“I will stay,” the spirit insists, practically sitting on top of her at that point, like Cullen’s mabari used to do any time he got injured.

With a sigh the healer throws her hands into the air, and apparently abandons the idea of reasoning any further with it. After a few more spells go by, the woman stalks off, and she is left alone with only the ambience of the beautiful-but-horrible chamber around them, and the Spirit of Compassion gently petting her head.

It’s… surreal, she supposes. It feels like a horrible dream.

After a few seconds, the spirit hums, and the magic binding her limbs evaporates.

A few of the elves still in the chamber throw her startled glances. It’s unnerving, being surrounded by so many of them. They’re so tall, and rigid, and not-quite-right looking, and she managed to fight plenty of their kind in her campaign against Solas; those woken early from their sleep to help fend off his opponents, after many of her own people realized his plans were not precisely in their best interests.
Which was well after most of them were dead, of course.

“You have very sad thoughts,” the spirit notes.

“Thank you for not giving them voice in the out loud,” she says. Awkwardly. She’s still better at understanding complex elvish than speaking it.

“I am learned in politeness,” the spirit assures her. “Not like the young ones.”

Then it sits with her in silence, as she catches her breath, and struggles to come to terms with her newly-grown arm.

It looks like the other one, mostly. Except for the bit where the nails are nicely trimmed and it’s not covered in blood and dirt. It doesn’t look like her old arm, though. It’s missing scars and blemishes, callouses and all the other familiar little markers it used to have. She lifts it up and flexes it, gingerly. Perhaps if she thinks of it as a very, very good prosthetic. Dagna made a few of those.

One of them had even shot projectiles, before a dragon bit it off.

Dagna hadn’t been able to replace it before the final stage of Solas’ plan had gone into motion.

She runs a finger along the place where her arm used to end. She thinks there’s a slight seam, there; though it could be her imagination. Or the dirt and grime and bloodstains.

Probably the dirt and grime and bloodstains.

She’s ridiculously filthy.

As if on cue, one of the other elves approaches them. Everyone she sees looks like a young adult, though some manage to convey ‘age’ better than others. No one looks a day over forty, if that. This one seems to erring towards the ‘young’ end of the scale, though.

He’s probably still about a thousand years older than she is all the same.

“We should wash it,” he says.

“I will take it to the baths,” the spirit declares.

The elf makes a face.

“That is where People bathe. It will make the place unhygienic. Use the Place of Animal Washing,” he insists.

“It is not shaped like an animal, it is shaped like a Person,” the spirit replies. “I will take it to the baths.”

“They will not let you in,” he warns.

“They need not see us,” the spirit replies, and keeps a firm hold on her.

Then elf blinks, and stares at them, and then looks around himself; squinting as if trying to see where they’ve gone. But of course, neither of them have moved.

“You can make me not be seen?” she asks.
“For a little while,” the spirit replies. Then it coaxes her gently off of the slab she’d been placed on, and, keeping hold of her, leads her from the massive and unsettling chamber. There is a growing furor in their absence. A few voices call for Compassion, and someone starts berating the elf who had spoken to them. Neither of them are inclined to pay the chaos much mind.

The spirit leads her down beautiful corridors, lined with gleaming golden mosaics, alive with magic that shines lights into every dark corridor, and wreathes the ceilings with beautiful shapes and moving artwork. It’s almost like being in the Fade, except that it’s entirely different.

Eventually they come to a massive archway, and a room full of steam, and large, warm pools. There are ancient elves. Bathing, chatting. None remark upon their entrance.

The spirit prods her towards one of the less-occupied pools, and the whole thing still feels massively surreal as she undresses, and sinks into the water. She nearly forgets her new arm and smacks it against the side of the pool. The stab of pain in it feels strangely normal, however.

She’s in the past, in ancient Elvhenan, in a bath house full of magic, with a Spirit of Compassion making soft noises at her, and a newly grown eye and a newly grown arm, but smacking the damn thing still feels the same.

After a moment, she sinks below the surface of the water, and scrubs furiously at her skin. “Good,” the spirit approves.

It ghosts into the pool. A very pretty sight, she thinks. All changing lights and shifting shapes against the water. Not eerie, thankfully.

Spirits seem to be more or less the same, in the past or in the future, in one world or in another. “Some things stay constant,” Compassion promises her.

“What happens next?” she wonders. *What new horrible thing is happening now?*

“You will speak with Mythal, and Mythal will decide,” the spirit explains.

Ah. Yes. Mythal.

The ‘best’ of the evanuris.

Which, from what she’d gathered of history, was rather like being the ‘nicest’ slave-owning Tevinter magister.

She dunks her head under the water again; when she comes back up, the spirit hands her a textured cloth, and some very sweet-smelling soap. It tingles against her skin, but the bar does a good job of pulling up the dirt.

Despite its claims about only being able to hide her for a ‘little while’, the spirit doesn’t seem inclined to hurry her. She washes until the grime is gone, until she can see that, no, there actually isn’t a seam between her old stump and her new arm, until she can move said arm without wanting to immediately smack it against something or throw up.

She still feels incredibly off-balance and unnerved. Somehow, the new eye is less disturbing. Probably because she’d only lost her other one a couple of months ago. And also because she doesn’t have to keep seeing it.
Some elves gather at the entrance to the bath house, clearly in some concern.

She takes that as their cue to leave, and climbs out of the pool. The air dries her almost immediately, to her consternation.

Magic.

She shrugs, and then slips – awkwardly – back into her clothing. It seems to have cleaned itself, somehow, while she was in the water. Even the ground-in bloodstains are gone, and the floor where it was laying is warmer than the surrounding tiles.

Magic again, she supposes.

Convenient. If odd.

Compassion leads her past the increasingly upset-looking elves without incident. The air around them feels strange. It... moves differently. Not like the wind. More like they’re all putting off strange electrical currents; cues about distress, frustration, suspicion, and so on. She recalls Solas, talking about how all the world seemed Tranquil to him. Disconnected. Missing some fundamental piece of itself.

Apparently, the ‘piece’ was ‘emotional electricity storms’.

She hopes she’s just lacking some vital instrument to help interpret them more clearly, because otherwise, that is disgustingly underwhelming.

“You are all in you,” the spirit tells her, as if it heard the question. “Your feelings do not reach beyond your skin. They could probably sense you better if they attempted to, but they do not realize that an attempt needs to be made.”

“So they… pour everything into the air, and I mind my own business?” she summarizes.

“Yes,” Compassion confirms.

They wander the building for a while, then. The spirit doesn’t try to lead her anywhere in particular, and so she lets her feet be her guide, and follows massive hallways and drifts through unfamiliar doorways, looking at the wonders of this ancient place that belongs to Mythal. It’s easily the most gorgeous building she’s ever been in.

But somehow, it fails to impress her.

“I cannot hide you much longer,” Compassion warns her, after a point. It feels like hours have passed, though she’s not sure what time it even is. Or if anyone cares to mark its passage, in this era.

She could try and escape.

That seems like it would take a lot of effort, though, and she’s not sure what it would accomplish. And there’s probably some sort of magic or other that would find her again in short order. If she’s going to be captured and treated as a curiosity, she supposes that, at least, Mythal’s people don’t seem inclined to go the ‘blood sacrifice’ route.

Yet.

“Alright,” she says. “Where do we go?”
The spirit shows her the way to a massive throne room.

Truly massive. It puts Skyhold to shame. There are rows upon rows of benches, and an altar, and giant, beautifully decorated statues of dragon ladies and wolves, and solid gold mosaics on every wall, and water fixtures that, on closer inspection, actually seem to be pouring magic into glittering rivers that trail along the borders of the room.

The throne itself is mercifully simple by comparison – a silver chair of woven branches, with the massive symbol of the moon carved behind it.

She wonders if this is considered to be the seat of a goddess, yet, or merely the seat of a queen.

She wonders if Mythal has killed any Titans.

How far back did Solas intend to go, to stop her murder?

Compassion gently pushes her through the room, towards a doorway behind the throne’s dais.

“Knock,” it advises.

She does.

Another ancient elf opens it, and stares over her head, a moment, before angling her gaze appropriately downwards.

“Mythal wished to see this one when she had been sufficiently repaired,” the spirit intones.

The elf calls an inquiry further into the corridor behind her, and after a moment, is answered.

“Let them in,” Mythal’s voice says.

The door is opened wide, and they are ushered into the beautiful space, and down and through it to what appears to be the world’s most nature-friendly study. Tall, arched windows open towards a garden filled with blooming plants and reaching vines and many-coloured trees. Small, bright birds flit between the branches. Fountains pour never-ending streams of water from the mouths of carved dragons, and Mythal sits, turning some glowing rune over in her hands.

A massive white wolf rests beside her.

Ah.

Her heart stops, for a minute. Her steps falter.

The wolf regards her curiously.

So, too, does Mythal.

“I did not think my people would let you wander freely,” the evanuris says, and waves away the elf who escorted them in. And attempts to wave off Compassion, as well.

“I will stay,” the spirit insists.

Mythal arches a brow.

“Interesting,” she concludes, leaning back and tapping her chin. Shades of Flemeth hang about her, in that moment.
It takes a monumental effort on her own part not to stare at the wolf. She locks her gaze onto the
golden-eyed elf in front of her, instead.

“What are you?” Mythal asks.

“As I said. I am a person,” she repeats.

The evanuris waves dismissively.

“What manner of person, then? Made? Self-made? Where is the spirit of you, or are you like the
Children of Stone, who are hollow but claim personhood the same?” Mythal wonders.

She means dwarves, then.

“I would seem as the Children of Stone to you, is my guess,” she decides.

Today, she thinks, she would sooner claim kinship with the dwarves than with any ancient elf, past
or present, living or dead.

“Were you made by their rulers? Or by their craft?” the evanuris presses.

“I was born. They did not have much to do with that process,” she replies, dryly.

There is a long, speculative pause. Mythal looks at the spirit of Compassion, and then looks back
towards her. After a moment, she closes her golden eyes, and sucks in a deep breath. There is a
strange stillness. Then a current, almost like a static shock to the back of her head.

She brushes a hand over the back of her skull to try and ease it.

“Oh,” Mythal breathes. “There is something more than flesh to you. How unexpected. You are…
maimed.”

Her new arm twitches.

“There is nothing wrong with me,” she says, cold as death in a long winter camp.

“But you do not connect. Your feelings are broken,” Mythal insists.

“They work fine,” she counters. Even if she’s having some trouble processing them at the moment.
They must work; after all, they’re the only reason she’s here, and not putting flowers on Solas’
grave somewhere in a still-living future. Surrounded by all the people he never got a chance to kill.

“She feels,” Compassion interjects.

Mythal returns her gaze to the magical-whatever she had been fiddling with, and after a beat,
lowers it onto a nearby table.

“A spy?” the evanuris wonders. “Cut off from the rest of us, to keep your true motives
unknowable? Meant to draw pity?”

“No,” she replies, simply.

“Then from whence do you come, and how did your state become this?” Mythal asks.

Now there’s a question that’s worth a few sovereigns. She thinks of being honest; dismisses it
almost immediately. There’s no chance she’s trusting Mythal, not now and probably not any time
in the future, either. Or the wolf at her side, for that matter. Which leaves her with the obvious options between lying or abstaining.

Or obfuscating.

“I was born like this,” she finally settles on saying. “I come from another world.”

That claim is apparently not as preposterous in ancient Elvhenan as it would be in her own time. Or else Mythal is very good at taking things in stride. The woman only raises a single eyebrow in response to the declaration. Maybe she just finds the prospect too absurd to take seriously, though.

“What 'other world'?” Mythal wonders.

“Another one,” she repeats. “Pardon me. My language understanding is imperfect.”

“I see. Then there are more like you, where you come from?” the evanuris surmises, raising another eyebrow at her.

“Yes.”

“By what means did you come here, in that case?”

She pauses, again. Considers.

“By way of mistake,” she finally settles on. “My world burned. This was the only way out.”

“Is this true?” Mythal asks the spirit.

“It is,” Compassion replies. Then it leans against her, slightly, and though she isn’t keen on being hugged in front of their current audience, it’s still somewhat… comforting. It eases some of the numbness, and some of the ache that replaces it.

“How was your world destroyed?”

It is the wolf that speaks, in a voice that scrapes like knives along her insides. It is strangely light; strangely youthful, free of the burdens of grief, the weight of exhaustion, the price of pride’s folly.

“I could not protect it,” she says.

“From what danger?” he presses. “Might it have followed you? Could it assault us, also?”

She looks at him. Calm eyes, and clean fur; he looks like a beloved exotic pet, sitting there at Mythal’s feet. Like he has never known a single day of hardship or uncertainty. He has fierce claws and sharp teeth, she knows; yet she is almost surprised to see no jewel-encrusted collar looped neatly around his throat, with the picture he is currently painting.

“The danger is already here,” she tells him.

“Then you will tell us what it is,” he demands, rising to his paws.

“It is what it always is: the ugliness of people,” she replies, filled with such bitter disdain for him that it’s actually disquieting.

The response earns her a hard look.

“Peace, my friend,” Mythal says, laying a hand atop the wolf’s head. “Clearly our guest has
suffered, and has not met much comfort beyond Compassion’s mercy. There will be more time for questions, when the skin over healed wounds is not still so tender.”

After a moment, the wolf subsides.

“Of course. Forgive me, it is hard to tell this creature is anything like a person,” he says.

That should not hurt as much as it does.

“We know the value of Compassion, and its judgements,” Mythal decides, nodding to herself. “You may remain here, so long as you bring no harm to my people, and make no presumptions. We will shelter you, and in return, you will tell us more of your world and its death. We will spare you time for grief, before that payment comes due.”

Not that she’s terribly eager to share living space with a bunch of people who think she’s some kind of talking flesh golem, but she supposes that’s the best she’s going to get. And it’s not wholly dissimilar from the reception Cole earned at Skyhold, once upon a time.

“Thank you,” she says, and inclines his head politely.

“Compassion will go with you,” Mythal replies, and gestures her towards the exit.

The spirit follows her out.

They emerge once again into the opulent – but empty – throne room.

“Were you just commanded to mind me?” she wonders.

The spirit at her side nods.

“It is no inconvenience; I would have stayed anyway,” it asserts. “You need me.”

“I cannot be the only person here who does,” she points out.

“No. But you need me very much,” Compassion replies.

She remembers Cole well enough not to try and argue the point.

~

Mythal’s palace, she finds, stands in the middle of a jungle. Possibly the Arbor Wilds, though it doesn’t look anything like the temple of the Well of Sorrows, and she suspects it’s a different building altogether. Everything is… impressive, she supposes. Lots of pillars. Statues. Fountains – tons of fountains. And the plants are gorgeous, and there are spirits absolutely everywhere, wandering as freely as they might in the Fade. Though it’s not the Fade.

There are animals, too, that she swiftly realizes aren’t actually animals, and people with animal-like features. Some ancient elves are apparently just more comfortable walking around looking like half-tigers, or perching on the rooftops with wings.

It’s amazing. It’s enough to make anyone paranoid about the birds listening from the trees, but it’s amazing.
She loathes it.

Every new marvel she sees, she weighs against all of the lives lost. Was this magic worth killing everyone? Were these people just so much better? These gaudy decorations, this pale immortality, this easy, beautiful existence, where everyone treats her like half a person, if that…

She has to stop herself.

The bitterness is raw against the back of her throat. It is a better world, in many ways that she can see, even with it being so new to her. Even at just a glance, just a thought... there are elves living well, here. Surrounded by beautiful things of their own making, with access to food, to luxury, to ease. She can see why Solas thought this was so much better, that he would do anything to bring things back to this state. It doesn't take long to look and to see.

She just wants her own world back.

Compassion stays with her, most of the time. The elves either avoid her like plague or else gawk at her the same way she’s seen Orlesian nobles gawk at bizarre displays; like they think there’s some kind of invisible barrier that means she can’t see them or hear them or look them dead in the eye until they make a hasty retreat.

*Halamshiral,* she thinks. *It’s like a thousand Winter Palaces all stacked on top of one another.*

The spirits are less unsettled by her than the elves seem to be. They drift right up, some backing away again soon after, others joining into what she’s beginning to mentally dub her Ghostly Entourage. There’s Compassion, of course, and at some point Curiosity drifts down from the incomprehensibly massive library (that she avoids like the plague, because a certain white wolf spends a lot of time there), and a Spirit of Sorrow that doesn’t speak much eventually begins to tail them. Even a Spirit of Rage joins their ranks.

It’s not quite like the Rage Demons she’s used to. It’s more slow-burning, she supposes, and it speaks predominantly in flat, even tones, before snapping or flaring out, blue fire dancing up its spine. It’s the one that brings her a sword.

The blade is sharp and silvery. The handle is comfortable and easy to grip.

“Cut down the opulence and burn it,” Rage tells her, clawed fingers dragging demonstratively through the air.

“I wonder what would happen if you did?” Curiosity muses. Blinking at the weapon with many eyes.

“Please do not take Rage's advice, it would upset people,” Compassion interjects.

Sorrow gives her a long, steady look.

“Do it,” the final spirit intones.

She doesn’t, because she would prefer not to try and survive this mad world outside the relative shelter of Mythal’s favour, but it’s a near thing. Instead she takes the sword and her Ghostly Entourage and finds one of the more modest gardens, which tend to be less popular. And she takes the opportunity, and the sword, to begin trying to get her fighting style to cooperate with her new state of being. Adjusting to the changing of her limbs.

Again.
She gives some serious contemplation to just chopping the new arm off. But she suspects that
they’d just replace it again anyway, which would be painful and traumatic, and she’s not wholly
certain she wants to go that far even so. It seems to be consistently true that the eye bothers her far
less, enough so that she can avoid thinking about it most of the time. But the arm is different.

She’d worked very hard to adjust to the amputation. It hadn’t been easy. Surprisingly few people
had expected her to take to the battlefield again, herself included. But then, it was just what she did.
She felt too vulnerable, too incomplete, when she was unable to physically fight, to run around, to
protect people with her own weapons and skills.

So she’d thrown herself into it; and her friends had risen up to meet the challenges she set for
herself, to help conquer them.

It was never the same, of course. Prosthetics, even Dagna’s amazing ones, didn’t work like her
natural arm had. Even after she felt like she’d ‘adjusted’, there were mornings where she woke up
and the absence struck her; where things she could once do easily were no longer easy, and she
hated it. Phantom limb pains and dreams where she had two arms instead of one, and she would
wake disoriented, only to feel the crushing disappointment of reality in her chest.

That was being maimed. That loss of part of herself. Not how she felt things, not the state of being
she’d always known as normal, but the new one that had been foisted onto her by circumstance and
tragedy.

Just the same, she had fought. Just the same, she had made a kind of peace with it. One arm was a
paltry sum to pay for the world still existing.

Yet now, she has her arm back. And the world is gone.

Maybe that’s why she hates it so much, she muses. It’s not a trade back she’s very fond of.

But chopping it off won’t bring back what’s been lost. If it would, she wouldn't hesitate. She'd...

Not that it matters.

She goes through the combat motions, practices, still favours her right side but tries to recall how a
two-handed weapon would weigh against both palms, how the steps change when she’s holding a
shield. With prosthetics, it hasn’t been too long since she did either. Though it feels like centuries
have passed, since the world burned.

After a while, she folds her ungainly left arm behind her back, and goes through the one-handed
movements, too.

Curiosity flits off at some point, and Rage leaves her when it becomes apparent that she’s achieved
something close to calm, and Sorrow also finds somewhere more interesting to be.

Compassion lingers.

“You have an audience,” the spirit tells her, at length.

She turns, and stalls when she sees white fur in the corner of her eye.

Finishing out the movement, she stops, and then sinks the tip of the blade into the ground at her
feet.

“What?” she asks, without turning around.
“I wish to speak with you,” the wolf replies.

“Then speak quickly.”

She adjusts the edge of her glove, and peels it back. Her clothes have been sort of cleaning themselves when she bathes, some kind of magic she doesn't understand, though she still only has the one set. It means there’s nothing to cover her left arm. One of the spirits might find her something, if she wants it badly enough, but she’s eager to take as little charity from Mythal as she can get by on. The food is an awkward conundrum all on its own, given that absolutely everything seems lavish, and meal times are drawn-out, bizarrely ceremonial affairs. Taking as little as she can with as little fuss as she can is unreasonably complicated. The dining hall is nearly always full of people whenever it is open, and they tend to stare, no matter what she does.

“Mythal believes you are too grieved to describe what you have endured. I am not certain I believe you feel any grief at all,” the wolf asserts.

Ah.

There is an ancient phrase she knows that fits this kind of situation perfectly.

“Fuck you,” she says, succinct and clear.

It practically rings through the quiet garden.

The wolf looks exceedingly taken aback as she stalks past him.

“That was uncalled for,” Compassion tells him, before following her away from him.

She does her best to avoid the wolf, thereafter, but he seems intent on pursuing her. Sometimes the spirits warn her when he’s coming. Sometimes they don’t. She can never quite guess if it’s because of their conflicted loyalties, or because of her conflicting feelings.

It makes her think of all the dreams where she’d chased him. Except, in reverse.

He knows the palace far better than she does, however, so it’s probably inevitable that he corners her sooner rather than later. She makes the mistake of going into one of the far gardens, a small one with only one entrance and one exit. It’s pleasant because the plants there are less lavish than most, and it seems rarely-used. Quiet, and more familiar than the extravagant spaces that abound here.

It’s a bad choice because as soon as she turns around, the wolf is between herself and the door.

She gives some serious consideration to scaling the walls.

Probably couldn’t manage it, though. They’re high and steep and smooth as glass.

“It seems I have been impolite, and inconsiderate,” the wolf tells her. “I did not mean to imply dishonesty in terms of your devotion to your lost people. I only question the depth of your emotions, as they apply to our concepts of them.”

It’s nearly impossible for her to look at him without feeling angry.

“Go away,” she requests.

“Please understand. I am a guardian. I protect,” he says. “If there is danger, to The People, to Mythal, I must stand against it.”
“What a loyal hound,” she commends, sarcastically.

It’s possible she’s being unfair.

She finds she doesn’t much care if she is, though.

The wolf bristles.

“I think you are yourself dangerous,” he says.


“A game?” the wolf suggests.

“Yes! The world is just a game to you,” she concludes.

“That is not true. Mythal cares for her people, and so do I,” he insists.

“Your people. A very small pond, in a very big world full of oceans,” she replies.

The wolf tilts his head, as if he is more baffled than insulted.

“Everyone must care for their own,” he says. “You are here by Mythal’s grace, offered food and shelter. Do you feel you deserve more?”

“No,” she says. “I do not deserve nor wish for more.”

“There from whence comes this strange condemnation?” he wonders.

She supposes, given his perspective, it’s a fair question. Not that she wants to answer it. She wants him to go away and leave her alone; though alone to what, she isn’t sure. It’s not like she can stay here forever, sitting on her hands, waiting for everything to fall apart again.

Kisses and stone, dust and silence. Compassion left to go and see to someone else. She wishes it hadn’t. It’s harder to hold her tongue when there’s no one else to turn to.

“A girl knew a wolf, once,” she says. “The wolf took her hand; and then he ate it. The wolf touched her markings; and ate those, too. The wolf looked into her eyes, and ate one of them. The wolf cradled her heart, and swallowed it whole. The wolf hunted her friends, and burned her world, until they were the only two people left on an island wrapped in flames. And then he did the very worst thing he could have done.”

“He tried to kill her?” the wolf guessed, sitting down; expression curious and solemn.

“No, no, no,” she replies. “That would not have been the worst thing, not then. The wolf took everything, and then he made her survive it. Alone. The very last of her people, with not even the wolf beside her anymore.”

Her eyes itch.

She’s startled when she feels something land on her hand, and realizes there are tear tracks on her cheeks.

The wolf regards her silently for a moment.
He seems to be at a loss.

“You feel,” he says.

“Of course I feel,” she replies. “Even if I did not, would I suddenly no longer be alive? Thinking? Real? When do I ‘count’ as a person to you?”

The questions fall out bitterly, as she thinks of Tranquil and mages and casteless dwarves and city elves and slaves, and her own people, all cast by some into the bitter role of nonpersonhood. That special place where rights and decency need no longer apply.

“I have not had dealings with anything like you before,” the wolf says, in his defense.

“How small your grand, opulent world must be, then,” she replies.

He looks around himself.

“Opulent?” he wonders. “This… upsets you? Beautiful things?”

She considers that. Do beautiful things upset her? They never used to. Though, she supposes, anything fancy enough would have always made her uncomfortable, because it would be a sign of a strong human presence. Ruins were what she grew up being accustomed to. Statues strewn with moss, overtaken by nature, pillars half-sunken into the ground; not gleaming and standing tall above everyone, speaking of a culture with time enough to spend erecting monuments and creating wonders as they please.

But it’s not fair, she supposes, to hold their successes against them. It’s bitterness, pure and simple, to resent the ancient elves for having things like time and abundance and easier ways of approaching monumental tasks. These things aren’t even what’s wrong with this place; if anything, they are what’s right about it. Not having to struggle to survive. Being able to build, being able to flourish, and enjoy life.

The trappings are not the problem. They are just the most inescapable reminder of how different everything here is.

“I am accustomed to more modest living,” she finally admits.

“Modest in your surroundings, and modest in your self-expression, it seems,” the wolf muses. “We must be overwhelming for you.”

“Yes,” she agrees, because that’s true. Though, she was already overwhelmed long before she arrived.

“What would help?” he asks.

“Solitude,” she readily replies.

After a moment, the wolf inclines her head, and of his own accord, leaves her be.

~

The next time he finds her, he isn’t a wolf.
She stares at him. He’s standing at the entrance to the dining hall, and it’s definitely him. He has hair. Shaven on the sides, a long stripe down the center of his skull, bound and capped with elegantly molded toggles in silver and platinum and bone. Mythal’s vallaslin trails over his face, written in white.

He looks… young. Too young. Millennia too young. He looks barely a man, and when he sees her, he smiles a broad smile that shows off pointed canine teeth.

“Since you do not like wolves, I have taken a different form,” he tells her.

Is he…?

Yes, he is indeed bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Thank you. You can go back to being the wolf now,” she replies.

His smile falters a little. But then he rallies himself again.

“I have had food sent to a small room. I thought, perhaps, it might be less overwhelming. If you would dine with me?” he asks.

And there’s that cleverness, she thinks. An act of kindness, now, something he knows she will appreciate, and something which gives him an excuse to keep her trapped in one space long enough for him to ask his questions of her.

She supposes it’s inevitable, in the end.

“No thank you,” she says.

“Please,” he asks.

Damn it.

“Fine, then,” she agrees. Grudgingly. It’s hard to look at him. It makes her want to go find Rage and light things on fire.

He leads her to a room that looks like it was probably some kind of simple storage space before someone cleared it out and shoved a table into it. It’s not precisely modest, per se – the window is beautiful, and looks out on a truly unbelievable level of exotic foliage, and the table is inlaid with silver and some kind of gorgeous stone. The food is still ridiculous. But it is almost – almost – an endearing effort.

They sit down across from one another.

“Was the wolf in your story metaphorical, or are actual wolves in your world that powerful?” he asks, as he begins to pick basically every sweet thing off of the table.

She keeps her eyes off of him as she tries to find things that aren’t too strange for her to consider trying. Bread. Bread is good. And those spices smell familiar, so that stew’s probably a safe bet. Bread and stew, can’t go wrong there.

“Yes and no,” she replies.

“Was he like me? A shape-changer?” he wonders.

She makes herself look up at him.
He seems only curious; but that doesn’t mean anything. It’s physically painful to see his eyes that wide and guileless.

“How old are you?” she asks.

Or blurts, more like.

He blinks, and then his cheeks colour, slightly.

“Old enough,” he says. “I only took a body two hundred years ago, but I was a spirit for at least another two hundred before that. I believe.”

Wait.

What?

“You’re a spirit?” she asks, taken aback. “I thought you were an elf.”

He tilts his head at her.

“I am, of course. I came to the People from a Dreaming instead of from a Waking birth. But there is not much difference, in the end,” he explains.

That... actually, that explains a lot.

He’s like Cole, then.

Probably Mythal is, too, come to think of it. Justice. Pride.

“That is rare where I come from,” she admits.

Was rare.

The food sours on her tongue. Cole, poor Cole. Not even the spirits could flee far enough to survive what came when Solas tore down the Veil. No matter what all of them had hoped.

“Oh. It is quite common here.”

They sit in awkward silence for several moments. She seems to have thrown him off his planned line of questioning.

“How old are you?” he eventually asks her.

“Thirty one,” she admits.

He nods.

“Thirty one hundred. That fits,” he decides.

She opts not to correct his error.

“Please do not mistake my youth for inexperience. I have fought in many wars,” he assures her. “I have won many battles. Mythal herself asked me to become her guardian, and her general. That is not an honour lightly bestowed.”

Shit. *Shit.* He sounds like one of those eager young prodigal lordlings. Dammit.
She isn’t sure if she wants to scream, or go and find Mythal and throttle her.

Possibly both.

“Many wars?” she asks.

“Perhaps it has only been one war. Technically. But there are many sides. And it is likely we will go to war with the Dirt Walkers, soon,” he explains.

Assuming ‘Dirt Walkers’ is a derogatory term for dwarves, and they haven’t already gone to war, she supposes that means Mythal hasn’t been killing any Titans lately.

Good to know.

“Why would you go to war with the Children of Stone?” she wonders.

He considers his answer. Seems to debate whether or not he should say anything at all. Obviously, he expected to be asking questions, not answering them. But even now he’s apparently too attached to the concept of dispensing information to completely break away from it.

“They cause earthquakes, and their underground cities and resources are wasted on them,” he says. “We would do better to claim them for The People and get rid of such useless creatures.”

“Their land is theirs, not yours, no matter what you think of their worth. Have you tried talking to them about the earthquakes?” she wonders.

“Talking? No. They do not speak properly, and they are too violent,” he declares.

“How many encounters have you had with them?” she wonders.

He shrugs.

“Our scouts have encountered them a dozen or so times, investigating the earthquakes. Many have not returned,” he says.

“No, I mean, how many encounters have you had with them? In person yourself?” she insists.

“…None,” he admits.

She stares at him.

After a minute, he colours, and looks down at the table. He’s fidgeting, she realizes.

Honestly.

Fidgeting.

“I must guard Mythal, and she has many other matters to attend to,” he explains.

Without really thinking about it, she picks up one of the rolls of bread, and launches it at his face.

He jumps in surprise as it smacks into him. Then he treats her to a baffled look.

“You have made up your mind about the Children of Stone and you have not even met them,” she says, disgusted. Reaching over, she chucks another roll of bread at him.

“You have made up your mind about the Children of Stone and you have not even met them,” she says, disgusted. Reaching over, she chucks another roll of bread at him.

“Why are you pelting me with food?” he asks.
“Because you deserve to be pelted with something,” she replies. “You cannot make these judgments secondhand.” She throws another piece of bread. “You have had a body for two hundred years, you should be intelligent enough to know that!” On the fourth piece of bread, he starts looking less shocked and confused than annoyed.

She slips into common.

“I can’t even believe how ridiculous this is! Do you have any idea what killing the Titans will do? No, of course you don’t, because none of you can bother to see past the edge of your own noses, and you are apparently a baby leading armies. A two-hundred-year-old one! It’s just like I thought! Tevinter and Orlais and all that insane stupidity, just with more magic and spirits and ridiculous emotional electric storms and who even needs those? Do I seem unemotional to you!?”

He stands up around about the time she runs out of bread, and she ends up flinging the contents of the stew pot over him and then storming out.

Petty revenge for his inexperience and carelessness and a world burned to ash.

Well.

Sera would probably approve, at least.

She gets to the small room that she has been afforded – ‘small’ by the palace standards; ‘comfortable’ by her own – before Compassion finds her.

“You dislike wasting food,” the spirit tells her, gently.

She scowls at the floor.

“It does not seem to matter much, here,” she says.

After a moment, Compassion drifts over, and takes a seat beside her.

“He had to walk to the baths like that,” it says.

She snorts. Then she clamps a hand over her mouth. Her right hand. The left rests at her side, still awkward; and somehow the snort becomes a laugh, which becomes a sob, and she’d thought she’d run out of tears but there are always more, it seems. Always more, when she least expects them. They shake out of her as she thinks about Sera, who died. And Cole, who died. And Dorian, who died. Cassandra, and Varric, and Iron Bull, Vivienne and Blackwall, Leliana and Josephine and Cullen, who all died, and more, and none of them deserved it, all of them should have been able to live and be happy and make the world better for simply having been in it.

She should have saved them.

“You did all you could,” Compassion says.

“No. I did not.”

“No one else killed him, either. Why should you be the most guilty for failing at that?” the spirit wonders.

She sucks in a shaky breath, and peers at it sideways. Presses the back of her hand to her lips and exhales.

“Because I had the chance,” she admits. “I had the chance and I did not take it.”
“Because you still thought you could save him."

“Yes.”

“Because you loved him.”

“Yes.”

“Because your hand shook on the blade, and it would not swing.”

“Yes.”

The spirit smiles at her.

“You never really had the chance of killing him, then. You were no more capable of doing it in that moment than you would have been if there was a stone wall between you,” it says.

“Because my feelings were more important than everyone else’s safety,” she replies, bowing under the weight of her guilt and self-recrimination.

“No. Your hand shook. You were no more capable of it then than you would have been if there was a stone wall between you. It doesn’t matter that your feeling were more important, those feelings were part of you, to which you have no control. You were not capable of it for the same reasons that you would have not been capable of it if there was a stone wall between you, because you could not do it, so it is better that you did not, because your decision was a better decision than the decision you might have made if there was a stone wall between you.”

Compassion tells her, gently. “It must be strange, to live in a place where you cannot feel what the people around you do. You think, sometimes, that you are the only one who falls prey to overriding emotions; to feelings which keep you from doing what is best for everyone. But you always knew, deep down, that it was not in you to kill him. Just as it was not in you to sprout wings and fly. Some things can be controlled. Others run too deep to deny. That is true of everyone.”

“I wish I had died,” she says. “I wish I had died, and gone with them.”

“I know.”

Another sob escapes her, and she hunches. Oh, the lauded Herald, the Great Inquisitor; nothing but a broken wreck.

“Why did he save me?” she wonders. “He had won, so why did he…?”

“I apologize. I cannot read his emotions, or hear his thoughts. I cannot answer that question for you,” the spirit says, and it sounds genuinely remorseful.

“It is alright. I do not expect you to,” she replies.

Eventually, the breakdown gives way to exhaustion, and she sleeps.

Dreams are strange in this time, she’s found.

The Veil doesn’t exist, of course, but there still seems to be some distinction between the Dreaming world and the Waking one. She doesn’t just close her eyes and find herself wandering around the palace, which is a mercy. If anything, her dreams are more vivid, and surreal. They’re filled to bursting with colours and light and sound, which would probably be fabulous if they weren’t, primarily, nightmares.

She doesn’t sleep very well.
That night is no exception, and the next morning she wakes tired and aching, her skin tingling strangely because magic is everywhere and constantly active and some part of her mind still thinks that means the end of the world is nigh, even though that’s actually already come and gone.

She exits her room to find him waiting for her.

He’s got his arms folded across his chest.

He is attempting to look stern.

Some ludicrous part of her wants to reach over and pinch his cheek. Just to make him angry, and break the image.

“You threw food at me,” he says. “And then you left.”

“Shoo,” she replies. “I am busy.”

“Busy doing what?” he asks, voice dripping with skepticism.

“I make to work sword,” she informs him, and then winces when she realizes how badly that came out.

It’s early. No one should be asked to make awkward semi-apologetic small talk with the ludicrously young (but still unnervingly old) version of their dead ex-lover-slash-enemy only minutes after waking up from a night filled with awful dreams and a lot of crying.

“Fine. If you require an opponent, I also ‘make to work sword’, ” he informs her, and with a snap of his wrist, produces a wickedly curved blade of his own.

Huh.

Well.

That’s a whole new level of ‘bad idea’ going on right there.

“No thank you,” she says.

“Too afraid of me?” he asks.

“I will not go easy on you,” she warns him.

He smirks.

“You will not have to. I plan on taking full revenge for last night’s bizarre assault.”

“Fine.”

She means to head for the gardens, then, but instead he redirects her towards an unfamiliar part of the palace, which yields what is apparently a practice field. There are elven warriors and spirits going about their business, practicing martial moves and spellcasting alike, weaving them together in ways that are interesting, but ultimately useless to her.

Some pause, curious, and watch as the two of them claim a small corner of the training yard. She’s almost positive he brought her here to unsettle her. There’s a lot of activity. A lot of magic.

Unfortunately for him, she’s actually used to that on a battlefield. It had only become more
familiar, as things devolved.

He readies his blade, and she lets him make the first move.

He has a dancer’s grace and an athletic build, but the flourish on his first swing screams ‘unnecessary waste of energy’ to her so loudly that she can almost hear her old combat instructor shouting at him from the grave. A thousand dead tutors cry out in agony as the young wolf makes a useless little kick and leaves himself open on several different fronts.

She counters, grabs him, and puts him on the ground.

He blinks, like he can’t quite figure out what just happened.

It’s not wholly surprising, as far as developments go. The few ancient elves she fought were formidable on the magical front, but tended to try and move through their physical attacks like they needed to look pretty. She supposes, when everyone’s a mage, it’s easy to make swordplay with something more akin to a ritual or display instead of a practical combat skill.

After a second her opponent finally gets back onto his feet, and decides to come at her again.

This time, he includes some spellwork with his swing.

It’s a good feint, she’ll give him that; use the magic to distract, then lash out with the blade. She ignores the magic as it crackles inches past her cheek, and counters him and puts him into the ground just the same, though.

Two hundred years.

Two hundred years.

What do these people do with all that time?

Honestly. Has he at least learned to paint?

With a groan, the two-hundred-year-old in question picks himself up off of the ground.

“You hardly moved,” he protests.

“Precisely,” she replies.

“Do you not care?” he wonders.

“Not care about what?” she asks.

“About… presenting yourself. Intimidating your enemy?” he suggests.

“Are you not intimidated by the prospect of charging at me again?”

He tilts his head.

“Perhaps,” he concedes.

“You waste too much energy with useless movements. You tire yourself out, and leave yourself open. You do not take the fight seriously, so you lose,” she tells him. Even as the words fall out of her mouth, she wonders if she will regret them. Perhaps the world would be better off if he never learned the benefits of ruthless efficiency.
And yet, she finds herself wondering how he’s even managed to survive any battlefields at all so far. Spellwork, probably. And also being a wolf. But those might not always be options for him.

“I am serious,” he assures her.

“Then prove it,” she suggests.

With a firm frown, he comes at her again.

It’s better, this time. He’s clearly focusing on striking, not on how he looks. And he’s fast; not at all bad for a beginner. He gets in a few swings, this time, before she disarms him, and he throws in more spells, using them more precisely. She gets a burn on her left forearm in repayment for her advice.

“Better,” she tells him.

She doesn’t offer him a hand up.

He doesn’t seem to mind.

When he rises to his feet, she takes up a ready stance again.

“Are you not going to heal?” he wonders, gesturing to her burn.

“Heal?” she asks.

Oh. Right. Everyone is a mage.

“I have no magic,” she tells him.

He gives her a baffled look.

“I do not understand. No magic? You are tired?” he asks. “It is only morning, and you have cast no spells.”

“No. I have no magic. I cannot cast any spells,” she explains.

He continues to look puzzled.

“*Ever,*” she tries.

The puzzled expression gradually gives way to horror. He takes a step back, like he half expects not-being-a-mage to be contagious.

She wishes it didn’t bother her to see that.

“That should not be possible,” he insists.

“Do the Children of Stone cast spells?” she asks.

“Yes,” he says.

Oh.

Huh.

“Well, I do not. I have never been able to,” she admits.
“Then you are soulless and empty inside,” he tells her, still horrified.

She wishes very dearly that she had something safe to throw at him again.

“Is that so?” she wonders.

For some reason, at the question, he actually seems to reconsider the matter. His expression of thoughtfulness is just the same, she notes. It pangs through her, and she looks down at the handle of her blade instead.

“How have you ever tried to cast a spell?” he asks.

In all fairness, she cannot say that she has.

“No,” she admits. “But that’s not how it works.”

“For someone from another world, it may be,” he suggests.

That… is actually a valid point.

“How would I go about trying?” she wonders.

He looks at her like she just asked him how to count to five. Then he sucks in a breath, brow furrowing a little, and apparently decides to take the matter seriously.

“It is about intent. You will something, call upon the energy around you, and shape the results,” he informs her.

_Will_ something?

She’s pretty sure that if she’d suddenly developed magical powers based on what she wanted to do, a large portion of the palace would have caught fire by now. But then, too, she remembers something about magic having to do with expectations as well. Or is that the Fade? And is there a difference, in a world without a Veil?

Does she have to expect to be able to succeed in order for it to work?

She sucks in a breath.

The wolf’s looking at her, waiting.

How did they even get to this mad point?

She’s supposed to be avoiding.


“Are you making any kind of attempt or just standing there silently?” he asks her.

Colourful, cheerful, and harmless enough to smack him in the face with.

A bright pink light erupts into the air and strikes him dead on the nose.

It diffuses into a cloud of sparkly, sticky dust, which proceeds to spread itself across him.

“Huh,” she says.
“It appears I am correct. You are capable of casting spells. For a given value of 'spell',” he declares, clearly caught between satisfaction at having been proven right, and annoyance at all the sparkly dust. “You may in fact be an actual person.”

“Fuck you,” she cheerfully informs him, and leaves him to go try and clean himself up.

If her magic’s even remotely decent, it should take him awhile.
She’s surprised when the wolf finds her again, not too long after the Pink-Glitterball-Congratulations-You’re-A-Mage-Now incident. She had more or less been expecting him to sulk for a while, all things considered. She may have even extended some faint hope that it would take him the better part of the day to get the glitter off of himself.

But he seeks her out at the evening meal for a second time; pristine, a little tense, dressed in a truly unreasonable amount of white fur and extending only another offer of quiet dining.

The same scenario, two days in a row, gives her pause.

“Will not some people get the wrong idea?” she wonders.

“Wrong idea?” he asks.

She waits, but he doesn’t seem to catch on to her meaning; so after a minute, she shrugs. Different times. Perhaps even the gossip works differently. Or perhaps she is generally considered too invalid as a being to even permit that kind of talk. An inadvertent mercy, if that’s the case.

“Nevermind,” she decides.

“Will you come?” he asks.

She sighs.

“If you insist.”

He leads her back to the same ‘dining room’, which has once again been set out with a variety of foods. None of which look like they’d be particularly easy to snatch up and throw, she notes. Though a strong arm could probably upend the soup tureen in the middle of it to spectacular results, if so inclined. He’s made the rookie mistake there of assuming that messy foods won’t be an issue if they’re too heavy to maneuver. She takes a moment to appreciate the potential horror show of all that white fur he’s wearing getting absolutely covered in lurid green soup.

Solas follows the line of her gaze and something of her thoughts must show, as he promptly moves the tureen to a less potentially catastrophic angle before taking his seat.

“I wished to ask you more about what destroyed your world,” he says.

She stares at him a moment.

Long enough for him to begin to shift uncomfortably in his seat.

“I realize that may not be an easy topic of conversation,” he concedes.

“No,” she agrees, and finally looks away. After a moment, she puts the soup tureen back to where it was, and pointedly serves herself from it.
His shifts around. Fidgets a little.

“You never properly explained the wolf of your tale to me,” he says, clearly attempting to tread more carefully this time.

“I did not,” she confirms.

There is a long, awkward silence. Well; awkward for him. Mostly she just ignores him in favour of the soup, which is actually disgusting, to be honest. It’s cold. Who serves soup cold? And it tastes like ten different things at once, which makes her think someone slopped it up from the bottom of a kitchen floor somewhere, and just... no. It must be what Vivienne and Dorian always called an ‘acquired taste’, or as Sera referred to it ‘eating shit to impress people and pretending it don’t taste like it fell out of someone’s arse’.

She keeps eating it, though. After a while most things start to taste like sawdust to her anyway, these days, and it’s clearly making her dinner companion uncomfortable.

The wolf watches as she raises and lowers her spoon.

He clears his throat.

“It died?” he prompts. “With the rest of your world?”

She glances up at him.

“Yes. He died,” she confirms. All thoughts of the soup fly out the window.

“Then his threat died with him?” he presses.

“No. That remains,” she replies.

“How?”

She stares down at the top of the table, the elegant whorls and patterns.

After a few minutes of this, he starts fidgeting. Playing with his utensils, rearranging things on his plate. It’s clear that he’s thinking. He’s trying to puzzle together as much as he can with what she’s given him, but he’s missing crucial information that would be too unlikely for him to guess, and so he can’t quite make the right connections.

She wonders if this was what she looked like to him, once upon a time.

She’s pretty sure that if she were to even breathe the words ‘time travel’ right now, he’d put a truly impressive amount of the story together. Even now, he’s too clever for his own good.

“How did you connect to this world?” he finally asks.

And, there it is.

There’s that sharp mind, so good at ferreting out the key points. Either to drag into focus or obscure from attention.

“I’m not sure. I didn’t do it; he did,” she admits, which is true enough.

He leans back, and tents his fingers together.
“There was no eluvian where we found you,” he muses. “No portal, or visible device. The pathway must have been direct. The air around you was distorted, momentarily. It felt like a battlefield. A bad one. Could something have followed you through?”

“There was nothing left to try,” she assures him.

He makes a frustrated noise.

“Then where would the danger come from?”

She gives it a moment, then sighs and puts down her spoon.

“Here,” she reiterates. “It was here before I got here. It has always been here. Your world has every chance of meeting the exact same fate mine did, entirely on its own merits. Or lack of merits. What you do, what Mythal does, what the other elves do, and the Children of Stone, and everyone else, even what I do, all matters. If you wish to protect this world then the first thing you should know is that there is no greater danger to it than the arrogance and pride of those who hold power, and are willing to see each and every piece of it as an acceptable loss in exchange for achieving their goals. Any corrupt leader can destroy a world by inches. But it takes a truly magnificent revolutionary to destroy a world all at once.”

He blinks at her.

After a second, she looks down, and realizes that the soup in her dish is boiling.

Huh.

Troubling.

“Did I do that?” she asks.

“I believe so,” he offers, cautiously.

“Shit,” she says. “How do I turn it off?”

He waves a hand, and a second later, the soup is cold again.

It does nothing to diminish the awkwardness in the air.

“…Thank you,” she says, somewhat uneasily.

“You have poor self-control,” he notes.

She glares down at the table. He isn’t wrong. She’d hoped to avoid the pitfall of random magical manifestations. The talent isn’t innate to her, after all. But apparently now that she’s more or less aware of it – or coincidentally to that realization – it’s going to start acting up, with or without her say-so.

Damn. This is going to take some figuring out, she realizes. One misstep and she could have ended up boiling someone’s blood instead of a bowl of soup. That would have been… not good. For a lot of reasons.

“I never had this magic before. I do not know what I should do,” she reminds him. Then she lets out a breath, and shakes her head.

Stranger and stranger, and even she is becoming a stranger to herself, with parts that aren’t her own,
and gifts she doesn’t understand.

“Try to do it again,” the wolf suggests, gesturing to her bowl.

She glances at him.

“I do not know how I did it the first time,” she admits.

“Just try,” he asks.

With another deep breath, she looks back at the bowl.

That she’d been upset, and angry, are the obvious connectors. Magic and emotions seem very tied into one another, especially here and now. But she is wary of dredging them up again. Will and intent seem like better options. She’s more familiar with using them as tools, as well. So she glares at the soup, focuses, and the air feels a little more sharp around her for a second.

The bowl breaks.

It’s a clean crack, right down the middle. Almost straight in half. The pieces fall to either side. The soup spills onto the table but, if nothing else, at least no pieces go flying. And none of it ends up in her lap.

“This will take some doing,” the wolf decides, as they both stare at the results.

“I will try not to inconvenience anyone as I figure it out,” she assures him.

He waves a hand, as if that isn’t of much importance.

“It is interesting,” he concedes. “Dreaming-born or Waking-born, most people come into the world breathing magic. Dreaming-born know control over their spells better than control over their emotions. For Waking-born it is the opposite, but both spend their growing years letting the knowledge come to them naturally, and command of expression follows until it is second nature, with tutoring only required for more advanced endeavors. Not simple control. Something like you is unprecedented.”

Ah. So she is to be the fascinating pet project, yet again.

And still a ‘something’ instead of a ‘someone’, she notes.

“I have adapted before. I will adapt again,” she declares, firmly as she can.

The prospect is beyond daunting, though.

“Perhaps I may suggest an exchange?” he offers.

He sounds intrigued, and a little excited, like he’s just had an idea he finds particularly promising.

She leans back in her seat.

“What for what?” she asks.

“Knowledge for knowledge, of course. No more vital currency exists in the world,” he replies.

“You teach me how you use a sword, and I will help you use your magic. One skillset for another.”

It’s an obvious solution to two problems. Obvious enough that she half wonders if he didn’t set the
whole thing up. But if he did, he’s done it in a way that’s so very far over her head, or her capacity to counter, that she may as well just let him have this part of the plan. Otherwise she’ll likely spend the next little while causing random chaos wherever she goes; and she’s familiar enough with how people work in general to know that when the ‘thing’ that isn’t really a person, that’s dangerous and strange, starts causing uncontrollable damage wherever it goes, well…

That’s usually the point where the well of tolerance runs dry.

“Alright,” she decides.

He smiles, wide and easy, and then claps.

*Claps.*

The sound makes her jump, which seems to amuse him.

It’s only when she glances down that she realizes he’s fixed her bowl. The soup’s still on the table, a sloppy mess, but he reaches over and ladles in a fresh serving for her. After a few minutes, the spilled soup begins to vanish; as if the table itself is somehow devouring it.

How unnerving.

“Try again?” he asks.

“Perhaps we should go back to the magic lights instead,” she suggests.

“I will know if you hit me with anything on purpose,” he informs her, suddenly not quite so chipper.

She chuckles, more to try and relieve her own tension than anything.

“That was funny,” she tells him.

“It was uncalled for.”

“It was much called for.”

He sighs.

“Focus on the bowl,” he says, coming off less as the wise instructor and more as the bossy young lordling again.

He folds his arms. Across the chest, not behind his back. It emphasizes his broad shoulders, but does nothing to make him look less petulant. Even his additional height can’t quite help with that.

But she lets it go, and opts to do as he asks. The more she draws it out, the longer she’ll have to spend in the room with him.

In the end it takes her three tries to get the liquid in the bowl boiling. The first effort just breaks the beautiful, gold-inlaid porcelain again, and the second freezes it over instead.

Success comes with only the faintest stirrings of satisfaction, however. It feels as random as all the other results; as if she’s simply lucked into the right combination again. If this is how magic generally works, she thinks, then most of the mages she’s known were even smarter than she thought. It feels like she’s just mentally crossing her fingers over a set of rolling dice. Wishing for the best and attributing it to skill when luck wins out.
It earns her a grin and a nod of approval from her supposed instructor, though. He relaxes enough to ease into a slightly less ridiculous pose.

“Now to stop it,” he says. “You may use gestures to help focus. Moving the physical form often creates the anticipation of a result. Once you tie that anticipation to specific gestures, they will help you focus, and produce more consistent results.”

“Then why haven’t I been gesturing this whole time?” she wonders.

He shrugs.

“Because I was curious to see what you could figure out on your own,” he admits.

“Oh. Well then, once again, fuck you,” she replies.

She smacks a hand down on the table, thinks about sucking in the spellwork like drawing in a breath, and miraculously, the soup stops boiling on the first try.

It’s still steaming, though.

She’s going to count it as a victory anyway.

The wolf sighs.

“That is a very impolite phrase,” he tells her.

“I know,” she says. “That is why I use it.”

He laughs in surprise. A flash of pointed canines, and a deep chuckle that wrenches something inside of her, and she has to look away. There’s a sinking feeling in her chest. She tries not to let it out, hopes it won’t turn the walls to ice or swallow all of the light in the room or silence his laugh, or do any other damning thing.

This magic’s going to be a real problem.

“I should go now,” she decides, and rises swiftly from her seat.

“You have hardly eaten,” he points out, laughter tapering off. “Please. We need not continue with the spells, for the moment, if it is tiring you.”

“No, it is not that. I will go,” she insists. With a nod, and without really looking at him again, she hurries out, then, ignoring his futile attempts to call her back.

It is too much, she decides. She cannot do this. She cannot see him, speak with him, laugh with him. It is too painful in too many ways. She isn’t made of steel and iron, she’s just flesh and blood and – and this is too much.

But what else is there? He’s the crux of it all. He’s the one who decides the fate of the world, in the end, and if she leaves him be, can anything change? Or will they just cycle through constant repetitions of destruction, over and over again? The wolf makes the Veil, the wolf tears it down, and on and on until whatever threads are holding the universe together finally snap between his bloodied jaws.

No, she can’t let that happen.

Or maybe she just needs to tell herself that, so she won’t have to admit that there are other reasons
why she won’t just cut and run from him completely.

She sucks in a breath, presses a hand to her brow and forces herself to reel in her distress.

Compassion finds her. A beautiful, quiet ghost that glides through the patterned walls, and settles beside her. The glow of it reflects off of the golden tiles around them.

“I will help,” the spirit says.

Something washes over her, soothing, and the constriction in her chest eases enough for her to breathe freely again.

“Thank you,” she replies.

It smiles in return, shapes and light shifting in its expression.

“Come,” it asks her, and begins to lead her off towards the gardens, again. The quiet ones. Somehow they pick up the rest of the entourage along the way, Sorrow and Rage and Curiosity, the latter flitting between walls and up across the ceiling, and then winding around the silver-leafed trees once they exit through a set of small, arched doorways. Sorrow follows more sedately, while Rage charges ahead, cold flames amidst somber trees.

It nods to Compassion, and she realizes the garden is empty. There aren’t even any birds there. Her feet pad softly atop perfectly manicured grass, and tiny, yellow flowers.

“Will you let me in?” Compassions asks her, standing close.

It takes her a moment to understand what it’s asking for.

“You want to possess me?” she blurts, taking an alarmed step back. A dozen red flags go off in her head, all the more urgent for how little she’d have expected such a thing.

“No, no, no,” the spirit hastens to assure her. “I will take nothing. I want to show you a certain way, to help, but to do that, I have to be within you. Only for a short time.”

“I… I’m not sure that’s wise,” she says.

“Please trust me,” Compassion asks.

Trust.

Oh, trust. It has been a long time since she trusted anyone. Time and experience beat that habit out of her, taught her wariness, caution, suspicion, and unease. Death stole most of those she would readily let at her back, and replacing them had seemed impossible, and then really had been impossible. She misses trust. She misses the ease of it. The comfort of it.

She misses Cole, and Compassion is so like him, and it would be so easy to trust.

To make that terrible mistake.

Or to have hope that it wouldn’t be a mistake.

Who else is she going to trust in this world?

She deliberates a long while. The spirits are surprisingly patient with it. She expects some to leave or to comment on her hesitancy – Curiosity, at the very lease – but none do. She wonders if they
are all there to make the same offer, and the same request.

“Alright,” she finally decides.

Compassion takes her hands, and for a moment, it’s like walking into a wall of feelings. The spirit vanishes in front of her.

Her perception… changes.

It’s as if there are colours in the air that she’s never been able to see before, but now she can. Whispers that were too quiet for her to hear, but are now just barely loud enough for her to catch. Worries and concerns and pain, all floating through the palace; memories and self-recriminations and doubts. Can it be enough? Did she really mean what she said? What if he never comes back? How could they say that to me? Where did it all go? What if she really is still angry? What if I fail again?

She has to help. She wants to. They’re all jagged edges, and she knows how they might be smoothed over. Brought comfort.

The calls are quiet, though, and grow quieter after a moment. Her skin tingles. The air feels thick, like humidity on her skin, but like electricity, too. Her hands come up – both of them – and she reaches for the magic, like she knows what she’s doing. Like it’s easy as breathing.

This is how it feels, Compassion’s voice whispers in her thoughts. This is how you should reach.

The spell gathers, and a dozen lanterns form in the air; lights that glimmer and gleam and pulse on command. They warp and form shapes, and dance between the trees. They swim, like fish, in the air overhead.

It is apart from you, but it is also a part of you. Like a false limb, or a sword in your hand. It is the breath in your lungs, drawn in, changed, and set free again.

The lanterns dim. Her hands lower.

There’s a strange shifting sensation, a moment of unexpected bereavement, and then Compassion is standing in front of her once more. The world returns to relative normalcy between one blink and the next. It’s so fluid that the lack of shock almost shocks her in and of itself. As simple as flipping a switch.

“That was easy,” she notes.

“I have no desire for a physical form. And if I did, one would simply be made for me,”
Compassion tells her. “Rare are those spirits who seek to dominate a form already occupied. Though some desire partnership for its own sake, but neither you nor I seek that. So it need not be anything but easy.”

That makes sense, she supposes. In a world without the Veil, where spirits can simply have bodies made for them if they’re interested in it, why aggressively try and possess anyone? What would be the point? And there would be nothing to trap one, either, because the Fade is all around them.

“Thank you for showing me, then. And withdrawing so promptly,” she says.

“It is why we are here. We like to teach, to care,” Compassion tells her.

“To discover,” Curiosity interjects. “Me next! I want to know what it is like to be with you!”
She hesitates. Compassion is one thing. It’s like Cole, and beyond that, on its own individual merits, she has grown fond of it; her first glimpse of kindness in an unkind world. The others are less easily classified. She might call them friends, but there are certain boundaries which casual friends really don’t cross, and she’s pretty sure occupying the same body is one of them.

“Curiosity is a good choice,” Compassion tells her. “It promotes inquisitiveness and experiments. To a student, there are few spirits more valuable.”

“I will not hurt you!” Curiosity assures her. “At least I do not think I will hurt you. Not on purpose. We can find out together if it hurts! And if it does, I will go away! Even if it is very interesting! I promise.”

The spirit is bright and gleaming and eager, wisps of it always darting away from its form, like it wants to be everywhere and see everything at once. But most of it is focused on her right now, all four large eyes staring, eager and expectant.

“…I’m holding you to your promise,” she decides, leveling a stern finger at it.

Curiosity beams and dashes into her immediately; not the gentle brush of Compassion, but a dozen tendrils of light that reach and sink into her arms, and it is a very different experience. Startling. A little overwhelming. It’s like being tackled with a hug that knocks her mind a little loose.

She notices so much.

The veins on the leaves in the trees, the vivid colour of the grass, the tiny insects crawling up a textured stone wall. She wants to go and stare, wants to follow the bugs to see where they end up, wants to take to the air and soar through the sky, and look down and see what the land is like when it’s spread out so far below. She wants to dive into the ocean and sink to the bottom, and walk along it, and see all the denizens of the deep. Keep going until her feet land on distant shores. She wants to rush into the library and read every book and record, ask every elf in Mythal’s palace about themselves and their lives and their histories.

But that’s not what she’s supposed to do right now. Right now, she’s supposed to do magic; to see how she does it, when she’s not normally able to. Does her magic work like everyone else’s does? Or is it different, too? Can she feel it the same way? It wraps around her, but it is different, she decides. Though she isn’t sure how she knows.

Oh, right. Curiosity knows. Curiosity has helped others learn before.

She plucks at the magic, tries to find it with all of her senses. She can see it, in part, and taste it, and feel it, and even hear it, when she listens right.

“Do not spend too long with her,” Compassion says. “You will upset her.”

She’s not upset, though, but she will be. Yes, she’ll get there. Alright. Reach for the spells, make something beautiful. Something to show herself why this world is worthwhile. Even if it will never soothe the ache of what has been lost, perhaps it can help her hold the good of what has been closer than she could before.

She conjures a memory. Swirling magic in ripples and eddies around her arms as they move.

It’s like a dream; like watching a painting spring to life in front of her, the figures all sketched out in blurred lines and shapes. Playing cards with members of the Inquisition. Varric is telling a story. Josephine is smiling, winning, while Bull laughs and Cullen hides a grin behind his hand, and Dorian makes some off-colour comment that has Sera snorting with laughter.
“-so then Rivaini goes, ‘that’s just where I keep my knife’, and the whole bar bursts into laughter!” Varric concludes his tale. She sees herself snicker, and catches Sera trying to peek at her cards.

“You’re not even in this hand!” she protests.

“Just let me see, I can’t tell if you’re bluffing!” Sera says, and Josephine tuts at them.

The memory fades.

Curiosity leaves in a rush of satisfaction, a lingering brush and a strong sentiment of gratitude, before it rushes off to satisfy its next interest.

In its absence, she feels exhausted, and melancholy.

She sinks onto one of the garden benches.

Sorrow sits beside her.

“I do not think I can do more yet,” she admits.

“I cannot show you much that you do not already know,” Sorrow tells her. “I will not make the offer. If I sink into you, I may never leave. That would end poorly for us both.”

She lets out a shuddering breath, and nods once; acceptance and gratitude together.

“I will make the offer,” Rage says. “You need me.”

“I do, do I?” she asks.

This spirit, she supposes, is one to be especially wary of. She’s fought so many demons of Rage, and seen more than a few mages fall prey to them. And this one in particular, she thinks, speaks to her. But it’s not a predator. Or at least, it doesn’t strike her as one. It makes her think less of the all-consuming anger so common to her world, and more of the slow-burning defiance in the hearts of those who have seen too much pain, watched too many atrocities, and yet only have their outrage to offer against it.

Righteous anger, she thinks.

“Are you certain you do not share Sorrow’s dilemma?” she wonders.

Rage shakes its head, flames gleaming along the surface of its form.

“We will not cloud one another,” it says.

She gives it another couple of minutes, and then nods in agreement.

“A moment,” Compassion requests, and the air trembles. At her questioning look, the spirit shrugs.

“So you do not destroy the entire garden,” it explains.

“We should destroy it!” Rage says. “Why should these haughty elvhen keep their nice things so intact all the time?”

Oh, this is probably going to go well.

“I would like to avoid wanton destruction,” she requests.
“That is not what Rage is for,” the spirit tells her, and she can’t decide if it’s agreeing or disagreeing with her.

Then it takes her by the arms. Grasps her, sharp and biting, and it’s hot and cold at once; it is the white-hot burn of fury, and the icy creep of old, bitter, unexpressed pain.

It is strangely glorious, for a moment. Unexpectedly liberating. She feels strong and careless. The future doesn’t matter. Consequences don’t matter. What is inside her, beating furiously in time with her heart – *that* matters. It is pure power and it rushes forth, and it is overwhelming and destructive and perfectly, purely *furious*.

And then she catches it.

Her arms spread wide and it’s like she’s casting a net, holding her energy in the threads and settling into the world around her. Writing on the walls. She can hardly see anything; everything is blurred, but the lines of her power are clear. Where they fall, the grass turns to ash and dust, and shimmering markers are left behind.

They set themselves off, one by one; tiny explosions that blow the petals off of flowers and scorch the stone bench, and strip bark from the silver-leafed trees. The longer she holds on, the longer it takes for them to go off. She is impatient, but determination and focus hone her fury into a weapon that can wait.

When the last tiny explosion eats up the net of runes, she exhales, and Rage leaves her exhausted. She sinks down onto the bench at her back.

“Some things deserve destruction,” the spirit tells her, a bright and still-burning figure at the heart of the damage. Then it sinks away through the charred ground.

Sorrow leans against her shoulder.

“I do not believe the poor flowers deserved destruction,” it says.

Then it sighs, and with its sigh, takes its own leave.

*No,* she thinks. In her mind she sees villages and cities burning, rampant chaos; people running and screaming and dying, collateral damage in the maelstrom of world-changing events. Too many to ever remember them all. *The flowers didn’t.*

“Thank you,” she says to Compassion, when she can speak again.

“We may show you more, when you are ready,” the spirit offers.

“It is strange for me. Where I come from, taking on a spirit is not… a good idea,” she explains.

“I cannot teach so well with words,” it tells her, apologetically. “But you need not fear. There is a… a strange, bright thing in you. I do not think I could fight you for control, even if I wished to. You could use it to burn me out if I tried.”

She blinks, baffled.

“What?” she asks.

Compassion reaches over and touches the center of her chest, close to her heart.

“There is a bright thing. Here,” it says.
Her blood runs cold.

She thinks of Solas, the last time she saw him. Of the pain. She’d almost forgotten the pain, the strangeness of the event, almost written it off as some last-ditch healing spell, but that’s not what it felt like. There’s been so much pain for so long, it’s easy to forget it.

Especially when she wants to.

She knows. She *knows* what the… what he did. To Mythal. To the Old Gods he dug up from the Deep Roads.

Oh no.

Oh no. Please.

*You absolute bastard.*

She clutches at her chest, nails digging into her skin.

“I made it worse,” Compassion whispers, horrified and remorseful. “Do not be afraid. It has done you no harm.”

“How would I know?” she asks. “It – it – it is not supposed to be there. I do not want it!”

What even is it? Mythal? One of the Old Gods? Solas?

“It has no mind,” Compassion tells her.

“It is a *soul,*” she protests. “A soul not my own.”

“There is no presence but yours. It is has no spirit, no feeling. I would know if it did,” Compassion assures her.

Her skin crawls. This, on top of everything else – no, she has had her body maimed and reshaped, the anchor branded into her flesh and then burned out of it, the flesh lost and then grown anew against her will; she has had magic foisted upon her, now she has even let spirits sink into her for a time, but she cannot stand this last violation. Not this. Not some unwelcome passenger to her very *soul.*

“I need to get rid of it,” she says.

“You must be cautious. Do not panic,” Compassion tells her. “It has no presence of its own. It is like the sloughed skin of a snake; do not fear that it will bite.”

The smooth, even tone of the voice, and the metaphor, actually manage to steady her nerves somewhat.

“I still want it gone,” she decides.

“We cannot ask it to leave, because there is nothing to ask,” the spirit muses. “I could… attempt to take it from you. I do not relish the thought. It is potent, if inert.”

She thinks about letting Compassion take the soul from her.

She thinks about letting *anyone* take the soul from her, and what new chaos it might put into the world, to have that strange power fall into the hands of any being which might actually be able to
use it. It is, after all, the same essence that brought the evanuris their ‘glory’.

“No. I would not ask that of you,” she decides.

“I am sorry,” Compassion says.

“Do not be. It is better that I know about it.” Reaching over, she moves to reflexively rest a hand on the spirit’s shoulder. It passes through, of course. She scoffs at herself.

“Oh. I forgot.”

“It is no matter. Here,” the spirit says, and takes her hand, and puts it back onto its gently glowing shoulder. The substance of it solidifies a bit more than usual, and lets her fingers rest there.

“You are a good friend,” she tells Compassion.

“I am glad to be,” it replies. “Come to the library. Do not fear Pride. There is solace in knowledge, and we may find inspiration to safely remove what has been foisted upon you.”

Not a bad idea, she supposes. Though she’s not sure she could handle seeing the wolf again today.

But Compassion goes with her, and promises to shield her from view if need be, and that’s enough, she supposes. Her hand keeps finding its way to her breastbone as they walk, uneasy, as if she can imagine a second heartbeat hammering next to her own.

Can she even trust herself now, if there’s some other soul within her? Compassion might claim it has no will, but what if it’s sunk into her so thoroughly that it’s just unrecognizable from her own? Is she even the same person now?

How would she know? So much has changed. Is the hollowness in her the grief she feels, or is it the echo of some ancient being? Her anger, her hesitations, even her impulses… the magic she can suddenly do. Are those things hers, or its?

Maybe it doesn’t even matter anymore. Maybe she did die with her world. Maybe she’s just some ruined soul with the memories and body of someone else. How would she know?

“Such creatures are not like you,” Compassion tells her.

“Have you met many?” she wonders.

“Some,” it admits. “I am old. I have seen spirits and souls and magic combine in strange ways, in many quests for power and enlightenment. There is a way about them which you lack. A hunger for completeness.”

“That is… actually reassuring,” she admits.

“Good.”

The library, when they reach it, is quite active. It generally is. So far, she hasn’t attempted to get past the entrance. The knowledge it might contain is compelling, but the elves there watch her with great discomfort, and wariness, like they expect her to immediately begin destroying anything she touches.

Their unease is palpable – in the ‘weird emotion clouds’ way, even – when Compassion brings her properly into the vast and spiraling tower.
“No. Take it out,” one of the elves demands in clipped tones, as soon as they reach the first staircase. He is a narrow-faced man, shorter than most, with green vallaslin on his brow and a truly gorgeous staff at his back.

“How?” Compassion asks.

“This place is for the learned and learning, those who seek wisdom and insight, not for constructs,” the librarian (she presumes) replies.

Curiosity flits down, sinking through glowing crystals, making unhappy noises.

“Knowledge is meant to be shared,” the spirit intones.

“Shared among the People,” the librarian replies. “Can it even read?”

“I can read as much of your language as I can speak,” she says, in her own defense, crossing her arms around herself.

“So, very little, and poorly,” he determines.

“More information will only allow her to improve her comprehension,” Compassion says.

“And if it destroys something in a fit of pique or frustration?” the librarian demands. “Pride has just warned us all that it cannot control its magic. One stray spell and knowledge worth a thousand constructs could be lost forever. It would not even need to be destructive by intent.”

She feels, unaccountably, the sting of betrayal.

So the wolf gossips about her behind her back. Warning its people of what a dangerous thing she is.

She doesn’t know why she’s surprised. She doesn’t even know if she has any right to be upset, as a matter of fact. She does have trouble controlling her magic, and he owes her no allegiance, here and now. They’re not even friends.

It still burns. Bitterly.

“You are being unconscionably cruel. I will not condone it,” Compassion tells the librarian.

That seems to bring him up short.

“I will take her!” Curiosity suddenly announces. “She is not so strong in magic yet. Two spirits to keep watch and there will be no harm to the records. We are good and diligent minders!”

“You are inconsistent and flighty!” the librarian refutes, but Curiosity takes her hands and starts practically dragging her up the steps, and he makes no move to stop them.

“Did Compassion tell you of the bright thing?” Curiosity asks, quietly.

“Yes,” she admits.

“Good! I wanted to ask but I was not supposed to but you must tell me everything now!” it insists. “But not here. First we will look at books and records, and then we will go somewhere else. But the wait will kill me! But it must. I am being very patient.”

She can’t help it; she laughs.
“Very patient,” she commends.

One of the library’s occupants gives them an odd look as they go by.

Compassion catches up to them once they reach the top of one of the balconies, a space lit with magical records and runes and many other things she makes the executive decision not to touch. The librarian is still watching them warily from the ground floor. Several eluvians gleam, and people come and go, moving from upper and lower reaches that she can scarcely see. It’s no Vir Dirthara – even the ruins of that place implied something far more elaborate – but it’s still something else.

She’s glad they took the stairs.

“Sometimes I get lost in the crossroads,” Curiosity tells her. “I go for days and days until I find something that reminds me I have other places to be. You wandered a lot, too. I can tell. But we’re talking about that later. Right now we need souls!”

She blinks, and something gleams and lights up around the spirit, and then it begins to parcel out information.

“When Curiosity recalls what to look for, it is very useful,” Compassion assures her.

“Even when I do not, I can still find things worth finding! Generally,” Curiosity replies. “Souls, souls, souls. No, not *spirits*. We know what we are. Complex forms and integrations only, please. Oh, I have not read that one! No. Focus. Just put that aside for now. Did *I* ask for emotions? No. Not for myself, obviously, for the records. Record. No, not a record of emotions! Gah! You useless thing, do what I want, not what I say!”

Whatever Curiosity is actually doing seems relatively incomprehensible to her. It seems to involve a lot of glowing shelves and things moving and shifting faster than she can quite make them out, until at last it produces three light, gleaming volumes, and shoves them into her arms.

“There, good,” it deems. “Well done, me!”

“What are these?” she asks.

“They are the most comprehensive lexicons in this library on matters pertaining to immortal energies,” it replies.

Oh.

Well, that works.

“Thank you,” she says.

The four-eyed spirit beams sunnily, and inclines its head.

“Can I sit in you while you read?” it asks.

She blinks, and takes a moment to figure out that it’s asking to possess her again, and not perch on her lap like some sort of bizarre toddler.

“Oh. No,” she decides.

“It will go faster,” it wheedles.
“Until you become distracted,” Compassion interjects.

“I would not! This is much too interesting!”

She opts to ignore their argument in favour of finding a space to sit and read in.

Her first problem with this plan becomes apparent when she actually finds a seat, and lifts up the top book, and realizes she has no idea what she’s supposed to do with it. It isn’t full of pages, like a novel. It looks like a solid stone stab, but is light as a hollow wooden block, with scrawling marks she only slightly recognizes covering its surface.

“She is wondering how to use it!” Curiosity blurts, and then zips away from Compassion to hover eagerly in front of her. “Press the runes! Start at the top if you wish to go all the way through from start to finish. Oh!” It pauses, and then darts over to the edge of the balcony, where one of the library’s other occupants is glaring down at their own work. “Twenty-seven!” it shouts.

The elf raises a hand in acknowledgement, and doesn’t even look up.

Letting out a breath, she touches the rune, as instructed.

A voice begins to whisper in her ears. Elvish. Lyrical. Half-singing, in fact. She’s unsettled for a moment as a spark of energy travels up her arm. When she lets go, the voice stops.

She switches to her left hand, and presses the rune again.

The spark jolts through it instead. The narration resumes.

It’s fast and the strange tones make it difficult for her to understand all of what it’s saying, and it seems to be saying a lot. She catches ‘spirit’ and ‘death’ and ‘dreaming’, and ‘eternal’, ‘void’, and ‘born’ a lot, as repeating themes. The narrator seems to have an accent she’s never heard before, as well.

She goes through the first segment three times, and manages to piece together that it’s speculation on what happens to the essences of spirits when they die, and why this might be different from what happens to embodied elvhen when they die. Both kinds of elvhen, she thinks, though the narrator doesn’t seem to feel the need to make any distinctions there.

After a while she tries a different tome, hoping for more comprehensible results.

Images flash in her mind as soon as she touches the first rune, and she pulls back in surprise.

“It’s a memory!” Curiosity calls at her, from somewhere behind one of the walls. “Close your eyes or you will get dizzy!”

After a minute, she decides she’s really not up for that, and turns to the third book.

This one, she finds, actually has pages. They aren’t immediately noticeable until she opens the latch on the cover, and unfolds it to find tiny, neat script, and several illustrations. Sucking in a relieved breath, she sets about deciphering it. The ink is dark green, and whoever wrote it did so with a steady hand.

*The Energy of the Soul,* she reads, on the first page. *A spirit may become like a soul, and a soul may become like a spirit. They are complimentary energies, easily interwoven, though their actual workings are often shrouded in mystery. With each new discovery made, more questions arise as to the nature of eternal energies, and how they manifest, re-manifest, and disperse throughout the*
world...

She makes it through the opening chapter, and finds herself wishing she had a paper and quill to make note of all the words she doesn’t have a translation for. And a dictionary to look them up in. Curiosity sometimes shouts their meanings at her, which she appreciates. Compassion comes and goes, a mother hen checking in. The elves keep their distance, though the librarian wanders up and stares at her through the doorway a few times.

He seems displeased.

She tries to imagine the look on his face if he ever saw how Dorian generally handled books.

Which leads her thoughts to the others, and what they would all make of this.

She finds she can’t really imagine it, though. When she pictures them reacting to this situation, her mind can only get so far as the recriminations and disappointment they would rightly heap upon her. She failed them. And now she is the only one left to remember them, and she isn’t the least bit sure what to do with that.

There aren’t even any graves to visit. No monuments. No shrines.

When her eyes are too tired to keep reading, she gives it up. It’s interesting stuff, to be sure, but none of it seems to address the matter of the thing in her chest. The closest she’s gotten is the general impression that souls have to, intrinsically, come with a certain degree of will or independent sense of self, so if it lacks that, then it’s probably not actually a soul. Or else the author’s understanding of the subject is incomplete.

She’s not sure which is likelier.

It makes her wish she could… well. One of her great failings, she’s found, is that she often wishes she could consult Solas on all the problems Solas has caused her.

Of course, funnily enough, she possibly could do that now, if she was willing to put up with the young lordling wolf running around. And if she could figure out how to talk to him without verging on some kind of emotional collapse. Or giving away the wrong information and inadvertently guiding him to too much of the truth.

Playing with fire, that.

She closes the book, and decides to give the librarians some peace of mind, at last, and leaves.

Compassion has gone off again, but Curiosity finds her, winging down from the rafters and trailing into her wake.

“You still have questions! You did not find what you wanted, I am sorry. We can look more again later! Can we talk now?”

“I am tired,” she admits staring into four very large, distinctly puppy-ish eyes.

The spirit cants its head to one side.

“And do you feel tired the same way other embodied creatures do, or is it different for you?” it wonders. “Do you dream?”

She closes her eyes, but again is surprised to find herself chuckling.
“Yes, I dream,” she says.

The response earns her a grin.

“Perfect!”

It zips off again, then, apparently satisfied or called to some other poor soul for the moment. She ignores the elves who glance at her until she’s in the winding hallways and less occupied corridors, stepping carefully over tiled floors that shine and gleam and reflect the moonlight through arched, open windows.

When she reaches her room, she’s surprised to find that someone’s set out a small plate of food for her. Simple things; some fruit that easily peels apart, a slice of oddly sweet bread, and cheese, along with a pitched of water. Compassion, she supposes. She finds she’s actually quite hungry after the first bite, and eats it all before slumping into bed.

She stares at the ceiling until exhaustion consumes her mind.

She gets partway through a nightmare where she’s watching everyone she’s ever loved burn from behind a glass barrier than she can’t break. Then the dream stops. The fire dies down, and the glass barrier drops, and she falls forward until a pair of silvery-blue hands catch her.

“Does flesh really look like that when it burns?” Curiosity asks her.

It takes her a moment to get her bearings; to realize that she’s dreaming, asleep, and that the spirit has interrupted the process.

“Yes,” she confirms, grimly.

“I had no idea. No one with a memory like that has ever shared it with me before,” it says.

“That wasn’t a memory. It was a dream,” she explains, with an odd pang of guilt. She has no desire to corrupt this spirit.

“But it was a dream informed by a memory. Anyway. Did you know you speak differently when you’re dreaming?” it asks.

“Differently?”

“You are not speaking the Language of the People, you are using different words. I still understand you, though. Intent is most important here anyway,” Curiosity tells her.

Oh. She must be using common, without thinking about it.

“I can try to speak elvhen, instead,” she offers, doing just that, focusing on the words.

“No! I would like to learn your language. I have never learned a different one!” the spirit insists. “I could speak it back to you if I did! And trade it to some of the other spirits for things. It’s rare knowledge; many of them would pay me dearly for it.”

She blinks.

“Pay you? In what?” she wonders.

“Their own rare knowledge, of course!” Curiosity replies. “Some spirits share freely. But some guard memories and truths like valuable treasures. I would not offer them your secrets, but your
language is not a secret, is it?"

“I… suppose not,” she concedes.

She has no idea how she’s going to go about teaching it, though.

Curiosity waves a hand, as if it caught that thought.

It probably did.

“I will figure it out myself, if you speak with clear intent often enough,” it insists.

“…Alright,” she agrees, and lets herself lapse back into common.

It’s funny, she thinks. So often she thought of the language as one that had been foisted upon her people, a thing beyond their culture. Now, she finds herself oddly excited for the simple prospect of having someone else speak it to her again one day.

“We are in private now. Where did the bright soul thing come from?” Curiosity asks her, abruptly shifting gears to reach over and poke at her breastbone.

She bats its hand away.

“How can it be a soul if it does not have a mind? Who was it? How did you get it, and why do you hate it?” it presses, but obediently moves a little further back.

“One question at a time,” she requests.

It blinks – not all at once, but in succession, four eyes rippling like a small wave – and then taps its chin contemplatively.

“What is it?” the spirit finally decides on asking.

What is it indeed?

Of course a Spirit of Curiosity would pick one of the hard ones.

She sags, and presses her palm to the place that Compassion had pointed out to her. Honestly, she thinks, it would be easier if the unwelcome magical thing was just in her hand again. At least that provided a little distance. Or the illusion of it.

“Where I come from, there are… not gods, but beings who set themselves up as gods. They did something terrible. It gave them power, but at a price the entire world had to pay. Their… essence, I guess, or something about them, could endure past death and destruction. One of them set about gathering as much of that essence as he could. When he died, he… must have passed it on to me. The last of it. Whatever it really is.”

The death of the Titans had brought the darkspawn. The evanuris had hunted them, killed them, and drank of their lyrium essence, and as their numbers diminished, the Blight had spread. Whether the Titans’ deaths had created the darkspawn, or if their absence had merely allowed them to spread, unchecked, was something they’d never quite managed to figure out.

They’d also never managed to figure out whether the ‘souls’ which Solas had been collecting had been changed solely by the lyrium, and how the evanuris and the Old Gods had used it, or by other things as well. Or if they, too, had been more or less taken from the Titans.
Curiosity tilts its head.

“You wonder if you really are a thief, when you keep taking stolen things by accident,” it muses.

“Yes,” she admits. There’s no point in denying it. Though Solas had, so far as she knew, given her this last ‘gift’ freely, she doesn’t really think it was ever his to give. Or even Mythal’s, or the Old Gods’. It was likely stolen by them, too. Through the lyrium, if nothing else.

“They took it from the Ones Who Sing Below The Earth,” Curiosity realizes.

“If you can just take the answers out of my head, why ask me the questions?” she wonders.

“Because you have to be thinking of the questions and asking them yourself before I can sense them,” it replies. “Like now. You are wondering if you can return what you have to the Ones Below, but you are also afraid that it has been warped and tainted by what has happened, and that it may be poison instead.”

“Yes,” she agrees.

But Curiosity keeps going.

“You wonder why he saved you. It is the question always on your mind,” it muses. “In the background. You wonder why you are here, and not him. It does not fit. It does not make sense. You wonder if, in the end, he actually could not stand by and watch you die. Could not turn his back again. You are afraid to wonder that, because if the answer is ‘yes’, it will hurt, and if the answer is ‘no’, it will hurt. And if the question is never answered, it will hurt even so, forever and always.”

She swallows. Clenches and unclenches her fist.

Curiosity blinks again.

“I do not like unanswered questions either,” it says. “I will help you find the answers. All of them! I will help you solve the mysteries, and the many more mysteries that come whenever one mystery is solved!”

Her breath leaves her, shakily.

“It’s not really safe, to volunteer that kind of thing. Especially not in my company,” she admits.

She thinks of the last time she was supposed to look into matters, investigating the question of Fen’Harel. And the conclave’s explosion, before that. While the perpetrator himself stood beside her and dispensed invaluable advice. How poor of an Inquisitor was she, truly, to have been so blind?

Curiosity’s eyes widen phenomenally.

“You were called ‘Inquisitor’, once,” the spirit tells her. “You were named for me! You look for answers. You are like me! I will help you, danger or no. I have decided! There are too many questions, and they are incredible questions. I must know, too!”

“I’m not letting you possess me long-term,” she warns.

It shakes its head.

“No, that would be interesting but it would go badly in the end,” it agrees.
Well, if they’re sincerely agreed, that’s one less concern.

“As long as that’s clear, then… I appreciate your help. If you’re sure you want to take the chance,” she decides.

“Good! Yes! We will find the answers, you and I! Some will come quick and some will come slow but we will find them!” it enthuses.

Then it’s gone.

It takes her a minute to figure out that she’s been completely abandoned.

One blink there, the next, poof.

She glances around. The Fade swirls, vibrancy and fragments, a disjointed thing, like torn tapestries and coloured glass. She’s still dreaming, she can tell; one second she seems to lose time and everything shifts, the scenery trading one bright mess of pieces for another. The next, everything lingers and crawls. But she’s not in a dream anymore, and Curiosity is gone.

*Flirty thing*, she thinks, with a growing fondness.

It’s better than the nightmare, at least. So she drifts. Pushes through the sea of strange images, until she finds a white wolf standing next to a tattered battlefield.

The ground is stained with blood and littered with broken standards. The bodies are shards of bone in amidst pristine yet broken armour. The wolf is a pale ghost beside it, and she doesn’t really think, lost in the logic of dreams as she comes to a stop beside him.

“What did they fight for?” she wonders.

“Petty things,” he replies.

All of the corpses she sees are elvhen. A civil war, then. Or a war between differing elvhen factions, at least. No dwarves, or other creatures, save the fallen mounts. It’s strangely picturesque for a battlefield. She wonders if he actually saw it in person, or if this is just how he imagined this particular slaughter to have looked. Or if the Fade is concocting it in that dreamy way it has, all on its own.

“Petty things not worth their lives?” she surmises, and he shakes his head. Then he looks at her, as if noticing her for the first time.

“How are you here?” he asks.

“I’m dreaming,” she says. “I think I intruded upon you without meaning to.”

The wolf looks flabbergasted.

It’s an interesting look on a wolf.

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“All of the corpses she sees are elvhen. A civil war, then. Or a war between differing elvhen factions, at least. No dwarves, or other creatures, save the fallen mounts. It’s strangely picturesque for a battlefield. She wonders if he actually saw it in person, or if this is just how he imagined this particular slaughter to have looked. Or if the Fade is concocting it in that dreamy way it has, all on its own.

“Petty things not worth their lives?” she surmises, and he shakes his head. Then he looks at her, as if noticing her for the first time.

“How are you here?” he asks.

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the ruins of a different battlefield and realized that her lover hadn’t followed her away from it, really.

Since the first dream she ever chased him through; and now, she thinks, there will never be a time when she sees a wolf in her dreams and doesn’t try to follow it.

“I did not even think you would dream,” the wolf admits.

“More evidence to dismiss my personhood with?” she wonders. “Even if I didn’t dream, I’d still be a person.”

“What makes you say that, I wonder? You do dream, after all. Have you known people who did not?” he guesses.

“Yes,” she says.

“Your world sounds increasingly strange,” he decides. “People who do not dream, who do not have magic, who do not share their feelings, or feel them in the way which seems most natural to me. I can scarcely imagine it. It sounds horrible. Empty.”

The dream of the battlefield is growing blurry, now, the details starting to ebb away, as his focus shifts from whatever musings it had inspired.

“So do not judge my world,” she asks. Or warns, more like. The bitterness in her is rearing up again. It’s put a bite into her tone.

“That was, perhaps, insensitive,” he concedes.

Then he thinks, for a long moment.

His gaze, when he turns it to her, is unexpectedly concerned.

“I fear I have been handling this situation poorly. I have approached you as a potential threat, and an unfamiliar creature, and a source of information. Yet you are here. I will concede to you that, in your world, dreaming may not hold the meaning it does for us. But for me… you have removed the majority of my doubts by doing this. You are something of a person, if a strange sort, and one I have mistreated. I apologize for that.”

He is young and fierce and proud, and yet, honestly contrite.

She is hypnotized; for a moment, she cannot look away. She remembers a kiss in the Fade, so long ago. It’s burned into her, that first kiss. That moment of impulse that changed everything.

Changed the world.

“Apology accepted,” she decides.

It feels like she’s signing a contract to her own doom in the blood from still-gaping wounds, but it’s what she chooses anyway. She will always take a chance on him. Not a week into knowing him, once, and she would have fought off the entirety of Haven’s chantry forces for his sake, if she’d had to.

Such a foolish heart she has. It’s not even him, but it is, so it doesn’t matter. Everything’s changed.

Not this, though.
“I’m sorry to have intruded,” she says. “I’ll go now.”

“You may stay,” he suggests.

She tears her eyes away from him.

“Thank you, but. It would be better if I didn’t.”

“Why?” he wonders. Then he seems to consider his own question. “I could change from this shape, if it bothers you.”

“No!” she blurts.

She’s barely handling it as it is. If she has to look at his face...

He tilts his head, clearly puzzled.

“No,” she says again, more ruefully. “You’re fine as you are. Wolf or no. It’s not the shape that bothers me.”

“Then what?” he presses.

“I can’t possibly answer that,” she admits.

There is a moment of uneasy silence.

At length, he nods.

“I suppose it would be discourteous of me to insist,” he decides.

“It would,” she agrees.

“In that case, I shall thank you for the visit. Shall we meet tomorrow morning on the training grounds?” he suggests.

Right. Their agreement. Their ‘trade’ of information. She wonders if she still needs to go through with it, now that the spirits have volunteered their services. Then again, she can’t avoid him forever, and it’s probably not wise to get her primary source of magical training from occasional moments of possession. Not if there’s a reasonably competent alternative.

“Alright,” she agrees. “In the morning.”

She sees him nod, and then the dream bleeds away, images and colours fading like spilled paint until she opens her eyes to the darkness of her room.

For a moment, she simply lays there in silence.

Then she drags her pillow over her face, and screams into it, muffling the sound until her skull is throbbing and her lungs are tired, and exhaustion claims her again.

The nightmares are almost a relief.
You guys are the best. <3
Getting out of bed the next morning is a force of effort.

She makes herself do it, though, hauls her way onto her feet, motivated by the thought of not turning up at the training grounds and having the wolf come looking for her.

As it is she beats him there, barely. He comes dressed for action, it seems; the armour he’s wearing looks fiddly and bizarrely form-fitting, but typical of what she’s come to expect from Elvhenan. Very shiny, very light, and very pretty. It also includes what she had once mentally dubbed his ‘metal wolf footies’. Otherwise known as paw-styled boots.

It takes her approximately three rounds to get the whole set utterly covered in dirt and grime. Which is actually impressive, given that the training grounds are appallingly pristine. There isn’t even a convenient puddle for launching people who mess up their footwork into. She has to make do with the general dust and dirt that’s invariably accumulated over the soft ground.

He falls.

A lot.

To his credit, he takes it with good grace, though, and listens when she corrects him. He keeps at it for a surprisingly long while before requesting a break, and by then he’s managed to close roughly half of the worst openings in his form, and he’s stopped bending his wrist like a moron who wants to see what the bone looks like poking out from his flesh the next time he strikes someone’s shield.

“You are improving,” she tells him, sinking down on a bench next to a ridiculously ornate, dragon-shaped fountain. She fills two of the cups arrayed around it, and offers him one.

“Thank you,” he says, almost startled by the acknowledgement. “Shall we work on your magic next?”

“Tired of kissing the dirt?” she asks.

He chuckles.

“I would enjoy getting some of my own back, yes,” he admits.

“Alright,” she agrees.

He settles into an unexpected easiness for a moment. Curious, a little tired, but not wary or nearly as stand-offish as he had been before. The day is bright, and the courtyard is gleaming. He gleams a little, too, despite the dirt. White teeth and sparkling eyes, golden armour and pretty toggles in his hair.

She has conflicting feelings on the scene.
When he stands, she is struck anew by how different the ancient elves are.

He’d never taken on this shape in her own time. He’d been tall and broad for an elf, yes, but small by the standards of his own people. But he’d never switched back to looking more like them. She’d wondered about it, sometimes. Why he would continue to use a form that was closer to those of the elves he so strongly disassociated himself from, than the ones he considered to be his own people.

_Pride stands tall,_ she thinks, and follows him up.

“Since we have been working on combat applications, let’s start with something simple,” he suggests. “A barrier, perhaps.”

Barriers, she knows – courtesy of a dozen overheard conversations – can be incredibly simple, or incredibly complex, depending on how they’re being implemented, and how long they’re meant to last. She agrees to his suggestion, mostly because it’s a sort of magic she actually understands. Though she supposes her knowledge might not be that applicable, since most of it comes via Dorian’s noisy musings on more efficient ways of accessing the Fade.

The Fade’s already everywhere, so she supposes she doesn’t need to worry about that so much, in her case.

The thought reminds her, though, of how her friend used to ‘forget’ to turn off that damn crystal of his. Five times she got partway through some tryst of his and Bull’s before she had to start loudly clearing her throat into her own crystal to remind him to turn it off. Once, it had taken them far too long (even with her swearing into it) and she’d almost chucked the thing over the side of a ravine.

She’d still had it with her, at the end. Hadn’t lost it until nearly all of her belongings had been incinerated.

The other half had vanished with Dorian when he died.

She has to shake her head to chase away the thought, and the pang of grief that follows.

Barriers. Right. Focus.

“What do I do?” she asks.

The wolf considers his answer.

“What you want to create is something that can protect, and repel, without necessarily impeding your movement more than necessary,” he muses. “It is a trade-off. Focus too excessively on mobility or physical defense, and your barrier will be weak to magical assault. Form something too rigid, and you will be entirely reliant upon it, as you will be unable to dodge. The more aspects you combine, the more focus you will require.”

“Alright,” she says, slowly. “That may be getting ahead of things. Where do I start?”

He sucks in a breath.

“Ah. Create a barrier? Focus on drawing energy and making it… into one?” he suggests.

Under different circumstances she might be annoyed at how vague that is, but since that just seems to be how it goes with magic, she only sighs and closes her eyes for a second, and tries to, essentially, do that.
Nothing happens at first.

Or for several minutes following ‘at first’.

A change of gears, perhaps. She knows how it feels when a mage drops a barrier onto her. Each one is a little different; magic seems to come with some personality courtesy of the caster, but it can be hard to pick up on the nuances if you’re not familiar with them. She’d only figured it out when she started realizing that she could tell who had cast a certain spell without having to see them do it.

She could always tell when Solas had created a particular ward, or set a certain trap, or put up a specific barrier. She could never describe what gave it away. It was just... like learning to recognize the sound of footsteps in the dark, and knowing who they belonged to even if you couldn’t list all the particular clues giving them away.

She thinks of barriers that gleam bright; that fall like protective blankets. She thinks of Dorian and Vivienne instead of Solas. Vivienne’s barriers were always cool and a little brittle. It made enemies think they could shatter easily; and they could. But they broke into shards when they did. Sharp pieces that assailed armour and rattled nerves, and sliced any open flesh they touched. The last she’d seen of Vivienne was one of those barriers breaking.

Dorian’s were always warm, by contrast. Hard to look straight at. Easy to distract and divert with, rippling and flexible, better at repelling spells than swords. Like he’d plucked a sunbeam out of the sky and wrapped it around everyone.

Hers, when she finally manages to build it, seems to come from below her feet, instead.

It’s like all the silver in the deep mines of the dwarves sweeps up through the dirt of the practice field, and swirls, a constant movement that maintains itself once she sets it spinning. She thinks of a set of silver balls that someone had gifted Josephine, once. Move one, and it would strike the rest, and the ball at the end of the line would swing out; then it would crash back, and with a rhythmic clacking, the cycle would repeat itself indefinitely.

Her barrier moves with her breaths.

She stares at it a moment, and then looks at her instructor.

He is wide-eyed again.

Tentatively, he extends the tip of his weapon towards the barrier. It rebounds; like a firm hand has pushed it aside. It makes him take an actual step back, and distracts her enough that she loses concentration.

The whole thing slips away. Dust in the air.

“Was that incorrect?” she asks.

A few of the other elves have stopped to stare at them, she notes. Or, more accurately, stopped to stare at her.

The wolf straightens his back and gives her a narrow look.

“I do not appreciate being lied to,” he says.

She raises an eyebrow at him.
That’s rich, she thinks.

“Then it is good I have not lied,” she replies.

Well. She’s misled him with regards to some of the details of her origins, but somehow she doesn’t think that’s what he’s referring to right now.

“You mean to tell me you have never done that before?” he asks. There’s a bite to his tone. Defensiveness, she realizes. He thinks she’s been playing him somehow.

“I have never done that before,” she confirms, her tone cool as she meets his skepticism. “I assume I did it right?”

“You did it very well,” he tells her.

Ah. Too well, then.

It’s probably thanks to her unwelcome spiritual parasite.

“Are you going to be suspicious of me every time I succeed?” she wonders. “I honestly have no idea what I am doing. I am making attempts. If you dislike the results, perhaps we should abandon this now.”

He glares at her for a minute. She wonders if he’s more unnerved that she succeeded, or annoyed that he didn’t get to, more or less, put her own face in the dirt a few times before she did.

But then he subsides, with a truly staggering exhalation of breath.

Hundreds of years old or not, she thinks he looks too young to sound that weary of anything.

“You do not see the contradiction?” he asks. “You tell me you have no experience with magic, and yet you find me in dreams. Ostensibly by accident. You claim you have never cast this spell before, and then you cast it near-perfectly. You are either unfathomably talented, or you are a liar.”

Having him, of all people, continue to accuse her of lying sets her teeth on edge. But she can see his point. If some green recruit insisted they’d never handled a sword before in their life and then went and thrashed Cullen on the practice field, she’d be deeply suspicious of their claims, too.

“This would be the clumsiest deception of all time if that was what I was attempting,” she points out.

“You do not strike me as naturally deceptive,” the wolf informs her.

“Thank you,” she replies, clipped. “The point is, if I was attempting to fool you, I guarantee I would feign much more incompetence. I am not that bad at lying. And I have had experience with magic before. Just not the casting of it.”

He frowns at her a moment. Takes his chin in hand, and she can practically see the gears turning in his head.

His thumb leaves behind a smudge of dirt.

“How did magic work in your world?” he asks. “You say you did not ‘have’ it. But it is not a thing to be owned.”

She stares at him a long moment.
Weighing the answer to that question.

Something she had grown to suspect, but never entirely confirmed, was that Solas had no idea how the Veil would reshape the world when he made it. It was the only way she could reconcile his shock and abhorrence towards the end results.

They never had occasion to discuss it, though.

Perhaps, this, at least, is something she can change. Here and now. Even if she dies tomorrow, she can leave him forewarned on something.

If it will even do any good.

…It might.

“In my world, there existed a Veil,” she tells him. “A barrier between Waking and Dreaming. It held back the sky, and pushed dreams deep below the earth.” She sandwiches her hands together, and then spreads them apart, slowly; demonstrating the space created between the heights of the Breach, and the depths below the Deep Roads. “It kept magic away from those who lived within it, and only in sleep could the Fade be visited, unless it was pierced. On the Waking side of the Veil, time passed relentlessly. People were born, grew, aged, and died when their bodies failed them. But some are — some were born with the talent to reach the Fade anyway. They could pull magic through to themselves, and shape it. Mages. Many people feared them because of their power, but it was only a talent.”

“A barrier?” he asks, morbidly fascinated. Then he shakes his head. “Wait. Their bodies failed?”

“Of course. Healing magic was rare, and time takes more than it gives,” she explains.

“Then… you are dying?” he wonders.

She pauses, surprised by the question.

Is she still aging, she wonders?

“I do not know,” she admits. “Coming here has changed a lot of things. I do not know if it has changed that, too.”

He looks disturbed. His mouth opens, but whatever he means to say gets swallowed back again.

“That does not sound pleasant,” he decides.

“Aging?” she asks.

“Aging is fine. It is the prospect of it becoming fatal that I find unnerving,” he explains.

She shrugs.

“It is normal for us.”

He looks very dubious of this statement. But after a few minutes, he shakes his head.

“If you begin to die, you must tell me at once,” he requests. Entirely serious, it seems.

She snorts.
“You will be the first to know,” she assures him.

He nods, momentarily appeased.

“If the mages of your world had to struggle to reach through some barrier to cast spells, it is possible their techniques were much more… forceful than our own,” he muses, then. “What you know from them may be akin to wielding an axe where a dinner knife would suffice.”

“Should we try something else?” she wonders.

“Yes,” he decides, apparently content to let the matter of her supposed dishonesty go for now.

He sets her to summoning more coloured balls of the light, then, and manipulating them while he observes her efforts, and occasionally makes requests. She tries to focus on how it felt when Compassion helped her summon the lanterns in the garden.

Nobly, she refrains from pelting him with any of them.

After the sixth round of blinking lights she’s starting to tire. Her mind feels like it does after several hours of solid reading, or twenty minutes of listening to Orlesian nobles talk. She puts the lesson to an end, for the time being, and the wolf doesn’t object.

“You are improving,” he tells her, with a tiny little smile.

A tiny little smile that makes something in her chest clench.

“I am utterly doomed,” she says, with a sigh that carries the weight of the world.

When he gives her a confused look, she only smiles at him in return, and takes her leave.

~

Mornings develop a routine. Every other one, she meets the wolf, and helps him with his swordsmanship, while he helps her with her spellwork. Sometimes Compassion or Curiosity or Rage will come and offer assistance on the days where he is elsewhere. Sometimes Sorrow will find her afterwards, and they will find some quiet retreat to sit in, when the grief becomes too large to allow for anything else in her thoughts.

Often, she finds Curiosity in the library. The spirit is earnest in its quest to help, and pours through tomes on the subject of souls and spirits and energies like the ones she can describe of its own volition, sharing its findings with her and helping her decipher the curiosities of the ancient books in Mythal’s palace.

Gradually, her presence becomes… more tolerated. A few of the elves even begin to approach her with questions or comments that don’t immediately equate her to an artificial construct of some kind. The librarian stops looking at her like a wild animal that just wandered into the building. It’s not precisely what she would call welcoming, but she’s had worse treatment in less hospitable places before. It’s livable.

After several weeks – and it’s hard to keep track of time, no one seems very bothered about the passage of time in general, for obvious reasons – the steady routine cracks.
So does the ground.

Midway through morning practice with the wolf, the earth begins to tremble. Some of the ancient elves recognize the telltale signs swiftly, and lay down spells to try and minimize the damage. But they don’t seem to have anticipated the severity of the quake. After a few minutes it feels like they’re all standing on the back of giant who just decided to sit up.

Given what’s potentially deep below the ground, that could actually be the case.

A few clever souls start to levitate. Not all think of it, though, and when the earth actually splits, opening a massive sinkhole in the center of the courtyard, some stumble into it before catching themselves.

She grabs the wolf by his collar and hauls him away from the wall, where the smooth stone is threatening to shatter.

He surprises her by grabbing her back and lifting them both into the air, the weightless sensation ever-so-slightly disorienting as his magic buoys them away from the spreading cracks and fissures.

The air around him snaps, tense; angry, she thinks.

When the trembling finishes, he lowers them both back down.

“Someone could have been hurt!” he exclaims, as if the concept of injury during an earthquake is equivalent to a dangerous prank, or a lapse in security.

“Was anyone hurt?” she wonders.

His mouth thins, and he strides towards the fissure, calling for headcounts and sending a pair of spirits inside to go and make sure no one got injured by having something fall onto them unexpectedly. After a moment, she picks her way carefully across some of the rubble, and follows them inside.

The worst damage, though, is to the beautiful mosaics and delicate, decorative fixtures of the palace, many of which have crumbled or even shattered under the strain of the sustained rumbling. She tries to ignore her strange, petty sense of vindication at seeing all of the beautiful, impractical pieces cast so easily into ruin.

On the whole, she thinks, this is not going to go well, and it’s definitely not worth a moment’s satisfaction for her own meaner impulses.

Magic repairs most of the structural damage by evening, though the sense of outrage in the air is palpable. The artwork will take longer, from what she gathers. Much of it is too damaged to salvage, it will have to be rebuilt or replaced.

She isn’t surprised when the wolf doesn’t extend his offer of private dining that evening.

She is surprised when, upon entering the dining hall to retrieve her meal, he beckons to her from the high table.

Where he’s eating with Mythal.

She raises an eyebrow, both at the apparent summons, and at the fact that he tries to gesture her forward like a prince calling his manservant.
After a second he lets out a breath and adapts the gesture into something *slightly* more beseeching.

She goes to the high table.

“What?” she asks him, upon arrival.

Mythal glances over. She looks, if anything, slightly amused. Her hair is a cascade of pale gold, wreathed with pearls and gemstone, and the dress she wears glitters like starlight.

If the earthquake and subsequent damage to her palace has upset her, it doesn’t show. Though the elf talking to her certainly seems to think she is *devastated* over the loss of some sculpted crystal dragon or other that was, apparently, made of perpetually frozen ice.

She doesn’t recall seeing that one herself, but the place is huge, so that’s not much of a mystery.

“Sit with me,” the wolf requests.

She’s pretty sure that only important people are supposed to sit at this table, but after a second, she shrugs and sinks onto the bench next to him.

“If your precious Children of the Stone are people, why do they keep attacking us?” he asks her, tapping his fingers in agitation along the side of his goblet.

Now they’re *her* ‘precious’ Children of the Stone?

She considers calling him on that. Then again, inaccuracy aside, she supposes trying to do so would only make it seem like she was intentionally distancing herself from them because of recent events. She’d learned a thing or two about the bizarre logic of nobles from her time with the Inquisition.

“*Are* they attacking?” she counters.

“You think it is a coincidence that these tremors keep assailing our cities and homes?” he wonders, skeptically.

“You would not be apt to notice tremors out in the wilderness and unoccupied places in the world. For all you know, they strike at random, and some of those random locations only happen to have elves living atop them,” she points out.

He considers that, tapping his gauntlet again, and then reaches over and begins to fill his plate.

She takes nothing for herself. He’d invited her to sit, but he hadn’t invited her to eat, and she has no desire to fall into some bizarre etiquette trap if she can help it.

“But if the tremors are not attacks, then why cause them?” he demands, with the air of one who has found the vital point.

And, though he doesn’t quite seem to grasp *why*, he has.

“That is precisely the question you should be asking,” she commends anyway. “Why are they causing these tremors? Are they doing so maliciously? Accidentally? On purpose, but for reasons that have nothing to do with you? Do they need help?”

“Help?” he wonders, baffled. “Why should we *help* them wreak havoc?”

“Not help in causing more earthquakes. Help dealing with whatever is inspiring them to cause the
earthquakes, so that they stop,” she explains.

He frowns.

“I will concede there may be other reasons for the earthquakes, but how would we even go about communicating with them? They speak only in gibberish,” he argues. Then he glances at the empty space on the table in front of her, and his frown deepens.

He moves an empty plate into it.

“Do you not know any spirits of Communication?” she asks. “Does no one study languages?”

“Language, certainly. But the way the Children of Stone speak is entirely different,” he replies. She considers this.

“You are not used to dealing with languages that do not… that are not grown from the same plant?” she suggests.

He blinks.

“What?”

“Branches of the same tree? Um, words that share the roots?” she tries. At his continued blank look, she huffs out a breath. “You think I speak gibberish when I do not speak this language because the other language I know does not come from the same source. But it is still a language. It can be learned, with enough effort.”

“I suppose,” he concedes.

“Curiosity is learning it. Look, here,” she reaches over and picks up the plate he’d set in front of her. “This is a plate. In common, I would call it a ‘plate’.” She demonstratively shifts between languages as she speaks.

“Plet,” he repeats.

“Plate.”

“Plate?”

“Yes,” she confirms. “I could teach you the whole language if it came to it. The Children of the Stone could also teach you how they spoke, if you convinced them to. But I would wager you would have better luck finding a spirit who has learned their language and asking it for the knowledge, instead. It is unlikely any of your people, as I have seen them so far, would inspire enough trust in the dwarves to get very far without some special effort.”

“What did you call them?” he asks, tilting his head slightly.

“Dwarves,” she repeats, a little embarrassed at the slip. “It is what they are called in common.”

“Dua’revs,” he sounds out.

“An interesting perspective,” Mythal’s lyrical voice interjects.

The table quiets, some.
She glances over at its gilded head, the lady who would become a goddess, and is probably halfway there already in the estimation of her people.

“Is diplomacy uncommon here?” she asks.

“Diplomacy is reserved for People. It is wasted on creatures that do not comprehend it, or cannot appreciate the needs of the People. The Children of the Stone have no reason to feel pain at our suffering,” Mythal replies, though she seems less belligerent or defensive than she does simply curious.

“Empathy is not bound by reason,” she says. “When you first found me, my state offended you. It had no reason to. It was not your body, nor the body of one of your people. It offended you because I still resembled you enough for you to imagine what it would be like to be in that state. *Dwarves* may not have any reason to care about what happens to your people, but that does not mean they cannot be made to care anyway.”

Mythal regards her silently for a moment.

“Interesting,” the evanuris then repeats, before turning back to the elf at her side.

When she looks away, she finds that half the dining hall is staring at her.

“What?” she wonders, wary.

The wolf looks smugly pleased, like he just won an argument with someone, somewhere.

“Mythal did not deny your point,” he tells her. “That she even spoke to you in front of so many is impressive.”

“It was only a short exchange,” she replies.

“It was enough,” he assures her.

Then he points to her plate.

“Are you not hungry?” he asks.

She casts her gaze over the lavish dishes, and shrugs.

“I will find something more suited to me later,” she reasons.

“What is wrong with this food?” he wonders, and follows the line of her gaze, puzzled.

“Nothing. It is only that it is not what I am accustomed to,” she admits.

He purses his lips, and then reaches over and plucks some kind of breaded roll with what looks to be jam and *meat* of all things mixed into the center, and drops it onto her plate.

“These are good,” he informs her.

His gaze is so earnest and sincere that the ‘no thank you’ dies in her throat, and she sighs, and picks up the offering.

It’s sticky.

And very, very sweet, with just a hint of unfamiliar spice in the jam.
But not wholly disgusting.

After a moment, he leans over to look intently at her face. Too close, she thinks. She can count his freckles. Her eyes fix onto the familiar pattern of his vallaslin instead; so out-of-place on what should be blank skin.

“Do you like it?” he asks, staring at her like he’s trying to decipher some complicated manuscript based solely on her expression.

“You are correct. It is good,” she tells him, leaning back a bit.

He grins.

She almost regrets encouraging him when he takes it as an open invitation to start piling random things onto her plate and staring at her with stupidly large, expectant eyes until she tries them all.

*How are you this young?* she wonders.

Her reprieve comes when Mythal finally stands and sweeps away from the dining hall, and Solas rises hastily and follows after her, along with what seems to be about half the table. He pauses when he’s nearly out of the room, turns towards her, and offers her a tiny wave farewell.

As soon as he’s gone, she makes her own hasty exit; hurries until she finds an empty hall and then stands in the darkest corner of it, just breathing for several long minutes.

Foolish. All of it.

Or maybe not.

What is she even doing here?

When she no longer feels that strange, lurching pain of being in the here and now, she decides to head for the library again.

Curiosity isn’t about, and she frowns at the enthusiastic spirit’s absence a moment, before shrugging and picking her own way through the archives. She means to look for more research material, but the system is still half incomprehensible to her, and so she finds herself rifling through what seem to be history books instead.

She pauses when a peculiar title catches her eye.

*Tales of Fen’Harel.*

Frowning in consternation, she picks it up. Her eyes double-check that she has read the words right, but they stare out from the spine and title page alike, undeniable.

It’s a written book, she discovers, and upon that discovery all but rushes off with it, sinking into the nearest sparsely-occupied space and opening it up. How could there possibly be a book about Fen’Harel in the time before Fen’Harel ostensibly rose up and took his title? Surely the wolf she’s met here hasn’t been running around causing any mayhem yet.

Or has he?

But the scrawling words have more the format of folk tales than a recitation of recent history. There are even some stories she recognizes, she realizes, scanning the titles of each chapter. *The Slow Arrow* and *The Noble and the Wolf*, in specific.
Others are utterly unfamiliar to her, and even a little bizarre. There are illustrations that illuminate when she touches them, their pages riddled with a soft kind of magic. The letters are large, and the wording simple and straightforward enough that she has very little difficulty following it. The consistent protagonist is Fen’Harel, the trickster, playing games of varying degrees of meanness, outwitting his enemies and often getting himself into hot water.

“You are confused,” a familiar, lyrical voice chimes, and she looks and sees that Curiosity has returned from its wanderings.

“Very,” she agrees. Then she extends the book towards the spirit. “What are these stories?”

“Those are tales for the young,” it tells her, brightly.

She blinks down at the pages. It fits with the strange format, she supposes.

“Then what is Fen’Harel?” she asks.

“He is an old figure from legend,” Curiosity replies. “Like the Son of the Sun, or the All Mother, or the Great Huntress.”

“…What?” she whispers.

The spirit regards her for a moment, and then flits off. Not a second later, it seems, it’s back again, carrying more books like the one she’d found.

“Back in the days before Elvhenan existed, when the People were warring tribes, they told stories of great spirits that helped shape the world. They are morality tales and fables now, used to entertain and educate,” Curiosity explains. “I like them. It has been a long time since anyone young enough to appreciate them has been here to read them with me.”

She feels momentarily overwhelmed as she takes up the books, and with careful hands, opens them.

Curiosity sits with her as she turns through all of the pages, reading and re-reading every word, every strange tale and seemingly nonsensical fable until well after the sun has set. Very little of it fits with what she knows. Fen’Harel’s is the only book with stories she recognizes as virtually unchanged from some that survived the passage into her time. The rest are vastly different, but the core of them is the same.

Fables. Legends.

Stories that belong to the People.

Stories that got interwoven with the evanuris, somewhere down the line, but that, at their heart, are more Dalish than anything she’s seen so far.

Stories that are older than Solas.

She shakes a little when she finally turns the last page of the last book, and sets it gently down. Her right hand comes to her face, and she cups it tightly over her mouth.

Did he not know what it would mean? This information? Was his perception of the fables so intrinsically tied to his concept of his enemies, was his understanding of her people so coloured by his disdain for their ‘mistaken’ worship of false gods, that he had forgotten these stories? Did he forget, too, that Fen’Harel once meant something other than himself?
Or did he think it wouldn’t matter, in the end? That these stories only belonged to *his* people, or that, as simple fables, they were unimportant in the grand scheme of things?

“I cannot answer that,” Curiosity tells her, sadly.

Her hand slips up to her eyes, and she shudders, hot tears leaking onto her palm.

Bastard. Bastard. *Bastard.*

They weren’t just the lies and propaganda of the evanuris after all.

In the heart of them were stories that predated even Elvhenan, and he had not shared them.

She feels a familiar warmth settle at her side, but Compassion cannot soothe her. She is shaken and she is *furious,* and when she realizes that, she makes a hasty exit from the library. Her control over her magic has improved, but she won’t risk damaging even one of those books.

She makes for the courtyard.

Rage finds her there.

The spirit takes up a blade, and stands across from her. Waiting next to the still-scarred ground, flames flickering in the cool night air.

In a flash she draws her own weapon, and they begin to dance.

It is not the angry flailing or rampant aggression it could be. Her anger is cold, like the spirit in front of her, and burns blue instead of red. She assails her partner with an economy of motion, left arm clenched behind her back as she lunges, parries, whirls and dodges. She is quick. She has always been quick. A wiry strength, the Keeper had once called it; unexpected, like when fools spy a gentle halla and think it is a fragile creature, and then learn that kicking hooves break bone as easily as they do branches.

Rage is a fierce partner, and does not go gently on her. Each time their swords meet it is a jarring clash and crash. The air crackles, hot and hazy, and it’s only when she inhales and feels her lungs burn on it a little, and remembers ash and smoke and fire and the death of everything, that she stumbles.

Her swing goes wide, and the spirit knocks her to her knees.

She stays on them, panting, bone-tired and spent.

“Good,” Rage says.

Then it leaves her, again, and she finds herself looking upwards, at the dark night sky and the constellations she can recognize. She takes a moment to be glad that she can. From her place on the ground, with nothing but the sky overhead, she can almost forget that she is entirely lost.

“He kept so much hidden,” she whispers. “Even now, there’s still more to find. I feel like I keep sticking my hand into a drawer full of hidden knives.”

Compassion settles in beside her.

“A long life builds many layers. It can rarely be narrated in full,” the spirit tells her. “Knowledge and understanding unfold in their own time. For those who have seen much, what to tell and when is not always clear. Memory falters, and old truths become buried underneath the bitterness of
disappointment. Good things are lost in the same fires that burn out the bad.”

“You think he forgot?” she asks.

The spirit tilts its head.

“I think he forgot why it was worth remembering,” it decided. “I have seen it happen before, to those who live and see too much pain. They bind everything up in it, and the small currents of kindness are lost, tangled in with the suffering until they can no longer be seen. It is my privilege to pluck them out, when I can. To make certain they are not forgotten.”

Cole had tried, she remembers. He’d tried so hard to make Solas remember himself, to see. He was the only one who never once thought that Solas wasn’t worth saving, the only one to insist, even more loudly than she did, at times, that he wasn’t simply evil. She had had her doubts. She had wondered if her heart had been deceived. Cole was always adamant that, to the very core of his being, Solas was honestly just trying to fix things.

Not that it had mattered, in the end. Actions spoke louder than words. Intentions were neither here nor there when offered apologetically to silent graves.

Probably worth even less when offered to memories that didn’t even have the grace of burial.

“Thank you. I am sorry to have to rely on you so,” she says.

“I find it only fulfilling to help,” Compassion assures her.

“I know. But thank you, just the same.”

She glances around, then, and is surprised to see that Curiosity has remained. And remained surprisingly silent. It blinks at her.

“Why did the fables upset you so?” it wonders.

She sucks in a deep breath.

“Because they were part of the answer to a question my people had been asking for a very long time, and someone I loved did not share them with me,” she replies.

“That is horrible,” Curiosity decides.

“It is,” she agrees.

“At least you have an answer now, though. Even if it just makes more questions. That is how it usually goes,” the spirit muses, before reaching over to offer her a hand up.

She accepts it, nearly slipping on the semi-hard surface it makes of itself, her muscles aching. A light rain starts to fall, then, a few clouds rolling in to obscure the view of the stars. Some spirits and elves drift outside as she heads back in, casting barriers over parts of the palace roof that are still cracked, so that the rain won’t spill inside.

Her room is in disarray when she gets to it. Her pallet has toppled over, mostly, and the wash basin is cracked. She rights what’s fallen and thinks of trying to use a spell to fix the basin, opts to leave it until morning, and slumps onto her blankets.

When sleep comes, it’s the dark and deep and quiet kind, and she’s grateful for that.
She remembers the last dream she had of him, before he tore down the Veil.

They were in a forest. Dark trees, perpetually burning. Corpses strewn among fallen logs and broken pillars. Smoke, and ruin, and ash that fell like snow. Not the most pleasant atmosphere. In the dream she’d still been wearing the stiff bandages over her ruined eye, though in the waking world, those had finally come off.

She caught him watching her again. Not a wolf, not that time. From the edges of the fire, she had seen him, cloaked and silent. Perhaps just another part of the dream.

Perhaps not.

For a long while, they had wordlessly regarded one another.

In the dreams before, she would reach for him when she saw him. She would try and reason with him. She would offer him sympathy, hope, even humour and affection, all in an effort to draw him out. He rarely responded. If she got too close, he would vanish, like a shadow erased by the light of a torch. Eventually, she learned to keep her distance. To dry and draw him out with words. With memories. With silent invitations.

None of it worked.

In that last dream, she abandoned all pretence, and simply fell to her knees.

“Please,” she said. “I beg you, Solas. Please stop. Please don’t kill us all.”

Her voice was cracked and rough. The opportunity to kill him had come and gone and she had not taken it. He was too powerful; there would not be another opportunity. She had searched long and hard for another solution to his dilemma. She’d dragged herself down to the darkest depths of the earth and across the most distant reaches of Thedas, through crossroads and shattered paths and both sides of the Veil, past darkspawn hordes and into ancient Tevinter ruins, and her hands were still empty. There was no recourse left to her except for this. To ask, one last time. To beg. To hope that she had been right when, once upon a time, she thought him the sort of man who would never do such a thing as this.

As she watched, on her knees, he fell, too, like a broken pillar crumbling under too much weight at last. He had dropped his face into his hands, shaking, and a pained, wretched sound had dragged itself out of him. And she’d known. Her pleas had not fallen on deaf ears, but there would be no changing his course.

He had always known the terrible price of his quest. It hadn’t mattered at the start. It wouldn’t matter at the finish. He had weighed his misery, his conscience, his values, her life and the entirety of the world against his goals, and even still, his goals had won.

That was the first time she ever left a dream before he did.

He had not come back to watch her again.

She curses at the memory. Runs her regrown hand over her regrown eye, and then sucks in a deep
breath, filling out her lungs until they ache before letting it go again.

After a few long, quiet moments, she makes herself get up.

The wolf is waiting for her on the training grounds, to her surprise. With all the repairs going on, she had more or less expected him to be too busy to come. But he’s not clad in his practice gear. Instead he’s dressed in elegant silver and white robes, patterned with delicate shapes that only seem to show up when he moves; so subtly done that his every gesture makes the fabric ripple like the calm surface of a clear pond. It is, perhaps, the finest outfit she’s seem him wear yet. It compliments the white vallaslin on his face, and is topped off with a slim, silver circlet that holds what appears to be a crystal carved in the shape of a wolf’s skull. It sits in front of his hair, at the middle of his forehead.

She hates it.

It’s ridiculous.

Why is the skull carved out of crystal? Was actual bone not shiny enough?

“What are you wearing?” she asks him, in a tone which manages to do an admirable job of conveying her sentiments.

He straightens, fussing a bit with the edges of his sleeves.

“It is formal attire. Mythal has called for a convening of leaders in Arlathan, in light of this most recent tremor. We are to accompany her,” he explains.

She pauses, her brain catching on the most peculiar part of his answer.

“We?” she asks.

“Yes,” he confirms. “She has deemed your presence necessary. Arlathan is…” he pauses, and then winces, slightly. “I do not expect it will suit you. I came to warn you. Some of Mythal’s attendants will attempt to make you presentable, and I do not expect that will suit you, either. But it is better to let them do as they will.”

She frowns, and then shakes her head.

“But why does Mythal want me to come? What is happening?” she presses.

“I suspect she is planning something. She often is. But the particulars are not known to me,” he admits. “I do not believe she would bring you along simply to serve as a curiosity.”

Oh, well. That’s a comfort. She scowls, and then looks back over at the wolf, who is standing there in his fancy clothes, giving her forewarning of what she suspects is going to be a deeply unpleasant series of events. Peering at her face. Like he’s trying really hard to read her emotions based entirely off of her expressions, and isn’t used to making the effort.

But is still making the effort anyway.

Dammit.

“Thank you for the warning,” she says.

He nods in acceptance.
“Hopefully, most of those assembled will be too preoccupied with the pressing matter of the
tremors to trouble you,” he says. Then he hurries off again, robes swishing elegantly behind him.

As warned, she doesn’t get far through the rest of her morning routine before a pair of elvhen
women approach her. They regard her with alternating curiosity and clinical assessment, all but
dragging her off, instructing her to bathe and, afterwards, taking her into a strange round chamber
that opens to the sky. Lithe green branches, leafy and flowering, trail up the walls, reaching for the
sunlight. And circular pool sits in the middle of the room. It looks oddly ceremonial.

At least it’s not whispering.

The attendants produce a familiar selection of inks.

“Mythal has deemed you worthy of the honour of her marks,” one of them informs her.

She stares at the row of bottles, and shakes her head, sharply.

“No. Thank you,” she says.

The two women glance at one another.

“Restrain her?” one suggests.

“Perhaps you do not understand,” the other one says, addressing her directly and ignoring her
companion’s comment. “Mythal means to take you to Arlathan. The great city of the empire. Seat
of the People’s Glory. You cannot go with your face bare. It will mean that you owe no
allegiances, and anyone will be free to kill you or claim you as they please. Without markings, you
will have no rights as a person, no protection, and compassion is not as abundant in the city as it is
here. Mythal is the kindest of the evanuris. You will not find better fortune than this. And, truly, it
is an honour that one such as yourself is even being offered this much.”

Such an honour.

Quietly, she regards this attendant of Mythal, who wears the same vallaslin she is offering, who
actually seems to be trying very hard to make her understand the importance of this matter.

Not that she doubts it.

Then she stares at the vials, and her skin crawls. It seems the past is set upon restoring everything
which the future ever cost her, in all of the ways that she doesn’t want it to.

So. She has two options, here. She can refuse, in which case, her time at the palace is probably up,
and she will have to leave. Or, she can acquiesce, and try to do what she can with the opening
Mythal is giving her to continue on this path. The path of future would-be gods gathering to discuss
the matter of the Titans, at a point in time which Solas sacrificed everything to try and return to.

She closes her eyes.

“Do it, then,” she decides.

The attendant who spoke to her shoots her less accomodating friend a glance that clearly reads as
‘see? I told you so’, and directs her to sit. She offers her a choice of colours, far greater than the
selection which Keeper Deshanna had presented to her once, a lifetime ago. She still picks the
same shade of ink she had the first time, though. If she must again wear vallaslin, she will do what
she can to make the marks hers once more.
It’s quicker, the process they use in this time, facilitated by magic that tingles and burns on her skin. The spell is still less painful than the needles, weaving her blood into the ink and sealing Mythal’s twining branches onto her face. There is no offer of a less complex pattern. A full tree blooms on her forehead and twines its way down beneath her eyes, spreading in her skin.

Afterwards, she is offered a set of clothes. Not nearly as ridiculous as what the wolf had been wearing, thankfully, but fine enough that she could have worn them to a banquet without seeming too out-of-place. A silver threaded tunic and smooth leggings, and, to her mixed surprise and relief, armour. Far lighter than she’s used to, but sturdy just the same, wrist and shin guards and a chest piece that matches them.

The clothes do not fit her, not at first, but the reluctant attendant weaves a hand through the air, and after a minute, they do.

Handy, she supposes.

She keeps the blade which Rage gave her, and looks at herself in the mirror, and feels very, very strange.

She looks almost like a true denizen of this time.

Not quite. But almost.

“You will suffice,” one of the attendants pronounces, and leads her into yet another part of the palace she’s never been to.

It’s a large and airy chamber, accessed by a massive corridor, and marred by a large, freshly-sealed crack in the foundation. Its chief feature, apart from the swirling mosaics and the random gemstones that seem to be just hovering in the air for no immediately discernable reason, is an eluvian. A massive, massive eluvian, big enough that a giant or two could comfortably walk through it.

What she supposes is meant to be Mythal’s entourage has begun to gather at the base of the mirror. There are elves she recognizes from the high table, faces she’s seen in passing, most everyone dressed to the hilt and buzzing with interest. Literally, in regards to the emotional clouds she can only just discern hovering invisibly in the air.

It’s a long wait before Mythal herself actually arrives, though. She spends most it just sort of lurking on the edges of the room and doing her best to be ignored. A few of the assembled elves do double-takes at her. She supposes it’s the vallaslin that’s throwing them off. Possibly also the clothes.

No one actually approaches her, at least.

They wait so long that, at some point, someone actually serves food and drink.

It’s the beginning of the evening when Mythal at last arrives, the wolf in her wake. The evanuris is even more resplendent and unnerving than usual. Qunari-esque horns – dragon horns, she supposes – curve up from her head. Not sculpted with hair pieces, but growing from her skull, in a shining gold that bleeds to crimson red. The colours are a match for her gown, which falls from her like spilt blood, and her armour, which is light and graceful and wickedly sharp at its every edge. This woman looks more like and unlike the Flemeth she recalls; there are undeniable shades of their kinship, and yet, there is a crucial layer missing. She doesn’t know what it is. The weight of years not yet lived, perhaps. Of betrayal not yet endured.
In a way Mythal is unsettlingly young, too.

She watches the dreamer mage stride up towards the eluvian, a striking mark of red and gold against its beautiful, silvery frame. Then the surface bursts into life. A sea of starlight trapped in the air before them. The shine of it sends unexpected shapes and forms scattering across the walls. Where the light catches on some of the odd fixtures in the room, it forms shadows that look like rearing dragons.

Mythal walks through first. The wolf follows closely beside her. With little more ado, the assembled elves follow.

She passes through with the last group.

The crossroads are beautiful. Not the hollowed place she recalls, but a neat network of roads, woven between blooming gardens and massive statuary, works of art trailing even through the air in the sky. It is meticulous, and the elves glide through it as if it is nothing.

She wonders how much effort it takes to maintain such a place. How many artisans have driven themselves half mad by lingering too long on their projects, and losing pieces of themselves to the space between in order to produce the beautiful effect.

Perhaps that is not such a danger in this time, though. Perhaps it works differently. Perhaps the work she sees is much more easily accomplished.

She doesn’t really know, either way.

Other travellers bow hastily out of their path as Mythal leads them to another massive eluvian and through a second sea of light. They emerge beneath a sky lit with the purple reds of evening, and a city that takes her a good, solid minute to process.

Arlathan, the much-longed for and beloved ancient jewel of Elvhenan. The city of a thousand dreams. The lost home of the People.

Her first impression is that of some massive, fallen beast; its bones bleached white by the sun, a mess of fireflies and dragon scales littering the ground beneath the spires of its ribcage. Then she blinks, and sees what she’s probably meant to, instead – intricate towers of beautiful white stone, and roads lit by softly glowing lights, runes etched into artful pillars and lanterns that drift beneath their own power, banners that sing through the air like birds, the setting sun reflecting off of dazzling surfaces to make even the mundane parts of the city look like a multifaceted gem.

There are also some random floating buildings.

She supposes that they have to use eluvians to get to those. And also that they once made quite an impact when the creation of the Veil sent them crashing down.

A song comes up at their arrival. She’s not entirely sure if the tune is magic, or if there are some unseen elves situated in the city’s walls, belting out tunes as they pass over a wide, white bridge, and into the thick of things. The lyrics seem to be about Mythal, so she supposes it’s a greeting.

Where the evanuris steps, the ground lights up, leaving a trail of moonlight in her wake. The wolf walks in it, as tense as she’s ever seen him in this time.

His tension increases her own, hitting some primal part of her brain that warns of threats, and she lingers at the back of the group and keeps her eyes peeled for suspicious movements. Watches the shadows more than the bright, shining spaces.
There is a lot to see, in the shadows of Arlathan.

 Mostly, there is the poor.

 Thin and marked, she spies them. They wear odd bracelets on their arms. Bands with runes upon them. Like the elves living in the alienages of any large city, they are quiet, and quick, many of them bruised, and all of them ignored by those who walk in the light and have less to fear. They stare at Mythal and the passing entourage with equal parts wariness and awe.

 The higher they get into the city, the more discreet the poor become. She wonders where they live. Not in any of the streets she’s seen so far, she thinks. Perhaps below what can be seen, or sectioned off in some dull corner where the sunlight doesn’t sparkle quite so brightly.

 They pass through a few more eluvians on their winding route. It feels almost like a parade. She’s half tempted to just leave the group behind, to make her own way through the city and really see it. Ugly underbelly and all. But she reins in that impulse and keeps pace, a small shadow at the back, far enough behind that Mythal’s moonlit footprints always fade before she reaches them.

 Eventually, spirits begin to drift by. Most flutter at the head of the group, drifting the air, flitting through walls, but a few float back to regard her with some obvious interest as well.

 She’d thought her reception at Mythal’s palace had been mostly due to the intrigue of her arrival, but apparently, there’s just something about her that comes across as interesting to the spirits of this time. A couple of them even prod at her, ghostly limbs tingling at her shoulders before they flit back, like children playing a game.

 At last they come to a gleaming citadel, one of those ill-advised floating buildings, sitting at the heart of everything.

 Honestly, though.

 Why make it float?

 What frame of mind does a city planner have to be in to not think ‘this is a terrible idea, if it falls, everyone inside of this thing and everyone underneath it, and probably everyone for a very solid radius around it, too, is doomed’?

 She feels vaguely uncomfortable just going inside the stupid thing.

 Of course, the interior is a work of art unto itself. Long, stained glass windows cast multi-coloured reflections onto a floor that swirls and eddies like glitter mixed in wine. Columns of actual, literal fire rise up at the back of the entrance. She counts eight of them. It’s difficult to imagine that they’re actually supporting any part of the building, though.

 Then again, if they’re symbolic of the evanuris, that might just be a surprisingly apt metaphor.

 The chamber is massive enough that the entire entourage passes swiftly inside. After her eyes catch on the pillars, she notices that they aren’t the only group in attendance.

 Two more are already present. One party is led by a woman whose elaborate beauty rivals Mythal’s. She is willowy, silver-haired and impressively tall, clad all in the purest white. Like someone wove her dress out of light itself. Which is possible. From the top of her head grow antlers, woven and winding, marked with runes that shine as golden as Mythal’s horns.

 Her entourage is much smaller, and most of them are clad in shining armour.
Ghilan’nain, she supposes, even before she realizes she’ll just be able to tell by the vallaslin on her followers’ faces.

The other party is led by a man. His fiery red hair is bound in elaborate knots, and his clothing is oddly intricate, pieces interlocking in unusual places, woven with seemingly random strands of runes that dance around him, all of it looking like it must take a team of experts several hours to dismantle. His followers are dressed like bronze and copper statues, and wear June’s vallaslin, leading her to an obvious conclusion.

He is the first to greet Mythal.

“Mother of my wife,” he says, inclining his head.

“Husband of my daughter,” Mythal replies, though she does not nod.

A moment later, Ghilan’nain extends the exact same greeting.

“Mother of my wife,” she says.

“Wife of my daughter,” Mythal replies.

The tension in the air is thick enough to cut with a knife.

So apparently everyone’s arriving separately of their spouses and exchanging the most sterile greetings she’s seen in her life.

That’s a promising sign.

Mythal takes up position in front of one of the Useless Flaming Pillars, and everyone else gathers behind her, as the other evanuris’ servants have gathered behind them, and… waits.

And waits.

It’s exceedingly dull.

She wonders if it’s a ‘patience of the immortals’ sort of thing or if there’s some weird social etiquette rule where no one’s supposed to point out how unreasonably boring it is to stand in an opulent room and do nothing while time just whittles away.

Possibly both.

One of Ghilan’nain’s followers coughs.

It’s such a pleasant break in the monotony that she’s almost tempted to thank the poor woman, who immediately straightens and looks mortified. After a day spent on waiting and walking and then waiting some more, she’s starting to seriously rethink her decision to let Mythal’s attendants put vallaslin on her.

Then, finally, the massive doors open again, and it’s like everyone just got the meeting times mixed up or something, because the remaining groups pour inside in quick succession.

An athletically-built woman, fiercely beautiful, with dark hair and golden eyes that make her think of Morrigan, greets Mythal as ‘mother’ and Ghilan’nain as ‘wife’. She’s clad in black armour, as dark as Ghilan’nain’s is light, and her followers wear Andruil’s markings.

Falon’Din and Dirthamen come next, near enough that she’s not sure, at first, which is which. The
raven-shaped persons perching on Dirthamen’s broad shoulders give him away before their groups break off to stand in front of their respective Phallic Fire Monuments, however. Dirthamen is masked and silent, covered in fabric from head-to-toe and trailing shadows behind him, while Falon’Din wears armour made of bone, and brings an entourage that’s half made up of spirits.

Sylaise comes then, clad in gold, with sparks of light strewn amongst her hair. She looks shockingly like Mythal, and actually smiles upon greeting everyone. Her servants smile, as well, all bright teeth and bright eyes and perfect, unblemished skin.

It’s deeply unsettling.

Elgar’nan is the last to come, and when the doors open for him, they clap like thunder. He is not the tallest nor broadest elf she has ever seen, but he walks as if even the vast chamber around them is too small a space to suit him. His steps are quick, and clipped, and the air vibrates around him. His eyes are embers, and so are his footprints. She gets the distinct sense that he’s trying to tear apart the world just through his very presence in it.

His entourage is small, and they resemble her concept of elves only loosely. Some of them appear to be perpetually on fire.

“How dare they?!” is the first thing out of his mouth, rather than any greeting.

“Calm yourself, husband. All is well,” Mythal replies.

“Well?” Elgar’nan demands. “The earth is strewn with vermin that dare attack my wife, and my wife says it is ‘well’?!”

“I mean only that I am unharmed. Buildings can be repaired, beloved one. Let us all just take a moment to be grateful that none of us have suffered any greater injury.”

Elgar’nan doesn’t seem eager to subside, however.

“You should have let me purge them all when this first began,” he insists.

“You are still recovering, treasure of my heart. I will not have you over-exert yourself. Especially not over a matter which has yet to do more than offend,” Mythal replies, her tone of voice practically a soothing song.

If the pours it on any thicker, the chamber is going to flood.

The air shimmers around Elgar’nan for a moment.

But gradually, his manner begins to resemble a rampaging beast less and less. The fury that even she can feel whirling about him dies down to a low simmer.

When he is no longer burning up all of the space in the chamber, Mythal smiles, and gestures to the doors behind the Ludicrous Flame Erections.

“Now that we have all gathered, shall we adjourn to our rest?” she suggests. “It is a poor excuse, my husband, but it has been too long since we were last together.”

Elgar’nan lets out a heavy breath.

“As you say. It has been too long,” he agrees

A series of elaborate farewells are then exchanged, and the evanuris disappear behind their
respective doorways. Elgar’nan and Mythal go in a pair. Actually, all of them seem to go in pairs, leaving their entourages to stand until the last door has shut with a resounding click.

She gets the unnerving impression that everyone is somehow meant to mingle while the evanuris all engage in... pair-based activities.

"Did they just all go off to have sex?" a follower of Ghilan'nain's - the one who sneezed - asks in a whisper that manages to carry through the whole chamber.

Well. At least she knows who to try talking to, if it comes to it.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, you guys, you're always making me smile. Thanks for all the encouragement!

Up next - Arlathan continues to be very pretty and also extremely awful.
The evanuris' entourages, previously separated into their own tidy corners, merge slowly; Falon'Din and Dirthamen's followers mingle first, and then everyone else follows suit in bits and pieces. A few obviously seek out specific individuals they're friendly with, and the rest come together in clusters, with much the same air of politicking as in any other gathering of nobles.

She keeps to the edges, at first, avoiding the pillars of flame, and for a little while it's almost like she's invisible. Clouds of emotion and intent crackle through the air, but she doesn't add to them, and she suspects it might make her harder to notice in such a crowd.

She files that information away for future reference.

It's a little surreal, being in a sea of people separated rather than united by their vallaslin, and the evanuris' followers are even more strange and diverse than Mythal's. Some simply look like elves in various ridiculous outfits. Others sport animal-like features, or eye-catching details like the perpetual flames of Elgar'nan's followers, or are even just animals, like Dirthamen's ravens.

The follower of Ghilan'nain's who first cracked the silence is also lingering back, clearly embarrassed and quiet again. She's one of the ones who looks more or less just like an elf, with white gems braided into her dark hair, and dark markings on her face. She looks young, but that could be neither here nor there.

More importantly, the young woman looks approachable, and it probably would be a good idea to talk to someone, she decides. The wolf is busy staring at the door which Elgar'nan and Mythal exited through like he can perhaps burn a hole in it with his gaze.

He probably can.

And she's gradually starting to draw a few curious glances herself, either because no one really recognizes her, or because the rest of Mythal's entourage is letting her peculiar status slip, or even because it's finally becoming noticeable to them that she's different, somehow.

So she makes good on her internal decision and approaches the young woman.

"Greetings," she says.

"My apologies!" the woman immediately replies, as if it's a reflex.

"I do not need apologies. I wish to thank you for breaking up the monotony before," she says.

The young woman blinks, and then smiles a little, hesitant and with growing confusion.

"You are with Mythal?" the follower of Ghilan'nain surmises.

"What gave it away?" she asks; dryly, in return.
It earns her an easier smile, though the confusion also deepens.

“Forgive me. It is my first time coming here with my Lady,” the young woman informs her.

“It is my first visit as well. Again, you do not have to apologize. I…”

She trails off as she realizes that some of the rest of Ghilan’nain’s entourage has begun to close in on them.

“Shira,” one of them says, “What are you making conversation with? Some trickster’s illusion?”

“She is with Mythal’s group,” the woman, Shira, replies.

“It is an empty shell!” one of the others exclaims, waving a hand through the air, as if that’s mean to demonstrate something. “No emotions! How did you not notice? Someone is making a fool of you.”

“What an insult. Though I suppose you deserve it, being so embarrassing,” the first one muses.

Shira looks stricken.

Well, this just took a fun turn, she decides. And it’s probably going to be a delight to try and extricate herself from.

“There is no cause for anyone to be offended. I was only making conversation,” she says.

Several sets of eyes turn, scrutinizing, towards her.

“How eerie,” one of them decides.

“I do not like its eyes. We should destroy it for the insult and be done with this,” another one insists.

Looking worse by the minute.

“I will defend myself if you attack me,” she warns.

“It speaks so strangely,” a third notes, all of them acting as if she’s some fascinating bug in a glass bottle. All save poor Shira, who simply looks uncomfortable and uncertain, in that way unique to people for whom discomfort and uncertainty are practically a way of life.

“If it is Mythal’s, we should not harm it. It wears her blood writing,” Shira interjects.

“Part of the illusion,” one of the others says, dismissively. He is a wiry young man, with glittering silver dust painted onto his eyelids, and strangely pointed teeth. She gets a good view of them when he curls a lip at her, and starts drawing the blade at his hip.

She draws her own sword before he gets far, levelling the tip at his wrist rather than his throat.

“Do you not know how rude it is to just go whipping things out in the middle of a party?” she asks.

The entire group tenses, like a dozen bowstrings being drawn tight. It’s actually a little alarming. She can almost hear the air snap with it, and a few of the other clusters and groups look over, clearly curious as to what’s inspired the abrupt change in mood.

“She makes an excellent point,” a familiar voice smoothly interjects.
The wolf glides through the assembled guests, drawing some of the attention onto himself, instead, until he’s standing alongside her.

“It is not, after all, _that_ kind of party,” he continues. “At least, not for us.”

There is a murmur of amusement from some of the closest onlookers.

None from Ghilan’nain’s camp, however.

“Is this construct _yours_, Pride?” the young man asks.

But he lets go of his blade, and she withdraws her own in turn. After a moment’s thought, she sheathes it. A drawn weapon might be more of a liability than a defense in this crowd.

“I did not realize the host of Ghilan’nain had become so unobservant in recent years,” the wolf replies, raising his eyebrows. “Clearly, she is marked as a servant of Mythal. It therefore stands to reason that she is _Mythal’s_.”

“Are you telling us the great lady queen brought along some soulless creation as a joke?” one of the others drawls, disbelieving.

“I am telling you that Mythal wished her to attend this gathering. Anything else you infer is a product of your own limited skills of observation,” the wolf says.

He’s sharp, and biting, and for half a second all she can see is _him_. In that half a second, she almost forgets where she is and what’s going on. She almost forgets that he’s painfully young and that the world is all wrong, and her lips curl upwards, briefly, as something tugs inside of her chest.

Then the weight of reality crashes back down, and she shakes her head.

“If my presence offends, I will leave you be,” she offers, taking a step back.

“But what _is_ it, then?” the young man insists, addressing the wolf.

“Vastly superior company, for one thing,” the wolf quips in return.

Shira makes an odd squawking sound and clamps a hand down over her mouth.

“Are you alright?” she asks.

“Fine. Sorry. That was an appalled sound. Definitely not a laugh. Sorry,” Shira says, the air around her trembling oddly for a minute. Like her emotional storm cloud is having some kind of spasm.

She thinks it must be some attempt on the poor woman’s part to choke back inappropriate emotions, at first.

But the air continues trembling. For a moment she’s not sure if it’s just the tension in the room, or the building hostility, but then everyone else pauses. The wolf’s head snaps up like he just heard something, and a few of Elgar’nan’s people flare oddly, and then the world gets very, very bright, and very, _very_ hot.

She has a sudden, visceral memory of the conclave in Haven, and her left arm burns with the phantom of that old pain, the way it sometimes did even after it was gone. It’s reflex to throw up the barrier, as if she’s lifting a shield instead. The air shines silver and white, fills with cries of shock and alarm and pain, cracks like breaking glass.
Something else surges up, familiar magic that wraps through the room. And then more, less familiar magic, as every alarmed soul in the room attempts to shield themselves and the people around them from the abrupt and inexplicable explosion.

For several seconds all she can see is blinding light.

Then the assault passes, and she’s left standing in a room full of glimmering barriers and shields.

It goes much darker than it had been before. It takes her a moment to realize why; the flaming pillars have all gone out. Everything else, from the floor to the ceiling, is blackened with scorch marks. The air fizzles with magic, heavy with smoke and the scent of charred flesh, and shocked silence.

She pauses, less than half a second, and then starts taking stock of the aftermath.

The wolf is still beside her. He’s fine. His arms are up, casting a barrier large enough to encompass her own, and a solid chunk of the room, including the followers of Ghilan’nain and a few of the curious observers that had gathered around them. A few tossed up their own shields, making barriers that gleam within barriers. Her own is wrapped around herself and Solas and a few of the other elves nearby, including Shira and the one who’d tried to draw a blade on her.

The rest of the chamber seems to have survived with varying degrees of success. Elgar’nan’s followers are wrapped in a fiery ball of magic in the middle of the room, agitated but seemingly unhurt, so far as she can tell. Most of Mythal’s entourage had spread out, but theirs are far from the only barriers that went up. Dirthamen’s ravens are dark shadows, weaving over top of half the room, their shadows shielding everyone below them.

But there are injuries. Figures collapsed, burned, caught outside of the range of various barriers, too slow to have raised their own. A number of June’s people are down, injured and bleeding. Anyone situated close to one of the fiery pillars in the chamber seems to have gotten the worst of it.

*They exploded*, she thinks. Someone set them off, somehow, and tried to incinerate the entire chamber.

The stillness of shock is broken by a cry of pain, and pandemonium follows.

Barriers drop – and a few go up; a delayed reaction, she thinks – and the air spins with turmoil. The various groups close ranks again, gathering up their injured, and frayed tensions ignite as accusations begin to fly. Most of them seem to be directed towards Elgar’nan’s people, who respond in kind.

She drops her own barrier, more because she’s too distracted to keep it up than because it seems like a good idea.

The wolf has turned to look at the doorways out of the chamber. He hesitates for half a second, and then closes a hand around her arm.

“*Keep close,*” he asks.

Then he starts moving, very swiftly; clearly intent on checking on Mythal.

Fortunately, they’re spared the awkwardness of interrupting anything when the doors begin to bang open from the other side, and several irate evanuris emerge only to stop at the thresholds, clearly as alarmed by the sight of the ruined hall as everyone else. Elgar’nan is a blaze of fury when he sees
it, bursting into the room and doing nearly as much damage again as the explosion itself; Mythal follows, and contains his fury in a wall of mist that eases the worst of the lingering smoke and heat from the air.

“What has happened? What has been done?” Elgar’nan bellows.

His followers flock towards him, like still-burning embers in the chaos, flaring with reflections of his outrage as they speak to him in words she can’t quite hear.

The wolf moves to Mythal’s side. She follows him, and the rest of their entourage joins them soon after, a few still healing their own injuries in washed of sparkling green and blue magic. Most do it less with the air of the wounded, and more with the manner of someone whose outfit has just been ruined.

“Is anyone dead or gravely injured?” Mythal asks, her eyes sweeping over them, for a moment looking like nothing so much as a bizarrely over-dressed Keeper doing a head count. But their own group is far from the worst off.

Elgar’nan comes enough to stop whipping through the air like a fiery tornado, and settles among his followers.

“Who offered this insult?” he demands, his voice ringing throughout the room.

Next to her, the wolf rolls his eyes.

“Because the culprit will surely volunteer themselves,” he mutters, just low enough for her to hear.

“Perhaps the Dirt Walkers are more intelligent than we thought,” Andruil suggests, leaning against a patch of charred wall at her back. “Luring us all into one place with an aim to strike while we are gathered.”

She’s speaking without really thinking about it, a reflex that comes from being an authority in most disasters.

“Lure everyone together and then wait until they’re all out of the room to try and do a shoddy job of injuring some of their followers?” she asks. “That supposes they’re informed enough to know exactly where and when you’d meet, but not informed enough to know that a little magical fire could not possibly take out a chamber filled with expert spellcasters. They would also need contacts among your own people to gain access to this city and this chamber, and some knowledge of how your spells work in order to interfere with the pillars. Very elaborate for people you have not even attempted to communicate with.”

Several eyes turn her way, and she realizes all at once that it probably would have been a much better idea to keep her mouth shut.

“What is that?” Andruil asks, voice dripping with disdain.

“An odd little thing with some interesting opinions,” Mythal replies, with a dismissive wave of her hand. “She makes a good point, though, Daughter. This was not an attack. It was an insult. And I believe we all know who would be likeliest to seize the first possible opportunity to offer us such.”

“They.” Elgar’nan breathes, and the air around him shimmers like a desert being pelted by the sun.

Dirthamen then raises a hand and waves it, slightly. His ravens flock to him, their wings melting into the air like shadows whenever they turn.
He confers with them in whispers, and the other evanuris watch him expectantly. After a second, he produces a familiar-looking orb from the folds of his robes. It flashes, once, and both ravens vanish. Then he tucks it back away again.

“They are not in the city,” Dirthamen says.

“Then Mother’s little doll is correct, and at least one of us has brought a spy to this gathering,” Falon’Din surmises, sounding more bored than anything else.

“The pillars were mine. The traitor will be mine,” Elgar’nann hisses. His bright, burning eyes scour over the chamber. Taking in the scorched walls and clustered groups of people, his fellow evanuris, the smoke still lingering up at the top of the high ceiling. It even lands on her, for a moment, narrowing briefly.

She feels something like a hot knife at the back of her skull.

Elgar’nann gestures towards her.

“Come here,” he commands.

It’s not in a tone of voice that implies refusal is a valid option.

She goes, tense, a little worried but not quite afraid. The air around him is stifling. She wonders how he keeps it up, if it’s just the way he is or if he’s constantly spilling energy into the world, exhausting himself by inches until he must, at some point, need to collapse and simply turn all of it off for at least a minute or two.

Even magical infernos will eventually suffocate themselves if they burn too hot for too long.

He scrutinizes her, and that burning feeling comes back. It makes her want to draw her sword, or raise another barrier, or do something to shield herself from it, but she’s pretty well sure that would be a death sentence right now.

“You do not fit,” Elgar’nann finally decides. “But you are not guilty.”

He gestures dismissively, and she takes the opportunity to hastily retreat from the radius of his presence.

The evanuris resumes his examination of the room and its occupants.

When his gaze comes to a stop again it fixes on a trembling form among Ghilan’nain’s people.

“Come here,” he says, and gestures Shira forward.

The poor woman looks like she’s barely keeping her feet as she steps forward, her fellows parting from her as if she’s suddenly developed the blight. Then, about halfway to the middle of the room, she suddenly squares her shoulders. Her expression hardens, and her back straightens, her gaze going flinty and defiant.

It’s a familiar sort of look.

The picture clicks together, then. The awkward interruptions, the nervousness, the ashen-faced shock after the explosion. Not because it had happened, but because it hadn’t done nearly the damage it was meant to. Hadn’t created any opening for her to safely flee in the chaos. Or go out
with the initial blast, even.

“You are guilty,” Elgar’nan pronounces.

“I feel no guilt,” Shira declares, her voice wavering throughout the chamber. Then she spits on the ground. “You build your monuments on broken backs and over once-holy places. The True Ones remember the Old Ways. When they break your throne at last, and dash your spirit to pieces, the gods will cast whatever is left of you from their sight.”

“There are no gods. Only leaders, and you chose yours poorly,” Elgar’nan replies, and with a wave of his hand, ignites the poor woman where she stands.

It isn’t a quick death.

Her stomach churns as Shira is burned alive. Screaming the whole while, as the flames eat her hair and peel off her skin, and burn through the air around her, as well; burn through whatever clouds of pain and anguish are erupting from her. She has seen people burn to death before, but never this slowly. Never with such obvious intent to do the deed as painfully as possible.

She almost draws her sword and ends the cruelty, consequences be damned, but right when she’s resolved to, an arrow sings through the air.

It punches through Shira’s head, cracking her skull with negligible effort. Flecks of blood paint the floor, but the screaming stops.

Ghilan’nain holds her bow in hand, glaring at the corpse of her follower.

Elgar’nan rounds on her.

“You dare?” he demands.

“She was mine, and her greatest insult was to me,” Ghilan’nain declares, unapologetic.

“I am Vengeance! The lives of betrayers and heretics are always mine to claim!” Elgar’nan snaps, like a cracking whip.

“And the lives of our followers belong to us,” Andruil smoothly interjects, not moving from her place against the wall. “You did not ask nicely, father, if you could burn sweet Ghilan’nain’s property for her.”

“Swallow your insolence, daughter, or I will burn your sweet Ghilan’nain in her property’s place,” he replies.

Andruil’s gaze flicks up, golden and disdainful. The air around her hums with a sudden interest.

“Just try it,” she says.

“Enough,” Mythal interjects. “The punishment was fitting. That you burned her was just, Elgar’nan, as she destroyed what was rightfully yours. That Ghilan’nain struck the final blow is also just, as amends for bringing the traitor unwittingly into our midst. So I deem it well done.”

Elgar’nan looks as if he’d dearly like to contest that point. But then his glance turns towards Mythal, and he subsides, somewhat.

Shira’s corpse lies, forgotten and ignored, now, in the middle of the chamber.
A whole life brutally lost just for the sake of offending the evanuris.

“This chamber offends the senses, now. We shall have to find another meeting place,” Sylaise muses, casting a displeased eye over the room. “I will not take my rest in a room adjacent to it.”

“I offer my citadel,” June announces. “It is large enough, and secure within the city. You all have my word of welcome and hospitality.”

“Your twisting labyrinth is hardly hospitable,” Andruil scoffs at him.

June treats her to a bland look.

“I can appoint you a guide if you fear getting lost, Sister of my Wife,” he offers. The huntress sneers.

“Getting lost is less likely than dying of boredom over the incomprehensible displays you claim to call artwork,” she declares.

“Forgive me. I fear I am short of the dismembered animal corpses which match your own aesthetic appreciation,” June blandly replies. “Perhaps a servant can be made to retrieve some and toss them randomly about your room. Make it feel more like home for you.”

“Perhaps I shall string up your servants and use their own corpses for the job,” Andruil suggests, with a smile that’s all teeth.

Sylaise sighs at them both.

“It seems I must once again do my duty. Hospitality is my purview, and my crystal tower is nearly as vast as my husband’s, and unquestionably beautiful. I shall take a day to make it ready for hosting guests and seating our conference, and in the meanwhile, Andruil, you may remain here or accept June’s kind offer as you see fit,” the golden evanuris declares.

“I will return to the woodlands,” Andruil says. “There is no need for me to remain in the city until our conference begins.”

“You would offer us insult by leaving early?” Elgar’nan asks, bristling with disapproval.

“It is not an insult. It is only a practicality,” the huntress insists.

“If Andruil is leaving, then so shall I,” Falon’Din declares, his bone armour clinking slightly as he moves in place. “This is a waste of time, anyway. The Children of the Stone are of no interest to me, and neither are the Nameless. Kill them all and be done with it so far as I care.”

“There are ceremonies to be observed,” Mythal says. “There is a reason we convene together on these matters. And it is not only that there are issues to discuss. Children, we have been apart too long. We grow further apart as all the years pass. If we are not careful, we will forget one another. We will forget the importance of what we do, and then only the long sleep can follow.”

There’s a moment of uncomfortable silence.

Andruil sighs.

“Fine, have it your way, Mother. I shall accept June’s offer of his citadel.”

“I am not so far gone. You worry too much,” Falon’Din says, but subsides.
“It is a mother’s prerogative to worry,” Mythal tells him.

The groups are gathered up again, then, and first June’s, and then Elgar’nans, and then Mythal’s entourage file out behind their respective evanuris out of the scorched building.

She wonders what will become of Shira’s body as the group flows into the city once again.

The sun has finished setting, by then, and the buildings are lit by a close summer moon. The very same that had once lingered on the horizons of Skyhold, though it’s strange to think of it. It becomes apparent that Arlathan, though designed to gleam in the daylight, was built with the night in mind. The shadows deepen to the point where every ugliness she’d spied on the way in is nigh-invisible, and the stars are reflected against the surface of every floating building. As if caught by a net and pulled down from the sky.

They pass through more eluvians, and cross a long bridge lined with gleaming crystals that hum with the passage of each evanuris, until they reach the base of a tower.

It’s easily the oddest building she’s ever seen in her life.

The walls are constantly shifting, changing through various shades of white, silver, gold, copper, steel, and bronze in places, doorways and coloured glass windows appearing at random intervals. The entire building is a column, with each floor hovering several inches above the next, twisting and turning over top of it. She can see the night sky through the spaces between them. Tiny sparks of crackling magic occasionally leap from one corner to the next.

She feels like it must have been a disaster of epic proportions when magic stopped making that work. An image drifts through her mind, of elves caught in the shifting shapes like mice trapped in cogwheels. Bones cracking as they’re crushed.

She also has no idea why someone would want to make this. How bored does one have to be with their life to want a building with random disappearing doorways and walls that are never in the same place twice?

“I really do not want to go in the giant puzzle deathtrap,” she whispers.

Then she almost jumps out of her skin when the wolf reaches over and grasps her forearm. Once, briefly.

She glances at him.

“We will probably survive the experience,” he says, also whispering.

Reassuring.

June waves, and the bottom floor of the tower stops shifting. Several doors appear, and stay neatly in place. The evanuris proceed through them. Once they’re gone, June’s entourage steps forward. There is a spark of magic as they gesture, and the bottom floor shifts again, the air sparking until a different set of doors appear. Each group is then motioned through one of them, and on to the terrifying building’s potential interior.

She actually has to steel her courage to walk inside. It’s unnerving. The air is cold, and even some of the most ancient depths of the Deep Roads didn’t perturb her quite this much. But she presses on with the rest of Mythal’s contingent.

The chamber they walk into is softly lit with ever-changing lights, gradually shifting across
different patterns as they migrate slowly up the walls. There’s a fountain in the middle of the room, although it appears to be circulating lightning instead of water. The air… fizzes. Oddly. An improbably high ceiling stretches above them, and several arched doorways lead out from the main room.

She can hear a massive, shifting groan as the building around them moves, like distant thunder. The surface of nearly every object she can see looks like it was poured from liquid metal.

“It’s like some sort of nightmarish living forge,” she decides.

The wolf snorts. So do some of the other members of their contingent, in fact.

They must be more familiar with it than she is, though, because after a few seconds, they head towards the archways as if they know where they’re going. A quick inspection reveals that they lead to yet-more branching doorways, which open up to bedrooms and washrooms and, on occasional, shifting walls and spiralling corridors that drop away into darkness.

She feels like touching almost anything is going to be a good way to lose some fingers.

Probably a good idea to stick with using her left hand, then. If she’s going to risk a limb it might as well be the one she already knows how to live without.

“It is very complicated. The magic in play must be constantly threaded through the workings of the building,” the wolf muses, frowning at the walls.

“Are we trapped here?” she wonders. The door they’d came in by has since vanished, replaced by more shifting walls.

“We should not attempt to leave on our own. It is frustrating,” he decides. “I dislike this arrangement. But it is only for the night, and Mythal would not have permitted it if she believed there was a danger.”

“Yes. Well. I am not so sure Mythal’s that great at appreciating just how dangerous her family is,” she murmurs.

The comment earns her a sidelong glance.

“I am not always so sure of that myself,” the wolf admits. “It is interesting that the first person you approached at the party should have turned out to be an infiltrator. I would think you a remarkable judge of character, except that you cannot even sense half of what is there.”

She shrugs, a sting in her chest.

“That could just mean I am not fooled by the same tricks as you. But you are correct. I am no great judge of character.”

Not at all, in the end. Though it hasn’t ever seemed to make a difference to her soft-edged heart.

He tilts his head at her, curious.

“Why did you approach that woman, out of all them?” he asks.

“Because she seemed approachable,” she admits.

He considers this information for a moment, and then seems to set it aside.
“For a moment I was worried you actually *had* caused the explosion,” he admits. “I would not have liked to see Elgar’nan vent his wrath upon you. I am glad you survived him.”

He reaches over and clasps her shoulder, and graces her with a genuine smile.

The sting in her chest turns into a lead weight.

“How often does he just burn people alive like that?” she wonders.

His smile falters.

“Too often,” he admits. “But that is his purview. Sometimes ill deeds must be done for the good of The People as a whole. Leaders take that weight upon themselves.”

His words scrape down her insides, snagging on old scars.

She stares at him for a long moment, listening to the creaking groans of the massive, distorted structure around them. Constantly feeding itself from the energy of the Fade, just to keep moving as it does. To no end. Only because it amuses and preoccupies June.

“Pardon me,” she asks. “I need to go retch.”

He blinks at her, and without further ado, she leaves him in search of a wash stand.

The facilities are bizarre, but she manages to figure them out before she empties her stomach into a basin, her limbs shaking when she finally finishes.

Every surface of the room is reflective, so she gets to start at herself from all angles as she makes a mess and then presses trembling palms to her cheeks, fire and blood and darkness dancing behind her eyes. It takes her a long while before she can calm down enough to emerge again.

When she does, it’s into a room that’s completely different from the one she left.

She sighs, and lets her arms drop heavily against her sides, her left wrist clattering against the hilt of her sword.

The walls are shifting grey and bronze, interlocked like puzzle pieces, and they tilt slightly so that she has to keep moving in order to avoid falling over and getting carried up the side of one of the walls. The ceiling opens and closes like a spiralling star around the single source of light, which flickers as it does.

There doesn’t seem to be an exit.

“If I get stranded in this place, I am finding a way to kill June,” she mutters.

“Should not be hard. Just get him distracted, then find a soft place to stick in a blade. He thinks himself ascended beyond mortal concerns, but his heart still pumps blood through mortal flesh,” an unfamiliar voice replies.

She blinks, and turns, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone else in the room.

A spirit, perhaps?

“Hello?” she calls. “Who is there?”

There is a heavy *thunk*, then, as a figure drops down out of the opening of the spiral-star ceiling
and lands in front of her.

Her hand goes to her blade, but she doesn’t draw it.

The man is clearly an ancient elf, though when he looks up at her, she’s surprised at the sense of age she gets from him. He doesn’t look any older, necessarily, than the other ancient elves she’s seen. There are no more lines on his face, no thinning to his hair or age spots on his skin. But for a moment she is viscerally reminded of the most weathered trees in the depths of the greatest forests.

He has brown skin and an unmarked face, dark hair that has been twisted into dozens of different styles of braid, a soft leather cloak that looks as though it has survived centuries of careful wear and tear, and boots that seem much the same. His forearms are bare, but his skin is riddled with scars. One deep mark on his chin, another on his throat, but most are on his hands.

She’s surprised to see them. She hasn’t seen anyone with scars in this time period so far.

Though, to be honest, she’s surprised by just about everything to do with this unexpected stranger.

“Who are you?” she asks.

“My name is Haninan,” he replies, straightening, and looking her over with undisguised curiosity. His voice is slow and considering, as if there are a hundred different thoughts all vying for use of his tongue, and he must choose between them with care. It lilts with an odd accent. “I would ask your name in return, but I confess myself more curious as to your nature. June… did not build you.”

He peers at her, and at the air around her. He gestures, and she feels like someone struck a match at her ear, and jumps back.

“She’s a person,” she informs him, just about fed up with this entire day and everything involved in it.

“So you are,” Haninan says, though, which is just about the easiest concession on that subject she’s ever gotten out of anyone who wasn’t a spirit. In this time, at least.

He circles around her.

She turns with him, keeping him in her line of sight.

When he reaches out, she tenses. But he only presses the lightest touch to her left arm, and then wiggles two fingers in front of her left eye.

“These pieces do not go,” he notes. “But they may, in time. You are a work of disparate parts. You grew in the wilderness and… were transplanted to a pot of soil, where they planted new branches on you. The marks must still sting, but it is your own skin, there, at least. And your own blood.”

His gaze trails down to her chest, and he reaches, but then catches himself. “Ah, no, that would be impolite of me, would it not? But what is it?”

She follows his line of sight down to her heart.

“You can see it?” she asks.

“See it? No,” he replies. “All of your armour and clothes and your flesh, of course, are in the way. But that piece definitely does not go with you, and it never shall. Who shoved it in there? They did clumsy work of a delicate thing. Poor child. You are… you are younger than a whisper. People
live a thousand years and never get eyes like yours, though. I suppose the years do not matter, in
the end.”

She frowns, watching him, wondering what on earth is going on here.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” she presses.

He huffs a laugh at her. There’s nothing of Solas in his looks, but for a moment, he reminds her
more of him than the young wolf does.

“I live here, you could say,” he admits. “My son considers me a prisoner, though he makes for a
poor warden.”

“You son?”

Haninan nods.

“June.”

She does a double-take.

“You are June’s father?” she asks.

Somehow, that’s almost stranger than meeting June himself.

“Oh yes. He considers me a great embarrassment. I consider him much the same,” Haninan
declares. “You are perhaps the most unique creation my slow boy has brought here in a hundred
years. I apologize for startling you, but I wanted a closer look.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“You were spying on us?” she surmises. And who else could be spying and when else would they
be, she wonders, if that’s an option?

“Yes. It was rude of me, I know, but June’s puzzles aren’t intricate enough to hold my attention for
long. My son somehow manages to make everything different seem entirely the same. It is his sole
talent,” he says.

This is just bizarre.

“So how can you tell things about me?” she wonders.

Haninan waves his hands, and pauses, mouth moving silently for a moment. Then he lets out a puff
of air, and gestures slightly to the right of her, before moving his hand to the left again.

“You are pieces,” he says. “A puzzle of thread wrapped around spools that are not wood, fire, or
shadow. In all honesty, it’s my own conjecture, but I’m… a very good guesser. Nothing in this
world made you. Nothing in this world would imagine making you. That is fascinating. You are
like a single misplaced note in a symphony. Why?”

She stares at him, and he stares back, honestly interested and denying her none of the respect or
rights a person should be due. It’s like finding a Dalish carving in an Orlesian patisserie.

After a moment, she takes a hand off the hilt of her sword.

“I come from another world,” she says.
He nods.

“That fits,” he decides. “You came with Mythal’s people?”

“Yes,” she confirms.

He lets out a long, low whistle.

“Lucky you met with her people first. Any of the others... well, it would have been a waste. You keep company with that Pride of hers. He’s another one who thinks he’s clever.”

“In fairness, he mostly is,” she replies.

Haninan chuckles.

“He is two years old if he is two hundred. But there is potential there, I suppose.”

“A lot of potential for a lot of things,” she agrees, and lets out a breath.

“Another puzzle,” he decides. “The type that involve people are often the simplest and the hardest.”

The room around them tilts, and she has to move to keep from losing her footing.

“Well? Have I satisfied your interest?” she wonders.

“Hardly,” he replies. “Barely-born things that carry the weight of universes in their tiny little palms are often a never-ending web of intrigue. Much more complex than this forsaken den of clichés and predictability.” Leaning over, he kicks the side of the wall. It ripples, and she staggers as it opens in sharp rips and tears, the edges it leaves behind knife-like and unnerving.

“I really hate it in here,” she admits.

Haninan blinks at her.

“Hmm? Oh.” He frowns, and then kicks again, and the walls stop shifting. “Yes, you were just vomiting. Perhaps some fresh air is in order.”

He stomps, and twists a hand, and the openings spread until the reach a hatch. Then he whispers something, and in a crackle of magic, the hatch becomes a door.

When he reaches out and opens it, she sees the streets of Arlathan through the frame.

“You can just leave?” she asks.

“Ostensibly I am trapped forever, convoluted by my brilliant son’s magnificent maze, but in truth, it is not a very good prison. Trapping a puzzle master in a maze is rather like trapping a rat in box made of cheese,” he replies.

Then he gestures towards the exit.

She considers that possibility that it’s a trick of some kind. But there doesn’t seem to be any other way out of the room, and honestly, the prospect of leaving is just too unappealing to ignore. It’s worth risking it, she decides, and steps out into the open air.

Haninan follows.
The doorway disappears behind them, and she realizes they’re at the back of the massive citadel, tucked away in its shadow. It creaks and groans; a massive, undulating giant at their backs.

“Why stay, if you can go?” she wonders.

“Well, if I left permanently, he might decide to build a prison that actually works,” Haninan replies. “As it stands, it is free room and board in the middle of the most populous city in the empire, and a perfect post from which to spy on my exceedingly absurd child. As bland as my accommodations may be, that is an acceptable arrangement.”

She chuckles.

It feels good, like something in her chest just loosened a little. Like being with Compassion.

Hananan grins at her, and lifts a hood up on his cloak. He runs a hand across his face, and June’s markings appear on it, lurid and orange.

“How can you just spell them on like that?” she wondered.

“Only the look of them. But that is enough for wandering,” he replies. Then he starts off down the road, away from the twisting, turning building at their backs.

She hesitates.

There’s a chance that something could happen while she’s gone.

Hananan turns and looks at her expectantly.

“Coming, Puzzle?” he asks her. “That group will just keep you locked in rooms until their farce of politicking is done. You will not likely get another chance to see the city.”

That’s actually a pretty convincing point.

“Alright,” she agrees.

They set off into the twilight.

~

Hananan leads her down a wide, silvery staircase. Far from chiming or shining or leaving magical footprints, the stones and lanterns seem to dim wherever he passes, enveloping them in a tiny sliver of darkness that dashes through the bright, reflective city. She thinks of a black rat darting through a gilded trap, too fast and too clever to be caught.

They move away from the main paths and into narrower ones, where the lanterns don’t float, and the banners don’t sing, and the starlight doesn’t shine across every surface. White stone fades to grey, and the buildings turn uniform, everything tidy and neat and nondescript, as if in the hopes that a passing eye will just skip right over it. The surfaces are so bland that even the doorways are hard to see, blending into the walls behind them with hardly a seam to show for it.

Don’t look, the air practically screams.
But there is golden light escaping from the corners of the coverings on the windows, and when Haninan presses open a subtle doorway, it creaks aside and colour spills out into the grey world. Blues and reds and greens and purples, painted in bold, thick swaths that make her breath catch.

Her mind turns to the alienages, and the city elves who would often paint every surface left available to them, as if in the absence of flowers that sought to make comforting colours bloom on wood and stone instead.

But even here, there’s magic.

As Haninan gestures her inside, she sees that the paintings are moving. Figures of elves dance, and trees sway, and painted fires crackle along the edges of everything.

It’s a tavern, she realizes. Several elves dressed in plain, undyed fabrics sit around painted tables, and paper lanterns hang from the ceiling. She smells drink and food, almost familiar in their simplicity, and hears laughter.

The woman behind the bar gives them an uncertain look as they approach.

“Haninan,” she greets. “You brought… a walking corpse with you this time?”

“We are all walking corpses, Ess,” Haninan replies.

‘Ess’ gives him a sceptical look, curling one dark eyebrow upwards.

“I am a person,” she confirms.

There is a soft clattering, then a spirit drifts down from the ceiling, its form stretching and turning as it looks at her.

“Oh,” it says, half a song and half a sigh.

“Love, what are you doing?” Ess asks it.

*Love?*

A spirit of *Love?*

Oh.

Oh shit.

“No, no, no,” she says, backing away, raising her hands.

“Oh,” the spirit of Love repeats, shining and long and seemingly indestructible as it stretches to follow her, and then wraps firm hands around the sides of her face. It’s impossibly warm, and her heart aches like it’s being hammered on by a thousand fists as it presses their foreheads together, and sighs. Its breath smells like sweet milk and honey.

“Help,” she asks, a little desperately.

“Love, it is not even putting out any emotion! What are you doing?” Ess demands, hissing like a Ferelden with an embarrassingly over-affectionate mabari.

“Clearly, she has emotions, and at least one of them is a truly impressive amount of love. One does wonder where she is keeping them hidden,” Haninan says. Then he knocks on the bar. “Two ales,
please. Put them on my tab.”

“‘You never pay your tab,’” Ess grumbles, but she starts pouring anyway. “Love, stop molesting the – the patron!”

“I am so sorry,” Love says to her. “But I am not sorry at all.”

“Please go away,” she asks.

The spirit smiles at her, sadly, and then vibrates a little. For a second it feels like it’s vibrating in time with her heart, and she nearly panics.

But finally, it pulls back; although instead of retreating up into the ceiling again, it twists its way around Haninan.

He pats it with that same resigned air of someone dealing with an over-affectionate pet.

“How do you have a Spirit of Love in your drinking establishment?” she asks Ess.

The bartender’s mouth twists into a sour expression.

“Because it will not leave.”

Cautiously, she edges back towards the bar, and drops into the seat next to Haninan. Love stays put, content to stay curled around him for the moment, and he slides her one of the ales.

In spite of herself, she finds that the spirit radiates warmth, and a sense of weight and surety that’s actually comforting, even as she gives serious consideration to just bolting for the door because of it.

“Ess really loves her tavern,” Haninan informs her.

“She does,” Love confirms.

Ess swears and makes what is probably a rude gesture at the spirit. At around the same time the door opens again, and a small cluster of elves stomp in. They’re dressed in clothing as nondescript as the exterior of the building, with some ash and dust spilling over their arms. The cloud of emotions they carry with them crackles, and they peer at her oddly when they see her.

“Haninan, what the fuck?” one of them blurts.

“No, that is a ‘person’. A ‘fuck’ is an activity. Generally performed by two or more parties, though I can understand you making the mistake,” Haninan replies, without even looking up from his drink.

“I am a person,” she confirms.

“That is just creepy,” one of the other elves mutters.

She gives in and rolls her eyes.

“You know what is creepy is how bad everyone here is at recognizing personhood. Haninan is the only one I have not had to debate about it,” she declares, trying her ale. It’s not bad. A little bland, with an aftertaste she doesn’t recognize, but it probably won’t kill her. And it definitely won’t put her under the table any time soon.
“That is because I am old and wise and much better than everyone else,” Haninan informs her, and though he doesn’t include the sly wink, it hangs in his voice.

“No, it is because you have seen so much weird shit that you believe everything now,” Ess refutes. “Or possibly because you are playing an elaborate practical joke on us again.”

“I have never done that,” he insists.

“This is a creepy joke. A really inappropriately creepy joke,” one of the party of strange elves reiterates.

“This whole world is a really inappropriately creepy joke,” she mutters into her mug.

There is a pause.

One of the elves shrugs.

“Fair enough,” he decides.

“It is a creepy but astute talking thing made of a functioning body,” one of his fellows concedes, and they settle in at one of the tables. Ess goes off to get their order, leaving her sitting at the bar with the father of June and a spirit of Love that keeps winding tendrils around her ankles, and making her think of the reflection of leaves on the aravels, and sitting in Skyhold with friends, and arms that smelled of paint and plaster as they wrapped around her and blocked the wind on a sunlit balcony.

“Please stop,” she asks, quietly.

The spirit reluctantly withdraws.

“It is all inside,” it says. “All trapped inside. Like an unopened bottle of wine.”

“Interesting,” Haninan decides.

“I want to let it out!” Love decides.

“Of course you do,” the old elf says, and pats it again. “Foolish creature.”

Over at the table, the elves begin talking. It takes her a minute to realize they’re discussing the explosion at the floating Palace of Too Much Fire.

“Now they are all bottled up in the Citadel of Insanity, so we cannot even ask the servants what happened!”

“What do you mean, ‘what happened’? Elgar’n nan had another one of his fits, obviously. It was practically written on the walls.”

“I have never seen him destroy his own artistry when he does that before. I am surprised anyone made it out of there alive if he was that furious.”

“Yes. You would think the death toll would be higher. Like when the bridge went down, and he dealt with it before Mythal could intercede.”

Pained looks go all around at that comment.

“I would just like to pass one century without having to clean up a charred corpse. Just one.”
“Careful with that talk. We would not want anyone to think you ungrateful for our glorious leaders.”

“Who will overhear? His cronies are all locked up with June, if anyone ever sees them again it will be because Haninan over there took pity on them and led them out.”

“Maybe the creepy thing is one of theirs,” one of the men suggests, and almost as one, they turn to look at her again.

“Hey, Haninan. Did you get that creepy thing from the leaders?” another one asks.

“Now is that any way to talk about a Spirit of Love?” Haninan replies, tsk’ing.

“You know what we mean!”

She sighs, and then internally shrugs.

“I am with Mythal’s contingent,” she admits. “A woman from Ghilan’nain’s group ignited the pillars in the chamber so that they exploded. Then Elgar’nan burned her and Ghilan’nain shot her and she died. She was called Shira, if any of you should know anyone wondering what happened to someone of that name.”

“A woman? Was she mad?” one of the men asks, leaning forward a little bit.

“She was working for someone. Some other people that the leaders would not name,” she admits. Comprehension dawns on the gathered elves.


“That will get you killed every time,” Ess agrees.

One of the elves from the tables leans closer towards her.

“Listen, creepy thing. You will not repeat what I said to the leaders, will you?” he asks, in clear, deliberate tones. “You are a nice creepy thing, are you not? Friendly? Obedient, perhaps?”

She gives him a wry look.

“When you ask with such charm, how could I possibly refuse?” she wonders, blandly.

His nearest friend elbows him.

“See, even weird soulless constructs think you are bad at smooth talk. You do need to work on it.”

“Shut up. I have a compelling personality, it makes up for it,” the man insists.

“It really does not,” Haninan assures him.

“Alright, alright,” Ess interjects. “Enough talking about treasonable offenses. As the Spirit of Love here attests, I am attached to my building, and if any of you get it raided by peacekeepers you will not be welcome back again.”

“Duly noted,” she says.

The bartender gives her an assessing look. Then she glances at the Spirit of Love, and then back at
her again.

“What did they do to you?” the woman asks.

She blinks.

“What?” she wonders.

“The leaders. They did something to you, did they not? Tried to make a better servant, perhaps. Cut you off. Took you out of the air,” Ess reasons, gesturing vaguely upwards with her hand.

“If anything, they added bits on,” she replies. “If you are speaking of emotion, I was born like this.”

The bartender winces, as if the whole idea of that is painful, somehow.

“…Sorry, then.”

“It does not bother me. It only seems to bother other people,” she explains.

The other woman looks unconvinced.

But the matter is finally put to rest, and the people gathered in the rest of the tavern only seem interested in asking her carefully-vague questions about the incident at the gathering. What was the explosion like? Was it really only one person who died? Elgar’nan’s not going to go hunting for more people to punish, is he? Eventually the Spirit of Love drifts off again, and she breathes a little easier, even though part of her pangs, too. Haninan finishes his ale, then tips his head back and stares at the ceiling.

“We should get back,” he decides.

“Thank you for the air. And the drink,” she says.

“No trouble,” he replies.

They file out of the tavern, and are making their way up the silvery staircase again when she sees a familiar white wolf standing at the top of it, head low to the ground.

Hаниnan pauses.

“Hmm. May be slight trouble after all,” he says.

The wolf looks at them, and between them. Then the air snaps, and a young man dressed in fine white clothing stands in its place, and proceeds rather angrily down the steps towards them.

“You! Who are you?” he demands of Haninan. “What did you do with her? Where did you take her? Did he harm you?”

This last is addressed to her, and his gaze darts to her sheathed blade, and over her form before some of the tension bleeds away from the corners of his eyes.

“Oh course I did not harm her. I am but a humble servant of June, and this guest merely asked for the opportunity to get some air. What could I do but accommodate?” Haninan says.

The wolf narrows his eyes.
“Liar,” he declares. “No servants of June have made themselves known in our quarters, nor would
they bother to before dawn. Tell me the truth, now, or I will drag you before Mythal and you may
explain your misdeeds in person!”

“It is alright,” she interjects.

But Haninan only sighs, and then runs a hand down his face, before pushing his hood back.

His vallaslin disappears.

“It was only a jaunt, wolfling. Your friend here is a puzzle, and I never could resist one of those.”

The wolf’s eyes widen.

“Haninan?” he asks, clearly taken aback.

“Oh, good. They still tell the little ones about me,” Haninan muses, with a smile.

“You are said to be imprisoned in the most treacherous bowels of June’s ever-shifting labyrinth,
lost forever amidst its inscrutable walls, and likely driven more than half-mad, if you could ever
have been considered sane to begin with,” the wolf notes.

“You got out,” Haninan points out.

“…Point taken,” he concedes. Then he looks at her. “You are truly alright?” he asks.

No, she is a mess of conflicting impulses lost in a nightmarish reality.

“I am truly alright,” she tells him.

“He did not do anything to you?”

She has no idea where this sudden wealth of concern is coming from, and it’s really unfair of him
to be that – that worried.

“I am fine! Look at me, standing here, completely unharmed!” she insists, lifting her arms for good
measure.

He looks at her, and then, finally, nods in satisfaction.

“You did not come back. I was convinced someone had absconded with you,” he admits.

“Well, your instincts were not technically wrong, my young friend,” Haninan mentions.

It earns him an irritated look that would have been much more effective on a face that wasn’t also
frowning petulantly.

“You are not my friend,” the wolf assures him.

“Ah. But I begin to think I would like to be,” he declares. “I was not aware such interesting children
had begun to appear in the world. First Puzzle here, all made of disparate pieces, and then you, a
wolf who chews through metal walls. Like old Fen’Harel, too clever for your own good.”

She shivers.

No.
“It is cold. We should get back,” she says, disquieted.

There is something about the sight of Haninan and the wolf together, something that clicks, and falls into place.

They knew each other, she realizes. In her time. They must have met, at some point, because there are shades of the Solas she knows in Haninan, and they’re the same shades that are somewhat lacking in this younger, more flighty version of him.

She wonders how she’s changed him, by changing this meeting.

She wonders if this is good or bad.

“Yes, you will want to sleep before the tedium of tomorrow. If nothing else, so you can avoid the embarrassment of passing out while those blowhards talk about themselves,” Haninan agrees.

“How long are you in the city for?”

“How long the talks take. Though we leave for Sylaise’s holdings in the city tomorrow,” the wolf tells him.

“So potentially for decades, but I shall have to brave Sylaise’s followers to reach you. Hmm,” Haninan muses.

“Decades?” she asks. “Please tell me that is hyperbole.”

“Sadly, no,” the old elf says.

“I will go deal with the dwarves myself if it takes decades,” she mutters.

“Dua’revs,” the wolf repeats, thoughtfully tasting out the sound. “Dwar-revs. Dwarves?”

“Dwarves,” she confirms.

They make their way back to the twisting citadel, and it feels uncomfortably like something has just been set into motion.

Chapter End Notes

You guys are the best! Absolutely the best. All the comments make my day whenever I get them.

Also, sorry this chapter took a little longer than usual. Real life and whatnot etc, etc, don’t worry, I’m not going to just drop everything and run. <3
Haninan gets them back into their chambers in the citadel with amusingly little fanfare, all things considered. Trying to sleep in the place is like trying to sleep in the middle of a toolbox while someone juggles it, and she finds herself staring up at an ever-shifting ceiling, listening to the groans of the building until exhaustion finally does her in.

Her dreams are vibrant – equal parts terrifying and bright – until she sinks through a shifting floor and hears a pair of voices in quiet conference.

In a garden, she spies the wolf in his lupine form. Sitting across from him is a spirit. It’s a pale figure, fluctuating between shades of blue and green, with a voice that makes her think of long, winding rivers. It speaks in a cadence that invites the ear to listen.

Their conversation stalls as they both look up and take note of her presence.

“My apologies,” she says. “I have intruded by accident again.”

The spirit smiles, and before she can figure out how to tactfully extricate herself, it is gone. The wolf doesn’t seem terribly perturbed, however. After a moment he changes into an elf, again, and offers her a smile.

“Do not concern yourself. I was only speaking with Wisdom,” he tells her.

Wisdom?

She wonders if that was the same spirit she saw die, once.

“Do you speak with many Spirits of Wisdom?” she wonders, as the garden around them becomes something wilder; more like a forest.

“As many as will welcome my questions,” he admits. His smile falters, a little, and he sighs.

It is a weighty sigh. A familiar sound that takes her aback.

“What?” she wonders.

“It is nothing,” he refutes, sinking down onto a bench of woven wood and stone. “Just trifling thoughts and wishes. Not anything worth being concerned about.”

“Thoughts and wishes are rarely trifling,” she replies, and after an awkward moment of hesitation, she sinks onto the bench beside him.

She could pretend it’s just good sense to keep track of his mental and emotional state, all things considered.

It would probably just be an insult to her own intelligence to try.

“There is something about you and Wisdom,” she guesses. It’s a thought she’s had before,
although it’s never quite crystalized into any concrete certainties.

He’s quiet for a while.

He folds his arms, brow furrowed, and he looks young but still weighted down, buried under some strange fear she can just barely glimpse. Something that might have looked more like cynicism or resignation on another version of himself.

“Most of the spirits you met at the palace were born of Mythal’s virtues. Did you know that?” he tells her.

She shakes her head.

“I did not think spirits were born of any one person’s traits. I thought they were more… embodiments of a lot of people’s. Reflections of them,” she reasons.

“All spirits can and will reflect what they find,” he confirms. “But most are born of an abundance of a certain sentiment. Or, they are born, and then the abundance of sentiment shapes what they will become. That is a matter of debate. They spring up in the Dreaming world, as currents move in the Waking one.”

He shifts a little, loosening his hold on himself and fidgeting with the edges of his sleeves. Flowering vines shift in the wind behind them.

She waits.

“I was born of Mythal’s Pride,” he tells her. “Her pride in the people, and what they could accomplish. The first thing she said to me, when I formed in the edges of her dreams, was a warning. ‘Pride is dangerous’, she told me. And so, for a time, I was.”

“You were?” she asks, less disbelieving than she is curious of the particulars.

He nods.

“I wreaked havoc,” he confesses, shifting and folding his arms again, frowning. “Mythal calmed me, eventually. She has a talent for that. Pride is not only conceit and vanity and self-obsession. Pride helps the weak stand tall, it helps the seeking find courage, it gives the faltering a reason to stay strong. But it is dangerous. I tried, for many years, to become something else. Sometimes Spirits of Wisdom become Spirits of Pride, especially when they stay too long among the Waking. I theorized that it could go the other way, too. That perhaps I could become a Spirit of Wisdom, if only I learned how to be wise.”

She stares at her hands. She can’t look at his face. Her chest feels like its cracking open again, that same old ache; a bruise always waiting for something new to press its thumb against it.

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“He sighed, again, and runs a hand down the side of his face.

“Of course, it hardly matters now. I am not a spirit any longer. When it became apparent that I had
failed, Mythal asked me to take a body, instead. It cemented the reality that I could never become Wisdom, but it offered another answer. A spirit can only be one thing; being born into the world gave me the opportunity to become several,” he explains. “I have tried to learn wisdom. I still try. Sometimes I think I have succeeded, and other times I am sure I have not. It is difficult to know.”

They sit in stillness.

After a moment, she makes herself look at his face.

He is clad more simply than usual, in this dream. Covered in golds and greens, with white fur on his shoulders, and his hair pulled to one side. His profile is the same. His arms are tight around himself, and the shadows of shifting leaves spread across him. Dancing patterns over skin and fur and fabric.

“Well,” she says.

He looks at her.

She swallows.

“I do not think wisdom is something you find and then keep forever,” she tells him. “I think it is something you are always supposed to look for. Because what is wise for every situation, is different for every situation. There is no point that you reach where everything works and all of your ideas are good ones. It is always a journey.”

He stares at her.

Then he blinks, and lets out a breath.

“I wonder if I am even journeying in the right direction, then,” he says, but his smile returns.

It punches something jagged loose inside of her, and after a moment, she smiles back.

Her eyes sting.

His expression falls.

“Are you crying?” he asks, hands fluttering in momentary alarm. “I did not mean to – I did not realize I was making you upset! Forgive me.”

She laughs, again, and then buries her face into her hands, as the laugh breaks into a sob.

“It is not you,” she says. “Not you.” Not yet, at least.

Maybe not ever.

If any true gods had ever existed, she would pray to them for that – for ‘not ever’.

Oh, Solas.

The first words he’d heard were a warning that, for at least one version of himself, had proven painfully true. A warning he’d fought against. A fight he’d then lost.

Her shoulders shake, and it’s like a dam has burst. It’s too raw in the Fade. She can’t bottle it back in. She thinks of all the things she’d tried so hard not to let herself dwell on, towards the end. Of the longing and the hope he’d looked at her with, the faint flicker that maybe, maybe, maybe she
could find some way to save him. To save them all. To give him an answer that he couldn’t find. To prove to him that the terrible thing he thought he had to do wasn’t really necessary at all.

After a moment, a hand settles down between her shoulder blades.

It stays there until her tears subside. Until her sobs ease into long, deep breaths, and she pulls her hands away from her face, and sees concerned eyes peering back at her.


“It was not your fault,” he tells her.

She laughs, again, bitter but strangely grateful, if only to hear the words.

“It really was, though. All the long years of history and the lives lived, just washed away, because I was not enough.”

She exhales, and before she can think the better of it, she reaches over and cups his cheek with her hand.

His eyes are impossibly wide.

“Do not ever, ever give up searching,” she tells him.

He is still staring at her in stunned silence when she wakes, opening her eyes to the shifting ceiling and an early dawn light that’s somehow pouring in, despite the utter lack of windows.

She blinks.

Then she throws an arm across her face.

Did she really just do that?

Yes. Yes she did.

…Shit.

~

A strange series of chiming noises heralds the start of the day. When she emerges back into the common area, she braces herself for her next sight of the wolf.

He’s dressed to impress again, clad in resplendent finery that appears to be a slightly different style from the day before’s, though she can’t quite put her finger on all of the changes. It’s white and shiny and it gleams when he moves and, oh, hey, pink whorls all over the sleeves, those are new.

To her immense relief, though, he just smiles at her, once, and then takes lead of the group when one of June’s followers shows up to summon the door for them again.

They leave the citadel only to wait for what feels like an hour, standing among the other assembled followers until the evanuris begin to emerge. Then it’s once again a matter of falling into step behind Mythal, and trekking through yet more of the city.
In the grey morning light, Arlathan looks cold. All the sharp angles and steep drops seem magnified, and every crystalline feature glints like a readied blade.

Sylaise’s crystal tower stands against the dawn, and blazes with its light.

It casts a rainbow of colours, from shining gold to rosy pink to a deep, rich purple across the buildings around it, drifting up high enough for its tallest spires to graze the clouds. A single framed eluvian, big enough to accommodate a crowd, is settled beneath it. She has no idea how someone is supposed to live in such a place. From the outside, it looks only like transparent rock – pretty, but she can hardly imagine anyone navigating it with any comfort.

“It is transparent,” she murmurs.

“Only on the outside,” one of Mythal’s other followers says, surprising her.

They’ve been mostly content to ignore her so far, after all.

She glances over, but the woman has already turned away again, her long profile lost within the shadow of her silver-trimmed hood.

Then Sylaise activates the eluvian, and there is some strange exchange of pleasantries and promises of hospitality, and when they finally get inside of the Floating Rainbow Castle it does, indeed, seem to offer solid walls. Somehow. They are rosy-gold and covered in tapestries made of woven metal thread, shining and massive. Liquid gold streams down decorative trenches that have been carved along the sides of their path, and trees made of crystals and spun glass stretch from floor.

The whole thing just makes her feel bizarrely exhausted, as if the part of her mind that’s dedicated to figuring out bizarre shit has just given up and gone back to sleep.

The evanuris exchange more talk and then disappear again, and Sylaise’s followers show them all to chambers that are, if nothing else, slightly less horrifying than the constantly-shifting rooms of the citadel. Though she finds she cannot quite escape the unnerving impression that, from the view outside, they might all of them still be visible; navigating the passages of a gleaming crystal trap, like ants crawling over spun sugar.

Sylaise doesn’t keep her guests quite as confined as her husband does, though. As the evanuris do whatever it is they’re so busy doing, she finds herself wandering through passages that sparkle, and shine, and are filled with glowing carvings and roaring fireplaces, and quiet pools that pour downwards into portals that reflect the sprawling city below.

She finds herself peering at the tapestries, trying to parse out what they mean. If they mean anything. There’s a consistency to their patterns that suggests a purpose, but all she can see in the woven figures of elves and dragons and dancing flames is a simplistic sort of prettiness. Nothing about the arrangement seems to tell a story, or even imply one.

The entire day passes uneventfully, though she feels almost like they’re all still waiting outside of June’s citadel. Waiting for the evanuris. There is food and drink, and the various entourages mingle informally, and the spirits that seem to be native to the place glide through it and approach her with interest.

When it looks like the second day will proceed in much the same manner as the first, she gives in and goes to find the wolf again.

It doesn’t take long. She discovers him making polite conversation with several of Ghilan’nain’s people; smoothing over ruffled feathers, it seems. He spots her long before she reaches them, and
breaks away, meeting her out of their range.

“Are you well?” he asks her, momentarily uncertain enough to remind her of their most recent shared dream.

She doesn’t know if she’s more embarrassed or worried or what to feel about it, to be honest.

After a second she just waves a hand, as if she might actually chase the conflicting emotions of herself and into the air instead.

“I am well. Although I am becoming sorely tempted to start smashing pretty things,” she confesses.

“That would not be wise,” he informs her, brows furrowing.

“I know. Are we permitted to leave?” she wonders. It’s her primary motivation for seeking him out, in fact. If they’re going to be waiting on the evanuris for days, she’d rather spend them wandering the city. At least she might be able to start preparing for the apparently-entirely-plausible threat of this meeting taking actual years.

“It is not disallowed, but it would not be safe for you in the city alone,” the wolf admits. “I could go with you. I would prefer not to be far from Mythal for long, but Sylaise’s hospitality is not lightly broken. She should be safe here, for now.”

“I would not ask you to compromise your duty,” she says, hesitating.

He pauses, and then inclines his head.

“It is little enough, as compromises go,” he decides.

They make their way back out via eluvian, and into the streets of Arlathan once more. She takes a minute to just appreciate standing on (comparatively) solid ground, and waits for the strange itching at the back of her teeth to stop.

Then she glances at the wolf, who is peering at her curiously in return.

She sighs.

“I suppose I should apologize for barging into your dream and bawling at you,” she decides.

He blinks.

“No,” he says. “That is not necessary. The Dreaming world has a habit of bringing things close to the surface. I should have been paying better attention.”

“You could not have known. And I am… I am glad you told me what you did,” she admits.

He offers her a tentative smile.

“It is best forgotten. I am not a spirit any longer. If that dream ever could have been realized, the window of opportunity has passed,” he reasons.

They begin to walk, then, moving further away from the splashes of rainbow light being cast over Sylaise’s corner of the city.

“Do you regret it?” she wonders. “Taking a body?”
He laughs, a little nervously, and his mouth seems to struggle to form an answer to that question.

“…At times,” he eventually concedes.

“Because you wish you could still change the way that a spirit changes?” she guesses.

“No. Well, not entirely. In part. It is more that…” he sighs, and shrugs. “It was done because I failed. If I had succeeded there would have been no need. So this life, this way I am, now… it is a constant reminder that I did not meet my goal.”

Just has her entire world had been a constant reminder of his failings. So impossible for him to bear. It twists the anger in her, and prods at her fears.

“It is a blow to your pride,” she says, a little coldly. His brows furrow.

“Yes,” he admits.

“Which, in turn, is a reminder that you have not escaped your pride. It is still a trait which holds remarkable sway over you, even if it is no longer your sole defining aspect,”

“May we discuss something else?” he asks, almost pleading.

“That would probably be best,” she decides, bitterness at the back of her throat.

They pass through an elaborate archway, etched with Sylaise’s name, and onto streets that are trafficked by elves and spirits alike.

“Where did your new friend take you when you vanished?” he asks.

“Hmm? Oh. Just to a tavern,” she replies.

“I have never been to a tavern,” he admits, musingly.

She almost trips.

“You have had a body for two hundred years, and you have never been to a tavern?” she asks.

He blinks at her, and then squares his shoulders defensively.

“Food and drink are provided by hosts, or by Mythal’s servants in her holdings. There has never been any need for me to visit one,” he reasons. “They are gathering places for those who live further removed from the machinations of the Leaders of the People. And I have spent many of my years helping lead Mythal’s forces into battle. There are no taverns on battlefields or in strategy rooms.”

“Well, there are taverns in the city,” she reasons. “Let us find you one.”

It’s as good a destination for their excursion as any, at least.

“I suppose it could be interesting,” he agrees.

They try to retrace their steps back to June’s citadel, then; a task she probably would have failed at, given that Arlathan itself seems very set on serving as a labyrinth all on its own, and offers precious little in the way of obvious signage or direction through the elaborate, twisting roads, which often end in eluvians that open to an equally baffling segment of the crossroads.
Though the individual eluvians can differ markedly from one to the next, she doesn’t see any readily decipherable pattern in how they look compared to where the let out.

But the wolf gets them back to the citadel, at least, and from there she finds the staircase that leads down into the greyed-out sections of the city.

There they run into another problem, though, as every subtle doorway and blank, unmarked wall looks identical to the next. She tries to remember exactly how far Haninan took her on their jaunt, and precisely where they turned and if there were any distinctive features, but her mind mostly pulls up on blanks. It doesn’t help that it all looks somewhat different in the light of day.

“Why is it so… blank?” she can’t help but wonder.

“The city is meant to be a work of art. Alterations to its exteriors must be approved,” the wolf tells her. “It is difficult to gain such approval without at least some political sway, which labourers and unfavoured residents do not have.”

“So everyone just has to figure out how to navigate streets that look virtually identical because anything more useful might not look pretty?” she asks, disgusted.

“In this case I think the aim is less to preserve appeal than to prevent the creation of eyesores,” he murmurs, looking at the same bland walls as she. Though, at least, he doesn’t seem to approve of the decision either.

She’s not sure if it’s because he really appreciates its cruelty, or if he’s just frustrated that they can’t find anything.

Luck strikes them before evening, though, and they spy a group of workers pressing through a doorway that opens to familiar moving paintings. After so much time spent in fruitless wandering, the sight excites her enough that she grabs his wrist and drags him almost half of the way there, before herding him inside.

She’s just two steps past the threshold before she remembers.

Oh.

Dammit.

The Spirit of Love wraps around her legs like a happy cat, creeping up from the floor, vibrating with such intensity that it almost feels like another earthquake.

“Oh!” it says.

“No. Shut up. Go away,” she replies, pushing at it with her hands. That only seems to get it onto her wrists, though, warm tendrils that wrap around her while her heart beats and she thinks of other painted walls, ones that didn’t move, and quiet evenings spent marveling at them from the shadows of the scaffolding.

The wolf just sort of stares at her, and at the Spirit of Love, and then at her again.

He opens his mouth.

After a moment, he closes it, wordlessly.

The spirit shimmers at him and reaches over to start tugging at one of his arms.
“LOVE!” Ess’ voice bellows from behind the bar.

“But it’s so much!” the spirit protests.

“Love, off of the patrons! Now!” the tavern’s owner insists, and after a moment, Love heaves a sigh and all but droops off of their limbs, sinking back through the floor. Though, she suspects, not going very far. The floor feels warm with every step she takes towards the bar.

Ess looks at her for a moment, and then looks at the wolf, and tenses considerably.

“My lord,” she says to him, stiffly. “What bring one such as yourself to my humble establishment?”

He smiles, and raises a placating hand.

“Nothing official,” he says. “I am only here to see it. My friend seemed to think it was an experience worth having.”

Ess darts another glance over towards her, clearly uncomfortable and uncertain.

“Your, ah, your friend might praise it too highly. I fear we have nothing grand to offer here.”

“He has too much grandness anyway,” she assures the poor woman, suddenly struck by the guilty impression that she’s brought precisely the kind of attention Ess never wanted straight to her doorstep.

Whoops.

But the wolf’s attention on the proprietor is fleeting. His eyes keep darting to the brightly-painted walls, and their moving subjects.

“On the contrary. I have never seen this before,” he says.

“Oh. Ah. That is, it is only some decoration. The spell to animate it was done by friend. It does not take anything from the city, I promise you. The spirit you met keeps most of it working, by its own volition. It – it is not bound!” Ess insists, looking very close to wringing her hands.

The wolf gestures dismissively.

“Of course it is not. I would know,” he assures her. “I am not here to enforce any regulations or bring you any trouble. Who painted it?”

“I… I… I did,” Ess admits.

“It is only something we mix up ourselves, here. In barrels. It is always bright at first but then it fades, so we replace it every few years. It is not suitable for the nobility for that purpose, though. No one wishes for monuments that will not last,” Ess explains, relaxing only the tiniest bit.

The wolf seems fascinated, however, moving closer to the nearest patch of wall and staring at flitting birds that arc across it.

“How old is this round?” he asks.

“Five years,” Ess replies. “Another five and I will do it again.”
“So quickly?”

“It is a labour of – of love,” the proprietor admits.

“I think it is the nicest place I have seen in this city,” she offers.

It’s apparently the wrong thing to say, as Ess gestures furiously and takes a step back, ducking her head. The air around her feels tense and thick enough that she can’t help but notice it.

“I thank you but no, no, I make no pretensions at competing with the wonders of Arlathan’s upper reaches,” the poor woman insists.

“It is nothing like the grand spires and tributes. But it has a strange appeal,” the wolf declares.

Then he smiles, radiating calm, and folds his hands behind his back.

Ess tentatively lowers her hands, and looks between them, as if she isn’t sure what’s going on and whether or not she’s just making the situation worse.

“I shall – drinks? We do not have a lot of variety, but there may be something in the back that will not overly offend your sensibilities…” the poor woman says.

“Whatever you usually serve will suffice,” the wolf says.

Ess rapidly disappears into the back anyway.

“I did not think we would frighten her,” she says, filled with guilt over the strange turn of events.

“I should have considered it. My attire is not precisely humble,” he muses, glancing down at himself. Then he looks back up, and examines the walls again, his eyes wide to take it all in. “But you are correct. This was worth seeing. I had not… I had thought it would be all grey on the inside, too.”

She blinks.

“So far everyone I’ve seen here seems inordinately preoccupied with art. Why should it all be at the top and not at the bottom?” she wonders.

“That makes sense,” he concedes. “But it is so… it is so different. Not like a pale imitation of what the grand artists create, but something else. All within the same city. Hiding. I am amazed.”

His confession gives her pause, and she wonders about other paintings; wonders when he discovered his love for them in another time.

It’s a thought too close to her raw nerves, and after a second, she chases it away again.

Ess serves the wolf wine, and then pauses in uncertainty, glancing towards her.

“Will your friend drink the same?” the woman finally seems to settle on asking.

“Certainly,” he says.

“He is not scary,” she promises, considering the situation as Ess feels her glass with a white-knuckled grip on the bottle. Probably an ironic statement, all things considered. But she’s going to stand by it.
“Look,” she decides, and after a moment of concentration, drops a ball of sparkling light onto his head.

Everyone in the tavern freezes as the glittering bits of dust cascade down over the wolf’s shoulders, catching in his hair and his eyelashes, and sticking to the bridge of his nose.

He looks over at her.

“What was that for?” he demands.

“It goes with your outfit,” she tells him.

“It absolutely does not.”

“It is sparkly. I added more sparkles. Everyone who sees you will be jealous, you are the most sparkliest of all the People now,” she reasons.

He lets out a growling sigh, and points at his sleeve.

“This is finely woven fabric, interlaid with strands of magic to make my image shimmer in Dreaming as in Waking, and reflect the aspects of mood in a room. This,” he says, and points to the glitter sticking to his skin, “is an utterly random collection of sparkles you just dropped on my head.”

“It is made of magic, too,” she points out, and reaches over to pat his shoulder.

He sulks.

When the moment passes, and it becomes apparent that he has no intention of killing her on the spot, the tension does ratchet down several notches, at least.

The wine is sickly sweet. She gets two sips in before abandoning her glass. It seems to suit him, though, enough so that he downs his first glass while his eyes roam over the walls, almost unthinking as he absorbs the artwork, and the sight of the other patrons.

None of whom seem terribly keen on speaking within earshot of them.

After a few minutes she gets distracted by the Spirit of Love, again. The thing keeps reaching through the floor, wrapping itself around her ankles and the wolf’s chair, blinking up at her and grinning cheekily whenever she spies it underneath her chair.

“Go away,” she tells it again.

“I do not want to,” it replies.

She gives sincere consideration to pouring the rest of the wine onto it. But when she glances up at the bottle, it’s almost empty.

The wolf is smiling up at the ceiling with a definite looseness to his limbs.

Oh.

Huh.

“Everything sparkles when I blink,” he tells her. “It does not suit the paintings.”
“Tipsy?” she asks, poking his shoulder.

“Hardly,” he scoffs.

Ess approaches them, then, as he seems content to keep on staring at the tavern’s ceilings.

“Did he drink it all?” the proprietor asks her, low and cautious.

“Pretty much,” she confirms.

“It is… very potent,” Ess tells her.

She raises an eyebrow.

“Hoping to get rid of him quickly?” she asks, quietly.

The other woman’s expression twists in a way that implies that was exactly her aim.

At around about that time, the wolf keels sideways, and falls out of his chair.

“Oh. The Spirit of Love is still down here,” he observes.

She closes her eyes and presses a hand to her forehead.

“Now I have to get him home drunk?” she asks, mostly of the universe at large.

Ess shrugs, only a little apologetic.

After a moment she heaves a sigh and stands up, and then leans down under the table to help haul the glitter-encrusted young lordling back onto his feet.

“We should get back,” she tells him.

“We should,” he agrees, smacking a palm down on the table. “We have been away too long. Mythal might need me.”

“Noooo,” Love croons from the floor.

Ess rolls her eyes and reaches down and seemingly fishes it up, arms full of warmly radiating spirit as she shoves it up towards the ceiling, until it finally sighs and goes, spiralling up like spools of gleaming cotton.

“Useless thing,” Ess mutters, fondly.

The wolf manages to keep his feet as they head back out onto the street, the light dimming into evening again.

They manage to get back to the citadel without incident; if nothing else, it makes for a distinctive landmark.

“I hate this tower,” the wolf tells her, once it’s finally within sight again. “I do not think anyone likes it. I do not think June even likes it. Do you realize how many spirits are bound in that thing’s eternal machinations? All their energy drained away until they are nothing, and then their remains are trapped, the shattered pieces fueling it onwards.”

She gapes at him.
“What?” she asks.

He nods, mouth twisting in anger.

“Spirits of Innovation. Purpose. Curiosity,” he says. “Even Pride. It is the only way to keep the magic from bleeding out. I am glad Mythal took me in, instead. She could have given me to June.”

Her gut twists, cold, and she stares at the citadel with renewed horror.

“They do that spirits?” she asks.

“Oh yes. It is not done lightly, of course,” he says, swaying slightly as they both gaze upwards. “Some spirits even volunteer for the honour. To be of service. To be of use. To be part of something ‘greater’ than themselves, the vision of the People’s glory.”

“And blood?” she asks. “Is that also put to ‘use’ in the name of glory? Are people with bodies sacrificed to such things as well?”

“Of course,” a new, familiar voice interjects.

Haninan wanders out from the shadow of the citadel. His hood is up again, but his face is bare. He smiles at them, his gaze taking her in before shifting to the wolf. Then he comes to a stop beside them, and follows their line of vision.

“Blood is powerful, and sacred. A long, long time ago, back when Arlathan was only a bud between the branches of the forest, there were animals that were powerful and sacred. We still ate them, of course. We just offered elaborate apologies for it,” he explains. “Now they would not even go that far.”

“Melthyl does not do such,” the wolf grumbles.

“If the need is great enough, even your Melthyl will not hesitate, Wolfling. But she is more judicious than my son,” Haninan replies.

“I am glad to see you,” she interjects.

It earns her a grin.

“Puzzle! A few spare hours without me and you are already pining, how charming,” he replies, pressing a hand to his chest.

“It has been days,” she informs him.

“Hours, days, the difference is negligible,” he replies, waving a hand.

“She was not pining,” the wolf grumbles.

Haninan peers at him.

“Are you drunk?” he asks.

“No.”

“Yes,” she corrects. “And I could use some help making sure we do not get lost on our way back.”

“Did you take him to Ess’ place?” Haninan asks, fascinated. “Looking like this?”
“He was less sparkly when we arrived,” she admits.

“We do not need help, I am not so inebriated as to fail to find my way around the city,” the wolf insists, huffing slightly.

“Ess does not own a sparkly tavern – ah! You did it! That is your magic, is it? Fascinating. That stray piece in you gives it an odd flavour, like the wrong seasonings on a familiar dish,” Haninan muses.

She stiffens, suddenly curious as to what he means, but not at all eager to give the wolf more clues.

“Yes, I did it. He was making people nervous,” she replies, trying to direct the conversation away from the particulars.

“What ‘stray piece'?” the wolf asks.

Precisely what she didn’t want him to pick up on.

Of course.

“Never mind my blather,” Haninan tells him, though. “Just a bit of rambling. You know how it is, trapped in an ever-twisting labyrinth for years, the mind comes and it goes.” Lifting his hands, he claps them together. “Very well, children. Let us get you safely back to warm beds in crystal rooms.”

“Thank you,” she says.

He waves her off, and begins to lead them down a path that’s different from the one which the evanuris traversed on their way to Sylaise’s palace.

They disappear into the shadows again, away from the bright roads and gleaming fixtures. Back to the grey and the dark.

“You are older than the city?” she asks, thinking of his comment before.

“Yes,” Haninan confirms. “Though not by much. That was a long, long time ago, back when there was more forest than city. The maze was harder then. The paths were always changing as new trees grew and old trees fell, and the land shifted. Things would grow and overgrow at a phenomenal rate. It was a race just to keep up with it, to learn the patterns of the plants and animals, the way a dragon could completely change the landscape in a single season.” He sighs. “Now it is all stone, of course. All set in. Once you learn the pattern, they rarely change it again.”

“The city does not grow?” she wonders.

“The last time anyone built anything new here, this one was barely even a dream,” he confirms, gesturing towards the wolf.

“Perhaps the city is simply finished being built,” said wolf suggests, scowling intently at his feet.

“Things are only finished when they are dead, Wolfling,” Haninan tells him. “But I will not disagree with you.”

That seems to vex him, and he purses his lips, thinking the matter over.

“There is no reason to think the city will die. Resources can be brought here from all over the continent, and the marketplace is always full and bustling. The magic remains strong. New spirits
are still born, and elves as well,” he muses.

“The leaders,” she offers, before she can think the better of it. Her mind turns to Tevinter, and Orlais. “There is a point where decadence becomes dull. Life is too easy, and the pleasures of it cease to please. The nobility scrambles to find a sense of purpose, or accomplishment, or even just entertainment to stave off boredom – and their excesses grow until they burn out the world beneath them. Or get themselves brutally killed by the oppressed underclass.”

Both men turn to look at her.

She shrugs.

“I have seen it before,” she offers, a little uneasily.

“So you have,” Haninan decides, with a nod.

The wolf shakes his head.

“Every time you tell me something new about your world, it gets worse,” he informs her.

“And yet, all too much of it applies to your world as well,” she snaps back, gritting her teeth.

He huffs, but after a moment, his expression falls.

“You truly think so?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says, curtly.

The conversation dies off a little, after that.

They make it back to the crystal palace in about half the time it took them to reach it, then, even accounting for the wolf’s slowed pace and occasional staggering steps.

“I did not think to ask yet,” Haninan muses, staring up at Sylaise’s opulent home. “What is this meeting of egos meant to accomplish? There is a purpose to it all, I assume?”

“They are deciding what to do about the earthquakes and the Children of the Stone,” she explains.

“Hmm. But with the Nameless acting up, no doubt that issue will be put under consideration as well. I wonder which prove the more pressing matter? The People suffer more because of the earthquakes, but the Children of the Stone hardly threaten the dominion of the leaders in the same way their rivals do.” He sighs, and shakes his head. “Well, I know which way my boy’s vote will turn. The world could grind to a halt and he would just spin on his heels and never notice a difference.”

The wolf snorts.

“Half of them could do that, until they realized the others were spinning in different directions and started accusing them of treachery,” he mutters.

HANINAN laughs.

It isn’t a terribly happy sound.

Then he sighs.
“Well, back to my prison I go. But I think I shall check on you two again soon. Sweet dreams, children,” he declares, and with a polite nod, retreats back down the road, and vaults over the side of the bridge, only to vanish into the shadows beneath it and scurry away.

She watches him go.

Then she turns to look back up the at the looming palace.

“Haninan is older than Arlathan,” she says. “I am friends with someone older than Arlathan.”

She’s thought her capacity for being weirded out by moments of revelation had dried up, but apparently, some things could still be just… too strange to wrap her head around.

The wolf blinks at her.

“Do you even know how old Arlathan is?” he wonders.

“No,” she admits.

“Why is it so strange, then?”

She shrugs.

“This must have taken a lot of time to build up. Where I come from, people die of age, remember?”

He scowls at the reminder.

“It would be unwise of you to do that here,” he says.

“It is not voluntary,” she replies, raising an eyebrow as he wavers a little. She nudges him towards the eluvian.

“We shall make you a new body, if it begins to happen,” he decides. “Perhaps then your emotions will work right, too.”

“My emotions work just fine,” she coolly informs him.

“Yes, but they do not show. It is infuriating. I cannot tell that you are about to cry until you do it, and then it is too late!” he protests. “I cannot – I cannot feel you and the more I come to know you, the more I wish to. It would help so much.”

He looks at her, and her heart sinks into her stomach.

“I am what I am,” she tells him. “I do not wish to change.”

For a second he just stares.

“You are content with what you are? With how you are?” he asks, wonderingly.

“Not perfectly. But enough to not want to be something else,” she admits.

After a moment, he reaches over. She freezes as the tips of his fingers graze her cheek.

He pulls his hand back, and smiles.

“Then I will leave it be, my friend,” he decides. “It is… it is not a good thing, to dislike what you are so intensely that you wish to be something else.”
She finds herself robbed of words. When it becomes clear he’s waiting for some kind of response, she musters up a nod, and that seems to satisfy him.

They make their way back inside.

She spends the night staring up at crystal walls, and barely sleeps at all.

~

It takes two maddening weeks for anything to actually seem to happen at Sylaise’s crystal palace.

The evanuris come and go and for a while she wonders if they are having preliminary meetings among themselves, a gathering of their inner circle – but when she asks the wolf, he only tells her that they are ‘resting’ and ‘recovering from the journey’ and the ‘shock of the attack’. It apparently involves a lot of napping and lounging and doing absolutely everything except discussing what they’ve actually, ostensibly, gathered to discuss.

Haninan makes good on his promise, at least, and comes to find them regularly. He slips into the palace, dressed in gaudy golden and rose-pink outfits, with Sylaise’s vallaslin instead of June’s on his face. And he meets them outside, a time or two, when the atmosphere gets to be too much for her. Then he takes them through the winding maze of the city, and she tries to press the streets into her memory. To learn how to navigate them.

The old elf has a way of thinking, of figuring things out, though, that just seems to require senses neither she nor the wolf were born with.

She thinks he would love the dwarves, in all honesty. She wonders what he would do if he ever saw the Deep Roads; if they would impress him, or if he would consider them as dull and inefficient as June’s twisting citadel.

And then she wonders if the Deep Roads have even been properly made yet; how sprawling the empire of the dwarves may or may not be in this time.

Finally, she wakes one morning and finds everyone gathering expectantly outside of a set of massive, gilded doors, and word spreads that they are at last ready for the first meeting.

It’s good timing, because she was giving serious consideration to just leaving. Even without any other particular destination in mind. The spirits in Sylaise’s palace don’t interact with her the way that her Ghostly Entourage did, or even the way that Love in Ess’ tavern does, and she’s not sure if it’s the magic or the atmosphere or what, but the longer she stays inside the place, the more she feels at risk of vibrating right out of her own skin.

The meeting room is massive. A giant table is stationed around a constantly burning fire pit, with the flames that form dancing shapes and clashing warriors, and shift through a rainbow of colours as they do. The table itself is shaped like an eight-point star, and the walls are etched with intricate designs and repeating patterns that make her feel dizzy when she stares at them for too long.

The floor is golden, but so polished that it’s as reflective as a mirror.

Before they go in, the wolf catches her arm.
“If you think of anything to say, whisper it to me. Do not say it yourself,” he asks. And warns, it feels like.

She thinks about standing in front of Elgar’nan’s scrutiny, and after only a moment’s hesitation, agrees.

There are only eight chairs at the table. The evanuris take their seats, and their followers are left to stand, clustered neatly behind them. The wolf takes his place to Mythal’s right, and this seems to be a standard post for favoured followers, as each evanuris save for Dirthamen has someone situated close at hand.

Dirthamen, for his part, seems content to simply keep a raven on each shoulder.

Sylaise begins the meeting with another long speech about hospitality and welcome.

Halfway through it, she realizes that the wolf is subtly mouthing the words, as if he has them memorized.

After she finishes, it’s Elgar’nan who seems to start the actual discussion.

And he starts it on the topic of the Nameless. Or the Forgotten Ones, as she assumes they must be.

“The insult of an attack in Arlathan itself cannot be permitted to stand,” Elgar’nan declares, slamming both hands onto the surface of the table.

“Do not vent your anger on my table,” the wolf whispers under his breath, glancing sideways at her.

“Do not vent your anger on my table, Father!” Sylaise objects. “We are here for civil discussion, not dramatics.”

“Bah,” the wolf whispers.

“Bah!” Elgar’nan says, dismissively. “You worry too much about petty things, Daughter. My own chamber is destroyed. That is the matter at hand.”

“The matter at hand – or at least the one which brought us here – is that of the Dirt Walkers’ assaults, not simple vandalism,” Andruil interjects.

“We should hunt them down,” the wolf whispers.

“We should hunt them down,” the huntress continues. “Slay those troublesome monsters they worship, and deal with the Nameless in due time.

“I agree,” the wolf whispers.

“I agree,” Ghilan’nain says.

She’s beginning to wonder if the wolf couldn’t just act out the entire meeting for them all in an adjacent chamber.

He catches her eye, and winks.

It’s… a little horrifying, though, she realizes, as he continues to pre-empt everyone in the discussion, quietly whispering almost precisely what they’re going to say before they say it. Mythal’s eyes glitter with amusement, but this isn’t a scripted play. These are the leaders of
Elvhenan, and they are apparently as predictable as if they’d spent the two weeks up to the meeting rehearsing the whole thing in private.

And it takes hours.

Falon’Din is ranting on about something to do with some village – she’s not even sure how they got onto this subject, but apparently it’s a familiar enough rant that the wolf is anticipating him entirely verbatim – when Sylaise steals into an opening and breaks the whole thing up with some odd flourishes so they can go ‘refresh’ themselves.

Or, basically, eat and rest and, in her case, think deeply unflattering thoughts about everyone.

Each evanuris retreats along with their entourage, for a change of pace, though she only half realizes that Mythal is with them when she turns sardonically to the wolf.

“That was five hours of pretentious, blathering nonsense,” she tells him.

Even in Orlais, they usually just confined themselves to one hour. Maybe two.

“There will be more,” he admits.

“I am not doing this for actual decades,” she reiterates.

Mythal chuckles.

“That will not be required,” the evanuris says, gliding through the room. One of the servants hands her a glass of sparkling, silvery liquid. In the gleaming room, she looks like a knife that’s fallen into a box of jewellery.

“Years would also not be good. Months seems like they’d be a bit much, to be honest,” she admits.

“Come and speak with me,” Mythal requests, glancing at her briefly, and then at the wolf.

With steps that click across the crystal floor, she then leads them off to small side room, adorned with silvery-white plants and a fountain that actually has water in it, for an interesting change of pace. A single window looks out over the city, tinting it all gold and pink.

Mythal drops onto a carved sofa, and gestures for her to take a seat.

The wolf stays by the door.

“Pride has told me much of you,” the evanuris informs her.

“Well. He speaks very highly of you,” she replies, a little uncertainly.

Mythal smiles.

“When you came here, you spoke our language. You have improved since arriving, but you already knew it. I admit, at the time, it did not seem strange. But then you spoke of the Children of Stone, and I realized that it is. You come from another world. Yet you look like us. You speak like us. You know things about us, for all that this place is strange to you – it does not surprise or bewilder you as much as it could,” the evanuris asserts.

She tenses.

This is not a good time for the truth to come crashing down around them.
If there ever could be a good time.

“My world is a lot like this one,” she concedes. “…was a lot like this one.”

Mythal regards her for a moment, gold eyes staring clean through her. They flit down to her chest, briefly, and then back up to her face.

“It must have been,” she says.

There is a moment of awkward silence. She shifts.

“May I ask why you're bringing this up now?” she wonders.

“Of course. It is a time for resting, so asking these questions here must seem peculiar,” Mythal grants her. “In your world, you have dealt with the Children of the Stone before. Pleasantly, it seems. The timing of the tragedy in Elgar’nan’s hall was fortuitous. It has distracted the other leaders, and afforded us a window of opportunity.”

“Opportunity for what?” she asks.

Mythal regards her for another moment, and then nods, seemingly to herself.

“There are resources beneath the earth. There are treasures yet unseen, and powers yet unknown. I am of half a mind to lead a march below the ground myself, and take them by force. But that would mean bloodshed and the chaos of battle. It would mean our own People would be forced to sift through the remains for what could be salvaged in the aftermath. On consideration, I would prefer something more… sustainable,” Mythal explains.

The pieces click together.

“Are you asking me to talk to the dwarves for you?” she wonders.

“Pride has offered to serve as my proxy on this endeavour. He wishes your assistance, and I agree with him that you may provide valuable insight,” Mythal says. “But though you wear my markings, I am not deluded enough to think that they are proof of your fealty to me. If it came down to choosing between serving the People and serving the Children of the Stone, I am not confident in your loyalties.”

She leans back, considering.

This is different.

This could be very good.

But there’s no fealty she would willingly offer Mythal that would be enough to assuage her doubts.

There is one thing, though.

“I can offer you a vow that I will not harm your wolf. That I will, in fact, defend him from harm, even at the cost of my own life,” she says, nodding towards said wolf.

Mythal tilts her head.

“Interesting,” the evanuris says, darting a single glance in his direction. “Why would you make such an offer for him, and not for me?”
“If he is to lead this endeavour, then it is more prudent that I will not stand against him than you. Unless you question his loyalty as well,” she reasons. “And I will confess… I am somewhat attached to him already.”

That she couldn’t bring herself to harm him even in the face of the end of the world probably doesn’t bear mentioning.

For a second, though, it feels like Mythal can see right through her to the truth anyway.

The woman’s lips twitch.

“I suspect this is also the best offer I will get from you,” the evanuris muses. “Very well. Your vow, then.”

“Is there any particular wording I should use?” she wonders.

“Intent will serve,” Mythal decides.

“She should pledge to you,” the wolf objects, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. His cheeks are red.

“But she cannot, and you, my Pride, are the one who requested her,” Mythal reasons.

Then she reaches into the fold of her sleeve, and produces a small, sharp dagger. It is so finely pointed that when Mythal takes her hand and opens a cut across her right palm, she hardly feels it. The blood wells up.

“Intent,” Mythal tells her.

She thinks of the wolf, who has asked to speak with dwarves instead of fight them.

She thinks of Solas.

Mythal casts a spell and the air wavers, and then bursts, the blood turning to light that burns itself back up her arm, and rests in her heart.

It feels warm. Not at all like a chain, or compulsion. Not what Morrigan described the geas feeling like. After a second, it floods through her, and vanishes again. Leaving behind only a strange scent of copper and a peculiar tingling.

“Interesting,” Mythal muses, and closes the cut on her palm.

“What was that? That did not look as it should have,” the wolf notes.

Leaning back, Mythal tucks her knife away again.

“The vow will work,” the evanuris says. “And either you are even more charming than I first supposed, my friend, or there is more at stake here than I initially suspected.”

“What do you mean?” he presses.

“She cannot harm you. Let us leave it at that, for the time being,” Mythal decides.

She gets the most unnerving impression that she just accidentally let on much, much more than she was hoping to.
The wolf looks like he wants to ask more, but he bites the questions back, and straightens his shoulders instead.

“Then we are to proceed?” he asks.

“If the rest of the meeting goes as I hope, then yes. I will claim the lead in the matter of the earthquakes, and you both will return to our palace, and collect whomever you desire for this mission. If you fail, our armies will follow,” Mythal decides.

An idea occurs to her, and it rushes out before she can manage to think the better of it.

“Haninan,” she says.

Both Mythal and the wolf glance at her in surprise.

The wolf catches on first.

“He may… actually be useful for this,” he muses. “The Children of the Stone are builders. Their roads are often riddled with traps and convoluting turns.”

Mythal blinks. Then she grins. Then she chuckles, and runs her fingertips across her brow.

“You wish the Forgotten Father of June for your expedition as well?”

The thought looks like it’s simultaneously amusing and also ridiculously inconvenient, like a child asking for a pet dragonling; and yet not quite so absurd.

“He has been imprisoned for a very long time. It would be a mercy to put him to some use,” the wolf reasons.

Mythal’s smile turns wry.

“Oh yes, of course. Locked away in the dark for all these years. Poor soul,” she says, in a tone of voice that leaves neither of them uncertain as to whether or not she knows about his frequent ‘escapes’.

They wait, as the evanuris mulls over her hasty suggestion.

“I will see what I can do,” Mythal finally decides.

“Thank you,” she says.

“Do not thank me yet. Reminding June that his father exists could as easily result in the end of said existence, on a bad day,” the woman cautions.

The warning makes her regret bringing it up.

But it’s too late to rescind the comment now, and so she only steels herself for the possibility of having to make a mad dash to June’s citadel to warn Haninan if things go badly, and then follows the wolf back out into the main chamber.

In the end, though, Mythal mentions neither the earthquakes nor Haninan until partway through the next day’s meeting.

“It is clear,” the evanuris then interjects, breaking into a lull between arguments. “That the matter of the Children of the Stone is of secondary importance to the matter of the Nameless. Their insults
are too grievous to ignore. My own people, however, are less suited to hunting them than most. I will send a contingent to see what may be done about the earthquakes. If more is needed, we can always reconvene on the matter."

There are a few objections to this idea. Falon’Din, mostly, as he seems to think Mythal is making a grab for power – which is actually astute of him, since she is.

The wolf is still able to quietly pre-empt the majority of his arguments, though.

Eventually, however, it is agreed that Mythal will handle the earthquakes, given that her home was most recently affected, and her resources are ‘best suited’ to the matter.

It isn’t until the third day of standing and listening to increasingly off-topic nonsense circling around the table that the question of Haninan is raised.

“Tell me, June,” Mythal says, towards the end of the evening, after a round of passive-aggressive insults has just finished passing between Sylaise and Andruil. “Does the Madman of the Maze yet live?”

June stiffens, and then gives her a sidelong look.

“I believe so,” he replies.

“He has a knack for navigating strange places, does he not?”

“One could call it that. It is more to do with trickery than any true talent,” June says, increasingly wary.

The others at the table mostly look intrigued. Apparently, this is not a subject they expected to hear come up.

Mythal smiles.

“I have been thinking, June. You were so kind to offer us the use of your citadel after that violent attack. It is a marvel, truly, but it is also a prison. Unfitting for one of your stature, truly. If you did not have your prisoner to contain, to limit your innovations to a specific direction, I believe the city as a whole would benefit from the unleashing of your imagination,” she tells him.

“Most likely,” he agrees. “But as you say, my prisoner yet lives.”

“But he need not constantly be your burden. You are the Husband of my Daughter, after all, June. We are all family here. I could make use of him, and relieve you of his tiresome presence,” Mythal suggests.

Sylaise snorts.

“Really, Mother,” she says. “If you wish to barter for my husband’s father, you need not pretend to be doing him a favour by it.”

June stiffens, and his expression falls from wariness into a full-blown scowl.

“Forgive me. I had quite forgotten about June’s relation to his prisoner,” Mythal says.

“As you should. It is a relation I have long forsaken,” June replies, with a sharp glance at Sylaise. Sylaise who only rolls her eyes.
“That does change things, though, does not it?” Mythal muses.

“No,” June barks. “It changes nothing. A forsaken relation is forsaken. If you wish my prisoner, Mother of my Wife, then I will not deny you out of hand. It is true what you say, that he has become burdensome and restrictive. But he is still mine to do away with; so what would you offer in return?”

Mythal seems to consider the matter for a moment.

“You once expressed an interest in using my Star Seer with more freedom of accessibility,” she decides. “I could loan you the use of it for a decade. Two, even.”

“Fifty years,” June immediately counters. “With all rights to dismantle it, and my promise to return it to you as functional and unharmed as it arrived.”

Mythal smiles.

“A hard bargain. But acceptable, if it will bring more of your inventiveness to serve Arlathan,” the Mother of the evanuris decides.

When that meeting lets out, she finds herself stopping for a moment, and just staring up at the walls.

“Did you just trade June a telescope for his father?” she finally asks.

“He has always been terrible at bargaining,” Mythal replies.
Fortune's Favour

Chapter Notes

Fanart, you guys!! By the lovely and talented Tales2TellU! FANART: http://bluegirlbooks.tumblr.com/post/130732245529/if-you-arent-reading-feynites-looking-glass-on

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes them another couple of weeks’ worth of meetings to actually get out of the city, which at least gives them the opportunity to inform Haninan of his new status.

The old elf seems to have mixed feelings on the news.

“For a telescope? A borrowed telescope? Dammit, boy, at least get permanent ownership of the thing!”

He seems intrigued, though, by the prospect of going to find the dwarves.

Eventually June does give Haninan over to Mythal, utterly indifferent throughout an elaborate ceremony until Haninan finally turns to him towards the end. His arms are chained with elaborate cuffs, covered in runes, but not bound so tightly together that he can’t spread them wide.

“Alright, boy. Do you need a goodbye hug?” Haninan asks.

“No,” June replies, tightly. A muscle by his left eye twitches.

“But you used to love hugs!” Haninan insists.

“Great Leaders do not hug their prisoners!” June hisses.

“No need to get defensive. It was just an offer.” After a moment, the old elf sighs, and treats his son to a single, solemn look. “Be cautious,” he says, and then he’s walking towards them, falling into line behind Mythal’s people.

A fleeting look of hesitation passes over June’s face; there and gone again almost as quickly.

Then the evanuris straightens, and once again seems utterly indifferent, and just a touch annoyed.

“My people will deliver the Star Seer to you as soon as possible,” Mythal informs him, placidly.

“See that they do,” June replies, before stalking off with his own contingent.

She thinks that’ll be about it, but shortly thereafter, the wolf decides to start obsessing over Mythal’s safety in light of the fact that she’s being left behind in Arlathan without him. This involves a lot of him yelling at the other members of their contingent while Mythal looks mostly amused.

“Wolfling, stop,” Haninan finally sighs at him. The man has Mythal’s vallaslin on his face, though
she suspects it’s the illusion-spell kind and not the ‘official’ sort. He’s been permitted to walk around without his bindings on, so long as he’s inside where none of June or Sylaise’s people can see him.

“I am Mythal’s guardian,” the wolf snaps, radiating anxiety.

“Mythal survived well enough before you came. I am positive she has not forgotten how,” Haninan assures him.

For her own part, she finds, given what she knows, that she can’t exactly fault him for a little paranoia.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asks him, in the midst of his flurry of precautions and preparations.

He sighs.

“I know it seems excessive. But when I am here, I can tell what is going on. When I am gone, I feel as though I must anticipate every possible outcome and leave some kind of contingency for it,” he admits to her.

“That is impossible. But I understand,” she informs him.

“You… protected people? Back in your world?” he asks, turning curious eyes towards her.

It feels a lot like getting stabbed in the gut.

“I used to,” she says, carefully.

He frowns, shifting a little, swaying from side to side for half a second, like he’s not quite sure what to do with his arms all of a sudden.

“What would you suggest?” he asks her.

“For Mythal?” she wonders.

He nods.

“Escape routes,” she immediately decides. “She is powerful enough on her own. The biggest dangers to her would come from treachery or overwhelming force. Or both. Ensuring that she cannot be cornered, then, is ideal. Anything strong enough or close enough to be a danger is better fled from than fought. So always leave her with escape routes. Especially those which only you and she might know about.”

He considers this.

“You offer good advice,” he decides.

“Well. I try, for whatever it is worth,” she replies, wryly.

They leave two days after that conversation, finally, passing out of the city and through one of the large eluvians, and thence through the crossroads, back to Mythal’s palace.

Exiting amidst the greenery and comparative modesty of the place, she finds herself suddenly grateful for it. She is tempted to make a spectacle of herself and go hug a tree, even, if only to appreciate the fact that it’s made of actual leaves and bark and not crystal or spun glass or wishes
or some other nonsense.

Haninan breathes in deeply, and exhales.

“Ahhh,” he says. “It has been too long since I was in more nature than magic.”

The wolf huffs.

“We will have more than our fill of nature very shortly,” he declares.

“I look forward to it! I think,” Haninan replies, with a toothy smile.

They make it out of the eluvian chamber, then, and she nearly panics as something slams bodily into her. She gets the impression of tall and arms and too close and nearly draws her blade before she realizes she’s not being assaulted so much as enthusiastically embraced.

By an elf.

An ancient elf.

A woman, she guesses, though beyond that the particulars are a little hard to discern, as whoever it is seems intent on crushing her like a Spirit of Love.

“You are back!” the elf crows in a vaguely familiar voice.

“Well,” she says.

The assault relents as whoever-this-person-is finally lets her go enough to lean back, and stare at her with large, large blue eyes.

The woman is tall and gangly, impressively long-limbed, with dark hair that stands up in tufts that make her think of baby birds. Mythal’s vallaslin is written in clear blue across her pale skin, and she is dressed in very nice clothes that look like they have been dragged through eight different kinds of mud in the past ten minutes. There are stains on her fingers, a large splash of ink on her cheek and her bottom lip, and she smells like a library after a hurricane.

“You are back!” the strange young woman repeats, as enthusiastic as an overgrown child.

The wolf takes one look at her and raises his eyebrows, and then looks down the hall, clearly expecting to find other people who aren’t actually there.

“Curiosity?” he asks.

The strange woman nods happily at him.

What?

“Curiosity?” she repeats, suddenly gripping the arms around her back; though more out of a shocked attempt to keep her balance than an effort at returning the hug.

“Surprise!” Curiosity exclaims.

“You have a body,” the wolf observes, in the same tone of voice with which she might expect him to say ‘there were no survivors’.

“I decided it was time because everyone was talking about how Pride was going to come back and
pick people for a mission and that he would not be able to take spirits along but I knew you would
go along because it is a mission to the Children of the Stone and I promised I would help and I
have been meaning to take a body for a long time because it is just so fascinating and so I talked a
lot with everyone and asked most of the questions I could think of and I finally did it!” Curiosity
tells her, sucking in a massive breath of air at the end of her spiel.

She feels rather distantly stunned.

“And you just… have a body now?” she says, blinking at said body.

“Yes! It is very different. But I can still fly! Look!” Curiosity says, and with a snap of magic that
makes spots dance in front of her eyes, the embodied spirit abruptly transforms into a very large
blue and green parrot.

Said parrot flaps violently in front of her face for a minute, scrambling to perch on her shoulder
before she summons enough mental acuity to think to lift her arm, and offer it a post there instead.

“See!” Curiosity exclaims. “I have discovered how to turn into a flightless bird, too! And also a
lion. Would you like to see the lion?”

“No! No, this is enough to take in, for now,” she decides.

Haninan laughs.

“Oh, this is just so magnificent,” he says, through it. “Babies. I am going to be trekking through the
wilderness with babies.”

The wolf shoots him a glare that could strip paint.

“I am eight hundred years old,” Curiosity says.

Then she squawks and flaps rapidly as she loses her balance. The parrot’s talons dig into her arm
brace, scraping along it before getting caught in the strap as she scrambles to try and catch her,
which earns her a wing to the face and then another dizzyingly close explosion of magic.

Curiosity turns back into an elf and nearly breaks her arm in the process.

“Whoops,” the former spirit says. “I am still learning a lot about bodies. Sometimes sharing one
did not fully prepare me for the reality of being in one constantly, all by myself.”

She just sort of stares, for a minute.

Then the wolf stride over and pointedly steers Curiosity a few steps away from her.

“Just take your time, and focus,” he says. “You must be more considerate. It is all different now,
and there is no going back.”

Curiosity smiles.

“Of course not! It is very interesting, though. I think I understand better why you kept tripping all
the time when you first took a body,” the former spirit informs him.

He darts a glance in her direction, and then hastily away.

“I did not trip that much,” he objects. “Regardless, this was a poor idea. Especially for the reasons
you gave. Body or no, you cannot come with us.”
Curiosity’s expression immediately falls.

“What? Why not?”

The wolf sighs.

“Because you have completely changed the nature of your being, and you are scarcely accustomed to it. It would be the height of irresponsibility to take you into a potentially dangerous situation,” he says.

She thinks of Cole, and feels a jolt of guilt.

Curiosity makes a noise like a deflating balloon.

“Where better to learn about having a body in a dangerous situation than by having a body in a dangerous situation?”

“You do not even know how to have a body in a safe situation yet!” the wolf snaps.

“Of course I do! I have hardly damaged myself at all,” Curiosity replies. Then she squints at him. “Do you think I could lift you up?”

“Possibly. But do not attempt-”

His request is cut off as Curiosity immediately starts trying to pick him up. It’s touch-and-go for the first few seconds, before the tall young woman manages to figure out a grip that will work, and essentially lifts the wolf off of his feet and starts swinging him around.

The wolf, for his part, looks mortified.

“Does this mean I am stronger than you?” Curiosity asks.

“No,” the wolf insists. “Put me down. Now.”

With a shrug, the former spirit complies.

She watches the whole thing unfold in a sort of stunned fascination.

“I like this little bird,” Haninan decides, with a sardonic grin.

She’s not sure if this actually qualifies as another disaster or not.

Time will tell, probably.

~

They spend several more weeks at Mythal’s palace as the wolf makes arrangements for their journey, then. And argues with Curiosity. A lot.

She finds herself in the company of spirits once more, but with the addition of Haninan. To her surprise, the wolf insists on resuming their morning practice exchanges – he’s gotten much better with his swordsmanship, and she’s lost a lot of the ‘uncontrollable’ aspect to her magic, but she
supposes it's fair to assume that the situation they're heading into now could go south on them in a lot of unpredictable ways.

Having Compassion’s company again is a bittersweet comfort.

The spirit lingers around her as often as ever, warm and bright and soft.

It makes her think of Curiosity, and of Cole. It makes her wonder what happened to spirits in the Waking world when the Veil went up. Would Solas have been able to warn them of what was happening? Would they have known to fly back to the Dreaming? Or to take bodies? And what of those who didn’t? Cut off from the Fade, what had happened to them?

Had they twisted into demons and abominations?

“You do not need to worry for me,” Compassion tells her, gently, one evening as the spirit helps her hide away in the public baths.

She thinks of Cole’s hands, ice cold in her own. Spirit gone. Eyes blank.

“Worrying’s a habit,” she admits.

“If I shatter, the echoes of me that linger in the Dreaming will begin to grow and form shapes out of the pieces left behind,” Compassion tells her. “I am very old. There will be many pieces. None will be the same as I am, but all of them will be part of me. Like children, I suppose. With enough time they will become new Spirits of Compassion. It is the way of the world to change. I do not welcome my death, but if it comes, something new may grow from it.”

The spirit smiles at her.

“I have always loved the idea of life that could only grow from such things,” it admits. “It is a notion filled with such hope and resilience. Even when circumstances seem their most dire, something will survive. Something will grow, if it can only be nurtured.”

She’s surprised at the amount of comfort Compassion’s words bring her. And at the bitterness.

“Sometimes I am not sure if my world was denied that chance to grow into something more, or if we squandered it before time ran out,” she admits.

“I do not know,” Compassion replies. “But tell me of the spirit you were thinking of. Then I will know of him, too. Then there will be more of his memory left to linger in the world.”

She lets out a breath, and sinks a little lower into the warm water.

It’s a good idea, but somehow she can’t quite seem to manage to find the words for it. Every time she tries they get stuck in her throat, or they come out strangely; drifting through metaphors and random, tiny moments that don’t really do anything justice.

Not that she could do a whole world justice either way, with her own small perspective.

Compassion doesn’t complain, though, or press. Just listens, until she finally climbs out of the water, and tries to shake some of the lingering ache out of herself.

It’s a start, she supposes.

Maybe it’s something worthwhile, too.
Sorrow flits around her shadow for a long time after that; quiet and steady. The world feels slower when it’s there, but not necessarily in a bad way.

It alternates at times with Rage, who seems pleased with her ‘progress’, in that inexplicable and slightly troubling way that it has.

The whole situation feels very far removed from ‘coming home’, but it’s much more comfortable than Arlathan, at least. She can sit in a garden without anything more than a few birds and tree branches looming over her head, and that’s nice, too.

Curiosity flits among the birds now, getting the hang of her wings, and utterly ignoring the wolf’s insistence that she absolutely will not be coming on their mission with them.

“You do not even know how to fight,” he argues.

“I can cast spells,” Curiosity replies, waving her hands demonstratively and freezing several nearby ferns.

“You do not have any *martial* combat skills,” the wolf counters.

“Then perhaps I should steal your combat instructor,” Curiosity counters. “Oh! I could learn so much, and you’ve already learned a lot, I should take your place! Then you can do other things in the morning!”

“No,” he snaps.

“Why not?” the former spirit wonders, blinking.

“*Because. You are not coming.*” he insists. “There is no need for you to focus on those skills right now. You should be acclimatizing yourself to your new body.”

“It is not that difficult,” Curiosity replies.

“You should take this more seriously.”

“I am taking it very seriously! I shall help. I *promised* I would help.”

The wolf sighs.

“Help with what?” he asks.

“Answering questions, obviously.”

“Questions pertaining to what?”

“Everything. All of them,” Curiosity asserts. “Or, well. I mean, I would like to answer *all* of them, but there probably will not be time. So most of them. As many as I can, anyway.”

Again, the wolf sighs.

“Your quest for knowledge, as ever, does you credit. But are there not other pursuits you could explore *here* for the time being?” he wonders.

“Of course there are,” Curiosity replies. “But I made a promise.”

And that’s the most, thankfully, that he can get on the subject.
Haninan watches it all unfold like it’s some kind of spectator sport.

She’s torn between doing much the same and trying to intervene; not least because she isn’t entirely certain whose side she should take. The wolf is fairly set upon leaving Curiosity behind, and Curiosity seems equally set on coming, and while she can understand both sides of the argument, her own experiences with a newly-embodied spirit don’t offer any better insight. Cole had handled himself remarkably well, she realizes. Particularly given that he was dealing with many more unknowns than Curiosity was.

But Curiosity appears to be doing a good job of adjusting, and she can hardly fault the spirit for wanting to help. Or deny that she appreciates having someone so dedicated to helping her find answers.

Still, she has no desire to see another friend die any time soon, and while she’s hoping their mission won’t end in violence, it could. The Sha-Brytol were the closest thing she’d ever met to ancient dwarves, and though she sincerely doubts they could serve as an accurate reflection of the majority of ancient dwarven society – or even a good reflection of any of it, considering the length of time involved – they had been formidable, if nothing else.

So she waffles, and mostly stays out of it, and does her best to try and think of where to go from here.

If she can keep the evanuris from killing the Titans… maybe that was what Solas had planned to do. Maybe that was why he’d chosen this moment, if he’d chosen the moment at all.

She finds herself pressing a hand absently against her chest, from time to time. Wondering.

A week into that marks the first time that the wolf comes to one of her dreams, instead of vice versa.

It is a familiar dream, one where she keeps trying to rescue falling things from dark, snapping jaws. When she sees him she reacts in the manner of the dream, at first, and grabs at him. They both go tumbling down, away from the reach of shadowed teeth.

For a moment they are simply a disoriented pile of limbs.

Then the dream breaks, and she blinks and realizes that she’s essentially lying on top of him.

Too close.

Much too close.

She stares at him for one bewildered moment, watching a blush spread across his cheeks and over the bridge of his nose, before her brain turns back on and she swiftly extricates herself.

“Sorry,” she says.

“No, do not apologize!” he blurs, scrambling backwards. “That was my fault. I should have warned you. Or, approached more carefully.”

She sucks in a deep breath, trying to get a handle on her jumbled emotions.

She finds spirits drift close, peering at the two of them before moving off again. The wolf gets to his feet, and offers her a hand up. His freckles stand out vividly against the embarrassed colour still painting his face.
“Did you come find me on purpose?” she wonders, accepting the offer after a moment.

His palm is warm.

“Yes,” he admits. “I have discovered a spirit who is willing and able to help with some of our communication issues. I thought you would be interested in meeting it.”

Oh.

“I am,” she decides.

“Good!” he declares, and the gestures and the air around them shifts, the landscape changing as the Fade distorts around him. Within a single swooping motion, she finds they have clearly moved from one region to another. The last remnants of her nightmare bleed away into vibrant colours and drifting forms, wispy towers locked in glittering rock faces.

“That was dramatic,” she notes.

“Hardly any effort, really, for someone skilled in such things,” the wolf declares, straightening his shoulders.

“What did you do, and how did you do it?” she can’t help but wonder.

He smiles at the question.

“I pulled us through the Dreaming. Or, well, that is not wholly accurate, as I pulled the Dreaming through to us, too. It is not a type of focus that affects the Waking world…”

He goes off, then, talking about the particulars of manipulating the Fade as they begin to walk towards the wispy pillars. She wonders if she could perform such manipulations herself, now. There are probably an untold number of things she could discover through the Fade, if she could learn to navigate it properly. She’d tried her hand at it back when the anchor had still been stuck in it, but it had taken a lot of effort and, in the end, she’d had too much to do to risk exhausting herself during her sleeping hours as well as her waking ones.

And then of course, the anchor had been gone, and the opportunity along with it.

They pass through a floating stone archway. The wolf reaches a lull in his explanations, and after a moment, extends an arm towards her.

She blinks at it.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“I just… I thought it might be easier to, well, to navigate things if we stayed close. So we do not lose track of one another,” he says.

“Is that likely to happen?” she wonders.

“It is entirely within the realms of possibility,” he replies. But after a second, he drops his arm.

“Never mind. You – you should be fine. I as well. We will both be fine, it was only a thought. Let’s just press on. It will not be much further.”

She stares at him.

He clears his throat, and keeps walking.
Was that…?

No.

Absolutely not.

She’s definitely imagining things. He’s only just barely wrapped his head around the concept that she’s a legitimate person. And the situation is completely different this time. He has no reason, none at all, to suddenly develop that sort of interest in her.

She’s probably just reading the wrong motives into the situation.

“Does this spirit we are looking for make you nervous?” she wonders.

“Hmm? Oh. No, not really,” he replies.

Damn. That’s one viable explanation down.

“What sort is it?” she asks, desperately scrambling away from this entire train of thought.

It’s a fluke, she decides. One of those awkward social flukes that just happen from time to time.

Anything else doesn’t bear contemplating right now.

“It is a Spirit of Fortune,” he tells her.

“I have never met a Spirit of Fortune before,” she admits.

“They do not often reveal themselves. They prefer to remain in the Dreaming, so I imagine in your world, they would have been particularly scarce,” he reasons. “I have been bartering with this one for the past few nights. It knows the language of the dwarves, but despite the fortune of that circumstance, it wished for compensation in exchange for the knowledge.”

“What compensation?” she wonders.

“Just some memories, in the end. Nothing too costly,” he assures her. “ Spirits of Fortune sometimes enjoy lingering in the ambiance of those who achieve success, but this one prefers to watch the journey of those who scrape their way upwards from humble beginnings. I offered it a glimpse of some memories relevant to those interests in exchange for its knowledge.”

“Sounds like a bargain to me,” she says.

“It was a fair trade,” he replies.

The ground slopes upwards, and they find the subject of their conversation, perched atop a gleaming pile of gemstones.

For a second she sees a figure made of many woven, golden strands standing above them, looking down.

Then she blinks, and in a flash it’s gone.

The pile of gemstones flutters away, like dust in the wind.

After a second, the strands of light coalesce in front of them again, forming a tall, uncommonly round and healthy-looking figure. Tendrils of its form trail through the ground, breaking off and
snapping into shimmering dust at points.

It looks at her, and then looks at the wolf. It opens its mouth, and then closes it again. “…Hmm,” it finally says, still looking at the wolf as it levels a finger in her direction. After a beat, its eyes drift back over to her again. “I am not sure if you are the luckiest soul I have ever seen, or the least,” it admits.

“I am not the least,” she says, firmly. No matter how it might feel, sometimes.

“That is a matter of perspective. Your perspective on the subject seems very mixed,” Fortune tells her. “Fascinating. Good fortune can be quite subjective, you know. I do not think I have ever met a creature so undecided on the topic as you are.”

She supposes it’s true enough that she’s never quite been able to decide if she has spectacularly bad luck, or supernaturally good, when it all boils down to it.

After all, despite everything, she’s still alive.

“As much as I enjoy entertaining spirits with my peculiarities, we came here for a reason,” she says.

“So you did,” Fortune agrees. “But never fail to seize a fresh opportunity when it presents itself. I will give you both the knowledge that has been bartered for. But you… I will give something more, if you let me in to glimpse the path that has brought you here.”

“No thank you,” she immediately replies.

The spirit drifts a little closer. Its sharp eyes search her face from atop rounded, ever-shifting cheeks.

“Are you certain?” it asks.

She hesitates, a moment.

“What are you offering?” she relents, marginally.

“I know more than just the language of the Children of the Stone,” it tells her. “I have seen the first spark of an empire flare beneath the earth. I will show it to you. Why go armed with only words, when you might have history as well?”

She glances at the wolf.

He seems more curious than concerned, for now.

“What do you think?” she asks him, wrestling with her unease.

He glances at the spirit, and then back towards her.

“It is your knowledge to barter. Whatever you choose, I will not permit the spirit to cause you injury,” he promises, with enough conviction that it pains her.

“Only a glimpse,” she tells it. “No more than that.”

“Done,” it agrees, and then the gold threads of its being break apart; only to wrap around her, instead, a smothering blanket that seeps into her skin. For a second it’s like her pulse has doubled
beneath her skin, and it feels like her heart is beating a mile a minute, and a dozen gold sovereigns have just been dropped into her stomach.

Then she sees herself interrupting Corypheus’ ritual, again. Catching the orb that sears the mark into her hand, saving her life and sealing her fate in one fell swoop. She feels a grip close over her wrist, thrusting the anchor towards a rift. That same grip closing around her other hand, years later, as the anchor is taken away from her – leaving only mangled flesh behind.

A kiss.

She loves him and he saves her, and he dooms her; and because she loves him she must save him, but she cannot stop him, and in the end he shoves the light into her chest and turns to ash instead. Because he loves her, he dooms himself along with everyone else. She survives; but survival does not feel like any blessing.

Fortune and misfortune, and such an improbable twist of fate.

*Enough,* she decides.

Her chest burns.

She hears words echo in the back of her mind. They’re steady, strong, like the roots of mountains. They stretch deep and low, a light in the darkness. A whisper with weight. The rhythm of them matches the pulse next to her heart, for a moment, before they fade away into the simplicity of knowledge.

Then she sees people.

Dwarves, and elves.

The image feels like a whisper, though; like something passed quietly to her from underneath a table.

The elves look almost like the Dalish, but not quite. Roaming bands that drift with spirits on the wind, groups that trade with each other, war with each other; fly bright banners and follow in the wake of massive, horned dragons.

The dwarves stay firmly on the ground, and the dragons and the magic of the Sky plague them with many dangers. Some inadvertent, some intentional. The earth is safe. The Stone is solid, and will not let the unwary be plucked into the Sky.

And it sings.

Home is deep within the Stone, and safety, too. But the dwarves are not without their own conflicts. Politics and outcasts and even simple explorers are drawn away from the depths, time and again, and risk the dangers of the Sky. Magic comes from above and below, and all around, and pulses in the Stone, and drifts through the clouds. Some reach up. Some reach down.

Roads split the earth, and the Titans sing to one another. Dwarves die and their bodies are returned to the Stone, and their memories join in the song. The way the memories of elves and spirits echo in dreams.

It all comes and goes again, cycling back and forth, Children of the Stone and Children of the Sky.

She sucks in a breath as the story ends, and Fortune unravels away from her; snapping threads and
dusty light.

She clasps a hand to her chest.

“Are you hurt?” the wolf asks her, brow furrowed, mouth thin.

“Only a little overwhelmed,” she admits.

He turns to the Spirit of Fortune.

“Let us be done here, then,” he decides, and extends a hand towards it.

The spirit coils up his arm, and for one disoriented, unreasonable moment she almost wants to bat it off of him again. But she casts aside the impulse. The exchange seems to go much more quickly, at least; or maybe she just perceives it as happening more quickly. The wolf’s skin flashes brightly, and then a minute later the Spirit of Fortune is disengaging from him, as well, and retreating further back into the atmosphere of the Fade.

“Seek me out again, if you wish,” it says. “I will be near.”

Then it breaks apart into a shimmering starburst, and doesn’t return.

After a second, the wolf shifts awkward beside her.

“I… saw some of that,” he admits.

She freezes.

“What?” she asks, hoping she’s just misheard him.

“Sometimes things bleed out into the Dreaming,” he says. “I saw you, briefly. The other person was the wolf from your story, was it not?”

She makes herself look at him, even as her heart drops into her stomach.

“You saw him?” she asks.

“In a sense,” he hesitates, and then smiles a little. “Sometimes the Dreaming reflects things strangely. He ended up looking more like me than like himself. I must have been projecting a little. Or the atmosphere confused one wolf for another.”

Her voice sticks in her throat, and for a solid minute, it feels like she’s screaming on the inside. It feels like she’s maybe been doing that since she got here, though.

“I did not intentionally intrude, but it was impossible to avoid noticing some of it. Why would anyone do such a thing? How could anyone do such a thing? You loved him, and he…”

“Don’t,” she asks, quietly.

After a beat, a hand lowers onto her shoulder.

“I am so sorry.”

She wakes up in the silent dark, and her breath shudders its way out of her.

She doesn’t go back to sleep that night.
The expedition, she thinks. That’s what she has to focus on. That’s what she can focus on.

She swallows the rest of it down, strategizes about the dwarves, rolls the the language Fortune gifted them over in her mind. She practices speaking with the wolf, and with Curiosity, who reveals that she found her own way to it before they arrived.

The former spirit’s knowledge gives her a massive advantage in the argument as to whether or not she can accompany them.

Finally, the wolf approves of their group – Curiosity grudgingly included – and they settle on a choice of destination – a region to the south, where a group of Mythal’s scouts managed to encounter several dwarves and make it back to tell the tale. It might not be where the earthquakes are originating from, but it’s a starting point.

She thinks of the location of the Titan she met in her time, and wonders if it’s still in the same place. She can’t imagine the things do a lot of moving around – but then again, that might be what the earthquakes are about.

They leave Mythal’s palace – herself, the wolf, Curiosity, Haninan, and six others, burdened with travel supplies that she scarcely thinks unusual, until she notes the uncertainty of some of their companions. They take the crossroads out to a small city. Not gleaming Arlathan; a less opulent place that drifts above the mountains.

Strange to think they are the same mountains she once lived in.

She still doesn’t see the appeal in floating buildings. But the view of the clouds is very pretty, and so are the fountains that spill water over the sides of the walkways, only to call it back up again in shining, perpetual loops.

They take an elevator down to the ground. It’s more of a crystal and stone platform that is slowly levitated down for them, really, but it’s easier to just think of it as an elevator.

Then they set off. Away from the network of eluvians, the paved roads between worlds, the settlements and cities and places her companions know, and off into the wilds.

Approximately fifteen minutes into their trek, she becomes aware of a tension uncoiling at the back of her neck. Something she’d been carrying for so long, she’d failed to realize it was there. It’s not that the cold air smells any cleaner than it had at the palace or in Arlathan, or even in the floating village. It’s not like escaping from the stench of living that comes with human cities, which don’t have the same abundance of magic to help dispose of things like refuse and waste.

It’s more like walking off of a ship after a sea voyage, she decides. Being freed from the constant movement of the waves and finding steady ground again. Something not quite so… saturated.

The metaphor seems to hold strong. As they proceed, she finds herself feeling more comfortable, but that can’t be said for the rest of the company. Like sailors, it seems, they’ve lost their ‘land legs’, and even Haninan looks a little ill-at-ease after a while.

“I have been in the city too long,” the old elf says. “Living in a hive of buzzing bees. It seems too
His assertion is met with numerous murmurs of agreement.


“There is less ambient magic out here,” the wolf tells her. “It does not radiate the way it does in places where it is in constant use, and the People are there to draw it forward often. The Dreaming feels further away. It is disorienting.”

She draws in a deep, cold breath, and stares at snowy mountain peaks and green pine trees.

The Fade is further away.

These are the mountains where Solas built Skyhold. Where he first raised the Veil.

She supposes that’s not a coincidence.

And it’s probably not a coincidence that dwarves would choose to populate an area where the Fade was less readily at hand, too, if their approach to magic is very different from the one which the elves take. It makes sense, but she feels strangely unnerved and comforted at once.

As the strange sense of normalcy grows she draws ahead of the group. The wolf is at the corner of her eye, dressed in comparatively humble travelling gear, and for a moment she can forget that time has passed. That everything has changed. She can look at him, and smile, and not truly forget but… not necessarily think about it, either.

“I like it out here,” she admits, the wind biting at her cheeks, blowing her hood sideways. “It feels more like home.”

The wolf stares.

Haninan laughs.

Curiosity tilts her head.

“This is what your home felt like?” the former spirit wonders, turning around on her long legs for a moment. “It is disorienting.”

“It is not exactly the same. And it was not disorienting to the people who were accustomed to it,” she explains.

“It must have been a challenge to get by with magic so far from hand,” Haninan muses.

“There were no floating cities,” she concedes. “But there were still beautiful things.”

The comment heralds a round of questions from Curiosity, then, as the ‘youngest’ member of their expedition attempts to figure out how a world could even work without constant and ready access to the Fade.

After a few minutes the wolf joins in as well, and Haninan, too, and she finds herself having to explain some things she’d never really thought about explaining before. Like how wells work, or wagons, or even how buildings are made without magic to help the process along. How one sends messages swiftly without spirits or eluvians or the Fade. How art can be made or inspiration can be found when only your own hands and thoughts are available as tools.
She’s surprised at how little disdain leaks into their fascination. Even some of the other members of their group, who have barely spoken to her, profess some polite interest.

They take many more breaks than she’s accustomed to. Haninan spends an inordinate amount of time staring at the mountains, mouth moving silently, as if he’s piecing together something from the view of the peaks and crags. Curiosity flits and flies until her wings get too cold, and quickly tires herself out. The wolf stops them to set up camp as soon as it starts snowing, well before sundown; she finds the leisurely pace a little absurd, and wonders if they won’t run out of supplies before they even spot their first sign of any dwarves.

“This is ridiculous,” she tells him.

“I know. It is cold and the terrain is terrible,” he gripes.

She stares at him.

Then she picks up a handful of snow and chucks it at his hair.

He blinks at her.

“Obviously, we are in the mountains!” she says. “I mean our progress. We are still within sight of the damn floating village!”

“It is only the first day,” he says. “And if we fly we might miss seeing what is on the ground. Which is where the Children of the Stone generally are.”

“Why are we stopping?” she asks.

“It is snowing,” he says, slowly, as if she might have hit her head at some point in their hike.

“Barely. There is snow on the ground. There will be snow everywhere unless you wish to waste the energy in magically removing it,” she points out.

“There is no urgent call for us to press through bad weather,” he counters.

“And if there is another earthquake while we continue to constantly delay?” she wonders. “If it strikes something that happens to be valuable to one of the other leaders? What then?”

“They have not been so close together as that,” the wolf insists.

“That could change,” she warns him.

He looks at her a moment, frowning a little. Reaching up he bats the snow out of his hair.

“You do not need to keep throwing things at me,” he mutters.

She lets out a heavy breath.

“I know. I should—”

Her comment is promptly cut off by a face full of snow.

It is cold and shocking and she almost jumps out of her skin, until she realizes what it is. Then she stills, blinking snowflakes out of her eyelashes as the wolf grins at her.

“Or perhaps I need to start throwing things back,” he suggests.
Her stomach flips over.

“That is hardly fair,” Haninan says. “She did you the courtesy of only hitting your hair, and then you go and strike her full in the face? Unsporting.”

Curiosity picks up a handful of snow and promptly mashes it into her own face. Then she sputters and wipes it away.

“That is not pleasant!”

One of the other elves snorts.

“Haninan’s right. It is like traveling with a pack of children,” she decides, casting her eyes skyward.

“Well naturally,” Haninan agrees. “Though coming from the youngest of our accumulated gaggle of babies, that says a lot.”

“She is not the youngest. Not even near to the youngest,” the wolf argues.

She levels Haninan with a look that she hopes successfully conveys the sentiment of ‘stop talking now’.

“Technically I am the youngest. Even though I am not,” Curiosity chimes in, and she could kiss her for it. Until she almost immediately ruins any good that might be done by it. “Thirty-one isn’t much of a head start, though.”

“Thirty-one hundred years is plenty,” the wolf says.

“Yes, yes it is,” she agrees. “Alright, conversation done, everyone just go back to throwing snow or something.”

Hananin grins.

“He thinks you are thirty-one hundred?” he asks, with a variety of delight that lets her know there’s no chance she’s getting out of this easily.

The rat bastard.

“I regret bringing you now,” she tells him.

“Oh, Puzzle. Calm down. I think it only makes you more impressive,” he insists. “Do you know what I was doing when I was thirty-one? I was following frogs to see where they went. That entire year, that was almost all I did. Well, that and survive a very harsh winter in a frog cavern.”

She sinks her face into her hands, lets out a breath, and then darts a glance sideways at the wolf. Whose perplexed expression is slowly beginning to give way to dawning horror.

“She cannot possibly be thirty-one years old,” he says.

“And Wolfling finally catches up to the rest of the class,” Haninan says, throwing a handful of snow like it’s confetti.

The other elves all look mortified.
“Thirty-one. Just thirty-one?” the wolf asks. He looks pained.

“I told you the people in my world died from age,” she says, folding her arms around herself. A simple fact shouldn’t make her feel this stripped bare. It’s not like it changes anything.

Not for her, anyway.

“How quickly do they die from age?” he presses her, glancing up and down, as if she might keel over at any moment from infirmity.

“It varies from person to person,” she says.

“Generally,” he insists.

“Generally… making it to one-hundred years old is very rare.”

In the silence that falls she could hear a pin drop.

“Small wonder you find us too slow,” Haninan says.

The wolf stares at her.

“It is normal where I come from,” she says brusquely.

The wolf stares at her.

“Things worked differently there. No one ever takes a year off just to go chasing frogs,” she continues.

The wolf stares at her.

“Not unless they are very peculiar, at least. And wealthy enough to waste a year. Some people might try it but it would not be considered common,” she allows.

The wolf stares at her.

“Anyway, things moved faster, so it probably works out to be equivalent to many more years here in terms of life experience,” she decides.

The wolf stares at her.

“I just got you to stop being entirely condescending!” she argues at him. “I was not going to endanger that by correcting you. Besides which, I never lied about my age. You just assumed I meant something I did not.”

The wolf finally blinks, and lets out a breath. It puffs on its way out of his mouth.

“I am not angry,” he says. “I am… I am shocked.”

She meets his gaze, and it seems true enough. His eyes are as wide as they had been when she’d pressed her hand against his cheek during their shared dream in Arlathan.

“You cannot be only thirty-one,” he insists.

“If you want to keep thinking I am three thousand, I will not object,” she offers, looking away.

“Time weighed against wisdom is a poor measure,” Haninan says, with a touch more gentleness
than he’d employed earlier.

“I am still technically the youngest, if we go by physical birth dates,” Curiosity reminds everyone.

“When I was thirty-one, Mythal would not let me leave the palace yet,” the wolf says. “Not until I was fifty. I was too vulnerable, she said.”

“I think perhaps people learn more quickly when time just isn’t a luxury they have,” she tells him.

“We should turn back,” one of the others declares.

“What?” she asks.

Glancing back at the wolf, she’s somewhat horrified to see his expression turn considering.

“No!” she objects. “Why should it matter now, all of a sudden? I have done more dangerous things than walk through the mountains. I have stumbled through mountains bloodied and half-dead in the middle of the night! During a snowstorm!”

Besides which, she was fairly certain up until this point that most of Mythal’s people were still operating under the premise that her personhood was non-existent. Where this sudden concern is coming from, she can’t say. But that it should only cropped up when it could inconvenience her seems pretty in keeping with the tone of her life so far.

*Figures*, she thinks.

Everyone looks horrified, except for Haninan and Curiosity.

“What was that like?” Curiosity asks.


“And then you had to walk through the snow?” the wolf surmises.

“Yes,” she says, shifting uncomfortably at his expression. “So as you might guess, hiking through the mountains looking for *dwarves* does not strike me as a particularly dangerous proposition.”

There is a moment of long silence.

“What is a *tray-boo-shay*?” Curiosity asks.

“It is a device that hurls very large rocks or explosives across a long distance,” she replies.

“What for?” one of the other elves wonders.

Somehow she finds herself launching into yet more explanations, then, of siege engines and how war works when every soldier is not a mage, and even the mages can’t just call magic to them out of nowhere. It’s a relief to get past the matter of her numerical age, and it seems to kill the argument for turning back before it really gains any legs, which is something else she’s grateful for.

By the time night falls she dares to hope that the whole thing has blown over, and will be forgotten.

“Thirty-one,” she hears the wolf murmur, as Curiosity helps set up their tent, and shows her how to cast the warming spells for it.
She breaks away from the task to go frown at him.

Her age had never seemed to bother Solas very much. Of course, for a lot of the time they’d spent together, he was pretending – badly, in hindsight – not to be thousands of years old. And then afterwards, there were more important things to deal with. Not to mention, he had woken to a world which was full of people like her, where his lifespan was the oddity.

When in Tevinter, do as the Tevene do, and all that.

She supposes it’s funny, though, that the Solas still in his hundreds is taking more issue with the matter than the one in his thousands had.

Haninan is pretty blasé on the subject. Maybe it’s one of those things that just sort of circles around.

“I am still older than you,” she tells the wolf.

He blinks up at her.

“You are most emphatically not,” he replies.

“Think of it in terms of percentages,” she tells him. “I am roughly a third of the way through my natural lifespan, and you are barely at the beginning of yours.”

“It does not work like that,” he insists.

“Why not?” she wonders.

“Because… because it is not fair,” he declares, and then lets out a gusty sigh. “That sounded juvenile. The world is not fair, I know. I swear to you, I am not young! Especially not compared to you now.”

“But you are,” she says.

Not mockingly. If anything, she’s surprised at the fondness that seeps into her tone.

By the look on the face, so is he.

After a moment, she lets out a breath, and sinks down beside him. He twists her heart into knots. He always has. New, ancient, mysterious apostate, or remorseful figure of legend, it seems all of his forms can pull at her.

And she is too old, she thinks wryly, to pretend otherwise.

“I will not say you have not accomplished anything, because clearly you have. But the world has not worn you in yet,” she tells him.

“I have seen terrible things, too,” he replies.

“Seeing terrible things, and even doing terrible things, is not what wears you in,” she informs him. “A child can witness tragedy after tragedy, and still be a child. A miserable, traumatized child, perhaps, but a child just the same. You have not really grown until you can look at the world and know that everything is fleeting. That you are just a passing in moment in time, and so is everything you love; but that it does not matter if that is true, because it is still all that you have.”

“If that is your standard for adulthood, then none of us are grown,” he tells her.
“Some of you are, in spite of yourselves,” she replies, and after a moment, reaches out and rests her hand against his shoulder. The ridiculous fur he’s wearing tickles at her fingers.

He stills, and glances at her.

“I doubted your claim to personhood,” he says. “I suppose, in light of that mistake, I should simply accept your word on your maturity.”

“I would appreciate that,” she admits.

“Still. It is not fair,” he repeats. “People should have time. You should have had time… I hope you have much more, now that you are here with us.”

She sucks in an icy breath, and lets it out again.

In one ear and out the other, she thinks, when it comes to time and the young wolf.

“Pride,” she calls him, in the common tongue. “Fleeting moments. They are all anyone has. Even immortals can be killed, after all.”

“What was that word?” he asks her.

“That is your name, in one of the languages of my world,” she tells him. If she cannot grant him his name, perhaps she can at least give him this variation of it.

He smiles; tentative, and unexpectedly charmed.

“I like it,” he tells her.

It’s not a reaction she expected from him, although she’s not sure what else he might have said. But it fits, she supposes. It’s his name, and not his name, and it’s probably time that she relinquished something to him. He’s young. He doesn’t deserve to live in the shadow of another lifetime, or of deeds he hasn’t done. Even if she fails utterly again, and he’s left to repeat the same mistakes.

To live through the same tragedies.

The very thought is intolerable, and not just because it would doom the world all over again.

*Let him never figure it out,* she thinks. *Let him never live that life, and never even know it happened.*

Her heart twists, and her thoughts turn, and she can’t quite stop herself from thinking of Solas, for a moment. Solas who is dead. Solas, whose young shadow is sitting next to her, himself and not himself, while she finds herself wishing that he will never become himself.

Except for one tiny, selfish part of her, that has endured all this time, and just wants him back.

She gives it a moment longer before she has to flee his company again.

Chapter End Notes

Slightly shorter chapter than usual, but I'm swamped for the next couple of days so I wanted to get it posted while I can. Next chapter should be longer but a little later than
usual. You guys and your excellent comments (and fanart oh man I love it) give me life!
Aha! I lied again. Well, not really, but apparently being massively busy did not stop me from obsessing over this story and getting this chapter done in a timely fashion. But there is fanart! FANART OF HANINAN YOU GUYS! SlaveToTheMocha did it again and has slain me: http://inquisilicious.tumblr.com/post/130822369778/coughs-not-solavellan-butugh-feynite-over-at

Turns out you can clear up a lot of time for writing by not sleeping. Apologies for any mistakes; and also if this turns out to be a random string of gibberish. I'm posting it now and I'll check it over for mistakes in the morning.

(I may die.)

If the revelation of her age brings one good thing, it's that Pride consents to quicken the pace of their exploration.

Not by much, but by enough that she feels more like she’s traveling with a party full of injured refugees rather than a gaggle of two-year-olds.

Still, they find themselves venturing back towards the floating village to restock their supplies before they find any decent signs of the dwarves. Under different circumstances, she might almost be amused. Dwarven ruins tend to be… noteworthy, in her experience. She would expect a society still thriving to be even more noticeable, but it takes them three excursions into the mountains before Haninan finally finishes whatever thought process began when he first spied the peaks, and points them in the right direction.

“Aha,” he simply says, one morning, and gestures towards a tiny pass between two massive mountain walls. “That is where we shall find them.”

It’s early morning, barely past dawn. Curiosity is sleeping, snoring enough like a small earthquake to inspire several jokes about the real cause of recent trouble, and Pride is still in his tent. They are the only two members of the camp awake yet. She has discovered that Haninan tends to be the first to rise and the last to sleep; unlike most ancient elves, he doesn’t seem to relish his dreams.

“How do you know?” she wonders.

He reaches up, almost idly, and undoes one of his many braids.

“The pieces come together that way,” he tells her. “Water flows, snow falls, stone erodes and the earth goes hard in places and soft others. They live underground, the Children of the Stone. It provides for them. So if they are going to come away from it, it will be in places that can protect them, but also offer them the advantages of coming up.”

Swiftly, his fingers thread through his strand of hair, changing the wrap of the braid as he ties it
again. She tries to follow the pattern he’s using. It’s too fast, at first, but after a moment he notices her looking, and slows down.

After a moment, he nods towards the mountains again.

“That place is hard to reach from above ground, except for a few paths. The mountains are large. A lot of stone. A lot of shelter from the sky, and prying eyes. The clouds offer cover from above. But there’s greenery, too. Animals. Water, flowing down from the ice caps. Not too much, though,” he explains.

“I am impressed,” she tells him. “Have you gone looking for dwarves before?”

He laughs.

“No. There was a time when my clan traded with them, but it ended badly. I might have sought them out again, I suppose, but it seemed wiser to let them be,” he says.

She stares at him for a moment.

“I have so many questions now,” she admits.

He chuckles.

“Well, the little bird and the wolf pup won’t be up for another hour, at least,” he muses. “Ask away!”

She purses her lips, considering, and the decides to start with her first point of interest.

“You belonged to a clan?” she asks.

He ties off his braid, and then undoes another one, starting the new pattern slowly from the beginning this time.

“Back before the great and glorious empire began its spread,” he confirms. “When I was young enough to do all that frog hunting I mentioned. Yes. I was born in the forests. We lived very differently then. Travel with the wind, see what you could find. Drift behind the wings of dragons. I built things for the joy of building them, and then abandoned them, never expecting them to last.”

His eyes go distant, and melancholy. She feels the tug of her own homesickness, and sees it reflected in him.

Maybe even for some of the same things.

“I grew up in a clan, too,” she says.

He smiles.

“I know, Puzzle. I can see it written all over you,” he replies. “Leaves on the wind, and things in the wild.”

She thinks of the images Fortune showed her, of the Children of the Sky, traveling all over as the dwarves began to dig their cities around the Titans. Following dragons.

“What are dragons like now? I mean, here?” she wonders.

The slip earns her a glance, and she knows he’s caught it.
But he doesn’t comment on it.

“Dragons are scarce,” he tells her, instead.

That’s a bit of a surprise, all things considered.

“Why?” she wonders.

He heaves a breath, and his mouth twists a little.

“There is a story. I have not thought of it for many, many years, but I have been thinking of it lately. It must fit in somewhere,” he muses. “The first Dreaming born were dragons. They could take on the most magnificent forms imaginable, massive and powerful. But it was – as all vain endeavours to transform one’s body into a monument must be – too much. A dragon needs a lot to live. To sustain its enormous form and all of its strength. Inevitably, the firstborn warred with one another over resources, and nearly scorched all life from this ground. It was the clever little spirits and the People, who chose lesser forms, that eventually outwitted them. Then they repaired the world, creating it anew, and became legends.”

The Creators.

She stares at him, fascinated and amazed.

“But you followed a dragon in your clan?” she prompts.

“The Keeper, yes,” he says, and her heart stops.

“Young dragon was your Keeper?” she asks, barely more than a whisper.

“That was what we called her,” he says. “The form of a dragon is difficult to sustain. But not all of them were wicked, or wanted to consume all things. So those that survived slipped into the long sleep, waking in turns, and in that way they never overwhelmed the resources of the world. Each clan had their dragon, their Keeper, and followed after her, protected by her fire and guided by her wisdom.”

“What changed?” she asks. It feels so strange, to hear this. To learn this. From someone who lived it, no less. Stranger even than seeing Arlathan, perhaps.

“I paint a pretty picture,” Haninan tells her, wryly. “But it was not all peaceful following, of course. Wars between clans were not uncommon, and time sharpened old grudges. The best way to hobble a clan was to kill their Keeper. Some dragons went to sleep, and chose not to return, for fear of being targeted. Many were slain. There were spells devised to rob a dragon of its mind, drive it mad so that she became a ravening beast and killed her own followers. A tidy victory – take out an entire clan without even dirtying your hands. The talented learned to take on the shape themselves, to try and become new Keepers to replace those lost, or defend their fellows from the ones who turned, but none have yet arisen who can hold the form for very long. Even Mythal has her limits, and she is the best I have ever seen at it.”

He shakes his head.

“Depressing, I suppose. Our own Keeper was lost to us during the darkest of days,” he declares. He looks towards her, and seems to debate something before speaking again.

“June learned to take the form after she… no, I will not speak of the particulars there,” he says. “She was his mother. He only managed it once, but that was enough to cement him as a ‘leader’.”
“June’s mother was a dragon?” she asks.

Embarrassingly, her first thought turns to the… unlikely logistics of that conception.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she can hear Iron Bull whistling.

As if he’s reading her mind, Haninan laughs, and then waggles his eyebrows.

“She did not always have to wear her wings,” he says. “Though she usually kept the scales. Very shiny.”

“I did not need to know that,” she decides. It’s easier to focus on than the overwhelming nature of the rest of it.

But a fresh and horrifying thought does occur to her. It stands to reason that modern dragons in her timeline came from maddened, wild ones; genetic descendants that had no memory of any ties to the people. Increasing in numbers as the Veil weakened over time, and the surges of magic let more of them sustain themselves.

As to the rest, though…

“Haninan,” she says. “Where do the Keepers who left the elves sleep?”

“That is a secret not even I know,” he admits.

“Puzzle it out,” she suggests, suddenly urgent. “Where would they go where no one would think to look for them?”

“Somewhere large,” he reasons. “Perhaps in the Dreaming itself. Or in the highest heights of the sky, if they could find a way to drift there. Perhaps on one of the moons.”

“Could they be underground?” she asks, cutting straight to the point.

He pauses.

“You think they are causing the earthquakes?” he wonders.

“No, no,” she assures him. “That is almost certainly to do with the dwarves. But would they – could they – sleep underground?”

He frowns at her urgency, but gives the idea due consideration.

“Yes,” he decides “It would fit.”

Oh no.

Oh no.

The Blight infected the Keepers, and the Keepers became the archdemons; leading the darkspawn as they had once led the People.

“Can they be woken?” she asks. “Can they be reached at all?”

“Something has come together in your mind,” he observes, staring at her eyes. “No. One Keeper can reach another, but when the last waking one was lost, that tie was severed. They will rise on their own, or not at all. Unless their sleeping place can be discovered. And it is not the earthquakes
you fear harming them, is it?"

“Could one of the leaders who can turn into dragons reach them?” she presses. “Could Mythal?”

“No,” he says. “It is different for them. Not even the most talented Dreamers or spirits can reach the dreams of the firstborn.”

She lets out a breath, and runs a hand across her brow.

Hopefully, the Blight began with the deaths of the Titans.

Hopefully, she can stop it from ever beginning, if she can stop the evanuris from ever killing them.

“What is it?” he asks, turning to look at her dead-on, uncommonly serious and severe.

She hesitates.

She likes Haninan. She would trust him, to an extent. But she doesn’t really know him. She can’t possibly give him the truth. Not yet, at least. She’s not sure she could give anyone the truth, or not all of it, anyway.

Maybe a piece of it, though.

Her eyes find his.

He waits.

“I am not sure yet,” she settles on saying. “But if what I fear proves valid, then I will tell you. I think we should find the dwarves as quickly as we can, though.”

After a moment, he nods in acceptance.

Then he claps his hands.

“Alright. We should wake Wolfling and Birdie, and get a move on.”

She’s not about to object to that plan.

They get an early start that morning. Most of the elves grumble about it, though thankfully, Pride takes one look at her, and one look at Haninan, and doesn’t protest. When she explains that Haninan might have figured out where the dwarves are, he seems to chalk it up to eagerness.

She lets him.

They squeeze through the narrow mountain pass, using magic liberally to ease their travel, and the world grows greener on the other side of the rock. Trees cling to long slopes and hardy, northern plants pop up through the snow. A few black nugs dash off into the underbrush. The air warms a little, and then she sees it; a dwarven statue, perched over the mouth of massive doorway.

They see no dwarves, but there are signs of activity. Spaces cleared out. Trees cut down. Shelters carved into the rock, with barrels underneath them, sealed to keep out any animals that might try and pry them open.

Pride stops them before they get close to the doors, and their looming monument.

“We should proceed with caution,” he decides. “If we approach too boldly, we might be ambushed.
Or they could perceive us as menacing.”

After a moment, he unslings his pack, and retrieves several pieces of parchment and a writing implement. She watches as he carefully scripts several messages in written dwarvish – all of which amount to variations on the sentiment ‘we would like to talk to you’ – and then, with more effort than usual, sends them sailing through the air via magic.

The parchments fix themselves to a few trees, and tuck themselves up by the barrels, and near to the massive doorway.

She supposes, even if the elements or animals destroy most of them before anyone emerges to check, at least one will probably survive for a while and remain legible.

Clever.

When she tells him so, he smiles at her, more broadly than she would expect the simple compliment to merit.

“We will withdraw to the mouth of the valley,” he then decides, clearing his throat and schooling his features back into something more neutral.

More waiting sounds about as appealing as yanking off her own fingernails, but in this case, she doesn’t think she can complain. This is a delicate situation, and the last thing they need is anyone getting shot by over-zealous dwarven defenders.

“I want to get a closer look,” Curiosity protests.

“Of course you do. We all do. But it is not safe,” Pride replies.

“No one is around,” Curiosity points out, stretching up and reaching for some low-hanging tree branches, and peering at the needles. “Oh, there is a cocoon in this one!”

“Do not eat it,” Pride tells her.

The former spirit rolls her eyes.

“I only needed to try that once.”

Gently, Haninan reaches over and disentangles her grip from the branch.

“We may be scaring them off by waiting here,” the old elf muses. “Let us withdraw, and see, and if nothing happens, then we can start poking things a bit more.”

As they make camp, she finds herself mulling over the possibilities, comparing what she knows and what Haninan has told her.

There were so many questions they never quite answered in their travels, though she gathered that Solas had imprisoned the Forgotten Ones underground. It had seemed an easy assumption, with the connection between the evanuris and dragons, and what little they’d gleaned of the elves’ war with the dwarves, that the Forgotten Ones were the archdemons. But perhaps it was more complicated than that.

Maybe the Forgotten Ones, the Nameless, had gone looking for the Keepers for some reason.

Maybe they’d joined them in their sleep.
Or maybe she was just entirely wrong.

After a long stretch of frustrating review and second-guessing, she sinks down next to Pride, not even entirely conscious of her decision to do so. Evening has begun to fall, and they have had no signs of activity from the door.

“What can you tell me about the Nameless?” she asks him.

He blinks at her, and nearly fumbles the spell he had been casting.

“That is a dangerous question,” he replies. “But, what do you wish to know?”

“Whatever you can share,” she says.

“It is a complicated subject,” he tells her, obviously hesitant.

She raises her eyebrows at him.

“If you are holding back on account of my age, I will have to throw more snow at you.”

He shakes his head.

“No, I – I would not,” he assures her. Then he lets out a breath. “They are the enemies of the Leaders of the People. Ones who would overthrow them and lead in their stead. But they…”

Pausing, he trails off, and gazes towards the edge of the camp.

She reads the concern in his eyes and follows his line of sight. All she can see are shadows between trees, but something raises the hairs on the back of her neck just the same. She notices what he must have; that they’re being watched.

“Hello?” she calls, in her newly-learned dwarvish.

Very faintly, she thinks she hears something like a whisper.

Then a figure walks out from the shadows beneath the stone and trees.

Short and stout, definitely a dwarf, she thinks. Clad in dark grey armour that looks heavy and smooth, and disguises everything about them, save a small gap for their eyes. The lines of curves on the helms make her think of water running over river stones.

The stare that fixes onto her is understandably inscrutable. The figure’s body language is reserved, as in one hand they carries a wicked-looking halberd, taller than themselves. The light catches the steel, and for a moment shines on the edge of the blade like a fallen star.

She hears the familiar click of crossbow bolts, or something similar, settling into place.

“Hello?” she tries again.

Pride stands, slowly. The rest of the camp begins to shift as they notice the new arrivals. He gestures at them, stalling.

The armoured figure’s breath escapes the confines of its armour, a single exhalation that somehow eases her nerves. If only just a bit.

Whoever this is, she thinks, they are wary, too.
We greet you warmly, and thank you for obliging our missives,” she offers, rising to her feet, as well, and dipping into the bow she’d seen some dwarves use before; legs together, arms spread, bend at the waist. Turn the head just so, but the eyes can stay fixed on target.

“You speak our language,” the figure finally replies, in a rumbling voice that nevertheless possesses a distinctly feminine quality.

“If one wishes to speak to another, knowing how is the best place to start,” she says.

“Forgive our intrusion,” Pride adds, smoothly, dipping into a bow of his own. “We would not have disturbed you, but it is important that we speak.”

She feels a warmth, a glow of approval that is surprising to her. But to go from ‘dwarves aren’t even people’ to such apparently sincere courtesy is… well, she knew he had it in him, at least.

The armoured figure shifts, only slightly. Then a smooth gauntlet rises, in an unknown gesture. Several more dwarves appear, then, stepping forward, away from their hiding places. Most are clad in similar styles of armour, though lighter, it seems. Their helmets are less concealing. She sees bold tattoos, braided beards, and fabrics stitched with runes that shine ever-so-faintly in the dusk. The vast majority of arms are burdened with projectile weapons that, at a glance, look like they would put even Bianca to shame.

But they are held loosely, for now.

After a moment, the lead dwarf reaches up, and removes her helmet.

She has a face that would best be described as ‘solid’. Dark, dark skin, and grey eyes, and white hair plaited tightly against her skull. Shining stones gleam from every possible point on each of her ears, and black tattoos trace the hollows of her cheekbones, the dip of her temples.

“If you would speak, then speak,” the dwarven woman says; not precisely friendly, but tolerant it seems.

“We come on behalf of Mythal’s people, the Children of the Sky,” Pride says.

“To seek what end?” the woman asks.

“The ground shakes. The earth splits, and damages our buildings. Endangers our people. We would know why it is angry,” he explains.

The tension in the air seems to ratchet up a notch. But it’s not quite the tension of hostility, she thinks.

“It is no concern of the Children of the Sky if the ground shakes,” the dwarf tells them. “You float, you fly. If the shaking ground offends you, then leave it.”

“It is the Titan, is it not?” she interjects, taking a chance.

The spokeswoman’s attention fixes on her sharply.

“It is our matter. Not yours.”

“But it is our concern. You are the Children of the Stone, but Stone and Sky are part of the same fabric. There is air below the earth, and there is earth that reaches through the air,” she reasons. “The Titan is disturbed. It is awake, yes? And maybe others are as well? There is a reason. What
causes this distress?"
Grey eyes stare at her for a long, hard moment.

“You know much,” the dwarf finally observes.

“I know less than I would like,” she replies.

“I should tell you to leave, and never come back. If things were any different I would. But this is… this is dire enough that we may risk ourselves even on the slight chance of help from any source.”

The woman sighs, long and heavy, strained well past the point of comfort.

That’s… not a good sign.

Well. It’s a fine concession for a negotiation, but it isn’t promising for the state of things below ground.

“What darkness has found you?” she asks.

It’s a phrase that rolls out without her thinking twice about it, but as soon as the word ‘darkness’ escapes her lips, she almost wonders if she’s jinxing it.

But it couldn’t be the Blight.

It’s too soon, far too soon, for any sign of it.

“The Titan sings the wrong songs into the Stone,” the dwarf tells her, and her profound sense of unease sharpens into visceral dread.

“Why?”

“We do not know. For years there has been a wrongness, and it has only grown. The Titan warned us, but we could not understand what it meant. I still do not think we do,” the woman admits, and the admission clearly pains her. “Do you know what has broken the song?”

“…I might have an idea,” she says.

After a moment, the dwarf’s face twists in anger.

“Was it your people?! Have you done this thing to us?”

Pride stiffens.

“To what end would we?” he asks. “We have no desire to be plagued by earthquakes!”

“You are plagued? Our city is in shambles!” the spokeswoman snaps. “The Titan has moved! The Stone reshaped, and the roads around it broken. Pillars have fallen. Hundreds have died, crushed by uncaring rock, and the lyrium is poisoned!”

“Lyrium?” Pride asks. “What is lyrium?”

“Poisoned?” she interjects.

The dwarf looks back at her, and she swallows around a dry throat.

“Red?” she asks.
Grey eyes go wide.

“You know.”

“I have seen it before.”

But it shouldn’t be happening. Not now.

Should it?

After a moment, the dwarven woman gestures, sharply, and suddenly every crossbow in the hands of every dwarf is pointing at them.

“You. You will come with us, and fix this; or we will kill you now,” the spokeswoman says, pointed at her.

Pride snaps his wrist, and a barrier flies up around the entire campsite.

“We come to talk and you-”

“I will go,” she decides, interrupting him.

“Absolutely not!” he snaps in elvish. “I will sacrifice no one to their clumsy attempts at intimidation. They may fight us if they so choose; they will regret it.”

“If what is down there is what I think is down there, then we need to know. Right away,” she tells him.

His jaw clenches.

“What do you think is down there?” he asks.

She opens her mouth, and then closes it again. Struggling to find the words.

“In my world, there was a poison, called the Blight,” she finally says. “It is… it is horror. It is death. It corrupts things, and turns them to ruin. If it is unleashed, it threatens everything.”

His brow furrows, and the lines around his eyes soften, marginally.

“Your world was strange,” he tells her. “We are different here. What you might think is impossibly dangerous could be easily resolved by us.”

“No,” she says.

He blinks, clearly taken aback by her utter certainty.

“Pride, if you only believe one thing I say to you, believe this – the Blight is not a trifle. It is corruption. It does not matter how powerful you are. In fact, it loves power. It will sink its teeth into it, and use it to spread. It is horror, living and breathing and filled with malice. It is infection, and once it claims something, it ruins it. Plants, animals, people, even gods, or beings like gods; it takes them all, twists them, and uses their jaws to rend the world.”

He stares at her, pale and nervous and she is faced, again, by the reality of how young he is.

He has never seen a darkspawn. He’s never heard whispers about brood mothers, or tales of archdemons. He has never walked through lands ravaged years ago by Blight, and seen blackened
soil and earth in which nothing can grow.

“That was your world. This Blight may not even exist in ours,” he decides. “But... perhaps we may negotiate travel to the source of this supposed poisoning, and see what can be done.”

He glances, sideways and unhappy, towards the dwarves who are still aiming weapons at them.

Their spokeswoman is looking increasingly impatient, tinged with the desperation of one who has been stretched thin over a quick succession of disasters.

She knows that feeling too well not to be somewhat sympathetic; hostility or no.

“We come in good faith to make inquiries, and you respond by threatening and demanding,” Pride says. “But still, we say – your troubles move us, and we would offer help. If you lower your weapons, and treat us as respected guests, then we shall turn our considerable talents and wisdom towards easing your plight.”

His tone is a brittle, but his barrier is strong and gleaming, and their impasse must seem obvious.

After a moment, the armoured dwarf gestures again; and the crossbows go down again.

“I may die a fool for this, but nothing else has worked. If this is some trick, know that it will not go well for you. There are places in the earth, untouched by the Stone; we may bury you there, where you will never again catch a glimpse of your precious Sky.”

“There is no need for threats,” she says.

“We shall see,” the woman decides. She gestures, a new movement, and her people begin to withdraw. “Preparations will be made. We will offer you hospitality, but if you try to follow us now, or leave this valley, it will not go well.”

A moment later, it seems, the dwarves vanish into the crags and rocks and dark spaces between them, one and all.

A stunned sort of silence follows in their wake.

“I have so many new questions!” Curiosity blurts.

~

In lieu of dwarves to interrogate, Curiosity seems to decide that she is the best person to vent her plethora of new questions on.

She’s not quite sure how it happens, but at some point this results in the two of them sitting in their tent, with Curiosity’s lanky height draped over her back, chin resting on top of her head while she asks questions about the Blight and dwarves and Titans and other things she can only give awkward half-answers to.

“I wish I could just sit in you and rummage through your thoughts,” Curiosity finally admits, heaving a gust sigh and somehow slumping even more weight onto her.

“You cannot anymore?” she wonders, before she thinks the better of it. But Cole could get into
people’s heads, she knows. At least enough to see what they were thinking.

“Only a little. Not to the same degree,” Curiosity explains. “It is like the difference between being able to hear a whole conversation, and only catching stray words.”

Shifting sideways, she tilts, until Curiosity finally slips off of her back and slumps onto the ground instead.

“Do you regret choosing this?” she wonders.

“No,” the former spirit immediately informs her. “I have always wanted to know what it would be like! I just… did not know what it would be like, until I knew. And now that I know, I still want to find things out, more and more, but it is different. There are other things. Some were already there, but some are newer, and all of them are louder. I… I cannot just be curious anymore.”

Looking down, Curiosity purses her lips, and presses a hand against the ground.

“How many dwarves do you think are below us right now?”

She snorts.

“I think you are still more curious than not,” she says. “As to a number, I could not begin to guess.”

Curiosity nods, accepting, and then rolls over onto her back, spreading her limbs out and staring at the top of the tent. There is a single, flickering magic light in there with them, soft as a candle.

“We need to know what the Blight is. As well as what the shining thing is. Do you think the Children of the Stone know?” Curiosity wonders.

“They do not seem to know what the Blight is. And I would be hesitant to ask them about the other matter, right now,” she replies.

“Maybe the Titan can tell us.”

If there’s red lyrium at hand, the Titan might not be up for telling anyone much of anything at all. Lyrium is the Titan’s blood, after all, and red lyrium is tainted. If it’s gotten far enough to appear, then maybe Mythal actually did do well by the world to kill this one in the other timeline. If this was the same Titan she killed. But she opts not to mention any of that.

Eventually, Curiosity finishes twisting and turning awkwardly around the tent, and decides she wants to sleep as a parrot. There’s a flash of magic as she changes, and then settles, a colourful bird truly out-of-place in their harsh, mountainous campsite.

When the parrot has finally fallen asleep, she slips out of the tent, quiet as she can manage.

She gets maybe two steps out of the campsite when a hand closes around her arm.

She lashes out, reflexively, but realizes mid-swing who’s grabbed her.

Fortunately, Pride has learned a lot since they started practicing together, so he manages to block her aborted blow.

“What are you doing?” she demands, hissing.

“I should ask you that,” he replies, as she pulls away. “I am checking the wards around the
campsite. Unless your magical skill has progressed even further than I would guess, you have no such excuse.”

“I was going to use a bush,” she tells him.

He looks unconvinced.

“There are bushes within the safe radius of the camp,” he replies.

“They are not private enough. Why are you interrogating me?” she wonders.

“Because you are lying,” he accuses.

She glares at him, more furious with actually being caught than angry with him for seeing the truth. He meets her stare, even and calm and just a little bit tense, and after a moment, it’s more than she can take.

It’s not fair, really.

She looks away, and then makes herself look back at him again.

“The Blight is dangerous,” she tells him. “I do not want you near it.”

The admission seems to steal its way out of her without her leave, when what she had meant to say was that she alone knew how to even begin to approach tainted things. What if they take Curiosity, and the poor girl tries to eat something she shouldn’t? What if Haninan puts the wrong things together and starts hearing songs in his head? What if one of the elves touches lyrium, or sees the power in it and starts getting some bright ideas about how useful it might be?

But what actually comes out is truer than she’s comfortable with.

Pride looks surprised, for an instant, then softens.

“Your vow to Mythal cannot be broken by my own choices,” he tells her.

“What?” she asks.

Then she remembers.

“Oh. Right. Yes, that,” she says.

Pride shifts, and he looks a little consternated, and though it’s dark, she thinks he might be blushing again, too.

He’s been doing that more and more lately.

She’s trying to chalk it up to just the general awkwardness of youth, but it’s becoming an increasingly tough sell.

“I am in charge of this group. It is my responsibility to protect everyone in it,” he tells her. “I have made no vow with regards to your safety, I know, but I take my responsibilities seriously.”

She stares at him.

Slowly, she closes her eyes, and sucks in a breath.
“I know you do,” she says.

“Then you must realize that I could hardly let you walk out of the camp and go and face whatever is waiting beneath the mountain without help,” he insists.

“We could end the expedition here and now,” she tells him. “You could go back to Mythal and tell her what we’ve learned of the dwarves’ plight, while I stay and deal with things. You would have no responsibility towards me, then; and I swear I would do everything in my power to stop the earthquakes.”

He frowns at her.

“Do not be ridiculous,” he says.

“I am not being ridiculous!” she replies. “You should not be here. It is too dangerous.”

“If it is too dangerous for me, then it is too dangerous for you,” he snaps.

“I have dealt with things like this before. You – you should just go back to Mythal, and focus on protecting her, and not be here!”

Her heart is beating, and she’s surprised to realize how frightened she is; how deeply lost a part of her feels at this turn of events, as if she was only just finding her footing and now the floor’s been wrenched out from underneath her again.

She can’t help but feel like this is her fault. Her fault, for being here with him, in this tiny group, instead of letting Mythal march in with an army.

Though that certainly wouldn’t have gone well for the dwarves. And may have done more harm than good anyway, even with the high probability of the Blight being here. Or rather, because of it.

She doesn’t know.

There’s so much she doesn’t know, still, and all of it is so very dangerous.

“You have asked me not to condescend to you; kindly extend me the same courtesy,” Pride asks, coolly.

“You do not understand,” she tells him.

“I am willing to listen, if you would just explain it to me.”

He’s angry, she can tell. She struck a nerve somewhere. His jaw is tense and his eyes are dark, and his nose is cast slightly upwards, betraying a petulance that he’ll lose when he’s older.

“Fine,” she says.

Then, before she can think the better of it, she reaches out and captures his wrist.

With determined strides, she pulls him along until they are within sight of the massive dwarven doorway.

It’s dark. The moonlight is bright over their heads, a few clouds drifting by, deepening the shadows where they pass. The great statue is a hazy outline of shapes and angles. Beneath it, the sealed doorway looks like a well of shadows.
“In my world, almost any time I saw a statue like that, it was a ruin,” she tells him.

“Hmm?” he asks.

He looks flustered.

She realizes she’s still holding onto him, and promptly lets go.

“I said, in my world, almost any time I saw a statue like that, it was a ruin,” she reiterates.

He catches her meaning, then, and his brows furrow.

Certain of his attention, she carries on.

“The dwarves built massive underground cities. Roads that ran throughout the continent. They were once one of the mightiest empires, but by the time I was born, only two dwarven cities remained. Two. The rest had been claimed by the darkspawn,” she says.

He swallows.

“Darek-spa’an?” he asks.

“Darkspawn,” she repeats. “They are creatures born from the Blight. The taint of it spreads like a disease. You come in contact with it, and it begins to poison you. Most people die. But sometimes they linger, in twisted forms. Sometimes they become things that can give birth to darkspawn. Brood mothers. What used to be a person becomes a vessel for the Blight, and the creatures born from them don’t die the same way most everything else does. They live. Sometimes they’re even intelligent. But all of them spread the taint and destruction.”

She can’t quite bring herself to look at him for the whole explanation, so instead she stares up at the night sky. Past the mountain peaks.

He’s quiet.

Listening, as promised.

“In my world, they nearly wiped out the dwarves. They found... great creatures, and corrupted them, and whenever they did those creatures would lead armies up from the depths and scour the world. And then it was not just the dwarves who suffered. Every few hundred years there’d be a Blight, and we’d lose a little more of the world each time. It might have done us in, in the end, if something else hadn’t,” she concludes.

She thinks of Corypheus; but that’s more than she can explain right now. And probably more than she needs to, anyway.

“You are afraid,” he says, like it’s a revelation. He’s peering at her again, reading her expressions and body languages. Ever-so-slightly too close for comfort.

“The first rise of the darkspawn coincided with the deaths of the Titans,” she says. “I thought… it seemed to be that when the Titans were killed, that caused the Blight to first appear. But your Titans are not dead, so you should have no Blight. But you do.”

“Perhaps the Blight contributed to the death of your Titans,” he reasons.

“Ours were definitely slain,” she admits. Then she sighs. “It was a supposition; I should not be so affected to realize I was wrong. But this… this world, if the Blight spreads here, now…”
With so much magic and so much power, and oh, Solas.

_What else did you seal behind the Veil, beyond the evanuris, ma vhenan?_ she wonders.

“Then we will contain it,” Pride declares.

“Many have tried,” she tells him.

After a minute, she shakes her head.

“I have to figure this out. But, it is, as I said, a contagious thing. It would be wisest if as few people
as possible were exposed to it,” she insists.

“You have to figure this out?” he asks. “What special duty do you have to all of this?”

She looks at him, baffled by the question.

“I…” she begins, and then trails off.

He looks at her, curious and expectant.

“This is not your world, though hopefully you will come to think of it as a home, one day. But I
know you do not yet. I am not blind. You have no obligation here, beyond what few promises you
have made since arriving,” he reasons.

But she does, she thinks. She has an obligation to make sure that things are better.

Otherwise… otherwise, there can’t even be the slim comfort that everything was lost for a _reason_.

Even if the reason could never hope to justify it. Not really.

It’s all that’s left to pull out of the ashes.

Of course, that’s not something she can explain to him. And it makes her angry, for a minute, that
she can’t. That it’s his fault, but also not _his_ fault, that she has to be here, now, trying to figure
everything out when she doesn’t even know half of what’s going on. It’s irrational, but the fact that
he’s looking at her for answers when he left her with so many questions is…

She wishes Rage was here, for a good solid minute.

“I failed my world,” she finally says. “If I fail yours, too, then there is nothing left.”

He looks at her closely, wavering for a moment. He sways a little, and then he reaches out, and
clasps her shoulder.

His touch is very gentle.

It feels like it’s cracking her open for a minute, spreading hairline fractures out through the tips of
his fingers and over her skin. Into her bones.

“I welcome your help, and I welcome your insights, and I... I admire your courage. But I will not
let you take on such a monumental task alone,” he tells her.

She looks up at him, and he smiles.

“It is my world, after all,” Pride says.
“It is,” she agrees, taking a careful step back. “I hope you are happy with it.”

His expression falters, a little, as she moves out of range of his touch. But then he straightens, and drops his hand back to his side.

“I would have no other,” he replies.

“True,” she murmurs, and moves a little further away again.

The steps put her closer to the doorway into the mountain, and she halts as something catches at her chest.

Not pain. It feels like… like a note of music, a stray note, reverberating through her own lungs, even though she hasn’t made a sound. Or maybe it’s not in her lungs, it’s…

Her eyes widen, and she presses a hand to her chest.

Very, very faintly, her skin hums, and something that is not her heartbeat thrums.

Pride frowns at her, noticing the sudden change in her demeanour.

“What is wrong?” he asks her.

“I can hear it,” she whispers, thinking of Valta, who had heard the Titan’s song in the earthquakes.

The earthquakes.

Almost as soon as the thought occurs to her, the ground begins to shake. The trees sway, and the rumbling grows, shaking up her knees as something cracks in the mountainside over their heads. She moves, grabbing Pride as stones rain down around them, her arm curling around him as she calls a shimmering barrier into place.

Something dark and hard rebounds off of it a half second later, striking with enough force to knock them both off their feet.

On her back, on the ground, her chest burns and the quake rumbles in time with the pangs of it. It feels like the anchor is back, eating through her ribcage instead of her hand.

Make it stop, she begs, not even sure where she’s directing her plea.

The rumbling subsides.

In the aftermath her breaths come out ragged, and the air wavers with the barrier she called into place, until it wisps apart. Pride is beside her, shocked and still.

“The camp,” he says, staggering back onto his feet.

“The dwarves,” she worries, casting a glance towards the doorway.

The statue above it is still standing strong, at least. But however bad that shaking was up on the top side of things, it must have been many magnitudes worse down below.

They return to the camp to find things more or less fine. The tremors woke everyone who was sleeping and knocked a few things over, but there are no injuries or any troubling damages to their supplies.
“We should check on the dwarves,” she says.

“I doubt they would welcome our concern,” Pride replies. “If this recent tremor has made them desperate, they may be even more set on taking you hostage.”

“Or they may need help,” she counters.

He wavers, a moment, and she turns on her heel.

“Fine,” he concedes. “But you will not go alone.”

Glancing back at him, she manages a nod of thanks.

Then she turns and searches the camp until she spies the face she needs.

“Hanian, their doorway is still sealed. If these dwarves are like the ones I know, they probably used some complicated mechanism for the job. We may need you to help figure out how to open it,” she reasons.

“Certainly,” Haninan replies.

“I want to see the door!” Curiosity volunteers; wobbling slightly, still a parrot, as she lands on the old elf’s shoulder.

In the end it is the four of them who venture back out into the night, carefully navigating as far from the mountain walls as they can, just in case another quake should start up and begin to shake a landslide or two loose.

The massive stone doorway does indeed open on a complicated mechanism. They try knocking first. When that doesn’t produce any results, Haninan approaches it with a look of sincere fascination, eyes trailing over the carved surface.

“They never used to have anything like this, or nothing that I saw,” he murmurs, pushing back his hood and then pressing a hand to the stone. “Amazing.”

“What is?” Curiosity wonders.

“It is simplicity itself, but – not,” Haninan replies, without tearing his eyes away from the doors. “The door is a barrier that presses spells away in a short radius. Can you feel it?”

She can’t, though after a moment, Pride seems to. Just judging by the extremely disquieted look on his face.

“How is that possible?” Pride asks.

“Something in it is reinforcing reality,” the old elf muses. “It sends the Dreaming further away. That should require a multitude of complex facets, but it… it is simple. Simple pieces. Simple gears. Etched stone and something bright, and almost alive.”

Lyrium, she thinks.

Creating a barrier pressing magic back.

Unease rushes down her spine. She had never considered, not once, that there was any similarity between what the Templars used lyrium for, and how Solas might have created the Veil.
It seems ridiculously obvious to her now, though.

“Can it be opened from this side?” she asks.

“Hmm… yes, it can,” Haninan confirms, and then reaches forward and begins sliding panels on the front of the door back and forth. There looks to be a pattern to it. It reminds her of Bianca’s doors. But now, as then, she’s at something of a loss to decipher what’s going on.

Curiosity watches, and seems to follow it though.

“Where would the dwarves come up with such an idea?” Pride wonders.

“Where everyone gets ideas, Wolfling,” Haninan absently replies, tapping at his forehead.

“But to even want to push magic back like this – why?” the young wolf insists.

“If one is worried about enemies from above who can use magic to lift heavy things like doors or even buildings, then sealing all of your upward exits with anti-magic runes just seems sensible,” she offers.

Pride shifts.

“If they employ such tactics beyond this door, venturing down may be even more dangerous than anticipated,” he muses.

Frankly, she’s more concerned over the possibility of disastrous underground collapses and red lyrium than the idea of not being able to use magic; but she opts not to mention that. After all, Curiosity is little more than a bird without some spells to throw around, and she has no idea if Haninan can handle a weapon or not.

Either way, he hasn’t brought one with him. And he’s never requested one, either, so when the door finally opens, she and Pride both wordlessly take the lead.

The doors move aside with an almost shocking degree of silence. There is no great groan, no creaking rumble. The gears whisper as they turn, and the stone retracts with barely an additional sound. It’s seamless, and smooth, and just a touch unnerving. She wonders how many smaller doors might be peppered through the mountains. Silent escape routes, barely noticeable against the various outcroppings, or hidden in the backs of caves.

If everything goes badly awry, whisper-quiet doors could open to truly terrifying depths. As it stands, this set opens to a broad staircase, and walls etched with carvings that glow.

There are no sconces for torches, she notes. But there is more light inside than outside, tracing artful shadows across the vast ceilings and floor.

She’s always wondered, every now and then, why such a short people were compelled build such massive structures.

But the intended effect is clearer in its original state. She can see the effort to limit claustrophobia, to make the buried spaces feel almost as open and unhindered as the world outside, without robbing the residents of the reassurance of closed stone all around.

An impressive attempt at maintaining balance, she thinks.

No one greets them, at first, but as they descend down the carved steps, she hears the distant
sounds of frantic shouting.

Without really thinking about it, she takes off at a run.

The damage of the earthquakes becomes more apparent at the bottom of the passage. The walls are cracked in places, badly enough to disrupt the glowing of the runes, and broken stones litter polished floors; the broken parts are more familiar-looking than the maintained ones. A wide chamber stretches at the foot of the stairs, lined with massive pillars. Two have fallen. One more has slanted sideways, and seems to have done so recently. Part of the ceiling has come down with it, stone and earth flooding that corner of the room. Beyond it, the chamber opens up to a large balcony that stretches out into a massive chasm.

Her heart is beating with an echo.

She has no idea what to do with that, but it seems less immediately important than the cluster of dwarves struggling at the edge of the balcony. Pride is calling after her as she runs for them, hears them calling curses and words like ‘collapse’, and sees the issue almost immediately.

The balcony curves down into an elegant set of staircases, but those are both destroyed by collapsed statuary. A series of makeshift wooden ladders have been put together to connect upper and lower levels, but the latest quake must have done something to their stability, because two of them are shattered. Their broken ends hang over the long drop below.

But the light spilling throughout the cavern is bright enough for her to see clear to the bottom. Broken bodies lie, tiny, amid splashes of red, tragic marks against a stone floor that swirls in patterns of sweeping sand and glossy marble, and several dwarves cling to the decorative ledges and what remains of the ladders. Several are injured, and it’s clear their grips won’t last them much longer. Their fellows scramble to pull them up, some climbing out towards them, others using strange staves to try and expand the stone beneath them – or at least, she thinks that’s what they’re trying to do. A few of the decorative ledges rumble outwards.

It isn’t working as well as one might want it to, however, and it’s probably not because of any anti-magic barriers.

She doesn’t even think of using magic herself. She climbs down as the others begin to catch up, nimbly finding footholds amidst the strewn rubble and shattered staircases.

It’s more like navigating the Deep Roads she’s familiar with than she would have expected, though the lighting makes it a little easier.

The first dwarf she reaches reels back at the sight of her, and almost goes tumbling down to join his fellows splattered at the bottom. She manages to catch his arm in time, yanking him back hard enough that she nearly dooms them to tumbling sideways instead.

But she doesn’t, and after his initial surprise, the dwarf accepts her help readily enough. One of his arms dangles limp at his side. He’s heavy, but they’re close enough to the top that he only really needs a leg up before he’s dragging himself to safety by his good hand.

She presses on to the next dangling body, struggling to grip uncooperative stone.

“Our magic is not working here! Come back up!” Pride calls to her.

“They will fall,” she replies.

“If you fall, we cannot catch you!”
“Fair enough,” she tells him, and this second dwarf, at least, only freezes slightly upon spotting her unfamiliar face.

She hears the flapping of wings, and Curiosity appears, snagging one of the dwarf’s sleeves and helping to draw the poor woman upwards. For a parrot, she is uncommonly strong. They heave and the dwarf finally gets onto solid footing, and proves sturdy and uninjured enough to carry onwards herself, too.

The next one is trickier; a young lad, clean-shaven, clings by his fingertips to a bare scrap of rock several feet below the broken ladder. His feet balance precariously on only the slimmest of outcroppings, but it crumbles and cracks, and will not last much longer. His hands are bloodied, and his fingers look broken in places; they won’t hold him once it fails.

He looks at her with wide, terrified eyes as the ledge under one of his boots gives out, and then he lets loose a cry of pain, spittle flying from his lips as he struggles to hold on.

Just for a second longer.

There’s no good vantage point to reach him from, and she’s still trying to find one when the ledge below his other foot finally fails him.

“Shit!” she swears, and lunges, twisting downwards to catch his arms as they drop.

Her hands close around his wrists, just barely, and she slides against the stone. For one terrified moment she thinks they’re both going to meet the same bloody end. But then her hip jams up against the rock, and the dwarf’s weight comes down on her arms, and she’s pretty sure it dislocates at least one shoulder as a blinding pain crackles up her limbs.

But he grips her back, and she’s got him.

For now.

“Stone preserve me,” the poor boy whispers.

He’s dangling from nothing but her arms, and she’s too far over the edge to pull both of them back, and… yeah.

“I need help!” she calls.

She can already hear the sound of footsteps, though.

Someone is coming, but every second seems to drag on and on, and she feels the blood and sweat slick on her hands and the pain in her arms, her hip burning as Curiosity flits anxiously about, and she’s certain that it won’t be enough. Her last sigh is going to be the boy she tried to save crashing into the ground shortly before she does.

And then someone grabs her, and starts reeling them both back in.

“You could have been killed!” Pride snaps at her, as Haninan grasps the dwarf, and relieves her arms of the weight of him.

She laughs.

It hurts, it really, really hurts, the pain sharp and dizzying, but it’s not the pain of failure just this second, so she’ll take it.
She caught the boy.

Her chest thrums with her extra heartbeat as she leans forward and rests her head against Pride’s chest.

He stiffens in shock.

For a few breaths she just leans there. He smells like rock dust and magic and himself.

“How many still might fall?” she eventually asks.

“None you could save. Your arms look unusable, and I cannot fix them here,” he tells her.

Then he gently presses a hand to her back, mindful of her shoulders.

“Stay here. I shall go help the rest myself,” he tells her.

Haninan and Curiosity go with him, and so she finds herself looking at the young dwarf, who is regarding her with stunned disbelief in turn.

“…Thank you,” the boy finally says.

“Happy to help,” she replies.

Some of the dwarves working closer to the top climb down to them, then, helping the boy up before, with only slightly more hesitation, her as well. She’s honestly not sure if their hesitation is because she’s an ‘Outsider’, or because it’s tricky to help someone whose upper body is a mess of agony climb anywhere without causing them extreme amounts of pain.

Possibly both.

Pride and the others and the dwarves working together manage to get everyone still salvageable back onto safe ground, at length. One of the dwarves takes a good look at her and then pops one shoulder back into place, all very matter-of-fact as she’s given a strip of leather to bite down on, and it’s excruciating. Not quite as bad as re-growing parts had been, though.

No one else falls.

The dwarves don’t seem to have the faintest idea what to make of their sudden arrival, but they aren’t openly hostile, at least.

It’s good to look on the bright side. She’s feeling downright optimistic at the moment.

There are sounds coming from further tunnels, and twists and turns below. Pride’s pretty white fur is dirty grey with stone dust and grime by the time the dwarf who had spoken to them earlier, at the camp, makes an appearance.

The woman looks less formidable at the moment, though only just. Her smooth, stony armour is gone, traded for gold and silver finery. Shimmering, rune-covered clothes that wouldn’t have looked too out-of-place in Arlathan, truth be told, if not for the copious amounts of dirt and dust also covering them. There’s a very fancy pin in her hair, though it seems to have been broken at some point in the chaos.

Her gaze is equal parts flinty and bewildered as it flits to Pride, and then fixes on her.

“You are trespassing.”
She raises an eyebrow.

“I apologize. We felt the quake, and worried for your state,” she replies.

There is a long, tense silence, as this ancient dwarven leader – for she could be little else – obviously debates between several courses of action.

Then the woman nods.

“We thank you for your help. It will not be overlooked. Return to your camp, and our people will come to you in the morning.”

She can still feel her heart beating double-time. Leaving seems like a very good idea; she only hopes that whatever reaction she’s having here, it’s solely on her own end, and not something the Titan can feel. Because another quake would be devastating, she thinks.

It’s probably not worth the risk, but the dismissal is obvious, and with her arms essentially out of commission, there’s little to be done about it. Not unless she wants to explain things that might just worsen the situation if they came to light.

So she nods.

Their party proceeds silently back out the way they came, and the silence remains until they get out of range of the massive dwarves. Pride heals her, waves of magic that ease her pain and right the wrongness in her limbs, and the second rhythm buried in her chest fades; though even once they are out of what she’d guess was ‘range’, it remains as a disquieting sort of hum.

When she can move without pain, Pride levels her with a look.

“That,” he says, “was unacceptable.”

“I think it went rather well, actually,” she counters.

“You are not in command here. You do not get to make these kinds of decisions, or take such risky actions without even consulting me,” he insists, and there is something to him, then. A little bit of the strategist; a little bit of the warrior.

She meets his gaze evenly, and listens.

“I understand that you feel for these people. There was little time, and you chose to act. But behaving like that could endanger us all,” he tells her. “If the dwarves had proven hostile, we would have had little recourse against them. Our spells did not work, and one of our best martial combatants was busy dangling off of ledges. They could have killed us.”

She opens her mouth to protest, almost reflexively, but then closes it again.

He’s… not wrong, she realizes.

For all that she isn’t accustomed to thinking of dwarven communities as a dangerous unknown, these ancient ones really are, in a lot of ways. And he is, indeed, in charge of things here. And probably not used to handling a ragtag band of impulsive misfits who would rather beg forgiveness than ask permission.

He’s no rebel, not yet.

“I apologize,” she finally says.
He blinks.

“Really?” he asks.

A breath huffs out of her. Behind him, Haninan looks amused.

“Really,” she replies, raising her eyebrows at him. “I am accustomed to leading. I am also accustomed to being relatively friendly with dwarves. I forgot myself, and that was foolish. Though I cannot say I regret the results, in this instance.”

Pride straightens, and seems to be at something of a loss, as if he’d fully expected to be fighting her on this every step of the way back to camp.

It takes him a few seconds to formulate a response.

“Then, you will not do it again?” he asks.

“I will endeavour not to be reckless. I will not always succeed,” she admits.

His lips twitch.

“That is the best I shall get from you, I expect?”

“Honestly? Yes.”

He sighs, but ultimately, lets it go.

They trek back to camp, exhausted and filthy, more or less silent again.

~

She wakes the next morning with only a few disjointed recollections of her dreams; impressions of snapping gold threads that leave her feeling nebulously uneasy. Curiosity has turned from a bird back into an elf, and is sprawled throughout most of the tent, limbs akimbo and hair spread out like a starburst under her head.

True to their word, the dwarves are up not long after dawn. They come armed, but do not raise their weapons, and their spokeswoman removes her helmet again before approaching.

Pride argues with them for what seems like an interminable length of time. Mostly over logistics and safety precautions and arrangements in the valley. She listens in, hanging back and only intervening when it seems like one party or the other is at sincere risk of shoving their foot in their mouth.

It’s a little bit strange to be on the mediating side of a political discussion, at someone’s right hand rather than standing front-and-center, or off towards the far side.

She can’t say she likes it any better from this angle.

But by the time the sun is high in the sky, they’ve reached an agreement that both groups seem capable of living with. Two of the elves are left behind to mind the camp, and the dwarves escort the rest of their party back inside the mountain, with promises to deactivate some of their anti-
magic wards for the sake of the elves’ comfort.

She doesn’t notice much of a difference, but everyone else seems marginally less uncomfortable as they descend into the mountain again.

The dwarves have cleaned up during the night, though not to the absurd degrees she saw in Mythal’s palace. They are led past the vast, open chamber where she nearly plummeted to her death, and down one of the side tunnels instead. Eventually they’re led into what looks like a very ceremonial meeting chamber.

Smooth stone walls stretch up towards a ceiling lined with glowing patterns that make the room as bright as daylight. Narrow rivers of magma run along the corners of the walls, warming the space and filling it with a strange, distinctive scent, and a circular stone table lined with many, many chairs waits in the center of the room. There are unfamiliar refreshments strewn across it, as if the space is half conference room and half dining room.

The spokeswoman, who identifies herself as ‘Lady Ortahn’, is joined by several other finely-clad dwarves. Guards come with them, lingering at the fringes of the chamber, and after a whispered conference with Pride, two of their own contingent hang back to watch the wary dwarves as they watch them in return.

Apart from the dramatic scenery, the whole thing feels a lot like a meeting between Fereldans and Orlesians.

It also feels like a waste of time. She needs to see, but apparently, the elves aren’t the only people in this era who have to do a lot of talking before they can get anything done. Even when another earthquake could strike at any moment.

It seems to be meant as a courtesy, though, and it’s probably better than being dragged down to the Titan at the point of someone’s crossbow.

Though after the first hour, she begins to rethink that position.

Lady Ortahn and Pride debate a course of action, and their impasse, at least, is readily apparent. The dwarves want her to tell them everything she knows about the Blight. Pride would rather they have the opportunity to examine what’s going on for themselves first and foremost. The dwarves don’t want them running around the Deep Roads, getting their sticky hands all over sacred things and probably being crushed by inopportune earthquakes that will prompt Mythal to send people to avenge their deaths or something equally foolish. They want them blindfolded, or to only have to take one of them along with a party of dwarves, and Pride is very set on denying them such ‘compromises’.

She might have been able to muster up more patience for it if she couldn’t hear the singing.

As soon as they’d begun to descend, her heart had started beating double time again. The longer they stay, the more she hears the rhythm, too, the strange pull from below. She wonders about Stone Sense and lyrium and the Titan, about Valta and the Blight, and the whatever-it-is inside of her, and every contemplation just feels incredibly daunting as well as unnerving.

The only people who actually seem to be enjoying things to any extent are Haninan and Curiosity. The latter asks a million questions a minute, while the former keeps peering at things as if he’s been dropped into a maze, and every new bit of it he sees is another key to figuring out how to get back out again.
And he’s thrilled.

Eventually, the talks break, and when they do she all but hauls Pride away from the table.

“What do you think the odds are that I can sneak away and go investigate this myself?” she asks him.

“Very low,” he replies. “For one thing, they seem more preoccupied with you than with any other member of our group. For another, I would stop you, because wandering around these dank passages alone sounds like a good way to get killed.”

Up go her eyebrows.

“You and I have very different definitions of ‘dank’,” she informs him.

He waves a hand dismissively.

“They will relent. Their need is more pressing than ours, in the end,” he assures her.

“I would not underestimate their stubbornness if I were you,” she cautions.

In the end he proves more or less correct, however, and when they reconvene, Lady Ortahn concedes to show them one of the ‘poisoned’ places in exchange for some simply information on red lyrium. It’s clear the woman is also dying to know how she has such information, but Pride shuts down her every attempt to barter for that knowledge.

Finally, they set out with Lady Ortahn and a mixed party of dwarves and elves towards the depths.

She hangs back, at first, and gestures Curiosity towards herself.

“Do not touch anything that glows or is black or bloated,” she says.

The former spirit looks like she just took away her favourite toy.

“You could die,” she adds.

Curiosity looks barely mollified over the matter, but consents to spread the warning around.

They take more makeshift passageways down. Closest to the surface, the structures most strongly resemble the Deep Roads she’s familiar with – admittedly, with features that will eventually be lost to time, but much of the shape and style of the chambers is the same.

The lower they go, the more things change. And it’s not so deep as the Titans’ paths, either. The tunnels and chambers become more… not quite natural-looking, but they do not have the same carven quality as above. They are beautiful, and decorated, covered in swirling tapestries and hosting stern statuary, and the walls are unerringly smooth. As if worn away by water.

Or, more likely, shaped by will and some strange dwarven magic instead of tools.

They are rubble-strewn, as well, and it’s striking to see the damage. But unlike the Deep Roads she knows, these chambers aren’t overrun. There are no darkspawn or giant spiders or blighted beasts lurking in the corners. The damage is just that – damage.

And the hastily erected support struts and ladders are oddly poor in construction. She’s seen dwarves bolster collapsing chambers and build massive elevators and walkways that sway with the shaking of the ground, but their ancient kin barely seem to know what they’re doing with such
things.

She supposes, in the end, if you’re used to your environment shaping itself to suit you, it takes a while to figure out how to do the job the hard way.

The light is, once again, what surprises her the most.

Everything is so clear that, if not for the ceiling overhead, she might forget they were underground. The others don’t seem to be quite so comfortable with the arrangement; they’re tense and quiet, and only get moreso as the dwarves lead them down, and down, and further from the surface.

When the ambient light begins to turn from clear daylight-white to more of an evening orange, Lady Ortahn calls them to a halt.

Curiosity peppers the dwarves with questions about how the lights work and how the chambers are dug and how deep the roads go, and Haninan stands at the edge of a long drop downwards and stares into the abyss, eyes glittering against the dark.

She sits with Pride and Lady Ortahn, the latter of which seems to debate something, before speaking.

“*The Titan began to sing wrong,*” she says. “*It was as if it was calling out to something that we could not hear. We thought, perhaps, one of the others had been injured, or that there might be dwarves lost in the depths. But no search parties turned up anything, and no messages came back with answers. And then it began to worsen. The Sha-Brytol began acting strangely. Maddened by something. The lyrium... when we found the first of the poison, I knew it was foul. Some thought they could discover the source of the changing song through it, though. They drank.*”

“And went mad,” she concludes.

Lady Ortahn nods.

“Not straight away. They could hear the change in the song better than most, but they could not explain it. In the end I was asked to take those who had not yet been affected up towards the surface, while the rest continued to search for a way to reverse the damage. Outcast, but not yet Casteless. It has been months since we had word from them. The earthquakes worsen. If the Titan dies... no others will welcome us for fear we are cursed. Without her, the Stone cannot sustain us. We will be cut off and die.”

Pride frowns.

“Why would you die?” he asks.

Lady Ortahn laughs, brittle.

“How would we survive?” she wonders. “We would have to venture to the surface for food. We have few hunters, and the land topside does not yield to us the way the Stone does. There is strange magic and dragons and your kind to terrorize us. We would fight to the last, but in the end, the surface would be our doom.”

Pride’s frown deepens, and he shifts a little.

“If it came to it, we could help,” he says. “Offer our aid and protection on the surface.”

“Forgive me if I do not have much faith in that idea,” Lady Ortahn replies.
“Why not?” Pride wonders.

The dwarven woman glances towards her, and she inclines her head; yes, she understand, even if he doesn’t. There’s fear and bad blood, and most of the elves simply do not see the dwarves as people. Probably, most of the dwarves have similar reservations about the elves’ validity as a group, too. The potential to be exploited would be high.

She sighs.

“People who are left to rely on the kindness of others are in the precarious position of hoping no one takes advantage of them,” she says. “And someone always does.”

“It was a genuine offer. Mythal is not a monster,” Pride insists.

“I know. But she does not need to be. Putting the Children of the Stone at the mercy of the Children of the Sky can only lead to disaster when they are not seen as equals, and have no resources of their own to fall back upon,” she attempts to explain.

His frown deepens, but after a moment, he seems to sink into thoughtfulness, rather than trying to argue the point.

She turns back towards Lady Ortahn.

“Still,” she says. “It may not be as hopeless as you believe. We will do what we can, but if the worst should come to pass, I believe your people may prove more resilient than you give them credit for. It would not be easy, but many things that are not easy can still be survived. And there is much you could offer in trade for help and support that would not leave you entirely dependent on charity.”

The dwarven woman regards her silently.

Then she lets out a gust sigh, her broad shoulders sagging a little.

“Perhaps. That it has come to this, though…”

Lady Ortahn’s despair is too close to her own, she finds, and she doesn’t know how to comfort it beyond the slim offer of hope. After a minute, she leaves both the dwarven leader and Pride to their brooding silences, and goes and stands with Haninan instead.

The old elf glances at her.

His eyes flit down to her chest, briefly, and then back towards the darkness stretching below.

“Your ill-fitting piece belongs here,” he observes, quietly.

She can feel it.

“So it would seem,” she agrees, wondering, yet again, what it might be. What part of the world it was wrenched from, and what having it truly means.

They stand in silence until the group is ready to move on.
It takes them a few days to get down to where the first signs of the Blight can be found.

As they descend, more of the dwarves with them hang back. They lose some of the elves, too – not to violence or ambush, but to claustrophobia and unease. Pride lets them withdraw along with the dwarves, back up to the surface with instructions to return to camp. The tunnels narrow. It’s not uncomfortable, not in her opinion – the walls open up towards massive drops that gleam with enough lyrium to make the Merchant’s Guild weep, as the wind echoes upwards, but the passages grow slimmer.

They journey down, and though she does not think they are anywhere near to being within the Titan itself yet, it does begin to feel as if they are passing through the body of the world. Blood coursing through veins. They pass strange sculptures that twist the air so it whistles and sings, and monuments embedded with gemstones the size of her fist.

The light begins to change. Not echoing the passage of the days above, but simply unable to illuminate the full darkness of the space. Instead there are shafts that fall from above; pooling over their path, and slipping down towards the depths, and gleaming overhead like a blanket of stars.

Lady Ortahn grows more talkative as they progress.

“You are not like the rest,” she notes, at one point. “You do not… buzz."

“Buzz?” she asks.

The dwarven woman gestures at the air around her.

Ah. Apparently, the dwarves can perceive that effect, too. Though it seems it’s much less pronounced underground.

Which, now she considers it, is probably one of the things making everyone else so uncomfortable.

“I am…” she deliberates, and then settles on an explanation. “It is like when a dwarf does not have the Stone Sense,” she reasons.

Might be the wrong analogy to use, as Lady Ortahn looks horrified.

“You are Casteless?” the woman asks.

Well.

Actually, all things considered, that’s probably a reasonable equivalent. A non-person to this society.

“Yes,” she confirms.

Lady Ortahn seems stymied by the news, as if she doesn’t know what to make of the concept of a casteless elf. It’s a while before she seeks her out for conversation again, but when she does, she seems bizarrely resolute.

“I do not believe you are Casteless,” Lady Ortahn tells her.

“Pardon?” she replies, surprised at being addressed after so long a silence.

Curiosity peps up and drifts over, walking behind them.
“The others of your group are not like you, but they tolerate you. Value you, even. You are not Casteless,” Lady Ortahn insists. “To become Casteless is to become utterly unwanted.”

“None of the People believed she was a Person at first!” Curiosity chimes in, towering over the dwarven woman as she joins the conversation.

“Most still do not,” she adds.

Lady Ortahn glances between them.

“There is nothing for me to regain,” she replies. “I was born this way.”

“Then, you have regained your place? Your Stone Sense – or Sky Sense – will be allowed to return?”

“Even Casteless dwarves born beyond the reaches of the Stone can find the sense again, if they are welcomed back to it,” Lady Ortahn tells her. “It is rare, but it does happen. Were you born underground, to be severed from the Sky?”

She can see the logic, she thinks. It stands to reason that an elf who didn’t go spilling off into the sky must have been born underground, to keep it all contained.

“Something like that,” she settles on saying.

Lady Ortahn glances at her, carefully.

“Is that how you have come to know so much, about such strange things?” the woman asks, and she supposes she’s not going to easily get away with bland non-answers for very long with her.

Not that she’s ever been great at them in general.

“It is a long story,” she says.

“I would like to hear it,” Lady Ortahn insists.

“Me too!” Curiosity declares. “I have only gotten parts of it, after all. But it is very interesting!”

“Birdie,” Haninan calls. “Come flit by me and look at these carvings.”

The former spirit obliges him, easily enough, and she lets out a breath of relief.

Pride moves up to join them in her place, as she hears Haninan faintly admonishing Curiosity not to pry something off of a segment of wall.

“It is not a time for stories,” he says. “Nor for lingering. My People are not meant to be in such places, Lady Ortahn. I would have us move with haste.”

Lady Ortahn’s lips thin, but after a moment, she nods in acceptance.

She begins to feel a nebulous anxiety, growing like claws against her second heartbeat, before they spy their first branch of red lyrium.

It’s not a natural vein. The stuff has clearly been taken out and separated from its place of origin, shoved into a neat pile in an empty chamber, just enough to fill a single horse cart. It glows ominously, but it doesn’t look to have been fed any flesh. There are no distorted lumps, no person-sized pillars, and she feels a heady mixture of horror and relief at the sight of it.
It’s undeniably red lyrium.

But not at its worst. Not yet.

She steps into the chamber, and she can hear it.

It’s like a song made out of a thousand voices screaming in agony, and it steals her breath, fills her lungs with a mirrored scream that she chokes back. It sounds familiar, though she’s certain she’s never once heard anything like it before; it sounds beautiful, and horrible, and it makes her bones tremble.

It feels like coming home to a campsite full of corpses.

She stops in the doorway, and stares, and refuses to let the others pass or get any closer. When Curiosity tries to fly in as a parrot, she catches the bird and holds her tight.

“No,” she says. “No, no, stay back.”

“It should not be touched,” Lady Ortahn says, “but at a distance it cannot do anything.”

“It can sing,” she says.

The comment gives the other woman pause.

“The song always echoes in the lyrium, even after it has been taken from the veins. The poison is no different, that is true. Though I have never known any song to cause harm from afar.”

“It has harmed your Titan. It carries the Blight; enough exposure, even from a distance, and your people will become tainted,” she warns.

Lady Ortahn’s gaze narrows.

“How do you know this?”

“Because I know,” she says, simply. “And I know how it might safely be destroyed, as well. It must be, or it will spread.”

The tension in the air runs high, the glow of the tainted lyrium casting the room in fire-like shapes. The air feels stifling, though she can’t say if that’s because it actually is, or if it’s just her.

The song is calling.

Somehow it’s taking more effort than she would care to admit to stay where she is.

She despises red lyrium.

She despises it, utterly.

She doesn’t want to get closer to it.

She doesn’t.

And yet, inexplicably, she does.

What is happening? she wonders, terrified and still.

After a moment, Lady Ortahn nods.
“I would know how you came by this knowledge before I use it. But if you are offering only the method, then I will take it. It would be foolish not to. I believe you when you say this poison is evil.”

“…Thank you,” she replies.

They retreat to make camp in chambers that are at a safer distance. These Deep Roads are clearly designed with long travel in mind, and built-in stops; areas where benches and beds and firepits have been carved, and strange subterranean plants grow alongside phosphorous mushrooms.

She explains how to destroy red lyrium to Lady Ortahn, and then sits down on one of the benches, wrapping her arms around herself and trying to quiet the thumping of her own heart, even if she can’t still the echo coming from beside it.

*What did you do to me, ma vhenan?*

Pride finds her in the silence.

“You are unsettled,” he notes.

She lets out a breath as he sinks onto the bench beside her.

“You have been unsettled for most of the trek down here. Perhaps my reaction is only delayed,” she replies.

He lowers his head.

“I am sorry we found what you feared,” he offers.

She laughs, hollowly.

“So am I. More than you know,” she tells him.

Then she stiffens in surprise as his hand lowers, coming to rest very gingerly on top of hers. For second it almost hovers, barely touching.

When she doesn’t immediately pull away, he lowers it all the way.

“We will discover the cause of it, and destroy it,” he promises her.

“Wiser people than either you or I have tried and failed at that,” she replies. But she will have to try, just the same.

His fingers tighten around hers.

“You and I have not tried together, yet,” he says, lightly, trying to cheer her.

She tilts her head, and looks at him.

“No, we have not,” she concedes. Perhaps it’s foolish, or selfish, but for some reason, the words actually do comfort her a little. The last time they worked together was the last time she remembers tackling something monumental, and coming out of it truly victorious.

His cheeks colour, and he shifts a little.

“I wrote you a poem,” he blurts.
She blinks.

Whatever response she had been expecting, it wasn’t that.

“What.”

“Not a long one,” he says, half assurance, half apology. “Would you… would you like to hear it?”

She blinks, again.

“Why did you write me a poem?” she asks him, honestly baffled.

Maybe she’s getting the translation wrong?

“Ohhhh!” Curiosity exclaims. “I figured it out! He is trying to court you!”

“No!” Pride blurts, embarrassed, and swiftly takes his hand from hers.

“Yes you are.”

“A man can write a poem for a lady without it being courting! You are just too young to understand all of the potential nuances of social interactions yet!”

“I read dozens of books about social interactions in the library before I took a body,” Curiosity insists.

Her stomach sinks.

“That is not the same thing! It is only…” he trails off, red-faced, and after a minute gets up and stalks away, straightening his clothing. She watches him walk all the way to the nearest ledge. A silvery figure against the deepest shadows.

He starts fidgeting with the edges of his sleeves.

Oh, no.

But why should he…? She is a mess! He can’t… he couldn’t…

Oh no.

No, no, no, no.

She’s going to have to turn him down. She’s going to have to turn him down and it’s going to kill her.

Do it quickly, she decides. Nip it in the bud. It’ll hurt less that way.

Well, it could hurt him less that way.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

Definitely in the long run.

She gets up, makes herself walk over until she’s standing beside him. Motes of dust sift through the shafts of light. Glowing flecks do, too; not quite lyrium. After a moment she realizes that they’re
tiny insects. Almost like fireflies, but smaller. And like nothing she’s ever seen so far below ground before. She takes a moment to stare at them, and to wonder what other creatures might be making a home down here, that were eventually lost to her time.

It’s absolutely not stalling.

After a minute, Pride clears his throat.

“Would you like to hear it?” he asks her, again.

No, she thinks. Say no.

Her mouth opens, and then closes again. The word won’t quite come out.

“You do not have to write me poems,” she manages to say, instead.

He laughs.

“No one ever has to write anyone a poem,” he replies. “That is not the point of poetry. It is… I only, I thought of it. They are just words I thought of, and they are in relation to you, so I had considered that you might be interested in hearing them. But if you are not, I understand. It was a passing fancy.”

A passing fancy. Yes, it would be best if it was. He doesn’t deserve to be a stand-in for his own lost future self, and she can hardly… she can’t…

But if it’s just a few words… surely just a few words couldn’t hurt.

And he looks shockingly vulnerable, standing half in the dark, in all of his ridiculous finery.

“Alright,” she says.

He lets out a breath.

Then he beams at her, bright and relieved, and a nervous chuckle escapes him.

It takes him a moment to collect his thoughts, and she almost thinks he’s changed his mind before he speaks again.

“The cup of the ocean becomes you, for you are many depths unknown to me; I aspire to your good graces, and wish a thousand years of fair weather to your wanderings. Many times I have thought how poor the world beneath your feet suits you; I would that it were soft as clouds.”

He stops, and she gapes.

Her heart pounds against her ribcage.

What. No.

After a minute, he starts fidgeting again.

What.

What. No.

“I said it was not long,” he murmurs, looking away.
“It was very good,” she tells him. Her voice is quiet. Barely more than a whisper.

“You do not need to say so. I am no great poet,” he admits. “They are just words. But, they are words for you.”

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

“I liked them. You are more gifted than you say,” she tells him, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

He smiles a little.

“If you liked it, I shall have to try again, then. And do better the second time,” he promises.

“One poem is enough,” she tries.

He laughs.

“Perhaps, but I should like the chance to surpass it. Thank you for listening. I hope you will listen again.”

Lost, she nods, and then finally manages to extricate herself from the situation. She feels his eyes following her as she all but flees.

…Shit.

Chapter End Notes

As always, all of my love to my readers and commenters. <3

Oh! And I have a tumblr now, if anyone might be interested in that sort of a thing:
http://feynites.tumblr.com/
When she goes to sleep, the song is loud.

Loud and strange and wrong. It’s a nightmare, but not of the kind she’s accustomed to.

It feels, at first, like she’s looking for someone. Whoever it is calls out to her. Sometimes she’s sure she knows the owner of the voice, but at other times it’s more like many voices all at once, or ones that are familiar but only in some nebulous, undefinable way. Sometimes it feels like they are calling for help. Sometimes, as if they are trying to help her. Sometimes it feels like they’re hunting her, dark with ill-intent and malevolence.

She searches until she reaches a wall of shadow, and when she walks into it, she can’t see anything.

Not in front of her, not back the way she came. It’s not just darkness, it’s nothingness. It feels vast and oppressive, like it’s trying to crush her into a space that doesn’t exist, but also like there’s no limit to it. Everything and nothing at once.

And it’s full – it’s full – of screaming. Terror. Death and ruin and anger so fierce and potent it’s the only thing that really seems alive. The only thing to clutch to beyond despair. There’s no sound and there’s only sound, there’s nothing and everything, and more than anything she’s overcome by the unsettling certainty that this is where she belongs.

But it’s all wrong.

She opens her eyes to the Deep Roads, and Curiosity shaking her. Wide eyes peer down at her face. Around them the camp is still and silent, everyone still resting. Not yet rousing to set out again.

“Where did you go?” Curiosity asks her.

She blinks, and manages to sit up. Her skin is clammy and cold with sweat.

“What do you mean? I was sleeping,” she says.

“But you were not in the Dreaming,” Curiosity whispers.

“I dreamt. I had a nightmare,” she admits, with only mild discomfort. It’s no use pretending she doesn’t have them. She’s pretty sure everyone under the sun knows otherwise.

Curiosity shakes her head. She looks unnerved. Deeply unnerved, and that, more than anything else, wakes her up.

“I could not find you,” the former spirit insists.

“Well, maybe I was not where you thought I was,” she suggests.
“No, I could not find you,” Curiosity repeats, anxious, voice rising.

“Shhh, it is alright. I am here. See? Fine as ever,” she says, aiming for reassurance.

“But where were you?”

She hesitates.

The implications of her dream, and what she knows about the taint, are not… pleasant. There’s a chance it was just a particularly bad nightmare. With red lyrium suddenly making an unwelcome appearance in her life again, she wouldn’t be surprised if her sleeping mind had a field day with it. But that explanation rings hollow to the echoes in her chest, and the song can just barely still hear, like a hum at the back of her skull.

Like the Calling of the wardens.

If it all goes wrong, she thinks… someone has to know.

“If I explain, you cannot tell anyone else about this unless it is absolutely necessary to their survival. Do you understand?” she asks.

Curiosity nods, readily.

“Yes. You and I, we have our quest. I will not betray you,” the little bird insists, and her heart softens.

“It is not about betrayal, my friend. It is just that there are too many things that could go wrong, and I do not know how to anticipate them,” she explains.

Again, Curiosity nods; a little more sedately.

“There are too many unanswered questions still.”

“Yes.”

She sucks in a breath.

“I am hearing the call of the taint,” she says. “I suspect it is because it calls to the other soul within me. I do not know why or how, but if it has tainted me, then I will begin to show signs. I may die, or I may become a senseless and violent monster. Either way, my body will have to be destroyed to prevent the spread of the taint.”

Curiosity’s face falls.

“I may not be tainted!” she hastens to reassure her.

“But if you are, then… you are doomed?”

If she knew how the Grey Wardens performed the Joining, perhaps not. Or perhaps not all at once. But that was never knowledge they shared before they were wiped out.

“Yes,” she says. “It is a death sentence.”

“But… there is a way,” Curiosity says, leaning forward. “I saw it. The question about that ritual. We could find the answer to that, too.”
“Perhaps,” she concedes. “And if the darkspawn appear, it may be needed for more than just myself. But for the time being, there are more pressing matters to deal with. Besides which…”

She hesitates, fumbling with her thoughts and reservations.

“I am not sure dealing with it the way it was once dealt with would be wise,” she finally decides. Curiosity droops a little.

“You cannot die with so many unanswered questions.”

She musters up a smile.

“Answers often just ask more questions. You know that. If we can figure out what we need to keep this world safe, or relatively so, then that will do.”

The memory of the darkness plucks at her, and she shivers.

Curiosity still looks worried, and, after a moment, slumps against her. They sit in silence until exhaustion finally demands she try and sleep again.

When she drifts off a second time, though, she doesn’t fare any better. And when she wakes again, her friend looks uneasy, and is uncommonly quiet.

Where did you go? she thinks to herself.

Not into the Fade, apparently. Or at least, not into any part of it that Curiosity could find. Though she’s glad for that. She doesn’t want anyone near this darkness; not even herself.

A thought nags at her, plucking away around the echoes of the dark song. Fade above and Fade below. Elven magic and dwarven magic. Lyrium and the Fade. If dwarves, like Templars, channel their magic through lyrium, and lyrium connects to the Fade and can be used by mages, why is dwarven magic different from the spells of elven mages? What changes about the Fade in the earth and the Fade in the sky?

She can’t figure it out, so after a moment, she sets the thought aside.

The Blight is more important, and that is what the elves and dwarves discuss.

Having seen the evidence of its presence, Lady Ortahn wishes to seek out her people who have remained with the Titan. Pride wants to withdraw to tell Mythal what they have found.

Both seem to be coming to the point where they agree to part ways – Pride’s group to return to the surface and seek a solution there, Lady Ortahn and her dwarves to press forward into the depths, and try to destroy as much of the Blighted lyrium as they can. Though the lady has more reservations, as she remains uncertain of the source of this infection.

It’s an uncertainty they all possess, and a different sort of mystery to each of them.

“I believe the song which the Titan heard is what brought the poison to it,” Lady Ortahn says, as they gather in their camp.

“It does not seem likelier to you that the Titan’s singing changed because it was poisoned?” Pride posits.

“The song went wrong before the lyrium began to change,” Lady Ortahn insists.
“The symptoms of a disease do not always appear as soon as it is contracted,” Pride counters.

Do the Titans create the Blight, or are they infected by it? Or both? Is it a defect in them, perhaps, that can spread?

She feels the pull downwards, and part of her wants nothing more than to flee back up to the surface, and away from it.

A hand falls onto her shoulder.

“A word?” Haninan asks her.

She hesitates, but his countenance is uncommonly serious. So after a moment, she nods.

Quietly, they leave the argument between Pride and the lady, and walk towards the edge of the camp.

Hananan taps his fingers against his arm.

He’s silent for just long enough that she starts to worry.

“That piece inside of you, Puzzle, that fits down here,” he finally says. “…You do not fit down here. And you do not fit with it. You must not let yourself simply be the box which carries it, but I fear that if it is taken from you, the process will break you.”

It takes her a moment to parse his meaning.

When she does, she sighs.

More prospective death, then.

Spitting in the ocean at this point.

“You think we should head back up?” she asks.

He tilts his head, slightly. His eyes go distant.

“No,” he finally decides. “That piece is the key. If anything is to be solved, you need to find what it belongs to. But you must be careful. You are as important as it is, and while that is true on a sentimental level, I mean it practically as well. The piece may not fit with you, but it is part of the same puzzle. I think.”

He pauses, and then, to her surprise, reaches over and pats the top of her head.

“You are a good child,” he says, wistful and sad, and suddenly it’s very, very easy to think that he’s older than the most ancient city of her people’s legends.

She swallows.

She’s not a child, but she’s pretty sure he’s speaking symbolically; and though she worries for what that might mean in terms of just how much he’s figured out, it’s not a moment she can bring herself to shatter.

He lets her go, and offers her a smile.

“The Blight,” she tells him, sucking in a breath. “If the Keepers of old are down here, it will seek
to taint them.”

“I know, Puzzle. I worked that much out,” he admits.

“We cannot let that happen.”

“No,” he agrees. “But where is it coming from? Songs do not sing without voices. Even if the voices are only wind over rock, or echoes without intent, something must make them. And it does not fit; but it does. That is the strangest part. It is like a flooding. Trying to change the terrain, water with nowhere else to go, rushing downhill; screaming.”

“You can hear it?” she asks, startled.

“The song? No. But I can see where it changes the patterns,” he says. Then he shakes his head. “There are too many pieces missing to solve it as we stand, however.”

Story of her life.

Well, that and all the horrible death, of course.

Footsteps approach, and Pride glances between them. He looks, for a moment, uncertain.

“What are you two discussing over here by yourselves?” he wonders.

“The mysteries of the universe,” Haninan replies. “Naturally. Have you managed to settle on a course of action for Puzzle to talk you out of yet?”

Pride frowns.

Then he straightens his shoulders, and lifts his chin slightly.

“I take it from that comment that you two have some kind of independent consensus on what our course of action should be?” he asks.

“Somewhat,” she admits. “I need to keep going downwards.”

“Why?” he wonders, as if he’d been expecting that answer and already knew he didn’t like it.

“Because that is where the problem is, Wolfling,” Haninan says.

“And what will going down there ourselves accomplish?” Pride counters. “I agree, wholeheartedly, that this matter requires further investigation. But rushing towards this sick Titan ourselves seems like a recipe for disaster. Lady Ortahn’s people have been informed of the method for destroying the Blighted isana. They know their gods better than we do. From here, it makes sense to allow them to try and contain the infection, and withdraw to inform Mythal of the situation and seek her counsel. If the entire creature must be destroyed to contain the Blight, then our forces should be mustered to that end.”

“Slaying the Titan will do nothing to help,” she says. That much, at least, she’s fairly sure of.

“Then we need to consider other options regardless. The People are resourceful. With access to libraries and the appropriate scholars, we may discover something that the dwarves cannot,” he reasons.

HANINAN TUTS.
“It is true, the People can innovate tremendously when they put their hearts in it. But on what premise would they bother? If you return with a story of a sickened god beneath the earth, most will either see it as an opportunity to take advantage of the Children of the Stone while it is weakened, or a necessity to slay it and keep its sickness contained. Killing either way. They will not take Puzzle’s word on it being a bad idea, and though Mythal might value your counsel, others will not. If we return to Arlathan with the problem unsolved, I find it unlikely that this will not end in violence,” the old elf reasons.

“So we do… what?” Pride asks. “Venture into the depths, follow this infection to its source, and see what madness it has driven the dwarves below and their god to? We are a small party. Skilled, but we can scarcely use magic down here. We need more people, at least. The risk to us is too great otherwise.”

He looks between them, and then sighs.

“I will concede, you make a good point about the likely response of certain parties. We will keep the matter simple, for now,” he suggests. “I will mention the… collapse of a dwarven city. Instability that has led to the tremors. A request for people capable of making the trip to these depths will not seem so strange is the cause is to aid in repair work. And that is what we are doing; aiding in repair.”

“Then I will stay here,” she says.

“I have told you, you will not handle this alone,” he refuses, immediately.

“No, I know. It is not as if I even could at this point,” she agrees.

He blinks.

“Then… what purpose would remaining serve?”

“Someone should stay,” she reasons. “As the least unsettled by the atmosphere, I am the most qualified for that role. Besides, I know the most about the Blight. I can help the dwarves dispose of it, and if the situation worsens, I am in the best position to spot the signs. I will remain here with Lady Ortahn and convince her to delay pressing on towards the Titan, and when you return, we can all go together.”

There is a long moment of silence. Haninan looks considering.

Pride looks surprisingly inscrutable.

“That is a reasonable suggestion,” he says. “But I must deny it.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Because I will not leave you down here alone, and I must return to petition Mythal for more people,” he explains.

“I could stay. Or Birdie could,” Haninan reasons.

Curiosity, hearing the nickname, perks up from where she’s busily packing up part of the camp.

“You are no fighter, and neither is she,” Pride replies. “Down here, with little magic, you would be more of a burden than a boon if it came to combat. No, it is not feasible. I am sorry.”
She lets out a breath, and gives serious consideration to the option of just… sneaking away, at some point.

*Because sneaking worked so well the last time you tried it,* she thinks to herself.

“We cannot deliberate on this for months,” she says.

“Going down into the darkness to look for answers gets us nothing if we die,” Pride replies, looking at her squarely, and with an unexpected intensity.

She meets his gaze.

“If we wait, and it worsens…”

“I do not think you realize how important you are,” he says, sharply enough to make her blink.

Haninan raises his eyebrows, and takes an awkward step back, as if suddenly wondering whether or not he should extricate himself from the conversation.

Pride carries on without so much as a glance in his direction.

“You are the only one with any comprehensive knowledge on this danger. If you die, we have nothing,” he says, before letting out a heavy breath. His voice softens. “Besides which, you agreed to listen to my next poem. I can scarcely recite it you if you’re miles away.”

She lets out a surprised little huff of breath.

“You do not have a spell for that?” she wonders, wryly.

“None that would work here,” he replies. Then he presses an arm across his chest in a gesture she doesn’t recognize. “I will expedite the process as much as possible, and you will return here, with me, and enough people to severely diminish the danger. If we are too severely delayed, then we will proceed ourselves,” he declares.

As far as compères go, she supposes it’s the best she’s going to get.

“Alright,” she agrees.

He smiles at her.

“Lady Ortahn and her people will do what they can to contain the infection. The wait may not prove as dire as you fear,” he reasons.

“I appreciate your boundless optimism,” she replies.

“I prefer it to being perpetually grim and fatalistic,” he says, and inadvertently makes her heart plummet into her stomach.

“I suppose so,” she murmurs, before he walks away.
She resigns herself to yet more unnecessary delays, after that; but also permits herself to at least enjoy the prospect of being further away from the Blight and the unnerving pull behind her breastbone. These Deep Roads are nowhere near as claustrophobic as the ones of her time; they are maintained, if recently damaged, and spacious. But there is definitely something to be said for open air and more trees than stone.

They pack up their camp and say their farewells to Lady Ortahn, and take one of her remaining party along with them as their guide back to the surface. Curiosity clings to her, a little, worried over their lack of answers and other things that she obligingly doesn’t mention.

“Do you think the dwarves would let us have some lyrium to look at?” Curiosity wonders at one point, a couple of hours into their ascent.

“I think it would be best if we left the lyrium to the dwarves,” she replies, uneasy at the prospect.

“But I cannot figure it out. How can lyrium make the Blight not work if red lyrium is lyrium that’s infected with the Blight?”

“I have no idea,” she admits.

Lifting a hand, Curiosity taps a finger against her chin.

“There must be something more to it. Another ingredient, or spell. A secret.”

She remembers the Titan she found with Valta, and how the darkspawn had left it be. How it had seemed resistant to the Blight. No red lyrium there. Was it as Pride thought, and was the corruption something which began in a Titan’s body? But if that was the case, wouldn’t all lyrium be susceptible to the Blight? Or was it as Lady Ortahn thought? Was it a matter of whether or not the Titan heard the ‘wrong’ song?

Or, perhaps more disturbingly, was it voluntary? A matter of choice? Did Titans choose to create the Blight?

Curiosity nods, clearly listening to her unspoken questions.

“The answer to those might offer the explanations we need,” the former spirit muses.

“If we can find an answer at all,” she agrees, tentatively.

Their guide brings them to an open area that she vaguely recognizes from the trip down, then; a crossroads where several long, wide paths branch off from one another at once. There seems to be a missive scripted along one of the walls. He stops to read it, and they take an opportunity to rest a bit, stretching out their limbs and investigating the scenery.

Haninan waves Pride over to himself after a minute.

“Wolfling. Come and discuss something with me,” he requests.

Pride goes, and Curiosity lingers at a listening distance, obviously interested in what the conversation could be about.

She’s a little interested, herself, but she gives them some space instead. The statues off towards the mouth of one of the passages look different to her eye. Smaller than most, and frozen in half-finished gestures, rather than the usual hammer-wielding displays of sturdiness and strength. More like dancers, she thinks.
One of them appears to be a nug.

An artist with a sense of humour, she supposes.

She almost doesn’t hear it, but by chance, she’s close enough to the wall and far enough away from Haninan and Pride’s increasingly noisy discussion – something about women and spring blossoms, and Pride’s getting upset, from the sounds of it – when the quiet *hiss* of moving stone reaches her ears.

Like the near-silent whisper of the doorway down opening.

She draws her blade, the metal ringing much louder than the stone as its pulled form her sheath, and looks for the source.

A figure, glowing faintly red, nearly drops onto her from the long ceiling above.

“Shit!” she shouts, and just barely raises her blade in time to counter the blow levelled towards her. Heavy; it sweeps low, and nearly knocks her off of her feet.

_Hiss, hiss, hiss._

Like something out of one of Varric’s books, a half dozen dwarves, wrapped in lyrium-fused armour, fall upon them.

Sha-Brytol.

Their riddled with tainted red, eyes lit with familiar corruption.

Their guide goes down, dropped by bad luck more than anything else; one of the Sha-Brytol manages to land directly on him. She can’t tell if the results are fatal or just painful, but he doesn’t get back up. There isn’t much time to dwell on it, as several projectile weapons fire, whipping through the air from dark posts shadowed at the top of the wall. Someone gets a barrier up, and there’s a snap of magic in the air, a flash as a bolt crackles against one of their assailants. That was Curiosity, she thinks, but the magic is weak. Flickering.

Her own attacker is wielding a massive hammer, carved with runes. They shine when it swings, and she tastes dust at the back of her throat; the ground _lurches_ beneath her.

But she’s almost expecting it for some reason, like she read the move even though she’s never seen it before, and she firms her stance and braces herself, her second heartbeat speeding up as her sword carves a path through the air.

The Sha-Brytol stills.

It’s like a ripple runs through the whole group – where initially they had seemed set upon ambushing them all, falling at Pride and Haninan and Curiosity with all the same furor, in the space of an instant, it’s chillingly clear that she just became the priority target.

Her companions are clustered together, but as they focus shifts, they seem to realize, and break apart in an attempt to divide it again.

Her sword splits through a gap in the armour of the Sha-Brytol in front of her, at least, stealing an advantage from his moment of distraction. A pained sound escapes him, red lyrium and red blood dripping from the wound, and he moves to strike her with the pommel of his hammer.
Not the head of it.

Interesting.

Now they want to take her alive.

She tries to get back towards the others, but the enemies had more or less dropped down into the space between them, and though she can see them fighting towards her, they’re outnumbered. Spells flash and Haninan draws a dagger, but only Pride seems to have much skill with his blade; he’s caught half between trying to reach her, and trying to keep the swinging weapons away from the other two mages.

The armour-fused dwarves are as quick as she remembers, and even stronger, and after a moment they seem to reach the silent consensus to all pull towards her location. A couple of spells trip them up, flashing ozone and one blast of fire from Haninan that leaves a charred, melted scent in the air, but after a minute, the last straggler among them crosses a thin seam in the center of the room; and before any of her companions can follow, three of the Sha-Brytol smack their weapons against the floor, and a wall shoots up through the middle of it.

A stone wall. Massive enough to reach the top of the chamber. Leaving her trapped on the wrong side with every last opponent on the field.

“Oh shit,” she says.

The Sha-Brytol regard her, menacing but oddly wary. When they speak, it is in low, quiet voices; little more than whispers, and difficult for her to translate, even with Fortune’s knowledge still firmly in her mind.

“Thief?” one asks.

“Paragon?” another suggests.

That’s the best she can make of it, as they seem to be communicating in gestures and touch and some silent, unspoken language that she can almost hear, like voices in another room.

It’s eerie. They feel half like darkspawn and half like spirits, ghosts, even stranger than the lingering descendants of theirs that she once met. Their faces are hard to see beyond their masks, and their gleams black and dark grey and cold in the light; meant for moving in shadow.

She’s not particularly interested in waiting around to see if they decide to kill her, though. After a few seconds she tries to slip down the side passage she’d noticed before, but one of them snaps a staff towards the ground, and the opening closes shut so quickly it makes the air whistle.

Then something hits the wall in the middle of the room with enough force to make it shake. Just a little. But considering it looks to be solid stone, she’s almost afraid it’s another earthquake starting.

It isn’t, though; it’s some attempt on behalf of her companions to bring it down, she guesses.

The Sha-Brytol glance towards it.

Then, as one, they turn back and stare at her.

Their synchronicity is unnerving.

Something pulses through the ground at her feet. Her heart lurches, and her second heartbeat
rumbles, and that seems to decide the matter.

They take her sword from her, and she’s half expecting to have her hands bound, but they seem hesitant to touch her. Another passage opens up, and they begin herding her towards it. Not quite violently, but in such a way as to make it unquestionable that she needs to move. Wherever they are going, she is not being given the option to stay behind.

She is to be a prisoner again, it seems.

Her mouth goes dry, and her gaze drifts to the red lyrium she can see on most of the figures. It’s not the only lyrium, though. Some of it is still blue. Strange, to see it side-by-side like that. Dagna would have a field day, she thinks, but though red lyrium is definitely a corrupting substance, it’s not always all-consuming. The Templars who used it died without exception, eventually, but they didn’t always lose all of their sense. Or at least, not all at once.

Though it tends to affect dwarves more strongly.

She holds out hope, and tries to block away the sing-song pull; swallows her fear and walks, down into winding tunnels that are marked with glowing geometric shapes, and curling letters.

These passageways are different still. They move around the motions of the Sha-Brytol, obliging them in a way the stone further above hadn’t obliged the untainted dwarves; reminding her more of the dark spaces below the Deep Roads, than the Deep Roads themselves. Like servants’ passages in fancy manor households, she thinks. Convenient shortcuts – and convenient ambush points.

Down they go, until she feels the unmistakable pull of something; until she knows they’re getting closer to the Titan.

It takes them two days to get there. Two long, long days.

The Sha-Brytol offer her water but no food. When they sleep, they all but bury her in a cocoon of stone; but she’s too fearful of what her dreams will hold, and that the whole thing will come crashing down and crush her, to actually drift off.

She spends the night trying to use magic to dig her way out, instead.

It doesn’t work.

She wonders about the others, and how they are taking this. Pride will be angry. Curiosity will be worried. Haninan… she’s not entirely sure how he’ll see it, actually. But if any of them could figure out how to find her down here, in all these twisting tunnels, it would be him.

The idea of a rescue has appeal. But the thought of her friends trying to dig their own way through the Deep Roads is alarming. Worse, still, is the idea that Pride will somehow blame all of the dwarves for this. He’s made strides with Lady Ortahn; it could be ruinous if he decides that this is some trap or trick of hers, and she worries.

It’s easier than worrying about what might be waiting for her at the end of these tunnels. Dark enough and narrow enough to make her feel, keenly, just how deep she is buried.

And then the mouth of one of their tunnels opens up to lyrium-veined walls, and a massive chamber with equally massive doors, bathed in a perpetual spotlight. The image of lyrium, rather than the real thing, is carved into their surface. Like trees, almost. Spindling branches and points that wrap around words. Fortune didn’t impart as much of the written language as the spoken, but
she thinks they are a welcome to the Children of the Stone.

The center knocker, far too large and elaborate to be anything other than ornate, depicts a giant curled above many smaller figures.

The doors remain sealed as they approach. The Sha-Brytol push her through a side entrance, and out, blinking into the belly of the Titan.


What she saw above, she realizes, was hardly anything. It was the crossroads of the dwarves; it was the traveler’s path. Here, in the Titan, is the true Ancient Dwarven Empire.

Veins of blue lyrium race like artwork between panelled walls carved with fine, precise script; written accounts of histories, stories, and lifetimes. White pillars stretch through skies filled with fluffy clouds. Gardens bloom between marble buildings, flowering plants and vines and even fruit trees, and pathways trail through the many stacked layers of the city, lined with smooth gemstones and intricate patterns on each step. It feels as if she is in the sky, rather than underground. There are birds, even; or creatures like birds. Pretty, winged, colourful things, smaller than her palm, flitting through the open air with impunity.

Statues tower up from the ground, some blocky and stern, as she would expect of dwarven artistry; but others are smooth, curving lines grown from willing stone that flow gracefully, creating a pattern of increasing levity from the highest levels down towards the lowest reaches. The lower you go, the easier it gets, the message seems to be. Strips of gold wind through black and white stone, and tapestries billow in the wind, proudly displaying what look to be family crests.

It is the Arlathan of the dwarves, she realizes. But so lost in her time as to be utterly forgotten. She keeps her eyes peeled for any signs of gleaming red amidst all of the sparkling blue.

It takes her a while to spot some, but to her dismay, it is there. Along the top chambers, mostly. Some of it seems to have been covered with colourful tarps, like a poor attempt at bandaging or disguising the wound, but she can see the places where the veins have begun to grow outwards; the infection spreading.

There are dwarves, of course. They shy away from the Sha-Brytol, watching her passage with wide eyes as her tainted escort urges her downwards. Their faces are largely unmarked. Elaborate bears, plaited hair, jewellery and piercings seem common. Of the ones she sees, none show the same signs of corruption as the Sha-Brytol. But she’s not sure if their fear is for her, or for her grim escort, which looks misplaced in the bright light of the center streets.

The sound of the song is getting louder. The second heartbeat in her chest is too, though, and after a while she finds she can scarcely pay attention to little else; her feet follow the path as she is prodded along, and her temples throb, and the world is too bright and dizzying and vast around her.

And yet, she feels, very much, as if she is inside of something alive. In the beast; as beautiful as the scenery may be.

There is a third heartbeat.
That’s far, far too many, really. Two was too many. If she’s somehow acquired another one, her veins will burst.

She has to stop, to listen. To feel. Her own heart, lub-dub, a quiet, familiar rhythm in her chest. The second one, thump-thump, a pulsing of the unwelcome soul added to her own. And then the third, boom, boom, like a drum echoing the pattern of the second through the air around her.

What is this? she asks, mostly of the universe, but perhaps also of the ancient being all around her.

One of the Sha-Brytol reaches, hesitantly, to touch her. His eyes are clear enough to show reason, for a moment. He is afraid of her.

Or he is afraid of something, at least.

A quick prod, and she gets the message and keeps walking.

They pass a few lyrium deposits that remind her of the guardian they fought, the last time she ventured into a Titan. One of them, disturbingly, is beginning to turn red.

The rest are fine. For now.

She is led to a spiraling staircase that trails down through mist and away from the open air, towards flat stone that whispers open as they approach it. Into some tunnels once more, though ones that are still brighter and airier than anything at the center of the earth has any business being. The lyrium deposits increase exponentially, until it feels like all of the walls are made of it. Her skin tingles, and it takes a lot of care to keep from touching the stuff by accident.

She wraps her arms around herself, the thumping joined by an unsettling dizziness and nausea.

Finally, she must stop for good. The veins of lyrium coat the ceiling and the walls, and trail onto the floor, and there is not enough clear ground for her to step on if she wants to move further ahead. But it seems that they’ve finally arrived at their destination. To her surprise, the Sha-Brytol leave her.

She finds she is in a chamber at the end of a passage, a web of blue and what looks to be white lyrium pulses; and in the middle of it is something silvery and bright, and resounding with the echoing drum of the third heartbeat.

She clutches her right hand to her chest.

Thump-thump.

Boom-boom.

Thump-thump.

Boom-boom.

The thing inside of her… it isn’t a soul. It was never a soul. The evanuris didn’t only take lyrium from the bodies of the Titans; what they truly took, what made them believe they could become gods, it’s right in front of her.

It’s right inside of her.

The heart of a Titan.
The brightness spreads, the rhythm speeds up, and she drops to her knees as the song *screams* in her ears. Her chest burns so badly that she feels as if it has been lit on fire from the inside.

She sees in her mind’s eye a great dragon, crimson and royal purple, head crested with many horns. Mythal. The dragon’s claws burn as it tears through the stone, magic rippling in the air. She is bloodied and exhausted, but determined. Lyrium floods over her scales, the interloper, the intruder, monster from the sky. Jaws rend and tear and there are no protectors left, the children are calling out, they are dying but the Titan can do nothing; the Stone will not heed it, and then the beast rips through the fabric of its heart, and swallows it whole.

It is the Titan’s heart.

It is Mythal’s.

It carries her through the greatness of an empire, the collapse, death and betrayal. Clawing, screaming, striving through a world that has been broken, time and time again it has been broken. It is Flemeth’s heart, waiting for her vengeance.

It is… it is Solas’, scrambling desperately to find a way. The world is failing, it is dying, it’s all their fault and they are out of time.

They need more time.

It is *her* heart, for a moment. One moment, at the very end, as it passes from Solas. But there is not enough left. It is hollow and fading and only the barest shell remains, the rest stripped away by time and sacrifice and too long spent separated from itself.

It forgets everything, but now the song, the *song* remembers.

The song?

The… the darkspawn?

How could the darkspawn remember something that never happened in this world?

She feels the mind, vast around her, the consciousness old as the earth. It is frightened. It has its heart, still, but it’s heart is somehow outside of itself as well, and it can hear them calling. It is a Pillar of the World. It should have no end, yet it fears the song that sings of death. It fears and longs for the echo, the shard of itself lingering in her chest. She has carried it from the shadows, she is of the shadows. She is of the Lost Children, the ones who sing, who scream in a space that no longer exists.

...What…?

It cannot explain.

It does not understand itself, in many ways.

But it is within her, and the song knows her, and she must *help*.

Her flesh burns and she screams and everything goes dark.

It’s like she’s fallen into the shadows from her dreams. It’s pain, of every kind, and for one awful moment she feels nothing but clarity.

The darkspawn.
The darkspawn are… they are…

No.

No, no, no.

The cry of grief which escapes her echoes into the song around her, and it fits into the symphony. Another note to the same tune. Another voice, lost in the shadows, senseless and pained, trapped in nowhere and nothing. But what is can never become nothing. Fire burns but it leaves smoke and ash. Makes heat. The souls of a world destroyed before it can ever be must leave echoes. Shadows. Time folds, and the imprints are pressed together.

Memories of death and pain, and a longing to escape; senseless malice and grief, the smoke of a fire not meant for a world where it never burned.

No, please.

She screams again and then she is back in the chamber, the heartbeat thundering around her.

“No,” she whispers, aloud.

She is shuddering, so horrified that it is almost numb.

A hand reaches for her shoulder.

She looks up and there he is, wisps and light and phantoms of a memory. Her memory, perhaps; he is clad in his simple tunic and leggings, his jawbone necklace, an outfit she had not seen him wear since he left Skyhold. Threaded through the silvery light are veins of red, pulsing, that make her think of the time she had found him in a prison cell, in another future that never was.

“Vhenan,” she breathes.

His face crumbles, and the phantom shape of Solas falls to his knees in front of her.

She pauses, uncertain, glancing at the chamber around them.

“You cannot be him,” she reasons.

“A ghost and a memory,” he says.

Her hands close into fists.

“There was no memory left in this thing you gave me,” she says, brittle, lost.

“No,” he agrees. Then he closes his eyes, and shakes his head. “I did not know, vhenan. It seemed the only recourse left. The world was dying. To let it die by inches, or to burn it all at once in the hopes of salvaging something, that was what I faced.”

“Dying is not the same as dead,” she snaps. “It was not hopeless. We could have figured out how to save the world instead of flinging it onto the altar of sacrifice.”

“Yes,” he says.

The simple agreement stops her; kills any further arguments still trying to claw their way out of her throat.
She swallows, and tastes blood in her mouth.

“What is this?” she asks him. Because she could be wrong, and she prays that she is. With every fiber of her being, she prays that she is wrong.

He doesn’t meet her gaze.

“What did you do to us?” she demands, and he shakes, and for a moment she’s almost afraid that he will disappear. Vanish again, and leave her with nothing.

But he stays. Miraculously. And after a moment, he speaks, barely more than a whisper above the beating of the Titan’s heart.

“I never knew where the darkspawn came from,” he says. “The first time, Mythal perished fighting the Titan. It was too much for her. It controlled the Stone, and her campaign ended with her body dashed in the depths. The other evanuris sought to avenge her, and mustered their forces. I looked for vengeance, too, and found what I thought was an even better solution. A way to make it so that Mythal would never die in the first place. A way to move through time.”

She stares.

He still will not look at her. His head bows.

“I did it,” he says. “It worked. I went back, and devised a means of blocking the Titan’s connection to the Stone. Mythal slew it, and my aid secured my place and status as her most valued General. I had risked everything to save someone I loved, and for many years, it seemed my secret gamble had paid off.”

“You went back in time… before?” she asks, a little numbly.

He nods.

“That is how I knew it could work,” he says. “Tear through time. Reshape the world. Go back and right the wrongs before they could even happen. But then the evanuris kept on killing the Titans, and the darkspawn, and the Blight, began to appear. Mythal tried to reason with the others, to make them see that their actions could only doom us all. So they killed her. She died anyway, and the world itself was placed at risk. I had only delayed the inevitable, and made things exponentially worse. I did not dare try to meddle with time again, not then; I built the prison, severed the Veil, and hoped to keep the damage contained.”

She closes her eyes.

“And then you woke to find that the darkspawn were still a problem,” she surmises.

“Going back again was the only solution I could divine, but to go back so far required tremendous energy. The Veil had to be torn down. Sacrifices of blood and spirit needed to be made, and the fabric of reality torn so it could be mended once and for all. Or so I thought.”

He looks at her, finally, so heavy with remorse that it actually pains her; even though she could scarcely imagine adding more pain to this, here and now.

“You wanted me to mend the fabric of reality?” she asks, lost and incredulous.

He lets out a breath.
“You did it before, you know. I would have gone with you, if I could have. But I had to choose,” he says, softly. “I loved you. You tried to save me, you tried to save the world, you tried to help me see what I could not. You survived. Every terrible thing that happened to you, happened because of me. But still you… you…” He wavers, and then reaches for her, ghostly fingers on her cheek. “Even this terrible thing that has happened to you, has happened because of me. But you are here. You are finding answers, and if you cannot mend what I have broken, then nothing and no one can.”

Emotion floods through her, pain and sorrow and above all, screaming through her veins, anger.

Rage.

“I failed!” she cries at him. “I tried to save the world and I failed! You were the one who succeeded! You won! How can you say that I would do better?”

“Because I created the Blight!” he cries.

She stills, and goes cold.

Red light shimmers in his eyes.

After a moment, she shakes her head.

“No. No, please, ma vhenan, tell me it is not what I think,” she asks. Entreats.

He slumps, all but on his hands and knees before her.

“That which exists cannot simply vanish,” he says, slowly. “The first time I went back, it was a hundred years. A hundred years in which children were born, buildings were made, plants grew and animals lived and died. But all of that, the world as it existed, was undone when time was folded. Where did it go? I never thought it went anywhere. It simply was not allowed to be. Had I known… had I known, I never would have attempted it.”

“It makes no sense,” she insists. “It makes no sense, the Blight is a poison, it’s not… it cannot be…”

“Where do souls go when their world is gone, and a new one occupies the space where it once stood?” he asks her.

“Wherever souls go anyway!” she snaps.

“They are trying,” he admits. “We, I suppose. We are trying. But there is no coherence in the darkness. It is nothing; yet it exists. It is a cup overflowing, but there is nowhere for the water to overflow to. The glass will break. The cracks already show. The Pillars of the Earth, the Keepers of the Sky, they are so tied in with the fabric of reality that they can hear it. They know that the glass is straining, that the world will shatter if left unaided. It needs an outlet; but what pours through is wrong. It is poison because it is the anguish of what cannot be, but still is. It tries to reshape the world to suit it, but once it is here, it no longer recalls what that can even be. Only that it is suffering. So it reshapes the world to suffer as well.”

The air burns with every breath she drags in.

“You are telling me, that the Blight… you are telling me, that the Blight is what is left of my future, my world?” she asks.
He is silent.

“And you… you are also… but, but how can you remember, then? You said the song remembers. If it remembers, how can it fail to recall what it is? What it wants the world to be?” she begs, clinging to the question as if it might somehow reveal this all to be a cruel joke.

“Because you are here,” he says.

She shakes her head.

“That makes no sense.”

“No. It makes sense. It is an only an injustice,” he says. “Sending you here was the only thing I did right in all of this. You are from the world that has been lost. You carry the heart of a Titan that died in it. You can make sense of the song.”

Again, she shakes her head, but he is firm in this. He reaches for her again, ghostly hands upon her shoulders; a touch she scarcely feels, but somehow, after a moment, it does help to ground her a little.

“I don’t understand,” she admits.

“The Titans cannot reconcile the song because they do not even know what it is, only that it is straining everything and must be let out. Thus when it comes to the world, it is discord,” he tells her. “But you, you are the misplaced note. You carry memories of what that song is supposed to mean in your very being. It would be true of anyone from the worlds I destroyed, but with the Titan’s heart inside of you, you can connect to it as well. That is how I am here. You are translating the song for the Titan. Now it sings it correctly, and I do not forget.”

She stares, searches his face. Reaches up, tentatively, and trails one finger down the glowing outline of his cheek.

“What are you, then?” she wonders.

“What is left,” he replies.

Amazing. Always, when she thinks it cannot get worse, the universe invents new ways of refuting her assumptions.

“How do I fix it?” she asks, and it feels like she is drowning. Drowning in all of the Titan’s blood around them, drowning in her failure, drowning in the red taint flecked throughout a silver ghost. She thinks of a dark future which she herself erased from existence; thinks of the darkspawn surging scant years later. Are those worlds still there, too? Writhing in the dark? The first one Solas undid, and the future which she denied?

And what is she to do for them, if she can only ‘translate’ her own world? What good would the translation even be, if the fabric of reality is still splitting at the seams?

He pauses, and the air around them pulses. She can hear a voice; a song, not like the Blight, and it is too much. Much too much, too big for her to understand, overwhelming until it quiets, like a whisper.

“You must translate the song. You must find the Titans, and the Keepers, and help them. Then what is lost can flood back into the world without forgetting what it is,” he says. “It will change everything, but the alternatives are worse.”
She lets out a breath that shakes into a laugh that turns into a sob.

Bright arms close around her, surprising in their warmth. She leans into him, almost falls through him, but he proves enough of a buffer to hold her steady for a moment.

“It is too much,” she says.

“I know. I know, ma vhenan. I am sorry. I am so, so sorry. I did not mean for this, but you are right. That does not matter. That excuses nothing. It should not be your burden. None of it ever should have been.”

No, she thinks.

No, that is not right. She is... she is someone who fights. That’s always been true. And someone who protects, or at least tries to. Protects her clan, protects her followers, protects those who need it. Protects those she loves. That is what she has always wished to do, and she failed, horribly, on all accounts in the end.

But as awful as this is, as much as this truth rends her soul and makes her want to crumple to the floor, it is what it is.

And two worlds still need to be saved. Once again, from each other.

This path may be overwhelming and merciless, but she chose to walk it herself.

She sighs, and then laughs, as something hardens with the resolve inside of her. It’s a hysterical, pained sort of laughter. Not really laughter at all. It goes on too long, but when it finally stops, she feels spent. Like she’s poured the edge of her denial out of herself. Like she could maybe stand up again, at some point in the future.

“You’re telling me I have to carry a song to all the four corners of the world?” she finally asks him.

“Translate a song, technically,” he replies. “It seems Andraste knew and did more than I gave her credit for. Or it is a coincidence. But you are correct in that it is the world you must travel. It is not only Thedas that struggles here. It is an entire globe.”

She sucks in a long breath, and lets out again.

“How am I supposed to ‘translate’ a whole world?” she wonders. “Especially the parts of it I’ve never even seen.”

“It is not...” he pauses, and considers. “You do not need to know everything that was lost. The song remembers, until it is sung in confusion, and the meaning slips away. You are a bridge. I am not your memory of me, but I am able to remember what would otherwise be lost because you are here, anchoring that truth from the other side. It is not what you know. It is what you are.”

“And when the world ‘changes’?” she asks, leaning away, resting on her legs. His arms drift from around her back, until his hands are on her shoulders again.

“I do not know,” he admits. “But what is threatening it now is a Blight the likes of which would overshadow all the history that you know, as an alternative to the destruction of the very fabric of reality. I believe your efforts could produce a result preferable to either of those fates.”

“I would say it can’t get much worse, but I’ve said that before to horrendous results,” she decides.
“As have I,” he agrees.

She regards him for a moment, silent in the thrumming chamber.

“I met you, you know,” she says, finally. “Your younger self.”

He smiles, a little.

“Throw him off of a cliff,” he suggests.

“He doesn’t deserve that, not yet at least,” she says, shaking her head. “Besides. He can hover.”

One of his hands cups her cheek. A spark of red in the corner of her eye.

“Does he love you yet?” he wonders.

She swallows.

“He wrote me a poem.”

The chuckle that escapes him is a hollow, scraping thing; but also genuine.

“I am terrible at poetry.”

“It was good.”

His eyes lock onto hers a moment, and then he leans forward. His lips brush hers only faintly, like a wisp of wind; no warm flesh but still her grip on him tightens, fingers challenging the substance of his form. He has done even more terrible things than she imagined – they both have, with this revelation – and still, this is true.

She loves him.

She will save him, if she can.

“I should have let it be,” he says. “If my other self ever learns the truth, tell him I said this – I once sacrificed a world to save someone I loved. Then, to make it right, I tried to sacrifice someone I loved to save a world. But I missed the truth until it was far too late. Sacrifice nothing that you do not own; and always remember that you own no one but yourself.”

He leans forward, and presses his lips to hers again.

He will never learn the truth, she thinks, fierce with protectiveness. But she memorizes the words anyway.

“Can you stay with me?” she asks him.

She already knows the answer, though.

Dreams are not made to last.

His brow presses against hers, and she closes her eyes; tries to feel him there.

“You must sing with the Titan,” he says. “The heartbeat will show you how. Once that is done, I will be gone.”

“Gone where?” she whispers.
“I do not know. But wherever I go, I will never forget you. If there is any shred of memory left in me, then it will be of you. Always.”

Her head falls, and she cups her face in her own hands. It is foolishness in every way. He is responsible for the Blight, for – for all of it. By anyone’s measure, an unknown fate is too good for him. Destruction, wrath, eternal suffering; having all the pain he has caused return to him a thousandfold would only be a verdict most fitting.

But he was young, and he wanted to save something. And she has gone back in time to try and save things, too. Neither of them knew it would have these kinds of consequences. And there is no going back again, because each return trip is only further ruination. He burned her world and worse, and they are long beyond the question of intentions now, but with such power, how many others would make the exact same mistake?

She sees him. Struggling against tides.

Losing. Drowning. Turning away from the hands that reach for him, and dragging the world into the depths as he mistakes downwards for up.

But it is always a mistake.

“I love you,” she says.

His touch grows, briefly, more distinct against her.

“Vhenan.”

The second heartbeat in her chest moves in time with the thrumming in the chamber. She focuses on it, tries not to think of anything else. Of what she’s even doing. It’s a simple rhythm. Not a song, she doesn’t think, until she finds herself really listening to it, and noticing complexities that eluded her before.

It’s not really meant for her. It’s... she’s not a dwarf, not a Child of the Stone, and it’s tricky, two people trying to talk through second languages that both only half know. But after a while, it starts to smooth out.

As it does, she hears the other song.

Everything goes disjointed again, wrong and chaotic, different musicians playing the wrong tunes. Screaming at one another. But there’s the familiarity, too, and now that she knows what it is, it kills her. She should be there. She should be suffering with them, but that would solve nothing. She can help, and so she will help; she hears the song and it resonates through her, drifts into her bones, seeps into her heart and echoes through her skull.

The world she failed.

The people who fought hurricanes, and lost.

There’s a flash and everything burns, screaming agony, her chest on fire again but for one moment it fits. The air bursts and the touch on her vanishes. She reaches back for it, scrambling for flitting traces that fade away, and are gone.

Then she keels over and falls into quiet, empty unconsciousness.
Chapter End Notes

Everyone knows I love them, right?

Because I do.

A lot.
She wakes up to a room filled with soft, purple light.

Something is prodding at her shoulder. Her chest aches. Her limbs feel cold.

She opens her eyes, and at first she thinks she’s been moved somewhere. The colours are all wrong. But then she blinks, and her mind crawls its way back towards clarity, and she realizes she’s right where she fell. Empty-handed, cold, staring up at lyrium encrusted walls.

The lyrium is purple.

All of it, everywhere, except for the silvery-white web of the Titan’s heart.

That is ridiculous, she decides. The lyrium rainbow is ridiculous. Purple is ridiculous.

Something prods her shoulder again. She turns, and looks, and sees a dwarf standing over her.

Or, well. More at a distance. With a tall, rune-marked staff that is, apparently, the source of the poking and prodding.

The dwarf look like he’s about Varric’s age, with auburn hair braided into sapphire and gold clips, a free-flowing beard that almost reaches his knees, and blue vein-shaped tattoos across his temples. He looks to have similar markings on the backs of his hands, as well. An ornate, heavy robe of platinum, gold, and green trails off of his broad shoulders.

He looks like a statue come to life, she thinks.

When she turns to him, he startles a little.

“You… who are you?” he asks her, recovering swiftly. “What has happened?”

She sucks in a breath.

Her chest hurts; as stabbing pain as it expands.

Who is she?

What has happened?

Good questions.

She has no idea how to answer them.

The second heartbeat is still in her chest. But it’s quieter, now; mercifully so. She can hear the song around her, but that, too, is easier. The pull is gone. Or lessened enough that she can scarcely feel it right now. Everything feels… strange, but not dire.
“I translated the song,” she says. It worked.

Apparently, the end result is purple lyrium.

If that’s the worst of it, she’ll take it.

“Translated…? You have changed the Titan!” the dwarf exclaims, his brows dropping as he glowers at her. “Has this been the doing of your people? Why did the Sha-Brytol bring you here?!”

She blinks.

“Can you not ask them?” she wonders. She is tired, still; exhausted and hurt, and trying to process for herself what has happened is hard enough, to be honest. Explaining it to someone else is beyond her right now.

“Every vein of lyrium has changed! The Titan no longer speaks to me, and the Sha-Brytol are incomprehensible!” the dwarf snaps.

So it’s more than just a change of colours, then.

“It was poisoned,” she says. “Now it is not anymore.”

The dwarf’s glower intensifies.

“Or you have spread the poison throughout the entirety of our home,” he counters.

“No,” she says.

But he seems to have made up his mind about her, now. He levels the end of his staff at her head.

“Reverse this!” he demands.

“I cannot,” she admits. She wouldn’t even know where to begin to start, even if she wanted to.

“You are in the Sanctum of the Pure. None save Paragons and the Sha-Brytol may enter here; I would be well within my rights to kill you simply for this,” he warns her.

“The Sha-Brytol brought me here,” she points out.

“They have been maddened and strange ever since your poison began to taint the Titan!” he snaps back.

It’s on the tip of her tongue to deny that the ‘poison’ is hers, but then she stops, muddled and confused because… in a way, it is. She can’t even say that it’s not her people’s doing, because that also wouldn’t be technically true. She flails in indecision, confused for a moment. This is her fault. Their fault.

But she can hardly say so, and let whatever punishment the dwarves deem worthy fall onto her now; she has to go and try to fix things.

“The Titan was trying to sing the song it did not know, to stop the world from dying,” she says.

The dwarf wavers, suddenly unnerved.

Her chest still hurts.
That’s not a good sign.

“I had to show it how to sing, to keep it from going mad. I am sorry. It had to change, or else it would have killed you all.”

“Where did this wicked song come from?” he demands.

“I cannot say,” she tells him.

Which is true enough. If she tells him, not only would he be unlikely to believe her, but he may very well kill her on the spot. And if he does that, then this world will be lost to the Blight, and whatever is left of hers will be abandoned to twist and distort into something utterly unrecognizable; all memory of the truth forgotten.

Of course, he could decide to just kill her anyway.

She tries to sit up, and immediately regrets it.

The dwarf regards her for a long moment, and then turns on his heel, and then taps the butt of his staff against the floor. When nothing happens, his scowl deepens; he taps again, and then again, and finally the section of stone beneath her begins to move; sliding her back up the tunnel she came in by.

The dwarf – a Paragon, she supposes, based on his comments and lack of lyrium-fused armour – walks alongside her. Her stone transport stops several times, and it takes him more effort, on each subsequent instance, to get it moving again.

His staff glows blue.

She wonders, blearily, if it would work better if it was purple, now.

“You will be kept alive until you reverse what damage you have done,” he tells her. “And then you will be tried for your crimes against my people. What you say may determine whether or not we make war upon yours, so I would advise you to keep that in mind.”

Oh, no.

“You cannot make war upon my people. They are all dead,” she tells him. Except she supposes he actually could, now, if it came to darkspawn.

Her people are darkspawn.

She closes her eyes, and forgets, for a moment, how to breathe.

“You cannot fool me. You are of the Children of the Sky; and you have come to kill us all, and steal what is ours,” he replies, resolutely.

“I came to try and help,” she insists.

He doesn’t reply.

After a moment, she gives up, too tired to keep trying, and drifts back towards unconsciousness as the stone rumbles beneath her.

When she sleeps again, it isn’t with the same blankness as before.
The song calls to her, still quiet. She slips into the Fade, and hears it like tremors beneath her feet. Deeper and more violent the further down it goes, but soft where she stands. For a moment she finds herself in Skyhold; on the upper level of the main floor, in fact, sitting with Vivienne. Sunlight streaming in from the balcony, as the other woman recounts a story about a mage who transferred to her Circle when she was younger, only to turn out to be an Antivan Crow who was gifted at sleight of hand and possessed no actual magical potential at all.

She remembers the story. She remembers the day, vaguely. There is a platter of finger sandwiches on the table, and Vivienne’s tea cup matches her outfit.

She waits for the dream to turn to a nightmare.

But Vivienne only keeps speaking; responding to her comments even when she fails to make them. Going through all of the motions of the memory until something gently tugs at the seams, and the whole thing washes away; leaves her sitting in a dreamy palette of colours and whispers, shapeless stages of her dreaming mind.

Golden dust drifts past her.

“It only gets more interesting with you, it seems,” a voice says.

She turns, and there, behind her, is a gleaming spirit made of snapping strands and shifting shapes. “Fortune,” she recognizes.

“Just so,” it agrees. “More and more you stir things up. I thought it was interesting before, but now… well, I will simply say I am very glad I chose to keep an eye on you.”

She rises to her feet.

“How much do you know?” she wonders.

“More than you would like, and less than I would like,” it replies.

Then it drifts closer; reaching, until she edges a step back. Then it stops and leans instead, its broad, shining face filling up her vision as it stares into her eyes.

“Your friends are searching for you. The proud little wolf has offered some nice things in trade for your whereabouts,” it tells her.

“Then… you will let them know where I am?” she guesses.

“Perhaps,” it says. “By chance, I found you before they could. As tempting as your friend’s offer is, what I want, much more, is what you can offer me.”

Unsettled, she rests her hand on the hilt of her sword.

“Why should I offer you anything?” she wonders.

“Why should you not?” Fortune replies. “I could pay you in knowledge. Power. Luck, even. I could tilt the odds in your favour – or stack them against you. And believe me, with what lies ahead of you, you will need every ounce of help you can get.”

Her eyes narrow.

“You would risk sabotaging the entire world trying to get a bargain?” she asks.
It laughs.

“\textit{I am Fortune. Risk does not deter me,\textquoteright} it tells her.

The strands of it whirl, curling around the edges of her vision. They tarnish from brilliant gold to a muddied bronze, green at the edges.

“I think I will find my friends on my own,” she decides.

“I think you will find that leaving here without my say-so is more difficult than you would expect,” it replies.

She draws her sword.

“And \textit{I’m} beginning to think that you might not be what my people would term a ‘spirit’ at all,” she counters.

It pauses, hesitant at the appearance of the weapon.

“\textit{Fortune or Misfortune?}” it muses, running its eyes along the blade. “\textit{Spirit or demon?} I am surprised you still think in such simplistic terms.”

“I don’t,” she refutes. “But I know a threat when I hear one.”

“It is bad luck to kill a Spirit of Fortune.”

“I think it would be worse luck to let you do as you please,” she counters.

That seems to bring it up short again.

“You really would kill me,” it murmurs.

“As you have pointed out before, I have mixed feelings on the subject of my fortunes,” she replies.

Its eyes flit upwards, gaze meeting her own again.

Then it inclines its head, and is gone.

The dream shakes itself apart, and she wakes to find herself in an unfamiliar room.

Surprisingly plain stone walls surround her, grey and silent. A small window, just barely high enough for her to see the bottom of, lets in light from the top of the room. There’s a stone bench with a flimsy layer of padding on top of it, a basin, and no door that she can see.

She’s still in pain, too. There are some bandages on her arms and someone has bound her chest – broken ribs, she supposes – but it still feels like something more is wrong with her on the inside. Internal damage of some kind. She can taste blood at the back of her throat, though it’s possible she just scraped it raw, somehow.

Possibly she screamed at some point. She’s not sure.

She needs healing magic, she thinks, but that’s not something she’s gotten the hang of doing herself yet. It’s delicate stuff. She makes a tentative attempt on one of the cuts on her arm. It closes, but the effort is exhausting.

Everything is exhausting.
She can see the appeal, now, of sleeping for centuries.

Eventually she drifts off again, and this time, when she falls into the Fade, she snatches her own focus up around her, and aims it at a familiar target. Hopes he is dreaming, too.

He isn’t, she doesn’t think. There’s an impression, blurry, like looking at something from underwater.

Then she blinks and he’s clear instead, looking at her with a heady mixture of amazement and relief.

“You are alive,” he breathes.

So are you, she thinks, staring at his face. He’s alive. He’s not the same, he can’t ever be the same because the world can’t possibly survive him repeating the mistakes he would need to make to become that man. To be Solas. But he’s also got a chance to be something that Solas could never manage to be.

She gives in and reaches for him, puts her arms around him and presses her face against him.

He goes stiff as a board in her arms.

Just for a moment, she thinks. Just let me hold him for a moment.

He’s flesh and blood, a beating heart, not light and Blight and broken things.

Then he puts his arms around her in return. Warm and solid.

She lets herself pretend, just for a second, that it’s all as simple as she wishes it could be.

“Where are you?” he asks.

“In the Titan,” she replies. “I had to… I did something. The dwarves are anxious about it, but it was the only way I could stop the Blight.”

His grip on her tightens.

“We will come and rescue you,” he promises. “I am sorry. I should have stopped them. Did they hurt you?”

The protectiveness in his voice is a surprise. It’s always a bit of a surprise, whenever it crops up in him. Solas could never afford to be protective of her. He met her knowing that she would be gone one day, sooner than either of them would like; one way or another. She thinks, sometimes, that some stray part of him might have even hoped that something else would do her in, before her death could only be a consequence of his own actions.

But Pride hasn’t had to learn that cynicism.

Throw him off of a cliff, Solas had said, of his own self. Still the pessimist; still bracing for the worst, for the inevitable cost, right to the end. Still thinking he is destined to walk the same dark path he once did.

But the roads have all changed now.

He is beautiful, she thinks. He is the young man peering at her face, trying to see what she feels because he can’t sense it instead. He has gone from the haughty lordling telling her that her
feelings don’t exist, to the fumbling romantic reciting poetry to her in the Deep Roads, in what must seem like a lightning pace to him.

He has all the potential to become something terrible, or something wonderful, or both. All over again, or in defiance of fate. If there is any mercy left in the world he will never, ever become the man she loved.

But that doesn’t mean she isn’t allowed to love him.

Maybe. Maybe, if she never mistakes him for Solas; if she lets him just be Pride… maybe it will not be cruel of her to love him. Or even to let him love her back.

“I may be injured,” she finally admits.

“How badly?” he asks.

“I’m not sure. I have a few cracked ribs, and I think there’s some internal damage. There’s pain,” she explains. The Titan’s Heart had healed her before, somewhat. Or had Solas cast a spell for that when he gave it to her? She’s not sure. It feels… tenuous, though. Like she’s been battered from the inside.

Well. She probably was, with the broken ribs and all.

“We will hurry,” he tells her. “I will cut my way through an entire army of dwarves if I must.”

She squeezes him, and lets out a breath.

“Don’t be foolish. This isn’t their fault, and they are frightened by what I’ve done. Talk with them. Talk with Lady Ortahn. I think their magic isn’t working very well right now, and you know how unsettling that can be,” she reasons.

She can feel his tension all around her. But after a second, he relents to reason. Which is good, because she doesn’t fancy the odds of three elves against an entire city of dwarves.

“They want me to reverse what I did, so they’re keeping me alive,” she says.

“Can you reverse it?” he wonders.

“No.”

“What did you even do?”

She pulls back, and looks at him.

There’s no way she can possibly explain it to him. Any mention of time travel and, she is certain, he will figure out who the wolf in her story really was. Maybe not right away, but sooner or later. He’s too keen not to put the pieces together, even if he doesn’t want to see the truth.

So what can she tell him?

She puts a hand to her chest.

“Before I left my world, the wolf gave me something. It is... well, what it is doesn’t really matter. But it turns out it can, sort of... it seems it harmonizes the tainted song that the Titans are hearing. It translates it through me, makes sense of it for them so that it doesn’t create the Blight. I don’t know what it will create instead, but probably something better than the Blight. I hope. The Sha-
Brytol took me to the innermost chambers, and... well, we worked it out. A little. The song will destroy the world if it isn’t sung, but if it’s sung the wrong way, it becomes poison and suffering. I think we’ve created a sort of compromise now,” she explains.

Pride looks at her.

His gaze drifts towards her chest, and he reaches out a hand. He brushes his fingers over her hand, where it’s clenched above her heart, before he swiftly retracts his touch; cheeks flaming.

Then his mouth firms into a tight line.

“So you have saved them, but they are afraid because you have changed how their god speaks to them,” he concludes.

“Yes,” she agrees. “But their wariness is merited. Even I can’t say what will happen to the Titan now, or to the lyrium.”

“Has anything terrible come of this yet?” he wonders.

“Not that I know of. But I’m in a cell, so I can’t precisely see for myself,” she admits.

Still, she supposes they would have probably yanked her out to yell at her about the damage if something truly disastrous had befallen them. Though, she doesn’t know what the full effect of their difficulty in using their magic will be, now. So much of this world seems to run on impossible things; changing the Titans could be as disastrous as creating the Veil.

Pride closes his hand into a fist.

“We will speak to the Children of the Stone,” he tells her.

She really hopes those talks go well, because his tone implies a lot of distressing things if they don’t.

After a second, his gaze softens, and he reaches a hand out to her. It wavers a moment, before dropping onto her shoulder.

“It will be alright,” he promises.

She almost hugs him again, but manages to refrain.

“Be safe,” she says, instead.

His brows furrow in concern, and then, after a second, drop in determination. He nods, and in the span of a breath, he is gone again.

In his absence, she lets herself slip into the waters of less focused dreams.

~

When she wakes up, back in her cell again, she doesn’t precisely feel better, but her outlook is marginally less awful. She hadn’t thought to ask what exactly Pride had been getting up to in her absence, which she regrets. But she thinks he would have mentioned it if anything particularly
disastrous had happened.

She hopes he would have, anyway.

At first she thinks that the song has gotten louder. But after a moment, as she wakes up more, she reconsiders. It’s not the song. It’s almost the heartbeat, in her and around her.

_Oh_, she thinks, realization dawning.

It’s the _Titan._

Sitting up takes some careful doing. Her breaths are shallow, and her own heartbeat skips strangely. The ache and the pain is still there. But when she puts her feet on the ground, it feels steadying. Something vibrates up through her legs. Like the faintest tremor, like a giant passing through the forest behind her. There’s a question, but she can’t really tell what it is.

It’s curious, she thinks. After everything that’s happened, it’s still trying to figure her out.

She doesn’t blame it for its confusion. She’s not sure what to make of all of this, either.

After a few moments, one of the walls in the room slides away.

She looks up, fully expecting to see some Sha-Brytol or heavily-armed guard staring her down. Perhaps even the Paragon who went and fetched her out of the heart chamber before. But the simple hallway she sees is empty.

“Was that you?” she asks of the empty air around her.

No answer; just more of the same curious, confused prodding.

It takes some doing, but she eventually gets to her feet. Her sword is still gone, and so is her armour, but they left her with her tunic and leggings, at least. She shuffles out into the hall, and almost as soon as she does, the wall behind her closes again.

“That’s going to be awkward if I need to lie down again,” she mentions.

The wall stays firmly closed.

“Yes, of course. We’ll make the injured elf stumble through the stone hallways,” she mutters, but turns, and resolutely starts making her way down the path.

The stone directs her, opening and closing, channeling her through simple corridors and into not-so-simple ones. As obsessed with artwork as the elves of this time period are, she’s beginning to realize that the dwarves are no different. Though where Sylaise’s crystal palace had seemed to strive for some nebulous concept of visual perfection, an aesthetic work from top to tip, the dwarves seem to be more narrative-driven. Figures carved into the walls depict clear stories. Runes she can’t read nevertheless seem to be organized in distinctive patterns that speak of language, repeating in the way that words do.

Tapestries, woven from strange materials she doesn’t recognize, depict skirmishes with other dwarves, and elves, and what look to be ancient battles with dragons.

The rooms and passages are largely empty, though, and she wonders if that’s intentional.

That particular trend screeches to a halt when she passes through a wide corridor, and a segment of wall opens up and leads her into a room covered from floor-to-ceiling in glowing purple script.
Pillars, also covered in script, fill the room like bizarre library stacks. There are shelves, too, littered with tablets full of text, all of it gleaming and shimmering, and stations riddled with what seem to be carving or writing tools and half-finished pieces.

Plus, there are about fifty odd dwarves milling around.

They all stop what they’re doing and stare at her when she walks in.

She takes a moment, and closes her eyes.

When she opens them, she manages a polite smile.

“Sorry. Wrong room, I think,” she says.

Wrong language, she then tells herself.

Well, shit, she’s just winning it all today.

The dwarves look like they’re not sure what to do with this development. No more than she is.

“I will go back now,” she offers.

The wall slides shut behind her.

“…or not.”

But she is tired, and she’s not even sure what all of this wandering was supposed to accomplish. The stone beneath her feet doesn’t quite seem to grasp the concept, though. She gets the distinct impression that it knows she’s squishy and young and breakable, and that she belongs Up instead of Down, but ‘tired’ is not a concept it grasps very well. Mountains do not get tired. They endure, until they are too worn away to endure any longer.

Eventually, one of the myriad of dwarves works up the nerve to approach her.

She’s old, wrinkled and grey, broad-shouldered and round-bellied. Her hands are covered in dust and smudges and callouses, and maze-like tattoos trace themselves in faint lines across her leathery skin. She’s the only dwarf in the room so marked.

“The Stone led you here?” the woman asks her.

She hesitates, a moment. Then nods.

“It yields to you?”

She shakes her head.

“If it did I would not have closed myself in here,” she explains.

The woman seems to consider this, and after a moment, purses her lips.

The others in the room look tense, and apprehensive. It is the atmosphere of uncertainty; of people who have found the rug pulled out from underneath them, once and then again, and are struggling to deal with the consequences.

Sort of like Haven was, really.
“This is the Shaperate,” the old dwarf finally tells her. “Here we speak to the Stone. Here we make records that the Titan reads, and sings into its song. The song which you have changed.”

She lets out a breath.

“The song was already changed. I changed it again so that it could be survived,” she snaps, patience waning in the face of it all.

“Changed it to what?” the woman asks.

“I do not know,” she admits.

The response creates a ripple of general frustration and disdain. But it’s the truth, and she can’t really pretend otherwise.

She waits for judgement.

The dwarf narrows her gaze.

“Why did the Stone lead you here?”

She shrugs, and immediately regrets it when she has to swallow back a hiss of pain.

The woman withdraws, conferring with some of her fellows in tones too low for her to hear. One of the younger ones nods and runs off again, and for several awkward minutes she’s just sort of left to stand in the room. Watched, warily.

Sort of like being in the library back at Mythal’s palace.

She looks at the literal writing on the walls, as she suspects that any sudden moves on her part would break the uneasy stalemate which they’ve apparently reached.

There are bottles and sealed vials of blue lyrium in the room, but the script in the walls and the pillars has turned purple. The tablets remain blue. She supposes that lyrium which has been isolated from the rest is either immune to the change, or will pick up the different song and change colour accordingly. Anything connected to the Titan, however, seems to have been thoroughly altered.

There’s a sense of expectation, but she has no idea what’s being expected of her.

Reading?

There’s more in this one chamber than she could read in a year, and she barely understands the script. If the Titan expects her to bone up on her knowledge of dwarven culture and history, it’s going to have to be a little bit more specific in what it wants her to look for.

If it understands her confusion, though, it doesn’t offer any clarity.

Eventually, just as she’s starting to wonder if she could maybe ask for a chair, a group of armoured dwarves manage to get one of the doors to the chamber open.

They’re not Sha-Brytol, she sees. Their armour is very fine, and heavy, and covered in runes, but not fused with lyrium. They clomp towards her with heavy strides, and prod her out of the room – not through the way she came, but through a wide, airy corridor lined with yet-more tapestries.

The passages don’t want to cooperate with them as they try to lead her back to her cell. The plain
lower tunnels of what was apparently the dungeons won’t open for them; they’re solid rock, and
they don’t budge, no matter how many times the guards tap at them with their weapons or press at
them with runed gauntlets that glow faintly at the touch.

She is exhausted enough that she almost resents being shut out, though. She just wants to lay down
again for a little while. And her chest feels increasingly wrong. Her regular heartbeat keeps going
strange, and her second one has taken on a strange, pulsing quality, that makes her feel like it is
trying – and failing – to somehow make up the difference.

It’s starting to make her incredibly dizzy.

Though that could also just be the fact that the floor is an ancient and unknowable being that keeps
trying to have a cryptic conversation with her.

After a few minutes of pointless banging, the dwarves give up, and drag her off to a room in the
upper levels instead.

They seem extremely disquieted with the whole development.

You and me both, people, she thinks to herself, before sinking down onto the narrow cot in the
room.

Laying down flat makes the pain worse, though. After a few minutes she props herself up against
the wall instead, and then, once more, she lets herself drift.

She dreams of the battle at Adamant. The early part of it, racing through demons and soldiers. It’s
a strange dream. She stands in place, staring; but the scenery moves by, as if she’s walking through
it. Like paper cut-outs being rolled behind the figure on a stage. Her companions fight through
enemies. The ones she killed herself fall, some invisible phantom of herself still cutting them down,
even though she makes no move towards them.

Some parts go hazy. Memory lost in the rush of battle. The fire burns hotter than it probably
should. The demons seem larger, and uglier, dripping with the blood of the sacrifices made to
summon them.

She thinks of the Grey Wardens’ plans to go into the Deep Roads and kill the Old Gods, one and
all. She wonders what that actually would have done. It wouldn’t have stopped the Blight. It may
have doomed all of reality, in fact, if the Blight was denied one of its major outlets into the world.

Would it have ever stopped, she wonders? Could the world have ever produced and slain enough
darkspawn to satisfy the souls overflowing from nowhere? Or was that impossible? Would the
need have only been satisfied once the world was actually reshaped, and only suffering remained?

She wakes with the wonderings still loud in her mind.

The pain is worse.

The cold is, too.

At some point another dwarf, one dressed in something marginally closer to ‘simple’ attire, is let
into the room with her. He pokes and prods at her, and she thinks he casts some kind of spell on
her, but it doesn’t seem to accomplish much.

She drifts off again.
Her next dream is of her clan, from when she was young. She sits on a fallen log, too tall for the memory, as one of the hunters shows her how to skin a hare. The aravels creak, and the leaves on the trees above rustle. The grass prickles her feet. Everything looks green, so green, and quiet. She finds herself going through the motions this time. The hunter speaks, but the words are distant and blurry; she was too young. She doesn’t remember them clearly. Just the sentiment, the patient, instructive tone.

It’s the same as the dream-memories before. It follows the set pattern, not interacting with her so much as existing around her. She wonders if it’s the changed song dragging them forth.

If so, she dearly hopes that she is the only one having these dreams. If the entire world, or even just the dwarves here, are suddenly witnessing her memories, that could be trouble.

She wakes, bleary and not good. Not good. The pain was bad, but now she’s numb. Now she can barely feel either of her heartbeats, or her limbs.

Someone is shouting.

Dagna, she thinks. Or, no, it can’t be Dagna. But it’s close. An insistent voice, a little worried, a little exasperated that whoever she is speaking with can’t seem to see whatever she’s talking about. She turns her head. Brown hair, not red. Dusky skin. Hands, gesturing, dramatic and insistent.

“If the Stone wants her in the Shaperate, take her to the Shaperate! She is nearly dead anyway, do you really want to risk making things worse?”

“Should listen to Dagna,” she murmurs. “Not Dagna.”

There’s a pause.

“See? I am certain she is saying she needs to go to the Shaperate,” Not-Dagna reasons.

“Paragon Urzanbar has ordered that she’s not to be moved,” one of the guards says, in a tone that implies he’s had to repeat this too many times.

She blacks out again.

The dreams flow around her. Not memories. Just dreams, incoherent and insensible, until she feels feathers brush at her, and long arms fling themselves across her shoulders.

“Found you!” Curiosity says.

“Oh good. You’re alright,” she replies.

The words come out very quiet.

“What’s the matter?” Curiosity asks. In common. Good; it’s nice to hear the words, the easiest ones for her to understand. Home. Home burning to ash.

She has to hold on, or else she can’t fix it.

“I think I’m dying,” she says.

“What?! No! Is it the Blight?” Curiosity wonders, turning her around and searching her face.

Search. Search partner.
She has to tell someone. Somehow, there has to be a way to fix things, even if she’s gone.

“No,” she admits. “Maybe? I don’t know. My heart’s not right.”

Wide, worried eyes stare at her. It’s so hard to speak. Why should it be hard to speak, in a dream?

“If you’re dying, you’re losing focus, even in your dreaming mind,” Curiosity explains.

Oh. That’ll do, she supposes.

“The heart. The Titan’s Heart. It might work even without me,” she thinks. Maybe if she just considers the question, that would be better.

She focuses on it. It’s from her own time, too, after all. It’s been in everyone from the original Titan to Mythal to Solas to herself. Maybe it can make sense of the song, somehow. Maybe it can spread with this one Titan here has figured out. Maybe it doesn’t need her.

“You found an answer,” Curiosity says, gently. “But we need you. We need you to find more.”

She’s not that special. She never has been. Everything’s just been thrown at her, and she’s done her best to meet it, but she’s just a person, in the end. Is that all she’s ever really been? Just a body to carry around glowing magical things until they could do the job for her? First the anchor, now the heart?

“Everyone is just a person, in the end,” Curiosity tells her.

She’s not sure she can help dying, though. She doesn’t even think she has the energy left for an ill-advised spell. Maybe, but the effort might do her in before the magic could fix anything.

“I have to go now,” Curiosity says, reaching out and squeezing her. It’s a dream, so it doesn’t hurt, at least. “We’ll be there soon. Just hang on, and stay where you are.”

Hang on.

Stay put.

Not that she could do otherwise. Or stop anyone from moving her, for that matter.

The song sounds louder.

She drifts and dreams and remembers. Gold threads, she sees again; someone offers her something, she thinks, but she turns it down. Copper and green. Her feet sink into shadows.

Someone holds her hand.

Colour floods back into the Fade. Blossoms of red and green and blue, sunlit tidal waves and shocks of purple, richer than the new lyrium. It brings back clarity, and the song grows quieter again. She wakes slowly, bit by bit; heartbeats in her chest and warmth against her palm, and a voice pushing through to her ears.

Angry Pride.

“If anyone is going to declare war over this it should be my people!” he snarls, in dwarvish.

Oh, that’s not diplomatic, she thinks, blinking her eyes open.
Oh, Haninan.

He smiles down at her.

“Hello, Puzzle. That was something of a scare,” he says, and squeezes her hand.

She sucks in a breath. Her insides still feel like one of Cassandra’s practice dummies after a bad day, but she can breathe deep, and the pain is more of an ache than a pressing danger.

“What happened?” she asks.

“Your ill-fitting piece went shaking around and decided to smash up your edges,” Haninan replies. “It vibrated hard enough to do quite a bit of damage. Though it was probably also the only reason you did not die a few moments later. Mixed blessing, I suppose.”

“It is at that,” she agrees.

“We fixed what we could. Birdie’s going to finish up. And Wolfling, naturally, is prepared to gallantly ruin any and all hope of establishing diplomatic ties with these people on your behalf,” he explains.

Of course. And to think, she thought the protective streak was charming before.

“Go stop him?” she asks.

“Ha! What do you think I have spent the past several days trying to do?” Haninan replies.

“Fine. I will do it,” she says, and sits up. She nearly dislodges the colourful parrot sitting on her legs.

Curiosity flaps her wings, and then scoots up and nudges her stomach.

“You have to tell me everything,” the bird whispers, loud enough for everyone to nevertheless hear.

She lowers a hand onto her feathered head.

“Pride!” she calls.

The sounds of arguing draw to a halt.

Pride comes around the corner, and sees her. And she sees him, still wearing his ridiculous white furs, and his gleaming armour, and his pale vallaslin.

She lets out a breath.

“Do not declare war, please,” she asks.

His mouth twists.

“They have kidnapped and almost killed one of the People,” he says. “I will not ignore that, or easily forgive it.”

Her breath catches in her throat.

One of…?
One of the…?

She is… he thinks of her as one of the People? He never has, though. Even when he loved her, she was always part of a different group to him. Not maliciously. Just… that was how he saw it. Him falling in love with her was like a human falling in love with a dwarf. Same-shaped ears didn’t make for a lot of points of commonality, when it came right down it.

She had thought that she had gotten past wanting him to see her people and his as kindred to one another.

But the declaration makes her feel strangely lost for a moment.

He’s more different in more ways than she can count, it seems.

When she finally finds her voice again, it comes out quiet.

“I did not die,” she points out. “As the injured party, I think forgiveness should depend at least a little on my own judgement.”

His expression falters a little.

“They have been slandering you as well,” he informs her.

“I did not offer them much of an explanation. Suspicion is natural; something strange happened, and a strange person was at the source of it,” she reasons.

“You have saved their lives,” he informs her.

“That is true,” Haninan interjects. “The paint has changed, but it no longer corrodes the brush. The artist must learn how to use it again, daunting as it is. The shape of the tool, the consistency of the colour, the way it must be mixed and applied and left to set, that has all changed. It may keep changing, for all we know. This is only the first step; the more colours are fixed, the more the artists must learn.”

She stares at him.

Yeah, she’s still too tired for this, she decides. Paint? Is he talking about the lyrium?

“He means all of the magic is different now,” Curiosity informs her. “It is really, really interesting. And also a little frightening. I think I am scared that our own magic will change and not work right, too.”

“If nothing ever changes, then nothing can ever change,” Haninan says.

She reaches over and pats his arm.

“I just almost died. Could you be less metaphorical?” she asks.

Hinanin looks at her with a rueful sympathy.

“No,” he sighs.

Pride doesn’t look pleased at being reminded of her recent brush with mortality.

“The magic has changed, yes. By all accounts, however, the symptoms of the Blight you described have also stopped. The Children of the Stone believe that we planted the poison for the express
purpose of doing this. Somehow,” he informs her. “Apparently, we are such cunning foes that we
managed to sneak through their secret passages, taint one of their gods, arrange it so that you alone
would be kidnapped by their people, dragged here, afforded the opportunity to entirely reshape
their magic, and nearly die in the process, for the purpose of… inconveniencing them, so far as I
have seen.”

Perhaps summoned by the sheer, unbridled disdain dripping from Pride’s voice, the Paragon she
met before makes himself visible from the edges of the doorway.

The room is small, and it feels awkwardly like a diplomatic council has just been convened at her
bedside.

“That is an elaborate theory,” she says. The truth is actually more elaborate, but she decides not to
mention that.

“It is the fiction of deluded minds more fixated on casting blame than dealing with the situation at
hand,” Pride replies.

Haninan snorts.

“Well, I suppose you would know a lot about fixating on casting blame, eh Wolfling?” he says.

Pride glares at him; but after a moment, actually subsides a little, chastised.

Alright, she thinks to herself. Enough of this.

She gets to her feet; gently deposits Curiosity onto Haninan’s shoulder, and makes her way towards
the door. Pride looks a little uncertain as she moves past him, but when she leans out of the open
doorway, his hand grazes her elbow.

She’s not sure if he’s trying to stop her or worried that she’ll fall over.

It doesn’t matter, though. She directs her gaze towards the Paragon; flitting it towards the guards
she can see clustered at both ends of the hall. Lady Ortahn is among them. She looks disquieted.

“Is it the common practice of the dwarves to hold such important discussions outside of sick
rooms?” she asks, opting not to term her new cell as such.

The question is rewarded with what she’d hoped for – defensive bristling.

“It was your people who threatened their way here and refused to leave!” the Paragon informs her.

“That was kind of them; I would have died without their aid,” she says. “But I am not speaking of
their decision to spare me that fate. Your people are clearly civilized; I have seen, in part, the
glories of your city, and the quality of your characters. I am surprised you would reduce so
complex a matter to petty arguments in hallways.”

She can see the man starting to waver, just a little; the question of propriety breaking through the
panicked sense of urgency brought on by the situation.

Thank you, Josephine.

As the Paragon opens his mouth to respond, she ducks into a bow.

“But I overstep; the first transgression has been mine. I have come into your city without leave
from the proper authorities, without introductions or even satisfactory explanations. I have enacted
a great change in your home without begging your leave to do so. I assure you, I would not have committed such a grave discourtesy if I did not believe it immediately necessary. If you are willing, I would offer explanations, now that I am coherent enough to do so,” she declares.

The offer earns her a cautious once-over. The Paragon tightens his hold on his staff, and then looks at Pride; then towards Lady Ortahn, and the armoured audience behind her.

“You are well-spoken,” he informs her. “And you make a good point. This is not the place for such discussions. But you remain a prisoner, accused of grave crimes. If there is to be an opportunity for you to speak, it shall be in your own defense, at trial.”

“Ridiculous!” Pride says.

The Paragon transfers his glare towards him.

“It is by courtesy alone that you are not also considered a criminal, sir!” the dwarf snaps.

“You kidnap one of my People, nearly kill her, and then claim to be the injured party?” he counters.

“Enough!” Lady Ortahn declares, voice ringing through the hall.

Both men quiet.

The dwarven woman draws in a breath, and then looks towards the Paragon; she, too, ducks into a bow.

“Esteemed Paragon. While I agree that this matter is cause for suspicion and wariness, and much investigation, there is as yet no evidence of criminality on the part of the Children of the Sky. I can confirm that they were making for the surface when the Sha-Brytol ambushed them. One of my scouts was leading them, and was present for the attack. While the presence of an impure Outsider in one of the holiest of chambers is, indeed, a crime, it was one committed by the Sha-Brytol who led her there by force; in front of witnesses, no less,” Lady Ortahn reasons. “Currently, it is more pressing that we discover all we can about what has afflicted the Titan and changed the nature of the lyrium, and what may risk corrupting the Stone, than that we attempt to proceed with criminal charges for which we have little evidence.”

The Paragon lets out a long breath through his nose.

“The evidence is plain enough; it is written in the changed colour of the lyrium itself,” he counters. “But… you make a good point, Lady Ortahn.”

He turns to regard Pride.

“You and your people will not be permitted to leave the city until this matter has been resolved to our satisfaction. Neither will you be treated as criminals, however. We will acquire chambers for your… delegation, and open conference on this matter. And you will offer explanations and solutions which satisfy the needs of the Children of the Stone,” he declares.

“Your terms are an insult, and one that will not be forgotten,” Pride counters, eyes narrow. “But it seems we have little alternative.”

The tension in the hall is so thick she’s a little surprised she can’t actually see it.

“The insult is your very presence here!” the Paragon insists.
“The insult is that my people have only attempted to help yours, and been repaid with suspicion and ill-treatment!”

“Help? Is that what you call it, when one of your kind changes the Stone so that it will yield to her passing, and yet leave our greatest Shapers fumbling over the simplest commands?”

“Would you have preferred poison, madness, and death?”

She’s suddenly, vividly reminded of Roderick and Cullen, arguing outside of the gates of Haven. Crowds gathering and accusations flying, fear thick in the air as everyone tried to cope with a disaster bigger than themselves by attacking people who weren’t.

“Take her to the Shaperate!” a new, unfamiliar voice exclaims.

Or, no. Not quite unfamiliar. A petite, brown-haired dwarf, clad in purple-stained gloves, pushes her way through a segment of the guard. Not-Dagna; though in light of her regained consciousness, the comparisons to Dagna are – at least physically – much weaker. The dwarven woman has a long nose and a pointed chin, a massive burn scar on her left cheek, and uncommonly messy hair. A silver ring glints from her right nostril.

“This is not the time for this discussion, Lady Hildur!” the Paragon snaps, the lines at the corners of his eyes tightening.

“The Stone has stopped listening to us because we have stopped listening to it!” Lady Hildur declares, clenching a stained fist and smacking it against the wall beside her.

“Once again, my lady, we will discuss this later.”

The lady in question curls her lip in a clear display of disgust and frustration; but it’s clear the argument won’t be going anywhere else.

Interesting, she thinks, as Lady Hildur stalks off again.

~

True to the Paragon’s words, they’re given a set of chambers. Humble chambers by dwarven standards, from what she’s seen of most of the rooms, but she’s not about to complain over that or mention the probably slight to Pride, who is silently seething and definitely doesn’t need the encouragement.

She’s pretty sure he picks up on it himself anyway.

But then, at least, they are left to themselves, with guards at their doors and enough space to comfortable move around. Curiosity changes back from a bird to an elf, staggering a little at the effort, and then plunks down into one of the short dwarf-sized chairs in the room. Her knees stick up and her arms dangle over the sides, fingers brushing at the ground.

“What happened to you?” she wonders, directing the question mostly towards Haninan.

“We should be asking that of you,” Pride says.

“I already told you what happened to me,” she counters. “Did you have a lot of trouble getting out
of the tunnels? I assume Lady Ortahn’s scout survived, at least, since she mentioned him.”

“We did well enough, Puzzle. We were worried more about you,” Haninan informs her.

“I hate worry,” Curiosity interjects, slumping her head over the back of her chair and staring at the wall. “I keep feeling it all the time. It is very tiring.”

“Sorry,” she offers.

Pride makes a gesture that she thinks is meant to be a dismissive wave, but comes out a little too sharply.

“Unless you are about to tell that you actually did orchestrate your kidnapping by those creatures, you have nothing to apologize for,” he says.

“They are dwarves, not creatures,” she replies.

“From what I have seen they are even less than that,” he snaps.

Her temper spikes; a hard knot of fear and anxiety and a strange sort of exhaustion.

“Do not use what happened to me to justify treating them as less than people,” she demands, fixing him with a hard look.

He stills.

Some of his anger wavers.

“I only-”

“No,” she interrupts. “I do not wish to hear it. I am glad you came for me. I am more than glad that you are all alright, but this matter is not going to be resolved by pretending that the dwarves or even the Sha-Brytol are just lesser creatures who cannot see sense. The Sha-Brytol brought me here because the Titan wanted me here, and the Titan wanted me here because…”

She stalls, and closes her eyes.

“Because you are what it needed,” Haninan finishes for her.

Lifting her hands, she runs them down her face; she doesn’t look at Pride.

“I am still tired,” she admits. “I need to rest again before we go try and sort this out.”

“Wait,” Curiosity asks, and then gestures towards her. A surge of healing magic, quiet enough to remind her of her own world, ripples through her. Some of her aches bleed out with it, and she lets out a breath; some of her tension goes, too, and her nerves still a little, and when they do she realizes just how tightly wound she has become.

Pride is quiet as she leaves, and goes, and rests in one of the rooms afforded to them, but doesn’t sleep.

She lays back and tries to think, but her mind keeps shying away from the real scope of what she has to do.

The whole world.
To cross the ocean… are there even Titans in the far-reaches of the globe? Dwarves? Elves? Humans came to Thedas from elsewhere; could she find them in distant lands? What would they be like, in this world so close to the Fade, if they even exist?

And the changes.

One Titan has been changed, so far, and not even in a particularly dire way, so far as she can tell; and still, at least some of the dwarves are ready to put her to the axe for it, it seems. She can’t imagine that every Titan, that every city, will even be this receptive to her actions. How is she supposed to get into them all? How can she make them understand?

And that’s just the Titans. Solas had told her to seek out the Keepers as well, and no one even knows where they are. ‘Below ground’ is hardly much of anything to go off of. Supposedly, the archdemon called to the darkspawn, but the song she hears currently doesn’t seem to come with a written map or any directions.

It hums at the back of her mind, now. Less jagged, but she can tell it’s only the faintest edges that have been smoothed out.

What’s left. What’s left of her whole world, and it’s the Blight.

Are they aware, she wonders? Do the people she failed know that they’re lost? Or is at all just… fragments, like the memories playing out in her dreams?

She supposes that, either way, there still only seems to be one thing she can do for them.

After an hour or so, her rest is interrupted by a knock on one of the room’s doors.

Or at least that’s what she thinks it is, until a segment of wall gives away.

She sits up, almost expecting to find that the Titan is insistently opening empty passages for her; but this time the surprise comes when she sees someone standing in the opening. A dwarven woman still wearing her purple-stained gloves.

“Lady Hildur?”

The woman raises her hands.

“I am not kidnapping you!” Lady Hildur declares, emphatically.

She blinks.

“…Thanks?”

With careful steps, her apparent intruder walks into the room; boots tapping slightly where they touch the ground. Lady Hildur looks her over, nods once, and then extends a hand. Then blinks, looks at said hand, and takes off the lyrium-stained glove on it before trying again.

“I am Lady Hildur of House Urzanbar, Shaper of the Dead – that just means I close people’s Memories in the records for the Song after they die, though. Not that I work with corpses. Though I do work with people who work with corpses. You may call me Hildur; the titles are just a formality.”

The resemblance to Dagna is getting stronger again, she decides.

“A pleasure to meet you,” she replies.
The response earns her a tight nod of acknowledgement. Lady Hildur – Hildur – frowns the whole way through her introduction, which is at least one clear difference.

“You must come with me to the Shaperate,” Hildur insists.

She tilts her head, and folds her arms, considering.

“You seem very keen on that.”

The dwarven woman gestures; but if the hand movement is supposed to clarify something, it’s lost on her.

“Records for the dead cannot be delayed. The city reels from the changes to the Song and the Titan, one after the other, and that stuffed nug of a cousin of mine has gone from ordering us all to investigate the red lyrium to commanding that we stay clear of the purple. Which is everywhere, and spreading much faster. But my work must be done while it still can be done, or it will not make it to the Memories; so I had leave to use it,” Hildur explains.

Hence the purple gloves, she supposes.

“I am not sure I am following you, entirely,” she admits.

“I am telling you that while these fools bumble around in the dark, I have figured it out,” Hildur says, just a touch impatiently. “The Stone wants you in the Shaperate. I have no particular conceit that I am wiser than the foundation of the very world; so to the Shaperate you go.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“But you are not kidnapping me?”

Hildur blinks.

“I had thought you would be willing. I suppose if you are not, I may need to consider it.”

She sighs, and shoots a glance towards the door.

If the others find her missing again, she doesn’t like the odds that it’ll go well. It’s already not going well; if Pride gets it into his head that the Sha-Brytol have absconded with her again, any hope of a diplomatic solution to this mess will probably go right out the window.

“I went to the Shaperate before. I had no idea what it expected to accomplish with that,” she admits.

It earns her another inscrutable hand gesture.

“That is because you are a Child of the Sky. You would not know what to do with a Shaper’s tools. I will be with you, this time; it will work.”

Well… that does make some sense, she supposes. And if it could, perhaps, somehow improve things for dwarves – and she’s not sure why the Titan would prompt her to do something that would make things worse instead – then it’s probably worth trying.

At least.

“I must tell my companions,” she decides.
Hildur gives her an impatient look.

“...If you must.”

She gets to her feet. The ground has that same sort of present quality to it; not something she thinks she’s going to get used to in a hurry.

She almost walks directly into Pride, who takes one look at her, and then one look at the dwarf standing next to the mysterious opening in the wall, and then gestures and pulls up a hard, thick barrier; gleaming between herself and a very surprised Lady Hildur.

“Are you alright?” he asks her.

She lets out a breath.

“I am fine. It is alright, Hildur is here to help,” she explains.

“She is here to help, so she snuck into your room?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. But his belligerence seems considerably lessened from what it was before.

“She is not here to help through official channels,” she replies, folding her arms. “Calm down. If she was a danger, I could make a barrier too, you know.”

He looks at her for a minute, and then relents.

The barrier drops.

“Thank you,” she says, holding his gaze until his expression softens, and he sighs.

“What have you come to help with, then?” he asks Hildur.

“Escorting and recording services,” Hildur dryly replies.

“I must go to the Shaperate; it seems the Stone wants me to,” she says.

Pride frowns.

“You have only just recovered from your last attempt to venture into the depths of this place. Can you not at least take a moment to properly rest before you make another?” he wonders.

“This could... help,” she reasons.

“How?”

“I do not know! I only know that it seems a likely thing, so I may as well try it because I have nothing else to try!” she admits.

“That does not seem wise,” he objects; though tentatively.

“Would it be wiser to just ignore the giant ancient being we are currently sitting inside of when it wants me to do something?” she wonders.

He hesitates.

“...I suppose not,” he concedes. “We will go, then. Fetch Haninan and Curiosity, if you would. I will watch our guest.”
She regards him, carefully, in his obvious reluctance to leave her alone with the dwarf.

But it’s probably the best she’s going to get without a lot of unnecessary, time-consuming arguing.

After a second, she goes.

Curiosity and Haninan both seem far more taken with the idea; particularly once she explains what a Shaperate is. Or what she knows of what it is. They return to the room to find Lady Hildur and Pride having what amounts to a stare-off. Neither one of them look particularly amused.

When she approaches Hildur, the dwarven woman reaches out and brusquely takes her hand.

“Do not touch her,” Pride snaps.

“Calm down,” Hildur replies. “It is easier this way; I need to feel the direction.”

“Do we not already know where we are going? How do you get directions from holding hands?” Curiosity wonders, striding into the space between Hildur and Pride, and forcing Pride to come up on her other side.

“The Shaperate is massive. I do not want to take the wrong approach; we could be wandering for hours if we did that,” Hildur replies.

Curiosity’s second question goes ignored as they start forward. The grip on her is sturdy, warm, and firm, and hangs on for a minute before Hildur apparently divines their needed destination, and they set out through the corridors and passages once more.

Hananan marks their progress with obvious fascination.

“Do you carve all of these tunnels, or do they just happen on their own?” he wonders. “I cannot tell.”

“Some yes, some no,” Hildur replies.

“Could you elaborate on that?”

“I could, but I would rather not give architectural lectures to fussy Outsiders.”

Hananan blinks.

“Did I translate that correctly? Did she just call me fussy?”

“Yes,” she confirms.

He grins.

“It must be the braids,” he muses. “Do you think the dwarves find me fancier than Wolfling here? And Birdie must be appalling to them, with her nest of hair.”

Curiosity claps a hand to her mouth.

“Is Haninan the pretty one by dwarven standards?”

Hildur scrunches her face up in bafflement.

“Do I look like an expert on dwarven beauty standards?” the woman wonders.
“Perhaps I am just the pretty one to Lady Hildur, then. How novel,” Haninan muses.

Hildur looks at him, and then turns towards her.

“You`re companions are frivolous and inappropriate,” the Shaper announces.

She snorts.

Pride, meanwhile, spends the entire trek looking alternately uncomfortable, sullen, and suspicious. He stares at where her hand is trapped in Hildur`s, as the walls twist open and closed behind them, empty as they were the last time she walked them. Except for the people actually with her, of course.

Finally, his glare becomes so intent that she imagines she can feel it itching at the back of her knuckles.

She reaches over and takes one of his hands with her free one.

He stills in surprise, and she has to close her fingers around him and tug him forward again. The gloves he`s wearing are thin, and his palm is as wide as she remembers. For a few seconds she`s the only one gripping, until at last his own fingertips curl against her.

Holding hands with Pride and Hildur, navigating an ancient dwarven city, is probably the strangest procession she`s ever led in her life.

When she glances at him, he`s staring at the wall alongside them, making it nearly impossible for her to see his face.

But she doesn`t think he`s glaring anymore.

Chapter End Notes

You guys remain, as ever, the wind beneath my wings and the lights of my life. <3
Hildur releases her hand not long before the reach the Shaperate, having determined to her satisfaction which angle they are apparently meant to approach from.

They don’t seem to be using the same corridors that she did the first time, but as vast and labyrinthine as the Titan apparently is, she’s not too worried about that. They came at it from a different set of rooms too, after all.

She lets Pride go shortly after that; he takes his hand back, awkwardly, darts a glance in her direction and then hesitates, as if he’s not sure what to do with it all of a sudden.

“Thank you,” he says.

She raises an eyebrow at him.

“What for?”

He drops his hand back to his side, abruptly, and straightens.

“Nothing. Nevermind. Where is this Shaperate? We have been searching for it long enough; I am beginning to wonder if you are not leading us on a wild chase, Lady Hildur,” he says.

Hildur gives him an odd look.

“You’re going to have to speak to her in dwarvish if you expect her to understand,” she points out.

He pauses; closes his eyes, and then runs a hand across his brow.

“Nothing. Nevermind. Where is this Shaperate? We have been searching for it long enough; I am beginning to wonder if you are not leading us on a wild chase, Lady Hildur,” he says.

Hildur gives him an odd look.

“You’re going to have to speak to her in dwarvish if you expect her to understand,” she points out.

He pauses; closes his eyes, and then runs a hand across his brow.

“Ah. Yes, of course. Thank you,” he says, cheeks flaming. “How much longer will it take us to reach the Shaperate, Lady Hildur?”

“Not long,” Hildur replies. “And you can drop the ‘lady’.”

“An interesting turn of phrase, ‘drop the lady’,” Haninan muses. “One might picture holding one’s lady love in their arms and dipping her for a kiss. Or sweeping her away so thoroughly that her knees gave out.”

Pride’s already bright cheeks colour further, and he scowls at the old elf.

“Or turning a lady into a bird and dropping her out of a window so she can fly away!” Curiosity
“Gently loosening the fastenings of her clothing so that it drops to the floor,” Haninan continues.

“Dropping her down a tunnel in the Dreaming that just loops on and on and is really fun!”

“Whispering filthy promises into her ear until she faints from shock.”

“Cunnilingus!” Curiosity exclaims.

Everyone pauses, and looks at her.

“How would that work, Birdie?” Haninan asks.

“Well, she would be standing…”

“Ah, I see. Nice one.”

Hildur stares between the lot of them, and then turns towards her.

“I always thought those stories about Children of the Sky being sex obsessed ninnies were exaggerations,” the dwarven woman admits.

Pride opens his mouth, as if to object – to some part of the situation; she’s not sure which – but then he closes it again, as if he has forgotten how words work. Or is suddenly at a loss as to where to even begin.

“They are not usually like this,” she admits. “They have gotten stranger since we came down here. I think being underground is addling their brains.”

Hildur considers this, and then shrugs.

“That’s what they say happens when you go Topside too long. I suppose it makes sense if it also works in reverse.”

“This is all vastly inappropriate!” Pride finally blurts.

“Your man is the strangest one,” Hildur informs her.

“He really is,” she agrees.

Haninan, Curiosity, and Pride all stare at her in surprise. The latter looks a little faint, even.

It takes her half a second to realize why.

“I mean, he is not... that is, he is my friend, who is male,” she hastens to amend.

Oh, dammit.

Hildur just shrugs.

Fortunately, that’s about when the last corridor finally opens up, and spits them back into the Shaperate.

It’s the same chamber as before. Slightly less populated, though still busy enough that several dwarves turn and, once again, stare at her arrival. Pride stares back, as if daring them to attempt anything; but his gaze soon slips to the pillars and walls around them, drawn from his posturing by
sheer fascination.

Curiosity and Haninan lean abruptly and obviously more towards interest, both immediately moving to examine the nearest pillar.

Hildur takes her hand again, and scowls down that the floor.

A few minutes later, she’s still scowling, brow furrowed.

One of the Shapers approaches them. The same one who had spoken to her before, in fact.

“Lady Hildur, what is the meaning of-”

“Shut it,” Hildur replies, tersely. Then her lip thin, and she shakes her head, letting out a breath.

“It wants… but that makes no sense.”

“What?” she wonders.

Hildur lets go of her hand, and brushes her palm briskly on the side of her trousers.

“It wants the names of the dead. But what dead?” the dwarf asks.

“I have already catalogued the most recent of our losses. It wants dead from you, to add to the Memories.”

She freezes in shock.

Hildur looks at her a moment.

“You know what it wants,” she says. Not a question; though her countenance seems to ask for clarification.

Names. Names of all the dead? A whole world of dead? That’s not something she can possibly give it. That’s not something she even knows.

But if…

If there can be something…

It takes her a moment to find her words; she clears her throat, staring at the dim purple light.

“Does it only take the names of Children of the Stone?” she asks.

Hildur pauses, and considers.

“We have never offered it any others,” she admits. “And it has never asked for them. But you are not one of us. So I would think it does not matter, in this instance.”

How many names?

The ground beneath her feet hums expectantly; almost encouragingly.

Hildur lets out a heavy breath, and without further questions, drags her over to one of the writing stations. The dwarven woman retrieves a hefty box of tools, frowning the whole while, and then takes another look over the chamber.

“How many names are there?” Hildur asks.
“...I... not as many as there should be,” she admits.

“What is this? What names is it asking for?” Pride wonders.

“It wants the names of the dead,” Hildur repeats, with a shrug, as if this kind of inexplicable-yet-demanding behaviour is just to be expected. As if the Stone is sometimes like a spoiled noble woman, asking for incomprehensible things just to see if she might get them. “So who died?”

“Everyone,” she admits.

Pride looks at her, and comprehension dawns.

“You cannot possibly give it the names of an entire world full of people,” he reasons.

“No,” she agrees. “Even if I could, I do not know them all. But I can give it some.”

“But why? Why ask you for this?”

He shakes his head, and she can tell he thinks it’s being cruel. Demanding. Dragging something painful up out of her, and making her bleed for it.

Which is true.

But then, too, her fingers are twitching, and already names are filling up her thoughts.

If it is something more she can give them, then she will do whatever she has to and try.

“There are no bodies,” she says. “There are no graves. But there are Memories, here. Maybe it is trying to be kind.”

Not a mercy for the dwarves, then; but a mercy for her.

How… unexpected.

Hildur huffs at them, speaking in elvish over her head.

“Come on, then. The Stone wants it wants,” the dwarven woman reasons, and with her tools, leads them down another corridor and towards a second chamber.

A very harried-looking dwarven man, with a forked grey beard and eyebrows that look like they’re trying to compete with it from the other end of his head, tries to stop them. Lady Hildur barks something about rank and rights and tradition, and the man backs down; scowling all the while.

The second chamber is even larger than the first, but it is empty. The walls are only half covered in writing, like purple glass; the rest of it, and most of the pillars, are bare.

“Oh. It is unfinished,” Haninan notes, with interest. “I wonder how many finished rooms like this there are? Walls written with the dead, chambers running down and down or... no, the stone shifts. New layers come and replace the old, cycling through; moving the finished names and records back and deeper into the Stone,” he realizes.

Hildur glances at him.

“How did you figure that out?”

He shrugs.
“I spotted the seams,” he admits.

Curiosity perks up, and taps him on the shoulder, asking him to show her where. He leads her over to one of the script-covered segments, while Hildur thrusts an unfamiliar tool into her hands.

It looks like a mix between a pick and a pen. There is a single rune carved onto the blade. The handle is a little wide and unwieldy for her to hold it easily, unless she heft it like a dagger; but Hildur tsk’s at that and rearranges her grip. She’s viscerally reminded of Vivienne tutting and showing her how to properly hold a dinner knife.

“Just make an attempt,” Hildur advises. “We shall see how it goes. I can add the lyrium myself; just try and carve.”

She stares at the impeccable writing on the walls in front of her.

“I have never carved stone before,” she admits. The tiny tool scarcely looks like a chisel. She is not offered a hammer.

Hildur lets out a breath, impatient.

“Do not worry over mistakes. Stone can mend. Just try.”

“This may be a trick,” Pride says; though she thinks it’s more out of discomfort than actual suspicion, now.

“Well, if the wall eats me, try not to declare war over it,” she requests, before moving to the nearest patch of stone.

Her limited knowledge of dwarvish writing cannot possibly encompass all of the names she knows. She could do it in elvish, but that seems unfitting. Will it matter to the Titan? She asks Lady Hildur, but the woman only shrugs.

Hopefully not, then.

What name to try? she wonders, tool hovering over the surface, hesitant and wavering.

Hildur makes an impatient noise.

She lowers the pointed tip to the stone.

It parts, like butter beneath a hot knife, and the first stroke is much deeper and longer than she expected. She retracts again, surprised; then she sucks in a breath, and brings the second stroke back up again.

‘V’.

The ‘A’ comes in reverse, and then the two R’s. The rounded parts of the letters are as easy as the straight. It’s not like carving at all; it’s like writing. Her script is clumsy and nowhere near so pretty as what lines the rest of the walls. Dwarvish writing flows through rock. Written common looks stocky and simplistic next to it, but when she finishes, she feels…

The stone feels encouraging, still. A gentle nudge. Yes, this, yes, and she stares at the first name.

‘Varric Tethras’.

It’s like the floodgates are opened, then.
She starts with the dwarves. It seems only fitting. Friends come first, like Dagna and Harding; then acquaintances, like Bianca, then names she’s only ever heard and never attached a face to. Political figures and Carta thugs and notorious Merchant’s Guild members. Criminals and travellers and friends-of-friends. She writes and writes, and at some point a hand comes down on her shoulder, but she gently reaches over and nudges it off again.

She can do this.

Lady Hildur moves beside her as the list grows; bringing more of the tools she’d grabbed, and doing things to the names already placed. She only sees it half out of the corner of her eye, too focused on dredging up every name she possibly can. Some, in the end, are just names she knows existed; she has no idea who they might have belonged to, but they are names, and there is probably someone, somewhere, who bore them when the world ended.

When she runs out of dwarves, she switches to humans.

Same pattern as before, she decides, moving over to a new segment. She manages to make them tinier this time; less having to move around as the space fills up. The surface of the stone is smooth, but even so, dust being to gather on the side of her hand. A corner of her palm scrapes as she moves it too quickly, and she unthinkingly raps a knuckle against the surface at one point, surprised to find it hard against her flesh even as it gives way to her tool.

The song at the back of her mind crests; sways.

Her throat goes dry and her arm grows tired, and she switches hands, writing turning clumsy but still good enough to work.

Barely good enough.

There are many more human names than dwarven ones, she thinks, and still more to go; but that was the way of the world.

A hand falls onto her shoulder again.

“Stop,” Pride asks her.

She blinks at him as if she had forgotten he was there.

She had, actually.

Haninan and Curiosity are gone, she sees. Lady Hildur is still working with the dwarven names, going much slower as she does something much more complex.

“Leave her be,” Hildur advises. “Names of the dead should not be left to wait.”

“It has been hours,” Pride protests. “She was injured, and I begin to suspect she could keep at this for days.”

Hildur shrugs.

He scowls.

“I will not let you manipulate her grief to appease your god,” he asserts.

She reaches over, and pats his arm. When she swallows, her throat scrapes like sandpaper.
“Get me some water, please?” she asks him.

“I cannot leave you alone,” he replies, brow furrowing.

“Where did the others go?” she wonders.

“Back to the rooms. It has been hours, as I said; Haninan wanted to see if he could understand the route.”

“And you just let them wander off?”

“They only left a moment ago. I had hoped we might catch up to them,” he admits.

“I cannot go. I have to finish.”

“Every name you have ever known will not be written in a single day,” he tells her, and in that moment, she thinks, he’s the voice of experience. He’s four hundred years of trying to cram as much learning and knowledge and wisdom into his life as he can get away with, and she is thirty-one years of scrambling to do everything before time runs out.

His eyes cast over her work, and she follows his gaze; names upon names, trailing to the floor, and reaching up to the highest point her arms could manage. Written in a language that only she and Curiosity speak, now.

“I will not stop you from coming back,” he promises. Then he meets her gaze, and lets out a breath.

“I will not let the dwarves stop you, either.”

The latter promise is not made with menace, she is pleased to realize; his anger at them has ebbed, somehow.

“…Alright,” she concedes.

~

Exhaustion hits her again when they finally return to their rooms. She actually sleeps, deep enough that her dreams are only dim impressions when she wakes again; shimmering dust and hazy pillars, and the vague impression that she was speaking a moment ago.

Probably acting out another memory, if recent trends are any indication.

Before she can figure out how she’s going to head back to the Shaperate, though, a group of armoured guards approach and announce that the Council is in session to discuss the Matter of the Sky Children’s Incursion into Sacred Regions of the Stone, and the Poisoning of the Titan.

Trying to think about what she’s going to do with this diplomatic nightmare occupies most of her thoughts as they’re escorted down wide passageways with an odd, forced detour through what seems to be a kitchen – apparently some of the corridors still aren’t opening at command – and then on into the Council Chambers.

It’s a room that would have given any architect in Arlathan pause.

The ceilings are massive, stretching high up into a dome that opens to the clouds outside. Coloured
glass windows ring around the upper archways, and carved panels cover every possible segment of wall, depicting dwarves in stylized historical events. White marble floors, veined with beautiful lines of green and black, are carved around what look like they are meant to be fountains of gold. But the fountains of have stopped flowing, and so the gold instead lingers, liquid but not hot, somehow, like a shimmering border. A massive statue rests at the end of the room opposite the entrance.

Before it are rows upon rows of seats; almost like an auditorium. The center of the room is reserved for a dais, or speaking platform.

The dwarves occupying the seats all have varying degrees of ‘noble’ written about their persons. Jewels shine from where they have been woven into braided beards and pleated hair. Clothes gleam with gilded embroidery, and many are clad in armour; she spies the pommels of several wealthy-looking blades at the belts of a half dozen dwarves, and feels her own lack of weapon keenly.

Not that one would probably be of much help, in this situation.

Curiosity immediately makes towards the nobles, and the rest of them move almost simultaneously to stop her, and end up catching her all together.

“Stay with us,” she advises.

“These are their leaders, Birdie,” Haninan adds.

Curiosity’s mouth rounds into a little ‘oh’, and she nods and subsides easily enough, at least.

An elderly female dwarf, stooped with age – and possibly also with the weight of the massive gold rings in her hair – makes her way to the middle of the chamber, as their armed escort heads back and secures the doors.

“Esteemed Fellows,” the elderly woman begins, in a voice that rings unexpectedly clear and robust throughout the chamber. “We have convened, in this dire hour, to discuss the matter of the Children of the Sky’s Incursion into Sacred Regions of the Stone, and the Poisoning of the Stone, and the Changing of the Lyrium, and the Changing of the Lyrium Twice Over.”

Well. It could be worse, she supposes. They could be convening to discuss The Matter of How We Shall Execute These Elves, Either by Flame or Impaling.

What follows, then, appears to be a long list of accusations made against them, and complaints about how awful purple lyrium is at doing anything. It’s a long process, and they’re left standing throughout it; almost like an afterthought on the fringes of the arena, while the nobles bicker and argue by turns.

She’s not quite sure what to do with it. There’s no table, and they have no representative among the dwarves. Lady Ortahn is present, and seems to be of the opinion that they’re probably not responsible for everything that has gone wrong, but that scant connection doesn’t seem to afford them any openings in the discussion.

Not that she’s entirely sure how she would explain anything to their satisfaction anyway.

About an hour and a half into the mess, she’s surprised when Pride, who had remained silent and scowling up until that point, suddenly sweeps into the central arena of the room; the floor where the most prominent speakers are accepted to stand.
She’s even more surprised when the first move he makes is to duck into a bow.

It’s not a very deep bow, but still.

It’s more courtesy than she would have expected him to afford the dwarves a minute ago.


The introduction, she notes, mirrors the one which the dwarven nobles tended to give before launching into their part of this debate.

“This Council does not yet recognize your standing, Sky Child,” the elderly spokeswoman informs him.

Pride inclines his head, just a touch curtly.

“Be that as it may, I am the leader of my people in this city. I would speak for them, rather than see them spoken for,” he declares. “If your Council must vote upon my eligibility to do so, I would request that the matter be broached now. What knowledge and information we possess may not be shared until we are given leave to speak; and are such things not necessary to any decision you might reach?”

One of the dwarves in the stands rises; he has a similar look to Lady Ortahn, though is much older, it seems.

“Knowledge and information, or trickery and lies?” the man demands.

Pride’s gaze narrows.

“We came in good faith, to offer help. Help which we have given, only to now be rewarded with unjust imprisonment and ignorant accusations. You faced a horror you can scarcely comprehend; and now that it has been replaced with mild inconvenience, you demand we pay for the crime of saving you!” he snaps.

The calm, respectful approach had been nice while it lasted.

The nobles launch into uproar, of course, arguing over one another until their spokeswoman restores order.

“Enough!” the rich voice finally booms, and is, with only a few petering complaints, heeded. Weathered eyes turn towards Pride.

“You are not yet recognized, Child of the Sky. Your words must wait,” the woman insists.

Pride stares, a moment; and then with a snap of his heel, he heads back over to them, practically vibrating with his frustration.

“I begin to understand your impatience with pointless ceremony,” he informs her.

“They are frightened,” she replies. “But probably indecisive. Let them have their say, so they can feel as though they have had it. Who speaks when seems to be an indicator of rank and status.”

“Well spotted,” Haninan praises, quietly.

“I have some scant knowledge of dwarven politics,” she admits.
“It makes no sense. Why should this chaotic and pointless arguing be an indicator of status? What can it accomplish?” Pride wonders.

She shrugs.

“What do the leaders of the People accomplish by repeating the same arguments with one another over and over again in their shining palace chambers?” she counters.

Pride opens his mouth to reply, and then closes it again. His brows furrow, a little, and he ponders the dwarven assembly once more; as if looking at it through a new lens.

Not, she thinks, that his last lens was so terrible. He figured out the formula; he only mistook his own place in the pattern.

“What do they accomplish with that?” Curiosity wonders. “It is like when halla bash their horns together, so they can figure out who the better fighter would be without actually having to fight and risk getting hurt?”

“Yes, Birdie. That is it precisely,” Haninan informs her.

“Do they win by making the most noise?” Curiosity suggests, though there is a sly curve to her mouth that suggests she’s joking more than asking.

“I think duration of noise-making may be likelier,” he muses, thoughtfully.

“It has to be a combination. Too quiet and no one notices how much noise you are making, too short and it will soon be forgotten,” she suggests.

“Good point, Puzzle. Wager there are any other elements?” Haninan replies.

“Many,” Pride interjects, voice thoughtful and more serious than the general tone of the conversation. “The seating arrangement is designed to afford advantage to some and disadvantage to others. The closer the seat is to the speaking center, the easier it is to seize the floor. The higher it is, the louder and faster one must speak to avoid having the sound of their words carried up to the top of the chamber, and lost. The favour of the woman who is mediating the discussions is invaluable. Though she does not offer an opinion herself, she conveys her preferences by way of controlling the flow of the debate. However, the individuals with the most sway are the ones whose nearest seatmates remain silent, except to repeat or support their arguments. They have acquired compliance from those best situated to impede their voice.”

She is, honestly, a little impressed. Dwarven politics don’t seem to operate under the same pretences that human or Dalish politics do, but she thinks he’s spotted the pattern pretty adeptly.

“Our Lady Ortahn is not particularly well-situated in the picture,” Haninan notes.

“She is not disfavoured, though,” Pride replies.

“No. Not like that poor fellow at the top corner there. Practically shouting himself blue in the face every time he stands up, but the acoustics are utterly against him, and he is about as far from the center floor as possible. That is the worst seat – and there are empty seats.”

“Is he not permitted to move?” Curiosity wonders.

“No. Seats are assigned,” she answers. “If it is like the dwarves I know, each prominent House owns at least one seat. Maybe more. Those that are empty are still owned. But either their owners
have refrained from attending the assembly, or they have died and their House has yet to select their replacement.”

Pride frowns a little, a line appearing between his brows.

“Do dwarves die of age?” he asks.

“Mmhmm,” Haninan replies. Raising a hand, he gestures loosely towards the elderly spokeswoman, and then some of the other aged council members. “See the lines on their faces? That is how time marks the tally of years for them. They live much longer than Puzzle’s people, but eventually, their bodies give out.”

Much longer?

“How much longer?” she wonders.

Hinanin taps his chin.

“You know, I cannot recall,” he admits. “I used to know, but that was a long time ago.”

Interesting. She wonders if that means that she is, indeed, still mortal here; or if her elven blood still makes her an exception to aging in this world.

Pride’s expression turns increasingly disquieted.

By the time the meeting is declared finished, he has gone from dissecting the political sphere of the dwarves to scowling at their ceiling, his arms crossed and his jaw tight.

He remains sullen and quiet even after they are escorted back to their rooms.

“What is wrong?” she wonders.

“Nothing. I am thinking,” he tells her, immediately.

She gives up, heaving an internal shrug, and assuming he would mention anything immediately dangerous that he’d spotted. It’s probably an idea, she thinks, to eat and drink a little, and then try to find her way back to the Shaperate.

Hildur’s words, about how the names of the dead shouldn’t be left waiting, keep trailing around the back of her thoughts.

Before she can announce her intentions, however, Pride approaches her; the look of determination in his eyes stalls her.

He is scowling, still. After a second, however, his expression smooths out. He smiles at her. She thinks the relaxation to his features is a little forced, but the smile seems genuine.

“Have you been onto the balcony?” he asks her.

She blinks at him.

“I did not even know there was a balcony,” she admits.

“Well that will not do,” he declares. “Come with me. The view is actually quite impressive.”

It’s on the tip of her tongue to tell him that she’s not really interested in the view. But then he
reaches out, with a strange and deliberate sort of care, and takes her hand.

He holds it very gingerly and loosely; long fingers laced atop her own, and it’s so strange to feel a touch that light, that uncertain with such a simple gesture, that before she can really think it through she finds herself gripping him back more firmly.

His smile widens.

She can hardly refuse his request now.

*Just a few minutes,* she thinks. They can go compliment the clouds or something and then she can tell him where she’s going.

The door to the balcony proves to be surprisingly small; a panel tucked away next to a roaring fireplace, which looks as much like a decoration as an exit. With how little she’s actually explored their assigned space, it’s not much of a surprise that she missed it.

Outside it proves small, but Pride undersold the view.

For all that they are deep underground, most of the city’s exterior walkways have the feel of being nestled more into the sky than they do the feel of being buried beneath rock. But from their little balcony, the misty clouds are only a flimsy curtain before a massive wall of unmarked stone.

A faint waterfall – the barest cascade – races down the surface of the wall, setting the stone to shine before dropping into mist below. Vines creep up the exterior of the building and weave through the guard rail, and up high above them, she can just barely see the place where the side of the Titan curves upwards, forming the first slope of the distant roof. Purple lyrium veins trail down the top of it. A few of the bird-like creatures flit about them, as if not quite sure what to make of the recent change in décor themselves.

“What is this so hidden away?” she wonders. There don’t seem to be any other balconies on this side of the building, and she can scarcely comprehend why so small a door would lead out to it.

“Perhaps it was someone’s secret,” Pride suggests.

Then he shifts, awkwardly; reaches for the edges of his sleeves and seems to catch himself, and folds his hands behind his back again.

“I finished my second poem,” he confesses. “I do not know that it can live up to my promise of being better than the first, however. Perhaps you would offer your opinion?”

Another poem.

Oh, he’s going to be the death of her yet.

She opens her mouth, and closes it again; and then just sort of gives up and nods.

He ducks his head, and glances sideways before he seems to decide he wants to look at her, instead.

“Time and wounds may not have you, for you are rare as winter lilac. A thousand heavy snowfalls sit upon your shoulders; yet how clear the thought within you blooms. Illusions of glory and stories of profound exaggeration will linger untouched in summer halls; yet you, rarest of all truths, must end. No. Time and wounds may not have you; though the frost beneath the snow will kill the winter lilac, you are made of sterner stuff.”
When he finishes, she lets out a heavy breath.

“I do not think I am quite so…” she gestures, but he only shakes his head.

“The sentiment is not insincere, though I understand if the words have failed to convey it,” he says.

“The words are beautiful,” she tells him.

“Then they must fit you,” he declares.

She can’t help it – she laughs in surprise, simultaneously charmed and impressed at how simply he turned that around. At the sound he beams at her, as if that was somehow a reaction he’d hoped for; though she doubts that was his intention when he suddenly decided to start composing poems, of all things, for her.

“Sweet talker,” she calls him, and then at once she remembers the last time she called someone that; and her breath hitches.

His smile falters a little into concern.

“If you do not wish to hear any more, you need only say,” he informs her.

She closes her eyes. Sucks in a breath, and then opens them again to smile at him.

“I will hear as many as you care to compose,” she informs him, lightly.

He pauses, and seems to be considering something. A question, she thinks, but after a moment he apparently decides not to ask it.

The moment passes.

“The Shaperate,” she recalls.

He blinks at her.

Then comprehension dawns.

“Oh. Yes. I suppose we could go back there,” he agrees.

“I could go alone. Or take one of the others,” she offers.

“No. You are still the one our hosts are most interested in taking retribution against,” he replies, firmly. “I will go with you. It is no trouble; though I do not know if we will be able to find the way again.”

“Well, hopefully the Titan will opt to lend a hand,” she suggests.

They set out together, quiet, but the quiet is easy. The atmosphere of the balcony bleeds away as she finds her mind picking up on the list where she left off, dredging up what she needs, as eventually passages begin opening around them, and the stone beneath their feet hums its approval to her.

Hildur meets them about halfway through the trek. She is wearing lyrium-stained gloves again, and looks irritated; but it seems to be with the universe at large rather than with them in particular.

“Good; those fool council members finally let you out. Bad enough to make you stand there while...
they all drop pants and measure,” the Shaper declares. Though she does give Pride a vaguely unimpressed look. “Oh. You brought the dull one.”

Well, he is my man, apparently, she quips back in her head.

Wisely, she refrains from saying as much out loud.

Pride just raises his eyebrows.

“How long do Children of the Stone generally live for?” he asks.

Hildur gives him an odd look.

“Why ask me?” the Shaper wonders.

“You record the dead, do you not? One might assume you have some decent grasp of this subject,” he reasons.

She finds herself vaguely interested in the answer to this question, too. As well as the reasoning behind it. What would make the dwarves more long-lived? Just… an easier lifestyle in general, with less exposure to darkspawn and the Blight? The Titan? Something else?

“Five hundred’s top of the scale, generally,” Hildur admits.

“Five hundred…” Pride murmurs, glancing towards her, and then away again.

Hildur shrugs.

“I’ve heard dwarves who try and survive topside tend to only manage three.”

“Why should it change?” he wonders.

“Further from where they belong, I suppose,” the dwarven woman muses. “Most things die quicker when you take them from where they should be.”

Pride looks absolutely horrified by this assertion.

She supposes even three hundred years still must seem too short to him, all things considered.

At least five hundred is more than he’s managed to live already.

“It is probably the hardship of survival,” she reasons, herself. “Hunger ages people prematurely. Injuries and illnesses, too.”

“True enough,” Hildur agrees.

“Have you eaten enough today?” Pride suddenly asks her.

She blinks at him.

“Yes. You have been present for all the same meals,” she reminds him.

“So you are not hungry?” he presses.


“No,” he tells her, and things go inexplicably awkward for a moment.
It takes her a moment to clue in. When she does, she’s not sure whether to laugh or cry. She reaches over and pats him on the arm.

“It is alright, Pride. I am not in any danger of dying from old age any time soon,” she tells him.

For a relative value of ‘soon’.

The look he gives her heavily implies that he’s thinking the same thing.

By the time they reach the Shaperate he’s back to brooding again. But she has more pressing things to focus on, so she mostly leaves him to it; ignoring the suspicious glares from the Shapers as Hildur leads them back into the unfinished chamber from before.

The names she wrote are all gleaming, faintly purple and finished like the more traditional segments of wall.

“Did you do all of this?” she asks.

Hildur nods.

“It is my job,” the Shaper says, simply.

“You superiors cannot approve, though. And these are not the names of your people,” she can’t help but point out. Her hand hovers over some of the gleaming names.

Hildur shrugs, and hands her the carving tool.

“I have known dead men I will not miss. But I write their stories and record their names just the same. People are people; my job is not to judge whether they are worthy of being remembered. It is to make sure they are,” the dwarven woman reasons.

“You are a good person,” she notes.

“I am a good Shaper,” Hildur corrects. “Being a good person is much harder.”

Maybe more Valta than Dagna, then. With a nod of acknowledgement, she raises a hand, and sets about carving again.

Pride watches them, quietly, before setting off to try and decipher some of the dwarven script in the room.

She gets through every last human name she can think of, in as many variations as she can manage, running into speculation again before finally moving on to the qunari. That ends up being a short segment. She writes all of the ranks she knows, and all of the Tal-Vashoth; starts with Iron Bull and Hissrad, and goes from there, throwing in the few qunlat words she knows of that might make suitable names as well.

Finally, the elves.

Clan first. Sera. Then the rest. Some she writes in elvish, if she thinks they would prefer that. Most are in common, though. She writes and writes, faster and more sure of the motions than before, and it’s almost like a trance. Think of a name. Write it. Think of a face, think of a name, write it. The song is her bones and the stone almost feels like it’s breathing around her, for a moment. An old, old thing that has seen so many young lives pass. It stays in place. The world moves around it. People bring it memories of lives, swift but filled to the brim with events. Passion. Sorrow. Joy.
Fear. Love. It takes the Memories because, small though they are, it misses them when they are gone.

It knows her grief.

It knows.

She pauses, and feels it resonate through the second heartbeat in her chest, and her feet on the ground.

“Do you want to rest?” Pride asks her.

She shakes her head.

“No,” she replies, and keeps going.

She’s a little surprised when he makes no further protests, but he doesn’t.

She goes until she is exhausted, wracking her mind for any last remembered names, or even potential ones.

Nothing occurs to her.

That leaves only one left, then.

She hesitates, tool in hand, a few fresh scrapes on her knuckles and dust on her palm. He wouldn’t – he wouldn’t really want it in common, she doesn’t think, but then again, all things considered, perhaps it’s only fair if it’s not entirely how he would want it. She carves the ‘S’, carefully, and then the ‘O’, and ‘L’, the ‘A’ and at last another ‘S’.

It still looks incomplete, somehow.

After another moment of deliberation, she moves the tool beneath it. In her neatest elvish script, she writes a second name, as well.

Fen’Harel.

Her shoulders slump. Her hand drops.

Pride comes, and looks at the wall. She wonders how much time has passed. It feels like days. Not far to the side, Hildur is carefully inscribing the lyrium into the letters.

“You wrote the wolf,” Pride notes. Almost a question, but he seems unsurprised.

“I wrote the wolf,” she confirms.

“Fen’Harel? From the stories?” he asks.

She brushes a hand across her face. An aborted breath leaves her, shaky and harsh, and she shakes her head as she smudges dust across her cheeks.

“His enemies started calling him that. He took it as a badge of honour, though. Turned it around on them,” she explains.

“A poor choice of insults. In the stories, Fen’Harel tends to succeed even as he wreaks havoc,” Pride notes.
“Apt,” she declares.

Then she looks at him. His uncertain expression.

His uncertain fate.

If she told him, she thinks, it would be certain to never happen. Solas hadn’t wanted to create the Blight. Pride might never even think to attempt to travel through time. But he could. He wouldn’t, though, if he knew.

But if she breathes a single word about time travel to him, he will almost definitely figure it out. He’s too smart for his own good.

If he figures it out, then he’ll have to know. He’ll have to live with knowing. He’ll survive it, she thinks, but the thought of dumping that burden onto his shoulders, of what he might do, of what he did do in another lifetime, when his eyes are still so free of shadows. When there is light in him that hasn’t been drowned out by cynicism and shame.

He’ll never know. He’ll never know, and that’s the biggest risk she’s going to take in all of this, she realizes.

Letting out a breath, she takes stock of her work.

Too few names, really. Not nearly enough for a whole world. But as many as she can offer. What it will mean to have them sung, along with the song she ‘translated’ for the Titan, she doesn’t know. Maybe only a symbol, in the end. But it feels like something.

“Did this help?” Pride asks her.

Like a bandage on an eviscerating gut wound, she thinks.

“A little,” is what she says.

“I will finish the Shaping,” Hildur tells her. “Delay the council for another day. Then we will have to leave.”

She raises her eyebrows at the abrupt declaration.

“We?” Pride asks.

“Leave?” she wonders.

“Leave?” she wonders.

Hildur sighs.

“They are not going to rule in your favour. My fool cousin has finally let some of the other Shapers and Builders and Casters start experimenting with the new lyrium. It has only been a short time, but a few things are clear, and one of them is that even when it is being cooperated with, this lyrium is not as cooperative as it should be,” the Shaper declares. Her lips curl, more disdainful than anything. “I saw the red lyrium. I saw what it did to the Sha-Brytol, and what it did to the Casters who tried to take it, to feel out what was wrong with the Titan. I wrote their names when they began to die in pain. This lyrium is inconvenient, but not poisonous. We can adapt to it, as long as we are willing to meet the challenge. But my cousin and his ilk lack perspective on the trade-off. They see a little red lyrium exchanged for nearly all of our stores turned to purple. They see the delays to their routine and the depletion to their luxuries. Now that the risk of the red is gone, and the quakes have stopped, they can focus on being angry at how it was taken away, and
what that has cost them. If they can blame the same person for starting things as well as fixing
them, that is a convenient little solution.”

“The red lyrium would have spread,” she says. “I am sorry for what happened, but it was the only
way to stop it.”

Hildur nods.

“I saw what the red lyrium could do. I know,” the Shaper agrees.

“I am still stuck on the ‘we’ part of ‘we will have to leave’,” Pride admits.

“The council still debates your status, so whether or not I am committing a criminal act by doing
this is also up for debate,” Hildur replies. “Once they decide you are criminals who tainted the
Titan and brought the city to its knees for the sake of modifying our lyrium and stealing it, or
whatever motive they ascribe to you, I will be told to erase these names. Then I will have to admit
that I have sealed them into the Stone, and they cannot be erased without destroying the entire
chamber. Since it is impossible to destroy this chamber without erasing the memories of a hundred
or so dwarves who have died in the past few decades – some of which are close relatives of the
current council members – they will have to keep them. Then I will be declared a criminal, too.”

She stares at the Shaper, startled.

“You did not have to do this,” she says, and thinks again of Valta, who refused to erase the truth
from the Memories of Orzammar.

“I know,” Hildur replies.

“Then why did you?” Pride asks.

“We live in the Titan,” Hildur replies, and her voice actually softens, for a moment. “The Titan
holds the memories of every ancestor I have. Every dwarf who lived and died here. The Stone does
not yield to us because we are entitled to it; it yields to us because the Titan asks it to. My entire
life I have lived in it, safe because it welcomes us. When it asks for things, I listen.”

“And now you will have to leave it, or be arrested. I did not know this would cause you such grief,”
she says.

Hildur huffs.

“Funny part is, neither did the Titan. It never quite wraps its head around little details like
‘laws’,” the Shaper admits.

“There must be a way for you to stay,” Pride reasons. “If we are to flee anyway, you could say that
we forced your hand.”

“I could. I would lose my position anyway, though.” Hildur sighs.

“Coming with us would be dangerous,” she admits. After all, Elvhenan dominates the surface, and
it’s not exactly what she’d deem a dwarf-friendly atmosphere.

“Some of Ortahn’s people are staying near topside to try and repair the damage done by the
quakes,” Hildur replies. “I will go with you that far, and then see if I can get passage with some of
them towards Kal’Arzok. My crime should not merit a manhunt. Probably not even a bounty, if the
council is worried over backlash for trying to order a Shaper to erase memories, which it will be. If
this red poison is infecting other Titans, I need to know."

Hildur smiles at her.

“Especially since the person who can, apparently, save them from whatever this is, owes me a favour now.”

She stares.

Pride’s gaze hardens at Hildur, and his lips thin.

For her own part, she grins.

“Yes,” she agrees. “I do.”

~

By the time they make it back to their rooms, Pride is silent, she is exhausted, and Curiosity has opened the balcony door and let in about a half dozen of the little bird things, while Haninan examines what appears to be a stolen tablet etched with lyrium.

She assumes it’s stolen, anyway. Or ‘borrowed’. She can’t imagine anyone in the Shaperate actually giving him one, even if he is pretty by dwarf standards.

Turns out the little bird creatures are actually very colourful bats.

Curiosity is feeding them things that look suspiciously like dead bugs.

“So I see you two have been keeping busy,” she notes.

“Not as busy as you two,” Haninan replies. “Two poems now. Moving along at quite the clip, eh, Wolfling?”

“Stop being foolish,” Pride snaps, uncommonly harsh. “We have to figure out how to get out of this place.”

Curiosity looks up from the bats.

“What, right now?”

“Soon enough,” Pride replies.

“Lady Hildur was kind enough to warn us of the way the council’s opinion will likely turn,” she elaborates.

“Lady Hildur seems a very sensible sort, but I would not assume she has eye for politics,” Haninan muses. “The Children of the Stone are upset, but if they move against us, they risk the inconvenience of open warfare with our people. That is considerably greater than the inconvenience of figuring out some new magic tricks.”

“And they have behaved so sensibly thus far,” Pride replies, dripping with sarcasm.
“There is belligerence and posturing, and then there is madness,” the old elf counters.

“There is also being grotesquely out-of-touch,” she mentions, ducking as one of the bats swoops a little low for her comfort, and then disappears up into the reaches of the high ceilings, chittering away.

Haninan raises a brow at her.

“You think they do not know what they happen to be risking?” he asks.

She shrugs.

“They are down here, practically in their own world. The red lyrium frightened them, and now the purple lyrium has angered them. They see our small group and listen to Pride posture and think we are representative of the kind of force the People can bring to bear; rogues and liars and people who sneak around and try to talk their way out of problems,” she reasons.

Haninan laughs, outright.

“That is what you think we are like?” Pride asks, surprised and not a little offended.

“No,” she says. “That is what I think the dwarves think we are like.”

“If the shoe fits,” Haninan declares.

“We are very fond of talking,” Curiosity says. “Do you think we could actually talk our way out of this problem? Because the dwarves have some very interesting things and it would be nice if we could look at them in a place that did not make me feel like I have a wet blanket over my head all the time.”

She blinks.

“A wet blanket?” she asks.

Curiosity nods. So does Pride, reluctantly. Haninan makes a so-so gesture with his hand.

“Huh.”

Well, that’s mildly interesting but not terribly helpful, she supposes.

“I do not think we can risk staying,” she reluctantly offers. A diplomatic solution would be best, but… she’s inclined to trust Hildur’s judgement on this front, more than any of theirs. She only knows a little about dwarven politics from her time, and Haninan knows dwarven politics from however many ages ago his clan dealt with them, and they’re both somehow the most knowledgeable on this topic, separated on opposite ends by thousands upon thousands of years of growing and changing culture.

“No, neither do I,” Pride says.

“If you two are agreeing then it is probably right,” Curiosity decides.

Haninan lets out a breath, and puts down his ill-gotten lyrium tablet.

“This will be tricky to manage without a dwarf, though I suppose Puzzle might substitute,” he muses.
“Actually, we will have a dwarf,” she replies, and then explains the entirety of the matter of Lady Hildur.

Pride scowls and folds his arms and stares the wall until she is done.

“She gambled on earning your favour, and on needing it,” he says, eyes narrow.

“And I am glad,” she admits. “Her investigation is unnecessary. The other Titans will show signs of the Blight, if they do not already, and I will have to repair the damage.”

“This attempt almost killed you. You were badly injured, and when people who… you cannot run around injuring yourself. You are not suited to it,” Pride tells her.

She raises an eyebrow at him.

“Pardon me?” she asks.

“I wonder what sort of people are suited to injury,” Curiosity muses, feeding another one of her bats what is definitely a dead bug. A spider, by the number of legs.

Pride lets out a frustrated breath.

“I mean only that it is not sustainable,” he says. “What would you do? Go from Titan to Titan, one of the People, traveling the roads of the dwarves? How would you sustain such a journey? Would you let the Sha-Brytol drag you off to the sacred chambers of every single one, hope to survive doing whatever it is you do, and then somehow escape the undoubtedly furious dwarves who attempted to capture or kill you as soon as you visibly changed every vein of isana in their city?”

“I do not know!” she snaps; frustrated that he has hit the very crux of the problem which she can’t seem to solve, either.

The air feels heavy.

She raises a hand, and presses her palm to her forehead. Plants the other on her hip, and closes her eyes.

Counts to ten.

“If I do not stop the Blight, it will spread,” she says.

“Perhaps we should let it,” Pride suggests.

She stares at him, aghast.

He raises an eyebrow.

“Perhaps if the dwarves can be made to appreciate what it is that they are truly risking, then they will welcome your help,” he continues. “We can send proper delegations, then. Healers and soldiers, welcomed into the cities. Cooperate with their own researchers to try and find a better way of accomplishing your task; if we cannot find a better way on our own, that is.”

From a purely pragmatic point of view, she can see where he might dig up this idea; and even think it is a good one.

It still makes her go cold, and she stares at him for long enough that he folds his arms, defensive and stubborn.
“You have no idea what you just suggested,” she tells him.

“The picture is still incomplete, Puzzle,” Haninan interjects, gently. “How about if you fill in some more of the blanks for us, and then we can actually begin to decide what to do? Together.”

The last word is added very pointedly, and very firmly, and she finds she is simultaneously grateful for the assurance of it, and wary of the prospect of it.

People do not save worlds on their own, however.

Sometimes they destroy them on their own.

She is quiet for a long time. Long enough that she half expects an interruption; but they all wait, surprisingly patiently.

“It is my world,” she finally says. “The Blight. It is what is left of my world.”

Pride tilts his head.

“The Blight from your world followed you here, somehow?” he suggests.

She takes another moment, and then shakes her head. It’s harder to deal with out loud. Hard enough to deal with on the inside, but somehow, trying to put it into words is even worse. As if it’s making the truth more real. More solid.

Less like a bad dream.

She needs to sit down.

She falls into one of the stocky, low chairs, and stares at her hands. Right and left. Old and new.

“When my world was destroyed, it was meant to be unmade,” she admits. “Written out of existence. It was not simply destroyed, it was supposed to never be. But things that cannot be destroyed cannot be unmade, either. The… souls of the lost had nowhere to go. It happened before; that was what caused the Blight in my world. Now it is happening again. The remnants of my world will destroy yours unless they can be safely guided into it. That is what the Titans have been trying to do. They sing the symphony of the lost souls. But, they do not know what they are doing. So it comes out wrong, and what manifests is poison.”

She folds her hands together.

“The wolf gave me the heart of a Titan from my world. It was what kept me alive,” she admits. “I am the key to deciphering the song. Not that I really understand it all. But I can make the Titans understand what is needed of them, and it comes out… not like a horrible pestilence of death and suffering and brutal hatred. So far it has just been purple.”

The laugh that escapes her is short and brittle and bitter.

“I have to do it,” she concludes. “It is the only way to save this world, and to try and save whatever is left of mine.”

“How are the remnants of your world invading ours?” Pride wonders. Though, gently.

She feels eyes on her, and looks up and meets Haninan’s gaze.

He looks at her, steadily, and she feels her stomach lurch.
“I do not know all of the specifics. I only gleaned so much from the Titan,” she says, looking away.

A low tapping sound begins, as Haninan moves his finger against the side of his sleeve. He stares at her, and then at Pride, and she waits to see if another axe will fall. She almost wants to grab Pride and drag him from the room; but that wouldn’t really work.

It’s still tempting.

“Have you figured something out?” Pride asks Haninan.

“Yes,” Haninan says. “This is going to be a logistical nightmare, for one thing. A diplomatic one as well. Fortunately, dwarven cities are much like the old clans in many regards. They govern themselves, and not all will share the same opinions. So there is always the hope that some of them will be more reasonable.”

She stiffens, bracing herself, and then almost falls over in relief.

“Not to mention, if this is affecting the Titans, it will likely be affecting most of the flashy ancient beings of the world,” Haninan continues. “We shall have to investigate the Keepers of old. Make sure their naps have not soured on them.”

“I need to go around the whole world,” she admits. “It is not just here. It is everywhere.”

“Wow,” Curiosity says. “We are going to see the world!”

“Birdie. Be excited about that later,” Haninan advises.

“Right. It is very sad about the rest of it,” Curiosity immediately rectifies, shooting her an apologetic look.

“It may not be entirely as dramatic as that,” Pride suggests. “Titans can communicate with one another, can they not? Why can this Titan not simply share what it has learned with its brethren?”

She pauses; blinks.

But Solas would have mentioned if the solution could be that simple. Especially if it’s something Pride could think up in under a minute.

Wouldn’t he?

“I do not know. I think I have to be there,” she admits.

“We can figure out the answer to that pretty easily,” Curiosity muses. “If the other Titans begin to turn purple, then we know it is working.”

“It turns purple because it is blue and red, but not the red eating the blue,” Haninan muses. “Not one thing trying to change another, but two things making something new. No wonder the magic works differently now. When you are done, Puzzle, the whole world will work differently.”

“I am sorry,” she says.

A hand comes down on her shoulder.

“It is not your fault,” Pride tells her.
“No indeed,” Haninan agrees, with another considering glance towards him.

“I wonder how it will all be,” Curiosity muses. “Do you think the Dreaming will change, too? Do you think it has already?”

“My dreams have changed,” she admits. But change is better than destruction.

“We will solve this,” Pride declares. “This is not something that even the haughtiest of the leaders can afford to ignore. We shall tell Mythal. She will believe me; and she will speak to the others, and they will believe her. This is a task, now, that the People will dedicate themselves to. I will keep you safe and we will find a way.”

She thinks of all the myriad ways in which expecting the evanuris to help are bound to go wrong, and after a moment, she finds her eyes locking with Haninan’s again.

“Even my dull boy would think twice before underestimating something trying to eat through the fabric of reality,” the old elf says. Then he nods to himself, and claps his hands together, and stands. “Well. If Lady Hildur is offering to oblige us with a dwarven associate, I say we take her up on that. In the meantime, I will work out how we might safely ascend, with a little luck and a little mercy. There are patterns the wind follows even underground.”

“Can I bring a bat?” Curiosity asks.

“It would probably die too quickly, outside of its environment,” Pride says, very quietly.

His grip on her tightens.

“I wonder if I could figure out how to keep it alive,” the little bird muses.

“So do I.”

Chapter End Notes

I love all of you guys forever and always, your support gives me wings!
Buried Things

Haninan leaves the room, and after a moment, she stands up.

“I think I shall go help him,” she says. “My connection to the Titan might useful.”

“I will come as well,” Pride offers.

She manages a smile for him.

“You should figure out how we are going to delay the council tomorrow,” she points out.

“They will delay themselves,” he says, but after a few seconds, he subsides and lets her leave on her own.

She follow’s Haninan’s path out of the room. Considers the matter of him, and the look he’d given her.

Someone was bound to figure it out, she thinks. Sooner or later.

But what to do about it? She’s more worried about his glances towards Pride, than his potential knowledge of her being from the future. If he’s figured out Pride’s role in events, or even his potential role, then… what if he deems him too much of a risk to be allowed to keep going?

From a purely practical perspective, it only makes sense.

She doesn’t want to have to fight Haninan.

It doesn’t take her too long to find him. She treads carefully through a few corridors, and eventually spots him near the front entryway. Standing near some of the strange seating placed in it, and staring at the walls, lips moving silently. Fingers twitching; counting off some unknown list.

After a moment, he stops, dipping his head as if he’s just had an odd thought, and then turns and looks at her.

She feels uncomfortably laid bare. It’s not like he’s trying to put the pieces together anymore. It’s like he has, and now he’s judging the picture left behind. He looks stern and a little unreachable, more distant than he generally does. There’s something uncomfortably ancient about the hard lines of his face and the scope of his sight. It reminds her of an astrarium, webs connecting over the vast night sky to create a completed picture.

If he’s really figured it out, then she’s honestly not sure what to do.

“I had suspected, somewhat; but I had also hoped I was mistaken,” he admits.

She lets out a breath.

“If you are, the truth probably is not going to be an improvement,” she admits.

“They pieces are not trying to drag themselves into the wrong spaces,” he says. “They are trying to fill the same ones they once did. Not another world. The world you come from was this world, however many far-flung centuries into the future.”
She looks at him, at his eyes, and after a moment, nods.

He is very, very still.

“It is not a secret that a wolf destroyed your world,” he says.

She never should have mentioned that, she thinks. Never should have told that story. It’s the piece of the tale that will damn her, in the end.

“A different wolf,” she tells him.

He tilts his head, and his mouth adopts a small, sardonic little curl.

“Puzzle,” he says.

She swallows.

“He…”

The rest won’t come.

Her mouth is dry. She swallows, and starts again.

“It was my task to save my world. To save that future,” she says. “I failed it. He died with it. I did not. Does the rest need to matter?”

He closes his eyes, and then takes a step towards her. She straightens, not sure what to expect, as he looks at her face for a long moment. Searching again; though she can’t imagine what for.

After a minute, he drops a hand onto her shoulder.

“I could not do it either,” he says.

She blinks at him.

“What?”

He sighs, and then nods to the seats next to them. After a beat, she takes the cue, and drops into one. He slides into the chair across from it. Folds his hands together, and gets a far-off look in his eyes. They are quiet, for a moment.

She waits, expectantly. But it’s going better than it could be going, at least.

“When I told you the story about the Keepers,” he finally says. “I mentioned June’s mother?”

“Yes. The dragon,” she confirms.

He nods.

“Beautiful. Any form she took, she was beautiful in. She used to breathe fire that danced through the air. Cold flames that never burned anything, in all the colours you could imagine. The magic woven into it made it sing, and turn into shapes and forms. She would tell June stories with them. All the old tales,” he says. “Neither of us were much for fighting. I suppose that made us seem like an easy target. Not too many warriors in our clan. She was one of the first to have her mind twisted. Magic used to strip her of her senses, until she forgot who she was, or who we were, or that she was anything other than a hungry beast.”
No.

Oh, Haninan.

He pauses, briefly, and runs a hand down the side of his face. His eyes are dry, but his shoulders slump as if an old weight has crept up to drag them down.

“She killed half the clan. The rest of us were stranded in the mountains, while she prowled the pass. June wanted to wait it out, to see if hunger or thirst would send her off. I knew it would do us in first, so I built a trap for her. There was a valley, just the right shape for it. We lured her in, several of us built a barrier on the top of it, and then we dropped half a mountain onto it. She could not fly out, and the passages on the ground were too narrow for her,” he explains, with a heavy sigh.

“But it could not last forever,” he continues. “She was good at weakening the magic. Blasting at the stone. She was a force of nature; of course my little trap could not hold her. I told the others to leave and escape while they could. June, too, but he refused. We tried everything we could think of to reverse her condition. Fourteen years we lived in those mountains, trying to figure it out. And then finally I had a breakthrough.”

He says this in such a way that she is certain, absolutely certain, that his breakthrough did not save her.

There is a bitterness beneath his voice that she knows all too well.

“It was something in the Dreaming that was driving her mad. I had tried to find the source, but then I thought to myself, what if I could just remove the Dreaming?” he tells her.

She stills.

No.

And yet, it almost makes a terrible kind of sense.

“What did you do?” she asks.

He hangs his head.

“I wish I had known more about dwarves back then,” he says, looking around at the images of lyrium etched into the walls. “But what I created was one of the most complex barriers I had ever made. Layers upon layers, to weave and repel, to counter and balance. I found a means of pushing back the Dreaming. Reinforcing reality at a single point, and moving all of the magic away from it. Channeling it off, like redirecting a thousand rivers into each other. A pocket without dreams; and I placed it in her cage.”

He folds his hands together, and shifts, and doesn’t meet her gaze.

*Like the Veil*, she thinks.

“Did it work?” she asks.

“It held for an hour,” he tells her. “One little hour. So small, and so large. Her eyes cleared, bright as day, mind back again. I could not feel her in the air, but what did that matter? *June*, she said. The first thing. Then, *Haninan*. I had feared I would never hear her speak again. I have kept that sound in my memory ever since, and it has been a long ‘ever since’. I hear it sometimes when I look at my
son, the way she said his name. I hear it in the silence when I am… when I am almost crushed by
the noise of distracting myself. The way she said my name.”

His eyes weaken. Shine with sorrow. He sucks in a breath, and when a tear tumbles down he seems
startled by it. He raises a knuckle to it, brushes it off, and chuckles as he stares at the dampness on
his skin.

She knows that feeling.

Sometimes it’s hard to believe that tears still come.

Then he drops his hand back down again.

“She asked me to kill her,” he says. “Before the Dreaming came back. While there was still time.
There was not much left, and she knew she would break out soon. I wanted to keep trying. I refused
her. I said it was because I was close to finding a way to save her, that I was on the verge of a
breakthrough, but I was not. I only… I could not kill her. I could not bear the thought of giving up.
I would have told a thousand lies to save her.”

Her own breaths shake, and her eyes sting as she twists her fingers into the hem of her tunic.

He shakes his head.

“She broke out. Nearly killed me, and destroyed several villages. In the end, June took on the same
shape she wore, and tore her out of the sky. He had to fight her, tooth and claw. He never forgave
me. I never quite forgave him, either.”

Silence descends, heavy with the weight of a thousand implications.

“I am sorry,” she eventually says.

“So am I,” Haninan replies.

He waits.

Her turn, now, tell the story of the love she couldn’t kill.

“The first time he changed history was long before I met him,” she finally says. “He had no idea
what it would do. Mythal died fighting the Titan. He went back to save her, and so she killed the
Titan instead. The leaders began using lyrium, hunting other Titans and mining their resources.
They became powerful enough to set themselves up as gods. But they unleashed the Blight, as
well, and Mythal tried to reel them back in line. So they killed her.”

She glances at him. June is one of them, after all. But he only inclines his head; unsurprised.

“He… to imprison them, he made a barrier. All wrapped around the world, that pushed the
Dreaming back, and locked up the leaders and tried to lock the Blight away, too. Then he slept for
a long, long time, and when he woke he found that the Blight had broken free, and that his people
were no longer as he recognized them, and that the world was still full of misery and suffering, and
even more rapid death and decay. So he decided the only solution was to go back, once more, and
try again.”

Hananan raises his hand, and brushes his fingers across his lips. He cups his chin, and lets out a
breath.
“Oh, Puzzle,” he says.

“The first time he tried, it all went wrong,” she explains. “He could not open the orb he needed to power the removal of the barrier he had set up. So he gave it to a monster, so that the monster would open it, and be destroyed, and he could sweep in and scoop up what he needed in the aftermath. Except he picked the wrong monster. He picked one who could survive his body’s destruction by moving to another host.”

She laughs, as the explanation escapes her. Ragged and rueful, bitter in her amusement.

Haninan snorts.

Corypheus, the joke. Once her supposed arch foe, and now the least of all her troubles, it seems.

“The monster kept the orb and the barrier did not come completely down. Instead it broke just enough to wreak havoc. I had the pleasure of interrupting the ceremony, and stealing some of the power he’d intended to use,” she says, and raises her left hand. “Got it sealed into my palm.”

“I take it one born and bred to a world so far from the Dreaming did not respond well to having incredibly powerful magic seared into her flesh?” Haninan muses.

“No,” she concedes. “He saved my life. Stopped the mark from killing me, and showed me to use it to undo some of the damage. Used me to try and get to his orb again. I fell in love with him, of course. He fell in love with me, too; that part has always been more of a surprise, in hindsight. When the orb ended up getting destroyed, he left. A few years later he saved me, again, from the magic trying to eat me alive, and warned me that he was willing to sacrifice my world to try and restore his own.”

She lets out a breath, and straightens a bit.

“I was supposed to be our fighting chance. But I could not kill him, or find a way to stop him, or deter him. So he burned the world, and at the last moment, he sent me back instead of coming himself,” she concludes.

There is a moment of strange understanding that passes between them.

Haninan is very old, and she feels very old, sometimes; and they have both held the axe, and found their hands would not swing. Known it would be better that way, and failed just the same.

It’s a peculiar sort of failing, she thinks. A special kind of selfishness.

“And now you get to see him here, before all of his mistakes have been made,” Haninan concludes. “Bright as dawn.”

She stares at him, steadily.

“He cannot make the same mistakes. He cannot become who he was again,” she says.

“But part of you would like him to.”

Her eyes narrow, and her jaw tightens, and her heart sinks.

“I would like him to be happy,” she says. “I would like him to find a path that does not demand that he become something which he despises. I would like him to never, ever know. But… yes. I would have liked him back, too.”
“Oh, Puzzle,” Haninan breathes, and then he all but falls out of his chair, and yanks her into his arms.

He’s warm and stiff and he smells like his worn leather hood and the soft minty sap of Antivan trees. After a moment she buries her head against his shoulder, and lets out a shuddering breath.


“Just for the record, if you try and kill him, I will have to fight you,” she says.

He sighs, and pats her back.

“There is no need to kill him, Puzzle. Done is done, and killing him will hardly reverse the damage. But you do need to tell him,” he decides.

She shakes her head.

“How do I ever tell him this?” she asks.

“Well. Give him enough clues and I would wager he can piece it together himself,” Haninan muses.

“Definitely. But how can I put that on him?” she clarifies. “He has not done it, and yet he could do it, and another version of himself did do it. It is so heavy. I feel the weight of it myself, and sometimes it crushes me, or I drown in it. He never meant for it to happen like this, he never could have anticipated the consequences when he began, and then he was only scrambling to try and repair the damage. And here and now he has not done it. He should not have to bear that weight. He is so bright, Haninan. He can be happy. If I tell him this, it will always be on him. Forever.”

Haninan pats her again, and sighs heavily.

“No one lives without sorrow, child,” he says. “No one lives without shouldering burdens they do not deserve. No one stays young and bright forever. Not even spirits. Ignorance and pride are a poor mix. You will never cure him of one, so you must rid him of the other.”

She shakes her head again.

It’s a good point, and she knows it. But it is so heavy. She would hesitate to lay this on an enemy, and to put it on this young wolf, as clean as snow… even if it is something he caused, once, too much of her wants to shield him from the pain of it now. Maybe before, maybe when she first saw him, pristine and haughty, seated at Mythal’s side… but she cannot muster that same resentment for him now. It has been shaken loose as she has come to know him as something of himself, rather than a part of someone else.

Haninan lets her go, with another gentle pat.

“Alright,” he says. “I will give you a little more time. To find a way to put it to him, if nothing else. Then I will begin scattering the clues myself.”

“You would not simply tell him?” she wonders.

He snorts.

“If I tell him he will think I am lying,” Haninan replies. “If he figures it out himself, that will be another matter.”
She sucks in a breath, and then stares down at her left hand. Flexes it open and closed.

“I wish…”

She wishes things were different.

She wishes they were easier.

She wishes that when Solas had spoken of ‘another world’, the reality of that could have been one where their problems did not, at least, have death tolls beyond counting.

Haninan wraps an arm around her shoulder, and her gaze turns to the walls of the ancient kingdom – ancient creature, even – around them. Lost, and restored, and almost lost again, to tremendous cost each time. There’s an intricate border running across the top of the room. Tiny little figures, carved with meticulous care. She wonders how long it took someone to do that. How pleased they were with the work, when it was finished.

“In this I am the voice of experience, so listen,” he says, still uncommonly somber. “Time is a luxury in abundance here. With enough of it, all wounds become scars. Burdens shared are lighter, and platitudes become plentiful. He will not keel over dead from the knowledge that he lived disastrously in one twist of fate. I know, because in that twist itself, he apparently endured right to the finish.”

She blinks.

Swallows past a strange block in her throat at the note of something almost like respect in Haninan’s tone.

Not that she would ever fault them for their low opinion, but no one else had ever seemed to appreciate Solas’ ability to keep going, as he had. She had sometimes wondered, if their roles were reversed, whether or not she would have been able to do the same.

It’s strangely gratifying to have someone else who knows the truth still see something to respect in him.

Haninan looks at her another moment, and then sighs.

“Of course, if Wolfling figured time travel out, there are good odds that someone else will, too, one day. It is not a door we can afford to leave open,” he muses. “Making the danger known would be a deterrent, but it never pays to underestimate the brazen foolishness of people, either. And making the danger known would require proving it was possible to succeed, as well. So that will have to be addressed.”

She pauses, and considers.

That’s a good point.

After all, Dorian and Alexius had been attempting the same thing. Maybe even other people had, throughout history, succeeded at it; unknown and unknowingly adding to the danger to the world.

And if they can find a way to make it impossible to repeat that mistake, then perhaps she doesn’t need to tell Pride anything after all.

Haninan looks at her face and shakes his head.
“That is not a problem that will be swiftly solved. And the longer you wait on Wolfling, the harder it gets,” he tells her.

“How does this get harder?” she wonders.

“Because it is something you are keeping from him,” he replies.

She opens her mouth to argue, and then stops, remembering the sight of Solas, his back towards her, clad in ancient styles and burdened by all of his impending revelations.

She closes her mouth again.

Haninan nods, slightly. Satisfied that she understands.

And she does.

~

That night, when she sleeps, her dreams take an odd turn.

They begin with their newly established routine, dragging her through memories that play out heedless of her actual involvement. She’s found some of them seem to match with the scattered, rhythmic pull of the song still calling to her; she thinks they might be like a layer, sitting on top. The changed tune pulls images of her world from her memories, and plays out her life in clipped fragments while she sleeps.

As she sits around the campfire, listening to Iron Bull enthuse over the dragon they apparently just fought, she begins to feel like she’s being watched.

She pauses, because this isn’t part of the memory, and even if it were, she doesn’t usually feel all of the same things when she’s going through them again. The firelight glints off of Bull’s horns, and the buckles of Sera’s vest, but the shadows beyond its circle feel uncommonly deep and dark.

Shifting, slowly, she scans the area.

Something glints, just once, like a pair of eyes, and is gone; a quick movement that makes her think of a wolf darting away.

Pride?

Would he watch her dreams?

She’s glad it’s something as innocuous as campfire bravado, in that case. But the thought unsettles her, and for obvious reasons. She climbs to her feet and heads towards the darkness, ignoring the memory as it carries on perfectly well in her absence.

As soon as her foot lands outside of the circle of the firelight, it winks out.

She blinks, and can’t see a thing for several seconds.

Then faintly, the silvery starlight drifting down from above makes the shapes around her distinct again. The outlines of trees and fallen trunks, rocks and bushes. The clearing she had been sitting in
is gone, she sees; in the blink of an eye she’s landed in the middle of a forest.

She doesn’t think she recognizes it. But she’s been in enough darkened forests that it could just be a memory she only faintly recalls.

A twig snaps.

She turns towards the source of the sound. Sees movement, again, just faintly.

“Pride?” she calls.

No answer.

The air smells crisp and cool as she inhales. Like the first bite of autumn at the end of a warm summer.

A light shines between the trees.

The faintest flicker, golden, like a distant candle. There for an instant and then gone again.

She hesitates for only a moment.

Then she heads towards it, moving carefully through the starlight.

Her bare feet tread quietly between tree roots and over mossy stumps. Branches brush her legs, and she tries to find a path. There isn’t one. A few animal trails, places where the trees are less close together, but nothing substantial. The air is unexpectedly invigorating, and as she goes she finds herself moving quicker. Her eyes grow keener in the darkness, and the dream…

The dream doesn’t really feel like a dream, exactly.

Another twig snaps behind her.

She turns, and doesn’t see Pride, or any hint of a wolf. But the light comes back, and before she can think twice she finds herself giving in to a sudden surge of intent, and taking off after at a dead run.

Like a hunt.

But of a far wilder and more foolish style than any sane hunter would embark upon; racing through the dark, no weapons, no path, in unfamiliar terrain, with only the barest speck of light as her target goal. Weaving over obstacles, moving more easily than the real world would allow.

Her heart pounds and her breaths come fast, and she feels absurdly alive.

Like she’s just herself.

Like there’s nothing lurking under her skin. Like there are no worries in her head, or grief in her heart. Like she’s just freedom and movement and a small thing in a large, dark forest; intent upon its prey.

She leaps over a fallen branch, and nearly stumbles down a bank, catches herself and then races through the shallow bed of a stream. The light gets bigger, closer; more like a gleam, reflecting off of something in the distance, and she speeds up, almost there, she almost has it.

She trips.
Catches a hand on the side of a massive tree, and half crashes to a halt.

Something sharp pokes at the side of her foot.

The weight of her burdens crash back into her, all at once, with such a terrible force that she almost regrets having felt freed of them for a moment. She had forgotten what it was like to be carefree. The reminder puts into perspective all of the burdens that have crept up in her over the years since; things that accumulated one by one over time now strike at her with full force, and it is devastating.

She almost folds beneath it.

But then she eases in a few breaths. The air tastes sweet, now, instead of crisp. Like fresh blossoms and clean water. It soothes.

It helps clear her head, and takes the edge off of her sudden misery.

Well.

That… that was not a good idea.

Was it?

She pauses, shakes her head, and wonders at the strange impact of dreams. Even surreally vivid ones seem to provoke the strangest impulses. Then she shifts her foot, and glances down, and freezes.

Something golden is poking at the side.

A single, sharp little piece, like a broken coin. She kneels down and picks it up. But as soon as she touches it, it turns to dust.

The light shines, much closer, and she looks up to see that the tree she caught herself on is at the edge of a clearing. Starlight streams down past rocks, where a tiny waterfall trickles down into a darkened grotto. White flowers bloom along the edges, and bits of broken gold are scattered throughout.

Something was dashed against the rocks, it seems.

Something made of gold.

Each piece she touches turns to dust. It looks solid enough when she peers down at it, but then, every time, it wisps away between her fingers.

Strange. Even by the standards of the Fade, if only because it’s never quite felt like this before.

After a minute, she abandons the strange mess, and peers into the gloom of the grotto. Mindful not to crush any of the little flowers.

The wind whistles and the water rushes, and she feels like something is watching her back.

As she steps around, she spies a single print, pressed into the softest portion of the ground.

Wolf.

She jolts awake.
The light in her room is bright.

She blinks back her incoherence, and wonders at the dream. When she staggers to her feet she feels tired, like she barely slept at all. But that could be her emotions, she thinks. Yesterday had, of course, been exhausting; and most of the days before it, for that matter.

Still.

The dream sticks in her head.

When she finds Pride, picking through whatever breakfast was sent for them, he smiles at her.

“Were you in my dream?” she asks him.

His smile falters, a little.

“No,” he says. “Were you trying to find me? I apologize, I did not sleep.”

“No, I was just… wait, you did not sleep?” she asks, sidetracked.

He shrugs.

“I had things to think over,” he explains.

“Are you not tired?”

If they’re going to make their grand escape attempt as soon as Hildur gives them the say-so, then they all need to be relatively coherent, she thinks.

Not that she’s exactly at her best herself.

But at least she slept.

Pride waves off her concern, though.

“One night of missed rest will not do me harm,” he says. Then he frowns, and looks at her. “Why? What will it do to you?”

She gives him an odd look for his tone, which has gone from self-assured to uncertain in very short order.

“It will make me tired, for one thing,” she says, and grabs the nearest acceptable food item.

“And for another?” he presses.

“Irritable?” she suggests, with a shrug. “Are you certain you did not sleep at all?”

“Yes,” he confirms.

She doesn’t think he’s lying.

Well, it’s not like it’s beyond her to just have a normal dream with a wolf in it. Though that would hardly qualify as a normal dream. And actually, she can’t even remember the last time she had a dream that wasn’t strange.

Maybe it was a normal dream after all. Maybe she’d just forgotten what those were like.
“I guess I just dreamed of you on my own,” she decides.

Pride blinks, a rapid flutter of eyelashes, and swallows.

“What sort of dream was it?” he asks.

“An odd one,” she admits.

“You said your dreams had changed,” he notes. Then he shifts, slightly. “Perhaps we should be cautious. Some spirits may be driven to unorthodox behaviour by whatever is going on. Or the Dreaming itself could be reacting to you in peculiar ways.”

The comment on spirits reminds her, then, of her encounter with Fortune. The uneasy standoff that ended in the spirit fleeing.

“I almost forgot,” she says. “The Spirit of Fortune, it approached me while I was injured.”

“I asked every spirit I could to help find you,” he admits.

She stills, touched by the frank and unexpected admission. A little burst of warmth ignites in her chest. Almost reflexively, she tries to smother it, but instead finds it just burrows its way a little deeper down.

“Thank you,” she says.

He shrugs. Then frowns.

“The Spirit of Fortune did not approach me,” he notes.

“No. It wanted to make a deal with me, instead. Threatened me a little. I had to drive it off,” she admits.

“That is unsettling. What did it want?” he asks.

“More of what was in my head,” she admits. “Maybe something else, too.”

One of her hands comes up and presses briefly over her heart.

Pride’s frown deepens.

“That spirit has long been an ally of Mythal’s. Perhaps the strange events here confused it,” he suggests.

She shrugs.

“Perhaps.”

They lapse into awkward silence. A few bats, who have apparently decided to set up residence, cheep softly from the ceiling.

Curiosity emerges, then. Haninan is the last to find them, and she would wager a guess that he hasn’t slept, either.

“Did you find anything useful?” Curiosity asks him. She perches on the back of a nearby chair, and starts pulling dead bugs out of her pockets, and wiggling them up at the ceiling. After a few minutes, the bats start to descend; she grins at them in obvious delight.
“We are in luck,” Haninan says. “It seems, in light of the recent difficulties, that the dwarves have taken to wedging open as many passageways as they can manage to, rather than closing them off as they normally would. I managed to get a good look at some of the patterns. Assuming the space we are in is only the size it appears to be – and the evidence suggests as much – then I believe there are several exits that could work for us, depending on where we try and escape from.”

“Is there a location that would be better than the others?” Pride asks.

Hinanin shrugs.

“Five feet from the main doors would be terribly convenient,” he says.

“Any location in the building?” Pride amends, irritated.

“The kitchens,” Haninan declares. “Exits and entrances aplenty, and enough activity that even some conspicuously tall escapees might go unnoticed.”

“Fine,” Pride says, with a nod. Then he glances at her. “If we left now, that would be easiest.”

“You mean if we left without Hildur,” she notes, disapproving.

“Yes,” he confirms. “But we will not be leaving Hildur. So, we had best check and see what progress she has made. She may have to meet up with us after the council meeting.”

“Thank you,” she says.

He inclines his head.

~

They find Hildur at the Shaperate. Most of the names, she sees, have been sealed into the stone, the letters shimmering faintly. All of the names towards the bottom are done, and Hildur is standing on a wheeled ladder to work on the ones that she placed higher than a dwarf’s easy reach.

Solas and Fen’Harel gleam from their place at the bottom; slightly removed from the rest.

They talk in low voices with the Shaper for awhile, going over the length of time needed. Hildur agrees to meet them in the kitchens shortly after the midday break, provided they can get free of the council by then. When they return to their rooms, they find that their escort is already waiting for them; and somewhat visibly annoyed by their ‘wandering off’.

Curiosity is a parrot again, and lands awkwardly onto her shoulder as they head out.

The reason for the change of pace becomes apparent when they reach the Council Chambers, and, shortly after the ceremonial declarations are exchanged and the rampant arguing begins, Curiosity takes wing and zips up to explore the higher reaches of the ceiling over their heads.

It takes the dwarves about an hour to notice, and when they do there’s a sudden flurry over it.

“Were there not four of them?”

“Where is the other woman?”
“A bird? What bird?”

As a delaying tactic, it works so superbly that she’s not sure if Curiosity meant for it to happen or not.

Either way, Pride does an admirable job of dragging it out, until at last he calls Curiosity back down, and the parrot’s wings flutter and shift and an elf lands instead.

*Getting better at that,* she thinks.

That’s the high point. The low one is realizing that Hildur was right, and the dwarves don’t seem to be gearing up to a decision in their favour. They don’t permit Pride to take the floor, and again, his steely disapproval over their politics grows by the minute. He attempts to appeal to them on multiple grounds, but is cut off every time.

She’s a little surprised, though, when he finally just marches back into the center of the room.

The two speakers currently arguing halt, and glare at him.

*“Child of the Sky, you do not have a right to the floor,”* the elderly mediator informs him.

*“That is true,”* he replies. *“No Child of the Sky would ever have a right to this floor, nor to the Stone beneath it.”*

It is, she sees in an instant, *exactly* the right thing to say.

They ignored his attempts to gain the right to speak; but now he has given them a comment that they cannot help but respond to.

One of the current speakers bristles.

*“If you believe that, then why have your people sought to seize control of it from us?”* he demands.

*“I could offer you the truth of that,”* Pride replies. *“We would tell you everything we know. Everything we sought to accomplish. The information is not being kept secret. But we have not been permitted to speak.”*

*“So now you seek this floor that you have no right to, as you seek the Stone that you have no right to?”* the other council member asks.

Pride spreads his arms.

*“I seek only to speak,”* he declares. *“Do words not flit through the air? And am I not a Child of the Sky? I shall stand outside of your circle, if you prefer, and let them fly from a distance. Would that appease you?”*

He is a bright, white figure in the center of the light, speaking firmly, chin tilted ever-so-slightly upwards; nose turned at the dwarves, but the effect is deliberate, she thinks. Provoking. *Making* them want to argue with him, to defeat him rather than simply shut him out.

It strikes her like a bolt of lightning.

Even if he never becomes her Solas, he’s always going to be the kind of person who stands up and acts.

There are so many ways this can all go wrong. Ways beyond counting. The change to the world
could prove disastrous in the long run. She could die before the job is done. She could do it wrong, err in some key way, and throw the world into chaos.

Pride will always try to fix things.

He will always move forward, and make an attempt.

She can’t let him make it blindly. He stands there, taking one last shot at relieving the assembled dwarven nobility of their ignorance; and Haninan’s right, it would be a profound cruelty to leave him blind to his own.

If this is going to happen, all of it, then…

Then she needs to prepare him for it, so that it doesn’t run him down and drag him through the worst of it again.

The dwarves resume their shouting and accusations, and after a few minutes, despite gaining some ground, Solas is chased from the floor again.

He falls into place beside her, lips thin with frustration. Crackling a little tiny bit, she thinks, at the edges of him.

She touches his elbow, and leans close.

“That was very well done,” she tells him quietly, before moving back.

He blinks, and some of his anger dissipates in a puff of surprise at the offer of praise.

“Alas, though, it did not work,” Haninan interjects, and Pride jumps, slightly, as if he’d forgotten that anyone standing behind him.

“To our second plan,” she agrees.

She’ll wait until they’re back on the surface to tell him, she decides. Give him some space if he needs it, or comfort of the familiar, or – or even just an easier venue to express himself in.

The dread curls in her gut.

Eventually, the dwarves give up their shouting long enough to break for a meal, and they are permitted to depart. It arouses approximately zero suspicion when they make for the kitchens.

Hildur is waiting for them at the mouth of the chaotic series of chambers, clad in what seems to be her standard clothing. The only conspicuous addition is the pack at her feet.

What follows is, at first, the most embarrassingly easy escape attempt of her life.

They weave through the kitchen chambers, Haninan and Hildur agree on an exit, and ten minutes later they’re heading through a set of tunnels faintly marked with purple lyrium veins along the edges. Haninan directs their path and Hildur focuses, and manages to open several routes for him, and seems rather grudgingly impressed with his ability to navigate a place he’s never been in before.

“It is living,” Haninan says. “Living things have their ways of working that are all the same. Veins that pattern out, from the heart or from the mind.”

“How many ways are there in the Titan?” Curiosity wonders. “Do new ones get made very often? Do you ever lose some? Has anyone ever decorated and furnished a whole house and then
forgotten how to get to it?’’

“Sheart the lyrium changed, no dwarf would ever forget a way,” Hildur asserts. “Even now, they’re less forgotten than they are difficult to open.”

“Do you think they might stop opening altogether eventually?’” Curiosity wonders.

Hildur pauses.

“No. I think my people will adapt, and it will get easier,” the Shaper replies.

“What if it does just get harder, though?” Curiosity presses.

“Then people will adapt to life being harder,” she interjects. “And that will make it easier.”

Hildur nods, once, in agreement. Though her brow furrows somewhat, and her eyes turn to the lyrium visible from their path.

They press on, as Curiosity asks Hildur questions about dwarves, and Hildur alternates between refusing to answer them and answering them with grave exasperation. Haninan is quiet; she is quiet, too, though she finds she can’t resist the urge to watch Pride. To stare a little too long at times, perhaps, at his face. At his eyes, and his jaw, and the way his mouth moves when he speaks, none of it showing the long drag of weighty things yet.

Or maybe there are some weighty things, in the stern shoulders and the stiff hands, she concedes. He’s by no means a complete innocent. Only by comparison.

He catches her looking a few times, and returns her stares with questioning glances. She finds she can only meet them head on, and smile a little, until he shifts and looks away again.

An hour or so into their incredibly harrowing escape, she feels a peculiar sense of unease ripple up through her feet.

Hildur stops dead in her tracks.

“What?”

the Shaper asks, quietly.

“What is wrong?” Pride wonders.

“I felt it, too,’’ she admits, and almost as soon as the words are past her lips, the unease crescendos into intense discomfort. A sense of urgency, and she finds herself reacting to it, reaching for the hilt of a weapon that isn’t there before letting out a curse and turning – the direction coming to her so sharply it leaves her dizzy – there, there, go that way. Hurry.

The wall splits and Hildur is already heading for it. She grabs Pride without thinking, and then Curiosity, shoving them forward as Haninan follows.

Hildur takes off down the new passageway at a run.

“What is it?” Curiosity asks. “Are they coming after us?”

“No,’’ she says. This is… something else, something deeper, but she’s not sure what. Another earthquake? No. Or, maybe. There’s… too much? Too much what?

“Something’s hurting it,” Hildur tells her. “The last time it felt like this was when the red lyrium first appeared.”
That’s probably not a good sign, she thinks.

The passageway twists downwards, segments opening and closing rapidly, herding them until they are led from the relatively-well-kept tunnels they’d been using before, and down into deep segments of rock that don’t even show the same sort of raw-but-maintained quality that the heart chamber had. They are raw holes in the earth, plain and simple, and it’s obvious that the only thing making them is the Titan itself.

“Should we really be following this?” Pride wonders.

And then they spill out of a narrow, dimly lit passage to a stone balcony, positioned over the edge of a long, long drop. Magma pours from one end of the chamber, and disappears down and down, a massive waterfall that pools so far below them that it looks like a glaring red eye in the gloom. She rushes out into it second, right behind Hildur, and then spreads her arms, halting the others before anyone can risk tumbling off the edge.

A lyrium vein the size of a tree crawls up the wall beside them. Purple, and pulsing. Painful. The song is loud and the veins are heavy; a few of them even seem to be peeling away from the stone.

A second after she notices this, the vein shudders, tremendous and terrible, and cracks.

Shatters, like glass.

Liquid lyrium floods down from the opening, and the unease and discomfort rise into pure pain beneath her feet.

The Titan’s blood hemorrhages into the magma.

“Oh shit,” she blurs, in common.

“I have never seen lyrium do this before,” Hildur murmurs, eyes wide and horrified. More of the veins break, and the pain, pain, pain, it beats in her heart, this isn’t good, this is too much, no no no.

“What do we do?” Pride wonders. “Cut off the flow? Could you move the stone to make a tourniquet?”

“It would have done that itself if it would work!” Hildur grips her hair as they watch, all of them at something of a loss. The vein is positioned over the open chasm. The balcony runs towards it, but stops short of the falling lyrium.

The air tastes like iron and electricity and water sizzling on hot stones.

Cutting it off won’t work, she thinks. There’s too much, that’s the problem, there’s too much and it needs to bleed or all the veins will burst.

It doesn’t need to be staunched, she realizes.

It needs to flood.

“Break the veins!” she says.

“Yes!” Haninan agrees, understanding coming to him most swiftly, and he raises a hand a whip of magic lashes out, and shatters more of the lyrium’s outer casing.

“What are you doing?!” Hildur demands.
“That problem’s not the bleeding, it’s the pressure!” she explains. “There’s too much lyrium, we need to let it out safely or it will start bursting everywhere!”

That seems to get through, as Pride and Curiosity start smashing more of the veins open, too. The spells aren’t well-suited to the task, though; the lyrium absorbs most of the magic that gets near.

Hildur seems to notice the same issue.

“Up!” the Shaper exclaims. “Do not hit the vein, hit the stone above it! Send the rocks into it!”

She does her best to focus, to send a spell of her own – cutting like a blade – into the stone that has clustered above the vein. To help, she thinks. On purpose. It comes down easily, but just letting it drop on its own makes it difficult to hit the lyrium; on her second attempt, a wall of air catches the falling debris, and launches it more directly into its target.

Pride glances at her, and nods.

They work until the entire tree has been broken, and the gleaming, purple light has flooded downwards; spilling into the magma, sparking and gleaming and breaking into strange shards that whirl through the distant pool below.

“Is it going to explode?” Curiosity wonders.

They exchange glances, and as a group, move further back into the tunnel behind them.

“More importantly, is it actually working?” Pride asks.

She and Hildur both pause.


A new passageway opens beside them, as the air sparks and flares, and she feels at once simultaneously invigorated and exhausted.

“I do not think I have ever been near this much spilled lyrium in my life,” Hildur confesses. “But it is still not enough, is it?”

“No,” she agrees.

The new passage disappears down a steep slope, and into barely-lit turns that seem to call to her with an urgency that is building up yet again.

“Why can it not ask the dwarves to help with this?” Pride wonders.

“It is probably asking everyone to help with this; and we may not even be the only ones listening,” Hildur reasons.

“So it could be driving your people towards these same locations?” he concludes.

“Oh this should be interesting,” Haninan decides.

She presses forward, passing even Lady Hildur, this time, as she takes the lead down the next tunnel. She wishes she had a weapon. Or even just a shield. She can do a lot of damage with just a shield, in fact, and protect with one at the same time.

The air is practically flooding with the energy from the lyrium.
Narrowing her eyes, she considers, and focuses on it.

It’s not exactly like it was at Mythal’s palace, she decides. Not like pulling from the air, if that’s even the best way to describe it. The air is thick as smoke and ash, to pull anything through it is like dragging a dull knife; like she’s fighting against the gravity of something much bigger, much less easily formed or manipulated.

Finally, though, she closes a fist, and something solid shifts into place along the back of her forearm; shining purple, oddly weighty. A simple round shield, filled with ever-moving patterns and whorls, like storm clouds trapped inside. It makes her teeth itch, a little, but when she tests it against the side of the tunnel wall, it doesn’t shatter against the stone.

“How did you do that?!” Curiosity asks her. “I did not know you could do that!”

Pride looks similarly stunned.

*It’s the lyrium*, she almost says. Lyrium can make magic stronger.

But then she reconsiders, and bites her tongue.

“It’s the Titan,” she tells them, instead.

Not entirely untrue.

She’s beginning to feel some strain from the weight of running around and casting spells, though, by the time their second network of impromptu openings leads them out at another vein. Or perhaps it’s the Titan’s own discomfort, shuddering beneath her steps.

This one explodes almost on top of them, and Curiosity catches her arm and yanks her back before she can be burned by the lyrium splashing up from where it strikes their platform.

Here, there is no magma-filled chasm; just a shallow stone chamber, and when the vein begins to burst, it begins to fill.

“We need higher ground!” Haninan exclaims. “Can you tell it so?”

“We can try,” Hildur replies.

After a few tense seconds of edging away from the flood, another passage opens; so narrow they have to crawl into it one by one, and climb their way up.

The tunnel comes out on the slimmest of ledges, but it gives them a better angle, and they decimate the vein until the lyrium has flooded the chamber, and they’re forced to climb higher still; racing upwards in a panic until she feels the stone begin to regain some semblance of calm.

Still not enough, though.

And the lyrium is too close; she thinks it’s having trouble finding safe places.

Not to mention, it can’t possibly be healthy to just smash open its veins like this. Preferable to the alternative, maybe, but still. Not good.

By the time they finally close the second vein, they’re crouched in the mouth of another tiny tunnel, trying to catch their breaths before they have to move again. Scant feet are between them and the settling pool of glowing purple below. Enough to fill a lake.
A lake.

The air tastes strange, and the top of the pool mists oddly, and for a moment she squints into it and sees shapes. Like distorted reflections. Figures trying to struggle their way upwards; drowning.

She reaches a hand out.

Pride catches her by the shoulder; wedged into the tunnel just behind her, heaving exhausted breaths from the effort of so much running and climbing and trying to cast spells to smash apart the Titan’s rupturing veins. He stares at her in alarm.

“What are you doing?!”

She blinks at him.


His brows furrow, and he climbs up past her, a little, and stares out over the pool.

He stills.

She follows the line of his gaze.

“Do you see them?” she wonders.

“…I see mist,” he says. “I imagine, in the strange light, it could form all manner of shapes. I would not be concerned.”

She closes her eyes, and reaches out, and pats his shoulder.

“It is alright. I already know what it is, in the end,” she admits.

Too much, she thinks. It’s too much because a whole world is trying to flood through a single pinprick entry point; flooding the Titan. But how to calm it? How to slow it down?

She leans back against the stone, and feels an assurance that it is slowing. It will be more careful; it will sing more quietly. She can go, and spread the song, and that will make it easier. But as to what remains, the veins are still shuddering, and there’s more left to do.

The opening to the pool begins to close, and the ground shifts, and another splits open behind her.

She nearly falls into it.

“Can Titans bleed to death?” Curiosity wonders, as they get moving again.

“Yes,” Hildur says, tightly.

She quickens her pace as much as she reasonably can, angling her shield so that it doesn’t hit the narrow tunnel walls. The air tastes strange again, crackling like static at the back of her throat. She supposes purple lyrium fumes might not be the best thing to be breathing in all the time.

The next chamber they get let out in is massive.

And, unlike the others, it doesn’t seem to be empty.

They walk onto a balcony; an actual one, held up by tall stone pillars, wrapping around the entirely
of the chamber. The pulsing vein they’ve been directed to spreads across one of the far walls, surrounded by decorative panels and statuary.

Down below, she can hear a banging; and when they lean over the side of the balcony, she sees the Sha-Brytol, raising a massive stone wall in front of the double doors leading into the chamber.

“They are sealing the chamber,” Haninan notes.

“This is a tribute hall,” Hildur says. “It would be connected to others. They have seen many visitors since the lyrium changed. If they all flooded…”

The implication is obvious.

“The vein is about to burst,” she notes, looking at the quaking tendrils, and then back to the Sha-Brytol, still struggling to raise their wall. “We need to buy them time.”

“The pillars,” Haninan says, and points towards several of the middle pillars along the far side of the room. “Knock them down, and it may slow the lyrium before it floods them.”

“That could make the whole chamber unstable,” Hildur says.

“Not if we pick the right pillars,” he counters.

Pride glares down at the Sha-Brytol, for a moment.

Then he sucks in a deep breath, and freezes the ends of the pillars.

And unfreezes them.

She catches on, and joins in, as Haninan and Curiosity begin to batter at the edges with sparking, flaring spells. Hildur watches them, gaze uncertain and feet planted fully on the ground.

“It will burst soon,” the Shaper warns them.

Finally, with a trembling groan, one of the pillars comes down. It nearly topples sideways instead of forwards, until Haninan buffers it with a barrier, and it falls mere centimeters shy of smashing into their balcony instead. It hits the ground with a trembling bang that shakes through the whole chamber.

Pride glares at him.

“I knew it would miss,” Haninan insists.

The second comes down a little more evenly, but shatters in half when it hits the floor.

The vein bursts.

The lyrium doesn’t drop downwards so much as shatter all across the chamber, at first, exploding like a skull struck by a warhammer. Shards fly and she lifts her shield, and something hits it; a purple shard that rebounds off and down to the chamber floor. No larger pieces fly towards them, thankfully, and then the lyrium begins to drain; rushing onto the ground and moving all-too-swiftly through the cracks in the insufficient barrier formed by the fallen pillars.

She stares at her shield.

Stares at the lyrium, already up the ankles of the Sha-Brytol still raising the wall.
“I hope this works,” she says, and reaches for the song, reaches for the Fade, and the energy all around, and puts up a barrier past the fallen pillars.

It shines like her shield.

The lyrium rushes into it, and holding it up feels like trying to catch a hurricane in a burlap sack. She glares at the light spreading on the ground, trying to focus. Her second heartbeat rises in her ears, matching the thrum from the hemorrhaging vein. Sound and light and straining, the shield on her arm vanishing.

She hears it.

So clearly.

It’s where she belongs.

All the flooding, and she should drown, too.

The wall behind the doors goes up. The Sha-Brytol run, and a tunnel opens for them; stone trembling. Air trembling. Everything is… everything is…

A hand closes around her wrist. Something whistles, sharp and discordant, and then another arm comes around her.

She blinks, and realizes she’s standing on the top of the balcony’s railing; about an inch away from diving off of it, and into the spreading lyrium below. Curiosity is up on it with her, one arm barring her from the fall, whistling in her ear.

Pride has her by the wrist; his grip tight enough to hurt.


She blinks at Curiosity, and then lets herself be guided back off of the balcony.

“Were you hearing the song again? That was what I thought. Did the whistling help drown it out?”

She blinks, again.

Pride still has her wrist.

“I…” she manages. “…Yes. I think it did, actually.”

She sucks in a breath, rattled.

“It was amazing,” Hildur tells her. There’s something a little unsettling in her gaze; some kind of wild awe. “Whatever you did.”

“It was dangerous. You should not be this close to it; you should not let it touch the magic you conjure,” Pride counters. Then his gaze widens, slightly, at something behind her, and before she can reply he uses his grip on her to pull her right to his side.

She follows his line of vision, and sees that another tunnel is opening, just a few feet from where she’d been standing.

It is filled with Sha-Brytol.
Pride glares at the Sha-Brytol, whose armour now gleams purple, and the air is tense. But the ground beneath her feet actually feels as though it’s finally beginning to settle, with the promise of sleep after a burst of pain.

Fenced in with stone on one side, and a chamber full of lyrium beneath them, and the opposite end of the balcony decimated by the collapsed pillars, they don’t have many options for avoiding a conflict unless the Stone decides to open up a convenient pathway beside them. And given that it just opened up a convenient pathway for the Sha-Brytol, she wouldn’t bet on its favouring them.

The Sha-Brytol stare them down.

It’s Hildur who breaks the silence.

“Does the Stone still bleed?” the Shaper asks.

The Sha-Brytol whisper among one another, speaking in that same, strange fashion that implies that more is going on than she can detect.

“There are more spaces,” one of them finally says. “Shaper, it took on too much. Sung too loud to try and reach the others; but they still do not hear clearly.”

The spokesman turns his gaze towards her, and there is wariness, and awe, and a little bit of fear in what she can see of his eyes.

It’s not for her, though, she doesn’t think. Or at least, she hopes not for her; but for the second heartbeat sitting in her chest.

“What does he mean?” Pride asks.

Hildur frowns, spreading her stance a little and then turning her gaze towards the lyrium pooling into the chamber beside them.

“Sha-Brytol hear the Titan better than anyone,” the Shaper says. “The council thinks the changes in the lyrium have driven them mad. But they’re just doing what they’ve always done; listening, and protecting. They know their role like I know mine. If they say the song is too loud, they mean the Titan’s trying to reach others. Other Titans. It’s trying to teach them the new way to sing, to counter the poison. But it’s too much, for some reason.”

“Is that what caused all this?” Pride wonders.

Hildur frowns.

“No. A Titan would never sing so loud it shattered its own veins. I think it was singing so loud because the ruptures were happening. Whatever’s happening, it’s happening too much.”
That made sense, she supposed. With only one Titan singing the song for a whole world...

Pride was still positioned very pointedly between herself and the Sha-Brytol.

And still holding her wrist.

“*It was not our doing, either way,*” he says. “*We have only attempted to render aid. If they make a move to apprehend any of us, we will fight them.*”

Hildur shakes her head at him.

“*Child of the Sky,*” she says. “*You do not understand. The sky is different, I suppose. The Stone goes deep. It is everywhere. Under every ocean is Stone. In the heart of the world is Stone. Not even the Titan is as vast as the Stone. You will never be the mountain; you can only be part of the mountain. The Sha-Brytol understand that better than anyone. They trade their lives, they render themselves dead in virtually all ways, to defend it. The song the Titans sing into the Stone is the only immortality we have. They are not here to impede us. They are here because they know what I know, and that sh-” the Shaper pauses and points at her, “*-is what is needed. Not here and now, not anymore. But for the others. For the Stone.*”

She blinks.

Technically true, she supposes. Although she’d prefer it if another chapter of her life didn’t take on cultish overtones; being the Herald of Andraste was bad enough. She doesn’t need to add ‘Herald of the Stone’ on there, too.

Then it’ll be a list.

She’d really prefer not to have a list of cult titles.

Pride regards Hildur carefully for a moment. Then he turns to the Sha-Brytol.

“*You will let us leave?*” he asks.

More whispers.

“*We will show you the way,*” their spokesman finally declares.

Pride pauses, and then glances at her.

“What do you think?” he asks. “You are the one who has been most wronged by them. I know where your sympathies lie, but it could be a trick.”

“I think if they wanted to corner us, they’ve already got their opportunity,” she reasons.

He lets out a breath.

“So do I,” he agrees. “Though whether this is about cornering us or gently herding us in some specific direction with the least amount of fuss is more difficult to say.”

She considers it.

“I think I believe Hildur. And if I am to gain access to any more Titans, I think I stand a better chance of appealing to the Sha-Brytol than to their politicians,” she decides.

“For what it’s worth,” Haninan interjects. “I suspect I could tell if they began leading us
somewhere significant to the Titan’s body, instead of out of it. This panicked run around of ours has illuminated even more of how it works.”

“It is hard to discern the specifics, but they have a lot of questions about what’s going on,” Curiosity chimes in.

She can see the gears turning in Pride’s eyes. The Sha-Brytol still seem to be able to work their magic, if imperfectly – the massive wall of stone currently keeping the chamber full of lyrium from flooding into the city attests to that. And they know paths that others don’t, as their successful kidnapping of her has also demonstrated.

But he doesn’t like them.

She’s possibly not their biggest fan either, all things considered.

“We will accept your offer,” he finally decides. Then he turns to her.

“Stay close,” he asks.

She glances down at where he’s still holding onto her.

He follows her gaze. She half expects him to snatch his hand away; she’s sure he’s forgotten it’s there.

It’s a bit of a surprised when he squeezes her, once, as if in reassurance, and then gently lets go.

The Sha-Brytol lead them from the chamber, opening wider pathways than they’d managed on their own. She watches them. They all do; Pride with suspicion, Haninan with interest, Curiosity with the obvious, and herself, with a sort of morbid fascination. She’d always supposed that the Sha-Brytol had served as a sort of inspiration for the dwarves’ legendary golem armies. People who sealed themselves in armour didn’t seem too far off from soldiers made of stone.

After Hildur’s comments, though, she wonders if they aren’t the precursors to the Legion of the Dead, as well. If so, who do they defend the dwarves from? The elves obviously aren’t their favourite people, but she’s pretty sure any sustained sort of warfare would have been mentioned at least at some point in all those tedious meetings in Arlathan. If only so someone could complain about how inconvenienced they were by it.

They trek in awkward silence, making their way through winding, roughly-hewn passages. These soon open into larger caverns. Almost natural-looking, she is surprised to see, and unlike the tunnels that they brought her to the Titan by the first time. Or like anything she’s ever seen in the Deep Roads before, in all honesty. At first she thinks they’re filled with trees; tiny, pocketed forests, nurtured by the strange light and ecosystem created by the Titan.

But then she inspects them more closely, and she realizes that they are mushrooms. Massive, thick stalks for ‘trunks’, and capped tops that branch out into pale and luminescent bulbs. Glowing fish swim in underground lakes – flares and flashes of light in dark water. Their feet tread across swathes of moss that kicks up tiny spores where they walk, like strange flower fields, as the Titan’s veins grow more distant; and yet the impact of its sheer existence remains strong.

She thinks of the Blight, killing this entire secret wilderness.

It’s amazing, she thinks, that any of the dwarves of her time still managed to survive in underground world that had become so comparably unsuitable for them.
The Sha-Brytol remind her more of hunters in this setting, navigating the wilderness of the deep roads, and she wonders again at their nature. It seems like such a sacrifice, to burden yourself with armour you can never take off. To cleave to a role you can never shed.

Why make it?

Finally, she gives up guessing, and decides to simply ask. The rush of hurrying around, trying to lower the Titan’s blood pressure catches up to them, and they rest in one of the more appealing caverns as they pass through. Their guides keep their distance from her, but she chalks it up to awkwardness over that whole ‘kidnapping’ thing. They cluster together at the base of one of the finer mushroom-trees.

The Shaper, on the other hand, lingers between their two groups.

She approaches. When Pride notices her moving closer to the dwarves, he follows.

“You say the Sha-Brytol are protectors, Hildur. What do they protect you from?” she wonders.

Hildur glances at her, and shrugs.


Pride looks at her with interest.

“What invaders?” he wonders.

“Well... Children of the Sky, for one,” Hildur reasons. “Not that you have troubled us in particular, not before now. But Kal’Arzok has been dealing with incursions for years. And there are beasts down here, of course. Shamblers and tunnel wyrms and whatnot. And Casteless bandits and marauders...”

“Wait,” she interrupts. “Kal’Arzok has been having trouble with Children of the Sky?”

“Yes. Of course,” the Shaper confirms.

“That cannot be right. Where is Kal’Arzok?” Pride asks, straightening up; his brows furrowing. He glances off towards Haninan and Curiosity, but the two are only speaking in cautious tones with some of the more approachable Sha-Brytol.

“South and to the West,” Hildur replies.

“Can you be more specific?” he wonders.

“I could draw you a map, but it would be of our roads,” the Shaper reasons. “I do not know what it might be near to topside. There is forest above it, I think. That would be the best I could offer.”

Pride narrows his eyes.

“Forest and to the southwest... Andruil,” he murmurs. “That bloodthirsty fool. She has been quarrelling with the dwarves and told no one.”

Her stomach sinks at the implications.

Lyrium.

Oh, please, she thinks. Please don’t let her have figured out anything about lyrium yet.
“These incursions, what are they about?” she asks, with looming dread.


Slowly, she closes her eyes, and presses a hand against her brow.

Shit.

Of course.

Of course.

Old stories about Andruil going into the deep and hunting there. Hunting beasts there. She might not have killed a Titan, but if she went searching for any of those monsters that Hildur had mentioned earlier, and managed to figure out what lyrium’s effect on her magic could be…

And of course she wouldn’t have been eager to share that at the meetings. Of course she wouldn’t have wanted anyone to know that she might be to blame for the dwarves using earthquakes to supposedly attack the surface. She had been in favour of hunting them down, hadn’t she? Slaying the Titans. And if she kept the truth of what lyrium could do to herself, she might have been able to secure untold amounts of it. Particularly if she led the ‘hunts’.

“That is bizarre. Why would any Child of the Sky want lyrium?” Pride wonders. “It seems to only dampen our magic and make yours stronger.”

Hildur shrugs.

“I could not say. Perhaps they think it pretty. I hope, if Kal’Arzok is poisoned, that they decide they like the red colour even better.”

“No,” she snaps.

The Shaper looks at her in surprise.

“Do not wish for that. That poison spreading would do no one any good, not matter how badly you want an enemy to suffer. Trust me.”

Hildur frowns. But after a second, nods in acknowledgement.

“Fine. I can believe that, I suppose.”

The thought of Andruil stealing lyrium is bad enough. The thought of her getting red lyrium…

“This is bad,” she says.

“If we tell Andruil what the red lyrium can do, she will not want it no matter how pretty she thinks it may be,” Pride reasons.

“It is not that simple,” she admits.

He gives her a questioning look.

She looks back at him.

“Come with me,” she decides, and stands.
“Where are you going?” Hildur wonders.

“Not far,” she replies.

Pride’s confusion only deepens, but he obliges her; following her back down the tunnel they came in by, until she deems them a sufficient distance away from the rest. Not that she doesn’t trust Haninan or Curiosity. But this isn’t information that she can afford to let slip freely. Not if she wants to have a hope of getting the evanuris to help save the Titans, instead of taking advantage of their weakness to slaughter them all for their blood.

“You saw what I did before, with the lyrium?” she asks.

He frowns.

“Yes,” he says. “You nearly died.”

She shakes her head.

“No, not that. The barrier, and the shield I made. The reason I could do things like that, even though I’m barely skilled with magic, as it stands,” she clarifies.

His frown remains, but he nods, tentatively, at her to continue.

Sucking in a breath, she folds her arms, and leans back against the wall.

“Lyriums does not… it is not only something that repels magic. It enhances magic, as well. Makes it more powerful, and easier to sustain. With enough lyrium… people with magic can become mighty enough to start entertaining delusions of godhood,” she explains.

Pride stares at her, fascinated.

“If you knew, why did you not mention this sooner?” he wonders.

“To what end?” she asks.

“To what – you were stolen right out from under us because we could barely cast spells down here!” Pride hisses. “You do not think that knowing that we could enhance our magic with this substance would be useful?”

“I thought it would be dangerous,” she replies.

His face falls, and he shakes his head.

“Dangerous? What do you imagine I would do with such knowledge?” he wonders, honestly baffled.

She closes her eyes.

“Tell Mythal, for one thing,” she reasons.

That brings him up short.

“What do you imagine Mythal would do with such knowledge, then?” he asks, shrewdly.

“Try and better the lives of her people, of course,” she replies, flatly.
He stares at her a moment, and she sees a flash of temper in his eyes. The air between them holds a crackle that is all too familiar.

“You think you are the only one who notices corruption?” he asks, harshly enough that it takes her aback. “You think you are the only one who notices that things are unfair? That the leaders are not perfect, that even the People are not perfect?”

She hesitates, caught wrong-footed as he is sharp and brittle, frustrated.

He folds his arms.

“I have been trying and trying to see things the way you see them. But how can I do that when you keep such important things hidden? I want to understand. I want to help. I have been trying to help, while you ration out the truth as if you think I am liable to betray you. You are one of my People. I have a responsibility to keep you safe and whole, and I am not a fool. You hide things. Haninan sees things he does not speak of. Curiosity puts together answers that she keeps to herself. And I am left trying to lead you all in the wisest course of action with what scraps you all see fit to throw me. Struggling to see how to make sure you do not die, while you hide away vital information that could help keep you alive.”

He’s hurt, she realizes.

And he has a right to be.

His gaze searches hers, looking for something. She didn’t think he realized that she was holding things back. But then, of course he did. He’s been being patient, she sees, in a sudden flash of insight. Considerate. Trying to hold her hand while she leaves him sitting in the dark.

“I am sorry,” she says.

He lets out a breath.

“You have introduced me to a many new concepts,” he says. “And dilemmas. You told me yourself, you find wisdom by looking for it. I wish you did not keep things that might help from me.”

She presses a hand to her forehead. Almost has to laugh at how horrible it is, because he’s right.

“That was unfair of me,” she concedes.

He nods, slowly.

“I am not one of the Leaders of the People. I do not want to be. I am loyal to Mythal, but not blindly. I know more about how they think and operate than you do. You need my help, and I want to give it to you. So let me help, and tell me why you are so afraid of this,” he asks.

She lets out a breath. Almost forgets how to take another one back in. He’s looking at her so intently; so fiercely, and she thinks she knows what he’s feeling right now.

She thinks she’s felt it, too, staring at someone with so many hidden things in them. Just wanting the truth because without it, how else could she know how to help?

“What do you think would happen if the dwarves discovered they could mine dreams?” she asks him. “If those near-sighted councillors we saw thought they could mend their problems and triumph over their enemies by marching armies to the surface, and whittling away the Dreaming,
tearing apart the Sky until nights became filled with darkness, and the sun and moon broke, and places that were once lush and beautiful turned distant and dead? And their empire flourished while the surface withered, and spirits became whispers, and Arlathan crumbled and was lost, until the Blight swept through and claimed even the memory of its existence?"

His expression turns, slowly, from intellectual consideration, so somewhat horrified.

“Because if the People discover what lyrium can give to them, they will march and dig and destroy, and everything you see here will be turned to ruin. You know the leaders better than I do. Fair enough. Do you think they are wise enough that they would leave such a wealth of power resting in the hands of people they do not even consider to be people?” she continues. “Or do you think they are petty and selfish enough that they would do everything they could to take it for themselves, no matter the consequences? Do you think they would risk temptation, or would they constantly suspect their fellows of manipulating the situation behind their back to steal an advantage? Do you think even Mythal would leave it be?”

Silence falls between them.

Pride still looks horrified.

She softens towards him a little, at the sight. He doesn’t know. For all that he is clever and insightful and sees more than she has, perhaps, given him credit for, he doesn’t know.

And he’s right; he can’t keep not knowing, she reminds herself.

But this isn’t the time or place for the whole truth. Not when they’re in the Deep Roads, still trying to get out. She can’t distract the leader of their group with such heavy revelations when he has no place to safely retreat to, at the very least.

“No,” he finally says.

“That is why I kept it secret. That is what I fear will come of this knowledge,” she explains. “But if Andruil knows already, then…”

Then they need to do something about Andruil, before the others find out. Or they need to find a way to make it so that it won’t matter if the others do find out. Though on that front, she has no idea where to even begin.

Pride looks at her, and then squares his shoulders.

“If I can see the dire nature of these circumstances, so shall Mythal,” he promises her. “I know you do not trust her very well. I remember your – I remember you preferred not to swear an oath to her. But what wisdom I have, I have learned from her. If we explain the full truth to her, of everything, she will see precisely what I do; that this song must be spread, and the Titans must be alive to spread it. The other leaders, I have little faith in. But I would not suggest sharing this truth with her if I did not honestly believe she would see past the allure of power. She has ambition, but it has never corrupted her. And it has never been for herself alone. Do not forget who sent us here to speak, rather than to make war.”

She shakes her head. Then she sighs.

“Maybe,” she concedes.

This Mythal is not the Flemeth of her time. Still, she remembers all too well the goddess who did see what her people had fought and struggled and striven for – and still chose vengeance, in the
end.

And even so, she’s not entirely sure it’s better to have a Mythal who hasn’t yet experienced the lows her kin can sink to, versus one who has but only nurtures her bitterness for it. Which one, she wonders, would actually be able to approach this situation sensibly?

If either could.

“Maybe it would be better if I tried to work with the Sha-Brytol, and we kept this as quiet as possible,” she suggests. “They could sneak me into the Titans’ heart chambers with less… obviousness than before. And help me get back out again, too, if it came to it.”

He scowls.

“You almost died translating this ‘song’ for the Titan here. You need skilled healers on hand before you attempt it again,” he points out. “And I have not given up hope that we may find a means of accomplishing this without nearly killing you in the process. Such damage is… it is not good for you.”

She raises an eyebrow.

Well…

Obviously?

But it is what it is. Still, she feels a rush of warmth for his concern; dampened mostly by the reality that the same flare of innocence that lets him indulge in it is going to take a major hit, courtesy of her, in the near future.

“What if we just deal with Andruil ourselves?” she asks.

It earns her a deeply skeptical look.

“Without Mythal?” he clarifies.

She nods.

He sighs, but then actually seems to seriously mull the option over.

“We would have to kill her. A challenge enough in and of itself; she did not earn her position through blood ties alone. Even then, there must be some among her followers who know – or have deduced – the beneficial properties of lyrium. The secret would not die with her,” he reasons. “Particularly if she has gone so far as to share it with Ghilan’nain as well. Which is possible; though also unlikely. Then there would be investigations into her death, and that might drag it out into the light anyway. Unless she died publicly, in such a way that no one would need to investigate. But then if we killed her publicly, we would have to face punishment for it. And the problem of the knowledge still existing would remain. Spirits could be bartered with to try and find it and erase it. They would have to be powerful, and bartered enough to secure their own silence, as well as their cooperation. No small feat.”

“I did not expect you to actually consider it,” she admits. “Or to jump straight to ‘assassinate her’ if you did.”

He smiles a little.
“I may not have demonstrated any great aptitude for what the dwarves pass off as politics, but I know how the real thing works,” he says.

She resists the urge to roll her eyes at him.

Barely.

“Andruil is Mythal’s daughter, is she not? But you do not hesitate to suggest killing her?”

Pride shrugs.

“I do not suggest it because I think we could do it. There are far too many ways for any such plan to go entirely awry. I suggest it because that is how it would have to work, and even then, it would not work as well as the alternative might. Though I admit, while Mythal would grieve for Andruil’s death, I would be somewhat more… indifferent on the subject. Of course it is a tragedy when any of the People die, but…”

“Not a fan?”

“Mythal is the best of her kin. The leaders have their roles, but none of them inspire the People the way that they should. The way that she does,” he reasons.

She regards him for a long, quiet moment, until he begins to look a little uncomfortable; as if he’s wondering whether or not he’s said something wrong.

“How do we kill Andruil?” she asks.

He lets out a surprised puff of air.

“We do not,” he says. “Even if it were to go perfectly, it would be better to have the truth known. For all their faults, the consensus would certainly lean towards not destroying the world. Agreements would be reached, and once they were, they could be enforced. Keeping it secret permits the leaders to act in secret, should they discover the truth by their own means. Presenting the information to Mythal allows us to approach the revelation from the best possible angle.”

“Maybe. But they will still try and steal their advantages, won’t they? Acting in secret, making excuses, pretending to work for the betterment of the world while seizing whatever they can for themselves. If they know what lyrium can do for them, they will want it. And once they want it, they will make moves to secure it, whether through legitimate means or backhanded ones,” she reasons. “If they know about the threat but not the potential of lyrium, then the matter is simple. It is a danger that must be dealt with. The power offers a temptation I have no faith in them to resist, and if Mythal tried to stop them, we would be putting her between her kin and their ambition. You are her protector. What do you think will happen to her if she chooses to stand there?”

It’s a low blow, especially when she hasn’t explained the truth to him yet.

But it makes her point.

He pales at the prospect; and then his expression hardens.

“All one of them who made a move an overt move against Mythal would face the wrath of the others. Her greatest advantage among them is, perhaps, that she holds none of the same petty rivalries which they do. Attacking her would give her attacker’s rivals a valid platform to retaliate against them on; likely with Elgar’nan’s blessing,” he reasons. “Of course, covert moves would increase. Security for her would become even more paramount.”
“What if they all teamed up against her?” she wonders.

“They would never agree to,” he scoffs.

“What would be tempting enough – big enough – to make them agree?” she presses.

He stops.
His eyes narrow, and he casts them about the cavern around them.

“…Give me some time to contemplate this,” he requests. “It is not simple. But you make good points. We will need to decide upon a course of action before we head back to the palace.”

“Do not tell anyone else about the lyrium. Or Andruil,” she asks.

“No,” he agrees. “For now, silence is best. I… I am not pleased you kept this from me, but I appreciate that you have trusted me with it, in the end. Thank you, for that.”

Reaching over, she clasps his shoulder.

“I have more secrets,” she admits, swallowing past the dryness in her mouth. “More things you should know. But, I think they should wait until we are above ground again. Not because I do not trust you, but they are… they are not easy to speak of.”

He regards her, steadily; with less anger than she’d worried he might show. After a moment he inclines his head.

“If you think so,” he agrees.

She opens her mouth, searches his face. Closes it soundlessly again, and nods. She tightens her grip on him for a moment, before she lets go.

“You are good,” she tells him. “You – your heart. It is good. You may not always be wise but I know you want your people to be safe, and that you see that there are things wrong, and you want to right them, and… and your heart is good. It is a good heart. Even when it gets lost or misled. And if you ever doubt it, come what may… just remember that I told you that.”

He stares at her in shock.

She shifts under his gaze, looking away from him, and lets out a breath. A laugh – pained – slips alongside it.

“See? You are not so bad at finding words for me. I am downright terrible at finding them for you,” she jokes.

His hand brushes, lightly, against her cheek. The backs of warm fingers trail down the side of her face.

It’s such a surprise that her gaze snaps back onto him.

He retracts quickly. His cheeks are red and his motions are jerky; he starts to fidget, and then clasps his hands together instead.

“Thank you,” he says, eyes bright and shining.

Then he turns, and hastily makes his way back towards camp.
The Sha-Brytol lead them up, out of the wild caverns and into places that begin to look more civilised; and then begin to look like the Deep Roads. When they make camp, she dreams of long shadows, and the feeling of watching eyes, and the song thrumming up from below.

They don’t encounter anyone else, though she thinks she spies signs of camps and movement, and at one point a massive body glides through the darkness in front of one of their tunnels. Quiet and twisting, like a giant snake.

Half of the Sha-Brytol break off, after conferring, and disappear into the darkness after it. The purple marks of their armour linger as distant, moving lights, until she loses sight of them in the gloom.

“How different is their magic now?” she asks Hildur, afterwards. Wondering, if the Sha-Brytol aim to hunt that beast, whether or not they might suffer unusual losses this time in the effort. Raising the wall to stop the lyrium flood certainly seemed to take an exceptional effort.

“It is less easy. I would think the purple is weaker, but I am not sure it is that simple,” the Shaper muses.

“Why not?” Curiosity wonders.

“Because it does not feel diluted. It feels distant and changed. Though I would not expect you to understand.”

Hildur sighs.

Haninan shakes his head.

“We are still far from the Sky, Lady Hildur. Distance is one thing each of us understands quite well,” he reasons. “Fight the infection and the body is weakened, but then strengthened, too, by the knowledge of how to fight it again. Your Titan has fended off the flood of poison in its veins. It may yet be that your magic is far away because it still recovers. Even giants need their rest.”

Hildur glances at him, and then lets out a breath.

“That is an optimistic possibility.”

“Maybe it is more than it was before,” Curiosity suggests. “When I got my body, I became more, but I could do less because I did not understand how being more worked yet. I still do not understand it all. Maybe the Titan is that way, too.”

“When you got your...?” Hildur glances at Curiosity, unnerved.

“Do Dwarves not have Dreaming born?” Pride wonders.

“Of course not,” Haninan interjects. “Not many spirits linger down here, and why should they? Dwarves cannot build bodies for them. Or at least, not out of flesh. And the Dreaming does not flow so freely.”

She takes pity on the Shaper, who is looking increasingly unnerved.
“Some elves start out as spirits who take on bodies,” she explains. “Curiosity and Pride are like that. Dreaming born.”

“Hmph,” Hildur replies, glancing at the two in question. “Strange.”

“Does it seem so?” Curiosity asks.

“Most things about you seem strange,” the Shaper admits. Then shrugs. “I suppose you could be right, though. If the lyrium is stronger rather than weaker, or more complex somehow, the people back home are going to have quite a time sorting out all of the excess.”

“Perhaps it might be traded,” Pride suggests.

She glances at him. He’s looking at Lady Hildur, though, considering.

“Do you think introducing the purple lyrium to the veins of a Titan might encourage it to spread, as the red lyrium did?”

Hildur blinks.

“You are thinking if we took purple lyrium to the Titans, we might be able to change them without the help of your friend,” the Shaper realizes.

“Yes,” Pride confirms.

“It could work. Would be worth a try, anyway. Though what your friend did... I am not so sure it can be so simplistically replicated. But still... yes. It would be worth the effort,” Hildur confirms.

“I shall ask the Sha-Brytol for some, and when I arrive at Kal’Arzok, if the Titan there shows signs of the poison, I will see what they will let me attempt. And what I might get away with attempting against their wishes, too.”

“Now that sounds to me like a dangerous proposition,” Haninan muses.

“This whole venture is a dangerous proposition,” Hildur replies.

“True enough. There are things in this world that sing, and things in this world that dream, and we like to think that they shall keep on singing and dreaming forever, and always the same way. But any shift that is not gradual brings the perilous truth to the forefront of thought – that the world as we know it is balanced on the edge of a knife, and even the tiniest little thing gone awry might send it spinning down into oblivion one day. Against that, there is no recourse; but people will fight change tooth and nail, simply to avoid being reminded of it,” the old elf says, voice distant and thoughtful, and after a moment his eyes turn towards her. Then Pride.

“That is true,” Hildur tells him.

“A Child of the Sky might say that nothing is set in stone. But it seems, under the circumstances, more accurate to muse that Stone itself is not set in its ways,” he reasons, in a lighter tone.

Very subtle.

She wonders what he could possibly be hinting at.

He and Hildur continue their back-and-forth, as Pride and Curiosity listen with interest and offer occasional insights of their own, until they reach the Deep Roads proper. It’s done with very little fanfare; the narrow passage they’re in opens up to the long roadway, and the glimmering of
Hildur convinces the Sha-Brytol to leave them there. She watches the figures disappear into their whisper-silent doorways, letting her gaze trail up the long walls and down the steep drops, and wonders, again, at this vast network of the world; as large below as it is above.

“You should head for the surface,” Hildur declares. “The arrow-shaped road markers will guide you upwards, if you follow them. I will join Lady Ortahn’s people and make for Kal’Arzok. Do what you need to do, but be quick about it. If you come back and are lost, find the Sha-Brytol. Or wait for them to find you.”

“And I will go with you,” Haninan decides with a thoughtful nod to their newest ally.

“What?” Pride asks him.

The old elf straightens his cloak, and affords him a smile.

“You acquired yourself a solver of mysteries, and there are still some pieces missing in all of this,” Haninan reasons. “And we can hardly let Lady Hildur brave such dangerous circumstances alone. But bringing things to the heart of the matter – you are about to broach the subject of the Keepers in the presence of the evanuris. If I am in Arlathan when June is reminded of certain things… it is wiser to discuss them without my presence.”

“You cannot come with me,” Hildur says. “You are tall and conspicuous and obviously a Child of the Sky. In Kal’Arzok, they will kill us both before they even think to pause.”

Hananin winks at her.

Then the air around him shifts, and shudders, and with a snap that feels like it takes an unusual degree of effort – a tug that reminds her of Morrigan – he shrinks down, and when the dust clears, a rather tall, rather lanky dwarf with Haninan’s features is left behind.

“You know how to turn into a dwarf!?” Curiosity exclaims, excited. “We should all learn how to turn into dwarves! That would be perfect!”

“I fear it is a rather complex trick, Birdie. You might not have the time,” he replies. His cloak is a little loose on him, now, though it, too, has shrunk.

With a wave of his hand, he wipes the vallaslin on his face away.

Hildur stares at him.

Blinks, and then shakes her head.

“I am going to regret everything,” the Shaper mutters.

“I have not yet granted you leave to go, Haninan,” Pride says, folding his arms. “You are Mythal’s, now, and even if I would permit this, it is not my place.”

“I suppose that is true,” Haninan concedes.

After a moment, Pride lets out a breath.

“This mission is not done,” he finally decides. “Since it is what you were acquired for, you are correct. Someone should escort our ally to her destination and help see that her efforts are not wasted… and it will be good to have someone relatively trustworthy to help investigate matters at
Kal’Arzok. You are the most reasonable choice.”

Haninan smiles.

“Well said, Wolfling.”

Pride inclines his head.

“It is a flimsy pretense at best and Mythal will see right through it. But it is also true. Try not to let Andruil’s people catch wind of you,” he requests.

“Who, me? A humble dwarf from... some dwarven settlement, somewhere? Why should any grand Child of the Sky pay me any mind?” Haninan asks, with a wink.

“You do not look humble,” Hildur informs him.

“Am I still pretty to dwarves then? Fantastic.”

Curiosity frowns.

“Be careful, Haninan.”

“Of course, Birdie. Do not fret. By the time you see me again, I will have much more of this place figured out,” he reasons. “Look after the other two. They will need it.”

Curiosity nods, very seriously.

Then Haninan looks at her, and they regard one another for a moment.

He sighs.


She breaks his gaze, but inclines her head.

It’s a wrench to part ways. She almost wants to just stay in the Deep Roads; not for themselves, but because each step closer to the surface drags her closer to a moment she dreads. Haninan and Hildur disappear towards Lady Ortahn’s camps.

The three of them remaining turn in the opposite direction, and begin the steady, upwards trek.

It’s a straightforward route, at least, though the smallness of their party feels profound, somehow. Curiosity flits and looms and plucks at them, eventually turning into a bird so she can ride on her shoulder, and then even switching to Pride’s after a while, settling against his white fur and tugging on his hair with her beak every once in a while. The poor bird looks nervous and jittery and also uncertain as to why.

“It is alright,” Pride tells her. “Haninan will be alright.”

“Everything is too dangerous,” Curiosity decides, grumbling a little.

It’s a little unnerving, though, she agrees. Navigating the tunnels without either Haninan or Hildur; facing a certain awareness that they are, truly, out of their depth. The yawning stretch of the roads makes for a rather stark visual metaphor of their situation.

They set up camp again before they reach the surface. She finds a crop of actual, leafy plants in a
garden along the route, and it’s a comfort to sit among them. Curiosity’s mood perks up when she discovers the leaves are flush with green beetles that leave behind tremendous welts wherever they bite.

Not something she’d personally count as a great feature, but Curiosity just heals the welts and then tries to figure out if they’re venomous or not.

The road they take doesn’t lead them out onto the surface via the same exit. They come up into another section full of magic-dampening runes, and then through a set of double doors that open with thankfully little fuss from the inside, but when closed behind them, are virtually invisible and impossible to figure out again.

They lead onto a narrow mountain pass; higher than she would have expected, in fact, but it leads down towards the valley that Haninan had first found for them. The trek is quiet. Pride and Curiosity breathe in the open air with obvious relish, and she finds that she does, too; though more for the quiet beneath her feet as well, as they move further from the rockiest ground, and soil pads the earth between her and the Stone.

It almost reminds her of her strange dream. Of running through the trees, and forgetting, only to remember it all at once again.

The weight of everything.

They find the camp, and Mythal’s people greet them with enthusiasm, and even worry over Haninan’s apparent absence. Pride tells them only the barest facts – that they discovered the source of the earthquakes, and dealt with it. That the dwarves were convinced that they were responsible for it starting in the first place, and that other dwarven cities might still be having troubles. That Haninan had gone off with one of the more reasonable members of their society to see what could be done for the rest, while they would have to return to the palace, now, and speak with Mythal.

They decide to make their return trip at a leisurely pace, and ordinarily she would be annoyed by it, but she finds she doesn’t have the emotion to spare for that. They make their way out of the valley, and camp in one of the more sheltered regions of the mountain, resting an entire day at Pride’s insistence.

She keeps thinking it will be the moment for her to take him aside; and he watches her, and waits, and she knows he’s getting impatient. But she can’t quite bring herself to. Just a little longer, she thinks. Keeps thinking, until the air around the mountains begins to grown more flush with the Fade, and their party breathes audible sighs of relief; letting off little clouds and jolts of potent feeling as if to simply celebrate that they can.

The floating village comes, distantly, into sight.

Turning, she looks back at the mountains, and remembers Haninan’s story, of his trapping his wife and creating a pocket free of the Fade. She thinks of the way the Dreaming is further here, and of Skyhold, where Solas made the Veil. Of dwarves and lyrium, and sleeping Keepers, and singing Stone.

It feels almost like a tangled knot of destiny; but she has no idea why any force would wish to cause such complex and painful misfortune.

They pass by a grove. Beautiful, rife with greenery, and as the elves talk about setting camp again, she closes a hand around Pride’s wrist.
“We should have our conversation, now,” she says. “About secrets.”

He looks at her, and nods, and even smiles as she leads him away from the rest.

Pretty far away, too. Evening is slowly turning to dusk, and by the time she finds a quiet spot in the grove, the moon is high.

“I have another poem for you,” he says. “Before we speak, would you hear it?”

She doesn’t know how much poems will matter to him after they do. It isn’t in her to refuse. She draws a breath, and nods, and he smiles at her.

His smile is always so beautiful.

“Ships without a destination rest in uneasy harbours. Intricate spider webs are torn even by slender rain. But here I find only comfort, entwined in fingers that reach so readily for my own. There is no courtly guile between us, as we seek what we must for tomorrow. Though you are sworn to me, I will accept from you no vow that I cannot return.”

*He will never find out.*

*He needs to know.*

She stares at him as the moonlight catches on all of his bright pieces, and makes them shine.

He looks at her, and shifts slightly, before glancing away.

“Perhaps it is too obvious, now,” he says. “But I would do it properly. I do not know your customs. Perhaps you might tell me; how may I court you?”

She forgets how to breathe.

Oh.

Oh no.

For a moment she stills, and then she closes her eyes, and tries to regain control over her faltering heart. It isn’t fair. It isn’t *fair*, that in the world where he can offer her *this*, she has to repay him with… with…

No, no, she can’t do it. She can’t do it. She looks at him, and his features twist into worry; nervousness.

“Have I offended you?” he asks.

“No,” she tells him, shaking her head as she takes a step back. “No, you – you… no. I would let you court me. Every time. Every time, I would.”

Nerves turn to confusion, and he extends a hand, tentatively, towards her. It hovers between them for a moment.

“Then what is wrong?” he asks.

She stares at him.

*Steel your heart*, a voice whispers. But she can’t. She never can, not to him. No matter how she
tries, no matter how he changes. It’s soft and open and it lets him in, every single time. And she can’t even regret it. She can only regret that it never seems to matter.

She can’t.

‘I can’t,’ a voice in her memory whispers; and she sees Solas, in that moment in Crestwood. Hands up, expression twisted into misery, backing away from her as he broke her heart and refused to explain why. As he swallowed down the truth he’d meant to offer her – that he’d been inspired to offer by his love for her, and that he’d failed to offer for the same reason, until two longs years of wondering culminated in a pained and painful revelation. The whole of it wrestled from him at last, just so she could watch him walk away again.

Hiding it hadn’t spared either of them, in the end.

“I have to tell you the truth,” she says.

His hand lowers, slowly. He looks unsettled, now.

But after a moment, he offers her an encouraging nod.

How?

How does she say this?

“It…” she begins, and then she has to stop. Draw in a breath. Calm down, calm down. It’ll be worse if she can’t tell it clearly, if she can’t command the conversation, at least it little. It will still be bad, but a blade only cuts more raggedly when it’s held by trembling hands.

He has been finding all of these words for her.

What are the ones that will cut the most cleanly for him?

“He did not mean for it to happen,” she says, and makes herself look him in the eye. So, later, perhaps, he will not think she is hedging, or making excuses. It’s the truth.

“What are you talking about?” he wonders.

“The wolf,” she tells him, and comprehension arrives. Though it doesn’t replace all of his confusion, it eases some away.

“He changed the world, and so he felt like… like all of the suffering that happened because of that change was his doing. He was ashamed of what he had wrought. But everything wasn’t his fault. He tried, and he couldn’t know what all the consequences of his efforts would be.”

“Did he not know the consequences when he destroyed your world?” Pride asks, coolly. Though his gaze on her is soft.

“Not all of them,” she replies. “Destroying it was not his aim. It was merely the cost of his choice. The world – my world – seemed so bleak to him, that he felt the only solution was to go back, and
start over.”

“Go back?”

Pride’s brows dip, and his curl downwards, and she sucks in a long breath.

“I am not from another world,” she admits.

Slowly, he takes a step back.

“I am from this world, in the future. The far, far distant future.”

He stares at her, and the air goes cold. His expression smooths into something more detached, but his eyes are sharp as he turns over the implications of her confession.

All the implications of her confession.

“Why did you not tell me this sooner?” he asks, quietly.

“I did not think there was a need, before the Titan,” she replies. “And after, it seemed impossible to explain.”

“So the Titan – the Blight – the energy invading this world, it is trapped here because this world should no longer exist? Because a future was destroyed, and the past was dragged into its place?” he surmises, in that same quiet, careful voice.

“Yes,” she confirms.

Perhaps he will not figure it out.

Perhaps it will simply seem so unlike him that he will fail to make the connection.

“The memory I saw,” he says.

She closes her eyes.

“Your wolf looked like me.”

“He did,” she agrees.

There is a long, still moment of silence.

“No,” he says. “No, no – I would not do that. I would never do that. The wolf… I, I would not destroy a world, even a world I despised. I would not hurt you. To take… the wolf took your arm. Your, your eye. Killed your friends. You said he ate your heart. Is that what you see in me?” he demands. “The monster that ate your heart?”

“No,” she replies, but he is shaking his head, taking another step back. His hand comes up to his mouth, and then balls into a fist at his side.

“I would not do those things!” he shouts.

“You did not know,” she replies. “Mythal died fighting the Titan. You went back to undo that, and you did. You did not know what it would lead to. The Blight began to spread, and the evanuris went mad with power. Mythal died again, and you tried to lock it all away. And you did. You locked the Dreaming away, and put them in their prison.”
He paces, sharp, angry motions, and the air feels like a building storm to her.

“I locked the Dreaming away? That is not possible! I could not do that!” he insists.

“A lot of time passed,” she replies. “Thousands of years passed. You think you would not learn many amazing things in thousands of years?”

His steps falter.

“All of it, then,” he says, in a sharp whisper. “Tell me all of it.”

“I do not know all of it,” she admits.

“Then tell me what you know!” he snaps, fierce and cold.

She opens her mouth, and nothing comes out. Her arms fold tightly around herself. It’s sickening, this frost growing in the ground between them. It feels like she’s doing this to him, hurting him with the truth, like it’s some malicious thing creeping out of her to strike at him on purpose.

The tiny, tiny amount of satisfaction she gets at seeing his horror is overwhelmed by her regret.

*Tell me what you know.*

What does she know?

What did she ever really know?

She swallows, thickly.

“You could paint,” she says.

He frowns, a brief knot of confusion dragging on his brows.

“You used to paint the walls. We would joke that if anyone left you alone in a bare room for long enough, they would come back to find you had erected scaffolding and started mixing your own paints out of thin air. You led a rebellion. When the evanuris went mad with power, you started gathering people. You made safe places for them, and you asked nothing in return for letting them stay. No one was ever obliged to follow you. But they did anyway, because you stood up for them. You taught them how to be proud of who they were, when their leaders were telling them that they were worth less than nothing. You made a mistake and you tried to fix it. Everything you did, after that mistake, was just another effort to make it right. You were always asking people for their thoughts. You always wanted them to explain to you why the world worked as it did, or what they would do if they were ever in your place, and always answered everyone’s questions in return. Most of you was still dreaming, I think, after being asleep for so long. Nothing seemed real to you at first. But then you started to wake up. You saw that we were people, and when you saw, you did not hide from it. It would have been easier to. To just pretend that we were all lifeless dolls, with no substance; a mistake that no one would regret erasing. But you did not shy away from painful truths. You never pretended that what you were doing was right. It was just that you could not see another way.”

She closes her eyes.

“I was supposed to find it for you. I failed. I failed you, and everyone else. And…”

She sucks in a ragged breath.
“I am sorry. You were supposed to come back yourself, but you sent me instead. I should not have… I was selfish. Seeing you, like this, was hard. You have not made any grave mistakes, or led any rebellions, or slept for any long years. You are very different. But you still have so many of the same good things in you. It is not fair to put the weight of what you could do onto your shoulders. It is not fair to keep the truth from you, either. I wanted to keep you safe. Since I met you, I have wanted to keep you safe. I have failed, every time. I am a poor shield from danger, but ignorance is a worse one.”

Silence.

It’s a great force of effort to life her eyes, and look at him. To trace the moonlight up over shining armour and white fur, and stop at his face, which is pale and solemn and horrified, hurt and scratched with bewilderment.

“What would you like to know?” she offers, quietly.

His jaw clenches, and his eyes narrow. Determined, she thinks. Not shying away from the pain.

He draws in a breath, and begins to ask.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the brief delay on this chapter! As always, I love you guys. <3
The questions come more quickly than she has the wherewithal to answer them, in all honesty. He sends them to her and she forces herself to muster what she can.

And every time, it feels like it’s scraping her raw from the inside-out. Even what should be easy questions hold a heavy weight, knowing how the image of them all must come together for him. The urgency with which he demands them of her doesn’t help.

“How could I have possibly travelled through time?” he asks.

“I am not sure,” she admits. “A friend of mine knew a great deal about the process, but it is complex, and magic was never my field of study.”

“You say the evanuris went mad. From the Blight?” he asks, almost as soon as she finishes answering.

“They began killing Titans and mining lyrium. Some of the lyrium was red. So, it was likely involved,” she explains.

“How could… how did I even fathom holding back the Dreaming?” he asks, his hands clenching into fists.

She opens her mouth.

Closes it again.

“That all happened long before I was born,” she finally says.

He points an accusatory finger at her.

“You know something,” he says. “What is it? Why hold back now? Do not tell me there are worse things you are still keeping hidden!”

His anger burns, frantic with hurt and fear, and she cannot help but clench a fist at the accusation in his tone.

“There are many details I do not know for certain. Details that do not even matter, unless you are planning on attempting to recreate the effect?” she wonders, voice low.

He freezes.

“No,” he says, horrified. His head shakes, only slightly, at first, but then with increasing determination. “No, no I – no. Never. I would rather die than cause what you have described! I would… I would rather die.”

He looks at her, and his expression hardens; his eyes go a little blank.

“If what you say of me is true… perhaps my death is a solution you have considered?” he asks, softly.

The wash of horror that rushes over her is so visceral and fierce that it seems to drag every drop of blood down and away, and sink it into the hollow of her second heartbeat.
“No!” she snaps. Then she has to look away, because it’s not entirely true, of course. Not for Solas, and not even for him. But considerations aside, it wasn’t an option she could go through with in one time, and it’s not one she even cares to consider here and now.

He stares at her, still distant, and she strides forward until she is closer. Until she can feeling the ugly pull of whatever his emotions are doing in the air.

It takes her a moment to recognize the feeling; a chilled, sinking sensation she’s felt pouring off of demons.

She feels ill.

“I did not tell you this to bring you despair. I did not tell you this because I think you are a monster, or because I wish to punish you, or cause you grief. I have told you this because I have faith in you,” she tells him.

He stares at her, uncomprehending.

“You never meant to cause what happened. I know, because I have done the same thing. I have seen a future so bleak that I thought the only recourse was to go back and unmake it. I, too, have added, unwittingly, to this mess,” tells him.

He keeps staring at her, and after a moment, he shakes his head.

“That mistake… very well,” he says. “That is a danger that I can be warned of. A consequence that would not have been obvious, however dire it has proven. But what of the rest?”

“What do you mean?” she asks.


She swallows, thickly.

“To go back so far needed a lot of power,” she tells him.

He moves away again, horrified anew.

“No,” he says. “No. I would never do that. To sacrifice people, to such a degree, to fuel a spell that would erase their very world? That is monstrous!”

“We would be gone no matter what,” she whispers. “You did not want us to suffer, but you could not leave things as they were.”

He starts shaking his head again, though, and she begins to wonder if she made the wrong choice after all.

“How can you defend such an action?” he asks, lowly. Almost accusatory.

She stares at him.

“I do not,” she replies.

That seems to bring him up short.

“I do not defend it. Neither did you. It was a terrible thing to do, and I fought to stop it. I would
have died to stop it. I will never, ever, ever defend that act. It was wrong, and it destroyed everything I held dear. But I understand why it seemed like the best option out of a slew of terrible options. I understand why he felt like he had an obligation to do it. I do not defend the choice, but I do defend the man who made it.”

Pride looks away.

“I need to see it,” he decides. Distant, but strikingly resolute.

“See what?” she wonders.

“What happened,” he explains. “I need to see it. What I did, or… or what I could do.”

She shakes her head.

“No. Why?” she asks. “What would be the point? You know. Knowing is what matters. Seeing… how would you even begin to? What good would it even do?”

“Because there must be something,” he insists.

There is an almost frantic quality to him, then, as he strides towards her, and stops just short of touching her. He looks into her eyes. The air still heavy, still cold; but beginning to crackle as well, raw with a strange kind of desperation.

“Let me see,” he begs.

She shakes her head.

“How could I?” she asks. “You are not a spirit. You cannot sit in my head and sift through my thoughts.”

“True,” he agrees. “But there is a place. Old grounds, once sacred, where the Dreaming can pull upon memories in like it can nowhere else that I know of. If we go there, you can show them to me. Clearly. Without even the distortions of sleep.”

Oh. Shit.

“No,” she says, immediately.

“Please,” he asks her. “Please, I need to see. There must be something, some important thing… some answer that you have missed. There must be something. I need to see for myself.”

He is wild, and fraying at the edges; and clutching at straws, she knows. At the faint hope that this is all some terrible misunderstanding.

That, too, is a feeling she knows very well.

“I will answer any question I can. But do not ask me for this,” she begs.

“Please.”

“You want to see it? Every terrible detail? You want to see yourself do something that destroyed you?” she demands, and her eyes burn. Hot tears fall from the corners of them, as she clenches a fist and wishes she could grasp all of time and space and fate by the neck, and throttle it. For putting her here. For putting him here.
“No,” he says, very quietly. “But I need to.”

She shakes her head.

“We have too much to do. We have to go back and speak with Mythal, and deal with the Blight,” she insists.

His paleness in the moonlight no longer looks bright. Now he has more the look of a phantom. A wraith. Hurt and haunted.

“With the eluvians, it would only take a few days. I could convince the rest of our group to stay in the village that long, easily,” he reasons. “They would not even find it terribly suspicious. Mythal would know where we had gone, but she would not know why. It would be easy.”

She stares at him.

“It would be anything but easy,” she assures him.

He is becoming resolute again, though. Some of the wild edge of his panic ebbs, and he meets her gaze. He won’t be moved away from this, she knows; but he can’t force her into it, either. She shakes her head, and then lets out a heavy breath and drops her face into her hands.

For a moment, she simply breathes.

“It will not give you what you want,” she tells him. “It will only hurt you. I do not want to hurt you.”

“There must be something more,” he insists, quietly.

She forces herself to look at him again.

“No. There isn’t,” she says, shaking her head.

He squares his shoulders.

“I am certain there is. But if you are correct… then I still should see. What I did, or might do. Nothing else will convince me of the truth,” he tells her.

A rush of dread washes through her, as she realizes what he’s done. He’s put her entirely on the spot. If she refuses him, then she’ll have to deal with the possibility that he doesn’t believe her; that her revelation has fallen on deaf ears. If she accepts, then she’ll have to show him what he’s asking to see.

What she absolutely doesn’t want him to see.

“How kind of you to back me into a corner,” she snaps, fists balling at her sides.

His expression falters.

“I…”

She swallows, closes her eyes again, and shakes her head.


Turning, she stalks – almost stumbles – away from him.
She walks swiftly towards the camp. But though she tells herself not to, she pauses, and turns, and halfway there, she looks back and sees him still standing where she left him; shoulders shaking, and face in his hands.

It just makes everything worse.

She strides past their sentry – who gives her a curious look – and marches towards her tent, and when she sees Curiosity, she gives into impulse and keeps going, wrapping her arms around the tall young woman’s middle, gripping her tight because she needs to hold onto someone right now.

Curiosity ‘oofs’.

*Why? She thinks. Why, why, why, it’s not fair, why.*

Why her world?

Why her love?

Why her life?

“I do not… I do not know,” Curiosity says, gently, and curls around her.

She shakes away the useless questions; no point in distressing her friend any more than she already has.

“What happened?”

Her throat won’t work, she finds. She can’t even seem to open her mouth. It’s heavy, and sealed up, and won’t work anymore. As if it regrets all of the words she’s just spoken, and is trying to save them from the trouble of making things worse by making sure she won’t speak ever again. All she can do is shake her head, slightly; she tries to make it reassuring, but Curiosity’s worried eyes follow her even when she pulls away, and heads into their tent.

She stays inside, even when she hears Pride return.

The sentry greets him, but he doesn’t speak either.

She doesn’t sleep.

In the darkness she sits, awake, and Curiosity sits with her; attempting to get her to speak, and then giving up after a while, and simply telling her all the things she learned about the colourful bats down in the Deep Roads, and what she figured out about the beetles, and when she thought the change in the lyrium might be.

By morning, her friend is slumped against her, finally having lost the battle for consciousness with her exhausted body.

She stays where she is, well past the usual time when she would get up. It’s hard to move. Her dread is a heavy thing, and it sits in her chest, like a knot, and bolts her to the ground. She thinks it would be better to get up, and move. She half entertains the idea of slipping away; running and never looking back. Not at any of it.

But she can’t do that.

So she waits, until a familiar hand finally slips through the tent flap, and a familiar face peers at her with a distant, dissonant sort of concern.
“We need to pack up and go,” Pride tells her.

Then he drops the tent flap.

She sucks in a breath, and slowly, carefully, gets to her knees; and then to her feet.

She stands, and she makes herself move.

~

The floating village seems even stranger to her on the return approach. She feels rooted to the ground in a way that she wasn’t before. She’s not sure if it’s do with the whole mess of the Titan’s heart and the Stone, or if it’s just the heaviness of what is to come, but it seems impossible to think that she could stand on its drifting platforms and not drag the whole thing back down to earth, somehow.

Pride keeps a distance that makes her realize how little distance they’d begun to keep down in the Deep Roads. She finds herself alternating between staring at him and staring at anything but him. Curiosity alternates between them, confused and obviously a little bit frustrated, as things progress; demanding answers neither of them can give, and sulking over their silences, before invariably trying to offer some form of comfort, at least.

Under other circumstances, she thinks it would have been more than enough to work.

They keep up a pace towards the village that actually seems reasonable to her. The rest of the elves complain about the rush, but Pride only insists that it will be better to get to the village quickly, and glances at her when he does.

He still seems deeply unsettled, deeply unnerved; but there is something else, now. Some determined hope, and it makes her gut clench horribly, because she knows it will be dashed.

If she refuses him, he might always be allowed to have it.

As long as he has it, he might never really understand what he needs to.

It is nightfall by the time they reach the village. When they press on travelling through the evening, the rest of their company’s disquiet becomes increasingly obvious.

When Pride announces that he intends to take her somewhere, and that they will be gone a few days, she does not look at him.

She nearly jumps out of her skin when an unfamiliar hand drops onto her shoulder.

“Pride,” one of the elves whose name she does not know says; keeping the hand in place, but looking at the leader of their party. “If she has offended you, take it up with Mythal. Do not do something you will regret. I am certain the poor thing can scarcely comprehend half the nuances that pass between People.”

She’s not too thrilled to be a ‘poor thing’, or one that can ‘scarcely comprehend’, but the sincerity of the unexpected attempt to defend her is surprising enough that any reply she might make dies on her heavy tongue.
Pride looks taken aback, a moment.

Then he shakes his head, understanding dawning on his features. He falters, a little, as if he’d overlooked something important in the chaos of her revelation, and now some new worry has come to assail him.

“No,” he says, firmly. “It is nothing like that. She has done nothing wrong. My mood is… it is reserved for another matter. I only need her help.”

The elf looks unconvinced; but after a moment, subsides.

Pride looks at her, expression heavy.

“…Have you eaten?” he asks her.

She stares at him, baffled by the abrupt question.

“What?”

He shifts, and drops his gaze.

“You should eat. And rest. We shall leave in the morning,” he tells her.

Then he goes, leaving her to stand alone for a moment, off-kilter again before she sinks back into a quiet sort of numbness.

The village affords them enough space for individual rooms for the night, the locals rousing with a distinct air of interest, asking questions of the rest of their group. She finds Curiosity nevertheless, and when she at last retreats for the night, it is to a room with walls that reflect that pattern of starlight and passing clouds from the sky beyond, and with a parrot resting against her.

“If the things go very wrong, find Haninan,” she says.

“What might go wrong? What are you and Pride doing?” Curiosity asks.

She closes her eyes.

“Pride wants knowledge that I do not want to give him,” she admits.

“Why do you not want to give it to him?”

She draws in a heavy breath, and lets it out again.

“Because it will hurt,” she says. “It will hurt me to share it, and it will hurt him to have it. Because I am afraid of how it will change him. Because I wish it was not true, and I hate that it is.”

Curiosity is quiet, for a time.

“If it is that big, you should make him trade for it,” the little parrot finally advises; feathers shuffling in the starlight.

“No,” she sighs. “He has a right to it. Besides, what would I ask for in trade?”

“Ask him to still be Pride, when it is done,” Curiosity advises.

She looks down to see dark eyes staring intently up at her.
“People cannot generally help how they change,” she points out.

“No, I know. I have changed a lot. I am not just Curiosity anymore. But I still am Curiosity,” the parrot explains. “I knew Pride when he was a spirit. He was very bright, and always looking for things. Every day he would tell me he had figured out the secret to true wisdom, but then he would come back and tell me that no, it turned out he had not. I told him I would help him, however long it took, and find all the answers he needed. But it was hard for him. He did not like what he was. He decided he would never become what he most wanted to be, so it was better to give up, and become something that was different anyway.”

Curiosity lets out a gusty sigh.

“I liked the Spirit of Pride. Pride now is very different. He decided he had to be. I have come to like him this way, too, but… he did not change the same way most do. It was not gradual for him. He took his body and he smashed himself into it, and it was like he died more than he changed.”

She swallows, hard, and her throat scrapes.

“I do not want that for him,” she says.

“Then make him promise not to do it again,” Curiosity advises. “I wish I had made him promise, before he took his body. I never thought of it. But if you get him to promise, he will at least try. He hates breaking his word. Especially if it is in trade.”

She can’t really think of a response to that. It’s seems so simplistically childish, to just ask him not to change. Not to let it break him. As if a falling mirror can somehow will its glass not to smash against the ground.

But he’s not an object. People are different. She snatches onto that though, and grasps it as exhaustion slowly wins her over.

People are not glass, and sometimes will alone can, if not stop them from breaking, at least let them hold onto what’s important even when they do.

She drifts into dreams.

In sleep, the Emerald Graves spread around her. They are so lush and green that the vibrancy is almost painful; rolling stretches and broken ruins, scattered around the pulsing wound of an open rift.

Another memory.

She wanders, quietly, and watches as her companions battle the demons pouring through. The ones she once fought fall of their own accord, hewn by slashes and strikes she doesn’t bother to re-enact. The rest fall upon Cassandra, and Varric, and Solas. She doesn’t clearly remember the details of the fight. It’s mostly colour and noise, and clamour of motion until a Despair demon whirls around to Solas’ back, spitting ice and shrieking through the sky.

Clarity snaps into place then, and suddenly it is not only the colours that are vivid. Everything is. The positioning of every figure on the field solidifies as Solas’ barrier goes down, and frozen shards strike at his shoulder before something blocks them; the invisible phantom of her own self.

She remembers the pounding of her heart. The taste of the magic on the air. The fear, and the anger, fierce and protective and so strong she’d almost marvelled at it.
Not him.

The Despair demon goes down, split nearly in half.

Solas leans heavily against his staff.

“I shall be fine; go on. The battle is not over yet,” he says to her, with an uncommon note of gentleness. She remembers the question she’d snapped. Reaching for him, trying to check and see, momentarily forgetting everything except that the shards the demon had flung had nearly gouged in his heart.

He looks at her and smiles reassuringly.

Somewhere far off, a wolf howls.

She blinks.

The vibrancy of the memory dims. The grass greys, and the air stills. She turns, startled, as the edges of the grove are swept away by a chill wind. The trees beyond have darkened, and the shadows between them are long.

When she looks back, the figures of her dream – demons and allies alike – are gone.

A sudden and overwhelming sense of dread slips through her.

“Shit,” she says, and without much thought as to why, gives in to a sudden impulse, and takes off running.

Her feet fly and she darts into the grey space past the fading grass. In the blink of an eye, day becomes night, and light becomes dark. She skitters around the trunk of a tree, and finds herself in the dream-forest again; the one where she’d chased the traces of a strange light. Or at least, that’s what it appears to be. Her heart pounds in her chest; beating in time with the echo of the Titan’s.

The wolf howls again.

Shit, her mind echoes. She’s not sure why, but she’s utterly certain that something has gone wrong.

A shape darts past the corner of her gaze.

A whisper, a shadow; gone quicker than she can catch it.

The hairs on the back of her neck creep to attention. She turns, scanning the gaps between the trees. Starlight filters down through the broad leaves above. Dim. For a moment there is stillness, and the stillness fills her with even more apprehension. Wrong, wrong, something is wrong, something itches at the back of her neck.

The wind changes, and she catches the iron scent of blood on it.

She takes off so quickly towards it that a branch strikes her shoulder, and breaks off, leaving a stinging welt behind.

It’s ridiculous, even by the standard of a dream, for her to be tracking through an unfamiliar forest by scent. Yet she pushes it all aside and runs, runs, sprinting through the gaps between trees and leaping over tangled foliage, catching herself whenever her heart begins to feel too light.

She is not light. She is solid and strong, heavy as a blade, and she cleaves through the darkness,
and sparks, like struck steel, catch where her nails scrape over bark. Cold and white.

A sharp exhale breaks the air to her left. Paws crash against the earth; it sounds like an animal running in step with her, but when she turns to look, she sees nothing but the tail end of another darting shadow.

Then she’s skidding down a steep embankment, tumbling into a fresh segment of forest, and the wind turns. Her feet turn with it. She can see the moon, now, up high above; nestled in the night sky like a pearl in the ocean. Clouds brush the edges, but the gleam of it is so brightly silver that it almost seems to burn them at the touch.

In the trees to her right, in the distance, something moves.

Something massive.

She stills, and swallows her heavy breaths, and stares.

She was sure she saw something.

A giant. A beast. A dragon, perhaps; or something the size of one. Or maybe just a movement, high on some distant hill.

The trees are rooted in flat, deep earth, and she feels the distinct sensation of being watched.

The beast moves again.

Long, dark limbs, and an angular head.

Not a dragon.

Not at all.

She has scarcely comprehended the shape before it disperses again; trembling through the air, shadows that vanish like an exhalation, and the form slips from her mind. Slips like dark water through her fingers.

A yelp breaks the air.

Blood.

A shock of white, bright between the shadows, catches her eye.

The beast forgotten, she races, again, towards the light.

The light, in turn, races away.

She thinks it’s a halla for a moment, blinding and bright, galloping through the trees as some dark and relentless hunter pursues it. But then she draws closer – moves faster, somehow, even though she shouldn’t by any means be able to – and she sees the shape of it more properly.

A white wolf, low to the ground, fleeing pursuers.

Pride.

No.
Whatever impressive speed she had managed before, it is doubled in her sudden burst of terror.

The ground turns sharply upwards. The trees strain sideways along the base of a steep hill, and her lungs burn as she climbs, following the fleeting white shape and his less distinctive pursuers. Up and up. Her feet dig against the ground she grasps straining roots and rocky outcroppings for purchase, scratching her hands and scraping her shins, sending pebbles tumbling down in her wake as she hurries.

Something brushes past her.

Sharp teeth, ragged claws that tear at the earth. Anger and pain and hatred, fierce enough to make her still, but it’s not for her. The wisp of shadow that brushes past her limbs is soft. Just the faintest touch, and the scent of blood, and it moves away only to charge at Pride, who weaves from it.

There is red staining his white fur.

She swallows back the urge to call out; the risk of distracting the wolf as he dodges.

The fight tumbles over the other side of the hill.

With a curse, she follows after.

When she reaches the crest of it, the moonlight is so bright it nearly blinds her. More shadowy hunters flow past her. She tries to stall them, but they flood across her touch, heedless of her efforts. They whisper in her ears, and the sound of them is like the pull of music. Like the flaring recognition of kin.

They think she’s one of them.

“Oh no,” she breathes.

The white wolf gives up on his dodging, and flees outright instead.

“Pride!” she calls.

He doesn’t turn.

She follows after, the hunter on the trail of the hunters, cursing at the wisps and the whispers they leave in their wake. No matter how she attempts to stop them, or draw them away, they ignore her. They are teeth and eyes and gleaming claws between the tries. They slam at the fleeing wolf, and draw blood and yelps of pain from him, and her chest burns.

She just needs a way to fight them off; or to get them focused on something else so he can flee.

Something dashed in front of her. Another shadow, she thinks, except in the moonlight it doesn’t look quite dark enough. It catches her knees and sends her tumbling, and she curses again as her back crashes against the rough bark of a tree. Branches sway, and leaves fall, and something chimes strangely in her ears.

Her first inclination is to get back on her feet and keep running.

Something makes her look up instead.

She gapes, mind blank at the incongruity for a moment.

Someone has hammered a branch into the trunk of the tree she tumbled into. A rough, messy job,
but the branch is only the resting place for a russet wolf pelt mantle.

It is thick and heavy, eyes blank, with bone chimes dangling from the sides of it, and either blood or paint marking the edges of the fur. The face is narrow. Sharp. The top of the jaw is lined with even sharper teeth. Below it, the bottom jaw hangs from strings; the blackened bones, tethered in place by rough, leather cords.

*If it is a wolf they are after, then why not give them one?*

The thought drifts through her head, lyrical and incongruous.

She turns, thinks she can almost hear it coming from somewhere else.

Something darts away from the edges of her vision.

*What is this?* she thinks.

What is it?

A dream.

Her lips thin, and she reaches up, and takes the mantle.

It falls heavily across her shoulders.

The scent of wood and smoke and blood drops over her with it. But it is warm, and *clear*, somehow. The night sharpens in her gaze. The bruises and scrapes ease away, and when she inhales her lungs fill out, and she feels strong.

She runs, again.

Paws hit the ground beside her.

She doesn’t even bother trying to look this time.

Her steps carry her into the shadows. Again, they ignore her, at first, until the mantle brushes the edges of their shapes; and then they pause, and shift, like deepstalkers scenting new prey.

She dashes through their midst, and past the white wolf, who stares at her with wide, wide eyes as a howl – not his – breaks the air. The scent of his blood is so thick it crowds her senses. He is on the ground, and she feels desperate fear, and a wild sort of intensity, unbound and big enough and yet, not unbreakable.

Turning on her heel, she runs away from him.

The shadows turn from their gleaming prey, and follow her instead.

“No!” Pride cries.

But she is even faster, now, despite the heaviness over her shoulders; the weight of it is a good match for the weight inside of her, and her mouth twists; a bitter smile. She ducks behind trees, and moves as if she has run this forest all of her life. It is a map in her mind, plain as broad daylight, familiar as her lost home.

The howling follows her, echoes all around her, and draws the hunters into her wake. They reach and claw, snap and snarl, but their grasping always falls just short of the red edge of the mantle.
She feels manic. Raw.

Terrified.

Exhilarated.

Then the chase winds down to the edge of a cliff. The sea laps against it, a dull roar and her pursuers overwhelm her as she skids to a stop. Salt and blood in her nose. Claws rip at the mantle, and pitch her over the edge; she grabs hold of the rocks on the way down, gasping as the tumultuous mess of shadowy hunters writhes and surges, and wrenches the fur from her shoulders.

Then the whole mess of it, mantle and monsters, goes crashing into the silvery sea.

She stays dangling where she is for several long moments. Just hanging on as the strength flees her, gasping with exhaustion, limbs trembling, all of her threatening to drop at any moment.

Soft steps catch her attention.

She looks up, and on the edge of the cliff above her, a wolf sits, and looks down.

It is not white.

Its fur is the same russet colour that the pelt had been, and its eyes gleam golden. It twists its head, looking at her sideways, with something barely short of an indifference so profound that the universe could bow to it and it would not care to notice. Not the indifference of nobility, or privilege, but the indifference of nature. Of wind, and storms, and raging forest fires that care so little for what they destroy that they would not mind destroying nothing at all.

Then it grins at her.

She wakes with the impression of that grin burned into the back of her mind.

“Oh shit,” she says.

Curiosity is sitting on her chest, wide awake; eyes big and beak fixed around the collar of her shirt.

“Where did you go?” the parrot asks her.

Her heart pounds like a drum.

“I have no idea,” she whispers.

When she tries to sit up, she finds that she is covered in bruises.

~

She jostles Curiosity as she practically flies from the room, and she’s down the hall and throwing open the doors to Pride’s, muscles aching and scratches pulling, her breath trapped in her chest.

Pride startles awake at the slam of his door opening.

For a moment she just looks at him. His skin is unblemished; there’s not a scratch on it, not his
face, not on his neck, or the bare expanse of chest she can see. His expression is disoriented and alarmed, and there’s a raw edge to him, but that’s… that’s just what he’s been like, since. He’s fine. No bloodied fur.

No fur at all, she thinks, as he drags his blankets up to cover more of himself, and looks at her with ever-sharpening alarm.

“What?” he asks. “What has happened?”

She sags against the doorframe, and her breath comes out all in a rush.

A rustle of sheets, and then the soft sound of bare feet.

Pride stops at a polite distance, and peers at her. His expression turns wary, for a moment, and then hardens. One of his hands comes up. His fingers clench, and he lowers it back down to his side again. A whisper escapes him, too quick for her to catch; but the light in the room brightens, a bit.

He scowls.

“What did this?” he asks, gesturing towards her.

She blinks.

Then she realizes what he must be referring to, as in the brighter light, and in her sleeping clothes, it becomes obvious that the scratches and bruises and scrapes she can feel are just as visible from the outside. There’s blood smeared on her skin, and darkening marks.

No dirt or twigs, at least.

“It was a dream,” she says.

Pride moves fractionally closer.

“What did it?” he asks, again. He sounds low and furious.

“No one. It was a dream,” she repeats. “You were there. Or… I thought you were.”

His brow furrows.

“You think I did it?” he asks, with some obvious horror.

“No,” she says. “There were, just, things. Attacking. I led them off. You do not remember?”

His look of displeasure deepens as Curiosity arrives; in elven form rather than avian now.

“What other things?” he asks her.

“I have no idea! I went looking for her, but she was gone. So then I went looking for you, but I could not find you either. Neither of you were in the Dreaming. Or, not any part I could reach,” Curiosity says. Her eyes dart between them, wide and worried. “I had thought… sometimes she slips closer to the… to other things. But never you as well.”

“What other things?” Pride asks.

He makes a pained sound.

“You were planning on keeping quiet about that as well?” he asks her. “So you just slip off and dream about the dead world full of monsters that are trying to kill us all, and do not care to mention it to me? That did not make your list of disturbing revelations?”

His voice snaps, hard with anger and confusion, and pain, still, and she levels him with a hard look.

“It only happened once,” she says.

“Clearly not,” he replies, gesturing towards her.

“This was not the same,” she insists. “You were there.”

He stares at her a moment, and then runs a hand across his brow.

“I cannot remember what I dreamed,” he says, though it sounds more like he’s talking to himself than conceding any kind of point to her. “That does not happen to me often.”

“Nothing?” she prods.

His gaze darts to her face, and then over to the wall. He stares at a moment, his hand clasped over his mouth. He looks impossibly tense. There is a hard line to his shoulders, and a tightness to how he holds himself. The muscles of his torso are wound like a man readying for a fight.

“Nothing,” he finally admits. “It is possible I slept too poorly to dream. Unfriendly spirits may have deceived you. What did the creatures look like?”

She frowns.

Then she lets out a breath.

“Claws and shadows. And there was another wolf, besides you,” she admits.

“Another wolf? Like…?”

*Like another version of me?* he seems to ask.

The notion brings her up short.

If there was a chance… after all, he hadn’t known what would happen to him, had he? It could be possible, couldn’t it? For him to… to still be out there, somewhere?

But.

She would know him, she thinks.

And that wolf was a wolf of an entirely different sort.

For a moment she hears Keeper Deshanna’s voice in her memories, and old blessing slipping past her lips.

*May the Dread Wolf never catch your scent.*

She shakes her head. The Dread Wolf is an old story, and a revolutionary who hasn’t yet started any revolutions.
Curiosity gives her a gentle nudge.

“You are all banged up. Should I do the healing?” her friend offers.

Pride nods.

The magic washes over her, and though it doesn’t do much for the bloodstains, it seals the cuts and makes the bruises recede. When it’s done she still feels sore and drained, but at least less physically awful, with all things said and done.

“It is almost dawn,” Pride says. “Go dress. I will meet you outside, and we can discuss this matter further.”

He shifts, folding his arms across his chest, a little, as if conscious of the fact that he’s in nothing but a pair of loose pants.

She pulls away from the doorframe, and gives him one more look over, but there’s still no sign of any injury.

It’s a relief and frustration in one; at least if he’d had a scratch, that would have added some confirmation to his presence in the strange dream. But she can’t honestly say, recalling the blood on that white pelt, that she’d wish those injuries to linger.

Wordlessly, she turns, and goes.

A few eyes follow her passage from cracked open doorways.

There is barely a sliver of light on the horizon when she eventually makes her way outside. What is there spills through the open mouth of an envelope made by grey clouds and sturdy mountains. The beams catch on the corners of a few of the village’s taller buildings, and makes her think of the fine lines of spider webs; so intricate, and so often hard to see.

The sun has spread on to ignite the tops of some of the shorter buildings by the time Pride emerges. His skin is ashen, and his expression is pinched.

“None of the spirits I consulted knew anything of a move against you,” he says.

“If Curiosity could not find us, I am not surprised they had no knowledge of what was going on, either,” she reasons.

He shakes his head.

“I need to know what is going on. Truly,” he says.

“I have told you,” she replies, tightly.

“But do you understand now why I must see it?” he asks, as Curiosity stands to the side, and darts an anxious gaze between them.

“Because you cannot leave anything well enough alone?” she snaps.

It’s unfair.

She’s knows it’s unfair as soon as she says it, but it still slips out. Carried past her lips by fear and anger and frustration.
“Because you have no idea what is going on either, and I cannot help you if I cannot see!” he snaps back at her, his fists clenching. “What might you miss, in ignorance of how things like magic truly work, that could be readily apparent to my eyes? What might you have presumed, or misread, and misunderstood, by not knowing me as well as I know myself? What truths could be hiding in places that you have erroneously assumed you understand?”

Her gut clenches.

“You do not want me to treat you like an untrustworthy fool, so kindly extend me the same courtesy,” she says, coolly.

“It is neither about trust nor foolishness. It is about ignorance,” he tells her.

She turns her face towards the sunlight, and curses.

Ignorance.

“If you want my memories, you will have to pay for them,” she decides.

That brings him up short.

“I have a right to know,” he says, though he sounds a little uncertain.

“You have a right to know; you do not have a right to see,” she replies.

“That is true,” Curiosity asserts; her first comment since Solas strode out and joined them in the dawn.

His expression shifts, a little. Wary. More cool and distant. Professional, she supposes.

Fair enough. She has made this about bargaining, in the end.

“What price would you ask?” he wonders.

She sucks in a breath.

“You must promise me you will not let it unmake who you are,” she says.

He freezes.

“You must promise me you will hold onto yourself, no matter how terrible it seems,” she continues. “You must promise me you will not give in to despair, or that if you do, you will not let it reshape you into someone who forgets how to smile. You must promise that you will not hate yourself for these things that you have not done, just because you know that you may do them. You must promise me that you will still be… still be Solas, in the end.”

His gaze stays fixed on her for a long, quiet moment.

Then he swallows.

“I think I like it better when you call me Pride,” he finally says.

A twist of mingled elation and despair follow that assertion. Her eyes sting.

“Still be Pride, then,” she amends.
He looks away, and shakes his head a little.

“Are you certain you want such a promise, all things considered?” he asks.

“Yes. I am certain,” she declares.

Closing his eyes, he nods.

“Very well, then. Since I cannot see myself doing any of the things you have described – particularly as I know what their consequences are – then I agree to your terms. I shall not let my personal integrity be compromised, insofar as I am able to avoid it.”

The words ring formal, and solid, and they seem to settle between them.

After a moment, he turns to Curiosity.

“Keep an eye on the others,” he asks. “We may be gone a few days. If anyone comes looking, tell them we are scouting. Do not mention Haninan, and avoid mentioning the dwarves as much as possible.”

Curiosity nods.

“Of course. Absolutely.”

Pride looks back at her.

“We should go. The sooner we do this, the sooner we can begin to resolve things,” he decides.

She nods, and feels as if she’s walking to an execution as she moves into step alongside him.

They pass through the village’s eluvian, and out into the network of the crossroads. It is, as promised, not a terribly long trip through the majestic pathways. They come to a circle surrounded by statuary shaped like trees, and she wonders if it will someday become the first part of the crossroads she ever saw; the paths that Morrigan’s eluvian led onto.

But the mirror they take out is distinctly different, and when she steps through the light, she is surprised to find herself in a locale even more familiar.

She stills.

The eluvian they exited from is stationed on a small platform, drifting just slightly above a warded jungle clearing. Runes seem to be doing a job of keeping the plants at bay, but a few have still managed to persevere, and creep up the back of the tiled stage; bridging the inexplicable gap between platform and earth.

Why it has to float about two inches, she has no idea.

But most of her attention is reserved for the wilds around them. Teeming and vibrant, and though she could be mistaken, she doesn’t think she is.

The Arbor Wilds did not change so very much over all the long years.

“It is a rough road,” Pride tells her.

“I suspect I have seen it rougher,” she murmurs.
But the path they take holds no restored ancient bridges or pillars; no signs of grand heraldry, or temple monuments. She realizes, with a jolt, that they haven’t been restored because they probably haven’t been built yet.

Instead they trek across a rune-warded path. In a few places the runes have died – cracked and broken by the passage of large animals, or spent and never restored, it seems – and where they have been, the jungle has taken over again; unimpeded even by the scant protection of stone. Massive insects buzz in the air, and brightly coloured parrots zip through the trees; while strange animals call out to one another, hidden by morning mist.

She almost doesn’t realize it when they arrive at their destination.

It is… small.

There are pillars, but they are wooden instead of stone. Light, and twisting; they hover over the air, too, but they are filled with holes and hollows; pieces revolving, and where the wind kicks up, they make music. Soft, far-reaching sounds, and a few low whistles, that are answered by birds in the trees.

She wonders if the birds are elves.

“Could we be spied upon?” she asks.

“I will make certain we are not,” Pride replies. “But it is an old place. Not many come here anymore. The purpose it was originally built for has fallen out of practice, and a new one has yet to be devised.”

The pillars lead up to a shrine, which has been set into a clearing surrounded by massive blue and purple flowers. A sweet scent fills the air. There are no great statues. No images of dragons. A wooden wall curves around the lip of a stone pool. On it is carved the image of the moon, and a lady reaching towards it.

Mythal, she thinks.

But Mythal is back at her palace, and in a flash, instead, her mind turns towards a russet-furred wolf instead.

“What was this place originally for?” she asks, quietly.

“Storytelling,” Pride replies. “Passing along memories and knowledge. It still works, better than most places, but a spirit can do the job just as easily. Only… that is slightly more invasive.”

She nods a little, and then gestures to the wall.

“Who is she?” she asks.

“An old story. Mythal took her mantle from the legend of it. But we are not here for those tales,” he tells her.

She really wishes they were.

Her eyes close, and she sucks in a deep breath.

“What do you want me to do?” she asks.

He hesitates.
Just a moment.

“Stand by the pool,” he says.

She takes a step forward, and then pauses again.

“I will… it cannot be all of my memories. We would be here for years if that was the case. I will be able to – to choose, will I not?” she wonders.

“The waters will help pull the story from you,” he tells her. “There are spirits in them. Long dead and quiet, but they still have some sense of purpose. They will know how to weave what needs to be shown.”

“Dead spirits?”

He sighs.

“I will explain whatever you care to know about this place, in full, after we have dealt with the matter at hand,” he replies.

She laughs.

“You will not feel like doing much explaining after, I suspect,” she replies, more bitter than she expects.

But she makes herself go.

There’s a place to stand, she realizes. Worn wooden boards, and it makes her think of some of the fixtures of the campsites in the Free Marches. The few built-in things the clans left behind, to weather the elements and hope to still find when they returned. It’s a little cracked in places. She thinks the markings carved into it are decorative, but when she steps onto them, then glow with a faint light. The water in the pool isn’t dark, to her surprise; it’s clear, and a little silvery, and reflects the colour of the sky.

It is one of the most beautiful places she has seen in this time.

And she will probably never want to look at it again when this is over.

“Focus on the beginning,” he tells her. Then he frowns, and shifts. “Of relevant events. Not your whole life.”

“I gathered,” she assures him.

The beginning.

Where did it begin?

The conclave, probably. That’s where it began for her, anyway. She takes a breath, not sure what to expect, but it’s not too painful anymore, actually, to recall that particular trauma; waking up in a cell, something burning and crackling green in her hand, angry humans threatening her. Is this it? Do I die like this, another elf killed by enraged shemlen? What even happened?

The memory of that thought slips up in her mind, more clearly than she would have recalled it herself. There’d been so much chaos at the time, most of that day was lost in a jumble of running and fighting and wondering when she was going to die, and why the world had suddenly decided to flip itself onto its head just shortly before that happened.
Something creeps up the edges of her perception, bright and clear.

Pride inhales, a little sharply.

She opens her eyes and sees herself.

Herself as she was. Clear as if someone had hand carved a perfect, somewhat smaller model, and set it atop the shimmering pool. The outlines of the walls around the image of herself grow faint and faded, and her mind feels strange; like something’s tugging at the back of it. But she can’t help marveling a little herself, at how young she looks.

Not necessarily physically that much younger. But there is a plainness to her fear, a lack of weight to her shoulders. A softness to her eyes that makes her think of inexperience and vulnerability.

Comparative inexperience and vulnerability, of course.

This is, after all, a time when she had been infused with mysterious magic and imprisoned by hostile forces.

Cassandra strides into the room, and the interrogation begins. Hearing the Seeker’s voice tugs at her. The image shifts as she is dragged out, and shown the breach; a bright spot that appears above the rest of the scene, hovering close enough that she could reach out and wrap her hand around it.

She almost does.

It’s not so bad, at first. The memories skip through most of the running and fighting. They stop again when she meets Solas, but watching that meeting play out feels less strange than watching the memories in her dreams, where they’re life-sized and looking towards her.

He takes her hand, and holds it towards the rift.

She watches the moment again, and something knots and unknots in her chest. Varric introduces her to Bianca. They pick their way through the ruined temple, and she watches her broken memories play out in a projection of her other memories, and wonders what would have happened if she’d tried to start there; but those images have always felt a little second-hand, even after she got them back.

It’s surprising, she thinks, how much she forgot. Little things that slipped by, even as she tried to cling to them. She can see why people would want a place like this. Just to look, and to share.

She almost crouches down to watch herself more closely as she meets Dorian for the first time, and makes her own decision to change time.

Not that she’s the only one making it, at least.

Another Solas lost, she thinks, and it’s painful all over again to watch him fall. And Leliana.

She wonders if they are trapped as well, and if what she’s doing can possibly help them, too. And not for the first time.

But it’s… it doesn’t hurt as much as she expected. She doesn’t know if it’s some effect of the process, but it’s almost strangely comforting, she finds. She sees her friends and hears their voices, and they’re not looking to her, asking her to replay the past she’s lost; they’re with her. Another version of her. Reliving it, pressing it all more firmly into her mind.
She smiles a little, when she kisses Solas in the Fade, and then nearly runs off like a nervous teenager. Before, of course, he catches her, and kisses her back tenfold.

“Ma vhenan,” she whispers.

Something warm spills onto her cheek.

These are the good days, she knows, though they did not feel like them at the time. But these are the days when they win their battles, and their enemies are enemies, and the memories tell the story but something they throw in pieces, here and there, that almost seem more like they are for than anything else; drinking with the Chargers, and spying on Solas painting, and playing pranks with Sera, and taking Cole to fancy Orlesian restaurants.

The Arbor Wilds are a sight to behold; watching herself run through the same jungle she’s standing in, but so different. Meeting Mythal who is Flemeth, who is human and so very wild and frayed and removed from the striking evanuris.

And then Crestwood. Moonlight and broken hearts.

*You are so beautiful.*

He walks away.

She understands, now, how impossible it must have felt for him to try and explain.

The scene doesn’t linger on her reaction, and she is glad for that.

The story moves on.

Corypheus. Distractions. The shadows of a vanishing lover, gone without goodbyes. The qunari. A reunion before an eluvian; a figure clad in hard armour rather than soft fabrics, with eyes that flash silver, and take the anchor from her hand, and leave behind flesh that falls away in shattered, magic-riddled pieces, until the surgeon can finally clean the stump of it for her.

And then, she braces herself.

Running. Searching. Digging for every possible answer in Thedas; becoming increasingly desperate as her efforts turn up nothing.

She wants to stop, now.

The narrative continues, though, and she finds she cannot bring herself to look away, either. She watches friends die. Watches quests fail. Sees her hand fail to swing the blade; watches herself lose her eye. Broken all down the left side.

She sees the end. Or what should have been the end, but wasn’t. The fold in time spreads over the scene in a golden line, and at the end, when she flings herself through it, she reaches out, and give in to impulse, and touches the edge of it.

The image fades away.

It’s dark, she realizes for the first time.

It’s dark, and in the gloom lit by ancient stars and faded runes, Pride is on his knees.
She steps down from the platform, quietly.

Even in the dark, the jungle around them is still vibrant. Bits of phosphor gleam on the petals of the massive flowers. Runes glow faintly, and the pool behind her looks like another moon; fallen from its pedestal and left to rest, tranquil, upon the earth.

The starlight still catches on his brightness, in her eyes.

She moves until she’s standing in front of him, and then she kneels, too, across from him. The moss is soft against her knees.

His gaze finally shifts away from where it’s stayed fixed the pool, and he looks at her. The despair in his eyes is one she knows. She’s seen it on that same face, before. She’s seen it in reflections. It’s heavy, and it hurts. He didn’t find what he was looking for in her memories.

He found the opposite.

Just like she knew he would.

“You should kill me,” he tells her, softly.

The words aren’t really a surprise, as little as she wants to hear them.

She shakes her head.

“Never,” she tells him. “I could never; and you do not deserve it.”

His expression cracks, and as she watches, he breaks apart. His chest heaves and he sucks in a panicked breath, his shoulders shake, tears spill from his eyes as his face twists. He sobs. Great, gasping sounds as he clutches the ground, and bows, and comes entirely undone. Each sound he makes claws at her. The grief and fear and pain wracks through him, so massive that the air trembles, and even she can’t escape feeling it. So primal and blatant that there’s no denying what it is.

She reaches for him. She can’t possibly do anything else. Her hand closes around his shoulder, but the tentative touch just makes him sob harder.

Something flits through the air. A bright bird, dropping down from the trees.

Before either of them can really react, there’s a flare of magic, and a friend slumps down on the ground, landing on Pride’s other side.

Curiosity is red-eyed, and more wild-looking than usual. Frayed at her own edges. Her arms close tightly around Pride.
So much for no one else watching, she thinks, and for half a second she’s almost afraid.

But Curiosity just holds Pride tight. Tightly as she wishes to, in fact. The grief in the air thickens. Pride sucks in a shuddering breath, and looks as though he might speak. But whatever words he wants to find must fail him. After a moment, his misery overtakes him again.

He clutches Curiosity as he sobbs.

She withdraws her own touch, and grips at the mossy ground beside her instead.

For a long while, there’s just the night, and the sound of Pride’s ragged breaths. Every time it looks like he may be reaching an equilibrium, something seems to strike him anew, and he starts over again. The air is so thick and heavy, she almost expects it to rain.

It doesn’t.

Curiosity looks at her with wide, wet eyes.

When it finally subsides, Pride is an utter wreck, and she has all but dug a trench into the ground beside herself.

She draws in a long breath of her own.

“I saw him again, in the chamber of the Titan’s heart. An echo of him,” she says, quietly. “He told me to tell you, if you ever found out… he said, tell him ‘I once sacrificed a world to save someone I loved. Then, to make it right, I tried to sacrifice someone I loved to save a world. But I missed the truth until it was far too late. Sacrifice nothing that you do not own; and always remember that you own no one but yourself’.”

Pride closes his eyes.

It’s the wrong thing to say, she thinks; it only starts his weeping again.

For a long while, again, that’s all there is. Her nails catch on a stone buried in the earth below her.

“I remember,” Curiosity says, gently. “I remember the Spirit of Valour. Do you remember it?”

She looks at Curiosity, wondering. Pride shudders and doesn’t really answer. But their friend carries on.

“So boisterous, and never wavering. The banner of Mythal’s battlefields. Not that I saw any of those in person, but it always spoke so highly of them. And then there was that battle. And no one could speak highly of it. The children who were killed when the village burned, along with all the other innocents. And when Valour came back from the battlefield, and it was Rage instead. The pain of the world had changed it.”

Pride swallows.

Curiosity lets him go.

“We were both spirits, once. We know how even the best can be corrupted. They say, when you take a body, you cannot be corrupted in the same ways. But the answer is, everyone can be corrupted; body or no. It is always possible, but that is not the same as it being inevitable.”

She glances away, and looks towards the gleaming silver glow cast from the pool.
“It would be one thing to know it was possible,” Pride says, quietly. His voice is rough and cracked. “But it happened. There are consequences to it, here and now. It is not simply an abstract. It is real.”

Her breath stops.

She tilts her face up, and stares at the sky; the distant canopy of the trees around the clearing, and the stars above. Bright as the Titan’s heart. Is that what they are, she wonders? The beating hearts of a thousand distant gods? Do any of them deign to care what happens down here?

Have they ever?

It is real, absolutely it is real, and it happened; and there’s definitely no going back and changing any of it, now.

But she won’t fail again. She won’t fail them, and she won’t fail him, and she won’t fail another world.

“I am sorry. I am so, so sorry. It is not enough, but I am sorry,” Pride says.

She shakes her head.

“You did not do it,” she tells him. “I know who did it. I lost him. You are him, and you are also not him. You can make different choices, because you know things he did not. You are not responsible for his actions, and you are not doomed to repeat his mistakes… or share his fate. Curiosity’s right. When you were a spirit, and you took a body, you changed. If I went back in time and told that spirit not to, would that spirit still be you? Or someone you used to be? Someone who could still decide for themselves what they would do, and who they would become; whether it was you or something else.”

He stares at her for a long, quiet while.

“Is that why you asked me to stay the same?” he wonders. “So I would not become a monster?”

_You never became a monster_, she thinks.

She shakes her head.

“You saw it. You saw what I saw. Did you honestly see a monster?” she wonders.

He hesitates, for a moment.

“I saw someone who did monstrous things,” he finally says. “I am not so sure there is much difference, in the end.”

She closes her eyes.

A fair point, in many ways.

Things quiet, for a time. The noises of the jungle around them fill up the air in the silence, and she realizes that they must have been uncommonly silent, before. The air feels a little less oppressive.

Still heavy, but maybe… survivable, now.

“I did not want to lie to you,” she says. “But I did not want to put this weight on you, either.”
He looks up at her.

“You threw food at me,” he says, very softly.

She blinks.

“I destroyed your world, and you threw food at me.”

He laughs.

It’s not a happy laugh.

Curiosity looks up at her with wide, worried eyes again, and she lets out a breath.

“Shall we be monsters together, then?” she asks. “Both of us horrible wretches? I destroyed a world, too, remember?”

“That was not the same,” he says.

“The end result was not far off, if we are judging by consequences more than intent,” she replies.

He looks up at her, and his eyes are sharp, now. Hard.

Gently, he pushes Curiosity off of him, and stands.

“You destroyed a future that asked you to,” he tells her. “But, very well. Let us overlook the terrible nature of such choices, and the consequences we were both ignorant of. That wolf you loved decided the fate of your people, and his verdict was death. And then he hung their only chance of survival on your shoulders. Rather than finding a solution, he created a war, and hoped he would lose against opponents who had only a few scant decades and the barest scraps of knowledge to contend against him with. He asked the impossible of you, and when you speak of this, you speak of your failure. Because he made it your failure. He was like the worst of them, using People as sacrifices, lamenting the burdens of necessity, leaving you in the dark whilst comforting himself on fantasies of you somehow succeeding anyway.”

He is fierce, and furious; grief and despair breaking into a brittle anger that’s shockingly palpable.

“It was not the same. He does not deserve any of your defenses, and you do not deserve any of the fault,” he tells her, firmly. Absolutely certain of this assessment of his. Of where guilt and blame should lie; and where wrathful punishment ought to fall, too.

She doesn’t think she’s ever heard him sound so much like Solas before.

“Stop,” she asks him.

The air around them changes a little. Turns less sharp. Some of the hardness in his expression falters.

“I know what he did,” she says. “But I am not helpless. None of us were. If he could have offered me something that would have helped find a better solution, then he would have. Because he wanted it, too. He was not playing games or toying with us. The difference was that he did not truly think a better way existed, and I did. I did not try to save my world or save him because he wanted me to. I tried because that is what people do, when their world and when someone they love is at stake. They try.”

Pride’s brow furrows, and she sighs.
“That is what he did, too. Mythal fell, and the world suffered, and he tried. And I would have tried, too, in his place.”

There is another moment. Long and drawn.

“You would not have sacrificed a world full of people on the altar of your mistakes,” Pride finally declares, with unwavering certainty.

Before she can respond to that, or even think to, the air around him wavers. There’s the snap of magic, a light which she has to avert her gaze from. She feels a spike of fear at the uncertainty of what spell he’s suddenly casting. But when the shine of it clears, she finds only that a white wolf has taken the place of the elf standing before her.

There are threads of grey in his fur now.

She wonders if he put them there on purpose.

The wolf stares at her, and then averts his gaze. He walks with heavy steps towards the mouth of the path, away from the Well and the clearing. His tail drags and his shoulders slump.

“We should return, now. There is no more reason to stay here,” he says.

She cast a gaze back to the shining waters, and feels a brief pang of unexpected longing. To go back, again. To see, again. To maybe stay, and linger, and hear the voices of loved ones lost, and all the places she will never again return to. She thinks, for a moment, that there is a genuine danger of her slipping into the waters, and never leaving them again. Drifting, forever, in the story of her life. Replaying it on and on.

A hand breaks the line of her vision.

She follows it up towards Curiosity’s face. The young woman is standing, now, and staring down at her with determination.

After a breath, she takes the offered hand, and finds a strong grip helping her back onto her feet.

They both fall into step behind the wolf.

The jungle is deep and dark around them, and the path back to the eluvian is shadowed and more difficult to follow. Animals scurry ahead of them. Gleaming eyes that reflect the shine of the sporadic runes marking the way. They probably should have camped at the well, she thinks, but Pride moves quietly on, obviously unwilling to linger. His paws are near-silent over the ground. It reminds her of the dream, of the hunters chasing him.

Her eyes watch the darkness.

~

It’s dawn again by the time they get back to the village, and she feels as though she hasn’t slept for a week. Pride remains a wolf, though this sudden change in preference doesn’t seem to disconcert the other elves in their group, and they still listen to him as obligingly as they had when he’d been shaped like an elf instead.
There is a uneasy quiet between them. The yawning chasm of the truth remains, with no bridge she can see to cross it. But she can’t quite bring herself to leave him alone, either.

“Stay with him,” she asks Curiosity.

“He asked me to stay with you,” Curiosity replies. “What if we all just stayed together?”

She shakes her head.

“I am fine; he is not,” she declares, and while that’s probably stretching the definition of ‘fine’ to the point of breaking, it’s also true. She’s known it all since the beginning. If anything, apart from its effect on Pride, seeing it all again has been… unexpectedly helpful. It’s made a story. No less true than it ever was, but something that can be told. Shared. Remembered. Like the Titan singing the names she gave it. A thing unto itself that can be carried through, from one world to another.

Not that she’s in a hurry to share it with anyone else.

Even Curiosity knowing what happened feels like another witness too many, but she can’t bring herself to resent her friend for following them. She is Curiosity, after all; and she’s good for Pride.

“Shame is hard for him. It burns against the core of him; he is not good at enduring it,” Curiosity admits, worriedly.

“No,” she agrees. A thought occurs to her. “The Spirit of Valour you reminded him of… was that Rage? The Rage I know?” she wonders.

After a moment, Curiosity nods.

“Why do spirits change like that?” she wonders.

“Because we… because they are certain,” Curiosity tells her. “In dreams, everything is simpler. It is why, when you are dreaming, even the strangest things only seem to make sense. Even questions are just questions. If something seems real or feels real, then it is. Or, at least, it is as real as anything else is to you. When that certainty is shattered, you can no longer continue on the way that you did before. Spirits have to find something new to be certain of. But when you have a body, I think… you have to learn that you cannot be certain anymore. That even the answers you think you know best can all be swept away. It is funny,” Curiosity smiles. “They say the Dreaming is malleable, and the Waking is fixed. But there is so much more certainty in dreams than there ever is here.”

She lets out a breath, and remembers Cole.

“It is easier. More comforting,” she muses.

“Yes,” Curiosity agrees.

With a nod to herself, she retreats back to her room in the village. They will be leaving for Mythal’s palace tomorrow, according to Pride. She closes the door, hopes Curiosity will heed her request and stay with him, and then gives in to her exhaustion.

Or tries to.

She lies awake, even so.

It’s all so big, and they’re all so small. She stares at her left hand, and thinks of home. Real, long-
lost, proper home. Trees and campsites. Hunts and stories, and the biggest danger in the world being ‘shemlen’ out for their blood. Keeper Deshanna, placing a hand on her head when she was small and sick.

For some reason she drifts into that memory, when she dreams. Being small and hot with fever, curled up into one of the aravels in the middle of camp. It had been winter. Cold. The whole clan had visited her while she was sick, it seemed; fussing over the little one with the fevered eyes. In the dream the aravel looks bigger than it should be, as compared to her grown form. Cold air and dark walls, fighting off the frostbitten winds, and incense burning as Deshanna coaxes medicine into her.

The world is foggy and diffused, and she sits and stares, and remembers it herself even as it plays on around her. Feeling not the least bit scared, despite her sickness. Feeling safe and looked after and loved, even when the clan had been forced to pack and flee, suddenly, at word of armed humans accompanying Templars through the wilds.

The argument she recalls starts up around her.

“We cannot move the child through the cold!” Deshanna snaps at their lead scout.

“Our warriors cannot face down such numbers,” the scout returns. “If we stay, we risk more deaths than one child’s, and that child’s besides.”

She listens, again, as the risks are weighed. She’d been packed up in the end. Bundled into more furs and blankets than she was ever generally afforded, and she’d been bored, mostly, and tired of the burn in her throat and the fog in her head. She’d dreamed of taking up a sword and defending the clan from the forces they were fleeing. Of standing with the warriors and making sure none of them fell.

Of returning the protection she felt, the safety she felt, to those who had granted it to her.

To those who needed it.

She wakes up and stares at a ceiling made of stars instead of cloth.

The procession back to Mythal’s palace is a quiet one. Pride – still a wolf – looks at her, but doesn’t speak to her as he leads them through the crossroads again. Past winding paths, as Curiosity walks alongside him; occasionally glancing back towards her, though.

She finds herself drifting at the rear of their party. Not out of any particular desire to put distance between them, but because of an old habit; one she thought had been trained out of her by her time with the Inquisition. A clan’s warriors walked to the back of the procession, while hunters and scouts took the lead. Bows at the front and shields at the back.

She has no shield, but she still feels better putting herself there. Watching as they wind their way across narrow roads, and past a long drop into a dreamy, cloud-like expanse, and then on through the eluvians until they emerge in the central chamber of Mythal’s palace again.

Their party disperses, with an obvious air of relief. The palace is full of magic and energy and noise, all playing up her nerves, and she finds she can’t share it. But it’s still not so bad as it could be. Not as bad as it was at first, at least. And better than the strange twisting, the odd, lingering internal pressures of the crossroads, or the stifling weight of the Deep Roads.

Paths through sky and paths through earth.
Pride approaches her, as Curiosity lingers.

He stops a polite distance away, and looks at her a moment. As if he doesn’t know what to make of her anymore.

Then he lets out a breath.

“I shall go and report to Mythal,” he tells her.

She considers this.

“What will you tell her?” she asks.

“Even an hour ago, I had no idea,” he admits. “…I will tell her about the dwarves. And the Blight. I will tell her… what she must know to make a wise decision. And that Andruil has been harassing another dwarven city.”

She blinks.

“Nothing else?” she wonders.

“Nothing else. For now,” he declares.

Another long silence descends between them.

Slowly, he turns away again, and pads off out of the chamber. Curiosity hesitates for a moment before following him.

When they’re gone, she turns back to the massive mirror behind herself, and wonders if she shouldn’t simply leave. Pride knows the truth now, and the evanuris are easily as dangerous to her as they are potentially useful to her quest. Probably more, in fact. She could find her way back to the mountains, she thinks. Go from there. Maybe track down Haninan and Hildur again, or seek out the Sha-Brytol, or try any number of things on her own.

She thinks of the dream of two wolves, and blood on bright fur, and turns away.

Instead she heads back through the corridors of the palace, and tries to look at it with new eyes. This is Pride’s home. His first one, probably. She trails her gaze over the tile mosaics, and sculptures, and feats of magic and beauty and artistry. She makes it back to her room without finding any delight in them; though at least, she thinks, she can see more of the appeal. Not even simply in the aesthetic, but in the challenge of a craft. Of completing something worth showing to others.

She shucks off her elven armour, and slips back into her old clothes; left behind since her trip to Arlathan.

It’s easier to breathe in them.

Then she makes her way to the gardens again, and then on to the practice field. For a time she finds her footsteps echo, and when she looks up she sees the Spirit of Sorrow, trailing a mirror of her path along the ceilings. Eventually it drifts off, though, and through dint of searching, she finally finds Rage in the palace’s northernmost corridors; glowering into the eyes of the statuary there.

“You have returned,” the spirit notes.

“I have. I fear I lost the sword you gave me,” she says.
“Did you fight whoever took it from you?” Rage asks.

“I was not there to fight the people who took it from me,” she replies.

“Yet they took it from you still. Thieves. You should go back and cut them down for it,” the spirit condemns, dragging sharp fingers across the edges of the statue across from it.

She moves a little closer, and stares at Rage’s target. An elven soldier, sculpted mid-strike, weapon raised and shield lying, abandoned, upon the ground. Made of something that looked halfway between mosaic tiles and liquid gold; reflecting colours strangely where they landed upon it.

Rage’s flames burn blue. Hot and cold. Bitter and resentful.

“I need another sword. But more importantly, I need a shield,” she says.

“Why?” Rage asks. “I could find you a sword. I could find you a cleaver, too heavy to be carried off by thieves. I could forge you one of dreams.”

“I want to protect,” she says.

“It is futile. Those who fight kill. They do not protect. Brandishing sword and shield or sword alone, it does not matter. Blood is spilled. The only question is if the blood is worth spilling,” Rage tells her, its voice echoing through the hall around them.

The long windows at the end of the corridor look out across another garden. The light spilling in is grey, filtered through clouds; and through Rage’s fire, she sees another shape within it.

“Are you really a Spirit of Rage?” she asks.

“Yes,” it replies.

She draws in a long breath.

Rage is near-sighted, but powerful. It can backfire spectacularly. But it can also be what saves someone, in the heat of a dangerous moment. Or what drives someone back onto their feet when they’ve faltered. Rage can provide strength. But sustained, it can only exhaust, and twist, and burn out.

“Will you help me find a shield?” she asks.

“I will help you find a sword,” Rage replies.

“Where did you find the first one?” she wonders.

“I pulled it from the Dreaming,” the spirit says. “Such things can be made by my will. A shield is beyond me.”

“Why?” she asks.

The spirit looks at her with bright and burning eyes.

“Rage is a poor shield,” it tells her.

She tilts her head, a little.

“I have never heard of a Spirit of Rage making such things before. Though I have known Spirits of
Valour to,” she notes.

Rage snarls.

The air shakes, and a wash of heat strikes at her. Not strong enough to be frightening, though. She stands her ground, and folds her arms, and waits for it to subside. There’s a strange clash of energy. An electric pull-and-tug, and she feels… connected to it. Or at least, sympathetic to it. Solas had told her, on more than one occasion, that the future was full of demons because that was what people expected to find.

But it could not – could never – have been expectation alone.

“Valour is for fools,” Rage says, bitter and acrid, words practically dripping onto the ground. “There is no glory in battle. There are only those who must burn, and those who must do the burning.”

She looks into the spirit’s eyes. Into the fractured light of its being.

“Find me a sword, then,” she asks.

“What will you offer me in return?” Rage wonders, subsiding only a little, and with the barest flicker of interest.

“A shield,” she says.

Confusion twists its countenance. She almost expects a question, or a denial, or more of the flurry of its anger. But then it slides down, drifting away through the walls and the ground, and failing to reappear at all in the open window behind it.

A few butterflies drift towards the sill; they are blasted away again when Rage returns.

The blade it brings her is massive, indeed. Wickedly sharp and heavy. Simple, compared to the artistry around them. A solid grey blade, a long handle, easily gripped. No adornments. Just an edge built to cut, and a weight made to crush. Enough to strain her, a little, and force her to readjust to it.

“Come on,” she asks, nodding in satisfaction.

She gets a better feel for the balance of the weapon as they take to the garden.

It’s one of the nicer ones, though not one of the truly beautiful, well-trafficked sorts. There are broad, golden flowers, and pretty insects, and birds, and slender trees with white bark and silvery leaves shaped like stars. A few elves are milling quietly in a further-off corner of the space. Their eyes track her curiously.

She looks the trees over, and nods in satisfaction.

Rage follows.

“Try and destroy them,” she suggests.

The spirit flares, but then subsides, slightly.

“I am discouraged from such things,” it says.

She scoffs.
“You are a Spirit of Rage that can be discouraged?” she asks.

“I am not angry at the trees,” it snaps back.

“No,” she agrees. “You are angry at the battle. At the loss. You are angry at the fight that never should have been fought, and the cost that was not worth it. You are angry because what you strove for was an illusion, and the innocent died and the guilty lived, and went back to their gilded halls, and you were never the same but they have never changed. You are angry because blood is spilled for unworthy causes. For gardens and tapestries and statues that glorify what is horrible. You are angry because this world spits on everything you are, and I know it, because it makes me angry, too.”

Rage stares at her.

“Destroy the trees,” she says.

It lunges forwards, and the air burns.

And she curves her blade and chases the cold fire from the sky. Slants the edge and sends up a gust of wind, peppered by her will and her scant mastery of it, she buffets the flames away from the slender branches. Her stance firms and her muscles strain, and when Rage charges at her, long claws and sharp motions, she’s ready.

She defends.

It is, despite it all, a purely furious fight.

Rage is fast and unyielding and it takes every ounce of her to counter its strikes, to sweep away its flames and meet its blows, and keep it from sweeping behind her or ducking around her. It snarls rather than roars; it sweeps at her, sometimes brutal and deathly strong, sometimes chaotic and relentless and everywhere, all at once. It’s impossible to counter in its entirety. Branches are singed and her arm is burned, and her blade grows hot and heavy and her muscles scream; her muscles sing. She meets it, angry herself, but also more than angry.

This world is corrupted.

This world is a mockery.

But it isn’t hollow. Trees might grow in frivolous gardens, tiered by their relative luxury, existing as statements of opulence as much as escapes. But they are still trees. People may change, or go back, or become so remarkably different; but they are still themselves.

Even spirits are still themselves.

Underneath it all, what makes the heart of a thing cannot be snuffed out. What they are. Who she is.

Who he is.

She blocks a blast of flame that singes her cheeks, and gets the flat of her blade against Rage, and in one swift, unyielding move, forces the spirit downwards.

It breaks away, and moves back, and finally, the assault reaches its end.

She sucks in a deep breath, and lowers the heavy blade at last. Turns, and looks, and sees a few
charred leaves and blackened branches on the trees behind her. Nothing they won’t survive, though; and already, it seems, the damaged leaves are dropping, and new ones are budding in their place. The branches look like they might take longer.

Not so pretty anymore, but still quite alive.

Panting from exertion, she looks back at Rage.

Its flames have quieted, somewhat; in broad daylight she can see it even better. The faint outline of its figure. Battered armour. Broken helmet.

“See?” she says, offering the sword back to it. “You made a shield.”

The spirit stares at the weapon. Then up, at the trees around them; at the damage, and also the lack of it. The pristine trunks, and unmarred central branches.

Reaching out, it takes it; and it seems to her that the battered figure beneath the flames gleams a little brighter.

“The song of battle broke,” it tells her. “I thought I was glorious. But my pedestal burned, as it was only made of tinder. What I was… it did no good. To lift such things so high only so they could fall. Valour is a lie told by generals, to comfort soldiers sent to die; to make them feel honoured when they do so bravely. It cannot exist in a battle unjustly waged.”

It does no good to put things too high. Not ideals, not principles, not one’s self. Not innocence. Not wisdom.

Not even one’s love.

She notices, then, that they have drawn something of a crowd; elves watching, intent and wide-eyed at a distance. She wonders if it’s because of the trees. But most of their gazes are fixed on Rage, and not the battered leaves and branches.

“Rage is honest,” the spirit says.

“Rage is exhausting,” she replies. “It’s brave to keep on when you’re exhausted. To push through it. To find the fuel to keep burning.”

“It is.”

She honestly isn’t sure what she expects. But when the light gleams, and the spirit’s flames bank down, she’s worried, for a minute, that she’s just done something awful. The air clears. The last of the smoking heat draining from it. It wraps around them, and the gathered elves put out flurries of emotion that are almost swept away.

The spirit left behind is dimmer than before. There are no flames about it, and no armour, either. It is of narrow frame, thin-limbed and roughly her own size, and the shell of its skin is split with cracks and peeled away in places. But through the cracks gleams golden light; and its eyes are blue, and steely, and fierce.

“Rage?” she asks, tentatively. “…Valour?”

The spirit shakes its head.

“I am Fortitude,” it declares, and draws itself up, and lets out a long breath.
She gapes.

“How is that possible?” she asks.

“What valour can inspire; what rage cannot burn away. Thank you,” Fortitude says, meeting her gaze. Then it shifts the blade in its grasp. Wisps of burning blue spread across the metal. It twists, and warps, and burns up. And when it’s done, the massive, heavy blade is gone.

In its place is a smaller blade, fit for a single hand.

And a shield. Patterned in the same gleaming cracks that cover Fortitude’s form.

The spirit extends them towards her.

“Did I do you harm?” she wonders, reaching for them a little hesitantly.

“No,” Fortitude promises her.

The straps of the shield and the handle of the blade feel warm when she touches them. She accepts them, with care, and is startled when the spirit before her leans forward and presses a chaste kiss to her brow. Wisps of energy and light, a faint touch, there and then gone.

“You must not let them break your song,” it tells her.

She gapes, unnerved by the unintended dual meaning of that statement.

And just how unintended it might or might not be.

Then Fortitude sinks into the earth at her feet.

The assembled elves all seem to look at her where she stands, gripping her sword and shield, in front of the singed trees of the garden. She shifts, slightly, not certain what kind of reception she should expect. The emotions she can perceive are still thick in the air.

Most of the onlookers seem flabbergasted.

“I shall just… go now,” she decides, and makes a swift retreat of her own.

~

She manages to avoid most of the rest of the residents of the palace – searching for Compassion, primarily, and coming up empty-handed – until the evening meal. At which point the pressing matter of her hunger overrides her general unease at having no idea what the reaction to Fortitude’s… existence will be.

It’s a bit of a surprise to turn down the corridor towards the dining hall and find Pride waiting for her, though.

He’s still a wolf.

For a moment, they regard one another in silence.
“We should speak,” Pride finally declares.

She nods in acknowledgement. If he’s finished updating Mythal on the current situation, then they definitely should.

Before they can actually get any further than that, however, an unfamiliar elf rounds the opposite corner of the hall, and begins to head towards them.

She almost expects him to keep going straight past them, but the determination in his stride tips her off to his true intentions. It’s still something of a surprise, though, when he stops next to them, and turns towards her rather than Pride.

“You. Come with me,” the elf says, in a tone of voice that implies he’s not pleased to be asking her, and that he expects her to oblige him without even the barest hint of hesitation.

“What do you want with her?” Pride asks, a little sharply.

The elf glances sideways towards him.

“Mythal has asked that I bring this one to her,” he says. “Having been suddenly demeaned to the status of errand runner, I would prefer to get the matter done with quickly. If you do not mind?”

“Mythal could have asked me to bring her,” Pride replies, obviously a little unsettled.

“Yes. And she should have,” the strange elf replies. “But she did not.”

He then snaps his fingers at her – in a manner not entirely unlike a trainer calling a dog to heel – and takes off back down the way he came.

She hesitates, a moment. But rude or not, she decides it would probably be better to follow him, and just get it over with. There could be any number of reasons for this unexpected summons. It could be to do with the mission, or with Fortitude, or even with some questions about her ‘other world’, given what Pride has likely told her.

A moment later, and Pride falls into step alongside her.

The elf glances back, and huffs.

“Such an elaborate escort for a lowly servant,” he declares.

“You may go, if you are so distraught; I will take her to Mythal,” Pride replies.

“Shirk my duties? Never,” the elf says.

Their steps take them down past the entrance to the dining hall, and past several more large chambers. Past the entrance to the throne room, even, and up, and up, climbing several staircases that twist their around hanging sculptures that shine as water trails down over them from above.

It’s enough of a climb, after everything, that she’s tired when they finally reach the top. The stairs give way to a platform that seems to be the very highest point of the palace. A large fountain dominates the middle of it, draining the water down into the stairwell from the open mouth of a curling dragon. Woven railings break up the view of the forests, and a distant lake. Vast and shining beneath the sun. The air that drifts over them is sweet, and the canopy overhead sends scattering shapes and shadows of dancing figures across the floor.

Mythal stands, looking out over the lake. She is clad in a green dress. Simpler than most of the
ones she’s seen her in before. But the belt of it is lined with ornate and elaborately carved blades.

The evanuris turns towards them.

“Leave us,” she asks.

The surly elf bows, and proceeds back down the way they came.

She doesn’t envy him his hike.

Mythal looks at Pride, and raises an eyebrow.

Pride hesitates, just a moment. He glances at her, but then, a moment later, head back down as well.

“Close the door, please,” Mythal requests.

She does; it thunks heavily into place, and some trace of magic gleams along the edges of it.

For a moment, there is quiet. The sound of the wind has been dampened, though she can still see it moving the canopy over their heads. The air still smells sweet. But it’s cold, too; and Mythal looks a little cold as well, standing in contrast to the distant lake.

“What happened to the Spirit of Fortune?” Mythal asks her.

She blinks.

Of all the questions she’d expected, that wasn’t one of them.

“Something has happened to the Spirit of Fortune?” she replies, warily.

Mythal turns to her. Smiles a little, but it’s not quite a friendly smile. It’s a little too knowing for that; a little too sharp around the edges.

“That spirit is an old friend. A good one to have. I confess, I may have asked it to keep an eye on you. Good fortunes can often turn that tide of any great endeavour. Particularly diplomatic ones,” Mythal explains. “But it has gone. I have searched and searched, and found no trace of it. The last I knew, it had been trying to find you in the dwarven kingdom.”

For some reason, her thoughts drift to the first strange dream she had. Running through unfamiliar woods, and finding flecks of shattered gold at the edges of a flower-strewn grotto.

“He found me,” she says. “He tried to barter with me, but I denied him, and he left. That was the last I saw of him.”

“That is worrying,” Mythal tells her.

“I am sorry. I wish I could offer more,” she replies.

The evanuris smiles, again.

“An interesting sentiment, considering how much more you could have to offer.”

She shifts. There’s a shield at her back and a sword at her belt, and she has just been given the sudden and strong impression that they might be needed.
Though against the woman before her, she’s not entirely sure how much they would avail her.

“To what do you refer?” she asks.

Mythal sighs.

“I must tell you, when you make a vow, never make it based on intentions. Not unless you are prepared to reveal the truth of them to the person extracting it from you. I had my suspicions before then. But even a quick heart would strain to reach the level of devotion I read in you. Not so soon. Not still while you were barely keeping your head above your grief,” the evanuris tells her.

She feels much, much colder now.

“Pride has his charms,” Mythal continues. “But to inspire such unyielding, unwavering depth – no. Not with how little had passed between you. There were other clues, but none so absolute. You are not from another world. You are from another time.”

More silence.

She swallows.

“Yes,” she admits. Not much point in trying to deny it, now.

Mythal only inclines her head. Acknowledging her admission, at the least.

“Pride did not tell me.”

She hadn’t, she realizes, even guessed that he might have.

Slowly, the supposed mother goddess of her people, the woman who would become a ghost, who would become Flemeth, strode towards the mouth of the fountain. Then regarded her, another moment, in silence. Looking over her clothes, her weapon and shield, the vallaslin on her face, and seemingly all the features involved.

It paused, again, over her heart.

“What Pride told me was that remnants from another world have poisoned this one. Remnants of your future, I presume. I had thought, given your attachment, that it was nearly certain your coming would be beneficial to me. I was content to wait for the truth to unveil itself in time.” Mythal’s expression hardens a little. “I am no longer content to wait.”

She meets the golden stare levelled at her.

Gold like the shattered pieces in her dream.

Gold like Morrigan’s eyes.

Gold like… like an unfamiliar wolf, grinning down at her from the top of a cliff.

And yet, nothing like any of them, either.

“What are you doing?” she finds herself asking, instead of answering. Which would probably be the wiser choice, all things considered. “What are you even planning in all of this? With the Titans, and the leaders. Your family. Is there a course you are trying to set, or are you simply scrambling to keep them all from ruin?”
The question earns her a raised eyebrow.

“. . . Interesting,” Mythal replies. “You really have no idea. Any of my kin would have brought you pain for that presumption, and any of the People should be wary enough, even of me, to know better. Just how far in the future are you from?”

“Far,” she admits.

Mythal stares at her a moment longer, and then looks towards the sky again.

“It must have been something truly calamitous to risk what Pride has described to me, in sending you back here,” the evanuris muses. “And yet, I can scarcely imagine a more vulnerable creature to select for this task of yours. Whatever it may be. Even dealing with the consequences alone seems liable to tear you apart.”

She straightens.

Doesn’t let herself think of that moment. The last in her own time.

“We did not have a wealth of options,” she says.

Mythal folds her arms, and nods.

“Pride has never kept something from me before. Yet, this day, he did. He gave me a very thorough, and very tidy report, and he hoarded your secrets away from me. I would never have expected it of him. But devotion like yours bleeds from love,” Mythal muses. “I had plans for him. Plans that hinged upon his loyalty. You have made him unsuitable for them, now.”

Her heart stalls at the low tone of voice those words are delivered in. Musing, but also just a little bit . . . dangerous.

“All of your plans will likely be unsuitable now,” she says. Maybe a little more sharply than she meant to.

Mythal taps her chin.

“I wonder.”

A cloud moves further from the sun. The extra light beams down on the lake, and glitters there. Hard and cold. The wealth of the forest surrounds it like a blanket.

“The first time he went back, it was to save your life,” she admits.

It earns her a long, sideways glance.

“From what?” Mythal asks.

“From the Titan,” she replies. “You fought it. It did not go well for you. He did not know, at the time, what the cost of changing history would be. He wanted to save you, and he did. But everything that followed was the price of that. I am the end result of his attempts to undo the damage he caused.”

Slowly, Mythal nods.

“Not to let me die, though, it seems.”
She shrugs.

“‘The world was not damaged because you lived. It was damaged because its future was destroyed,’” she says, plainly.

“And so another future was destroyed? That seems like a good way to make the problem worse,” Mythal replies.

“It was not the best of plans, no,” she agrees.

Another stretch of silence falls between them. She thinks, rapidly, on the spot to decide here and now what is to be done about Mythal. Trust or wariness? Alliance or flight? The door behind her is likely sealed by magic. She might be able to hack through it, though. Or scale down the tower they’re on, though that would probably be a much riskier venture. She could fight. Likely, she would not win. But even if she did, then she would be the person who killed Mythal; and that’s not quite a bridge she’s willing to cross unless she absolutely has to.

The wind picks up away. A flurry of motion catches her attention, and she turns towards it, reflexively.

In the sky above the forest, a large, winged creature turns and twists through the air. Not a bird. Not even a dragon. Her mouth drops open as she sees the leonine body, and strong, white wings, and realized that she is watching a griffon.

A griffon, cartwheeling through the air; chasing updrafts.

Playing, it seems.

She moves, unexpectedly transfixed for a moment. So many strange and legendary things she’s seen, now. But griffons came so close to surviving into her lifetime. They became such a symbolic loss, even beyond the boundaries of different races. Everyone, to some extent, lamented the extinction of the griffons, and in that brief instant, just spying one from a distance, she understands why.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, why.

Moving towards the railing, she places her hands upon it, and watches.

Mythal follows her gaze.

“They were all gone in my time,” she admits.

A pause.

Then Mythal’s boots click across the platform, and she comes to stand at a distance beside her.

The griffon angles itself downwards, wings a flurry, and then sweeps back up.

Definitely playing.

“Time is a thief. Even here and now, there are things that have been lost,” Mythal tells her.

She sucks in a breath. Lets it fall, heavily, from her again.

“Pride sent me here,” she declares. “Pride sent me here to save your world. To do that, I have to change it. More will be lost. Your people may suffer. Your kin may suffer, too. You may die all
over again, if it comes to it. So might any of the rest of us. The griffons might disappear again. But if I can succeed, then the world will survive.”

“Would Pride not have done better to come himself?” Mythal wonders.

“He had to choose between us.”

“Ah,” the evanuris says, and shades of Flemeth are in her tone. That same deep and old sort of knowing. “You are the champion which sentiment chose.”

“I am the one you will have to deal with. Do the motives of my dead lover concern you so?” she returns, finally tearing her gaze away from the griffon.

Mythal keeps her own fixed on it, however, and tilts her head slightly. Narrows her eyes.

“I think you are protecting him,” the evanuris decides. “I think you will not tell me the truth, to keep him safe. As he will not tell me to keep you safe. I think, perhaps, it would serve us all best if my poor wolf was to be granted the mercy of a quiet death, in penance for and as a ward against his impending crimes.”

The blade is in her hand so quickly she doesn’t even recall drawing it, there and levelled at Mythal’s throat in the blink of an eye. The edge of it catches the sunlight, and her heart beats furiously in her chest, her mind blank and then racing. What shall she do? How quickly can she get to him? She will have to batter down the door, hopefully he will have been interested enough in goings on here to wait in the stairwell, and…

Mythal laughs.

Deep, rich, and genuinely amused.

“Put it away, child.”

She holds her ground. A stray spell buffets the blade; wind turning it down. She holds it steady, even so, and Mythal raises an eyebrow at her.

“Put it away,” the evanuris insists. “And now that the cards have been laid upon the table, I will do you a great service, and we shall bargain.”

...Bargain.

Alright.

Perhaps a bargain would be easier to handle than trying to fight Mythal herself, as well as, in all likelihood, the entirety of her palace.

Slowly, she lowers the blade.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! <3
Compassion and Clarity

Chapter Notes

I am back! My writing break is done! Hooray! Updates should resume, but I'm going to be pacing myself, so they probably won't be at their normal rate. Until I get a little bit more used to things I can't really say how frequent they will be. But, almost definitely no slower than once a week.

In addition, I will be adding warnings for cliffhangers to my notes here - so, if you hate them, you can know that one is coming and wait for a non-cliffy chapter to come along before you resume your reading.

Hopefully you guys enjoy the chapter. Thanks for bearing with me! <3

Mythal inclines her head, slightly, and beckons her towards a pair of chairs on the far side of the fountain. Still within sight of the soaring griffon, though as she sits – wary and tense – the beast finally dips low between the clouds, and presumably lands somewhere to rest.

It doesn’t rise up again.

“What do you know of me?” Mythal asks her, a little unexpectedly.

She considers the question, keeping her gaze on the evanuris across from her. She recalls the dreams that the elves of her own world often spoke of, in hushed whispers, and stifled rumours. Mythal coming to them. Calling to them. They had never completely certain if it was Mythal herself, or Solas pretending to be her, or something else entirely. Even Morrigan had no insights.

But she can see why this leader is compelling. Why people would come to think her a goddess. She is beautiful, certainly, but beauty alone wouldn’t mean much. Especially not in this place and time, where it’s so abundant; it’s a minimal standard, she thinks. Beauty is the basest of requirements here. No, there is much more than captivation at this woman’s fingertips. This is the leader who keeps the others subdued, who weaves the future of Elvhenan – who treats her servants well, but does nothing to avail them of a corrupt system that keeps them vulnerable.

She wonders how thoroughly the Titan killed her, in one lifetime.

She wonders how long it might have taken her to claw her way back then, if Solas had left the matter alone.

“I know you are the best of the Leaders of the People,” she says.

Mythal smiles.

“Some might consider that a compliment.”
“Some might,” she agrees. Diplomacy is something she learned by necessity, but this feels less like weaving the intricacies of one of Vivienne’s salons, and more like going toe-to-toe with a demon who would rather talk than fight.

After a moment, Mythal turns her gaze back towards the sky.

“You speak of survival,” the evanuris says. “I wonder what I must have become, by your time, that you think I would accept mere survival as a goal. You offer the bare minimum for this world – my world – and I have never been one to see the appeal in low standards. The People have come a long, long way from wandering on the wind, racing after the tails of dragons.”

Her wariness doesn’t ease.

“Now they sit in place, before the feet of new dragons,” she suggests.

It earns her a shrewd look.

“For now,” Mythal agrees, and looks back towards her. “I have been seeking a means of changing our course again. The course of the People. It occurs to me that you offer an opportunity for that. Both for betterment, and for ruination. But I am not so convinced the approach you would take is what is needed.”

She raises an eyebrow. She wasn’t even aware she had an ‘approach’ yet.

“Oh?” she asks.

The evanuris regards her a moment. Slowly, her expression drops into something far closer to sympathy than the hard line she’s held so far.

“I saw your pain,” Mythal tells her.

Her breath halts. It’s not the words themselves, or even their implication; it’s something buried in the tone. Something that makes her apprehension grow further still.

Mythal sighs. The colour on her dress shifts. It begins to ripple at the edges, tarnishing like autumn leaves. The green fades to gold, and the gold fades to red.

“To lose everything is not an enviable fate. I cannot imagine how it must have reduced you. How it would have reduced even myself, in another life. You scramble for scraps. The shards of what once was. You are a mourner digging for the bones of your family’s corpses, and for that, I offer you sincere condolences. But the risen dead are not the same as loved ones returned.”

She narrows her eyes.

“I am not trying to resurrect my world.”

“No? I would be, in your place. I think almost anyone would be scrambling to preserve whatever they could, from a home destroyed and loved ones lost.”

Mythal regards her, plainly, and still with her stray touch of sympathy. It doesn’t even seem manufactured, for all that it’s almost certainly manipulative.

She opens her mouth, and almost speaks. Almost tells Mythal just how well she knows the folly of trying to resurrect what is gone. That she has seen firsthand that even when it succeeds, the cost is all too high. That the woman may look at her and see someone scrambling to revive the dead, but
that Mythal herself is the dead revived; that her entire world is fragile and breakable as glass, and that Solas’ efforts changed everything, in more ways than one. Time travel, yes. The Blight. But also the rebellion. Also the Veil.

She sucks in a breath, and sighs instead.

Mythal has enough advantages without her temper granting the woman more.

“There is a force threatening to destroy your world, and so far as I know, I am the only who can stop it from spreading like poison and death,” she says. “You may think of survival as too small a standard, but I do not believe you are foolish enough to risk losing even that by countering me. So if we are to bargain, perhaps you should simply tell me what you wish, and leave these games aside.”

There is another long moment of quiet.

The wind passes over the covered roof. Clouds drift, caught in the currents; casting shadows where they move across the sun.

“You do not know what changes your efforts might bring upon the world,” Mythal confirms.

She nods.

And this time she does think of Vivienne, briefly. Vivienne who learned how to play a system so beautifully, that even though it was broken, when the world threatened to cut it out from beneath her, she felt great fear. For all her strengths and virtues, it was a thought that clearly unnerved her. To be left adrift in a dance that she didn’t know the steps to. To become obscure and lost in the shuffle of a changing scene.

“You held power in your time, I can tell,” Mythal notes, shifting slightly in her seat. Her belt jangles. A pretty sound, but sharp, too. “In this one, as things are, a person of your situation could never rise higher than you have now. It is only by the whims of one woman that you stand above the lowest possible status. You are vulnerable, and restricted, and you have reached the top of a very shallow pool. It has been a long time since I was forced to scramble, as you have, and press against unpassable barriers. But I recall the feeling.”

“If you are offering me rank, I am uninterested,” she replies, easily.

It earns her a raised eyebrow.

“You would attempt to change the world without it?” the evanuris wonders.

“I tried to save the world with it, once. It did not avail me much,” she admits. “Where the corrupt grant power, it is usually conditional on the recipient allowing them to continue their corruptions. I have found that such perspectives often lean away from the long-term benefits of large groups, and veer more towards the furthering of personal interests.”

Mythal levels her with a long look.

“Now that was not complimentary at all.”

She meets the stare. Golden and sharp.

The evanuris’ dress bleeds to red in full. The shifting shadows on the canopy overhead change, and though they are up high, she is reminded of patterns dancing across forest floors. Of windswept
branches and shuddering leaves.

“You are correct when you say that I would not risk the survival of this world by acting against you. Yet.” Mythal finally declares. “But I do not need to act against you. Your attachments are written in ink as bold as the markings you so graciously consented to wear. Oh, you would fight me if I threatened them. But I do not need to tell you if or when I mean them harm. I only need you to know that I own the lives of every person in this world that you care about, and it is a very poor idea to oppose someone in that position.”

Mythal leans down, then, and produces a strange crystalline container from beneath her seat. It is the size of a small jug. Pretty; shimmering with refracted traces of light that seems to be trapped inside of it. The quality of the light looks somewhat familiar, though she’s not certain of why.

“You do not know what this is,” the evanuris notes.

“No,” she admits.

“It is a tragedy,” Mythal tells her, with what seems to be some genuine sorrow. “Wrought by both of our hands, and delivered unjustly to an innocent target. I did not wish for it to happen this way. I sent Fortune to you instead. But then you thwarted it, somehow, and so what information I needed of you had to come from another source.”

Her unease intensifies by many magnitudes.

The light… is familiar. Like the light of a spirit. Like the light that sheltered her when…

…When she first arrived here.

Oh no.

“What did you do?” she asks, cold as the numbing horror spreading through her bones.

“What I had to, for my People,” Mythal replies.

For an instant, she is back in time again. Her arm burning as she sees Solas for the first time in two years, standing in front of an eluvian; talking about past and future, about restoration and remorse. And then, it is later, still, and she is staring as droves of Solas’ own people die to buy him time for his plans to work.

She stares at Mythal, and feels like Haninan, putting together another piece of a puzzle.

Compassion.

“That was one of your people,” she says, very, very quietly, as she stares at the refracting light.

“I loathe sacrifices,” the evanuris tells her. “Every sacrifice made is a defeat admitted to. You think I am invested in my self-interests, and I will concede, most of my kin are. But I love my People. I love my children. It is only such a love that would ever give me the resolve to do something so truly terrible. To make such a painful and personal sacrifice. Too many of us have spent the long years of our lives trapped in shallow pools. Knowing that we have reached the pinnacle of where we might stand, and floundering as we can go no further. I would set us free into the oceans of the world. But there are things that will be lost in the flood.”

She stares.
Mythal stares back. Her face is lit by the shine of the damning crystal vessel.

Solas, she thinks, asked her to deliver his message to the wrong person in this time. This is the worst part of him, and it is in the ‘best’ of the evanuris.

It is in all of them, she suspects.

“Sacrifice nothing you do not own, and always remember – you own no one but yourself,” she says, very quietly.

“An interesting sentiment,” Mythal replies. “A general directs a battlefield, and soldiers die. Sacrifice. A leader decides where resources and defences are most needed, and must leave others to be lost. Sacrifice, again. Power is needed to aid the many, and power lies in the light of spirits and the blood of the embodied. Sacrifice, in its purest form. Such decisions are what make leadership a burden. But responsibility demands it be taken up, just the same.”

She stands up, her hands clenching into fists.

“To what end?” she demands.

“A world where that is no longer true,” the evanuris tells her.

“And you think you will get to that world by enforcing the opposite? Why hurt Compassion?” she demands, and her voice breaks on the word.

Mythal’s face falls again, and she turns towards the crystal vessel. One of her hands comes up, and caresses the top of it.

“A spirit focuses on what it is. What it is embodies, and how it might spread that in the world; and how it might inspire the same in others. I knew Compassion when I was young. It counselled me well, but it is, in the end, only compassion. It is not wisdom, it is not ambition, it is not the broader perspective needed in order to change the world. It was born of a part of myself, and all parts are only that – parts.”

*It was a spirit,* she thinks. *It was its own.*

“So you harmed it?”

The air around them is sharp and brittle, and she feels sharp and brittle herself. The patterns spreading across the floor grow more ominous. Where Mythal’s feet rest, it is like a pool of endless shadow.

“I dug your pain from it, and it broke apart. This is but one piece of many. The rest litter the Fade, and Spirits of Compassion, or Mercy, or Sorrow may grow from them in time. Harm is relative. A spirit changes irrevocably when it takes on a physical form. When its nature shifts, it becomes something else. If you truly seek to change the whole world, you will bring about far more harm than the shattering of a single spirit,” Mythal informs her. “But I know of at least one thing we agree on. Change is, indeed, preferable to annihilation.”

Her hand drifts, again, to the hilt of her blade.

The woman sitting before her follows the motion with her sharp, golden eyes.

“What do you imagine you could do, right now?” Mythal asks.
What does she imagine she could do?

“I think I could kill you,” she says. “You have powerful magic, but I have fought powerful mages before. You could become a dragon. But I have killed dragons before. I do not know what would happen if it came to it, in all honesty. I think, the more you speak, the more inclined I am to tip whatever chessboard you have arranged straight to the ground and cleave through you, rather than play along.”

Mythal tilts her head.

It’s not entirely true, she supposes, though in that moment, she has rarely felt more tempted. It’s not the same visceral defensiveness she’d felt on Pride’s behalf. What has been done to Compassion has already happened.

Could happen again, to any one of the people who are, indeed, at Mythal’s mercy.

“Allow me to illuminate the possibilities for you, then,” Mythal offers. “We fight. Let us presume you are indeed as competent as you suppose, and you kill me. The man you seek to protect is loyal to me, and loves me. Most of the friends you have claimed are much the same. My own kin will fall upon you, and you will die, and likely Pride will die, and your quest will be left unfilled, and the world will turn to ash and ruin.”

That does seem a likely scenario, she can admit.

Reality does little to ease the furious twisting of her guts, however.

Pointedly, Mythal stands, and stretches to her full height; not inconsiderably taller than her. The evanuris carries the shard of Compassion up with her.

“Shall we?”

She gives it another moment of serious consideration.

Then she slides her hand from the hilt of her sword.

Mythal nods, in acknowledgement.

“It is clear to me that we will not reach a resolution on many issues between us today,” the evanuris declares. “A pity. But I did not get this far by being hasty, nor by failing to make appropriate concessions. Pride mentioned that Andruil has been interfering with the blood of these ancient Pillars. The same blood which carries the poison of your world.”

“That is true,” she says, stiffly.

“Then, this is the matter at hand. I must know if my daughter has been poisoned,” Mythal declares.

She shifts, slightly. The shadows below Mythal begin to spread across the floor, circling around the fountain, like the roots of spreading trees.

Almost, she asserts that any such changes would be obvious; but then she holds her tongue again.

“You want me to tell you if Andruil has the Blight?” she asks, instead.

Mythal inclines her head.
“I must know, and if she has, then the matter must be resolved. Without her death. She is my child, and there is nothing I love in this world more than my children. Do you understand?”

She thinks of Pride’s own suggestions regarding Andruil, and finds herself raising an eyebrow. Her jaw tightens in something caught between her grief and outrage, as he gaze catches on the shard of Compassion, and something perilously close to black amusement.

All of these people, she thinks. This ridiculous world.

“I must reach a Titan that lives below her lands,” she says, anyway.

“Andruil has sabotaged your potential for dealing easily with the dwarves. If she has not infected herself with this corruption, then her removal from the situation can be arranged. If she has, then she must be cured,” Mythal reasons. “You wish to carry on with your quest. I am in a position to make it much more obtainable for you… or much, much more difficult.”

“I know,” she concedes, through clenched jaw.

“Then, here, we reach our first bargain,” Mythal declares. “You will save my daughter. Either by curing her, if she is corrupted, or by removing the danger of such corruption from her lands. Given the immediacy of the situation, and a lack of ready alternatives, I will grant you leave to use your current methods and discretions to resolve the matter. I will make no further moves against certain individuals whose well-being is of value to you, and you will ensure that my child does not suffer too gravely for her foolishness.”

The shard of Compassion gleams, and seems to her like an implication of just how badly things might go for the ‘individuals’ whose ‘well-being is of value’ to her if Andruil doesn’t meet with an acceptable fate.

“And then?” she wonders.

“And then, we gain a better understanding of one another, and bargain again,” Mythal reasons.

She considers this.

“I suppose I shall be heading for Andruil’s lands,” she finally decides.

“We must see her, first,” Mythal refutes. “I shall summon her to Arlathan, under the guise of discussing matters of the Nameless between ourselves.”

“Then we are agreed?”

“So it would seem. Our bargain should be sealed.'”

“No,” she decides. “It is a bargain. It stands as it is. I am not, as you have mentioned, versed in the matter of magical pacts. I will make no more of them with you.”

Mythal does not look terribly pleased with this development. But after a moment, she concedes.

“My own fault, for revealing that to you.”

After a moment, the evanuris extends the shard of Compassion towards her.

She blinks in surprise, but her hands take it readily. Defensively. It’s warm to her touch, as she tucks it against herself. The crystal surface is hard and smooth.
“Why?” she wonders. And for a second she’s not entirely sure if she’s asking why Mythal is giving it to her, or why something like this had to happen in the first place. Why all of these terrible things must keep happening, by the whims of people who should know better. Who should be better.

“I may have shattered the spirit, but I am not utterly devoid of its sentiments,” Mythal replies.

Her jaw clenches, again, and she clutches the warmth even closer.

The door back down into the stairwell shines once, and opens.


She finds Pride is, in fact, waiting for her in the stairwell down. He’s perched on the steps, silver and white matching with the pale walls; some spray from the cascading water feature misting lightly over him.

He looks up at her, and then his gaze falls to the crystal vessel she’s holding. His expression crashes.

“What…?” he asks, quiet and aghast.

She wonders, all things considered, if it’s viscerally horrific for him to look at something like this. He used to be a spirit, after all. And what she’s holding is basically the remains of another one. One he’s likely known all of his life.

She opens her mouth, to try to explain.

Words fail her.

How can she tell him that Mythal shattered Compassion? Because of her? How can she keep breaking him apart, and why do invents keep conspiring to ensure she has to? She looks at him, and looks at the light in her hands, and she wants to scream. She wants to go back and put a blade through Mythal’s heart, because death, she thinks, suits her.

A crime which Solas had once told her was worthy of an eternity of torment.

But then again, that was shortly after he had committed it, as well.

Pride stares at her a moment longer, and then pads carefully up the stairs towards her.

“What happened?” he asks, more clearly.

“...It knew about me,” she finally manages to say.

Silence falls between them, broken only by the sound of rushing water. She sucks in a breath, and meets the wolf’s gaze. The shard in her hands warms, a little. Pride seems confused, for a moment. And then not confused. And then he simply seems sad.

“I do not know what to do with it,” she admits, lifting Compassion’s remains indicatively. The light scatters across Pride’s features. Makes the silver in his fur shine like platinum.

“Come with me,” he says, and after a moment’s hesitation, nudges her gently before turning and
heading back down the stairs.

They walk in silence, the repeating taps of his claws and the soft patter of her footsteps spiralling down around the falling water from the fountain above. She thinks of Mythal, still standing there, staring out over the world. She thinks of Compassion, hiding her in the baths when she had first arrived, so overwhelmed with grief that she could scarcely feel at all.

When Pride speaks, it is softly.

“Did the trauma of knowing your pain break Compassion?” he asks her.

By his tone, she thinks he knows the answer to that question already, though.

“Mythal wanted Fortune to spy on me. But something happened to it. So she went elsewhere for information,” she explains. “She threatened to kill you, too.”

Pride doesn’t even break his stride.

“She was testing you,” he asserts.

She glances at him.

“I hope having a sword drawn on her was the result she wanted, in that case,” she replies.

He almost misses a step, then.

“You… you drew a weapon on Mythal?” he demands, aghast. He looks up at her with a look that implies that there are so many things wrong with that action, he doesn’t know which problem to bring up first. But then, apparently, he decides on one. “How could you be so foolish? Every great disaster you have described to me has been precipitated by her death! How could you even contemplate causing it? And how could you risk yourself like that?”

And you know what her death generally does to him, she thinks, with a painful internal clench.

She can hardly protect him if she keeps finding new and inventive ways to traumatize him instead.

“I did not kill her,” she offers, because even so, she can’t bring herself to apologize for wanting to.

“You could not have won that fight,” Pride asserts. “No matter your competence with a blade, Mythal is one of the most powerful spell casters in the world. You would have had no chance to swing it. You are fortunate she even tolerated you drawing it. That was the height of foolishness.”

She halts in the stairwell, and stares at him. The remains of her friend warming her hands.

“She threatens you and kills Compassion, and you think there is a different response I should have given?” she asks. “She knows you kept things from her. She figured out the truth, about where I am from, and that you are tied to the events that brought me here. She knows I love you.”

He sucks in a breath, and she tears her gaze away from his.

“A version of me,” he corrects, quietly.

She opts not to argue the point right now. He has enough to deal with, she supposes, without the complexity of her affections on top of it all.

“You can see the folly of what that version of you did. Using people as sacrifices, lamenting the
burdens of necessity – why is it more acceptable when Mythal does it?” she wonders. “Because you know she did. She killed Compassion, and how do you think she justified it to me?”

He looks at the shard, and his expression falters.

“Compassion was Mythal’s,” he says. “It was born of her. It was part of her.”

“Like you?” she wonders.

He shakes his head.

“Whatever you may think, she would not have harmed such a part of herself if she did not think it necessary.”

“The funny thing about necessity is how many unnecessary things feel like it,” she counters.

His gaze breaks away from hers, his lip curling slightly.

“What if we take this thinking in the other direction, then?” he asks. “You so readily pardon his actions. Mythal broke something beloved to herself because of you and I. Because we kept things from her, and she knew enough to know that the fate of the world was hanging in the balance. Because she is wise. So what other recourse did she have? What makes her so inexcusable to you, when you defend someone who broke not only one spirit, but an entire future?”

Her temper and upset – frayed so raw – finally break at the accusation in his tone, and at the kernel of truth nestled within it. She cannot handle this, cannot handle seeing so many parts of Solas scattered in him and Mythal and the horrifying world around them, cannot handle that the first real connection she made in this place is now little more than a silent piece of glass in her hands.

“Stop sneering at my love,” she snaps.

Pride comes up short again.

“Just… stop it. You seem to be labouring under the impression that because I loved him, I must have been blind to his folly. No matter how many times I declare otherwise. I know why he did what he did. I know why Mythal did what she did, though I know far less of her goals and motivations. Understanding it does not mean I forgive it. I am not obligated to forgive Mythal for killing my friend, either. That she was more keenly bonded to Compassion does not make it better. It makes it worse.”

The last word echoes through the air around them, and seems to spiral down the currents of the water.

Her eyes burn. Her second heartbeat pulses, for a moment.

Then she lets out a heavy breath.

“I did not mean to mock you,” Pride says.

His head hangs, staring down towards the bottom of their descent. He looks exhausted. Painfully so. Even though he is a wolf, she can think of nothing so much as Solas; of how he would look, at times, when he felt something so keenly that he could only tuck all of it away, and present himself as though he was feeling nothing at all.

She doesn’t want to see this look on him.
She doesn’t want to have helped put it there.

“I am afraid,” Pride admits. In the admission, he sounds very young to her again. “Everything that happens seems to breed a new fear in me. I am afraid for the world. For the People. For you, and for Mythal. I am afraid of myself. I have always known my instincts were bad, but…”

“They are not,” she tells him, plainly.

He looks up at her.

“Your worst impulse is the one you have to dismiss them,” she informs him. Then she looks down at the shard, again. “Sacrificing compassion is a mistake.”

Pride swallows, and heaves a tremendous sigh.

“Then do not give it up yourself. Mythal is easily more deserving of it than I am,” he advises, resuming his trek down the staircase.

She’s not sure she agrees with that assessment. But he has a point about compassion, she will concede.

Under the circumstances, it feels distinctly criminal to betray the sentiment.

They make it to the bottom of the stairs in comparative silence, and Pride leads her through a series of passageways she’s unfamiliar with. He halts her at the entrance to a few corridors, stopping in front of her legs and peering around before gesturing her forward. Checking their emptiness, she supposes. The doorways to the chambers they reach grow more lavish, and strangely ornamental. Symbols and curtains, spilling like waterfalls over the frames.

Eventually they reach a pair of double doors. Silvery, and without curtains, but marked with a wolf’s head. They open before Pride even touches them, and she follows him through to an airy parlour.

With a whisper, the doors close behind them again.

Pride clears his throat.

“These are my chambers,” he informs her. “We can speak quite freely here.”

She glances around, a little curious despite the circumstances.

The room is opulent, but not ostentatious. The largest feature are the windows, which are filled with coloured glass patterns that reflect in gold, silver, and green across the floor. The wall opposite them is mirrored, with a pair of delicate white chairs and a small table positioned in front of it, and a single crystalline plant catching the myriad glimmers of light everywhere. It curls down towards the floor, thin branches weaving in patterns that make her think it looks bizarrely mournful.

An archway leads off into further rooms. The most she can see of them is yet more light spilling onto floors that are covered in tiles, patterning out the whirling shapes of wolves. There are several shelves next to it, and each one is fit to bursting with books and tomes, neatly stacked right up to the edges. Most of them deal with philosophy, dreaming, and tactics, judging by the words she can see on them.

“I made a deal with Mythal,” she finally says.
“I was afraid you would say that,” Pride replies.

“Why?” she wonders. Not because she can’t see a good reason to be, obviously; but considering his staunch defense of her, it takes her aback a little.

“Because, now this entire situation is even more of a mess,” he declares, walking over towards one of the chairs. He regards it for a moment, and then with a deep sigh, shines brightly. The air shifts, and he stretches upwards, and regains his elven form again.

His shoulders are stiff as he takes a seat, and gestures her towards the one opposite it.

She looks at him carefully as she does.

At a glance, she thinks, he would come across as fairly composed right now. A little stiff; irritated, perhaps. But not distressed. This is a mask she’s seen before, though, and being worn by someone much more accustomed to it. Pride sits, rigidly. His features are fixed. He folds his hands together, tightly, and when he looks at her, his jaw flexes. His brows sink. His eyes fall on the shard she’s still holding, and they sink further still, before carefully smoothing out again.

“You know too little about making such deals, and Mythal – thanks to my own poor judgement – knows too little of this situation,” he tells her. “I should have been honest with her.”

“If you think so, then why weren’t you?” she wonders.

He scowls, and glances down.

“Too many things are uncertain. I was over-cautious,” he admits. “Now she has figured it out anyway, of course, and has reason to distrust my judgement. And rightly so.”

“Mythal does not know all of it,” she assures him.

She then elaborates on the basic facts of their exchange for him. The bargain, and what Mythal gleaned, and admitted to. What she admitted to, in return. She even finds herself mentioning the griffon.

He listens. Pensive and silent for the most part. He barely reacts when she describes the threat made against him, but he flinches when she recounts the matter of Compassion again.

It could be her imagination, but she thinks the shard in her lap grows warmer when he does.

“I did not seal any magical pacts with her,” she concludes, and he does seem to relax, at least a little, on that note.

“Good. It may have been dangerous for both of you, as tenuous as things are,” he asserts.

She falls quiet for a while, then. Somber. She looks at him, and at Compassion’s remains, and thinks of Mythal and of the resurrected dead. She thinks of Cole – kindly Cole, who snapped and snarled about the man who ‘killed’ him. Shattered things that become other things. Broken futures that rip away at the corners of restored pasts.

Pride slumps, a little.

“I shall have to go beg Mythal’s forgiveness, and try and explain myself,” he reasons.

“I will go with you,” she says.
He shakes his head.

“Better if I go alone,” he asserts.

“Better to go meet someone who threatened to kill you alone?” she asks.

It earns her an unimpressed look.

“Even if she truly contemplated killing me – and under the circumstances, I can hardly blame her for that – it would be a break of your bargain to act against me now,” he reminds her.

“A bargain sealed with nothing, that she could break upon a whim. If you say or do the wrong thing-”

“I may not have thousands of years of persistent failure under my belt yet, but I am not so staggeringly incompetent that I have forgotten how to speak to someone I have known my entire life,” Pride’s voice is sharp and uncontrolled, his temper flaring beneath the heavy shroud of detachment that he’s cloaked himself in.

“You are not the one I am doubting at the moment,” she snaps back, and raises the crystal vessel in her grasp rather pointedly.

His expression twists.

“As if that is Mythal’s fault alone,” he says. “What did you do to the Spirit of Fortune?”

She goes cold.

“I told you exactly what happened between it and myself,” she says.

“Oh? It was not another lie, or half-truth?” he wonders.

His expression falters somewhat almost as soon as the accusation escapes him. She stares at him a moment, and he closes his eyes and runs a hand across his brow. Fingers trailing over the pale lines of his vallaslin.

“What was I supposed to do?” she asks him. “Just tell you? Because things have gone so well for everyone since I did. I am sorry I do not have any wiser reactions to offer to all this. I am sorry I do not know what to do. All this time I have just been scrambling and failing to protect what I care about, and I still am. What should I have done? How am I supposed to react to all of this?”

He shakes his head.

Sighs.

“I do not know,” he admits. “I do not know either.”

His fingertips tremble, as though he is trying to hold on to an invisible thread, and he cannot look anywhere but at the floor. At the silhouettes of gemstone wolves.

Her heart wrenches.

In all times, it seems, the world is fully capable of being relentlessly awful.

“How do I decide what to do, knowing where my decisions might lead?” he wonders. “I am supposed to protect Mythal. Protect her people. But this has changed everything. Do I trust Mythal?
I do not even trust myself anymore. You tell me I should, and there seems a kernel of wisdom in your reasoning, from what I saw of your memories. None of what he did seemed right to me, and yet, he did it anyway. But did he feel it was right? He must have, in some way. Why do it, otherwise? How could…?”

He trails off, and lets out a heavy breath; slumping over a bit.

Carefully, she puts down the crystal vessel on the tiny table between them. She stands, and walks over to his chair, and places a hand on his shoulder. She notices for the first time how strangely unadorned he is today. The fur and decorations he typically favours are gone, and he is clad mostly in neat, simple layers of silvery fabric.

““I am sorry,” she says.

He shakes his head.

Then he reaches up, tentatively, and closes one of his hands over top of her own. He turns to look at her. Eyes bright with tears, and the light streaming into the parlour.

She forgets how to breathe for a moment.

He searches her face for a moment, and seems to find something that offers him an answer.

“I do not want to inherit your affection,” he says.

The words bring her up cold.

Ah.

So he has decided, then, that any closeness between them is unwelcome. Complicated as it is, she supposes she can’t blame him for that. For preferring to keep more of a distance. It makes sense. It’s only fair, and it’s his right to choose that for himself.

She begins to retract her touch, but his hand stalls her.

“I wish to earn it,” he declares.

She freezes again.

There is something shifting in his expression. A resolution taking over the sea of doubt. His throat bobs as he swallows, and looks her in the eye.

“Y-you…” she begins, and trails off; momentarily at a loss.

“I realize now. He did none of it as he should have,” Pride declares. “I can only assume that applied to all aspects of his decision making, and not simply his acceptance of your romantic pursuit.” He clears his throat. “Well. That seems as good a place as any for me to begin to part ways with him. We are not in your world. We are in mine, and I know at least a little of how my own world works. Even now.”

He stands up, and she blinks at him a little.

“I know how to do things as they should be done. I know how to play these games. Even with Mythal,” he declares. “I do know this. And what I do not know, you know. You know how to approach people beyond the spheres of this society. You know of follies that I am only still beginning to grasp. You know how to fight impossible odds.”
Reaching out, he almost clasps her shoulder; but then he stops himself at the last minute. Instead he moves his hand back to his side, and bows towards her a little instead.

“Neither of us can sit idly by and hope for the best. So we must do as we must,” he declares. Then his gaze sweeps over to the crystal vessel, sitting quietly on his little table.

He sighs, heavily.

“One thing at a time?” she suggests, a little awestruck by his resolve.

“Yes,” he agrees.

Slowly, reverently, he lifts the crystal vessel up from the table. He stares into the light of it for a moment. His expression drops into something deeply hurt. Even a little betrayed, perhaps. Very deliberately, he tips his forehead against the shimmering surface, and exhales.

“Do well,” he whispers.

“Pride?” she asks him, quietly. It feels as if she is intruding, for a moment.

Her own throat is thick and tight at the thought of the spirit that had been destroyed. Of what, and who, has been lost.

She really, really wants to kill Mythal for that.

Her fists clench.

But after a few minutes, the rage wears back down into a weary grief. Pride pulls back from his moment with the shard of Compassion, and turns towards her again.

“We should return it to the Dreaming,” he declares. “It can grow there. It is… Mythal granted it to you. You could use its power, if…”

She immediately shakes her head, and something in him seems to unclench a bit.

“I have no desire to ‘use’ it,” she declares, not bothering to hide her disgust at the entire notion.

“Of course not,” he murmurs. “I… my apologies, for even suggesting it. Ordinarily you would be expected to carry it into your dreams, to find a safe place for it, but you are not yet so proficient at such things. I could carry it through to the Dreaming myself, however. You could meet me there.”

She considers this. The Fade does seem like the place for Compassion’s remains to be. But it is not that simple, these days.

“That is assuming we dream normally,” she points out. “What if we have another strange night?”

He frowns.

“I am not even certain what that was. Particularly not now,” he admits.

“…Perhaps Curiosity should do it?” she suggests.

“It should be fine,” he suggests.

They both look at the shard, and she can tell that they’re both thinking about their own individual potential to utterly fail at protecting things, and how badly presuming that everything will be fine
could turn out for them.

“...I will get Curiosity,” Pride amends, handing the shard back to her. “Stay here, please, and do not open the door.”

“Why not?” she wonders.

He grimaces.

“It... I... this is a practical space for us to speak, but...” he trails off, colouring a little and clearing his throat, and she is almost ridiculously relieved to see it. To see him flustered. Even if she’s not sure precisely why, it’s so blessedly close to normal behaviour that she almost doesn’t care.

“I won’t open the door,” she tells him, simply. Something to do with etiquette and propriety and weird ancient elven codes of conduct, she suspects. She is glad enough for the existence of the moment to simply let it be, for now.

He gives her a grateful look, and turns to go.

She stops him with a touch to his arm.

“Be careful,” she says.

“It is only the palace,” he replies. That sentiment rings distinctly hollow for her now, all things considered.

But she lets him go, despite the urge to follow him. To keep close, and watch his back. He’s right; he knows these people and these games better than she does, and she risks more than she likes by following her own impulse to just batter through them right now. And he’s not... well, she would not say he is better, but he is resilient.

Always and entirely, she thinks, as she stares at the door.

She stays standing, turning the crystal vessel gently over in her hands, until she sees the drops of her own tears falling on it. Then she has to sit, again, and swallow past the wall in her throat. Her hands shake against the warmth; even now, it’s trying to reach her. She sucks in a shaky breath and it shudders out of her as a sob, and that is it.

Her composure frays apart, and she finds she cannot seize it back.

“I am sorry,” she tells the shard.

She should have anticipated it.

She should have done something.

She should have realized that, sooner or later, word would get out. She should have let Fortune have its information. At least enough to satisfy it. She should have stayed away from Compassion, and the other spirits; should have kept her distance from such beings who could see so much, and yet were so vulnerable to the machinations of higher powers who might scramble for the truth.

She should have been more careful.

Something slips over her hands.
A softer light; somber.

The Spirit of Sorrow unfurls from the air before her, and rests its fingers atop her own. It is silent as she shakes through her grief and despair, but there is something steadying about it, too. It drains some of the sharpness away. The self-recriminations fade, and leave behind acceptance.

It is done.

It is awful, and irreversible, and done.

Just like everything else.

The spirit’s touch trails over the crystal vessel.

“I am sorry,” she says, again; this time to Sorrow itself.

Sorrow nods.

“How long have you been here?” she wonders.

“Long enough,” it replies. “Pride is a beacon to me, now. Compassion is gone. I will do what I can, until it grows anew. We were kindred, after all.”

“You and Compassion?” she asks.

It nods.

“The world is less. The end always comes. The new spirits born where Compassion fell will one day fall, too. Compassion is a virtue. I am an inevitability. One needs to nurture Compassion; one need only wait for me,” Sorrow tells her.

The air around it smells like rain. It makes her think of Pride; of the wistful longing to be Wisdom. She wonders if Sorrow ever wished to be Compassion instead.

It’s a sad thought.

“Yes,” the spirit agrees. “Mythal could have taken me, instead. I see your sorrows. I have known the whole of them ever since you arrived, and I first brushed the grief that bleeds into your soul. I did not even have to join with you to reach them. Mythal did not realize.”

She meets its dark, somber gaze.

“It should have been me. There are many Spirits of Sorrow in this world. Compassion is rarer.”

“It should not have been anyone,” she replies, resolutely.

“To destroy Sorrow is not such a terrible thing,” it tells her. “What else may I do, in this world, except linger and watch better things die? The help I can offer is meager.” It sighs. “But I will offer it, still.”

She regards it a moment longer, and then lifts her hand and gently covers its fingers, in turn.

“I suppose it is no great surprise that you are depressing,” she declares.

“No,” it agrees.
“Thank you,” she says, and they lapse into silence again.

Sorrow drifts off shortly before Pride returns, with Curiosity perched on his shoulder. He closes the door carefully behind him, and the bright parrot unfurls into a gangly elven woman, who stares wide-eyed at the crystal vessel in her lap.

“I really had been hoping it was just the most tasteless lie you had ever told,” Curiosity declares.

Pride doesn’t even look upset at the implication that he would lie about that sort of thing. If anything, he looks as though he almost wishes that, too.

Curiosity seems more shocked about it than Pride did. Grief-stricken and a little wobbly as the shard is carefully transferred to her hands, which hold it with the same quiet, mournful reverence that Pride had used.

There is a moment of heavy silence.

“What will you become?” Curiosity asks. It’s a quiet murmur of a question, and not one which seems to need an answer. Or at least, not one right away. Leaning forward, the former spirit then presses a kiss to the surface of the vessel. It shimmers, slightly. Just the tiniest shift in the light, moving towards the point of contact. It makes her think of flowers turning towards the sun.

“Curiosity…” Pride trails off.

“Mythal is like the rest, now,” Curiosity says. “Compassion made her different. But she gave it up, just like it was any other spirit.”

“It is not that simple,” Pride insists.

“Compassion was thousands of years old. It knew Mythal from the beginning. It knew Mythal when she was a child. And Mythal broke it. Do you think there are any spirits she would not break?” Curiosity wonders. “Do you think she would not have broken me, if I was still one? Or you?”

Pride falls silent.

It reminds her of the conversation they one had outside June’s tower. Of the gratitude in his eyes when he mused on his good fortune, that Mythal never traded him away to be used as fuel for such things. Too smart for his own good, she thinks; and perhaps he really does know Mythal better than most, because somehow she doubts it ever occurred to him that being broken wasn’t an option for his life.

She reaches over and rests a hand on Curiosity’s shoulder.

“Can you help us save what is left, Curiosity?” she asks, quietly.

“Of course,” Curiosity replies. “I can find a place for it in the Dreaming. I know a lot of good places. It can become Compassion again; or something else that is nice. Somewhere peaceful.”

“That sounds perfect,” she decides.

“I will take it deep in the dreaming. Far away from the palace. I will hide it,” Curiosity carries on, determinedly.

“It is in no further danger here,” Pride says, but subsides at the look it earns him.
“I will take it far away,” Curiosity reiterates.

“Thank you,” she says.

It earns her the slightest of nods.

Pride has them leave by turns, after that.

Curiosity, first, transforming into a lioness – a beautiful animal with inexplicably turquoise fur – and carrying the crystal vessel carefully in her jaws, like a beast with its cub. Then Pride turns back into a wolf, and escorts her through the corridors again; tense and observant until they finally reach the main hallways once more.

“Truly, though – why should I not be seen near your rooms? Is it a danger?” she wonders.

He hesitates.

“It is… an impropriety that could lead to dangerous assumptions,” he replies. “Because of your status, and mine. I would not wish people to think it was acceptable to… that you could be solicited for…” he clears his throat. “It would not be a good impression.”

“Ah,” she understands. Wouldn’t want the lowly servant to be seen around the noble’s chambers without a reason to be there; in her own world it would not be a good reputation for either of them to have, for a whole host of reasons. Not so surprising that it’s the same here.

Pride pauses for a moment, and considers.

“Would you dine with me?” he asks. “As before?”

She looks down at him, and his eyes peering uncertainly up at her.

“Of course. If you still wish to,” she replies.

“I still wish to,” he declares, resolutely. “I… I do not know a great many things. But I still wish to.”

He glances at the sword and shield she is armed with again, brow furrowing slightly.

“Where did those come from?” he asks.

“Fortitude gave them to me,” she replies.

He stiffens, a little.

“Who is Fortitude?” he asks. “I know of no one by that name. Why did they give you such gifts? Those are Dreaming forged weapons. Powerful ones. They could not have been easily obtained.”

He sounds legitimately worried again, and so she hurriedly recounts the matter of Rage to him. Nearly forgotten, even as dramatic as it was, in light of her encounter with Mythal and everything which followed. Pride listens, and looks increasingly surprised by her explanation. His ears prick up, and as she continues he actually beckons her into a small alcove, where he can stand and listen more easily.

“Fortitude,” he says, musingly.

“The elves watching seemed… surprised?” she suggests.
“They would be. Most of them do not think you have much in the way of feeling or connection to the Dreaming; and it is rare for a spirit to change without some dramatic event to signify it,” he reasons. His brow furrows yet more, and he paws at the ground – and idle gesture that reminds her of his habit of fidgeting, at times. Yet, more anxiously, she thinks.

“What does it mean?” she wonders.

“It means… it was a surprise,” he reasons. “How they take it will depend on what Mythal does; if she does anything at all. Under the circumstances, she may not.”

A horrible thought occurs to her.

“Do you think she would harm Fortitude? Because of this?” she wonders.

Pride shakes his head.

“No. And that is not naivety; Mythal does not render violence to her people without good reason for it.”

“Curiosity seemed to think she had crossed a line,” she points out. It certainly feels that way to her.

“Curiosity is new to feeling grief, and anger, and fear, and anything at all that is not at all related to curiosity,” Pride replies. “And she has not been on battlefields, nor has she waded through tense political arenas. She has only been to Arlathan through the Dreaming. She is not accustomed to such things, because Mythal is not prone to them; because Mythal does not perform such acts lightly. And she fears the implication of Compassion’s destruction, because she knows how greatly Mythal valued it. But if something must be done for the good of all, then personal bonds must be set aside. When the goal is greater than any one person, then it is also greater than the attachments of any one person.”

She stares at him.

He opens his mouth, and closes it again; realizing the full implications of his words almost as soon as they tumble out from behind his teeth.

“I cannot say I agree with that philosophy,” she tells him.

“It is… it is perhaps an argument to reconsider,” he concedes. “In light of… if… it may not be for everyone. But it is what Mythal believes, and it is one of the tenets of our society. It is how she has always been.”

“Tenets?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“You should, perhaps, be made more aware of such things,” he replies. The thought turns him contemplative for a moment. “Yes. You should be made more aware of many such things.”

“Things we might discuss over our very routine and in no way out-of-the-ordinary meals with one another?” she suggests.

He nods.

“Yes,” he agrees. “That seems perfectly reasonable to me.”

The wolf pads alongside her, then, as they resume their trek down the hallways of Mythal’s palace.
Despite her obvious reservations on the subject, Pride does end up going and apologizing to Mythal. Alone. It’s her own turn to wait uncomfortably in stairwells for a while, turning increasingly unpleasant scenarios over in her mind until he re-emerges; looking somewhat satisfied and entirely unharmed.

Her nerves don’t settle much, though. She thinks she’s never felt so keenly the precariousness of her own situation here before, and she’s felt plenty precarious ever since she arrived. When night finally creeps over the palace she sleeps fitfully, and dreams of dim and broken memories of memories; of Justinia and the orb.

But Pride seems content to stay close, after that; and for all that it occasionally feels like the walls are going to cave in around them, and sometimes the silences are long and fraught and she has no idea how to bridge them, it helps. Sometimes he’s a wolf and sometimes he’s an elf, and she finds herself not minding too much either way.

Things settle into a routine again, in spite of everything.

Curiosity carries the shard of Compassion off into the Fade, and tells no one where it’s been hidden. Not even Pride. The days crawl by as Mythal announces her intentions to return to Arlathan, to enjoy the company of one of her daughters and rest a while in Andruil’s small estate there. The air feels tense and strange; the atmosphere looms with expectation and uncertainty.

In Compassion’s absence, the palace seems… less.

It takes six days to make the preparations to leave again.

Pride takes his meals with her, and she listens to him unfurl some of the politics of Elvhenan, as deft in his explanations of them as Solas once was in his explanations of the Fade.

“Arlathan is the seat and symbol of our society,” he tells her, over food that’s obviously been selected more for sustenance than indulgence. She wonders if he’s chosen it for her, or if everything just tastes like ash in his mouth, now, too. “Each of the leaders controls a segment of territory, but ostensibly, the empire is unified. In practice, Arlathan is the only place where the leaders stand on equal ground. Sylaise and June control the largest holdings in the city, and tend to spend the most time there, but that is a trade-off for them. The less time they spend in their own territories, the more they have to rely on delegating the management of those regions to high-ranking followers.”

“So why do it?” she wonders.

He shrugs.

“The empire was founded by Elgar’nan and Mythal, and they remain the most prominent figureheads of the People. Sylaise and June are ambitious, however, and wish to reorder the balance of power within the leadership. By seating themselves at the heart of the empire, they hope to create the impression that they are in command of it. Sylaise has taken it upon herself to be the arbiter of culture and tradition, and fiercely upholds the founding tenets and principles of our society — or at least, appears to. She makes certain that she is front and center for every major
celebration and every pivotal moment, and does her best to define what should be sacred to the People.”

Pride sighs, and shakes his head a little.

“The People must come before all other things,” he says, in a tone of voice that makes her think he is quoting someone. “And the People are the people of the empire; those who would unify all elves under a banner of prosperity and hope. Each individual is precious beyond measure, but the whole of the picture is greater than the sum of its parts. We were scattered, before. In unity, we innovate, and find the means to make the world better. Striving to create a lasting paradise; pooling knowledge and resources to become the masters of our own fates. No longer subject to the whims of nature, or the worship of gods, but free to achieve true enlightenment.”

He sighs again.

She regards his expression, carefully. It’s a strange feeling, hearing it all come pouring out so neatly and plainly. This is the world of her ancestors; this is the dream. In her time, it had been an idyllic vision of the past. In this one, it’s a pressing hope for the future.

But it hasn’t ever been real, not in either one.

She wonders if Solas hated the qun so much precisely because it reminded him of the worst parts of this philosophy, taken to its furthest extremes.

“The empire does not seem very unified to me,” she points out.

“No,” Pride agrees. “The reality does not live up to the expectation. Not yet, at least. Too often the ideals are merely used to justify individual bids for power. Sylaise drapes herself in the culture and traditions of the People, speaks such words by rote, but they have no meaning to her beyond their impact on the masses. Self-improvement and accomplishment are the guises which Andruil prefers. Her personal glory, of course, is also the glory of the People, and she justifies her hunts and her perpetual thirst for greater challenges as a need to lead by example, and provide inspiration and a marker of accomplishment for others to strive towards.” He scoffs. “None of them are sincere. Well, Elgar’nan is; but he is tempestuous and near-sighted, so it does him little credit.”

“So they all just… play The Game?” she wonders. Even in Orlais, there had been people who were sincere; they just disguised their sincerity amidst a field of lies and obfuscation, to keep themselves from becoming vulnerable.

And even Tevinter had its Dorian.

But then again, the nobles of both nations had vastly outnumbered the mere eight evanuris who rule in these times. It’s not so hard, she supposes, to imagine that six out of eight of them are liars to the core.

Pride hesitates, though.

“No,” he admits. “Dirthamen does not. He has his own interests, and agenda. I confess that I have never been entirely clear on what it is. The rest… Sylaise and June wish to be held in the highest esteem. To have no others placed above them. Elgar’nan wishes to be obeyed. Falon’din strives to control all things, to master all realms and hold all threads of fate within his hand. Ghilan’nain wishes to create, and leave her mark upon the world through her creations. Andruil wishes to do the same, but by killing rather than creating. They are sincere in their desires for themselves. But they do not truly care about the People as a whole. They would be content to remain seated at the
top while others suffered to serve them from below for the rest of eternity.”

His expression twists with disapproval.

The light in the room is soft, but his eyes are sharp. He’s dressed more simply than usual again, today. No fur mantle. Crisp, neat lines, still very fine, and there is silvery embroidery trailing up from the edges of his sleeves; curling like leaves across his shoulders, and over his chest, until it wraps around the sides of stylized moon. But his appearance has become… subdued, she thinks.

She wonders if he’s doing it on purpose, or if he simply can’t muster up a lot of interest for his wardrobe at the moment.

“What does Mythal want?” she wonders. “To create that utopia?”

“Yes,” Pride replies. “Mythal is not satisfied with the world as it is. She wishes to make things better. For her kin, and for the People. So long as people must suffer in the world, she will not be satisfied.”

“Then Mythal will never be satisfied,” she muses.

Pride stares at his barely-touched food, and says nothing for a moment.

She looks at the shadows under his eyes, and the hollows of his cheeks, and lets out a heavy breath of her own.

“What do you want for the world?” she wonders.

He opens his mouth, and then closes it again. Lifting his glass, he takes a drink. His throat works silently for a moment afterwards.

“I do not know how to answer that,” he finally admits. “Part of me is certain it would be an unwise presumption on my part, at this point, to think that anything I could envision for the world would end well. But I cannot simply withdraw from matters, either. That would be irresponsible of me. I catch myself wishing there could be some way to undo it all.”

He laughs; wry and self-deprecating.

She closes her eyes.

“That is normal, I think,” she offers.

He shrugs.

“Whether or not it is normal, it has proven to be a disastrous impulse,” he reasons. “I must accept that it is done. But I…”

He looks at her as he trails off.

She understands. There aren’t a lot of words for the scope and magnitude of this thing.

“Do you wish I had not told you?” she wonders.

He shakes his head almost immediately, though.

“The truth is what it is,” he insists.
Still.

She looks at the slump of his shoulders, and wishes…

For whatever her wishing could ever be worth.

“How do you think Haninan and Hildur are faring?” she wonders.

“I have no idea. I do not seem to have much skill at anticipating dwarves,” he replies. “Hopefully they will be able to give us a better idea of the situation in Andruil’s lands, at least. It is a very wild place on the surface. I do not know how that might translate underground; if it influences things there at all.”

She wonders what Pride considers to be ‘very wild’.

“Are there cities?” she asks.

He blinks at her.

“Of course,” he replies. “Cities, villages, palaces. Fewer than in any other lands save Ghilan’nain’s, though, and smaller, by and large. The woods are thick and deep, and filled with all manner of creatures. Increasingly so; Andruil has been commissioning her wife for ever-more dangerous game to hunt. I had thought it was simply the natural progression of her pursuit of greater challenges. But now…”

“Now you’re wondering if she’s been using lyrium, and needs stronger prey because she’s just that much more powerful?” she guesses.

He inclines his head.

“Her schedule has not change. Provided Mythal’s sources on it are still accurately reporting it,” he muses. “For the past few years it has more or less been the same. Summers campaigning in the North with Elgar’nan and Falon’din’s forces, trying to rout the Nameless hold outs there. Then during autumn she heads south for her Great Hunts, and to Arlathan for the Harvest Festivals. She stays as briefly as politeness will allow, and then winters with Ghilan’nain, until they both return for the Winter Solstice. In the spring she sets herself up in the Hunter’s Palace, and rests and accepts tributes. Sometimes takes a lover or two.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Ghilan’nain does not object?” she wonders.

He blinks.

“To what?” he asks.

“To Andruil taking lovers,” she clarifies.

Pride blinks again.

“No. Why should she?”

“Because they are married?”

There is a moment of somewhat awkward silence.
Right, she thinks. Immortals. Probably not that big on monogamy. After all, the nobles in her own time seemed to have a lot of difficulties managing it, and they didn’t have to draw the attempt out for thousands of years. Though she couldn’t help but wonder, then, what all the nuances of such relationships were in Elvenan.

And what that might mean for herself. And Pride. Though, as tentatively as things were beginning to… do as they would between them, that was probably getting ahead of things.

Pride tilts his head, considering.

“Does marriage necessarily imply exclusivity in your world?” he asks. “That… would explain some things.”

“It does, generally,” she confirms.

He nods, and then glances at her; and then away again, somewhat quickly. He clears his throat.

“It does not, here. Marriage is an acknowledgement of a bond. Something that will endure regardless of other relationships, or time spent apart,” he explains. “Though obviously each relationship is different and will possess different parameters. Not everyone feels the need to… ah, to indulge in romantic or sexual exploits very often. Elgar’nan tends not to, for example.”

Reaching over, he takes another sip of his drink again. Then he clears his throat.

“I do not suppose exclusivity would trouble someone like myself very greatly, either. For example. In a hypothetical scenario,” he asserts.

In spite of everything, she feels just the slightest twinge of amusement.

“I imagine living indefinitely changes a lot of things,” she reasons.

“Personally, I hardly see the appeal in having… in… just in, as a general… frivolity…” Pride trails off.

“And I imagine the leaders are often surrounded by very attractive and interested potential lovers,” she carries on musing.

“Yes,” he agrees. “But the frequency of Andruil’s dalliances are not standard. For everyone. Most, um, most certainly do not… not every year, at least…”

“It is not so surprising. I should have realized it myself,” she concludes. There goes another Dalish standard based on ancient times; some of the hahrens in the clan would have been absolutely scandalized to learn that, in fact, the elves of Arlathan had not possessed such unerring devotion as to never even once stray in their affections.

Although, considering the different standards for ‘straying’, perhaps there is still some truth in the sentiment, too.

Pride stares at her for a moment.

Then he lets out a huff of breath.

“You are not perturbed,” he notes.

“Should I be?” she wonders.
“I am getting ahead of myself,” he reasons. She’s not entirely sure what he means by that. His lips thin, for a moment, and he taps his fingers atop the table, before leaning down and retrieving something from underneath it.

Carefully, he slides it across to her.

“A token of my esteem,” he declares.

The box is a flat square, pale brown, minimalistic and unadorned. She stares at it for a moment, wondering what could possibly be in it, and then looks back up at him.

“You… got me a gift?” she asks.

“Yes,” he replies, swallowing. “It is… when you said, before. I mean. When you said you would accept… every time…”

His voice goes quiet, and he shakes his head at himself.

“I wished to,” he says. “And I should give you gifts, if I am to do things properly. Which is also something I wish to do.”

Oh.

Her breath stalls for a moment, and her hand hovers over the box.

“You do not have to give me gifts,” she says.

He looks resolute, again.

“I wish to,” he reiterates.

There’s not a lot of turning him down, it seems. Not without flatly rejecting the box, and she gets the distinct impression that that would send the wrong kind of message.

Gently, she lifts it, and opens it.

The interior is soft. Nested within it is a small book. Old, she thinks, as she carefully lifts it out. The cover is leather, and worn soft; indented with letters and a simple stamp mark of a tree. It smells like parchment, and the stamp shimmers softly. Embedded with some faint magic.

‘Tales of the Sun and Moon’, is what the title reads.

She runs her touch gently over the spine.

“They are old folk tales,” Pride tells her. “Old stories of the People. There are not very many in it, but… the book was a gift to me, once. When I was new to being in this world. It is not serious history. Only myths and unsubstantiated children’s fables.”

Very carefully, she opens to the first page. Her eyes are greeted with a handmade illustration; delicate brown ink, outlining the scene of a forest split between night and day.

“When I was a spirit I thought it was the truth,” he confesses. “I did not understand fiction. I was very angry when I discovered it was, ah, inaccurate.”

There is a little damage on one of the corners, she notes. A blank page, and then the first story. Written in tiny but very legible script, that shimmers slightly when she tilts it into the light.
Here is the story of how the Sun loved the Moon, says the first line. The Sun loved the Moon as your heart loves your dearest dream.

She swallows, and flips gently through more pages, until she comes to the next tale.

Here is the story of how the Moon loved the Sun, it says. The Moon loved the Sun as your heart loves your fondest memories.

She flips through again.

Here is the story of how the Sky loved the Earth.

Again.

Here is the story of how the Earth loved the Sky.

Until the fifth and last one; the shortest by far.

Here is the story of how the People love on another, it begins.

As all things have loved one another, in all ways, for all time, it ends.

Below it is a winding illustration full of different animals, sitting among one another. A friendly menagerie of horns and claws and feathers. At the forefront of the image, a wolf sits, happily ensconced amidst the chaos. Its eye is turned towards the reader; flecks of golden ink in its gaze. The only colour to be added to any illustration in the set.

“They are all about love,” she notes.

Pride freezes.

“I, um, I recalled them more as fanciful explanations of the tides and such things,” he says, looking a little perplexed.

Quietly, she hands him the book.

He flips through it with the same care which she had shown, and when he finishes, he’s red to the tips of his ears.

“I should have checked,” he says. “This is rather more forward than I was intending for the first gift…”

A sudden bolt of alarm hits her.

“No!” she blurts.

He blinks at her.

“No!” sheblurts.

He blinks at her.

“It is – I like it,” she insists, holding her hand out for it again. “It is perfect. Old stories, and – and things. I like them. To know even more of the culture and history, of the stories we told before the stories I knew. And the ones that carried through.”

She swallows, tightly.

“It is perfect,” she repeats. “It is a beautiful gift.”
Slowly, he hands it back to her. His fingertips just lightly brush hers as she accepts it from him.

“I am glad,” he says.

~

The matter of Fortitude does not come up again until the day before they are due to leave. The spirit makes itself scarce; and though the people of the palace regard her with more uncertainty than before, Pride and Curiosity keep her frequent company, and no one approaches her or voices any objections towards her.

When Fortitude finally emerges again, it’s at night, in her room.

The spirit seems to melt out of a nearby wall, and startles her half to death. She has her sword in her hand before she realizes what she’s actually looking at. Even so, she needs a minute to try and get her hammering heartbeat to calm.

“Shit,” she says, by way of greeting.

Fortitude tilts its head. The soft glow of light escaping from it fills up the small room, like the gleam off of a working forge.

“I have something to show you,” it declares.

She sucks in a deep breath, and lets it out again. Spirits.

“Alright,” she says. “Let me get some actual clothes on.”

“That should not be necessary. It is in the Dreaming,” Fortitude informs her.

“Then why didn’t you wait until I was asleep and approach me there?” she wonders.

“It is easier this way,” the spirit declares.

She hesitates, and stares at it, while it simply stares back. Blue eyes softly glowing.

Does it expect her to just… go to sleep? While it stands there watching her?

A heavy breath escapes her, and she settles onto the edge of her pallet, putting her sword aside again.

It’s lucky, she thinks, that she’s very accustomed to sleeping in strange places and under bizarre circumstances. And the room feels warmer than before; not that it was cold, and not that she’s entirely certain the spirit is putting off any actual heat. But it could be worse.

Still. Sleep is long in coming.

When she finally drifts off it feels like something flows through with her. Something tugs at her back, like a hand on her shirt, and catches her. She drifts through disjointed pieces of memories and thoughts for a moment. Then they’re swept aside, and she finds herself standing ankle-deep in a network of rivers and streams made of soft light.
It’s green.

She leans down and stares at it. Looks up, and sees similar rivers running overhead. It reminds her of being in the Titan, except there’s not the same overwhelming sense of confinement. The light runs free, and disappears in winding tracks that sink deeper into the Fade.

Fortitude stands on the bank, between streams.

“What is this?” she wonders.

“It is where Compassion died,” Fortitude replies.

She stills.

“You saw it?” she asks, as her heart sinks into her stomach.

“No. But I found it, afterwards. Resilience,” the spirit explains. “Mythal took much of it, to try and restore.”

The shard which the evanuris had given her had not seemed like ‘much’, but then, she supposes it’s hardly a terrible surprise to find out that wasn’t all of what was left.

Carefully, she steps out of the stream of green light, and ponders it for a moment. Just another piece of the Fade? Or some further remnant of Compassion? When she asks Fortitude, the spirit only shakes its head, and offers no answers on the subject. Instead it beckons her further along, up the path of the streams. The ground is smooth and dark, like eroded stone. In the real world she thinks it would be slippery. But in the dream, her feet find the path easily enough.

Lines of light break away. The weave together, like spiderwebs, fading more towards blue than green. When her feet brush against them, they are cool. Like Sorrow more than Compassion, she thinks. And there are sparks in the ground. Tiny flecks and pieces, that grow and waver, and whisper of lost things. Old hurts. Healed wounds, and scars left behind.

A few other spirits drift past; indistinct, and preoccupied. Scavengers or mourners, she wonders?

At last their path ends at the side of a vast wall that curves towards them. A few jagged shards are embedded within it. Tiny, no bigger than her fingernails. They the way the spread out makes her think of one of Dagna’s glass jars exploding, and peppering the walls of the Undercroft with gleaming splinters.

It paints a vivid picture of what must have happened.

“Why did you want to show me this?” she wonders.

Fortitude drifts towards one of the fragments; a sparkle, like a chip of glass too small to be caught by a broom. It beckons her to come closer. In the Fade, in the grave of Compassion, the living spirit feels brighter. More compelling. The lines of light on it resonate with the shards around them. Not perfectly; but it makes her wonder how well and for how long Valour, and then Rage, knew Compassion.

“Touch the shard,” Fortitude encourages her.

She raises an eyebrow.

“What will that do?” she asks.
“It will show you.”

Hesitating only a little, she lifts her hand, and presses it to the marked surface of the wall. She can’t even feel the shard, really, it’s too small. But a warm spot radiates out from her palm, and the air around them changes. A whispered thought carries through, and for a moment she sees a girl.

A young elven girl, barely on the cusp of adulthood, though her features are difficult to distinguish. Her hair is coiled tightly around her skull, and her eyes are wide, and she is staring at her hands.

They tremble.

“I do not understand,” she says, softly. The image wavers, then, and seems to speak again, though she cannot hear the words. The hands reach out. One of them touches her shoulder, so close she sees shades of something recognizable in the face.

“Mythal,” she realizes. “It is Mythal?”

“Compassion counseled Mythal when she was young,” Fortitude says. “Most of what remains is splintered and small. But it was broken for the truth of you. Here, also, lies some truth of her.”

Carefully, she withdraws her hand. The spectre vanishes.

“Would Mythal consider this a betrayal on your part?” she wonders.

“Perhaps,” the spirit muses. “It is not meant as one.”

“I would not want to endanger you.”

She has no desire, none at all, to see another spirit die for her. Not in some bizarre kind of revenge, and not even for scraps of knowledge about Mythal. Ghostly images of her youth don’t offer much, she thinks.

“We are all of us always in danger,” Fortitude replies. “To do nothing, to shy away, will not make me any safer. Nor you. Nor Mythal, in the end.”

Her gaze trails over the lines of light and shards of broken things.


Fortitude is quiet, for a time.

“It is possible to feel so deeply tied to something that you forget that it is not simply another part of yourself,” it finally says. “Self-inflicted wounds are often the most difficult to survive. And often the ones most readily made. I see, now, where people have cleaved at themselves. Where they have broken others whom they loved so dearly, it broke them, too. All the tattered shapes that remain are different. They do not fit seamlessly into the world. They struggle upon the sharp edges of all the others who were broken, and lingered as well. And yet… they endure. As I do.”

She swallows, and Fortitude takes her hand, and presses it to the wall again.

“Look,” it asks. “Compassion endures. Its greatest wish is for Mythal. It always has been.”

Mythal who killed it.

Her anger is sharp, even as she sees the wide-eyed specter of the young woman return.
But Fortitude’s grip is firm and warm, and she watches, because she doesn’t know what else to do.

Because Solas loved Mythal, perhaps. And she wants to see why. The whole picture of why, really. Why that love endured so long, and was ensconced so deeply within him.

She sees a young woman, struggling.

The how’s and why’s of it are indistinct. Her voice fades in and out, and there is no clear picture. It’s more muddled and blurry than even her own lost memories of Justinia had once been. Dwarven phantoms she once saw playing out scenes of ancient history and war had more clarity to their features than the barest glimpse of young Mythal here, buried in this tiny little shard. Sometimes she loses pieces of herself. Limbs, or the edges of a skirt, or her eyes, or mouth.

It’s unnerving.

But there is… there is something, in seeing her struggle. Flemeth had survived many struggles, and wore them plainly. Mythal hides hers, though. She is composed, always. Yet in these tattered images, she is clearly pained and frightened.

Clearly not so detached from the simple realities of life.

“How long ago was this?” she wonders.


“Do you know what is happening in these… memories?”

“No,” it admits.

“I am not sure what this is supposed to accomplish, then,” she replies, and as Mythal staggers, she gently lifts her hand away.

“All pedestals crumble. But what they have once held high is not made worthless because of that,” Fortitude tells her. “You had to see.”

“Why?” she asks. Snaps, in fact. Though she doesn’t realize that’s what she’s doing until she does it. One of her hands clenches into a reflexive fist. But the spirit only blinks, and doesn’t seem the least bit perturbed by the sudden appearance of her temper.

“Because it is part of the thread that runs between us all,” it tells her, as if that explains everything.

The air around them whirls, strangely. It feels heavier.

“Do you want me to pity Mythal?” she asks.

“Do you pity Mythal?” Fortitude wonders. It looks her straight in the eye; plain and simple and utterly unapologetic, lacking in ulterior motive, she thinks, even if its motives are a bit difficult to grasp.

Does she?

She is furious with Mythal. She would have killed her several times over by now, if she could. It makes her think of Solas, rounding on the mages who killed Wisdom, so long ago. That kind of anger, that anger at senseless loss, is overwhelming. She would have offered information in exchange for Compassion’s wellbeing. She would have…
But…

There was no chance, and it is done; and the spectre of a young elven woman, struggling, reaches for the comfort and guidance of a spirit that her older self destroyed with her own two hands.

She remembers the sight of Solas’ back turned towards her.

Does she pity Mythal?

“I do,” she admits.

Fortitude is right, she realizes. There are threads woven between them all.

Painful ones, it seems.

Gently, she rests her hand back against the wall. Golden eyes gleam at her from where they sit, framed by a youthful face. As youthful to Mythal as Pride would be to Solas. Maybe even a little more so. Her second heartbeat skips, and the air wavers.

The light spilling away from Fortitude shudders and flickers.

“What is that?” the spirit wonders.

The streams of light around them go still. As if suddenly frozen. The impressions of memories vanish, and the light dims.

Unsettled, she reaches for the spirit’s shoulder. But her hand passes through. Its bright eyes turn towards her, and it speaks. But as with the memory of Mythal, she finds she cannot hear its voice. Or… she can, she thinks, but so faintly as to be utterly indistinct. As if she’s just ducked her head below water.

Fortitude reaches for her. Its hands pass through as well, though. For one moment they can only look at each other.

It flares, briefly. The light in its eyes gleams. The air ripples again.

Then it all goes dark.

“Fortitude?” she calls.

Silence.

It’s blacker than pitch. She takes a step, and something crackles beneath her foot. Smooth and damp, like the litter of a forest floor. When she sucks in a breath, she tastes moss and the scent of recent rain. Clear and real.

*It is alright,* she thinks. *It is another of these dream. Just another dream.*

She swallows, and closes her eyes – not that it makes much difference – and wills herself to wake up.

Wake up.

The sound of running water reaches her.

When she opens her eyes again, there is a full moon overhead. Silvery light streams between the
columns of the trees. It is the same forest, she thinks. It feels the same.

What happened last time… Pride. She has to look for Pride. It isn’t safe for him here, and if she’s here, then he might be again. Whether or not he remembers it, and whether or not he’d woken with wounds the last time, he could still be in danger. She strains her ears for the howling of a wolf, for the sounds of animals or other things moving between the trees.

But there doesn’t seem to be any particular urgency, tonight. No beckoning light, no malevolent shadows. Not ghostly pale fur, fleeing between the trees.

She finds a trail, and follows it down towards the sound of the water. Her nerves are fired, and she finds herself working to keep hold of her senses. To not get lost in the thrum of energy all around; in the strangely vivid physicality of her presence in this place. It’s so easy, she thinks, to get lost here. To forget. She splashes through the river. The light catches on smooth stones at the bottom, flecked with little bits of green and pale blue.

For a long while, she wanders. Not running this time, at least. She trails her hands over moss-strewn logs, and the cracked bark of bent and weathered trees. If she didn’t know she was asleep, and if she couldn’t feel the strange disorientation in her own mind, she would have never guessed she was dreaming.

She even recognized one of the same trees. One which she had crashed into before, during the first such dream.

One standing at the edge of the grotto.

The same white flowers litter the ground, and the same lingering glint of strange, golden things can be found.

She stares at them.

There are fewer than before. Sprinkles of dust rest on the delicate petals of nearby flowers, and shine stop blades of grass. She recalls how they fell apart when she touched them. Yet the ones which remain look much the same as before. Scattered about, as if something had gripped a golden statue, and dashed it so hard upon the rocks that it broke.

Something moves, in the corner of her eye.

She resists the urge to turn and look.

Gingerly, she reaches out, and touches another one of the tiniest pieces. Where her finger strikes it, it falls apart. Frowning, she tries touching it through the material of her sleeping clothes instead; but the results are the same.

Something cracks behind a tree.

She does turn to look, then. But she isn’t surprised when she sees nothing.

She turns back to find a wolf sitting almost directly in front of her.

Golden eyes and russet fur. Its tail swishes gently back and forth. Its ears are up, and its head is cocked to one side. It sits amidst the wealth of white flowers. Like a living illustration from the book which Pride had given her; though distinctly less friendly.

But not *un*friendly, perhaps. Her heartbeat speeds up, and she swallows in a long breath.
“What are you doing?” the wolf asks.

The voice is a shock to her. It sounds almost like her own. But far lighter than she is accustomed to hearing; playful and unburdened as she can never remember hearing it. Not even when she was a girl.

“What are you?” she asks in return.

The wolf’s tail stops swishing.

“What a strange question. What am I? What are you?” the russet wolf replies.

“I am a person,” she says, because that’s a fairly ingrained response at this point.

“And what is a person?” it wonders. She realizes, then, that it’s speaking common.

Stranger and stranger, and she finds herself wishing that this was a lot more like a dream, just so she could chalk it up to being one. Only a dream, and nothing more.

It could never be so mercifully simple.

“A person is… a person?” she ventures.

“Is a person a different thing from a wolf?” the wolf asks.

“Not necessarily,” she replies, and feels all of the little hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention. Something very deep and primal in her wants to run; and something deeper and more primal still insists that this would be a very, very bad idea.

“Then I shall call myself a person, too. It seems vague enough to suit,” the wolf decides. “Now answer my first question. What are you doing?”

She swallows.

“I’m not sure,” she admits. “I… there…” Raising her hand, she gestures towards the shards. Her mind turns to Fortune. And to Fortitude, and what might have happened to it when it vanished in the dark.

The wolf ponders the golden pieces for a moment.

Its lips curls upwards, slowly, and it grins back at her.

“Was that a spirit?” she wonders.

Those teeth look like they could rip her throat clean out with scarcely any effort at all. She’s never been terribly afraid of animals, in general; but she feels very, very aware of that fact right now.

“Do you know, it has been a very, very long time since new things came here?” the wolf asks, rather than answering. “Now all at once there are all sorts of things coming here. Whispering. Screaming. It’s all very different. It’s all changing.”

The moonlight catches on those very sharp teeth. The wolf’s tail begins to sway again.

“I invited you in. Not the other one, though. It tried to peer after you, and got too close. It’s been a long time since I snatched up such easy prey. Like a fat rabbit, flush with dreams,” it declares. Then it chuckles. A giddy sound that makes the gleam in its eyes.
Her own dart towards the spirit’s remains again.

“Have you harmed any others?” she wonders.

It tilts its head the other way.

“No. Not since then,” it says, and she feels a surge of visceral relief.

It mingles with her primal wariness, and creates an interesting cocktail of adrenaline.

A little nauseating, in fact.

The wolf ponders her for a moment, and then turns its head. A low breeze kicks up. The flowers sway, and the wolf’s fur ripples. A few of the golden flecks catch on the air, and begin to whirl. The way sand would sometimes flurry up from the desert in the Western Approach. She takes a wary step back, uncertain, and the wolf turns to look at her.

The breeze turns into a brief, blasting gale. The flowers bend. The branches of the nearest trees rustle, suddenly set to swaying. The spirit’s remnants blast apart, carried upwards in a sudden, shimmering twist of the weather.

“What are you doing?” she asks, sharply.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” the wolf replies. “Not much left to it but prettiness, now. It seems to be distracting you. Perhaps I ought to send it all away.”

“Away to where?” she wonders.

It shrugs.

“Everywhere. Nowhere. Little pieces too small to even be flecks. I ate most of what mattered anyway.”

Her stomach rolls. The wind lifts, and carries the remnant, gleaming, up towards the tops of the trees. It’s a pretty spiral of gold and silver in the moonlight, as the damp leaves reflect the gleam of it back in equally broken shapes.

“Give it to me, please,” she asks.

The wolf’s tail twitches again.

“That’s a strange request. Do you like glittery things? Or fat rabbit bones?” it wonders. “Would you give it all to your pretty wolf?”

Her heart stops.

“Did you invite him here, too?” she asks.

The wolf’s grin becomes all the sharper, she thinks.

“Not tonight,” it says.

Then it turns its eyes towards the whirling dust in the air. The moment hangs. A whim, all of it; her, the remnants, even the forest, perhaps. She is as small as one of those specks, in the end.

But the speck of Compassion had been small, too; and it had still held something, after all.
With all the grace and ceremony of an indifferent shrug, the wind sweeps down, then, and nearly chokes her. She closes her mouth as she is pelted with flecks of gold and a suffocating chill, shutting her eyes and raising her hands.

A chuckle chases her into the dark.

She wakes, gasping.

Fortitude stares at her in shock.

The entire room is covered in dust.

~

After a long and slightly traumatized silence, and then a stilted and still slightly traumatized explanation, she and Fortitude set about gathering up as much of the dust as they can. It seems to have managed to get everywhere. By the time the first streaks of daylight are trickling in through the window, they’ve swept most of it up into a large sack in the corner of the room.

Fortitude silently uses magic to peel the flecks off of the layers of her sheets.

Following her own attempt to use magic to help, it became apparent that slightly more finesse than she was capable of would be needed.

She sweeps the remaining flecks off the floor with the help of her pillow case.

“I think it is Fortune,” she finally admits, when she sits back on her heels to look at the bulk of it.

“Yes,” Fortitude agrees.

“…Can we do anything for it?” she asks.

In the cold light of morning, the flecks look less golden than they do tarnished and brown. Fortitude sweeps the last that they can find into the sack, and regards it solemnly.

“Perhaps,” it decides. “I will see. If any spirit can help, it is probably one such as myself.”

She contemplates the matter a moment longer, and checks her clothing for any residual dust. A speck clings to the skin on the side of her wrist. It feels like washing off blood when she peels it away, and drops it into the sack.

“Could you possibly not mention this to anyone?” she asks.

“I could,” Fortitude replies.

She glances sideways at it.

“Does that mean you won’t, or…?”

It stares back at her.

“We shall see,” it offers.
She sighs. But she supposes that’s the best she can expect. Though if anything could make her current situation more strained, it would probably be Mythal finding out that she woke up literally covered in the dead remnants of her spy.

Fortitude takes what’s left of Fortune and slips away, back through the walls of her room. She hopes it doesn’t intend to march down the corridors carrying a sack full of highly incriminating evidence. But when she manages to dress and make herself reasonably presentable, and heads through the door, there are no shouting elves or damning trails of golden dust anywhere.

At least.

Still. This is probably the kind of thing she shouldn’t sit on for very long. She goes to find Pride. She heads first for the practice field, and when he isn’t there, tries the library. The dining hall. Both turn up empty, and so, as discreetly as she can manage, she makes her way through the corridors leading to his chambers instead.

That proves fruitless, though. There’s no response to her efforts to knock, and the door won’t open for her; and even if it did that would probably be crossing some kind of a line.

She withdraws, and thinks about finding Sorrow and seeing if it could, perhaps, tell her whether Pride is just sleeping in or not. Or maybe Curiosity might know. She finds herself trailing through the halls, keeping her eyes peeled for any spirits, in fact. The palace is quiet. It’s early, so that isn’t strange. But it feels inexplicably ominous to her anyway.

She passes the massive chamber of the throne room, and pauses.

Pride is standing outside of it.

The relief at spotting him is dimmed as she takes in the actual sight of him.

He’s an elf, at the moment, though she thinks he looks as though he’d prefer being a wolf just now. His head is bowed, his shoulders slumped, and the weight to him has worsened, somehow. She hesitates, considering. The air around him feels… tight, insofar as she’s a judge of such things. He’s staring fixedly at an irrelevant segment of wall. The muscle in his jaw is clenched, and his brows are low.

He looks miserable, yes. But also, she realizes, furious.

She treads lightly as she approaches him.

“Pride?” she asks, when she’s near enough to ask gently.

He looks at her. It’s the kind of stare that feels like it could have pinned her to the floor, except that it’s coming from Pride, and so it only makes her heart clench instead.

“What has happened?” she wonders.

They are set to head for Arlathan today. Her mind turns over the possibilities for what could be wrong. A delay, though she thinks that would bother her more than him. Some disastrous news of Andruil; or even of Haninan and Hildur. Another issue with Mythal. She even considers, briefly, that Fortitude went straight to the evanuris with tales of the most recent incident, and that this is because of that. That the matter of Fortune has tipped things over the edge.

“I have been removed of several of my obligations,” Pride tells her, quietly.
Obligations…?

Duties, then.

“What does that mean?” she asks, though she thinks she knows.

He clears his throat a little.

“In light of recent events, and my youth and inexperience, Mythal has considered that I may have been bestowed too many responsibilities in too short a time,” he says, and confirms her fears. “Rank, after all, must be earned. It is more surprising that I have not made similar missteps before in the past, apparently. That I have done so well for so long is a credit to me, and I should see this as an opportunity to reflect upon my life, and choices, and priorities.”

Her mouth goes dry.

Stupid. Stupid of her. She should have waited until he wouldn’t be expected to report back everything he had learned. She should have done things differently.

She thinks of Compassion, and Fortune, and her throat goes tight.

She should have done everything differently.

Pride has always been so set on his duties. On protecting Mythal, and the people, and defending her decisions.

He does not deserve this.

Her fist clenches.

She can’t think of a single way to fix it, though. Anything she could do right now would likely just make things worse.

At least he’s still alive, a little voice of relief in the back of her mind whispers. Demoted is still vastly preferable to dead. Even if he’s – rightly – upset about it.

“I am sorry,” she offers.

He shakes his head, slightly.

“She argued that I would not be needed for this excursion to Arlathan,” he says. “I had to… I managed to convince her otherwise. But I will no longer be the highest ranking servant in attendance of her.”

With a glance down both ends of the hall, he gestures at her to follow him, and then moves towards an alcove further from the closed entryway. The mosaic tiles along the walls are a deep blue and crimson, and the crèche is deeper than it seems at a glance. Still, he leans towards her as he speaks, intently.

“You must be very careful. Tarensa has been given the honour of Mythal’s guard, and is her second for the time being. She is not cruel, but she will favour individuals by rank. She will never side with you in a dispute, so you must do your utmost to avoid becoming involved in one. The exception is if you are accosted by the servant of a different leader. Then you may approach her in confidence,” he quickly explains. “Thenvunin is the other ranking elf of our party. His sense of humour often leaves much to be desired. He may attempt to humiliate you, if you draw his ire. Or
attention. If things go awry I will still do what I can. But neither of them hold any great love for me."

"Why not?" she wonders, honestly baffled for a moment, before she remembers that she is… perhaps uniquely predisposed towards liking Pride.

He only sighs, though.

"My rank was granted to me as soon as I took on a body. I have not held a different one since I was a spirit. The speed with which I earned Mythal’s favour did not endear me to those who worked much harder to gain similar respect," he explains. There is hardness in his eyes again. Temper, but also hurt, too.

She reaches out, and takes his hand in hers. He stiffens for a moment as she threads their fingers together and squeezes.

His throat works silently.

After a second, he squeezes back.

"I am sorry," she says, again. "If there is anything I can do to fix this, you need only ask."

He closes his eyes, and gently disentangles his hand from hers.

"On its own it is a reprimand, and nothing more. But in context of what we must do it puts us at a distinct disadvantage."

"Which is probably why Mythal did it," she reasons. Her mind turns to their confrontation before, when Mythal had told her that she had made Pride unsuitable for her plans for him. What plans? What about her could make him unsuitable to them?

He stares at the wall again. His gaze narrows. Then he folds his arms and lets out a breath.

"Well. Now it is more imperative than ever that we know what we are doing," he decides.

"Pride," she tells him. "This is your life. It is alright to be upset, even beyond how it might affect our plans."

He scoffs.

Then he catches her eye, and looks away.

"I do not begin to know what to make of my life at the moment," he admits.

They stand in silence.

She’s not sure how well she can help him there. Her own life hasn’t been hers ever since the explosion at the conclave; and she’s not entirely sure how she would begin to go about changing that, at this point. What she wants is…

Well.

Her fingers twitch, and she tamps down on the urge to reach for him again. He probably wouldn’t welcome it, at the moment.

*Something*, she thinks. *Do something for him.*
She searches his face.

“We will work it out,” she promises.

He inclines his head, but the tension in his expression doesn’t ease much.

“We will have to,” he decides.

Chapter End Notes

So I’m thinking every four or five days is probably the new update speed. As always, I love you guys, and hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Footsteps interrupt their conversation before it can progress much further.

They both keep still, and when the sound passes into the corridor beyond their alcove, continuing without incident, Pride fixes her with a look.

“Keep scarce until we depart. I will try and speak with you again,” he says.

She catches his sleeve before he goes.

“Something happened,” she tells him. “I think it can wait, but, you should know. I had another one of those dreams.”

But there are more footsteps, then. The palace is beginning to spring to life, shifting from morning calm to morning rush. His gaze drifts over her, assessing more than he had before.

“Were you hurt?” he asks.

“No. But I know what happened to the Spirit of Fortune,” she says, quietly.

He glances down the corridor, and then back at her.

After a moment, he nods – an acknowledgement, an agreement to speak more later.

“Keep scarce,” he repeats, and then he goes.

She gives it a minute before she follows. Not that she thinks it would be particularly troublesome for them to be seen together, all things considered, but Pride seems to think there is some delicate balancing involved in their interactions. Especially now. So it’s probably wiser to err on the side of caution.

She takes his advice, and avoids the more trafficked areas of the palace. After a while she tries to find Fortitude again. But few of the spirits seem to know where it might have gone, and she can’t really explain what it was doing.

Except, perhaps, to one.

She finds Curiosity prowling some of the lower corridors, where the walls and floor gleam like mirrors. A sleek lioness, though some of the usual golden fur has been replaced with vibrant blue and green feathers. Especially around the neck. And when she approaches, Curiosity turns to her with the same bright blue eyes as ever.

Four of them, in fact.

The effect is a little disconcerting.

Curiosity’s not-inconsiderable claws tap across the floor.

“What are you doing?” she wonders.
In the mirrored walls around them, a pack of feathered lionesses weave their way towards her.

“I am practicing,” Curiosity replies. “I like flying. But this shape is better for fighting, I think. I want to master more. Some are harder than others, though. Also, it is not colorful enough, so I am improving that as well.”

She leans a little closer, and looks at the feathers and how they bloom from the fur; golden strands shifting into narrow quills. The barbules turn blue and green, but the shaft remains tawny. How does it work, she wonders? Changing one’s own shape. Could she also do it? Would the magic make sense to her?

And what would it change in her, to change her body?

She glances at her left arm. Wonders, if she changed shape, and then changed back again, would it be gone? Lost as an unwelcome part of her?

Though, of late, she has been getting used to it. If only because there have been much more pressing things to focus on.

After a moment she runs her thumb over her bicep. She can’t remember, anymore, just exactly where the seam should be.

She shakes her head, and abandons the notion.

“Pride got demoted,” she mentions.

“I know,” Curiosity replies. “Many of the spirits are talking about it. They all have different ideas of what he might have done wrong.”

“I also had another one of those dreams,” she admits.

That brings the lioness up short for a moment. The back set of eyes, slightly smaller than the others, blink. Like Pride, Curiosity assesses her for any signs of damage. Even leaning a little and twitching her nose to sniff out anything that might be hiding.

“I wonder where it is you go?” Curiosity muses, apparently satisfied that nothing too dire has occurred this time. “Dreamers go in the dreaming. Or their mind goes quiet and stays close to them. But it is still either in their bodies or in their dreams. Some dreamers can block off parts of the Dreaming, but I do not think that is what happens to you. It is like… one might close a door, but the door will still be seen. Where you go, there are no doors. No walls. It is another place, or it is a place that hides the doors so well that they cannot be found.”

“Are there such places?” she wonders.

“I have been investigating that,” Curiosity tells her. The air swirls, then, and the lioness is once again replaced by a tall elven woman. One who is dressed in finery fit for travel. A long, plain blue gown, and brass-coloured armour that looks at once decorative and practical. Weapons have joined the fray; a slim bow, written with runes, and turquoise-fletched arrows in a matching quiver.

“Mythal is letting you come with us?” she guesses.

“Yes. I am to watch you. I do not think she knows what I know, or who I am becoming. Sometimes I am not sure of all that I know, or all that I am becoming, either. But I will be happy to be there,” Curiosity reasons, steelier than usual. “We can find the answers we need, and I will make sure we live long enough to find ever more.”
‘Live long enough’?

“Are you afraid of Mythal now?” she wonders.

Curiosity pauses. Looks down, and trails long fingers over the bracers on her arms. Her nails are painted turquoise. Or maybe just coloured that way by virtue of whatever talent allows her to change shape and form.

“It is not just Compassion’s fate. When I saw your memories, and how she was. Who she was…” the young woman trails off.

“Flemeth?” she asks.

A nod.

“Sometimes when you look at something that has been broken, you see more of how it really works. I am not sure what to make of how Mythal works anymore,” Curiosity admits.

There isn’t much she can say to that, really. It makes her think of what Fortitude had shown her, though, before the dream that followed had wiped most of that from the forefront of her thoughts. The young elf, struggling. Reaching. She had seen people afflicted in this time, and people who had suffered and survived things. She had seen Pride laid low by the truth, and Haninan enduring the weight of his grief, but the desperate striving for something that she had glimpsed in Mythal…

That felt more like a sentiment and a state belonging to her own time. To her own world.

“Do you know what she wants?” she wonders.

‘A better world’ had seemed the answer the woman herself was inclined to give. But what kind of better, and for whom? What was so lacking in this world that Mythal in particular wanted to change it? What star was she charting her course by, that she had made this system of things, and yet seemed to find it unsatisfactory as well?

A part of her still didn’t care. Or rather, didn’t want to.

It would be so easy to lay at least some of the blame for all of this at the feet of someone who wasn’t herself or Solas.

And easy things, she thinks, are the ones to be most wary of.

“I used to think she wanted to make things better for everyone,” Curiosity tells her, drooping slightly. “Now I do not know. I do not think the answer will come easily, either.”

They stand in silence for a moment.

Tentatively, she extends a hand, and rests it on the taller woman’s shoulder.

It’s there for a warm beat, before Curiosity turns and puts her arms fully around her instead. She finds herself enveloped in soft, fancy fabric, with the corners of a pair of brass-coloured arm braces digging into her back.

“I am sorry you saw it all like that. It could not have been easy,” she says, and realizes all at once. To know that the world could crumble, that it would be the fault of someone you cared about, to witness all the tragedy of what had happened… of course Pride would not be the only one affected. Anyone seeing that and knowing it could be their future, and that the reality of it was still
threatening their present, was bound to be distressed.

“I keep thinking about all the little children,” Curiosity admits. “All the spirits. Everyone in your world was so young. And now they are trapped, and I want to find more answers to help them. I want to help. I do. But I am afraid, too, that the answer will be that we cannot. That there is nothing we can do, and it will all just get worse and worse. I do not think that is the answer but… it does not stop me being afraid.”

She closes her eyes, and swallows. Hard.

“I know,” she says.

“I do not like to be afraid. The only thing that helps is trying to – to move. To do things. Or getting angry, that helps, too.”

“It can. Though sometimes it is enough to admit it, as well.”

Afraid. So afraid. She wonders if the Nightmare is out there somewhere, growing fat on the wealth of all the new fears she’s cultivating in this time. All the pains and sorrows and tragedy she’s brought along with her.

But there’s nothing for it.

“Come on,” she says. “Do you know how to actually use that bow?”

“A little,” Curiosity replies.

As projectile weapons go, magic will probably be more useful, under the circumstances, than arrows. But ‘a little’ still doesn’t cut it, and she thinks of Sera as she steps back, and declares that they should spend the rest of the morning figuring just how good of a shot Curiosity might be.

At least the practice field is relatively quiet, and the session is not entirely disastrous. There’s good essentials to be found in Curiosity’s long limbs, and with time, a skilled archer might be made. Lavellan thinks of the young hunters of her clan. For a few moments, she steals a breath of simplicity from the encounter; there’s the wind, and there’s her friend, focused on her targets. Speaking of arrows and timing, and the hunts for which Andruil is renowned.

It makes her homesick, but, in a tolerable sort of way.

Lamentably, time is one of the luxuries that they don’t have. They are due to join their fellow travellers.

Pride doesn’t find them before they do. She feels a pang of worry when they arrive and see him nowhere among the assembled elves.

Mythal’s entourage for this trip is decidedly different than the last. Smaller, and most of the elves are ones she recognizes from the practice fields. Nearly everyone is clad in some kind of armour or carrying some kind of weapon. She wonders if Mythal has become that much more concerned with her own safety, or her people’s. In a strange way it’s almost encouraging; at least until she asks Curiosity, and gets the real answer.

“Visiting Andruil usually means tournaments and hunts,” Curiosity explains.

Ah. So they are, by all appearances, proceeding as if this is a normal visit between mother and daughter.
Well, from the perspective of covertly attempting to gather information, she supposes that works. And two of the elves she sees are familiar from their party into the mountains. When she glances their way, one of them even nods at her in greeting.

She’s not sure if any of the elves already gathered are the ranking ones which Pride had mentioned to her. As more trickle in, though, settling into their patient wait, she finds her worry growing.

“I am going to go find him,” she finally decides, forgetting even to mention who she’s talking about.

Not that it would be any great mystery.

Curiosity stalls her with a hand to her elbow, but before either of them can say anything more, the subject of her concerns finally arrives.

Or.

Well.

Two elves that are vaguely recognizable arrive. One of them is the elf who was tasked with bringing her to Mythal for their infamous meeting. Thenvunin, she guesses. The other is a woman she can only recall seeing a few times, in the dining hall. They’re both clad in very fine armour, etched with climbing vines, and silvery cloaks that vanish into wisps and vapour behind them. The effect is one of shining, gleaming champions who stride forward and seem as though they might have been breathed into life by the very air around them.

Pride follows them in.

He gives her a moment of genuine pause.

His new penchant for dressing down is holding strong, which isn’t a surprise, considering he’s been demoted. Even so, apart from herself, he’s probably the most simply clad member of the delegation. His armour is much like the sort she’s wearing – elegant, but sparsely decorated. He’s donned no cloak or mantle or even any of his usual furs at all. There are no decorations in his hair. Nothing on him shimmers, or moves much. Even the blade sheathed at his hip is stark and simple.

Walking in the wake of the other high-ranking elves, he looks very plain. Even when Solas had been playing the part of the humble apostate, he had been more decorative than this. But the effect, she thinks, is quite striking. Pride looks solid. Practical. Unpretentious. She’s not sure if it’s her own perception or if he’s doing it on purpose, but there’s almost a subtle insult in the whole display; an implication that the ranking elves in the room are playing games, while he is not.

But he is, she thinks. He’s playing them best of all.

Though, maybe she’s the only one who sees it that way. Some of the other elves look a little pitying at the sight of him. A few even snort, as if they think he’s being melodramatic.

He locks his gaze with hers, but shakes his head minutely, and doesn’t break away from following Thenvunin and Tarensa.

For an hour they more or less mill around in the eluvian chamber. Thenvunin and Tarensa speak among themselves and more or less ignore Pride, who nevertheless remains positioned politely behind them. At some point he clasps his hands behind his back, and tilts his head a certain way, and she reads a wealth of frustration in the angle of his shoulders and the tightness of his lips.
When Mythal finally arrives, adorned in armour that outshines all the rest both in loveliness and ferocity, it’s a relief.

Relief followed by a shock of cold anger, that burns down and settles into her bones. She goes rigid and still.

Mythal doesn’t even glance at her, though. The elves fall into procession behind her. Pride finally slips back towards herself and Curiosity once they do; he takes up a position in front of them, as she, once again, brings up the rear. They file through the shimmering surface of the mirror. Just as the last of the elves step through, and right before Pride does, he turns towards them.

“Stay close,” he requests.

Then he steps through, smooth as if he hadn’t bothered to stay anything at all.

The crossroads are much as she recalls.

They take the same route, past dreamy monuments and across winding pathways. Somewhere up high an eluvian seated upon a cresting peak becomes active, and sends scatterings of light through drifting crystals. It makes the roadways sing and hum. Like the magical equivalent of wind passing through chimes, she thinks.

She pauses half a step, and finds herself wondering again about all the makers of this world. The artisans and labourers, all reaching for something. But what? Do they even know? Someone put that eluvian up there, and those crystals. Made those chimes so that however often, a procession would be moving through, and someone would open up that path and music would rain down upon them.

She looks down, and wonders how the roads in this place were even built. Was there always ground here to settle them onto? Or was there just… space? Was everything here brought in through the eluvians?

Not that it matters so very much, she supposes. But stray thoughts are easier to focus on than the monumental tasks still sitting in front of them.

Their route alters slightly towards the end of their trek through the mirrors, and they arrive at Arlathan via a different gate this time. The city looks much as she remembers it, in the afternoon light. She can see the gleaming reflections of Sylaise’s palace, and the distant spires of June’s tower, but they are further away from both structures, here. This gate is nestled at the mouth of a tangled wood. The frame of it is thick, silvery wood, polished until it shines like stone, and carved with images of diving falcons and coiled serpents.

They don’t enter the city by it, though.

Instead the procession turns onto a long road that splits through the trees. It is wide and entirely flat, she realizes. As they proceed along it the soil of the forest rises around the sides of it. The road refuses to incline, even when it turns in towards a massive hill. It cuts through, instead, and leaves them walking amidst walls of earth. Walls that don’t crumble. She can see the roots of the massive trees growing above them, all tangled together in strange patterns. Some are clearly decorated, and carved with glowing runes.

Motes of magic drift up in the wake of Mythal’s footsteps, and follow their procession. Sunlight filters down through the uppermost reaches of the trees, gold turned green by the sea of leaves.

At last they come to a pair of massive double doors, buried into the hillside. Carvings of great
beasts leap across the surface of them. The frame is deep red, and when they draw close, she realizes that it’s moving. Flowing, like liquid.

Like blood.

When they pass through the doors, her skin tingles.

“Blood magic?” she wonders, quietly.

Curiosity glances around.

“Andruil’s holdings are heavy places,” Pride whispers back.

*Heavy*. Yes, that’s a good word for it, she thinks. The doors lead them into a large chamber filled with deep shadows, and close solidly behind them.

At first she thinks the place is surprisingly simple, by the standards of the time. There is a light at the top, and motes still drifting away from Mythal, and strange torches burning against the rounded chamber walls. But most of it is dark and windowless and still. The floor shifts, as if they are standing on the surface of a deep, dark lake. The ceiling, she thinks, is covered in rippling fabrics, that trail down over the walls.

But as they wait, she looks closer, and realizes.

Not fabrics.

Pelts.

Every visible surface of the walls around them is covered in pelts and hides. Different furs and skins all woven together, arranged by colour and texture it seems so that the different shades bleed subtly into one another. An inexplicable breeze shifts over them, and they billow with it; fur rippling, edges trailing downwards like strange flags.

There are enough of them to have seen a hundred clans through their harsh winters, she thinks.

After a moment, the interior doors of the chamber swing open. Two lines of elves, armed and resplendently clad, file in and fan out.

Then Andruil comes.

Unarmed, unlike her followers; but the huntress stalks into the chamber in the manner of one who doesn’t need a weapon to be dangerous, and is well aware of that fact. As sharp and as beautiful as her mother, albeit in a distinctly different fashion.

There don’t seem to be any visible signs of corruption about her, at least. No darkened veins, or strange hollows in her face, or blood in the whites of her eyes. But such things could be disguised with magic. Who knows how thoroughly the taint would be able to manifest on the body of a skilled shape-shifter?

“Mother,” Andruil greets. “Be welcome in my home.”

“Thank you, daughter,” Mythal replies. “I am sorry to have visited on such short notice. But I found myself bereft for your company after matters at the gathering were concluded. We have too few opportunities to see one another of late.”

Andruil hums, but inclines her head.
“Then we shall seize this one. Take your rest here, in safety, and we shall discuss the lighter things that grand gatherings overlook.”

The huntress actually smiles, then. The thread of similarities between mother and daughter are easier to see, in the strange light of the chamber, with the two of them across from one another. There’s a… warmth she finds unexpected. In the air between them. Their feelings, she supposes; though how genuine the sentiments are would probably be harder to say. But so far as she can tell, Andruil seems to actually be happy to have her mother visit.

It’s strangely unnerving.

It makes her think of Morrigan.

Andruil gestures to several of her followers, and then she and her mother withdraw from the chamber together. She watches them until they’re out of sight.

A moment later, several of the pelts lining the walls part, like a split wound, to reveal another doorway. The rest of their part is led through it, into brighter hallways and corridors.

When she looks up, she sees that the ceilings here are absolutely covered in woven antlers. So many they look like some spiky, nightmarish version of a basket weave.

But there are windows in this part of the… palace? Household? Half-buried castle? Over-dramatic hunting lodge?

Whichever.

There are windows, and they’re clear and tall, and look out over sprawling trees and massive ferns, and branches that are far wilder than anything in Mythal’s lushest gardens. Beasts roam the outdoors. She wonders how many are truly beasts and how many are elves. Most are little more than darting shadows between the branches. Birds and rodents and fleet-footed shapes in the underbrush.

The foliage is completely different. But it still makes her think of too-real dreams, and hunters in the dark.

She moves closer to Pride, and adjusts her shield slightly.

~

All things being taken into consideration, she can admit that most of the accommodations in Andruil’s holdings are much more to her liking than any others so far. The furnishings are carved from wood and bone – far more finely done than even the most masterful craftsmen of her time could manage, admittedly, but not to an overwhelming degree. The main room of the guest chambers is home to an intricately decorated mantle over a large stone fireplace, where a constant rosy pink fire burns. She has to admit, the pink catches her by surprise, until she gets to wondering what fire made with sacrifices of blood might look like.

In the middle of the chamber is a finely crafted table, with legs carved in scenes of nimble rabbits, and matching chairs marked with stalking hunters. It gives the effect that the chairs have ambushed the table. Above them, the ceiling is domed, and filled with windows that look out towards the
afternoon sky.

And there are hunting trophies.

A lot of hunting trophies.

Skulls and fangs and claws, and whole, preserved beasts. Most are strange, but not truly unnerving. The exception is the centerpiece of the room.

Suspended from the center dome of the ceiling is a whole, dead griffon.

It looks perfectly intact, from what she can see. She supposed Andruil must have killed it, though. Perhaps it was grown fully-formed from magic to serve as a decoration; but that doesn’t seem to be in keeping with the… general theme of the place. The griffon is massive. Bigger than most horses, she thinks. Its wings are spread wide, white flecked with grey, and its talons are reaching. Its beak is wide open, showing off the wicked, predatory edge of it, and a curled blue tongue.

It feels like the eyes are following her as she moves.

She stares at it for a long moment.

So does Curiosity.

They’re both still staring when Andruil’s servants leave them be; closing the chamber doors with a heavy thud. The sound jars her away from the griffon’s corpse. She makes note of the other exits; archways that lead off into side chambers and rooms. The windows above. A staircase, but that slants down towards a lower part of the main room, filled with pelts and pillows in some kind of communal lounging area.

“Joy. Now we can spend the rest of the season cooped up in a hovel full of brutes,” Thenvunin mutters, in a low tone that nevertheless manages to carry throughout the chambers.

Pride glances upwards. Very subtly, she thinks she sees the griffon tilt its head. Just a little.

…Huh.

“The accommodations are gracious, and most appreciated on such short notice,” Pride says.

Thenvunin snorts.

“I see your tastes have devolved along with your status.”

It earns him a long, sideways look.

Don’t, she thinks.

“I see yours are still trapped by the tremendous swell of your ego,” Pride replies. “And here I was, hoping against hope that you would finally manage to see past it.”

Oh, that was probably not a good idea.

Thenvunin’s lips thin.

“Is that any way to speak to your betters?”

“Not at all. Fortunately, I was speaking to you.”
What happens next comes in a flurry of movement.

Thenvunin reaches out, and smacks Pride cleanly across the face. The sound travels through the air like the crack of a whip. She feels a jolt of mingled fear and outrage, and before she can think twice about it she’s drawn her blade. The slide of the metal through its sheath follows the reverberation of the smack of flesh in such quick succession, it’s almost as if they’re linked together; whack-shhnkt.

She’s still several steps away. Curiosity grabs her arm. Tension bleeds through the room as Pride looks up from the blow, but most everyone stares at her.

There’s a moment of surprise. Quiet. Tense. Even she isn’t entirely sure what to do with it. Her nerves are humming, and the strike – as objectionable as she might find it – was clearly meant to stand on its own, and not serve as the prelude to an attack. But now here weapon is drawn, and there is a red mark spreading on Pride’s cheek, and a dead griffon staring with interest down at them all.

“No one is attacking,” Pride says, loudly and clearly. He catches her gaze and holds it. “You may stand down.”

Thank everything, she thinks, for his quick-thinking. Now it looks less like she was prepared to kill someone for the act of harming him, and more like she was simply startled by the aggressive gesture.

Though in all honesty, she’s… not sure that’s inaccurate, either.

She sheaths her blade.

“The atmosphere must be rubbing off on you, Thenvunin, if you are resorting to violence so readily,” Pride carries on, though there’s a certain brittleness to him, now. And when he straightens up from the blow, he ends up standing between the high-ranking elf and her line of sight. “I should think you would prefer to save that energy for competing with our hosts.”

“You must be reminded of your new standing before the quick tongue of yours gets you into more trouble than it is worth. Better to have it firmly established now, among friends, than to see you misstep in the presence of less forgiving souls,” Thenvunin says, coolly.


“Enough,” Tarensa interjects, from one of the further corners of the room. In her whispy cloak, she bleeds into the edges of the shadows around her. “Pride, you will prepare the rooms. Make certain they are acceptable. Thenvunin, if you are so set upon disciplining something, take that soulless creature to task. If anything in this room is liable to embarrass us in front of our hosts, it is that thing.”

She tenses.

Pride, too, goes very still.

Thenvunin only rolls his eyes, however.

“I do not possess the barbarism needed to actually beat sense into some mangled oddity,” he declares.

Pride straightens a little.
“I should extend my apologies. I will make certain that your rooms meet your exacting standards, insofar as I can,” he says to Thenvunin, who blinks at him, and then nods in the wary fashion of someone who suspects there is a trick, but can’t see it enough to be certain.

With a nod of his own, Pride sweeps through the nearest archway.

Most of the tension follows him out. A few of the others glance towards her, but they don’t seem particularly condemning, at least. Thenvunin approaches Tarensa, and they speak in their private corner near the hunting chairs.

She and Curiosity give it a minute, and then follow through the same archway Pride left by. They discover him swapping pelts between two very fine-looking bedrooms.

When he spots them, he fixes her with a fierce scowl.

“What were you thinking?” he demands.

“Me? What were you thinking?” she hisses back. “You were goading him!”

“Yes! I was! It was deliberate, you were not supposed to-”

“I was not supposed to what? React?”

“You were not supposed to draw a blade on him! How did that seem like a remotely good idea to you? You are lucky Thenvunin did not decide to take Tarensa up on her suggestion. He could have done – he could have devised all manner of punishments for that!”

His grip slips over an armful of what looks like bear skin, and she catches the bottom of it and takes it from him.

“Next time warn me if you are going to do something will result in someone attacking you, then!” she snaps at him.

His scowl falters.

“At least nothing came of it, this time,” Curiosity interjects. “Why are you moving blankets around?”

“I am replacing every piece of fabric in the nicest set of rooms with a pelt,” Pride replies. “Thenvunin will want the most lavish accommodations, but he despises animal hair. He will have to choose between the more comfortable, but more modest side room, or else spend every night in perpetual discomfort. If he asks I will simply claim that I assumed he would let Tarensa have the finer rooms, and arranged them accordingly.”

She raises an eyebrow at him.

“And we are infuriating this elf because…?”

Not that she’s objecting to the idea on its own merits.

Pride shakes his head, slightly.

“Not here,” he says. “These rooms are probably safe enough, but… I would not take the chance.”

Right.
Enemy territory. After a fashion.

She nods. Curiosity’s nose scrunches up in a way that implies that delayed answers are distasteful, but not insurmountable.

They get a good look at the rooms, at least, while they’re helping Pride ‘prepare’ them.

The decorative woodwork seen in the main chamber is carried through here, manifesting bed frames that splinter and sprawl like fractured antlers, and massive beams marked with elaborate figures chasing even more elaborate prey. The trophies are abundant as well. The head of a massive creature she’s never seen the like of before rests over the bed in the finest chamber. Something like a cross between a dragon and a shark, all scales and teeth.

Pride has her exchange it with the one from a different room; some poor, cow-eyed creature covered in impressive swaths of long, golden fur.

She wonders how many of these beasts are still wandering the wilds somewhere.

Assuming Andruil hasn’t killed them all; which, given the sheer volume of trophies in this part of the holding alone, doesn’t seem impossible.

They finish the main rooms, and move to inspect the others. Unlike Mythal, and June and Sylaise, who all seemed content to provide even the lowest of servants with at least their own walls and doorway, Andruil’s accommodations appear to be made up of a few private rooms for the ranking elves, and then larger chambers, more like barracks or a bunkhouse, for the rabble.

Admittedly, very nice bunkhouses. With large beds and fireplaces and headboards inlaid with patterned ivory.

No bathing chambers, though.

“I suppose we will be using the same baths as Andruil’s people,” Pride muses, with a faint hint of discomfort. She’s not sure if it’s for the security of the matter, or if he just doesn’t like the idea of a group of strange elves seeing him naked.

It makes her think of Compassion.

She forces her thoughts away.

There are, at least, small washing stations. The water in them runs freely, like fountains; spilling into blue stone basins. Clear and crisp. It smells like melted snow to her, and when she dips her fingers into it, she finds it’s ice cold.

That’s going to be bracing.

Curiosity drinks some of it.

“Just water, and magic,” her friend declares.

“Curiosity, that is not how one checks for poison,” Pride says, with a sigh. “And if you keep doing it that way, one day you will find it.”

“I was checking for soap,” Curiosity replies. “Although poisoning the wash water sounds like a creative way to kill a lot of people.”

“Andruil seems more like the type to just shove someone in a pair of leggings lined with nails and
then hunt them as they try to escape, with their every step tearing their flesh further apart until they either slow down enough to be caught, or bleed to death,” she muses.

Pride stares at her.

“That’s true,” Curiosity agrees, with a decisive nod.

“Also unnervingly specific,” Pride notes.

She glances at him, but only shrugs.

When they’ve finished up, he steers them back towards the main hall. Things have more or less settled, with the rest of their party examining various carvings and trophies and fixtures, or lounging in the ‘comfort’ area, or, in the case of their illustrious leaders, sitting at the carved table and having what look to be fairly casual discussions. She wonders if they might not be able to slip away themselves and try to find a good place for some conversations of their own.

A few minutes later, though, the doors to the main room open again.

Three of Andruil’s servants appear. Two of them are tall, even for ancient elves, and built like qunari. Their hair spills over their shoulders in tremendous manes, and their hands are tipped with long, sharp claws.

Yet they somehow manage to be less attention-grabbing than the third member of their group.

A huntress clad in crimson armour, with a massive stag thrown across her – his – their shoulders. The figure is not so tall as the others. Their vallaslin is blood red against their golden skin, and their form is narrow and inscrutable beneath the elegant but firm lines of their armour. When they smile, it is to reveal a mouth full of very sharp teeth.

“Since it is your first night, as is custom, you will not have to hunt for your meal. Our Ladies have chosen to eat in privacy, so we servants will make do with one another for company. This is your invitation – come and enjoy the spoils of the hunt with us,” the figure declares.

Just, holding onto the stag the whole while.

For show, she supposes.

“We would be most pleased to join you,” Thenvunin replies.

The hunter turns to look at him, and their smile edges towards something even sharper than before.

“Of course.”

Turning, the trio lead the way back out of the rooms. The entourage falls into a somewhat more casual approximation of the same procession they’d used to follow Mythal, and spills back out into the main corridors of Andruil’s holding.

She watches Andruil’s people as they walk. Mostly keeping her eyes on the main hunter’s armour. It’s red, and shining, and more ostentatious than she would expect from someone who prowled the wilds in earnest. But then again, she reminds herself, the wilds here are vastly different from the ones she knows. And there’s magic in every hunter, too. It may be that wearing bright red in a brown and green forest isn’t quite so damning when you can turn yourself invisible. Or when the brown and green forest is actually something truly bizarre, like a field of scarlet, crystalline trees, full of shark-faced dragon beasts.
More than the lack of stealth concerns her about the shade, but there’s not whisper of lyrium about it. No pull of the taint.

It’s just fancy and red. And loud.

Pride’s thoughts must run along a similar trajectory. He catches her eye, but she just shakes her head.

Nothing so far.

Not, she thinks, that she would expect Andruil to start serving lyrium to her guests on a silver platter.

Their escorts lead them to a central chamber in the holdings. Like Mythal’s communal dining hall, it’s filled with tables and the din of conversation, and one table in particular raised above the others. But that particular table is empty. None of Andruil’s servants have been seated at it, and they, as the guests, are only led to find seats in among the others.

The red hunter takes their stag, and before the meal commences, cleans it, guts it, and begins carving strips off of it to cook in the main fire pit.

Only then do more elves pour into the room, bringing other dishes. A few whole roasted beasts and spiced vegetables, and stranger things.

She and Pride and Curiosity settle into one of the far tables, until Thenvunin gestures at Pride.

“We should not leave our hosts to put themselves out on all levels. Help them serve,” the ranking elf demands.

Pride inclines his head, and rises, and begins helping pass down wine and various dishes.

After a moment, she rises to do the same.

Curiosity follows.

A few of the other elves in their group seem to decide it’s a matter of courtesy, and perhaps even pride, then, and join in. Andruil’s followers are mostly amused in response; though a few do double-takes at her, and seem unsettled by what they discern. Some hesitate to hand her food. But the vallaslin on her face decides them, and most do, or else take so long that she simply moves on down the line and finds someone less discomfited to lend a hand to.

Somehow this pattern ends up with her helping gather up the discarded remains of the stag, to be carried away before their stink can ruin the meal. She leans next to the fire pit to hand a bucket of guts over to one of Andruil’s people, and when she straightens back up, a hand catches her jaw.

She stiffens and tamps down on the urge to lash out. Sharp nails bite into her skin; not deep enough to hurt, but enough to unnerve. The grip on her turns her head, and she’s placed eye-to-eye with the red hunter.

Whose eyes are brown, she notes.

“Look here,” the hunter says, with another sharp-toothed grin. “It is Mythal’s little doll. I remember you; Elgar’nan almost roasted you when all of those pillars went up.”

“Forgive me. I do not recall seeing you there,” she replies, a little tightly. Her unease coils in her
gut as the grip on her doesn’t relent.

“I would be offended at that, but such frightful incidents can outshine even the most remarkable of strangers,” the red hunter says with a laugh.

She eases her head back, and finally the grip on her chin is dropped.

“She is a servant of Mythal and is due as much respect as any other guest,” Pride interjects.

The red hunter waves a hand dismissively.

“Of course, of course. We will not be so impolite as to put the great lady out. But I am curious; I have never seen a construct like this, walking and talking. Thinking things,” they say. “Tell me, creature — do you know how to skin a beast?”

She glances at Pride, but if his returned look is supposed to communicate anything useful to her, she can’t divine it.

“Yes,” she replies, truthfully.

To her surprise, this answer gets her a bloodied knife shoved handle-first into her grasp.

“Let us see how useful you are, then. Help me serve the day’s last kill,” the hunter commands.

And it is definitely a command; there’s no denying it or turning it aside. Not that it’s particularly troublesome in itself. Up close she can tell there’s definitely no taint on this particular servant of Andruil’s, at least; and most of the others just seem to be amused or indifferent to the proceedings.

So, hopefully it’s not some kind of trap or hidden insult. Though, even if it is an insult, that, at least, she can survive.

And should probably endure with as much grace as possible.

She helps finish skinning and carving the stag, falling into the routine. Deft as ever, despite how long it's been since she had much practice at it.

“Well, well,” says the hunter. “So you creatures can be taught useful things after all. Let us see how many! Come and serve me.”

By then most everyone is seated. Pride is still standing. He leans down and whispers something to Tarensa, but whatever he says, it only earns him a dismissive wave and instructions to take his seat.

A wash basin is provided for their hands, and finally the meal seems to get properly underway. She finds herself spending most of the evening gathering strips of venison from the main fire pit and refilling the red hunter’s glass, and asking questions and serving as the butt of occasional jokes. She’s a subject of some casual interest, it seems; a strange thing worth making into some light entertainment.

“Have you ever killed anything?” the red hunter wonders, as she almost burns herself on the fire pit, before she wonders if she could use magic to push the flames back a little whenever she moves to claim a strip of venison. She finds that she can.

“Yes,” she says.

“Oh! Yes, it tells us,” the hunter declares, and reminds her of nothing so much as a human noble
child trying to make sport out of an elven servant. “What have you killed?”

“In general? Or would you like a comprehensive list?” she wonders.

“Ha! So it has killed many things. Is that what it is for, then? A lethal puppet to do the hunting and the skinning and the hard work that Mythal’s people disdain?”

On this note, the hunter slides a glance towards Thenvunin.

“ Its tasks are assigned by Mythal,” Thenvunin replies, and apparently decides to respond to implications of his disdain by displaying it in full force.

She holds out some hope, then, that this entire debacle will just degenerate into a sniping match between the two elves. But a few minutes later the red hunter is back to staring at her and asking more questions of her. The light filtering through the windows in the ceiling darkens. The flickering magical torches brighten to compensate.

“Do things like you feel fear?” the hunter wonders.

“People generally do,” she replies.

“People, certainly. I was asking after you, though.”

“I am a person,” she says. Maybe it would be smarter to deny it, to play along. But she can’t really say for certain, right now, and she’d rather not.

The red hunter raises an eyebrow at her.

“Is that what you think? Well. I suppose the rabbit might like to think itself the equal of the hunter. But in its tiny beating heart, it knows that is not the case. There is an order to things. Sitting in the truth of their nature. Every prey animal knows it is lesser. Ever predator knows it is greater.”

She refills their glass.

It’s a pretty glass. Pale blue, with a stem that spreads into an elegant approximation of a raptor’s claws.

“Predators are creatures of fear and hesitation. They are opportunists, targeting the weak and sickly to survive,” she counters. “If their greatness was so innate, one imagines they would have no need for caution.”

The hunter looks at her a long moment.

Then grins.

“Spoken like a true lamb,” they say. Then, before she can do anything more than settle the wine jug onto the table, they reach out and catch her by the wrist. “But no, no – do not mistake me. Any good hunter knows there are times you catch the prey, and times the prey catches you. But that is the fluke of fate. That is the twist, and the joke nature likes to play on the complacent. I imagine that concept appeals to something like you.”

“It does,” she replies.

The grin stretches, and the hunter – thankfully – lets her go.

And then nods at the shield slung over her back.
“How did a thing like you end up better armed than most of your contingent? Truly, do Mythal’s people dress their lowest servants in their best finery, and offer their most useful tools to the birds in their gardens?” the hunter wonders.

She lets out a profound internal sigh, and wonders if that last sentence was some kind of figure of speech that she doesn’t have the appropriate context for.

Pride catches her eye and shakes his head, minutely.

Right. Okay. Not the truth, then.

“I was the only one nervous enough to bring substantial weaponry with me for this trip,” she declares. “A person of my status must be cautious with their safety.”

The hunter casts a glance over the other members of Mythal’s contingent.

“And everyone else has higher faith in our hospitality? Ah, but they should know just what the hospitality of Andruil’s people is like. We do not sit around our halls, here, listening to music and drinking wine and contemplating pretty trinkets, and dithering over who we will take to our beds.”

There are a few chuckles, at that.

Some of Mythal’s people look distinctly insulted.

“Speaking of which – I see the pretty white wolf has fallen down in status. Did you displease your lady between her sheets?” the hunter wonders, turning to look at Pride.

The wine vessel is still at hand. She’s reasonably sure she could smash them in the skull with it before they had enough time to realize what she was doing, let alone react or defend themselves.

Pride only blinks, and shrugs.

“Everyone knows, the higher you go the thinner the air becomes. I am merely taking a refreshing break,” he declares, and punctuates this point with a long drink from his glass, and an obviously resentful glance at Thenvunin.

A little too obvious to not be deliberate, she thinks.

The hunter laughs.

“Is your lady so insatiable? Or, dare I ask, is she a chore?”

“Bite your tongue,” Thenvunin warns, with a firm smack to the table next to his plate. “Mythal is not so indiscriminate with her lovers as Andruil.”

Andruil’s servants just laugh at this declaration, however. None she can see even seem the least bit insulted.

“So we find our replacement wolf! Ah, Thenvunin. Your persistent lack of taste and self-awareness has been a constant through the ages, eclipsed only by your general uselessness. I am pleased Mythal has finally found something constructive for you to do. For her sake, I hope you are better at pleasing her than you generally are at physical endeavours,” the hunter declares.

The chair screeches backwards as Thenvunin stands, followed with only slight delay by Tarensa; who is more stern-faced than furious.
“Such insults you offer to your guests, Uthvir. Surely you do not expect them to go unanswered?” Tarensa asks.

“Insults. What insults?” Pride interjects. “I hear only facts delivered with a pleasing lack of pretension.”

He takes another long drink. Most of it ends up on the floor, she notes.

Thenvunin’s hand clenches into a fist. Her own drifts, unbidden, to the hilt of her sword.

The hunter – Uthvir, she supposes – tracks the movement, and grins at it a little before looking away.

“Discord in the House of Mythal. Ah, but Tarensa is right. The wine has loosened my tongue past the point of propriety,” Uthvir declares. “Forgive me, forgive me! I have let old rivalries go to my head, and forgotten that they are years long behind us, and should be buried beneath the veneer of civility. At least until a few days have passed, if only for appearance’s sake. Sit down, friends. Kindly overlook my inappropriateness.”

Tarensa retakes her seat first, apparently satisfied. A moment later, Thenvunin reluctantly reclaims his as well.

“You are as insufferable as always,” he grouses at Uthvir.

The hunter spreads their arms out in a grandiose shrug.

“I would offer you some sweetly scented flowers or gentle music to try and soothe your sensibilities with, but alas, we have none,” Uthvir counters.

Pride laughs.

Thenvunin hits him again.

She tenses, but doesn’t draw her weapon this time. But then she almost rethinks that stance when Pride surges up from his own seat, and glares.

A tense moment slips by.

At length, Pride also retakes his seat, however. The meal resumes, and Andruil’s followers continue to look more amused than anything else. After a few minutes, she catches Pride’s eye again, and he inclines his head at her.

Just a little.

He’s doing something.

She wishes it required fewer blows to the face for him. It’s not doing his cheek any favours. Nor her nerves.

They’re sent jangling once more when Uthvir catches her wrist again.

“Tell me, thing. Have you ever been gored?” the hunter asks.

The questions continue in that vein for the remainder of the meal. She wonders what she’s done to make herself interesting, and wishes she could find a way to negate it. But she suspects that would require behaving in a manner that would ultimately displease her even more than being – for lack
of a better term – *pestered* for several hours.

Finally, Uthvir actually does seem to have enough wine, and leaves the table arm-in-arm with the very tall servants they first approached the guest chambers with.

Most of the other elves are retiring by then, too. She sinks down into a vacant spot next to Curiosity, who has been sampling every available dish, in between watching all of the social byplay with interest. And a certain degree of wariness.

A plate full of venison and some unfamiliar vegetables is shoved under her nose.

“I think they like you,” Curiosity declares.

“Yes. The way that children like insects right before they pull the wings off of them,” she replies.

Her friend nods in agreement.

She feels utterly and thoroughly exhausted as she eats, and tries not to glare at the bruise on Pride’s cheek.

~

By the time they make it back to the guest rooms, moonlight is spilling in through the windows and ceilings, and catching on the ivory carvings. Torches gleam, but even with them there are deep shadows in the turns of the corridors, and between and behind the largest carved pillars. It creates the effect of a creeping forest.

They leave with the remainder of Mythal’s people. A cluster of elves in various states of inebriation. She winds up conscripted into helping shoulder a staggering drunk, and with little recourse, finds herself toting the strange elf down the hallways instead of conferring with Pride and Curiosity – who, at least, manage to stay close. But it’s kind of tough to have delicate conversations when one third of your secret spy party can’t hear anyone else over the sentimental song being belched into her ear.

In the forests outside of the windows, something four-legged and large prowls along the same path as them. Stalking them until they turn, and pass beyond its sight.

She feels its stare itching at the back of her neck long after they retire to the communal bedrooms.

Most of the lower-ranking elves, she’s surprised to see, have actually passed out amidst the blankets and cushions of the main room. But there are plenty ensconced in their beds, too. Most of the ones along the walls have been taken. She feels uncomfortable, on-edge and exposed, and wary of what her dreams might hold when she finally claims a mattress for herself; adrift in the middle of the room, but with Pride and Curiosity close by, at least.

She lies awake for a long time, listening to them breathe.

When she finally drifts off, she dreams her way through her memories of luring a High Dragon, and mercifully, stays put.

She wakes before dawn, though. For one hazy moment, in the room full of quiet snores and deep
breathing, she could almost be at camp. A rare winter night, buried beneath furs, safe and still and surrounded by…

Squeezing her eyes shut, she lets out a long, shuddering breath, and then chases the thought away.

She gets up.

A quick check reveals Curiosity is sprawled out in the expanse of her bed, and Pride is wide awake and staring at her.

She blinks back at him.

After a moment, she turns, and slips out of the room.

He follows.

The main room is still full of people, sleeping it off amongst the cushions and blankets; curled around the burning fires. For all Thenvunin’s disdain, most of Mythal’s chosen entourage seem to be enjoying themselves. There are even a few of Andruil’s people, she thinks, in amongst the slumbering forms. Doubtless old friends and acquaintances brought back from the dining hall.

How many friends, she thinks, do immortals make and miss over the long courses of their lives? Most elves seem to at least know one another’s names, if not have some kind of established history with one another. And the longer they live, she supposes, the more people they build relationships with.

But then she thinks of Solas, lonely and alone, despite everything. She glances at Pride; a little sleep-mussed but alert.

The thought sours with pain.

By unspoken agreement, they slip out of the guest rooms, and into the halls.

“Where can we go?” she wonders, staring at the flickering torchlight.

“Likely nowhere, with ease. Not at the moment anyway,” Pride reasons. “We could try and slip outside, but… it is Andruil’s territory in the dead of night. We would spend more time evading predators than speaking to one another, I imagine.”

He sounds exhausted.

The light clothes he’s wearing cover him from collar to ankle, much more thoroughly covering him than what she’d seen him sleep in before. Nevertheless, he looks soft and hollow. His sleeves are crumpled around his elbows, settling them a little shorter than they should be. For some reason, her eyes keep catching on the exposed skin of his wrists. The vulnerable pulse points, pale, and soft.

Before she can stop herself, she reaches over and closes her fingers on the edges of his sleeves, and pulls them down for him. The backs of her knuckles brush against his hands.

His chest stills; breath caught.

She looks up at him. The bruise on his cheek is gone. Banished with barely a whisper of magic. But the weight in his eyes is still there; the wounds she’s inflicted on him far stronger than any spell could mend.

Reaching up, she brushes her fingers over his cheekbone.
He catches her wrist. His lips part a little as he looks at her. His eyes flit down to her mouth, and then back up again.

Gently, he squeezes her, and then pulls her touch away from himself and lets go of her.

She takes a step back.

“I am sorry,” she says.

For a moment, he’s quiet.

“I understand,” he finally says. “I know it is more complicated for you. Sentiments get tangled up. I look very much like him. It is not the same as competing with the average former lover, and yet not so different. How you feel about me… it must be very confusing, sometimes.”

He shrugs, hangs his head with a wry smile. She feels absolutely wretched. Like the most foolish, clumsy, inadequate person in all the world.

“I do not just see someone I lost when I look at you,” she tells him.

There’s the faintest flash of hope in his expression, and it makes her feel even worse about how she’s been handling all of this. How is anyone supposed to handle it? She doesn’t know, but probably, once again, her life would be a serviceable instruction manual on how not to.

She swallows, and searches for the words to try and… to make this better.

“I fell in love with him because of who he was. Fate did not write ‘you will love Solas’ on my heart. I saw him, and knew him, and loved him. And you… you are also a person who-”

“I am not like him,” Pride interrupts, firmly. “I am not like him, I will never – never…”

She stills as he brushes his own hand against her cheek. Just below her left eye. After half a second, he snatches his touch away again, as if burned.

It takes her a minute to draw in a single, shaky breath.

You might, she thinks. You might, when all the other choices are gone, and there are only bad endings left to choose between. But that isn’t what he needs to hear right now.

“However much you are like him or unlike him, you are also a person I have come to care about. For yourself,” she insists. It feels like she’s cracking something open; or tearing up a grave, but she doesn’t dare stop. Not when there’s hope in his eyes. Not when he’s looking at her like this and she, she really can offer him something. Something true.

“I cannot say it has nothing to do with that. He used to be you, and I loved him. I still love him. I will always, always love him, and it would be a lie if I said otherwise. But you are – you are him, but you are not him. If you were separate, if no threads bound you to his past, I think I would love you,” she declares. “You are… I… I am sorry, I am so sorry, I never wanted to hurt you. I never did, I only wanted… I tried… I couldn’t…”

She’s lost it, then. She’s losing it. It’s all cracking out of her, all of the confusion and conflict, all of the rush of feelings and pain and grief. Always so much grief.

The first sob shakes out of her, and her vision blurs with tears.

“I am sorry,” she says again, taking a step back.
He closes a hand over the top of her arm, and to her surprise, pulls her towards him instead.

“No,” he says. “No, no, no.”

She’s not sure if he’s asking her not to cry, or not to apologize, or just repeating the single word that’s likely been filling up his head ever since she showed him the future. But he’s warm and soft. He smells like sweat and the smoke off of the cooking fires. She takes the offering and buries her face against him; his hands, when they come around her shoulders, are shaking a little.

It occurs to her that this is, perhaps, not the best place for such things. Standing outside of the doorway to the guest chambers in Andruil’s holding, offering impromptu confessions and clumsy attempts at reassurance, and weeping and shaking like a leaf.

Really, excellent job on the critical mission that will keep Mythal from killing everyone.

Even so, she can’t stop. She wishes it could be simple, that everything could all be simple, somehow, but it can’t be.

She’s not lying to him, though. Not keeping secrets. Not anymore. She never really wanted to. The truth has its own sting, they’ve both felt it now. It’s not like she can pretend Solas is an entirely different person from Pride; like she’s just fallen in love again with someone new. He isn’t, and she hasn’t. But she thinks that if Solas had chosen a different path in life, she would have fallen in love with him just the same. She can scarcely imagine the fates converging on a less convenient set of circumstances for her to have fallen in love with him the first time, after all. So it stands to reason that the circumstances, the timing, the choices, the rises and falls, those don’t really matter.

Whatever spirit runs through him, in all times and places, she’s probably going to love it. Not because she’s bound to it. But because she sees so many beautiful things in it.

She’s scarcely aware of babbling all of this in barely-coherent tones as she weeps into Pride’s collar.

He must get the gist of it, though, because he goes very still.

She sucks in a shaky breath, and tries to get a hold of herself. She’s got a death grip on the back of his shirt and when she eases up on it, there are tear stains along the front, and his expression is stricken and she can’t tell which of any possible mixture of emotions has done the damage.

She succeeds in moving back enough to swipe at her eyes.

“Forgive me. It has been a long night,” she says.

“It has,” he agrees.

Then he opens his mouth, but whatever he means to say seems to get jammed on his tongue instead. He swallows, and tries again.

“We will do this properly,” he says. Repeats, as if he is much more sure of it now. “Perhaps if we walk the path together, we will see what the answers really are. If – if you are – if you do – if… in the unlikely event that things actual reach a favourable outcome, perhaps they may become simple for us. One day.”

She doesn’t dare hope for that.

But she can let him. And for her part, she thinks, there’s no great mystery to her feelings.
Only to what they’ll bring.

The atmosphere doesn’t feel a whole lot lighter when they manage to compose themselves again, though. They spend a little time wandering quietly through the corridors. Poking around more like actual, sleepless-and-bored guests than people searching for signs of ancient lyrium smuggling. Which, probably works to their advantage in the long run.

Though, sadly, they don’t actually uncover anything useful. Pride manages to figure out where Mythal’s chambers are, and stares at the door critically for a long moment. They find a large chamber with a dirt floor and a very high ceiling that makes her vaguely uncomfortable, and a corridor with what looks like an intact dragon skeleton strung up from the rafters.

The carved bones whisper when they draw near.

They don’t proceed to the end of it.

When the sun comes up, they head back to their rooms to find everyone else just beginning to stir.

“Whatever happens, try not to draw your sword on anyone,” Pride requests.

“I suppose I can try,” she offers, wryly.

It earns her a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Got this chapter done to my reasonable satisfaction at last! Hooray!

Thank you, everyone, for being so wonderful!
The morning meal is not a formal one for Andruil’s people.

A few platters are brought into the guest chambers, littered with packaged offerings that make her think of trail food. But only in the broadest sense. Seasoned strips of meat and fish are wrapped in golden breading. The fruit is fresh and juicy rather than dried; apples of bright green, small easy to peel oranges, berries like plump and perfectly round gemstones. There are nuts that have been roasted and seasoned in a variety of flavours, and other small snacks that aren’t as familiar. Everything is obviously meant to be eaten during a day of movement – no ceremony, no forks, no politicized seating chart.

Some of their group grumble at the offerings.

“Clever,” Pride declares, weighing a package of breaded fish in his hand.

Thenvunin snorts, but doesn’t make an issue of it. Tarensa has vanished. Off to attend Mythal, she suspects. The morning light filtering in through the windows is bright enough to lighten some of the heaviness of the room.

“Where are we meant to go?” Curiosity wonders.

The doors to the chamber open, then, as if on cue. Uthvir stalks in, flanked by a different pair of elves this time. They are all clad in very sharp looking gear. Tight-fitting, but it bends readily with their steps and movements, like a second skin. The red hunter’s armour is more dull bronze than blood red today, though the patches of crimson fabric she can see beneath it make up the difference.

“Well, friends, I hope you slept adequately,” the hunter declares, gaze drifting briefly towards Pride, and then flitting over herself.

…Shit.

She glances at Pride, but his expression betrays nothing more than polite interest. If not a little expectancy.

“Now that you’ve been properly fed and pampered, it is time to earn your keep. Our great lady has deigned to give you permission to hunt in her woods. The honour of the morning hunt is reserved for those of the greatest rank and skill,” Uthvir explains. Their lips twist, and they glance at Thenvunin. “Likely you will want to bring the doll along, to make up the difference in skill.” That earns a few snickers.

Thenvunin bristles. He looks like a bird next to Uthvir, she thinks. All long neck and delicate limbs, clad in finery that seems bizarre to her for sleeping clothes, but would scarcely qualify as proper daywear, either. A long outer robe, embroidered with clashing stags, and colours that shift
from midnight blue to periwinkle. Then several tighter inner layers, all wrapped around one another. She thinks it’s supposed to echo the plumage of a raptor. But it puts her more in mind of a grouse.

“Afraid we will outdo you otherwise?” Thenvunin asks.

Uthvir lets out a full bellied laugh at the prospect.

“Dear Thenvunin. It is not even a competition today, and you will still find a way to lose,” the red hunter asserts.

Pride chokes on a laugh of his own.

The sniping continues apace for a while then, until Tarensa returns. The ranking elf is clad in silvery armour of her own, marked with bright pearls, and her expression is twisted with disapproval. She sends Andruil’s people on their way with a promise to have the appropriate elves ready for their hunt very shortly.

“One benefit to a promotion. It seems I will not have to endure the tedium of your company this morning,” Pride notes to Thenvunin, after the doors close behind Uthvir.

“Just for that I should make you attend me,” Thenvunin counters, scowling.

“No,” Tarensa interrupts. “We will attend Mythal, as it should be. Whatever Uthvir implied, that is the obligation of the morning.”

Thenvunin’s expression twists.

“So we are to spend the day slogging through wilderness and carting corpses about. What a concept of honour and privilege Andruil’s people have,” he groused.

“It is what it is. We will not be an embarrassment to ourselves,” Tarensa insists.

To that, it seems, Thenvunin has no rebuttal.

“Cheer up,” Pride advises. “You probably will not end up carting any corpses around at all, considering you would have to kill them yourself. As that would require a certain modicum of skill, you are in little danger.”

Shit.

She braces herself, but her nerves still jangle when, yes, Thenvunin hits him again.

Pride only turns his head with the blow, though, and raises an eyebrow when he looks back. As if implying that the weakness of the strike against him has just proven his point for him.

“Enough,” Tarensa interrupts again. “Pride, you will tend to matters here while we are gone. Thenvunin, you had best get ready. At least if we are to do this, we shall look resplendent in the midst of it.”

With some obvious displeasure at the situation all around, the high-ranking elf withdraws towards his chambers again.

“Try not to let any fell beasts make off with you,” Pride advises, dryly.

Tarensa gives him an unimpressed look, but then strides over to her fellow ranking elf, and
prevents any further escalations.

When they are gone, the remaining elves settle into groups; murmuring speculations among themselves. Pride drifts towards her and Curiosity. A wave of his fingers, and the redness on his cheek immediately fades. Gone before it’s even begun to settle in. He still brushes his hand across it, though, as if tracing the remnants of the insult.

Above them, a slight breeze from the doorway ruffles a few of the dead griffon’s feathers.

“This has been an auspicious start,” she notes, quietly. An evening spent with Mythal and Andruil secluded with one another, and then a morning spent with them off hunting together. When even Pride can’t attend to pass along any observations to her, how is she supposed to assess Andruil’s potential levels of corruption? She hasn’t even seen the woman since yesterday. Just how long does Mythal expect this process to take? Actual months?

“This is repellant,” Pride says, more clearly. His gaze drifts ever-so-slightly towards the griffon.

So it is watching them, then. And listening to them, too.

“The hunting?” Curiosity wonders, surprised.

“Not that,” he replies. “Being reduced to this. Thenvunin will make an embarrassment of himself, and of us in the process.”

“There does not seem to be much for it. Unless Mythal requests your presence, I doubt you would be allowed to attend,” she reasons, catching on. Say without saying. The doublespeak of intrigue and politics; not something she has ever been partial to. But she can do it.

“Do you think she would?” Curiosity wonders.

Pride sighs.

“She is still displeased with me, I expect,” he replies.

“It is unfair of her to be. It was my fault, what happened,” she ventures, tentatively.

He looks at her, and his expression softens.

“I made my own choice. I will deal with the consequences of it,” he counters.

Curiosity sighs.

“I wanted to go hunting. I never have done it before.”

“We undoubtedly will, probably even today. Just not this morning,” Pride muses.

“What do we do in the meantime?” she wonders.

He shrugs.

“We do our duties. Frivolous and beneath our skills as they may be. Clean up the rooms, extend whatever friendliness we can to Andruil’s people, and make sure there are no venomous snakes or waiting assassins in Mythal’s chambers. Not that there will be, but one never knows,” he reasons. “We may even get a chance to explore a little more. Andruil’s holdings are always full of unexpected surprises.”
Ah.

They’re to snoop, then.

Well, she supposes, in the absence of actually being able to observe Andruil for a while, that makes sense.

Pride drifts off, then, to go and ask a few of the other members of their retinue to set about righting the main chambers from last night’s sleeping pile. She and Curiosity settle the communal rooms, and he vanishes into the ranking elves’ quarters for a time.

She watches him go, and wonders how many blows he’s going to suffer while out of her sight.

What is he up to? He’s had no chance to tell her, and so she lets herself puzzle the matter over as they settle the sheets and toss the pillows. Many tasks seem to be handled by magic, just as in Mythal’s palace, so it passes quickly enough, at least.

He wants Thenvunin angry and unsettled, and he wants anyone spying on them to think he is bitter and resentful about his loss of rank, she suspects. Perhaps to explain any strange absences from the group he might take? Let them be attributed to sulking or social rejection, rather than suspicious behaviour?

Or has he noticed something that he simply hasn’t been able to convey to them yet?

Uthvir’s comment about restful nights flits through her mind again. They’d been incautious. She wonders if anyone actually saw them. Heard them. Or what they might make of such an exchange. A disquieting thought. It had been… private, that moment.

She shakes away the memory of his arms, solid and warm, and forces herself to focus on the task at hand. Hopefully the only spying in the holding is done through Andruil’s trophies. Eyes and ears made to continue their work long after their owners are dead, perhaps. Necromancy. Dorian had been able to manage similar spells. Before the end he had been good enough at it that he could use the hollow sockets of animal skulls like scrying stones. Human skulls, too, but he always insisted that was garish.

The memory is like salt.

By the time Thenvunin and Tarenra set out, most of the tasks in the guest rooms are done. She finds herself struggling past a blanket of melancholy, while Pride informs the rest of their party that they should explore the holdings, and feel free to mingle with any of Andruil’s followers who might welcome their company.

“We are guests,” he reminds them all. “Be respectful. These are the huntress’s people, after all. They are proud. Believe me; I am something of an authority on the subject.”

It is charming, she thinks. Perhaps it is the aftermath of the evening, but he looks extremely approachable to her eye. Simply clad, again, in light and silver-grey clothing, eschewing armour, but sporting a few more adornments than he has in recent days. Toggles in his hair, and a few jangling bracelets on his wrists.

It takes her a moment to realize that they are all made out of bone.

When he walks towards them, she realizes that Curiosity is easily the most lavishly clad out of their trio. Most of that is in terms of colour. In her time, they all still would have been impossibly
fine. But here, she can see that they look like what they are, now – a few elves of low to middling rank, unremarkable in the midst of Mythal’s grand visiting party.

At least a certain amount of invisibility can suit them for snooping, even if it isn’t much use in terms of getting close to Andruil.

“Let us see what this place looks like in daylight,” Pride suggests.

Curiosity blinks at him.

“You know what it looks like at night?”

He shifts, and they glance at one another.

“We may have poked around a little bit, last night,” she admits.

“Without me?” Curiosity asks, obviously put-out, if not a little hurt.

“It was… we were unable to sleep. We did not plan it,” Pride says, apologetically.

“You did not miss much,” she offers as well.

It doesn’t seem to do much to mollify their friend, however. Curiosity remains somewhat deflated until they actually set back out into the corridors again.

In the morning light, the passageways feel brittle, and just a little bit exposed. They are clearly not meant to be appreciated very much at this time of day. Without the warmth of torch fire or the golden glow of a late-day sun, everything looks stark and hollow. A carcass leathered by the elements, empty of its spark and fight.

The air is unexpectedly and oddly cold, and she realizes that many of the clear windows have been thrown open, letting the wind chase through the passages. Some of the bone decorations on the walls and ceilings whistle where it does, carrying along strange tunes that echo down passageways like ghosts in a maze. It would be easy to get lost, if you were following the sounds. The woods outside look restful, and the only movement she sees in the trees is that of birds and a few small rodents.

*If I were an evanuris smuggling lyrium, where would I keep it?* she wonders, as they quietly explore.

Probably not at her Arlathan holding at all, to be honest. Not unless she was planning on launching some sort of attack upon the city itself. No, unless Andruil is more ambitious than they suppose, the lyrium would be kept to her own lands. Easier to keep the secret there, and she could use its advantages in her hunts.

If only it wasn’t addictive.

Depending on how the evanuris has been using it, there may be a *need* to have some here.

Or, even if there is not, some emergency supply in the event of treachery from her allies. Any visit to Arlathan would leave her without the advantage it could afford, otherwise, and she doesn’t think the evanuris enjoy surrendering their advantages.

She glances at Pride.

He probably knows this better than she does.
“Have you been here before?” she suddenly thinks to ask him.

He glances at her, and inclines in his head.

“Twice. Though I confess, I have never had much chance to explore. Ordinarily I am included in the ventures reserved for high-ranking persons,” he explains. “Which tend to keep one busy.”

“So you do not know where all the unusual treasures might be?” she surmises, mindful of the skulls on the walls.

“Sadly, no. I am poor tour guide in this regard,” he admits.

“That just makes it more interesting for us,” Curiosity reasons.

They settle in to simply getting a better feel for the layout of the place. Some areas are clearly sealed off. When she pauses, but feels no telltale pull, no flash of interest from the Titan’s heart in her breast, they opt not to press their luck, and move on.

Not that she would necessarily pick up on regular lyrium, if there was some. But she thinks she might. And however dangerous Andruil’s knowledge of the properties and potential of lyrium may be, it’s the tainted variety that’s the real worry. And fortunately, that sort is infinitely more noticeable.

Their wanderings lead them to the public baths, which are the airiest chambers in the whole building. The floors and walls are built with smooth, lightly golden stone that reminds her of far northern beaches. In fact, she thinks there might be actual sand in some of the pools that dip into the floor. The waters are an odd range of colours, everything from deep green to muddy grey, to an ominous blood red reserved for a single pool in the far corner of the room.

The steam rising up from the baths swirls towards the top of the ceiling, where some effect twists it into artful clouds. There are wide archways, thrown open to a strange garden. Strange in that they are deep within the hillside, and though there is plenty of light, the garden is clearly underground.

Many of the plants she sees are ones she recognizes from the Deep Roads, too.

Most damning of all, perhaps, are the brightly coloured bats. Just a handful of them, dozing along the ridges of a tree-sized mushroom.

“Does anyone feel like a bath?” Curiosity asks, eyes narrowed at the tiny little bats.

“I think that is a good idea,” she agrees.

She glances meaningfully towards Pride. He catches her eye, and colours.

She’s confused for a moment before she realizes. Oh, right. **Baths.** Nudity and… bathing. And suchlike. And them being all… as they are.

Pride clears his throat.

“If you two like, I think I shall pass up the opportunity for now. But I can wait for you in the garden,” he suggests.

Oh.

Clever.
She nods approvingly, and he offers her just the tiniest of smiles. She and Curiosity can provide an excuse to linger, and now he has a good reason to snoop around and see what he can find in Andruil’s little interior model of the Deep Roads.

They head into the chambers.

There a few elves already present. But the space is large enough that there is some room for privacy, too. Pride nods at them, and swiftly makes his way towards the garden.

Admittedly, she’s not, in fact, all that interested in testing out the strange waters of Andruil’s baths. The air smells odd, and try as she might she can’t find any water that looks like just plain, regular water, except for what’s pouring from a few artful wall fountains. Rinsing stations, most likely.

She lets Curiosity take the lead. Which is probably a mistake, in hindsight, because Curiosity hastily strips down and then makes a straight line for one of the weirdest looking pools in the room. The one with the muddy grey water, that, on closer examination, looks more like a silvery soup than anything else. With weird currents swirling around in it.

The upside, she supposes, is that no one else is using it.

…but that doesn’t really reassure her much, though.

She undresses at a somewhat more hesitant pace, and lingers at the edge for a minute before sighing at herself, and climbing in. The liquid in the pool is thick and clings to her almost immediately. Curiosity seems to have momentarily abandoned all other interests for the sake of squelching it around in a fashion caught halfway between clinical and playful.

“It is like mud,” she notes.

In texture, anyway.

In appearances it’s more like mud’s wealthy cousin. There are even tiny flecks of glittering sand in it.

“There is not a lot of magic in it,” Curiosity tells her. “Which is odd because you would need at least some to get most of the earth I know about to look like this. And it is earth. Or if you wanted to make it yourself, you would need magic, too. It must be a kind of earth from some other part of the world. Deep underground, I suppose.”

…Ah.

She turns a fresh eye towards the substance. It doesn’t look familiar to her, but she supposes it could come from deep underground.

There’s no lyrium in it, though.

After a few minutes Curiosity dunks herself fully beneath the surface, and comes up looking like some kind of silvery swamp monster. For her own part she’s a bit more modest in her efforts, and doesn’t stick her face into the communal muck pile of questionable origins.

She does help her friend peel some of the gunk off of her face, though.

“I do not think you are meant to submerge yourself in it,” she says.

“It tastes awful,” Curiosity informs her.
“Probably not meant to eat it, either.”

Her friend hums in agreement.

Once Curiosity’s face is reasonably visible again, she settles back, and lets her gaze drift towards the archways. The long stems of the mushrooms and softly glowing fungi. The light is softer beyond the bath chamber itself, allowing some of the luminescence to manifest. But it’s not quite right to her eye. Maybe it’s the atmosphere or the displacement of it all, but everything is off. In some inexplicable and subtle way. Even the bats seem too languid and still from what she recalls, barely moving even when Pride gets close to them.

For his own part, Pride plays the role of the slightly bored tourist very well. Hands clasped behind his back as he casually paces through the foliage, stopping every so often to stare, as if simply admiring the colours and patterns on display. He takes long steps. Circles around one of the giant mushrooms, and then stares up towards parts of the ceiling that she can’t see from her angle. At one point he moves through a falling shaft of light.

Motes of it drift in his wake, and stick to his hair.

It makes him look just a little like a dream.

She’s focused enough on observing Pride’s observations of the garden that she doesn’t really notice the approaching elves. Not until they’re already slipping into the silvery pool.

Curiosity drifts a little closer as they do.

She looks over to see the source of the tremors in the muck, and almost jumps out of her skin when she does.

Two of the elves are… not quite normal, but reasonably person-shaped. The one nearest to her is the tallest. Her limbs are chorded over with thick muscles, heavier than she’d ever see on any elf in her own time, and softened by a layer of fat that also strikes her as distinctly un-elven. Not only in its richness, but in how it folds across her body, perfectly even and artful as a painting. Every inch of her dark skin is covered in even darker freckles, and her fingers end in long, thick claws. Her only adornment is a necklace of very large teeth and gems that hangs above her breasts.

The other is a thin and wiry young man, with short brown hair, and skin so pale it almost looks painful where it turns pink at his joints. A pair of pale brown antlers sprout from his brow, and his ears are large and set low at the sides of his head. Across his chest is something that looks like a tattoo. Not vallaslin, though it’s the same shade of green as his markings. The patterns are stark lines, like shooting arrows.

The third elf is a bear.

Just a huge golden-brown bear.

Her first impulse is to get out of the pool, because there is a bear climbing into it. But no one else is even remotely unsettled, and when the bear settles into the muck, it looks at her with very intelligent eyes.

Not a bear at all, then.

“So you are Mythal’s new blood,” the lady of the group observes.

“We are,” Curiosity replies, edging yet closer, until they are virtually shoulder-to-shoulder.
“Hmm. ‘We’. So you count the blood of this one, too,” the antlered man observes, trailing his gaze over them both. Assessing.

She is glad for the opaque nature of the pool’s liquid, just then.

Before either of them can reply, the freckled lady does.

“Of course she does, Sassan. Do you not see Mythal’s writing on both of their faces? There is only one way it got there, and that is with Mythal’s blessing,” the woman reasons, before turning back towards them.

“This is Sassan. I am Nehnalin, and the bear there is Banathim.”

Sassan offers them a tiny wave at his name. The bear huffs, and just in general looks very uncomfortable to be sitting in a pool of silvery goo.

Curiosity offers their introductions for them, while she chances a glance back towards Pride.

He’s moved from the midst of the garden and is hovering at the edges of the archways, now. When she looks to him he catches her eye, briefly. Then he turns his gaze towards the elves that have joined them.

Right.

Well.

She supposes if they’re being approached, there’s an opportunity to see if they can get any interesting information from Andruil’s people, at least.

Nehnalin settles a bit more into the muck. It sticks in streaks to her skin, like silvery ribbons.

“So what are you, then? We have been trying to put it together. Old Uthvir failed to crack you last night, and that was something. Sassan here thinks you are some kind of mistake. An experiment gone awry. I would expect that more from Ghilan’nain than Mythal, though,” the woman muses, sharp gaze narrowing at her.

“Oh, it is very simple,” Curiosity says. “She is just a person. Waking-born, even.”

Sassan scoffs.

“A mistake must have been involved somewhere. Obviously,” he declares, gesturing towards her.

“Yes, but we are talking about my friend, not you,” Curiosity replies, in such a blankly innocent tone that it takes her a moment to realize what she actually just said.

In fact it seems to take everyone a moment.

Then Nehnalin cackles so loudly, it makes the muck slosh.

Sassan looks less pleased; but not massively insulted either. She supposes a certain amount of insult is normal, just going off of their body language. In fact it reminds her, of all things, of the Chargers. Bull’s people and their tendency to trade quips and cutting remarks so often, they lost their sharp edges altogether after a while.

“See, Sassan?” Nehnalin declares, once her laughter finally subsides. “Even the little ones know there is something lacking about you.”
“They have seen him naked. Fairly illustrative, that,” the bear, Banathim, rumbles, speaking for the first time in a weathered but distinctly feminine voice.

Sassan sneers, and sends a handful of muck at her snout. It hits with a distinctive *splat*, catching in the fur there. Banathim glowers at him balefully, and all of a sudden rears over and bites down on one of his antlers. There’s a tumult of movement as Sassan is dragged close enough for heavy paws to press him below the surface, dunking him as thoroughly as Curiosity had dunked herself.

When he’s finally let up, he sputters and flails, sloughing huge handfuls of muck off of his face in an effort to breathe again.

She feels a momentary flare of concern when he starts hacking the stuff up. But then there’s a flash of magic, and half of it just burns off of him.

The spell takes a little skin with it, too.

She winces.

Nehnalin groans.

“Again? Sassan. No one wants to smell your measly flesh cooking this early in the day,” she grouses.

“The price you pay for all those sense enhancements,” Sassan merely replies, washing healing magic, in turns, over his burns. It makes the air waver a bit. “I told you, you would regret them.”

“Because you keep lighting your face on fire?” Nehnalin asks, with a snort.

The trade of insults and a little roughhousing keeps up for a while. She and Curiosity watch it with the special kind of interest reserved for outsiders witnessing the random insanity which only long-time friends, with some… troubling predilections, are capable of managing. Sassan is clearly the group punching bag, but he seems to have little qualms with trying to hit back.

It doesn’t strike her as entirely harmless, though.

Eventually, Sassan gets dunked again and the tumult subsides.

The bear watches them through most of it.

She feels something itching at the back of her mind. It sharpens for a second, then, like a blow to the inside of her skull. An investigative strike at her, that peels past a certain layer of herself.

She winces.

“Oh,” Banathim says, very quietly.

A shadow falls over her shoulders, and she tilts back to see that Pride has approached the edge of the pool.

He’s staring at the bear.

“Something you were interested in, friend?” he asks, lightly.

The pool falls silent, though. However light Pride’s tone may be, there’s a certain edge to his aura that even she can pick up on.
Banathim looks up at him, and settles a little further back on her haunches.

“I am interested in most things that happen into our Lady’s presence,” the bear finally says. “But you understand that, do you not? Mythal’s wolf.”

Pride smiles.

It shows a lot of teeth.

“Naturally,” he says.

Sassan snorts.

“Mythal’s wolf, kicked out of Mythal’s bed, they say. But what I do not understand is why Mythal let you bring your own plaything along, if that is the case,” he says, gesturing towards her.

The air turns brittle enough to snap. Some of the steam evaporates.

“Because she is no one’s plaything,” Pride replies.

“Right!” Curiosity chimes in, whilst making a cutting motion with her hand above the surface of the pool, where Andruil’s people can clearly see it.

“I am a warrior,” she offers, disquieted by the turn this conversation has taken.

“Of course,” Nehnalin says, and reaches over to clap her on the shoulder. “Do not be an idiot, Sassan. Uthvir had her carving up kills last night, and she did it like one accustomed to the task. Mythal’s people have precious few who are suited to our revels among their number. It makes sense they would bring them all along.”

Banathim breaks off staring at Pride, and chuckles.

“Perhaps it is a sly insult. Implied that even a little doll of Mythal’s can compare to the hunters of Andruil,” the bear suggests.

Sassan smacks the side of the pool.

“We shall see about that!” the hunter declares.

“In the tournaments, I wager you shall,” Pride informs her. “But we have tasks to return to. My companions must finish up now.” He glances down towards her, and nods slightly, before turning back towards the gardens.

He doesn’t go far. But he keeps his back to them as she and Curiosity take the hint, and begin to climb out of the pool. The muck sticks to her arms and makes it a slippery effort. It’s uncomfortable with so many curious eyes pinned to her, as well; Andruil’s people watching as if they are looking for some hint or clue about her on her body.

It makes rinsing off a somewhat unnerving experience.

She’s glad enough when she’s got her clothes back on, armour strapped and sword and shield retrieved. And then again, when she taps Pride on the shoulder, and he falls into step with them; trailing one last look back towards Andruil’s people.

They get another corridor between them and the baths before she shakes off the last tremor of unease.
“So how was the garden?” she asks.

Pride tilts his head.

“Very well constructed,” he pronounces. “A good facsimile of the foliage in the Deep Roads. A bit more colourful in places, though. And the bats were not doing well. But sometimes constructs can be lethargic, so I could be mistaken on that front.”

So the garden was made by magic, then, and not with plants and animals actually taken from the Deep Roads.

“Constructs? What a shame,” Curiosity says. “I was hoping Andruil had figured out how to get them to survive aboveground.”

She’s… not entirely sure if Curiosity is earnest about that or not.

Either way, it’s not much of a development to be going off of.

“Survival of the fittest. If the bats die, Andruil would simply replace them with other bats that did not,” Pride asserts. His tone is light, but there is just the slightest betrayal of disdain in his features.

The corridor they’re in is a somewhat dimly lit one. There are a lot of mounted heads along the tops of the walls, and tightly woven tapestries unfurling towards the floor. The hunters on them move and dance, and vanish between the threads like shadows. It’s breaks off into a wide hall, that leads to the main entryway.

“The hunting party will be returning soon,” Pride muses. “We had best start to collect everyone, so we can offer them an appropriate greeting.”

She nods, and after a moment’s considering, they make their way back to the entryway, so they can branch down one of the side corridors and return to the guest quarters.

The chamber is just as strange and eerie as she recalls, with its fluttering pelts and dark, liquid-smooth flooring. Without the cluttered air brought on by the rest of Mythal’s entourage, it feels only slightly less heavy. But there is an unease that lingers, slithering down her spine as they walk through it.

She had thought it was the same eeriness that suffused the entirety of the holding, before.

But as they cross the middle of the room, she stops, and reconsiders.

Unease.

Disquiet.

She looks up towards the pelts, while Pride and Curiosity realize she’s no longer walking with them; and then down, towards the slick, dark floor.

Her own reflection stares back at her, distorted, with shadows where her eyes should be.

“What is it?” Curiosity wonders.

“What is this floor made of?” she wonders.

“Water,” Pride tells her.
She looks over at him in confusion.

“What?” she asks.

He takes a step closer, and looks down at the same spot she had been. His own reflection is no less eerie beside hers.

“It is water. The surface has been suspended with a barrier.” He pauses, considering. His brow furrows. “Only the surface, though. The floor is quite deep.”

Curiosity joins them, then.

“A deep pit full of water would be an interesting place to hide things.”

Pride nods in agreement, as she looks up, turning slowly to get another idea of the sheer size of the chamber. Deep. How deep? Is the water black, or does it go so far down that it is impossible to tell? A vault of lyrium, right below the front entranceway, disguised by the same pretentious artistry that marks a building as worthy of the evanuris? Guests would be walking over their host’s greatest trophy without even realizing it. What sort of humour did Andruil have?

“How would anyone access it, though?” she wonders, trying to keep her voice casual and speculative. Remove the barrier and you still have the water. She supposes people could just swim, though. Or turn into sharks or similar animals, if it’s very, very deep.

Would Andruil be eccentric enough to want to go hunting for her own lyrium?

“Andruil could take down the barrier, easily. But putting it back up would require some time and effort,” Pride muses. “Of course, if you had some… way of making the magic easier, which I am absolutely certain so talented a leader could devise, that would be of little issue.”

The three of them exchange glances.

“Well,” Curiosity says with forced lightness. “Maybe there is treasure down there. Or not. It was a fanciful notion!”

“I often forget how unfamiliar you are with certain forms of decoration,” Pride adds.

“It is a fascinating concept for a floor,” she agrees, and then they head for the corridor.

Every step she takes feel tenuous, though, and by the time she finally passes between several hanging pelts and out of the room, her nerves are jangling. And she’s honestly not sure if it’s from the double-speak, the feeling of being watched, or something trembling up towards her from the deep depths below.

She has a thousand questions she wants to ask, and she can’t figure out how to make a single one of them sound anything other than highly incriminating.

Frustration steals over her as they make their way back into the guest chambers.

Some of Mythal’s contingent are still milling around inside. Pride instructs most of them to gather in the main hall, and sends two others off to go and retrieve the wanderers. Before they go, one of them stalls Pride by catching his arm.

It’s probably a testament to how unnerved she is that she almost draws her sword on the poor man.

He doesn’t notice, though. Instead he hands Pride a slip of something. Not quite like paper, but a
close cousin. She’s seen a fair amount of the substance before, in Mythal’s library.

“Someone sent a message up from the city for you,” the elf says. “Lucky thing it got here before
the others returned, or Thenvunin would likely have made you unlock it for him.”

Pride accepts the missive, and inclines his head.

“Thank you, Malaras,” he says.

The elf nods, and then goes to attend to his duties.

“Someone sent you a message?” Curiosity asks.

Pride waves his hand over the slip, and regards it for a moment.

“It is a message regarding a message,” he declares. “Which is apparently waiting for me in
Arlathan.”

“Who sent it?” she wonders.

He catches her.

“No name. It is a puzzle,” he says. “Perhaps an old friend, looking to send some condolences over
my recent loss in status. Likely where Thenvunin and his ilk would not demand to read it.”

Oh, she realizes. Haninan.

Haninan sent a message?

That must have taken some doing, unless circumstances have changed a lot.

Still, she hopes if he’s sending them messages, that means he and Hildur are making out alright.

“Are we going to go into the city, then?” Curiosity wonders.

“If there is time,” Pride allows.

Then he tucks the missive into his sleeve, and glances out towards the windows.

“For now, we have a welcome back to prepare.”

~

It takes a surprising amount of effort to corral elves with a… somewhat questionable concept of the
passage of time. She finds herself beginning to understand why Mythal’s outings always seem to
start gathering people together in the morning and only setting out by evening – it could,
potentially, take that long for some elves to remember that they have a place to be or thing to do.

Even with a few of the others helping, she does a quick headcount and thinks they’re missing a few
bodies by the time everyone assembles in the main hall. Andruil’s people gather, too, in reasonable
number. Not all of them, but then she supposes that would be highly impractical. None of the elves
from the baths are among their numbers. Most of them seem fairly low-ranking, if she’s any judge
Likely just people with no pressing tasks to attend to, assigned to fill up the space and make the welcome back seem full. Given Andruil’s love of frequent hunts, she can imagine this is all fairly routine for them by now.

But it looks impressive, she can concede. Bodies filling up the chamber, arrayed before its doors, Mythal’s people and Andruil set up on opposite sides of a circle.

It would be incredibly dull to wait. Except for the fact that they’re in the entrance chamber, with its floor made of water, and the unease it sends trickling up her spine.

That gives her plenty to focus, at least; exploring the feeling, and trying to discern what it is. Whether it’s her or something else, and if it’s something else, how they might go about discovering it. She wouldn’t expect ambiguity over this kind of thing. But the heaviness in the room, and the atmosphere created by the gathered elves, can make their own sensations.

What is it?

Is it a feeling drawn down into the darkness below, or pressed there by the heavy pelts hanging above?

She doesn’t find an answer until the doors to the chamber bang open, and the hunters return.

Andruil and Mythal are both immaculate, and splendid in their armour, with weapons sheathed and long wagons drifting behind them. Uthvir and several others trail Andruil, whilst Thenvunin and Tarensa follow Mythal. They all look a bit more bloodied than their glorious leaders, though not as much as she would expect after a fierce hunt.

And there’s plenty of prey, by the looks of it. Andruil’s bounty is notably larger, including the tufted corpse of some beast she doesn’t recognize at all. But Mythal’s is far from an embarrassment, either, including a truly impressive boar as the centerpiece of her kills.

“A successful hunt,” Andruil pronounces. “We should spill a little blood on the floor to mark the occasion.”

Mythal inclines her head.

It’s Uthvir, though, who retrieves a hare from the stacked kills, and carries it towards the middle of the room. Then spills its blood with one quick, clean swipe from a knife, spattering it over the ground.

As if that’s some kind of cue, several of Andruil’s people start forward, then, and begin gathering the rest of the slain animals. Pride gestures towards her and Curiosity to stay put, and takes a few others with him over to help with Mythal’s. He goes straight past the evanuris, who doesn’t even glance at him.

In the middle of the room, Uthvir steps back from the spilled blood.

The flash of their knife as they sheath it, and the movement, catches her attention. And then she finds her gaze drifting towards the blood resting atop the liquid floor.

As she watches, it sinks in.

She shudders.
Down, it sinks, into the black – the black that in this light could be a very, very deep red – and her second heart beats strangely.

Something flares, brilliant red, from below.

The room goes utterly silent, as everyone looks down towards the cause of the unexpected flash. Andruil and Mythal and all of their gathered servants.

In the darkness below the barrier of the floor, glowing red veins light up and spread, patterned out like the circulatory system of some massive underwater beast. Shadows pass across them, wavering dark fins in the water. Down, and down the veins spiral, until they become too faded to see any longer. She scarcely registers the scale of creature which that implies.

Most of her vision is filled up, anyway, by the massive, outlined, monstrous head resting just below her feet. In the blackness, the glow is barely bright enough to illuminate a few scales, and the edges of deep, fathomless eyes.

The elves around her skitter backwards.

Curiosity grasps her arm and tries to pull her into following. There is a song in the back of her mind, though. A stronger pull at something deep within her, and she knows even before she takes a step back, that the massive head will follow.

It does, trailing after her from beneath the barrier of the floor.

*Klunk.*

The vibrations shake through the room, jittering up her legs and nearly knocking her off of her feet. The best nudges the barrier. Both of her hearts beat faster.

*Klunk, klunk.*

“Halt.”

The stern voice rings out, and she glances up to see Andruil glowering down at the creature below.

The command seems to be for it. But she stops, too. It’ll follow her no matter what; there’s no point in terrifying the rest of the room by dragging it around. Reaching over, she gently unhooks Curiosity’s grip from her. Pride is striding towards them.

She catches his eye and shakes her head.

He keeps coming, though.

“It seems our pet has a liking for Mythal’s doll,” Uthvir notes, tracking the beast’s movement’s from Andruil’s side.

“What a strange creature,” Mythal notes.

Andruil turns to her mother.

“My creature? I would ask more about yours, considering it has fascinated the beast so.”

Mythal only raises an eyebrow.

“Insects floating atop the water tend to draw the attention of fish.”
Wonderful. If there is anything she loves, it’s feeling like a bug. Especially right now, when the comparison feels only too apt.

*Klunk.*

“Get it out of the chamber,” Andruil instructs, gesturing towards her.

“Absolutely,” Pride agrees, and yes, that’s… probably a good idea, she decides. Though as they head towards the edge of the room, she finds herself wishing Pride and Curiosity were anywhere but at her side. The massive head pulls back, and if she was a more optimistic person she would take it as a good sign.

“*Run!***” Andruil snaps at them, before whipping towards her own people. “Backs to the walls!”

The three of them bolt, feet skidding across the smooth floor. Something pulls at her senses, dragging her down. It’s hungry for the faint flare of recognition, of familiarity and kinship, unexpected and yet so painfully potent.

They aren’t going to make it.

She turns on her heel, whips around, and speeds towards the main doors instead; leading the creature away.

Pride shouts after her.

The entire chamber flashes with red, bright enough to make it look like the pelts on the ceiling have caught fire.

Then something strikes the ground beneath her feet, hard enough to send her flying through the air. The crashing sound of the barrier breaking is phenomenal. Dark water surges upwards, carried on an electric tide of shattered magic. She smacks into the wall, hitting the soft pelts with enough force to crush the air straight from her lungs. Her hands catch at them, more reflex than anything as shouts add to the furor of roaring water and crackling magic.

Disoriented by the sheer force of the blow, she can’t hold onto the wall. There’s a nauseating ripple through the air that lets her know that the barrier is gone, entirely, the spell broken.

Then she drops into the water below.

Once, a venatori mage had cast an electrical spell on her in the middle of a rain storm.

She wouldn’t say that the sensation of falling into Andruil’s floor is the same, but it’s definitely comparable.

For one thoughtless, panicked instant, she tries to breathe and instead sucks in a mouthful of water. Something whirls around her, the surface frothing with violent motion. Something calls to her, deep and dark, a song fit to hollow out her bones and seep into her blood. She’s not sure which type of drowning is worse. But then she turns in the water, and finds herself facing a single, dark eye.

The chaos seems to still, for the span of a breath.

In the rounded surface, her own reflection stares back at her.

Wide jaws peel open.

It is hungry.
Always hungry.

She grasps her shield, more easily drawn beneath than water than her sword, and slams the edge of it against the beast’s eye. Hard as she can. Hard enough to split the surface membrane, and send a viscid, tainted liquid flooding into the water between them.

It thrashes, and knocks her back and away, and the panicked chaos returns. She can’t breathe. She can barely see. She clings to her shield, and wonders what has become of everyone else.

And then something hard and sharp closes around her collar, and yanks her upwards.

She barely has time to register the relief of having air around her head and something solid beneath her body before she’s gasping, and vomiting up mouthfuls of water. Something strikes her back, and her chest burns. But then the choking sensation recedes.

“Found the doll! And still alive, too!” an unexpected voice declares.

She turns, drawing in a few ragged breaths, and tries desperately to get a better idea for just what is happening.

There’s a flat barrier hovering in the air of the chamber. She can see more, similar things spread throughout the room. Various elves are perched atop them, or else hovering under their own power. Some appear to have transformed into birds, and are flying. The one she is on is occupied by an impressively large bird of prey, marked with a red crest across the top of its head. Its heavy talons look about the right size to match the bruises on her shoulders. Even so big as it is, she wouldn’t have expected such a bird to be able to carry her weight. So, obviously, it isn’t actually a bird.

And it’s speaking with Uthvir’s voice.

That’s a pretty good tip-off, too.

Most of these observations take a backseat to the chaos reigning below, however.

There are still elves in the water. Most of them seem to be rising up out of it, though, trying to avoid the chaos.

Which is completely understandable, because the massive sea monster thrashing the room to shreds has been joined by two dragons, tearing into it, roars ringing through the chamber as the unexpected battle rages.

Quickly, she looks to the platforms, but she can’t see either Pride or Curiosity.

No.

She looks down to the water, but there’s too much chaos. Some elves are sweeping down to pluck people up. After a breath of a moment, Uthvir swoops from his perch, leaving her behind to rake his talons across the top of the monster’s head, before snatching an elf up shortly before he can be crushed to death by an unfurling dragon’s wing.

With a curse, she draws her sword.

It’s impossible to fight in that water.

But she might be able to distract the thing, at least. As she strands, and gauges the jump between
the platform Uthvir landed her on, and the one next to it, it turns its head towards her again. Only to snap back as one of the dragons tries to close her jaws around its throat, and smash its skull through the back wall of the chamber instead. There’s a massive tearing noise.

That’s it. That’s the chance.

She leaps from her platform to the next, staggering, and then makes the jump to another one, slightly closer. She almost over-shoots it. Her feet skid across the smooth, magical surface, and the elf beside her blinks in surprise, but this angle puts her right next to the wall the fighting just broke.

Right above the monster’s head.

“You might want to move,” she advises the platform’s other occupant.

The elf glances at her, but instead her gaze hardens, and she notches a blazing magical arrow into an unstrung bow.

Right.

Andruil’s people.

Lifting her sword, she bashes it against the surface of her shield. It’s mostly for show, though. The real tug comes from inside, as she reaches towards that terrifying, sickly sweet song that’s reaching for her.

And pulls back.

The monster rears up.

Out of the water, its black scales gleam dark and deep red. The lyrium veins of it still glow, but she can see more of it now. The sharp curve of dozens of fins, stretching down its body. The strange hollows of its head, caught somewhere between a dragon’s skull and some strange, deep-sea fish. Sharp spines trail away from the edges of its jaw. Its injured eye is weeping dark blood, but it cranes towards her slowly.

Like a hypnotized snake.

Its jaw opens. Sharp, black teeth glisten as they part; stained red.

Always hungry.

Magic suddenly courses up it, crackling and furious; seemingly repelled by its scales, and the trance of the moment is broken.

The archer beside her fires a shot into the creature’s battered eye.

It shrieks, just as the second dragon lunges for its side.

Something blue whips up from the surface of the water, and she barely registers what it is before a familiar parrot is crashing into her.

“Pride!” Curiosity exclaims, wet-feathered and struggling.

Fear knifes through her.

“Where is he?” she demands.
The parrot turns, and gestures down to where the monster’s coiled body still stretches below the surface, battering against the sides of its pool.

Oh, no.

Carefully, she sets Curiosity down.

Then she sheaths her sword, slings her shield over her back again, and dives.
She hits the water.

Whirling darkness fills her vision. There’s no purchase, nothing for her to grip. Underwater her muscles are weaker. Her ability to strike blows, to stand firm, to brace for impact – it all abandons her. Her magic is the only good weapon she has here, and it’s one she still struggles to master; and one which even the masters are struggling to make work in this place. Something’s sloughing it away from its targets.

The pool is almost more dangerous than the creature in it, really.

The only light she can see by is the glow off of the monster’s veins as it thrashes. Some burst with the force of its struggle and cascade into the water, raining lyrium-tainting blood overhead. Her thoughts fill with images of Pride, dashed against the walls. Crushed between its coils. Swallowed down and struggling, suffocating on the inside of the thing.

Where is he?

She looks for signs of movement. The frothing water offers plenty, but it only confuses her search. She swims down, deeper, desperate, and right when her lungs begin to burn, she spots him. A pale figure, just barely outlined against the flesh of the monster. There are a few corpses drifting in the water. He could just be another one, except the light catches on his face, just so, and she sees.

It’s him.

He’s not moving.

No.

The beast thrashes, and she realizes that Pride is pinned to its side. He’s pressed tight to the spines rippling along its body, the sharp edge of one of its fins crushing into him. The water fights against her, currents ripping violently around as the fight rages. She forces herself to try and swim against them. Her lungs burn and her heart beats wildly, and after a moment it feels like her skin is crackling, too. Blood thrumming, joints splitting.

Like the water’s trying to carve itself into her flesh.

But she has to reach him.

There’s no other possibility that she will accept.

She has to.
One of her hands closes around the smaller fins along the beast’s lower body, and she uses the grip to haul herself along its flank. Twice, she has to stop, as it thrashes and the water churns, but each time it clears again, and Pride is still there. Trapped. She forces herself further, and further, and finally surges forward in the burning gloom and closes her hands around his shoulders. Her fingers scramble for purchase. She never thought she would miss his ridiculous penchant for wearing fur, but the smooth armour and slick fabric he’s got on now gives her little cling to. And something’s holding him back.

Fighting her grip.

The spines, she realizes. The beast’s spines have torn into Pride’s armour. There’s no time for gentleness; she wrenches him free, pulling him forward as hard as she can until he comes loose in her grasp. The sharp fin batters against her furiously for a moment. The need for air has become an urgent and desperate demand, but Pride has been under even longer than she has. And he is unconscious.

He’s a heavy, dead weight as she kicks up and makes frantically for the surface.

The song pulls at her. Calling, down deeper. Below her feet, she sees red glowing; not from the veins of the beast, but from a spot deep below. Pulsing, and distant. Trying to trick her. Coax her downwards instead of up.

She pushes away from it.

Kicks as furiously as she can.

Gasps as they break the surface.

Pride is not breathing.

Keeping both their heads up is a challenge enough in the churning pool, but she clutches at him, and tries to press against his back, and force any water she can out of his lungs. He’s not breathing. He’s still, and not breathing, and what can she do? It’s chaos all around. There’s no ground to lay him on, no shore she can safely reach. What can she do? Curiosity! Where is Curiosity? They need magic. Healing magic; something to force Pride to breathe.

A tremendous roar splits the air.

She ignores it, for now.

Magic.

She can do magic, too. Nothing like this. Never before. But there is blood in the water, and strange sensations still burning over her skin, and she feels it. All she needs is to focus. Will and intent, and – and focus. Just carefully, so, so carefully. There is a current running through them both. She doesn’t think about what it might be until she traces it to his lungs, and pushes the water from them as gently as she can. Magic flowing like all the liquid around them.

The water.

The blood.

The tainted, red lyrium.

Pride coughs and shudders. The sound is loud in her, cutting like sharp edges. Through her.
Through him.

For a moment, it seems to her that the whole chamber flashes into stark relief. Bright, instead of dark. The red veins of the beast are black. Her heart is silver. The taint, the Blight, seeps through the water in poisoned clouds. It swirls at her feet, and reaches for her. Then passes through her, calling but not corrupting.

It seeps into the veins of one of the dragons, battered against the walls. It runs rampant through the monster, now caught in its death throws.

And it is already within Pride, shaking in her arms.

The moment passes. She blinks, and the world is chaos again, dark and incoherent. One of the dragons is rending into the monster’s skull. Roaring and breathing flames across its flesh. The waters are choppy, sloshing in massive waves as the coils around them rise up only to slam back down against the surface. Blood and taint spills all around them. Seeps into everything, carried by the currents.

No.

She needs to get Pride out of this.

She picks a direction, away from the worst of the fight, and start kicking towards it. Her grip on him is so tight, it hurts her hand.

He’s still hacking up water when they’re dragged under again, dragged down by an unexpected current. It almost seems to grasp at her limbs, tugging with odd insistence before she struggles free. When they surface once more, he is gasping and ragged. He tries to say something, she thinks. His lips move rapidly between coughs, but the dying monster is shrieking and roaring. The rush of water buries her head, and crashes into her eardrums, and she can’t hear him.

His skin looks ashen.

She glances up, searching for any elves who might be swooping through the air or perched on nearby platforms. A rogue wave drags them under again before she can get more than a glance, though. It rises like a dark wall over their heads, and when it crashes over them, she almost loses her grip on Pride. The water weighs against them.

In the next instant, the majority of the monster’s neck collapses into the pool.

It strikes the surface not far from them, and then seems to twist as it sinks. The current pulls and they’re dragged beneath it.

There’s a flare of panic in her chest. Her hands are clutched around Pride’s arm, but she can hardly see him, and the wall of flesh over them seems crushing and impenetrable. Some primal spark in her is sure they’ll drown, and it drives the irrational thought that she should draw her blade and try to cut through it. But she can’t let go of Pride. Everything is dark. The monster’s veins are spilling around them, the glow of the lyrium in it diffusing into the tainted pool.

Dying off with its host.

And then suddenly, there’s air.

Brief and flickering, a bubble that spreads around their heads. It pushes back the water, though in the darkness beneath the beast’s flesh, everything has gone completely black. But she can feel it,
and hear Pride drawing a few ragged breaths, until it collapses again.

Right.

Magic.

She forces herself to focus again, and tries to mimic what he just did. Air. Push back the poisoned water. A bubble, just a simple bubble. Like a barrier, and not like a barrier. Sealed tight enough to keep the air in, but not to cut into their bodies. The first one bursts, sending the water rushing back in and jarring her nerves again.

But the second try works.

The air is dank and stale but it’s air. She draws in a mouthful as Pride gasps.

“Another one!” he coughs out.

She honestly can’t see why they need another air pocket. But there’s a good chance he’s delirious, or somewhat panicked himself. Her own heart is thundering in her chest. Between that and the crackling currents of power surging all around them, she’s nearly numb.

They need to out from underneath this corpse. The thing is dead, at least, but her mind keeps skittering around what she saw.

She has to get Pride away from this poison.

That’s the first thing.

“I have you,” she tells him.

She keeps one hand on him as she reaches up, pushing with her shield, and then with her will, trying to either shove the monster’s body aside, or move them along it until they reach a point where they can surface. Whichever happens first. Pride tries to speak again, but only manages another wrenching cough.

And then they begin to sink.

It would be difficult to tell, except that she has her arm against the corpse above them, and she can feel it pressing down all of a sudden. As if trying to crush them. Her first, alarmed thought is that it isn’t really dead. She freezes, and debates the idea of wrapping Pride in an air pocket and simply thrusting him away from the danger. Using herself as bait and drawing the creature away until it finally, and truly expires. But the flesh above still feels lifeless. Empty.

Sinking?

Most corpses float. Then again, most corpses aren’t hideous lyrium beasts made to live in an evanuris’ floor.

“Swim,” Pride tells her, clutching at her shoulder. “Go, go! There is another-”

Another…?

Oh, shit.

Another one.
She barely has time to process the implications before something closes around one of her legs. A vice of muscles, it feels like. Stronger than iron, warm and pulsing, with a few jagged edges that bite into her armour. Like some demon tentacle.

It wrenches her downwards.

She’s ripped from the air pocket so violently it feels like she left her skull behind in it. Her leg burns, and water rushes past. The breath is crushed from her lungs by the shock of it. Her vision is darkness, peppered with flashes of gleaming red; points that turn to lines as she is dragged downwards. Past the thunder of her first heart, her second thrums an anxious beat. Stirring in her chest like a moth trapped in a jar.

She kicks out with her free leg.

It’s like flailing at the sea.

Her struggles are only making the grip on her leg twist harder. So she forces herself to go limp, instead. To wait.

The flash of red grows brighter.

The song gets louder.

She tries to make another air pocket, but she’s moving too fast. Each attempt wrenches away from her almost as soon as she creates it. It’s terrifying, how deep she must be going, how far from the surface, how far from Pride, still trapped beneath the other creature’s corpse. It feels as if the water itself is starting to crush her.

She wonders if that is what this one does. She remembers talk of beasts in Seheron. Ambush predators. Reptilian things, smaller than drakes but more patient, that would pull people under water, and wedge them beneath logs and boulders. Let them thrash and flail their way towards drowning, and come back for an easy meal later. Teeth and patience, Bull had described them as, once.

Calm, she tells herself. She still can’t see what has her, can’t stop the drag of it. But the next air pocket she makes forms below her. The creature pulls her through it, and as it does, she gulps in a breath.

Two more, she manages, before she finds her descent slowing at last. Or maybe only her perceptions are slowing. There’s a ringing in her head, and she honestly cannot tell if it’s the pull of the taint, or just the rattling in her skull.

The burning in her blood.

But then the water shifts, and she turns.

Six fiery red eyes stare back at her, this time. Bright where the first beast’s had been dark. Hard, like crystal, and molten at their center.

Something in her freezes, awash with recognition. In the glow spilling out of its red lyrium gaze, she sees the jagged outlines of a face, like and unlike those of the many, many pride demons she has fought. This creature is warped, even by the standards of its predecessor. The water around it curls like clawed and grasping limbs. Answering its beck and call. The shadow around her leg, what could be taken for a massive, heavy rope of muscle, is little more than tendrils of blood and shadow. Shards of red lyrium drift through its being, wedged against the flesh of it. Swirling the
water that seems to be part of it, but also separate from it. Horns like shattered crystal stretch from
the top of its head.

A twisted and tainted demon, sunken below Andruil’s holdings. Below the lush forests, and the
glittering, nearby city. Utterly undeniable as what it is.

It laughs at her.

The sound reverberates through the water. Carries through the taint in it. Magic crackles along with
it, like white sparks. Her lungs are burning, her leg is burning, and this thing… this thing is…

It reaches for her. Its fingers cut through the water, sharp as knives. It’s all she can do to swing her
shield in front of herself. The claws scrape along the surface. It’s a sound like the hull of a qunari
dreadnought straining against rocks in a shallow bay. The blow scores the metal of her shield.
Scrapes off some of the cracked exterior, and draws more gold gleam from its surface.

For one brilliant instant, it seems to her as if a ray of sunlight has struck down into the depths, to
battle the angry red gleam of the blighted lyrium.

_Fortitude_, she thinks.

With a burst of inspiration, she surrounds herself in a pocket of air. It’s not much, and strains to
hold onto it. It closes beneath her feet, leaving her to teeter preciously for a moment. Her limbs feel
twisted, and her skull is screaming. But in it, she gulps down desperate mouthfuls of air, and draws
her blade. Sweeps down and slashes at the magic binding her leg. In the pocket of air, the water-
formed tentacle strains and shatters; breaking right when the air bubble does.

The demon only laughs at her again.

Prey. She is prey.

A tiny thing possessed of some valuable good, wrought within her very flesh. A rabbit with a silver
heart. It is the essence of the hunter’s pride, this thing below. No prey is beyond it. All creatures
fall before it. It has patience, stillness. It could wait for however long it needed to wait. It only
needs a moment of action, a single strike, and then victory will come to it. It is strong. It is fierce. It
is a predator, and as a predator it sits above even other predators. Peerless at the top of its food
chain.

It is Conceit, without a doubt. Monstrous and blighted. The pride of a hunter with none of the
respect.

And it’s planning to kill her.

Something crashes against her back. Sharp and biting; more claws. They rake through her armour,
punch the breath out of her lungs and send her spinning forwards. The demon reaches for her
again, and she raises her shield once more; finds herself pinned between claws at her front and
claws at her back. A grinning face and gleaming eyes. Leering within reach.

**Within reach.**

Well, thank you very much.

She thrusts her blade as hard as she can into the demon’s face.

Her muscles strain, and the metal scrapes between blighted flesh and hardened eyes. An outraged
roar replaces the mocking laughter, as she twist, and presses, and tries to do as much damage as she can. Bleed it. Break it. Pierce its skull and drive through the essence inside.

It sets the depths *on fire*.

All at once it’s like she’s swimming in lava instead of water, blood, or ichor. This red is like the burning red of dwarven fountains. Conceit vibrates, shrieking, furious at the insult of her blow. Her skin cracks, her armour sears. Not with heat but with the force of the sheer power in it. Blood magic. Blood magic and lyrium.

This is how she dies.

…But she can feel it.

Like the purple lyrium flooding through the Titan. The translated song in that had called to her, as surely as her strange new capacity for magic had reached for it. As surely as her knowledge of lyrium’s power had availed her.

And here, too, it’s the same. The song is kindred to her, far more than to the demon it’s been poisoning. The creature draws on the power, but the power, in turn, seeks to destroy the creature. Just as it seeks to destroy everything in this world.

It is like fire, and destruction. It needs to burn as well.

Let it burn as well.

She sinks into the song, swept away upon its currents. It carries her from the pain. Crushes her into the darkness, where there is no light. Where there’s nothing, except that there cannot be nothing, no, but that’s how it is and isn’t all at once. She races through the undefined, destructive power of it, and together, they tear at the world. It is what they are. What they do. They ignite the waters, and burn through the heart of the demon.

It shrieks. It cries. It does not understand. It must always have victory. Success. The essence of domination sits at the truth of its being.

It reaches for her, clutching and clawing. Reaches for its power, but the power doesn’t answer it. There is no kinship there.

Pitiable thing.

It has never been the predator, but the prisoner. Buried at the bottom of the well.

The bones of it shatter like glass. The flesh twists and boils. The eyes bleed, seeping into the water around them, as the water, too, is consumed and destroyed. Fragments swirl as it is torn apart. Flash as it is shattered, and shattered again, until she is swimming in the coarse sand of its remains.

She drifts into the blighted blackness.

She drowns in it.

~
The song is like a river.

The song is like a cage.

It flows and roars and rages, surging at the world. Passing through it.

It stays in place, trapped in the dark. Immovable in a space that does not exist; pressing through the cracks towards the one which one does. Bleeding chaos, confusion. Destruction. Why, why, why.

And then something reaches for her.

Closes somewhat forcefully over the light in her. Something massive, and gleaming. A mountain. The mountain. Hearts within hearts, and it hears her, and it pulls her through. Strange kin. Odd child. Little mortal thing, with its copied earthen heart, fragile and breakable. But its work is not done. It is the little things. The little things that make the big things possible.

The song is like a river.

She flows along it, until she finds herself in a river in truth, it seems. Trembling and coughing. Bones aching; heart jangling. Muscles twitching. Burnt and wet, and still clutching her weapons. Wisps of steam rise from the torn edges of her armour.

There is moonlight overhead.

Smooth stones beneath her palms.

She pulls herself onto the riverbank. Branches scrape at her, and the water pulls at her. The current is gentle. Even so, it takes a monumental force of effort just to keep moving. She can barely even spare the thought to wonder where she is, or how she’s gotten here. Maybe there was some underground river flowing into Andruil’s fortress. Maybe she’s in the Deep Roads, and the moonlight is the bright gleam off of some glowing plant. Maybe the river ran to the surface, and she’s in the woods surrounding the hill.

She flops onto the bank, sucking in desperate gulps of air. Her battered leg is numb. It’s a worry, but also a relief; everything else is just a pulsing web of pain. Each time her lungs expand, it hurts. Each time she twitches, it hurts. Every moment she spends lying still, it hurts. Her intestines feel like they’ve been tied into knots, and her ribs feel like they’ve been shattered and presses only loosely back together.

“Pain does seem to be your lot in life,” her own voice says.

For a moment, she freezes.

Some of the blurriness in her vision recedes. It’s definitely a moon over her head. Reaching, twisting branches offer it an almost deliberate seeming frame, as it shines down upon her. Lighting up the river with odd, brilliant reflections, and making the smooth stones look like polished gems. There’s mud at her back. The air is beautifully clear, though. Vivid. She supposes almost any air would taste good after having so little of it, but she recognizes this taste. This crisp clarity that makes her senses come alive.

Which, considering they’re currently wracked with misery, isn’t great right now.

Mustering herself, she turns her head, and tries to look for the source of the voice. Her voice. Speaking to her from somewhere else.
The russet wolf.

But all she sees, at first, are the trees. The brush growing between their roots. The vines trailing down around knotted trunks.

She knows these woods.

It’s a dream.

“Am I dead?” she wonders.

Her own laughter rings through the air. Less mocking, at least, than the demon’s had been.

The demon.

“Is my enemy dead?” she demands, trying to sit up and failing miserably.

“Oh, there is still quite a bit left of you. Not as much left of it,” the wolf replies.

She turns her head, and there it is, then. Sitting right beside her, on the bank. As if it had been there the entire time. No hint of movement, no betraying shift in the air; just a wolf, perched on smooth river stones. It’s tail grazing the edge of the water. It looks at her like she’s a trout, washed up and gasping.

“What happened?” she wonders.

“I invited you in again, of course,” it tells her. “That was very good of me, if I do say so myself. It would have been very uncomfortable for you if I hadn’t. But you know, it could have been an interesting turn of events, too. Very entertaining to watch. Your pretty white wolf is even more unpredictable than you are. I wonder what he would have done… well. Maybe it’ll happen again. Maybe I won’t let you in that time.”

It’s eyes gleam speculatively.

She is far, far too exhausted to be having this conversation.

“So… I am unconscious, then,” she concludes.

The wolf blinks.

“What a funny way of looking at it. You seem perfectly awake to me,” it declares.

“I mean in the… in the waking world,” she murmurs, straining a little as her breaths burn. Sharp pain finally shoots up from her leg, the numbness wearing off. It makes her hiss, and then curse.

“Fenhedis.”

The wolf laughs, as though delighted.

She immediately regrets it.

The russet wolf, she thinks, is everything the demon believed itself to be. Looking at it, she has no doubt that it could sit precisely where it is until doomsday – and after doomsday – if the idea suited it. That it could wait for any opportune moment to strike, or contrive of dozens upon dozens of traps in an instant, and manipulate the world to bring precisely what it wanted straight to its doorstep.
Just as it’s brought her right to this very place.

That this wolf exists is utterly terrifying.

Because she can fully believe that it is just shy of bored, right now, watching the world tear itself apart. And what does that say about the trajectory that everything has been placed on? Where was this wolf when her time was being destroyed?

It smiles at her.

“I should like to see you fight more,” it says. “It’s funny, watching tiny things run amok in the schemes of bigger ones. Like a little stinging insect. Have you seen an elephant spot a bee? Oh, the big beasts, they hate bees. Too small to follow, but the sting is sharp. It always kills the bee to attack, though. It only sometimes kills the elephant to get stung. But when that happens, however big and grand the elephant thinks itself, its life is only worth as much as the bee’s.”

She blinks.

Yeah, she’s really ten thousand times too exhausted for this conversation.

“Am I a bee now?” she asks.

“Don’t be silly. You’re a person; you said so yourself,” the wolf replies.

At the moment she feels much more like a giant flesh sack of pain.

“I could make you into a bee, if you like. Or a hornet. Hornets are more like wolves. That would be dull, though. You would probably just die very quickly. Even if you were a whole swarm of them. Get their wings wet and they don’t do very well.”

She stares up at the moon, and deeply, deeply wishes that this was an actual dream.

The wolf tilts its head the other way.

For a long moment, they simply endure one another’s company in silence. She can’t seem to work out how to speak, as the pain in her leg grows and joins the cacophony of her other hurts. And the wolf seems content to let the quiet be. The moonlight spills over it. A few clouds drift by, but they don’t touch it; don’t block the glow of it. She can see them against the night. Wispy edges catches the light, unveiling the stars when they move.

It feels like the aftermath of the Titan. Like she’s dying again.

She really wants to stop getting herself into these messes.

The wolf stares at her. Its golden gaze is the brightest thing in the whole of the forest, even accounting for the moon.

It makes her think of the book Pride gave her.

Pride.

Pride’s been…

“I have to go back,” she says. “I have to wake up.”

“It is a terrible thing, to wake up sometimes. Better to sleep and dream. Or, so many believe. Sleep
and dream, and forget all about your pains. Your fears,” the wolf suggests.

A broken and bitter laugh escapes her.

“Those are all still here,” she replies.

That makes the wolf smile again.

“I could help, you know. You went and ruined that poor body of yours again. Not that I blame you. It doesn’t serve your needs very well. I could fix it for you, if you like. It would certainly help with the pain.”

Standing up, it begins to prowl around her. Even under the circumstances, the silent footfalls, and careful gait of a predator make her nerves stand on end. She tracks its movement out of the corner of her eye; but she’s suffering under no delusions. The only reason she can see it is because it’s letting her see it. At a moment’s notice, she thinks, it could vanish.

Could probably kill her, too.

“Aren’t you going to ask for my help?” it wonders.

Isn’t she?

Pride has the Blight.

“Can you take the taint from someone?” she asks.

The russet wolf settles back down on her opposite side.

“Your pretty white wolf’s fur is going to turn all black,” it muses. “I can’t help that. But you can, I think. Though it would be much harder for you to do it if you were dead.”

She sucks in a breath.

“Am I dying?” she wonders.

It earns her a brief, speculative look over.

“Oh, I think so. A little. It’s hard to say. You’ve got that tricky stolen heart, and it saves you and kills you at the same time. But then, you’re always dying by inches anyway, aren’t you? It’s your nature. Death must like you very much. I wonder if it likes you more than your wolf does.”

With some effort, she manages to drag herself up. Her muscles scream and her arms almost give out, but she pushes herself into a somewhat vertical position against the bank, and finally looks at her own skin.

She’s a wreck.

Bloodied and burnt. Her leg is broken, flesh torn and crushed. Her clothing is in tatters. She can feel the gouges in her back, as the open air rakes across them. Her right wrist is sprained, at the least, and she thinks there are fractures in the bones of her left arm. From holding up her shield. Her insides probably aren’t doing much better than her outsides. Her vision swims, but the air anchors her, and drags the world back into focus.

“Are you going to help me?” she wonders. If this is what she looks like awake – if it is, more horrifyingly, better than what she looks like awake – than she doesn’t care much for her odds.
“I don’t know. I think I’d like a present, if I did,” the wolf decides. “I’ve been giving quite a lot, you see. I let you in, and I gave you those old bones you asked for, and I’ve been quite a generous conversationalist, if I do say so myself. Even though you’re a little dull sometimes. So I think it’s time you offered me something back.”

She blinks at it.

“What would you like?” she wonders, warily.

“Oh, I get to choose? How lovely,” the wolf replies. Which makes her think that it was hoping she would ask. Damn. Maybe she could have just gotten away with a bouquet of flowers or something.

It settles back a bit on its honches.

“I want my skull,” it tells her.

Her gaze drifts, a little baffled, over the outline of the wolf’s head.

“You seem to already have it…” she ventures, tentatively.

“Well, here, yes. Here I have it in as many ways as I like. But I mean the other skull, in the other place,” it explains. “It’s all broken into pieces, you see. A very impolite thing to do. It’s a bit silly, not having a skull, you know. I suppose some spirits get by without one. But then their thoughts spill all everywhere, don’t they? Nothing to keep them in.”

She shakes her head a little.

Then immediately regrets it, when it only makes her dizzy.

“Oh, okay, so you need a wolf’s skull?” she asks. She can do that. That’s doable. She has no idea how she’s supposed to transport something like that into a dream, but she knows people. They can probably figure it out. Maybe there’s some sort of package delivery system that would work. It wouldn’t surprise her.

“I need my skull,” the wolf clarifies, firmly.

“Your skull. A specific skull.” She sighs. That’s harder. “Where is it, then?”

“How should I know?” the wolf asks. “Though I do suppose there are quite a lot of wolf skulls out there. Mine is the nicest, even broken. But you might need help. Your eyesight isn’t terribly good, is it?”

It isn’t, at the moment, but somehow she suspects it’s referring to the entire concept of how her eyeballs work in general. Probably thinks it’s insufficient that she can’t see the whole of the cosmos in an acorn, or something.

“I’ll fix that, too, then. As a favour. Because I’m very kind,” it assures her.

Its teeth gleam in the moonlight.

“What?” she asks.

It doesn’t answer.

Instead it nods, and everything snaps around her.
It’s painful, but it’s hard to tell if that’s just the pain she’s already in carrying on, or if it’s changed somehow. The world goes bright and then dark and then dizzying, motes of light drifting up from her skin as it starts to glow like deep earth mushrooms. She falls backwards with a soundless cry, and for an instant she sees her own blood twisting through the air. Red ribbons, weaving together. Then it all surges towards her eyes, and sinks into her skull.

Her right eye burns more than the left.

She reaches for her face, but her arms won’t come up. Everything in her is rigid, bones shaking, snapping back into place, and she was worse off than she realized if all the ones that crack and twist were misaligned to begin with. Her skin ripples. She thinks of when the elves grafted an unwanted arm onto her; shoved a new eye into her skull. These pieces cause the least pain, now. She’s not sure if it’s because of what they are, or because they still feel less real to her.

Perception and suffering.

The whole process jabs at the second heartbeat in her chest. Nudges it, a little, as if coaxing it into a new position. Maybe it was misaligned, too. Or maybe it’s just been misaligned. Maybe this is just a very painful and amusing way to die, thinking she’s being fixed while she’s really being torn apart.

Then, gradually, it begins to subside.

Her pulse is thundering in her ears. Her skin is tingling, like in the aftermath of an electrical spell.

The wilds along the riverbed don’t look any different, at least. Or feel any different, either. She can smell the trees, and the mud, and the rushing water. Over the tips of the lowest trees, she can see the creeping fingers of a sunrise, just beginning to touch the sky.

The russet wolf is gone.

_Now you find me my skull, or I’ll be very unhappy with you_, the wind whispers.

She shudders.

Then she staggers to her feet, and takes a lurching step; and all at once she is amidst the bright colours and dreamy shapes of the Fade. The air around her dull and without scent. The world drifting, pulled by currents of thought. By gliding spirits. Something more solid catches in the corner of her eye.

A hand closes around her wrist.

She turns, is half-pulled, and finds herself pressed against a familiar chest. Arms clench tightly around her.

“Wake up,” Pride pleads.

Of course, she does.

~

She blinks her eyes open to a brightly-lit chamber. Soft cream walls, sculpted with the shapes of
blooming flowers, frame archways that lead out towards a paved garden. The ceiling is a swirl of
delicate colours, with the ghostly image of white clouds drifting across the polished surface of it.
She’s on her side, facing towards the archways. The distant sound of running water fills her ears.

Thinking about water in general right now isn’t encouraging.

She moves, carefully. It feels like she’s just woken from a deep and surprisingly refreshing sleep.
Her heartbeat is a little fast, and her skin is tingling. But she feels no pain. No pull from her burns
or resistance from her muscles, or heavy numbness. No screaming from her nerves.

A breath escapes her.

Turning reveals the source of the running water sound – a dragon fountain, jade green; one that
wouldn’t be at all out of place in Mythal’s palace – and Pride. Sitting in a chair beside her, slumped
over. Hollows in his cheeks and under his eyes, his pallor sickly in hue. She sits up even as he
seems to wake himself. His eyelashes are still fluttering as she takes his face into her hands. Presses
her palms to his cheeks, and searches for dark veins. When she sees none, she pulls his bottom lip
down gently with her thumb. Checking his gums.

He starts, apparently taken aback for a moment, before his hands close around her waist.

“You need to rest!” he protests.

“I’m fine,” she tells him.

“No! You…”

He stops. Looks at her, and trails off. His gaze flits over her face, her skin. She realizes, for the
first time, that she’s been divested of her tattered clothing and armour. There’s a light shift covering
her right now. But the skin it reveals is quite clearly whole. Maybe even better than it had been
before the fight. There isn’t a single bruise or scratch on her.

Pride looks utterly baffled.

She takes advantage of the situation to pull down the collar of his shirt, and peer at his skin.
There’s nothing. But she won’t – can’t – take it as a guarantee. She knows what she saw.

“How are you better?” he asks, quietly.

They’re very close, right now. His hands still on her waist, warm through the thin fabric; hers
drifting to rest at his shoulders.

This close, she could probably pick up on something, she thinks.

That would likely be the easiest way to check, really.

Maybe she did just imagine it.

Maybe she was so afraid of it, she only convinced herself it had happened. That she had felt it. Seen
it, somehow.

Didn’t the wolf say her eyesight was terrible?

(Didn’t it also say he would blacken with corruption?)

He looks at her, the question still at the forefront of his gaze. But she leaves it, for now. Instead she
finds herself rubbing her hands just softly over him, as her eyes slip shut, and she tries to follow the feeling. She leans in closer. It’s a wrench, even just looking for it. Her mouth goes dry and her heart skips a beat, as her forehead brushes against his.

His breath stills, before pushing out of him in one long shudder.

There are whispers beneath his skin.

Quiet, but there.

Her eyes sting.

“Please tell me what is happening,” he asks. His voice cracks.

“You have been infected by the Blight,” she says.

Her grip on him tightens. Her fingers wrinkle in his shirt; clench, as if she could somehow pull it out of him. Can she? Can she do something? There’s a connection between her and this. The lost souls of her world. Maybe she can draw them out. Pull them towards her, instead. Like a magnet. She swallows, even as his hands lift to her shoulders.

Gently, he pushes her back.

She looks at him.

“No,” he denies. “You are confused. I am fine; you were the one who nearly died. Again.”

She shakes her head.

“The wolf fixed me. I only have to bring it its skull, now. You’re the one who’s still in danger,” she insists.

His brow furrows.

“The… wolf. Which wolf?” he asks her, carefully. As if he is afraid that she will come apart right before him. Always, he is so gentle with her. So kind. It isn’t fair. It isn’t right. She’s got to fix it, she can’t let this be his fate, can’t let the poison… can’t…

It would be justice, some would think. For him to be undone by the very world he destroyed in another life. An inevitable twist of fate, perhaps.

She takes his face between her hands. He stills, as she’d hoped. Carefully, she presses back towards him. Puts her forehead against his again. Closes her eyes, and follows the whispers.

One of his hands shifts to her back.

“It is alright,” he tells her, soothing. “Just breathe for a moment.”

“Yes. Just breathe,” she agrees.

But no matter how she reaches for what’s in him, it stays where it is. The song answers her. Drifts into her. Pulls her down, and down. She follows it, trying to grasp what she can find, until she begins to lose track of her own thoughts. Of what she’s even searching for in the first place. Only then does she pull back a little. She coaxes and calls back. It doesn’t seem to accomplish much, though, apart from making her skin hum.
Pride’s pulse jumps.

“What was that?” he asks.

She sighs, and steps back a little.

“That was the Blight,” she tells him.

He glances down at himself, and then back up at her. His expression still more perplexed than alarmed.

“The healers found no such thing. No signs of poison. And I feel fine, apart from being tired,” he assures. “I am more concerned for you. You were the one who nearly died. And now you are…”

His gaze trails over her, again.

This time his cheeks colour.

“You said a wolf did this?” he asks.

She lets out a heavy breath, and glances around the chambers they’re in again. Clearly some kind of healing rooms. She’d think they were back at Mythal’s palace, but she doesn’t recognize the walls, or the garden. And when she peers out of the archways, and past the reaching leaves of rich, emerald-green firs, she sees gleaming spires. The distant outline of Sylaise’s palace.

“Can we talk here?” she wonders.

Pride stands up. He’s clad in a simple grey tunic and leggings.

“For now,” he tells her. “Mythal was injured in the fight. Andruil was… incensed by the ordeal. But her holdings are severely damaged. Tarensa managed to convince her to come and stay here. This is Mythal’s property in the city. It is too small to house both her people here and Andruil’s entire household, but Sylaise gave most of the servants accommodations in the city. The only spies I do not know about here would be Mythal’s; and she is in no state to make use of them.”

He looks at her expectantly.

She nods, but strides to him just the same; mindful of the garden walls. She lowers her voice.

“You recall the dream I woke up injured from?” she asks.

He nods, once.

“The reverse has happened,” she explains. “The wolf I met there struck a deal with me. I told it I would bring it back its skull, and in exchange, it healed me.”

A rushed explanation, but the best she can do, for the moment. Too much of her focus is still caught up in what might be wrong with him.

“A skull?” Pride asks, raising his eyebrows.

“A specific skull,” she confirms. “It… nevermind. We can worry about that later. I am more concerned over you.”

His brows drop, a little, and he spreads his arms.
“As I said; the healers looked me over. They have pronounced my condition acceptable,” he declares.

“The healers do not know what to look for,” she counters.

He shakes his head.

“Would you stop, for just one moment? You are not taken into consideration what has happened! I had to tell Andruil that you killed the spirit at the bottom of the pool, so I could get her healers to look at you. I had to explain to her that you were a massively talented warrior who had suffered terrible trauma but possessed great power, and that Mythal had taken you in for your tremendous skills. I had no desire to reveal that much information to her about you! But Mythal was unconscious and no one could understand why the guard beast had attacked, and you were dying! All of the water burned up. Six of Andruil’s people were killed.”

He grasps her shoulders, and squeezes so tightly it hurts, just a little. There’s something frayed and jagged in him. Driven right up to the edge, and left to teeter too long. She’s not sure if it’s the Blight or just the strain, really, but it’s showing again, as surely as it had after he learned the truth.

All these cruel things.

She leans forward, and brushes her lips across her cheek.

_I am going to save you_, she vows. And this time, she will keep her promise. This time, there will be nothing that can be served by his suffering, and no reason for him to endure it. Or have it inflicted upon him.

This time, she will succeed. Or die trying.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to worry you,” she says.

He lets out a broken huff, just short of hysterical.

“They all said you would die,” he tells her. “The best healers are tending Mythal, and I could get none of them to see to you. The ones who came all said you would die. I was going to… I do not even know. Do something foolish, I suppose. I could not even find your mind in the Fade, until the end.”

“I am alright now,” she promises.

As usual. She has come out of her tortures to find herself whole, with more doom waiting on her doorstep.

“I tried to swim after you. But you were lost in the gloom,” he says. “I went for help, but no one would go. Andruil wanted to seal off the pool. Everyone was frantic over Mythal. They said that if it had taken you, then you were dead. Curiosity almost went anyway, and I had to stop them from sealing a new barrier in place, or else there would be nothing. And then the pool began to empty.”

“I think I burned the water,” she muses. That part had been somewhat incoherent.

He shakes his head.

“Andruil’s people said it was likely the spirit’s death that caused it. It was only when it began to happen that I convinced Andruil to send people down. When they brought you back up…” he trails off. Then looks her over again, as if making doubly sure that her injuries haven’t sprouted anew
across her skin. But he can find reassurance. As she curls her touch over his cheek, all she can think of is the whispers that are still there.

“I am fine, now,” she promises again.

“It is not just a dream?” he asks her.

She smiles, a little.

“You are the Dreamer, Pride. I think you would know if it was one,” she points out.

He tilts a little, and looks bemused for a moment. But then he closes his eyes, and lets out a heavy breath.

Her own catches in her throat when he eases his grip on her, only to brush his thumbs over the tops of her arms.

“Monsters in the floor,” he says, as if he is condemning the whole of the universe.

“You just cannot take me anywhere, can you?” she muses.

“I leave your side for five seconds and there is an underwater abomination at your feet,” he says, the attempt at joviality breaking in his tone.

She sighs, and finally lets her touch slip from him.

“How bad is Mythal?” she asks.

His expression drops.

“Her wounds are healing more slowly than they should. Andruil’s healers think she has contracted a ‘rare poison’, and wish to take her to their experts in their own lands. This is beyond unusual. Tarenza has been suspicious, and politely refused all such offers; Mythal’s own healers have taken over, but they are at a loss,” he explains.

Mythal tainted, too?

Now there is a possibility she hadn’t considered.

Still.

“I would not be surprised if many of those in that fight came away from it ‘poisoned’,” she reasons. “If Mythal has it, I can tell.”

Pride frowns a little.

“As you can tell with me?” he ventures, carefully.

A breath escapes him.

“Well,” he says. Then he sighs again, before straightening his shoulders. “I feel fine. If it is as you say, then we need to find a solution to it all the same. Mythal wanted one for Andruil, and now, I suspect, Andruil will want one for Mythal. The quest has not changed much.”

She catches his eye.
“I will do everything I can,” she promises.

He looks at her as if he is not entirely certain that is a good thing.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who patiently waited for this after the cliffhanger! And as always, to all my readers! <3
She finds herself incredibly disinclined to let Pride out of her sight.

The feeling seems to be mutual, at least.

“Where’s Curiosity?” she wonders.

“Resting,” he admits, as they finally make their way out of the healing chambers. It would be difficult to say which one was watching the other more, or with greater concern. She finds her gaze turning frequently towards him. Fixing onto the shadows beneath his eyes. The pulse point at his throat. But just as often he looks at her as if he half expects her health to fail. The whole of her to fall apart as easily and abruptly as she was restored.

Mythal’s Arlathan estate is, indeed, smaller than Andruil’s. Or any other Arlathan estate she’s been. It’s nestled close to the heart of the city, with airy archways and tiled ceilings, and graceful statuary. High walls around the exterior block the view of the streets, leaving the eye to fall upon the reaching spires and sunny skies. In one corridor the gardens spill inside of the building itself, like living walls of flowers. Trailing vines marked with shimmering pink and gold flowers thread themselves between circular floor tiles, and clamber verdantly across the ceiling.

The main hall sports a massive, indoor tree, with pale white bark and bare branches that sharpen like spears at their tips. It’s like the plant version of the city itself, she thinks; reaching points and dangerous edges.

Andruil’s people stalk the halls, and seem less out-of-place than might be expected. In the bright light, their casual adornments and sharp-toothed smiles simply draw the eye towards all the pointed edges more subtly incorporated into Mythal’s designs.

Still. They’re easy to pick out from Mythal’s only people, and not only because of their vallaslin.

Pride leads her through the winding corridors towards increasingly crowded chambers. The corridors are filled with many more of Mythal’s people. A few she recognizes from the palace, including the elf who forcibly regrew her arm. Fortunately, before they delve into the crowd, Pride taps her elbow, and leads her off towards a nearby alcove.

It is bright. A shaft of light descends down an opening in the ceiling, and the walls are angled in such a way that the space looks only like a simple, decorative nook, with a jade statue of Mythal positioned directly in the center of it. Soaking up the sunlight, so that the flecks of gold and veins of pale green seem to almost move, like running water. But when they are in the alcove, she sees that it’s an illusion. One of the walls that looks to curve all the way into the others in fact opens to a small passageway.

Not hidden, precisely. There isn’t even a curtain to disguise it. But definitely out-of-the-way.

She shoots Pride a curious look.

He shrugs.

“If I am to be demoted, it is only appropriate that we use the paths reserved for servants,” he
“And since most of Mythal’s household has been relocated into the city, I take it not many people here are terribly aware of such paths?” she reasons.

He inclines his head.

“All the more reason for us to be keen in seeing to our duties. We would not wish to make Mythal seem a poor hostess,” he reasons.

“And what duty are we seeing to now?” she finally wonders.

“Mythal,” he declares.

The passageway is small, but neither dark nor dingy, at least. The walls are smooth and silvery, and adorned shifting tiles, that slide of their own volition down along narrow borders. They make the tiniest *click-clack* sounds as they do.

Still, there’s barely enough room for two people to walk side-by-side in the space.

She contemplates the matter a moment, and then carefully takes Pride by the hand. His skin feels clammy. Worrying. Her brows furrow, and she finds herself reaching for the whispers, again. Plucking at them with her mind. It doesn’t seem to do much except reaffirm for her that they’re present, and yet, she finds it difficult to resist. She remembers Sera, worrying at the frayed edges of a bandage on her head. *Stop touching it; you’ll only make it worse.*

The thought resounds, and she leaves them be again.

Pride pauses, just half a step.

Then he squeezes her palm, just lightly, and keeps walking.

“What state is she in?” she wonders.

“She has not woken yet,” Pride admits. “Not coherently, at least. I have not seen her myself. Most without rank have been barred access to her, and I was… otherwise occupied.”

His hold on her tightens again.

It makes her feel weary, to have worried him. It’s all beginning to make her feel a bit weary, in fact. Though she can’t afford much weariness.

They fall into silence. She threads her fingers through his, and thinks. And thinks. About Blights and songs and Titans, and strange creatures lurking in legends and dreams. Worrying wolves, and broken worlds. Bones.

The passageway lets out into another alcove. This one holds a statue of Elgar’nan, by the looks of it. Jade, again, but threaded with shocks of crystalline red, with magical fire burning at the edges of its fingertips.

Reluctantly, she lets go of Pride’s hand.

They proceed into a wide, but less populated corridor, lined with elegant doorways. Much like the quarters for high-ranking elves in Mythal’s palace.

Her mind is thoroughly occupied when they round a corner, and come to a stop before a pair of
beautiful green doors. Thenvunin is positioned just outside of them, along with several others. At
the sight of them, the ranking elf’s expression sours; though for a moment, as he looks at her, he
also seems deeply taken aback.

“What are you doing here?” he asks Pride. Beneath his usual veneer of haughtiness, she thinks he
has been unnerved.

Pride’s brows sweep upwards.

“Thenvunin, please. I know we have had our differences, but do you really think I would neglect
my duties so terribly?” he asks. Then he gestures, somewhat sweepingly, towards her. “I have been
struggling for hours to get someone to come and tend to one of our leading experts on poisons, as
Mythal fights against her mysterious affliction. And now that she has finally woken, I have brought
her here to see what might be done.”

Thenvunin blinks, clearly caught wrong-footed. A few of the others around him glance towards her
with interest. A few of them are wearing Andruil’s vallaslin, she notes. It seems as if they’ve
approached in the midst of some kind of debate.

“Expert on poisons? Since when is that thing any kind of expert?” the haughty elf nevertheless
demands.

Pride folds his arms. His chin tilts upwards, and his expression drops. It makes the exhaustion on
his face seem more pronounced. He looks every ounce a man who has reached the end of his
tether.

“Truly, Thenvunin? Now, of all times, you still insist on being a petty and near-sighted bastard?”
he snaps. “Am I to be blamed for your utter inability to know the first thing about anyone you
deem beneath your notice? Of course you know nothing of anyone’s skills but your own. I do not
pity the poor healers, doubtless having to deal with your ignorance as you attempt to tell them how
to perform their duties. But I do not have time to waste babying your ego. Punish me as you like,
but wait until we have had a chance to actually help this wretched situation. And kindly do not
forget that the ‘thing’ you refer to is the warrior who slew a demon that almost boiled you alive.”

There is a moment of surprised quiet.

Thenvunin looks shocked, at first; and then incensed.

“You arrogant-” he begins, all but snarling.

“Stop,” one of the healers commands.

She is a tall woman. Taller even than Curiosity, with a voice that demands obedience, and
Andruil’s vallaslin written faintly across her skin.

“We have been over this a dozen times. There is no more need for experts; this poison is one which
my people are familiar with. It is a sickness of the dwarves. Mythal must be brought to our lands
for the complexity of the treatment; it is the only solution,” the woman insists, clearly tired of
repeating herself.

“And our healers remain unconvinced that there is even a poison involved.” Thenvunin counters,
with equal exasperation. “Why you insist on returning when you have already been thanked for
contributions and dismissed is beyond me.”

The healer bristles.
“Perhaps because we would prefer not to see our Lady’s mother die in agony due to the stupidity of her servants.”

Thenvunin rounds on her, then. The air in the corridor turning increasingly stifled by the emotions sparking through it.

Pride nudges her towards the green doors, pointedly, and then strides forwards.

“You do realize, Thenvunin, that if Mythal dies you do not get promoted to Leadership? We are not Nameless, squabbling over titles like animals fighting over scraps…” he says, loudly, injecting himself into the argument once more – and directing most of the attention towards himself, even as he puts some distance between them.

Oh.

She’s probably supposed to slip into Mythal’s chambers while everyone is distracted with the drama, then.

But Thenvunin is rearing, and something hard and cold closes over the chambers of her heart. Because Pride is sick. He might not know it, but he is, and as the ranking elf raises a hand she dashes the subtle plan to pieces and strides right for him instead.

The blow meant to strike across Pride’s face lands in her grasp, instead.

Her fingers close around the elf’s wrist. It’s very light. Like bird bones, she thinks; though the muscles aren’t weak. He’s dressed in sharp, dark purple at the moment, with silvery embroidery on his sleeves. Very pretty. But there isn’t a scrap of armour on him.

At her back, Pride freezes.

“I think I have had enough of watching you hit him,” she says.

Thenvunin stills.

He looks at her. The outrage and the surprise she expects. The brief flash of genuine fear, however, is new.

Tension rolls through the air.

“Unhand me,” the elf demands. He reminds her of all the worst nobles Sera ever squared off with, in that moment. The kind who would use their rank and station and sense of entitlement to demand, and always expect to be obeyed. Right up until the moment they encountered someone who wasn’t playing their game, and certainly wasn’t obliged to follow their rules. And then the world caught them wrong-footed, and always, for a few seconds, it would finally occur to them that they were just flesh and blood. Skin and bones. And all of it could be spilled as easily by the same blows and blades that they would turn upon ‘lesser’ people.

Except Thenvunin, she thinks, has the look of someone who has already had this revelation, and doesn’t appreciate the reminder.

She lets him go.

Almost unthinkingly, her grip drifts towards Pride’s wrist instead.

“Forgive her, Thenvunin; she does not understand the concept of violence towards one’s allies,”
Pride says. There is a note of tension in his voice. Probably, she’s just made everything much, much harder than it needed to be. In all likelihood a slap to the face wouldn’t have done as much harm in the long run.

“Undisciplined thing,” Thenvunin mutters, looking very much as though he’d like to take a step back.

“Perhaps you should demonstrate the concept, and teach it better manners,” Andruil’s healer suggests, with an arched brow, and the air of someone who would enjoy seeing the results of such an endeavour.

Pride shifts their grip so that he has hold of her, in return, and firmly attempts to tug her backwards.

“It was my transgression. I shall take the intended retribution for it. She has only just recovered from grave injuries,” he insists.

She stays firmly planted where she is.

The smart thing, she thinks, would be for Thenvunin to wash his hands of it all right now. Make some declaration about arranging appropriate punishments for them both, and step back, and let himself be above the pettiness of it all. Of course, the truly smart thing would have been to never raise a hand to begin with. But that ship has already sailed.

As it turns out, if nothing else, Thenvunin can put a surprising amount of impact into a strike.

He hits her with a fist, rather than the flat of his hand. Straight across her temple, hard enough to make her see stars. Pride pulls her backwards, so that the end of the swing only glances her.

She’s almost impressed by the form, if nothing else. Thenvunin can throw a punch. Who knew?

The air around her sparks and flares. She thinks it’s magic, at first. But then she realizes it’s a burst of emotion. Surging outwards from Pride as she is thrust behind him. The warrior behind the mage, some part of her thinks, a little distantly, that’s not how it’s supposed to go.

The elves around them gape a little. Even Thenvunin looks taken aback, again.

“That is it, ” Pride snaps.

Ah. There’s the magic, then, surging up in the air like a cresting tide. Her hand wants to reach for her blade, but Pride’s still holding onto it. Muscles taught with unexpected fury.

“If one more thing touches her today-”

The long, slow sound of applause from the end of the corridor cuts him off.

All eyes turn towards the source of the sound.

Andruil stands in the light streaming from the windows. She looks pristine and unmarred; more simply armed than she has on previous occasions, dressed in a rich red tunic that bares her arms to the world, winged armlets curving around her biceps, and golden arrows trailing down the shimmering fabric on her thighs. Despite these adornments, the overall impression is more modest than usual.

“Marvelous,” the evanuris declares. “Tell me, does the Lady Mythal instruct you to put on such shows outside of her sick room whenever possible? To relieve the boredom, perhaps, by watching
a few dramas play out?”

The tension in the air changes significantly. The overall impression is one of a pack of misbehaving children spotting an older sibling, and immediately withdrawing into some semblance of good behaviour.

Pride’s hold on her, almost impossibly, tightens further. Just shy of painful. But she moves up to his side as Andruil strides forward, and takes the opportunity to examine the evanuris more closely. The whispers she can feel beneath Pride’s skin provide a steady contrast. As Andruil gives her a small and assessing look in return, she can feel nothing from her. No hint of song, no lingering sense of corruption.

Not blighted, then.

Well.

She’s not sure if that counts in their favour or not right now. And part of her twists at the revelation; that Andruil should be fine while her thrice-damned red lyrium pets have tainted Pride.

“Such a service you do my mother, trying so hard to wake her with this clamour,” the huntress continues.

In that singular moment, she seems so much like Morrigan it’s almost unnerving. It’s in the curve of her brow, the quality of her sneer; the way her chin tilts with self-assuredness that’s just one step removed from crippling uncertainty.

“We endeavour only to keep the clamour behind closed doors, and away from where it may taint the air of her recovery,” Thenvunin offers, so deferential now that the switch is almost impressive.

“Did I say I disapproved?” Andruil asks.

Thenvunin hesitates.

“No, Lady Andruil, you did not,” he offers.

“And yet, here you are defending yourself. That already tells me that you find your own actions inappropriate,” the huntress declares. She tuts. “Such inspiring behaviour, quibbling over rank and abuses in the middle of a hallway.”

Thenvunin actually looks… a little frightened.

“Well. Since our Lady of Justice is bedridden, it falls to me to make determinations on discipline,” Andruil continues.

Then the evanuris backhands Thenvunin so hard he hits the wall with an audible crack.

Pride hisses as the air around him changes, magic swiping up from the ground at his feet. Only his grip on her keeps her from drawing a blade, and then she feels it, too; the tense coil of burning in the air, pressing at her lungs. She stamps down on the urge to move. To put him back behind her, and draw her shield, or lash out at the evanuris before them.

But then the moment passes, and only leaves a scraping burn in their throats. Some heaviness in the air. Pride clutches her shoulder. His gaze flits over her, and then towards Andruil. His expression is painfully and pointedly blank; a calm betrayed only by the clenched muscle in his jaw.
“There we are,” Andruil declares, as Thenvunin picks himself up off the floor. The healer looks amused. A few of Mythal’s other followers seem more disconcerted.

“Now that all the arguing children have been properly chastised, I am going in to see my mother. Clear the hall.”

Cautiously, they begin to withdraw.

Andruil raises a hand, as if a thought has just occurred to her.

“Oh. Wait. Not that one,” the huntress says, pointing towards her. “A poison expert, you say? And our hero of the hour. Perhaps your verdict on my mother’s condition will hold some sway. Come in with me.”

She glances at Pride.

Well. At least it will actually get her in to see Mythal.

“Of course, my Lady,” she offers, ducking into a bow. Pride’s hand is like a vice on her shoulder. When she steps forward, he trails after her, until Andruil’s gaze pins him in place.

“Not you, wolf.”

With another glance, she offers Pride what she hopes is a reassuring nod.

It’s alright.

However much he might worry, she feels fine. Better than fine, apart from the turmoil of his own state, in fact. She’d rather a dozen punches, or absorb just as many spells, than see him have to deal with any at all. Especially while he’s blighted. Though her own nerves are displeased to be leaving him behind with Thenvunin, all things considered.

The high-ranking elf is holding his shoulder in such a way, however, that she gets the distinct impression it’s broken. Hopefully the distraction will keep him occupied, then.

The green doors to Mythal’s chambers open at Andruil’s touch.

She feels a wash of unfamiliar magic course through her as she steps across the threshold.

The rooms are as light and airy as any other. Pale gold curtains, wispy and transparent, billow in a soft breeze that carries the fresh scent of the trees from outside. Patterns of light shift across the floor, migrating like dancers across the smoothly polished surface. The front room is a foyer, elegant and peaceful, and lined with climbing crystalline plants. It gives way to several more chambers. The main exit, though, leads to Mythal’s actual bedroom.

She follows Andruil through to it.

Blue-green fire burns in a tall, white marble fireplace on the far side of the room. There’s a distinctly medicinal quality to the scents it sends through the room. The plants in here are more organic. Soft, broad flower petals, and trailing moss that creeps artfully over the actual bedposts of the room’s massive central feature. Carved dragons crawl along the ceiling. Light spills from their open mouths, pooling in shafts throughout the room. But most of it has been dimmed, giving the space the quality of a restful garden.

Andruil pauses, expression dipping down into concern, just briefly.
In the large bed, Mythal looks surprisingly small. Her hair spreads over the pillows around her, like the fanned tail of some great bird. She is pale. There are scratches along her arms, and a bandage wound around her neck.

“Mother,” Andruil greets, as if the woman might be woken by her voice.

Mythal stays just as she is.

“Well,” the huntress sighs. “Sickbed vigils are always so dull. I suppose you wish to check her?”

She snaps herself away from the strangeness of the mood, and nods.

Andruil extends an inviting hand towards the ‘patient’.

With only a little hesitation, she moves towards the bed. There are actual flowers strewn over the sheets, she sees. And she can feel magic crackling in the air. She has to lean over the broad expanse of the mattress just to get close. Her sense spread, reaching for the hum of the song, the sense of the blight.

There’s…

Nothing.

Not even the faintest whisper.

What’s going on, then?

Andruil’s eyes are on her back. After a moment she supposes she should probably seem to… actually be doing something, other than hovering in Mythal’s general vicinity. Maybe there’s something in the wounds themselves? She reaches out, carefully turning the toned arms of her patient over. Examining the blood, the split skin. She touches, just lightly, the edges of a bandage.

Mythal’s eyes flutter open.

“Oh. Andruil,” Mythal says, softly. “Are you alright, dear child?”

“And of course I am! I have yet to cross paths with a creature I cannot defeat. As if I would house one in my own holdings!” Andruil scoffs.

Mythal chuckles, weakly.

“It is a parent’s place to worry.”

“Ridiculous woman. It has been a long time since I sat at your knee,” the huntress returns. “You are poisoned, and your people flit about like useless butterflies. You must tell them to let mine treat you. I will even put you up in my own lands, until you are well again. Else I fear your in-fighting servants will spend more time bickering than they do sensibly seeing to your needs.”

Again, Mythal chuckles.
"It would be a shame, to cut short our visit so soon." One of her hands comes up, a little weakly, and brushes Andruil’s cheek.

Then her gaze fixes onto her.

Andruil follows her line of sight.

"Ah, yes. Your strange little follower, all full of surprises. I would have half a mind to demand her life for ruining my floor. But the wolf says she is an expert on poisons, and she slew one of my guardians. And she is yours, of course. What do you make of it, mother?"

Mythal lets out a sigh.

"I think you and Ghilan’nain need to teach your pets better discipline,” the bedridden evanuris declares. Her golden eyes are sharp, though, where they fix upon her.

Andruil scoffs.

"I might say the same of yours. What a strange thing, to have hypnotized the beast. What is she?" the huntress wonders.

"A rabbit," Mythal says. “Or a deer. Perhaps the first to enter your den of predators.”

Andruil looks unconvincing. But subsides, after a moment, as her mother’s eyes begin to droop.

"Let me speak to her,” Mythal requests. “I must pass along instructions, while I am still able. Tell Tarensa we will agree to your suggestion. If you know this poison, then I trust you to cure me.”

“I could always leave you bedridden and push through a few agreements I have been angling for against your judgement,” Andruil suggests. “Though likely the tantrums father would throw would not be worth it.”

“Poor Elgar’nan. Do not let word spread to him too quickly, if you can. I fear I am in no fit state to calm him,” Mythal says. One of her hands closes over her daughter’s, and offers it a light squeeze.

Leaning forward, Andruil brushes a kiss to her mother’s brow.

“I will do what I can,” the huntress promises.

Then, with a long, sharp glance in her direction, withdraws.

She waits until the sounds of footsteps pass through the front foyer, and out, and the large green doors swing shut.

The air changes, momentarily.

Mythal sits up, and sighs, wincing ever-so-slightly and stretching out her shoulders.

“I do detest lingering in injury,” the evanuris declares.

She gapes.

“You are faking it?” she snaps, as baffled as she is incensed. “You are faking the Blight. Why? How?”

Mythal looks at her as if she is being particularly dense.
“I have just gained us access to Andruil’s lands, at Andruil’s own insistence,” she declares. “And I did not even have to stoop to the levels I had originally planned. Rejecting yourself and Pride so thoroughly that you would believably wish to take up company among her ranks would not have provided so neat and clean an opportunity. As it stands, all it took was a few unusual symptoms, and her people reached the logical conclusion that I was suffering due to the interference of a strange magical substance.”

She blinks.

Then blinks again.

“I admit, I expected you sooner,” Mythal continues, with just the faintest note of disapproval. She scowls.

“Forgive me. I was unconscious and actually dying,” she snaps.

“Ah. Well, that would explain it,” the evanuris graciously concedes. “I am pleased you have recovered. That would have made things exponentially more difficult.” Mythal tilts her head, slightly. “Have you discovered anything on Andruil’s condition? Is it necessary that we take her up on her hospitality?”

It’s a force of effort not to freeze up, then.

Andruil isn’t blighted.

Mythal isn’t blighted.

Possibly, by Mythal’s standards, they actually don’t have reason enough to keep up this charade. They could withdraw and reassess, and Mythal could take time to consider what approaches to this situation she really would or would not be willing to support. All of the cards would be back in her hand.

In the flash of a split second, it occurs to her that here and now, she’s never needed to sell a lie quite so completely.

But Pride has the Blight.

“It is more pressing than ever,” she says.

The best lies, after all, aren’t lies.

Mythal regards her for a moment.

Then her eyes slide shut.

“Oh, Andruil.”

“I will do everything within my power to counter the Blight,” she says, resolutely. “I will find a way to stop this poison from spreading in people. It is possible. It may even be simple, in the end.”

Perhaps, if all else fails, she can take Pride back to the first Titan. If they can manage to pull that feat off, with the dwarves still likely to be out for their blood.

Mythal inclines her head.
“You know what is at stake,” the evanuris reminds her.

“Yes. I do,” she agrees.


When she exits back out into the corridor, it’s almost entirely empty. She turns, searching, and spies two figures at the end of it.

Not far from a beautiful mosaic wall, Andruil leans towards Pride. Whether it’s simply her natural demeanour or an intentional air, the evanuris’ pose strikes her as distinctly predatory. Intimidating. Even on the very of being menacing. Pride is at a polite distance. The mask of neutrality is on his face once again. His hands are clasped behind his back, and there’s a line of tension in his shoulders.

The whole portrait of the scene sets off alarm bells in her mind.

*You know what’s at stake,* she reminds herself. She needs to stop being reckless. It’s doing no one any favours; and if Pride and Curiosity’s recent behaviour is any indication, it seems to be contagious.

She keeps her hands carefully at her sides as she strides over.

She makes no effort to quiet her footsteps. Andruil glances her way; sharp and assessing again. The evanuris slants a little further from Pride, which is good. Her arms fold, and one of her shoulders leans up against the mosaic.

“These are strange days for the servants of Mythal, it seems,” Andruil declares. “The poor, lovely wolf has lost his station, and I can scarcely get a straight answer on what you even are.”

*Click, click, click.*

The sound of claws tapping over the smooth floor momentarily distracts from the tension of the encounter. All three of them turn to look towards the mouth of the corridor, and the source of the animalistic footfalls.

A lioness stalks down the end of the hall.

A *familiar* lioness; and yet distinctly different, now.

Curiosity’s blue eyes gleam, sharp. Her claws are longer. Her shimmering feathers have a finer edge, and ripple down the back of her neck, like dozens of flattened knives. There is a leaner quality to her. More muscle, less pelt; narrower feet, and long paws. A more pointed quality to her face, as well.

“Lady Andruil,” Curiosity greets.

Andruil raises an eyebrow.

“Strange days indeed.”

The sharpness to Curiosity is worrying. After all, her friend was in that water, too. She finds herself
torn between hurrying over to check, and staying right where she is; close at hand to intervene between Pride and Andruil. A stretching of her senses plucks up the whispers of the Blight in Pride again. But no such sense comes over from Curiosity.

“Well, well, little lion. I would not have expected to see your like cropping up here, of all places,” the evanuris muses.

The lyrical quality to her voice, the gleam in her eyes… for a moment, it makes her think of the russet wolf, as much as it does of Morrigan, and Flemeth, and Mythal.

It makes her think of leaders, modelling themselves after old stories. Endless trends that ebb and flow.

Do they match up perfectly, she wonders? The evanuris, and the figures of legend. Are there old gods for which no evanuris has become equivalent?

An odd, stray thought. She looks at Pride, as Andruil switches her focus, only to find him moving towards her. His gaze fixes onto the side of her face for a few seconds. The bruise Thenvunin gave her is probably still there, she supposes. Except when she brushes at it with a hand, there’s no tenderness to her flesh.

Huh.

“We have met before, my lady, when you summered a few centuries ago in your mother’s palace,” Curiosity says, with an uncommon sort of coolness. “I was a spirit, then.”


Next to her, Pride stills; taken aback.

“Curiosity,” the lioness asserts.

“Surely not!” the huntress declares. “I have seen Spirits of Curiosity take on bodies before. They flit. They flutter. They never quite sit still, or stop looking at things for a moment. They do not prowl.”

Curiosity lifts her head. There is a strip of light, brighter than most, falling through the decorative window beside her. It makes the gold of her pelt gleam, and the blue of her feathers shine. She seems less leonine and more… on the verge of something else.

Something bigger.

“And should we all be alike, my lady? I am a spirit no longer. I have learned other things. Like patience, and sharpness.”

Andruil makes a speculative sound.

“Normally my mother is more given to coddling her newly embodied.” A pointed glance is thrown in Pride’s direction, then.

“I was brought to attend your hunts,” Curiosity points out. “I did not think we would be doing much fighting indoors, though. That was a surprise.” Her head tilts, just a little.

“It was, was it not?” Andruil agrees.

The evanuris glances over the three of them, then. There’s something in her gaze that says that
she’s caught on to the existence of a larger picture, even if she’s not quite sure what it means, yet. Probably a worrying development. But maybe also an inevitable one, all things considered.

With a slight huff, just verging on amused, the huntress then turns, at last, and leaves.

For a moment, there’s silence.

Curiosity stares down at the end of the corridor.

“Do you think you could kill any of the leaders?” the lioness eventually asks.

“This is not the place to speculate on such things,” Pride warns. “We are in a hallway.”

“It was only a thought. I mean, you did kill that spirit at the bottom of the pool. Even Mythal and Andruil had trouble with the other one, and that was two of them,” Curiosity says, with a shrug.

With Andruil gone, she at last gives in to impulse, though, and goes to check on her friend; dropping to her knees in front of the lioness, and taking the large, feline head between her hands. She presses at the skin, searching for whispers of the song, and checking the corners of four blue eyes for signs of anything unusual.

Well.

More unusual than a feathered lion with four eyes.

Curiosity responds to this treatment by blinking, and then butting her head forward, eyes closed as she lets out a rumbling sound caught halfway between a purr and a chirr. There’s no trace of the Blight. A relieved breath escapes her at the confirmation.

“I am so glad you are alright,” the lioness tells her. “I thought you might be dead. That would have been very bad, for all sorts of reasons.”

“I am glad you alright, as well,” she says.

“I tried to fight the monster. It was too big, though. I shall have to do much better next time;” Curiosity declares, firmly.

Leaning in, she wraps her arms around the lioness’s neck. The feathers are sharp against her arms.

“Pride has the Blight,” she whispers, low as she can, into one flicking ear.

Curiosity makes an angry sort of sound.

But that is, thankfully, the sum total of her response to this delicate revelation in the middle of one of Mythal’s corridors. After a minute she pulls back. The lioness rubs her head against her one more time, and then with a cascade of glittering air, turns into an elf.

Curiosity gives her a hand back onto her feet.

Pride clears his throat.

“Andruil told me Mythal had woken,” he declares. “Likely Thenvunin and Tarensa have already been informed. Arrangements will have to be made. But in the meanwhile, I feel in desperate need of a break. What say we head into the city?”

She blinks, surprised at first, until she remembers.
The city.

Haninan’s message.

“I could definitely use a break,” she agrees.

“Are we not being quartered in the city anyway?” Curiosity asks. “We might as well get out from underfoot. And I want to see it all. Not that we can see it all, but at least some of the good parts. Do you think we could go and look at June’s tower? Only, it is supposed to be quite amazing.”

“That’s one word for it,” she says, with a shrug.

Pride snorts.

He takes the lead, then, showing them the way through the winding corridors to the front exit of the building. Stained glass doors that whisper open to a verdant courtyard, marked by high walls and a gleaming set of gates, that reach out towards the polished roads of the city. It’s almost pleasant, she thinks, for a few moments. Despite the realities looming around them, for the time being, at least two people she cares about are safely at hand.

Next to the gates, however, is a familiar figure clad all in crimson.

Leaning.

Waiting.

“Uthvir,” Pride greets, not breaking his stride.

“Heading out into the city?” Uthvir asks. “A fine choice, now that the tension is broken. Your Lady waking is a good sign.”

“It is,” Pride confirms.

With a sharp smile, the red hunter pushes away from the wall. Against the white and pristine backdrop of the city, they look like a single speck of blood.

“I hope you do not mind if I accompany you. Only, given all that has happened, I feel as though a certain sense of kinship has developed between us,” Uthvir declares, stalking forward to open up the gates before Pride can get there.

“I was not aware anything much had happened between us,” Pride says; politely, with just a hint of surprise.

“Perhaps not between us,” Uthvir concedes, with a nod. The hunter catches her eye, then, and smiles a bit more. “But the doll and I had a moment. Did we not, doll? I pulled you from the pool. You leapt back in, like a driven thing. I feel like I have had a moment of revelation. My hunter’s sensibilities are overcome with a new sense of appreciation, driven by the sight of your bravery. It was remarkable. Truly. And either way, we have all bled into the waters of the same fight. I am certain by some tradition or other we have all been deemed friends now.”

…Uh-huh.

Colour her convinced.

She glances at Pride, who only shakes his head, minutely.
“As you like, Uthvir. You are welcome to come with us. Though I fear we cannot offer much in
the way of entertainment,” Pride asserts.

“Oh I doubt that,” Uthvir declares. “Your very presence itself seems to create abundant
opportunities! It is almost a shame we cannot bring Thenvunin along. The inevitable brawl would
be a sight to see.”

Pride sneers, rather pointedly, she thinks, and then makes for the road.

Uthvir strides along beside them. The hunter’s steps are quick, and glide at the edges of the street;
as if not quite walking on the same path. There is something distinctly strange about it. A little…
familiar, too. It takes her a while to place it, but it reminds her of the way Cole used to be, back
when he would frequently rob people of awareness of his presence. Her mind would skip over him
being there, until suddenly it didn’t anymore. And then it would almost be as if he’d teleported
from one part of a room to another.

Uthvir is not precisely vanishing from her mind, but it’s a near thing.

“What are you?” she asks.

The hunter blinks at her, and then laughs.

“Very blunt of you.”

She shrugs, and raises an eyebrow.

“Are people supposed to be tactful about these things? I had not noticed,” she drawls.

Pride glances at her. But Uthvir only laughs; and Curiosity snorts, as well.

“I will make you a deal. If you can tell me what you are, then I will tell you what I am,” the hunter
suggests.

“That sounds fair,” she says.

Uthvir gives her an expectant look.

“Not that I will oblige you, of course. But it does sound fair. You may keep to yourself,” she
clarifies.

It earns her a long, and slow-building smile, that spreads and reveals the many sharp points of the
red hunter’s teeth. A moment later their unnerving steps slow, somewhat. Falling into a rhythm that
matches the rest of theirs a little bit better.

“No, but in truth, who does not enjoy talking about themselves?” Uthvir asks, moving close
enough to make things just the tiniest bit uncomfortable.

“A lot of people,” Curiosity asserts.

“Not many of them become hunters, then. Boasting is one of the favourite pastimes of the People!”
An arm comes down around her shoulders. A friendly sort of gesture, she supposes. It feels a bit
like having a live scorpion dropped on her. One of those big ones, from Antiva.

Pride gives Uthvir a hard look.

The hunter winks at him.
“I am quite accomplished, of course. That is one way to achieve a rank, and it is the only way I would wish to. Though one can, I suppose, still be quite deserving of titles gained through other means,” Uthvir muses. This close she can smell the leather on their armour, and a sharp sort of perfume. Almost citrus, but not exactly.

“Or hold no rank where one would be deserved,” the hunter continues, grinning at her. “I have killed a fair few corrupted spirits over the years. None underwater, though. That must have been a sight to behold. How did you do it? Conceit was no tiny little wisp. Not even at the beginning, and we fed it quite well besides.”

“To what end?” she wonders.

Because really, why would you want to plant a demon empowered with red lyrium right under your floor?

Uthvir shrugs.

“Amusement. What else? No, but truly, there is no better guardian than one’s own worse traits. Line them up at the door, and let your enemies unleash them first, should they dare to strike. It seemed quite ingenious. Of course, that was before it turned out to be a ravening beast drawn to the blood of… whatever it is you are,” the red hunter declares. “It did seem singularly fixated on you.”

“Probably just smelled the jerky in my pockets,” she suggests.

It earns her another laugh. Though she notes that, for all the laughter and smiles, and the ‘friendly’ arm slung over her shoulders, the sharpness never leaves Uthvir’s gaze.

“Cartloads of corpses, and it wanted your cured meat? Try again,” the hunter advises.

“Maybe it was hypnotized by her beauty,” Curiosity suggests.

“Ooh, I like that one,” Uthvir declares, with a snap. “The maiden and the beast. Impulses confused. Does it wish to admire her, or merely gut her? And when one is a predator, is there even a difference?”

Yes, that’s definitely a very sharp smile.

“Do you know how we generally celebrate such a grand battle, among Andruil’s people?” the red hunter asks her.

She shrugs.

“Drinking too much?” she suggests.

“Among other things. By all rights, we should offer you the remnants of the spirit you slew, too; but it already belonged to Andruil, and she hasn’t been feeling very charitable, all things considered,” Uthvir muses.

Pride drops back a step, then.

“We are Mythal’s people. You will forgive us if we reserve even the thought of celebration for when Mythal has recovered from her injuries; and then, when we prefer to celebrate as our own customs dictate,” he declares.

Uthvir’s head tilts, in a something not quite like acquiescence, but a bit like a concession.
“I meant no harm. Only wondering.”

“Was there much left of Conceit?” she finds herself wondering.

“No, actually,” the hunter says. “Even more impressive. Tell me, what did you do to it?”

She glances at Pride. But whatever Pride’s gaze is meant to convey, she can’t quite pick up on it.

“I boiled it,” she finally says.

Silence.

Uthvir regards her for a moment. Slowly, the arm around her withdraws.

“Hmm,” the hunter says. “That must have taken some doing.”

“It was a little painful,” she admits.

“Yes. I saw you when they pulled you out. I must admit, I am amazed at your swift recovery! Not to mention relieved. I thought when you leapt back into the pool that all the work I had done in rescuing you was about to go to waste.”

“That reminds me. I should thank you for pulling me out,” she says. The sky overhead is just beginning to dip towards twilight, now. The colours falling across the city, lighting things in warmer tones that make the red hunter seem slightly less out-of-place by contrast.

Uthvir waves a dismissive hand.

“Chalk it up to a strange sort of solidarity.”

“Solidarity?” she wonders.

The only answer she gets is a wink.

The question of what one of Andruil’s hunters would consider a point of solidarity between them to be follows their steps as they proceed down into the lower levels.

If Uthvir finds their choice of destination strange, they at least offer no comment on it. Against the grey of the lower districts, the red armour should be a splash of ostentatious colour; and yet somehow, it fits better, as if the darker tones serve to mute the hunter in their midst. Or maybe it’s some trick of magic, she thinks. Some means of blending in with one’s surroundings.

She suffers a moment of trepidation.

Should they really be taking one of Andruil’s people to Ess’s tavern? Considering the reaction Pride had earned when she’d brought him along for the first time, she’s not sure it’s wise. Or welcome. But she can’t think of a good way to broach the subject without seeming rude, and she’s not sure they can afford to be rude towards Uthvir right now. Pride certainly seems disinclined to it.

And then they’re almost there, and she’s not sure withdrawing would do any good.

The high-ranking hunter, however, can definitely be an ass.

Curiosity, on the other hand, looks very intrigued. Her eyes dart around the walls, and the light spilling from the windows. When they finally reach the tavern door, and open it to the whirling
wall paintings and bright washed of colour, the effect is almost entrancing. The evening sky and the light from within conspire to make the paint by the doorway glow, and the soft magic in the air crackle like a welcoming hearth.

It’s so friendly, so unabashedly beautiful, that she stalls for a moment. Her mind turns towards the tavern in Skyhold. Bard songs and mercenary companies and adventurers, and soldiers, all seated around, talking and shouting and telling tall tales into the warmth and gloom. Bull leaning up by the bar. Krem perched awkwardly on his chair. Voices raised in welcome whenever she pushed through the door.

The tavern is more crowded than on previous visits. Elves in nondescript clothing spill over the tables, enough so that the open door doesn’t draw too much notice. A few large birds wing through the air, and one of the patrons appears to be some kind of orange-furred ape. Ess is behind the bar, her back towards them, and one of the tables is covered in what looks to be some sort of game. The pieces float and gleam. The bulk of the crowd in the tavern is gathered around it, voices rising and falling as the spells involved seem to sputter or surge.

She’s so busy paying attention to Uthvir’s reaction, and to Curiosity’s reaction, that she forgets a vital element of this equation until it’s directly upon them.

“Oh!” a familiar voice exclaims.

…Oh no.

Oh damn.

She takes a hasty step back towards the doorway, and almost makes it a long and reaching set of shimmering tendrils close around her, and drag her forward instead.

The Spirit of Love essentially vibrates around her. It stares at her with big, big eyes, clutching it her with half its limbs while the other half pluck and Pride.

She swallows, hard, and feels her heart clench as she and Pride are all but wrapped up together. Clearing her throat doesn’t seem to help much.

“Love, come on, let go,” she says.

“But – but – but oh,” Love tells her. “Look how many ties there are now! There is so much more than there was before. It is so much, so very much. It is beautiful.”

“I understand, but this is really not polite,” she says. It feels like her blood doesn’t know whether to rush to her face or sink to her feet. The overall effect is a little nauseating.

Uthvir is staring at them, slightly wide-eyed.

Curiosity still seems more interested in the tavern.

“Damn,” Ess swears from the bar. A few of the other patrons are looking at them now. Some seem amused by Love. Most, however, seem more unsettled by Uthvir. A few of the elves wearing Andruil’s vallaslin drift away from the game table.

Pride doesn’t seem to be inspiring the same degree of unease. That could be because it’s difficult to be intimidated by a man with a spirit of love draped all over him, or it could, come to think of it, be because of his humbler style of dress. At the moment, in his silvery-yet-modest attire, he doesn’t
look nearly so far-removed from the city elves as he had the last time she brought him here.

“Shit. I mean – welcome,” Ess says, moving out from behind the bar. “Revered Hunter, our humble establishment is honoured by your presence.”

Uthvir blinks, and then just sort of waves a hand.

“Yes, yes. Good. Bring alcohol,” the hunter says, still apparently preoccupied with the conundrum of Love. And it’s… enthusiasm.

“Love,” she hisses.

The spirit sighs.

“But you need me,” it insists.

“Perhaps later,” Pride gently interjects. His face is very, very pink, but his voice is steady. It must have some inherent property of command that hers lacks, because after a moment, Love finally relents and begins to unwind from them a little bit.

“I want to try all of the alcohol!” Curiosity declares.

Oh, this is going to be a fun evening.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY! Thank you for your patience, everybody! Updates will probably continue to be weird until after New Year's, but I'll do my best!
One good thing about picking up Haninan’s message in a tavern is that they don’t really need to provide a reason for being there.

Uthvir, it seems, is perfectly content to accept the existence of a tavern as a sufficient reason for visiting it. So once she gets Love to unclench long enough for them to find a seat, Pride slips off to the bar under the pretense of acquiring food, and accepts a small envelope from Ess while Curiosity asks Uthvir a lot of questions about various drinks.

Not, she supposes, that they necessarily need to keep the existence of a message secret. Though a message from their friend in the dwarven lands beneath Andruil’s territory is probably sensitive enough that even alluding to its existence is a bad idea.

“There is a shark in the bottle!” Curiosity exclaims, pointing up at the rack behind the bar. She squints, and, indeed, in one of the bottles displayed at the very top, a tiny, live shark appears to be swimming. “Or is it an illusion?”

Uthvir shrugs.

“Shall we try it?” the hunter suggests; and then, without waiting for an answer, waves Ess over again and demands that the drink be served to them.

She gives Ess her most heartfelt look of apology. But the tavern owner barely glances at her, mostly preoccupied with grabbing Uthvir whatever they ask for, when she isn’t running around seeing to all of the other patrons crammed into the establishment.

Pride lingers only a moment before returning with Haninan’s message tucked into the folds of his clothing, and a few plates of an odd salty-sweet snack in his arms. It’s only as he does that she realizes that Love, who has drifted down towards the floor, has been trailing after his steps with shimmering tendrils.

The rest of it is wrapped around her own ankles.

Uthvir’s nose crinkles at the food. But when she plucks a piece of it up – some kind of candied vegetable, she thinks – it’s not at all unpleasant. The atmosphere in the tavern is slipping between wariness and a return to the usual proceedings, while they settle in at their table.

As it happens, the shark in the bottle is an illusion. Uthvir gives it a disappointed ‘tsk’ when it vanishes as soon as the bottle is opened.

Curiosity remains enthusiastic, however.

“It is so blue!” her friend exclaims, as Uthvir tips the bottle to pour a clear, thick stream of alcohol into her glass.

It is, indeed, very blue.

Richly sapphire and all but shimmering, in fact.
She grabs one of the more innocuous bottles for herself, and takes a subtle whiff before pouring. Not too strong, she thinks. Pride hands her his own glass, as well; one eye fixed to the red hunter in their midst.

“I have never been drunk before,” Curiosity admits.

“This should be an experience, then,” Uthvir replies, with a sharp little smile that does a wholly unconvincing job of conveying friendliness.

Curiosity examines her glass for a long moment, before lifting it up and knocking it back in one shot. Her cheeks puff out a bit, swishing as if to taste all of it, before she swallows and smacks her glass back down onto the table.

“That was disgusting!” Curiosity declares, smiling proudly with a row of blue stained teeth.

Uthvir snickers, and, apparently, not to be outdone, drains down their own drink.

“Hmm. Not much of a flavour, but hard enough,” the hunter decides, before raising a hand. Ess appears at their table so quickly, she might as well have been fired from a bow. “You have blood wine?” Uthvir asks.

“Ah. No, Revered Hunter, I fear not. We did not get many of your station here,” the tavern owner admits.

Uthvir smiles.

“More’s the pity. Alright, bring two bottles of sunwine, then,” the hunter asks.

All but radiating relief, Ess rushes off, and returns a moment later with two tall and narrow bottles. The glass of them is blue at the top, but tints on the way down, gradually fading into purple, pink, and a fiery orange. Through the liquid she can see a single orb in the bottom of each one. Like a marble-sized sun, gently rotating, but never tipping or tilting away from its post, even when the bottle does.

“Pretty,” Curiosity compliments.

Love sighs wistfully from the floor.

“How the sun loved the moon,” the spirit hums.

She blinks, and looks down at the spirit pooling around her ankles. But before she can think of a reply, Uthvir uncorks one of the bottles, and drags her attention back to the business of drinking. There’s a small burst of golden light. Just a tiny flare that dies down and instant later, and then all the colour in the bottle turns to a warm amber hue.

Rather than pour, however, the hunter then reaches into a small pouch in their belt. With a flourish, a tiny silver vial is produced. Giving it a tap, Uthvir holds it up.

“Blood wine is the traditional accompaniment to a remarkable hunt. Best done with blood from the kill,” they announce. “A good wine takes years to ferment, though, and not everyone cares to wait so long for their celebrations. A shorthand tradition is to add some fresh blood to existing wine. Sun wine will work for it, too. And the effect is dramatic enough.”

“I am not convinced that this recent fight would qualify as a hunt,” Pride interjects.
“Perhaps not our hunt,” Uthvir replies. “It was certainly Conceit’s, though. Turning the tables on a hunt is even more thrilling than following through, at times.”

The hunter breaks the top off of the vial, and empties it into the opened bottle of wine.

Thick, crimson liquid spills down into the amber glow. Like a red cloud. In tendrils it reaches towards the sun-like marble at the bottom. As soon as the two touch, the golden gleam dims, and then bursts. Like a small, exploding star. She almost expects the bottle to break from the force of it. But it doesn’t. Instead, it all just turns to a rich, deep red.

She stares.

“That was blood from the beast?” she asks. “But I killed the spirit.”

“Spirits do not have much in the way of blood. Sadly,” Uthvir replies, pushing the bottle towards her. “But boiling one to death certainly merits some acknowledgement. Our Lady may have little regard to spare at the moment. Never let it be said, though, that her hunters lack for hospitality.”

“Hospitality like giant monsters in the floor?” Curiosity quips.

It earns her a smirk.

“Well, you were the guests. The monster was technically a resident,” the hunter says.

She looks at the bottle, a moment.

She can feel the Blight in Pride. The whispers. But they don’t stretch beyond his skin. Whatever blood Uthvir poured into the wine, it wasn’t from the beast they fought. It isn’t Blighted. Which implies, she thinks, that Andruil’s people know better than to drink tainted blood in their celebrations.

And that the hunter, most probably, wants to see if she knows better, too.

When she reaches for the bottle Pride catches her wrist. Grip tight.

“You do not have to do this,” he says.

“It is fine. There is no harm in it,” she replies, catching his eye.

His expression wavers a moment.

But then he lets her go.

She glances at Uthvir, whose eyebrows are up. There’s a gleam in the hunter’s eye. It spreads into a grin as she raises the bottle, and tips the whole of it straight to her lips. The liquor is not as unpleasant as it could be. There’s a distinct burn to it, that spreads through her whole mouth. Spicy, and very potent when it hits the back of her throat.

It’s a force of effort not to sputter. She thanks Bull and the Chargers, with a pang that burns almost as much as the alcohol, when she succeeds.

Uthvir leans back, and offers a slow clap.

“Not even a cough! The wolf here nearly spat his own up, the first time he visited us,” the hunter asserts, nodding at Pride.
Who makes a face.

“It is an… acquired taste,” Pride asserts.

“I will drink it, too,” Curiosity declares, with a fierce sort of resolution.

“Give me your glass,” she says, and when she simply pours, and hands the drink back to her friend, something painfully tight in Pride’s shoulders eases a little.

Had he really thought she’d Blight herself just to appease one of Andruil’s hunters?

But apparently he at least knew she wouldn’t poison Curiosity for the sake of a lie.

It is Uthvir, however, who puts a hand out and stops Curiosity from drinking.

“Have you killed anything yet, Lion?” the hunter asks.

Curiosity frowns.

“Yes. Lots of things.”

“Name a few.”

“…Bugs. Some of them were very large, though!”

“Larger than you?”

“…No.”

With a ‘tsk’, Uthvir plucks the glass out of her hand.

“You may drink when you have killed something worthy of the drink,” the hunter declares, and pushes the unopened bottle of sunwine across the table instead.

Curiosity’s frown hardens into a full-blown glare.

“Like you?”

Uthvir smirks.

“Keep aiming that high and you will be drinking in no time at all.”

“Here,” she suggests, interrupting. “Let me see how much it tastes like the sunwine. It may not be all that different.”

Reaching over, she uncorks the second bottle – almost forgets about the light show enough to be startled – and then tips a mouthful of amber liquid into her glass. When she downs it, she tastes honey, and something light and airy, and just the faintest warmth.

“There is only a slight difference,” she assures Curiosity, handing her back the bottle.

Her friend looks unconvinced.

“You did not make the same face.”

“I was ready for it that time.”
Uthvir laughs, and drinks from the blood wine, while Pride reaches down to gently discourage Love from scaling up his calves. The drinks go a few more rounds. The hunter trades the blood wine back and forth with her. Pride helps Curiosity with the sunwine, which seems to appease some of the disappointment over forbidden drinks.

“Sit in his lap,” Love whispers at her.

She nearly drops the blood wine onto it.

“Shh,” she whispers back.

“But it would-”

“No.”

The wide eyes staring up at her take on a distinctly mutinous quality.

A few minutes later, after she’s passed the bottle back to Uthvir again, there’s a slight groan and a sideways lurch. Something – no prizes for guessing what – yanks her chair over towards Pride’s, until the two clack together.

“Love!” she hisses.

“Hold his hand!”

“No.”

Curiosity sighs and drops down under the table for a moment, sloshing the last of the sunwine as she does so.

“You are being very pushy,” her friend says. “It is rude!”

“I am helping!” Love whispers, plucking at her elbow.

“This is disgusting,” Uthvir declares, lip curling. Ess – as if summoned – arrives with another bottle of sunwine, and something in a short, rounded, black bottle. “Letting verminous little spirits establish a hold in the city. Making nuisances of themselves. Perhaps we should do the proprietor a favour and dispose of it.”

Ess’ eyes go wide.

“I would not dream of imposing upon you over such a slight inconvenience, Revered Hunter,” the tavern owner says, hastily. “Let me just clear it away, I did not realize it was bothering you. Love! Love, come here. Right now.”

“Noooo.”

There’s something just short of panic in Ess’ gaze.

“We have killed enough spirits today,” she finds herself saying. “It is not bothering you, Uthvir. Leave it alone.”

The hunter’s expression tightens, just a little.

“Well of course it is not bothering me. It is a Spirit of Love, or somesuch nonsense. Though I suppose the direction of its interest does illuminate a few things about you two.”
Pride stiffens.

She glances at him. As the tension in the air changes, significantly, Ess sweeps down between them and with surprisingly efficiency, yanks Love up. Winding tendrils spiral over the proprietor’s arms, spilling towards the floor, reaching to get back until the air around Ess changes, too. Then Love all but collapses onto the woman holding it, vibrating like a happy cat.

In a few quick steps, both of them vanish back behind the bar again.

“What does it matter to you?” Pride asks.

Uthvir shrugs.

“Nothing, I suppose. Even if it does beg a few fascinating questions.”

“They are very boring, really,” Curiosity asserts, and then lifts up the black bottle Ess left behind. After a few seconds of contemplation, her friend apparently determines how to open it. The top comes off with a clean ‘pop’. Even at a distance, the scent of the fumes that waft up from the lip of the bottle make her eyes water.

“Hmm,” Uthvir says, tapping the side of their glass. “Is this why Mythal became disenchanted with you, then? You went and fell in love with her new toy, and she took some offense to… what? The direction of your affections? No longer being first in your thoughts?”

“Something like that,” Pride declares, to her surprise.

It makes the red hunter smile. Sharp, of course. Like a spider that’s just seen a fly land upon its web.

“Pity you do not serve a different sort of Lady. Andruil is not so interested in the softer emotions of most of her followers. In any capacity.”

Pride raises a brow of his own.

“Is that so?”

“I think we got a bottle of floor cleaner by mistake,” Curiosity interjects, before shrugging at the black bottle, and pouring some of it into a glass anyway. It pours black, with flecks of red in it. Like embers. Two glasses are filled, and Curiosity nudges the second one towards the hunter.

Uthvir holds Pride’s gaze for a moment, before looking down at the drink.

“Have you tried it before?” her friend asks.

“Not this sort, no,” they concede.

The drinking resumes, then. The blood wine was strong enough that she can feel a telltale tingling in her nerves, and turns down an offer of the dark drink. Even Uthvir strains a little at the first sip. Curiosity knocks hers back, as with all the others, and ends up having to spit it back into the glass. A sharp curse escapes her lips.

“It is not even pretty to look at! I do not like this one.”

“Drink more sunwine,” Uthvir suggests.

“No,” Curiosity declares, rising onto slightly wobbly feet. “I want to try something else. I have not
tried all of them, even the ones I am allowed to try.”

On that note, her friend heads towards the bar, and begins staring at the bottles lined up on display.

Uthvir snorts.

“That one is going to twist herself into knots and strangle something to death in the process,” the hunter declares.

“Leave her be,” Pride says. “This is all new to her.”

“And how, I wonder, was the edge so swiftly worn off of Curiosity’s enthusiasm?” Uthvir counters. “An inquisitive spirit like that should still be all smiles and sunshine and happy, flighty hugs. Everyone knows that. There is a predictable pattern to these things.”

“Andruil said something similar,” she notes. “You must be accustomed to predictable prey, if this is all so unexpected to you.”

Uthvir looks at her. Sharp eyes, and sharp smile. For the barest instant, something trickles down her spine. A sensation that’s… almost familiar, though she can’t quite place where from. Maybe some sense of a specific magic.

It goes before she can really catch it, though. And Pride doesn’t seem to note its presence.

“Things have been growing a bit stale of late,” the hunter asserts. “But we are such folk who always welcome new challenges.”

Rising up from their seat, the hunter drops into the one beside hers. The one which Curiosity had vacated.

Pride does notice that, if the way he tenses is any indication.

Curiosity returns, then, carrying three bottles in her arms. One of them is a startlingly bright green, with some sort of vines growing on the inside of it, another is purple and sparkly, and the last is a simple, square brown bottle, with all sorts of ominous, exclaiming symbols etched into the side. Her friend slumps into Uthvir’s seat, not seeming to notice the change in arrangements, and proceeds to open all of the bottles and take a swig from each one.

“Curiosity, you will not actually be able to try everything. Not in one night,” Pride asserts.

“I know that!” Curiosity insists, then pours a little from each bottle into her glass, and drinks what seems to be the world’s most misguided cocktail. The bright green and the purple both serve to muddy the brown, the sparkles vanishing, and yet somehow thickening the liquid.

Curiosity adopts her most disgusted expression thusfar.

“That is the most unpleasant thing I have ever tasted! Here, you have to try this, it is absolutely horrible,” her friend insists, thrusting the glass towards her.

Considering some of the things Curiosity has attempted to ingest, she’s… actually a little alarmed.

“Since we were just talking about new experiences, why don’t you try it, Uthvir?” she suggests, sliding the glass over to her side.

The hunter looks down at it.
“Consider it a challenge,” she suggests.

Yup.

There it is.

The right thing to say.

Uthvir’s eyes narrow. With a very pointed gesture, they lift the glass, and drink.

And spit.

And swear.

And throw the glass onto the floor, shattering it with the sort of determination usually reserved for possessed objects and unexpected fires.

“Now I have to make another if anyone else wants to try it,” Curiosity scolds.

“No one else wants to try it!” Uthvir snaps. “You could feed it to your enemies to make them wish for death, though.”

Reaching over, the hunter swipes up the green bottle, and promptly downs half of it in what seems to be a desperate attempt to wash the taste from their mouth.

Curiosity beams.

“Oh, good! I have made a new weapon.”

She glances at Pride, to see what he thinks. And that’s when she realizes that he’s not paying quite so much attention to the table anymore.

He’s turned, just slightly, towards one corner of the room. Not enough to really be noticeable, but she can up the shift in his body language. She looks herself, trying to be subtle about. There are still a lot of patrons in the tavern, though. The game table has more or less emptied out, but plenty of drinkers and diners seem to have decided that the introduction of one high-ranking hunter isn’t going to spoil their evening.

And then she spots him.

At a table near to the door, an elf sits, with a tankard and a full plate. Both mostly untouched. He’s got a long, grey cloak on, and his head down. On his chin she can see the faint markings of Mythal’s vallaslin. But nothing else about the figure is familiar. She supposes he is one of Mythal’s people in the city, then. Maybe one of those displaced by their recent hospitality to Andruil’s folk.

The most noteworthy thing about him is that he is watching them, and trying not to seem like he is watching them, and doing a very bad job of it.

Curiosity is asking Uthvir a question.

She leans towards Pride.

“You know him?” she asks.

Pride shakes his head.
A few minutes later Ess emerges from behind the bar, though, and walks with purpose towards the stranger. Love is nowhere to be seen; possibly banished back into the Dreaming.

The two of them watch as Ess makes no attempt to check on him, or offer any type of service. She simply knocks the hood off of his head. The fabric flops back to reveal a fairly handsome-looking young elf. Nothing dramatic or remarkable about him, really. His hair is tied neatly back, and his eyes are a little… wide, she thinks. Young-looking. Strikingly violet, but in this crowd, even the vibrant colour of them is hardly noteworthy.

Ess takes the tankard out of his hand.

“Child!” she scolds.

The young man glances towards them, and the back at Ess, bristling.

“I am not! Not anymore! I can drink. It is allowed!” he insists.

“Not in my place,” Ess counters. “Twenty-six is still too young, Ghilashim.”

‘Ghilashim’s’ face reddens considerably. The air around him swirls, embarrassment so palpable a few other patrons look over to see what’s going on.

“Esenastenasalin,” he hisses. “Leave me be!”

Ess points at the door.

“Out. Go home to your parents. They must be frantic.”

“They are fine!”

A few more of the tavern’s patrons join in then, though.

“Ghilashim! Go home, this is the wrong sort of atmosphere for a child.”

“Oh, let the boy drink. It does not do to deny children experiences.”

“Not much of a child anymore, eh? They grow past the cute stage so fast.”

“Ess, send him over here, we can keep an eye on him.”

“No, send him home. It is late. Children need sleep, his body is probably still tired from all its growing.”

“It has finished growing, I think.”

“So they say. Look at that baby fat still clinging to his cheeks. He is not at all done.”

“He is twenty-six!”

“Growth is an inexact thing. I know, I tend plants. Plants are not so different from children.”

“Perhaps he is just fat. He is past growing, I say.”

Ghilashim’s eyes dart between them and the steadily growing debate around him, until finally he surges to his feet and bolts out of the door.

By then, more or less everyone had been watching the exchange.
“Should’ve let the boy drink. It would have done him good, I think. Killed some of the rabbit in him.”

“There was a boy?” Curiosity asks, looking up from the recently-emptied purple bottle. “Where? I want to see him! Does he have questions?”

Her friend then attempts to stand, and succeeds in flopping face-down onto the table.

Pride reaches over and gently pats her shoulder.

“I think Curiosity has left us, for the moment,” he says.

And yet, she thinks, she still finds herself rather curious about that young man, and why he might have been watching them. Youthful fascination, perhaps? But… a twenty-six-year-old. An actual young person. The sort of person she could meet in her own time, looking his own age, and being exactly as he seemed.

No twenty-six-year-old would have ever been run out of a tavern for being ‘too young’.

She lets out a breath at the strange tangle of thoughts and feelings suddenly rising up in her, and takes a sip from the brown bottle. Strong and vile. She puts it back down again.

“I think we are done celebrating,” she declares.

Uthvir waves dismissively.

“You drink around the unconscious ones in cases like this; it is fine,” the red hunter insists.

“You will have to forgive us. Mythal’s people do not quite have the endurance for revelry that Andruil’s do,” Pride interjects, rising smoothly from his seat.

The comment earns him a smirk.

“You are not at the end of your tether yet. Why not test your endurance, hmm? Consider it a challenge,” Uthvir suggests; looking from Pride towards her, instead. “Or send the wolf here off with the lion, if that’s what has you worried. It is your celebration, in the end. Why not enjoy it to the fullest?”

“I think I already have,” she says.

The hunter shrugs.

“So be it. I, for one, am not nearly done.”

On that note, Uthvir leans back, and takes up the brown bottle.

“Enjoy yourself,” Pride declares. With a wave of his hand, then, he gets Curiosity to gently float up from her seat.

She feels a definite note of concern as they make their way out of the tavern, though. Ess’ tavern. Where they’ve just left Uthvir. The ranking Hunter of Andruil, who had casually suggested killing the Spirit of Love, and who has Ess running at their beck and call, driven by more fear than she’d shown when Pride had first visited her place.
She hesitates, once they’re out of the door and back onto Arlathan’s city streets. Moonlight filters down onto the high spires of the upper levels. The glow of the open door spills out after them, warm as a hearth fire by comparison. It’s enough to illuminate the outline of a figure, standing in the road.

The young man with the violet eyes.

Ghilashim.

She and Pride both pause at the sight of him. Waiting, it seems. They glance at one another. Pride’s a little baffled, she thinks. So is she, for that matter.

“Can we help you, child?” Pride finally asks.

Ghilashim looks at him.

“I…” the young man begins, before hesitating. One of his hands comes up to scratch at the markings on his chin, before he snatches it back down again. “You… you are Mythal’s people. The ones who took Haninan with you?” he finally manages to ask.

Oh, she thinks.

Haninan. Haninan who lived in the city, ostensibly imprisoned, but in fact wandering its streets, for many years. Haninan, who seems to compulsively mentor nearly everyone he comes into contact with; if not overtly, than at least subtly. Haninan, who, if faced with an actual child at some point in the past several decades, would probably be as gentle with them as he seemed to be with all the other young people he had met.

Of course.

“You are a friend of Haninan’s?” she asks.

Ghilashim glances at her, and then back towards Pride. After an awkward pause, he nods.

“Yes. Ess told me he went with you, to go and serve Mythal. I thought… I wondered if he had come back with you, as well. He has not seen my blood writing yet. I was out of the city, with my parents, when I came into my majority. And when I returned, he had gone.”

For an instant, then, she forgets that she’s looking at an ancient elf. That this young man is immortal; that his culture is significantly different from her own. The sentiment of ‘I just got my vallaslin and I want hahren to see’ is such a familiar one, she finds herself smiling, gently.

“Haninan is not in the city,” Pride ventures, apologetically.

The boy deflates.

“He is alright, though? Mythal does not… I, I mean, no one ever thought June would release him, but Mythal is at least… not that I would speak ill of any of our great and glorious leaders, it is just that some would… would not be as…”

He gestures, awkwardly.

“He is well, last I heard,” Pride assures him.

Ghilashim looks at him, and his cheeks darken.
“The rumours say Lady Mythal is unwell. I probably should have asked about that, first. I mean you are him, are you not? Mythal’s Pride?” the young man asks. “You must be. I – I have seen you before. Do you recall? You told me I had a keen mind. That was twenty years ago, though. You might have forgotten. I was a lot… smaller, back then.”

Pride blinks, and then straightens a little.

“Ah,” he says. “I do remember! Mythal was quite enchanted with you. I was surprised she did not invite your parents into her retinue, to enjoy your presence for longer, but I suppose merchants are vital enough in their tasks.”

Ghilashim ducks his head.

“Lady Mythal was very kind,” he says. “So were you. I thought you were fine enough as a wolf, but when you took on your elven form, you were just the same, somehow. Though… you look… you look different now, if you do not mind my saying so.”

Pride glances down at himself, and then back up again. His gaze flits towards her, briefly.

“I have changed, in many ways. Just as you have,” he confirms.

Ghilashim laughs, awkwardly.

It reminds her of something. Someone.

Sera, she thinks, in a sudden rush of epiphany. Sera, in the early days of her running in and out of Dagna’s workshop, lingering in corners and giggling at random intervals. Planning mischief, she had thought at the time; indulging in a youthful crush had proven to be more accurate.

…Oh.

She blinks, and looks between Ghilashim, and Pride.

Well, that explains some things.

Especially the awkward staring.

“You may have changed, but I would – I would still recognize you anywhere,” the young man insists.

Pride smiles.

“That is nice to hear,” he says. “Now, I am afraid you will have to pardon us. We must see to our friend, and find our accommodations for the night.”

Ghilashim’s eyes widen.

“I can help!” he blurts, raising his hands as if he expects them to just suddenly dash down the street. “I know where everyone is staying. I can show you where to go, and it would be no trouble at all!”

Pride hesitates, a moment.

She leans towards him.

“I do not think he has a complex ulterior motive,” she offers.
“…Perhaps not,” he agrees. “Very well. Thank you kindly, Ghilashim.”

The young man grins, broad and obviously pleased. He gives her a wide berth, though, walking nearer to Pride and the still-unconscious Curiosity as he begins to lead them off.

They are barely at the end of the street when she pauses.

“What is it?” Pride wonders.

“I am uneasy with leaving Uthvir there alone,” she admits.

He lets out a breath.

“Even with us present, there would be little we could do to stop them if they became set upon a course of action,” he tells her. “I no longer possess the rank, and Uthvir has a reputation for… considerable combat skill.”

She nods in acknowledgement.

Still. Uthvir had clearly been trying to stay reasonably within their good graces. Without that incentive, how might the hunter behave in a tavern full of elves with lesser standing and influence?

“Perhaps I should go back,” she suggests.

“I do not think so,” Pride counters. “Uthvir wished to have you alone. I do not think it would be wise to indulge that desire.”

There is a certain bite to his tone. Just the faintest hint of fear.

That, more than anything, gets her moving again.

Ghilashim glances between them.

“You are… worried? About this Uthvir?” he asks.

“More about what this Uthvir might do,” she admits. “It was inconsiderate of us to take them to the tavern.”

The young man looks at her again, wavering in some strange limbo of indecision.

“I would not worry. Ess can handle most things,” he finally ventures. “Do you actually feel worry? I… you are… not very present.”

“Tactfully put,” Pride commends.

Ghilashim colours again.

“I meant no offense,” he murmurs.

“No, he is being sincere; that is probably the politest way I have been asked about it so far,” she assures him. “I actually feel worry. And everything else as well.”

The young man nods at her, smiling tentatively.

As soon as they begin walking again, however, they face another interruption. A tendril of soft, rosy light rises up from the bottom of the street. It coils around her, nearly tripping her; not so
much by catching her legs. Mostly by surprise.

Next to her, Pride faces a similar impediment.

A long, narrow face, with wide eyes, slips up from the bottom of the street.

“Love?” she demands.

She has never seen this spirit leave Ess’ tavern before.

“Hello!” Love chirps.

“What are you doing?” she asks, even as the tendrils being to tug at her. She follows them almost without thought, caught off-guard for a moment, and nearly crashes into Pride before she realizes what’s happening.

The levitation spell on Curiosity wavers a bit.

Ghilashim gapes.

“Ess told me to go outside,” Love says. Then it sighs, and clambers up her side, resting a head on her shoulder. “It is all so confused. Let me help. I want to help! Ohhh, I really do.”

“Love!” Ghilashim interrupts, waving his hands. “This is… you should not… that is, do you, do you even know what you are doing? They… obviously, they aren’t… are they…? I think you must be confused.”

“Ghilly!” Love chirps at him, vibrating with happiness. A few more tendrils reach out and catch the poor young man by the face, plucking at his cloak and the strands of his hair, almost patting him like a doting relative. He blushes, furiously, and tries to bat them away.

“You should go back to the tavern!” he exclaims.

Love sighs.

“Ess said not to come back until the pointy one was gone,” it insists, bopping him on the nose.

Ghilashim looks quite a bit like he wants to sink through the floor and die.

“We have to go, Love,” she says, intervening a little and trying to pry some of the tendrils off herself. Pride is looking at them like he doesn’t quite know what to do with this whole situation. Or, perhaps, more like he’s trying to decide something.

“I will come too!” Love says. “I need to help. I can show you. I think that would help, a lot. You need to see. Or hear, but if I just told you, it would not work so well. People misunderstand these things all the time. It is confusing, but you do not have to be confused!”

“No one is confused,” Pride murmurs.

He’s blushing almost as hard as Ghilashim, now.

Well.

Damn.

Love gives him what manages to be an impressively skeptical look, for a spirit with a distinctly
limited set of features.

“I can help,” it insists, again.

“That is a kind offer, but…” she tries.

“Pleeeeeease,” Love asks. “Please let me help. Just a little. Just a little, tiny bit, I can help, I know I can…”

Pride clears his throat.

“What did you have in mind?” he asks.

She raises an eyebrow at him, as Love glows brighter, and practically shimmers with excitement. Before it can reply, though, Curiosity lets out a low groan, and shifts a bit in the air where she’s floating. Her eyes blink open.

The attention of the moment is rather dramatically seized when, almost immediately, her friend begins to vomit.

“Oh,” Pride says, caught by surprise. Almost immediately he lowers Curiosity closer to the ground, and casts some kind of healing spell. She pushes past Love, who doesn’t offer up much resistance, and gets a hand on Curiosity’s back.

“Oh,” Ghilashim ventures.

After a few seconds, though, the puddle of vomit vanishes from the street.

“That was unpleasant,” Curiosity pronounces, a bit raggedly.

“That is the consequence of drinking too much,” Pride informs her.

“I know that. I have just never experienced it before. Although I have vomited before. It was different this time, though. I wonder why?”

At least some things seem disinclined to change, she muses, as she rubs Curiosity’s back, and helps her friend rise – somewhat shakily – onto her feet. Love wraps around her shoulders like some kind of awkward scarf. Though the spirit’s warmth provides a not-wholly-unpleasant contrast to the stark reflection of the streets around them.

“One day, I will drink so much I make myself sick,” Ghilashim says, quietly, like he’s caught somewhere between excitement and some sort of grim prophecy.

She stares at him.

“Not the most sensible life goal I have ever heard,” Pride ventures.

Ghilashim glances at him, and shifts a bit.

“I would not call it a life goal. Perhaps I should skip it instead. I was only musing out loud, it seems like the sort of thing I would do, but maybe not. It is likely not all that clever. Although exploring new things is a good idea. I, um… I am going to stop talking now,” the young man blurts out, dragging his hood back up over his head.

Love giggles.
It occurs to her, suddenly, that she is standing in the ancient and most revered city of her people, helping Curiosity recover from over-drinking, and listening to a boy whose vallaslin might as well still be wet stumble his way through a crush on Pride as a Spirit of Love drapes itself all over them.

“This is very surreal,” she decides.

Pride glances at her with a worried frown.

“How so?” he asks.

She opens her mouth to explain, but ultimately just ends up shaking her head, andshrugging.

“Love, please leave us be, for the moment,” Pride finally asks, pulling at one of the tendrils on his arm.

Love sighs.

“You should let me show you how it shines,” the spirit insists, just on the very edge of pleading.

“I…” Pride hesitates.

She looks at him.

Oh.

Oh, she realizes. He… he wants to.

Well, that makes a strange kind of sense, she supposes. This entire thing has had its moments of strangeness. And Pride isn’t as hesitant around spirits as she is; even accounting for how much more comfortable she has become with them. He’s still leagues ahead of her. She supposes that, from a certain point of view, letting Love do whatever it thinks is best must seem less embarrassing or intrusive or unnecessary than it does practical. Helpful, even.

Like when Compassion had approached her to suggest that she let the others show her some of how her magic worked.

And yet…

Pride looks at her.

“This is not the time or place for such discussions,” he reasons. “We will consider your kind offer, Love. Thank you for making it.”

Love sighs again.

“Fiiine,” it concedes, slumping down off of her shoulders at last.

By all appearances, then, the spirit retreats. Though she thinks she can feel it still, following their footsteps.

Ghilashim proves an able but somewhat awkward guide as he leads them through the streets, in the familiar direction of Sylaise’s gleaming, floating, crystalline palace. He glances at her, every so often, and stares at Pride. Awkwardly attempts to make small talk, a few times, and nearly trips over his feet whenever he does.

Curiosity figures him out pretty quickly, it seems, and when she does she all but drapes herself over
the poor man. Clucking at him.

“Baby.”

“I am past my majority age!” Ghilashim insists, mortified. His fingers rub at his vallaslin again.

“So many questions. Hmm. Oh, they are all so cute!” Curiosity exclaims.

“What? No. How would you know my questions? Are – are you Dreaming-born?” Ghilashim frets, darting a very telling glance in Pride’s direction. Pride, however, is lost in thought, and paying very little mind to their conversation.

Curiosity laughs.

“Oh, you are clever. I am! I am Curiosity!”

“Please do not try and help with my questions,” Ghilashim asks.

“But they are very easy questions. We can just ask-”

“No!”

Curiosity sighs, and pokes at his forehead.

“Mythal’s. Hmm. Should have brought you to the palace. That would have been nice, to have a baby around.”

“I am not a baby!”

“Curiosity, stop embarrassing our guide,” she requests, finally prying her friend away. It takes some effort. Twenty-six-year-olds are, apparently, fascinating for some reason.

Well. She’s a little fascinated with him, too, but in her case, there’s an obvious reason for it. Of all the people she has met since coming back, Ghilashim here is the first to stand anywhere close to her own age.

And he may strike her as a very young twenty-six, but she wouldn’t find him out-of-place in her own time, either.

The young man shoots her a grateful look.

Then he glances away, suddenly self-conscious and conflicted again.

They manage to make it to their housing without any further incidents, though. It isn’t, thankfully, actually in Sylaise’s ridiculous crystal palace again. She would not be terribly eager to repeat the experience of staying in that place. Instead it is in a building nearby. Beautiful and shimmering, but obviously more subdued; intended to compliment the surrounding environs without competing with the gleaming star attraction. Ghilashim’s parents have also been relocated here, it seems.

A few of Sylaise’s people meet them at the gates. More humbly clad than the attendants in the gleaming palace had been. They show them all inside. The building is mostly white, carven walls, etched with crystals. The exterior gleams and shine.

The interior, by contrast, is much plainer. Several rooms spiral out from a central chamber, mostly marked by a large hearth and a few chairs. Not at all unpleasant, but definitely lacking in the ostentatious qualities of most other accommodations she’s been in so far. Likely intended for
servants and service people, then, lower in stature than those expected to serve Sylaise directly.

Unlike in Andruil’s holdings, there are separate rooms, at least.

“If you need anything, I would be happy to help,” Ghilashim assures Pride. “Anything at all. Even if it is the dead of night, you can come and wake me. I mean, if it is an emergency. Or not! I would be happy to help. Again. If I can. Happy to help.”

Pride just sort of nods at him, and pats him on the shoulder.

“Thank you, that is very kind,” he asserts.

The air bursts in an awkward spiral of emotions. Pride blinks at them. Ghilashim colours, phenomenally, and then all but bolts out of the room.

“Odd,” Pride decides. “What was that about?”

“…Really?” she asks him.

Curiosity snorts.

“Poems,” her friend blurs, drunkenly.

She and Pride both stare at her in utter bewilderment.

“I think it is, perhaps, time we all called it a night,” Pride suggests.

“Agreed,” she says.

They manage to get Curiosity safely ensconced in her room, then. A small enough chamber, not much larger than the one she has in Mythal’s palace, really. There are charging horses carved into the walls, though, and a crystalline plant that gleams and glows as if it is made of trapped candlelight.

She stares at it, and thinks about Compassion for a moment, as Curiosity flops onto the bed. The shining shards of a decimated spirit. The way they’d glowed, and spread warmth, and light, and…

Before they leave, she catches Pride’s wrist, and gestures to the plant.

“What is that made of?” she asks.

He follows her gesture.

“It is a fern, I believe. Infused with magic and reshaped to create a more appealing design,” he says, obviously a little confused at her sudden interest.

She relaxes, just a bit.

“Good. It is only that it looked somewhat like…” she trails off.

He catches her meaning, though, and understanding dawns across his features.

“It is not,” he promises. “Such a simple decoration would be far too frivolous a use for so valuable a commodity.”

There is a certain wry twist to his mouth on the word ‘commodity’. It seems everything this
evening is conspiring to remind her of other things. In that moment, with yellow light cast upon his face, his shoulder stern and his expression twisted with disapproval at something in the state of the world, Pride looks very much like Solas.

“Do you think that piece of Compassion is doing well?” she wonders. Insofar as such things can do well.

“Yes,” he says, with surety that surprises her.

And comforts her as well.

They make their way out of Curiosity’s room, and into the corridor. A quick investigation yields two empty rooms not far, sitting next to one another. She supposes she should be tired. It’s been a long day, following some very dramatic events. Not to mention a few drinks. But she feels alert. Clear. As if she could still keep going for quite a while without having to worry about much.

Given what has happened, that’s almost troubling.

She catches Pride by the wrist.

“Come into my room,” she asks.

He freezes.

His lips part, just a little. His cheeks pink. After a few seconds, he clears his throat.

“That would possibly be getting ahead of things,” he says.

She blinks at him.

“What?” she asks.

“What?” he repeats.

Maybe he’s a bit more drunk than she’d thought.

“Can we talk here?” she clarifies. “I would like to speak with you. The room seems more private than the corridor. Or the main chamber.”

“Oh!” he says. “Oh. Ah…” his gaze darts about the rooms. “It is late, and this may not be the best venue for certain conversations. Depending. On what sort of conversations they may be. I would not recommend reading any letters just yet.”

He swallows. She nods in acceptance, and means to let go of him. But then a moment of worry strikes her, and she holds on a moment longer. Reaching for the sense of the taint in him. Has it grown any stronger? What if it surges up during the night? How would she know?

What could she do?

She thinks of Uthvir, pouring blood into a wine bottle. She thinks of Grey Wardens, and their Joining ritual. Blood of an archdemon to make a warrior strong enough to use the Blight. Strong enough to survive, at least for a while. Before the Calling claimed them. Solas had always thought it the height of foolishness. You cannot use the Blight.

Knowing what it really is, now, she’s not sure what to think of it all anymore.
At least the whispers haven’t gotten any louder.

He hands slips down from his wrist, and threads in with his fingers. She looks up at him. Leans in close, searching for any hint of irregularity in him. Pain. Corruption. She peers at the corners of his eyes, at the edges of his markings, and the pulse point of his neck.

“You should stay with me,” she decides.

His breath halts. His fingers tighten around hers, just a little.

Then he gently lifts her hand, and presses a kiss to back of it. His lips are soft and warm. Her own breath hitches in her throat at the unexpected gesture.

“I must say no, for now,” he tells her, very gently.

As if he…

Oh!

Understanding dawns, and she could kick herself for being that unclear. Maybe she is more drunk than she’d thought. Though, as the idea comes, she cannot help the flash of the thought it brings. The idea of leaning up, just a bit, and pressing her lips to his own. Taking his hand and coaxing him into the room behind her, there to…

She swallows, and clears her throat.

He is right; that would be getting ahead of things. And he has already turned the idea down, even if it wasn’t quite what she meant to ask him.

She smiles at him, as an unexpected pang of longing twists in her chest.

*The next room,* she tells herself. *He’ll just be in the next room. That’s good enough.*

It might not make too much of a difference to her while she’s unconscious anyway.

Especially not, she thinks, if her dreams follow any of their more recent patterns again.

The thought puts a new note of disquiet in her. Dreams and dreaming. She has found nothing of the russet wolf’s skull; still scarcely knows how to start. It’s only been a day, but who knows how a creature like that perceives time? It strikes her at the sort of being that could be unendingly patient and ridiculously demanding all at once; and she has no idea what to expect of the world when she puts her head on a pillow anymore.

Or loses consciousness in a giant boiling pool full of monsters.

Either way.

She should step back, but instead she stays where she is for a moment. Searching his eyes again as she reaches up, with her free hand, and brushes her palm just gently across his cheek. It’s all so fragile, she thinks. Whether either one of them will survive the night. Or day. Or any of this, really.

Pride sighs, and leans in to her touch.

“I will find you in the Dreaming,” he promises, before at last stepping back.

She draws in a deep breath, and nods.
“Sleep well,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

I hope everybody had a good holiday! <3
All things considered, she manages to fall asleep surprisingly quickly that night. Despite the strange surroundings, the room is at least fairly simple, and as soon as she lies down the alertness she’d been feeling gives way to a meditative tiredness. The edges of the alcohol pull her senses down, so that she falls into a rare moment of peaceful thoughtlessness, and then on to sleep.

The Fade in Arlathan is a riot of vibrancy.

Even so, she’s not expecting to go from restful quiet to a cacophony of noise and light and colour quite so swiftly. Something bright, and pink like sunsets, crashes into her. Her vision is filled with it, along with a familiar, cooing voice, and beyond that something cracked and molten and equally familiar in and of itself.

“Hello!” Love exclaims, winding all around her.

For one moment she’s not totally certain that she’s still asleep, and that Love hasn’t just snuck into her room and woken her up. Even considering the aesthetic of ancient elves, she thinks she’d remember if the ceiling of her room had been a rolling sea of silver, blue, and emerald light, dotted with the outline of verdant, floating shapes, and drifting wisps. And beyond that, she’s standing upright, and fully clothed. It’s just that she feels so…

Present.

Like she’s two steps shy of recreating Adamant. Or her other dreams, the ones of the forest, and the russet wolf.

She wonders if this is the doing of that wolf. If it’s tied into how it… healed her.

“Hello, Love,” she says, gently reaching up to try and get the over-enthusiastic spirit to disentangle from her a little. She doesn’t put a lot of energy into it, though. In the relative privacy of the Fade, Love is warm and strangely comfortable, and rests a little more easily on her.

She quickly realizes that the spirit isn’t alone, though. Fortitude is looking at them with a certain degree of interest, cracked and shining in the strange landscape around them. Next to it, Sorrow lingers, sinking partly into the ground as pieces of it drift downwards. With the added clarity of the Fade, it looks more like a living waterfall than anything, spilling down over the crystalline whorls that mark the dream’s floors. She’s most surprised to see Sorrow; she wouldn’t have expected the spirit to be inclined to leave Mythal’s palace, even by way of the Fade.

“What are you all doing here?” she asks, as Love settles onto her like some sort of inelegant travel pack.

“We came to show you something,” Fortitude says, blinking at Love. “This one was already waiting for you.”
Love makes a vaguely affirmative noise.

“Just need him to come, now,” it mutters. “Then I can help!”

Reaching up, she pats at the nearest glowing tendril. Apparently Pride hasn’t quite fallen asleep yet.

“We do not need that much help, Love,” she says.

All three spirits look deeply skeptical.

…That’s probably a fair response.

She sighs.

“Alright, fine. We need every ounce of help we can get,” she amends. Then she turns back towards Fortitude and Sorrow. “What did you want to show me?”

Before either spirit can answer, the dream ripples, and suddenly Curiosity is rushing towards them; a lioness on urgent paws.

“Is it happening?” her friend asks. “It should be. I did not realize, until I noticed you were all together, and then I wondered why and then I figured it out!”

“Yes, it is happening. Whatever may come of it,” Sorrow says, with a long sigh.

“What’s happening?” she wonders.

“Fortune,” says Fortitude. “I took what remains of it, and placed it in the echoes of where Compassion was lost. What will come of it, if anything will, shall come of it now.”

She hesitates. Love wraps a little more tightly around her. She thinks they should wait for Pride; but then she remembers that this is the Fade, and he’ll be able to find them wherever they are. And if what’s happening is important, it might not wait for him to fall asleep. Then another thought occurs to her, and she looks between Fortitude and Curiosity with concern.

“The piece of Compassion? You used it on Fortune?” she asks.

“No,” Fortitude says, swiftly. “That was enough on its own; trying to bleed it into Fortune would have harmed both, in the end. These were only the embers. The grave I took you to, before.”

A wave of relief sweeps through her.

“Alright then. Show me,” she asks.

Fortitude and Sorrow turn and begin to drift off. They sketch a strange path through the Fade. Love clings to her as they move. As Curiosity lopes alongside them, over strange roads that wind upwards. Though they are apparently heading for Compassion’s grave, it feels as though they are going somewhere else entirely. Someplace high upwards, deep into the web of dreams.

She’s not sure if it feels different because she’s different, or because they place is stranger than usual, somehow.

As they go, though, she notices that more and more spirits seem to be congregating. More than she’s ever seen in any one place before. Even the streets of Arlathan had not offered up such variety. A few more fall into their wake. Wisps drift behind them, and they edge in close; but most
seem to be preoccupied with something else. Something more interesting than their small procession.

“Are they all here for Fortune?” she wonders.

“In a way,” Curiosity says. “If this works, there will be a new spirit born. Most spirits can tell when that’s happening. I used to be the best at it! I presided over the births of lots of spirits. I used to tell Mythal when it was happening, and she would come and see what would be born.”

She blinks down at the lioness.

“You ‘presided’?” she asks.

Curiosity nods.

“Oh, yes! I was always very interested to see what would come. I still am, of course, but I cannot preside anymore,” her friend explains. “Sometimes new spirits need a little help along. It is very confusing, just suddenly coming into existence. You only know one thing, and if no one helps, you can get lost and jumbled. It can make it very hard to focus. People with bodies, we are much too complicated now to help. It would be overwhelming at first. So a spirit is going to have to do it.”

Curiosity sounds just a little wistful about the whole thing. She can’t but think of how different her friend looks from the spirit she first met. Even in the Fade, the weight of her changes are impossible to ignore.

“I am sorry you cannot preside,” she offers.

Curiosity shakes her head.

“No. Do not be. I was always going to take a body, one day. And I can still see what comes of this!” the lioness exclaims, and with a flash, turns into a large parrot again; a jewel-winged bird that soars up over some of the congregation of spirits.

When they at last reach Compassion’s grave, Fortitude has to all but cut a path through all the gathered spirits for them. It seems largely unconcerned by this, however, and sets about the task of gently push aside the crowd with steady hands. The place is markedly different from what she remembers. Gone are the scars and shattered pieces. Instead, they at last come to what looks like a small, tidy pool. Flecks of amber, gold, and grey whirl in tiny eddies, and wisps dip down into the surface, glowing as they spread. Like falling petals, she thinks, brushing the surface of a pond. A much more placid one than the last body of spirit-inhabited water she was acquainted with.

The spirits gathered close by aren’t ones she recognizes, by and large. Love trembles around her, though, eager and excited.

“Can I preside?” it asks. “Can I?”

“No,” says Fortitude. “You knew neither Compassion nor Fortune so well before they were destroyed. It should be one who knew them.”

“You?” she suggests.

The spirit shakes its head.

“I was changed, after they died. And I have already offered what I can.”
She nods in acceptance – mostly because she is no authority on these matters – and looks at the crowd of spirits. Wonders what’s supposed to happen. The air above them is calm, but expectant. The occasional pulse of light, or flare of odd energy, drifts across it. More like lazy clouds than anything else. Curiosity swoops down, landing on top of Love, and subsequently weighing her down, too.

“This is so exciting!” the parrot exclaims. “It is rare for a spirit to be born like this, from so many broken pieces. There is no way to know what it will be. It is Compassion’s ashes and Fortune’s remains, it was rescued by you, and saved by Fortitude. It is not being made by a dream, or a vision, or a strong impact of feeling. It could even be some kind of horrible monster!”

Granted, she’s not an expert, but she doesn’t think that anticipating a newborn’s odds of being a horrible monster right before the birth is a good idea.

“You may give it bad luck, talking like that,” she says.

Curiosity shuffles a little.

“It could be a Spirit of Luck! That would be interesting. A lot like Fortune, I suppose. Or it could be another Pride. Though it looks all wrong for that. But I suppose it would look odd no matter what, considering.”

She turns, attention drawn. Love hums around her.

“Pride?” she asks. Who still hasn’t turned up; but then, in the Fade, it’s hard to tell how much time has really passed. “You were there for Pride’s birth?”

“Of course!” Curiosity says. “I did not make it before Mythal did, though. But she was already there. I had to snatch him up before he got too confused.” The parrot sighs. “Sometimes I wonder if I made it in time.”

Something’s starting to come together for her, then. Curiosity – always curiosity, of course – but also a minder. Swift to notice the new spirits. Swift to help them, to reach out, to offer them a perspective on the world. To lead them to what they needed, and help them find what they were seeking. No wonder that shining four-eyed spirit had been so eager to extend her the same courtesy. No wonder, as a person with a body, Curiosity had somehow come into a protective streak a mile wide. Protecting. Guiding. It had already been her job well before then.

“Ooh, look!” Love says, reaching a tendril towards the pool. Fortitude catches it, and pointedly pushes it back.

But Love’s gesturing has called attention to the rippling surface, which is shining all the more brightly now. The tiny flecks floating within it being to hasten, rapidly swirling, dancing. Rising up in tiny, crashing waves, as if a storm has started up within the once-peaceful waters. The spirits all move closer. A sea of intent eyes and strange forms. For a moment, then, any number of them could be Spirits of Curiosity. They all seem fascinated, even when she would suppose such fascination to be contrary to their nature.

To her eye, the storm of magic looks much like any other inscrutable bit of spellwork. It’s more interesting, really, to look at the assembled spirits. Large and small, slender and wide, elf-shaped and distinctly not elf-shaped. Some burning, some icy, some lit from within, some spilling soft glow or shadowy darkness beyond themselves. A few look more like animals. Twin birds, that make her think suddenly of Dirthamen’s ravens, twist through the air overhead.
Then the storms surges up into the air, and that definitely gets her attention. She’s reminded of the russet wolf, sending the fleck of Fortune up on a mocking, stray wind. The pieces tremble, glowing.

*Come on, you can do it!* she thinks.

For a moment, she is certain the storm will break. The pieces will fall, lifeless and still. The energy will die, or disperse back into wisps.

And it does break. But it does so inwardly. Like a magical barrier shattering in onto itself, not falling apart but folding together. The tension in the air erupts into excitement. Something trembling and small winks into existence. Her breath catches, her mind going utterly blank, mesmerized by the reality of watching something new and alive being realized.

Then the air flashes, too bright for her to keep looking. She and Curiosity have to cover their eyes.

When the flash clears, she looks back, and blinks.

Sorrow is holding the hands of the new spirit. The new spirit which is larger than Sorrow almost twice over. It is warm and coppery in colour, glowing like a gentle hearth; shaped like a figure made of embers and sand. Its eyes are bright, and half-moon shaped. Its face is round, friendly and soft, despite the utter absence of any kind of mouth.

She doesn’t know how she knows what it is; except that she does.

“Charity,” Sorrow says. “That which is given to those in need. There will be need; you will be welcome.”

She suddenly remembers that breathing is a thing she’s supposed to do.

“Oh,” Love says. “Oh, I like this one!”

Fortitude nods, once, apparently satisfied. Sorrow lets go of Charity’s hands, and all at once the congregation of spirits apparently decide that the scenario is no longer all that interesting, and begin to disperse. Well, for the most part. Some linger.

She moves forward, not sure what to do. Except that it seems rude to just turn around and go.

“Can I talk to it?” she asks Curiosity.

“Hmm? Of course you can talk to it,” her friend replies.

“It is not dangerous to do so?” she checks.

“Oh! No, no, that point has passed. Sorrow took care of it,” Curiosity explains.

With a little more confidence, she takes another step forward. She’s not sure what she’s expecting from a brand new spirit. It blinks at her, and she can *feel* how young it is, somehow. Even though it’s bigger than Bull, it’s like looking at Ghilashim, she thinks. There’s a newness there that makes her feel acutely aware of how much living she’s done, and how little it has by comparison.

“Hello,” she says, quietly.

The spirit smiles – an expression that shows only through the tilting of its eyes.

“Hello!” it says back. Its voice seems to echo from the core of it. “Can I help?”
For some reason, this question startles a laugh out of her. Maybe because it’s so obviously suited to the spirit’s nature. But then she thinks of Compassion, and Curiosity; and Sorrow, and Rage who became Fortitude. Her Spirit Entourage. One dead, one embodied, and one changed.

“Ever since I got here, it feels like spirits have been asking me that question,” she says. And she has just crashed through their world in turn.

Charity bends down towards, half-moon eyes widening a little. There are glowing dots within them, she realizes. Tiny orbs of light, suspended in the ether of its being.

“That is good,” it decides. “Can I help?”

She smiles.

“I am sure you will help in all kinds of ways,” she says.

The spirit trembles, and then reaches out. It takes one of her hands, and drops a grain of its being into her palm.

She looks at it a moment.

Then, gently, she turns the spirit’s own hand over, and presses the grain back into it.

“Thank you. But I do not need that,” she assures it.

It blinks.

“What do you need?” it asks. “I will try and get it for you!”

She thinks. It probably isn’t a good idea to tell a Spirit of Charity not to try and give her anything, or do anything for her. Especially one so young and obviously vulnerable. But if they’re not careful, she thinks, it’ll run itself into the ground trying to help this world, and not accomplish much for all its sacrifice. The sand of its being is warm beneath her grasp. Its gaze is eager, and near to anxious, she thinks; though perhaps she’s just imagining that.

“Hugs!” Love chirps. “She needs hugs! And to know you will be alright.”

“Uh…” she manages.

That’s about all she gets out before Charity’s eyes crinkle up at the corners, and it swoops down. Large, sandy arms enfold her. There’s a sound in her ears. Like the very softest sighs of relief, and light the gentle whirling of a distant wind. It’s not unpleasant. In fact, it’s… really nice, actually. A little like hugging a very friendly dust storm, but one which she can get her arms around, just the same. After a few seconds, she closes her eyes, and lets out a breath.

“I will be alright. I will help,” Charity tells her.

“You will,” she agrees, patting it.

A Spirit of Charity. She wonders what her people would have made of it.

Her gaze catches Sorrow’s. She wonders if its help has had any hand in shaping what Charity became. After all, in a perfect world, charity wouldn’t be required. But then again, there are no perfect worlds. And Sorrow had been right when it told the newborn spirit it would be needed. If everything is to be caught in upheaval – and it seems unavoidable – then it will be easier, in the aftermath, if people are giving.
“I am glad you are here,” she assures the spirit.

“So am I,” it says. Then it goes, flitting away more independently than any newborn thing should. But the other spirits make no effort to stop it, and show no alarm.

“Where is it going?” she asks.

“It will wander, a while,” Curiosity says. “It will find a place to suit it. Some spirits stay close to where they are born, and some follow the currents of where they are needed.”

“Some manage both,” Fortitude says.

She thinks of Pride, and wonders what he was like as a spirit. Newly born, and cautioned against his own nature.

It reminds her of him in the present time, too. Infected with the Blight, having promised to meet her in the Fade, and yet, still nowhere to be seen. It’s possible that only a few minutes have passed for all of this, perception being what it is.

And yet.

“Can someone wake me up?” she asks.

Curiosity tilts her head.

“Did you want to go tell Pride what happened?”

“Yes,” she confirms.

“I can do it!” Love says. “I can draw you into Waking! Then we can both see Pride, and I can help there, too!”

She lets out a breath.

“Alright, Love. Thank you,” she agrees.

The spirit beams, and squeezes her a little more tightly. It feels a bit like she’s being yanked through a very affectionate grate, for a moment, a little awkward as her consciousness is pulled from sleep. Love comes with it, and she wakes to a feeling of intense disorientation, and a softly glowing spirit wound up around her chest.

When she takes a minute to sit up, Love gives her an impatient shake.

“Come on! I want to see it all light up!” Love says. “I am so excited!”

“We are just going to go see Pride,” she replies, grumbling a little as she sits up, and then gives the room a few seconds to stop spinning.

“I knowwww,” Love croons. “You are so happy every time you are going to see him! I can feel it. Even now, you want to see him. It is so very nice.”

She is extremely glad that no one else is around to hear that.

“Love,” she scolds.

Love just sighs.
With a sigh of her own – distinctly different in tone – she finally gets up, checks to make sure she’s decent enough (challenging, with a spirit wrapped around her like an extra set of clothes), and then heads out into the quiet of the hallway. She taps on Pride’s door, and blinks when there’s no answer.

Knocks a little more firmly.

Nothing.

Love is still. Unease slips down her spine, and she reaches for the doorknob. It opens easily enough. The room inside is dark, with only the faint light of the hallway and window spilling in, illuminating a shape curled up on top of the bed.

She moves, quickly. Her pulse spikes with fear as she reaches Pride, and confirms that he’s not awake. It only eases a little when she realizes he’s breathing.

“Oh no,” Love says, very softly.

Unconscious, but breathing. She tries to shake him awake. She’s going to scold for not coming and meeting her like he said he would, for worrying her, but he doesn’t wake. In the glow coming off of Love, she sees his face.

There’s a scratch mark on it.

A bloodied, smeared scratch mark, that definitely wasn’t there before.

No.

No, no, no, no.

He’s not in the Fade. He’s dreaming, but not in the Fade.

“Pride,” she says, giving him another sharp shake. It’s almost on the tip of her tongue to ask Love if it can wake him. But then she remembers Fortune, and the russet wolf, and the shattered pieces of a spirit it caught for coming too close.

Love is already unwinding tendrils from her, though. Reaching for Pride.

“Do not go after him,” she warns.

“Where is he?” Love wonders. “He would have reached for you, in the Dreaming. I would have felt it. But he is sleeping. He is not dead. All the tethers between you are still there, just the same as before and right where they should be. Even the tiny ones.”

“He is dreaming somewhere else,” she confirms. Then she reaches for him, her touch skirting around the scratch on his face.

Fear hardens into resolution.

“Oh,” Love says.

“I need to sleep,” she decides. “I have to go find him.”

“Follow the tethers!” the spirit tells her.

“What tethers?” she asks. It’ll probably be easier if she stays close. Mindful of Pride’s potential
injuries, she climbs up onto the bed beside him. Actually falling asleep like this is going to be
difficult. Determination and willpower, she’s found, are not terribly helpful when it comes to
drifting off.

“The bonds between you,” Love says. “They are real things, you know. That is how you always
find him. You follow them, like roads in the dark.”

She settles against the blankets. She can feel the whispers of the Blight in him, and she curses
herself for not thinking of this sooner. For not considering this possibility. Is it the russet wolf? Is it
the Blight, calling him downwards, as it did to her once?

Fear is not helping her sleep.

She swallows, and after a moment, she curls an arm carefully around him. She leans towards his
warmth. Rests her cheek against his shoulder, and forces her breaths to even out. Her eyes to close.

Love settles over them like a warm blanket.

“Do not follow me,” she warns it.

Something in her tone must really sell the danger of the scenario, because the spirit doesn’t argue.

After what seems an interminable length of time, she finally, finally, drifts into unconsciousness.

~

She opens her eyes to the Fade, again. Which isn’t precisely what she’d been hoping for. If Pride is
in the russet wolf’s dreams, then that’s where she needs to be, and she has no idea how to find that
place on her own.

But then, she supposes, he’s tainted. There’s also a chance he’s gotten lost in the song. Just like she
once did, in the Deep Roads; before she knew what it was.

That, at least, she can find.

It takes her a moment to adjust. The dream landscape still has the strange, vivid quality as before,
but the surroundings she finds herself in remind her more of the Fade in her own time. The ground
is hard stone, jagged, surrounded by an eerie mist. The surface of it is marked by odd pools, and
scorch marks, and gouges. Stray objects drift through the air. Rocks, and crystals, and bits of
random, Fereldan-style furnishing, and odd shapes and shadows that are less easily identified.
Broken bars and crumbling pillars loom in the distance. There are fewer wisps, and no spirits that
she can see.

Good.

She draws in a breath. It smells foul, and dank, but as clear as the forest air in her other dreams
might.

Beneath her feet, the ground is solid.

It all serves to make the whole thing even more alarming than it otherwise would be. It feels real,
substantial and weighty, in a way that makes her heart speed up. She has to force herself to calm
down. To close her eyes, and focus, reaching for the song that has become the ominous background noise of her life. The symphony of a broken world, tearing this one apart at the seams.

It doesn’t take her long to find it.

The air darkens. In a shift that passes like a sudden turn from day to night, the landscape around her changes, distinctly. The shadows deepen, and the mist pours in more thickly. Whispers press at her. Hands reaching. Voices calling. Confused and disjointed, pained and suffering. *Wait,* she wants to say. *Just wait, and I will help you.* But it cannot understand. Even if it could, time is immaterial. In the space between spaces, tomorrow and yesterday are meaningless. The only thing that matter is right now, and right now there is torment, and confusion, and everything gone awry.

But she is part of it. She is part of it, so it calls to her. And she *should* suffer with them, but if she does, she cannot help them. She holds onto that thought, and it keeps the rest of it from overwhelming her. She has to keep going. She has to find Pride. The whispers that are in him, too, but that song is everywhere, and nowhere. She cannot follow it to him. It’s only as she realizes this that she realizes she’s started walking anyway, her steps tracing a path down and down.

She passes broken memories as she goes. Phantoms from her life. Echoes of everything lost, playing over each other, like storybook illustrations bleeding into one another in a book left in the rain. The ones which act out the world she used to know. The ones that began after she sang with the Titan. After she wrote the names of the dead.

They are part of the song, she realizes, all at once. The fragments are *in* it. The song has become easier to manage, not because it has quieted, but because there are pieces of it that are not solely chaos or pain. Pieces that… take shape from her memories? Somehow? Or maybe that’s only how she sees them. Maybe it’s just that those are the parts of the song that she can understand, if the song is made up of all the souls of her world.

The air darkens, further.

She halts at the mouth of a massive drop. As deep and as dark as the watery floor in Andruil’s holdings had been. Without being wholly certain of what prompts it, but knowing what she will see, she tilts her gaze upwards. The sky is a mess of green light. Clouds whirling, energy crackling. Not a Breach, not really, but the memory of it. The echo. She wonders if it would be possible to tear a Breach between the past and the future, as Corypheus did between reality and the Fade. A stable hole, dropping souls out of the darkness and into this world. Or a chaotic tear, slowly but steadily widening, eating away at the fabric of reality until it threatened the whole of existence.

She wonders if the lost souls would fall like demons did, confused and twisted, lashing out. Darkspawn, in essence. Raining from the sky. Is that whole this world will break, if she cannot save it?

Her gaze turns down towards the blackness. The song is pulling at her. Calling like an injured friend. It wants her to fall into the darkness, to come to it and then pull it back out in return. In another dream, she might. But in the here and now, she feels as though she is standing in the deep roads, at the mouth of some terribly drop towards the endless reaches of the earth below. If she falls, she thinks, her body will break; in the real world as well as this one. Because this is real, too.

It has all always been real.

*Pride,* she thinks. She is looking for Pride. And if he is in the darkness, then she will go down. But all she can hear is the song.
What had Love told her?

She can find him. She has to find him, not the Blight. Just like she usually can find him in dreams. She’s still in the Fade, after all. But he isn’t.

Or is he?

It’s all mixed up, it doesn’t make sense. But she forces herself to focus, again. To move further from the edge of the darkness. It seems like it’s spreading. Like the mouth of the drop is opening by inches, and the dream-Breach above it is growing in tandem. Pulsing wounds. There are no spirits here. Not even in the distance. There are no wisps. The edges of the ground feel raw. Damp, and bloodied, almost.

Pride.

Where is Pride?

…Who is Pride?

Her eyes snap open at the senseless thought. It is such a ridiculous question. She knows who he is, and has no reason to wonder at it. Yet it tugs at something in her, and she feels as if she has happened more upon an answer, rather than a question.

Or maybe it is more that the question is not hers.

Pride. The Blight. The souls of lost futures.

Futures Solas created.

Lived in.

Died in.

That’s it.

She reaches out, and the Fade changes again. She takes a step back, and it’s like passing through a curtain. Everything goes dark. When it clears, she’s standing in the remnants of another one of her memories. Fetid water high around her waist. Stone walls, tainted with red lyrium, so close she can remember the way it warped the air. How it made every breath taste like iron and raw, burning energy. For a moment she looks only at the surroundings. Another world lost.

Then she turns to her side.

The memory of Dorian looks as solid and real as if he’s truly there. She watches for a moment as her old friend acts out the scene she recalls, figuring out where they are, and what’s happened to them. As in her dreams, he does not seem to mind if she forgoes repeating her own lines. He carries on as if she’d answered him. Doesn’t even pause when she reaches over and touches his arm; though she feels the fabric beneath her fingers, right before he moves a certain way to gesture, and her hand passes straight through him instead.

It’s not Dorian. Not really. He’s just another prop, like the walls and the red lyrium around them.

It’s still a wrench, and a force of effort, to turn away from her friend. To ignore the guards that race in to fight them, and leave them to act out the scene in her absence.

She takes off down the corridors, and without even considering it, tracks the path towards a
different set of cells once again.

The place is not quite the same, though. Maybe it’s the inconsistency of memory. But if that was the case, she thinks it would still be what *she* expected it to be, given that her own memory would be what was changing it. And yet instead she finds that the corridors are far longer than she would have ever imagined them to be. The shadows are deeper, and the walls are more warped. Taller. The ceilings loom in utter blackness, and shapes she does not recall move in the periphery of her vision.

The further she goes, the more different things become, until she finds herself lost in a maze of a castle. A monstrous place, disjointed and even more nightmarish than before. No matter where she turns, she only seems to find empty cells. Growing lyrium. Even trying to backtrack doesn’t work. She can’t find Dorian again, or anyone she would expect to. No lost companions, no Leliana, no Grand Enchanter Fiona, or even any of Corypheus’ worshippers. No red lyrium keys, or vast halls where Felix and Alexius might be waiting.

No demon hoards charging the gates.

But then, that’s all the memory. And the memory, she thinks, has only provided a stage for something else.

The red lyrium is only *remembered* lyrium. But the Blight, the song, is louder and more discordant than she can ever recall it being. It is not coming from the tainted lyrium. It’s coming from everywhere, because she is in it, again. Or in part of it. Some place where they dreaming has… let it in.

Her steps halt in the center of a large chamber. Cages hang from the ceiling. Blood stains the floors.

“Pride?” she calls. He’s here. He’s *somewhere* here, if she can just find him…

“Pride?” she calls again, more loudly.

Something *bangs* in the distance. Like the sound of a projectile striking a wall, or a massive set of doors slamming closed. It’s not really a reply, but it makes her heart leap, and she takes off towards it at a run. Twisting down yet more corridors, as they seem to grow narrow rather than vast. As the shadows draw closer, and she finds herself racing through them as surely as she might race through the twisting pathways of a forest. Rubble in place of undergrowth; lyrium instead of rocks. Steep drops replace the rivers, and there is no moonlight. No brisk air, or rushing wind. Only castle walls that turn to jagged tunnels, and strange forms flitting in the corner of her eye.

She runs until her breaths are laboured, and her lungs are burning, and her feet are torn on the sharp stone edges of the mangled flooring. Until she slams into the surface of a thick wooden door, so determined that the sheer force of her impact flings it open, and she tumbles into a chamber lit only by a single bright point in its center.

Her balance fails her. The door crashes off its hinges. She hits the ground, and the breath gets knocked out of her; and then knocked out of her *again*, when she looks up and horror steals it.

The room is tall and wide, a grand hall made up all of darkness. The bright point in the center of it is a lone shaft of light. Motes of red dust, lied dried blood or powdered lyrium, drift through the bottom of it in a strange mist. The shadows are full. She can all but *feel* the shapes in them, the waiting eyes, the hungry whispers. Anger and sorrow and pain. Suffering, eager to cause more of the same; but above all, confused, and wretched, and lost.
This is not what arrests her attention, however.

In the middle of the shaft of light, a pale wolf has been strung up. He is bloodied and beaten, bound in harsh chains that hold him pitilessly; left to drip blood into a growing puddle beneath himself.

*Pride.*

She has to get him down, get him away. To safety. She bolts towards the light, wondering if she could use some kind of magic to break the chains; but before she reaches him, something crashes into her from the side.

It’s like being batted by a massive paw. Bigger than a bear’s. A claw catches on her side, but not sharply enough to rend. She hits the ground, again, and before she can recover, something presses down upon her. Darkness. Looming. In the song resounding through the air, she hears recognition. She is one of them, and not one of them. It knows her, but it cannot remember. Just as it knows-but-cannot-remember the other; except that the other is the *wolf,* and it hates the *wolf.* It is the *wolf* that is to blame. It is the *wolf* that they must hunt, rip, kill, destroy. Stop from being. Make pay the price in blood, because the blood will… the blood will free them.

“No,” she says.

The shape pinning her shifts. She feels more than she sees the beast, then. A jagged, broken, absolutely *massive* wolf. Ripped and torn. It knew, it realized something, when it ceased to be, but could not cease to be. When the broken future was consigned to darkness, so that it could be changed. It realized, but it does not remember anymore *what* it realized. But it let them have him. The others. The lost ones, tearing at the edges of the world. It let them tear at the edges of itself, until they forgot why they even wished to. The *wolf.*

The *wolf,* they hate.

She remembers the hunters chasing *Pride* in the russet wolf’s dream.

The dark future of Redcliffe. As lost as her own. The Solas of that time, who would have realized, when it was all unmade; just as her own had realized, when she spoke to him in the Titan’s heart chamber. *This song isn’t uncommonly discordant to her because there’s too much of it; but because it’s not really from her time.*

“No,” she says.

*Who is that?*

She remembers.

It was the same, up until Redcliffe. So she remembers, Haven. A hand closing around her own. Lifting it towards the rift.

*“Quickly, before more come through!”*

A laugh. A smile. Snowflakes landing in eyelashes, a wry voice, a face turned towards the sky as she tries to heal it. A figure by her side in the Hinterlands. Oh, how strange it must have been for him, to be surrounded by these silent people, with their expressive emotions and their quiet air. All the chaos that had been created by another one of his missteps. She remembers him moving to help tend the wounded refugees, fleeing from the war.

Asking her help in activating the artifacts to measure the Veil.
She remembers promising to protect him.

“*You came here to help, Solas. I won’t let them use that against you.*”

“How would you stop them?”

“However I had to.”

And she remembers Redcliffe. A lone figure in a cell. Riddled with lyrium, dying, but still holding on. Comprehending the situation immediately. Unhesitating in what had to be done, even though it meant his death. His undoing. A whole world’s undoing, but he couldn’t have known what the real cost would be. He never had.

The beast looms closer. The song wavers, but her second heart doesn’t beat any faster. She blinks, and in the darkness, perceives only the faintest shape. Torn fur, twisted muscles. Gaping wounds that cut straight down to bone. A head that is little more than skin stretched over a fractured skull, and sharp teeth with wide gaps, where the rest have been knocked out. A shape without true form; yet the one it can imagine for itself is one in perpetual suffering.

Because that, that is his only constant now.

*Oh, Solas.*

She lifts a shaking hand, and rests it on one of the massive claws pressing her down.

What can she do? This is not her time, not the time of the stolen heart sitting in her ribcage. And even if it was, there is no Titan here. This is not a song she knows, and there is no one to sing it.

What can she do?

There has to be something.

She turns, and looks at Pride. They’re running out of time. He’s hurt, and hanging there, like a still-bleeding corpse. She needs to get him down and away. But she can scarcely leave things like this. There is another Solas, yet, and if she cannot think quickly, both of them will be lost.

“She is not that wolf. He has not done anything to you, and he will not,” she insists. “Please. Solas. Let me go; let me find a way to help you.”

Denial.

She is one of them, and she is not one of them. It knows less of her than it does of the wolf. It knows it must stop the wolf, or else everything will turn to ash and dust. To ruin, and to death. That is all such beasts can create. That is all it is, in the end; ruin and death, turned in on itself. If it must kill her, too, then that is no more of a sacrifice than has already been made.

She closes her eyes.

The claws pressing her down start to sink deeper, biting into her flesh.
With a sharp movement, she closes the hand at her belt around the hilt of her sword, and wrenches it from its sheath. The crackled blade, shining like Fortitude, cuts across her hip even as it bites into the underside of the beast’s paw. It’s an unexpected enough sting that the weight retracts, shadows pulling back, and she rolls, trailing blood behind her as she gets to her feet, whipping the shield from her back.

She staggers into the light. Glances up, briefly, and catches Pride’s gaze. His eyes are glazed with pain, but there is recognition in them.

And fear.

She raises a hand, trying to focus on creating enough energy to break the chains on him. Well before she can, though, she has to turn on her heel as something moves in the corner of her eye. Her shield barely gets up in time. *Wham.* The shadows slam into the shaft of light, striking the surface, pushing her back. One of her feet skids in the blood of blood. Her shoulders strain, her hip burns. There’s no hope of holding that kind of weight at bay, so rather than digging in her heels, she turns, trying to deflect it off to the side instead.

Her blade slashes through the darkness. A practiced move, good for fighting big opponents, like giants. But giants are flesh and bone. When this blow lands, it sparks. Her sword jerks, as if struck by lightning, and in the shadows, she sees eyes. Dozens upon dozens of eyes, rolling over one another, and mouths that part only to scream in a pained symphony, just slightly off key with the one hammering at the back of her mind.

Pride’s chains rattle. His blood flows more freely.

She curses.

“I do not want to fight you!” she says.

It does not understand. Fighting? This is not a fight. This is suffering; this is what is, what always shall be. All it can – all they will – know for certain.

She grits her teeth, and curses again.

“Let me help end it!”

Fear. Fear, so toxic and absolute it chokes her, seems to fill the air. The shadows surge forth again, but she’s ready for them this time. A blackened wolf’s skull slams into the edge of her shield, and she braces better for the impact to her sword arm, cleaving through it as she would a spirit more than a beast. Cutting down energy, relying on the crackling enchantments in her blade. The shadows split. The air shrieks as more cut through, towards the shaft of light, and she is forced to step outside of it to avoid being knocked off of her feet.

Pride howls, and struggles.

But she recovers swiftly, even as something sharp lashes at her heels. She cuts it away, and tells herself it’s like fighting in the thick of things, at the mouth of a large rift. Demons of all kinds pouring forth. Never quite sure which will turn up next. Terror and Despair and Pride and Rage; spirits broken by the shock of a world torn utterly alien to them, of a status quo torn asunder.

She keeps her guard up, uses her sword sparingly. There’s no way to tell the shadows apart from the wolf. No way to be certain if she is ever hitting a singular target, or just the whole of the darkness.
Redcliffe.

She remembers finding him in that cell. Remembers how it tore at her; how badly she wanted to save him. Why couldn’t she save him? Even then, even before she had ever kissed him, ever reached for him, she had seen something in him.

Even then, he had been suffering. And he not stopped. Not for a moment; captured by Corypheus forces, and caged until she freed him, only to watch him die so she could go back. So she could ‘fix’ it.

So she could consign them all, unwittingly, to a fate worse than death.

The light flickers.

A massive beast, with eyes like red cracked crystal, and black fur and bones, protruding wounds and warped flesh, surges straight into her. Teeth scrape across her shield. She flies backwards so sharply that she’s not only knocked into the shadows again, but straight into the far side of the chamber. It’s a struggle just to keep her shield up, to keep the snapping jaws from closing over one of its edges and wrenching it away. Her back is crushed against the wall. The air is made of a screaming, maddened cacophony.

She closes her eyes.

This cannot go on.

Her second heart beats, and her muscles burn, and she is so tired of this. Of all of this.

She pushes back.

It’s like straining against a stone wall, but she does it. There’s an echo in her chest as she plants her feet. The heart of a mountain is in her; steadiness should come relatively easily, one would think. She holds her stance, and pushes, and pushes again, until the blackened skull is forced back towards the light. Until she is standing in it one more, slamming her shield against the snarling, suffering beast.

“It’s not your fault,” she says, slipping into common, staring into hollow eyes. “It’s not your fault. This one is mine. You see? No wolf did this. You died, just like all the others. I was the one who went back. I was the one who changed it. No wolf. Me.”

Suffering.

It understands suffering.

So does she.

“Forgive me, Solas.”

She brings up her sword, and cleaves through the shadows of it, cutting it back; buying an opening to finally wrench at the chains above Pride, curling what magic she can manage into them. It makes her breath strain, costs her concentration as she tries to fall back towards him. Something screeches above them, in the shadows past the shaft of light. Something charges into her again, leaving her straining against it with her shield.

The chains snap.
Pride falls.

She shoves outwards, swings wildly, and then drops her sword as she curls sideways to catch the falling wolf. He falls into her grasp. Bloodied and shuddering. She curls, anticipating another attack, and is rewarded for her foresight when the darkness comes roaring in. The light goes out entirely. All she can see is the gleam from her weapons. She folds herself over Pride as something rakes across her back, and reaches to take up her sword again. Her hang closes across the hilt. Something claws across her skin, but she only hisses, and then swings her weapon to chase it back.

This is not good.

Barrier. She can do a barrier. Her heartbeats echo as she lifts one up, and not a moment too soon. The magical surface shudders as broken teeth crash against it. As screaming mouths and bloodied eyes stare into it. She strains, holding it fast, and stares down at Pride.

The wolf shudders. He clenches his jaw, but as she watches, a wash of magic spreads over them. Some of the wounds on him begin to close. The pain in her back eases, and she spares some annoyance that he healed *that* when he could have healed *himself*.

“The floor,” he says. “Break the floor.”

She grits her teeth, and in a move driven more by desperation than sense, she takes up her blade and drives it into the ground beside them. In the real world, the move probably would have cost her a perfectly good sword; or else just jarred her arm very badly. But though this place feels real, they’re still dreaming. So instead she drags her weapon through the floor, and it’s like cutting open a wound on the side of some massive beast. The ground shudders.

They drop through the opening just as her barrier breaks, and the shadows come chasing after them.

The floor gives way to another chamber. Falling into it is like climbing into it; they cross onto the ceiling, over twisted fragments of the memory-castle. Broken chandeliers lined with red lyrium, and swirling floors that arc over their heads, suspending piles of rubble. Pride’s claws scrabble over the uneven surface. The darkness follows them like a shrieking storm. It tears at them, reaching tendrils that seem to catch Pride more than her, pouring as much *from* him as in pursuit of him.

Because the taint is already in him, she realizes.

With a curse she stops, and turns her weapons back onto the encroaching tide of lost souls at their back. If she can fight the Blight with her damn sword, then she will. A thousand Grey Wardens would have given everything they had for just that opportunity. She cleaves at it. Catches the monstrous wolf against her shield again. It is not their fault, none of them, but she cannot let them have him. She will protect him.

But this, too, is a version of him.

“What are you doing?” Pride calls, skittering to a halt when he realizes she’s no longer with him.

“Run!” she tells him.

Her answer is a snapped curse, snarling, as the darkness drags at him again. She moves, pivoting to cut it from him. It’s only a moment, but it gives her opponent an unexpected opening. Something hard and heavy knocks down the top of her shield. She can only let out a gasp as massive jaws close around the flesh over her left arm and shoulder. Broken teeth dig into her flesh.
"No!"

The snarling cry, snapping through the air like a whip, actually seems to stall the massive wolf.

It seems to stall them all, in fact.

Pride stands, four legs braced as if to charge; heaving with the force of his breaths. Eyes narrowed, blood still matting his pale fur.

“You were me, once,” Pride says, fierce and low. His head shakes. “Do you truly remember nothing? No glimmer of what was? You hold… you hold one of the People in your jaws.”

“Pride,” she says.

He ignores her, keeping his hard focus on the wolf still clamped down around her arm.

“It has always been for the People. Has it not? And now they suffer, and you bring them more suffering. Is that what you wish for? My blood will not fix this. Just as yours could not. Tearing more pieces from her cannot fix this, and never could. She is not yours to make suffer. Nor am I,” he declares, with a resoluteness that catches her breath. “You were me, once. I know precious little of myself anymore, but I know I would not surrender to such failure. I would not resign my People to endless suffering.”

The shadows ripple at her back. There is a note of hesitation. Only the smallest note, but it’s enough to keep them still.

“Let her go,” Pride says.

The teeth clamp down on her a little harder.

Pride snarls.

“Traitor to the People!” he snaps. “Betrayer. That is what they called you and that is what you are! I saw what you did. Even now, you do not know your real crime. Even now, you think to hunt me, you think to hurt her. You think to drag everything into the darkness with you! But you were me. What are we, at the core of our being? What sits at the heart of pride, what persists in that space without memory that lets you hold that form, where all others become the same shades of suffering? What are you, wolf?”

With a snarl, the wolf tosses her aside, and charges for Pride. She cries out, nearly dropping her shield as the flesh of her shoulder is torn, as she is left to crash against the ground.

When she scrambles back onto her feet, the dark wolf is looming over the bright one. Tattered and broken and massive, over bloodied and beaten and small. Pride stands his ground, staring down the shadows. Teeth bared and eyes hard. Her heart is in her throat. And yet, in that moment, for all that they are not evenly matched, it seems to her as if Pride holds the advantage. Holds some invisible sway, like a chain wrapped around the other’s wounded throat.

“What is it that cannot be lost, even in the darkest of places?” Pride asks. “What is it that we can never completely cast aside, even when we try? Despite all your efforts not to let yourself have it, it is still there. Isn’t it?”

Riddles? she thinks, wondering just what she is watching unfold. Whatever it is seems to be working, for now. She’s entirely sure how long that will last.
The massive wolf leans down.

*Solas,* she thinks, and her heart breaks at the battered form; even as she readies her blade. She’s too far away, but maybe, if she can just get back to Pride in time…

“Hope,” says Pride.

She stills.

The two wolves stare one another down for a moment that could have lasted forever, and could have lasted only for one very long second. Then the air shifts. Pride stands, unfurling from the form of a wolf into that of an elf; still bruised and bloodied, but clad only in his simple, silvery greys. As she watches, he extends a hand out towards the looming beast. He rests it, briefly, on the shadowy fur. A single pale touch against the darkness.

The monsters vanishes.

The shadows recede.

She blinks, and all at once, the castle is gone.

In its place, there is the Fade. The bright landscape, shifting colours and changeable surroundings, no longer wrought from the iron of her memories. A shifting, open sky stretches overhead. The ground beneath them is a riot of colours, and vibrancy.

Pride looks at his hand. Then towards her.

“It was me,” he says, simply. As if he has just figured something new out in all of this.

“I know,” she replies, wincing as her shoulder throbs, and blood trickles down her arm.

Pride’s eyes widen. He strides towards her, putting an arm around her and then wincing in turn as her hand accidentally brushes some injury of his own. He whispers, and another wash of magic – weak from over-use – pours over them.

“I think we just bled all over your bedsheets,” she says.

He blinks at her. Opens his mouth, but she cuts him off with another question.

“What did you do? What happened?” she asks.

“I… it was, like a spirit,” he says. “Corrupted. It was me, corrupted. Once I realized that… I finally understood how it all kept happening the way it did. I knew that if I could understand, then *he* could. Because he was me.”

She stares at him.

“Hope?” she asks.

He shrugs.

“What else could persist like that, against all reason?” he wonders. “Even if I am wrong, the concept alone has bought us a reprieve.”

A reprieve. Because Pride is still Blighted, and will still, presumably, need to do things like sleep.
She lets out a breath, and leans into him as much as she can.

“I need to put a bell on you or something,” she says.

When she wakes, a moment later, it’s to the sound of Pride’s pained laughter.
Love

She feels a shudder of pain course through her as she wakes more fully, and realizes that her injuries have, indeed, followed her. Moving a little, she hisses with unexpected pain as she shifts her arms. There are some deep gouges still in her shoulder, and bruises aplenty. She’s wrapped really thoroughly around Pride, blood sinking into the blankets, all of their accumulated injuries having added to the mess. He looks at her, and his brief surge of laughter dies down. Love is still with them. The places where the spirit has wound around her seem to hurt marginally less than the rest.

Pride shifts. She has to bite back another hiss of pain as she moves to disentangle herself from him; to see what the damage to both of them is. The adrenaline has worn off – if it ever really affected her here – but her senses still feel sharp. Any numbness she might have experienced thanks to the need to run and move and act is gone, leaving the pain to close in without inhibition.


“Yes!” Love chirps.

For a moment she’s confused. Why would Pride be soliciting Love’s help now, of all times? The spirit sinks towards him, and confusion is replaced by brief, reflexive alarm, as Love’s tendrils gleam and vanish. There is still some knee-jerk disquiet in her at seeing a spirit so casually do what looks, more or less, like possession. But she reminds herself that things work differently now, and the disquiet doesn’t last long. Some of Love’s tendrils stay clasped around her left arm, too. It’s strange but surprisingly reassuring. Like if she grasped them and pulled, she could drag Love back out if she needed to.

Pride’s skin gains an uncommonly rosy hue, but a moment later, realizes what he was getting at as he begins to cast healing spells.

She supposes they do look decidedly alarming, bloodied as they are.

Pain aside, she thinks it’s more mess than real damage at this point, though. Their blood has seeped into the sheets around them, but Pride’s healing spells in the Fade seem to have done their job in the real world, too – just as the damage dealt to them had.

Still. She finds herself at a peculiar loss for words as she becomes aware, again, of how close they are. As Pride runs a careful hand down her shoulder, his gaze intent on knitting the tears in her flesh back together. The air between them is warm and crackling with magic, aided by the helpful spirit still twisting between them. His eyes look a little strange.

There are pink flecks in his pupils, she realizes.

After a few minutes, the blood stains start to shrink away, too. She’s not sure if that’s Pride’s doing, or Love’s, or if it’s part of some built-in laundering spell. Probably that last one, she thinks. The spikes of pain, the sting of her split flesh, eases bit by bit. As it does she becomes increasingly aware of a pulling sensation in her chest.

Not unpleasant. Not even persistent. It’s just, there’s something there. Something she can feel. It seems to course through her veins, spill back out of her again, through the places where Love
touches her. And where Pride does, too. It’s a strangely familiar sensation. It aches, a little. Like an old bruise. She thinks of her second heartbeat, but that’s not it.

Wrong kind of heartache.

Pride finishes casting his spells.

His hand settles onto her shoulder. She’s still very close to him. The solid weight of him sinks into the bed beside her. One of her legs is thrown over his, and her palm is resting atop his chest; her other arm trapped between them. Neither of them are wearing very much, she realizes. She’d gone after him in her sleeping clothes, and he’s… not wearing a shirt, at the very least. The rest of him is tucked under the blankets, out of sight.

The first trembling fingers of daylight are creeping into the room. Everything looks pale and soft. Especially Pride’s skin.

Beautiful, she thinks. Then she snaps herself out of it, and gingerly starts to disentangle herself from him. Pulling back her leg and scooting further towards the edge of the mattress.

His fingers flex atop her shoulder. His other arm slides around her.

“Wait,” he asks.

She pauses.

Tilting her head up, she looks into his eyes again. Love’s still there, still wrapped over her and in him. She spares a moment to wonder if something’s gone wrong. But then Pride moves closer still. Her breath stops as he presses his brow against hers. She swallows. A sigh rushes out of him, fluttering across her cheeks. The pull in her chest flares, sparking like someone has tossed a lit match onto it, and for a moment, she sees a light rush through Love’s tendrils.

“See?” the spirit’s voice whispers, softly.

She’s not sure what she’s supposed to be seeing. Not really. But she gets the impression that the spirit isn’t speaking to her right now. That it’s not for her benefit that this pull is being emphasized; that she’s not the one who needs to notice something about it. It’s already familiar to her. It’s already something she knows, and something she has known for a long while, perhaps. Maybe not something easy. But something she understands.

“Oh,” Pride says. His voice breaks, just a bit. There’s an echo in it.

She swallows.

“You sound like Love,” she tells him. “The spells are done with. Should you two still be all – merged like that?”

Pride lets out another breath. She goes still as his hand trails up from her shoulder to rest on her cheek. As he shifts, and leans back a little bit so he can look at her again. His expression is painfully familiar.

Longing.

She knows what longing looks like on his face, so very well.

“Pride?” she prompts, starting to really worry.
As she does, though, the air around him shimmers a bit. Rosy, ropey pink tendrils pull up and out of him. It’s strange to watch. For a moment it looks as if he’s more or less tied up in a ball of giant ribbons. But it’s a relief, too, as Love disentangles itself. The pink flecks retreat from Pride’s eyes, and the pull on her chest eases up considerably. The spirit puddles onto the floor, stretching and rolling a little until it begins to return to its usual shape. A head dips up. Two eyes open, as Love’s features regain their shape.

It blinks.

Then it smiles. And with surprisingly little prompting, it sinks away, down through the floor.

She watches it depart over Pride’s shoulder. When it’s gone, she manages a baffled shake of her head – but at least things don’t seem to have gone wrong. And she got him back, again, in one piece. Still Blighted, but whole. For now. Her hand reflexively grasp at him, as if to reassure her of his solidity. Of the pulse still thrumming beneath his skin.

When she turns to look at Pride again, the breath gets chased out of her all over again.

He’s so close.

The early dawn light from the window spills across his face, catching on the bridge of his nose. The tops of his cheeks. His freckles look like a faint spray, dusted over his features, split in places by the pale lines of his vallaslin. There are two of them, she knows, that rest just on the tip of his right ear. Faint little brown dots that no one would ever notice, unless they got very, very close. She could see them right now, if she looked. But her gaze zeroes in elsewhere.

His lips are right there. She could move just the tiniest bit forward and brush them with her own. She almost does. Her heartbeat speeds up, and her skin warms, and she wants to so, so badly. To just kiss him. Taste him. Have him, even if only for a moment.

But that’s not what he wants. He wants to do things a certain way, in a certain order. He doesn’t trust her feelings for him. He’s not ready, and might never be.

She remembers that, and stops herself. It’s not just about what she wants. She looks up to see his gaze half-lidded, his cheeks flushed. His hands are still warm against her. One at her back, and the other resting at the side of her neck. However intent her own gaze had been, it seems she had been under a similar degree of scrutiny. Pride’s lips part, just the tiniest bit, as he stares at her.

Move back, she tells herself.

His hand is warm across her spine, and his touch is gentle at her neck.

Moving away right now would be like pulling out her own fingernails, she thinks. She’ll have to wait for him to do it. Or for the moment to pass.

But neither of those things happen. Instead, Pride licks his lips, and catches her gaze.

“May I kiss you?” he asks. His voice is little more than a whisper.

It’s embarrassing how thoroughly that question seems to blow away every good and practical thought she’d just been having. She very nearly pounces on him just for asking.

She forces herself to keep thinking, though. To hang on.

“Yes. But are you sure you really want to?” she asks him, carefully, matching his own quiet tones.
An odd, pained little sound rushes out of him. An instant later he tilts his mouth up, and he presses his lips against hers. Soft and warm, a gentle brush that makes her forget everything else, just for a moment, just because it’s really happening between them. It’s a little clumsy. He collides with her top lip, nearly hits her nose instead, and wavers a bit, just pushing at her before dropping back down. As if he’s not totally sure of what he’s doing. It occurs to her that maybe he’s not unsure because he doesn’t really want this, but because he’s… well.

Because he’s never really done this.

She looks into his eyes a moment. Sees the note of apprehension, just at the edges of his expression, and utterly loses all hope of holding back. This is it. Restraint be damned.

Leaning in, she kisses him back with every ounce of longing in her.

She captures his lips, coaxes them into parting, and sweeps her tongue into the warm cavern of his mouth. He gasps. She swallows it, pressing flush against him, her pulse racing. She tilts her head, and gets her hand onto his cheek, gently easing him into a better angle. His fingers curl tightly into her shirt. She pulls back, just a little, drawing out the motion before she finds herself diving in again. Swept away, nearly intoxicated by the warm sweetness of his mouth. It sends a bolt of arousal straight through her. A shock of awareness of his every move, every shifting muscle, every noise, of all the places where they are touching. The weight of his arms around her. The warmth of his skin.


With monumental effort, she manages to press a final, lingering kiss to his lips, and then withdraw.

He’s crushed into the sunset-coloured pillows beneath her. His face is as red as she’s ever seen it, and his pupils are wide. His breaths are a little ragged.

His looks at her mouth.

“My apologies,” she says, roughly. “I think I got a little carried away.”

Pride licks his lips.

Her own gaze zeroes in on the pink flash of his tongue. She almost swoops back down on him again, like some sort of insatiable beast.

Oh, this was probably a bad idea.

She’s never going to be able to ignore his mouth again, now.

…Or anything else about him, for that matter. Not that she was doing very well at it before, but still. She’d had some success at it.

“She’s never going to be able to ignore his mouth again, now.

“Please,” he says, clearing his throat. “Please feel free to get carried away.”

Then he leans up, and kisses her again. Their noses bump together. He falls back down onto the pillows again, an apology on his lips, but it will be a rare day indeed when she’ll let him feel bad for kissing her. She follows him down. Focusing more or less on getting a better angle, she climbs fully on top of him, essentially straddling him. She cups his face, and kisses him until they’re both breathless. Until her lips feel like they’re on fire, and she’s managed to trail them over every angle of his mouth; down the corners of it, and across his jaw, and onto his neck, before coming back up again. She nips at him just gently, and then plants soft kisses wherever her teeth have touched. She
works her way up, and presses her lips to the freckles on the bridge of his nose, and then goes higher, and at last rests them against his brow.

“Pride,” she says. Her voice comes out a little broken, and unexpectedly reverent.

Any further endearments seem to jam in her throat, though; not quite so certain of their welcome.

His hands unclench from her clothes. In an unexpected move, he pulls her sidewards, turning and dragging her back down onto the bed. She lets out a soft ‘oof’ of surprise. They’re side-by-side again. Pride pulls her close, burrowing his face against her neck. His breaths are ragged. His eyelashes brush against her skin. Somehow one of her hands manages to work its way across the side of his scalp, and her fingers tangle into his hair.

It’s very thick, and very soft.

“I thought…” he says.

She swallows.

Waits to see what he needs to say.

His lips brush against the side of her neck. So careful where they touch the point of her pulse.

“I thought, if you looked at me and saw only a shade of someone who has been lost, then nothing good could come of this. It would hurt us both. But it would be fitting of fate, from what I have seen, for it to be so cruel. Why it would grant me any mercies? When it has brought you such pain, when it has seen to the ruination of this world, and its restoration at the cost of your future. I feared I was only an echo to you. Perhaps a comforting one, at times; but nothing of my own merit.”

She closes her eyes.

The thought comes, unbidden, of poems in the Deep Roads.

Of a book of stories, given over a meal.

Of a white wolf, fur tarnishing to silver. Revelations narrowing eyes that once looked more widely at the world.

She loves him. She always loves him. That she loves every version of him does not change what has built up between just the two of them. That it started from an echo does not mean it stayed there. Or even that it ever really was just that.

“I love you,” she says. Her voice has turned rough. The corners of her eyes are stinging.

*Please, please, believe it.*

He kisses her neck again. His lips linger for a moment, this time. It sucks in a deep breath, and something inside of him seems to unclench.

“I love you as well,” he tells her.

The words feel like they burn through her. Like they break something inside of her open, something sharp and jagged that needed to be broken, if only so that what was inside might, at last, be freed. She closes her eyes, and tightens her grip on him. Clutches at his hair and his shoulders as she presses her lips to his temple.
“I wish it was simpler,” he admits.

*I am sorry,* she finds herself thinking. *I am so sorry to have laid this all upon you. I am sorry you are tied to it. I am sorry I could not save you, twice over. I am sorry that part of me is so glad to have you here, now, like this, when there is still so much suffering. I am sorry you have been made to suffer again; I am sorry I am such a poor champion for your heart.*

“It is what it is,” she finds herself saying, instead.

Pride lets out a long sigh, filled with a sort of resigned agreement that is, somehow, less dramatic than it could be.

“I want to be by your side, no matter what comes.”

*No matter what comes.*

She closes her eyes and leans into him.

For a while they simply lay as they are, wrapped up in one another, in this further break with whatever plans either of them might have had. Maybe they should just give up on planning, she thinks. Maybe they should just run headlong into chaos, fists swinging, hoping for the best.

Probably wouldn’t work out any better than the plans do, in the end. However increasingly tempting the prospect becomes.

The light in the room increases. There’s an ever-increasing warmth of arousal in her from Pride’s proximity, but she tamps down on it. They have things to do, still, and she has some self-control left.

Somewhere.

…Theoretically.

It takes her a moment to dig through her internal reserves and find it. But when she does, she at last pulls herself away from him. Not before stealing another kiss, though. This one is quicker. Brief but insistent, as if to memorize the feel of his lips, so that she won’t forget it when they’re no longer close by.

Then she sits up, arranging herself onto the edge of his bed. It takes him a moment to follow her. When he does, he moves as if he’s tipsier than he had been the night before.

Her brows furrow in concern.

“That was not just… residual energy from, you know, Love, was it?” she suddenly wonders.

He blinks at her.

“What?” he asks.

She bites her lip, and shrugs. His gaze fixes on her teeth. His fingers twitch.

“You just let a Spirit of Love inhabit you a little while ago. I only want to make sure you were not somehow addled, I suppose.”

Comprehension dawns, and then softens into something fonder.
“No,” Pride says, offering a reassuring smile, and a shake of his head. “That is not how spirits like Love work.”

Relief floods through her.

“Good,” she says. Then she clears her throat, just a bit, and shifts in place. “I guess it, ah, showed you… something?” The thought her feelings may have been laid bare is an odd one. Not necessarily bad, she supposes. But strange, to have had a proxy for such a thing. To have been exposed in such a roundabout way.

Pride reaches over. His hand seems to aim for her shoulder, at first, before changing courses at the last minute, and caressing her cheek instead. The backs of his knuckles brush over her skin. Then he cups the side of her face. His warm palm resting there a moment. She almost laughs when she finds herself drawn back to him.

Between the two of them, they’re never going to get out of this bed.

“People describe love like a flash of inspiration. Or like a rope, bound by destiny. As if it is made only of a singular element,” he says, musingly. “But it is not that. If it is a rope, then it is one made of many threads, all woven together. Each shared moment, each insight or new depth of affection creates another strand. Love showed me some of what you felt, but only so it could reveal to me what I had missed, in my fear and self-doubt. Even if some of the threads between us are… complicated, that does not mean all of them are. What exists between us exists between us.”

He frames her face with his hands, and presses their foreheads together.

“But I am sorry. I should not have encouraged such an invasion of your privacy. I should have made it clear what was happening, at the very least. Please, forgive me,” he asks.

She lets out a long breath.

“Forgiven,” she grants. After all, she’d had some inkling of what was going on, too. But it had felt very compelling in the moment. And she doesn’t mind, really, even if part of her has been laid conspicuously bare. It’s a part of her that she wants him to see.

“Sorry,” a small, familiar voice drifts up from under the bed.

They both still.

Leaning back, she looks down at the mattress.

“Love?” she asks. “Are you spying on us from under the bed?”

There’s a long, conspicuous pause.

“…No?” Love suggests.

With a sigh, Pride shifts away from her to turn and lean down, peering underneath the carved frame of his bed. The change in position gives her a particularly excellent view of his back. The expanse of bare skin, the dusting of freckles across the backs of his shoulders, stretching a little as his muscles move. He’s in a loose pair of pants, she realizes. They’re slung low on his hips, just barely covering the curve of his backside. Another spray of freckles dots his skin there, too; they’re paler than most. Faint little spots that vanish beneath his waistband, and trail up towards his spine. She wants to run her fingers over them.
“I can see you, Love,” Pride says.

“Yes! You can! Because I helped,” Love chirps back. “You are doing such a good job! You should keep going.”

With a sigh, she tears her gaze away from Pride – no small feat – and finally manages to get up off the bed. She kneels down beside it, instead, spying the familiar bits and pieces of a spirit half-sunken into the floor. Love moves a lot like Sorrow, she notes. Swimming through the background of things.

Well, when it’s not overtly cuddling her.

“Come here,” she says, offering the temptation of her arm.

The spirit wavers, for a moment. But then clings onto her, and she pulls it out of its hiding spot.

“You should go back to the tavern,” she says, standing. As soon as she’s on her feet, Love reaches for Pride, too, winding around the both of them like a happy ball of eels. “What if something happened to it while you were gone?”

“The tavern is fine,” Love says. “I can tell. Ess, too.”

The spirit puddles around her shoulders. It tries to pull them closer again, but it also seems much more contented than usual in that regard.

“Well. At least that is one less thing to worry about,” she decides.

Love nods.

“You should go back to thinking about Pride’s spots!” it suggests. “Because you love him, and you love his spots. Tiny little dots.”

Pride colours.

She runs a hand down her face.

“I think the moment has passed,” she says, wryly. “We have a lot to do, besides. We will need to find a place to... read. And sort some things out. And apologize to Ess.”

Pride clears his throat, and inclines his head.

“Of course,” he agrees. There’s a definite spark of something in his eyes, though. Pleasure.

Just... genuine pleasure.

It’s been a while since she’s seen that.

The sigh of it is so compelling, she can’t help but move a step closer. Love goes quiet as she brushes his cheek, trailing her thumb gently across his skin. Over the lines of vallaslin, and, yes, the freckles underneath it. His skin is still flushed and rosy.

*My heart.*

The words stick in her throat.

So she leans in and steals one more kiss instead, trying to press them to his lips through hers,
before she straightens, and forces herself to leave the room.

Love goes with her, stretching through the walls as it tries to hold onto Pride, too, before finally withdrawing with an unhappy noise.

“Go back!” the spirit asks.

“I have to get dressed,” she says, heading through to her own room.

“No! Why?” Love complains. “You should go back and kiss him some more! And say all the nice thoughts you have. I will go away. Properly this time. I promise.”

She gives the spirit a thoroughly unconvinced look.

“…I am not good at lying,” Love admits.

With a sigh, she sets about the challenging task of getting ready for the day.

~

Arrangements in Arlathan are different when one is not staying in the household of a high-ranking evanuris, she finds. Rather than being served breakfast as guests, or being expected to go hunting for it, they have to make their way to one of the city’s communal dining halls. Pride emerges from his rooms shortly after she does, dressed and composed. She checks him over with a slightly different eye this time. The Blight is still there, but the spread of it is less aggressive than it could be.

She wonders if it’s the environment. The connection to the Fade, and the magic that pours from it. Or some physical difference in the elves of this time. Or something else. There had been signs that the ancient elves had tried to manipulate the Blight in many ways, in her own time. That they had been more adept at mitigating its symptoms than later generations. Mages often seemed to have some knack for that; Alexius had certainly done his best to keep Felix from succumbing.

Whatever the case, she’s grateful for it, for now. They need time to get to Andruil’s territory, and... figure something out.

Pride shows herself and Curiosity to the communal dining hall, and eats with them, but then he has to leave to take care of things at Mythal’s holdings, lest Thenvunin or someone else come looking for him. She’s sorely tempted to go with him, if only to make sure he doesn’t suffer some grievous retribution for the scene outside Mythal’s chambers.

“I do not think that would be wise,” he says. “Neither of us has proven particularly adept at keeping a clear head where the other is concerned. If I am punished, it will pass. If you kill someone in my defense, however, we will have a far larger problem on our hands.”

That... is true. And reasonable. Though it still grates on her, and she almost goes with him anyway. It’s Curiosity who finally settles the matter.

“I will go, too,” her friend says. “I have duties as well, and I will look after Pride.”

“I do not need looking after,” Pride protests.
Curiosity pats his shoulder.

It almost turns around, then, as Pride worries over leaving her alone. She tries to reassure him with a promise to take Love back to Ess’ tavern, and wait there until he’s done whatever it is he needs to do. She can offer apologies for the night before and make certain Uthvir didn’t cause too much trouble in the meanwhile. Then, she reasons, they can meet back up and find a safe place to decipher the contents of Haninan’s message.

They’re still arguing about it at the dining hall when a tentative voices breaks through their conversation.

“I could go with you.”

Almost as one, all three of them turn around.

The dining hall is a wide, open building, nestled between an upper and lower level of the city. The ceiling is a curved dome, white and shining, with circular glass windows set into artful patterns throughout it. Broad archways lead out towards the street. A fountain filled with colour-changing energy – something not quite fire, but not quite water – serves as the centerpiece of the hall. It’s surrounded by long, pale tables, piled high with food. As near as she can tell, the kitchens are a level beneath the area. The elves who work the hall wear Sylaise’s vallaslin, and they all come up, burdened with platters, from the stairs that vanish beneath the shining, swirl-marked floors.

It’s a bustling, if airy, segment of the city. There are enough faces coming and going that it would be easy to overlook most of them. She thinks this is probably the only reason that young Ghilashim has been able to approach their group without drawing the attention of nearly ever elf in the nearby vicinity, as seems to be standard for someone his age.

He’s abandoned his cloak from the night before. Now he is dressed in fair white clothing that makes her think of Pride when she first met him. Though, not quite so fine. A pair of silvery boots reach up to his knees. His tunic is billowy, and patterned with textured flowers and vines that shimmer when he moves. A glassy wolf’s head pendant hangs from his neck.

As they look at him, the young man shuffles from one foot to another.

“That is, um. I am sorry. I did not mean to listen in, but I saw you and I thought I would come and make certain everything went well for you, and that you slept well. But if you are worried, I could go with her,” he says, primarily addressing Pride, it seems.

Pride smiles at him.

“We would not wish to trouble you,” he says. “I am certain you have lessons to attend.”

Ghilashim colours, noticeably, and ducks his head.

“Not this morning,” he replies. “I am free to explore the city.”

Pride glances at her.

She shrugs.

It couldn’t hurt, she supposes. And if it reassures him about her safety… well, she doesn’t think many elves, at least, would start something in front of Ghilashim, who seems to occupy a sort of ‘young elf’ bubble of safety and positive behaviour.
“Thank you. That would be very kind,” she tells him.

“It is no trouble,” Ghilashim assures Pride’s shoes.

Before she can bring herself to leave, she reaches over and catches Pride’s hand. Squeezes it.

“Be careful,” she asks.

“You as well,” he replies.

When she looks back at Ghilashim, he’s glancing uncertainly between them. But when she begins to head for the street, fall obligingly into step alongside her. Love doesn’t put up a fuss, this time, letting its tendrils drift away from Pride and even from herself, weaving across the ground and clambering over the walls in the wake of her steps.

“It is funny when you realize we just sent a twenty-six year-old to look after a thirty-one year-old,” she hears Curiosity say to Pride, just as they pass through the archway.

Pride makes a pained noise.

In the daytime, Arlathan’s streets are colourful and bustling, but also distinctly well-organized. Traffic along the streets is divided into lanes, split by gently glowing patterns, that keep the elves traversing them flowing in an orderly fashion. The higher in the city one goes, the brighter and bolder the appearances of its denizens seems to be. She wonders if there are laws that ensure that, or if it’s just some unwritten rule that everyone, nevertheless, deigns to follow.

In broad daylight, Ghilashim’s clothes soak up the sunlight, so that they turn a faintly cream colour instead of pure white. The two of them don’t speak much at first. A few passersby stop them to speak to Ghilashim. Love cuddles up to her when they do; it seems to have the effect of making everyone more amused by the spirit’s antics, and less prone to noticing her own conspicuous lack of emotional presence.

No one questions her, thankfully. She supposes it’s not so strange to see one servant of Mythal in the company of another, even if you don’t recognize who it is.

But eventually they work their way down to the greyer streets. Ghilashim beckons her through a shortcut between two buildings, that passes through a small, blossom-filled garden. Dropping of the waist-height fence lets them down onto a winding, shaded road. All grey, save for the yellow flower petals that the wind sends spiralling onto it. The air smells sweet.

It’s quiet. The spires of the city seem more distant, and from this angle, when she lifts her head, she can see straight through to the vivid blue of the sky.

A few peaceful white clouds drift across it.

“So, how long have you known Pride?” Ghilashim asks her, breaking the quiet.

She glances at him. He seems calmer without the subject of his interest around, though still distinctly nervous.

“Several months,” she admits.

He blinks, obviously a little taken aback.

“You must be new to Mythal’s accompaniment, then,” he reasons. “Did you do something…
auspicious? To gain notice? I would like to join Mythal’s inner group, but it will be difficult, now that I am grown. I will have to accomplish something important to merit it.”

There is a wistful note in his voice. Longing. It reminds her of the way the newly blooded warriors and hunters in her clan would talk about restoring Arlathan, or establishing a new home for their people. Big dreams that none of them ever truly believed were attainable, or at least, not as neatly and tidily as imagination would have it.

Funny, to hear such a tone spilling from the lips of someone living in Arlathan itself.

“It was not so much what I did as what I am,” she admits.

Ghilashim nods.

“I asked around about that,” he tells her. “No one really seems to agree on what you are. Though they all say that Pride likes you. Someone even said that… that he is in love with you. Is that true?”

Love, who had been trailing across the street behind them up until then, decides to chime in.

“Yes!” it declares.

Ghilashim glances back towards the spirit. His cheeks flush.

She sighs. But even with the morning’s declarations and kisses still fresh in her mind, the confirmation makes a rush of something warm flood through her. He loves her. Maybe not… maybe not as surely or as strangely as she loves him, but even if it might not be sensible, the knowledge is welcome.

“How did you get him to fall in love with you so fast?” Ghilashim asks her. He looks like he’s caught somewhere between envy and fascination, and like he can’t quite make sense of it all.

She raises an eyebrow at him.

The colour in his face darkens further.

Love laughs, and works its way forward. It climbs up the backs of Ghilashim’s legs, twisting and winding and nearly tripping him, before it settles onto his shoulders. Resting its head over top of his, like a playful older sibling, or affectionate parent.


Ghilashim frowns.

“But how could you connect to someone without time to do it?” he grumbles, just shy of pouting.

“Little baby Ghilashim, in his parents’ arms, small and new and already there are so many connections. Mother’s eyes, and father’s hair, and tiny fingers that grip larger ones. So many little things to find, so many new bonds born from one second to the next. Tethers woven in an instant, that might last forever,” Love replies, with a deep and contented sigh.

Ghilashim, if anything, just seems even more mortified.

“I am not a baby anymore!” he insists.

“I know. I was explaining,” Love replies, unperturbed.
“I am fully grown!” the young elf nevertheless reiterates.

“Of course you are,” she says, trying to nip the non-argument in the bud before someone inevitably gets worked up.

Ghilashim gives her a wary look.

“I am,” he says.

“You are twenty-six, right?” she replies. At his nod, she nods back. “Twenty-six, with blood writing on your face. You might not have done much with it yet, but yes, you are grown.”

The wary look on his face remains. He narrows his eyes at her, as if he is trying to find a trick in something she said. Which would be an accomplishment, considering there isn’t one. He is acting so much like a young man, newly come into adulthood, that she doubts she could think of him as anything else; whatever this world might expect from someone his age.

Of course, his behaviour might be more in line with someone who was seventeen or so, rather than nearly ten years past that, but still. The point stands.

“How old are you?” Ghilashim asks her.

“Fully grown,” she replies, with a smile. “A bit older than you.”

He snorts.

“Obviously,” he says. “Everyone is older than me.”

“Not Charity,” Love chirps.

The street they’re on reaches a turn, then, back onto wider roads. Distracted by Love’s assertion, Ghilashim starts asking the friendly spirit questions about Charity as they finish the trip to the tavern. Mostly things about the birth of spirits, and what Charity had looked like, and whether or not Love supposed it might ever want to take a body someday. Ghilashim seems fascinated with the Dreaming-born. The way his eyes light up at the subject makes her think of Dagna with a new sample, or Solas whenever something unexpected happened with the Fade.

The familiar pang of grief pulls at her.

She’s quiet as they make their way into the tavern. A quick sweep of the place reveals it to be relatively intact. It’s not busy – she doesn’t suppose morning is typically a bustling time for the place – but it’s clean. The murals are all as they left them. Nothing has appeared to have caught fire, and there are no bloodstains anywhere that she can see.

Ess is gone. An unfamiliar elf is wiping down tables when they come in. He greets Love and Ghilashim, offers to get them all something ‘better than public fare’ to eat, and directs them towards a table. When she sits down, Love slumps off of her, and vanishes through the floor. The spirit lets out a happy little sigh as it does.

Leaving her alone at the table with Ghilashim, who looks painfully self-conscious.

“So do you… do you love Pride, too, then?” he asks her, in the quiet of the empty tavern. A few dust motes drift through the sunlight spilling in past the windows.

Or so she thinks, until she realizes they’re actually little wisps of magic, falling off of the murals.
She watches them for a moment before she answers.

“Yes,” she says, simply.

Ghilashim stares at her.

“Oh,” he says.

Awkward silence descends. A few minutes into it, the unfamiliar tavern worker returns with a few plates of food. He gives her a somewhat curious glance, but doesn’t seem inclined to question her. Instead he pats Ghilashim on the head and exchanges a few pleasantries with the young elf, encouraging him to eat before going back to his tasks.

The food they’ve been brought smells surprisingly good. She’s not too hungry, but it does seem much better than the ‘public fare’ of the morning, which had been all sticky meats and sauces and unfamiliar grains. What they have now is some kind of brothy stew, filled with colourful vegetables of a very broad variety, with a loaf of soft, fresh, and flaky bread, and mugs of honeyed milk. Or something very similar to it. Ghilashim makes a face at it, but when she tries a spoonful she finds the flavour pleasantly mellow.

“They keep giving me growing food,” he complains. “Even though I have stopped.”

Her lips twitch.

“I think it is quite good,” she replies.

He glances at her, but after watching her unapologetically enjoy the food for a few moments, he picks up his spoon and digs in as well.

At first.

After a few minutes he devolves into poking at the vegetables rather idly instead.

“It must be hard for Pride, to love someone who cannot show it,” he says, at length.

She stills.

The words put an unexpected pang through her, even as it takes her a moment to make sense of them. She swallows her last mouthful of stew, and sets down her spoon. A glance at her dining companion reveals that Ghilashim is looking at her somewhat intently now.

“Many things are difficult for Pride right now,” she says.

“Because of you?” Ghilashim asks, bluntly. “All the rumours say he began acting strangely after Mythal took you on. They say you were discovered out in the wilds, without markings on your face. That you have no emotions and no spirit, and you are strange, and broken, and do unpredictable things.”

She stares back at the young elf.

Well.

This is interesting.

“What else do they say?” she wonders.
Ghilashim shrugs.

Silence descends between them again. After a few minutes, the younger elf gives up all pretense of eating, and pushes his bowl away from himself.

“Pride is a good person,” he says. “Everyone used to talk about him like he was amusing. They were upset because he got so far and did so much, even though he was very young. They thought he did not deserve admiration, but he did. He is kind. And smart. And funny. And he notices things. It is not fair for him to suffer for those traits.”

“It is not,” she agrees.

Ghilashim pauses. He stares at her for a long moment.

Then he ducks his head.

“Sorry,” he says.

“What for?” she wonders.

The young elf lets out a gusty sigh, tapping his fingers on the top of the table.

“I am being rude,” he concedes. “I do not know enough to judge you, or what is going on, really. Haninan always says I need to think more about why I feel what I feel, and act less on impulse. But it’s hard.”

“Well. At least you have time to practice,” she reasons.

Ghilashim lifts a hand and scratches at the back of his head. He lets out another heavy breath. Then he treats her to a blatantly assessing look. She sits back a bit as he scans her face, and then the rest of her. As the air around him changes, a bit, and feels for a few seconds as if it’s clumsily poking at her. Though that could also be a breeze, she supposes.

She wonders if, in another lifetime, anything had ever come of Ghilashim’s obvious crush. She and Solas had never spoken much about his past lovers. Though, based on many factors, she had assumed he’d had some. For a moment, she feels an intense pang of sympathy for the elf in front of her. Whatever had happened, once upon a time, she doubts it had gone well; whether he had never really been noticed by Solas, or if he had been but his crush had gone unrequited, or if it hadn’t gone unrequited, but nevertheless led to their inevitable parting. One way or another.

“He is very easy to fall in love with,” she commiserates.

Ghilashim swallows. His cheeks darken, and after a second, his gaze skitters away from her own.

“You do not feel the least bit threatened by me, do you?” he asks. “You do not think there is even the slightest chance I might draw his gaze away from you. Or you would not care if I did.”

“Oh, I would care if you did,” she assures him.

He frowns.

“So you do not think I can, then,” he surmises.

After a moment, she sighs.

“There is a lot going on,” she says. “More than you could account for. If he could be distracted by
peacefully pursuing someone other than me, I would let him. It would break my heart, but I would free him from all of this mess, if I could. I cannot, though. He is as bound up in it as I am."

“What is it?” Ghilashim wonders.

She smiles, and shrugs, incapable of answering on that front.

Not far from their table, the tavern steps creak, then. The both of them glance upwards. She does a double-take as she sees a familiar figure making his way down from the upper levels of the place. Clad in very fine, very red armour, straightening a fastening on one glove. Hair slightly mussed, as if from recent sleep.

Uthvir offers her a sharp grin.

“Well! This is a surprise,” the red hunter declares.

“Uthvir,” she greets.

A moment later, another elf hurries past Uthvir and down the stairs, moving like someone who has just figured out that they’re late for something incredibly important. She barely has time to register the fast-moving blur, except to note the presence of some rather bold fashion choices – and a shirt still being pulled on. For a moment the three of them only watch as the elf flies down the stairs and out of the door, leaving behind a stray puff of weirdly perfumed magic.

Huh.

“I did not expect you to still be here,” she says to Uthvir, at length.

The hunter smiles.

“The night life seemed promising. It proved to be a more tepid diversion than I had hoped, however.”

Sharp eyes roved over the table, and herself, and Ghilashim. They flit over the stew bowls and remaining bread crusts, before landing on the young elf across from her.

Uthvir tuts.

“Little child. Do not tell me you have not finished your meal? Oh, that will not do. How will your growing bones manage without their vital nutrients? How will you get to be strong and healthy?” they ask him, sauntering down the last few steps in the staircase.

Ghilashim reddens.

“I am fully grown,” he snaps.

“No,” Uthvir says. “You are a petty little child, with a painfully obvious crush. I gathered that after two seconds of listening to you talk. A word to the wise, boy, since you still seem to be in need of nurturing guidance – if you are going to try and injure your rivals with words, really commit to it. Find their actual weak points, and strike with precision.”

Striding forward, the hunter reaches for Ghilashim, who rears back. But Uthvir only clasps the wolf’s head pendant around the youth’s neck.

“Revered hunter…” the tavern worker says, hesitantly.
A glance from Uthvir silences him.

“For example, if I wanted to hurt you with words, I would point out that for someone so certain of his maturity, you are certainly in no hurry to leave the warm bosom of other people’s protection. Wanting all the accolades of adulthood, but you are afraid of it. You are afraid of being unimportant and unnoticed. That is why you are so fixated upon the wolf. Oh, yes, he is kind, and—” Uthvir waves vaguely, dropping the pendant, “—other commendable or attractive things, I am sure. But he treats you barely differently from how he treats anyone else. Enticing in the prospect of being seen as an adult, but frustrating in the lack of preference it places upon you. If you cannot be special in one way, be special in another. If he will not dote upon you like a charmed caretaker, perhaps he might become besotted with you as a lover. But he will do neither, little child, because the truth of this world is that you are only special and precious because you are young, and every year that trickles by drags you further and further from the warmth of people’s preference, and closer to the obscurity of a lackluster adulthood.”

Ghilashim looks white as a sheet.

Uthvir smiles, and pats him on the head, while she stares at them both in surprise.

“Enough baby food,” the hunter decides, turning towards the tavern worker. “Wine.”

“Ah, it is quite early…” the tavern worker attempts.

Uthvir looks, and the poor soul rushes off to go and get a bottle of wine.

For her own part, she is not quite sure what she should say. The air around Ghilashim is a riot of impressions, and also seems to be attempting to collapse in on itself. Uthvir looks relaxed, and even just a little bit pleased; sinking into the seat next to her. When the tavern worker returns with the wine and several classes, the hunter piles the remaining soup and bread and mugs of milk onto his tray, and sends him off again with a wave.

“Now. The little child came here last night to try and drink, and was, I believe, chased off. So let us see how committed he is to adulthood, and fill the baby full of wine,” Uthvir declares.

She looks at him.

“‘Fill the baby full of wine’?” she parrots. “You realize that is a horrible sentence. Ghilashim, you do not have to drink.”

Ghilashim glares at her, for some inexplicable reason, and grabs the bottle of wine. Not a set of impulses she’s sure she understands, given that Uthvir, who acquired the wine, was the one who just spent a good few minutes attempting to verbally eviscerate the poor kid.

“You are wrong on all counts,” Ghilashim says.

Uthvir grins, broadly.

“I am not,” the hunter returns. “You are a soft, petty, childish little thing, and you have no stomach for adulthood. Once the glorious gleam of youth has worn off, you will not survive long.”

Ghilashim blanches again.

“He will do fine,” she counters. She means it, too; the kid honestly doesn’t seem much worse than any other young and brash types she’s met in her life. And of course he is afraid of adulthood. Of course he is afraid of losing the comfort of protection and preference, and receiving only callous
indifference in its place. That’s perfectly normal.

Isn’t it?

*Of course it is,* she thinks. That’s why Uthvir said it. The hunter has known Ghilashim for less than two minutes, they would *have* to pick a fairly universal set of insecurities if they wanted to poke at him.

“I do not need you to defend me,” Ghilashim tells her.

Ah.

Right.

Insecurities, and whatnot.

She shrugs, and gives up as Ghilashim uncorks the wine bottle, and proceeds to drink straight from the neck of it.

And almost immediately sputters it back up afterwards.

“What kind of wine is that?” she wonders, as Ghilashim coughs.

Uthvir shrugs.

“No idea. But I doubt the bleeding heart behind the bar would give us anything strong,” they say.

“Did it go down the wrong pipe?” she asks Ghilashim, when he finally recovers.

The kid just clears his throat, and then drinks again, and this time manages to keep it all down.

When he’s finished he lowers the bottle onto the table with a heavy thunk, as if it was hard liquor and he’d just emptied the whole thing. Which is not the case on either front.

He looks at Uthvir, and folds his arms.

The hunter raises a brow.

“Is that it, little child? A mouthful of wine and you think you are all grown now?”

The disdain rolling off of them is so potent, even she can’t mistake it.

*Well, this is going to be interesting,* she thinks, as

“You are a jerk,” Ghilashim declares.

Uthvir laughs.

“And yet you want to impress me.”

“No,” Ghilashim refutes, taking another contradictory swig of wine. “No. I want to show you up.”

“If that makes it easier for you to stomach, little child,” Uthvir replies.

“Stop calling me that!” Ghilashim demands, swaying a little. “I drank the stupid wine! Stop calling me a little child!”

“Ask me that again once you have killed something.”

“Are you really that slow?” Uthvir wonders, head tilting to one side. “You want the wolf, do you not? And what does the wolf want? What is the one thing that is painfully apparent about your ‘rival’, what is written all over her? She who has won your prey? She is a warrior. She is a fighter. She does not wear the trappings of adulthood like a costume. She is strong, and she has killed things, and she will kill things again. You, in your soft clothes, with your soft face and unbloodied hands – you could drink all the wine you want, and at the end of it, you would just be a drunk. You would never catch his eye.”

Poor Ghilashim looks caught somewhere between shouting and crying at that, and glares at them both with equal ferocity.

“What are you doing?” she asks the hunter.

“I am picking on the brat. Naturally,” Uthvir says.

The ‘brat’ glares, and in a rush, stands up from the table.

“I do not have to listen to this!” he declares.

“You absolutely do not,” she agrees.

For some reason, though, this just earns her another harsh look. The young elf turns on his heel and strides out of the tavern. The door sways and slams in his wake, disturbing the little motes of magic in the air. A moment later, the tavern worker rushes out after him, clearly concerned and intent on making sure those few mouthfuls of wine didn’t somehow incapacitate a petulant twenty-six year-old.

Uthvir turns to her with a grin.

“Well. That was fun.”

She runs a hand across her temples, and sighs.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! I went on a bit of a road trip, and got to see Star Wars!

As always, you guys remain the best! <3
It doesn’t really occur to her that she’s alone in the tavern with Uthvir until a moment or two has passed.

Without conversation or activity to fill up the place, the silence of it feels odd. She can’t see Love anywhere. Her gaze turns to the walls, and the murals painted on them. Sorting out details amidst the animals and elves and animals-who-might-be-elves frolicking across the surface. Most of the bottles over the bar have been restocked, she notes. One of the new drinks, set up on a rack over the back of it, seems to be filled with moving and writhing tentacles. As if an entire live octopus has been shoved into it.

She looks back at Uthvir when their chair scrapes just slightly across the tavern floor. Jostled by a casual move backwards.

“So. Speaking of you and your wolf,” the hunter says. “That seems an interesting state of affairs. So many rampant little rumours and speculations to choose from. I wonder which is true?”

She considers her options for a moment, and then decides to respond via shrug. It’s none of Uthvir’s business, and she’s not sure what the hunter is getting at. There might be nuances she’s not grasping. A non-answer is probably best.

Uthvir stares at her a moment. Their gaze slides, then, towards the tavern door. But no one comes back through, neither Ghilashim nor the employee who left to chase after him. For a long moment another silence stretches between them. This time she takes the opportunity to look at Uthvir again. She finds herself wishing she had Cole – or more practically, Haninan – to offer some insights on their nature. There is something just… off. She can see it again, in the line of their shoulders as they sit, perched on their chair as if they could be up from it again in less than a moment’s notice.

The hunter picks up the bottle of wine, and takes a drink from it.

“I am beginning to think you do not trust me,” they say.

“I do not,” she replies.

It earns her a wry smirk.

“You are quite right to be wary of me. I am, after all, in a position of some power and influence. There are any number of things I could do to you, and no one would stop me,” they declare.

She would stop them herself, she thinks, but likely the consequences of that would be troublesome to deal with. Uthvir’s sharp teeth clink against the wine bottle as they take another drink from it. She wonders if this is a threat, or a warning, or if they’re just playing some kind of game. It reminds her uncomfortably of the russet wolf. So many things in this world seem to derive a great deal of pleasure from toying with whatever they have at their mercy.

Not that her own time had been any great exception to that trend.

“There are any number of things that any elf with my rank could do to you, and no one would stop them. Anyone who tried would suffer for it,” Uthvir continues. Their smirk drops away, and their
head tilts as they regard her; leaning back in against their chair.

“I believe you are working your way towards a point,” she surmises.

“I am, at that,” Uthvir agrees. “You are wary of me. But you are not afraid of me, are you? I would think you incapable of fear, but you are too complex for that. Even the most basic sort of self-awareness is capable of fear. It is one of the oldest things in this world. The first moment the first waking thing realized it existed, it learned the fear of that existence stopping.”

The hunter’s voice is slow. Musing. But an air of relaxed conversation is only skin deep. Uthvir’s eyes are sharp, and their countenance is too still to be at ease. It is the forced stillness of anticipation.

Of what, she doesn’t know. Combat, perhaps. Though she think that might just be the hunter’s default state.

The hairs on the back of her neck all rise to attention.

After a moment, Uthvir nods.

“Well. This could work out, you know,” they declare. “I am not the worst sort, as such things go. A little bird told me last night that Mythal will be heading for my lady’s lands. I have a sneaking suspicion you and your wolf will be among those accompanying her. Andruil’s hunters are not so prim and proper as the scholars and gardeners and dancers you are accustomed to. But I have sway and influence. I could make things much, much easier for you while you are our guests.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“What a generous friend you are,” she commends, dryly.

“I can be,” Uthvir replies, seriously. “If you do not have much concern for yourself, consider this – your wolf. Mythal’s former bedwarmer. You are interesting enough, and will merit attention, but you are also ambiguous and strange. That works to your advantage. Not so with fair Pride, who is considered far more of a known commodity. And the cast-offs of our revered leaders make for enticing targets among those who wish to emulate them in any way. Far away from the politeness of Arlathan’s politics, he will be a fresh and entertaining treat, and I do not imagine the likes of Thenvunin – or Mythal, for that matter – will shield him.” The hunter leans forward, resting an arm on the table. “But I can.”

She stills.

The full ramification of what Uthvir is implying drift through her mind. They have a point, she realizes. Maybe even a better one than they know. She would hardly trust Mythal with Pride’s safety, all things considered, and even if they proceed swiftly to the Deep Roads, they would still have to spend some time in the company of Andruil’s followers. Neither Thenvunin nor Tarensa seem terribly inclined to protect Pride from non-fatal insult or injury. But if some high-ranking hunter got it into their head that it would be fun to…

Well.

She would have to kill them.

And then they would have to deal with her having killed them, with would either entail elaborate and secretive body disposal methods, or Andruil trying to murder her, in return, for the offense.
“So what are you after?” she asks Uthvir.

The red hunter grins at her, sharp and shark-like and pleased.

“Friendship,” the say, spreading their hands. “Have I not proven myself friendly? And do friends not share things about themselves?”

Ah.

Information.

Not too surprising. It’s actually what she would have guessed.

“And what sort of things do you expect your friends to share?” she wonders.

“Their accomplishments,” Uthvir says. “And interests. History, you know. That sort of thing. Of course, other sorts of sharing may be welcome, too, should the inclination arise.”

Are they flirting with her?

She considers the possibility, but it’s too difficult to tell, she decides. That could be troublesome, if they expect something along those lines. From her or from anyone else who is supposedly benefitting from this deal.

“If you touch Pride, I will kill you,” she warns.

“I had, funnily enough, picked up on that,” Uthvir replies.

“I will also kill you if you touch Curiosity,” she adds.

“As you like,” the red hunter says. “And what about yourself? Do you also have an aversion to touch?”

The way they’re asking makes it sound like innuendo. But for a moment some hint of something serious seems to steal over them, too.

Or perhaps she’s imagining that.

“With a few exceptions, I do not have much interest in it,” she settles on replying. Her mind skitters, briefly, towards the events of that morning. Pride, underneath her, lips moving against hers, hands warm on her body as she pressed her tongue into his mouth.

It takes her a second to chase the image away again, and it leaves her heart beating a little faster just the same.

“Then you should accept my offer,” Uthvir advises, with a nod. “Believe me. I am a naturally sympathetic soul. I used to be a Spirit of Sympathy, back when I lived in the Fade. Poor Andruil needed so much of me that I felt all I could do was take on a body, in order to provide her with a reliable shoulder and an attentive ear.”

The hunter’s voice is rife with insincerity. But it seems they expect her to pick up on that; and the matter of being Andruil’s ‘attentive ear’ could, from a certain point of view, read as a warning. Not that she wouldn’t have guessed on her own that anything she says to them will get straight back to the evanuris.

“I do not know that I have very many great insights I can offer you, with regards to this friendship,”
she says.

Uthvir waves dismissively.

“I am good at picking up on subtleties,” they say. “One does not get far as a hunter without being able to read the signs. I am certain Mythal bids her servants hold their tongue on some matters, just as Andruil does. Such things should not be directly broached in friendly discourse. But I think there would be mutual benefits to us enjoying one another’s company. My Lady frets over the treatment of her guests, you see. And your unpopularity among your peers has not gone unnoticed. I would be remiss, both as her humble servant and as someone who has won your friendship in the field of… whatever we shall call that debacle in the front entrance, if I did not present to you the potential benefits of confiding in me. Personal matters only, of course.”

Of course.

She regards the hunter carefully for a long moment.

“So, what?” she asks. “You want to learn about my personal life? Hear about my secret infatuations and aspirations?”

Uthvir chuckles.

“‘Secret’,” they say. “I think the Love spirit gave up the game on that one. And it is mutual, no less! A doll and a wolf. I suspected he valued you, and that you were somehow beholden to him. I did not suspect things to run deep enough to entice a spirit like that one.”

She struggles to think of a suitable response. A shadow passes by the tavern window as she does, and Uthvir takes another drink; apparently content to let the observation stand without further commentary, if they must.

“A deal, then,” they suggest, with a little bit of haste. “My protection from the other hunters, in exchange for whatever information you have not been barred from sharing.”

A deal. She thinks of spirits bartering knowledge in the Fade, and of Fortune before it shattered. These thing are binding, she knows, in not in ways she always has the wherewithal to parse. As tempting as having another high-ranking elf to pull strings for them would be, would such a deal compel her to share all of the information she has? Things she most definitely would not trust to one of Andruil’s servants, let alone one so blatantly sent to gather information on them?

There’s no chance she can risk that.

“It is a kind offer,” she says. “But I must decline.”

The red hunter does not seem surprised, nor offended. If anything, her refusal appears to amuse them. Their lips twitch, and they take another drink, eyebrows high, as if they cannot seem to decide whether to be mocking or impressed.

“I see,” is all they say. But she does somehow get the impression that her declination has somehow given away more than he realizes, or would have cared to reveal.

*Mythal,* she suddenly realizes. Uthvir had offered to let her keep Mythal’s secrets. By turning down the offer, she had inadvertently betrayed the fact that she had secrets of her own.

She look across the table. Between the red and subterfuge, her mind turns, briefly, to Leliana, and her sharp-beaked birds, and information network, and how good she had always been at getting
people to betray themselves.

The tavern worker comes back in, then, looking nervous and only slightly reassured about whatever he had discovered of Ghilashim’s state. Uthvir takes their leave of her, mentioning something about duties and hauling off the remaining wine with them. She finds herself with a rare moment of inactivity. The establishment remain quiet, her table secluded; Love off doing whatever it’s doing.

Despite everything going on, it’s… not an unwelcome moment of seclusion.

She draws Pride’s gift out from the small satchel at her belt. The folk tales. The slim book has survived well enough in the pouch, despite seeing nearly as much activity as she had in the past few days. Her eyes scan it over for damages, but water doesn’t seem to have touched it. Some of the edges of the pages are curled, and darker, as if they’ve nearly been burned. She feels a pang of remorse, and runs her fingers across them, almost apologetically.

At least the damage seems to be limited to the borders. There’s no harm done to the illustrations, or the text.

This is the story of how the Son loved the Moon, she reads again. The Sun loved the Moon as your heart loves your dearest dream. It is a thing you always reach for, and yet, it always seems so far away. For the dearest dreams we have are not small, or petty, or even bound only to ourselves. They are the ones you feel when you, too, stare up at the Moon, and your heart twists with longing...

She reads on as the Sun and Moon dance in strange, fabled courtship. Her mind turns to Pride, and tries to imagine him as a young spirit, reading this book while wholly convinced that it was a factual account of history. That the Sun really was in love with the Moon, and that all dear dreams were bigger than the scope of anyone person. As the story progresses, and the Sun attempts to reach the Moon only to accidentally boil the oceans and nearly fall from the sky, until the Moon itself weeps, and this stops it, she imagines Pride seriously reading along with these words and shaking his head at the catastrophe of it.

Casting a suspicious eye up to the sky, and hoping the great, burning sphere had learned its lesson well enough that it would not recklessly endanger the world again.

Because of love.

She closes the book. Her mind turns to Solas, instead.

Not anything in particular. She just thinks of him. Of all the things he has in common with his past self, and all the things that must have changed over the course of his life. Pride had been inexperienced in kissing. Solas had not been. For a moment, she wonders about the parts of his long life that had never been divulged to her. Who he might have kissed before. Or danced with before. Loved, before. How many years did it take before his rebellion began? Enough for the evanuris to ascend to the status of godhood among their followers. And then, how many years did the fighting stretch on for? How many friends did he lose?

Well. However many there were, he lost all of them, in the end. Only to make more and then…

She sighs. Runs a hand down the cover of the book, and puts it away again.

Just in time, too, it seems, as the tavern door opens again. Curiosity makes her way inside, a lioness eyeing the restocked bottles above the bar with interest.
She gets up from her seat.

“Where is Pride?” she wonders.

Curiosity makes a face.

“Thenvunin turned up in an awful mood this morning. I think he slept outside the estate last night. He has had Pride running around doing all sorts of things,” the lioness explains. “Where is Ghilashim?”

She shrugs.

“He left.”

Her friend looks none to impressed, but after a moment, shrugs it off. No harm done.

“A contingent is going ahead with some of Andruil’s people to prepare for Mythal’s arrival,” she declares. “We have been assigned to it, of course. Tarensa is staying with Mythal, but Thenvunin has been put in charge of it. I came to fetch you. We will leave in the evening, along with some of the hunters. I have never been to Andruil’s lands. It should be interesting.”

“Never? Not even in the Fade?” she asks, heading for the door. The late morning light pours into the tavern, brighter and more sure of itself than when she had entered.

Curiosity shakes her head.

“No. Some of the spirits there are very territorial, and impolite. There is a lot of Rage, and Fear, and Conquest, and Pursuit. I visited the borders once, but I was not quick enough to get past them, and it seemed very dangerous. So I decided I would wait before I tried again. I suppose this is me trying again, now,” her friend reasons.

“From what I have gathered, I doubt it will be terribly safe from this end of things, either.”

Curiosity nods in agreement.

They make their way down the streets for a time, then, caught in rare but companionable silence. One of the roads leading up to Mythal’s estate is wound in a tight spiral, with paved stones that hum wherever Curiosity steps on them, but remain silent beneath her own feet. It’s very pretty, but it almost doubles the walk to the gates.

“I read the letter,” Curiosity says, quietly, before they reach their destination.

It takes her a moment to realize what she’s talking about.

The letter… from Haninan?

“Pride, too?” she wonders.

“No,” Curiosity says, shaking her head. “He has been too busy. But I was impatient, so I took it out of his pocket while he was paying attention to other things, and then I read it and put it back. You should read it, too. Soon. Even if we cannot talk about it for a while.”

Something in her friend’s voice catches her attention.

It’d probably pay to do just that, then.
When they find Pride, he’s busy organizing a small contingent of elves in the estate’s main hall. Thenvunin is sitting nearby. The man is dressed in what her brain can only describe as ‘midnight blue draperies’, flung over a suit of golden armour, with bears carved into the shin guards. He gives her a sharp look when he sees her. It’s an uncommonly challenging look; she wonders if he’s still thinking about yesterday’s confrontation in front of Mythal’s chambers. But if he is, he makes no move to bother her, at least.

Nor Pride, it seems. Despite having an abundance of tasks to complete, he’s mostly left to them. When she drifts up to his side and asks how she can help, the air around him warms, just a little. He looks at her and his cheeks colour. Pink at the tops. It makes her thinks of...

Things that are not appropriate to the situation at hand.

“Just make certain you take anything you need,” he says. “We may not be returning for a while, after all. Mythal has given us leave to make use of the armoury. It is down the stairs past the east wing, in the basement,” he informs her. Some of the other elves watch their interaction curiously. A few seem more than a little baffled, but no one makes any aggressive moves.

A quick check reveals that the whispers haven’t escalated.

After a moment, she decides it’s safe enough, and goes to see what Mythal has made available. She has her sword and shield, of course, and she suspects that what Fortitude has given her is better than anything she’ll find in an estate stock room. But better to check and make sure than to ride on presumption, she supposes. And Curiosity comes, too, shifting from lioness to elf before they leave the main hall.

She pauses on the way out herself, just looking at Thenvunin for a moment.

To her surprise, the high-ranking elf actually shifts uncomfortably under her scrutiny, and narrows his eyes in turn before glancing away.

The east wing of the estate isn’t one she’s seen before. It appears to be a series of paths that pass through a large garden. Pale green willows with perfect, tiny leaves rustle in a breeze, sending narrow branches to trail after their steps, their roots curling around the borders of pristine, glittering ponds that smell of crisp mountain snow. Past the garden the walls of the estate turn to latticework, with the diamond-shaped openings filled with faceted glass that makes the light daub the floor like errant paint. The armoury itself is darker, though, and windowless, lit by glowing wall panels, with a draconic statue seated proudly in the middle of it.

The walls are lined with racks of weapons. There are spears and bows and swords and shields, claymores and axes and knives. No armour, though. As she turns her gaze over the different shapes of gleaming blades, all well-kept and polished to a shine, Curiosity nudges her shoulder, and silently hands her something.

Haninan’s letter.

She opens it carefully, as her friend moves to look at a selection of longbows lined up near the door.
At first she thinks it’s surprisingly short. ‘My dear friends,’ it says, ‘you will be pleased to know that I have arrived safely at my destination. Best regards and fondest wishes, your faithful servant, Haninan’.

She has no idea why something like that would need to be read with any urgency. The very fact that he managed to send a missive sort of implies that he, at least, reached his destination alive, if nothing else. Though she supposes the fact that he doesn’t mention Hildur at all could be concerning. But then her thumb brushes the bottom corner of the letter, and all at once the whole thing changes. The surface shifts. The words wind together, rearranging themselves, and she is filled suddenly with a rush of impressions. A whisper in the back of her head.

“Puzzle!” Haninan’s voice greets, cheerily.

She almost drops the letter, before she recognizes the sensation. Some of the books in Mythal’s library had done this. Some of the ancient tomes in the Vir Dirthara had, too, though it had been different then. Time and damage had worn away the potency of the effect. It had been much more indistinct. And even the books in Mythal’s library had possessed a sort of… detached quality, as if the authors were well aware that strangers might be reading them, and would never presume to claim familiarity with the people interacting with their writing.

This is not the case with Haninan’s letter. Instead it feels very much like the elf in question is standing just to the right of her shoulder. She can’t resist the impulse to check, in fact, but of course he’s not there.

“I am so glad you are reading this letter. I hope you have not been getting into too much trouble – fighting, or kissing, or other such exciting things – while I have been gone. I would hate to have missed it. The Lady Hildur is well, and deeply devoted to our cause of investigating the goings on of Kal’Arzok. We have enjoyed a primarily uneventful trip, I would say. A few interesting encounters with the wildlife were had, but on the whole, nothing of note happened. I hope you have divulged the truth of matters to Pride – if not, I fear this letter will prompt some awkward questions from him. But you are likely aware that I would not write such a letter just to exchange pleasantries. So, to the matter at hand. The Lady Hildur has secured us temporary lodgings with Kal’Arzok. Things are not good here. I suspect the local dwarves were already being driven to the edge by the sharp-eyed eagles pecking at their stone, and the peculiar behaviour of their god has not helped. A disagreement seems to have cropped up, as to whether the red lyrium is being caused by the injuries to their stone, or whether it is meant to be used against the hunters as some sort of weapon. The danger in the air is palpable. Lady Hildur has informed me that the need for haste is absolute, and that the state of the stone here is increasingly incoherent. I fear I must agree with her assessment. The patterns here are unpredictable in a fashion that speaks of pain and desperation. It is much worse than before.”

She winces, her mind tracking back towards the Titan she sang with, and the purple lyrium. The councils of the dwarves. Lady Ortahn’s people, fleeing towards the surface, and the Sha-Brytol, struggling to find a way to help their god. ‘Worse’ does not sound promising.

“There is more news besides,” Haninan’s voice assures her. “It is only a rumour, but I believe I have recognized the signs that might lead to the sleeping place of an old friend. If I am correct, then I believe Andruil’s original goal was not to contest with the dwarves at all, but to hunt a more draconic sort of prey. It seems her discoveries with regards to them may have been incidental. Not that this makes them any less troublesome, of course.”

She pauses a moment, and considers. A more ‘ draconic’ sort of prey…?

The Keepers, perhaps?
Or at least one of them. That would make sense, she supposes, if Andruil decided to wake one of the sleeping legends of old, and face it in combat. And if her search brought her through the Deep Roads, which were so much easier to traverse, if she had been digging and followed the plainest paths towards the dwarves, and found another incredibly creature to consider slaying…

She lets out a heavy breath.

But if Haninan’s right, then that’s definitely worth investigating.

“I will do my best to uncover more information. Hildur and I are staying outside of the city, at the moment, in a camp set up for those who have been left without other recourse thanks to the earthquakes. Kal’Arzok has offered food to such folk, in exchange for joining the militia set to guard against elves. There is a certain wry twist in signing up for such a thing myself. Especially considering the limitations of my own martial combat skills. Though, in that regard, I am certainly not unique among the dwarves here. When you come, have a care. Most everyone will probably try and kill you. If you could learn to shapeshift into a dwarf, that would probably be best, but any kind of animal form would be better than an elf’s. That will not be an easy feat for you, I know. Best of luck.”

A feeling like a hand landing on her shoulder comes, then. For a moment she gets a strong flash of insight. A camp buried in the rocky wilds, deep beneath the earth; surrounded by giant mushroom trees and filled with glowing, purple insects. One brushes against the side of her cheek, gentle and harmless, before bouncing off. Tents are arrayed, and a cook fire burns, and haggard dwarves sit with small pots in their laps and makeshift weapons at their sides.

Then the picture fades, and she is back in the armoury again.

She takes a moment, and then looks at the weapons arrayed all around them. Thinks about pulling them all down and packing them into carts, and bringing them to those haggard-looking dwarves, to help defend their home. Taking Mythal’s weapons and giving them to the dwarven people, to use against Andruil’s hunters. It would be too noticeable, she knows, and most of those dwarves probably wouldn’t fare better with an ensorcelled halberd they didn’t know how to wield than a worn pitchfork they’d been using all their lives, but still.

Still.

This is one mess after another.

“I am taking this quiver,” Curiosity declares.

She looks over, and sees her friend pull down a pearly white quiver, light but large, with blue stones embedded around the top border of it. With a nod of satisfaction, Curiosity begins filling it with arrows – transferring some from the quiver she already had, and added more from the armoury.

“It suits you,” she offers.

“I think I am going to shoot a lot of things,” Curiosity decides. “When I am not busy being a lion. Or a bird. Or something else. It might be nice to figure out a new shape to turn into. You should help me with that; I can show you how to do it.”

She feels a trill of nervousness run through her, recalling Haninan’s advice in the letter. Figure out how to take a new shape.

“I do not know if I am capable of that sort of thing,” she admits.
But then, too, as little as she likes to think about it, her body has… well. Changed. Again. Been mended but, she knows, altered, too. In ways she’s not sure of.

Not quite comfortable with, either. Though it’s better than being dead.

“You cannot really know until you try,” Curiosity insists. “I bet you could do all kinds of things. There is no rush, of course. But I would like the company while I experiment.”

“Fair enough,” she agrees, seeing the reassurance for what it is.

“Do you see anything you like?” Curiosity wonders, slinging her quiver into place. She takes a moment to look around more properly.Anything she took, though, she suspects she would have to carry; and with her own weapons already in place, and most of these ones being fine but not quite so promising, she’s disinclined to over-burden herself. Still, she takes a boot knife from one of the smaller shelves. A slim thing, but very sharp, with blooming lilies carved across the handle. Subtler than most of the decorated pieces in the armoury. There’s one sword she spies with a handle shaped like a tree – reaching branches and all – and she has no idea how anyone would use that successfully in a fight. It looks as liable to jab the wielder’s limbs as to strike out at an enemy.

Curiosity follows her line of sight.

“What?” her friend wonders.

“How are you even supposed to use that?” she asks.

Her friend blinks, and then her eyes widen in comprehension.

“Oh! The design is meant to help focus an attack spell. You would not actually hit someone with it.”

She tilts her head. More like a mage’s staff, in that case. It looks considerably unwieldy, even for that. She supposes it must be lighter than it looks.

“Then why the sharpened blade?” she wonders.

She turns and looks, and finds Curiosity staring at her with a furrowed brow.

“What’s wrong?”

Her friend pauses a moment, then shakes her head.

“Nothing. It was only… I could not hear the questions,” Curiosity admits. “It has been a while since I heard any. I was unsure, but now it is obvious. I cannot hear them anymore. Not yours, not anyone else’s.”

Oh.

Turning fully away from the baffling weapon, she reaches up, and puts a hand on Curiosity’s shoulder. Her friend sighs, and then sags a little; and a moment later she finds herself being crushed into the embroidered blue fabric of her dress, as she is dragged into a hug. The limbs around her are shaking, she realizes.

“Hey,” she says, gently, bringing her own arms up return the embrace. “It is alright, you are alright. The questions are still there. I can always tell them to you. Well, my own, anyway. And Pride can tell you his. We can figure out the other ones, too.”
“I know,” Curiosity says, tearfully.

But it’s not that. No. She knows; it’s not that. It’s that it’s frightening to become something else. To be changed, even if change is inevitable.

She closes her eyes, and just clings back for a moment. Curiosity is warm and tall, and smells like bath oils and the fresh air from the garden. And salt, as the tears track down her face, dripping across her shoulder and leave wet marks that only just manage to fade before new ones fall to replace them.

“I do not regret it,” Curiosity says thickly, at length. “But I want to keep hearing the questions. I did not want to lose that.”

“I am sorry,” she says, sincerely.

It earns her a massive sniff. Her friend finally lets go of her, then, pausing to wipe at her face with her sleeve.

“Please do not tell Pride I cried. He will feel badly. He cried an awful lot when he took a body, but it was different for him. I do not want him to think I am the same.”

“I will not tell Pride. Or anyone else,” she promises.

Curiosity manages a watery smile.

They sit in the armoury for a while, until the redness in her friend’s face has faded, and the tear stains are all gone. Sunlight filters in through the open doorway and down the steps. The warming stones of the armoury floor smell like sunlit rocks, and summer breezes. It makes her think of Skyhold. Of sitting out in the open air of the courtyard with Cole, trying to help explain something to him, or listening to Varric and Solas do the same.

She links arms with Curiosity as they head back towards the main hall, slipping Haninan’s letter into her pocket, next to Pride’s book.

“It will be alright,” she promises.

Curiosity nods.

She really, really hopes she can make good on that.

This time.

When they get back to the hall, they find that Pride has managed to organize things in a much timelier fashion than seems common. A few of the elves are grumbling about feeling rushed, and some have apparently wandered off again to go and fetch something or other, but at this rate, she thinks, they might actually set out before the sun goes down. Several of Andruil’s people are also about. Some are sitting with Thenvunin.

The red hunter, she notes, is among them. Whatever they are saying, it’s apparently enough to make the air around Thenvunin snap with tension as he makes some snide rejoinders. Or at least she assumes that’s what he’s doing, just going off of the sneer.

It means neither of them are bothering anyone else, though. Curiosity watches them with some interest, as Pride scowls at a sheet of paper in his hands.
“What is it?” she asks.

He looks up. His eyes dart to her lips, for a moment, before he shakes his head and shifts on his feet.

“There is a name I do not know on this list,” he explains. “I had not noticed it before. I suppose it must be someone recently assigned to the city, probably one of the outlying territories. I cannot fathom why they would be assigned to this task, though.”

She follows the direction of his gaze towards the page. Names are listed along the whole of it, though, and most of them are ones she’s unfamiliar with. She doubts she could put even half of them to the faces in the room.

“Perhaps they have some special skill, or familiarity with Andruil’s people,” she suggests.

“That would be likeliest,” Pride says. “Unfortunately, no one else seems to know who this ‘Felassan’ is, so I am uncertain of how to go about finding them right now. I could consult with Tarensa. She usually handles distribution of persons more than I or Thenvunin, but she is with Mythal at the moment.”

Well, that does seem a little inconvenient.

“Have you tried-” she begins, but the sound of a throat clearing almost immediately cuts her off.

On the skull one of the larger statues in the main hall, a silvery fox sits. It has thick fur and a clever face, with odd shades of muted green banded throughout its pelt. A long tail swishes, rather like a cat’s, as it peers down at the both of them. When they look up, it straightens.

“Did you say ‘Felassan’?” it asks. Obviously an elf, then, she supposes.

“I did,” Pride confirms.

The fox leaps down from its perch, landing on nimble feet scant inches from Pride’s boot.

“That would be me,” it declares. “Felassan, at your service. I understand there is some sort of important mission going on?”

“Of a fashion. Mythal has taken ill, and is planning to seek a remedy in Andruil’s lands. We are to help make ready for her arrival, and extend our thanks to her servants for hosting us on such short notice,” Pride explains, raising an eyebrow. “Forgive me. I know most elves who would be considered pertinent for such tasks, yet I do not believe we have met before.”

The fox smiles.

“We have met before,” it declares. “But I do not blame you for forgetting. It was hardly a memorable occasion. I cannot say why I have been included in this mission; though I do possess some skills in combat, and knowledge of Andruil’s lands. I am often travelling, you see. Perhaps the great lady believed I might make a suitable guide, or hoped I could prove to be one on short notice.”

There is something, she decides, that is bothering her about this fox.

It glances at her, only briefly, and the expression on its face seems to her to turn momentarily agitated. Its tail flicks.
Pride raises an eyebrow.

“We have met before?” he asks. “Were you in a different shape? The only foxes I can recall meeting were Dirthamen’s. Or there was one who served Ghilan’nain, I believe. But she was cream, and much smaller.”

“I was indeed in a different shape. Though my preference is for this one, nowadays,” Felassan declares. “It is quite easy for me to keep. I am certain you understand. I believe you are prone to taking on a wolf’s shape yourself, are you not? They are somewhat similar. As it goes.”

Once again, the fox’s tail flicks. But after a moment, Pride accepts its answer, and only shrugs.

“Very well then, Felassan. I am certain it will be pleasant to work with you,” he decides.

“Likewise,” the fox declares.

Felassan. Felassan… she knows that name, she thinks. Is that what is bothering her?

Rather than moving off to join the others, the fox lingers, sitting next to Pride’s boots. It takes some increasingly unsubtle cajoling on Pride’s part to get the shape-shifted elf to actually move off. When it does, and passes her, she merits what seems to be a look of challenge.

“Huh,” she says. Ordinarily she gets more outright distastes, bafflement, or dismissal than a look like that. Especially on first meeting.

“Very odd,” Pride decides. “Perhaps it has been a while since he spent time in polite society.”

She takes the opportunity to move a bit closer to him.

“I am sorry, but did he say his name was Slow Arrow?” Curiosity asks. “What sort of a name is that?”

“It is from a legend,” she offers, and all in a rush realizes what must be bothering her. Felassan! That was the name of one of Solas’ followers. He had left notes, clues, and similar things to try and help stop his plans. He’d died before the explosion at the conclave had ever happened, though, as near as anyone could tell. Another casualty of Solas’ plans.

She glances at Pride, but there isn’t the familiar twist of resentment or grief when she looks at his face. He’s staring at his list, and Curiosity is staring over at the fox, who has moved to stand next to the fountains. And stare at them. And not really mingle or converse with anyone else at all, which seems a little odd, but then again, if he doesn’t really know anyone here, she supposes it makes sense.

She feels a pang of sympathy.

Felassan had made it all the way to her own time, once. He had tried to stop Solas, even after what seemed to be a lengthy friendship, and years upon years spent serving his cause. Is it the same Felassan? It seems likely.

“I think it is a poor name. What kind of good is a slow arrow?” Curiosity wonders. “It sounds like the arrow who cannot catch up to the other ones.”

“It is a trap,” she says.

Over by the fountain, the fox cocks his head. Listening, she thinks.
She offers him a smile.

He gives her a sour look in return.

“In the story, a village is being attacked by a monster each night. The villagers ask the Dread Wolf to kill it for them, even though he is not nearly a match for the beast in strength or menace. Knowing he cannot defeat the monster, the wolf fires a single arrow into the air, and then leaves. In their conceit, the villagers think that they will be guaranteed safety, but the Dread Wolf has not promised them this. What few protections they had, they tear down. They spend the night drinking and revelling, thinking the monster dead, and when it comes again, it consumes them all with ease. Soon enough only the children are left cowering in the wagons… er, in their homes, and the monster opens its mouth wide to devour them. That is when the arrow that the Dread Wolf fired comes back down again, though, and falls into its open jaws. As promised, the monster is slain. The children mourn their village, but they set out a tribute for Fen’Harel. And the moral of the story is, do not let other people fight your battles, and be very specific in how you word your requests,” she concludes.

Curiosity blinks.

“That is a ridiculous tale,” Pride asserts, shifting uncomfortably. “How could the Dread Wolf have known that the beast would rear its head and open its mouth at precisely the right time and angle for the arrow to land in it? That sounds more like luck than cleverness to me. And if he had warned the village that he needed to set a trap, the villagers could have helped him do so. They could have made a better one, and not all been killed in the process. Letting that many people die is terrible, even if they are foolish.”

There is a harsh note to his voice. Recriminations more for his future self, she thinks, than for the figure from the legend. *Letting that many people die…*

She reaches over, patting his elbow, and regrets mentioning the whole thing.

“I do not think the arrow fell,” Curiosity asserts. “I think a spirit must have cast it back down at the right time. Or a spell must have been used to do it. But it is silly, isn’t it? If he could get such a spell to work, then the Dread Wolf ought to have fired the arrow straight into the monster’s mouth the first time it opened it to eat the villagers. Then I bet the villagers would have seen how close they all came to dying, and have been a little more cautious next time.”

There is a streak of silver, then, and before she can blink, Felassan is standing next to Pride again.

“She told it incorrectly!” the fox declares. “That is *not* how the story goes. The village asks Fen’Harel to slay a great beast, and he goes to it in the morning light, and sees that it is impervious to most kinds of harm. So he fires an arrow into the air. When he goes back to the village, they ask how he will save them. And Fen’Harel says to them, he said – ‘when did I say that I would save you?’ Then he left, and the great beast came into the village at night, and it slew all of the warriors, and the all of the crafters, and the high ranking and the low. Then it at last it came to the children, and it opened its maw, and the arrow fell into it and killed it. Because everyone had forgotten about the arrow, you see. As soon as it went up into the air, it was small and swift and no one thought it would really make a difference. They thought perhaps it was a mistake. But it was not, it was what killed the beast in the end, and if the villagers had been paying attention, they would have realized the plan all along and would not have tried to fight,” he insists. “It is a very good story! I took my name from it because that is the best kind of cunning. It is the shot that takes its time in arriving, but always does so right when it is needed.”

The three of them stare down at the fox, who seems focused primarily on Pride.
Pride, for his part, raises an eyebrow; his mood still askew thanks to the mentions of Fen’Harel.

“I fear I will have to disagree with you, Felassan,” he says. “I do not see much that is commendable in that tale. The villagers asked for help. And while one can scarcely fault the Dread Wolf for not fighting a battle he could not win, I can and shall judge him for taking on the task himself, without much regard for those who would be affected by it. At least if he had refused, the villagers might have fled, or mounted a better defense.”

“But they did have a defense, I am sure,” Felassan insists, giving her a hard look, as if he suspects her of actively sabotaging him. “It is not like how she said, where they tore down the defenses and broke into revelry. She made that part up. The village was prepared, I am sure; it is only that the beast was too strong. Fen’Harel could only do what he could do, but that was still more than anyone realized. And it saved the children, besides.”

Pride’s gaze goes flinty.

“And I am certain they fared remarkably well, with their families all killed before their eyes. I hope the Dread Wolf appreciated his tributes from them, then. One marvels at their fortitude in creating such things from whatever meager resources were left to them after they had finished burying their parents,” he snaps.

Felassan’s ears flick back, flat against his skull; apparently at a loss for words, considering the ferocity of Pride’s tone.

Which has very little to do, she thinks, with old stories and elves who take names from them.

“And at least they lived.” she interjects. “If the Dread Wolf had done nothing, it may have all played out just the same, with no one at all surviving.”

Pride’s gaze turns towards her. It softens, some. Then he shakes his head, and sighs. Poor Felassan looks more than a little uncertain at all of this.

“If it helps, as a less biased party to all of this, I think that story is ridiculous, too,” Curiosity interjects. “But not because the Dread Wolf did a bad job. It just does not make any sense.”

Her lips twitch.

“It is a fable. The importance is more in the message, and less in what sense it makes,” she says.

“The Dread Wolf did not do a bad job,” Felassan insists, grumbling. She wonders if he might not be unaccustomed to being argued with, as well. He glances up at Pride, once more. “I would have thought you might admire such a figure. Being both wolves, and all.”

Pride opens his mouth, and closes it again. He clears his throat, and shifts slightly.

“No,” he finally declares. “Let us leave it at that.”

Felassan’s fur ripples. She wonders, for a moment, if he might not be transforming for some reason or another. Perhaps so that he doesn’t have to crane his neck to argue. But then his eyes widen, and without another word, he turns and dashes out of the main hall. His paws scramble over the smooth floor, and he nearly smacks into the doorframe in his haste to leave.

The three of them watch him go.

“That was odd,” Curiosity decides.
Chapter End Notes

At last! Whoohoo! <3
They do, in fact, manage to leave before evening. Thenvunin heads their procession through an eluvian by the city gates, accompanied by Uthvir. Felassan returns and falls into their segment of the procession, a narrow little fox slipping in between herself and Pride. It’s not a large group, though. A few healers, some of the more combat-oriented types, and several hunters. She recognizes three of them from her visit to Andruil’s baths; the bear, and the two others. Or at least, she’s assuming that bear is the same one.

The eluvian they take is by the gates that lead out towards Andruil’s holdings. In the distance she can see odd flashes and swirls of magic. Repair work, perhaps. A breeze passes through several nearby trees. It makes the leaves vibrate, and chime like bells.

The peaceful atmosphere is utterly changed once they pass through the crossroads, and emerge on the other side.

The eluvian they exit by is large and set upon a broad, brown stone platform, at the mouth of a short but wide road. Overhead the sky churns with a fierce storm. Winds press upon them, strong enough that Felassan almost gets blown back through the mirror. She sees the impending disaster and manages to catch him in time, though it only seems to earn her an annoyed look.

“Perhaps you should turn into something larger?” she suggests.

“I am fine,” he replies, in clipped tones, even as his ears press tightly to his skull.

When she puts him back down he struggles, though. The storm is magnificent. The sky churns with colour as wells as clouds, a sea of purples and pinks and even some harsh crimson, split by lightning and rolling with thunder. Rain falls in fat, eager droplets that splash where they land upon the hard surface of her armour, and are blown sideways by the wind. It makes her realize just how long it’s been since she’s seen some really volatile weather. Along the road there are trees. Large, thick-trunked monsters, some easily the size of buildings. Their branches stay clear of the path, though, allowing for the open view of the sky, and creating a tunnel for the wind to go screaming through. Though the trees still seem to be quite alive, thick markings and symbols are carved into the bare surface of their trunks. In the spaces between them she can see deep forest. Moss-strewn branches and sprawling undergrowth, fallen logs overrun with mushrooms and ivy, and shadows filled with hidden things that shy quickly away from sight.

Uthvir whispers a word, and the trees glow. The wind lets up a bit.

“It seems the weather was set on greeting us,” the red hunter notes.

Thenvunin, whose outfit has been rendered hopelessly askew, sneers.
“Why do you not keep that spell active?” he demands.

Uthvir shrugs.

“Most hunters like the challenge of true weather, Thenvunin. We generally only bother dampening it for little children. And guests, of course.”

That seems to be the end of Thenvunin’s good mood. The wind stays steady, but she finds herself appreciating it. The breeze smells strongly of ‘forest’ to her. There is a crispness, a beauty to the air that she savours for a moment, not even conscious of the fact that she’s stopped and turned her face towards the trees until she feels Pride’s hand on her shoulder.

“Come on,” he says. His own hair is hopelessly windswept. He stills when she reaches over to pull a leaf from it. His eyes drift towards her lips. They’re at the back of the procession. Felassan is trying to make his way down the massive stone steps of the platform, and everyone else is facing forward. In a moment of rare impulse, she presses a kiss to the leaf, before tucking it carefully into her pocket.

Pride colours.

Felassan snarls.

They both look over to see if the fox is having troubles. But he doesn’t seem to be, instead only grumbling at the bottom of the steps. She shakes her head at herself, and they resume their trek. High walls wait for them at the end of the short road. The forest sprawls towards them. Overhead she can see the spires of a palace, and behind it, the straight stone face of a beautiful mountain range. The rain seems to swirl and dance around the gates, which are carved in square panels; each depicting a different beast.

Uthvir produces an ivory horn from their belt. A single blast and the gates open wide. Their procession heads through to a busy courtyard. The level of activity is a bit of a surprise, and a broad departure from the usual, more leisurely standards of Mythal’s palace. Though, then again, who knows what it might look like if the place was expecting a prominent guest to arrive. There is some great beast, freshly killed by the looks of it, in the main square. It’s massive, easily twice the size of a wyvern, with four large tusks protruding from its unfortunate maw. Two elves are quietly debating whether to try and take it inside or just skin it now and parcel it off in pieces. As they do another pair dash by, clearly focused on some task or another. There’s shouting and barked order and demands, and she spots several hunters using some subtle magic to cart a very large statue of a dragon down a staircase and into the palace proper. The weather whirs around them, storms of feeling and magic as much as wind and rain. On some of the higher balconies she can spy, crimson banners flare outwards – like fingers reaching for the warring clouds.

There are stables, too, she sees. Not like ordinary stables, though. The courtyard breaks off towards what looks like a garden, at a glance, broken up only by a few sheltering buildings and trees. A lotus pond, of all things, separates part of it from the rest of the yard. But there aren’t enough plants or flowers among the greenery for a decorative garden, and when she spies the first flash of white, it arrests her attention.

She’s not expecting her heart to catch in her throat.

In the beautiful stables sit several halla. To her eye, they seem to shine. Their horns are carved with intricate patterns she doesn’t recognize, and there are red, embroidered blankets settled over their backs, but there’s no mistaking what they are. One sits in the grass while two more graze, calm and clearly accustomed to the bustling courtyard around them. An elf with Ghilan’nain’s
vallaslin on her face is playing a low tune on a flute. Perhaps soothing them just in case something unexpected should happen in the chaos of activity, and cause them alarm.

Halla.

She has no idea why this, of all things, is making her eyes burn. She used to see them every day, after all. But they look the same, she thinks. For all the strangeness surrounding them, for all the beauty of the blankets on their backs, they look the same. As radiant and regal and proud as she knows them to be, no more or less magical than they had been the last time she saw them.

“Three halla!” Curiosity notes. “That is an awful lot. I suppose it makes sense, though. Andruil is Ghilan’nain’s wife, after all.”

“We have six, actually. The others are likely on a hunt,” Uthvir declares, glancing towards her. “Have you never seen them before?”

It takes her a moment to tear her eyes away from them. To stick her gaze to the floor of the courtyard instead.

“I have seen them before,” is all she can manage to say.

There are better moments to be rattled, she decides.

Knowing that doesn’t make it any easier to shake off the mood that’s stolen over her. As Uthvir and Thenvunin lead them inside, she finds herself turning and looking again, back towards the halla. Even though it can only make her heart clench, she stares at them until they are inside, and the closing door at last bars them from her view.

Inside, Andruil’s palace proves only slightly less claustrophobic then her Arlathan holdings, and even more strewn with opulent trophies, pelts, and magical taxidermy. The main hall is arranged around a massive statue of the huntress, with many trophies set upon pedestals of varying height around her. The whole thing is placed in gold, settled underneath a narrow skylight that filters the storm’s chaos through several faceted panes, and scatters the sunlight onto glowing animal skulls that reflect it further, filling the room with deep shadows and brilliant columns of light. The effect makes the statue seem to loom.

The guest quarters of the palace are larger than the previous ones, but otherwise not too different. One major deviation is that the main bedroom – Mythals’ – lets out into a small garden, which several of Andruil’s people seem to be in the process of remodelling. Thenvunin oversees that, and assigns the rest of them to preparing the chambers and ‘making them suitable’. Pride seems to have a good enough idea of what that entails, and sets everyone to various tasks. Felassan disappears at one point when he’s supposed to be helping her air out the bedding, only to turn up again when the work is almost done. She wonders if he was spying on their hosts.

They get most of the work done before nightfall, but only just. Uthvir arrives after the sky has darkened, and bids them come and eat with the hunters, offering the same hospitality they had at Andruil’s estate. They don’t demand that she serve them, thankfully. The dining hall of this palace is twice as busy as the dining hall of Mythal’s, and roughly four times as loud. There is raucous drinking and boasts, calls for a song from one of their contingent – a long faced healer who nevertheless belts out quite a lovely tune – and someone actually seems to have a pleasant conversation with Thenvunin about some past hunt or another.

She wonders at the excitement and sheer wakefulness in the air. In many ways it’s more alert than any other place she’s been in, though she can scarcely place why. But whatever is going on beneath
the earth, whatever suffering the dwarves are enduring, it seems as if Andruil’s people are honestly quite happy themselves. She wonders if it isn’t the newness of discovery. However dangerous, however strange, what they are finding and doing in the Deep Roads is different from what’s come before. While the rest of Elvhenan seems stuck in their own glory, there is a new frontier being explored here. New treasures to find, quarry to seek, and resources to plunder.

She considers this as they eat at one of the lower tables, spared most notice as these hunters seem less bored than their city-bound kin. At least, at first. Than someone makes mention of something, and Uthvir gestures towards Pride.

“Ah,” the red hunter says. “But the white wolf has fallen from Mythal’s favour. Perhaps he might welcome some comfort!”

She freezes, and focuses a glare at Uthvir. They only shrug back at her, raising an eyebrow as if to say ‘you were the one who did not want to be friends’.

There is a call for Pride at one of the larger tables, then, as the ranking hunters seem set upon getting as much of ‘the story’ as they can out of him. When he rises to their summons, she moves to stand with him. He stops her with a hand on her shoulder.

“It is alright, I will only be a moment,” he assures her.

She’s not convinced. But for now, she stays put; her food forgotten as she watches the interactions closely. Pride is good at deflecting unwanted attention, though. He gets some of the hunters boasting about themselves rather than asking after his accomplishments, and returns flattery in such a way as to disarm most innuendo. Still, hunters are indeed more blunt than Mythal’s people tend to be, and after a few too many ‘invitations’ and ‘suggestions’ she finds herself gritting her teeth.

And she isn’t the only one, it seems. A low growling kicks up, and she spies Felassan – sitting under the table, of all things, picking at a plate of roast venison and glowering at the ranking hunters. It could be her imagination, but he looks a little stranger than usual. His paws seem to have too many toes.

Well, that’s none of her business, really. He can have however many toes he wants, she supposes. It probably makes eating easier. Though, being an elf seems like the more direct approach for that sort of thing.

A thought strikes her.

“Psst,” she says.

The fox’s ears flatten. He gives her a sullen look.

“What?” he asks.

“Do you know any of them?” she wonders. “Can you distract them?”

He shakes his head, but then seems to pause, and reconsider.

“I could knock a sconce onto their table. That would probably be at least a little distracting,” he reasons. The dining hall is lined with massive sconces, burning with gold and silvery flames. One of those toppling, she thinks, would definitely make an impression.

“Could you get away with it?” she wonders.
One of the hunters brushes a hand down Pride’s shoulder. She scowls, and Felassan grumbles. “Yes,” he decides.

Then he darts off from under the table, disappearing into the chaos of the dining hall. She waits, watchful, and thinks she sees a flash of silver from somewhere at the side of the room.

As it happens, Felassan does not knock down a sconce.

Felassan knocks down nearly all of the sconces.

It starts with one of the ones nearest to the high table, of course. There’s a small flash, hardly noticeable amidst all the flames and flares of cooking fires and sparks of spells being let off anyway. Then a low groan, which actually does get a lot of the talking to quiet. The carved base of the massive sconce cracks, and she sees the problem straight away; rather than crashing towards the table, it’s falling to the side, towards the one next to it.

And towards the seating beside it, too. Where a dozen hunters, Uthvir, and Pride are all situated.

She’s on her feet in a second, but the moment of danger passes rather swiftly; the sconce falls like a toppling tree, smacking the one next to it but striking a barrier raised by half a dozen reacting hands before it can hit anyone sitting below. Still, the second sconce falls and hits a third, and then a fourth, before someone thinks to try and halt the toppling chain of events. Fire sparks on the floor and catches on the table clothes. Magical flame hits the cooking fires in a burst of sparks that make the air smell like lightning. The bang of toppling metal is matched by the storm outside.

When one of the hunters at last catches the fourth sconce before it can strike the fifth, there’s a moment of surprised silence.

“Well,” Uthvir says. “Is this a new hospitality ritual I was unaware of? Destroying the holdings of your host seems to be becoming a bad habit for your people, Thenvunin.”

Thenvunin looks livid.

“What makes you think this was our doing?” he demands. “Perhaps you let the wooden base go to rot.”

Any hope of this explanation flying is killed when a familiar bear lumbers up from the side of the room, holding a struggling silver-and-green fox by the scruff of its neck. There are a few blinks as the bear deposits the fox onto the middle of the table, but apparently this is not terribly unexpected behaviour. What was her name again? Banathim? The beast traps Felassan between her paws, as the little fox shakes under the gaze of Andruil’s hunters.

At least she’s already standing, she thinks, as she begins to move towards the table. That was… slightly less seamless than it could have been. But she’s not about to let the fox suffer for this, if she can help it.

“Felassan?” Pride asks.

“I saw him use a spell to knock the sconces over,” Banathim asserts. “There’s magic marks at the base, and it smells like him if you do not believe me.”

“Who is this?” Thenvunin demands.

“He was a late addition to our party,” Pride tells him. “A guide. Supposedly skilled.”
“Well. It would seem we have a vandal on our hands,” Uthvir muses, rapping at the plate in front of them with a bone from their meal.

Thenvunin puffs up in outrage.

“Unacceptable. I… apologize for the poor behaviour of my people, good hunters,” he grinds out, glaring absolute death at the fox on the table. “Felassan will be punished severely.”

Her first impulse is to insist that it was as much her fault as his, but Pride’s cautioning of how to behave considering her own lack of station stalls her, for a moment.

“I believe it was accidental,” she says, instead. A few curious eyes turn towards her.

“Yes, it was an accident!” the fox agrees. “I did not mean to. I am sorry. I was only startled, and used magic by mistake. Why would I do something like this on purpose?”

“You used magic by mistake?” Uthvir drawls, though they seem a little amused. They reach over and grab up the fox themselves, glancing at her, and then it. Their lips purse in consideration.

“Well now, Felassan. The only people I have ever known to use magic unintentionally have been little children.”


“Uthvir, he is one of ours. I will punish him,” Thenvunin insists, though without much energy.

“Are you certain? I could always just snap his neck here and now. He hardly seems a consequential sort; I would wager our ladies would call it even on that,” Uthvir says.

At that, Thenvunin and Pride both look appalled, and she feels a jolt of genuine alarm. The fox trembles, though, and light kicks up around it. Not like a deliberate transformation, though. More like… well. Actually, rather like he’s been struggling to keep his shape, she thinks, and has just now lost control of it. It’s sporadic and strange and he seems to fight it for a moment, before Uthvir drops him, and he gives in. There’s a swirl of light and magic, and an elf is left crouching on the floor.

A familiar elf.

He tries to hold his hood over his face, but the clothes and the shape of him are familiar.

“Ghilashim?” Pride exclaims.

She gapes.

Ghilashim? Felassan is Ghilashim?

…That does explain quite a lot, actually.

“It is the little child from the city!” Uthvir says, chuckling. “Oh, this is delightful! The boy has a hopeless infatuation with the white wolf. Did you put your name on the list, in hopes of having a grand adventure and sweeping him off of his feet, boy?”

The glare Ghilashim fixes Uthvir with is fierce.

“I am not a little child, I am twenty-six years old!” he insists.

The hall bursts into raucous laughter at that. Pride looks aghast, and Thenvunin looks like someone
just shoved a lemon in his mouth. Curiosity has gotten up too; though her expression seems more, well, curious than anything else.

“A stowaway!” one of the other high-ranking hunters declares in glee.

“A babe! Oh, how precious. I bet those palms have never once held a bow!” another says.

“Does he know knives yet? Look how soft his cheeks still are!”

“My cheeks are not soft!” Ghilashim insists.

They aren’t, really, she supposes, though something about his face certainly is. It’s also very red, as he darts uncertain glances towards Pride, who seems deeply unsure of what to make of this particular situation.

“Ghilashim, what are you doing?” Pride finally asks. “Why would you lie? Why would you come here?”

Ghilashim looks at him, and shuffles awkwardly in place.

“I was only trying to help,” he insists.

Uthvir waves dismissively.

“The motive is obvious. He wanted to steal away to wild and unseen lands, perform daring deeds and win your hand!” the red hunter declares.

“Shut up!” Ghilashim snaps.

“Enough!” Thenvunin bellows in turn, grabbing the young elf by the collar, and pulling him sharply to one side. “I said I would punish the culprit, and I shall. Doubly so for falsifying his name and claiming a duty that was not his. You say you are twenty-six, boy? That is of age. If you are going to make claims to adulthood, then you can accept a full punishment for making foolish mistakes.”

Even as Thenvunin says this, though, there are a rush of objections from the hunters. Suddenly the matter of the sconces is a trifle, and Ghilashim is just a lad, and the hunters at the high table want him to sit and tell them all about how his young heart goes aflutter at the sight of Pride. And has he ever held a knife before? A sword? Does he know how to make arrows out of magic or ride a tamed mount? Who are his parents? Twenty-six and already able to take a fox’s shape, for a Waking-born that’s impressive!

The change is as amazing as it is immediate. It’s like being back in Ess’ tavern, watching all of the patrons fuss and jeer and offer suggestions. Thenvunin gives Ghilashim a sour look, but then sighs and lets him go.

“Alright then. It is your hall, hunters. But he is going back the city at first light, and Mythal can decide what punishment he has earned for coming here under false terms,” the high ranking elf declares.

In the end, though, most of their group is assigned to help pick up the fallen pillars, while the hunters fuss over Ghilashim. If nothing else, it does get Pride away from them again, though. And their intentions towards the young ‘Felassan’ are much less objectionable, in her opinion. He seems to prompt everyone to bring out their stories about being young hunters. Curiosity listens avidly, while she helps shift some of the fallen pillars into more manageable positions. Pride and
some of the hunters together get them standing again, with assurances that the craftsman who made them can be drummed up in short order, and see to proper repairs.

Thenvunin starts making noise about it having been a long day and about there still being matters to attend to in the guest chambers, though. At length the whole of their party manages to withdraw from the dining hall. At which point Felassan finds his ear snagged in a tight grip by the ranking elf, who looks furious once again.

“You young fool!” Thenvunin declares. “What is this? Madness! A twent-six year-old in Mythal’s escort! Was there ever a real Felassan? Is there some guide out there wondering why his people left without him?”

“No,” Ghilashim insists, shaking his head, looking fairly cowed. Then he gestures towards her. “But she told me to knock over the sconce!”

All at once, everyone’s gaze snaps towards her.

Thenvunin’s glower turns marginally more wary. Pride straightens, and the look he gives Ghilashim immediately has the young elf paling.

“No, that is true,” she says. “I asked if he could do it, and he did. It was only supposed to be one sconce, though, not half the hall.”

“So you did not tell him to do it; you only asked if he could,” Pride reasons, folding his arms. “I am certain young Ghilashim misunderstood and in the heat of impetuous youth, acted rashly and without thought to the consequences of his actions.”

“I did to save you!” he insists. “From those hunters. With their jeering and their – their looks!”

Pride raises an eyebrow.

“I am confused, Ghilashim. Were you trying to rescue me of your own volition, or acting on someone else’s orders?” he asks.

“I think he was hoping to get credit for wanting to rescue you but shift the blame to someone else,” Curiosity volunteers.

Thenvunin gives Pride a long look, as if he is trying to puzzle something out and coming up utterly blank on it.

“How do you keep inspiring these things?” the ranking elf finally demands.

“Because he is excellent!” Ghilashim insists.

The compliment doesn’t seem to be having the intended effect. Pride actually looks a little bit pained.

Thenvunin doesn’t seem satisfied, though for a moment his gaze turns a little uncertain, as he looks to Pride, and then glances at her. He gestures, sharply, and turns away from them all as if they’re a headache he can no longer be bothered with.

“If you embarrass me in front of Andruil’s people again, Ghilashim, your age will not spare you from punishment,” he warns. “The hunters will expect us up early for some barbaric ritual or another. You will stay here, in these chambers, until arrangements can be made to send you home. One of us can convey you safely back to the city, I am sure. Your blasted parents must be out of
their minds with worry.”

“I am fully grown!” Ghilashim insists. “I will accept punishment for what I have done. I would do it again, without remorse!”

“You are twenty-six!” Thenvunin snaps. “You do not even know what punishment is! No one in your life has raised a hand to you, have they? Do me favour, child, and do not make me the first.”

There is enough warning in his tone, apparently, that Ghilashim heeds it, and subsides.

With one last, stern look, Thenvunin turns and heads towards his chambers. As the door closes she thinks she hears him muttering more curses about furs.

As soon as he’s gone, she raises a hand, and smacks Ghilashim soundly upside the head.

He staggers, clearly not at all expecting it.

“You tit,” she says.

Ghilashim is Felassan. Felassan is twenty-six, and kind of a shithead. With a massive crush on Pride.

“She struck me!” he protests, looking at Pride.

She does feel a pang of sympathy for him at the look on Pride’s face, which is… less than kindly.

He looks rather like he is counting to ten in his head, in fact.

“Do you realize what could have happened?” Pride asks him, finally. “You were pretending to be someone with skills you do not have. What if we had relied upon them? In fact someone did rely upon them, and you comported yourself with disastrous ignorance and unsubtlety, nearly felled an entire hall, and only earned us a reprieve by virtue of failing to maintain your transformation spell. And then you attempted to turn Thenvunin upon someone who, were she to be punished, would face far more severity than you ever would. What were you thinking?”

Ghilashim’s expression, which began to fall as soon as he looked at Pride, is utterly devastated. There is a long moment of silence, in which he seems to inch perilously close to tears.

“I only wanted to help,” he says.

Pride’s expression does soften, just a little; but Ghilashim runs off, then, heading towards one of the bedchambers. At least the palace affords more private ones than the city holdings had. The door slams behind the young elf, and the remainder of their party look like they can’t decide whether they’re amused or appalled by all of this.

“Does explain a few things,” Curiosity decides.

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It’s still a while before she’s able to get Pride for a moment alone. She’s mostly thinking of Haninan’s letter, and giving him the chance to read it, if possible. The corridor leading to the guest rooms has a high ceiling, covered in carvings and lined with what look to be the wings of massive
birds. Curiosity stands with her and stares at them for a long while, before retiring to her room. Pride at last finished allaying the concerns of some of the rest of their party, and heads towards her.

He stops a few feet away, looking at her as if suddenly uncertain.

All at once her mind turns in a very specific direction. Towards the feel of him in her arms, his mouth against hers, his skin warm and flush and...

She swallows.

“We should talk,” she says. Her voice comes out quiet, barely more than a whisper.

Pride nods, and starts moving towards her again. There are a few empty rooms left to choose from. She opts for the nearest, and he follows without a word. The interior is fairly simple; a decent-sized bed, some furniture with bizarre tiny antlers on the handles, and a small window that looks out towards the palace walls. As soon as Pride gets in, she makes herself focus, and hands him Haninan’s letter.

“You should probably read this,” she says.

Pride blinks at her as if she just started speaking gibberish, but then comprehension dawns.

“You read it?” he asks.

“And Curiosity,” she confirms, with a nod. “I think she got impatient.”

After regarding the letter for a moment in silence, Pride sinks into a nearby chair. She takes a seat on the bed and watches him. His eyes scan over the text, before he blinks, and stares a little blankly at the surface in general. As he listens to whatever message Haninan meant for him, she finds herself staring at all the little pieces of him. His fingers. His shoulders. The way the light in the room casts itself over the angles of his face. It puts her in mind of the Deep Roads, and the first poem he recited to her.

The cup of the ocean...

Could she ever write him a poem, she wonders? She doesn’t have his aptitude for these things, not really. Are there words for him in her? Are there ones that could do him justice? Just trying to imagine it makes her thoughts stall, and come up short.

He looks up from the letter, and stares at the wall for a moment. Lost in thought, that settles into the silence between them, and seems to fill it up.

At length, he shakes his head. And then he turns towards her.

His own gaze skitters across her. It flicks away from her face, and then back again, as if taking in the full picture of herself perched on the bed, before he turns his head a little. He clears his throat.

“Thenvinin was right when he said we would have to wake early,” he tells her. “There will probably be a hunt, and we will likely be expected to join. Particularly if Uthvir decides we should.”

She supposes that means it isn’t quite safe to talk, then.

Slowly, she stands up, and takes the letter away from him. She slips it into her satchel, and then lingers for a moment, uncertain. He is right there. They should probably part and sleep, if what he’s said is true. Or, if they’re going to stay awake, they should be searching. Looking for any clues on how to stop what Andruil is doing, or anything else they might find, really. Or they could
slip away, under cover of darkness, and head for the nearest entrance to the Deep Roads. Or she could go wake up Curiosity, and start on those shape-changing lessons.

A thousand things to do. All of them important – not least because each step gets them closer to curing Pride.

She reaches for his cheek. She honestly means to just brush her hand across it. To offer the gesture, the reassurance that she hasn’t forgotten their kiss (as if she ever, ever could). But he leans into her touch, and lets out a breath that brushes across her wrist, and she suddenly can’t bring herself to withdraw. She brushes her thumb gently across his cheekbone, before settling her hand against his jaw instead. He leans up and she leans down, and their lips meet in the middle. Soft and a little dry, at first. Still, the point of contact seems to spread warmth straight through her.

She moves her other hand to his face, as well, cradling it as she coaxes his lips apart. It doesn’t take much. He’s a quick learner, and he darts his own tongue into her mouth this time. He closes his hands around her waist, but rather than pulling her nearer he moves forward on his chair, until more of him is off of it than on.

When she at last pulls back, his lips follow hers for a moment. He nearly topples off balance.

She moves and catches him by his shoulders, instead. He blinks, and then moves back into the chair. She finds herself rather missing the feel of him against her, even through all the layers of their clothing and amour.

“I think I might be the one getting carried away this time,” he says, hoarsely.

Something inside of her clenches with want.

“Stay,” she asks, before she can talk herself out of it.

She almost regrets asking as soon as she does. There are still so many uncertainties, and she’s by no means angling to insist. She opens her mouth again, ready to apologize, but the look on his face stops her. His own want is written so apparently there that no one could mistake it. His hands are still on her waist. His shoulders are firm beneath her palms. She doesn’t want to let him go, doesn’t want to see him leave. Even if it would only be to cross the hall. Right now, for this moment, she just wants to have as much of him as she can.

“Yes,” he agrees; as breathless as if she’d just kissed him again.

Well. If he’s going to sound like that, she might as well give him the excuse for it.

She leans back in, and kisses him as thoroughly as she can. The feel of his lips and the slick warmth of his mouth are almost hypnotic. Her body knows other places where it wants his touch, and even as she finds herself almost content with devouring his lips, a spark of anticipation shoots right through her. She doesn’t recall making a conscious decision to all but climb into his lap, but she does notice when their armour presses together in awkward places, and when the chair they’re in scoots backwards and knocks against the wall behind it.

She stops, then, and lets out a breathless huff.

Pride licks lips. His eyes are wide and dark.

“There is a bed,” he says, roughly, in the tone of someone who knows that this might be relevant to the task at hand, but has somewhat drifted away from why.
But she remembers. Because anyone who is this inexperienced in kissing is very likely inexperienced in other things, and she will not be careless with him. She forces herself back, instead; takes his hands as she climbs off of him, and draws him to his feet. He’d felt smaller on the chair, somehow, even when she was in his lap. Standing, he has to peer downwards to meet her gaze. In the dim light of the room, it would be easy to make the mistake of forgetting who he is, and what he has and hasn’t experienced.

She won’t.

“If you want to leave, or stop, you just tell me,” she says.

He lifts a hand, and brushes her own cheek softly. A tender press of fingertips.

“You, too,” he requests. “I am not… very well-versed in these matters. If I err, please tell me so.”

She smiles at him, and kisses his palm. Then she starts working at the clasps of his armour. Or at least, she means to. However simplistic it looks on the outside, however, it seems the fastening points are much more complex than those on the armour she wears. She works at one in consternation for several moments, before Pride laughs, and shows her how it’s supposed to go. Even still, her efforts seem to prove more of a hindrance than a help.

After a few moments, she waves her hands and gives up.

“You are in charge of undressing,” she pronounces.

Pride snickers, but the flush in his cheeks renews. He glances away from the fastenings on his gauntlets to give her an unexpectedly playful look.

“Does that mean I can undress you, too?” he asks.

Another bolt of heat shoots right through her at the low rumble of his voice.

“Yes,” she readily agrees.

She’s not expecting him to immediately change targets. And, in fairness, he does finish with his gauntlets, first, before reaching for her. He moves with very deliberate care, apparently having determined that he is going to do everything well and thoroughly. He slips off her bracers, and runs his thumbs across the pulse points of her wrists. Takes off her shoulder guards, and smooths a hand down the side of her neck. He strips each piece of armour from her with brushes and touches, as if trying to memorize every part unveiled; as if she’s not simply wearing soft clothes underneath.

When he gets her down to tunic and breeches, his fingers skitter over the top lacings of her pants. She shivers at the light touch, and leans in to capture his lips again.

Then she taps the breastplate he’s still wearing.

“Off with it, my love,” she requests, whispering.

His breath hitches.

He kisses her once more, first, before he obliges. The breast plate almost drops straight to the floor. She catches it, though. It probably wouldn’t hurt it, but instincts of a lifetime insist that Pride’s armour is his protection, and that is vital, and so it must be well-kept. She sets it aside more carefully, and then she does help him undress, in the end – taking the pieces as he removes them. Brushing her fingers over the backs of his palms. The sides of his legs. She finds herself entranced
by his calf muscles for a few moments, as the last of his armour finally come away.

Once that is done with, they pause again. He’s still in a few more layers than her. Silvery fabric that shimmers, and looks very fine, and proves very fine when she runs her hands over it. She could probably take over for this part, but Pride still seems quite set upon his task. He strips himself to the waist before turning back to her. The pale expanse of his chest makes her want to press up against him. To kiss his collarbone, and suck at the base of his neck, and run her fingers over sensitive nipples, and lick his navel. She only gets as far as the kiss, though, before he reaches for the hem of her shirt.

“Is this alright?” he asks her.

“I am not shy,” she assures him.

Though perhaps she could almost become so, around him. He lifts the tunic from her. Then he presses gentle fingers towards her chest wraps. Unravels them with care, and looks at her. His eyes rove across her breasts, and the muscles of her stomach, and the waist he has been holding. They trail up to her face, and then down again, the same way she’s seen him look at artwork; but with much, much more want in him. His admiration is so thorough and apparent, it makes her conscious of every little thing about herself. Of the seamless space where her left arm is, and the twitch of muscles in her stomach, and the hardening of her nipples in the cool air.

He reaches for her, and then seems to hesitate, as if he’s not quite certain where to go next. Or as if there are too many options for him to decide between.

She catches his hand, and moves it to the laces of her pants.

Might as well get it all off, then.

He doesn’t untie them at first, though. Instead he uses them to pull her near.

“You are beautiful,” he tells her. His voice is low and intent, and just a little inadvertently haunting.

Her throat goes thick. She puts her arms around him. Presses close to him. Skin-on-skin, her breasts flush against his chest. His heart’s hammering, a frantic rhythm beneath his breastbone, but as she holds him it calms just a little. She kisses his neck. Soft pecks, and nibbles, just tracing the spray of freckles she can find as his hands rest upon her back. Warm and steady.

Eventually his touch trails down again, his hands slipping towards her hips, and then brushing the curve of her backside. She steals another kiss – incidentally inching upwards to reach his lips, so that his hands slip lower still, into a somewhat more bold arrangement. She can feel the press of his palms through the seat of her pants.

“I do not have words for how lovely you are to me,” she confesses to him. His throat bobs, and his grip on her tightens. “I keep trying to find some, but none suffice. You are not perfect, but you are. Beauty is accurate but also inadequate. You are…”

She pauses, and draws in a breath.

“You are my heart, you know,” she whispers.

For a moment, there is no response. Pride is still and quiet. But then at last he shifts. His hands move to her arms, and he eases her back – just a little. The look on his face is adoring. And pained; there is always some pain. But it's very little, tonight, compared to the rest of it all. He stares at her
a moment, and then he trails his right hand across her collarbone. His touch dips low, and stops just above her actual, non-metaphorical heart.

His palm feels very warm.

“You are my heart, too,” he promises.

Vhenan.

She can’t help it. Tears itch at her eyes, and tumble down her cheeks. She kisses him, soundly, revelling in the feel of him, the presence of him, and then wraps her arms around his shoulders.

A surprised sound escapes her when he hugs her close in return, and actually manages to lift her up, spinning a small half-circle before he puts her down again.

“My love. My heart,” he breathes, when their lips part. Then he kisses her again, as hungry for it as she is.

She thinks, if they’re not careful, that they could spend the whole night kissing and just holding one another. And while that would by no means be a tragedy, she is burning now. The fabric of her breeches feels too confining and claustrophobic on her skin. She wants him beneath her, above her, spread out before her; under her hands, or against her back, or lying atop her. Moving inside her. She pulls back a little and grasps him by his own pants, and whispers these desires to him as she tugs him towards the bed, until he is so red that it looks slightly painful. But there’s a spark in his eyes, too. Eagerness to go with all the intensity.

The ever-vibrant desire to learn everything and become skilled at it.

The back of her legs hit the fur-strewn mattress. She accidentally drops into a sitting position; but when she moves to stand, Pride halts her instead, and at last undoes the laces of her pants. She obligingly lays back and stretches out to help him pull them away, along with her smalls. He stares at her again, once he does; taking in all the pieces of her, and the whole picture of her body, bared in its entirety.

“Still beautiful?” she asks, propping herself onto her elbows. The question comes without too much real fear. His expression is telling. So is the bulge at the front of his pants.

“You are correct. Beauty is accurate, but inadequate,” he determines.

He stares at her, and makes another aborted reach for her. She smiles at him.

“Pride,” she says, gently. “Let me see you, too. Then come and lay with me?”

He nods, swiftly. His own motions are a bit unceremonious when it comes to revealing himself, and he almost climbs immediately onto the bed. She halts him for a moment, though, taking her time to drink in the sight of him. The fell expanse of his skin, and the flush of his arousal. The jut of his hips, and the strong muscles of his thighs. When she finally pulls him onto the bed, she coaxes him into spreading out in front of her.

“You can always stop me,” she reminds him, leaning over him as she threads her fingers through his.

“I know. I trust you,” he assures her.
That almost makes her cry again. It is such a thing, she thinks, to have her lover trust her. To see the sincerity of it written in his eyes. To know that even if there are things still unknown, it’s not because there are any secrets between them. They are both bared to one another.

She kisses him, long and slow. Savouring the heat of his lips. The gentleness of her feeling for him floods through her, and she kisses her way down his chest, as well. Taking her time. Tracing over muscles, and finding the softer patches of his skin. Everything is mesmerizing, she finds. The delicate veins in his wrists arrest her, the rise and fall of his every breath is hypnotic. She presses her lips to the pink skin of his nipples, and traces her fingers across his belly button. She maps him, thoroughly, before she finally eases her way between his thighs, and brushes her first touch to his erection. He draws in a rushed breath when she does.

She keeps it slow, though, watching his face as she wraps her fingers around him, giving him a careful stroke before drawing her touch up towards the head of him. When he bites his lip she leans forward and brushes a kiss to it, and licks her own lips before she starts to ease him into her mouth. One bit at a time. She pulls back, often, licking and stroking until he’s slick with her saliva. Then she manages to take him fully into her mouth. Hot, warm, firm flesh settles against her tongue and presses towards the back of her throat. It’s the sound he makes that has her own desires surging, though. A low breathy moan.

His hips jerk reflexively upwards, but she’s expecting that. She holds him in place as she coaxes more sounds out of him, until his breaths are ragged and she can tell he’s near to coming. Good. She wants him to, but he’s talking now, words pushing through the haze that sound like a request for her to stop. So she does. She lets him slip away from her mouth, and looks up at him as his head drops back, and his chest heaves.

He’s quiet for a moment.

“Come here,” he asks.

She climbs back up the bed towards him. He kisses her; fiercely at first, and then more carefully as he realizes her lips are a bit swollen from what she’d been doing. He runs a hand down her back and moves his kisses to her cheek, and brow, and the bridge of her nose.

“I want to please you, too,” he insists.

“We have time,” she assures him.

“Not enough,” he says. His voice breaks, just a bit.

There is an early morning to think of, she supposes.

“Alright,” she agrees.

One of his hands stays on her back. He draws in a breath, and brushes the other over the tops of her thighs. Tentative. Nearly tickling, in fact. She smiles, and leans back a little. Takes his hand and puts it where she wants it, before moving in to kiss him again.

He brushes his fingers carefully through her sensitive folds. Long, slow touches, as if he, too, is trying to map her. His gaze stays riveted to her face as he starts pressing more firmly, searching for the reactions he wants. It isn’t too hard for him to find them. Her every nerve feels like it’s poised for his touch, just waiting for the brush of his fingers. She lets him see what she enjoys, and when he finds that tiny cluster of nerves that makes sparks flare, she grinds down against him, and gasps in pleasure.
He doesn’t need another clue. His attentions focus there, his fingers circling and pressing, until he finally slips one inside of her, too. Despite his earlier insistence on haste, he takes his time, moving the digit only slightly.

“Oh,” he says.

He sounds a little worried.

She looks at him, a wash of concern in herself, and he bites his lip.

“Is it… it does not seem like… I do not think I will fit,” he tells her. “Not without hurting you, which I will not do. We will have to forgo that act.”

It takes her a moment to figure out what he’s driving at. Her thoughts are not as coherent as they could be, given the circumstances.

When she does, she can’t help a soft huff of amusement.

“It stretches,” she assures him. Leaning forward, she nuzzles at his jaw, and then kisses the side of his mouth. “Go in circles. When it gets easier, add another finger.” She shifts again, angling her legs so that they’re further apart, and there’s more space for him to move his hand. It requires some willpower to resist the impulse to squeeze him close, instead, but she manages it.

With a careful intensity, he does as advised, moving in incredibly gentle circles. As worked up as she is, it’s an almost horrible inadvertent tease – even when she encourages him to apply a little more pressure, he remains stubbornly cautious, and slow. By the time he finally adds a second finger, she is biting her lip and straining to keep from grinding down onto him as hard as she can.

“Please,” she breathes. “Pride, I need… please, my love, harder…”

He looks at her as if she has just done something incredible.

But he does press down more firmly, at that. She moans her approval at him, moving her hips in encouragement, and after a moment Pride begins working his thumb against her most sensitive spot as well. His fingers inside her and the warm press of him against her is exquisite. She slips her own hand down to start stroking him again, as her wetness and his diligence ease her open.

She takes over again, then, pushing at him until he’s on his back, and straddling him in turn. She’s near to frantic, now, but the sight of him slows her down again. The dim light catches in the moisture of his eyes, and makes them look like they’re sparkling.

Is he crying? She leans in closer, but no; there are no tear tracks on his cheeks, no signs of pain or upset on his features. Just brilliant arousal, and the faintest hint of concern.

“You are doing so well,” she assures him. And he is, too; most inexperienced lovers go too fast, rather than slow, and pay too little heed to their partners, rather than too much. Too concerned with how virile or accommodating they seem, and not with what they’re actually doing, and who they’re doing it to. There’s none of that, here.

“I love you,” he tells her. “I do not wish to hurt you. Ever.”

His hand comes up, cradling her cheek. She bends down until she can press her forehead against his; and then tilt down, and kiss him softly.

“This will not hurt me,” she assures him.
Then she pulls back, and lines him up with her, and carefully sinks her way down onto him.

It’s slower than she needs to go. But he watches her the whole way. His hips don’t even twitch, at first. His eyes trail her movements until she’s taken him all the way in; and then he stares, as if he cannot wholly believe it. His hands rest on her hips. His thumbs brush gentle circles across her skin, and he lets a long, low breath. And then he twitches. Just the tiniest upward thrust, but as close as they are, it’s impossible not to notice.

The truth is, she’s somewhat entranced herself, lost to the warm stretch of him inside of her. The press of him against her inner walls.

She takes him with care, though. A languid rhythm that taxes her self-control, as he bites his lips and moves his hands to clutch at her thighs, and then the sheets; apparently not trusting himself to avoid digging his nails into her. She doesn’t think that would be too bad, in fact, but it wouldn’t be worth distressing him. She rolls her hips, endearments and slightly incoherent praise tumbling from her lips as she rides him. She’s pretty sure at least half of what she’s saying isn’t even in ancient elven. Eventually he starts to meet her, matching her rhythm, encouraged by her reactions. The warmth surging through her spreads and sparks.

She reaches down to touch herself as well, as she feels her release building. Pride is straining, clearly very near to his own limit, and possibly holding back on sheer willpower alone. So she urges herself along. His gaze fixes to her again, wide and enraptured.

When she comes it’s in a rush. She clenches around him, and he follows close on her heels; spilling into her as white hot sparks burst behind her eyelids. Her whole body seems to tremble with it. A soft cry escapes Pride. She slumps towards him, only to find herself caught up fiercely in his arms; a surprisingly pleasant, sweaty tangle of limbs as he crushes her to him in the aftermath. Words have apparently fled them both for the moment. But she manages to kiss the nearest patch of skin on him, before he lets out a long breath, and rolls them both sideways; still holding onto her like he’s half convinced she’ll scatter into dust if he lets go.

He presses his cheek against her brow, and just breathes awhile.

All things considered, she kind of needs to catch her breath, too.

“I love you,” she tells him. “My heart. I love you so, so much.”

“What does that mean?” Pride asks, and she realizes that had all slipped out in common.

She gives him a translation, and he presses his lips to her temple.

“Ai lohv yu,” he approximates back at her.

She squeezes her eyes shut, and keeps him close.

~

Eventually, they do sleep.

They end up tangled in furs and blankets and one another. She wakes to Pride kissing her; one of his hands curled around her face, his lips at the corner of her mouth. His fingers brush across her
brow. It’s not precisely the most comfortable of scenarios, though. Dried sweat and itchy furs and the scent of the night’s activities cling to both of them. Not repulsive, by any means, but she has a sudden urge to go sit under a waterfall for a while.

Barring that, the washing basins in the room will suffice, she thinks.

Still.

She takes a moment to kiss Pride back, properly, as she blinks herself awake. The light in the room has gone from the dim glow of evening ambiance to a cold, stormy, pre-dawn grey.

“We should get ready,” Pride reasons. His voice is rough and low and apologetic, and makes her wish they could spend the morning right where they are – even with the itchy furs and dried sweat. But that’s never really been her life. So she contents herself with brushing her thumb across the shell of his ear, and sighing on him a little bit.

“We should,” she agrees.

His lips purse, a little. Obviously as displeased with that state of affairs as she is.

By some miracle they still manage to get up before everyone else, it seems. They make it to the common room of the guest wing with nary a soul in sight, dressed and clean and armed, no less. She takes advantage of the calm to give Pride a hand with his hair, running her fingers gently across his scalp before tying it back for him. He gives her plain silver ties to work with, and leans against her knees, easier and more relaxed than she might have expected after a first night together. Though he does periodically ask her if she’s feeling alright.

“I am fine,” she tells him for the thousandth time, when she finally finishes brushing her fingertips across the shaved sides of his head and pretending it’s an important part of the hair-fixing process. “I am not the one to worry about, anyway.”

He gives her a look, and she almost reminds him of just who has contracted an incredibly dangerous disease, before she remembers where they are. So instead she checks him over in silence. But he seems, mercifully, more or less the same.

He’s still sitting in front of her, with her hands on his shoulders, when the main door opens.

Uthvir stalks into the hall. They’re clad in their typical, shining red armour; though they’ve added a crimson cloak to the proceedings this time, too, with a narrow hood and built-in mask for the bottom of their face. The material of it shimmers like spilt wine when they move, and the edges curl away just before they touch the ground. They’ve got a javelin braced across their shoulders, and two long knives clink from either side of their hips.

When the red hunter catches sight of the two of them, they pull down the mask portion of their hood.

“Well!” Uthvir greets, with a sharp smile. “How cozy. And here I thought I would find everyone lazing in their beds.”

“Uthvir,” she replies, with a nod.

“Did you ship the little fox back off to his parents, then?” the hunter wonders.

She and Pride blink at one another.
Somehow, Ghilashim had crossed neither of their minds recently. Funny, that.

“No,” Pride admits. “That is for Thenvunin to handle.”

“Ah, and we mustn’t spare Thenvunin,” Uthvir declares, with a nod. “Speaking of. I suppose I shall do my duty as host and rouse your illustrious leader. As well as the rest of your party. I hope your people enjoy being jabbed with point things.”

So saying, the hunter disappears unerringly towards Thenvunin’s chambers.

She sighs, and nudges Pride with her knees. Quiet morning done with, then.

“I will go wake up Curiosity,” she says. “Before Uthvir does it the unpleasant way.”

A loud and distinctive shrieking, followed by Uthvir’s laughter, erupts from the direction of the nicer guest rooms.

Pride nods.

“That would probably be best,” he agrees.

She sets off for the room Curiosity selected. Pride seems to be taken with a streak of benevolence, as well, and heads for another of the occupied rooms. She thinks one of the healers took that one. A tap on Curiosity’s door yields no answer. When she pushes it open, she finds the room within is one of the airier ones. The window is a bit larger, and looks out over the garden, letting in more light and colour than most. Curiosity is a giant ball of blankets in the middle of her bed.

All she can see is a single tuft of dark hair sticking out from the top.

“Curiosity?” she calls.

No answer.

Concerned, now, she moves closer; and as she does she picks up the low rumble of snoring. She pokes the blanket lump, making an educated guess at where an arm might be.

“Curiosity?” she tries again, more loudly.

“What?” Curiosity’s voice demands from the midst of its den, low and sleepy and definitely edging towards an unexpected degree of surliness.

“Curiosity, did you sleep last night?” she wonders.

Finally, the blankets flip back, and her friend’s head emerges. She’s treated to the sight of wide blue eyes, dark, disheveled hair, and a jaw-cracking yawn.

“It is still night,” Curiosity insists.

“No anymore,” she replies. “Uthvir’s waking everyone up.”

“Uthvir is a menace and they can go hang themselves,” Curiosity grumbles. She then follows this statement up with a series of grouchy muttering that sounds suspiciously like ‘peck out their eyes and feed them to snakes’, but she could have misheard… at least some of that.

“We are probably going hunting, though,” she muses. “You can shoot your bow. And if you kill something good, I bet the hunters will let you try bloodwine.”
There is a pause.

Followed, at length, by a tremendous sigh, and the blankets being thrown back. Curiosity struggles her way out of bed, looking particularly tired, in fact. She double-checks for any signs of Blight or obvious trouble, but it looks like nothing more than a poor night’s sleep. Or possibly a few too many drinks at the banquet the night before.

By the time she manages to emerge with an armed and dressed – if still droopy and surly – Curiosity, most everyone else has in the main hall. Pride could only spare a few from Uthvir’s efforts, it seems. Probably because Uthvir’s methods worked much faster. And then it turns out that only the elves who have proficiency with weapons are expected to go on the hunt, so most of the healers get to go back to bed anyway. So does Ghilashim, who spends most of the time glaring at the floor, until Thenvunin catches one of the healers by the arm.

“While we are gone, talk to whoever runs the eluvian here and see if you cannot escort our wayward child back home,” he asks.

Ghilashim glares upwards, at that, but looks back down again swiftly enough.

“Ah, that would be Lennehn. You can probably find him in the main hall for the morning meal. He will probably be a hart, or something with antlers,” Uthvir helpfully informs the healer. Then the hunter tsk’s. “Really, Thenvunin. Can you not learn anyone’s name? Sometimes I am flattered you even recall mine.”

Thenvunin colours, and scowls, and generally looks like he hates this entire situation and wishes they would all die so he could go back to Mythal’s nice, peaceful gardens for a good hundred years or so.

“Are we to depart without breakfast?” the ranking elf asks, instead.

Uthvir shrugs.

“The storm is waning. Our quarry will vanish with it. Eating can wait until after we hunt,” they reason.

She won’t argue with that. A full belly would just slow them down, anyway. And despite everything, she finds there’s a note of anticipation to her. The energy of this palace is infectious. The vibrancy of the wilderness around it is compelling. She wants to go, she finds. She wants to hunt. The desire is a wild feeling, pulling at her senses, begging her to go and take down something big and sustaining.

When they finally make their way towards the main courtyard, she finds herself in a rare, eager mood. She can’t help it. She wants to link her arm through Pride’s, but she settles for just walking close beside him, light on her feet. None of her weapons are particularly good for hunting, but she can improvise. Especially if they’re hunting some interesting, which, under the circumstances, she rather anticipates. Several of Andruil’s people also seem to have swords and weapons cut out more for combat than ambush, so it seems a good guess.

Her mood shifts somewhat, though, when her gaze is once again arrested by the halla pen. There are, indeed, six of the animals this time. Uthvir leads their party towards the stables. The elf she’d seen before, the tender with Ghilan’nain’s vallaslin, is up and yawning. Even she, though, might not have been at all misfit in another time and place. She smiles at them, and at Uthvir, and yields her charges without complaint; three to Andruil’s people, including Uthvir, and one to Thenvunin. The rest of them, apparently, will be walking, and the two remaining mounts will be staying
behind.

That’s probably for the best, really. She can barely stop looking at the halla even as it is; if she actually got to ride one, she’s not sure how she’d react.

The storm from yesterday is, indeed, still going strong. Rain drops lightly into the courtyard, but once they get past the doors by the stables, it turns into a real downpour. The motive behind Uthvir’s hood and cloak becomes abundantly clear, as they’ve barely begun to move before all of them are more-or-less drenched. Thenvunin tries holding up a barrier to repel the droplets, but Uthvir discourages it.

“Better wet and energetic than dry and weary for this hunt,” they say, and surprisingly, Thenvunin actually takes the advice.

She keeps a worried watch on the halla, but these animals are not subject to the elements the same way their descendants would be. Not only are they beautiful and surprisingly hardy, the rain barely dapples their pristine fur. In point of fact, they seem to enjoy it; turning their heads up every so often and making swishy back-and-forth motions with their ears.

They’re having fun she realizes.

It makes her think of an old halla who had been the keeper’s favourite for many years. He had been a playful buck, even in his declining years, with a particular fondness for blossoming trees. In the spring, if the clan passed through the right territories, they would often set up camp in a field of pink and yellow petals. The old halla had loved to sit in the breeze and try to catch them in his mouth. When he had finally died, the keeper had planted a blossom tree over his grave.

She wonders if the halla in this time are as immortal as the elves.

That would be fitting, she thinks.

She’s so busy looking at the animals, the first thing she notices when Uthvir pulls back a bit is that one of them is closer to her than the rest.

“Do you know how to ride?” Uthvir asks her.

She blinks up at them, nearly as startled by their voice as she is surprised by the question.

“Where would she learn a thing like that?” Pride asks from beside her, his expression neutral as he looks up at the hunter.

Uthvir shrugs.

“Perhaps wherever she saw one before? Mythal does not keep them. Does not see the need, as I understand. So I must admit, I am curious as to where she happened upon one of Ghilan’nain’s treasures. There are none in the city, not even in the lady’s own holdings.”

“There are many images and impressions of halla in the Dreaming,” Pride says.

She almost laughs. She can’t help it; her mood is strange.

“There are indeed,” the hunter agrees. “So you dream, doll? Do you dream well?”

A glance up at them reveals that their expression is somewhat difficult to read. Especially with the hood, and the flurries of rain obscuring her vision.
“Not always,” she settles on saying.

It seems to put an end to the conversation, at least.

The road from the stables is narrower and not quite so stately as the one from the eluvian. It clearly sees a lot of use, though. In the Free Marches or Ferelden, she’d call it a good road. There are obvious hunter’s signs in the woods; though they are made with magic, it seems, and she doesn’t recognize them. The tree branches sway, and the scent of the rain catches in her hair. The sky churns with clouds. Every so often and rumble of thunder, like the roar of a dragon, breaks across the world. She finds herself mirroring the halla, before long; turning her gaze upwards.

Uthvir stops them a few times to check the hunter signs, and at length leads them off the main road, and down a steep, narrow trail that leads towards the mountains. The rush of a river, not far off, adds to the din of the storm. It makes her think of her russet wolf dreams, but only in the vaguest sense. That’s a problem that can wait until it can’t anymore.

The halla handle the paths with the talent she would expect of them. Some of the on-foot warriors don’t fare so well. But the weather at least seems to provide an amply distraction for Curiosity, who catches rain drops on her tongue, and comments thoroughly on the feeling of water soaking through her clothing. Gradually, the trail turns rockier, and the thick forest thins into slick grey boulders and broken ground.

Uthvir halts the hunting party.

A sound catches her ears. Beneath the rain, and the distant river. It’s almost familiar. A low, reptilian growl, near to a croak. Like the low call of a wyvern, but different, too.

“Stormchasers,” Pride says, in the tone of someone who has just figured something out.

She raises a hand to quiet him, because it’s clear they’re meant to be listening, and waiting for some further direction in whatever Uthvir gathers from the sound.

When the line of the red hunter’s shoulders changes, she turns to Pride.

“What are they?” she asks him, quietly.

“Large,” is the first thing Pride says. Then he shakes his head. “They are like serpents with wings. They follow in the wake of storms, and hunt spirits, sometimes. That makes them unwelcome in most lands.”

“And we are doing everyone a great favour by dealing with them while they are in ours,” Uthvir says, gesturing to one of the other hunters. “They will be by the river bend. There are small animals and spirits that congregate there. Good hunting for them; and now they are good hunting for us. Riders will flush them out. Use magic sparingly, and if you get close enough to strike at one, do so. Ranged fighters will wait on the ridge. Be mindful of your aim. If you hit a hunter or a halla, it’s most likely the end of you. The rest can block off the river, so the chasers will be forced up towards the bowmen, and can’t escape down the falls instead. Use barriers if they aim to fly over you.”

She spares a concerned glance at Curiosity. But her friend only looks excited.

Still. If this was her clan’s hunting party, she’d insist that Curiosity should watch such a hunt a few times, at least, before participating in one. Especially if careful aiming is required. Not that her friend is half bad with her bow, but what would a seasoned hunter consider good enough for this kind of thing?
“Be careful,” she says.

“I will,” Curiosity assures her. “Stormchasers are large, like Pride said. Especially the wings. Those are the best things to hit; I read about it. Then they cannot fly away and the people on the ground go and bash in their skulls.”


The party splits, then; the riders take the road further down, and the archers head up, and she and Pride and two of the hunters – one of whom is the bear, Banathim, she sees; and it’s probably a testament to how distracting she finds halla that she didn’t notice that sooner – make their way through the trees, towards the roar of the river. It’s careful going over slippery rocks until they reach the bank.

Then she sees their quarry.

‘Large winged serpents’ would certainly work as a description, in the same way that ‘big hot lizard’ might technically be used to describe a dragon. The stormchasers are barely smaller than dragons anyway, and perhaps much longer, she thinks, though it’s hard to tell; of the five she can see, none of them seem to reach a coherent end. They are chasing wisps around the river; dipping into the water and then cresting back out of it, drinking and snapping at one another. Their scales are the same dark purple as evening clouds, shimmering wet and bright, like gemstones. The membranes of their massive wings are flecked with red veins, and their eyes are white as pearls. They clack boney jaws at their kin and snap up wisps, and one of them seems to have caught something bigger.

Pride stiffens at her side.

The stormchaser is holding something bright and twisting. A spirit, she realizes. As they watch, the beast clamps its jaws down, and shakes its head. Strange sparks of magic burst from it, and the spirit writhes, crying out as the colour in it dims and twists, and tiny wisps of it break off. The other stormchasers catch these. Clamping their jaws over them the same way the halla had caught raindrops.

She winces.

“They are killing it,” Pride hisses, voice low.

“They do that,” Banathim says, with a huff. “Nothing for it, right now. We have to wait on the riders.”

“We cannot just let them kill it!” Pride insists.

The bear stamps a foot down heavily on his cloak, as if convinced he might run off on some ill-conceived rescue mission at a moment’s notice.

“If we rush in too early, the stormchasers will bolt, and get away. And then they will keep on chasing storms and eat many more spirits,” Banathim explains.

Pride’s expression falters.

And then tightens into anger, and a surprising degree of obstinacy.

“It is not our place to let that particular spirit die for the sake of other, hypothetical ones,” he insists. “We are here now; we can save it now.”
Oh.

She swallows, as Pride and the bear continue to bicker in hissed whispers, and looks back towards the stormchasers. They don’t really need to rush out at them, though. They just need to distract them from their meal long enough for the spirit to escape, if it can. A lot of things can distract a predator from their meal without giving up a chase. If they’re well-fed, almost anything can do it. If they aren’t, another, better meal might work.

“What else do stormchasers eat?” she asks the remaining hunter in their group.

The woman shrugs.

“Deer, elk, usual prey beasts, really.”

“Are they afraid of elves?” she wonders. “They know we can kill them?”

“Yes. They’re mostly blind, but they can pick up on magic. If we get too close they’ll scent our emotions, and scatter,” the hunter explains.

There’s a moment, then, while everyone pauses, and looks at her, and considers. Pride with some mounting concern.

“Well,” she says. “I think we have an obvious solution.”

“But what would you even do?” Pride asks.

The stormchaser chomps down on the spirit again. The sound it makes sets her gut twisting.

“Something,” she decides, “Trade weapons with me, Pride. If they can see magic, mine won’t work.”

Pride hesitates, for a moment; but the scream must have wrenched at him, too, because he doesn’t protest when she takes his sword. Nor when she deposits her own blade and shield into his grasp.

Without further delay, she begins to make her way further up the river. Pride hisses at her, and she waves reassuringly to him. She’s not a fool. These are creatures she’s never fought before. But she doesn’t need to kill them, she just needs to distract them until the cavalry arrives. She darts along the bank, quick as she can without the risk of toppling into the river, until she’s close enough to see the individual scales on the stormchasers’ serpentine hides.

As she nears, one of the beasts snaps at the fellow who has caught the spirit. The challenge seems half-hearted, but it gives her an idea.

The water is shallower here. Still choppy and probably deceptively deep, in places, but she doesn’t need to go far. The stormchasers challenge one another with quick, snapping motions that threaten jabbing teeth. Drawing her sword, she eases her way down the bank, until she’s close enough to reach the nearest chaser.

Then she jabs at it.

It’s not the beast holding the spirit, but for this to work, it doesn’t always have to be. The stormchaser rears towards her, and she flattens herself against the bank.

Nothing, nothing, she thinks. I am nothing, and nothing is here, not at all, no.
The stormchaser waves its head about. Up close she can see the pattern of the scales on the underside of its jaw. But it doesn’t look towards her, or sniff the air, and after a moment it turns away.

When it does, she makes for a different section of the bank, and jabs at a different beast.

It’s not enough to frighten them. The sword scratches their hides but they are covered in little nicks and tears of comparable quality anyway. It does start to infuriate them, though, as they begin to decide that their fellows must be taking jabs at them – because nothing else is there – and quarrel more frequently. After a few minutes it’s enough to get them all ganging up on the stormchaser with the spirit in its maw; if only because envy combines with irritation, and the cocktail makes the whole flock aggressive.

Perfect.

The lead stormchaser lets up on the spirit as it settles on defending itself rather than slowly tearing apart its prey. It doesn’t drop the poor thing, as she’d hoped. Instead it keeps it mouth full and sends irritated sparks and jolts of magical lightning towards the others.

This does have the benefit of making them all even more upset, though.

Before long she needn’t add any jabs to the proceedings. Which is a good thing, because the river has started to electrify.

But that’s a problem of its own. With the water becoming uncomfortable to the stormchasers themselves, sparking at them all with abandon, their wings are beginning to unfurl.

She’s trying to figure out what she can do about that when the air seems to, all at once, grow heavy and oppressive.

It’s an oddly familiar sense. Not in what it evokes, but in the strange sort of atmosphere that settles over the river. The stormchasers go still. The water is sparking, but apparently that irritation is of a lesser concern to them now. Eerily, almost in unison, they turn their heads upwards. She follows their line of sight. All she can see is the same storm that’s been tearing across the sky since yesterday.

The stormchasers apparently see something different, though. They huddle closer to one another. Instead of taking wing, they hunch their necks, and waver; like nugs suddenly caught in a trap. But try as she might, she can’t see any trap. There’s just the feeling in the air. Like the sky itself has dropped down and turned malevolent; like there are things. Biting, stinging, clawing things that are lying in wait for whatever might flutter above the treeline.

When the riders burst towards the river from the opposite bank, the stormchasers let out terrified calls, and begin climbing all over one another in their haste to flee towards the cliff. That direction, she realizes, is the only one that doesn’t feel menacing. Like bizarre eels, the creatures struggle their way up the river towards it. The riders give chase.

Only one turns to take a more ominous path. The lead chaser, with the spirit still in its mouth, had been pushed further away from the cliff by all the commotion. Apparently deciding that the distance is too much for it to manage, it flees towards the other end of the river, keeping low and making strange chittering sounds of fear.

Fear.

She races back down the bank after it, but the other hunters have already gotten barriers in place.
She knows where she’s felt this before, she realizes, as the stormchaser crashes against the magic; clearly aware it’s there, but desperate to break through. It finally drops its prey. The small spirit hits the water, and a moment later she sees Banathim go splashing towards it. The barriers turn, curling the stormchaser towards the bank, where it can fall prey to blows. It at last gives in to the urge to flight over its sudden fear of the sky, and tries to hurtle itself higher; but it’s too late. Pride catches the creature with a sharp blow that drags along its belly. The other hunter joins in, pinning one of its wings.

She breaks into a run. But by the time she gets back, the beast is clearly in its death throes.

Still; she helps Banathim back to shore, taking the small, trembling spirit from the great bear and offering her a shoulder, until they all collapse against the bank. Far enough away that the sparking river doesn’t bite at their heels.

Pride staggers towards her. He’s carrying her sword, covered in stormchaser blood.

The spirit in her arms trembles a few more times, and gradually begins to fade.

With a jolt of alarm she sits up.

“Is it dying?” she worries.

“No,” Pride assures her. “Just going back to the Dreaming, where it can heal.”

He reaches over, and brushes a touch over the glowing approximation of a head. A moment later, she’s left with a vague sense of gratitude, and empty arms.

“What was it?” she wonders.

“Terrified,” Pride wryly supplies. “Anything beyond that was too difficult to tell.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she slumps back against the bank.

Terrified.

Yes.

So had been the Stormchasers.

So the question, she supposes, is why the river had suddenly begun to feel like she’d just been dropped into the Nightmare’s domain.

Chapter End Notes

I’m probably going to be a bit swamped and there are some prompts I want to get done in the next little while, so the next update might take longer than usual. Thanks for reading, you guys! <3
Whatever the source of the Nightmare’s presence, it doesn’t last long. She waits, nerves on edge; but though she can still feel a certain dread to the atmosphere, it dissipates before too long. The dead stormchaser goes through its awkward, twisting death throes before the hunters move in to start packing it up for transport. In the midst of this process, Thenvunin comes and finds them. He rides a bit awkwardly, she notes. As if he doesn’t quite trust his halla; and his halla, in turn, doesn’t seem overly charmed by him.

But there is a light in the ranking elf’s eyes when he announces that they hunters have taken down all the prey.

They bring their own kill – Pride does something to make it much easier to shift the long, winding corpse, after they’ve finished helping the hunters tie it up and keep it from dragging much – and follow Thenvunin back towards the road, trailing up the cliff. The river seems very quiet by comparison, as they make their way back. Most of the smaller wildlife had been scared off by the presence of the stormchasers, and then probably even more deterred by the subsequent fighting and splashing, she supposes.

That oppressive atmosphere probably hadn’t helped, either.

The rest of the party is waiting by the time they get there. Arrayed against the wilderness backdrop, some riding halla, with the dead stormchasers piled behind them. Defeated monsters. The picture arrests her for a moment. A low wind hits her face, and obscures some of the clarity of detail; and for an instant, she can almost see the past that she used to imagine. The dream of her people’s history, that died an ignominious death long enough ago that she’d almost forgotten she ever used to share it.

And it is still dead, she knows. But for a moment, she lets herself mourn it, a bit.

The wind changes, and they make their way back to the high walls and steady stream of activity that marks Andruil’s palace. Another party seems to be returning at about the same time. This one looks like they’ve gone from their home base for much longer; she wouldn’t have thought so in her own time, but the slight signs of wear-and-tear on their gear would indicate a long trip for the elves of this era. They have no halla, either; the only animal in their party is a single, steady ox. It pulls a wagon burdened with a strange trophy kill. She’s never seen quite the like of it before, but the long claws on its massive feet seem more the sort for digging than for goring; and the wagon is burdened with a few pretty rocks, as well. Ore samples, perhaps? Or just whimsically chosen treasures, brought back for some jeweller to make use of?

The leader of the second party greets them readily, and speaks to Uthvir and Thenvunin as they approach the gate.

“We go a week, and come back to find you here, with a party of Mythal’s folk?” the huntress notes. “Did the City Holdings burn down?”

“Close. The destruction was more water than fire,” Uthvir replies.

The ranking huntress blinks.
“Truly?”

“Truly so; and the Lady Mythal has been poisoned, to add to the injury. Andruil has promised her a cure; your people might be setting out again sooner than imagined,” the red hunter explains.

Their colleague winces.

“That may be easier said than done. The passage we were using has been sealed, with great prejudice. Another earthquake struck while we were withdrawing from our hunt. Fortunately no one was injured, but it was a near thing. We lost one of our carts and oxen, too; this is only half our haul. I would say we had an even greater prize on the second load, for the sake of boasting, but truthfully, we were happy to get away with what we did.”

“Wait, what does this mean?” Thenvunin interjects, sharply. “My lady is coming here for healing treatments, not an expedition. Why would you set out again, and why would the closing of some path have any impact on our visit?” He urges his halla to move closer. The mount complies, grudgingly, letting out a disgruntled huff at having its sides prodded.

“Your lady is coming for a cure to the poison that has afflicted her,” Uthvir replies, glancing backwards at the rest of the party; briefly. “That poison comes from the wilds below the surface of the earth. So, too, does the cure.”

“And I am to believe you have none of it in supply?” Thenvunin asks, voice rising. “That you are experimenting with this poison, without keeping such things readily at hand?”

Uthvir shrugs.

“The beast was Ghilan’nain’s experiment. I would sooner ask her people about the particulars of responsible handling. Or perhaps your own ‘poisons expert’ could have kept you better informed on this subject.” Turning lightly in their saddle, they gesture towards her. “Come now, doll! I would accuse you of neglecting your duties, but knowing this one, I would wager Thenvunin failed to even ask for your insights.”

She glances over at Pride and Curiosity, before moving forward to walk closer to the halla and their riders. Her friends follow just a few steps behind.

“I recognized the poison,” she agrees. “I am familiar with such corruptions, to an extent. And I was part of a recent expedition underground myself. Though I am not sure what cure you are speaking of.”

“I would be surprised if you were. The cure comes from the blood of a great beast, that Andruil has been hunting for some time,” Uthvir admits.

“And you have caught one of these beasts before?” Thenvunin presses.

“Only once,” the red hunter confirms, with a glance towards their colleagues.

The air goes uncommonly tense and quiet for the rest of the ride back to the palace.

When they arrive they are greeted well, though. The halla tender comes to take her charges back to their paddock, and servants arrive to help deal with the various spoils they have brought. The ranking elves vanish, with none of the fanfare that had come from the hunts in which Andruil participated, and they are left with the other low-ranking elves to help move the stormchaser corpses down into a vast, cold stone basement.
Looking at them, she doesn’t imagine that there’s much in the way of edible meat on them. Their eyes are milky white in death, and they’ve collapsed and deflated in places, giving them all a sunken, haunted appearance. Still, she suspects, some use could be made from those sharp teeth, and tough hides, and perhaps the bones, too.

Andruil’s servants let them go, though, without asking them to take up knives and help with the butchery.

On their way out, Curiosity takes time to direct their gaze towards a stormchaser with a ravaged eye.

“I shot that one!” her friend loudly proclaims. “It was coming right up and I saw it and it saw me and then I shot it, and it fell and died! I get to drink bloodwine now!”

“Well done,” she commends.

Curiosity sucks in a deep breath, and lets it out again.

“I think I would feel a little bad about killing it. It was just an animal. Except it was also a stormchaser, and they are awful, so I do not.”

“I cannot say they endeared themselves much to me, either,” she admits.

“At least you rescued the spirit,” Pride says, as they make to leave.

Curiosity wants to know what he means then, of course, and so it comes out; the tale of what happened at the river. Then they get to hear about what it had been like to be standing up atop the cliff, with the riders had come racing down the river, herding the twisting mess of stormchasers ahead of them like some giant ball of eels.

“The atmosphere changed,” she mentions.

They come out of the stone basement and back into the courtyard. She takes a moment to breathe in its own atmosphere; the mossy scent of the nearby forest, and the fresh storm, and rain. Despite the morning’s activities, again, she finds that she isn’t the least bit tired.

“What do you mean?” Curiosity asks.

“I mean, it changed. Something was keeping the stormchasers from just flying away,” she explains.

“Hunting wards, most likely,” Pride says. “Uthvir’s plan would not have worked well if the creatures had simply flown up and away. Though I know what you mean. They felt… peculiar. Ominous.”

“Why is it ominous?” Curiosity wonders, stiffening a bit, and glancing around the courtyard.

“No, that is how they felt,” Pride clarifies.

“It was a surprisingly familiar sensation,” she admits, shifting on the balls of her feet. The Nightmare… well, Solas had always said it was an old spirit, and it had never given her a reason to doubt that. It could be nothing, she supposes. Maybe that little spirit they’d rescued had had something to do with it. Maybe one day, in another lifetime, it would grow up to be a big, scary Fear Demon.

There’s a strange thought.
“Was it familiar because everything keeps feeling ominous, or familiar because you recognized this particular kind of ominous?” Curiosity wonders.

“The second one,” she says.

Pride frowns.

“Where did you recognize it from?”

She takes a moment, and considers how to answer that.

“Do you remember when I showed you that story about the spider that ate the hawk?” she asks. “It reminded me of the spider.”

It takes a moment. But when the understanding comes, it’s fairly apparent that they’ve both caught on. They glance at each other, and at her. But none of them really have much idea of what to make of it. Nor much time to dwell on it, in the end. The first procession of Mythal’s accompanying entourage arrives shortly after that; and then the lady herself does.

She’s conveyed through the palace gates in a green and platinum carriage that looks rather like a giant lotus blossom made of woven strands. They catch the light and shimmer oddly, as if they are true petals that might sway and part underneath a strong enough wind. The carriage floats along, before and behind several groups of elves. It parts at the main entrance to the palace, and Tarensa and several attendants accompany Mythal – who looks convincingly pale and as if her steadiness is maintained by a force of effort – inside. Andruil comes not long after, having apparently concluded arrangements and instructions in the city, and spends several hours with her mother in the chambers that have been prepared for her.

That at least sees the bulk of their duties done, for the time being. While Pride is left to do some remaining tasks assigned by Thenvunin, Curiosity closes a hand around her arm.

“Come with me,” her friend asks.

She goes, not bothering to ask; it’s possible her friend couldn’t really answer her, depending on what’s going on. By then it’s afternoon. Some of the bustle of the palace has died down; or, rather, it seems most of the remaining tasks of the sort that require less running to-and-fro, and more quietly working in one place. They pass a large chamber where several hides are tanning; strangely-textured skins stretched out from one end of the room to the other. And then Curiosity leads her down a side passage, and out into a small garden.

Unlike the gardens of Mythal’s palace, which seem to be driven towards a calming, organized, peaceful sort of beauty, Andruil’s are sprawling and wild. They are full of long, dark shadows, even in broad daylight. The trees of this one are tall willows, spread around deep blue ponds. Leafy vines creep around the walls, and strange lizards dart between the fronds of large, dark green ferns. The only path through the garden is a simple stone walkway, and a short bridge over the ponds. Curiosity lets out a cry of triumph, however, and leads her straight past it.

She is debating asking what’s really going on as they slog through Andruil’s ferns, when she comes up short.

Past the willows, the thick stone walls give way to thinner fences, and the back view of a familiar paddock. The halla mill about one the other side of the fence; their white shapes distinctive between the slats.

“Oh,” she says.
Curiosity moves a bit closer, and ventures to stick a hand through the fence.

“They are very pretty. I think I see why you like them,” her friend asserts. “Do you know what they eat? We could probably get one to come closer if we had some food for them. I thought about trying to make friends with the halla tender, but then I thought, what if Andruil takes offense at having someone of low station cozy up to her halla? They are very valuable after all. So this seemed like a better idea. I was sure I saw another garden behind the pen. I wonder if they ever break through and escape into this one?”

She finds she cannot answer. Her gaze is stuck on the halla, again, and her throat feels too heavy to form words. It takes her a few minutes to venture closer to the fence. When she does, she sees the nearest halla’s ears prick; it looks over towards them. Dark eyes intent, but not alarmed. It tilts its head a bit. This was the one Thenvunin was riding earlier, she notes. It has very distinctive markings on its horns; patterns like unfurling scrolls.

Slowly, it makes its way closer, and she finds herself holding her breath. The halla ventures near enough that she can feel the air shift when it snorts. Then it noses at the fence.

She lets out a distinctly wet-sounding little laugh.

It’s looking for treats. Or a good scratch to the forehead, perhaps. Not the least bit wary of an unfamiliar elf. She reaches through the fence, and gently works her nails up its nose. A few stray hairs come loose under her careful touch; ah, shedding. It must be itchy, then. She scratches a little more firmly, inching her fingers up between its eyes, which close. It tilts its head, antlers tapping against the fence as it encourages her towards more troublesome spots. It snorts a bit as a few stray hairs fall onto its nose. Then it decides it’s had enough, and with a flick of its ears and shake of its head, trots off to go lounge in the sunlight with the rest of its herd.

She’s quiet for a moment; and so is Curiosity, as she watches the halla settle.

“Ghilan’nain really made them?” she asks, after a moment.

“Yes,” Curiosity confirms. “Mounts afforded some advantages during the war. The problem was, most of them got killed faster than they could be replaced. Ghilan’nain devised an animal that could be bred quickly, that would take well to battle, and require little to eat, and still look beautiful. But the first halla she made were not built to last. They began to fall apart after a few years.”

She frowns, turning a little to look at her friend. They sunlight filters through the garden leaves, and the swaying willow branches, and casts green shadows over her skin.

“Fall apart?” she wonders.

Curiosity nods.

“They were made by magic. Any instability in their form tended to have a sort of a cascade effect. But everyone liked how they looked so much that Ghilan’nain perfected them. Now they live much longer, but they are not made so swiftly.”

She turns away, and looks back at the halla.

It seems impossible to try and imagine them as expendable creatures, in any sense. Considering all the wonders that didn’t survive to her time, the fact that they did… disposable battlemounts, and then some strange vanity project; and yet, in the end, a huge percentage of her people’s survival had hinged upon them. They’d made it through history with them. Through the lifting of the Veil,
the fall of Elvhenan, and Arlathan, the enslavement of Tevinter, through Andraste’s rebellion, and the Blights, and the Breach. Right up until the very end.

A laugh escapes her. A strange, strained sound. Then another. She sags against the fence, and sinks down, laughing at… she doesn’t know what. At fate, maybe.

After a few minutes, Curiosity slides to the mossy ground next to her.

“Was this a bad idea?” her friend wonders.

She sucks in a deep breath, and lets it out again.

“No,” she assures her. “I just… miss my home.”

They are silent for a bit.

“You had other animals you rode on,” Curiosity notes, after a moment. “Harts, and… horses?”

She nods in confirmation.

“And the lizard-y ones. I liked them.”

“The lizard-y ones were… different,” she concedes.

“Do you think you could turn into something like that?” her friend wonders.

She blinks, surprised by the unexpected question – and strange turn to the conversation. But Curiosity is only looking at her earnestly, waiting for a response, as if the idea of turning into some kind of four-legged animal isn’t all that odd. Of course, it isn’t. Not here and now. She’s even almost gotten used to seeing people shift forms as casually as they might change a shirt.

But it’s one thing to watch someone else do something. It’s another to do it herself. She’s still new to magic itself, after all.

“I would not know where to begin,” she admits, looking down at her arms.

Curiosity considers this, and they lapse into silence again for a while. Her friend stretches out her own limbs, heedless of the garden soil getting onto her fine clothes, and after a few minutes, rolls up her sleeves.

“I think you have to want something that you cannot get as you are,” Curiosity muses. “Something that you could get if you were something else. Or… not always. Sometimes it is like, I need wings so I can fly, so I can see how things look from the air, and find spaces that I might not otherwise reach. But other times it is like, I want claws and teeth and muscles, so I can be strong. I want legs that will run more swiftly than these do. I want… a shape that speaks to a part of me that is buried when I am an elf. When I was a spirit it was different. My own shape mattered far less than what I could accomplish with it. But now, it is part of the accomplishment itself. I think.”

She nods, wrapping her head around the sentiment as best she can. Certainly, as a child, she had daydreams about things like flying, or running as fast as the wind. They were just idle fantasies, though. Even coming here, and having her body changed, as only changed it into shapes and forms it’s already known. Her new arm sits more easily at her side these days, because she’s ultimately more accustomed to having two limbs than one.

That’s a far cry from changing her whole shape.
“I do not know that I can do it,” she admits.

Curiosity shifts around, facing her more fully.

“Some things, you might not be able to change. But you have not even really tried,” her friend insists. Then she extends her right arm, and glares at it very intently. Intently enough to forestall any questions about what’s going on. Curiosity’s skin is pale and unmarked, her hands large and long-fingered. After a moment, her flesh wavers. The blue veins in her wrists pulse, briefly, and the texture of her skin seems to magnify. Dim light washes across the limb, as it firms, and shifts, and the fingers curl into claws. The soft skin gives way to something harder and bonier; like a bird’s claws. Nails turn to black talons. A bead of sweat trickles down Curiosity’s temple, dropping into her collar.

After a few seconds, her arm shakes. The shape disperses, smoothing out, reverting more quickly than it had changed.

“What was that?” she wonders.

Curiosity shrugs.

“Something I have been working on,” her friend says. “But that is complicated. Most of the time it is simpler to take on a full form. Though it takes longer to figure out how to use it. But it helps if there is one that you know, that suits you, that you can hold in your mind. Even if it is just because you like the look of it, or the thought of it. Something about it should appeal to you.”

She frowns, and glances back towards the halla.

One of them, perhaps?

Curiosity follows her line of sight.

“Creatures with an innate magic are usually harder,” her friend explains. “Something similar would be easy. But when the exact shape is held together by a unique kind of magic, it requires a sympathetic element to hold onto the form. You have to be like them, already, to be like them. It is… hard to explain.”

“No, I think understand,” she says. “They were sacred to us, you know? I do not know if that means it would be even more fitting to become one, or less.”

Curiosity shrugs.

“It would not hurt to try.”

She thinks about it a moment more, and then sucks in a deep breath.

“So I just… visualize?” she wonders.

“No. You have to do the magic, too. Like… sculpting yourself. Or like shaping a spell, but your body is the magic you are working with,” Curiosity explains.

Well.

That sounds… alarming.

But she supposes there’s not much point in trying to avoid it. Closing her eyes, she focuses on her magic. That strange, solid-but-not, present-but-not push that her mind can give the world now. She
makes an experimental spark in the air, first. It drifts harmlessly towards Curiosity, who nudges up into a draft; the air takes it, spiralling upwards like a stray butterfly. That much is pretty easy.

Using it on herself.

Like healing, she supposes; not that she’s got much experience at that.

Still, she tries to focus on the shape she makes in her own mind’s eye. On the way the magic comes from her and flows out of her, and sort of defines her, too, in the outlines of the world. She feels like a solid, steady rock to herself. It makes her think of the Titan deep below the earth. Alive, but nearly unmoving. Unyielding flesh of stone. But even the Titans do move. Even their stone flesh gives way, opening corridors and turning down paths. The Fade floods the air around her, making the world mutable. It probably is strange, supposes, to not be able to flow with it.

To be stuck, still separate from it all, even though she’s here in the thick of it now.

But her shape is hers.

Even allowing for the ways it’s been changed against her will. The things she lost from it, and had forced upon her to replace them; the parts that have been damaged and healed and damaged and healed, again and again. The outline is the same. She feels something inside of her. The current, running amidst stolen heartbeats and oddly heightened senses. It’s the same shape as her body. Emotions, maybe, like the kind that come spilling out of Curiosity and Pride and everyone else.

*You are a rare and remarkable spirit.*

The words drift through her mind; and the expected knife of pain and grief comes. But it’s less sharp than she might have thought.

She focuses on her own outline, and the words, and a shape that she thinks she might fit into…

The air cracks.

It’s like the magic she’s trying to angle towards herself bounces off instead. One minute she’s sitting quietly with Curiosity, and the next the air warps, and cracks against the trunk of a nearby tree. Curiosity ducks. The halla look over; though they don’t bother to stand. Leaves rustle and plants sway, as the abrupt surge of air passes through the rest of the garden.

She blinks.

There’s a yelp, and then a familiar silver-and-green fox drops out of the nearby tree.

He lands in the vines clustered around its roots, letting loose a second yelp; a moment later his shape is twisting, and distorting, and the small, furry little fox is a somewhat larger, distinctly less-furry elf. Tangled in crushed vines, wide-eyed and looking at them like he doesn’t quite know whether he’s indignant, alarmed, or contrite. Even *she* can make out the chaotic contradictions of the emotions that pour into the garden from him.

His expression twists awkwardly, too.

“Ghilashim!” Curiosity says, folding her arms. “What are you doing here? You were supposed to go back to the city.”

Ghilashim glances between them, and then makes his way awkwardly to his feet.
“There was a change in plans,” he says.

She stares at him, and is reminded of nothing quite so much as a young hunter, smuggling themselves away on an expedition they’d been deemed too inexperienced for; not quite appreciating the level of stress their inclusion is bound to bring to everyone else, and determined to prove themselves.

“Wait, let me guess,” she says. “Everyone thought that someone else was taking you back, and you just slipped away when no one was paying proper attention, and came here so you could look at the halla.”

Ghilashim scowls.

“Maybe I was following you,” he suggests. “Maybe I wanted to see where you would go and what you would talk about. Maybe I do not trust you. Maybe I have figured out that there is something strange going on, and I am just doing a very good job of investigating it. After all, there is clearly intrigue going on here. Mythal is ill. There is an expedition to Andruil’s lands, with a strange elf who talks about halla being sacred, and riding beasts, and who does not know the first little thing about changing shape. Pride has been caught up in questionable machinations, and lost rank, and everyone seems to mean two different things every time they speak. I am a servant of Mythal. I would not rest, knowing such suspicious goings-on surrounded her in her time of weakness.”

Ghilashim raises his head, with a defiant look, and folds his arms.

“We have to kill you in that case,” Curiosity says, primly.

The young elf’s eyes go wide for a moment.

She glances at her friend, and is pretty sure she’s joking. There’s a slightly meaner glint to her eyes than what she’d previously levelled towards their intrepid stow-away, though.

“Curiosity,” she says.

Curiosity relents, rolling her eyes just a bit.

“Fine. We will be nice.”

So saying, her friend gestures Ghilashim over.

The future-Felassan hesitates, but then he seems to muster up his nerve, and answers the beckoning. He makes his way over; pausing just a moment as he comes within clearer sight of the halla. Who are still, some of them, looking over at their little group. They don’t seem alarmed, though. If anything, they look as if they’re waiting to see whether or not there will be any more interesting magic shows. One of them noses at the grass, and then settles about rubbing is face against the soft blades. It’s such a familiar move – a halla trying to relieve some of its shedding fur on a convenient patch of ground – that it arrests her own attention for a moment again, too.

When she pulls her gaze away from it, Curiosity is giving Ghilashim a very sharp, speculative sort of look-over.

For his part, Ghilashim seems to have settled on being nervous.

“I want to apologize to Pride,” he blurts, at last. Then he ducks his head. “I did not want to leave while he was still angry with me.”

The look he shoots her is edged with resentment again.
Curiosity lifts a hand and waves it.

“You can apologize to him when we take you back to Thenvunin,” she declares, obviously not much focused on that. “Twenty-six… and you are Waking-born. You have trouble holding your fox shape. But still, it is impressive that you can take it on, as young as you are. And given that you have never been a spirit.”

Ghilashim blinks, obviously not expecting the abrupt change in the conversation. Nor quite sure what to make of it.

He shifts on his feet a bit. Then he straightens his shoulder.

“I am good at shape-changing,” he confirms.

Curiosity eyes him up and down, and then nods, and tugs him into sitting with them.

“Explain how you do it,” her friend commands.

“What?” Ghilashim asks, shrugging of her hand and glancing between them. Now it seems he doesn’t know whether to be more worried about her, or about Curiosity. She supposes that makes sense, considering she’s keeping mostly to herself; and frequently being distracted. One of the halla stands up, and her gaze drifts back towards them, again. But it makes its way further down the pen, rather than coming up to their side of the fence again.

Still.

It gives a shake, and she watches its coat gleam in the daylight.

“Explain how you change shape,” Curiosity commands. “You were born in that body, and it has changed its own shape to grow over the years. But it is different, I think, to switch forms when you have a body you were born into. My friend is trying to master a new shape. Explain to her how you turn into a fox, and I shall put in a good word for you with Pride and help you get him to forgive you.”

Again, she tears her gaze away from the halla.

Ghilashim stares at Curiosity a moment, and then glances at her. He shuffles slightly in his seating position, and threads his hands together, clearly considering the possible downsides of this arrangement.

“Maybe she cannot change shape. Given… things,” Ghilashim suggests.

“I did not ask for your opinion,” Curiosity tells him, folding her arms. “I asked you to explain. If you will not, then we will take you back to Thenvunin right now. And Pride is busy; you will probably not have a chance to see him before you are marched straight home.”

The kid cracks.

“Alright!” he says, raising his hands. “Alright, I…”

For a moment he dithers. Not delaying on whether to comply, she thinks, but searching for the right words to say. He glances at her again. And then, straightening his jaw out a bit, he looks at her fully. His hands fold together, fidgeting a little, and then parting to pull idly at the edge of his tunic.

“When I change it is like… I step back,” he says. “I am not so, um. Forward, I suppose, in my body
anymore? I have to be behind it or above it. But, not looking at it. Not thinking about it. It is like…
if my body was a box, and I was inside it, I would have to take myself out to change the shape of
the box. And then I fold it, with my mind. I. Um. I did not pick the fox. I was trying to turn into…
something else. Haninan says it is good to know what you want to do, but sometimes there are
parts of you that know what you want to do, except they do not talk so easily with the rest of you.
And if you insist upon doing something that they do not wish, they will fight you, and you will be
struggling against yourself even without meaning to. That will make it harder. So, I clear my mind,
and I let the part of me that I cannot command change the rest of me, and make the part of me that
I can command obey it, and then I am a fox.”

Ghilashim concludes his explanation, and lowers a hand to pluck at some nearby grass rather than
his tunic.

Curiosity blinks.

“That… did not make much sense,” her friend determines.

The young elf’s expression turns mulish.

“You asked me to explain,” he says. “That is how it works! You just… you step back. From the
inside. The magic part is easy, and the desire to change does the rest.”

“How can you ‘step back’?” Curiosity asks. “I have never been able to.”

Her friend frowns, and is clearly concentrating on something.

“Well, you are Dreaming-born,” Ghilashim says, defensively. “Dreaming-born are always a step
back anyway. There is probably nowhere else for you to go without becoming disjointed from your
physical form, and trying to drag yourself into being a spirit again.”

Curiosity keeps frowning.

It suddenly strikes her, then, that for all that the Spirit of Curiosity has hundreds of years to her
name, the embodied version is, in fact, ‘younger’ than Ghilashim. With the halla still grazing
nearby, for a moment it’s like being yanked back to the children’s circles in camp. Sitting in a
cluster, waiting for the storyteller to come and tell them another tale of their people, speculating
and joking and getting huffy with impatience.

As if to emphasize the point, Ghilashim reaches over and prods Curiosity.

“Stop that,” he says, interrupting her friend’s obvious concentration. “Like I said, you are
Dreaming-born. You are already a step back. That is why you change so easily.”

“It is not always so easy,” Curiosity mutters. But relents, too, and then turns towards her instead.
“You try it, then.”

Try what, she wants to ask. Take a step back from where? Though, after a moment’s consideration,
she thinks of all the times she has felt notably disconnected from herself. In dreams. In moments of
considerable pain, or shock, or grief. None of them dredge up pleasant sensations in her. It makes
her shift uncomfortably, in fact; and she thinks of Solas, staring at blank rotunda walls, his gaze
distant and far-off even as he seems fully awake.

Shaking her head at herself, she focuses again.

Is it magic? Mentality? Though, it’s not as if the two aren’t heavily interconnected, she supposes.
One of the halla snorts. A familiar sound.

She closes her eyes, and figures she can at least try and visualize it.

In the end, though, she just finds herself sort of drifting along the path of vague imaginings. She draws in steady breaths and lets her mind slip as far from matters of her body as she can. But nothing happens. She tentatively reaches for her magic again, but after the incident with the tree, isn’t quite sure if she has the nerve to try and use it on herself once more. And then, after a while, she finds herself going in the complete opposite direction.

It isn’t really a conscious decision. But this atmosphere keeps pulling her back to times and places, and memories of what’s been lost. And she thinks of Solas, talking to Sera about staring past the Breach. Talking to Cole, about focusing on reality. Cole’s voice, asking what is real, what is here. The scent of the garden is sharp in the air, and stray bits of plants rest against her. She can feel the press of her own clothes and armour. The light on her skin, and the cold brush of the wind. The lingering damp, and the warm bodies of the halla, and of Curiosity and Ghilashim.

She feels sharp. Not a step removed at all, but a step closer, somehow. As if reality is more real, and her shape is even more persistent, and there is something beneath. Deep, deep beneath.

Waiting.

Her second heartbeat stutters and her eyes open.

“She cannot do it,” Ghilashim tuts. “Not even close. Were you even trying, or did you just nod off?”

“Shh,” Curiosity says to him, distractedly. Her friend is looking at her in concern.

She catches her eye, and at length, shrugs.

The garden’s colours look more vivid. So does the blue fabric of her friend’s clothes, and the violet gleam of Ghilashim’s eyes. After a moment, she turns towards him.

“Thank you for your help,” she says.

He looks at her for a moment, and then nods, awkwardly.

“Can I stay long enough to watch the games?” he asks. “I have heard Andruil’s people always play games with their guests. I would like to see them, I think. Then I can apologize to Pride, and go home.”

Her first thought is that Ghilashim has likely misunderstood the meaning behind ‘Andruil’s people always play games with their guests’. She thinks of Uthvir, with their sharp teeth and layered comments, and doesn’t suppose that anyone will be sitting down for a round of Wicked Grace in the near future. But Curiosity just sighs, and to her surprise, nods.

“Fine,” her friend says. “I suppose you are safe enough, for now. We will not tell anyone you are still here until afterwards.”

“Thank you,” Ghilashim ventures.

“Games?” she asks.

Curiosity nods.
“I am going to shoot things,” her friend firmly declares. “And then I am going to drink bloodwine.”

“Can I drink bloodwine?” Ghilashim asks.

Curiosity tilts her chin.

“No. It is not for the inexperienced. You need to have killed something very dangerous in order to try it,” her friend asserts. “I killed a stormchaser just this morning, so I get to have some.”

“I killed a mouse one time,” Ghilashim says.

“Was the mouse bigger than you?” Curiosity asks.

The young elf scowls.

“No,” he admits.

She gives her friend a look, and raises her eyebrow. But Curiosity is focused on doing what seems to be her very best Uthvir impression.

“You can have some when you kill a mouse that is bigger than you.”

An amused snort escapes her.

~

‘The Games’, as it turns out, do not begin until the sun goes down. There is some debate among the servants – both Andruil’s and Mythal’s – as to whether they will go on ahead, given Mythal’s state, but apparently everyone is erring on the side of caution preparation-wise and assuming they will.

They leave Ghilashim to turn himself back into a fox, and watch him dash off to another part of the garden. Then she and Curiosity make their way out of their quiet little halla-adjacent niche, and back into the main throng of palace activity. Her friend tells her what she knows about the proceedings, which doesn’t seem to be much.

“There will probably be fighting,” is what Curiosity can say. “I think it is supposed to be divided up by rank, but I am not certain. But it is a sort of ‘welcome’ ritual for staying at the palace, before everyone feasts a bit. I think. I have never done it before. It should be interesting!”

As it happens, though, one of the high-ranking hunters puts it around that Andruil wants such festivities delayed until tomorrow. Her servants seem mostly relieved about this; she supposes all of this is happening on relatively short notice, by their standards.

The evening meal ends up being a comparatively quiet experience. They meet up again with Pride beforehand; though he’s drawn away again, swiftly, to go and attend Thenvunin. Andruil does not make an appearance. Neither, unsurprisingly, does Mythal. Most of the hunters seem disappointed at Ghilashim’s ‘departure’. Neither fox nor young elf are anywhere to be seen, though she thinks she spies a small, silver flash of fur darting out of the kitchens at one point. She herself helps with the skinning and preparing far more than the eating and drinking. But Curiosity steals a lot of the attention of the crowd by making much of her success with the stormchaser, and her first
opportunity to drink to the bloodwine. That seems to appease some of the hunters’ disappointment over losing the chance to fuss over Ghilashim. Curiosity is given a full bottle, and there are cheers when she drains it. The spectacle takes up most of the attention for the ‘lower ranking’ ends of the hall.

She keeps her own eye on Pride, as he is drawn between the ranking hunters, and their speculative gazes. But tonight it seems the mood is different from the last. There’s more talk of the stormchasers, and the hunt, and of tomorrow’s planned events. And of Andruil and Mythal, she thinks; though such conversations are had with bowed heads, and far quieter voices. Uthvir seems content to spend this particular meal sniping with Thenvunin, for the most part. Though they do glance at her, at a few points. Speculative and sly.

After dinner, she and Pride are at last summoned to Mythal’s rooms.

The evanuris speaks more carefully in her daughter’s palace, and maintains the illusion of being poisoned more thoroughly. She doesn’t keep them for long, either; merely summoning her close for a moment.

“If there are to be any expeditions, I can spare you for them,” Mythal says, pointedly. “Your expertise could be useful in such circumstances. But I may need to keep Pride here, with me. Attendants are in short supply, and illness is a trial.”

“I am certain I should be less needed than more esteemed servants, my lady,” Pride says, from his post closer by the door.

“Perhaps,” Mythal allows. “Perhaps not. I will consider the matter. You are a comfort to me, Pride. But it may ease my mind to have more distractions if you are to be absent. Things to think about, at the least. Any interesting news you could bring me, or thoughts you could share, would be a welcome respite from the tedium of convalescence.”

The evanuris’ words are mostly directed to Pride, but it is not him that her gaze fixes upon.

The message is fairly clear; give me something more on what is happening.

She dismisses them, then.

There are more duties to attend to. Tarensa takes them aside as they are leaving and hands them some seed pods, with instructions to take them out into the gardens outside Mythal’s chambers to be planted. She doesn’t say anything until she and Pride are already outside.

“Is it that crucial that we change Andruil’s landscaping?” she wonders.

Pride is a warm presence beside her, and with the pressing issues and the demands of others no longer distracting, she finds herself once again incredibly aware of him. The gardens are lit with a soft, ambient glow; not the nighttime phosphorous of underground plants, but a gentle radiance that’s hard to place a source to. It casts everything in shades of amber and distant purple; a reflection of the failing light that’s still clinging to the edges of the sky.

Everything is so vital here.

And she’s not even sure if it’s the place, or if it’s herself.

“The plants will grow over night,” Pride tells her, gesturing towards a turn in the garden path that leads towards a secluded bench and resting place. They find some soil along the foot of the benches, and set to planting. Pride advises her on the depth and distance of the seeds; he uses
magic to upturn the soil, but she uses her hands. It goes just about as quickly, either way.

“And Mythal needs her plants?” she wonders.

“They will provide her a secluded and more restful space while she is unwell, should she wish to venture outside. And I suspect she might,” Pride says.

Pausing, she looks at the gently lit foliage around them again. The sloping fronds and reaching vines. A fountain trickles in the far corner of the nestled space. The water shines, silvery as the moonlight.

As the horns of Andruil’s halla.

As the fabric of Pride’s clothes.

“I feel strange,” she admits, quietly, as she plants the last seed. She kneels next to one of the benches. The soil is damp against her knees, but not unpleasantly so. It smells like earth, and recent storms, and wild things. So sharply that it’s almost unnerving. Has she ever smelled dirt this clearly before? It’s not even as if her face is that close to it, or is it has clung much to her hands. She presses her palms to her thighs, and the soil brushes away, loose and easy. Not even clinging from the moisture.

Pride looks at her. His brows furrow, and he moves beside her.

“What is wrong?” he asks, very quietly. “Are you unwell?”

Unwell?

No. She’s fine. She’s fantastic.

Pride isn’t, though.

But he doesn’t seem to be getting much worse, either. She turns and looks up at him, and before she can help herself she reaches out. Rising up as she slips a hand around his waist. He moves closer at the touch, unresisting and still frowning.

“Curiosity was trying to help me change shape earlier,” she admits. “I do not know that I can. It feels… wrong.”

Pride’s arms close around her.

“I like your shape as it is,” he says.

Her lips twitch. That’s beside the point, she knows. If Haninan thinks it would be easier to handle things underground without looking like an elf, then it’s probably a skill worth investing in. But she can’t help appreciating the silly, fond sentiment of it either. She leans into him and breathes, and it’s better, she thinks. It’s not so bad, when her senses are all full up of him. The shift of his clothes beneath her hands, and the scent of his hair, and the warm thrum of his pulse. Maybe louder than it should be. But she’s used to noticing him excessively, she realizes.

A deep breath escapes her.

“I tried focusing,” she says, back on track. “But…”

Pride leans his forehead against her, as he squeezes her close for a moment. One of his hands closes over her left bicep. They both go quiet for a moment, then. She feels the press of his palm
through her sleeve. He brushes his touch gently up and down for a moment.

“I saw you,” he admits, quietly. “When you first arrived.” His throat bobs as he swallows.

When she first…?

Oh.

She remembers the light. The pain. Seeing Mythal, feeling so pained and lost that everything just turned numb instead. The way the air burned.

It’s easier, now. The grief’s still there, but the edge has been dulled. Despair has eased its clutches on her mind. She almost feels guilty, at that; when the world is still in peril, when everyone she ever knew is still suffering. But she can’t… she can’t cling to it, and still move. She needs to move, and she needs to remember why; and Pride is good at that, she thinks. Good at reminding her why.

“I am sorry,” he says, very quietly.

Her hold him tightens, a bit.

“If I had known, I would not have let them… I would have let you decide, what was done to you. I could have prevented them changing your shape against your will. I should have. I should have realized it was wrong.”

Her throat feels thick. Of all the things to have happened to her, having a limb regrown is certainly not the worst.

“You could not have known, then,” she says. But there is still apology in her tone, rather than dismissal.

“I could have,” Pride counters. “I could not have known you, perhaps. But I could have known it was wrong.” He lets out a breath, and then tilts, and presses a kiss to her forehead.

The soft brush of his lips steals her breath for a moment. It’s gentle and quiet, and she lets herself escape into it. Burrow against him a bit.

“You do not have to change your shape,” Pride tells her. “Not ever. You are perfect, just as you are.”

She shuts her eyes and breathes him in.

“That is a lovely sentiment,” an unexpected but familiar voice purrs from above.

They both stop, motionless.

Oh.

Shit.

She looks up; and there, perched at the top of the garden wall, is a very, very large hawk.

Uthvir.
Finally! Sorry for the, uh, uncommonly long wait. ^^;

As ever, I love you guys, and appreciate all your patience and support and enthusiasm and encouragement!
There is a strange moment, where she and Pride look at the hawk, and the hawk looks at them, and it almost feels like they’ve been awkwardly walked in on. Except that Uthvir has obviously been perched there for some time, and doesn’t look the least little bit uncomfortable with the current situation.

Pride’s grip on her tightens.

The moment breaks, a bit, as Uthvir alights from their perch. In a dark wind their form shifts, and when they land they touch the ground with elven feet, rather than avian claws. When they straighten, it’s clear they’re still in their hunting armour, but without the cloak or mask. They brush a speck of imaginary dirt from their shoulder, and smile sharply.

Pride clears his throat, and tries to move her a bit behind him. Right around the same time she attempts to move in front of him. The end result is a sort of a foot-shuffling stalemate.

“We were planting seeds for Mythal,” Pride says, as if that part of the proceedings didn’t just happen. “That is permitted.”

Uthvir waves a dismissive hand.

“Of course it is permitted. My lady would never dream of denying yours her comforts, under the circumstances. I am not here to defend the landscaping from your interference. Let the gardeners take offence, if that is their inclination,” the hunter says, moving in a slow circle around them like a predator feigning boredom with its cornered prey.

Pride ducks his head, respectfully.

“Then we should take our leave. It is late, and there will be much to do tomorrow,” he concludes.

“True enough,” Uthvir says. “You go. I wish to have a word with our friend, and then I will send her right along after you.”

Pride freezes.

He goes so tense beside her, she can feel little tremors in the air.

“I could stay, until you are through,” he says.

“No, no. I would not dream of troubling you unnecessarily,” Uthvir insists. They come to a stop in front of him, head tilted to one side. Considering. Assessing. Then they lift one hand, and make a little ‘shooing’ gesture with it. Dismissive and ultimately unconcerned. “Off you go.”

Pride doesn’t move.

She gives his arm a squeeze, and then a pointed little push.

“It will be alright,” she tells him, as he looks automatically towards her. “I will catch up with you.”

“I am not troubled by staying, not at all,” he insists.
Uthvir looks amused.

“Sweet. Now run along, before I become offended by your implications,” they say; though she thinks they’d be less likely to take genuine offense at them, and more likely to use them as an excuse. She catches Pride’s sleeve, again, and then gives him a much firmer push towards the entrance of the garden.

“Go wait by the door,” she suggests, trying to convey with her gaze that it’s not worth getting this worked up over matters yet; that she can defend herself, if need be. And at least the garden is relatively secluded. If Uthvir doesn’t want witnesses, then that means there wouldn’t be any for what she might do to them, as well as the reverse.

Pride looks at her for a moment, and then takes a reluctant step back.

He watches Uthvir as he retreats down the path they’d followed to the bench.

The hunter lets out a tiny sound of amusement once he’s at last out of sight.

Then they turn towards her, and that speculative assessment is back in their eyes. It lingers a bit as they look her over again. They make their way over to the bench, and recline on it. Sacrificing none of their alertness, despite the relaxed pose. They trail an arm across the back. The moonlight catches on the dark angles of their armour. For a moment they look more like a blood-tinted phantom, forming itself out of the sharp-edged shadows of the garden’s leaves and pointed branches, than an elf.

“Did Ghilan’nain make you?” they ask.

She blinks at the strange and unexpected question.

Her first impulse to flatly refute the bizarre idea. But then she hesitates. I was born this way, she has been telling Mythal’s people. Perhaps that’s not information for Andruil’s, though.

“Why do you ask?” she counters, instead.

Uthvir smirks.

“Because. You are a doll and you have seen halla. I know of no one else with both the inclination and skill to create something like you. But my lady’s wife does love her little pet projects. The better question is why you would not admit to it. It is obvious what you are, and since that is so, it must have been intentionally done. If you were a gift to Mythal from Ghilan’nain, then you would be introduced as some rare pet. Instead you are treated as something between an unmarked slave and a talented expert – and you slew Conceit,” Uthvir reasons. “One might suspect you were, perhaps, stolen or ‘rescued’ from the clutches of some effort or another that Ghilan’nain lost to Mythal. Kept quiet to avoid drawing the attention of too many other leaders. Meant to be a gift for my lady, perhaps? An artfully crafted body, built for hunting, and slaying, and keeping to Andruil’s side as some emotionless toy and companion. But I suppose Mythal has use for such things, too. And it seems you have bonded with her wolf.” The hunter’s eyes take on a particularly speculative gleams. “Perhaps he was not cast from her favour for his fondness towards you, after all. Perhaps he stole away the devotion from you that should have been hers alone. Some quirk of your nature, to put loyalty to a single master in your heart?”

She frowns in revulsion at the prospect. Construct of flesh, they called her. She’d never really spared too much thought to what an actual construct’s lot in life might be. Some part of her,
maybe, had shied away from the notion that any of them really existed. Or existed as more than just silent bodies, for spirits like Curiosity to be put into.

“It is not like that,” she says, for lack of a more thorough response to offer.

Uthvir looks at her for a moment.

Then they glance away, with a single shrug.

“As you like,” they say. “I suppose it does not matter too much. Machinations between leaders can suit themselves.”

They turn their gaze upwards, then; and they are quiet enough that she starts to wonder if she shouldn’t just turn and walk away. Find Pride again, and ask how the best way to respond to this kind of supposition might be. Letting loose about the halla was a mistake. She doesn’t think it would be wise to claim that Ghilan’nain made her, but she also doesn’t want to trap herself into revealing more than she should.

“If that is all,” she says.

“Why do you wish to change forms?” Uthvir asks.

The question sounds idle. But again, she finds herself inclined to think that it’s anything but. It feels stepping into a maze every time she talks with this hunter. More double-speak and hidden meanings than half the courtiers of Orlais.

“Why would I not wish for that?” she counters. “It is a common enough skill.”

“Indeed,” Uthvir agrees.

They make a beckoning gesture to her; obviously calling her to come and sit with them.

She hesitates, just a moment. But then she does. She drops onto the opposite end of the bench, and folds her arms in front of her.

“Your shape does not want to change,” they say, steady and matter-of-fact. “You are a doll, built to someone else’s specifications. It would be inconvenient if you could just go and ruin all the fine artistry that went into your creation by exerting your will over it. If you wish to change your shape, you will require help.”

She is silent.

There is something very disquieting in this interaction. And she doesn’t think it’s necessarily Uthvir’s own natural demeanour, this time. And implication nestles at the back of her mind. Not quite formed, but there, and it gives her pause.

“What kind of help?” she wonders. That suggestion seems to follow in the same vein as their earlier offer at Ess’ tavern. “Yours?”

Uthvir snorts.

“Well I could try and change your shape for you, I suppose, if you not mind the high-to-guaranteed odds of pain and unproductive disfigurement,” they say. “There are rituals and tools that can be used to forcibly reshape someone against their will. Nearly none of them pleasant, or easily done. No. If you want to change your shape, your best bet is a spirit.”
She raises an eyebrow.

“A spirit?” she asks.

But then she thinks, and remembers the spirits’ help in teaching her how to use her magic. And it makes sense, she supposes. Spirits are naturally good at changing forms. If one possessed her, it could probably show her how such a feat was supposed to feel, and be accomplished.

“Your body is not designed to succumb to your will. But a spirit’s will exists beyond that restriction. Take one on, and you will be able to reshape yourself. The spirit will fill in the gaps that mark you as different from other elves. It will be difficult for others to deny your personhood when they cannot tell you apart from the rest of the world at a glance,” the hunter explains.

Wait.

“Do you mean I should take a spirit on permanently?” she says.

Uthvir looks at her. Their gaze is steady, and just a little bit cool. It seems like they’re looking for something, for a moment. But then they simply shrug.

“Your wolf has lost his rank. You are in a perilous place. You may have rejected my exceedingly charitable offer of help, but I will still extend you this much advice – with a spirit, you might seize rank enough for yourself. Particularly if your little acquisition is not well known.”

The idea, forming at the back of her mind, solidifies into a horrible suspicion.

“You seem to know an awful lot about this topic,” she observes.

Uthvir looks away.

“Sometimes Ghilan’nain sends my lady gifts. Little dolls for her to play with. Pets for her to keep. Pitiable creatures, really. Not good for much more than bedroom activities and sport. But every so often one will acquit itself well enough to earn some scrap of being. Steal its way into rank as a servant, or at least outlive my lady’s inevitable disinterest, and survive as a slave. You already have a scrap of rank. Your odds are better than most of theirs,” they say.

“And would you happen to know any of these poor folk yourself, Uthvir?” she wonders.

“I have not met any for a very long time,” they reply.

After a moment, they stand up. Glancing back towards her, they raise their eyebrows.

“I am one of Andruil’s favoured. She is a generous lady; once she has used her gifts to her satisfaction, she often shares them with her ranking hunters. I am not entirely without pity. Do not hang your hopes on your mid-ranking wolf. He is young, yet, but one does not need to be a great Leader of the People to lose interest in even their most treasured toys. Whatever affection he holds for you, it is not as worthy a guarantee of safety as seizing what power you can for yourself.”

So saying, the hunter treats her to small smirk, and then transforms again. The air whirls. A large hawk surges up into the air. In the dark it flies over the edges of the trees, and the vine-strewn walls, and then wings its way into an open window of the guest chambers.

The night goes quiet.

Uthvir is wrong, she knows. Well, not in essence, but the reason she can’t change shape isn’t
actually because she was built and designed not to by some conceited ancient elven tyrant.

Even so.

She thinks the hunter just offered her some useful insights.

Standing up, she makes her way back towards the entrance of the garden. Pride is waiting for her, rigid and worried until he sees she’s alright, and then reassures him further of her integrity; patting her shoulders and asking what happened.

“We talked,” she says. “They wanted to know if Ghilan’nain made me. I think my reaction to the halla gave them some ideas.”

Pride’s expression turns conflicted.

“What did you say?” he wonders.

She shrugs.

“I mainly just answered their questions with questions,” she admits.

He looks a bit relieved, at that.

Slowly, they begin to make their way back down the corridor, and into the guest halls again. It’s quiet, at least. Everyone else seems to have retired, anticipating tomorrow’s festivities. She takes the chance to thread her arm through Prides, and keep him close.

But her mind is churning.

“Constructs of flesh…” she begins, and then halts; not quite sure in which particular direction her thoughts are turning.

“They are not like you,” Pride says, quietly. She looks at him. His expression is soft. It’s reassuring, in a way; but it also strikes her wrongly, in another.

“Have you met many?” she wonders.

“No,” he admits. “But…” he stalls, and then stops. Leaving them both standing in the hall for a moment. His gaze casts upwards, and he spies the stuffed head of some great, horned beast hanging above them. Dead eyes glinting in the firelight. With a tilt of his head, he pulls her down another hall, and then leads her to his chambers in pointed silence. The kind that anticipates being broken at its nearest convenience.

She closes the door behind herself.

Pride walks into the middle of the room, brow furrowed. It seems the shape of his intended commentary has changed, somewhat, in the time it’s taken for them to reach a relatively safe place to speak.

“Most constructs are simply created in anticipation of a spirit’s embodiment,” he tells her. “They are empty. Mindless. Blank. Their hearts beat, but they have nothing in them. Not until the spirit breathes life into their forms. Sometimes, though, an embodiment goes wrong. If a spirit changes its mind at the last moment, it can inhabit a body and then abandon it again almost in the next instant. Such creatures that wake from those things are senseless. They do not know how to move, how to speak, they flail and scream like wounded animals. Most are destroyed.”
She closes her eyes.

Well.

Yet more horrors of the ancient world.

“And this is what people think I am?” she wonders. Mythal had once asked if the dwarves had made her, she recalls.

“No,” Pride refutes, instantly. “As I said, you are nothing like them. It is simply that they do not know how else to explain your…” he gestures at the around her, rather ably conveying ‘lack of magical emotions’ despite the vagueness of his movements. In the next breath, he winces. “I did not know any better, either. Sometimes creatures are built that are not simply blank vessels for embodiment. There are variations.”

“Ghilan’nain makes them?” she surmises, letting out a long sigh.

“She is gifted in crafting and altering flesh, and combining it with magic in odd ways,” Pride confirms. “Vessels built by her for embodiment are often beautiful beyond compare. Sometimes she creates tributes for particular sacrifices. Forms that never wake, that are simply flesh and bone, meant to look fitting for ceremonies and displays. It costs more energy to create such things than can be gained by destroying them. It is presentation,” he says, expression darkening with disdain.

For a moment, she wavers, wondering.

“And she gives gifts to Andruil?” she asks.

“Yes, but, they are not… they are more like animals which look like elves,” Pride explains. “They are not born. They have no spirits. Their intelligence is meant to be limited, and they cannot speak. I imagine that is why the hunters treat you as they do. They are interested in seeing how ‘clever’ you are, as if it is some great trick.”

Well, that puts slightly different context to pouring drinks for Uthvir and doing every odd and random task they asked of her on the first evening they met.

It makes her think of mabari, all at once. Dogs that are still dogs, but smarter than most. People gathering around them, trying to see what tricks one can do, how clever it is, how much language it can understand and what it can figure out.

She swallows.

“You are not like that,” Pride says, moving to take her face in his hands. “You come from a different place, and you have a different nature. You are one of the People. Beyond a doubt.”

She opens her mouth, and closes it again; staring into his eyes. Then she sighs, and leans into his touch.

“You are not like that,” Pride says, moving to take her face in his hands. “You come from a different place, and you have a different nature. You are one of the People. Beyond a doubt.”

She opens her mouth, and closes it again; staring into his eyes. Then she sighs, and leans into his touch.

“Pride, any living being that has known only a few minutes of life is going to be confused. Even newborn spirits are confused, until someone helps them. That does not mean they are not people. It means they do not know anything. They have not been taught anything.”

Pride is quiet for a moment.

Then he lets out a long breath, and shifts his hold on her; folding his arms around her. He’s warm all around her. Comforting, and just a bit worn out by it all, too.
“I wish to say ‘it is not like that’,” he tells her. “But given all that has happened, I suspect it is wiser to give you than benefit of the doubt. Perhaps I should say ‘I wish it was not like that’. I do not know if that makes it any better.”

She burrows against him again, for a moment. It’s true enough, she supposes, that there’s not much either of them can do with this information. Her mind trails to Uthvir, and she wonders about the hunter. And their particular interest in her. And their odd wealth of knowledge. But it doesn’t sound like many constructed beings could get so far as being one of Andruil’s highest ranked hunters.

It might just be as they say, she supposes. Maybe they knew someone like that. Maybe they pitied whoever it was, in the midst of all their tangled predation upon them.

Her hands move slowly across Pride’s back.

“There is not much to be done about it tonight,” she determines. “We should sleep.”

Pride brushes a kiss to her temple.

“Sleep with me?” he asks. Then he freezes, and immediately backtracks. “Not to – I mean we did, before, but we not have to again… we could just sleep. There is a lot to be done tomorrow, but I would… I would feel better having you close. That is all I meant.”

Pulling back a bit, she presses a kiss to his plush lips, and smiles into it. A trail of warmth sinks into her. She means it to be only an affectionate gesture. But he yields to her so readily that she can’t help but work his lips with her own. And then part them. And then deepen it all and delve into him, walking him back towards the bed.

“I like sleeping with you,” she tells him, quietly, when she finally pulls her lips away from his.

His tongue darts out between his lips. The pink tip of it momentarily tracing where her own had been.

“Thank you,” he says.

She lets out a huff of fond laughter at the response, but cannot help sinking into him again.

In the end, though, when they part again to undress, it’s clear to her eyes that Pride is tired. He slips into a soft set of pants, and she tests the poison in him; coaxing him to lie back against the mattress as she curls on top of him, ear towards his heartbeat, and listens to the whispers coiling beneath his skin. Are they louder? She cannot tell if they are, she realizes, or if her own anxieties are making it seem that way. By the time she’s satisfied that he’s at least not sporting any blackened veins or lingering bruises, his breaths have evened out, and he is relaxed against the pillows.

She pulls a blanket over them, and curls back into him again.

Then she follows him into a sea of blessedly uneventful dreams.

~

The next morning, they are woken by Uthvir.
This involves her eyes snapping open as she feels a menacing gaze on the back of her neck; her arms closing around Pride as she promptly rolls them both off of the bed in the opposite direction, and then snatches her sword off of a nearby chair and is halfway through drawing it before she properly wakes up.

Pride blinks from the floor.

Uthvir smirks from the doorway, one intrigued brow raised.

“Good morning,” the red hunter says, simply, before sauntering off.

“Are you alright?” Pride asks, a little blearily.

Sucking in a deep breath, she sheathes her sword, and nods.

“Fine,” she says, moving to help him back up. “Just startled. Sorry.”

He waves off her apologies, and once he’s on his feet, presses a kiss to her forehead. Her heart is still racing a bit; but she behaves herself, given the timing, and they simply help one another dress and get ready. By the time they emerge, most of the other lower-ranking elves are up. Tarensa is organizing Mythal’s breakfast. There’s an arrangement already on one of the communal tables that looks to be the same sort of fare served to them in Andruil’s Arlathan estate.

Curiosity hasn’t emerged, and neither has Thenvunin, it seems. Tarensa snaps at Pride to go and get the latter, while she slips away to find the former.

Her friend is once again tangled up in a heap of blankets, snoring and obviously deeply asleep.

It takes a few shakes to get her to wake. But at length Curiosity’s eyes open and stare blearily at her, before her mouth curls into a mulish frown, and her long arms reach to take up a pillow and jam it over her head.

“No,” her friend says succinctly, through the layers of fabric.

“It is morning, Curiosity,” she says, with some amusement mingled with concern.

“I am still sleeping. Go on without me.”

“There are a lot of interesting things happening today,” she mentions. “Hunts and games and feasts, by the sounds of it. Do you not want to participate?”

“I will participate later,” Curiosity insists.

“Are you not hungry?” she tries.

“No,” her friend reiterates, and promptly rolls over and burrows deeper into the blankets.

Well. She supposes Curiosity has fewer duties than most of them; if she wants to sleep in a bit, that’s probably not a big deal. With one last assurance that there’s food and interesting things to be found beyond the confines of a bedroom, she gets back up and heads out again. Pride’s returned, too, and is busily talking with a few others; helping with an outing for Mythal to take her breakfast in the garden, by the sounds of it. She busies herself tidying up some of the emptied bed chambers, and is at her task when Thenvunin emerges fully-dressed from his rooms; apparently successfully woken by Pride.

He’s wearing engraved platinum armour today, by the looks of it, and a cape that puts her in mind
of purple butterfly wings. It flutters behind him. There are butterfly clips in his hair, too, she
realizes; their wings flutter to match it. It’s a strange enough image that she stares at him for a
moment, and notices a red mark on the side of his neck.

Odd.

She hasn’t seem many elves sporting lingering injuries, for obvious reasons. She’d expect it even
less from someone of Thenvunin’s rank. But maybe he injured himself during the night, and
somehow didn’t realize it in the process of fussing over all those ridiculous clothing items.
Probably in a hurry, given how little time has passed since Pride was sent to wake him.

Her staring must be a bit obvious, because he frowns at her.

Disinclined as she is to do him any favours, she still finds herself catching his eye, raising a brow,
and tapping the relevant side of her own neck.

Thenvunin blanches, immediately, and clutches the small blemish as if it must be a gushing
wound. He turns right back around, and heads into his room again.

She goes back to her tasks. A few minutes later he emerges from his chambers again, and the mark
is gone.

The mobile butterfly hair clips and matching cape sadly remain.

She’s a little surprised when he approaches her.

He clears his throat.

“I would appreciate you not mentioning that to anyone,” he says, straightening a bit. “In light of
recent events, and provided you are capable of discretion, I may be convinced to adopt some more
lax policies towards Pride. It is, after all, quite jarring to fall in favour. Even when such descents
are wholly merited.”

It takes her a moment to parse out what he’s actually saying.

He’s going to be nicer to Pride in exchange for her not mentioning that he left his rooms in a less-
than-pristine state?

“Done,” she agrees, with a nod.

“Good,” Thenvunin says.

He turns briskly on his heel, and marches off again.

There’s a morning hunt again, but she and Pride aren’t included in the group. Curiosity’s invited
along, though, and has to drag herself out of bed in earnest. There is a great deal of grumbling and
acidic glaring that seems to amuse the hunters as the party sets out. She finds herself worrying, a
bit; but a hunt seems an unlikely place for someone to launch an attack. Little as she trusts
Thenvunin, he doesn’t seem to have a vendetta against Curiosity, at least.

And then there’s not much time to dwell on the possibilities, as preparations are made for the day’s
‘festivities’. She manages to stay with Pride for most of it, and harbours a growing suspicion that
someone in charge – likely Tarensa – has been convinced that she requires a certain degree of
supervision in order to be functional.
Still. Given the results, she supposes she won’t mind it too much. There is a buzz of excitement around the hunters, as the shape of the front courtyard is changed by magic and dint of effort. The halla still catch her gaze, despite her best efforts to avoid being so obvious about it. They graze and watch the elves at work with a contemplative, slightly interested air. When the more magical changes are being made, their tender calls them all into the sloping stables next to their pen; likely so the massive displays of magic won’t unsettle them.

She tells herself that’s a good thing, since they won’t distract her anymore.

It doesn’t help that Pride seems less apt to redirect her attention whenever they do, and more prone to just sort of stopping and staring at her, in turn.

But somehow she finds the empty pen nearly as preoccupying.

A few ranking hunters rearrange several of the palace’s exterior walls, reshaping the space as several other elves linger to watch. She finds herself among them. The magic reminds her of the repairs done to Mythal’s palace after the earthquake. She wonders at it a bit, but mostly it’s just interesting to see the courtyard widen, and help and watch as spaces are set up for combatants and magical displays and events she doesn’t have much of a point of reference for.

One of the more familiar low-ranking hunters – Sassan, she thinks; the pale one – lingers about, obviously excited by the prospects.

“You. Wolf,” he says to Pride. “Do you think you might earn back your favour by competing?”

Pride glances at him, and shrugs.

“Mythal does not favour one form of strength above and beyond all others. I doubt it will earn back my rank, should I win.”

“Shame,” Sassan extends. “Sometimes Andruil uplifts champions who acquits themselves very well in her name. I am going to beat every servant of Mythal who crosses my path. But that might not claim me much glory, given the softness of your lot.”

“You will regret that statement, when a soft servant of Mythal hands you defeat,” Pride counters.

Sassan grins.

“Going to send in the little murder doll?” he wonders, gesturing towards her.

“Her standing is too low to compete,” Pride refutes.

“Andruil might make an exception, if you asked her.”

“Perhaps. If we did.”

Sassan wanders off not long after that. She glances towards Pride when he’s gone.

“Is my standing too low?” she wonders.

“You have already drawn enough attention to your capabilities,” he replies, voice low. “But still. No one witnessed much of your fight in Andruil’s palace. I think it would be best if we kept the full extent of what you can do between ourselves. Drawing too much notice, under the circumstances, does not seem advisable.”

She feels a brief tug of disappointment. In some way, she suspects, she’d been looking forward to
being able to stand for herself against a few of these boastful, presumptuous people. But it’s a fair
point, she concedes. She nods reluctantly.

“You will be participating?” she asks him.

“In my case it would be insulting to refrain,” he confirms, with a tilt of his head.

“Should I cheer for you?” she wonders. “Or do you have to underplay your own skills to avoid
notice?”

Pride colours, just a bit, and glances swiftly around. He moves a bit closer. There’s a light in his
gaze.

“At this point, I doubt it would surprise many if you cheered for me,” he says, a bit wryly. “Even if
it probably would be wisest of me not to win. I should still get far, particularly in the field of
magic. Downplaying my swordsmanship should not be remarkable, given how many
improvements in that skill I owe to you.”

Reaching over, she brushes his arm lightly; a gesture that could be remove some stray leaf or scrap
of dirt as much as a caress.

“Beat Thenvunin, at least,” she suggests.

He laughs.

“Perhaps in one event.”

She wants to lean up and kiss him.

Instead she gives his arm a squeeze, and they get back to work.

The morning hunt returns not long after that. Curiosity stares around the changing courtyard with
obvious interest. Her friend apparently bagged a ram, and describes the matter at length, along with
the differences between food hunts and questing hunts, and the different mounts that the hunters
had ridden this time, and all manner of things; morning grumpiness apparently gone, and excitable
interest firmly back in place.

Lunch is still a rushed affair, though. There’s some brief ceremony with blood-letting that Andruil
oversees, before retreating back to attend her mother, or whatever it is the evanuris is doing in the
depths of her palace. She gets told to clean up the remnants of the ritual, which mostly involves
hauling a dead doe to the butcher’s, and then carrying an altar to a room that takes her three false
starts to find.

Pride is helping line fencing around a combat circle outside, and Curiosity is setting up archery
targets. So she finds herself alone in the silent palace corridors. The room for the altar has a slight
indentation where it fits perfectly. There are a few other items of ambiguous use stored in it. The
walls of the corridor leading up to it are covered in scrawling carvings. It looks like wood, to her
eye, with a glossy sheen, and bits of bone and ivory and iridescent shell laid into the depictions as
they scrawl up towards the ceiling. A great dragon fights with many beasts. It razes whole armies,
and contests with massive monsters of varied description, and smaller elven figures who summon
carved spells before being caught in wide and hungry jaws.

It makes her wonder, morbidly, if an elf turning into a dragon and eating another elf counts as
cannibalism. Though, in fairness, there is no indication the presumable-Andruil actually consumed
her targets. Just that they were chewed a little.
She’s about to turn and head back when something catches the corner of her eye.

Black.

In amidst all the rich browns and whites and ivories, there is a small, square black hole. Roughly the size of her thumbnail. She can’t really say, at first, why that should catch as much of her attention as it does. She turns and looks, and sees that it’s punched into the skull of a wolf depicted in the carvings. Howling at the dragon. She takes a step closer, and the oddity that drew her attention becomes more apparent.

It’s not a hole.

The darkness is raised from the carvings, rather than dug into them. She’s not totally sure, at first, but then she reaches and presses her fingers to the surface and confirms. She touches the wood backdrop, and then her fingers slide over a rough, raised bit of darkness. It looks utterly black but it feels entirely different from the polished carvings around it.

Her hand goes cold.

She squints, and for a moment, instead of a hollowed out piece of shadow, she sees a fragment of dark bone.

The hairs on the back of her neck stand up. The taste of iron fills the back of her throat, and her heart feels like it slows, for an instant. An animal breath, hot and unexpected, resounds in her ear.

She snatches back her hand.

Something snarls.

Her nerves clamour, and she turns, drawing her weapon. Her eyes scan the corridor. She even reaches for her magic, but there’s nothing there. Sunlight falls from the high windows overhead. The air is still, and quiet. Outside she can hear the distant sounds of activity, filtering in past all the doorways that have been thrown open for convenience’s sake.

Her eyes stray back towards the carving, and the one dark piece on it.

Bone.

Skull bone, maybe?

Here, conveniently in Andruil’s palace, of all places?

After a moment, she sheathes her sword, and reaches back for it. Her fingers brush it again, and she feels like something settles into place in the corner of her eye. A long, lupine body. Watching. Waiting.

We made a bargain.

With a glance down both ends of the corridor, she draws a knife, and carefully pries the bit of bone away from the wall. She feels entirely on edge as she does; like at any moment someone will turn down the end of the corridor and find her defacing precious artwork. Or the wolf at her back will lose patience with her, and snap its jaws around a vulnerable ankle or two. Or her knife will slip, and shatter the piece; which proves incredibly difficult to remove, as it happens. It takes her an alarmingly long amount of time.
Or maybe it just feels that way.

The final effort takes a lot of focus, as rather than popping neatly free, it feels as if the fragment is straining towards her while something else struggles to hold it fast. The last corner strains and she worries it will break. But then she gets the tip of her knife under it, and finally, the piece drops into her palm.

She stares at it a moment.

Then she looks up, and sees a small grey-and-green fox sitting at the end of the corridor.

Staring at her.

There is a long and awkward moment of silent.

“What are you doing?” Ghilashim finally asks. “Vandalizing Andruil’s walls?”

She takes a moment, and considers her options.

“…Yes,” she decides.

It’s not, technically, untrue.

“What for?” the fox wonders.

She scrambles a bit, still caught up in definite feelings of disquiet, and the lingering sense that that damn russet wolf is still watching, and even more is very amused. Out of the corner her eye she gets the sense of it standing, and moving closer to the little fox; and she finds herself moving, in turn, putting herself between them.

“There was a wolf,” she says.

Ghilashim blinks.

“Pride told you to deface Andruil’s walls?”

“No! I mean.” Damn. That might have actually worked. “There was a wolf, in the carving, and it was an offensive depiction, so I broke it.”

…Shit.

That’s the dumbest lie she’s ever come up with.

Ghilashim’s little fox face scrunches up, and he heads over, and stares at the point in wall. She quickly shoves the bone fragment into one of the pouches on her belt. As soon as she's not touching it anymore, she finds some of her equilibrium returns. The wolf vanishes from the fringes of her awareness – though she supposes that doesn’t necessarily means it’s gone – and some of her jangling nerves settle, just a bit.

Ghilashim stares up at the dragon on the verge of devouring a wolf – which really does have a hole in its head now.

He glances up at her, in turn.

“That is fairly offensive,” he allows. “Is that meant to be Fen’Harel?”
“Absolutely,” she says.

She’s pretty sure it’s just supposed to be a wolf, in fact.

“Well. I suppose you do seem to care about the old stories, even if you tell them wrong,” Ghilashim allows. “I do not think I need to tell anyone about this. Not right now, anyway. There may come a time when I change my mind, though. I do not know. You and I, we are rivals, after all.”

“We are?” she asks.

“Obviously, we are!” he snaps. “For Pride’s attention!”

“Oh. Right. Yes. That,” she allows, with a stab of sympathy.

Ghilashim sighs.

“I am telling you I will not forget this, but I will not use it against you if you do not give me a reason to,” he says, explicitly.

“Thank you,” she tells him. “Could you warn me if you feel like I might be giving you a reason, though? Only I seem to have a lot of trouble anticipating you.”

And reconciling the bold young elf with one of Solas’ few surviving followers.

She doesn’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing that she never actually met the man. Maybe his reputation was a bit grander than the reality; or maybe thousands of years just has a way of substantially changing people.

It certainly changed Solas himself.

Ghilashim blinks at her, and then lets out another sigh.

“Fine. But you are a terrible rival,” he declares.

Then he gives a little shudder, and blinks his eyes shut. For a moment the air around him seems to waver. His fur trembles, and she gets a strong sense of anticipation. A spike of worry shoots through her. Stupid. Just because she isn’t touching the fragment anymore, doesn’t mean that something isn’t still going on. She reaches for the pouch at her belt, any number of bizarre and unpredictable scenarios running through her head – but then Ghilashim just turns into an elf.

An elf sitting on the floor, looking thoroughly annoyed. But more with himself, she thinks, than with her. Right now.

…She has no idea what to do with him, she decides.

“What did you sleep last night?” she suddenly finds herself wondering.

Ghilashim glances up at her, and then avoids her gaze a bit as he stands, brushing himself off.

“I just went back in the room they gave me before,” he admits. “I tried to just stay there for a while but everyone was cleaning things up, so I had to turn back into a fox and hide under the bed. And then it seemed like I could never find a good place to turn back, and now I am too tired to hold that shape, and the games are going to start soon! I will miss it all.”

He sounds so frustrated.
She stares at him a moment, and then sighs.

“I think Curiosity has a cloak with a hood in her room,” she says, directing him towards the store room with the altar in it. “Stay there, do not let anyone see you. I will borrow it; there are so many people running around, between Andruil’s servants and Mythal’s I doubt anyone will notice one extra, so long as they do not recognize you right away.”

Ghilashim blinks.

Then he frowns a bit.

“That will not make us even for my keeping quiet about the wall,” he insists. “Because I helped you and Curiosity yesterday and that was so I could watch the games.”

She has to bite back some amusement at this.

“I never said it would make us even,” she tells him.

He gives her a wary look, but then retreats into the store room.

It’s the work of a few minutes to head back to the guest rooms. With a mental apology to Curiosity for not asking permission first, she retrieves the blue cloak hanging over the back of one of her chairs, and then heads for the corridor of carvings again. Ghilashim is right where she left him, looking a little nervous and a little impatient.

The relief on his face at her return sours into a more mixed set of feelings, after a moment. But he accepts the cloak, with a word of thanks, and slings it over himself, and pulls up the hood.

“Is it raining out?” he wonders.

“On and off,” she says. There had been some grumblings from Mythal’s people on that front, but Andruil’s apparently considered the extra challenge important, and had neither side had been too shy to be disdainful over the matter.

“Then I suppose I will not look entirely out of place,” Ghilashim allows.

They make their way back to the courtyard to find that most of the preparations are completed. Ghilashim looks around with interest, pausing to take it all in.

“Do you think my disguise is good enough that I could compete?” he wonders, with just a hint of excitement. “Or maybe we could find a mask? And I could be the mysterious Servant of Mythal, whose name no one knows, who rises up through the competition and eventually wins and impresses everyone?”

She stares at him.

“I… have no idea where we would find the mask,” she settles on saying, after a moment.

Ghilashim sighs.

“I suppose not,” he concedes. Then he frowns at her. “I could compete if you had not gotten me found out, though.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“They would let you compete as a fox?” she wonders.
“Banathim competes as a bear, she says,” he tells her. Then he hesitates. “…Except for in some events.”

“Mandatory events?” she asks.

Ghilashim raises his chin.

“I would have thought of something,” he insists.

With an internal roll of her eyes, she opts to let it go.

As the last stages of set-up happen, then, they go and find Curiosity, who does a double-take at Ghilashim and then snorts in amusement. But she only pulls her hood down a little further on the young elf’s face, and then sets about getting them both a good place to watch the proceedings from.

“Are you competing?” she asks.

“Of course!” Curiosity says. “I doubt I will win overall, but I will certainly try. Andruil usually grants the champion a favour. If I win I will ask her to let us take some halla with us on our expedition.”

She blinks.


“Because, then it will be less conspicuous when you figure out how to turn into one,” her friend reasons.

Ghilashim scoffs a bit.

“That is highly unlikely,” he points out.

Curiosity levels a finger at him.

“Shush,” she says.

The impending disagreement ends before it can begin, then, as some of the ranking elves – Uthvir included – announce in sonorous voices that the proceedings are beginning. Seats have been placed around the courtyard, with far more observers than participants, it seems, even among Andruil’s people. The evanuris herself shows up, then, and takes a seat at the head of the proceedings. Clad in a cloak of rippling golden fur, with shining armour beneath. The interior of the cloak is deep crimson, and waterfalls down her back like blood.

“The Palace of the Huntress welcomes our kin, who serve my Wise and Radiant Mother, Mythal,” Andruil says. The rain is a mist that falls around them, and eddies away from her where she stands; as if the light drops are repelled by the energies just naturally falling from the evanuris’ skin. “In light of my mother’s condition, she will not be presiding over her representatives. Instead, one of her attendants – Respected Tarensa – will sit in her place. Even so, I expect my mother’s servants to do her credit in their efforts. And I expect my own hunters to honour my greatness accordingly.”

The evanuris then spreads an arm, and the courtyard lights up. Motes and wisps of magic, accentuating the borders between competition circles, surge to life. Barriers jump up around magic proving grounds. There is electricity in the air.

“Regardless of service, to the winner will go my favour. We begin!”
She watches for Pride, but she is not quite certain of the order of the proceedings. Neither is Ghilashim, it seems. There are several matches between Andruil’s hunters alone, before there are then several among Mythal’s servants.

As it happens, one of the ‘games’ in which Banathim competes as a bear is duelling. She’s fought a fair few bears in her life, but she’s pleased to say that at least none of them had torn after her with a sword clutched in their mouth, bellowing and snarling and turning their heads to try and stab her. Sheer intimidation factor wins her a fair few bouts, before Nehnalin manages to get the sword out of her mouth and win by disarmament.

Other displays include magical competitions that seem to vary between outright fights, and contests of will, and displays which hold a purpose she cannot easily gauge. Endurance, she thinks, in one case, where two of Mythal’s people seem to be fighting to build bigger towers of ice in the middle of a circle; but then the one with the shortest tower wins, after their competitor’s topples. Or perhaps focus. There are archery contests and wrestling matches, and among the high-ranking elves, there is a range of targets which several halla are brought to, and riding archery is attempted.

At that, no one seems to particularly excel except Uthvir; though Tarensa, in her seat next to Andruil, sits up a bit, and looks frustrated at her own inability to compete.

She gathers, after several events, that there is a distinct difference between some. A few seem to be minor games that are awarded praise and victory in and of themselves; whereas others seem to be mere stepping stones into a larger tournament that’s at play. She finds herself glad that she’s not actually competing; while she thinks she would do a fair job at some of the events, and more than fair at others, she also wouldn’t relish the challenge of trying to figure out where she was supposed to go next. There is very little in the way of outside elaboration to the purpose of events.

Probably, she thinks, most everyone here has competed in them before. Apart from Curiosity, that is; and her friend only manages to progress from standing archery before being eliminated in one of the more seemingly-unfathomable magical competitions, and coming to sit with them.

“You shot very well,” she commends.

“I did,” Curiosity agrees. “I think I would have gotten further if the events were organized differently. I do not have very much affinity for explosions.”

Reaching over, she pats her shoulder consolingly.

But most of her attention is reserved for Pride, once the bouts for Mythal’s people begin, and then progress into mixed matches. He seems to be competing in everything, she notes; though he loses a fair few of the self-contained events. He does well in nearly all of his magical competitions, and commendably in the more physical matches. He loses at wrestling against Banathim – who is dominating that particular event, given it is also one that she competes in as a bear – and she acknowledges that she has a slight problem when she moves her hand to the hilt of her sword and starts to get out of her seat.

Curiosity catches her embarrassingly quickly.

“He is not going to get eaten by a bear,” her friend says, before turning back to the match. “Even if the bear is a FILTHY CHEAT!”

The insult falls into the flurry of calls and jeers that mark the audience crowd. And not only those, but emotions, too, pour out towards the courtyard, in a tumultuous sea of impressions; support and derision, victory and celebration and sympathy and consolation. She cheers without the symphony
of external emotions, of course. But Pride catches her eye, every once in a while, and grins.

He is beautiful on the field, though. Half the time she catches herself mesmerized by watching him move. He has become more utilitarian, she realizes. His gestures have less flourish. His focus is less divided, or turned inwards. He keeps his gaze on his opponents, and is a quick, silver step when he moves against them. Against flashier foes he falls away. Easy to overlook and ignore. Simplicity mistaken for ineptitude. And even when he loses, she sees, it’s more often to overwhelming strength or force than a failure of technique.

Her breath stops when she realizes how much he resembles Solas in a fight now.

And then she finds herself distracted, a moment later, as a great cheer goes up for another segment of the courtyard. Banathim has been bested at wrestling, and she has to do a double-take when she sees by whom.

Thenvunin has pinned the bear to the ground.

The ranking elf’s butterfly hairclips are gone, and most of his armour has been removed, but his cloak still flutters as he finally breaks his hold on his opponent’s neck. He’s red-faced and strained, and he drops his hands to his knees, as Banathim stands up and shakes out her pelt. It looks almost ridiculous for a moment. Thenvunin is much physically smaller.

“How did he do that?” she wonders.

“I do not know. I was watching Pride,” Ghilashim admits.

“He got her paws tangled and then held the ground with one hand and her neck with the other,” Curiosity says. “Thenvunin is quite strong, actually.”

Huh.

He gets another chance to demonstrate when he duels Pride.

The two of them face off against one at opposite ends of a wisp-strewn circle. Thenvunin’s armour is back. He looks like an over-sized bug to her as he and Pride nod at one another, and then almost immediately clash. There is the clang of blades. The rush of fit forms moving clear, decisive strikes. For an instant, it throws her mind straight into the depths of every warrior’s bout she’s ever witnessed. She can almost hear Cassandra’s voice right next to her, commenting on their form.

“Thenvunin has strength and aptitude, but his training is substandard,” the seeker would say.

“Nah,” she can imagine Iron Bull interrupting. “Not substandard. Too high-grade. That’s a man who fights with a lot of finicky rules bogging him down.”

“Pride has better form,” Imaginary-Cassandra insists, with a note of faint approval.

But then the imagining dies. Cassandra, she expects, would not approve of Pride. None of them would, all things considered. She bites down on the note of guilt that creeps up along with the grief, and focuses her own eye on the proceedings. Pride can win, she thinks. Thenvunin expends too much energy in a hurry, even though he definitely has a lot of it. All he has to do is keep his blocks economical and wait him out, and then strike.

Pride can win.

He rushes forward, instead, meeting Thenvunin’s pace. She’s not actually sure if it’s deliberate or
not. In the end, though, he can’t meet the other elf’s strength, and Thenvunin batters him to the ground.

Curiosity closes a hand over her arm; but she’s not rushing to stand.

It’s enough like a tournament, she supposes, that she isn’t too alarmed. Though she does feel a note of trepidation when Thenvunin levels the tip of his blade at Pride’s prone form.

It gleams at his throat for only a few seconds before Thenvunin sheaths it with a sudden flourish. Pride gets to his feet, and the two bow; and that’s Pride done, it seems, as he retreats from the matches, bowing also to Andruil and Tarensa before coming and joining them in the stands.

He blinks at Ghilashim, but after a moment just sighs, and has the young elf move over so he can sit next between the two of them.

Not an arrangement either of them object to.

“You did very well,” she says. And means it.

Pride smiles.

“Did you lose to Thenvunin on purpose?” Curiosity asks.

Ghilashim scoffs.

“Of course he did not.”

“Yes,” Pride says.

“Of course he did. Thenvunin could never beat Pride in a fair fight,” Ghilashim immediately amends.

Pride looks vaguely pained.

The crowd’s attention spikes, though, and all their eyes are drawn back to the field.

It seems the next round of matches has begun.

Chapter End Notes

Updates are probably going back to a weekly schedule, I think! <3
The last match of the cumulative events of the games goes to Thenvunin and Uthvir. After Pride’s defeat, it feels as though the playfulness has gone out of the games. All casual participants defeated, it’s clear that things matters have progressed to challenges between the most serious and ruthless combatants. Victors are chosen and the defeated take their seats on sidelines, a swift flurry of competitions growing more and more vicious in their severity, until it is narrowed down to the final two.

The last match of the cumulative events of the games goes to Thenvunin and Uthvir. A duel of sorts, it seems.

The sun is at the hunter’s front, and casts a long, deep shadow behind them. The light reflects, gleaming, off of the bright angles of Thenvunin’s armour. It makes her think of stained glass windows. The kind she used to see often in the finer chantries, depicting slaves overthrowing their corrupt masters, or Templars battling with abominations. Uthvir clearly has the villain’s role, with their spiked red edges and menacing look; though they are notably shorter than Thenvunin, which ruins the whole effect somewhat.

And Thenvunin still has his butterfly cape. Also not something she would expect to see in any sort of romantic chantry depiction.

The pair nod to one another. Thenvunin barely tilts his chin. He looks tense and focused, she thinks. Uthvir is a little more fluid, a little more meaningful in their nod. As soon as they have leave to move, the red hunter is prowling, turning the duelling blade over in their hand. Thenvunin stays where he is, holding a somewhat atypical defensive position and watching his opponent.

“I suppose they have fought before?” she asks Pride, quietly.

“Thenvunin is one of Mythal’s better martial combatants,” Pride concedes, easily enough. “He often competes in these events. In all cases I have witnessed, though, he has always lost to Uthvir.”

She keeps her eyes on the match, curious to see how things will play out, in that case. There’s always an advantage in watching two enemies – or potential enemies, at least – match up with one another. She waits to see who will make the first move, and she doesn’t have to wait long.

Thenvunin looks like he’s prepared to stand in one place all day if he has to, and by way of that stubbornness, forces Uthvir’s hand.

The red hunter doesn’t seem terribly unsettled by making the first strike. They move quickly, feinting and then drawing a quick strike straight past Thenvunin’s defences. The metal of their blade rasps against the other elf’s armour, and leaves a long scratch behind.

Thenvunin’s defensive strategy seems to crack with it.

Given their fleetness of foot, she mostly expects Uthvir to avoid trying to contend with their opponent’s strength head-on. And sometimes they do. But as often they meet it, and she’s a little surprised to realize that they’re a match for it, too. The exchange of blows goes hurried and fierce, as Thenvunin seems to decide his best chance is to overwhelm his opponent and try to force an
opening, or get lucky.

The red hunter, by contrast, is sharp and efficient in their movements; near to toying with their prey, but when she glimpses their expression, it’s stoney and still. There’s no mocking grin. Not until the very end, at least, when Thenvunin finally over-extends himself enough that Uthvir disarms him and plants him face-down in the ground. Then the hunter smirks, cocky as anything.

“You insufferable, underhanded ass,” Thenvunin grouses.

From her seat at the head of the proceedings, Andruil raises an eyebrow, and rises carefully to her feet.

“Such gracious defeats we see from my mother’s servants,” the huntress says, her voice low as she stares down at the combat circle, and the red hunter, and the butterfly knight hastily making his way unto his feet. “But I see nothing underhanded in the victory of my own.”

Thenvunin bows low.

“Forgive me, Lady Andruil. I meant no offense, and I concede my fair and honest defeat with only thanks for your graciousness in hosting my people, and overseeing these proceedings,” he says, backtracking so hard she can almost see him sliding over the courtyard grounds.

Uthvir scoffs a bit, and moves forward, angling slightly in front of their opponent as they, too, bow low towards Andruil. They sheath their blade and spread their arms, and their smirk is firmly in place as Andruil turns her attention to them, and smiles.

“Again, my favoured hunters do me credit, and remind me how they have earned their place,” the huntress says. “The tournament is yours, Uthvir, and all the glory of it. What boon would you ask of me, in reward for your service?”

The red hunter doesn’t hesitate.

“The only reward I have ever sought is continued service to you, my lady,” they say, smooth and simple. Then they lift themselves up out of their bow, and tilt their head; smirk still firmly in place. “Though perhaps a new knife or two would not go amiss.”

Andruil smirks back.

“I am certain we can devise something fitting for you.”

The stained glass picture changes, then, and for a moment the huntress looks like nothing so much as some dark Andraste, smiling down upon her sinister petitioner, as the bright knight stands humble and defeated. The sky overhead is a sea of colours, and a light rain has begun to fall. More mist than anything else.

Tarensa stands, and graciously concedes the defeat of Mythal’s forces, congratulating the esteemed hunters and complimenting their skill. She does well enough at it that Andruil doesn’t seem to object. Thenvunin stalks off, and most of the hunters break into celebrations.

Uthvir stands where they are for a moment. Their smirk drops, and they look at Andruil speaking to Tarensa; and then they glance her way. Their eyes catch hers for a moment. Just a moment. But their stare is hard and sharp and nowhere near to cocky anymore before it is gone again, and they stalk away from the duelling circle themselves.

“Do we still get to celebrate, even though we lost?” Curiosity wonders.
Pride, though, almost immediately begins urging them out of their seats. They make for a secluded section of the courtyard, near to the halla pens, and then he rounds on Ghilashim.

“What are you still doing here?” he demands. “You are supposed to be back in the city.”

Ghilashim quails a little at his tone.

“I only wanted to see the games,” he replies. “I wanted to cheer for you.”

Pride lets out a heavy breath, and then glances back to where the majority of the crowd is milling. He shakes his head a bit. But he also relents, and after a moment, offers Ghilashim a somewhat gentler look. The young elf returns it with a tentative smile.

“You did very well,” he says.

“Thank you,” Pride replies. “But now you must go, beyond a doubt. It is not safe here.”

Ghilashim blinks.

“Why not?” he wonders.

Pride doesn’t answer him, though. Instead he turns to Curiosity.

“Can you take him to Tarensa?” he asks. “Or Thenvunin, I suppose.”

Curiosity doesn’t look too thrilled at the prospect. But after a moment she just nods, and straightens the hood on Ghilashim’s head. The air’s still misting around them. Ghilashim gives Pride a worried look, but after a moment, he goes without much fuss. Mid-stride Curiosity seems to decide she’s had enough of being an elf, and switches to her lion form instead; loping alongside the young elf, who is still clad in her blue cloak.

She watches them go, and then turns back towards Pride. Her thoughts stray towards the strange little piece of skull, sitting in the pouch at her belt.

“I found something,” she admits, once they are alone.

Pride’s brows furrow, but then he glances at the courtyard around them.

“Later,” he advises, softly. Then he reaches out, and very swiftly lifts her hand, and kisses the back of it. The gesture is so seamless and down with so quickly that her only reaction is to blink at first. Her skin tingles a bit where his lips had brushed it. He offers her a smile, and then tilts his head towards the activity of the courtyard. “We will be expected to help set things to rights again, now that the day’s events are over.”

“Just the day’s?” she wonders.

“Likely there will be more festivities,” Pride decides. “Though how lighthearted they will be remains to be seen. Our expedition will probably set out before they are completed. But if there is one thing Andruil demands of her guests, it is entertainment.”

“So we set up the courtyard, put it back, and set it up again, over and over?” she wonders.

“Unless the events are continuous; which would not be unlikely, but for Mythal’s condition,” Pride replies.

And indeed, when they get back to the main throng of activity, Andruil’s servants are already
setting about rectifying the altered courtyard. The higher ranking elves are, by contrast, beginning their revelries. It seems putting the structures back the way they were requires less effort than reshaping them initially. Few talented mages are enlisted; though Pride’s skills certainly come in handy.

They spend a great deal of time working at the task, running around once more. It makes her think of packing up camp and setting it again; only there was always a practical purpose to that. In the case of the courtyard, it doesn’t seem to lose much utility even when it’s divided into segments for duels and challenges. The effect appears to be purely a matter of appearances. So then she finds herself, as it goes on, thinking of ornamental gardens, and nobles obsessing over rose bushes that are the wrong shade of blush, and June’s twisting tower in Arlathan, with all its inexplicable moving pieces powered by blood and sacrifice.

The tops of aged trees are just barely visible above the courtyard walls. It makes her want to get outside of them. To take one of Andruil’s halla and ride off into the wilds. Her heart beats a little faster at the thought, and the scent of rain fills her nose, and she hears the halla in their pen, letting out their own rough breaths and shaking their heads as they wander through the misty air.

She hates this place, she thinks. It’s so close to being familiar, and yet, still so very wrong.

The servants break for lunch. Andruil’s dining hall is filled with those who have rank enough to avoid tedious duties, drinking and sharing stories of the day’s events, recalling past ones in a noisy clamour of boasting and mocking and amusement.

That atmosphere persists even as everyone else gets back to work, and is still there when the time for the evening meal arrives. Curiosity returns before too long, without Ghilashim, and helps her carry several barrels over from one side of the courtyard to the next. Some drunken hunters emerge from the palace interior at one point, and set about lounging against the halla’s fence until their tender chases them off. A few more stagger out and snag away some of the more idle-looking servants, with a different sort of ‘celebrating’ obviously in mind.

She makes sure Pride always has something in his hands when that starts happening; though, at least, most of the lower-ranking elves who are subjected to such treatment seem to be inviting it, and nobody looks terribly upset or uncomfortable. It eases some of the knot in her stomach; but only slightly.

She’s a little surprised when the evening meal finally arrives, and everyone treks inside for it, to see that Andruil is in attendance.

The damaged hall has been completely repaired, and the evanuris is sitting at the head of it; half in shadow, half in the flames of the room’s sconces. She’s changed outfits again, now clad in shining, sleek black furs, and golden jewellery, and a hair piece that crests across her scalp like the jaws of a rearing dragon. A skinned elk is spread out before the fire pit in front of her. One of the high-ranking hunters cuts up the meat for roasting, as Uthvir sits at their lady’s right side; Tarensa and Thenvunin to her left.

It changes the atmosphere of the room quite a bit, she thinks, to have the huntress fully present in her palace halls. There’s still a great deal of clamouring, but it quiets with Andruil’s every move and gesture; as if all her hunters know that at a whim of hers, they might become prey. The evanuris speaks often, voice ringing as the hall fills, praises certain parties for their accomplishments in the day’s events.

When the huntress’ sharp, golden eyes turn to Pride, she cannot help but stiffen.
“Such a pity that my mother’s wolf could not redeem himself,” Andruil says.

Pride inclines his head.

“There will be more opportunities for redemption,” he says. “Though I thank you for your consideration, my lady.”

“Consideration is always due when talent expresses itself,” Andruil declares, clutching her goblet and leaning back in her seat. After a moment, the evanuris gaze drifts over to where Thenvunin is sitting, just on the other side of Tarenza. “I must commend my mother’s chief champion. Uthvir is a scythe upon the field, and you are a blossom. It was inevitable that you would be cut. Still, you managed to look quite lovely when you fell.”

Her gaze is languid and assessing, and Thenvunin looks uncertain of the proper response to her backhanded compliment. After half a second, he inclines his head.

“Appearance is certainly one skill Thenvunin has cultivated in excess,” Uthvir interjects, twirling a small knife in one hand, and then skewering a large segment of roast with it. “It is a shame they lack any real form or substance to make more of them than a pretty picture. Alas, though, as with most garden flowers, when the petals are peeled back, there is nothing to recommend the end results.”

At that, Thenvunin seems less conflicted on how to respond. He straightens his chin, and sneers right back at the hunter.

“If we are to speak on a lack of substance, your underhandedness deserves full commendations,” he says, rigidly.

Andruil smirks.

“You yet find my hunters underhanded?” the evanuris asks.

Thenvunin stalls again.

“Actually, I believe you will find that Thenvunin asserted that my underhandedness lacks substance. Which, in fact, implies the opposite,” Uthvir interjects. “Such roundabout compliments Mythal’s people offer. It puts me in mind of the last time we were in your sister’s halls, as well, my lady.”

Andruil glances sideways at Uthvir, and her smirk widens just a bit.

“There is a certain congruity between my mother’s subjects and my sister’s. Flowers and gemstones, I am inclined to believe; though we do our fair share of harvesting both around these parts. Particularly of late.”

She gives Thenvunin a decidedly predatory look, then. He glances at Tarenza, who only raises an eyebrow, as Uthvir chuckles.

“Hunting far outweighs harvesting, I would say,” Uthvir offers. “There is little challenge in plucking unmoving treasures from the unresisting earth. As my lady well knows. Perhaps she might humour her champion, and regale us with a tale of her exploits, and give this evening some greater hint of excitement. As I recall, the last time you visited your sister’s summer estate was the time that feral dragon had turned up in the canyons to the west of it.”

“Oh, indeed,” Andruil agrees, taking a sip from her goblet. The huntress purses her lips, amused,
and then turns her gaze from Thenvunin, towards Uthvir. The torches dim a little, save for the two closest to the evanuris. The firelight catches in her crown like drops of molten gold.

Tales of a dragon hunt then abound, as Andruil takes the obvious invitation. Most of the higher ranking elves are drunk enough from a half day of revelry that the lower ranks are only sporadically called upon to attend anyone. Thenvunin, true to his word – or perhaps simply uncommonly subdued by his recent loss – doesn’t badger Pride much, and so he stays mostly by her and Curiosity’s side, as they eat and every so often rise to refill a pitcher of wine, or help with the fresh roasting and boiling of the feast’s components.

She listens to Andruil describe her hunt of the feral dragon. It’s almost like listening to Bull talk, in fact. Leathery wings that cracked the air like thunder. A savage creature, dangerous and deadly, but magnificent in those qualities, too. Andruil is a good storyteller. She paints a good picture of her quarry; sweeping through the air, vanishing through rocky outposts. Clever and, by the sounds of it, more powerful than the dragons of her own time.

Pride and Curiosity are listening too, she can tell; the three of them all a bit tense as the evanuris describes tearing out the dragon’s eyes with her bare hands, and slicing open its throat, and ‘glutting herself on the acrid taste of its blood’, which makes Pride and Curiosity stiffen. Up at the high table Tarensa does, too; and Thenvunin a little green.

“You drank of its blood?” Tarensa asks, clearly a bit unnerved.

Andruil laughs.

“I did! There is power in such things. Not for just anyone to take, of course. But that is the right of those who own such shapes. It is a pity dragon flesh does not keep better, or I would feast upon it for days,” the huntress asserts. “It is not the same as the power which comes from the shards of a spirit, of course. Blood is blood, whether dragon’s blood or not. But there are times when the hunts feel the same.”

“Speaking of flesh – your plate is empty, my lady. Let me refill it,” Uthvir says.

Before they can move to, however, Andruil closes a hand around their forearm, and stalls them.

“Let others handle that. You are our champion this evening,” the evanuris declares. Then reaches over, and trails a finger over the angle of the red hunter’s jaw.

Uthvir smirks.

“Even champions serve,” they say.

“Just so,” Andruil agrees, and turns her attention away from them, and back to her goblet. One of the servants nearer to the high table immediately takes up the task of refilling her plate, and refreshing several pitchers of wine along the table. The scent of roasting meat is thick in the air. But where before it had been a delicious fragrance, now it feels overwhelming; charred, in places, where the wooden stakes and skewers holding the fresh kills had come to close to the flames. The fat sizzles and cracks, running into the fire, filling the air above with smoke.

The hall goes strangely quiet for a time.

Her appetite dies, as the smoke of the cooking fires curls up towards the ceiling, and her gaze catches on the bloodstains that have yet to vanish from the hall floors. The unbleached bones, littered at the edges of the cooking pits.
“I know a story that suits this air this evening,” Andruil says, low and considering. The glow of the fire catches in the unearthly shade of her eyes. “I know a hunt. Years and years ago. Centuries, now. A tale of my beloved Ghilan’nain. She fell to contesting with wrathful Falon’Din. Covetous Falon’Din, who would not be appeased by any reasonable offerings. It is the curse of great leaders to never know satisfaction, save in fleeting moments; it is our own sacrifice we make, to sit atop the great thrones we do. But Ghilan’nain sought to give Falon’Din that fleeting moment of satisfaction, to release his rage at her. And as ever is the case with my beloved, she gave me great satisfaction, too.”

Andruil’s words drift through the hall, and every able ear listens to them. At her side, Uthvir raises their own goblet to their lips, and all but drains it.

“It was the last time I hunted a spirit in any fashion worthy of being named a hunt,” the evanuris continues. “A challenge indeed. My Ghilan’nain had built a form so beautiful, it could not compare to any other. But it needed a spirit. And not just any would do. It had to be one which Falon’Din coveted. A rare, old, and powerful being. One that could stretch itself through forgotten veins of the Dreaming, and move as quickly as a pulse. Tracking it was near impossible. Trapping it was the only viable choice, but even then, how does one trap a being that can be anywhere and nowhere? I must credit my mother with anticipating where the spirit might next appear.”

Andruil’s eyes narrow as she sees into her own memories. The huntress doesn’t smile while reciting the details of this hunt. Instead, there is a hunger to her. The light catches in flashes of amber and red in the gold of her eyes, glinting on her lashes like embers. Something takes the regal face in shadow, when the torchlight dances away.

It makes her think of how lyrium addicts who had gone too long without sometimes looked at anything that was bright and blue.

“Even so. Even so, it was a vicious, long hunt. Dragging that spirit from the Dreaming. Glory did not come easily; it would have been one thing, to rend it apart. But my Ghilan’nain wished it whole, and so what could I do, save bring it to her in one piece? It burnt me bloody. Charred the skin from my hands and face, and nearly blinded me. I even thought I might die. It all came so close, but in the end, my claws were the sharper. I was a sight, I am certain, when I gave the spirit to my beloved; I bound it at her feet, and I would bind a thousand prizes greater there as well, come to it.”

There is silence again.

Uthvir refills their goblet, their expression so neutral as to point towards boredom. Tarensa and Thenvunin, by contrast, seem somewhat fascinated by the tale.

So do Pride and Curiosity.

Pride especially so; she can’t help but look at him, and feel something twist in her chest at the tale. Some great and beautiful spirit, captured for no other reason than because it was great and beautiful.

Glory.

What is Glory, if not a sort of Pride?

She feels a brief spike of inexplicable fear, then, for the idea that the huntress might turn her gaze towards their little segment of table. That the hungry look in her will land on Pride.
After a moment, though, Andruil only shrugs.

“Of course, Ghilan’nain bound her prize, in turn, to the beauty she had made for it. Stunning creature. Falon’Din was quite appeased until he broke it, as he is bound to break any toy at his disposal. It was inconsiderate of him; but then, too, it is the place of great leaders to be inconsiderate at times,” the huntress muses.

After a moment, Andruil turns in her seat, and looks towards Uthvir.

“Do you remember that hunt?” she asks.

Uthvir raises a brow, shakes their head.

“That was before my time,” they say.

Andruil chuckles.

“Yes, it would be,” she agrees. Turning again, she looks towards her high-ranking guests. “What about you two? You are of an age for it, I believe. Did either of you chance to meet with Glory?”

Tarensa clears her throat.

“I cannot say that I did,” she declares.

“I met the spirit once,” Thenvunin confesses. “Only at a great distance. I was very young.”

His expression is tight. But Andruil’s eyes gleam, and her fingers curl atop the table in front of her; nails tapping for a moment.

The huntress grins.

“How fortuitous! What did it look like to you, Thenvunin? Did you chase it? Most would try to, back then. There are days when I miss those chases. Like trying to catch the wind.” Reaching over, she runs one of her hands down Uthvir’s back. The red hunter stills, a moment, but then only refills her drink, and Andruil retracts her touch to take it up again.

“I did not chase it,” Thenvunin says, quietly.

It earns him a laugh.

“I would say that those disinclined to chase Glory are those doomed to humble fates; but as you ranked second in our hospitalities, I may have cause to amend that opinion,” the evanuris declares.

“Second place is still humble enough,” Uthvir declares, with a mocking lilt to their voice, and a sharp look in their eyes. “I would not discount the likes of Thenvunin on the subject of disappointment, either.”

Thenvunin bristles.

Andruil clucks her tongue.

“So sharp you are, my pet,” the huntress chides. It’s not a wholly convincing effort, though. Particularly when Andruil reaches over and runs another hand down the red hunter’s spine, before plucking up a haunch of roasted meat from her plate, and biting into it. A molten trail of grease flows out of the corner of her mouth. Slick and shining, before she brushes it away with her clawed thumb.
“Perhaps another tale would dull my edges,” Uthvir suggests. “You breathe such life into the memories of the old hunts.”

“What about something more recent?” Curiosity calls.

The sound of her friend’s voice is such a surprise, ringing out clear and solid from beside her, that she jumps and puts a hand to the hilt of her blade. Turning, she sees that Curiosity is staring up at the higher table; eyes sharp, and back straight. Pride is tense as a bowstring, and a cold breeze creeps beneath the hall’s benches. Curling like ice beneath the oppressive blanket of smoke, just beyond the heat of the cooking fires.

Curiosity’s eyes are cold and blue.

Andruil meets her stare, and raises an eyebrow.

“Am I bard, now, to regale my guests upon request?” the evanuris wonders.

“Of course not, my lady,” Curiosity replies. “But I am young, and curious. Your halls hold many wonders. There must be many stories to go with them. Much has been said lately of the prosperity of Mighty Andruil’s people. I find it hard to believe that your greatest hunts are all so long ago and far away from these current days.”

The huntress leans back in her seat.

“And they are not. But we have had enough hunter’s tales to see us well through the night. What can my mother’s young servants offer in return? What tales have they to tell?”

Andruil looks at Curiosity, and then her gaze, just slightly, shifts. And she finds herself meeting those golden eyes, with their black, black pupils. She wonders, briefly, what the evanuris really would make of the tales she could tell. She thinks of shrines built to the glory of a huntress long trapped in a cage. Of tracing her fingers over carvings of hares and arrows, and imagining a great, tall, strong-armed provider, guiding hunters’ arrows to fly true, and chasing fat quail into the paths of starving clans, and sending hawks to circle over forests where the game was good.

And, too, she remembers maddened creatures screaming in the darkness. Transcripts of corruption, murder, despair, and destruction. She thinks of the hall carvings, and the dragon with elves between its jaws. Wondering if a dragon eating elves was cannibalism; wondering now, too, if elves eating dragons would be.

Andruil’s eyes are the same colour as her mother’s. But somehow, they don’t look like the same kind of eyes at all.

“I shot a stormchaser clean through the eye,” Curiosity says, bright and proud, puffing up a bit. The evanuris looks back towards her. “Uthvir said it was very good for a first proper hunt. I suspect a little bit of it was luck, but I have been practicing quite a lot as well. It is funny, though, how even an inexperienced person with a good amount of luck and the right kind of opening, can kill something that should be much too hard for them.”

Andruil’s lips twist.

“And do you aim for yet stronger beasts, now?”

“Is that not how it is supposed to go?” Curiosity returns. “I wonder if you could kill a feral dragon that way. If you knew enough about how they were made, and where all the weak points were. Obviously your skill is above question, my lady. But have you ever simply gotten lucky? That
must have been very anticlimactic for you.”

“A time or two,” Andruil says.

“There was the giant snake,” Uthvir offers. “Bashed its own skull into the mountainside when it misjudged the distance to you.”

The evanuris chuckles.

“That… yes. That was not much of a hunt,” she agrees. The gravity of the moment flees. The air doesn’t turn friendly, not in the least, but some of the pressure lifts away from their group. She breathes easier, just for a moment.

Underneath the table, Pride catches her hand.

He holds it until the evanuris retires from the evening. Andruil stands from the table, and makes a beckoning gesture towards Uthvir, and leaves with her ranking hunter in tow. Most of Mythal’s contingent follows not long after, and they go with the crowd, escaping the thick atmosphere as they venture into twisting corridors.

Her thoughts stay fixed upon the wall carvings, though, and the wolf’s skull, and the fragment she still has. Neither Tarensa nor Thenvunin offer many assignments before they retire for the evening. Thenvunin looks like he’s still unsettled, and licking his wounds from defeat at Uthvir’s hands. Tarensa checks on Mythal, and confers for her with a long while. The guest rooms are quiet and still; mostly from exhaustion, it seems.

“Why did you address Andruil?” Pride asks Curiosity, urgently, once the three of them can catch a moment alone; slipping into her own small room.

“I thought she might give something away without realizing it,” Curiosity replies, unabashed. “Do you think drinking a dragon’s blood can help you turn into one?”

Pride blinks.

“What?” he asks.

“Does drinking the blood of other things help you turn into them?” she herself wonders, not quite so taken aback. It may just be the atmosphere, but that question actually makes sense. “I eat venison quite often, but I doubt it might help me turn into a deer.”

“Yes, but dragon’s blood is different,” Curiosity says. And then shrugs, as Pride continues to look like he’s not really sure what to do with this conversation.

“Drinking blood has very few noted benefits, and is incredibly unsettling besides,” he says.

“Well, yes, obviously, but if we are going to be in unsettling territory, we may as well ask the obvious questions,” Curiosity counters.

Drinking blood makes her think of the Grey Wardens, and their Joining. The blood of the archdemon…

She stills.

Archdemons which were, perhaps, Keepers. Keepers like the one which may be somewhere near here, if she has interpreted Haninan’s allusions correctly. Keepers like the one which Andruil
might have been hunting in the first place, when she began to venture underground. Andruil, who
knows a way to counter the poison of the red lyrium; or at least, ostensibly does.

Archdemon blood – Keeper’s blood corrupted by the Blight, and yet able to help Grey Wardens
keep their minds and their bodies from being wholly consumed by it.

What might the blood of an un-Blighted Keeper do?

She looks at Pride. Reaches out, and catches his arm.

“We have to go,” she says.

As soon as she says it, she knows it’s ridiculous. They have an expedition to go on, and
appearances to keep up if they don’t want Mythal’s wrath bearing down on them, and the sensible
thing to do would be to just carry on with the plan as it is until a more opportune moment to depart
from things might present itself. But she can feel the whispers under Pride’s skin. And she thinks of
leaving, right this minute; of heading straight underground and finding Haninan and Hildur,
working out where the Keeper might be and… well, they wouldn’t need much blood, she thinks.
Probably. Maybe.

If it’s even a workable idea, and not utter insanity.

A chance for something other than just going to the Titan and hoping for the best, though, she
thinks.

“What is it?” Pride asks her.

She looks up into his face. Opens her mouth and closes it again, and then shakes her head.

“I just… realized something,” she says. “But it is alright. I was not thinking clearly. Still. The
sooner we leave, the better, by far. Mythal’s health is at stake, after all.”

Pride opens his mouth to reply; but a moment later, there is a knock on the door.

All three of them freeze, and she finds herself thinking that they really need to stop doing that. It’s
pretty conspicuous, and very adeptly telegraphs that they’re all keeping at least one fairly large
secret between them. At the very least, though, no one’s there to actually see them do it that time.

Curiosity recovers first, and opens the door.

“What?” she asks. Not quite impatiently, but not precisely in welcoming tones, either.

Tarensa stares at the three of them. Her eyebrows edge up, just the tiniest bit.

“Manners, Curiosity,” she chides. “Mythal wishes to see the construct.”

The high-ranking elf’s gaze move towards her, then – and towards the hand she’s still got on Pride.
She lets him go, but only folds her arms and moves in front of him a bit. Tarensa has, at least,
proven less prone to casual violence than Thenvunin, but not precisely on any philosophical high
ground, either.

“Alone?” she asks.

“Alone,” Tarensa confirms. “Pride, you can clear the bottles someone has thrown into the
communal room’s hearth out of the way, and then retire for the night. You as well, Curiosity. You
looked like death turned over this morning. Do not stay up reading until your eyes fall out of your
head, or doing any other such... distracting activity.”

The look Tarensa shoots Pride is very particularly sour, then. But a moment later the woman only turns and heads down the hall, confident that orders have been conveyed and that they will, in turn, be obeyed.

There’s a bit of an awkward moment.

“Do you suppose she thinks we are all having sex with one another?” Curiosity asks.

“I am certain she has not discounted the possibility,” Pride replies, colouring just a bit, but also looking more resigned than anything else. He glances towards her. “I will wait outside Mythal’s chambers for you. If she asks you to agree to any bargains, come and speak to me before you do.”

That’s... a reasonable concession, she decides. Given that if their positions were reversed, she’d probably insist on following him in there anyway. Or at least try to. But it does stand to reason, at least, that Mythal probably won’t be just killing her or anything at this point in the proceedings.

“I suppose I will go and clean the bottles out of the hearth, then,” Curiosity offers.

“Thank you,” Pride says.

His thanks are accepted with a nod, and the three of them slip back out into the quiet guest chambers.

Mythal’s rooms are much the same as she recalls them. Peaceful, and serene; a very pointed oasis in the palace. The evanuris in her bed looks regal, and like a romantic painting of an invalid. Her hair tumbling loose around her shoulders, the bed sheets flowing like water around the pale layers of her night clothes. But, if anything else, Lady Mythal also looks a little bit bored.

She’s becoming convinced that boredom and ancient elven leaders are the worst possible of combinations.

But she almost retracts that sentiment when Mythal’s gaze drifts towards the pouch at her belt.

Despite the quiet in the air, everything in the room seems to somehow shriek to a sudden halt. Nothing actually freezes in place, but she can feel everything stop, just for a moment. She’s taken by an overwhelming temptation to put her hand over the small pouch, and somehow separate it from the evanuris’ stare.

“What is it?” she asks, instead.

Mythal’s face turns towards her before her eyes do. As if the hidden little fragment has somehow drawn her gaze. But even she, who first found it, can’t somehow see it through the thin layers of fabric it’s being held in.

“...Nothing of much importance, I suppose,” the evanuris decides, at length. Their gazes lock, and it seems there are a lot of things that neither of them are saying; and a lot of factors, now, that both of them are wondering about. For half a second, she’s almost tempted to mention them. To make an offering from her own end, because if Mythal knows... if she can tell her more about this part of the world’s mysteries...

But that’s perhaps more trust than she can afford to extend.

And maybe it’s just a strange coincidence, after all. Maybe Mythal only knows there’s something.
Maybe it wouldn’t change anything.
Maybe it would get her killed.
Or Mythal killed.
Both would be pretty inconvenient right now.

“What did you want to see me for?” she asks.

There is another pause, long enough to make her wonder if she’s going to get an answer or not.

“You will be leaving tomorrow,” Mythal says. “Along with whomever Andruil sees fit to send with you. I had thought to send Tarensa. But now I think I shall send Thenvunin, instead. He placed quite well in the day’s proceedings, as I understand it.”

Oh, joy.

“Perhaps you might want to keep him here, then, to keep on doing a credit to your name,” she suggests.

Mythal offers her a tight smile.

“Thenvunin’s loyalties are not so conflicted as those of others. I am entrusting my daughter’s life to you, after all. There may come a point in time where that might seem like more of an inconvenience than it is worth. I am well aware that Andruil is not always the most personable soul.”

She frowns.

“Out of curiosity, how does her ‘personability’ compare to her siblings?” she wonders.

“It is a poor mother who compares her children in such ways,” Mythal replies. “Your life has been brief. You do not know what hungers you have glimpsed. What trials the long road of existence holds, and how they wear, and what it costs to reach for glory.”

“Reach for it?” she wonders. “Or run it down and tear it out of the Dreaming?”

Mythal pauses. Her expression is inscrutable.

“My daughter has been telling tales over dinner,” the evanuris surmises.

All at once, then, she thinks of Compassion. She thinks of Pride. She thinks of Cole, and she’s angry. Her fist closes at her side. She breathes in slowly, and stares down Mythal. And she thinks of Solas, too. She thinks of his mistakes, and all the blood on his hands, and of Fortitude’s efforts to make her somehow see this woman in front of her. Who helped trap a spirit, who encouraged Pride to take on a physical form, who destroyed Compassion just to get at the knowledge it held.

“Do you even know what you are doing anymore?” she asks.

Mythal tilts her head, just slightly.

“Do you?” the evanuris returns.

No, she thinks. But then, she never really has.
After another long moment of silence extends between them, she turns, and heads back out through the door. Mythal makes no protest or move to stop her. The handle opens easily at a touch, and she heads back into the corridor.

Pride is waiting, just as he said he would be.

They are both mostly quiet as they retreat to his room again. The communal hall is empty, and Curiosity’s door is closed when they pass it. She watches Pride walk through the shadows of the corridor, and stares at features lit by the soft ambiance of his room’s lighting, and when the door closes behind her she reaches up and takes his face between her hands. She pulls him in for a kiss.

Her heart beats at her ribs as she slides one hand into his hair, and his own arms come around her. His mouth is warm and intoxicating enough that for a few minutes she forgets everything else. The strange fragment at her belt. The dark eyes of the huntress at dinner. The long, twisting games of immortals, and Mythal, and even the Blight lingering inside of him. Beating through his heart.

But only for a few minutes.

She pulls back and presses a softer, sweeter kiss to him, and brings her hands down to his chest.

“I love you,” she tells him.

His expression turns concerned.

“What did Mythal say?” he wonders.

“Not much. Only that we are leaving tomorrow, and Thenvunin will be coming with us,” she explains.

“That is quite a hurry,” Pride notes. “And I am surprised she would choose Thenvunin, and not Tarensa. Thenvunin is loyal to her, of course, but Tarensa is even more reputable on that front. Though he does defer to rank, in most situations. Perhaps she knows something of who Andruil will be sending with us. Perhaps she worries that Tarensa might side with her own servants against Andruil’s, to the huntress’ detriment.”

“I would rather we had neither of them,” she asserts.

Pride can only sigh in agreement, it seems.

Then he leans forward, and steals another kiss. He trails his lips across her jaw, soft and gentle, and then down her neck. She lets out a breath of her own and leans into him. Another long and busy day waits for them tomorrow. But this warmth eases some of the aches in her. In both of them, she hopes. She slides her hands up his chest, and towards his collar, and starts gingerly trying her luck with the fastenings there. They’re simple enough, at least. His own hands slip down to her waist as he keeps on kissing her, but when he reaches for the edge of her tunic and brushes over her belt, she remembers the fragment in the pouch again.

She stalls, and then pulls back a bit.

“I should show what I found,” she says.
Pride blinks, but obligingly changes gears as she reaches down and unhooks the pouch at her belt, and opens it.

“Do not touch it,” she advises, holding it under the light.

He looks down.

“There is nothing in it,” he notes, perplexed.

She follows his gaze, and easily sees the tiny, dark fragment she’d put there, though. She thinks she’d know if it had vanished, somehow. If someone had stolen it or if it had fallen out, or anything like that. Regardless, it’s still there. Looking up at Pride again, though, she can tell he isn’t lying or overlooking any small detail.

“Alright,” she says, quietly, and braces herself – for what, she doesn’t know – before tilting the pouch, and dropping the fragment into her palm.

At first, it doesn’t seem as though anything changes. Pride blinks, and frowns, and squints for a moment before his face clears a bit.

“A bit of… bone?” he asks.

But she’s not giving him her full attention by then. His words sound far-off and detached.

In the uneven light of the room, she can see a shadow behind him. She can’t see its source. But painted up the wall, long and looming, is the outline of a large wolf at Pride’s back. The shadow splits, muzzle opening to reveal the pointed tips of canine teeth, and a long, twisting grin.

She grabs Pride with her free hand and pulls him away, just as something moves in her peripheral vision. She hears the panting of a breath. The click of claws atop the smooth surface of the floor. It feels like she’s being laughed at as she brings him close, and sees that the room behind him is empty. The shadow on the wall looks like the outline of the bedposts instead.

Something brushes up against the backs of her legs.

She drops the bone fragment swiftly back into the pouch.

“What’s the matter?” Pride wonders, looking sharply around the room.

She sucks in a breath, and then shakes her head. After a moment, she lowers the pouch onto the nearest table surface, and then reaches over and pulls him close again. She brings her lips up towards his ear.

“If I touch it, I see the wolf,” she says. “And I feel… strange.”

Pride’s grip tightens around her.

He takes in a deep breath, and lets it out again.

“Do not touch it, then,” he advises.

*At least not again tonight,* she reasons. Though what her dreams will be like remains to be seen.

She hangs on to Pride a few moments longer, and he obliges her. She wonders what would happen if she were to strike out at the wolf while holding that fragment. Nothing good, probably. And then she wonders what would happen if she tossed that piece of skull into a fireplace somewhere.
Maybe threw it in among all the cooking bones in Andruil’s dining hall.

Again, probably nothing good.

She doesn’t know if it’s still a tempting thought, or a worrying one. Or both.

Most tempting of all, she thinks, is the option of not thinking about it. But then she imagines golden eyes, watching her in a forest. Staring at her from the shadows of a sickbed. Catching her gaze from the head of a hall.

Golden eyes.

And her own eyes, which were inferior to the purpose that stray wolf needed her for.

She is taken by a brief moment of fear, that shoots straight down through her. Letting go of Pride, she heads for the nearest mirror – angled against one of the corners of the room – and stares at her reflection in it. Stares at her eyes.

But after a few minutes, she lets out a breath.

They look the same as they ever do.

And then in the reflection of the mirror, she sees Pride reach over, and pluck the fragment’s pouch up off of the table.

She whirls around, a protest flying out of her mouth even as he unhesitatingly opens the top of it, and dumps the blackened bit of bone into his own hand.

Cold terror washes straight through her.

She’s moving towards him, even as he looks over at her. He frowns, and squints, and stares at the outline of her shadow. His brows furrow and his lips thin in frustration, his fist closing around the fragment as she reaches him, and grabs his wrist.

“Whatever you are, if you hurt her, I will find a way to hurt you back a thousandfold,” he promises the dark shapes of the room.

Then she gets his hand open. But he stalls her before she can take the fragment from him, and instead drops it back into the pouch himself.

“What were you thinking?” she demands. “You cannot be near that thing!”

Her hands fist into his shirt, but his own eyes are fierce as he looks at her.

“And you can?” he counters. “I have seen what wolves do to you, my heart. I have already told you I will not be party to it happening again. And I will not let some other wolf – whatever fashion of wolf it may be – hurt you, either. If it is a spirit, if it is some echo of another version of myself. If it is Fen’Harel himself from old folk tales and lore, I do not care. I will not let more pieces be torn from you. I will not let more unfair demands be made of you.”

She lets out a curse, and then yanks him fully into her arms, and clutches him.

“You stay away from it. I made the bargain, I will deal with consequences,” she snaps.

Pride’s lips settle against the top of her head.
“No,” he says.

With another curse, she makes herself let him go. She reaches out and sweeps up the fragment’s pouch, and marches towards the door.

“If you will not stay away from it then I will keep you away from it,” she declares.

“Heart,” Pride says.

She stops, her hand halfway to the door handle.

“What would you do, if it were me?” he asks her.

Her fingers tremble a bit. There is a deep, sinking pit in her chest, where all her fear has seemed to settle. And there’s a prickling warmth in the corner of her eyes, too, biting at the edges of everything. Frustration and worry so thick, she almost wants to change her mind about what to say to Mythal. To go marching back into the evanuris’ bedchamber, and just offer her what she knows in the hopes that it will get her some answer, some safeguard, in return.

But she doubts it wouldn’t just make things worse, in the end.

“You are already sick,” she says, quietly. “I can hardly stand it. Please, my heart. I need you safe.”

Pride’s steps are quiet, as he comes up behind her, and closes a tentative hand onto her shoulder.

“We will keep each other safe,” he says.

She sags, just a bit.

Gently, he takes her free hand, and coaxes her away from the door. After a few moments of silent conversation, made mostly by way of eye-contact and a few nods, she shoves the pouch into her pack, and puts the pack behind the room’s wardrobe. She and Pride undress quietly, keeping more to themselves until they fall into bed. Then it seems a bridge to far not to tangle themselves into each other’s arms.

She falls asleep with Pride’s ear pressed to her heartbeat.

And her dreams steal her away.

Chapter End Notes

Few days later than I planned, but it’s here! Thanks for all the continued support, you guys! <3
She’s not really surprised when her dreams turn strange.

Mostly she’s expecting to open her eyes and find herself in that forest again. The russet wolf waiting for her, or lurking just beyond the fringes of her perception. The thick-trunked trees fencing the edge of the world, the same way they’ve begun to encroach on her waking thoughts. She’s expecting to breath in the scent of cut fir boughs and deep, rain-soaked soil.

She is not expecting to see the ruins. When she opens her eyes, she’s surprised.

The sense of wind on her face. Little bits of grit brushing against her cheeks. She draws in a breath, and her lungs ache a bit, as if she’s just finished running from something. The sky overheard turns and churns like a frothing sea, sunset clouds boiling at the fringes of a sickly sun. Shattered walls and crumbled outbuildings surround her. Cracked flagstones spread beneath her feet. The rubble in the distance is difficult to make sense of it. It feels like she’s standing in the ruins of a fortress, but the collapses framework of the main building looks unlike any architecture, or even mixing of architecture, that she’s familiar with. The sunlight feels hot against her skin.

She takes a step forward, and debris crunches beneath her feet. The Fade stretches beyond the ruins. More clearly than she can ever recall seeing the landscape beyond a dream, in fact. Rivers of light stretch through the sky, and distant shapes and visions are outlined like far-flung cities and mountain ranges and bizarre countries in the distance. Shifting, every so often, as they reshape themselves. Trees of light climb up towards the sky, as big as towers. Spirits whirl and wind their way around them. At this distance, they look like fireflies. Silvery pools of light rest like distant lakes and oceans.

She can’t help but stare. Marvelling a bit, even. Most of the time trying to look far past any given point in the Fade just yields blurry shapes; a sense of space beyond immediate interest, or, as in her time, a distant green fog. But beyond the ruin now, her eyes see the shape of it all in vivid thoroughness. No fog. No hazy, distant perception. She sees more clearly than she usually can when she’s awake, in fact. As she stares at an outline in the distance, the shape of it resolves more and more, until it becomes the cracked peak of a fiery volcano; spilling lava that turns to fiery rain, and then motes of light that drift down into the dream of a city marketplace.

When she finally tears her gaze away, she looks for Pride. In her mind as much as in her surroundings. Her heart beats a little faster, and she feels dizzy for a moment. But the surroundings don’t change, and he doesn’t suddenly appear. The ruin persists around her. No new pathways open up.

“Pride?” she tries calling.

Silence.
The wind whirls in small eddies around the broken earth at her feet.

She takes a few more steps forward, trying to make sense of her surroundings. Gradually, a sound does reach her ears. It’s not an answering voice, though. It’s more musical than that. The distant ringing of chimes, she thinks. It puts her in mind of old forest shrines, well-tended by passing clans and their own keeper. She moves further into the ruin, passing shattered pillars, and torn tapestries, and filmy, broken glass. Something that looks like it might have once been a great, circular light structure lies in pieces on an open patch of ground, half-shaded by the remnants of a decimated ceiling. It glitters, and gleams, just a bit. Small fragments still shining barely enough to catch the sunlight.

The source of the sounds lies beyond it. A slanted pillar crumbles against a wall it has nearly taken down. From a window in the wall, a set of chimes hang. Half of them lie broken on the ground. The rest dangle from the warped outline of a crescent moon, tarnished and fractured, but still whole enough to fill the air with the faint sounds of ringing.

“This is a strange place.”

The voice drifts up from behind her. But it’s familiar, at least.

She turns, and there’s Fortitude, standing just at the other side of the chamber. The spirit looks strange in its own turn, she thinks. More solid than she’s ever seen it in either the Fade or the waking world. The light from the cracks in its elf-like form remind her of the streams of lava she had just seen pouring down the dream volcano in the distance, except, of course, that they’re gold. Its features seem sharper than when last she saw it.

She thinks it must be her perception. But even Fortitude seems aware of a change, as it lifts its hands up, and flexes its fingers, and casts its own gaze over itself.

“I am not sure it is safe for you here,” she says, worried over the possible implications of this place, and a spirit’s presence in it.

“Perhaps not,” Fortitude agrees. “You were difficult to reach. I had to follow the traces of myself in the weapons I gave you.”

“Do you know where we are?” she wonders.

“We are in the Dreaming,” the spirit confirms. “But not near to where you should be. I do not think this place corresponds to anything I know in the waking world, either. You have wandered very far.”

“I just fell asleep,” she admits. Then she shakes her head, and thinks of Fortune, and the russet wolf’s taste for spirits. “You should go.”

Fortitude tilts its head, and contemplates that idea a little bit.

“I would rather stay, for now. It may be dangerous, but it is not yet dire, and I am not certain the danger to myself is greater than the danger to you,” the spirit decides. Its tone makes it pretty clear that she’s not going be talking it out of that idea any time soon. Unless things actually do become conspicuously more perilous.

Probably the wisest thing to do, then, would be to find a way to leave, and take Fortitude with her.

She glances back towards the tarnished chimes, and their warped moon decorations, before she turns away and heads for her spirit friend.
“I want to try and find Pride,” she says.

Fortitude accepts this sentiment easily. It’s… admittedly, not an unusual one for her.

The ruins around them turn more sparse at the edges, further from the main building. Cracked crumbled outbuildings give way to external walls and monuments that have not, it seems, fared much better, in their dreamy landscape. There are no plants, no fountains or statues, nothing except for dirt and dust and broken walls, until they reach the edges of the area, and discover – unsurprisingly, for the Fade – that the ruins are on an island, of sorts.

She peers down from the edges of it, and has to take a step back, and draw a breath to ground herself. Beneath the windswept, barren dirt at her feet, silvery clouds drift above yet more layers of dreams. It’s like having the world’s most elaborate map laid out below. Forests waver, the trees rustling as if from the wind, before transforming in the climbing waves of an ocean. Water crashes over white stone buildings and snowy mountain caps, and washes away the scenery. Blue depth are shadowed by the distant, deep form of large creatures – spirits, perhaps – that turn and vanish, at last going further than her eyes can see. The waters below turn to fire, which recedes until it shines like the lights of a great city. Like Arlathan; like the lanterns of Minrathous, burning through the night.

It’s dizzying. There’s a part of her that feels like she’s very close to tumbling off towards it, and there’s nothing nearby for her to cling to. It’s all dreams. She doesn’t even know if there would be a consequence to falling; though she thinks, she feels, like there must be.

A consequence worse than waking up in a cold sweat, anyway.

“Do you see this?” she asks Fortitude.

“The Dreaming?” Fortitude asks back.

“The – the lights, and the cities, and all of it changing. It was a forest a minute ago. Or, that part was, anyway,” she explains. “If I look too closely, I focus in too much.”

“What did you see before, when you looked into the distance of dreams?” Fortitude wonders.

“Nothing. Or, well, not nothing. But not this,” she admits.

“I did not realize it was so different for those with bodies,” the spirit muses. “The horizon is less strange to me than our immediate surroundings. The air here is wrong. It is almost like being in the waking world. And yet it is unlike it, too. It is difficult to describe.”

*Difficult to describe* is a good summation of a lot of this experience, she thinks.

After a moment she tears her gaze away from the distance, and turns it to the soil at her feet instead. Or tries to. It’s distressingly difficult. After a few moments, Fortitude closes a hand around her forearm, and firmly tugs her back. It helps. The sensation of their grip is grounding, even if it is keenly.

“Can you wake me up?” she wonders.

“The connection to your sleeping mind is strange. That is why I had such difficulties finding you, in part,” Fortitude admits. “It is like you are here. And yet, you are obviously sleeping.”

“I am not physically here,” she denies. She’s been *physically* in the Fade before. She knows what it feels like. The disorientation, the strangeness, the perpetual, humming nausea at the back of her
skull. The itch on her skin, as if she has brushed too close to something unfriendly to flesh. Almost a burn. The stifling air, that isn’t quite air at all; that tastes oddly electric on the back of her tongue, and comes to hot and thick and reluctant to her lungs.

This isn’t like that. It is, if anything, almost the opposite. There’s not disconnect, no pain. There’s too much clarity and ease. She takes in another breath, until she feels that ever-so-slight ache in her lungs, and wonders.

Her gaze focuses on the ruins, and scans them again.

There are no wolf-shaped shadows.

“Do you recognize anything at all about this place?” she asks Fortitude.

The spirit blinks at her, and then nods. Turning a bit, it gestures towards a nearby pillar, where a few of the remaining stones have been decoratively carved. Most are worn down beyond easy recognition, even so. But on a few the simple outlines of various lunar shapes remain.

“Those symbols are old. They are on shrines, in places. They denote the ancient goddess for which Mythal named herself,” Fortitude explains.

Like the shrine at the Well of Sorrows, she thinks. Where she showed Pride her memories.

“Do you know much about that goddess?” she wonders, and hesitates only a moment, before she begins moving further into the ruins again. There’s still no clear way out. Well, apart from jumping. But perhaps there are easier routes yet to be found.

“No,” Fortitude admits. “When I was Valour, I knew tales of the glory and greatness of battle. But their meaning was lost to me when I became Rage, and saw only the lie in my own nature.” The spirit follows after her, and she notices for the first time that its steps are making a sound. Light, airy taps, where they fall in beside hers.

“Haninan told me that the old gods were like folkloric heroes,” she says. Those who rose up to impede the Keepers who had become tyrants. Spirits who had taken on bodies themselves, but not the shapes of dragons. Other forms. Like elves.

Or… wolves, perhaps.

Their steps lead them back towards the crumbling pillar, and the window, and the gentle ringing of the chimes. Which sway and sound even when there’s no wind against them, it seems. Again, her gaze is caught by them. Not quite in the same way that the distant landscape can arrest her attention, dragging it down into the surreal twists and turns of a place her mind can only barely seem to grasp even at the best of times. But more like the tiny skull fragment, lodged in Andruil’s wall.

“I think you should go now, Fortitude,” she says, carefully.

“I do not perceive any new threats,” the spirit replies.

“Perhaps not. But I think I am going to do something, and I would rather not discover the hard way whether it will have any negative repercussions on you,” she replies. Tearing her gaze away from the chimes, she looks towards her friend. The spirit’s solemn gaze meets her own, steady and unafraid. But not foolishly bold or insistent, either.

“Go,” she asks, again.
“As you wish,” Fortitude concedes. It tilts its head towards her, and though it takes a moment, gradually the spirit twists into light. Rather than the usual come-and-go vanishing she has come to expect, she can see it turn into a trail of sparks, that blink through the air, and then slide into it like an opened doorway. It’s a strange sight. It twists her thoughts, just a little, trying to perceive what’s really going on. But then a moment later, Fortitude has successfully left.

She shakes her head, as if to clear the spots from her eyes. Even though there are none. And then she turns back towards the chimes.

Still gently ringing, far clearer than anything that broken and warped has any business sounding.

Reaching out, she traces her fingers over the shape of the ruined moon.

Almost as soon as her touch lands upon it, the air around her snaps. The light level drops, as if from day to night. A dark, torchlit night, with no stars to see by. Just the glow of embers, all around, and heat at her back, and distant cries that make her feel as though she’s standing at the end of the world again. Only for an instant. The world on the other side of the window goes pitch black, and something snarls. The moon chimes catch the light, and so do a sudden set of bone-white teeth. Before she can even think of retracting her hand, he feels hot, angry breath on her palm, and something lunges forwards. Crashing through the window, sending the chimes screeching as they are displaced by the surging outline of a skull.

Her arm burns as it’s suddenly caught in the jaws of a beast. A wolf. Golden eyes glittering and teeth sinking into her flesh, digging deep. She flails a fist against its skull with her free hand, and tries to reach for her blade. Her limb burns in agony, as if the wolf’s saliva is acid, stripping the flesh from her bones.

She screams.

She lifts a hand, giving up on the sword to claw at one of the beast’s eyes; only to find her wrist sinking past the golden glare, and into the sockets of an empty skull.

And then all at once, the creature lets her go.

She tumbles over, thrown badly off-balance. Her back crashes into the floor, as she clutches her bloodied arm to herself.

The light is bright again.

Her lungs burn.

The wind chimes are dashed upon the windowsill.

Mustn’t touch the wrong things, a lyrical, mocking voice sings in her head; sounding quite a bit like her own.

She sucks in several rapid, frantic breaths, trying desperately to regain her equilibrium. Her gaze drifts down towards her arm. The torn fabric and flesh, the scent of blood nauseatingly thick. Her fingers twitch and pain lances through her.

She cries out again as she wakes up.
There’s an awkward moment where her pained shout escapes her and her awareness shifts from sleeping to waking. A lurching moment, as she goes from lying in the ruins to lying in bed, but the lancing pain in her arm persists. The lights shift and her stomach twists, and she feels disoriented. Like someone’s just rolled her down a hill. The scent of blood remains overwhelming, as she sucks in a ragged breath.

And then, at once, she’s awash in light.

Pride curses and grasps her, spilling healing magic over her as he reaches for her wounded arm. His eyes are wide and frantic, edged with the lingering sleep from his own rude awakening. Her left arm is covered in gashes and gouges, blood pooling over the sheets, and for one disoriented moment she’s afraid that it’s Pride’s blood, too. But he’s not hurt, she sees. He’s not hurt. It’s just her arm.

He staunches the blood, pressing down hard enough to add to the pain, and might bite back another cry. Then the magic does its job, slowly, and the wounds start to close. Her flesh tingles with it. She’s holding his arm, she gradually realizes. Holding him as he stares intently at her injuries, dishevelled and taught with alarm.

The wounds close.

He’s getting better at that, she thinks. The pain recedes, the venom-like burn of it faltering into the rush of his magic. For a few moments they’re both silent, as he fixes her wounds and she sucks in ragged breaths, blinking her way past the sensation. Her disorientation fades. Bit by bit, she comes back to herself in the warm solidity of the guest quarters, in Andruil’s palace, in Pride’s arms.

“Shit,” she murmurs, sucking in a long breath through her teeth.

“What happened?” Pride asks, helping her up. Together they look over her arm. His hand rests at her shoulder, and his gaze takes in the room again, before he helps her clear up some of the blood. She’s fairly certain he got all of her injuries, though.

Her heart’s racing.

She takes a moment, shaking her head.

“I was in another strange part of the Dreaming,” she admits.

“Did that wolf do this?” Pride demands.

She would put good money on that.

“I am not certain,” is what she says, though, because Pride doesn’t need further encouragement to keep challenging mysterious and nebulously powerful wolves to come and fight him. She presses a few experimental touches to her regrown skin. Her arm aches, horribly, but that’s only to be expected.

Pride’s scowl intensifies. One of his fists tightens around a nearby edge of the bloodstained sheets, trembling in anger and obvious frustration.

“It was not the forest again,” she says, “I was in a ruin. Fortitude was there, for a while. But it was strange. I could see parts of the Dreaming that I have not seen before. Or, at least, in a way I could not see them before. Fortitude did not seem to think it was strange to see things that way, but it felt
She considers the matter, as her thoughts settle further and adjust to the latest batch of trouble.

Pride was a spirit once, after all.

“How do spirits see the Dreaming very differently from how the rest of us do?” she wonders.

Pride’s expression shifts, slightly, as some of his worry gives way to a different flavour of unhappiness. She almost regrets asking. But after a moment, he nods.

“Yes. Though I do not recall it well enough to offer any specifics. The first shift in perceptions is significant enough for most to recall that it happens, even if they cannot recall precisely what has changed,” he explains. “I know I perceived it differently before, though.”

But *how* differently, she wonders? Did Fortitude see things the exact same way that she had, or did it simply see more?

As if summoned by the question itself – which she might suspect, if it were Curiosity and not itself – Fortitude arrives. It slips into the room, gliding as if from the walls. The shape of it is much more like what she’s grown accustomed to. There-but-not-quite, a little hazy at the edges. Still well-defined, and *present*, but not like a statue carved out of magic anymore.

“You ran into trouble,” Fortitude surmises, glancing at the blood still fading from the bedspread, and sticking to some parts of her arm, and the corner of her elbow.

“Should you be here?” Pride asks it, uncertainly. “Hunting grounds are not always the kindliest of places to spirits.”

“Or others,” Fortitude agrees. “There is struggle here. Claws and teeth and blades that spill blood upon hungry floors. The lady of this palace admires resilience only when it snaps between her jaws. But that is why I came. I wish to help.”

“Getting caught in these machinations will help no one,” Pride says. “You must be careful. Though I suppose you know that well enough.”

Fortitude inclines its head.

Pride turns his attention back towards her.

“What happened?” he asks again.

She sighs.

“Fortitude found me in a dream of a ruin,” she explains. “I could see things in the distance of the Dreaming, though. Beyond the dream we were in, I mean. It was like... all these things, constantly moving and reshaping themselves and crashing into one another. A landscape made out of impossible pieces. There were these trees, and these... massive spirits, I think. Above and below. Every time I looked at something, it drew me in. I could see more and more parts of it. I stared at a volcano and at first it was like a distant rock, and then it was as though it magnified, and I could see all the smaller parts of it. Until it exploded. That sort of thing.”

Pride looks intrigued, despite himself.

Fortitude blinks, and tilts its head.
“That sounds as it should be, and as more than it should be. The Dreaming looks to me as you describe, and yet it is not so vivid. Though perhaps that is because spirits are accustomed to it,” it reasons.

Pride looks like he has dozens of questions about that, so she’s a little surprised – and a little disappointed that the distraction has failed – when he redirects the conversation back to the matter at hand.

“And what attacked you?” he wonders.

She glances at Fortitude.

“We explored the ruin. I was not certain where you were. I wanted to find you. But we could not discover an easy way for me to leave. Most of the ruin was just rocks and dust, but there was a set of chimes. With a moon on them. I had a strange feeling about them, so I told Fortitude to leave, and I touched them. And someone bit me,” she explains.

Pride stares at her.

“You told Fortitude to leave. You knew it was dangerous,” he reasons.

“I did not know it was dangerous to me,” she replies. “But if the same wolf that killed Fortune should have made an appearance, I did not want to see what it might do to another spirit.”

“What it did to you was nearly as bad,” Pride says, tense and angry.

And she knows she would be angry, too, if their roles were reversed. She knows, that horrible, angry sort of helplessness, because she feels it, too. In the whisper of the Blight beneath his skin. In the weight of dreams, like the ones another wolf had caught him in.

They are practically making their own pack, at this point.

A pack of Dread Wolves.

But even so.

“I do not know for certain what attacked me,” she says. “I do not even know for certain what that wolf is. Though, I have the obvious suspicion.”

When she was a child, once, one of the less tolerant hahrens had grown tired of some of the children making too much noise during one of the clan’s relocations. He had gathered all the children around for stories, one evening, and he had told them that such racket would attract Fen’Harel. That his wolf’s ears could hear the sharp, high-pitched shrieks and laughter of playing little ones. But that also saying his name aloud would get his attention, too. That even if he was deep in the Fade, and clear on the other side of the world, if a child shrieked too much, or whined too much, or called his name, he would come in the night and swallow them up.

Needless to say, the parents and other elders in the camp had not been terribly impressed with him, as many of the children had left the story with shaky new fears and nightmares to show for it. She had not been one of them herself, though. Some part of her had been curious to see what the Dread Wolf might look like.

Well. She is grown now. She knows the countenance of monstrous wolves, and other frightening creatures besides. And this wolf has her scent, regardless of what she says.
Even so. For a moment, she hesitates.

“You think it is Fen’Harel,” Pride surmises, thoughtfully. “The first Fen’Harel. The one from the old tales?”

“Could it be?” she wonders.

He lets out a long breath.

“Before all of this, I would have said no,” he decides. “Those tales are just that – tales. Every war needs its heroes, and heroes need their legends. I would have supposed that there was some truth to it, but that in the end, the figures recounted were no different from the Keepers or from other particularly ancient and powerful Dreaming-born elves. There is strength in belief.”

He pauses.

“Mythal once told me it was a sign, that I favoured the form of a wolf. She said it made her more certain of her faith in me,” he says, considering. “She never believed in the old gods, though. That is what she told me. They were figures of aspiration. Fitting symbols for the leaders of the people to fashion themselves after. Belief in them would feed belief in the guidance of those who strove to be like them. It is a strategy. But that sort of thing only works upon the supposition that the figures who might have taken up such mantles in the past were doing the same thing. Or if they are long gone, beyond chance of returning. But if they are real…” he pauses.

She gives him a moment, wondering where he’s going with this. She has an inkling.

She doesn’t think she’ll like it.

A memory flits up to the surface of her thoughts. Running through the forests, in dreams. A mantle on her head. Shadowy hunters chasing after wolves.

Pride stands up, and heads over to the desk in the room. She and Fortitude both watch as he snatches up a piece of parchment, and begins writing things down upon it.

“There are nine figures in the old stories,” he says. “Though only a few of them have names. There is Mythal, and Fen’Harel. Falon’Din, Andruil, and Sylaise. Then there is the Son of the Sun, the patriarchal figure, which would be Elgar’nann. The secret-keeper and retainer of forgotten things. Dirthamen is the only child of Mythal’s not to bear the name of a folkloric figure, but even so, he is named for knowledge and secrets, and that is his purview among the leaders. June and Ghilan’nain both married into Mythal’s family, but Ghilan’nain took on a name suitable the role of the ancient guides when she married Andruil. Not that she is much of a guide. She and June are the least neatly packed into their role, but they fit by way of association. So the only seat left unoccupied is Fen’Harel’s. If the matter is symbolic, then that is hardly of much concern. Treachery and rebellion are not precisely traits one wishes to foster among their allies. But if these figures are like spirits – old, sleeping, powerful spirits – then…”

He trails off again.

Turning around, he looks at Fortitude. Then back at her.

“These associations would open a door for such beings to latch onto the bodies of those conflated with them. Does Mythal wish us to be possessed by these things?” he wonders, clearly aghast and uncertain. “Why do that to her own kin? It makes no sense.”

She thinks of gleaming, golden eyes.
Mythal’s eyes.
The russet wolf’s eyes.
Morrigan’s eyes.
Andruil’s eyes.

She thinks of Flemeth, speaking of treachery. *She was betrayed, as I was betrayed.* There’s something… but Pride’s right. It still doesn’t all fit together. She would kill to have Haninan with them, she thinks. She feels like she’s holding all of the pieces to a puzzle, but she just can’t figure out how they should be arranged. There are some missing, still. There’s some perspective they don’t have.

“Mythal does seem really set on Andruil not dying,” she says. “But is that because she loves her daughter, or because she doesn’t want the trouble of grooming another replacement huntress?”

It’s tempting, in many ways, to assume the worst of the evanuris sleeping further within the guest chambers.

“Mythal loves her children,” Fortitude says. “If she were to select some to sacrifice for a greater goal, it would not be those she cares most for. Nor herself. If her plan is what you suspect, then she has also positioned her own identity in the midst of it by taking on the mantle of an ancient goddess.”

*Why do their eyes look the same?* she wonders.

Well.

Maybe someone else will have an idea.

“The russet wolf has eyes like Mythal’s,” she says. “Not just gold, but a certain kind of gold. I do not know how to describe it properly. But it is more than the colour of them, though the colour is the same. It *feels* the same.”

“How so?” Pride wonders.

“It just – I cannot really explain. It was the same at dinner, though. With Andruil. You look into them and it is like… there is something there.” Morrigan had had the least of it, she thinks. Maybe because of the Veil. Or maybe because whatever trait it was that created the impression, she simply didn’t have as much of it.

“Where does Mythal come from?” she wonders.

“She and Elgar’nan were twin spirits, born from an ancient champion’s desire for Justice and Vengeance, back during the days when civilization was still sporadic and divided. The champion vowed to bring an end to the chaos of the world. She bid her spirit companions take on bodies to join her. But she died before her goals could be realized, in one of the bloodiest wars to ever wage between the old clans. Mythal took up her cause after she fell. She rallied what remained of their clan, and laid claim to the settlement that would become Arlathan,” Pride explains. “She is not the ancient goddess she named herself for,” he then adds.

Fair enough. If frustrating.

“Who was ‘Justice’ championing, then?” she wonders.
Pride shakes his head.

“Not much is known about her,” he admits. “Mythal and Elgar’nan do not speak of her, ostensibly for grief. Records from those times were not well-kept, either. Haninan might know more, or other elves of his age, but most are either dead or in eternal sleep. And even so, there were many clans, and many champions. Most of Mythal’s original people were wiped out in the subsequent fighting. Ancient spirits might know more. Although, with our luck, it would probably yield few insights at to her motives in all of this. If we are even looking at this the right way.”

Fortitude is quiet for a long moment.

“Compassion would know,” it says. “But it would not have offered such knowledge. There are old spirits within the Dreaming who might have insights they are willing to part with, however. I can seek them out.”

“You have faith in Mythal,” she recalls.

“Yes,” Fortitude confirms. “Mythal is not unlike you. You are not unlike Mythal. And yet there are differences. Should it come to it, I do not know which between you I would side with. I dislike this conflict. It would be better to see it resolved, clearly, in some way.”

“I am sorry to have conflicted your loyalties,” she says. And for a moment it feels like she’s speaking to both of the room’s other occupants.

Pride heads back towards the bed, and settles beside her again.

“Do not be,” Fortitude tells her, gazing at her steadily. “But understand. Things are not simple.”

They never are.

But she knows what it means, she suspects. Things are not simple, and so acting upon them – for good or ill – could have any number of consequences, when there are so many unknowns to deal with.

“Perhaps I should speak to Mythal again,” Pride suggests.

“Because that always turns out so well,” she replies. She’s too on edge for this, she thinks. They’re leaving in the morning, there’s a bit of Possibly Fen’Harel’s skull in her possession, Fortitude’s blatantly uncertain of whether or not it’s going to take their side in what seems to be some kind of inevitable conflict with Mythal, Pride is still poisoned, Haninan and Hildur are dealing with dwarf-hunting elves and Blighted lyrium, and she’s got a Titan to sort out and no idea what’s going on with her own body and/or debts related to its current state of functionality.

She can still feel phantom teeth biting into the arm that part of her brain stubbornly insists shouldn’t even be there in the first place.

Pride works an arm carefully around her.

“Perhaps if Fortitude can give us something more to work with, then we might be better off reserving such conversations for our return,” he acquiesces.

“I will not be far,” Fortitude promises. She’s kind of touched by the reassurance, even considering it might also double as ominous foreboding, under the circumstances. But she can’t bring herself to think of the spirit as an enemy. Not even really a potential enemy.
She still remembers a time when spirits seemed dangerous and unknowable. And maybe they still are, but they’re also really not, in so many ways.

“Be careful,” she asks.

Fortitude inclines its head, and then is gone.

She and Pride are both silent for a moment, in the wake of its departure. She leans against Pride, and wonders how late it is. How close they are to dawn, and if there’s any point in trying to sleep more. She wants to, and at the same time, she possibly never wants to sleep again. And yet, too, as time passes and she wakes up more and more, she finds she’s not really that tired. Despite the obvious interruption.

Pride looks a little worn, though.

She hopes that’s because of sleep deprivation and the sudden need to cast a flurry of healing spells, and not the other obvious culprit.

“You should get some rest,” she says.

He sighs.

He’s so warm beside her. She shifts around until she can hold him, and draw him back down onto the blankets; which have at least lost their bloodstains by now. He is soft and tired in her arms, as she gets him onto his pillow. He lifts a hand and trails his touch across her cheek. Runs his thumb over her lips, so gently that they tingle in the wake of his touch. She chases down the sensation by pressing them to his own.

Then she leans her forehead against his, and sighs.

“I wish I knew more,” she says.

“So do I,” he replies.

~

In the end, she doesn’t go back to sleep that night. Though Pride does, drifting off in her arms until the first morning light begins to stream in through the windows. She feels for the poison hiding in him, and runs her fingers gently across his scalp. When he wakes he checks her over, as if he has been afraid to have found her broken and bloodied again during the night. She wishes she could offer him more reassurance that it won’t happen again, or at least not so often, but it really is becoming a bad habit.

They are both of them quiet and consumed by their thoughts as they get ready. She wakes Curiosity and Pride goes and retrieves Thenvinun, who is up more promptly than their friend. Though Curiosity doesn’t voice any actual objections this morning, despite the obvious effort it takes her to peel away from her blankets and move, bleary-eyed, to get ready.

An unfamiliar but authoritative hunter comes and checks on them as they are still assembling themselves, and then leaves again almost as quickly. Thenvinun is quiet himself. She’d think he was nursing unhappiness over taking second place the other day, but she’s not sure she’d expect
his promise to lay off of Pride to hold up if his mood was really foul. Instead he seems nearly as quiet as the rest of them, swirling around in an emerald green ‘travel cloak’ that twists and curls in invisible winds and of its own accord. Which strikes her as a somewhat unpleasant trait for a cloak to have, especially when they emerge from the interior of the palace to find that heavy rains have kicked up again.

One of Andruil’s servants directs them towards the stables. Not the halla stables – she notes that with more disappointment than she would care to confess to – but a section of buildings just outside one of the courtyard gates. The beasts stalled in them are neither horses nor harts, and certainly not halla. They have sturdy legs covered in thick fur, in greys and browns and near-black tones, and almost put her in mind of oxen, but for their more slender shoulders and the curved beaks at the ends of their faces. She wouldn’t precisely call them attractive – which is a surprise, all things considered – but they seem to have very stable countenances.

Uthvir is waiting for them at these stables. The red hunter is dressed once again in their hood and mask, and is accompanied by Banathim, in her massive bear form, and a few other hunters she can’t put names to. They are securing the saddlebags onto one of the mounts, speaking sharply to a hunter who is saddling another, when their party arrives.

“I will be leading this excursion,” Uthvir says, their tone tight, if not a little clipped. “Not my lady’s party, mind you, but the whole of it. We are in Andruil’s lands and her law takes precedence. My duty is to see to it that we retrieve what is needed for the sake of her mother, and that no assets belonging to her are unavoidably damaged in the course of our pursuit. I am the one who is qualified to decide what counts as acceptable losses to this end. Given that you are here at the behest of the intended beneficiary of this endeavour, by implication, all of you are considered acceptable losses. So I suggest you do not cross me.”

The red hunter barely glances towards them as they proceed towards the next mount. Pride moves towards one, as well, and after a moment she follows him, helping him secure their own supplies onto the available steeds. She is little surprised to realize there are enough of the animals for everyone to ride. But then, she supposes, it would slow things down a lot if half the party had to walk.

ThENVUNIN takes exception to Uthvir’s little opening salvo.

“We may be in your lady’s lands, Uthvir, but Mythal actually values the lives of her subjects.”

“Of course she does. Lives are valuable,” Uthvir snaps back, sneering in their tone. The claws of their gauntlets graze a little too hard against the hide of the mount they are seeing to, and it jerks back, flinching in pain. They move away from it.

“And they are not yours to barter. I will decide when and if the lives of Mythal’s servants are to be spent for her,” ThENVUNIN insists, bristling with indignation.

“If you have a problem with this arrangement, ThENVUNIN, I suggest you go back inside and beseech your gentle lady to bequeath someone else your assignment,” Uthvir snaps back, dripping with derisiveness. The rain falling around them seems to sway away from them, as if something in their aura is snapping and snarling too. It makes her think of Andruil, standing the mists of the last storm as she presided over her tournament.

“If either of us is unfit for this task, I would venture to say it is you. We have not yet even set out, and already you are prepared to write off our lives. Are you that unassured of your own competence?” ThENVUNIN asks.
“Unlike you, you fool windbag, I actually know a thing or two about where we are going,” Uthvir sneers. “Now either go back and launch your complaints or shut up and get on your mount.”

So saying, then, the red hunter swings up onto the back of one of the beaked beasts, and proceeds to ignore all of Thenvunin’s subsequent complaints and blustering. Most of the hunters seem fairly ill at ease themselves, though Banathim, at least, seems amused. The bear is the only member of their party not to bother with a mount. One is brought along for her, regardless. Perhaps in case of emergency, or a particular need for haste. It carries their surplus provisions in the meantime, as Banathim keeps to her paws, and has no trouble holding pace with the rest of them.

Andruil doesn’t come to see them off. But she supposes that isn’t much of a surprise. If they succeed they’re only doing their expected duty, and if they fail, then they’ll probably be in a mess of trouble that actually will merit her attention.

Some quiet part of her mind that had been worried the evanuris might accompany them herself is eased, too, by her conspicuous absence.

The stables they leave by turn off into a wide road, that heads towards the mountains. The rain follows them as they ride. Though, at least, their mounts are apparently quite waterproof, and don’t smell much besides. The weight of them is odd, though. It takes some adjusting for her to get used to the shape of her beast’s back, and the plod of its steady gait. Around them the wilderness remains thick and abundant. The road is good, too, until it veers down towards the familiar gleam of a large eluvian.

Another road breaks off from it. This one is less elegantly paved, though it remains quite passable; packed earth framed by gnarled, rune-scrawled tree roots as they move along. The scent of nature grows ever thicker around them. Rain and bark, the mists of deep forests, and the rustle and cries of wild creatures. Banathim disappears a few times. Venturing off into the shadows between trees, and staying gone for some time, before returning. Sometimes still wiping blood from her muzzle.

Thenvunin curls his lip at it, and sets about trying to get Uthvir to ‘rein in the savagery’ of their fellow hunters.

Uthvir only snaps at him to shut up again, though.

The atmosphere is tense enough that it takes some time for conversations to fill the quiet. At length, though, the hunters begin to murmur among themselves. Pride glances at her, and seems to read her own preference towards quiet, before turning to talk to Curiosity about some of the plants and animals to be found in such parts of the world. She listens to the sound of her mounts split hooves plodding over the road, and the patter of raindrops striking the forest canopy, and their clothes. She watches the rain sink into the road, sliding through the surface without reducing it to mud, until they’ve been riding several hours. They take a brief break, cold and uncomfortable in its atmosphere, and then at last the packed earth grows more coarse, and the trail turns more narrow. The party splits to riding two-by-two in order to more easily fit.

Uthvir and Thenvunin take the front, and carry their foul moods with them as they do. Pride ends up next to Curiosity before any of them seem to realize the implications of how they’re being reordered, and by then it’s more fuss than anyone will allow them to change the order. Not that she minds it herself. She ends up bringing up the rear, watching her friends’ backs, with Banathim as her inconstant trail partner; and that suits her fine.

For the most part, her ride continues to be silent. She tries to track the path they’re using, and make sense of the wilderness around them. But wherever they are, the landscape is dramatically different enough from what it might be, in the future, that she can’t really place where they are. Not
Seheron, at least, she doesn’t think. Or the Arbor Wilds.

It makes her wonder, though, how really different the landscape is in this time. How much does land change, with thousands of years and plenty of magic involved in the process? And then the sudden absence of magic, too?

At one point Banathim vanishes again, and comes back a dead fawn clutched in her jaws. The bear glances towards her, and then rears up. Her mount doesn’t even startle as she is essentially handed the fresh kill.

“Hold onto that,” Banathim requests.

Slick blood flows onto her gloves. The fawn’s neck is cleanly broken. The meat will be tender enough, she supposes; though it’s always seemed a poor practice to her to kill such young creatures without a great need for it. They don’t even need to bolster their supplies. Not yet, anyway. There’s still plenty of fresh food for them to eat up before they’ll have to fall back on trail rations and hunting.

Still, she keeps her peace. Poor thing’s dead now, just the same. She twists around, and manages to secure it to the back of her mount.

“You are good at that,” Banathim notes.

“Thank you,” she says.

“Who taught you such things?”

She considers her answer carefully.

“No one in particular,” she admits, after a few moments. “I just picked it up.”

“You seem to have a lot of odd skills,” the bear says, lumbering along at an even pace with her mount. “Mythal’s people are not usually so diverse. Not unless she wishes them to serve some specific purpose. Most of them are nearly as decorative as Sylaise’s flock.”

She shrugs.

“Perhaps among her attendants and more immediate subjects, that is true. But there are always outlying settlements and more far-reaching places where there is a need for certain skills, no matter what a person’s individual inclinations are,” she reasons.

“Then I must wonder how a construct made of flesh came to be in such regions, and in a position to learn such things, regardless of their instruction, or need for them,” Banathim says, in her low, bear-ish voice.

“I am not in a position to divulge my past,” she settles on saying.

“Shame,” the bear decides. “I imagine it is an interesting story.”

“It is,” she cannot help but wryly confirm, at least.

But she’s still glad when that particular line of questioning ends, and they go back to their silent trek. Soon enough the road does indeed turn muddy and mucky under the rain. Their steeds plough on, uncomplaining despite the growing levels of sludge sticking to their legs. Another break is called when they clear the worse of the muck, and one of the hunters sets about washing down the
mounts’ legs, before they come upon rockier terrain. Then the procession has to turn single file in certain places, as they wend their way through paths that are framed by sheer drops towards tree tops that shoot up like spears, and steep upward climbs, and sharp descents. The trees seem to grow yet more massive as they venture deeper into the wilds.

Before evening, though, the rain does stop at least. A few birds venture out to make tentative calls. The light turns purple and fiery, and the sun dips low against the horizon, and the rushing sounds of a river reach her ears. They set up their evening camp not far from it.

She swings down from her mount quickly enough to help Pride off of his, rightly guessing at the degree of shakiness in his legs; and then they both help Curiosity, who, after hours of riding, nearly falls out of her saddle. The hunters fare better; and admittedly, Thenvunin does, too, handling his patient beaked-beast better than he had his halla.

That might be more to the credit of their mounts, though, she finds herself thinking, as her own doesn’t even startle when Banathim rears up to reclaim her slaughtered fawn.

“I do not like riding that much,” Curiosity decides.

“At least we are not camping in the rain,” she consoles.
Chapter Notes

This is a NSFW chapter! If you don't want to read sexual content, head on over to the edited SFW version in the series!

Setting camp among the small party of hunters, with ultimate authority lying in the hands of Uthvir and Thenvunin, feels a little like trying to figure out how to bed down in a field full of scorpions. It has her actually thinking fond thoughts of the expedition to the Deep Roads with Mythal’s people, back when Pride’s authority was intact.

She finds herself carefully sizing up the hunters, in between running around trying to help Pride meet Thenvunin’s particular demands about his tent and the layout of the camp, and other things which Uthvir doesn’t seem inclined to contradict him on. She finds herself sizing up Thenvunin, too, but she’s already seen him fight at his best, she suspects. Or as near to it as anyone can come in a tournament setting.

Banathim’s strong enough, of course. She hasn’t seen the bear do much magic yet, though. It would be dangerous to make assumptions about her abilities in that field, then. The other hunters she can recall placing well enough in the tournaments, here and there. And they seem to know their way around the wilderness much better than Mythal’s people ever did.

Uthvir’s the big mystery, she supposes. The looming, vaguely sinister question mark of the group.

The hunters get their tents up quick. Banathim disappears inside of hers, escaping the damp with her latest kill. Uthvir watches the bear cram itself into the entryway of the tent, and then sucks in a breath through their teeth, and glances over to where she’s gathering up firewood.

Even magical fires need something to eat, after all, unless anyone wants to expend the energy to keep them going by other means. She practices a little magic on the branches; staring at them a bit, and focusing, and trying to dry them out without catching them on fire in the process.

She combusts a fair few, but it’s still an easier job than trying to figure out how ancient elven tents are meant to work.

She sees Uthvir watching her, and moves a little further off, gathering some more branches. The hunter strides over. Points towards her, and snaps.

“Leave that task, doll,” they say. “I will be fetching us our supper, and I suspect I will be needing another set of hands for that.”

“I can help,” Pride immediately volunteers, looking up sharply from his work on the tent.

“I can, too!” Curiosity cheerfully suggests. “Me, pick me, please, I am having such an interesting time with hunting!”

Uthvir raises an eyebrow at the pair.

“As delightful as a hunting party of such enthusiastic companions may be, I would not dare draw
you away from your more pressing duties,” they say. “This will be quick, and dull. And since the doll knows how to handle a kill, she can help with the messy bits.”

So saying, then, the hunter makes a dismissive, shooing sort of gesture at her friends.

She catches Pride’s eye, and offers him a reassuring look. She can handle Uthvir, she thinks. Well. She’s been alone with the hunter a few times now, and has suffered none of the dire consequences that anyone had worried about for it. Thenvunin only glances at them, but voices no objections as she sets aside her firewood, and follows the red banner of Uthvir’s cape through the barrier of gnarled and twisting trees along the side of the road.

A few small animals scurry away through the undergrowth as they push through, and for a few minutes she’s baffled as to what they’re supposed to accomplish by clomping through the dense foliage. Even the lightest of feet would struggle not to make noise by passing through it. The ground is uneven, and slippery from the rain. It’s enough to nearly convince her that the excuse of hunting is just that, and that her apparent guide really does have something nefarious planned. But then she spies the rough lines of animal trails, and sure enough, the hunter leads her onto one.

“What are we hunting?” she wonders.

Uthvir glances back towards her. They consider her for a moment, and then lift their arm and point up towards the swaying branches over their heads. Small grey birds are roosting in them, she realizes. Or mostly grey. A few are more of a warm amber colour. The hunter says nothing at first. She wonders if they’re meant to catch the birds. They seem like poor prey; more feather than meat, she would guess.

After a minute, though, one of the birds opens its beak, and lets out a shriek that sounds entirely incongruous with its round little body.

“I heard them on the way up,” Uthvir says. “It’s the birds mimicking the call of a type of large cat that lives in this forest.”

“We are hunting a large cat?” she asks, not bothering to hide her distaste. That doesn’t sound like much of a delicious dinner. Given the supplies they still have, she thinks she’d rather abstain from fresh meat in this instance. And she’s more than had to ‘make do’ in her life before.

Uthvir snorts.

“That would be a trophy hunt, and one well beneath my prowess at this point,” they say. “We are hunting what the cats hunt. What their presence in these forests allude to. And that is a quarry large, dangerous, and delicious.”

“And called...?”

“I believe the full name is ‘Beast of Best Parts’, but most of us just refer to them as Dinner,” Uthvir admits.

She huffs a breath at that, equal parts surprise and amusement. It makes her think of her clan’s own best hunters, and their strange little traditions and practices and in-jokes. And yet, she considers the matter as they start walking again.

“That does not sound like a dull hunt to me,” she notes.

“How marvelous all the world must seem from the perspective of the unjaded,” Uthvir replies. “Now if you do not mind, these things do have ears. Tread lightly, and do not speak any further
until the prey is dead.”

Well. At least if they’re not going to talk, she won’t have to field any prying questions from them, either. And she still has her weapons with her. She keeps a hand close to her blade as they make their way down the narrow little animal track. Uthvir is light on their feet, and quieter than she is. That strange quality to their movements strikes her in force again. A hair-raising sensation that makes her think she could blink, and they would go from being at her front to at her back. A knife in hand.

Cole had been terrifying sometimes, in his way. Innocuous to the point where it became dangerous. Uthvir is clad all in bright red, and yet the little birds and scurrying animals of the forest startle more at her passage than theirs. The shadows of the trees fall over their path. The air smells heavy with rain. Slick leaves and small, reaching branches catch at her arms. But they move without either trouble or hesitation.

*What are you?* she wonders again.

One of the grey birds shrieks.

There’s blood on the bark of a nearby tree.

Uthvir halts, and so does she. Her gaze moves up. She doesn’t have much experience with big cats, but she’s heard things. Stories out of Seheron, mostly. They like to hide in trees, and suddenly she finds herself wondering if that was one of the birds after all. But the bloodied trunk only leads up towards a stashed kill. Another fawn, it looks like. Must be breeding season. The body is tucked up into the ‘v’ between two wide branches, largely untouched. The nearby trees seem empty, too; though the foliage is thick enough that it would be difficult to be certain.

After a moment, Uthvir gestures to the right. Beyond a massive tree of a kind she’s unfamiliar with, with sharp blue leaves and bark overgrown with hungry vines. In several more beyond it, nestled high amidst greener leaves, she can only just see a pair of feline eyes watching them. Tensed and silent, so still that she might not have ever seen them, without a cause to go looking for them. There’s a footprint near the trail, she notes. Bigger than her own hand.

They regard the cat, and the cat regards them; and then the red hunter turns, and she delays only a moment before following them deeper into the trees.

She wonders just how far they plan on going. If there are signs of their prey, she can’t pick them out among the other obvious traces of wild creatures. But then again, she doesn’t really know what they’re looking for. Hoof prints? Paw prints? Droppings? Scent markings? Antler scrapings?

At length the trees thin enough to reveal a small pond. She almost doesn’t realize it’s actually a pond at all, at first. It’s so overgrown, it almost looks like a clearing instead. Thick algae and lotus-like flowers crawl across the top of dark water. The trees around the pond sport broad leaves, that drip thick droplets of accumulated rain downwards. Splashing over moss and tiny white flowers.

She thinks of the white flowers in another forest.

Uthvir gestures at her to get down, and she does. Crouching, looking for whatever they’ve spotted. They lower themselves, too, and all of the air seems to crawl with a new tension. Expectation. It should suck her in, and for a moment, it does. She can feel her pulse underneath her skin. Nerves singing, as she knows they’ve seen *something*, but not *what* or even precisely where. She follows the line of their gaze, but spots no trace of movement between the trees. No eyes, no beast.
She needs to watch, she knows. Give how little information she has, that’s crucial. She has to be prepared for any number of things.

But for some reason, her gaze keeps dropping back towards the flowers. Drawn there, as if by some magnetic force. They’re exactly the same, she realizes. Exactly the same as the little white flowers that had bloomed all around… all around the russet wolf’s forest. That shouldn’t be so remarkable, she supposes. They’re in a forest, and that was a dream of a forest, and of course the flowers were probably of a kind that existed in the world. And might even have still existed in her time. They’re simple enough to look at. Small and white, sweet-smelling…

Uthvir moves.

She scarcely registers it, as she finds herself reaching down and gently taking one of the blossoms between two of her fingers. She can see the veins on it. The soft fuzz on the green stem, and the delicate lines, so thin and faint upon the petals. The center, dark and black, until she tilts it into her palm, and it falls out into her hand.

The petals flutter to the ground. Simply and gently, as if the only thing holding them together has abandoned them of its own volition.

She stares at the tiny bone fragment left in her grasp.

What?

What?

Her mind is still racing over the possible implications of finding a damn bone shard in a flower in the middle of the woods when something bellows like an angry ox, and comes crashing towards her.

Her head snaps up, and her fist closes around the bone fragment. The beast, she realizes, was in the pond. It comes thundering out of it. Uthvir is little more than a red flash on the periphery of her vision. But whatever they’re doing, it doesn’t seem to be effectively countering the massive creature charging straight at her.

It may, in fact, be encouraging it.

Her brain registers an equine face full of incongruously sharp teeth, and a long, scaled body. Squat limbs and barrel torso and speed, a surging sprint as it opens its snapping jaws and lets loose another ox-like bellow. The moment slows, and she can almost feel it. The blood in its veins, the faint magic crackling over it. The mud and rain-slick plants crushed beneath its clawed feet. Her right hand is still holding the bone fragment, and for reason, her reflexes won’t let her drop it; and so she grabs her shield, instead, raising it with her left arm and angling it so that the sharp teeth angling towards her scrape across its surface.

The impact is hard, but not hard enough to knock her off her feet. A scaly tail thrashes. The beast moves as if to get around the obstacle, and she recovers enough sense to counter it; shifting around and withdrawing the shield, just long enough to get another glimpse of those sharp teeth before she slams it against the beast’s skull.

It reels back, and that gives her enough of an opening to angle the edge of the shield towards its neck. The strike only stuns it, though. The hide’s too thick and her shield isn’t sharp enough to split flesh, and the beast’s bones are too durable to break without significantly more force, it seems. But it lets her get to her feet, ready for another charge as it rears back…
And a spear splits through the back of its skull.

Straight through, and on into the ground. She sucks in a few breaths as the body twitches and the trail thrashes, and the supposedly delicious creature spills dark blood into the muck beneath it. Already dead, but not quite finished moving.

Uthvir strides forward.

“My apologies. It seems I failed to anticipate just how… spirited being flushed out of hiding would make our quarry.”

She glares at them.

“You did that on purpose,” she accuses.

But something is moving again. Not the beast. Another shape, a shadow. Resolving out of the forest. Curling around the base of a tree behind Uthvir.

For a half a second, she’s confused enough and alarmed enough that she thinks it’s a real wolf. And she isn’t too worried. But then the shadowy shape moves in just a certain way, and she realizes. The bone fragment in her hand.

She’s still holding onto it.

“I am flattered that you think I have that much influence over the whims of the local wildlife. But in fact, I am a hunter, not an animal trainer,” Uthvir says. But she’s barely listening to them, now.

She gets her hand towards her belt pouch right as a lupine shape slides out of the trees behind the hunter.

The russet wolf tilts its head, regarding them for a half a second as she stalls, and stares at it.

And then its lips spread to reveal sharp teeth, and it snaps at the air.

Or… not the air.

Its bright, glinting teeth close around something dark and thick, like water; and she’s given to the incongruous thought that it’s bitten into Uthvir’s shadow, before she realizes that it might not be quite so incongruous a thought after all. Her eyes widen as the hunter gasps and reels backwards, as if grasped and pulled.

She shoves the fragment swiftly into her belt pouch, and draws her sword instead.

Something growls at her.

But as soon as she’s no longer touching the thing, whatever the wolf’s doing seems to stop. Uthvir staggers and turns, and the air around her crackles with magic and alarm and fear, so visceral for a moment that it makes her think of the Nightmare again. Her own blood is singing in her ears, but there’s nothing there, of course. No wolf. No trace of even an invisible foe. The red hunter’s shadow is whole enough where it spills across the forest floor.

“What?” they snarl, just the same. Their expression twisted in a grimace of pain. She moves to try and see if there’s any injury on them, only to find the blade of one of their knives angled towards her, instead. The pretense of charm is utterly gone from them, now. Their eyes are hard, the points of their teeth bared, and it makes her think of a wounded animal that will bite any hand that comes near.
“What was that? Did you do that?” the hunter demands, still snarling, as surely as the beast they’d killed had snapped its jaws at her.

“No,” she says, tensed and ready in case she needs to defend herself again.

“You saw something,” they insist. “You were looking past my shoulder.”

“I do not rightly know what I saw,” she says, which is… somewhat true.

For a moment, she’s not sure if Uthvir means to try and kill her on the spot. The air is so tense, she can feel it. Can feel the threat of it. Like every branch in the forest has suddenly become a blade, and all of them are angled towards her. The speared corpse on the ground gives another twitch, and the spilled blood around it steams.

And then the hunter straightens back, and retracts their blade.

They keep it in hand, though.

“What did you see?” they demand.

She hesitates. But she has the feeling that failure to produce any kind of explanation will see that knife coming back up again.

“There was an animal. It bit your shadow,” she admits. It sounds ridiculous. But she has no idea what would make for a more plausible lie in this situation.

Uthvir stares at her one wary moment longer. Then they cast their gaze around the forest and nearby trees instead. The recently disturbed pond, and the dead prey. A muscle in their jaw twitches, and their cloak whips sharply through the air as they head back towards the trail.

“We are leaving,” they decide, sheathing their knife and taking their spear back with a sharp pull. They whip it once through the air, magic crackling, and the blood burns off of it.

She bends to retrieve their kill.

“Leave it,” Uthvir says.

“But it is the whole reason we came out here,” she counters. They came out here, hunted this thing down, and killed it. She supposes if they leave it, the big cats and some scavengers will get a full meal out of it. But even so.

“There is something out here that is far more dangerous than that thing, and I do not care to stand in what might be the middle of its lair without even knowing what it is, ” the red hunter snaps at her. “And considering your first response when being charged at by a snarling predator is apparently to cower behind a shield, and not even bother to draw your actual weapon, I would suggest you do as I say and follow me out of here. Now.”

The last they say resounds through the trees like a clap. A few birds take off from their roosts, and something snaps a branch not too far off. Uthvir raises their spear, eyes narrow and arm steady, and yet somehow they seem more jittery to her than anything else.

Jittery, but still terrifying.

She stares down at the corpse.

They odds of her successfully carrying that thing out of here all by herself are… very low.
She moves to follow the hunter, and gets another surprise when they gesture for her to take to the trail first, instead.

“Keep in front of me,” they instruct.

“I can handle being rear guard, you know,” she says. And part of her wishes, surprisingly, that she could tell them that the threat is probably done with now. That the wolf only seems to mess with them when she’s touching part of its skull. But that would likely entail explaining how she knows about these things, and she has absolutely no intention of doing that.

“And shall I trust you at my back?” Uthvir wonders. “Walk swiftly, and only speak if you see that creature again.”

She resists the urge to let out an irritated curse, and does as requested instead.

They return to camp empty-handed, with Uthvir thunderous and tense, weapons still drawn, and herself feeling awkward and off-balance. The hunters, at least, seem more than willing to attribute their overseer’s foul mood to an unsuccessful hunt. As soon as she can manage to do it without being conspicuous, she draws back behind Banathim’s tent, and checks on the bone fragments.

There’s only one piece.

But it’s the size of two.

She stares at the black speck, and feels an uncomfortable lurching in her gut at how little she really knows about it. For a moment she’s almost tempted enough to hold it again. To see that wolf, and see if she can’t demand answers from it. But she’s still got at least enough sense to know that bringing it out in the camp, after what it just did – or tried to do – to Uthvir, would… be unwise.

And Pride and Curiosity are here, too.

The former happens upon her while she’s still staring at the offending bone shard.

“What happened?” he asks. “Are you alright?”

“…I’m fine,” she says, closing the pouch and securing it back at her belt. “I found another fragment.”

She turns to face him, to meet the uncertainty and worry in his gaze with her own. Whatever he was expecting her to say, it probably wasn’t that.

“Where?” he wonders.

“In the woods. In a flower,” she replies.

He frowns, and glares at the innocuous little pouch. She’d been half tempted to permanently banish it to her pack or saddlebags. But in the end, it had seemed more dangerous to risk losing it, somehow, or letting it fall into the wrong hands – Pride’s own, particularly – than to keep it close-but-untouched. For the time being.

“If that is the case, then I think it sounds more like the fragments are finding you,” he unhappily determines.

“Either that or Andruil is in the habit of liberally sprinkling her territory with smashed up wolf skull,” she agrees.
But there is a pattern, she thinks. The first fragment had come from the carving of a wolf. The second had come from a flower that she had seen in the dream of the russet wolf. She thinks of the slow arrow. Of the old stories. Wolves and dragons, moons and flowers and where the mind goes when it sleeps.

Reaching out, she catches Pride by the arm.

Her gives her a questioning look. She opens her mouth to say something, but she’s not certain what. It’s all so tangled up. She’d not even sure why she grabbed him, except that she keeps feeling like if she doesn’t, he’s going to slip away. Like she’ll blink and he’ll be gone. Or corrupted. Or she’ll look over and see that other wolf grinning from his shadow again.

She closes her mouth, and just squeezes him a bit.

“I will figure it out,” she promises.

“Not alone,” he promises back.

Then Thenvunin is shouting something about furs in his tent, and the one Curiosity’s pitching unbalances and topples over, and one of the hunters says the wrong thing to Uthvir and nearly gets backhanded clear across the camp.

She double-checks the little pouch, and with a sigh, follows Pride back out into the fray.

~

There are a lot of snide remarks over dinner about the lack of fresh meat. Uthvir retreats well before they begin, though, vanishing into their own tent, and not emerging again until the campfire is burning blue, and the sky is nearly all black. The magical flames don’t impede the view of the stars, nor the surrounding woods, which grow noisy and active with the sudden rousing of the nightlife. Creatures both large and small prowl the perimeter of the campsite. But nothing passes beyond the markers around it.

The red hunter makes their return appearance, still clad all in cloak and armour, as Thenvunin is laying into Pride again about the lack of un-furred blankets available to him.

“Enough,” Uthvir snaps. “Thenvunin, if it will stop your perpetual whining, you can sleep in my tent tonight. Nary a scrap of fur will be found in it. I will take this night’s watch.”

They glance towards her, but only briefly. Eyes glinting with the firelight.

Thenvunin rears as if he’s just been splashed with a bucket of cold water.

“As if I would! The impertinence! Everyone knows what a hunter means when they invite someone to their sleeping space. I would not be caught dead in your tent,” he insists.

“Imply again that I would neglect a watch, Thenvunin, and I shall take legitimate offense,” Uthvir replies, with rather more snapping anger than warning in their tone. Thenvunin continues to bristle at their every word, in turn. The quiet evening conversation is broken up by more bickering and snarling, then, as the hunters watch their leader snipe with Mythal’s over questions of courtesy and custom and responsibility.
“Why not let Thenvunin take first watch?” Banathim suggests. “Since he has deemed his sleeping arrangements insufficient, and seems so dubious of our party’s skill at it.”

“I would rather not wake to find something big enough to breach the wards pissing on our tents in the morning, that is why,” Uthvir counters.

“I have been committed to military service for over two thousand years,” Thenvunin insists. “I know how to handle a watch!”

“Volunteering, then?” the red hunter asks, curling their lips and raising their brow in a fashion which manages to imply that Thenvunin just stumbled right into a trap. As if this whole argument was orchestrated in order to get him to accidentally volunteer himself for an unwanted task. Which Thenvunin clearly catches, and subsequently expresses his outrage towards.

She watches as the conversation turns in circles, around and around again, until somehow it ends up that Uthvir will be taking the night’s watch – for the entire night, by the sounds of it – and when Thenvunin at last storms off, it’s under the insistence that he has earned the right to a peaceful night’s sleep and since the hunters are the ones hosting them, he may as well take it in their leader’s tent after all.

He glances towards her, briefly, as he makes his way into it. She only stares back at him for a moment, before he looks hurriedly away.

…Huh.

Apparently, Pride had been downright reasonable and reserved by the standards of his high-ranking peers. Though she’d already suspected that. But she doesn’t think Uthvir was actually angling to get Thenvunin to take the watch. Probably the opposite, in fact. They still strike her as distinctly on edge as they make their way towards one of the far points of the camp, and settle in there. Watching the shadows.

Their angle is such that their own is cast in front of them by the firelight. Clearly visible.

She watches them in the corner of her eye for a moment, until Curiosity claims her attention as they clean up the remnants of dinner, and the hunters begin to withdraw to their own tents. Only Banathim doesn’t seem eager to leave; settled by the fire, idly gnawing on some of the bones of her own successful kill.

“Have you tried any more with the shape-changing?” Curiosity asks her. “There are a lot of strange animals in the forests here. You should keep an eye out for them. I already saw a few that I might like to turn into, or try to, someday. There might be one that works for you. I was thinking, and it occurred to me that perhaps you just do not know the shape that would fit right.”

“I was a bit distracted from that,” she admits.

Banathim glances up towards them.

“Trying to change your shape?” the bear asks.

She stills. Curiosity hesitates a moment, too. They glance at one another.

“Just seeing if she can manage it,” her friend replies, after a moment.

Banathim gives them both a considering look. In the glow of the firelight, her eyes seem particularly hollow. It makes her think of Andruil’s halls, and the cooked bones strewn around the
fire pits. The huntress and her hunters, and their hungry sort of magic.

“My mother used to say, ‘do not waste water on dead plants’. Some things are beyond the means of constructs, animals, artwork, and other things which might reflect the People, but are not People themselves,” the bear tells them.

She feels a brief pang of disappointment at that. And here she’d almost thought Banathim might be friendlier than most of the other hunters, after pulling that spirit out of the river. The urge to insist upon her personhood has become exhausted in her for the moment, though.

Curiosity stiffens, but then tilts her head, considering.

“You are Waking-born?” her friend asks.

“I am, at that,” Banathim confirms.

Curiosity scoots a little closer to the fire.

“You seem like a very accomplished shape-shifter. I have not met many Waking-born yet who are very adept at it. But a younger one described the process of changing his shape to me, and it seemed different to how I think of it. Maybe you could tell me a bit about what it is like for you?” she requests. “ Mostly it is Dreaming-born who tend to hold animals forms and other shapes for long periods of time. At least, it is among Mythal’s people.”

“It is like that among hunters, too,” Banathim says. “When you are born to a body, it belongs to you in a way that it never can when you come to it through other means. From the start of your life, your vitality depends upon the rhythm of your heart. The strength of your bones. A living thing is a fragile thing. One wrong move, and it is living no more.”

“Spirits are fragile enough, too,” she feels compelled to mention. She thinks of holding that shard of Compassion in her hands. Of the little spirit the stormchasers had caught.

“Oh yes indeed,” Banathim agrees. “But spirits can twist and reshape themselves in ways that most Waking-born would not even think to. And Waking-born can withstand contradictions and denials and horrors that would break spirits in an instant. The longer either live for, though, the closer they come to one another. That is why we are one people. A hundred years. Two hundred years. A thousand. Waking-born learn that, in the end, all of us can be butchered down to the same base parts that define spirits. Dreaming-born weave themselves into their bodies, and forget what it is like to live beyond the confines of their skin. And so those born to bodies change them in ways that would have once seemed beyond them, and those born to dreams narrow their spectrum of preferences and perspectives.”

As strange and almost somber as the conversation is, for a moment, her mind flits back into memory. To Solas, and all his odd little quirks and preferences. His excessive self-portraits, anchoring an image that matched perfectly to the man she saw. As if simultaneously struggling to keep on defining himself, to hold onto who he was, but also to change and reshape the world around him as thoroughly as he could in the solid lines and shapes of his artwork.

I do not want to lose myself, she realizes. What if she does change her shape? What if she becomes something else? What if, bit by bit, she becomes more like the ancient elves?

What if that removes her from being who and what she is? A mortal elf. A Dalish elf.

The only one left.
“Were you afraid, the first time you changed shape?” she wonders.

Banathim looks at her for a long moment.

“I was thrilled,” the bear confesses, at last. “The only fear I knew was that I would be locked forever in some weak and spindly form.”

On that note, then, the hunter gets up from beside the fire, and lumbers off to her tent. She watches her go, and for a moment sits with Curiosity and listens to the crackling of the flames. Pride’s busy not far off, getting a headstart on dismantling Thenvunin’s tent, since it’s unlikely to see any use before morning.

Curiosity nudge her.

“So we just need to make you hate your body,” her friend reasons.

“That sounds like a terrible plan,” she decides.

“Well, we could probably just start with the one arm you have mixed feelings about anyway,” Curiosity reasons. “I mean technically it takes more effort to just change one part, but you are strange as it is, so perhaps we need to go about things completely differently. See if you can grow claws.”

“I think I would rather just sleep,” she admits.

“Oh, come on. Just for a little bit,” her friend cajoles.

She glances over to where Pride is still busy, and after a moment, relents.

But trying to focus on changing the shape of her hand doesn’t yield any productive results. After a while it just makes her palm itch, and her nails feel vaguely bruised; and then she remembers the weight of that anchor, and somehow sets off a sparking flare of unintentional magic that nearly singes Curiosity’s eyebrow, and they both agree to call it quits for the night.

By then, Pride’s done, anyway.

Their own tents are pitched not far off from Thenvunin’s, but closer to the edge of the camp. Curiosity heads into one, and she and Pride regard one another silently for a moment; and then, by unspoken agreement, head into the other.

They’re quiet as they strip down to their softer layers. She holds her bone fragment pouch for a moment, before dropping it into the middle of her shield, and arranging her weapons handily next to her bedroll. Pride puts his own beside hers, and offers her a questioning glance.

“Is this alright?” he asks, quietly.

She blinks.

“Is what alright?”

He gestures to the arrangement, and she realizes he’s asking permission to be close to her.

Smiling, she reaches over and pulls him in for a kiss. Sinking into him for a moment.

“Of course,” she whispers.
She leans fully into him, and runs a hand down his side. Slips it under the soft fabric of his tunic, and then up his back as she kisses him again. Clutches his shoulders. In the dim light it’s all touch and warmth between them. The feel of his arms closing around her. The puff of his exhaled breaths against her lips, as she pulls back. The sounds of the rustling fabric. The scent of him, still carrying traces of the rain they’d ridden through, and the sweat he’d earned through working and riding.

He sighs, and she kisses him again to hush him. The walls of these tents aren’t thick, after all. She lets her hands slide back downwards instead, to the waistband of his leggings. She gets both of them down the back of them, and squeezes him a little as she pulls him closer.

That’s maybe not the best way to discourage sound, though.

He squeaks against her mouth.

She bites down a laugh, her shoulders trembling with it, and she can practically feel him blushing. He heat rising in his face, so close to her own.

He retaliates, though. Attacks her neck with kisses, and obligingly presses flush to her. Shifting and most definitely rocking his arousal against her. For a moment she just lets him have at it, enjoying the feel of his lips on her skin, his hands at her back, his erection at her hip. She closes her eyes and sighs, softly.

His kisses still. And then press once, deliberately and on-so-gently, over the pulse of her neck. He nuzzles her, and she draws him down to their bedrolls. It feels too exposed, though, for them to undress. To really take their time with one another. They’ve got who-knows-what waiting for them in dreams, and another early start, and two fickle and often violent group leaders to manage, and then everything that might be waiting for them below the earth.

So she just pulls Pride close, and grinds against him through their clothes instead. She wants to touch him. To feel his skin on hers, and have him inside of her again. But this is good, too. They swallow one another’s moans with kisses. His hands feel so very hot where they press beneath her tunic, supporting her as she shows him how to move, like this. How to brush up against the right places on her, and please himself at the same time. She takes his earlobe between her teeth, and squeezes a hand between them to work it down the front of his pants.

And then she decides she needs to feel this, properly, and throws her previous decision out of the window just enough to shimmy her own leggings down off of her hips. She touches herself, opens herself up enough so that she can take him and pulls him fully on top of her to do it.

He hesitates, though.

As she grips his backside and tries to guide him in, he pulls away a little. She lets him, worried that she’s missed some cue, between the dark and the quiet.

His fingers slide into her.

“I will not be rough with you,” he whispers, straight into the curve of her ear.

She bites her lip at his touch. And, if she’s being honest, maybe just a little at the words, too. At how fiercely he promises her such things. Refusing to bend on this matter. She wouldn’t mind being a little rough, a little hasty. She wants him badly enough. There would be something, she thinks, to be said for the hungry rush of right now, need to have you, get in me this instant between them.

But the gentleness undoes her, too.
Maybe even more than a little pragmatic haste ever could.

“I could be rough with you, sometimes,” she warns, her own voice soft as can be. Nearly apologetic.

“I will tell you if I mind that,” he promises.

She almost says, then, that she doesn’t mind a little roughness. But somehow she thinks he’d still object. That this isn’t so much about what she’s comfortable with having done to her – though obviously that matters to him – but what he’s comfortable doing to her, as well. And she doesn’t suppose she would ever be comfortable with hurting him, or thinking she was hurting him. Especially not in this.

“I wish to try using my mouth on you,” Pride tells her, and her brain just cuts right out then. His fingers curl inside of her, as she stifles a truly telling sound at that, and he kisses the corner of her jaw. “Like you used yours on me, before. Would that be alright? If I kissed you just where my fingers are?”

She’s not really sure his lips could reach where his fingers are at the moment, but the intent is pretty obvious.

“Yes,” she agrees.

That’s a wholly inadequate response, but he’ll have to wait until they’re no longer in a flimsy tent in a crowded camp to get a better one. He starts to move down her, but she catches him. There’s no chance, none, that she’s staying quiet enough if he…

Yeah, no.

“Not here,” she tells him.

He hesitates, and oh, he’s disappointed about that, disappointed that he doesn’t get to try using his mouth on her for the first time. She might just let him anyway and forget to care if anyone overhears. But that’s probably too cruel to poor Curiosity, one tent over, and she doesn’t really want to find out what the potential responses of Uthvir or Thenvunin might be.

“Kiss me,” she asks him, instead, and that at least gives him something to do with his mouth and nothing to deny her. She takes his face between her hands as his fingers keep working away at her, and delves between his lips with her tongue, before coaxing his into her own mouth. Letting him explore her there, again, for now. The heat building her has her hips rolling, and even so, even with his insistence on slooowly stretching her open, it doesn’t take long before he’s back in place and she’s gripping him and pushing him into her.

She lets him set the pace, this time. Long kisses and careful strokes, and at one point she actually ends up biting down on his hair to keep from making too much noise as she comes in a steady wave. Like the molten pool in her stomach has just overflowed and rushed through all of her.

He latches onto her neck, in return, mouthing at her and muffling his moans so that they reverberate through her. She can hear both of their hearts pounding, and their heavy breaths echoing into the distant sounds of the forest wildlife. He stiffens when he comes, and then curls into her. Lust given way to languid satisfaction. She brushes her fingers through his hair, and murmurs endearments against his temple.

“My heart. My beloved. You are so good, so very good.”
He sighs.

“My one love,” he calls her.

She stills, a little surprised at the phrase. Solas had never called her that. She didn’t suppose he rightly could. He probably had other loves in his life, after all. And even if they were gone, he wasn’t planning on that being a permanent situation. Not if any of them were elves of this time, at least.

It feels… strange, to think about that. The relationships that Solas built, that Pride might not, now. She wonders if she could call Pride her one love. She’d called Solas that, and they are the same person, and yet not the same person. Though many, of course, use the endearment to denote any number of meanings. That the recipient is their only lover. That the recipient is their only living lover. The only one they are in love with at the moment.

Still.

It wouldn’t feel right, she decides. It would be too much like saying that Pride is on the same path, she thinks. And he isn’t. For good or ill, he’s off that track forever. But she’s not certain that she could claim the opposite, either. That she’s fallen in love with another person. Another soul.

“I love you,” she whispers, because that’s true enough no matter the complications.

And if Pride at all minds that reciprocation, he certainly doesn’t show it.

~

She falls asleep wrapped safely up in her love’s arms.

She dreams strangely again. But not with the same terrifying, vivid danger as before, at least. Her perception is still different. The forest around them becomes a tangled, living net in the Fade. Twisting vines and waterfalls that loop on themselves, like glittering rings at the feet of mountains that migrate over fields of cloud and glass, and deep, murky depths, that go further and further down, the longer she stares at them. Unfamiliar spirits flit through the woven vines and distorted, surreal trees.

Some move like birds, or cats, or other beasts. A few drift along the currents of the water, or follow spider-web patterns of energy. It would be marvelous, and in a way it is, except for the shards. Broken pieces of things, like smashed glass sculptures, litter the ground everywhere she walks. As if some great predator has torn through this part of the Fade, and indiscriminately killed anything it could clamp its jaws onto. The shattered husks of dead spirits bleed some power back into the dreamscape around them. Tiny, shining trickles of light. But most of them are empty husks. There’s no warmth to any of the pieces she touches, like there had been with Compassion.

She thinks of Fortune, and Charity, and of scooping up the shards. But there are too many, and even so, she doesn’t know what could be done for them that would be better than leaving them to try and cycle back into this environment around them.

Did the wolf do this?
But though she feels, at times, as if there are eyes on her, she never so much as glimpses its shape out of the corner of her vision. And in searching, she even finds Pride. Unlike before, when she’d tried to reach him in the ruin. He doesn’t even seem to notice the plethora of spirit corpses, or the mountains, or anything far beyond the corner of forest they’re in.

The Fade moves a certain way around him, she notes. He moves through it in almost the same way Fortitude had. Folding through layers, and sifting through his surroundings. Whether it’s because of the location or his own talent for dreams, she can’t say, but he has a direct impact on his surroundings. And she can see it. The ripples he casts, and how things shift to meet his expectations. How the trees change until they look more like the ones in Mythal’s gardens. Interspersed with some of the more impressive examples from Andruil’s own lands.

His thoughts, like his breaths, brush everything, and the dream breathes back.

She looks at herself, and is suddenly given to the strange notion that it’s not doing the same thing with her. That it used to, but now it isn’t. Or at least, now it’s doing it less.

Bit by bit.

But then she sees the dark tendrils trailing down from Pride’s steps. Whispers of the Blight leading towards distant rivers that pulse like angry, infected veins. It distracts her from everything else, as she struggles and tries to explain the difference in what she’s seeing to Pride himself.

In the morning, she wakes to the sounds of frantic shouting.

Specifically, one person frantically shouting. With a familiar voice. She’s armed and out of the tent before she’s completely awake, some part of her mind backtracking to other days, and other interrupted camps, and she half expects to find them set upon by Venatori agents or red Templars, or, more likely, wild animals.

The dawn catches her eyes, and she realizes it’s no such thing. The camp is fine, even if the other occupants are being roused by the noise. The calls are coming from beyond the camp borders. Cries for help that have other, reflexive segments of her brain firing, back even further, to human hunters and just regular Templars, and young scouts fleeing from danger. But she’s waking up a bit more; remembering where she actually is, and why she recognizes that voice.

Uthvir is already moving towards the source, quick and sharp like a scythe through the trees. She ploughs in after them, following the source of the cries. The sun’s barely dawning, most of its face still buried behind the mountains. The forest is dark in the faint early light, damp with dew, and tinged with a frostbitten wind. The red hunter is a flash of crimson, moving with the unerring confidence of someone who isn’t just following a sound, but has likely surmised the actual location of it themselves.

She hears a few others following, crashing through the undergrowth behind them as they reach a grove.

It’s a small one. More like a gap where the roots and branches of several large trees have prevented the growth of nearly anything else, and left an opening where only smaller plants and shoots have managed to survive. In the middle of the grove is a small, miserable-looking grey fox, soaked through and surrounded by a crackling hum of magic. Trap wards gleam beneath the undergrowth; but the real source of fox’s distress seems to be the occupant of a nearby tree.

She barely glimpses the large, predatory cat before it bounds down and away, vanishing back into the forest gloom.
She pauses, as the little grey fox looks at herself and Uthvir with an expression that manages to simultaneously convey relief at being rescued, and extreme dissatisfaction with his particular rescuers.

It eases somewhat when Pride arrives, hot on her heels; a groggy Curiosity not far behind him.

There’s an awkward moment of silence as everyone assesses the situation.

“…Could someone please let me out of the trap?” Ghilashim finally asks.

“No!” Curiosity blurts, looking quite content to leave him there.

“I am almost impressed,” Uthvir decides. “If I was in a better mood, I would free you on principle of your impressive ability to get just far enough with your plans to become a massive inconvenience. But as it stands, I believe I will let your comrades decide your fate.”

They sneer down at the miserable-looking little fox, who scowls back at them, and then turn and almost immediately begin withdrawing from the forest. They pass her as they go, but don’t so much as look at her.

“Come now,” Pride says. “You could deactivate those with a wave of your hand. This will take us at least an hour.”

“And yet, my time is still valuable enough that I have already wasted too much of it on fool children,” the red hunter decides.

They carry on, then, back towards the camp, leaving herself and her friends to look back at poor Ghilashim.

Who drips, and wilts, just a bit.

“How did you even get in there?” Pride finally demands. “You are supposed to be in Arlathan!”

She looks at Curiosity, who is rather conspicuously not meeting anyone’s gaze. Though that could be because she is currently making for one drowsy and disgruntled lion. Reaching over, she grabs said drowsy and disgruntled lion’s feathers, and gives them a light tug.

“What?” Curiosity demands.

She raises an eyebrow.

Her friend sighs, and then shakes her head as Pride turns and gives her an expectant look, too. It doesn’t take much to get her to relent.

“He said he just wanted to watch the hunters a bit more. It would have been fine if he had still been an elf, but he managed to transform and he has giant baby fox eyes when he does that. And I thought it would be fine if he just made a nuisance of himself in Andruil’s hall. I did not think he would be stupid enough to follow us.”

“It was not stupid!” Ghilashim insists. “I am on a special mission!”

“No you are not,” Pride says.

“…No, I am not,” the little fox admits. “But I said I was a good guide, and look! I managed to follow you! I even made it through most of the night. And I had almost figured out how to get out of the trap before that giant, slavering beast showed up. That is better than a lot of guides,
especially since I have never actually been through this route before.”

“That actually is pretty good,” she allows. “How did you get caught in the trap?”

“I stepped in it,” Ghilashim tells her, a little snidely.

But then he wilts again, and sniffs a bit.

“I was trying to find something to eat. I did not want to reduce rations in the packs, so I thought I could catch something, like the hunters were telling me. There was a hare, and I am faster as a fox, but… I thought I could shortcut through here and then I got trapped. And I have been stuck like this for hours. It hurts,” he admits, his eyes welling up.

She sheaths her blade, as Pride’s expression softens, and he moves over towards the ring of runes, and starts methodically unravelling the magic in them. Curiosity lets out a sigh and moves to help as well.

“I will be right back,” she decides.

“Where are you going?” Pride wonders.

“To see if one of the other hunters feels like helping,” she says. “Keep an eye out for any large predators, if you please.”

Heading back to the camp, manages to catch Banathim as the bear is emerging from her own tent; ironically more keen on mornings, it seems, than Curiosity is, despite the reputation of her animal form. After a brief explanation, the somewhat amused-looking hunter agrees to follow her back to the grove, and takes in the scene of the disaster.

“There is an easier way,” the bear says, lumbering forwards between Pride and Curiosity. “Any hunter’s trap must yield its quarry to a hunter, in turn.”

So saying, Banathim closes her jaws around Ghilashim, and lifts him by his scruff. She carries him straight out of the trap that Pride and Curiosity are still attempting to dismantle with no trouble at all; and the wards go dull, and cease to gleam.

The bear dumps the fox onto a nearby patch of moss. Ghilashim shakes and then immediately transforms from a soaked, unhappy animal into a soaked, unhappy elf. He lets out a long breath and pats himself. Stretches his arms and nearly topples into a fern.

“Thank you!” he exclaims.

“Next time tread more carefully, little stowaway,” Banathim advises. “If we had made an early start, you might have been left to less kindly jaws.”

Ghilashim swallows, and then nods.

“I know,” he admits. Then he looks a bit stricken. “I almost died.”

She sighs, and watches him carefully pick himself up. Looking over, she shares a glance with Pride. They’re a day into their mission, which was already moved up to an urgent timescale, and however well Ghilashim managed to fare in following them, she doesn’t suppose anyone will just let him walk all the way back again. Which means that either someone will have to escort him – and at this point, she’s beginning to harbour deep suspicions that he’d just find a way to elude or bribe or manipulate his escort – or let him come along.
On their incredibly dangerous trek into the Deep Roads.

Maybe, she thinks, Thenvunin will actually do something useful and produce a solution to this dilemma.

But judging by the way he looks at them when they get back, that’s… not really on the table.
Elven Glory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Travelling with the hunters is strange and tense and challenging.

Travelling with the hunters and Ghilashim makes her feel like she’s back with the Inquisition, but only in all the worst possible ways. She had forgotten, for a while, what it was like to travel with people who had little to no idea of what travelling actually entailed. Thenvunin makes Ghilashim ride between himself and Pride, when possible, and with Pride when not. The young elf has troubles holding his tongue, complaining over various aches and pains, and the discomfort of his saddle, and his lingering trauma over the incidents of the morning.

She almost can’t believe that he managed to follow them at all, but then again, she’s harboring some suspicions that now that he’s been caught out, what the young elf really wants is some kind of reassurance that he’s going to be looked after. And given what happened this morning, she can’t entirely blame him.

Except that she can, because he should have just gone back to Arlathan where it was relatively safe and sound.

He’s Felassan, she reminds herself. And he’s young.

Not everyone has the patience for it, though.

Three hours into their renewed trek, Uthvir turns in their saddle and levels Ghilashim with a sharp look that makes the young elf’s steady mount falter a step. Ghilashim himself looks nervous at being treated to the hunter’s glare.

“You will be silent until we break for midday,” Uthvir instructs. “Or I will tear out your vocal chords and string a bow with them. Then I will hunt you with that very same bow.”

Thenvunin stiffens.

“You most certainly will not!” the high-ranking elf snaps. “I will not have you disciplining my Lady Mythal’s followers beyond your bounds, Uthvir.”

The hunter sneers at him.

“Then you had best keep him quiet,” they advise.

This, unsurprisingly, leads to another round of the two sniping at one another at the head of the procession. The other hunters provide something of a barrier, at least, and Ghilashim does go silent –Pride keeps motioning at him any time he might speak – which is useful, because as the day progresses it grows hot.

And then hotter still.

Curiosity takes up the rear of the procession along with her, and Banathim; whose ventures off into the shelter of the trees grow more and more frequent as the heat increases. Still, the bear hunter never looks beleaguered. The path they’re following through the thick copse of trees turns upwards, and their mounts begin to suffer and strain to keep up the pace as the rocks beneath them
grow warmer, and the terrain becomes unforgivingly steep. When the party stops for midday, it’s alongside a river with enough shade to afford them some comfort; and when they resume, the sun is fierce enough that she can smell the heat burning up off of the path, and the air humid enough that it feels like every leaf that brushes her arms or vine that dips down to her shoulders leaves behind a heavy trail of forest damp.

The storms carry on, as well, mostly churning through the clouds. But sometimes pausing to dump handfuls of rain onto them as well. Insects stir and buzz in clouds that, at least, the party’s ambient energies just seem to naturally dispel. Curiosity explains some of how it works as they ride along until dark again, and she keeps a watchful eye out for any signs of strangeness.

Well.

Strangeness she might recognize, at least.

There’s a plentitude of plants and creatures that stalk their path, that don’t fall into that category. Birds with dark blue wings soar between tree branches, and a few more big cats watch with gleaming eyes, as she keeps a lookout for any more canine shapes. At some point Uthvir calls a halt to their procession, as something large crashes through the treeline further along their path. She can’t see any sign of what it might be, though. Just hear it, moving, bigger and heavier than a wyvern.

The red hunter has them stay in place until the sounds move on, and then they carry through.

“Not going to fight it?” Ghilashim wonders. “I thought that was what hunters did. Hunt big ugly monsters.”

“Be quiet,” Uthvir snaps.

“You only said I had to be quiet until midday, and it is well past midday,” Ghilashim points out.

“Then let me amend myself, if you—” Uthvir begins.

“Enough,” Thenvunin snaps. Of all of their party, he is starting to wear the obvious signs of the elements the worst. His hair is drooping, and his finery looks overdone and uncomfortable in the current swelter. His skin is red, and his lips are thin. “Do not goad. Ghilashim. We are hardly going to divert our expedition to go chasing after every great lumbering creature that chances upon our path. It would be the height of irresponsibility. Lady Mythal is unwell.”

Ghilashim takes the rebuke with a wince.

“I did not mean it like that,” he says.

“What was it, anyway?” Curiosity asks, and earns him a reprieve from the backwards glances and disapproving looks.

“Large,” Uthvir drawls.

“They do not know,” Banathim supplies, before Curiosity can protest. The bear trundles up alongside them again, muzzle stained with blood, and face upturned towards the latest batch of rain. It pings off of some nearby fern fronds, and splatters where it hits the rockiness of their path.

“There are many creatures in Andruil’s wilds for which there are no names, no known distinctions. Beasts that live and die nowhere else. Her lady wife is fond of releasing the less dramatic of her failed inventions into these lands. Sometimes they manage to multiply. Sometimes the offspring bare such little resemblance to their predecessors that it beggars belief. It makes life interesting.”
Curiosity blinks, and then stares off into the wilds. Her eyes narrowing at the gaps between the trees.

“I want to know,” her friend murmurs.

“Maybe we will happen upon it again on the way back,” she suggests.

It’s a flimsy consolation. But Curiosity doesn’t do anything as foolish as rushing off the path or trying to dismount, so it probably helps. A least, just a little bit.

Honestly she kind of wants to know, too. Even if most of the well-known creatures in this time and region are a mystery to her. What Banathim’s described just seems like another incredibly inadvisable thing piled all on top of a mountain of them.

By the time they make camp for the evening, the air is so thick and sweltering its hard to breathe, and their mounts can’t be expected to go any further. Some of the hunters manage to clear the atmosphere, and the site they set up around is marked by glowing runes that yield a less oppressive space, nestled in at the side of their ragged and increasingly narrow path. Uthvir snaps at their people and Banathim trundles over, and the two of them confer for a moment, before all of the hunters are sent out ahead on foot.

“They will make certain the road is passable in the morning,” Uthvir says. “We are venturing into more unpredictable territory.”

“I will go and fetch us a meal,” Banathim decides. “And actually bring it back this time.”

Uthvir frowns, but offers no retort as the lower-ranking elf trundles off. The bear passes their group as they are tending to the mounts, trying to get enough water to satisfy their obvious thirst without letting them drink so much that they vomit – this need becomes readily apparent after one of them nearly empties a stomach full of water all over her. The beasts’ eyes are glassy, and their hides ripple as they shake it out and clack their beaks irritably.

Banathim huffs out a breath, and shakes her own fur.

“New blood,” she says, and nods at Curiosity. “Come along and hunt with me, since you want to learn.”

Curiosity looks at Thenvunin, but he only nods and then waves a dismissive hand, before barking at Pride to get the tents ready. His hair is clinging awkwardly to the sweat on his skin, and it’s probably a testament to his discomfort that he actually stops and sweeps it into his hand in front of everyone, and roughly ties it back.

“Be careful,” she tells Curiosity.

Her friend nods, and checks her quiver before following Banathim off and away from the campsite.

It’s an uncomfortable evening. She and Ghilashim help Pride set up the tents, but Ghilashim seems to have some very pointed opinions on how to go about that, and takes every opportunity he can to criticize her own ‘technique’. Pride gets impatient with him, in turn, and then with Thenvunin, whose mood has been increasingly sour all day. Uthvir sets up their own tent, and takes to pacing around the borders of the camp. A habit that doesn’t do much for anyone else’s tension, no matter how subtly they perform their rounds.

Thick clouds roll over head by the time they sun is on its last legs, and she’s giving some serious consideration to looking for Curiosity and Banathim when they return; Curiosity using a spell to
help shift a large, ox-like kill. The pair look fairly satisfied with themselves as they dump their prize at her feet, to clean and prepare. It’s a bigger animal than she generally tackles on her own, but Pride sets about helping, while Curiosity enthuses over the hunt. Banathim, for her part, seems content to trundle off into one of the prepared tents, and stay there until the cooking fires are burning and the best cuts of the beast are roasting at the edges of them.

By then, her arms are heavy with fatigue, and her backs hurts from travel, and it’s all she can do to slump down next to Pride and lean at his shoulder. Staring up towards the moon.

Ghilashim takes Pride’s other side.

She’s a little surprise when he doesn’t immediately start in on a set of complaints. Thenvunin has found several to voice, off in the other corner of the camp – well, if his tone’s any indication, anyway. Their illustrious leaders are back to sniping at one another again. Though at least that means Uthvir’s not weaving around the campsite like an agitated spider.

“I am sorry if I caused you trouble, Pride,” Ghilashim says, at length.

Pride glances over towards him. Beneath her cheek, she feels him tense, just a little.

“If you respect my opinion, then you should not disregard it,” Pride tells him, quietly. “We are not going to a safe place, Ghilashim. You have little experience in fighting, or dealing with dwarves. Or hunters, for that matter. It will be dangerous.”

“I know it will be, that is why I came,” Ghilashim insists. “Even Lady Mythal was displeased at having to send you off with the hunters like this, with only Thenvunin and Curiosity to help.”

She shifts around, glancing at the young elf and raising an eyebrow.

He sees her, and after a moment, looks at Pride’s expression, and lets out a sigh.

“And her,” he concedes, with some obvious difficulty. “But it is no secret that Thenvunin dislikes you, and Curiosity is still figuring out how to be in a body, and… I only wanted to help.”

Pride tilts his head, slightly.

“Did you speak with Mythal, before you followed us?” he wonders.

She glances up at him, in turn, and he catches her eye for a moment.

No.

Mythal wouldn’t send someone as green as Ghilashim to come and spy on them.

Would she?

“No,” Ghilashim says, just a little too quickly. “Of course not. Now that I am grown I am hardly worthy of my lady’s attention. Not that she would judge me so lowly, of course, the Lady Mythal values all of her subjects, but I would never presume to demand her attention when she is in so uneasy a state.”

He looks at her, while he speaks; and she gets the distinct impression that he finds it much easier to lie when he doesn’t have to look at Pride while he’s doing it.

“That makes sense,” Pride agrees, neutrally. He reaches over and rests a hand on Ghilashim’s shoulder; the young elf jumps, clearly not expecting the contact. He blinks rapidly, and stares at
Pride with an expression that implies he’s just been kissed, rather than patted.

Not that she blames him. Pride’s hands are easily as nice as his lips.

“If you truly want to help, I would appreciate it if you would keep an eye on the surroundings more than anything,” Pride carries on, giving Ghilashim a friendly pat before withdrawing his touch. “I would rather you were not here. But since you are, we should put your travelling skills to use in examining the terrain. Keep an eye out for signs of dwarven doors or mine shafts, or any potential disasters in the weather.”

“Of course,” Ghilashim agrees, readily.

Curiosity chooses that precise moment to move away from her examinations of their dinner and slump down on his other side, and makes a huffing noise before batting at the back of his head.

“You can make yourself useful by telling me more about how you change shapes, too,” she says, when Ghilashim turns an annoyed glance her way.

“I already told you most of it,” he insists, a definite sneer in his voice.

“You only think that because you are bad at explaining,” Curiosity informs him.

The conversation devolves from there, then, as she leans against Pride until she has to move again. By the time things are ready to eat, though, and exhausted silence has fallen over most everyone. Banathim comes out to claim the largest portion of the kill for herself, before withdrawing again. Uthvir takes their own portion and sets up at the edge of the camp, watching the trail back down the way they came by. Thenvunin sits apart from everyone else, and fusses with his hair in between devouring his supper.

Curiosity eats nearly as much as Banathim, then flops over onto her back. She herself goes and checks the mounts, before Uthvir comes back to the central circle, and announces that she’s going to take first watch.

“I will do it,” Pride insists. “She is nearly dead on her feet.”

Uthvir snorts.

“So are we all,” they say. “But if you are so eager, then you can take second watch. I would recommend your bumbling stalker for third, but as I would like to wake in the morning, Thenvunin can have that one.”

“Stop giving orders,” Thenvunin snaps at them.

The hunter all but rolls their eyes.

“If you would like to select someone different for third watch, Thenvunin, by all means – exert your authority,” Uthvir drawls, before stalking off towards their tent. Leaving behind a high-ranking servant of Mythal who looks like he’s just been caught inexplicably wrong-footed by something. Maybe the utter dismissiveness to the hunter’s tone, or even just the simplicity of their concession.

“Do not mind what Uthvir says. Trade watches with me, at least,” Pride suggests, but she shakes her head.

“I am not that exhausted,” she assures him. “It is mostly just the heat.”
A heat which persists even past sundown, threatening at the edges of the camp. Pride makes a few more attempts to convince her, but eventually concedes; Thenvunin has him share his tent with Ghilashim, anyway, which distracts him a little as he tries to convince Thenvunin that if anyone should share with Ghilashim, it should be the illustrious leader of their little band, who is technically responsible for all of their well-being.

It’s not an argument that compels Thenvunin, shockingly enough. And poor Ghilashim looks just a little bit giddy and a little bit faint at the prospect.

She’s not worried, though. For all his youthful crush, Ghilashim doesn’t seem like the type to make an unwelcome pass in the dead of night; and even if he did, she sets up her watch where she can see the tent, and be readily at hand if Pride should make a hasty exit.

Curiosity sits with her for a little while, chatting about shapeshifting again. But her eyes are heavy, and she doesn’t last long before slipping into her own tent.

The night isn’t quiet.

She listens to the sounds of small animals zipping through the undergrowth. The calls of nocturnal beasts waking – setting out to hunt those diurnal animals that might be made vulnerable in the night. Something whoops, and something else shrieks back. The clouds cluster over the moon and block the starlight, and so the only light to see by is what comes from the campfires, and the shimmering runes around the borders. The camp is bright enough. But of course, the downside to that is that the night beyond it seems all the darker by comparison.

She’s not completely surprised when Uthvir comes up alongside her post; even though she didn’t hear them leaving their tent.

The red hunter stands, still clad in their armour. She wonders if they sleep in it. It doesn’t look nearly comfortable enough for that, but maybe there’s some secret to its design that makes it easier to wear than she’d guess.

“Have you seen it again?” they ask her, at last.

“Seen what?” she replies, though of course, she thinks she knows.

“The creature you saw before. On our hunt,” they clarify. Tone low, and even, as they keep their gaze out towards the darkness.

“No,” she admits, honestly. She hasn’t touched the bone fragment since then. There’s been no cause to.

“You know what it is,” they say.

She glances up towards them. Their own gaze darts down to meet hers, narrow and suspicious.

“Why would you think that?” she wonders.

“Because you have not been watching for it,” Uthvir reasons, glancing back out towards the wilds around them. “A person sees an unknown creature launch a mysterious attack, and withdraw – they will watch, to see if it comes back. Even dolls and pets and trained animals will keep a wary eye out, unless they have some other sense they can trust to tell them of the predator’s return. You have not been watching, and it has not come back.”

She’s quiet.
Well.

Shit.

They’ve got her there.

An awkward silence drags on between them, filled with the cries of some nighttime bird.

“What is it?” Uthvir asks.

“Large,” she replies, in an echo of their own earlier assessment. Large in a different way, though. The russet wolf lacks bulk, but she would wager that in essence, it is much bigger than any trundling beast they might have passed on their route here.

Uthvir is silent a moment longer.

“Will it come again?” they ask, at length.

“It might,” she admits. If she finds another shard. Though she’s starting to think it might be wiser to just… keep them separately. She might not have enough pouches for that, though.

“Will you warn me if it does?” Uthvir wonders, with a sort of casualness that, she thinks, belies their genuine unease. It doesn’t show, except in their accumulated actions since the brief attack.

“Yes,” she promises.

On balance, she thinks she’d prefer the elven hunter – however mysterious, however questionable their loyalties or motives – to the russet wolf. If only because their own agendas are likely easier to comprehend. Easier to manage, or parse the motives, or most importantly, consequences of.

“If you do not, then you had best hope that whatever it is kills me,” Uthvir looks into the deepest of the outward shadows, and there’s a casual conviction to the warning.

“Noted,” she agrees.

The hunter lingers a moment longer, before stalking off back towards their tent.

Leaving her alone.

Letting out a long breath, she draws her knees up towards her chest, and rests against them. It will probably be easier to hear anything unusual than to see it at this point, so she listens, and lets her eyes drift shut. There had been a member of her clan who was blind, she recalls. Nevertheless, one of the better sentries they had. She thinks of keeping watch in long nights, listening to the ordinary sounds of nature; wary for what could be sounds of danger, disguised in amidst them. Back then she knew the cries of most every bird, it seemed. The calls of tree-dwelling primates, and the shrieks of mating insects. The screams of some small rodent being snared for a meal. She could tell what everything belong to, until she left for the conclave; and then she had gotten her first taste of lands far beyond the clan’s roaming range, where this was not so.

And it has gotten stranger ever since.

But she thinks of those animals, and of Curiosity’s advice; and tries to imagine what it would be like to be one of them. Even if she can’t do it, she can still contemplate it, she supposes.

Fast-running deer, and clever, burrowing squirrels. Night owls beating their wings against the sky, and little snakes and lizards sunning themselves on convenient stones. Spiders weaving webs, and
butterflies swarming carrion, and wolves.

Of course she thinks of wolves.

Wolves that aren’t shaped like shadows. That don’t stalk the edges of nightmares, or dreams. Wolves that are neither white nor black, not russet. Grey ones, bigger than mabari but smaller than legends, with silent footsteps and cautious gazes. Not maddened. Animals, only, trying to protect their own. Trying to catch a meal, to fill their bellies and make it another day longer.

The poor animals never deserved such extreme associations, she thinks.

It’s a wolf that relieves of her of her watch, too. She blinks over at Pride, whose white fur is streaked with grey; whose muzzle nudges against her, as he nods towards Curiosity’s tent.

“Go rest,” he instructs.

Reaching out, she runs a hand through the soft fur around his neck. She steals a moment to press her forehead against his, and let out a breath.

“Be careful,” she requests.

“Of course.”

He gives her another nudge, and then sits down rather pointedly next to her post; she sighs and gets to her feet, and stumbles her way into Curiosity’s little tent. Her friend is sprawled out in the middle of it, dead to the world but snoring well enough that she doesn’t worry. She nudges her long limbs over and falls on top of the furs next to her. The tent’s interior is cooler still than the campsite, at least; and it doesn’t take long at all for her to fall asleep.

~

She opens her eyes, and for a moment, she thinks she’s just rolled over in the tent. Blinked and not really fallen asleep at all yet. The heat is back, rolling over her in an unexpected wave. She sits up to see if someone’s opened the front flap of the tent, and freezes.

She’s not in the tent.

Or, rather, she is, but she’s also probably asleep.

Moss has replaced the furs she fell asleep on, though, and what she’d initially taken for the walls of the tent are revealed to be the long, drooping branches of a cluster of willow trees, circled all around her. Their slender branches are covered in thin, dark leaves, that barely ripple and sway with the unfamiliar touch of some stray breeze. A glance upwards reveals a sky that churns with magic-riddled clouds, and dark shadows layered up and up, towards what seem to be the undersides of distant, drifting continents. She has to wrench her gaze away from them before she’s caught by the urge to look closer, and see the details underlying them; the places where rivers run off into shimmering currents that spread, like rivers, between the platforms of dreams.

Slowly, she stands up, and sucks in a breath. It hardly seems fair, she thinks, to go to sleep only to feel like she’s still awake an instant later – with the heat back, no less.
Though the warmth does pass. It takes a moment before the slight breezes begin to carry it away.

In the shadows between the willows, something moves.

“Who’s there?” she asks.

No reply.

Probably not someone convenient, like Fortitude or Curiosity, then.

At least her muscles don’t feel much of the day’s strain anymore. She shakes out her limbs and draws in a breath, and if anything, feels the returning invigoration instead. Turning in a slow circle, she takes in more of her surroundings. A forest. Not like the russet wolf’s, though. And not quite a reflection of the wilderness of Andruil’s lands, either. But closer to the former than the latter, she supposes.

Something moves, again. A shadow.

She draws in a breath, and lets it out again in a long, slow fashion.

“Fine,” she mutters, and with less intrigue than begrudging acceptance, she takes off in the direction of the movement.

It doesn’t take long for her to realize that there’s a trail.

Soft, broken stones lead out and away from her little mossy clearing. She can hear a waterfall, she thinks. She can smell the heat still baking off of the rocks, and when she missteps and her foot lands on the branches of some hardy little plant growing between them, the crunch of it seems to echo in her ears.

She pauses, a moment, before carrying on.

Whatever’s leading her darts in out of her awareness. Less a person or beast that she’s following than an impression, really. As she walks the wilderness flattens out into open terrain, and she has to keep her eyes cast downwards to keep from losing her perspective to the wild sky above.

A feather brushes against her calf.

She stares down at it, before the breeze carries it away. Not a soft feather, like the kind commonly shed. It’s a large, primary plume; pale gold and white at once, and badly bent. Before she can barely entertain the notion of reaching down for it, though, it’s gone again – carried off behind her.

A few more steps bring her another one, though. And another. The feathers flutter across her path, brown and white and gold, patterned and large enough that there wouldn’t be any chance of them all having come from the same bird. Well. If this wasn’t a dream, anyway. Most of them are bloodstained, too. Spattered with it in an ominous fashion that has her keeping her gaze fixed ahead, looking for where they might be coming from.

But not matter how she tries to focus, all she can see up ahead is the distant outline of a hill, and trees that grow bigger and bigger until they seem more like mountains than anything.

The feathers keep coming, though. More and more, until it’s like someone has knocked all of the petals off of some macabre tree. But after a while the blood grows, too, until it’s not simply confined to patterning the stray feathers, but actually makes up what is evidently a trail; splattering against the craggy path. Just tiny droplets, but numerous enough that she doesn’t think most
creatures could spare that much and still survive the loss.

_Are you sure you should be following the mysterious blood trail alone in the Fade?_ she asks herself. Because at this point that does seem like the obvious question.

The answer is probably ‘no, there’s not even any apparent need to’.

She keeps with it, though. The embarrassing answer might be that there doesn’t seem to be much else for her to _do_, but she can’t help but think that whatever might be connected to these feathers, to this blood, needs some sort of assistance. It reminds her too much of Fortune, and what happened to it.

And there are wolves about.

The trees grow large enough and close enough that the gnarled roots of them feel like the sides of cliffs. What’s more, they look dead. The trunks are dull and grey, nearly petrified. There are no leaves on their branches, which reach like skeletal arms only to draw short of some stray magical river up above. There are no animals, no spirits, not anyone except herself, and the occasional wraith in the darkness.

And whatever caused the feathers, and the blood.

It feels almost like she’s stepped on someone’s grave.

So her steps, in turn, grow more careful, as she keeps going, until she reaches the base of that distant hill. Everything stays much the same, with hot winds blowing across her face, and bloodied feathers smacking into her front, until she gets there.

Then she sees the bones.

Yellowed, withered bones all arrayed around the base of a barren hill. Elven bones, by the looks of them. They’re tattered and broken, some arrayed around rusted weapons and disintegrating armour. Grinning skulls trapped in battered helmets lie strewn several feet from their shattered neck bones, and blackened ash surrounds some corpses which look to have been burned.

In the center of it all lies a crater; and in the crater lies a lake’s worth of bloodied feathers.

Another one of them flutters past her. It strikes her knee, and blows away; and in the corner of her eye she sees it hit something else.

Something bright.

She turns, bracing, and when she sees who it is she lets out a profound breath of relief.

“Fortitude,” she greets.

The spirit blinks down at the feather upon itself, before inclining its head in acknowledgement. In the shadow of the hillside, the usual vibrancy of the light in it looks more subdued. But… she takes a moment, staring, and realizes that it’s not only that. The spirit on the whole looks different. Fuller. More substantial, than she could recall it seeming last time.

Just like the dream around her.

And yet the light it seems to cast is duller, and more weighted.

“Are you alright?” she asks.
The spirit blinks.

“Yes,” it confirms, as if it cannot fathom a reason for her concern. “What are you doing here?”

She offers up a surprised blink of her own, and then shrugs.

“I just fell asleep and here I was,” she replies. “Why? Where is ‘here’?”

Fortitude tilts its head, and looks up towards the hill; and then turns, and sets its gaze upon the distant, mountainous trees.

“This was a secret place,” it says. “Not one which I had visited before, but I had heard it spoken of in whispers, once. Some of the oldest spirits lingered here. Knowledge and Memory and others of their like. I had not realized that Glory’s passing would mean their end; but in hindsight, I suppose it must have.”

“Glory?” she wonders, and thinks of the dinnertime tale which Andruil had told. Of the spirit forced to take on a body. “The one Andruil trapped?”

Fortitude shakes its head.

“Andruil caught it. Ghilan’nain trapped it. And Falon’Din kept it, until it is said the strain became too much, and the spirit shattered itself to shatter its bonds,” it explains, striding up alongside her to look towards the massive pit full of feathers. “Falon’Din did not understand Glory. It cannot be held. It comes and it goes, as it must, for glory cannot be in all things at all times. Or else what state seems glorious will simply become mundane, and what must seem as glory will change to something even less attainable.”

“So this is… what is left of it?” she wonders.

The spirit shakes its head.

“This is the echo of where it died,” it explains.

Like Compassion.

She thinks of the impression of movement which led her here. What’s she meant to find? A distraction, maybe? Or nothing? Perhaps her dream simply drew her here because she can’t help but see some ominous parallels to Pride.

To Solas.

“Does that mean there’s some… trace, or impression left of it?” she wonders.

“There could be,” Fortitude allows. “Glory was very old. It would have known a great many things; though what lingers would have been more recent, I suspect.”

She ventures a step closer, edging towards the obvious target of the feather-filled pit. There are no rivers of spiritual essence, like there had been with Compassion. She supposes that Compassion was a much more recent case, though. Her heart clenches in her chest as she thinks of it. Thinks of all of it.

What does it do to the world, to take spirits like Compassion out of it? To embody spirits like Glory?

Like Pride?
The ground is torn around the edges. The blood seems to be coming from there; seeping out of the soil, like a wound that’s never properly healed. Sluggish and thick, though, she thinks, that doesn’t explain the trail.

*Something walked out of it,* her experience tells her. She followed it in the wrong direction.

But this is a dream. No matter how visceral her dreams are becoming, they’re still not inclined to follow the same logic as the waking world.

Fortitude follows her, with only the slightest hesitation. Then it surpasses her, even, moving straight up to the edge of the pit. It stares down into the feathers, and as she watches a low wind stirs throughout the clustered remnants; scooping them up and sweeping them into a circle, so that the whole mess looks like a whirling vortex of dead birds.

Fortitude points towards the middle of it.

“*There,*” it says.

“*There, what?*” she wonders, moving up to stand at its shoulder.

“*That is what we must touch, if you would witness what remains,*” it says.

She stares at the massive, bloodied vortex of spinning feathers.

“*Um,*” she offers, shifting back and forth on her feet. Fortitude blinks at her, apparently not seeing the problem. “*Are we supposed to jump, or…?*”

The spirit glances back towards the pit, and then meets her questioning gaze again.

“*Yes,*” it says.

Of course.

If it *felt* more like a dream, she wouldn’t be experiencing quite so much hesitation at the prospect. But feathers can scratch, and the drop looks long, and she doesn’t actually relish the thought of finding out just how much of an impact her heightened sense of the Fade may or may not have on her when she jumps into it.

Fortitude waits.

Drawing in a deep breath, she takes a few steps back to get a running start. She catches Fortitude’s hand, drawing the spirit with her. Its grip is dry and hums with a current of energy that makes her skin tingle. It goes readily, and when she starts to move, holds her pace.

They reach the edge.

Then they leap.

Feathers whirl around their legs, but they manage to both get into the center of the whirlwind, and none of them scratch against her skin. On reflection, she thinks Fortitude’s probably moving them out of the way on purpose. Their descent is steady, but the air feels strange. Almost more like water than wind. The iron scent of blood is strong, and after a few moments the light grows dim. The crackled lines on Fortitude shine brighter, glowing as the feathers close over their heads.

They don’t so much hit the bottom as slide into it; a slippery pool of thick darkness that coats her every sense in fearful nausea. The pool had no bottom.
“What did you do to me?”

The voice doesn’t come from Fortitude. It isn’t one she recognizes. The tones are soft, bewildered and horrified.

She turns, and Fortitude catches her arm.

“Do not step,” the spirit advises. “Any further and we will lose focus.”

She nods in acknowledgement.

But in the darkness beyond them, she can see shapes. Ghostly and dreamlike in a way that nothing else has been. A figure stands in the shadows. They are… easily the most irrefutably beautiful person she has seen in her life. Barely taller than her, but with long, flaxen hair, and flawless golden skin, and delicate features. Like a person made from spun silk and glass, the heart of a fireside tale come to life, the elusive expression of a portrait impossible to capture.

And yet, there’s something deeply uneasy about them. Not dangerous, per se. But the way they are looking at themselves; the expression in their eyes. It makes her think of horrible things. Of pain and transgression and something that, perhaps, wasn’t meant to be.

Also, they’re virtually naked except for a small skirt around their waist.

“Is that Glory?” she wonders.

“Yes,” Fortitude confirms. “It must be.”

Someone speaks, and Glory shakes their head.

“I do not want this. Release me!” they ask, though it seems as if they’re having difficulty figuring out even how to speak. Or move. Their words are halting, and their hands shake as they flex them, as if trying to get rid of the very feel of their flesh itself. Whoever they’re speaking to can’t be seen, but must answer them, if the way they look up and towards something is any indication.

“I said release…”

Her heart clenches, as they trail off. There’s a look on them, now, more than horror and bewilderment. A terrifying sort of realization.

The image fades.

She looks over to Fortitude, who is still staring at where the faded memory of Glory had been. All at once, she wonders if this was ever going to be a good idea. These are the memories of someone who suffered. Someone she doesn’t know, and doesn’t really have much business invading the privacy of.

And probably vague enough that they wouldn’t be of much help.

She opens her mouth to suggest that they go, but then another image appears over Fortitude’s shoulder, and her words halt.

Glory’s ghost appears again. Dressed in armour, Falon’Din’s vallaslin on their face, their hair pulled back, and for the briefest instant there’s something…

She squints.
Familiar?

But why would Glory look familiar?

She’s still trying to puzzle that out when the embodied spirit speaks again.

“Rescues are a hollow promise,” they say. “The leaders will never let me go. The obsessions of Falon’Din are only a convenient cage. Mythal will not suffer rivals to her pantheon. No new Keepers may come into the world. No spirit great enough to achieve that will ever be permitted freedom again.”

She stares, and feels uncannily, for an instant, as if Glory is speaking to her.

Fortitude’s own light flares, briefly.

“What is Mythal trying to accomplish?” she asks the phantom.

Glory smiles, sadly.

“I know, my heart,” they say, answering an unspoken line from a long-dead conversation. “You should go. Try, if you must. I will hold out for you as long as I might. But I will not blame you if you simply fly from this place.”

Her breath catches in her throat.

“I hope you succeed. But I do not expect you to.”

Solas, she thinks. Her hands tighten on Fortitude’s arms, and for an instant she’s standing in front of an eluvian, with stone qunari all around, and Solas’ back turned towards her. Unfamiliar armour framing his form, no staff in sight, and his expression when he turns towards her… when she sees him again, and even before he speaks, she knows. Of course she knows. She followed all of the clues, all of the steps to find him again, and they told her half the story anyway.

But there was still hope, until she saw the look in his eyes.

There was still hope even afterwards, however vain it might have been.

Glory stares at her, and she sees that same look, and she wonders if that’s why they seem familiar.

The darkness ripples.

The black framework of the pit they’re in changes, as the second ghost wisps away, and the shadows and shapes give way to a battlefield. A fight. She can’t tell if the soldiers are elven or qunari, Templars or mages; if this a battle she fought in, or an ancient killing field she knows nothing about. For an instant it seems to be all and none.

Fortitude stiffens beside her, and she sees flashes of light. Blood. Bodies falling to the ground. Turning to stone. Incinerated where they stand. A thousand different fights, a thousand different horrors. Haven buried under a mountain of snow, Val Royeaux turning to ash, campsites filled with colourful aravels rent apart by feral dragons, and lines of elven soldiers clashing like waves upon one another.

For an instant, she sees Solas.

But then Solas becomes Mythal; and Mythal becomes Glory. Bright and gleaming, in armour again, their arms spread in the casting of a spell that sends the enemy soldiers around them
staggering. A banner flares above their head, and the soldiers around them cheer and call out. The ones they’re fighting seem far less unified and well-equipped, but they’re also numerous and fierce. She thinks of the Avvar when she sees them, as they fling themselves into battle with a ferocity that implies death before dishonor.

It’s a vivid scene. Not just a single ghost, whispering through a fragment of a dead spirit. But she thinks she and Fortitude might be supplying more details than not, as distant fighters turn into red Templars and venatori, and some of the elven combatants turn from hardened warriors into desperate children, swinging weapons far too large for themselves as they stumble over their own feet, and cry out for help. It’s a force of effort to stay where she’s standing. To know that none of it’s real, and all of it’s long past.

“Enough,” Glory whispers.

A single arrow arcs through the air, and the person of silk and spun glass shatters.

The scene dies.

The battleground fades, in all its horrors and anachronisms. The shattering pieces of gold and silver light vanish into the blackness, as Glory’s body slumps, grey and empty, to the ground.

Another ghost in the void.

But this one lingers.

Her brows furrow, as she and Fortitude look. Again, she considers suggesting they leave. Perhaps it’s done, then. Perhaps this is all that there is – a few brief moments, and horror, and then the still silence of a corpse. What more could Glory have left behind? Her mind turns over the spirit’s comments about Mythal.

*Mythal will not suffer rivals to her pantheon. No new Keepers may come into the world. No spirit great enough to achieve that will ever be permitted freedom again.*

Pride.

Her gut twists.

The Keepers. As Haninan told it, they had been spirits that had taken on the form of dragons. And the evanuris were elves which had mastered that form, too. Was there some substantial difference, though? The evanuris had been strong enough to fight the maddened Keepers, but a maddened creature was never the same challenge as a clear-headed opponent. Was Mythal so terrified of another feral Keeper arising that she would deny any spirit the chance to get so far?

Or was it as Glory said?

A question of rivalries?

“Fortitude,” she begins, but then halts.

The body moves.

A hand twitches. Fingers flexing, and then relaxing. The arrow still protrudes from their shoulder as Glory seems to rise. It isn’t dead? She stares, aghast, wondering what the light show was for in that case. The spirit had shattered, it seemed. But the body…
That’s not a fatal wound, she realizes. Painful, certainly, but most of the arrow looks to be buried in the flesh of their shoulder, and a portion of the shaft is still wavering in the air. The armour did a fair job in stopping much of it – more out of luck than any particular courtesy of its impractical design, she assesses.

Glory lets out a gasp of breath, and looks up.

“Glory,” they say. “What… what is…”

Something grabs the fallen body.

Something grabs her, too, and Fortitude, wrenching them backwards with enough force that she reflexively reaches for her blade. Sharp claws tear into her shoulder, drawing rivulets of blood and slamming Fortitude back as the darkness shatters again, and the dream gives way to a barren island, nestled into the midst of the tumultuous skies.

She knocks whoever has grabbed them back, lifting her shield only to find herself face to face with a furious red hunter.

“What are you doing?” Uthvir snarls.

Her hand freezes around the hilt of her sword.

She stares.

Because beneath the vibrant red markings of Andruil’s vallaslin, and past the distorting outline of their sharp and copious armour, Uthvir’s skin is flawless gold, and their features are delicate and fine. Not precisely the same, of course; they have pointed nails and even more pointed teeth, and the shape of their eyes is different – though that could just be the change in shape and colour to their brows. Their hair isn’t the same, and their bearing is entirely different, but seeing one after the other the resemblance is undeniable.

“…Glory?” she asks.

Uthvir goes rigid, and pales.

And then they lunge.

She barely has time to get her shield up to block, but even as she does a whip of some unexpected magical force knocks her legs right out from underneath her. Uthvir crashes against her shield, fierce and furious, and she thinks again of feral beasts as they lash out and she tries to evade their attack. They don’t even bother with a weapon. The fear in the air is so thick that she’s not even certain this feels like they are attacking her.

It’s almost more like she stumbled into an already-cornered beast.

Uthvir tries to crush her underneath her own shield and then whips away from her, just in time to avoid a counter-attack from Fortitude. The spirit charges and the hunter dodges, quick and deadly as they catch Fortitude by the throat instead. Their shadow spreads behind them, snapping at the edges with odd energy as the claws on their gauntlet dig into the spirit’s outer shell. She stares in horror as a crack begins to spread outwards from their thumb, leaking fresh light across Fortitude’s frame.

“Stop!” she demands. “Uthvir, stop!”
The hunter clearly isn’t listening, though.

With a snarl she lifts her shield and charges, and forces them to let go of Fortitude in order to dart away. The fury in their stare doesn’t let up, and they are fast, though. An instant later they’ve gotten her knocked off of her own feet again, tearing into her shield, and as they do the tips of their fingers turn black, and something utterly otherworldly seems to grow around them.

The fear in the air is so thick she wants to scream.

“Uthvir, get a hold of yourself!” she tries calling out, instead.

“You will not kill me,” they hiss. “None of you will ever kill me!”

“Uthvir!”

Fortitude surges up from ground at her side, and slams into the hunter’s shadow.

Uthvir cries out in shocked pain.

And then…

She wakes up.

~

It’s a visceral, disorienting experience, and all she can think at first is no. No, she has to go back, and make sure that Uthvir and Fortitude don’t kill each other. She has to keep that from happening. She has to find more answers. She has to get the hunter to stop panicking and attacking and remember how logic and sense work again.

What could have possibly woken her up at such an inopportune, horrible time?

She blinks, and finds herself staring down the long end of a very sharp sword. Square and sturdy, with what’s definitely lyrium pressed into the blade. A quick glance to the side reveals that Curiosity is awake, and similarly situated, with two dwarves in charcoal black armour standing inside of their tent.

“Up,” says the one with their sword on her.

Please let them have gone into Uthvir’s tent, too.

That’s probably an inappropriate hope, under the circumstances, but it’s the one she’s going with.

As per instructions, she slowly gets up and lets the two heavily armed dwarves roughly direct herself and Curiosity back out into the main camp. She can’t see much of their apparent captors’ faces behind their helmets, but they seem fairly grim. A scar trails down the visible lips of the one directing her, and the other doesn’t speak. Their armour is solid and heavy-looking, and a quick check of her magic reveals that there’s definitely something interfering with it.

When they get out into the camp, the wards around it are down. She wonders how that happened without anyone noticing, and sends another wish out into the universe – please let them be on Thenvunin’s watch by now, because if Pride can somehow be held responsible, she doesn’t
imagine this will go well for them no matter what.

More dwarves appear, drawing the others out of their tents. Two emerge with Thenvunin, and two more with Pride and Ghilashim. Three come out with Banathim grumbling and glaring at sword point, and three more appear with Uthvir, whose expression is tight and whose gaze doesn’t meet her own at they pass.

There are a lot more dwarves, though.

She counts at least twenty, situated around the camp’s perimeter.

“You see? No need for violence. Everyone is behaving,” a familiar voice intones in dwarven, then, and she looks over and feels a visceral surge of relief.

Which she tries really hard not to show.

From out behind Uthvir’s tent walks Haninan. Haninan in his dwarven form, but still. He looks over all of them with a pointedly neutral expression, as Hildur follows alongside him; and so does another dwarf she doesn’t recognize. A bulkier one than either of them, dressed in lighter armour than their captors, bald, with knives at her belt and what looks like a mechanical prosthesis strapped to her leg in place of her right foot.

“The night is not over yet,” the unfamiliar dwarf says, and then clears her throat, as her armoured soldiers prod them all into standing in a circle in the middle of the camp. She looks over at Pride, who catches her eye, and looks pinched.

She wonders if he’s wondering whether or not Haninan’s betrayed them.

Personally, she’s inclined to give him more credit than that.

“Those that are they are elfin. It is welcome not,” the unfamiliar dwarf says in stunted elven. “Trespasser. Next upon you is a justice. Arbitration. You will present atonements, for broken things. Maybe those that are they will live, if atonements are worthy.”

Thenvunin sucks in a breath, his eyes wide as if they’d just seen a mabari open its mouth and recite Orlesian court poetry.

“Very sorry,” Haninan says, in perfectly accented, broken elven. “Inconvenient, we know. Must be patient. Be courteous, and all will be over quick.” He looks at Uthvir, though, and frowns.

There’s a moment of thick tension, where she can see essentially every warrior in their group weighing their odds against the blocked magic, and their martial prowess, and their enemy’s numbers. See them figuring out what she has, which is that they’re really outdone for the moment. Wondering if the other hunters out there have been met with a similar fate. In some cases, not even having the comfort of knowing that Haninan’s probably on their side.

Some of them are going to have to continue to live in ignorance, though, she thinks.

Uthvir looks at Banathim, and some wordless conference passes between them.

“We surrender,” the hunter allows, with full coherence and lucidity.

In the darkness just beyond the dwarven soldiers, she spots a familiar gleam between the trees; the outline that of Fortitude, watching from a distance.
And despite being – once again – captured by angry dwarves, she lets out a relieved breath.

Chapter End Notes

Ha ha! I bet you were all starting to wonder whether this chapter would ever come or not! Well it DID! Huzzah!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!